

# Kant and The Enlightenment

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## **Published in:**

*Philosophical and humanistic postmodern views : international scientific conference : Iasi, 21st of May – 3rd of June 2012 / coord.: Ana Caras, Elena Unguru. - Iasi : Lumen, 2012*  
ISBN 978-973-166-336-4, pp. 493-506

## **Abstract**

This paper aims to understand Kant's conception of Enlightenment and, in particular the idea of "*Sapere Aude*" (dare to think for yourself), described in his article published in 1784 *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment ?* where he defines pre-enlightened people as living in a self-imposed "minority". In the first part of the article, I will develop this notion, along with a process of domestication of human beings. In the second part, I will examine the solutions proposed to overcome this situation, with particular emphasis on the development by the State, of the so-called "public use of reason".

## **Key-words**

Kant, Enlightenment, Sapere Aude, Reason, Philosophy

## Introduction

Kant's ideas on the Enlightenment are especially prevalent in his well-known article "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" published in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* (a monthly journal published in Berlin) in December of 1784. As its title indicates, it is an answer to a question that the reverend Zöllner posed one year earlier in the same journal. For Foucault, Kant's article will have important consequences in relation to modern philosophy, not only for its attempt to define the Enlightenment, but most importantly for connecting philosophy to its present and for being "at the crossroads of critical reflection and reflection on history. It is a reflection by Kant on the contemporary status of his own enterprise (...). And, by looking at it in this way, it seems to me we may recognize a point of departure: the outline of what one might call the attitude of modernity (...) struggling with attitudes of « countermodernity »" (Foucault, 1984, pp. 38-39). In the same sense, according to Paton, Kant is "the apostle of human freedom and the champion of the common man". Thus "a truer view of Kant's ethics will show him as the philosopher, not of rigorism, but of humanity" (Paton, 1948, pp. 171 & 198). Ferrari echoes this by calling Kant's work "the invention of man" (Ferrari, 1971, pp. 19-20). In a famous passage, Kant writes:

*Enlightenment is the human being's emergence from his self-incurred minority. Minority is inability to make use of one's own understanding without direction from another. This minority is self-incurred when its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. Sapere aude! Have courage to make use of your own*

understanding! is thus the motto of enlightenment (...). I have put the main point of enlightenment, of people's emergence from their self-incurred minority, chiefly in matters of religion because our rulers have no interests in playing guardian over their subjects with respect to the arts and sciences and also because this minority, being the most harmful, is also the most disgraceful of all (Kant, 1784, pp. 17 & 21)

To define the Enlightenment, Kant reinterprets "*Sapere Aude*". This idea has its origins in Horace's *Epistles* (I. II, 40): *dimidium facti qui coepit habet: sapere aude, incipe*: "He who has begun is half done: dare to know" (Horace, 1994, p. 59). Kant interpretation of "*Sapere Aude*" changes its meaning slightly from the original passage, when found in its classical context. Horace rather meant "Dare to be wise" to achieve a balance in your inner soul. Kant was able to reinterpret this idea to the degree that it was chosen, in 1736, as the motto of the so-called "Friends of Truth" ("*Alethophilen*"). This society was founded in the courts of Berlin by Count Manteuffel and was frequented by Frederick II of Prussia. It was intended to openly spread the ideas of Wolff and Leibniz. It is important to remember that Kant was introduced to the ideas of these two philosophers (by teacher Martin Knutzen) at the age of 16 when he entered the University of Königsberg. Along with introducing Kant to Wolff and Leibniz, Knutzen also exposed him to the ideas of Newton (Muglioni, 1994, p. 44; Venturi, 1959, pp. 119-128). Thus, Kant conceives the Enlightenment as the liberation ("*emergence*") of human beings, and establishes its formal basis through the "think for oneself" principle. He also insists that this "minority" is derived from its own unique responsibility. In this situation, lack of courage and daring are found but not lack of intelligence. A "pre-enlightened" person would be an individual who would let his mind be controlled by others. The Enlightenment put an end to this apathy and coincides with the will of human beings to run the risk of thinking for themselves. It is

important to remember that the German word, “*Aufklärung*” includes a concept that does not appear in English (“Enlightenment”), French (“*Lumières*”) or Spanish (“*Ilustración*”) versions. More specifically, it means a process by which light is diffused and clarity is obtained. Therefore, “*Was ist Aufklärung?*” should be translated as “What is the process of the Enlightenment?” (Muglioni, 1994, p.19). Kant’s approach should be interpreted as a reflection on the evolution and the conditions of the Enlightenment.

