

An Answer to the Question: ‘What is Enlightenment?’ – The Relevance of an Incisive Work by Kant from the Year 1784

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We consider the year 1784. Frederick II, king of Prussia, appellated Frederick the Great, yet resides in Sanssouci. Two years hence, Frederick the Great will die. Five years forward and the French Revolution ignites; the newly incorporated National Assembly embraces the Enlightenment of the people’s and citizens’ rights. This is the historical landscape for a concise composition appearing in the “Berlinischen Monatsschrift” in December of that very year. The trappings are themselves without precedent. The work’s title is not prominent in comparison with the actual text, indeed the opposite: the headline “An Answer to the Question: ‘What is Enlightenment?’” appears as *small* print, the content itself in *large*. The article’s author does not have an *audience*, but *readers*. But as though he would relate to his readers the pitch with which he would have his message declared, he employs not only larger letters as in the title, but settles upon letter-spacing for his inaugural words:

*“ E n l i g h t e n m e n t i s m a n ‘ s e m e r g e n c e
f r o m h i s s e l f – i n c u r r e d i m m a t u r i t y .
I m m a t u r i t y i s t h e i n a b i l i t y t o u s e o n e ‘ s o w n u n d e r s t a n d i n g w i t h o u t t h e
g u i d a n c e o f a n o t h e r . T h i s i m m a t u r i t y i s s e l f – i n c u r r e d i f i t s c a u s e i s
n o t l a c k o f u n d e r s t a n d i n g , b u t l a c k o f r e s o l u t i o n a n d c o u r a g e t o u s e i t w i t h o u t t h e
g u i d a n c e o f a n o t h e r . T h e m o t t o o f e n l i g h t e n m e n t i s t h e r e f o r e : S a p e r e a u d e ! H a v e
c o u r a g e t o u s e y o u r o w n u n d e r s t a n d i n g . ”*

Alas, not only the letter-spacing, but in truth and above all the *substance* lends his message the pitch of a trumpet blast. Before I set upon his trumpet’s next blare using a separate quotation from the essay, I would like to first pause a moment. At the end of the text it reads:

“Königsberg in Prussia, 30th September, 1784. I. Kant”

Who is “I. Kant”? One would first pursue: wherefore is the question? Everyone knows who Kant is. Nevertheless, the scrupulous discussion of Kant quickly gives way to stammering. Overheard keywords of yore – usually from one’s schooldays – like “categorical imperative” inevitably turn up. During the course of their studies, lawyers need on occasion apply themselves to his works and do celebrate his art of definition, for example as regards marriage, “*the Union of two Persons of different sex for life-long reciprocal possession of their sexual faculties*”^[1].

In addition, most are aware that Kant virtually never left his birthplace of Königsberg in the nearly eighty years of his life spanning from 1724 onward. All the same, he must have been – as seems to be the general consensus – an *immense* philosopher, otherwise there would not be so much written about him. The dry wit attributed to him, the confinement of his life's orbit to a small city on the Baltic Sea, ultimately yet tender the imprint of a sagacious, to be sure, but *philistine* man, such that Heinrich Heine could have been correct in observing:

“The life story of Immanuel Kant is difficult to describe. For he had neither a life nor a story.” [\[2\]](#)

The contrary is also true. Walter Benjamin appositely characterized him thus: Kant demarcates:

“the rigid center between the schoolmaster and the tribune of the people.” [\[3\]](#)

The schoolmaster must have stood in the foreground for quite some time. The tribune of the people surfaced slowly at first and expressed himself with restraint; in many cases the incendiary brisance of his thoughts went unnoticed over the years, over decades even. Exemplary of this trend was his 1755 treatise – Kant was just 31 – “Universal Natural History and Theory of Heaven”. It was first discovered and appreciated only eighty years later, by a French physicist. Kant ascribed the origin of our solar system (as well as the Cosmos as a whole) to a completely chance cosmic primordial nebula, within which the gravitational force of its mass (the universal law of gravity devised by Newton) gradually generated a concretion, upon whose conclusion the sun and planets came to be. In the preface to his work, Kant intuits the quintessence of his discovery:

“After I place the world in the simplest chaos, I have applied to it no forces other than the powers of attraction and repulsion, so as to develop the great order of nature. These two forces are both equally certain, equally simple, and at the same time equally primal and universal.” [\[4\]](#)

He would “place the world in simplest chaos.” A wonderful phrase. Thus are thoughts and indeed an entire cosmos able to materialize.

