

1.4 IMMANUEL KANT (1724–1804)

Kant was born in Königsberg, East Prussia, a remote fragment of Germany that was eventually separated from the rest of the country by a strip of Poland and finally absorbed by Poland. It was a region of large estates and poor peasants.

Kant was born into the family of a very poor leatherworker who made straps for harnesses. He was one of eleven children of whom several died in childhood. His sisters worked as domestic servants, and his parents were buried as paupers because the family was too poor to pay the fees for a religious burial. His parents were devout Pietists, one of the many denominations of Protestants. They awakened not only Immanuel's religious faith but also a love of nature, poetry, and learning, as well as a sense of kindness and duty. The free public schools of Königsberg enabled him to obtain an education, and his teachers and family encouraged him to attend the local university. His uncle, a shoemaker, helped him financially during his studies.

Kant struggled to make a living, first as a tutor for wealthy families and later as a librarian and *Privatdozent*, an unpaid "contingent" lecturer whose income was entirely based on his ability to attract students—his customers—to his courses. He lectured in mathematics, anthropology, physical geography, and teacher training, as well as philosophy. He held this type of appointment from 1755 to 1770 and was 47 years old before he became a salaried professor and finally enjoyed a measure of security and institutional recognition for his prodigious achievements as a scholar. The academic employment situation was difficult; the University of Königsberg had only 16 salaried faculty and a few hundred students, and further reductions loomed after the Seven Years' War amid the growing poverty of the region.

His lifestyle matched his meagre finances and, even more so, his general sense of limits. Until he was 59, "he had no house of his own, but was a changing lodger in one unsatisfactory boarding house after another."¹ He never travelled—late in life he set out in a stagecoach to visit Berlin at the urging of friends, but he got off within a few miles of home and turned back.² Nor did he marry. One biographer remarks, "Indeed, he may be said to have been born unmarried."³ He did however have a servant. He was slight of stature, a bit hunched, and, at less than 5 feet, very short even by the standards of the times when the average height of Europeans was far shorter than it is today. He suffered from problems of the lungs and stomach—but lived to be 80. At midday, he ate a full meal that stretched from 1 till 4 in the afternoon and that was always enjoyed in the company of friends. For breakfast and supper, he consumed only a cup of coffee and a slice of bread. He rose at 5 AM, worked in the morning, took a walk at 4 PM after his midday meal, and went to bed at 10; it is said that his habits were so regular that neighbours could set their clocks by him.

Despite his limited means and extraordinarily circumscribed life, Kant was kind, alert, vivacious, generous, helpful to his siblings, and hospitable once he had his own home. Students were attracted to his lectures by not only his knowledge but also his animation and sense of humour. He was immensely interested in and informed about science, current events, and political systems. As one can deduce from the selection "What is Enlightenment?" he sympathized with the French and American revolutions. Even colleagues who were not his friends admired his "frankness and intrepidity," and he was widely recognized for speaking

out against despotism, for democracy, and, above all, for the rule of law.⁴ Though the Prussian government was hardly democratic and the authorities made him apologize for some published remarks about religion, he was not expelled from the university, imprisoned, or physically harmed (even when he reiterated his views later), a noticeable contrast to the repression of intellectuals in many states of our own times.

One of his biographers sums up his life with the words “rich and happy.”⁵ Though outwardly constrained, Kant’s life was enriched by intellectual stimulation, the company of friends, wide-ranging interests, a sense of production and accomplishment, and a fulfilling routine that he was able to enjoy till his very last years.

Notes

1. George Herbert Palmer, “Opening Words,” in *Immanuel Kant 1724–1924*, ed. E.C. Wilm (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1925), 3. [Return to text.](#)
2. Carl J. Friedrich, “Introduction,” in *The Philosophy of Kant: Immanuel Kant’s Moral and Political Writings*, ed. Carl J. Friedrich (New York: Random House, 1949), xliii. [Return to text.](#)
3. Palmer, 5. [Return to text.](#)
4. Friedrich, xlv–xlv. [Return to text.](#)
5. Palmer, 13. [Return to text.](#)

Kant's "What Is Enlightenment?" (1784)

"An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant is an essay published in 1784 in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* [Berlin Monthly] as a compact response to the question posed by Reverend Johann Friedrich Zöllner to a broad intellectual public in 1783 (a year that falls between the American Declaration of Independence and the French Revolution). Although Kant's essay was one of many responses, it was by far the most famous. It serves as a founding moment of sociological thought and a touchstone for thinkers that followed Kant. Consider Kant's response to "What is Enlightenment?" as a baseline for the readings that comprise this volume. Consider how this question resonates in a conversation across time. It is a question continually returned to, reworked by, and responded to by the theorists you will encounter later in this book—whether "classical" thinkers such as Durkheim and Weber, "mid-twentieth-century" thinkers such as Adorno and Horkheimer, or even contemporary theorists from Habermas to Foucault. Consider how Kant's driving question "What is Enlightenment?" can be transposed to our own time and rephrased as "What does it mean to be modern?" or, more colloquially, "What does it mean to live today in contemporary twenty-first-century North America?"¹

