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Kant on Enlightenment¹

Introduction

In the Autumn of 1783, the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* published an essay on the question whether religious marriage could be reconciled with Enlightenment ideals. Its author, Johann Erich Biester (1749–1816), was a founding editor of the *Monatsschrift* and a leading member of its associated debating club, the liberal-leaning ‘Berlin Wednesday Society’.² Although anonymously published, Biester’s article was not especially scandalous (even by the standards of the day) and it would no doubt have faded into complete obscurity had it not been for the entry into the debate of another member of the Wednesday Society: the clergyman and educational reformer, Johann Friedrich Zöllner. In reply to Biester, Zöllner argued that the institution of marriage was too important to be divorced from religion, and that it depended on the stability that only religion could provide. So far, it would seem, so humdrum; but now Zöllner raised the stakes. Warning against “confusing the hearts and minds of the people in the name of Enlightenment”, he asked: “What is Enlightenment?”—adding sagely, “This question ... should be answered before one begins to

¹ My thanks to Ray Buchanan, Sinan Dogramaci, Anil Gomes, Jon Litland, Colin Marshall, Roy Sorensen, Andrew Stephenson, and Amélie Suldinger.

² The Society’s outlook is evident from its private name: “The Society of Friends of the Enlightenment” (See Birtsch 1996).

enlighten”.³ Appearing as it did in one of the leading organs of the Berlin Enlightenment, Zöllner’s essay could hardly have failed to cause a stir. And, indeed, within a year it had elicited two major responses: one from Moses Mendelssohn, the other from Kant.⁴ The latter, who made his contribution without having seen Mendelssohn’s (E 8: 42n), proposed the following, now famous, definition. “**Enlightenment is humankind’s emergence from its self-imposed immaturity**” (E 8: 35).⁵

In this essay I examine the meaning and role of this definition, while also considering its relation to the Enlightenment slogans ‘*sapere aude!*’ (Dare to be wise!) and “Think for yourself!”. I consider Kant’s related views on ‘freedom of the pen’ and his distinction between public and private uses of reason. Although I concentrate on the essay in which Kant introduces his famous definition, “What is Enlightenment?” (1784), I also consider certain writings in which he refines his view, especially his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. For the sake of charitable exposition, I tend to give priority to Kant’s mature and more considered opinions. I lack the space to discuss his various unofficial conceptions of enlightenment, though I touch on certain of them in closing.⁶

§1. The definition

³ At a meeting of the Wednesday Society that same December, J. K. Möhsen had asked the same question. He proposed that “it be determined precisely; What is Enlightenment?” (See Möhsen 1996).

⁴ For this background I’m indebted to two especially illuminating sources: James Schmidt 1996 (introduction), and Klemme and Kuehn 2016.

⁵ Throughout this essay bold typeface in quotations from Kant corresponds to separated type in the original.

⁶ Nor will I be able to discuss the debate that Kant’s article was to inspire (for a helpful account, see chapters 3–10 of Fleischacker 2013).

Kant's definition contains three elucidation-hungry expressions: 'emergence', 'immaturity', and 'self-imposed'. Concerning 'emergence', three observations are in order. First, although the German word '*Ausgang*', literally means 'exit', 'emergence' is a better translation because, while English is happy to speak of, for example, 'entering' one's middle years, it is less happy to speak of 'exiting' one's youth. Second, since 'emergence' possesses product-process ambiguity Kant's definition, taken in isolation, leaves it unclear whether enlightenment is the process of becoming enlightened or the culmination of this process (a *state* of enlightenment). Third, Kant nonetheless clearly resolves this ambiguity in favor of 'process'. So much is clear from his insistence that his age is not an "enlightened age" (E 8: 40) but an "age of enlightenment". His elaboration of this remark leaves no doubt that he means that his age is still in the process of *becoming* enlightened.⁷

For Kant, the process of enlightenment is a *transition* between states. It is a process in which a person emerges from a state of self-imposed 'immaturity' [*Unmündigkeit*] and enters one of maturity [*Mündigkeit*] (8: 35). Officially, what undergoes this process is a *collectivity*, namely: humankind [*Menschen*]. But Kant thinks of this collectivity as attaining its enlightenment in virtue of its individual members' doing so. The process of enlightenment will be complete, he claims, only upon the "*universal* enlightenment of human beings" (ibid, emphasis added). However, this 'universal' enlightenment turns out to require not the enlightenment every single human being but merely such of them as are appropriate subjects of the predicates 'enlightened' and 'unenlightened'—a set that does not include, for example, children.

⁷ Since Kant describes his "age" as both "the age of Enlightenment" and "the century of Frederick" (E 8: 40), the age of Enlightenment must correspond for him roughly to the eighteenth century.

The term ‘*Unmündigkeit*’ raises further issues. Although standardly translated as ‘immaturity’, it does not, for Kant, imply chronological youthfulness. For this reason, the translation ‘minority’ must be eschewed. Indeed, as Kant makes clear in his *Anthropology* (1798), ‘minority’ [*Minderjährigkeit*] for him designates a *sub-species* of ‘*Unmündigkeit*’, namely immaturity based on “inferiority of years” (in contrast to “legal arrangements”) (Anth. 7: 208–9). What Kant means by ‘*Unmündigkeit*’—early and late—is the inability to make use of “one’s **own** understanding without the guidance of another” (Anth. 7: 209, emphasis added; compare E 8: 40). As this especially pellucid characterization suggests, there are two ways in which one might fail to be *mündig*. On the one hand, one might find oneself in—or even perhaps voluntarily place oneself in—a state in which one does not use one’s *own* understanding, but relies instead on the understanding of another. On the other hand, one might use one’s own understanding but only *under the direction of another*. The first kind of dependence is at issue when Kant enumerates some of the ways in which the immature person might delegate to another certain kinds of intellectual labour that are not, in his opinion, appropriately delegated:

It is so convenient to be immature. If I have a book that has understanding for me, a pastor who has a conscience for me, a doctor who judges my diet for me, and so forth, surely I do not need to trouble myself. *I have no need to think*, if only I can pay; others will take over the tedious business for me. (E 8: 35, emphasis added)