The revolutionary quality to this theory was not only that it is in principle yet uncontested unto this day, but also and above all that the account of the world's order posited by Kant rendered itself utterly absent mention of the ultimate guiding hand of *God*. One notes the subheading:

“or An Exploration of the Constitution and the Mechanical Origin of the Entire Structure of the Universe Based on Newtonian Principles”

To construe the origin of the world's creation as a mechanical process and thereby eschew every religious endowment of meaning to life would have been for Isaac Newton, ingenious albeit god-fearing unto his end, yet unthinkable. In the preface to his work, Kant in fact openly addresses the subject of heresy:

“If the planetary structure, with all its order and beauty, is only an effect of the laws of motion in matter left to itself, if the blind mechanism of natural forces knows how to develop itself out of chaos in such a masterful way and to reach such perfection on its own, then the proof of the primordial Divine Author, which we derive from a glance at the beauty of the cosmic structure, is wholly discredited. Nature is self-sufficient, the divine rule is unnecessary” [\[5\]](#)

In light of his contention, Kant occasions such a time as this to readily pacify his anticipated antagonists with the observation that he holds dear the conviction of *“the infallibility of divine truths”*, heralding agreement between *“my system and religion”* [\[6\]](#). He must have feared, however, that his detractors would not be contented by this assurance. Thus it was conceivably a cautionary measure unto the protection of himself and his tract that he dedicated the work to Frederick the Great. His want for protection expressly permeates the dedication:

*“Most serene and mighty king,
All honored King and Master,*

The feeling of my lack of worth and the radiance from the throne cannot make me so foolish and timid, when the honour which the most gracious monarch dispenses with equal magnanimity among all his subjects gives me grounds for hope that the boldness which I undertake will be looked upon graciously. In most submissive respect I lay at the feet of your eternal kingly majesty one of the most trifling samples of that eager spirit with which your highness's schools, through the encouragement and the protection of their illustrious sovereign, strive to emulate other nations in the sciences. How fortunate I would be if the present endeavor succeeded in making the efforts with which the humblest and most respectful subject constantly tries to make himself in some way of service to the Fatherland win the highest possible feeling of goodwill of his king. With the utmost devotion until my dying day,

Your eternal majesty's most humble servant

The author” [\[7\]](#)

This dedication warrants two readings. His devotion is not deference. The kowtow before the King is then very profound, however impregnated with bulbous aplomb. Kant addresses his own “temerity”, the temerity of the thoughts advanced in his work. He commends his opus to “emulate other nations in the sciences” and thereafter signs the dedication as “most humble servant”. Sometimes one simply must affect the servant to effect the master.

Kant's *Critique of Reason*, released first in 1781 and later in the form of a painstakingly revised edition in Riga in 1787, won him anyhow the attention of the Vatican already thirty years hence and in 1827 was placed on the list of banned books. There Kant's principal philosophical work remained until the list's deletion in 1966 following a decree from Paul VI[8]. No German philosopher had accomplished this before.

The church's theologians felt violated by Kant's logical refutation of the manifold forms of proof for God's existence, which he scourged as deceptions. In the segment "Of the Impossibility of an Ontological Proof of the Existence of God" within his *Critique of Reason*, he extrapolates:

*"It is certainly allowable to **admit** the existence of an all-sufficient being—a cause of all possible effects—for the purpose of enabling reason to introduce unity into its mode and grounds of explanation with regard to phenomena. But to assert that **such a being necessarily exists**, is no longer the modest enunciation of an admissible hypothesis, but the boldest declaration of an apodeictic certainty" [9]*

This is *Kant*: initially calm, almost circuitous discourse, and suddenly the crack of a whip. The antagonist is not only tormented but downright broken to bits by so many grievous blows of glittering thought, until only ashes remain.

Hereby Kant earmarked not only the Vatican as his adversary. Indeed: the inexorable constancy in analytical clarity, the insistence upon *factual* logic, the scorn for every form of intellectual deceit, even should it be well intentioned—these are the fundamental premises of all of Kant's works. And eventually when Kant's judgment lands upon the questions, what is 'Right' and what is a 'juridical Constitution' of the 'State' – it does so first and foremost in the 1797 treatise *The Metaphysics of Morals* – the schoolmaster is completely vanished; it is only the tribune of the people speaking. Kant (hardly hedging) professes to the Republic that those among the "*old empirical and statutory Forms*" of the Constitution,

*"which serve only to effect the political **subjection** of the People, will be resolved into the original and rational Forms which alone take **Freedom** as their principle, and even as the condition of all **compulsion** and **constraint**. Compulsion is in fact requisite for the realization of a juridical Constitution, according to the proper idea of the State; and it will lead at last to the realization of that Idea, even according to the letter." [10]*

For all power is derived from its people – and Kant asserts as much during a time in which the Hohenzollern, the Hanover, the Wittelsbachs, the Habsburgs, and all other European royal houses and principalities had providently packed their coffers and mobilized in defense of the French Revolution:

*“Every true Republic is and can only be constituted by a **Representative System** of the People. Such a Representative System is instituted in name of the People, and is constituted by all the Citizens being united together, in order, by means of their Deputies to protect and secure their Rights.[...]It is in the People that the Supreme Power originally resides, and it is accordingly from this Power that all the Rights of individual citizens as mere Subjects[...]must be derived.”* [\[11\]](#)

This is nothing short of an honest and overt affirmation of Article 3 of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* adopted by the National Assembly eight years prior:

“The principle of all sovereignty resides essentially in the nation. No body nor individual may exercise any authority which does not proceed directly from the nation.”

