



SLANT

# DESIRING TO UNDERSTAND

August 16, 2018 • Jennifer Uleman on the phenomenology and reality of reason

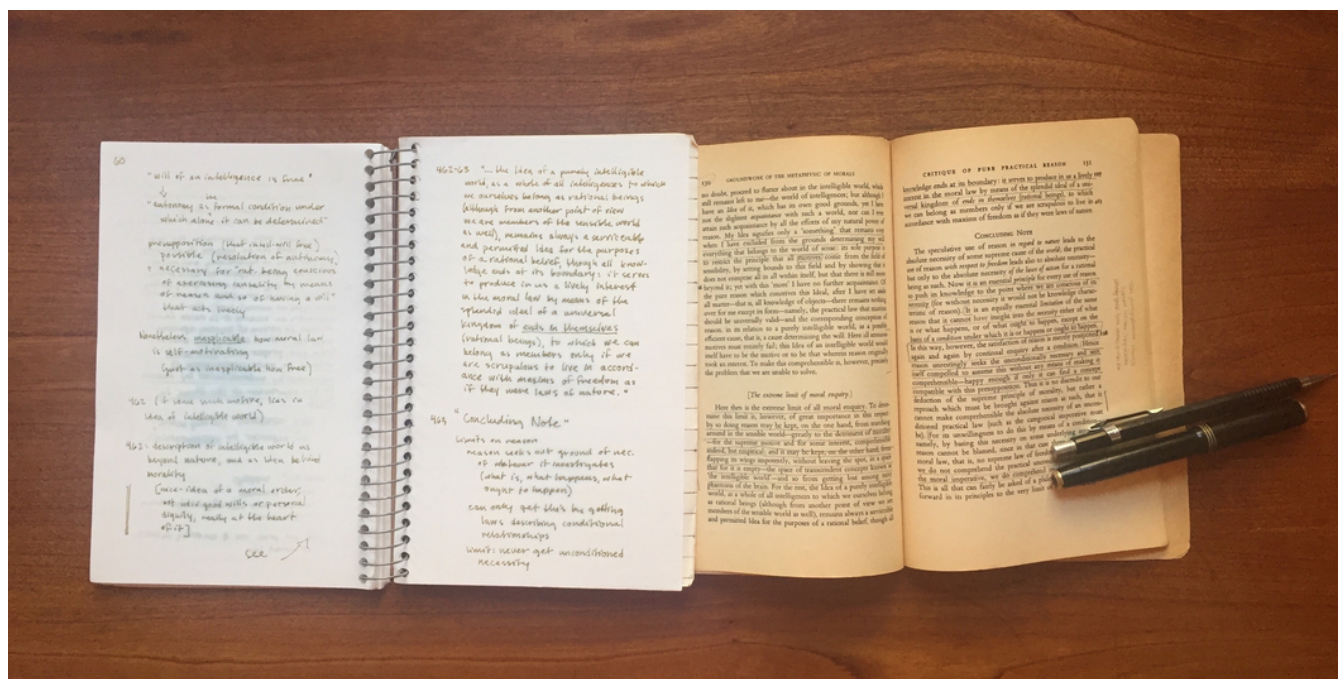


Photo: Jennifer Uleman.

*In conjunction with our special feature on what, where, who, and when is Enlightenment in the Summer 2018 issue of Artforum, scholar Jennifer Uleman contributes thoughts on the phenomenology and reality of reason.*

**IN 2004**, I was part of a public debate, designed to take up a controversy, engage the off-campus community, and maybe generate new dues-paying members of our departmental

Friends of Philosophy. The debate was on same-sex marriage. Like most of the audience, I was in favor, qualms about heteronormativity notwithstanding; the university's Catholic chaplain was against. We were in Miami. It was late March, probably early evening. The well-lit, air-conditioned lecture hall had stadium seating and was relatively full. As the chaplain spoke, I watched the audience. I guess I saw some headshaking, some shifting in seats, maybe some nodding. But what caught my eye, and what I remember exactly, was a group of six or seven students, clearly together, clearly there for the chaplain. They were sitting up straight, alert in their seats, intent as he explained the reasons that same-sex marriage shouldn't be recognized. It was astonishing and moving, like watching a quiet vitalization. Their very alive faces and postures were mixes of accord and relief. They had the look students have when something finally makes sense: shoulders drop, foreheads smooth, they inhale, galvanized.