The part of this quotation I have emphasized suggests that one who relies on another person in any of these ways will not, strictly speaking, be *thinking* about the subject matter in question. When I put myself in the hands of one of these experts, I will, of course, come to form certain

beliefs,⁸ but I will not be ‘thinking’ in the strict sense of appreciating the reasons for those beliefs and forming them on the basis of those reasons.⁹ In Kant’s terms, I will be forming the beliefs in question without ‘having insight into their objective grounds’.¹⁰ If we use the terms ‘thinking’ and ‘using one’s own understanding’ to refer to exercises of a capacity to form beliefs on the basis of an appreciation of their objective grounds, it will be natural to say—as in this passage Kant *does* say—that, strictly speaking, the person *unmündig* in any of the ways listed is not (in the relevant domain) thinking at all. Analogously, if we use ‘walking’ for an exercise of the capacity to walk *unaided*, then it will be natural to say that the toddler in their ‘*Gängelwagen*’ (a kind of eighteenth-century ‘baby walker’) is not, strictly speaking, walking (E 8: 35). (At most they are walking ‘by courtesy’). The first of our two ways in which an otherwise competent adult man might lack *mündigkeit*, then, is a matter of piggy-backing on the objective grounds-discerning capacity of another.¹¹ I will refer to this kind of immaturity as ‘*Gängelwagen*-immaturity’.¹²

The second way in which one might fail of *Mündigkeit* corresponds to Kant’s second image of immaturity, namely, that of a child in “leading-strings [*Leitbände*]”. As the etymology suggests, such ‘strings’ are more accurately described as *guiding bands* – reins for young humans, by means of

⁸ Since I cannot form beliefs at will, I will presumably need to induce them by means of Pascalian auto-brainwashing techniques—or something similar.

⁹ In his anthropology lectures Kant says: “The theologian, jurist, medical doctor, and so on, often command without giving the reason for their command” (AM 25: 1298).

¹⁰ They might still have insight into the *subjective* grounds for their belief. Such would be the case if, for example, they were aware of following their customary practice of taking their beliefs from some authority figure.

¹¹ In the case of a chain of informants the piggy-backing will be at some remove.

¹² Obviously, since we do routinely pay for the services of experts, including dieticians, and since this division of labour makes full sense on efficiency grounds, Kant’s implication that this reliance is always inappropriate is too drastic (See Bitner 1996). However, the idea that I should not entrust to another the work done by my conscience does seem to have something going for it—as does the suggestion that I should not entrust to (the author of) a book certain kinds of critical assessment. And it is these (much better) examples that matter the most to Kant.

which in Kant's day a Prussian child (out in front) would have been steered around by their guardian (walking behind). Kant compares the prejudices used by leaders to control "the thoughtless masses" (E 8: 36) to these guiding bands. Unlike a toddler lodged in his *Gängelwagen*, a child in *Leitbande* is capable of walking under his own steam, but he does so only under the physical direction of his guardian. Similarly, a person *unmündig* in the second way Kant envisages is *capable* of thinking (without further ado)—in the sense of forming beliefs on the basis of an insight into their objective grounds. But in spite of this they nonetheless allow themselves to be guided in their thinking by another. On this second understanding of non-autonomous 'thinking' it amounts to guided belief-formation in a competent adult man who is fully equipped with the legal standing and intellectual capacity to think for himself (and who has not temporarily disabled this capacity).

It is this second notion of immaturity—let's call it '*Leitbande* immaturity'—that is in question in the famous 'don't argue'-passage from "What is Enlightenment?":

But I hear from all sides the cry: ***Do not argue!*** The officer says: Do not argue but drill!
The tax official: Do not argue but pay! The clergyman: Do not argue but believe! (Only one ruler in the world says: ***Argue*** as much as you like and about whatever you like, ***but obey!***) (E 8: 37)

The ruler in question is Frederick the Great, whom Kant thinks of as the enlightened monarch *par excellence*. But the important point for our purposes is just that the various individuals who are being told not to argue *are* inclined to do so. They are therefore envisaged as possessing the (non-suspended) capacity to reason and—presumably—also to discern the objective grounds for their

beliefs. Nonetheless, they are, in each case, depicted as being guided in their actions and beliefs by another. The *Anthropology's* characterization of maturity (Anthr. 7: 209) therefore should be recognized as containing two ideas that ought, strictly, to be kept apart.¹³ Insofar as the immature are enjoined to use their *own* understanding they are encouraged to emerge from their state of *Gängelwagen*-immaturity; but insofar as they are enjoined to use their understanding without the *guidance* of another, they are encouraged, in addition, to emerge from their state of *Leitbände*-immaturity. Kant shows himself aware of these two aspects of immaturity later in the *Anthropology* when he says that prior to the revolution constituted by the human being's enlightenment, he had "let others think for him and merely imitated others *or* allowed them to guide him by guiding bands [*Leitbände*]" (Anth. 7: 229, emphasis added).

It is important to note that *Unmündigkeit* is not always a *psychological* incapacity: it can also be a matter of one's lacking, given the conventions and practices of one's society, the *legal* standing to *speak* for oneself in civil affairs (Anthr. 7: 209).¹⁴ Kant is playing with this connotation of 'unmündig' when he contrives the crudely sexist joke that women, though legally *unmündig*, are sometimes voluble enough to be literally described as '*übermündig*' (over-mouthed) (Anth. 7: 209). Mercifully, this crass remark is accompanied by a more progressive thought, namely, the idea that a woman's 'immaturity' consists in her being unable, *owing to the legal arrangements of her society*, to speak for herself in conducting her legal or civil affairs. At least in the *Anthropology*,

¹³ If we fail to distinguish these two ideas, we will be left wondering how someone incapable of using their own understanding might nonetheless be under an obligation to resist guidance in that use by another. *Ought*, after all, implies *can*. But with the distinction drawn, the puzzle disappears. For a person who has already escaped their state of *Gängelwagen*-immaturity might yet remain in a state of *Leitbände*-immaturity. And if they do remain in such a state, they will still be under an obligation to perform the needed further extrication.

¹⁴ The standing to speak should be thought of as an enabling condition for the exercise of the ability.

then, Kant's sexism does not extend to implying that a woman lacks the intellectual capacity or character to speak for herself. Legal arrangements, moreover, are mutable; so this kind of externally imposed *Unmündigkeit* is not, for Kant at this stage, a state in which a woman need be permanently trapped. Indeed, in the *Metaphysics of Morals* of the previous year (1797), he had stressed that women and all other "passive citizens" are capable of working their way out of their "passive condition" into an "active" one characterized by the ability to earn one's living in the Kant-approved, independent way that he sees as entitling a person to vote, and so to qualify as a full citizen (MM 6: 315) (see Varden 2017, 678–9).

