

An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?

Immanuel Kant

Translated by James Schmidt

Immanuel Kant's 1784 essay is by far the most famous of the responses to Zöllner's request for an answer to the question "What is enlightenment?" Dated 30 September 1784, it was written, as Kant explained in a footnote at the close of the essay, without knowledge of the contents of Mendelssohn's response, which appeared in the Berlinische Monatsschrift as Kant was completing his own answer. The essay was the second of the fifteen articles Kant wrote for the Berlinische Monatsschrift in the years between 1784 and 1796.

Enlightenment is mankind's exit from its self-incurred immaturity.¹ Immaturity is the inability to make use of one's own understanding without the guidance of another. Self-incurred is this inability if its cause lies not in the lack of understanding but rather in the lack of the resolution and the courage to use it without the guidance of another. Sapere aude! Have the courage to use your own understanding! is thus the motto of enlightenment.²

Laziness and cowardice are the reasons why such a great part of mankind, long after nature has set them free from the guidance of others (*naturaliter majorenes*), still gladly remain immature for life and why it is so easy for others to set themselves up as guardians. It is so easy 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 forth, surely I do not need to trouble myself. I have no need to think, if only I can pay; others will take over the tedious business for me. Those guardians, who have graciously taken up the oversight of mankind, take care that the far greater part of mankind (including the entire fairer sex) regard the step to maturity as not only difficult but also very dangerous. After they have first made their domestic animals stupid and carefully prevented these placid creatures from daring to take even one step out of the leading strings of the cart to which

Originally published as "Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?" Berlinische Monatsschrift 4 (1784): 481–494.

they are tethered,³ they show them the danger that threatens them if they attempt to proceed on their own. Now this danger is not so great, for by falling a few times they would indeed finally learn to walk; but an example of this sort makes them timid and usually frightens them away from all further attempts.

It is thus difficult for any individual man to work himself out of an immaturity that has become almost natural to him. He has become fond of it and, for the present, is truly incapable of making use of his own reason, because he has never been permitted to make the attempt. Rules and formulas, these mechanical instruments of a rational use (or rather misuse) of his natural gifts, are the fetters of an everlasting immaturity. Whoever casts them off would still take but an uncertain leap over the smallest ditch, because he is not accustomed to such free movement. Hence there are only a few who have managed to free themselves from immaturity through the exercise of their own minds, and yet proceed confidently.

But that a public [*Publikum*] should enlighten itself is more likely; indeed, it is nearly inevitable, if only it is granted freedom. For there will always be found some who think for themselves, even among the established guardians of the masses, and who, after they themselves have thrown off the yoke of immaturity, will spread among the herd the spirit of rational assessment of individual worth and the vocation of each man to think for himself. It is notable that the public, which had earlier been brought under this yoke by their guardians, may compel them to remain under it if they are incited to do so by some of their guardians who are incapable of any enlightenment. So it is harmful to implant prejudices, because they ultimately revenge themselves on those who originated them or on their descendents. Therefore a public can achieve enlightenment only gradually. A revolution may perhaps bring about the fall of an autocratic despotism and of an avaricious or overbearing oppression, but it can never bring about the true reform of a way of thinking. Rather, new prejudices will serve, like the old, as the leading strings of the thoughtless masses.

For this enlightenment, however, nothing more is required than *freedom*; and indeed the most harmless form of all the things that may be called freedom: namely, the freedom to make a *public use* of one's reason in all matters. But I hear from all sides the cry: *don't argue!*⁴ The officer says: "Don't argue, but rather march!" The tax collector says: "Don't argue, but rather pay!" The clergyman says: "Don't argue, but rather believe!" (Only one ruler in the world says: "*Argue*, as much as you want and about whatever you want, *but obey!*")⁵ Here freedom is restricted everywhere. Which restriction, however, hinders enlightenment? Which does not, but instead even promotes it?—I answer: the *public* use of reason must at all times be free, and it alone can bring about enlightenment among men; the *private* use of reason, however, may often be very narrowly restricted without the

