

What did kant think
enlightenment was
essay



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Immanuel Kant was a German Philosopher who was a key figure central to modern philosophy, he argued that mankind's perceptions, classifications and concepts shape our outlook of the world, and that rationale is the source of morality.

In Germany in the late 1700's there was a newspaper called the ' Berlinische Monatsschrift', this newspaper put out an invitation to intellectuals around this time to answer the question, : what is enlightenment? Immanuel Kant responded by writing an essay stating what he thought enlightenment was. This piece of work was called ' Was ist Aufklärung'. Immanuel Kant thought that enlightenment was " man's release from his self incurred tutelage" (Kant 1784, p. 1-4) what Kant means by this is that enlightenment allows people to break free from the cowardice and laziness that they have imposed on themselves, which has resulted in them to be apathetic about using their own rational minds but follow the instruction (tutelage) of others.

In this essay I will explain in detail exactly what Immanuel Kant thought Enlightenment was and provide evidence and theoretical arguments that validate that he was wrong to think this. Another key element of Immanuel Kant's study on enlightenment is that Enlightenment, is the final stage in the continuing progress of mankind which leads to the liberation of the human mind, which he thinks is stuck in a state of false consciousness and it can't break free from because of man/woman being ignorant in wanting to follow what others tell them to do rather than using their own free reason. " For Kant, enlightenment was man-kind's final coming of age, the emancipation of the human consciousness from an immature state of ignorance and error" (Porter, 2001, p.).

Immanuel Kant, believes that we the people of the world are all capable of being rational, autonomous, free thinking individuals; he believes that we are all capable of reflecting on the world that we live in and may come to the same conclusions not because we fall to prejudices and follow the majority opinion but because we are all human and it is likely that we will draw the same conclusions Kant explains in his essay: enlightenment is when man breaks free from his self inflicted immaturity. Enlightening is, Man's quitting the nonage occasioned by himself. Nonage or minority is the inability of making use of one's own understanding without the guidance of another".

(A. F.

M. Willich, 1965, pp. 35). So there are two aspects there that Kant is hinting at; the first is that the idea that to be unenlightened is to be immature, and to be enlightened then is to be mature and secondly this state of being unenlightened is self incurred/self inflicted and we somehow have chosen to be immature/unenlightened. Kant is wrong to think this because I am against his idea of the freedom of action due to enlightened individuals. " Who has given the state, or its ruler and his hired professors the right to tell others how to live? " (Berlin et al.

2000, ch. 4). This critique of Kant is from J. G Hamann who also argues that " the Aufklärung is nothing but aurora borealis- cold and illusory, he sees no good in the ' chatter' of those emancipated children (the philosophers) who constitute themselves guardians of the other guardians"(Berlin et al.

000, ch. 4). According to Kant this state of not being enlightened then, only takes an act of courage and this is reflected in Kant's essay when he refers

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to the motto of enlightenment as being: "sapere aude" (Kant 1784, p. 1-4), which means dare to be wise or have courage to use your own reason. So he sees enlightenment as being a part of growing up and becoming mature, and if we aren't then it is our own fault.

Kant does give some justifications in his essay as to why we may choose to be unenlightened, in paragraph 2 of his essay 'Was ist Aufklärung' they are: "Laziness and cowardice" (Kant 1784, p. 1) he elaborates on this and states: "I have a book which understands for me, a pastor who has a conscience for me, a physician who decides my diet... I need not trouble myself, I need not think if I can only pay, others will undertake the irksome work for me" (Kant 1784, p. -4) Kant believes that to be mature and enlightened it requires energy and effort so it may be that we have very good reasons to be wanting to pass on the job of thinking for ourselves to others. However, I disagree with Kant because I don't believe it is just an act of will to become enlightened, and that it is much harder for an individual to decide that they're going to think for themselves now, instead of relying upon authority figures and others to do the thinking for them. Kant refers to a term in his essay; 'chained to dogma's' which means stuck in a system of belief which is familiar and in the context of enlightenment.