In this paper, I would like to point out that many ideas that Kant expresses in this article are derived from more general approaches developed in advance and continue to deepen in later writings. One of the originalities of this text is its clear and politically committed tone to achieve a better understanding by a broad audience of readers. At the same time it praises (in some aspects) the reign of Frederick the Great and anticipates the religious mysticism and other vicissitudes of his successor (In 1784, Frederick II was 72 year old. In 1786, his nephew, Frederick William accessed to the throne). In the first part of this paper, I will examine why humans are in this “minority”. I will develop Kant’s explanation of the “domestication” of human beings. In the second part, I will examine the solutions proposed to overcome this situation, with particular emphasis on the development by the State, of the so-called “public use of reason”.

## 1. The “Domestication” of Human Beings: The Origin of “Minority”

Enlightenment is an unfinished process that directs mankind to progress. In fact:

If it is now asked whether we at present live in an *enlightened* age, the answer is: No, but we do in an *age of enlightenment*. As matters now stand, a good deal more is required for people on the

whole to be in the position, or even able to put into the position, of using their own understanding confidently and well in religious matters, without another's guidance (Kant, 1784, p. 21)

There are several reasons why we do not live in an "enlightened age". One reason could be anthropological, as shown in *Universal Natural History and Theory of Heaven* (1755). According to Kant, the passivity of men is maintained because mankind feels there is no reason to rebel. Laziness fits comfortably within the physical nature of a human being:

When we look for the cause of the obstacles which keep human nature so debased, we find it in the coarseness of the material stuff in which his spiritual component is buried, in the stiffness of the fibres and the sluggishness and immobility of the fluids which should obey the movements of his spirit (Kant, 1755, pp. 148-149)

The same argument reappears in Kant's article on the Enlightenment. He points out that passivity and laziness provide individuals with state of comfort and peace, and thus, have no reason to rebel against this situation

It is because of laziness and cowardice that so great a part of humankind, after nature has long since emancipated them from other people's direction (*naturaliter maiorenes*), nevertheless gladly remains minors for life (...). It is so comfortable to be a minor!" and "He has even grown fond of it (Kant, 1784, p. 17)

A second reason could be political. The lack of courage and audacity are supported through the domestication of men by other individuals. Kant expresses this idea sarcastically:

(...) those guardians who have kindly taken it upon themselves to supervise them; after they have made their domesticated animals dumb and carefully prevented these placid creatures from daring to take a single step without the walking cart in which they have confined them, they then show them the danger that threatens them if they try to walk alone. Now this danger is not in fact so great, for by a few falls they would eventually learn to walk; but an example of this kind makes them timid and usually frightens them away from further attempt (Kant, 1784, p. 17)

Aside from comfort, humans are also in a minority because of the fears of daring to think for themselves. This notion of domestication shows that humans are not to blame for the situation in which they find themselves. On the other hand, humans are able to free themselves from the true deception that embodies, not ignorance, but a lack of individual courage. This is fueled first by a certain conception of religion. In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, published in 1797, Kant will link indeed the idea Enlightenment with a spiritual and moral progress: “(...) no people can decide never to make further progress in its insight (enlightenment) regarding beliefs, and so never to reform its churches, since this would be opposed to the humanity in their own persons and so to the highest right of the people” (Kant, 1797, pp. 469-470). He stresses the psychological dimension of the minority, trying to explain the cognitive mechanisms that keep men passive under freedom that they could easily conquer. This fear of freedom was not a new issue and had, for instance, already been explained (and for other reasons) in the sixteenth century by Étienne de La Boétie (1548). Kant also shows that easy discouragement could be added to the fear felt by individuals for daring to exercise their freedom of understanding. An individual is quickly discouraged by effort and possible failures that are required for the liberation of man. The problem is that both fear and discouragement are artificially created emotions to prevent freedom of human beings. Consequently, and unfortunately, this work of domestication is so effective that every individual feels his minority “has become almost nature to him” (Kant, 1784, p. 17). This situation is contrary to the Enlightenment where audacity appears as the driving force in the liberation of the individual who dares to venture off the road where he/she was domesticated. This idea appeared implicitly in the *Observations on the*

*Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764) where Kant said: “The highest flight that human genius took in order to ascend to the sublime consisted in adventures” (Kant, 1764, p. 61). Therefore, before the article on the Enlightenment, we see Kant demonstrating the idea that human progress depends primarily on its ability to try out many different paths in life. The idea of “thinking for oneself”, the formal basis of the Enlightenment, also means constantly venturing beyond the normal and expected paths one may choose in life (La Rocca, 2006, p. 118). After a time when religion and science were merely “wretched grotesqueries”, Kant sensed an event in new era in human history. He felt a change from the figure of the human Prometheus, who was going to open human eyes to false images of the world:

Finally, after the human genius had happily lifted itself out of an almost complete destruction by a kind of palingenesis, we see in our times the proper taste of the beautiful and noble blossom in the arts and sciences as well as with regard to the moral, and there is nothing more to be wished than that the false brilliance, which is so readily deceives, should not distance us unnoticed from noble simplicity, but especially that the as yet undiscovered secret of education should be torn away from the ancient delusion in order to early raise the moral feeling in the breast of every young citizen of the world into an active sentiment, so that all delicacy should not merely amount to the fleeting and idle gratification of judging with more or less taste that which goes on outside of us (Kant, 1764, p. 62)

Schiller, in his *Letter VIII*, shares this same perspective: “*Sapere Aude!* A spirited courage is required to triumph over the impediments that the indolence of nature as well as the cowardice of the heart opposes to our instruction. It was not without reason that the ancient Mythos made Minerva issue fully armed from the head of Jupiter, for it is with warfare that this instruction commences” (Schiller, 1794, ¶ 1). In fact, is it no coincidence that Kant defines philosophy as “an outlook ever-armed (against those who perversely confound appearances with things-in-themselves), and precisely because of this unceasingly accompanies the activity of reason” (Kant, 1796, p. 455). It should be remembered that Kant, in the words of Borowski, used to show up for class with simplest modesty. He remembered that Kant always “would not teach philosophy, but to philosophize”. That purpose “was not to trust anything, not attending to any authority outside that it was; observe with your own eyes and test everything to the root”

(Borowski, 1993, pp. 55 & 110). There is, therefore, a “militaristic” spirit inherent in the Kantian conception of philosophy which is reverberated in his definition of the Enlightenment. According to Cassirer, the philosophy of the Enlightenment asserts that the gravest obstacle to the investigation of truth is dogma. Thus “the principle of the freedom of faith and conscience is the expression of a new and positive religious force which uniquely characterizes the century of the Enlightenment (...). It is not supernatural power nor divine grace which produces religious conviction in man; he himself must rise to it and maintain it” (Cassirer, 1951, pp. 160, 161 & 164). The domestication of the human being first comes from superstitions and religious dogma. In *The Critique of Judgment* (§ 40), Kant stresses that the first goal of the Enlightenment is, therefore, the “emancipation from superstition”. He explains this is “for the condition of blindness into which superstition puts one, which is as much as demands from one as an obligation, makes the needs of being led by others, and consequently the passive state of reason, pre-eminently conspicuous” (Kant, 1790, p. 519). In relation to the will of God, “resignation” might be a duty “but that does not mean that we ought to do nothing, and let God do it all; rather; rather we should resign God what does not lie in our power, and do those things of ours which are within our compass” (Kant, 1757, p. 106). Kant contemplates a moral existence of a god of which humans are not subject to pathological fear but rather freedom in virtue of reason (Kant, 1790, pp. 595-596). Therefore, Kant rejects religious rituals and other mysteries of revealed religions that are nothing more than “fetish-faith” and “delusory faith” (Kant, 1794, p. 209). The main reason why Kant rejects religious dogmas is because they do not contribute to human progress. For example, the establishment by law of an “ecclesiastical constitution (itself formulated at some time in the past)” would conflict with the “vocation and end of humanity” because it opposes human progress, which is precisely its purpose (Kant, 1793, pp. 302-303; Kant, 1784, p. 19). This would be even a “crime against human nature”, violating the “sacred right to humanity” (Kant, 1784, p. 19).

Since the human race is in constant progress, an attempt whose purpose is to stop this destiny would be illegitimate. In short, the “domestication” of humans especially occurs in the religious sphere. Humans are kept in their “minority” breathing fear and despair if they try to walk alone. To overcome this situation, Kant grants the State an important role: to develop and promote the public use of reason.