In our previous selection, Zeitlin argues that the heart of Enlightenment thought was the negative-critical stance towards institutions. The *philosophes* of the French Enlightenment questioned the social and political arrangements of their time and, by implication, those of every epoch. Institutions limit our ability to realize our full capacities and potentials. Institutions that are hierarchical, rigid, and based on unquestioning adherence to custom and established religion (as were the institutions of Europe's monarchies and feudal states) are particularly constraining and deserve to be dismantled. The documents that proclaim these values of the Enlightenment include Rousseau's reflection that human beings are born free but are everywhere in chains, *The Rights of Man* (written by Thomas Paine and adopted as a founding document in revolutionary France), Mary Wollstonecroft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (claiming the rights of men for women as well), and the Declaration of Independence of the United States (in which a slaveholder—considered exploitive and mean-spirited even by his slave-owning peers—wrote stirringly not only of liberty and equality but also of the universal right to pursue happiness).

Kant offers a different definition of enlightenment, one more attuned to individual thought than to society and its institutions. For Kant, enlightenment is the individual capacity to think independently, to free oneself not from social arrangements but from the doctrines and ideologies imposed by others. "Have the courage to use your own intelligence!" he writes. Kant begins by arguing that we must free ourselves from "immaturity"—from the tutelage of authority, custom, and obedience to others—and actualize our faculty of reason and the capacity it holds for self-determination. Enlightenment, for Kant, is not a sense of overcoming our underdeveloped nature, rather it is to actualize our potential for freedom as collective social subjects.² Thus, Kant ushers in the motto of the Enlightenment—"dare to know"—as the call to overcome unthinking obedience through the development and deployment of our critical faculties in the service of freedom.

The exercise of this capacity might well eventually lead to new social and political

arrangements, but Kant “goes there” only briefly at the end of the full text of this essay (not included here). For Kant, the essence of enlightenment is autonomous thought rather than a negative-critical stance toward the existing social order.

Kant distinguishes public statements from the positions that one must take in the course of one’s occupational and institutional responsibilities (which he calls “private” whether or not they are literally in the public or the private sector). The public intellectual (whom Kant calls “the scholar”) speaks to everyone and does so openly, whereas the institutionally anchored individual must speak and act in a more limited sphere defined by administrative and occupational responsibilities and competence; this individual is therefore constrained by organizational and institutional imperatives. The public intellectual, unlike the functionary of an institution, must be able and willing to express his or her thought freely and truthfully. Recognizing that individuals may hold dual roles (as public intellectual and as institutional functionary), Kant’s formulation opens the door to role conflict within one’s self—contention between the scholar who speaks the truth in a public arena and the institutional representative who must be compliant to institutional demands.

In the last portion of the essay (not reprinted here), Kant suggests that an enlightened despot may establish a freer realm of speech and ideas—especially with regard to religious thought—than a state with apparently more civic freedom. The despot is satisfied with outward behavioural obedience and therefore can be comfortable with the expression of autonomous thought. This hypothesis of Kant’s converges with Alexis de Tocqueville’s critical view of the United States as a society in which democracy has actually produced conformity of thought.

Because Kant’s essay is directed to the general public, the call to critical thinking and transcendental reflection (the conceptual activity of thinking about what is conceptually possible, of considering the concepts through which we interpret and make sense of the world) is not one issued to philosophers alone. As a result, Kant’s critique is not simply a philosophical one in terms of the role of reason or the meaning of being a human being. Rather, he is offering a social critique in terms of the role of reason in social life and the uses of reason to both promote enlightenment and maintain social order among the collective subjects of the republic governed by reason. Because Kant’s critique is not only social but historical as well, the use of reason must be applied to thinking reflexively about the historical conditions within which the question about enlightenment is asked. Because we live in an “age of enlightenment,” we must use this temporal location as a springboard to examine the sociohistorical conditions that define the age. In addition, we must identify the political-economic structures that enable or constrain the type of freedom Kant is proposing.

Notes

1. The interpretation of this question is a slight modification of that raised by Michel Foucault in his own essay “What is Enlightenment?” which views Kant’s question as being one of difference: “What difference does today introduce with respect to yesterday?” See Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York, Pantheon Books, 1984), 32–50, see p. 33. [Return to text.](#)
2. This notion of the faculty being in the collective and not in the individual also appears in Kant’s theory of history. See Immanuel Kant, “Idea of a University History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View,” in *Theories of History*, ed. Patrick

Gardiner (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1959), 22–34, see p. 24. [Return to text.](#)

Reading 1.4: “What Is Enlightenment?” (1784)

[Source: Immanuel Kant, “What Is Enlightenment?” in *The Philosophy of Kant: Immanuel Kant’s Moral and Political Writings*, ed. Carl J. Friedrich (New York: Random House, 1949), 132–37.]