To arrive at a more precise understanding *Unmündigkeit*—at least as this concept features in Kant's mature philosophy, if not specifically in his 'Enlightenment' essay—it will help to draw up this concept's associated taxonomy or 'division'. For the sake of charitable exposition, I will focus on the least reactionary phase of Kant view, which is represented by the *Anthropology*. The first distinction to be drawn is that between natural and artificial *Unmündigkeit*. A child, a severely cognitively disabled person, and a person suffering from senile dementia will all, since denied the relevant capacities by nature, possess natural *Unmündigkeit* (Anth. 7: 210; E 8: 35). By contrast, a woman in Kant's Prussia will possess only artificial *Unmündigkeit*. She will be unable to speak for herself only because of the legal or civil [*bürgerlich*] arrangements that prevail. In Kant's phrase, she will qualify as "*bürgerlich-unmündig*" (Anth. 7: 209). Possessing such a status, a Prussian woman *will* be able to defend her legal rights, but she will be able to do so only through a representative [*Stellvertreter*] (ibid). Standardly, this role would have been played by her husband or father, who would have acted as the woman's spokesperson—or mouthpiece: the more literal

meaning of ‘*Vormund*’.¹⁵ Kant terms this guardian-representative the woman’s ‘*curator*’ (Anth. 7: 209). This is Latin for ‘one who takes care’; in the genitive: ‘guardian’ or ‘overlooker’.

Kant further distinguishes between other- and self- imposed sub-species of artificial *Unmündigkeit*. According to the *Anthropology*, a woman’s artificial *Unmündigkeit* is ‘other-imposed’ because imposed by the laws of her society. By contrast, the artificial *Unmündigkeit* of an otherwise mentally sound free adult man is self-imposed because caused, in Kant’s view, merely by his own laziness or cowardice. For Kant, women, or such of them as do not aspire to a state of active citizenship, are, if at all, then only blameworthy for their lack of ambition: they cannot be blamed for initially finding themselves in their institutionally ‘passive’ state. A man of the kind described, by contrast, is blameworthy for having allowed himself to fall into his state of passivity and guardianship. Translators sometimes try to capture the blameworthiness indicated by ‘*selbst verschuldeten*’ by rendering it as ‘self-incurred’. However, in the specific context of Kant’s taxonomy this translation is inferior to ‘self-imposed’. After all, while Kant clearly wishes to establish a contrast between self- and other- imposed sub-varieties of non-natural *Unmündigkeit*, the phrase ‘other-incurred’ simply does not mean ‘imposed on me by another’. For this reason and for reasons of brevity, I have opted for ‘self-imposed’. (Strictly speaking, however, the wordier ‘*culpably* self-imposed’ would be best.)

As we have noted, for Kant some human beings are neither ‘enlightened’ nor ‘unenlightened’. We can now see why this is so. The individuals from whom both terms must be withheld are, for the

¹⁵ ‘*Vormund*’ (guardian) and ‘*Unmündige*’ (immature ones) share the common root ‘*Mund*’ (mouth). A ‘*Vormund*’ is a legally sanctioned mouthpiece of the person they represent. See Garrett Green, 1996 in Schmidt 1996, 292.

most part, those who have never been in a state of culpably self-imposed artificial immaturity.¹⁶ Children have never been in this state because their immaturity is wholly natural. Women—in the view of the *Anthropology* at least—have never been in this state because their immaturity (as adults) is, though artificial, not self-imposed. And, although in earlier works Kant obscures this last point, the example of children is sufficient to establish that the predicates ‘enlightened’ and ‘unenlightened’ are for him contraries—technically ‘disparata’—rather than contradictories. Both terms can simultaneously fail to apply to a given person.¹⁷

Although Kant’s ‘guardians’ are often state functionaries, this is not always the case.¹⁸ In his *Anthropology*, for example, Kant tells the tale of a scholar, cerebral to the point of domestic laziness, who delegates worldly matters to his wife:

Scholars are usually glad to allow themselves to be kept in immaturity by their wives with regard to domestic arrangements. A scholar, buried in his books, answered the screams of a servant that there was a fire in one of the rooms. “You know, things of that sort are my wife’s concern”. (Anth. 7: 210)

One liberating aspect of this—perhaps apocryphal—tale is that Kant clearly thinks that scholars (whom he conceives of as men) are *wrong* to leave domestic arrangements to their wives. This momentary glimmer of progressive gender sentiment is, however, a late development and not typical of Kant’s writings. Five years earlier, in *Theory and Practice* (1793), he had claimed that

¹⁶ Formerly benighted people now suffering from senile dementia will constitute an exception.

¹⁷ Compare Kant’s discussion of the contraries, ‘finite’ and ‘infinite’, in the first *Critique* (A 503–4/B 531–2).

¹⁸ In Kant’s Prussia, university lecturers and pastors were regarded as state functionaries.

women, like children, fail to satisfy the *natural* condition for being citizens (TP 8: 295). And earlier, in “What is Enlightenment”, he had claimed that ‘the entire fairer sex’ were ‘placid creatures’ who had been successfully deterred from taking the step to maturity (E 8: 35). This last claim seems to have been too much even for some of Kant’s contemporaries; for it drew sharp, if private, criticism from J. G. Hamann.¹⁹

§2 The causes of benightedness

Since the adjective ‘unenlightened’ has no elegant nominalization, I will use ‘benightedness’ to stand for a state of culpably self-imposed immaturity. While Kant mentions laziness and cowardice as the principal causes of benightedness, he also acknowledges various other causes, including a certain “craftiness”, which leads people to renounce employment of their own reason and to “submit passively and obediently to formulas laid down by holy men” (Anth. 7: 200). These cunning people adopt this tactic partly in the hope of shifting “the blame onto someone else when they have acted wrongly”, and partly in order to avoid having to undergo a genuine “change of heart” (ibid.). These causes, Kant seems to think, are reinforced by certain insidious metaphorical comparisons, such as the figure of the prince as the “father” of his country (Anth. 7: 209; AM 25: 1299) and the pastor as the “shepherd” of his flock (AM 25: 1300). Kant finds these images demeaning. In particular, he sees this last comparison, encoded in the word ‘*Seelenhirte*’ (literally: herder of souls), as lowering humans to the level of “beloved livestock” (ibid.). Each of these causes of immaturity, Kant supposes, can be further reinforced by unscrupulous leaders:

¹⁹ Hamann’s criticism was made a private letter to C. J. Kraus and was not, so far as I know, communicated to Kant (Hamann 1996: 148).