progress of enlightenment being particularly hindered. I understand, however, under the public use of his own reason, that use which anyone makes of it *as a scholar* [*Gelehrter*] before the entire public of the *reading world*. The private use I designate as that use which one makes of his reason in a certain *civil post* or office which is entrusted to him. Now a certain mechanism is necessary in many affairs which are run in the interest of the commonwealth by means of which some members of the commonwealth must conduct themselves passively in order that the government may direct them, through an artificial unanimity, to public ends, or at least restrain them from the destruction of these ends. Here one is certainly not allowed to argue; rather, one must obey. But insofar as this part of the machine considers himself at the same time as a member of the entire commonwealth, indeed even of a cosmopolitan society, who in the role of a scholar addresses a public in the proper sense through his writings, he can certainly argue, without thereby harming the affairs in which he is engaged in part as a passive member. So it would be very destructive, if an officer on duty should argue aloud about the suitability or the utility of a command given to him by his superior; he must obey. But he cannot fairly be forbidden as a scholar to make remarks on failings in the military service and to lay them before the public for judgment. The citizen cannot refuse to pay the taxes imposed on him; even an impudent complaint against such levies, when they should be paid by him, is punished as an outrage (which could lead to general insubordination). This same individual nevertheless does not act against the duty of a citizen if he, as a scholar, expresses his thoughts publicly on the inappropriateness or even the injustice of such taxes. In the same way, a clergyman is bound to lecture to his catechism students and his congregation according to the symbol of the church which he serves;⁶ for he has been accepted on this condition. But as a scholar he has the complete freedom, indeed it is his calling, to communicate to the public all his carefully tested and well-intentioned thoughts on the imperfections of that symbol and his proposals for a better arrangement of religious and ecclesiastical affairs. There is in this nothing that could burden his conscience. For what he teaches as a consequence of his office as an agent of his church, he presents as something about which he does not have free reign to teach according to his own discretion, but rather is engaged to expound according to another's precept and in another's name. He will say: our church teaches this or that; these are the arguments that it employs. He then draws out all the practical uses for his congregation from rules to which he himself may not subscribe with complete conviction, but to whose exposition he can nevertheless pledge himself, since it is not entirely impossible that truth may lie concealed within them, and, at least, in any case there is nothing in them that is in contradiction with what is intrinsic to religion. For if he believed he found such a contradiction in them, he could not in conscience conduct

his office; he would have to resign. Thus the use that an appointed teacher makes of his reason before his congregation is merely a *private* use, because this is only a domestic assembly, no matter how large it is; and in this respect he is not and cannot be free, as a priest, because he conforms to the orders of another. In contrast, as a scholar, who through his writings speaks to his own public, namely the world, the clergyman enjoys, in the *public* use of his reason, an unrestricted freedom to employ his own reason and to speak in his own person. For that the guardian of the people (in spiritual matters) should be himself immature, is an absurdity that leads to the perpetuation of absurdities.

But would not a society of clergymen, such as a church synod or a venerable classis (as they call themselves among the Dutch),⁷ be justified in binding one another by oath to a certain unalterable symbol, in order to hold an unremitting superior guardianship over each of their members, and by this means over their people, and even to make this eternal? I say that this is completely impossible. Such a contract, concluded for the purpose of closing off forever all further enlightenment of the human race, is utterly null and void even if it should be confirmed by the highest power, by Imperial Diets, and by the most solemn peace treaties. One age cannot bind itself, and thus conspire, to place the succeeding age in a situation in which it becomes impossible for it to broaden its knowledge (particularly such pressing knowledge), to cleanse itself of errors, and generally to progress in enlightenment. That would be a crime against human nature, whose original destiny consists in this progress; and posterity would be fully justified to reject these resolutions as concluded in an unauthorized and outrageous manner. The touchstone of everything that can be concluded as a law for a people lies in the question: could a people have imposed such a law upon itself? Now this would be possible for a specified brief time period, in order to introduce a certain order, as it were, in expectation of something better. At the same time, all citizens, especially the clergy, would be left free, in their capacities as scholars—that is, through writings—to make remarks on the failings of the current institutions. This provisional order would continue until insight into the nature of these things became so public and so reliable that through uniting their voices (even if not unanimously) they could bring a resolution before the throne, to take those congregations into protection who had united into an altered religious organization according to their conception of better insight, without hindering those who wish to remain with the old. But it is absolutely forbidden to unite, even for the lifetime of a single man, in a permanent religious constitution that no one may publicly doubt, and thereby to negate a period of progress of mankind toward improvement and thus make it fruitless and even detrimental for posterity. One man may indeed postpone, for his own person and even then only for a short time, enlightenment in that which it

