



An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?

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Musean Translation

MOUSEIA



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Essay



481 An Answer to the Question:

What Is Enlightenment?

(See December 1783, p. 516.)

Enlightenment is the human being's emergence from self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding without another's guidance. 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 another's guidance. Sapere aude! Have the courage to use your own understanding! That, then, is the motto of enlightenment.

Laziness and cowardice are the reasons why so great a part of humanity, long after nature has released them from the guidance of others [482] (*naturaliter majorennnes*)—of age by nature, nevertheless gladly remain immature throughout their lives; 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 to serve as my understanding, a spiritual adviser to serve as my conscience, a physician to judge my diet, and so on, I need not trouble myself. I have no need to think, if only I can pay; others will readily take over the tiresome business for me. That by far the greatest part of humanity—including the entire fair sex—should regard the step to maturity as not only arduous but also very dangerous is something those guardians, who have so graciously assumed supervision over them, take care to ensure. After first making their domestic animals stupid and

carefully preventing these docile creatures from daring to take a single step outside the walking frame in which they have confined them, they then show them the danger that threatens if they try to walk alone. Now this danger is not really so great, for after falling a few times they would eventually learn to walk; but an example of this kind nevertheless makes them timid and generally deters them from any further attempts.

It is therefore difficult for any individual, bound by an immaturity that has become almost second nature, [483] to work free of it. He has even grown fond of it and is for the present truly incapable of using his own understanding, because he has never been allowed to try. Rules and formulas, those mechanical instruments for a rational use—or rather misuse—of his natural gifts, are the shackles of a perpetual immaturity. Even someone who cast them off would still make only an uncertain leap across the narrowest ditch, because he is unaccustomed to such free movement. Thus only a few have succeeded, through cultivating their own minds, in freeing themselves from immaturity and nevertheless walking with a sure step.

But that a public should enlighten itself is more possible; 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, who, after throwing off the yoke of immaturity themselves, 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 oneself. What is peculiar here is that the public, previously brought beneath this yoke by them, afterward itself compels them to remain beneath it, when, by some of its guardians who are themselves incapable of any enlightenment, it has been incited [484] to do so. So harmful is it to plant prejudices: they ultimately avenge themselves upon the very people who, or whose predecessors, originated them. Hence a public can attain enlightenment only slowly. A revolution may perhaps bring about the overthrow of personal despotism and of oppression driven by greed or a lust for power, but never a true reform in the way of thinking. Instead, new prejudices, just as much as the old, will serve as leading strings for the unthinking mass.

For this enlightenment, however, nothing is required but *freedom*; and indeed the most harmless of all that can be called freedom: the freedom to make *public use* of one's reason in all matters. Yet on every side I hear the cry: "*Do not argue!*" The officer says: "Do not argue; drill!" The treasury official: "Do not argue; pay!" The clergyman: "Do not argue; believe!" (Only a single ruler in the world says: "*Argue* as much as you wish, and about whatever you wish; *but obey!*") Everywhere here freedom is restricted. But which restriction hinders enlightenment? Which does not, and may even promote it? I answer: the *public* use of one's reason must always be free, and it alone can bring enlightenment among human beings [485] into being; its *private use*, however, may often be very narrowly restricted without thereby seriously hindering the progress of enlightenment. By the public use of one's own reason I understand the use someone makes of it *as a scholar* before the entire public of the *reading world*. I call its private use the use he may make of his reason in a particular *civil position* or office entrusted to him. Now, for many affairs that concern the commonwealth, a certain mechanism is necessary, through which some members of the commonwealth must conduct themselves merely passively, so that the government may direct them, by an artificial unanimity, toward public ends, or at least prevent them from destroying those ends. Here, of course, one is not permitted to argue; one must obey. But insofar as this part of the machine also regards himself as a member of an entire commonwealth, indeed even of the society of world citizens, and thus in the capacity of a scholar addressing a public in the proper sense through his writings, he may certainly argue without thereby impairing the affairs in which he is employed in part as a passive member. Thus it would be highly pernicious if an officer, given an order by his superiors, wanted while on duty [486] to reason aloud about its appropriateness or usefulness; he must obey. Yet he cannot justly be forbidden, as a scholar, to make observations on defects in military service and submit these to his public for judgment. A citizen cannot refuse to pay the taxes imposed upon him; even an impertinent criticism of such levies, when he is required to pay them, may be punished as a scandal that could provoke general resistance. Yet this same person does not act against a citizen's duty when, as a scholar, he publicly

