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THE PROGRESS OF ABSOLUTISM IN KANT'S ESSAY "WHAT IS ENLIGHTENMENT?"

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Introduction: The Essay's Immediate Intellectual Context

In December 1784, Immanuel Kant published his essay "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?" in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* (*BMS*). The question that Kant was answering had been posed the previous December in the *BMS* by Johann Friedrich Zöllner, who was writing to defend the role of clergy in marriage ceremonies against a proposal to make them purely civil, as with other contracts.¹ After arguing that attacks on the role of religion in social life would only hasten an ongoing decline in morals and that writers should not, "in the name of enlightenment, confuse the hearts and minds of men," Zöllner asks in a note: "What is enlightenment? This question, which is almost as important as the question, what is truth? should really be answered before one begins enlightening! And yet I have not found an answer to it anywhere."²

Zöllner's question and his concerns about the possible negative effects of enlightenment arose in the context of an ongoing discussion within Berlin's *Mittwochsgesellschaft* (Wednesday Society), a secret society that was tied to the *BMS* and whose members included Zöllner, J. K. W. Möhsen, Moses Mendelssohn, and other notables of the German Enlightenment.³ In the

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same month that Zöllner's essay appeared, Möhsen had presented a paper to the society that asked a series of questions, the first of which was, what is enlightenment?; he went on to ask whether enlightenment was "useful or harmful, not only for the public, but also for the state and the government."⁴ Möhsen's presentation sparked months of debate within the society, prompting Mendelssohn to address the issue in a contribution to the *BMS* in September 1784, three months before Kant's essay appeared.⁵ Mendelssohn defines enlightenment as the cultivation of our theoretical reason through scientific inquiry; moreover, he entertains the idea that friends of enlightenment may have an obligation to withhold certain truths lest "prevailing religious and moral tenets" be destroyed, and worries that "the misuse of enlightenment weakens the moral sentiment and leads to hard-heartedness, egoism, irreligion, and anarchy."⁶

Kant's essay, which is easily the most famous of the many responses to Zöllner's original question, takes a radically different approach, as we shall see. Instead of emphasizing theoretical reason, Kant shifts the focus to practical reason, both pure and empirical. Rather than agonizing over the possible dangers of enlightenment, Kant argues that free and informed public discussion in a protective political environment is the only way to teach people to think for themselves and to prepare them for intellectual and political self-government.⁷ In the remainder of the chapter, I will offer a detailed exegesis of Kant's essay, emphasizing its use of botanical and mechanical metaphors and showing how it anticipates his later works and their defenses of representative government and a progressive philosophy of history.

An Exegesis of "What Is Enlightenment?"

Kant begins his essay by defining the term "enlightenment" (*Aufklärung*) as "the human being's emergence from his self-incurred minority," where "minority" (*Unmündigkeit*) is defined as an "inability to make use of one's own understanding without direction from another" (*WE*, 8:35). Though our own "laziness" and "cowardice" are the primary reasons for our minority, those who guide us (priests, doctors, officers, tax officials) have an interest in maintaining and reinforcing it. How, then, are we to surmount such obstacles and achieve enlightenment? Kant discusses three possible paths to enlightenment, although two of them turn out to be false ones. The first

path requires each individual to overcome immaturity through his own effort, but Kant argues that the “precepts and formulas” (*Satzungen und Formeln*) that weigh us down are too heavy to be removed by individual initiative alone—except for a talented few who succeed “by their own cultivation of their spirit in extricating themselves from minority.” The second path is through violent revolution against our guardians, but Kant believes that such a short cut to enlightenment will never produce “a true reform in one’s way of thinking; instead, new prejudices will serve just as well as the old ones to harness the great unthinking masses” (*WE*, 8:36).⁸

After warning against these two false paths to enlightenment, Kant points to a third path. Unlike the first path, which counsels individualism, it recognizes that it “is more possible . . . that a public should enlighten itself” collectively; unlike the second path, which promises a quick fix, it realizes that “a public can achieve enlightenment only slowly.” To identify this path, Kant says, we must determine “what sort of restriction hinders enlightenment, and what sort does not hinder it but instead promotes it.” Contrary to the customary liberal prescription, Kant suggests that the “*public use* of one’s reason” must be perfectly free, while the “*private use* of one’s reason” may reasonably be subject to control—indeed, *must* be subject to control in order for the public use of reason to flourish and for enlightenment to be achieved, as we shall see (*WE*, 8:36–37).