## 2. The Public Use of Reason: A Necessary Condition of the Enlightenment

Kant refers to two forms of use of reason, one private and one public. With regards to the “private use of reason”, he points out that freedom of thought and expression can legitimately be restricted. For example, when performing job duties, individuals must first carry out their public duties (or other civil post) before expressing their personal ideas (Kant, 1784, p. 18). As for the “public use of reason”, Kant believes that this is precisely the fundamental condition of the Enlightenment that needs to be spread amongst human beings (Kant, 1784, p. 18). This use of reason has four major premises. First, Kant believes that the ability to think is critically dependent on its public use, which involves a certain kind of communication between individuals (Arendt, 1992, p. 40). Second, the holders of this use of reason are members of an intellectual elite (Kant, 1784, p.18). Third, this public use of reason would be a necessary condition for the progress of mankind (Kant, 1798, p. 305). Fourth, the State is responsible for guaranteeing this public use of reason, and particularly in two areas. The first relates to religion while the second refers to relations between the people and the State. In this part, I will closely examine the role of the State according to these two areas of intervention. In relation to the first, Kant praises enlightened rulers like Frederick II of Prussia, who, supposedly, knew how to protect their citizens’ freedom to help their own reason in relation to “all matters of conscience” (Kant, 1784, p. 21). In *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant deepens this approach and advocates a separation of Church and State specifically in order to neutralize the domestication of human beings:

As for *churches*, they must be carefully distinguished from religion, which is an inner disposition lying wholly beyond the civil power’s sphere of influence”. So a State “does not have the right to legislate the internal constitutions of churches or to organize them in accordance with its own views, in ways it deems advantageous to itself, that is to prescribe to the people or command beliefs and forms of divine worship (...). A state has only a *negative* right to prevent public teachers from exercising an influence on the *visible* political commonwealth that might be prejudicial to public space”. And concerning the expenses of maintaining churches: “for the very same reason these cannot be charged to the state but must rather be charged to the part of the people who profess one or another belief, that is, only to the congregation (Kant, 1797, pp. 469-

Kant, from a protestant ethic, does not condemn religion itself, but focuses on its influence and role. He distinguishes faith from the Church, and believes that the State must guarantee freedom of worship for its people. The Enlightenment contributes to progress engraved in the nature of humanity that cannot be diverted by religious dogmas. The State should exert external pressure only, and not lord it through an “internal coercion” of religion on the conscious of individuals (Kant, 1798, p. 428). Otherwise, man would become domesticated. This idea stems from two important assumptions in Kant: one anthropological, the other political. Regarding the former, according to Kant, human being can be “master of himself” (and have dignity) if allowed to become aware that he can choose the path of his existence (Kant, 1793, p. 294). As for the latter, some of Kant’s ideas seem to agree with certain aspects of political liberalism (McCarthy, 1981, p. 329; Solari, 1949, p. 233). The State must learn to limit its interventions. It cannot impose religion, and is not entitled to dictate a conception of life to individuals. In effect, “a person cannot make me happy against my will; if so, he does me wrong” (Kant, 1757, p. 76). In this respect, Kant criticizes “paternalistic government”, as a new type of domestication, because it treats its subjects like “minor children” who cannot “distinguish what is truly useful or harmful to them”. On the contrary, we must secure “everyone his freedom by laws, whereby each remains at liberty to seek his happiness in whatever way seems best to him (...)” (Kant, 1793, pp. 291 & 297). With the separation of political authority and the domestic authority of the *pater*, Kant would maintain, according Tosel, the best of Aristotle who would have been the first in capturing the essence of anti-despotic political link (Tosel, 2003, pp. 477-482). For Berlin, this same separation (between the authority and domestic policy) is necessary in order to treat a human being according to his/her dignity, that is, as an “end in itself” (Berlin, 1969, pp. 137-138).

After having seen the public use of reason in religious matters, it is important to understand the relationship between the State and its people. The main reason defended by Kant

to justify this use consists of the same legitimacy of the State. In essence, if individuals are not able to decide for themselves, the bases of the authority become illusory and not republican. If individuals cannot form their consent, a social pact cannot be created (Kant, 1784, p. 20). Thus, wrongly or not, Kant connects the grounding of political power with its functioning. More precisely, he provides the relevance of obedience held to the law, but depending on a “spirit of freedom”. Essentially, all men want to be “convinced by reason that this coercion is in conformity with right”. Freedom of thought is linked to legitimacy of the State, and even with a natural need of the men who lead them, once again, towards progress: a “natural calling of humanity to communicate with one another” (Kant, 1784, p. 21; Kant, 1793, p. 303). Without freedom of thought and expression, an individual is neither able to develop his /her own understanding nor, as a result, freely recognize state authority. For this reason, Kant defines “legal freedom” as the ability to follow only those laws which have received the consent of the individual (Kant, 1795, p. 323). From the Kantian perspective, freedom is closely linked to the obedience of the law, in a moral and personal level, and in a political and legal level (Kant, 1785, p. 85). The aforementioned obedience depends, first, on the possibility of the individual to give himself his own law, one’s own source of dignity, and to give one’s consent in political and legal scopes (Kant, 1785, p. 87). In fact, at the end of his article on the Enlightenment, Kant insists on the fact that the State should be able to “treat the human being, *who is now more than a machine*, in keeping with his dignity” (Kant, 1784, p. 22). Therefore, he introduces a principle of reciprocity between obedience (the law) and consent (individual). The Enlightenment represents progress that affects not only individuals but also the actual conduct of the State in its perception and relationship with its people.

