

An evaluation of immanuel kant's "the enlightenment"

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In the essay "What is Enlightenment," Immanuel Kant (1784) cited his views on "enlightenment" and how it affects the general public. He wrote: Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another.

Kant asserted that it is only after an individual liberates himself from guidance of others that he will be able to use the freedom he wants to exercise. In carrying out his duty, for example, man can argue but he cannot revolt as it most definitely will result to failure.

Public and Private Reasoning

Talking about achievement of enlightenment, Kant identified two types of reasoning: public and private. Public reasoning is being utilized when an individual makes an argument for the purpose of marking progress. On the other hand, rational workers who use reason in completing their specific jobs exercise private reasoning as the public need not know about their use of reasoning. Besides, people who make use of private reasoning must know how to obey otherwise the completion of the task is impossible.

Many examples have been cited by Kant in explaining the difference between public and private reasoning. An example is when military men refused to follow commands. If this happens, their group could no longer be considered military. In a different case, a soldier may follow commands which contrast his personal beliefs but later on will critique what he believes.

In this example, he exercises private reasoning in following the commands while his public use of reasoning is demonstrated in voicing out his complaints.

As Lewis Beck (1959) wrote:

Kant seemed to favor public reasoning over private reasoning as he stated that the public use of one's reason alone can bring about enlightenment among men. The private use of reason, on the other hand, may often be very narrowly restricted without particularly hindering the progress of enlightenment. An example involving clergymen and the case of changing the symbol of the church was provided. Kant described clergyman's performance of duties as a private use of reason while making use of public reasoning in fulfilling his responsibilities to the public in making progress. He stated, " For if he believed he had found such in them, he could not conscientiously discharge the duties of his office; he would have to give it up."

Enlightened Age or Age of Enlightenment?

According to Kant, we do not live in an enlightened age, but rather an age of enlightenment. He stressed: " As things now stand, much is lacking which prevents men from being, or easily becoming, capable of correctly using their own reason in religious matters with assurance and free from outside direction. But, on the other hand, we have clear indications that the field has now been opened wherein men may freely deal with these things and that the obstacles to general enlightenment or the release from self-imposed tutelage are gradually being reduced."

His assertion gave a clearer picture of the difference between an enlightened age and an age of enlightenment. In the former, people become religious without clergymen because they would know when to follow rules and when to disobey them. During the age of enlightenment, however, people make progress by utilizing both kinds of reasoning which eventually results in competence or the balance of both public and private use of reason. We must know how to determine when it is right to obey and right to argue. It enables us to become the managers of our own freedom.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Kant's Arguments

Kant offered several brilliant ideas in his essay. Specifically, his notions about public and private use of reasoning help us gain management of our own freedom. And if we know how to live by the rules of reasoning, we will be competent. This later on translates into moving closer to an enlightened age. While there are really good points in his work, I disagree with some of his views. I personally do not approve of the statement that an enlightened individual should be one who is free of having anything done for him. I strongly believe that man is naturally dependent of other people. We as social beings still have to learn from others and must know how to follow rules in the society. It is never wrong to accept the guidance of others as long as we know that it will eventually result to marking personal progress which shall then help in recording societal progress.

References

Beck, Lewis. Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals. Kant, Immanuel. What is Enlightenment. Bobbs-Merrill, Indianapolis, 1959.

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