



Modern Enlightenment

EDEN MCINTOSH

In this pithy examination of philosophy and culture, Eden McIntosh contends that Emmanuel Kant's pronouncements on Enlightenment compel a critical departure from the historical context of the Kant's own era and toward individual critique of oppressive structures in the service of equality. This essay was written for World Thought and Culture III with Drs. Shelley Rees and Nicholas Boyde.

WHAT IS MODERN Enlightenment? Modern Enlightenment cannot be defined without first addressing its origins. Between the late 17th and early 18th centuries, the Enlightenment was a philosophical, humanist movement that passionately preached the importance of unrestrained, individual thought. Immanuel Kant, in his aptly named work "What is Enlightenment?" stated that the motto of the enlightenment was "*Sapere aude!* Have courage to use your own understanding" (1). That slogan encapsulated the philosophical attitude in the past and has been expanded upon in the modern-day Enlightenment movement through criticisms of its forerunner and pursuits to rectify former exclusions.

In the old Enlightenment, the core belief that man must be able to utilize uninhibited understanding inspired by revolutionary ideas. Enlightenment philosophers challenged how the church had

encroached and established itself as an authority beyond its jurisdiction. They aimed to protect independent reason as an immutable human right. In the preface for his *Treatise on Theology and Politics*, Spinoza argued that “to fill each man’s judgements with prejudices, or to restrain it in any way, is flatly contrary to common freedom” (2). The modern thought emerged that man was not only entitled to physical freedom, but intellectual freedom as well.

However, advancement in the 1700s was stifled in Europe. Many popular Enlightenment figures who are praised for their humanitarian views on man’s rights rejected the notion that women and people of color are entitled to the same liberties. The Enlightenment is as inseparable from humanism as it is from prejudice. Should the Enlightenment then be discarded because of its shortcomings? No, but it must be reinterpreted through the lens of progress. The Enlightenment started important conversations about freedom of speech, the authority of institutions, and the natural rights of individuals. We must acutely survey what to keep and what to leave behind from the movement.

In response to its flawed genesis, the present-day Enlightenment has branched off from the past. Those who were denied autonomy and equal opportunity are now protected by law in most modern countries. In first-world countries, education is relatively accessible and, in many cases, mandatory. The U.S. government has taken measures to ensure citizens are given equal opportunities. Federal laws such as the Equal Educational Opportunities Act (1974) prohibit racial segregation and discrimination of faculty and students in schools. Additionally, an extension of voting rights has given a voice to those who were traditionally denied speech and sovereignty. Contemporary Enlightenment has reached beyond its defective origins. Progression is now found through inclusion.

Race and gender equality is an almost exclusively modern expression of the Enlightenment. European 18th-century philosophy was strangled by unfounded discrimination; ideas were unable to be fully realized because reason was weaponized to uphold personal

judgements. Mary Wollstonecraft, who eloquently advocated for women's rights, addressed this in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* when she wrote that "such deeply rooted prejudices have clouded reason" (3). Mankind will likely always struggle with bigotry, but it seems that modern thinkers have placed an emphasis on identifying individual biases and questioning the validity of their predispositions.

Propelled by the reinvention of the Black Lives Matter movement in the past year, there has been a call to listen to the voices of the oppressed and to critically examine support for discriminatory organizations. This is *sapere aude* (Kant 1). Present-day protestors questioning the authority of the police parallels Enlightenment philosophers who questioned the authority of the church. This is a continuation of Enlightenment ideas that implore human beings to think for themselves rather than blindly follow those in power, and to challenge establishments that infringe on their rights.

Immanuel Kant believed that enlightenment was a gradual work. In "What is Enlightenment?" Kant observed that he did not believe he lived in an enlightened age, but rather "an age of enlightenment" (1). Perhaps it is an optimistic bias, but I believe that in 2021 we are living in an enlightened age. Enlightenment is displayed in our opportunities to pursue education, in our scrutiny of oppressive institutions, in our protests for equal rights, and in our recognition that the previous enlightenment had defects. This is what Enlightenment should look like: a development grown from the groundwork laid by its predecessors. ►►

►► WORKS CITED

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