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# IMMANUELIO KANTO ATSAKYMAS Į KLAUSIMĄ „KAS YRA APŠVIETA?“

## Immanuel Kant's Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?

### SUMMARY

The article provides a historically informed exposition of Immanuel Kant's notion of enlightenment. The 18th century marked the zenith of absolute monarchy in Europe. The century was accompanied by the emergence of new social, economic, and technological conditions and the simultaneous rise of an intellectual culture that sought a wider public adoption of independent critical thinking through the proliferation of schools and academies across the Old Continent. This was the semantic setting in which Kant poses and answers the question of enlightenment. The article explicates the individual and societal aspects of the Kantian concept of enlightenment, while stressing their argumentative dependency on the analytic distinction between the public and private uses of reason. Enlightenment is conceived by Kant as a gradual progress both of the individual and of society towards a fuller mastery of their rational capacities, especially as they pertain to the public sphere of life. The philosopher's insights are as relevant to our times as they were to his.

### SANTRAUKA

Straipsnyje, išskleidus istorinį kultūrinį kontekstą, filosofškai aiškinama Immanuelio Kanto Apšvietos samprata. XVIII a. Europos kraštuose žymėjo absoliutinių monarchijų zenitą, lydėtą naujų socialinių, ekonominių ir technologinių sąlygų, o kartu ir naujos intelektualinės kultūros, modernėjančiose Senojo Žemyno visuomenėse per sparčiai steigiamų mokyklų ir akademijų tinklą skiepijusios savarankišką kritinę mąstyseną. Apšvietos klausimą Kantas formulavo būtent šioje semantinėje aplinkoje. Straipsnyje išryškunami individualusis ir visuomeninis kantiškosios Apšvietos sampratos pūviai, pabrėžiant jų argumentinę priklausomybę nuo analitinės skirties tarp viešo ir privataus protavimo būdų. Apšvietą Kantas suvokė kaip laipsnišką tiek individo, tiek visuomenės pažangą visapusiškiau įvaldant racionaliąsias žmogaus gebas, ypač jų taikymą viešajame gyvenime. Filosofo įžvalgos dabartinei visuomenei aktualios ne mažiau nei anuometinei.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: Immanuel Kant, Apšvieta, XVIII amžius, intelektualinė kultūra, Europa.

KEY WORDS: Immanuel Kant, Enlightenment, eighteenth century, intellectual culture, Europe.

## A CONCISE INTRODUCTION TO THE HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL MILIEU OF ENLIGHTENMENT

The question 'What is enlightenment?' allows of two interpretations. By posing this question I may wish to know what the *age* of Enlightenment is, or I may inquire into man's<sup>1</sup> *quality* of being enlightened. In his article entitled, "Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?"<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Kant's concern is for the most part with the "quality," not the "age," yet the very name of the age of Enlightenment stems precisely from a certain human quality, quality to be enlightened, which became the cultural hallmark of a definite historical period (the eighteenth century) in a specific part of the world (Europe).<sup>3</sup> Hence, before I begin unfolding the main points which Kant discusses under the question 'What is enlightenment?,' I wish to provide a concise cultural sketch of the very epoch<sup>4</sup> in which Kant had lived, thought, and wrote, the epoch, that is, of Enlightenment.

In the long run of the Western history, the age of Enlightenment was preceded and followed by two other notorious ages, those of Baroque and Romanticism. Its beginning was ushered in by the revocation of the Nant Edict in France (1685) whereby the French Huguenots were forced out of the country and by the Glorious Revolution of Great Britain (1688) in which the British parliament deposed James II and made legal enactments justifying the regal ascent of William III. Its end was signaled by the oncoming of the French Revolution in 1789.

It was during the age of Enlightenment that the dominance of absolute monarchy reached its highest stage. In France it was the reign of Louis IV (d. 1715) with its memorable extravagance established in Versailles, as well as no less spectacular kingships of his namesakes Louis V (d. 1774) and Louis VI (d. 1793). The same form of government also prevailed in Prussia, Spain, Russia, Austria, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and England of the eighteenth century.