Despite all disadvantageous developments, Kant held fast to the hopes that tethered him to the French Revolution unto his death. In a personal dialogue, given the state of affairs in Paris, he gave voice to his jubilation: *“Now let your servant go in peace to his grave, for I have seen the glory of the world!”* [\[12\]](#). And so my curiosities come full circle back to that tract from the year 1784. What stymies the Enlightenment? Even back then, Kant divulges the answer as a Republican:

“Laziness and cowardice are the reasons why such a large proportion of men, even when nature has long emancipated them from alien guidance[...]nevertheless gladly remain immature for life. For the same reasons, it is all too easy for others to set themselves up as their guardians. It is so convenient to be immature! If I have a book to have understanding in place of me, a spiritual adviser to have a conscience for me, a doctor to judge my diet for me, and so on, I need not make any efforts at all. I need not think, so long as I can pay; others will soon enough take the tiresome job over me. The guardians who have kindly taken upon themselves the work of supervision will soon see to it that by far the largest part of mankind (including the entire fair sex) should consider the step forward to maturity not only as difficult but also as highly dangerous. Having first infatuated their domesticated animals, and carefully prevented the docile creatures from daring to take a single step without the leading-strings to which they are tied, they next show them the danger which threatens them if they try to walk unaided. Now this danger is not in fact so very great, for they would certainly learn to walk eventually after a few falls. But an example of this kind is intimidating, and usually frightens them off from further attempts.” [\[13\]](#)

Upon what is Enlightenment contingent? Kant is wise to elaborate:

*“For enlightenment of this kind, all that is needed is **freedom**. And the freedom in question is the most innocuous form of all—freedom to make **public use** of one’s reason in all matters.”* [\[14\]](#)

Kant addresses the question, “*whether we at present live in an enlightened age*”, with the disclosure that “*No, but we do live in an age of enlightenment.*” [\[15\]](#)

Do we live in an “enlightened age” today? The answer is still a clarion “No.” The realizations of the proper sciences have since surmounted the Kantian era by leaps and bounds. The development of engineering immediately begot several other revolutions. The horrors of two world wars, the anathema of the holocaust nevertheless register no other possible answer. One thing is however certain: The availability of information of all varieties has expanded at an incredible rate. The chance to leaven *oneself* with enlightenment, to rend away the endless veils of disinformation, has never been so great as it is today. The chance is there to be taken, and it remains as ever a question of will and mettle to realize public utility from one’s own faculties and insight.

[\[*\]](#) This regards the details of a lecture held by the author before the Rotary Club of Hamburg-Lombardsbrücke on June 13th, 2012.

[\[1\]](#) *Immanuel Kant* , The Philosophy of Law: An Exposition of the Fundamental Principles of Jurisprudence as the Science of Right, trans. W. Hastie (Edinburgh: Clark, 1887), p. 110 .

[\[2\]](#) *Heinrich Heine*, Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland, in: *Heinrich Heine*, Lyrik und Prosa, published by Martin Greiner, Frankfurt a.M. 1962 (Büchergilde Gutenberg), Vol. 2, P. 461.

[\[3\]](#) *Walter Benjamin*, Deutsche Menschen – Eine Folge von Briefen, newly edited 1984, p. 23.

[\[4\]](#) *Immanuel Kant* : Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens, transl. Ian Johnston (Nanaimo: Vancouver Island University, 2009) 22.

[\[5\]](#) Ibid. 9.

[\[6\]](#) Ibid.

[\[7\]](#) Ibid. 7.

[\[8\]](#) This information draws from Wikipedia: http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Index_Liborum_Prohibitorum

[\[9\]](#) *Immanuel Kant* , The Critique of Pure Reason, trans. J.M.D. Meiklejohn (NuVision Publications, 2005), p. 245.

[10] *Immanuel Kant*, *The Philosophy of Law: An Exposition of the Fundamental Principles of Jurisprudence as the Science of Right*, trans. W. Hastie (Edinburgh: Clark, 1887), p. 210.

[11] *Ibid.* 210-211.

[12] Manfred Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 342.

[13] Immanuel Kant, *Political Writings*, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 54.

[14] *Ibid.* 55.

[15] *Ibid.* 58.