An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?

IMMANUEL KANT
1724–1804

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Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?

Translated from the German with AI (Claude) and edited

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INTRODUCTION

In 1784 a Berlin magazine asked its readers: what is enlightenment? Kant's answer, a few pages long, became the classic definition of the age. Enlightenment, he says, is humanity's emergence from its self-incurred immaturity: the inability to use one's own understanding without another's guidance. Its motto is *Sapere aude*: dare to know.

What holds people back is not lack of intelligence but laziness and cowardice, and guardians happy to think for them. Kant's remedy is freedom: above all the freedom to make public use of one's reason, as a scholar addressing the whole reading public.

What Is Enlightenment?

Kant defines enlightenment and argues that it needs only the freedom to use reason in public.

[35] *Enlightenment is humankind's emergence from its self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity* is the inability to make use of one's understanding without direction from another. This immaturity is *self-incurred* when its cause lies not in a lack of understanding but in a lack of resolve and courage to use it without direction from another. *Sapere aude!* [Dare to be wise!] Have the courage to use your *own* understanding! That, then, is the motto of enlightenment.[1]

Laziness and cowardice are the reasons why so great a part of humankind, long after nature has released them from alien direction (*naturaliter maiorennes* [of age by nature]), nonetheless gladly remain immature for life; and why it is so easy for others to set themselves up as their guardians. It is so comfortable to be immature. If I have a book that has understanding for me, a pastor who has a conscience for me, a doctor who judges my diet for me, and so on, then I need not exert myself at all. I have no need to think, as long as I can pay; others will readily take the tiresome business on for me. That by far the greatest part of humankind (including the entire fair sex) considers the step to maturity not only troublesome but also highly dangerous—this is seen to by those guardians who have so very kindly taken on the supervision of them. Having first made their domestic cattle stupid, and having carefully prevented these placid creatures

1 *Sapere aude* comes from the Roman poet Horace (Epistles 1.2.40) and had become a watchword of the German Enlightenment.

from daring to take a single step outside the go-cart in which they have shut them, they then show them the danger that threatens them if they try to walk on their own. Now this danger is not in fact so very great, for after a few [36] falls they would surely learn to walk in the end; but an example of this kind makes them timid and usually frightens them off from any further attempts.[2]

It is thus difficult for any individual to work his way out of the immaturity that has become almost second nature to him. He has even grown fond of it, and for the time being he is genuinely incapable of using his own understanding, because he has never been allowed to make the attempt. Precepts and formulas, those mechanical instruments of a rational use—or rather misuse—of his natural gifts, are the fetters of a permanent immaturity. Anyone who did throw them off would still make only an uncertain leap over even the narrowest ditch, because he is not used to such free movement. Hence there are only a few who have succeeded, by working on their own minds, in extricating themselves from immaturity and yet walking with a sure step.

But that a public should enlighten itself is more likely; indeed, if only it is left its freedom, it is almost inevitable. For there will always be some who think for themselves, even among the appointed guardians of the great mass. Having themselves thrown off the yoke of immaturity, they will spread around them the spirit of a rational appreciation of one's own worth and of every human being's calling to think for himself. What is peculiar here is this: the public, which those guardians had earlier brought under this yoke, afterwards compels them to remain under it themselves, if it has been stirred up to do so by some of its guardians who are themselves incapable of any enlightenment. So harmful is it to plant prejudices, because in the end they take revenge on the very people who, or whose predecessors, were their authors. Hence a public can attain enlightenment only slowly. A revolution may well bring about the over-

2 A go-cart (Gängelwagen) was a wheeled frame in which small children were placed to learn to walk without falling.

throw of personal despotism and of oppression driven by greed or lust for power, but never a true reform in the way of thinking; instead, new prejudices will serve, just as the old ones did, as leading-strings for the thoughtless great mass.

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE USE OF REASON

Kant argues that the public use of reason must always be free, while its private use may be restricted.

For this enlightenment, however, nothing is required but *freedom*—and indeed the most harmless of anything that may be called freedom: namely, the freedom to make *public use* of one's reason in all matters. But now I hear the cry from all sides: *Do not argue!* [37] The officer says: Do not argue, drill! The finance official: Do not argue, pay! The clergyman: Do not argue, believe! (Only one ruler in the world says: *Argue* as much as you like, and about whatever you like; *but obey!*) Everywhere here there is restriction of freedom. But which restriction hinders enlightenment? And which does not, but may even promote it?[3] — I answer: the *public* use of one's reason must always be free, and it alone can bring about enlightenment among human beings; the *private use* of reason, on the other hand, may often be very narrowly restricted without thereby particularly hindering the progress of enlightenment. By the public use of one's own reason, however, I understand the use that someone makes of it *as a scholar* before the entire public of the *reading world*. Private use I call the use he may make of his reason in a certain *civil post* or office entrusted to him.[4] Now for many affairs that concern the interest of the commonwealth a certain mechanism is necessary, by means of which some members of the commonwealth must conduct themselves merely passively, so that the government, through an artificial unanimity, may direct them toward

