

*Toward Perpetual  
Peace*  
and Other Writings  
on Politics, Peace,  
and History

I M M A N U E L K A N T

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Yale University Press  
New Haven and London

# An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?

Ak 8:33

*Enlightenment is the human being's emancipation from its self-incurred immaturity.*<sup>1</sup> Immaturity is the inability to make use of one's intellect without the direction of another. This immaturity is *self-incurred* when its cause does not lie in a lack of intellect, but rather in a lack of resolve and courage to make use of one's intellect without the direction of another. "*Sapere aude!* Have the courage to make use of your own intellect!" is hence the motto of enlightenment.<sup>2</sup> 8:35

Idleness and cowardice are the reasons why such a large segment of humankind, even after nature has long since set it free from foreign direction (*naturaliter maiorenes*),<sup>3</sup> is nonetheless content to remain immature for life; and these are also the reasons why it is so easy for others to set themselves up as their guardians. It is so comfortable to be immature. If I have a book that reasons for me, a pastor who acts as my conscience, a physician who determines my diet for me, etc., then I need not make any effort myself. It is not necessary that I think if I can just pay; others will take such irksome business upon themselves for me. The guardians who have kindly assumed supervisory responsibility have ensured that the largest part of humanity (including the entirety of the fairer sex) understands progress

1. "Immaturity" is a translation of *Unmündigkeit*, which can designate both natural and legal immaturity. *Mund* means "mouth," and a primary connotation of the term is not being able to speak (and decide) for oneself. The paradigmatic case of those who are *unmündig* is children. Legal immaturity consists in not being legally allowed to make certain decisions or to represent oneself in legal proceedings, that is, in needing a *Vormund* (translated below as "guardian," but the German word also has connotations of someone who speaks for another). The group of those who are legally immature can comprise more than just children (for example, adults who are not mentally competent or, in the eighteenth century, women).

2. The phrase stems from Horace's *Epistles* 1.2.40 and was a recognized motto in Enlightenment circles.

3. "Those who have come of age naturally."

8:36 toward maturity to be not only arduous, but also dangerous. After they have first made their domesticated animals dumb and carefully prevented their tame creatures from daring to take a single step without the walker to which they have been harnessed, they then show the danger that threatens them, should they attempt to walk alone. Yet this danger is not so great, for they would, after falling a few times, eventually learn to walk alone; but one such example makes them timid and generally deters them from all further attempts.

It is thus difficult for any individual to work himself out of the immaturity that has almost become second nature to him. He has even become fond of it and is, for the time being, truly unable to make use of his own reason, because he has never been allowed to try it. Statutes and formulae, those mechanical tools of a rational use, or rather misuse, of his natural endowments, are the shackles of a perpetual state of immaturity. And whoever would throw them off would nonetheless make only an uncertain leap over even the narrowest ditch, because he is not used to such freedom of movement. Hence there are only very few who have succeeded through their own intellectual toil in emerging from immaturity and who still walk confidently.

It is much more likely that an entire public should enlighten itself; indeed it is nearly unavoidable if one allows it the freedom to do so. For there will always be some independent thinkers even among the appointed guardians of the great masses who, after they themselves have thrown off the yoke of immaturity, will spread the spirit of rational appreciation of one's own worth and the calling of every human being to think for himself. What is particularly noteworthy here is that the public that had previously been placed under this yoke may compel its guardians themselves to remain under this yoke, if it is incited to such action by some of its guardians who are incapable of any enlightenment. So harmful is it to instill prejudices, for they ultimately avenge themselves on their originators or on those whose predecessors invented them. Hence a public can only slowly arrive at enlightenment. A revolution is perhaps capable of breaking away from personal despotism and from avaricious or power-hungry oppression, but it can never bring about a genuine reform in thinking; instead, new prejudices will serve as a guiding rein for the thoughtless masses.

8:37 Yet nothing but *freedom* is required for this enlightenment. And indeed it is the most harmless sort of freedom that may be properly called freedom, namely: to make *public use* of one's reason in all matters. But now I hear called out on all sides: *do not argue!* The officer says: do not argue, just drill! The tax collector says: do not argue, just pay! The clergyman says: do