expresses his thoughts against the impropriety or even injustice of such assessments. Likewise, a clergyman is bound to teach his catechism pupils and his congregation in accordance with the creed of the church he serves, for he was appointed on this condition. But as a scholar he has full freedom, indeed even a calling, to communicate to the public all his carefully examined and well-intentioned thoughts on the defects of that creed and his proposals for a better arrangement of religious and ecclesiastical affairs. Nor is there anything here that could burden his conscience. For what he teaches in fulfillment of his office as an agent of the church he presents as something concerning [487] which he has no free authority to teach according to his own judgment, but which he has been appointed to expound according to instructions and in another's name. He will say: "Our church teaches this or that; these are the grounds of proof it employs." He then draws every practical benefit for his congregation from tenets to which he would not himself subscribe with full conviction, yet whose exposition he can nevertheless undertake, since it is not entirely impossible that truth lies concealed in them, and in any event at least nothing contrary to inward religion is found in them. For if he believed he found the latter there, he could not in conscience administer his office; he would have to resign it. The use, then, that an appointed teacher makes of his reason before his congregation is merely a *private use*, since this is always only a domestic gathering, however large; in this respect he, as a priest, is not free, nor may he be, because he is carrying out another's commission. By contrast, as a scholar speaking through his writings to the public in the proper sense, namely the world, and thus as a clergyman in the *public use* of his reason, he enjoys unrestricted freedom to use his own reason and speak in his own person. For that the guardians of the people [488] in spiritual matters should themselves be immature is an absurdity that amounts to perpetuating absurdities.

But should not a society of clergymen—a church council, perhaps, or a venerable classis, as it calls itself among the Dutch—be entitled to bind its members by oath to a certain unalterable creed, in order to exercise an unceasing supreme guardianship over each of its members and, through them, over the people, and even to perpetuate it? I say: that is wholly impossible. Such a con-

tract, concluded to keep all further enlightenment from the human race forever, is absolutely null and void, even if confirmed by the supreme power, by imperial edicts, and by the most solemn peace treaties. One age cannot enter into an alliance and conspire to place the next in a condition in which it must become impossible to extend its knowledge, particularly on matters of such great concern, to cleanse it of errors, and generally to advance in enlightenment. That would be a crime against human nature, whose original vocation consists precisely in this advance; and posterity is therefore fully entitled to reject such decrees as adopted without authority and in a spirit of outrage. The touchstone [489] of everything that can be enacted as law over a people lies in the question whether a people could impose such a law upon itself. Now this might well be possible for a definite short period, as though in expectation of something better, in order to introduce a certain order: provided that at the same time every citizen, especially the clergyman, were left free, in the capacity of a scholar, to make public observations, that is, through writings, on what is defective in the current arrangement, while the established order continued until insight into the nature of these matters had publicly advanced and proved itself so far that, by uniting their voices, though not necessarily all of them, they could bring a proposal before the throne to protect those congregations that had perhaps agreed upon an altered religious arrangement in accordance with their conception of better insight, without, however, hindering those who wished to leave things as they were. But to agree upon an enduring religious constitution that no one may publicly question, even for the span of a single human life, and thereby as it were annihilate a period in humanity's progress toward improvement, rendering it fruitless and perhaps even harmful to posterity, is absolutely impermissible. A human being may indeed, for his own person, [490] and even then only for a time, postpone enlightenment in what he is obliged to know; but to renounce it, whether for his own person or, still more, for posterity, is to violate and trample upon the sacred rights of humanity. What even a people may not decree for itself, a monarch may still less decree for the people; for his legislative authority rests precisely on his uniting the entire will of the people in his own. Provided he sees to it that all true or supposed