What he means by this is that it is hard for individuals to be courageous to use their own reason and understanding because if these "chains" were to be broken the individual themselves would be unfamiliar to the new way of thinking and of the ability to be able to think freely and may accidentally fall in to the trap of following other new narrow-minded ways of thinking too easily. As well as there being factors that involve the individual for there to be an

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enlightenment in a community or just for them to be enlightened themselves, there also has to be several conditions that help to spread enlightenment in area of society, they being freedom; freedom of speech is necessary for there to be freedom of thinking. Kant also believes that there are those in communities (enlightened individuals) who are active in spreading the positive attitude towards independent thinking. However; he does make distinctions as to how people may exercise their use of reason. He distinguishes between a public use of reason and a private use of reason. A public use of reason is when an individual has intellectual freedom where he or she can argue as much as he or she wants but still obeys laws and customs layed down by authoritative institutions.

A private use of reason is different in that it is a “ lower degree of civil freedom, on the contrary provides the mind with room for each man to extend himself to his full capacity” (Kant 1784, p. 4). It entails that the individual should not be able to criticize or argue with those highly respected and higher in societies hierarchy but “ only obey” (Kant 1784, p1-4) in order to maintain the status quo. Kant states that if people are free to form, express and disseminate their opinions to society then they will spread their thinking so others can follow it.

However some argue Kant is contradicting himself, he wants individuals to think freely so why would he want individuals to express their opinions so that others get stuck in the same trap that he believes enlightenment helps to break the individual out of? Kant responds by stating that he wants individuals to disseminate their own views, and other individuals should use their free reason in order to argue and dispute whether they want to agree

with them rather than just accept them. However I do not believe that this is a very viable response, I believe Kant is contradicting himself hugely here which makes his argument invalid and unreliable, making him wrong to think enlightenment involves individuals disseminating their views for others to follow. Immanuel Kant is lightly promoting liberal democracy by implying not to overthrow what we have to obey to but to use our free reason in order to try and influence others and society as a whole. Rousseau is quick to question Kant on these points as he believes Kant forgets how public life may become corrupted in modernity.

Kant also refers to the relationship between enlightenment and religion. The enlightenment is often characterised as having a critical attitude towards religion - or more specifically, the Christian faith and the authority of its churches" (Hyland et al. 2003, ch. 3). In his essay he asks the question " do we live in an enlightened age? The answer is no but we do live in an age of enlightenment.

" He argues that there is not a lot in the way of humankind from being " capable of correctly using their own reason in religious matters with assurance free from outside direction (Kant 1784, p1-4). What Kant is saying is that religion is no longer an institution that is limiting the free thinking of individuals and that also the hindrance's to general enlightenment and not just religious enlightenment has been progressively reduced. However, Kant has been criticised in this area by ' Friedrich Hegel', who alleged that " the enlightenment failed to produce any set of beliefs which could possibly replace religious faith" (Outram 2005, p. 112-113). In conclusion Immanuel

Kant does put forward several explanations as to what The Enlightenment is and argues compellingly why it is the case.

However, bearing in mind that no philosophers can collectively agree on what enlightenment is, even those who consider themselves inspired by Kantian thinking don't entirely agree with Kant. " Kant and his fellow contributors to the discussion in Berlin in the early 1780's could reach no agreement regarding the bounds of Aufklärung" (Munck 2000, p.)This makes his views seem somewhat abstruse and unperceivable , Kant does make some compelling arguments about enlightenment and I do agree with a small minority of them but overall I believe his way of thinking and his larger explanations of what enlightenment is are incorrect and there is much more to it than how someone is able to break free from their " self incurred tutelage" (Kant 1784, p1-4) I believe we need to look deeper at how relevant or irrelevant to us the enlightenment is because we have transitioned into a new epoch of history which is entirely diverse from the era of rationale. The Enlightenment's social setting is no longer ours. Its values are not our own. What period does it belong to? " (Marsak 1972, p.

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