is incumbent for him to know; but to renounce it, for his own person and even more for posterity, is to violate and to trample on the sacred rights of mankind. What even a people may not decide for itself can even less be decided for it by a monarch; for his lawgiving authority consists in his uniting the collective will of the people in his own. If only he sees to it that all true or alleged improvements are consistent with civil order, he can allow his subjects to do what they find necessary for the well-being of their souls. That does not concern him, though it is his concern to prevent one from forcibly hindering another from laboring with all his capacities to determine and to advance this well-being. It detracts from his own majesty if he meddles in this by finding the writings through which his subjects seek to put their insights into order worthy of governmental oversight. He does so if he acts out of his own exalted insight, where he exposes himself to the reproach *Caesar non est supra Grammaticos*,⁸ and does so even more if he degrades his supreme power so far as to support the ecclesiastical despotism of a few tyrants in his state against the rest of his subjects.

If it is asked "Do we now live in an *enlightened age*?" the answer is "No, but we do live in an *age of enlightenment*." As matters now stand, much is still lacking for men to be completely able—or even to be placed in a situation where they would be able—to use their own reason confidently and properly in religious matters without the guidance of another. Yet we have clear indications that the field is now being opened for them to work freely toward this, and the obstacles to general enlightenment or to the exit out of their self-incurred immaturity become ever fewer. In this respect, this age is the age of enlightenment or the century of *Frederick*.⁹

A prince who does not find it unworthy of himself to say that he regards it as a *duty* to prescribe nothing to men regarding religious matters but rather to allow them full freedom in this area—and who thus declines the haughty title of "tolerant"—is himself enlightened and deserves to be esteemed by the grateful world and by posterity as the first, with regard to government, who freed mankind from immaturity and left them free to use of their own reason in everything that is a matter of conscience. Under him venerable clergy, in their role as scholars and irrespective of their official duties, freely and publicly present their judgments and insights—which here or there diverge from the established symbol—to the world for examination. Those who are not restricted by the duties of office are even freer. This spirit of freedom spreads further, even where it must struggle with the external hindrances of a government which misunderstands itself. For it is an illuminating example to such a government that public peace and unity have little to fear from this freedom. Men work their way by themselves bit by bit out of barbarity if one does not intentionally contrive to hold them in it.

I have placed the main point of enlightenment—mankind's exit from its

self-imposed immaturity—primarily on religious matters since our rulers have no interest in playing the role of guardian to their subjects with regard to the arts and sciences and because this type of immaturity is the most harmful as well as the most dishonorable. But the manner of thinking of a head of state who favors such enlightenment goes even further and sees that even with regard to his own legislation there is no danger in allowing his subjects to make *public* use of their reason and to lay publicly before the world their thoughts about a better formulation of this legislation as well as a candid criticism of laws already given. We have a shining example of this, in which no monarch has yet surpassed the one we honor.

But only a ruler who, himself enlightened, does not himself fear shadows, and at the same time has at hand a large, well-disciplined army as a guarantee of public peace, can say what a republic cannot dare: *argue, as much as you want and about whatever you want, only obey!* Here is displayed a strange and unexpected tendency in human affairs, so that, generally, when it is considered at large, almost everything in it is almost paradoxical. A high degree of civic freedom appears advantageous to the *spiritual* freedom [*Freiheit des Geistes*] of a people and yet it places before it insuperable restrictions; a lesser degree of civil freedom, in contrast, creates the room for spiritual freedom to spread to its full capacity. When nature has, under this hard shell, developed the seed for which she cares most tenderly—namely, the inclination and the vocation for *free thinking*—this works back upon the character of the people (who thereby become more and more capable of *acting freely*) and finally even on the principles of government, which finds it to its advantage to treat man, who is now *more than a machine*,¹⁰ in accord with his dignity.¹¹