Even so, it was a time of social, if not political, emancipation wrought through the emergence of new economic conditions. The realm of intellectual culture was, too, undergoing a transformation which was expressed primarily through an explicit, often politically motivated, emphasis on education, public as well as private. It became almost an attribute of every principality and every duchy, to have a school attached to it like, say, *die hohe Karlsschule* of Charles Eugene Solitude of Württemberg which Frederic von Schiller defected when he flew from the duchy. The nineteenth-century duke had his own theater, ball, sentry, and now he also had his own high school or even academy<sup>5</sup>. Thus, just in seventeenth-century Paris alone, there were established 'Académie française' (1635) for the advancement of language, 'Académie des sciences' (1666) with an orientation toward the natural sciences, and 'Académie des inscriptions et des belles lettres' (1663) for the pursuit of historical studies.

Yet, it was in the age of Enlightenment that the institution of academy assumed quite novel tasks and functions with regard to the political and social structure of the state and thereby turned from a private association of scholars into a public academic organization funded and supervised by the Monarch himself. For an illustration of an “enlightened academy” let me describe the Royal Academy of Berlin (*Königliche Akademie in Berlin*). It was established by Prince Frederic of Brandenburg in 1701. Its first academic curator was Gotfried Wilhelm Leibniz. His idea for the academy was threefold: to spread the Christian worldview by way of science, to advance and stimulate the sciences, and to care for the good reputation of the German nation by enhancing its erudition and refining its language.

The diversification of scientific disciplines was set in motion. Just a century ago, at a regular European university there were but three theoretical specializations: theology, jurisprudence, and medicine. Any further specification of skill had to be developed in the working field of one’s practice after the completion of the university studies. To be sure, the Royal Academy of Berlin was also divided into four more or less traditional departments of theoretic investigations: experimental philosophy (chemistry, anatomy, botany), mathematical philosophy (geometry, algebra, mechanics, astronomy), speculative philosophy (ethics, metaphysics), and the fine arts (history, philology). Soon, however, there appeared such disciplines as engineering and marketing, besides,

there were founded schools of public and private services (*Kameralschulen*) and military schools.

The enlightened man seems to bear three unique traits: a positive view of the future, freedom of opinion, and a sympathetic sense of tolerance, each, of course, in a relative degree. One is no longer called upon to look backwards, but forwards. Not the ideal past, but the future, which he is to create, using his own reason and his own spiritual strength, that represents for him a state of happiness. The riches of the human nature, its drive for perfection, its capacity to achieve cultural progress – these are the things on which the hopes of the enlightened man should rest. He is a liberated man, ever more conscious of his moral and intellectual freedom, he is the master no less of his own thought as he is of his action. The hallmark of the eighteenth-century philosophy is a critical and free conversation about any topic without fear of disgrace. Just about anything can become a philosophical object: morality, religion, politics, art, science etc., so long as it does not address concrete names and retains a sufficient degree of abstraction. Finally, the enlightened man evolves a kind of cultural cosmopolitanism. Not only does he implement an order of (negative) tolerance and thereby refrains from attacking those members of society which hold different political, moral, or religious views than his, but he makes an active attempt to penetrate the understanding of these men, to adopt their cultural perspective, to master their language, to feel like they do.

## TURNING TO THE QUESTION: WHAT IS ENLIGHTENMENT?

Keeping this brief historical portrayal of the epoch of Enlightenment in mind, let me now turn to the main topic of my essay, Kant's answer to the question: What is enlightenment? Well, what does it mean to be an enlightened man? It is to be free from a state of dependence on others for which a person is himself responsible. By dependence Kant intends a person's inability to exercise his own mind without the help of others (see Kant 1996: 48).