not argue, just believe! (There is only one master in the world who says: *argue* as much as you like and about whatever you like, *but obey!*) Everywhere here there are limitations to freedom. But what kind of limitation is a hindrance to enlightenment? And what kind of limitation is not, but rather even serves to promote it? I answer: the *public* use of one's reason must be free at all times, and this alone can bring about enlightenment among humans; the *private use* of one's reason may often, however, be highly restricted without thereby especially impeding the progress of enlightenment. By the public use of one's reason I mean the kind of use that one makes thereof as a *scholar* before the *reading world*. I understand the private use of one's reason to be the use that one may make of it in a *civil* post or office with which one is entrusted. For many affairs that serve the interests of the commonwealth a certain mechanism is required, by means of which some members of the commonwealth must play only a passive role, so that they can be led by the government in the pursuit of public ends by means of an artificial unanimity, or at least be kept from undermining these ends. In these cases, of course, one may not argue, but rather must obey. To the extent that this part of the machine is simultaneously a segment of the entire commonwealth and even a part of the society of citizens of the world, and thus acts in his capacity as a scholar who addresses a public through his writings, he can indeed argue, without thereby impairing the affairs for which he is in part responsible through passive service. It would thus be very harmful if an officer who receives orders from his superiors were to publicly question the expediency or usefulness of his orders; he must obey. He cannot, however, justifiably be barred from making comments, as a scholar, on the mistakes in the military service and submitting these remarks to judgment by the public. A citizen cannot refuse to pay the taxes which are required of him; even a presumptuous public rebuke of such levies, if such taxes are to be paid by him, can be punished as causing a public scandal (which could set off a more general resistance). Regardless of this, the same citizen does not contravene his civic duty if he publicly expresses, as a scholar, his thoughts against the impropriety or even injustice of such levies. In precisely such a way a clergyman is bound to render his service to his pupils in catechism and his congregation in accordance with the symbol of the church that he serves, for he has been accepted into his position under precisely this condition. But as a scholar he enjoys full freedom and is even is called upon to communicate to the public all of his own carefully examined and well-intentioned thoughts on what is mistaken in that symbol, as well as his suggestions for a better arrangement of the religious and church-associated institutions. And there

is nothing here which should be regarded as weighing on his conscience. For what he teaches in accordance with his office as a representative agent of the church, he understands to be something with regard to which he may not merely teach at his own discretion, but rather which he has been employed to present according to instruction and in the name of another. He shall say: our church teaches this or that; this is the evidence that it relies upon. He then derives all practical benefits for his congregation from statutes which he would not himself endorse with full conviction, but the presentation of which he can undertake, for it is after all not completely impossible that truth lies hidden within it, and in any case, however, nothing can be found in it that fundamentally contradicts the inner religion. For if he believed to find such a contradiction therein he would not be able to execute his office in good conscience and would have to resign from it. Hence the use that an employed teacher makes of his reason before his congregation is merely a *private use* thereof: because this is always merely a domestic assembly of persons, however large it may be. And in view of this he is not free as a priest and indeed may not be free, because he is acting on a commission that comes from outside. As a scholar, on the other hand, who, through writings, addresses the true public, namely, the entire world, the clergyman, when making *public use* of his reason, enjoys unrestricted freedom in making use of his reason and in speaking from his own person. For to claim that the guardians of the people (in spiritual matters) should themselves be immature, is an inconsistency that would amount to a perpetuation of inconsistencies.

8:39 But should not a society of clergymen, for instance a church assembly, or a venerable *classis* (as it calls itself among the Dutch), be entitled to commit by means of oath among themselves to a certain unchangeable symbol, in order to thereby ensure themselves of constant guardianship over each of their members and thereby over the entire population, and even immortalize their guardianship? I say: that is completely impossible. Such a contract, which is concluded in order to prevent for eternity all further enlightenment for the human race is quite simply null and void, even if it were to be confirmed by the most supreme authority, by means of parliaments or by the most ceremonious of peace treaties. One generation cannot form an alliance and conspire to put a subsequent generation in such a position in which it would be impossible for the latter to expand its knowledge (particularly where such knowledge is so vital), to rid this knowledge of errors, and, more generally, to proceed along the path of enlightenment. That would be a violation of human nature, the original vocation of which consists pre-

cisely in this progress; and the descendents are thus perfectly entitled to reject those resolutions as having been made in an unjust and criminal way. The touchstone of anything that can serve as a law over a people lies in the question: whether a people could impose such a law on itself. Now this could well be possible for a certain short period of time in order to introduce a certain degree of order, in anticipation of a better law: by allowing every citizen, primarily the clergyman, the freedom to comment publicly, that is, through writings, in his capacity as a scholar, on that which is flawed in the present arrangement while the current order still prevails, until insight into the state of affairs in these matters has publicly progressed to the point where it has shown itself to be generally accepted, such that through a coalition of their voices (even if not a unanimous union) it could present a proposal to the throne to defend those congregations that had agreed upon what they view as a change in their religious organization that constitutes an improvement, without thereby hindering those who would rather leave things as they are. But to agree to a permanent religious constitution that is to be publicly called into question by no one, even within the space of a person's lifetime, and to thereby destroy, as it were, and render vain a span of time in humankind's progress toward improvement and thus make it detrimental to one's descendents, is quite simply impermissible. A human being can postpone enlightenment for his own person, and even then only for a short time, with regard to that which is his responsibility to know. But to renounce it for his own person, and more still for his descendents, amounts to violating the sacred rights of humanity and to trample them under foot. But what a people is not able to legislate over itself, a monarch is even less entitled to decree; for his legislative standing is based precisely in the fact that he unifies in his will the collective will of the people. If he only looks to ensuring that all genuine or supposed improvement is consistent with the civic order, then he can for the rest just let his subjects do that which they themselves find necessary to undertake for their own salvation; it does not concern him, but it is his concern to prevent one from hindering another, by forceful means, from working to determine and promote his own salvation with all of his own powers. He would even diminish his own majesty if he were to interfere here and deem writings in which his subjects seek to clarify their insights worthy of supervision by his government. This is true if he did so based on his own supreme insight, in which case he subjects himself to the objection: *Caesar non est supra grammaticos*.<sup>4</sup> And it is just