But what does Kant mean by these terms? The private use of reason is that use of reason that we make in our capacity as members of social hierarchies; it is empirical practical reason (specifically, precepts of skill) for the achievement of ends given to us by our superiors (*GW*, 4:415).⁹ Thus, soldiers cannot “engage openly in subtle reasoning about [the] appropriateness or utility” of the orders they receive, but must simply obey them; citizens must not argue with the tax collector over their tax bills, but must quietly discharge their obligations; and priests cannot attack church doctrine in the midst of communion, but must carry out their duties as required by their offices (*WE*, 8:37–38). Such obedience is required to maintain social order and to achieve important public ends, so our superiors in these hierarchies are justified in punishing us when we refuse to exercise our martial, ecclesiastical, or other skills for communal purposes.

The public use of reason, on the other hand, is that use of reason that we make in our capacity as members of learned society; the highest form of such reason is pure reason, whether theoretical or practical, which examines the foundations of science and mathematics, politics and religion. Kant

says that each person may consider himself a “member of a whole commonwealth, even of the society of citizens of the world” who “in his capacity [as] a scholar . . . by his writings addresses a public in the proper sense of the word” (*WE*, 8:37). As literate individuals, we can step outside our roles as members of social organizations and participate in learned society, where we are free to discuss and to criticize. Thus, for example, while a soldier is not allowed to “engage openly in subtle reasoning” about his orders, he may offer his thoughts to the public regarding military matters on his own time, in print.

Kant repeatedly emphasizes that what is needed for the public use of reason to flourish and for enlightenment to be achieved is, first and foremost, *intellectual freedom*. The very existence of public reason depends on free and open inquiry, as Kant argues in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. “Reason must subject itself to critique in all its undertakings, and cannot restrict the freedom of critique through any prohibition without damaging itself and drawing upon itself a disadvantageous suspicion. . . . The very existence of reason depends upon this freedom, which has no dictatorial authority, but whose claim is never anything more than the agreement of free citizens, each of whom must be able to express his reservations, indeed even his *veto*, without holding back” (A738–39/B766–67). As this passage suggests, freedom of thought requires freedom of the press, without which the former would be endangered;¹⁰ as Kant asks elsewhere, “how much and how correctly would we *think* if we did not think as it were in community with others to whom we *communicate* our thoughts, and who communicate theirs to us!” (*OT*, 8:144) Earlier in the enlightenment essay, however, Kant said that the “guidance of another” in intellectual matters was a sign of minority. How is the kind of guidance we receive by thinking “in community with others” different from the kind that our guardians provide for us?

The key to answering this question lies at the beginning of the sentence just quoted. First, consider how the two kinds of guidance affect *how much* we think. Our guardians have no desire to see us think for ourselves, as this would (ultimately) threaten their power over us. If it were up to them, we would hardly think at all—except for that instrumental reasoning necessary for us to discharge our duties within social hierarchies. Our interlocutors in learned society, on the other hand, are pressing us constantly to reason, question, and criticize. Their ideas, especially when different from our own, are an encouragement to thought, and their criticisms of our own ideas are a similarly fruitful provocation.

Now consider how the two kinds of guidance affect *how correctly* we think. To the extent that our guardians encourage us to think at all, they desire that we think in terms of “precepts and formulas” whose accuracy cannot be guaranteed in the absence of vigorous and open debate and whose function is to preserve social order rather than hone our reasoning skills. Our interlocutors in learned society, however, have no patience for dogmatic assertions and challenge us to defend our claims. By questioning our comfortable assumptions and noting our missteps, they compel us to develop our intellectual capacities, which atrophy under guardianship, and become more self-critical. In short, by challenging us to think more and think more correctly, by engaging us in a critical public culture, our fellow participants in cosmopolitan society can help us to overcome intellectual dependency (which makes us little more than the “domesticated animals” of our guardians) and thereby to achieve enlightenment (*WE*, 8:35).