To achieve this objective, always considering that the State should ensure the “public use of reason”, Kant outlines a method. First, freedom of thought should be granted gradually. With this first principle of prudence, the State can “coexist”, realizing that it poses no threat to its stability (Kant, 1784, p. 21). This idea incorporates a more general approach to Kant on the relationship between rulers and ruled. If the former fear their subjects, (also a source of domestication), it is because of the excessive coercive burden exerted on the latter. For example, Kant transcribes, in this sense, the common contempt of the politicians towards the people: “We must, they say, take human beings as they are, not as pedants ignorant of the world or good-natured visionaries fancy they ought to be. But in place of that *as they are* it would be better to

say what they *have made* them – stubborn and inclined to revolt – through unjust constraint (...)” (Kant, 1798, p. 298). In a famous footnote, Kant reports an alleged discussion between Frederick the Great and Sulzer (member of the Berlin Academy of Science), when the former justifies his despotism: “« *Ah* (said the King), *mon cher Sulzer, vous ne connaissez pas assez cette maudite race à laquelle nous appartenons* » [My dear Sulzer, you don’t really know this wretched race to which we belong]”. Kant cautiously criticizes this attitude: “While publicly professing to be merely the first servant of the State that great monarch [Frederick II] could no conceal the contrary in his agonizing private confession” (Kant, 1797, p. 428). The Enlightenment will also put an end to false images that those governing have made of those governed. It could be said that the Enlightenment also consists of the State leaving its own “minority”, by daring to let its people to think for itself, with the assumed risk, that it may make a “candid criticism of what [legislation] already give” (Kant, 1784, p. 21). To minimize this risk, Kant introduces a second principle of prudence, which consists of the initial limitation of holders of this public use of reason. They are only “philosophers” and the “guardians of the people”- those who will gradually spread the new spirit of Enlightenment to the rest of society (Kant, 1784, p. 19; Kant, 1795, pp. 337-338; Kant, 1798, p. 305). Thus, education has a central role to encourage this progress. According to Foucault, the Enlightenment (according to Kant) can be seen just as much on individual level as well as on a general level, set to appear as a process constituted collectively by humans in a given period, and that arises particularly in the advancement of education. “Men at once are elements and agents of a single process” (Foucault, 1984, p. 35). Reinterpreting the classical ideal of *humanitas*, Kant believes that education should, specifically, promote the feeling of delicacy in order for human beings in general, and most importantly heads of the State, to feel their cosmopolitan identity (Kant, 1757, p. 221). Consequently, to be educated in an “enlightened” way as a “world citizen” means expanding our cultural horizons to a certain awareness of humanity. In *Theory and Practice*, Kant speaks of the “*freedom of the pen*”. This is the “sole palladium of the people’s rights” but that right is always for the philosophers (an intellectual elite), able to educate people and give advice to the heads of State (Kant, 1793, p. 302; Bourgeois, 1990, p. 43). This right does not imply recognition of a right of resistance, but quite the opposite, “*Argue as much as you will and about what you will; only obey!*” (Kant, 1784, p. 22). This expression might be the motto of the enlightened despotism, represented by Frederick II who needed the Enlightenment as an instrument for his

propaganda and his government. The progress of the critical spirit of freedom goes in the same sense as political stability, making the people respect the laws even more. Moreover, the progressive attribution of freedom of thought coincides with anthropo-philosophical reasons. To the extent that human nature is in constant progress, this freedom cannot be bound but must evolve in accordance with human nature, more precisely, from the “propensity and calling to *think* freely” to the “*freedom* in acting” (Kant, 1784, p. 22). In other words, and as a conclusion, Kant defines not only an ideal of the Enlightenment, part of a general progress of mankind, but also a method, where philosophers would also dare to take their function seriously, showing (to those who governs and those who are governing) that there are no reasons to be “afraid of phantoms” (Kant, 1784, p. 22).

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