Kant isolates two principal reasons why individuals in their thought are dependent upon others. *First*, it is their own sloth and timidity which stand in the way of liberating the understanding of men. Sloth, because it is so easy to let others judge and decide, to submit oneself to external commands without learning their meaning or ever taking an initiative. Timidity, because personal conviction may cause many inconveniences, may demand responsibility on account of one's words and deeds, may arouse social tension and strain. *Second*, we find that in society there is a class of men who think of themselves as patrons and protectors and assume the role of tending those who are weak, in need of guidance and instruction, who require that their lives be ordered from above by more illuminate minds. Such leaders have a rather negative effect on commoners in that they treat the latter as if they were children never to grow up and start deciding for themselves and thus hamper commoners – even if at the risk of making a few errors – from choosing on their own and acting independently. Kant as-

serts, and does so without qualification, that the existence of an elitist class which arrogates to itself the monopoly of education and behaves as though it were the father and the rest of society were needy children is noxious and detrimental for all of citizenry.

It is interesting to note, however, that although Kant does stress that men who in their thought and action are dependent on others are usually themselves to be blamed, still he claims that people left to themselves are naturally prone to learn and thus their uneducatedness is for the better part caused by external factors such as somebody else's will (e.g., church's, nobility's).

Kant begins his essay with a succinct theoretical reply to the question 'What is enlightenment?', a reply, moreover, which underscores what it means for *an individual* to be an enlightened human person. Yet, as soon as Kant starts examining various possibilities of how a state of enlightenment might be introduced into the actual historical, social, and political conditions of a concrete society, he concludes that the emergence of an enlightened society must precede the universal fact that *all* of its members are *de facto* enlightened. That is to say, a state in which a group of enlightened men teach the rest to become *like* themselves, to wit, to become enlightened and independent even of their *actual* teachers, such a state may already be called an enlightened state, though not all of its members are yet enlightened. This cultural progress forms a small number of educated citizens to an ever larger *cannot*

be accomplished by way of a political revolution. A reform in thinking can be achieved only by slow and arduous effort, involving more than one generation, to learn reading and writing, absorb the lessons of history, expand the horizons of one's soul to comprise an ever great portion of the universe.

Well, if to be enlightened means to exercise one's mind freely and independently, will not this manifesto lead, as soon as it is realized on a societal scale, to an uncurbed pluralism of opinion as numerous as there are free and independent minds? And will not such political conditions imply nothing short of the collapse of the state whose order may be secured only by some form of *unified* will directed to *one* consistent set of goals? How are we to reconcile the pluralism of opinion with the singularism of political government? In order to solve his dilemma, Kant avails himself of the distinction between 'public' and 'private' uses of reason.

Kant applies the terms 'public' and 'private' in a somewhat odd way, though perhaps odd for our generation but not his. By private use of reason Kant intends the exercise of one's mental powers in accord with duties of the public office one represents. In using his reason privately, a person is an extension of his public occupation. A priest must proclaim what the church teaches, a soldier must follow the commands of his superior; as long as the errands assigned to the priest and the soldier do not in principle conflict with their deepest moral attitudes, the primary duty of both is to *obey*, not to reflect. Hence, in the sphere

of private use of reason citizens are dependent on the pre-established order of the political community they are members of. It would amount to a disintegration of society if every individual in it would run his duties only when he likes them, only when he thinks they are acceptable to him as *this* man. A lawyer would administer law only when it pleases his conscience or at least does not trouble it, a soldier would carry out the commands of his general only if he does not find them reprehensible, a priest would proclaim only those items of the ecclesiastic doctrine which meet his personal beliefs and will neglect any other church teaching which he does not understand or outright rejects. Such situations, however, cannot be tolerated in the field of *political action*. No pluralism here!

The second, public use of reason is where every citizen should liberate himself as much as possible. In contrast to the private use of reason, its public exercise consists in man's ability to voice his personal views to the general public, by speech or writing, on some definite matter. This is the proper form of human enlightenment: freedom to exchange and share opinions publicly such that they become subject to open discussion and criticism. The goal of enlightenment is not so much to prove that every man has the right to declare his personal conviction as that he is able to have such a thing as *his own* conviction to begin with.

The significant difference between private and public use of reason is the latter's merely theoretical nature. Public use of reason is confined to the world of thought and deliberation, it should not

enter the world of action, as it is the case with the private use of reason. Thus, two distinct intellectual dispositions should be accommodated by one and the same man: on the one hand, he is expected to suspend his deliberative powers and simply follow the rules determined by some higher authority, on the other, he is urged to develop his own world view, to make his own judgments, and, moreover, to share them openly with others.