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4. "The emperor is not above the grammarians."

as true, and indeed much more so, if he lowers his supreme authority by supporting the spiritual despotism of a few tyrants in his state against his other subjects.

If it is asked, then, whether we live in an *enlightened* age, then the answer is: no, but we do live in an age of *enlightenment*. It is far from the case that humans, in present circumstances, and taken as a whole, are already or could be put in a position to make confident and good use of their own reason in matters of religion without the direction of another. But we have clear indications that they are now being opened up to the possibility of working toward this, and that the obstacles to universal enlightenment, or to the emancipation from one's self-incurred immaturity, are now gradually becoming fewer. In this regard our age is an age of enlightenment, or the century of *Frederick*.<sup>5</sup>

8:41 A prince who does not see it as beneath his dignity to say that he regards it as a *duty* to dictate nothing to men in matters of religion, but rather to ensure them perfect freedom in such matters, a prince who thus himself rejects the arrogant name of *tolerance*, is himself enlightened and deserves to be praised both by the grateful world of the present, and by posterity, as the one who first freed the human race, at least from the side of government, from immaturity and let everyone be free to make use of his own reason in all matters of conscience. Under his rule venerable clergymen may, notwithstanding the duties of their office, present, in their capacity as scholars, freely and publicly to the scrutiny of the world, judgments that might here or there deviate from their assumed religious symbol. This is even more the case with any others who are not constrained by duties of office. This spirit of freedom also extends outward, even to where it must struggle with the external obstacles presented by a government that misunderstands itself. For such a government is presented with evidence that granting freedom need not leave one concerned in the least for public order and the unity of the commonwealth. Human beings will gradually work their way out of their condition of brutishness, as long as one does not intentionally meddle in order to keep them in this state.

I have described the main point of enlightenment, that is, the human being's emancipation from its self-incurred immaturity, primarily in terms of *religious matters*. For with regard to the arts and the sciences our rulers have no interest in acting as a guardian of their subjects; moreover, immaturity in matters of religion is the most harmful sort, and hence the most degrading of all. But the way of thinking of a head of state, who encourages

5. Friedrich II ("the Great") (1712–86), king of Prussia from 1740 to 1786.

freedom in the former, goes even further and recognizes that even with regard to his *legislation*, there is no danger in allowing his subjects to freely make *public* use of their reason and to present publicly their thoughts to the world concerning a better version of his legislation, even by means of a candid critique. We have a brilliant example of this, and the monarch whom we admire has no precedent.

But only he who, himself enlightened, is not afraid of shadows, but at the same time has at his disposal a well-trained and large army for guaranteeing the public peace, can say what a free state may not dare say: *argue as much as you want and about whatever you want, but obey!* Here one finds an odd and unexpected course of human events, just as one does at other times, when one considers the course of human events in the large, in which nearly everything is paradoxical. A greater degree of civic freedom seems to be of benefit to the *intellectual* freedom of the people and yet also sets unsurpassable limitations on such freedom; a lesser degree of civic freedom, by contrast, creates room for the people to extend itself in accordance with all its powers. When nature has fully developed the seed concealed in this hard casing, to which it gives its most tender care, namely, the tendency and the calling to free *thinking*, then this seed will gradually extend its effects to the disposition of the people (through which the people gradually becomes more capable of *freedom of action*) and finally even to the principles of *government*, which find it to be beneficial to itself to treat the human being, who is indeed *more than a machine*, in accordance with his dignity.\*

8:42

Königsberg in Prussia, September 30th, 1784.

\*I read today, on September 30th, in Büsching's *Wöchentliche Nachrichten* from September 13th, a notice concerning this month's *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, in which Mr. *Mendelssohn's* answer to the same question answered here is cited. I have not yet received the journal, otherwise I would have withheld the present observations, which I offer here only in order to see to what extent chance might yield a unanimity of thoughts.<sup>6</sup>

6. Moses Mendelssohn (1729–86), "Über die Frage: Was heißt aufklären?" [On the Question: What Is Enlightenment?] *Berlinische Monatsschrift* 4 (1784): 193–200.