NOTES

1. The phrase *selbstverschuldeten Unmündigkeit* is central to Kant's entire argument. As Kant explained in his *Anthropology*, *Unmündigkeit* designates both "minority of age" (*Minderjährigkeit*) and "legal or civil immaturity" (AA VII:208–209 [*Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (The Hague, 1974), 79–80]). Those who are legally immature—a group that includes children, so long as they remain "naturally immature," and women, no matter what age—must be represented in legal proceedings by a "curator" (*Kurator*), a "proxy" (*Stellvertreter*), or a "guardian" (*Vormund*). (All of these designations have their origins in Roman law and were given exhaustive definitions in Christian Wolff's *Grundsätze des Natur- und Völkerrechts* §§898–912.) Kant's use of these terms echoes that of Ernst Ferdinand Klein, who in an article on freedom of the press published a few months earlier in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* had called on those kings and princes who had taken on the role of *Vormütern* over their *unmündigen Kinder* to follow the example of Frederick the Great and grant them freedom of expression (translated above, pp. 90–91). Enlightened theologians such as Semler and Spalding had also used the term

Unmündigkeit in their criticisms of clergy who kept their congregations in a state of “immaturity” (see Steven Lestition, “Kant and the End of the Enlightenment in Prussia,” *Journal of Modern History* 65 [March 1993]: 77–78). *Verschuldeten* carries implications of guilt and blame, hence *selbstverschuldet* designates a guilt that is self-incurred.—TRANS.

2. The Latin phrase *Sapere aude!*—Dare to know!—is taken from Horace’s *Epistles* 1.2.40. Franco Venturi has traced the history of the phrase, noting that it was used on a medal struck in Berlin in 1736 for the Société des Aléthophiles—Society of the Friends of Truth—a group of clergy, lawyers, and civil servants dedicated to the spreading of truth in general and the Leibniz-Wolff philosophy in particular. See Venturi, “Was ist Aufklärung? Sapere Aude!” reprinted in Venturi, *Europe des lumières* (Paris, 1971), 39–42. The phrase was widely used in the eighteenth century; for example, Kant’s friend Johann Georg Hamann used it to close a 1759 letter to Kant.—TRANS.

3. The phrase “leading strings of the cart” is an attempt to translate Kant’s “*Gängelwagen*,” a small, bottomless carriage with casters that was used, like our present-day baby-walkers, so that children might move around without the danger of falling. Jean Mondot’s French translation of Kant’s essay notes that the image of the *Gängelwagen* was used by Kant, Lessing, Wieland, and Mendelssohn as a metaphor for mankind’s immaturity. See *Qu’est-ce que les Lumières?* (Saint-Étienne, 1991), 85. Rousseau may have been a possible inspiration for the metaphor: in *Emile*, he states that Emile will not be tied to “leading strings” (*lisères*).—TRANS.

4. The phrase here is *räsoniert nicht!*—which carries connotations of both “reasoning” and “quibbling.”—TRANS.

5. By the end of the essay, it is clear that this “*einzig Herr*” is Frederick the Great.—TRANS.

6. In the months preceding Kant’s essay, there had been a heated debate over the propriety of requiring Lutheran clergy to swear oaths of conformity to their confession’s “Symbolic Books”—the basic principles or Creed of their faith. Mendelssohn had argued against such oaths in his *Jerusalem* and in the January 1784 issue of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* had responded to criticism of his argument.—TRANS.

7. The term *classis* was employed by the Dutch Reformed Church to designate a subdivision of a synod.—TRANS.

8. “Caesar is not above the grammarians.”—TRANS.

9. A reference to Frederick the Great, king of Prussia from 1740 to 1786.—TRANS.

10. An allusion to Julien Offray La Mettrie’s *L’Homme machine* (1747), a book whose materialism and atheism prompted such opposition in Leyden (to which La Mettrie had fled in 1745 after his *Histoire naturelle de l’âme* had caused similar problems for him in Paris) that, at Frederick the Great’s invitation, he moved to Berlin, where he was a member of the Royal Academy until his death in 1751.—TRANS.

11. I read today in Büsching’s *Wöchentliche Nachrichten* of 13 September a notice for the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* of this month, which cites Mr. Mendelssohn’s answer to this same question. I have not received this issue, otherwise I would have held back the present essay, which is now presented only as an attempt to see how far agreement in thought can be brought about by chance.