How do these two uses of reason, the private and the public, interact, and what is the practical principle of having them *both* in *one* man? Kant's reply is as brief as it is lucid: philosophize as much as you wish about whatever you wish, yet *obey!* Supposedly, these are the words of Frederic II, emperor of Prussia, at the time of Kant, words which Kant accepts and even praises. Of course, it would be ideal if we were in possession of perfect harmony between our beliefs and our duties, still both spheres may retain a considerable degree of autonomy even in the case, when there is a gap between what we think and what we are obliged to do. And the two worlds, that of private and that of public uses of reason, are by no means unbridgeable for Kant. What is at first just a public opinion *may* in due time become a part of public order, what is thought may sooner or later become what is also done. The political procedure enabling such a practical transition from thinking to acting in the state is, according to Kant, twofold: first, a given opinion should become widespread among the members of society; second, it should receive an official formulation, be voted for and enacted.

Since the state Kant is a citizen of was a monarchy, he does not fail to pay attention to its imperial head, the monarch. Here, too, Kant's distinction between private and public uses of reason is apparent. In as much as the monarch represents his office, thus in his private function, his will must be the unified will of the people, *not* his own will. The monarch for Kant, it seems, is the ultimate spokesman of democracy, he is the singularization of its plurality. His duty, is, first, to mirror the will of his subjects, the citizens, second, to watch that this will be practically realized and maintained. In his public function, however, the monarch has no more say than any other fellow citizen. In fact, Kant warns the monarch against playing the sage where he should not. *Caesar non est supra grammaticos*<sup>6</sup> (Kant 1963: 8) is Kant's brave admonition to the head of the monarchy.

As a final point in Kant's article comes his historical estimation of his own culture. Thus, at the end of the eighteenth century, Kant asks: "Do we now live in an *enlightened age?*" and immediately responds: "No" (*ibid.*). It is not yet enlightened, says Kant, but it is *being* enlightened, enlightenment has not yet been accomplished, but it is in the making.

Hence, enlightenment or the ability to exercise one's mind freely and independently, was more of an ideal than a reality in the eighteenth century, and it has remained so, let me insert, up until now. Perhaps we know what progress means in human enlightenment, its completion, however, escapes our imagination.

## CONCLUSION

The 18th century marked the zenith of absolute monarchy in Europe, accompanied by the emergence of new social, economic, and technological conditions and the simultaneous rise of an intellectual culture that sought a wider public adoption of independent critical thinking through the proliferation of schools and academies across the Old Continent. This is the semantic setting in which Kant poses and answers the question of enlightenment. Special heed must be paid

to the individual and societal aspects of the Kantian concept of enlightenment and their argumentative dependency on the analytic distinction between the public and private uses of reason. Enlightenment is conceived by Kant as a gradual progress of both the individual and society towards a fuller mastery of their rational capacities, especially as they pertain to the public sphere of life. The philosopher's insights are as relevant to our times as they were to his.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Throughout the article, I shall adhere to the generic usage of the words 'man' and 'men,' including the masculine personal pronouns referring to them, to signify 'human' and 'humans,' respectively.
- <sup>2</sup> The article was first published in (Kant 1784).
- <sup>3</sup> By Europe as a "specific part of the world" I intend a much broader geographical area than the European continent *per se*, thus, including the British Isles as well as the many colonies which, though interspersed all around the world, still were greatly influenced by the Anglo-Saxon and European patterns of living.
- <sup>4</sup> See (Hof 1993). My historical knowledge about the age of Enlightenment is based on *this* book.
- <sup>5</sup> The latter type of institution, namely, the academy, did not originate with the age of Enlightenment, it was begun by Plato circa 4th century BC and carried on with several intermissions through the times of Hellenism, the first centuries of Christianity, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, all the way to the Modern era.
- <sup>6</sup> That is, "The ruler is not superior to the men of learning."