The second necessity is *education*. In both “What Is Enlightenment?” and “Idea for a Universal History,” Kant treats education as something that a public creates for itself, “if only it is left its freedom” (*WE*, 8:36).¹¹ As he puts it in the latter essay, while “the world’s present rulers have no money to spare for public educational institutions or indeed for anything which concerns the world’s best interests (for everything has already been calculated out in advance for the next war), they will nonetheless find that it is to their own advantage . . . not to hinder their citizens’ private efforts in this direction, however weak and slow they may be” (*UH*, 8:28).¹² However, in *The Conflict of the Faculties*, published fifteen years later, Kant suggests a much more positive educational role for political rulers. He says there that “the education of young people in intellectual and moral culture” cannot hope to succeed “unless it is designed on the considered plan and intention of the highest authority in the state, then set in motion and constantly maintained in uniform operation thereafter.” Kant admits, however, that such administration can be expected from political rulers “only . . . through their negative wisdom in furthering their own ends,” a theme to which I will return below (*CF*, 7:92–93).¹³

Intellectual freedom and education are necessary but not sufficient for enlightenment; in addition, Kant argues, *civil unfreedom* is required, a finding he admits is “paradoxical.” By the term “civil unfreedom,” he appears to mean the restrictions on the private use of reason previously discussed, along with the political means to enforce them—specifically, a “well-disciplined and numerous army ready to guarantee public peace” as

well as an enlightened absolute monarch to govern (*WE*, 8:41). Kant is not clear about why civil freedom would set up “insurmountable barriers” to intellectual freedom and therefore enlightenment, but his reasons are not difficult to discern. The intellectual freedom that Kant endorses is a wide-ranging one, embracing art, science, religion, and even legislation, but the critical public culture that this freedom makes possible is by its very nature subversive, leading its participants to question and criticize the “precepts and formulas” that buttress the authority of doctors, priests, and officers of the law. Without an enlightened absolute monarch at the head of a “well-disciplined and numerous army,” such criticism might threaten the very public order that facilitates the long and laborious exploration of ideas needed for enlightenment; it might even provoke a popular uprising that would harness an insufficiently enlightened public with “new prejudices” as pernicious as the old ones they replaced (8:36).

A republic, by contrast, would be incapable of providing this kind of external discipline. Its natural responsiveness to the preferences and passions of a semi-enlightened citizenry would lead it to censor ideas that its citizens found threatening or offensive and to respond inadequately to outbreaks of lawlessness. This is why Kant argues that an enlightened absolute monarch “can say what a free state may not dare to say: *Argue as much as you will and about what you will; only obey!*” (*WE*, 8:41). Just as our interlocutors in learned society provide a guidance that differs in kind from that offered by our guardians, so the enlightened monarch imposes a constraint that differs in kind from that imposed by unenlightened rulers, who offer nothing but “personal despotism and . . . avaricious or tyrannical oppression” (8:36).

As I have just indicated, however, a tension exists between argument and obedience, a tension that motivates Kant to endorse enlightened absolutism but that promises to greaten with time. As a people grow increasingly enlightened, their hostility to established authority and its ideological supports will grow as well: the “precepts and formulas” formerly offered by their guardians will seem increasingly hollow and inadequate, and they will begin to question the legitimacy of rule that is not subject to the same mature public reason that governs the world of ideas. Kant indeed recognizes this dialectical tension and hints at a resolution in the last sentences of his essay: “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 the former, on the other hand, provides a space for the latter

to expand to its full capacity. Thus when nature has unwrapped, from under this hard shell [*harten Hülle*], the seed [*Keim*] for which she cares most tenderly, namely, the propensity and calling to *think* freely, the latter gradually works back upon the mentality of the people (which thereby gradually becomes capable of *freedom* in acting) and eventually even upon the principles of *government*, which finds it profitable to itself to treat the human being, *who is now more than a machine*, in keeping with his dignity” (WE, 8:41–42).

