



An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?

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Plain English Translation

MOUSEIA



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Essay



481 An Answer to the Question:

What Is Enlightenment?

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Enlightenment means leaving behind immaturity that is your own fault. Immaturity means being unable to use your understanding without someone else guiding you. This immaturity is *your own fault* when the cause is not a lack of understanding, but a lack of resolve and courage to use it without someone else's guidance. *Dare to know!* Have the courage to use your *own* understanding! That is the motto of enlightenment.

Laziness and cowardice explain why so many people gladly remain immature all their lives, even though nature freed them from outside guidance long ago

[482] (*as adults by nature*). They also explain why others find it so easy to set themselves up as their guardians. Being immature is so convenient. If I have a book that does my understanding for me, a spiritual adviser who supplies my conscience, a doctor who decides on my diet, and others of that kind, I do not need to make any effort myself. I do not need to think, as long as I can pay. Others will take on that tiresome job for me. The guardians who have so kindly taken charge of supervising people make sure that the great majority of them—including all women—see the step toward maturity as not only difficult but also very dangerous. First they make their domestic animals stupid. They care-

fully keep these quiet creatures from daring to take a single step outside the walking frame in which they have shut them up. Then they show them the danger they face if they try to walk alone. The danger is actually not so great. After falling a few times, they would eventually learn to walk. But an example of that kind makes them timid and generally frightens them away from any further attempts.

So it is hard for any individual, whose immaturity has almost become second nature, [483] to work his way out of it. He has even grown fond of it. For now, he really cannot use his own understanding, because he has never been allowed to try. Rules and formulas are mechanical tools for using his natural gifts rationally—or rather, for misusing them. They are the shackles of a lasting immaturity. Even someone who threw them off would still be unsure of himself when jumping over the narrowest ditch, because he is not used to moving freely like that. That is why only a few have managed to develop their own minds, free themselves from immaturity, and still walk steadily.

But a public is more likely to enlighten itself. In fact, if it is simply left free, this is almost inevitable. There will always be a few people who think for themselves, even among those appointed to guard the masses. Once they have thrown off the yoke of immaturity themselves, they will spread a spirit of rational appreciation of their own worth and of every person's calling to think for themselves. There is something especially worth noticing here. The public, which these guardians had previously brought under this yoke, later forces the guardians themselves to stay under it, when some of its guardians who are incapable of any enlightenment have stirred it up [484] to do so. Planting prejudices is that harmful: in the end they take revenge on the very people who created them, or whose predecessors did. A public can therefore reach enlightenment only slowly. A revolution may bring an end to personal despotism and oppression driven by greed or the desire to rule. But it will never bring about a true reform in how people think. Instead, new prejudices, just like the old ones, will serve as leading strings for the unthinking masses.

All that this enlightenment requires is *freedom*; specifically, the most harmless kind of all: freedom to make *public use* of your reason in every matter. But now I hear shouts from every direction: “*Do not argue!*” The officer says, “Do not argue; drill!” The financial official says, “Do not argue; pay!” The clergyman says, “Do not argue; believe!” (Only one ruler in the world says, “*Argue* as much as you want, about whatever you want; *but obey!*”) Everywhere there are restrictions on freedom. But which restriction gets in the way of enlightenment? Which does not, and may even help it? My answer is this: the *public* use of reason must always be free. Only that can lead people to enlightenment [485]. But its *private use* may often be very narrowly restricted without particularly holding back the progress of enlightenment. By the public use of your own reason, I mean the use you make of it *as a scholar* before the whole *reading public*. By private use, I mean the use you are allowed to make of your reason in a particular *civil position* or office entrusted to you. Some affairs that concern the commonwealth require a certain mechanism. Some of its members must behave purely passively, so that the government can direct them toward public goals through an artificially produced agreement, or at least keep them from destroying those goals. Here, of course, you are not allowed to argue: you must obey. But this part of the machine can also see himself as a member of the whole commonwealth, and even of the society of world citizens. In that case, acting as a scholar who addresses a public in the true sense through his writings, he certainly can argue. This does not harm the affairs in which he has been assigned a partly passive role. For example, suppose an officer is given an order by his superiors. It would do great harm if, while on duty, [486] he openly questioned whether the order served its purpose or was useful. He must obey. But he cannot reasonably be forbidden, as a scholar, to comment on defects in military service and submit his comments to his public for judgment. A citizen cannot refuse to pay the taxes imposed on him. Indeed, an intrusive criticism of those charges at the time he is supposed to pay them can be punished as a scandal that could provoke widespread resistance. Still, that same person does not violate his duty as a citizen if, as a scholar, he publicly states his thoughts about how inappropriate or even unjust such tax demands are. Similarly, a clergyman