Enlightenment is man’s leaving his self-caused immaturity. Immaturity is the incapacity to use one’s intelligence without the guidance of another. Such immaturity is self-caused if it is not caused by lack of intelligence, but by lack of determination and courage to use one’s intelligence without being guided by another. *Sapere Aude!* Have the courage to use your own intelligence! is therefore the motto of the enlightenment.

Through laziness and cowardice a large part of mankind, even after nature has freed them from alien guidance, gladly remain immature. It is because of laziness and cowardice that it is so easy for others to usurp the role of guardians. It is so comfortable to be a minor! If I have a book which provides meaning for me, a pastor who has conscience for me, a doctor who will judge my diet for me and so on, then I do not need to exert myself. I do not have any need to think; if I can pay, others will take over the tedious job for me. The guardians who have kindly undertaken the supervision will see to it that by far the largest part of mankind, including the entire “beautiful sex,” should consider the step into maturity, not only as difficult but as very dangerous.

After having made their domestic animals dumb and having carefully prevented these quiet creatures from daring to take any step beyond the lead-strings to which they have fastened them, these guardians then show them the danger which threatens them, should they attempt to walk alone. Now this danger is not really so very great; for they would presumably learn to walk after some stumbling. However, an example of this kind intimidates and frightens people out of all further attempts.

It is difficult for the isolated individual to work himself out of the immaturity which has become almost natural for him. He has even become fond of it and for the time being is incapable of employing his own intelligence, because he has never been allowed to make the attempt. Statutes and formulas, these mechanical tools of a serviceable use, or rather misuse, of his natural faculties, are the ankle-chains of a continuous immaturity. Whoever threw it off would make an uncertain jump over the smallest trench because he is not accustomed to such free movement. Therefore there are only a few who have pursued a firm path and have succeeded in escaping from immaturity by their own cultivation of the mind.

But it is more nearly possible for a public to enlighten itself: this is even inescapable if only the public is given its freedom. For there will always be some people who think for themselves, even among the self-appointed guardians of the great mass who, after having thrown off the yoke of immaturity themselves, will spread about them the spirit of a reasonable estimate of their own value and of the need for every man to think for himself. It is strange that the very public, which had previously been put under this yoke by the guardians, forces the guardians thereafter to keep it there if it is stirred up by a few of its guardians who are themselves incapable of all enlightenment. It is thus very harmful to plant prejudices, because they come back to plague those very people who themselves (or whose predecessors) have been the originators of these prejudices. Therefore a public can only arrive at enlightenment slowly. Through revolution, the abandonment of personal despotism may

be engendered and the end of profit-seeking and domineering oppression may occur, but never a true reform of the state of mind. Instead, new prejudices, just like the old ones, will serve as the guiding reins of the great, unthinking mass.

All that is required for this enlightenment is *freedom*; and particularly the least harmful of all that may be called freedom, namely, the freedom for man to make *public use* of his reason in all matters. But I hear people clamor on all sides: Don't argue! The officer says: Don't argue, drill! The tax collector: Don't argue, pay! The pastor: Don't argue, believe! (Only a single lord in the world says: *Argue*, as much as you want to and about what you please, *but obey!*) Here we have restrictions on freedom everywhere. Which restriction is hampering enlightenment, and which does not, or even promotes it? I answer: The *public use* of a man's reason must be free at all times, and this alone can bring enlightenment among men: while the private use of a man's reason may often be restricted rather narrowly without thereby unduly hampering the progress of enlightenment.

I mean by the public use of one's reason, the use which a scholar makes of it before the entire reading public. Private use I call the use which he may make of this reason in a civic post or office. For some affairs which are in the interest of the commonwealth a certain mechanism is necessary through which some members of the commonwealth must remain purely passive in order that an artificial agreement with the government for the public good be maintained or so that at least the destruction of the good be prevented. In such a situation it is not permitted to argue; one must obey. But in so far as this unit of the machine considers himself as a member of the entire commonwealth, in fact even of world society; in other words, he considers himself in the quality of a scholar who is addressing the true public through his writing, he may indeed argue without the affairs suffering for which he is employed partly as a passive member. Thus it would be very harmful if an officer who, given an order by his superior, should start, while in the service, to argue concerning the utility or appropriateness of that command. He must obey, but he cannot equitably be prevented from making observations as a scholar concerning the mistakes in the military service nor from submitting these to the public for its judgment. The citizen cannot refuse to pay the taxes imposed upon him. Indeed, a rash criticism of such taxes, if they are the ones to be paid by him, may be punished as a scandal which might cause general resistance. But the same man does not act contrary to the duty of a citizen if, as a scholar, he utters publicly his thoughts against the undesirability or even the injustice of such taxes. Likewise a clergyman is obliged to teach his pupils and his congregation according to the doctrine of the church which he serves, for he has been accepted on that condition. But as a scholar, he has full freedom, in fact, even the obligation, to communicate to the public all his diligently examined and well-intentioned thoughts concerning erroneous points in that doctrine and concerning proposals regarding the better institution of religious and ecclesiastical matters.