[T]o **make** oneself immature, degrading as it may be, is nevertheless very comfortable, *and naturally [this fact] has not escaped leaders who know how to exploit this docility of the masses* [and who choose] to represent the danger of making use of one's **own** understanding without the guidance of another as very great, even lethal.²⁰

It seems, then, that agents other than the person undergoing enlightenment can be at least *partial* causes of a person's immaturity. Presumably, benightedness nonetheless counts as 'self-imposed' because the benighted person is the *principal* cause of their own immaturity. Without their laziness or cowardice, after all, the unscrupulous leaders would have no docility to exploit.

Kant concludes that we must remain on the lookout for respects in which we might have made ourselves immature (AM 25: 1302). His moralized language ('degrading', 'docility') suggests that he regards this vigilance—presumably, along with the exercises of self-enlightenment in which it may result—as nothing short of *duties*. And these duties, one supposes, arise from a more general duty to cultivate such of one's capacities—or natural predispositions—as advance the ends set forth by reason (MM 391; G 4: 422–3).

§3 Guardianship

²⁰ Anth. 7: 209, italics added. As usual, bolded text corresponds to separated type in the original.

When Kant characterizes “immaturity” as one’s inability to use one’s—or one’s own—understanding without the guidance of another (E 8: 35), the envisaged ‘other’ is the immature person’s guardian [*Vormund*] (ibid.).²¹ In general, a guardian assumes responsibility for the immature person’s *care*. A pastor—literally a ‘soul-carer [*Seelsorger*]’—is entrusted with the care of one’s soul, a dietician the care of one’s body. To the ‘jurist’ an unenlightened citizen entrusts the work of justifying their state’s (often dubiously belligerent) legal claims (AM 25: 1298).²² And to the theologian one entrusts the work of correctly interpreting scripture (ibid.). Kant also mentions (by implication) the example of a confessor [*Beichtvater*] who handles the spiritual care specifically of the penitent [*Beichtkind*] (NCA 15: 786).

Which particular form of guardianship will be fitting—or allegedly fitting—in a given case will depend on the ground for one’s (alleged) immaturity. A child will have a *ward*, a congregant a *pastor*, a penitent a *confessor*, and a woman a *curator*. A book is none of these things, so why does Kant include it on his list of guardian-types in “What is Enlightenment?”? The answer, I think, is that its inclusion is intended to metaphorically extend the concept of self-imposed immaturity to the realm of ideas. Kant is suggesting that I will be in a state of figurative guardianship if I merely parrot the textbook orthodoxies of my day.²³ Insofar as I do so, I render myself the willing ‘ward’ of the book’s author.

²¹ Often one’s *own* understanding (see, for example, 25: 1298).

²² Kant’s ‘jurists’ include Hugo Grotius, Samuel von Pufendorf, and Emer de Vattel. These legal theorists, he says, “although their code has not the slightest lawful force ... are always duly cited in **justification** of an offensive war” (PP 8: 355).

²³ Kant is not referring specifically to a book of Holy Scripture; for he sees such books as being read only with the assistance of a clergyman, who warns the reader to find in the Holy Scriptures “nothing other than what we assure you is [therein] to be found” (Anth., 7: 209–10). With regard to Holy books, then, it is the clergyman rather than the book (or its author(s)) that plays the role of guardian.

Kant would, I think, have regarded his own dogmatically slumbering, pre-critical self as existing in a state of guardianship of this last kind. Memorably, he claimed to have been roused from his dogmatic slumbers by his recollection of David Hume (Prol. 4: 260) and (again?) by his reflections on the Antinomy of pure reason (Corr. 12: 257-8). With these awakenings, Kant began to exercise his understanding independently of the guidance of any previous philosophical system. They therefore amount to two milestones on Kant's 'personal journey' of self-extrication from his prior state of intellectual guardianship. That he would have himself so viewed these awakenings is perhaps suggested by his characterization in the *Anthropology* of a human being's emergence from their state of self-imposed immaturity as a kind of (personal) *revolution* (Anth. 7: 229). For in the first *Critique* he had famously portrayed his novel "transcendental" idealism as occasioning a revolutionary transformation in our way of thinking analogous to those that had already taken place in mathematics and natural science (B xii, B xvi-xvii). In the same work, Kant at one point personifies *reason* as having emerged from a state of immaturity. Prior to the Baconian revolution, he tells us, reason had been kept in *Leitbände* by *nature*. The revolution constituting reason's enlightenment had involved a reversal of a certain metaphorical power relation: in the Baconian revolution reason wrests power from nature and *compels* it to answer questions of its own devising (B xiii). In a similar fashion, one might think of the enlightened human being as capable (once they have grown into their state of enlightenment) of turning the tables on the authorities, whether religious or political, who had formerly kept him in a state of guardianship and *rationaly* compelling them to answer before the tribunal of reason. But this last point should not be taken literally. Kant does not think of a human being's enlightenment as proceeding by means of a political revolution. A *political* revolution, he insists, "can never bring about the true reform of a way of thinking" (E 8: 59).

In “What is Enlightenment?” Kant describes the “rules and formulas” relied on by the unenlightened when imitating or being led by others as “mechanical instruments of a rational use (or rather misuse) of [the human being’s] natural gifts” (E 8: 36).²⁴ They are so many fetters to be cast off. However, he warns that whoever casts them off “would still take but an uncertain leap over the smallest ditch, because he is not accustomed to such free movement.” (ibid.). The intellectual revolution Kant associates with enlightenment, then, is no heady storming of the Bastille. His timid revolutionaries resemble less the impetuous Paris mob than a group of newly freed cave dwellers tentatively trying out their dazzled vision as they emerge, gingerly, from the darkness of their captivity. Nonetheless, Kant does think that a few bold pioneers may, through their own example, manage to steady the nerve of the others, so that a *public*, whose members are able to offer one another moral support, can enlighten itself more readily than an individual. Modestly, Kant refrains from observing that he himself fits the profile of one of these bold pioneers.²⁵

§4 *Sapere aude!*

Kant sees the unenlightened individual’s characteristic incapacity to think for himself as owed to a lack of *resolution* to use his understanding without the guidance of another. He therefore regards the Enlightenment’s motto, “*Sapere aude!*” (“Dare to be wise!”) as entirely apt. Originating in

²⁴ The mention of mechanism here resonates with Kant’s parting allusion to La Mettrie in “What is Enlightenment?”: “the [enlightened] man, **who is now more than a machine**” (8: 42, emphasis in the original).