improvement is compatible with civil order, he can otherwise only leave his subjects to do for themselves what they find necessary for their souls' salvation. That is no concern of his; his concern is to prevent anyone from forcibly hindering another from working, to the best of his ability, to determine and promote that salvation. It detracts even from his majesty if he interferes here by deeming writings through which his subjects seek to clarify their insights worthy of governmental supervision: whether he does this from his own supreme insight, in which case he exposes himself to the reproach *Caesar non est supra Grammaticos*—Caesar is not above the grammarians—or, still worse, if he debases his supreme power so far as to support the spiritual despotism of a few tyrants [491] in his state against his other subjects.

If, then, we are asked whether we now live in an *enlightened* age, the answer is: no, but we do live in an age of *enlightenment*. As things stand, much is still lacking before human beings as a whole would already be able, or could even be put in a position, to use their own understanding confidently and well in religious matters without another's guidance. But that the field is now nevertheless being opened to them to work freely toward this, and that the obstacles to general enlightenment, or to emergence from their self-incurred immaturity, are gradually diminishing—of this we have clear indications. In this respect this age is the age of enlightenment, or the century of *Frederick*.

A prince who does not think it beneath him to say that he considers it his *duty* to prescribe nothing to human beings in religious matters, but to leave them full freedom in these, and who thus rejects for himself even the presumptuous name of *tolerance*, is himself enlightened. He deserves to be praised by a grateful world and posterity as the first to release the human race from immaturity, at least on the government's part, and to leave everyone free [492] to use their own reason in all matters of conscience. Under him, venerable clergymen, without prejudice to their official duties, may freely and publicly, in their capacity as scholars, submit to the world's examination their judgments and insights that differ here or there from the accepted creed; still more may anyone else who is restricted by no official duty. This spirit of freedom also spreads abroad, even where it must struggle with external obstacles raised by a government that

misunderstands itself. For an example nevertheless shines before such a government, showing that freedom need not cause the slightest concern for the public peace and unity of the commonwealth. Human beings gradually work their way out of barbarism on their own, if only one does not deliberately contrive to keep them in it.

I have placed the central point of enlightenment—that is, the emergence of human beings from their self-incurred immaturity—chiefly *in religious matters*, because in the arts and sciences our rulers have no interest in playing guardian over their subjects; moreover, this immaturity is not only the most harmful but also the most dishonorable of all. Yet the way of thinking of a head of state who favors the former goes further still and recognizes that even in regard to his *legislation* [493] there is no danger in allowing his subjects to make *public* use of their own reason and publicly present to the world their thoughts on a better formulation of it, even with a candid criticism of the legislation already enacted. We have a shining example of this, in which no monarch has preceded the one we honor.

But only someone who is himself enlightened and unafraid of shadows, while also having at hand a numerous and well-disciplined army to guarantee public peace, can say what a free state may not dare: “*Argue as much as you wish, and about whatever you wish; only obey!*” Here a strange, unexpected course of human affairs reveals itself, just as, when viewed on a large scale, almost everything in them is paradoxical. A greater degree of civil freedom seems advantageous to the freedom of the people’s *mind*, and yet sets insurmountable barriers to it; a degree less of the former, by contrast, gives the latter room to expand to the full extent of its powers. Once nature has unfolded beneath this hard shell the seed for which she cares most tenderly, namely the inclination and calling to *think freely*, this gradually acts back upon the people’s disposition, through which they become more capable of *freedom in action* [494] by degrees, and finally even upon the principles of *government*, which itself finds it advantageous to treat the human being, who is now more than a machine, in accordance with human dignity.¹

I. Kant.

Königsberg in Prussia, September 30, 1784.

1 Today, the thirtieth of September, I read in *Büsching's* weekly news of September 13 the notice of this month's *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, in which Mr. *Mendelssohn's* answer to this same question is mentioned. It has not yet reached me; otherwise it would have held back the present answer, which may now stand merely as an experiment in how far chance can bring about agreement in thought.