is bound to teach his catechism students and his congregation according to the creed of the church he serves. He was hired on that condition. But as a scholar he is completely free, and even has a calling, to share with the public all his carefully examined, well-intentioned thoughts about faults in that creed, along with proposals for better arrangements in religion and the church. Nor is there anything here that could burden his conscience. What he teaches as part of his office, as the church's representative, he presents as something [487] he is not free to teach however he sees fit. Rather, he is employed to present it according to instructions and in someone else's name. He will say, "Our church teaches this or that; these are the arguments it uses." He then draws every practical benefit for his congregation from teachings he would not endorse with complete conviction himself. He can nevertheless commit himself to presenting them, because it is not entirely impossible that they contain some hidden truth. At any rate, they must contain nothing that contradicts inward religion. If he believed he found such a contradiction in them, he could not carry out his office with a clear conscience. He would have to resign. So an appointed teacher's use of reason before his congregation is only a *private use*; however large the gathering may be, it is still only a domestic one. In this respect, as a priest, he is not free, and should not be free, because he is carrying out someone else's commission. But as a scholar who addresses the true public—the world—through his writings, the clergyman makes *public use* of his reason. He then enjoys unlimited freedom to use his own reason and speak for himself. For it is absurd for the people's guardians [488] (in spiritual matters) to be immature themselves. That amounts to making absurdities last forever.

But could a society of clergymen—a church council, for example, or a respected church assembly, called a *classis* among the Dutch—be entitled to bind its members by oath to a fixed, unchangeable creed? Could it do this to keep each member, and through them the people, under a continuous supreme guardianship, and even make that guardianship permanent? I say that this is completely impossible. A contract aimed at keeping all further enlightenment away from the human race forever is absolutely null and void. It would remain so even if the highest authority, imperial diets, and the most solemn peace

treaties confirmed it. One age cannot make a binding agreement and swear to put the next in a position where it cannot expand its knowledge—especially on matters of such great concern—clear away errors, or make any further progress in enlightenment. That would be a crime against human nature, whose original purpose consists precisely in this progress. Later generations are therefore fully entitled to reject those decisions as unauthorized and wrongful. The test [489] of anything that can be made law for a people lies in this question: could a people impose such a law on itself? It could do so for a fixed, short time, to establish a certain order while waiting, as it were, for something better. At the same time, every citizen, especially every clergyman, would have to remain free to act as a scholar and publicly comment, through writing, on the faults in the current arrangements. Meanwhile, the established order would continue. It would last until public understanding of these matters had advanced far enough and proved itself well enough to bring a proposal before the throne through the combined voices of those involved, though not necessarily all of them. The proposal would seek protection for congregations that had agreed to change their religious arrangements according to what they understood to be a better insight. It would not obstruct those who wanted to leave things as they were. But it is absolutely forbidden to agree on a lasting religious constitution that no one may publicly question, even for the span of a single human life. Doing so would, in effect, wipe out a period of humanity's progress toward improvement. It would make that time fruitless and perhaps even harmful to later generations. A person may, for himself, [490] and even then only for a time, put off enlightenment in matters he ought to know about. But to renounce it, whether for himself or, still worse, for later generations, means violating and trampling on humanity's sacred rights. A monarch has even less right to decide something for his people that the people themselves have no right to decide. His authority to make laws rests precisely on his uniting the will of the whole people in his own. Provided he makes sure that every real or supposed improvement is compatible with civil order, he can only leave his subjects to do what they find necessary for their salvation. That is no concern of his. What does concern him is preventing anyone from using force to stop someone else from working, with