²⁵ Kant does not require that to count as enlightened a person must be quite as original as himself. For example, he thinks that Moses Mendelssohn was able to think for himself (see Corr. 10: 345). (I am indebted to Colin Marshall for suggesting the idea in the penultimate sentence of this paragraph—or something like it).

Horace's *Epistles* (1.2.40), this motto resurfaced in the early Eighteenth Century. Franco Venturi has traced it to a medal struck in 1736 for the Berlin *Societas Alethophilorum*—a learned society of Wolffian bent.²⁶ But even before that—in 1718—it had already been adopted by the poet Ambrose Philips as the masthead of his Enlightenment magazine, *The Free-Thinker* (See Porter 2000, 2). By Kant's time, then, the motto was already a standard Enlightenment accessory. Kant just dusts it off and gives it a critical twist. Supplying an emphasis absent from the Latin, he glosses it as saying: "Have the courage to use your **own** understanding." (E 8: 35). This gloss serves to mould Horace's original motto into a slightly wordier version of Kant's own maxim "Think for yourself!" (Anth. 7: 200). Kant was not, however, alone in making this connection between enlightenment and intellectual autonomy. As Günther Birtsch notes, J. K. Möhsen had described the intent of the Enlightenment-friendly Wednesday Society as being to promote in every person "the capacity of thinking for themselves in their required spheres of activity" (Birtsch 1996, 242). Where Kant innovates is in insisting that, on the contrary, in one's *required* spheres one should *not* think for oneself but rather obey. For Kant, autonomous thinking is appropriate in the *avocational* sphere of public letters.

§5 Thinking for oneself

I have suggested that Kant's "Think for yourself!" means "Form your beliefs by relying on insight into their objective grounds rather than on testimony". Such an interpretation, however, faces a difficulty. For Kant has no *general* objection to relying on testimony. On the contrary, he thinks

²⁶ See Schmidt 1996: 64.

that belief so grounded can, if the quality of the testimony is sufficiently high, even become *knowledge*. Thus, in his essay “What is Orientation in Thinking?” (1786), he says:

Historical belief, e.g., [the belief in], the death of a great man, as reported in some letters, **can become a knowing** [*ein Wissen*] if his burial, testament, etc. are announced by the local authorities. (OT 8: 141; compare R 5645; 18: 288–9)

Clearly, to make Kant consistent we will need to divide contexts of belief formation into those in which it is permissible to rely on testimony and those in which it is not. How should this be done?

One plausible answer has been suggested by Axel Gelfert, who observes that according to Kant we may rely on testimony in forming beliefs only when those beliefs concern *empirical* matters. We may not do so when the beliefs in question concern matters that are (by Kant’s lights) a priori knowable. Gelfert supports this suggestion with a report of a remark from Kant’s logic lectures:

If a cognition is so constituted that [its truth] can be discerned with the understanding alone, then the authority of others is no legitimate ground of holding-to-be-true.²⁷

For Kant, then—or at least the Kant of these lectures—reliance on testimony has no place in, say, mathematics or morals.²⁸ Nor, I think, does it have any place, for him, in metaphysics. If, for example, succumbing to the “prejudice of prestige”, I form a belief in the immortality of the soul

²⁷ Pinder 1998, 584. (See Gelfert 2006, 641).

²⁸ The evidence from the lectures is not consistent on the question whether testimony can form a basis for belief in mathematical claims.

merely on the authority of Plato, I will have gone badly astray (VL 24: 869–70). I conclude that the prescriptive motto “Think for yourself!” has, for Kant, the meaning of an injunction that is harder to fit on a T-shirt, namely: “Form your beliefs on a priori knowable matters using your own understanding—that’s to say, ‘by your own lights’—rather than by relying on the testimony of another!”.

In Kant’s view the main point of enlightenment is to achieve autonomy in forming beliefs specifically about ‘religion’:²⁹

I have located the main point of enlightenment, of people’s emergence from their self-imposed immaturity, chiefly in **matters of religion** because our rulers have no interest in playing guardian over their subjects with respect to the arts and sciences and also because [this particular instance of] immaturity, *being the most harmful of all*, is also the most disgraceful. (E 8: 41, italics added)

In the *Anthropology* he makes clear that respecting a person’s autonomy in (moral) religion is nothing less than a duty:

[T]o require that a so-called layman (*Laicus*) should not use his own reason in matters of religion, particularly *since these must be appreciated as moral*, but instead should follow

²⁹ For Kant, forming religious beliefs is hardly to be distinguished from forming beliefs about one’s duties. “Religion”, he says in a reflection, “is not a theurgy for having an influence on God and His will through formulas, spiritual exercises, purifications, and expiations, but is aimed at the improvement of our self.” (R 6094: 18: 449–50).

the appointed **clergyman** (*Clericus*), [and] thus [follow] someone else's reason, *is an unjust demand*. (Anth. 7: 200, italics added)

The demand is unjust because, when it comes to moral responsibility, there is simply no passing the buck to the cleric. "In moral matters", Kant says,

every man must himself be responsible for his acting and omitting, and the clergyman will not, and indeed cannot, assume the responsibility for [the act or omission] at his own risk. (ibid)

This is relatively clear, but in the same part of the *Anthropology* Kant complicates this story by presenting the maxim "to think for oneself" as one of three maxims for gaining "wisdom". These maxims are:

1) To think **for oneself**, 2) To think oneself (in communication with human beings) into the place of every **other person**. (3) Always to think **consistently** with **oneself**. (ibid.)