This rich, somewhat obscure passage needs to be carefully unwrapped itself; I believe it holds the key to Kant’s theory of enlightened absolutism. Attend first to the botanical imagery. Kant describes civil unfreedom (i.e., enlightened but militarily powerful absolute monarchy limiting the private use of reason) as a “hard shell” that safeguards our “propensity and calling to *think* freely,” which he describes as a “seed” in need of development. This shell, hard but capacious, “provides a space” for the seed to grow and mature; this space is intellectual freedom, and the maturation of the seed is the steady process of enlightenment that culminates in our intellectual majority. A germinating seed soon presses against its shell, however, and the pressure gradually builds; this pressure is symbolic of the tension between argument and obedience that I discussed above. This tension is resolved when the seed is “unwrapped” by “nature”: the shell, weakened by time and weather, is slowly penetrated and disintegrated by the germinating seed, which no longer needs its protection. The metaphor is most complex—and subversive—at precisely this point. If the shell is indeed civil unfreedom, then its penetration and disintegration suggests that an enlightened people attain not merely freedom in thinking but also “freedom in acting,” i.e., it assumes responsibility for its own governance. Intellectual self-government, which is facilitated by a critical public culture flourishing under the protection of an enlightened absolute monarch, becomes a prelude to and preparation for *political* self-government. Nature (which is itself used as a metaphor for providence [*Vorsehung*] in Kant’s other writings, notably *Perpetual Peace*, 8:360–63) makes this transition possible, but the details are difficult to infer from the metaphor itself: a shell may passively submit to disintegration by a germinating seed, but why would an absolute monarch allow himself to be displaced by his enlightened subjects, who are now able to govern themselves? In fact, why would he ever allow, much less encourage, his own subjects to grow into such a threat to begin with? Kant suggests in the above passage that a government may find the adoption of political

principles more consistent with human dignity “profitable to itself”; in other words, self-interest may motivate an absolute monarch’s early support for enlightenment and his eventual acquiescence in representative institutions, a possibility to which I will return below.

Additional support for my reading of this botanical imagery is provided by Kant himself in a strikingly similar passage in *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793), in which he uses gestation imagery to describe “the continuous development of the pure religion of reason [*reinen Vernunftreligion*] out of its present still indispensable shell [*Hülle*]” of historical faith: “The integuments [*Hüllen*] within which the embryo is first formed into a human being must be laid aside if the latter is to see the light of day. The leading-string of holy tradition, with its appendages, its statutes and observances, which in its time did good service, become bit by bit dispensable, yea, finally, when a human being enters upon his adolescence, turn into a fetter” (RE, 6:121, 135).¹⁴ Historical faiths, which divide men from one another with their different holy texts and statutes, can only lay claim to being true faiths by serving as a “vehicle” for the pure religion of reason, which is a moral religion, i.e., a religion of “good life-conduct,” not of ritual observance (6:123, 170–71). This moral religion will gradually displace the ecclesiastical elements of the historical faiths, including not merely “statutes and observances” but even religious hierarchy itself: “the degrading distinction between *laity* and *clergy* ceases, and equality springs from true freedom, yet without anarchy, for each obeys the law (*not* the statutory one) which he has prescribed for himself” (6:122). This vision of colegislation of the moral law by a priesthood of all believers has subversive implications for religion *and* politics.

Let us return to the last sentences of the enlightenment essay excerpted above. Attend now to the mechanistic imagery at the close of the passage. Hans Reiss suggests that this is an allusion to Julien Offray de la Mettrie’s materialistic doctrine in *L’homme machine*.¹⁵ However, it may also be a reference to another use of mechanistic imagery in the essay, which is in the midst of Kant’s discussion of the *private* use of reason. He says there that a social hierarchy serving public ends (e.g., military, church, or civil service) is like a “mechanism” and that when an individual serves in one he acts as “part of the machine” (WE, 8:37). Therefore, to say that man is “*now more than a machine*” is to say that enlightened man is capable of service in institutions other than such hierarchies and is capable of reason beyond the limited, functional private reason proper to such hierarchies, which is ex-

emplified by “precepts and formulas, those mechanical instruments of a rational use, or rather misuse, of his natural endowments” (8:36). In other words, man’s capacity for the *public* use of reason identifies him as a potential participant not only in the cosmopolitan society of men of letters but also in the critical political culture of a self-governing people.