3 The one ruler is Frederick II ("the Great"), King of Prussia 1740–1786, to whom Kant returns below.

4 "Scholar" (Gelehrter) here means anyone who addresses the reading public in writing, not only a professional academic.

public ends, or at least keep them from destroying those ends. Here, of course, it is not permitted to argue; one must obey. But insofar as this part of the machine regards itself at the same time as a member of a whole commonwealth, indeed even of the society of world citizens, and so in the capacity of a scholar who addresses a public in the proper sense through writings, it can certainly argue, without thereby harming the affairs to which it is assigned in part as a passive member. Thus it would be very ruinous if an officer who has received an order from his superiors wanted, while on duty, to quibble aloud about the appropriateness or usefulness of this order; he must obey. But he cannot fairly be forbidden, as a scholar, to make remarks about errors in military service and to lay these before his public for judgment. The citizen cannot refuse to pay the taxes imposed on him; indeed, impertinent censure of such levies, when he is supposed to pay them, may even be punished as a scandal (which could provoke general insubordination). Nevertheless the very same person does not act contrary to the duty of a citizen if, as a scholar, he publicly expresses his thoughts on the impropriety [38] or even the injustice of such impositions. In the same way, a clergyman is bound to deliver his teaching to his catechism pupils and his congregation in accordance with the creed of the church he serves, for he was accepted on that condition. But as a scholar he has complete freedom—indeed, even the calling—to communicate to the public all his carefully examined and well-meant thoughts about what is erroneous in that creed, and his proposals for a better arrangement of religious and church affairs. Nor is there anything in this that could burden his conscience. For what he teaches by virtue of his office, as an agent of the church, he presents as something about which he has no free authority to teach as he sees fit; it is something he is employed to deliver according to another's prescription and in another's name. He will say: Our church teaches this or that; these are the proofs it uses. He then draws all the practical benefit for his congregation from precepts that he would not himself subscribe to with full conviction, but that he can nonetheless

undertake to deliver, because it is not entirely impossible that truth lies hidden in them, and in any case there is at least nothing in them that contradicts inner religion. For if he believed he found anything of the latter kind in them, he could not administer his office in good conscience; he would have to resign it. The use, then, that an employed teacher makes of his reason before his congregation is merely a *private use*, because a congregation, however large, is always only a domestic gathering; and in this respect he, as a priest, is not free, nor may he be, because he is carrying out someone else's commission. By contrast, as a scholar who speaks through writings to the public proper, namely the world, the clergyman in the *public use* of his reason enjoys an unrestricted freedom to use his own reason and to speak in his own person. For that the guardians of the people (in spiritual matters) should themselves be immature in turn is an absurdity that amounts to perpetuating absurdities.

NO GENERATION MAY BIND THE NEXT

Kant argues that no church, ruler or people may fix a creed forever and so block further enlightenment.

But should not a society of clergymen—a church assembly, say, or a venerable classis (as it calls itself among the Dutch)—be entitled to bind itself by oath to a certain unalterable creed, so as to exercise a perpetual supreme guardianship over each of its members and, through them, over the [39] people, and even to make this guardianship eternal? I say: that is quite impossible. Such a contract, concluded to keep all further enlightenment away from the human race forever, is absolutely null and void, even if it were confirmed by the supreme power, by imperial diets, and by the most solemn peace treaties.[5] One age cannot bind itself and conspire to put the next in a condition in which it must become impossible for it to extend its knowledge (especially knowledge of such urgent concern), to purge it of errors, and generally to advance further in enlightenment. That would

5 A classis is the regional governing body of clergy in the Dutch Reformed Church.

be a crime against human nature, whose original vocation consists precisely in this progress; and posterity is therefore fully entitled to reject such resolutions as made in an unauthorized and wanton manner. The touchstone of everything that can be decided as law for a people lies in the question: whether a people could impose such a law on itself. Now this might indeed be possible for a definite short time, in expectation, as it were, of a better law, in order to introduce a certain order: meanwhile every citizen, and above all the clergyman, would be left free to comment, in the capacity of a scholar, publicly, that is, through writings, on what is defective in the present arrangement, while the established order still continued. This would go on until insight into the nature of these matters had advanced so far publicly, and proved itself, that by uniting their voices (even if not all of them) the citizens could bring a proposal before the throne —to take under protection those congregations that had agreed, according to their notions of better insight, on an altered religious arrangement, without hindering those who wanted to leave things as they were. But to agree on a permanent religious constitution that no one may publicly call into question, even just for the length of one person's life, and thereby, as it were, to annihilate a span of time in humanity's progress toward improvement and make it fruitless, and indeed even harmful to posterity—this is absolutely impermissible. A person may, for himself, and even then only for a time, postpone enlightenment in what he is obliged to know; but to renounce it, whether for himself or, still more, for posterity, is to violate and trample underfoot the sacred rights of humanity. But what not even a people may decide [40] about itself, a monarch may still less decide about the people; for his legislative authority rests precisely on his uniting the collective will of the people in his own. If he only sees to it that all true or supposed improvement is consistent with civil order, he can for the rest leave his subjects to do for themselves what they find necessary for the sake of their salvation. That is none of his business; but it is his business to prevent anyone from forcibly hindering another from