I thought of the title of Jonathan Lear's book about Aristotle, *The Desire to Understand* (1988), which comes from the opening line of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*: "πάντες ἄνθρωποι τοῦ εἰδέναι ὀρέγονται φύσει," or, all human beings, by nature, desire to understand. We want things to make sense. We spend hours and hours listening to talk radio, to preachers, to teachers, to each other; we talk and talk and talk, we read and read. We crave accounts, theories, breakdowns of how things fit together and why. Everybody (as some translations go) naturally desires knowledge.

Enlightenment: Kant's German was *Aufklärung*, a clearing up. This is what enlightenment, what the desire to understand, satisfied, feels like: you come into a clearing, a calm place that feels like truth, that counters chaos, a place where pieces settle, fit together, where the pains and discomforts of confusion, at least, are relieved. You say oh, or aha, or mmm-hmm.

Those students: I don't really think they were enlightened, or understood. But I think they wanted to understand. You could argue they'd come to the debate just to have their prejudices reaffirmed, their biases confirmed. And maybe you'd be right—maybe new ideas and connections were not being made, maybe the feeling of enlightenment I thought I saw them having was just self-satisfied "nyah nyah nyah," or anyway nothing worth being struck by. Maybe their rapt attention was something to recoil from. But that wasn't

what I felt. I felt like they had a real desire and like, however f—ed-up the content was, they were responding to the chaplain's own kind of wrong-headed sense. He seemed like a kind man. It felt like they were feeling something we all really like to feel.

To claim importance for the feeling of enlightenment is to claim that a real need is satisfied when sense is made. We need sense, like we need truth, beauty, justice, and love. Unfortunately, things can make sense without being true ("valid but not sound!" my logic students yell). Conspiracy theories have a logic. So do creationism and libertarianism and the theories that defend racism and sexism. Many views that make sense to people are false and can be shown to be. But they answer a desire to understand even if, as theories, they were born of something more craven.

To claim that some views are false, that some views are better than others, even just to claim that understanding itself really matters, is one way to make the important claim that might does not make right. To claim this is to resist those on both left and right who insist that everything in our minds and maybe also in our hearts is just there to serve power, or the dear self, somehow construed, that all our thoughts and senses of intellectual satisfaction are just complicated results of the coercion, violence, material power, overt and wily, brutal and enticing, that constantly lobbies for our assent. To claim this is to resist the claims that reason is just rationalization or sophistry, that systems and laws are always just mechanisms of coercive control, that truth is always subjective, whatever works best for me. These hard-nosed, cool-kid positions are not far from claims that intellectual discipline itself is unjustified and there only to keep gates; that book-learning itself is overrated; and that "enlightenment" itself, given history, can only ever be code for epistemic imperialism.

But this is all wrong. There is something that matters and that is real in thoughts and feelings and experiences that make sense, times in which, however awful but also of course however awesome, truths are articulated and click in. These times matter like it matters when beauty fills the lungs and brain, when love keeps fear, destruction, and isolation at bay, and when justice is glimpsed. People desire all of these, for their own sakes, and we should. If you refuse the earnest reality of a desire to understand, including among at least some you call enemies, you refuse the importance of the desire, and if you do this, you

don't take the whole project of truth seriously. You won't be able to say that the chaplain's students were wrong, or to hope that they have come around. If you can only scoff at everyone who disagrees with you, you ultimately refuse to allow that enlightenment is a thing. You render all claims weapons in a war, all "truths" partisan self reports. But true understanding, true enlightenment, however underground, unpopular, or losing, *is* a thing. It is a tender thing, worth cultivating, coaxing, exercising, smiling on—worth succoring. Sometimes there really is a clearing, and the clearing holds the reasons you fight for truth, beauty, justice, and love—because you are fighting for them, aren't you? And for the bits of them that crop up, that are already here—operating and mattering and moving—even if they are not winning, are not most mighty. Truth, beauty, justice, and love may never win, enlightenment may not save us, but that doesn't mean they aren't here, or real, or ours for the desiring and sometimes the happy finding.

—Jennifer Uleman

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