The idea of thinking *consistently* with oneself is familiar. Kant treats it as a constitutive demand on any thinking at all. The idea of thinking oneself *into the place of another*, on the other hand, is less familiar. It involves giving appropriate weight to the opinions of others when forming one's own beliefs. This is the "broad-minded" way of thinking discussed in the *Critique of Judgment* (CPJ 5: 293-96). In the *Anthropology*, Kant terms the principle that recommends the policy of thinking in this manner the "principle of **liberals** who adapt to the principles of others" (Anth. 7: 228). He supposes that by adhering to this principle we are able to correct for the distorting influence—or

“illusion”—of the “subjective private conditions” of our judgments (CPJ 5: 295). To do this is not, however, to enter a state of immaturity, for it does not involve delegating responsibility for our thinking to any *single* individual. Rather, it involves giving some weight to the opinions—or such of them as come within our purview—of *every* other mentally competent adult. And presumably there need be nothing mechanical or straightforwardly imitative about the way in which this is done. For, first, those opinions will not in general agree with one another, and, second, one can—and typically will—exercise judgment in gauging how much weight to place on each opinion.³⁰ However, Kant implies that this requirement does not hold independently of the subject matter of the beliefs in question. Indeed, he maintains that in metaphysics there is *no* requirement to think in this “broad-minded” way, for here “it often happens that human beings have the same deception” (VL 24: 872). What he has in mind, I think, is the alleged fact that human beings are *universally* subject to transcendental illusion (A 297–8/B 353–4). Since Kant sees this metaphysical error-inclining illusion as universally shared by human beings, he supposes that the opinions of others are powerless to provide a reliable cross-check on one’s own metaphysical judgments (VL 24: 872). Accordingly, insofar as I form beliefs on matters metaphysical, I will be exempted from the second requirement.

This point helps to preserve some of the original force of the injunction: “Think for yourself!” in the face of the second requirement. However, it is hard not to feel that the ‘principle of liberals’ serves somewhat to dampen the spirit of Kant’s famous slogan. Worse, there seems to be a sharp difficulty here. Suppose that you and your ‘epistemic peer’ disagree on some mathematical question. As epistemic peers, you are “equals with respect to exposure to the evidence,

³⁰ See Gelfert 2006: 640–2.

intelligence, freedom from bias, etc.” (Christensen, 2009, 756–7). Suppose, further, that you *know* you disagree with your epistemic peer. Then the recommendation of the ‘broad-minded’ way of thinking, which encourages conciliation, will straightforwardly conflict with that of ‘Think for yourself!’, which encourages a ‘steadfast’ stance. It is hard to see how a coherent recommendation could emerge.

Kant maintains that the moral right to “expound my thoughts publicly”—that is, the moral right to freedom of the pen—derives from the requirement to use the opinions of others as a corrective to one’s own (VL 24: 875). His idea is as follows. If I am denied the critical feedback made possible by publication, I will be unable to correct for my “egotistical prejudice”, according to which one “finds the offspring of his [own] understanding free of mistake” (VL 24: 869).³¹ Kant doesn’t say so explicitly, but plausibly the right to gather critical feedback is in turn derived from the moral duty to cultivate one’s capacities (G 4: 422–3; MM 6: 392); for such cultivation would presumably require one to eradicate the relevant prejudices.³² State-imposed restrictions on free expression (about matters non-metaphysical), therefore, constitute for Kant an impediment to the discharge of one’s moral obligations. Accordingly, they are, in his view, *ethically* unacceptable.

Returning to Kant’s mottoes, we need to consider a prima facie problem for his apparent endorsement of Horace’s injunction: ‘*sapere aude!*’. The worry is that Kant’s understanding of this motto seems to render it self-undermining. As we have seen, he takes it to have the force of a prescription, namely, ‘Have the courage to use your **own** understanding (without guidance from

³¹ We now see a second reason why a public should be better able to enlighten itself than an individual: feedback from others accelerates the process. (The first reason was noted at the end of section 3 above).

³² I am indebted to Colin Marshall for alerting me to the second of these passages.

another)!—or more simply: ‘Have the courage to think for yourself!’. And he regards thinking for oneself as requiring, among other things, that we should not merely imitate the thought of others (VL 24: 865), as we might do if we were mindlessly to follow pat formulas (VL 24: 866). Among those formulas, however, are what Kant calls ‘sentences’, and among these, somewhat awkwardly, are Horace’s prescriptions (VL 24: 867). Suppose, then, that I must heed the prescription ‘*sapere aude!*’. Then, among other things, I must not heed it. Therefore, I must not heed it. The prescription, in short, appears to be self-stultifying.

Fortunately, Kant seems to have foreseen this problem; for he indicates a solution in the course of explaining his notion of a ‘formula’. “Mechanization in matters of the understanding”, he says, “very much helps the understanding in some respects, if I have first thought this through myself.” (VL 24: 867). Indeed, formulas lead to error only when “they have taken root in me without mature reflection” (ibid). In Kant’s view, then, I *may* think in accordance with a pre-existing formula, but only if I have previously arrived at the thought in question myself. This answer is promising; but it suggests that the motto of the Enlightenment ought to come with some kind of a warning label—or instruction manual.

§6 Public and Private uses of Reason

Kant does not believe that one ought to think for oneself in every walk of life. Rather, this mode of thinking is appropriate (and required) only in the public realm of scholarly letters (E 8: 37). When one’s intended audience is private, by contrast—for example, when one is acting as a pastor addressing one’s congregation or a military officer addressing one’s troops—one is to act as if one were merely a cog in the state machine (ibid.). This requirement also holds when one’s speech is

directed up the hierarchy. The officer, for example, is not free to dispute an order: he must obey without question. Nonetheless, in his capacity as a scholar, he may, when off duty, publicly critique military institutions (E 8: 38). The same goes, *mutatis mutandis*, for the university lecturer, the clergyman, and the taxpayer (the last being thought of as occupying the civil ‘post’ of ‘citizen’).

John Christian Laursen suggests that insofar as Kant treats relatively humble civic functionaries and tax-paying citizens [*Bürger*] as entitled to wear a scholar’s hat, he is making the “radically levelling” move of seeking to extend to lower ranks of society the traditional privileges of the professional scholar [*Gelehrten*] (See Laursen 1996: 258). This is plausible, though later, when menaced by Frederick William II, Kant disowns this goal, insisting that he had “censured the temerity” of non-academics who assume the privileges appropriate to the scholarly world in raising objections and doubts in popular writings (CF 7: 9).