Similar mechanical imagery makes an appearance in Kant’s other texts as well, especially the political ones, and once again reinforces the proposed interpretation. For example, Kant says that to employ someone as a soldier and to make use of his skills “to kill . . . seems to involve a use of human beings as mere machines and tools in the hands of another (a state)”; they become part of a larger mechanism, the military, which serves public purposes but demands of its participants qua soldiers that they simply exercise their limited, functional private reason to fulfill their duties (*PP*, 8:345). In *Theory and Practice*, Kant emphasizes that “there must be *obedience* under the mechanism of the state constitution to coercive laws” in order for public order to be maintained, an obedience requiring nothing more than a rudimentary instrumental reason (e.g., paying one’s taxes, respecting others’ lives and property, etc.) (*TP*, 8:305; cf. *CPrR*, 5:38). Going on to echo the theme of his enlightenment essay, however, Kant argues that citizens must be “convinced by reason that this coercion is in conformity with right,” something they can only do with liberty of thought and press, which allows them to exercise their reason publicly and thereby develop their capacity for self-government. To deny this capacity, as Kant accuses the Machiavellian “political moralist” of doing in *Perpetual Peace*, is tantamount to “throwing human beings into one class with other living machines” (*PP*, 8:378; cf. *MM*, 6:355). To affirm the capacity, on the other hand, is to recognize man’s aptitude for an active, republican citizenship, which is the ultimate way in which enlightenment “eventually even [works back] upon the principles of *government*.”

Conclusion: Republicanism and the Cunning of History

In “What Is Enlightenment?” Kant suggests that an enlightened absolute monarch (such as Frederick the Great, who ruled Kant’s Prussia from 1740 to 1786) can and should lead his subjects to intellectual and political self-government. What form of political self-government does Kant have in mind, however, and why would any absolute monarch take such steps to

empower his subjects and thereby jeopardize his own authority? Kant offers answers to these two questions in his later political and historical writings. As for the form of political self-government, Kant endorses *republicanism*, which for him means a separation of powers between a unitary executive and a representative-democratic legislature whose members are chosen by a limited electorate of “active” citizens. The separation-of-powers component of Kantian republicanism is described in *Perpetual Peace*, where Kant contrasts republicanism (“separation of the executive power . . . from the legislative power”) with despotism (“the high-handed management of the state by laws that the regent has himself given”) (*PP*, 8:352).¹⁶

Kant lays out his views regarding the legislative branch most clearly in the first half of the *Metaphysics of Morals*, the *Doctrine of Right* (*Rechtslehre*). He argues there that “sovereignty” (*Souveränität*) resides in the “person of the legislator,” and in addition that “legislative authority can belong only to the united will of the people” (*MM*, 6:313). The “active” citizens of a republic are described as those with an “equal right to vote within this constitution” as well as “the right to manage the state itself . . . [to] organize it or to cooperate for introducing certain laws” (6:314–15). But Kant was not an advocate of direct democracy: he goes on to say that citizens are “represented by [their] deputies (in parliament)” and “act through their delegates (deputies),” i.e., their political agency is expressed by voting for and otherwise trying to influence their legislative representatives (6:319, 341). The legislature can grant or withhold war-making powers from the executive; citizens “must therefore give their free assent, through their representatives, not only to waging war in general but also to each particular declaration of war” (6:345–46). It also has power of the purse, for “the people taxes itself, since the only way of proceeding in accordance with principles of right in this matter is for taxes to be levied by those deputized by the people” (6:325). Finally, and most radically (given his political context), Kant gives the legislature the right to “take the ruler’s [executive’s] authority away from him, depose him, or reform his administration. But it cannot *punish* him (and the saying common in England, that the king, i.e., the supreme executive authority, can do no wrong, means no more than this)” (6:317). Given his experience with the Prussian censors, such an assertion may strike the reader as quite bold, bordering on reckless, but Kant does rule out punishment of the monarch (no doubt with Louis XVI in mind), and he later stresses that citizens can only “legally *resist* the executive authority and its representatives

(the minister) by means of its representatives (in parliament)” (6:322).¹⁷ Kant’s motto, as always, is “Reform not revolution.”