working, to the best of his ability, at determining and promoting it. It even detracts from his majesty if he meddles in this by subjecting to his government's supervision the writings in which his subjects try to clarify their views. This holds if he does so from his own supreme insight, where he exposes himself to the reproach *Caesar non est supra grammaticos* [Caesar is not above the grammarians]; and it holds still more if he degrades his supreme power so far as to support the spiritual despotism of a few tyrants in his state against the rest of his subjects.[6]

AN AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT

Kant says his age is not yet enlightened but is becoming so, thanks to Frederick's freedom of conscience.

If it is now asked: Do we at present live in an *enlightened* age? the answer is: No, but we do live in an age of *enlightenment*. As things now stand, much is still lacking for human beings, taken as a whole, to be already in a position, or even capable of being put in one, to use their own understanding confidently and well in religious matters without direction from another. But we do have clear indications that the field is now being opened for them to work freely toward this, and that the obstacles to universal enlightenment, or to their emergence from their self-incurred immaturity, are gradually becoming fewer. In this respect this age is the age of enlightenment, or the century of *Frederick*.

A prince who does not find it beneath him to say that he considers it his *duty* to prescribe nothing to human beings in religious matters, but to leave them complete freedom there—who thus declines even the arrogant name of *tolerance*—is himself enlightened. He deserves to be praised by a grateful world and posterity as the one who first released the human race from immaturity, at least on the part of government, and left everyone free to use his own reason in all matters of conscience.

6 The Latin saying goes back to the retort made to Emperor Sigismund at the Council of Constance (1414) when he claimed authority over Latin grammar.

Under him, venerable clergymen may, without prejudice to their official duty, freely and publicly lay before the world for examination, in their capacity as scholars, those of their [41] judgments and insights that depart here and there from the accepted creed; and still more may anyone else who is not restricted by any official duty. This spirit of freedom is also spreading beyond, even where it has to struggle with the external obstacles of a government that misunderstands itself. For such a government has before it a shining example that under freedom there is not the least cause for concern about public peace and the unity of the commonwealth. Human beings will gradually work their way out of crudeness of their own accord, as long as no one deliberately contrives to keep them in it.

I have placed the main point of enlightenment, that is, of human beings' emergence from their self-incurred immaturity, chiefly in *matters of religion*: because our rulers have no interest in playing guardian over their subjects with regard to the arts and sciences; and because, moreover, that immaturity is the most harmful and also the most dishonorable of all. But the way of thinking of a head of state who favors enlightenment in religious matters goes further still and recognizes that even with regard to his *legislation* there is no danger in allowing his subjects to make *public* use of their own reason, and to lay before the world publicly their thoughts about a better framing of it, even with candid criticism of the legislation already enacted. Of this we have a brilliant example, in which no monarch has yet gone before the one whom we honor.

But only a ruler who, himself enlightened, is not afraid of shadows, and who at the same time has at hand a well-disciplined and numerous army to guarantee public peace, can say what a free state may not dare to say: *Argue, as much as you like, and about whatever you like; only obey!* Here we see a strange and unexpected course of human affairs—as indeed elsewhere, when it is considered on a large scale, almost everything in it is paradoxical. A greater degree of civil freedom seems advantageous to the freedom of the people's *spirit*, and yet it sets up insur-

mountable barriers to it; a lesser degree of civil freedom, by contrast, gives the spirit room to expand to the full extent of its capacity. When nature has unfolded, beneath this hard shell, the seed for which she cares most tenderly—namely, the propensity and calling to *think freely*—this gradually works back upon the mentality of the people (who thereby become more and more capable of *freedom to act*), and finally even upon the principles of *government*, which finds it beneficial to itself [42] to treat the human being, who is now *more than a machine*, in accordance with his dignity.[7]

Königsberg in Prussia, 30 September 1784.

7 KANT'S NOTE. In Büsching's weekly *Nachrichten* of 13 September I read today, the 30th of the same month, the notice of this month's *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, which cites Mr. Mendelssohn's answer to this very question. It has not yet come into my hands; otherwise it would have held back the present essay, which may now stand only as a test of how far chance can bring about agreement of thoughts.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE. Anton Friedrich Büsching edited a Berlin weekly review; Moses Mendelssohn's essay "On the Question: What Does It Mean to Enlighten?" appeared in the Berlinische Monatsschrift in September 1784, where Kant's own essay followed in December.