It has been widely observed that Kant’s position confounds the reader’s expectations about which “use of reason” is to count as public and which private. After all, a civil servant might also be called a ‘public servant’, and when they write in their spare time they might be said to be writing ‘in a private capacity’. To accustom oneself to Kant’s mirror-reversed terminology, it helps to remember, first, that ‘public’ qualifies ‘use of reason’ rather than ‘capacity’, and second, that a public use of reason is one in which reasons are made public: it is a use of reason made before, and directed to, the reading public.³³

³³ Laursen also argues that Kant’s return to the older use of ‘public’ [*öffentlich*] as meaning ‘out in the open’—as opposed to the (more recently established) ‘pertaining to the state’—is itself subversive (ibid., 254–256)

Ironically, as far as clerical autonomy is concerned, Kant embraces a position that in part anticipates the wildly unpopular ‘Religion Edict’ of Frederick William II.³⁴ A clergyman, Kant says,

is bound to deliver his discourse to the pupils in his catechism class and to his congregation in accordance with the creed of the church he serves, for he was employed by it on that condition. (E 8: 38)

However, *as a scholar* speaking to the world in general, the same clergyman enjoys (and *should* enjoy) “complete freedom [of the pen] and is even called upon to communicate to the public all his carefully examined and well-intentioned thoughts about what is erroneous in [his] creed” (E 8: 38). In his role as a state functionary, then, the clergyman must follow the letter of this part of the Religion Edict, but when off duty he may write as he chooses; indeed, he is “called upon”—that is, morally obligated—to make his reservations public, so long as they are well-considered and well-intentioned. This distinction between public and private rights and obligations turns out to have had practical import. For Frederick the Great’s minister for ecclesiastical affairs, von Zedlitz, had apparently appealed to it in defending the atheistic minister, Zopf-Schulz (Kuhn 2001, 365).

Although Kant vigorously defends the freedom of *the pen*, he is notably less liberal about the *performances* of the quack and the charlatan. For example, in the case of the ‘animal magnetist’, Franz Mesmer, Kant urges the police to “watch out that [he and his followers] keep away from moral issues” (Corr. 11: 142). If Kant is consistent, he must be referring here to non-written

³⁴ Issued on the 9th of July, 1788, the edict demanded orthodoxy from preachers. It complained that “many Protestant pastors allow themselves unbridled liberty in the treatment of the dogma of their confession”, impudently spreading the “errors” of “the Socinians, deists, naturalists, and other sectarians” under “the much-abused banner of *Aufklärung*.” Quoted in Kuehn 2001: 339.

engagement with moral issues. It is natural to suppose that the reason why Kant is concerned with defending specifically *written* expression is that in this domain one creates a record for which one is answerable.

Kant's declared reason for thinking that the cleric-as-scholar must be free in his public use of reason is an alleged absurdity in the idea that the spiritual guardians of the people should themselves be immature (E 8: 38). Unfortunately, however, he fails to explain where this absurdity is supposed to lie. It does not seem to be conceptual in nature; and if it is supposed to be a 'real repugnancy', one would like to know which properties are supposed to stand in real opposition. After all, it seems *prima facie* possible that there should be a highly effective pastor—an ecclesiastical 'people person'—who devoted his energies to his congregation while having not the slightest interest in broader questions of church policy. Sharpening the problem is Kant's readiness to allow that a person immature in one role might nonetheless be a guardian in another. (Recall the domestically lazy scholar-husband, lost in his books.). Fortunately, however, there is a better—unstated but still Kantian—rationale for the conclusion that the cleric-as-scholar must be free in his public use of reason, namely, the point, already noted, that this conclusion plausibly follows from his possessing the moral obligation to cultivate his natural predispositions (or such of them as are worth cultivating, at least).

Kant takes it to be a corollary of his position that the governing assembly of no church could be justified in binding itself, through an oath, to an unalterable creed (E 8: 38). And more generally,

One age cannot bind itself and conspire to put the succeeding one into such a condition that it would be impossible for it to enlarge its cognitions ... and to purify them of errors,

and generally to make further progress in enlightenment. This would be a crime against human nature, whose original vocation lies precisely in such progress ... (E 8: 39)

Strong words, which suggest that for Kant the ability to make “progress in enlightenment” is a natural right. This ability has such a status because to erect obstacles to such progress is to impede the very end or vocation of humanity (CS: 305). The notion of ‘progress in enlightenment’ involved here seems to be a broadening of Kant’s official notion. It is tantamount to the very idea of moral improvement. Kant supposes that the adoption by a church of some list of non-negotiable articles of their creed, for example, the thirty-nine articles of the Church of England (27: 1366), would both infringe the natural right to make “progress in enlightenment” and constitute an inter-generational wrong of the gravest kind (MM 6: 305). What holds for a church or a people, moreover, holds yet more stringently for a monarch: the King may establish no official state creed or ecclesiastical constitution (E 8: 39–40; CS 8: 304–5).

Is Kant’s position consistent? How candid could a clergyman really be when “delivering his discourse” to his congregation if he had previously published his scholarly reservations about the doctrines thereby promulgated? Anticipating this objection, Kant claims that the job of the clergyman is merely to *report* a church’s doctrine rather than to present it as true. Speaking of the clergyman’s public, scholarly divergence from the articles of his creed, he says:

There is nothing in this that could be laid as a burden on his conscience. For what he teaches in consequence of his office ... he represents as something with respect to which he does not have free power to teach as he thinks best, but which he is appointed to deliver as

prescribed and in the name of another. He will say: Our church teaches this or that; here are the arguments it uses. (E 8: 38)

In a reflection from 1785, Kant makes clear that the freedom to think publicly entails the freedom to think *badly*—the freedom to abuse the freedom to think. “We live”, he says,

in an age that has not had its equal in the history of human understanding. The human mind has indeed probably exhausted every possibility for foolishness and madness that belongs to errant reason ... however, [the fact] that all kinds of absurdities and madness are manifesting themselves simultaneously and indeed openly while reason conducts its business in public and in private must be viewed as an *inevitable* misuse of a freedom-to-think [which freedom] is only now beginning to spring forth for the first time. [This freedom] must, just as in [the case of] states that have overthrown despotism, first produce anarchy and civil breakdown before, eventually, producing a legitimate civil state. (R 6215; 18: 504, emphasis added)³⁵

Kant sees the “madness” inevitably produced by abuses of freedom as the price to be paid for the transition to a stable, cohesive, and legitimate civil state. In the realm of ideas, as in the political realm, one does not pass directly from a despotism to a republic. Instead, one must first pass through a period of anarchy during which intellectual freedom resembles the “mad” or “lawless” political freedom enjoyed by individuals in a state of nature (PP 8: 354; 357; compare A ix). Such

³⁵ I have edited lightly to improve readability and emphasized ‘inevitable’ to make clear the purpose of Kant’s ‘however’.