Kant believes that the vote should be limited to “active” (rather than “passive”) citizens. He defines an active citizen as one who is “independent,” i.e., capable of “acting from his own choice” and therefore not dependent “upon the will of others” (*MM*, 6:314–15). By this definition he apparently intends to exclude from the franchise whoever is personally dependent upon others for his “preservation in existence (his being fed and protected),” whether through employment or familial dependency (e.g., wives and children) (*TP*, 8:295–96). Although he does not discuss his reasons for restricting the franchise in this way, he seems to believe that passive citizens would be unduly influenced by those upon whom they were dependent; allowing them to vote would therefore undermine the integrity of republican governance by effectively giving multiple votes to employers, husbands, and fathers—though a secret ballot could surely diminish this kind of influence. From our own perspective, such restrictions on voting may seem highly reactionary. In fairness to Kant, though, we should also note that he says that the “natural laws of freedom and . . . equality” require that “anyone can work his way up from this passive condition to an active one,” i.e., anyone who can escape personal dependency (by becoming an independent artisan, yeoman farmer, etc.) is entitled to the franchise (*MM*, 6:315; cf. *TP*, 8:292).

If republicanism so described is the enlightened absolute monarch’s goal, then what is his motive? First, he has a *moral duty* to facilitate this transition to intellectual and political self-government, as Kant says clearly in the *Rechtslehre*:

The spirit of the original contract (*anima pacti originarii*) involves an obligation on the part of the constituting authority to make the kind of government suited to the idea of the original contract. Accordingly, even if this cannot be done all at once, it is under an obligation to change the kind of government gradually and continually so that it harmonizes in its effect with the only constitution that accords with right, that of a pure republic. . . . Any true republic is and can only be a system representing the people, in order to protect its rights in its name, by all the citizens united and acting through their delegates (deputies). (*MM*, 6:340–41)

Moreover, the monarch is authorized to guide this transition by a *lex permissiva*: he may defer the institution of a government fully consistent with right “until the people gradually becomes susceptible to the influence of the mere idea of the authority of law . . . and thus is found fit to legislate for itself”; such a delay must be allowed “lest implementing [self-rule] prematurely counteract its very purpose,” as I discussed earlier (*PP*, 8:347–48, 372–73; cf. *WE*, 8:41–42).¹⁸

He may be morally authorized and even obligated to effect this transition, but given that it will demote him to a limited, constitutional executive, do we have any reason to believe that he will actually carry it out? As we saw above, Kant suggested in the enlightenment essay that *self-interest* might lead a monarch to reform. He maintains in “Idea for a Universal History” that “the mutual relationships between states are already so sophisticated that none of them can neglect its internal culture without losing power and influence in relation to the others” (*UH*, 8:27). In other words, geopolitical concerns will cause state leaders to engage in internal reform as a means of strengthening their societies for various forms of international competition. Among the reforms Kant mentions here are freedom of religion and freedom of thought more broadly, as well as the tolerance of (if not support for) citizens’ efforts to educate themselves:

Restrictions placed upon personal activities are increasingly relaxed, and general freedom of religion is granted. And thus, although folly and caprice creep in at times, *enlightenment* gradually arises. It is a great benefit which the human race must reap even from its rulers’ self-seeking schemes of expansion, if only they realize what is to their own advantage. But this enlightenment . . . must gradually spread upwards towards the thrones and even influence their principles of government. While . . . the world’s present rulers have no money to spare for public educational institutions . . . they will nonetheless find that is to their own advantage at least not to hinder their citizens’ private efforts in this direction. (*UH*, 8:28; cf. *WE*, 8:41–42)

Unfortunately, Kant does not say why these reforms would be to the advantage of “self-seeking” rulers, but his reasons are not difficult to infer. To begin, religious toleration may promote social peace, thereby freeing up state resources (especially military ones) for other uses; moreover, it may secure the loyalty of oppressed but economically powerful religious minor-

ities.¹⁹ More generally, freedom of thought and the education to make it effective, by fostering a critical public culture and an enlightened citizenry, enlists the talents of the people in the reform process. As noted above, Kant believed that freedom of the press should be broad, including matters scientific, religious, and legislative (*WE*, 8:41). The critical public culture that results will therefore be a rich source of new ideas for improving the efficiency of public institutions—a desirable state of affairs for an ambitious, expansionist ruler.