all their abilities, to determine and advance their salvation. He even diminishes his own majesty when he interferes in this. He does so when he considers the writings through which his subjects try to clarify their understanding worthy of his government's supervision. This is true when he acts on his own supreme insight, exposing himself to the criticism, "*Caesar is not above the grammarians*," and even more so when he lowers his supreme power to the point of supporting the spiritual despotism of a few tyrants [491] in his state against the rest of his subjects.

If we are now asked, "Do we live in an *enlightened* age?" the answer is, "No, but we do live in an age of *enlightenment*." As things stand, we are still very far from people generally being able, or even being put in a position, to use their own understanding confidently and well in religious matters without someone else's guidance. But there are clear signs that the way is now being opened for them to work freely toward that goal. The obstacles to general enlightenment, to leaving behind the immaturity that is their own fault, are gradually becoming fewer. In this respect, this age is the age of enlightenment, or the century of *Frederick*.

A ruler may consider it quite consistent with his dignity to say that he sees it as his *duty* not to prescribe anything to people in religious matters, but to leave them completely free. He therefore rejects even the arrogant label of *tolerance*. Such a ruler is himself enlightened. He deserves the praise of a grateful world, now and in the future, as the first to free the human race from immaturity, at least as far as the government was concerned, and to leave everyone free [492] to use their own reason in all matters of conscience. Under him, respected clergymen can act as scholars without neglecting their official duties. They can freely and publicly submit to the world's examination judgments and insights that differ here and there from the accepted creed. This applies even more to anyone else who is not restricted by official duties. This spirit of freedom also spreads abroad, even where it must struggle with external obstacles set up by a government that misunderstands itself. For even that government has before it a clear example showing that freedom gives no reason for the slightest worry about the

commonwealth's public peace and unity. People will gradually work their own way out of an uncultivated condition, if only no deliberate schemes are used to keep them in it.

I have placed the main point of enlightenment—people leaving behind the immaturity that is their own fault—especially *in religious matters*. Our rulers have no interest in playing guardian to their subjects in the arts and sciences. Besides, immaturity in religion is both the most harmful and the most degrading kind of all. But the thinking of a head of state who encourages enlightenment goes further. He sees that even where his *laws* [493] are concerned, there is no danger in allowing his subjects to make *public* use of their own reason. They may publicly present their ideas to the world about how to improve those laws, even offering a frank criticism of laws already enacted. We have a shining example of this, in which no monarch has preceded the one we honor.

But only a ruler who is himself enlightened and unafraid of shadows, and who also has a large, well-disciplined army at hand to guarantee public peace, can say what a republic cannot dare to say: “*Argue as much as you want, about whatever you want; just obey!*” This shows a strange, unexpected course of human affairs. As elsewhere, almost everything about it seems paradoxical when viewed on a large scale. A greater degree of civil freedom seems to benefit the freedom of the people's *mind*, yet sets limits it cannot get past. One degree less of civil freedom, on the other hand, gives that mind room to develop all its abilities. Under this hard shell, nature develops the seed it cares for most tenderly: the tendency and calling to *think freely*. Once developed, this gradually affects the people's outlook in turn, making them more capable of *acting freely* [494] over time. Eventually it even affects the principles of *government*. The government finds that it benefits itself by treating people, who are now more than machines, in a way that respects their dignity.¹

I. Kant.

Königsberg in Prussia, September 30,
1784.

1 Today, the 30th of September, I read in *Büsching's* weekly news of September 13 the notice of this month's *Berlinische Monatsschrift*. It mentions Mr. *Mendelssohn's* answer to this very question. I have not yet received it. Otherwise, it would have held back the present answer. This one may now stand simply as an experiment to see how far chance can bring about agreement in thought.