'freedom' is not, for Kant, true freedom simply because it is unconstrained by law. With this metaphorical comparison established, he continues:

[At present] the authorities do not meddle in any disputes that merely concern public (written) thinking, except solely insofar as this concerns religion, because religion is in fact a mighty pillar of morality, and by means of this, there is civil security and cohesion. (R 6215, 18: 504-5)

Clearly, Kant has some sympathy with the plight of the authorities. A civil state, he acknowledges, may indeed have a genuine interest in curtailing free public expression about matters crucial to morality -- religion included. On balance, however, he sees the state's interest in morality and public order as outweighed by the public's interest in freedom of the pen. Following reason and science where they lead, even when they encroach upon the territory of religion, is, he believes, on balance to be recommended:

Still, it is best that [the state authorities] let these things go and favor reason and science for only in this way can there emerge legitimate freedom of thought (in place of anarchy) and the supreme authority of reason (rather than the despotism of orthodoxy). (R 6215, 18: 505)

In other words, it is only by permitting freedom of expression within the public domain, including free public debate on such emotive topics as religion, that the authorities can cultivate legitimate (that is, non-anarchistic) freedom of thought. This requires that religious matters come before the tribunals of reason and science, but—as we have seen—it also requires that such constraints be

imposed on private freedom as are necessary to facilitate the orderly functioning of the very institutions that make these sober proceedings possible.

This last point dovetails with a closing reflection of “What is Enlightenment?”. Kant claims that “a greater degree of civil freedom”

seems advantageous to a people’s freedom of **spirit** and nevertheless puts up insurmountable barriers to it; a lesser degree of [civil freedom], on the other hand, provides a space for [freedom of spirit] to expand to its full capacity. (E 8: 41)

The diminished degree of civil freedom is that which results from the imposition of private constraints on the speech of civic functionaries. Kant’s idea is that those institutions, such as the army, that insofar as they protect the government and the rule of law also protect the people’s genuine “freedom of spirit” can function effectively only by restricting freedom within their ranks. He sums up this idea with another nod to Frederick the Great. Only someone, he says, who, being himself enlightened,

is not afraid of phantoms, but at the same time has a well-disciplined and numerous army ready to guarantee public peace, can say what a free state [*Freistaat*] may not dare to say: **Argue as much as you will and about what you will; only obey!** (E 8: 41)

In spite of its name, then, a so-called ‘free state’ would possess a lower degree of freedom (broadly understood) than Frederick’s militaristic Prussia. It would do so because, lacking the latter’s policing power—something made possible, in part, by iron discipline *within* the freedom-protecting

institutions themselves—it would be powerless to prevent disputes about religious matters from boiling over into civil disturbances. These disturbances would in turn threaten freedom of spirit by jeopardizing the operation of the institutions that make it possible. Freedom of spirit would be threatened in a second way too. For lacking the military muscle needed for the *regulation* of (inevitably rambunctious) public debate on religious matters, the free state’s only practical option will be to quash free speech by imposing an outright ban on the public debate of religious matters—or so, at least, Kant seems to believe.

Conclusion

In closing, I wish to acknowledge some of the limitations of my discussion, and also to draw one broad moral. The limitations are the following. First, I have not had the space to discuss how far Kant managed to live up to his own conception of enlightenment. My impression is that when it comes to questions of race and gender in particular, he was not successful in ridding himself of the prejudices of his day. Obviously, however, these biographical shortcomings in no way diminish the interest of Kant’s conception of enlightenment: a more reflective Kant would simply have agreed that his own enlightenment had been far from complete. Second, I have been unable to discuss Kant’s position on the general themes of Enlightenment as it is more traditionally understood. The question deserves closer scrutiny because, as Jonathan Israel has noted, Kant seems to have been attracted to a hybrid position combining elements of the Enlightenment’s moderate and radical wings.³⁶ Third and relatedly, I have focused on Kant’s official account of enlightenment at the expense of certain unofficial conceptions that occasionally crop up in his writings. One of these is

³⁶ See Israel 2010: 12–14.

enlightenment as an individual's "degree of culture" (DWL 24: 713), another culture itself, which Kant thinks of as "enlightenment" passed from one generation to the next (*Universal History* 8: 19). Yet another concerns the process of peeling moral religion away from its external trappings in this or that form of public worship (Rel. 6: 179, Anth. 7: 192).³⁷ All of these topics would merit consideration in longer study of this subject.

The broad conclusion I wish to draw is that Kant is attempting to steer the kind of liberal-minded reflection conducted in his time under the slogan of 'enlightenment' away from the traditional, other-directed—not to mention somewhat condescending—project of bringing intellectual light to the benighted by exposing their prejudices (while often ignoring one's own).³⁸ Instead, in a kind of 'subjective turn', he is re-directing this critical scrutiny inwards, towards the rooting out of those aspects in which one has oneself become immature. In Kant's hands, enlightenment becomes a transformative process of moral *self*-improvement—a refreshing antidote to the bewigged and frock-coated complacency of eighteenth-century coffee-house liberalism.³⁹

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³⁷ See Fleischacker 2013, 32, 34,

³⁸ The theme of 'improving the other through enlightenment' is discernible in the sub-title of Ambrose Philips's magazine (mentioned in section 4 above): "Essays on Ignorance, Superstition, Bigotry, Enthusiasm, etc". It is also evident in Möhsen's emphasis on enlightening the "common man"—especially "country folk"—by reducing their superstitions (see Birtsch, 242).

³⁹ Kant is also departing from any tradition that treats enlightenment as a set of attitudes, values, or doctrines (See Fleischacker 1913, 12).

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