But these initial rounds of reform can take a society only partway toward republican governance: economic and intellectual freedom can help create a prosperous and enlightened populace that is prepared for political self-rule, but political reforms are needed to realize such self-rule, and these are hard to square with the self-interest of an absolute monarch. One can imagine reasons, however, why an absolute monarch might set up representative institutions, albeit initially weak, advisory ones. For example, he might create them to learn the views of his subjects and to provide a venue for the peaceful expression of grievances. Kant even suggests a reason why actual powers might be ceded to them: the need for money. The very geopolitical competition that forces rulers to implement the initial rounds of internal reforms may compel them to make political reforms as a way to extract additional resources from the people without sparking serious opposition; the British parliament and other countries' representative assemblies gained much of their power as a consequence of monarchical penury. Kant himself offers Louis XVI and his convocation of the Estates General in 1789 as an example: "A powerful ruler in our time therefore made a very serious error in judgment when, to extricate himself from the embarrassment of large state debts, he left it to the people to take this burden on itself and distribute it as it saw fit; for then the legislative authority naturally came into the people's hands, not only with regard to the taxation of subjects but also with regard to the government, namely to prevent it from incurring new debts by extravagance or war. The consequence was that the monarch's sovereignty wholly disappeared (it was not merely suspended) and passed to the people, to whose legislative will the belongings of every subject became subjected" (*MM*, 6:341).

Thus, it can be in the short-run self-interest of a monarch to empower the citizenry legislatively. Myopia is apparently key here, for as Kant notes, "a republic, once established, no longer has to let the reins of government out of its hands and give them over again to those who previously held

them and could again nullify all new institutions by their absolute choice" (*MM*, 6:341). The return of sovereignty to its original owner (the people) reduces the monarch to a mere executive, an "organ of the sovereign," who can now be rightfully deposed or otherwise constrained by a popular legislature, as noted above (6:319).

By a series of policy innovations, each tactically sound, an absolute monarchy (or more likely a dynasty) thus engineers its own downfall and the creation of a republic. Moreover, this end is (or at least can be) accomplished without any violations of right, which would inevitably occur in a revolution (*TP*, 8:298–304; *MM*, 6:318–23). Whatever one thinks of the likelihood of such a sequence of events unfolding, Kant's theoretical accomplishment here is impressive and largely unnoticed: he has shown how republicanism might emerge from absolute monarchy in a manner wholly consistent with both justice and the short-run interests of the regent himself—the immaculate conception of a republic, in brief, unsullied by revolutionary violence or monarchical resistance. In this way Kant completes his narrative of the progress of absolutism from despotism and dependence to popular self-government, both political and intellectual, and of the systematic political self-emasculation of enlightening rulers prompted by moral duty or (more likely) by the cunning of history.

NOTES

1. Zöllner, "Ist es ratsam, das Ehebündniß nicht ferner durch die Religion zu sanciren?" *Berlinische Monatsschrift* 2 (1783): 508–17; reprinted in *Was ist Aufklärung?: Beiträge aus der Berlinischen Monatsschrift*, ed. Norbert Hinske (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliches Buchgesellschaft, 1977), 107–16. The proposal was made in a previous *BMS* article written under the pseudonym E. v. K. ("Vorschlag, die Geistlichen nicht mehr bei Vollziehung der Ehen zu bemühen," *Berlinische Monatsschrift* 2 (1783): 265–76; reprinted in Hinske, 95–106), which was commonly used by Johann Erich Biester, one of the founders of the *BMS*—on this point, see Hinske, xxxvii. Elisabeth Ellis provides an excellent discussion of the Biester/Zöllner exchange and its context in *Kant's Politics: Provisional Theory for an Uncertain World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 28–30. (The entire *BMS* is now online: <http://www.ub.uni-bielefeld.de/diglib/aufkl/berlmon>.)

2. Zöllner, "Ist es ratsam," 516; Hinske, *Was ist Aufklärung?*, 115.

3. Günter Birtsch, "The Berlin Wednesday Society," in *What Is Enlightenment?: Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, ed. James Schmidt (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 235–52.

4. J. K. W. Möhsen, "What Is to Be Done Toward the Enlightenment of the Citizenry?" in Schmidt, *What Is Enlightenment?*, 49, 51.

5. Kant writes in a note to his essay that he had unfortunately not received the issue of *BMS* that contained Mendelssohn's essay before completing his own (*WE*, 8:42). Moses Men-

delsohn, "Ueber die Frage: Was heißt aufklären?" *Berlinische Monatsschrift* 4 (1784): 193–200; "On the Question: What Is Enlightenment?" in Schmidt, *What Is Enlightenment?*, 53–57.

6. Mendelssohn, "Ueber die Frage," 198–99, in Schmidt, *What Is Enlightenment?*, 55–56.

7. On Prussian politics of the period, see Hunter, chapter 7 of this volume.

8. Kant's hostility to political revolution is a consistent feature of his practical philosophy. See, for example, *TP*, 8:297–305; *MM*, 6:318–23; and *RE*, 6:122. For Kant's views on citizen obedience under despotism and barbarism, see Ripstein, chapter two of this volume.

9. Cf. Ciaran Cronin, "Kant's Politics of Enlightenment," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 41, no. 1 (2003): 56–57; and James Schmidt, "The Question of Enlightenment: Kant, Mendelssohn, and the *Mittwochsgesellschaft*," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 50, no. 2 (1989): 288, who see private reason as reason that is valid for the realm of contractual relations.

10. On freedom of the press, see Laursen, chapter 9 of this volume.

11. On education, see LaVaque-Manty, chapter 8 of this volume.

12. Kant may have in mind here Frederick the Great's ill-funded 1763 attempt to create a universal primary education system in Prussia.

13. It has been suggested that *The Contest of the Faculties* is more hostile to absolutism than earlier works. Kant is certainly more openly critical of *unenlightened* absolutism in this work than in previous ones (e.g., *CF*, 7:80). However, the work is in other respects entirely consistent with his earlier political writings, especially regarding the impermissibility of revolution, the necessity of top-down reform by an enlightened ruler, and the desirability of mass education and enlightenment (*CF*, 7:86n, 87–88, 89–91, 92–93).

14. On the term "leading string" in Kant's work, see LaVaque-Manty, chapter 8 of this volume.

15. Hans S. Reiss, ed., *Kant's Political Writings*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 274n7. Even nonmaterialistic doctrines can turn man into a machine, however, as Kant indicates in the second *Critique* when he compares Leibnizian freedom to that of a "turnspit [*Bratenwender*]" (*CPrR*, 5:97).

16. Cf. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 67n, 82–99 [*Of the Social Contract*, Book II, chapter 6; Book III, chapters 1–6].

17. On censorship of religious and political writings under Frederick the Great and his immediate successor, Frederick William II, see Georg Cavallar, "Kant's Judgment on Frederick's Enlightened Absolutism," *History of Political Thought* 14 (Spring 1993): 112–14, 117–18; as well as Frederick Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism: The Genesis of Modern German Political Thought, 1790–1800* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 48–53. Kant's relationship with Frederick the Great's minister of state and head of ecclesiastical affairs, the liberal K. A. F. von Zedlitz, was extremely close, but he ran into problems with von Zedlitz's reactionary successor, J. C. Wöllner. Kant was censured for his religious writings and threatened with "unpleasant measures for [his] continued obstinacy"; he consequently promised to write no further on religious matters, a promise he kept until the death of Frederick William II in 1797. For more details, see Manfred Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 378–82, 404; and Hunter, chapter 7 of this volume.

18. For more on the concepts of a *lex permissiva* and of "provisional right" (*provisorisch Recht*), see *MM*, 6:223, 247, 256–57, 329; as well as Ellis, *Kant's Politics*.

19. Cavallar, *Kant's Judgment*, 115, suggests this may have been Frederick the Great's primary reason for tolerating diverse sects. His grandfather Frederick I's admission of thousands of persecuted but industrious French Huguenots may have provided a model; see C. B. A. Behrens, *Society, Government, and the Enlightenment: The Experiences of Eighteenth-Century France and Prussia* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 123–24. For more on this topic, see Hunter, chapter 7 of this volume.