



Kantian Enlightenment in the 21st Century

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Extending the insights of Immanuel Kant’s “What Is Enlightenment?” essay into modern times, Danielle Stevens addresses issues including racism, capitalism, and conspiracy thinking to argue that the Enlightenment lodestar of individualist “reason” is not enough to guide modern thought. Rather, she contends, we must also place educated trust in each other and communal decision-making. This essay was written for World Thought and Culture III with Drs. Shelley Rees and Nicholas Boyde.

IN HIS ESSAY “An Answer to the Question: ‘What is Enlightenment?’” German philosopher Immanuel Kant described what he believed was necessary for an Enlightened Age and what such an age would entail. His work was a response to the questions and growing excitement around the societal and scientific advancements of his day. When viewed through a modern lens, Kant’s essay does spark the question: What would an Enlightenment be today? What would that even look like? If we were to live within a second Enlightenment, we would need to consider the first Enlightenment and its values, such as reason, freedom, and individualism, and in applying those values today, we will need to examine the pitfalls of

Enlightened thinkers to avoid making them ourselves. By approaching philosophy and society so critically, we may hope to be apply the title of “Enlightened” to ourselves.

The Enlightenment, also known as the Age of Reason, was a philosophical movement focused on humanity’s progress and the generation of new ideas, promoting critical thinking and the relatively new scientific method. It took place during the 1600s and 1700s and coincided with other intellectual movements like the Scientific Revolution, itself inspired by the Renaissance centuries prior. The movement could be considered “profoundly secular,” being concerned with the current wellbeing and potential of humanity rather than its posthumous salvation (Romano 77). Famous thinkers like Thomas Hobbes and John Locke questioned the nature of civilization and human rights within such structures, and others, such as Kant, set about defining the Enlightenment and encouraging others to take up critical thinking, so that they may further the cause of the movement.

Now, it should be noted that the first Enlightenment sprung from a period of prosperity in Europe. France is often considered the site where the Enlightenment reached its “highest development,” in particular because it was one of the wealthiest and most densely populated nations of the time (Romano 78). New ideas were growing evident and plentiful, and, even as the movement was underway, people were already aware of the atmosphere of progress and terming it the “Enlightenment,” though some cautioned this was premature (Kant). Comparing this time with our own reveals a stark difference. Social structures and technology have obviously changed greatly since the 1600s, but the greatest difference lies in the degree of optimism. With the spread of COVID-19, the tumultuous political climate, and growing mental health crises, it is hard to call our modern society a prosperous or stable one. A spectrum of perspectives compete on the matter, but the prevalent attitude regarding the world seems to be one of anxiety. This does not mean that our age is incapable of Enlightenment. A prosperous society,

barreling forward in technology and philosophy, does not necessarily belie stability, and surely, anxiety accompanied excitement. Perhaps, then, Enlightenment occurs not as a byproduct of fortune but as answer to uncertainty.

It was Kant's belief that "Reason" would bring humanity out of its "immaturity," that the cultivation of critical thinking would free people from external control and the pitfalls of lazy thinking (1). Reason was a skill greatly valued by Enlightenment thinkers, its use carrying the hopes of the future. Naturally, this skill is still incredibly important. Logic is our key to navigating the larger world. It is how we solve problems, how we justify our beliefs, and how we stop ourselves from making dumb mistakes. It would be nothing but prudent to venerate the use reason and cultivate it within ourselves.

But is reason alone really enough?

I would say no, not really. As powerful as it can be, reason is only a tool, and inevitably, it will be as faulty as those who use it. Even if we could make flawless use of our logic, avoiding any leaps or fallacies, our conclusions would err off course as a result of our biases and ignorance. The Enlightenment thinkers were hardly immune to this. The Enlightenment corresponded with the rise of colonialism and the slave trade, and the "freedom" of thought and speech advocated for by philosophers proved a per-dominantly Eurocentric one (Bouie). These matters were not merely overlooked by Enlightenment thinkers but justified by them. Kant himself spent much of his later career formulating and explaining a "racial hierarchy," at the pinnacle of which he placed the "white race" as the most advanced and gifted. Such writings justifying slavery paved the road for a legacy of racial injustice, a legacy that has brutal effect on people of color to this day. These are the consequences of faulty or, to use Kant's term, "lazy" reason. It is thus important to always question one's base assumptions simultaneously to reason (1).

Not only is this necessary to ferret our prejudice and bias, but it can prove illuminating to interrogate seemingly simple concepts in this way. For instance, let us consider progress. The Enlightenment

was very preoccupied with the idea of progress, holding that “progress was inevitable” and would naturally lead to a “better society” (Romano 77). Furthermore, it was believed that progress was straightforward, that advancements once made would be held until they were further built upon. It is for this reason Kant argues against absolutist doctrines on the basis that immunity to change is “a crime to human nature, whose original destiny lies precisely in such progress” (2). Our modern conception of progress, based typically in technological and scientific terms, is greatly influenced by these Enlightenment readings, but just because this belief is prevalent does not mean it is entirely true. For instance, it ignores the fact that progress can ebb and flow, knowledge being lost or recanted, and it proposes a linear view of progress rather than a three-dimensional view. Any given advancement could have as many detrimental or neutral qualities as beneficial ones, and simplifying that into terms of mere good or bad erases that nuance.

It should be noted, too, that our view of progress is heavily influenced by capitalism, itself influenced by Enlightenment-era thinking and politics. Under capitalism, the goal of progress, like production, is to eternally increase and never recede. Problems are to be solved with further advancements, generally technological ones, and this kind of thinking blinds us to the potential of different methods of problem solving. Being willing to scale back or return to older, more sustainable methods of living may be regarded as antithetical to progress, regardless of if these methods would prove more beneficial to society.

Another matter worth consideration is the matter of authority. The Enlightenment thinkers like Spinoza were keen to question the authority and workings of the Catholic Church, particularly taking issue with church insistence on blind adherence to scripture and restriction of debate (Spinoza). However, much hope was pinned and authority ceded to so-called Enlightened Despots. These took the form of leaders and monarchs who were willing to endorse Enlightenment values and extend toleration to controversial debates. Kant

avored, in particular, Prussian king Frederick the Great, and his justification for supporting Frederick's absolute rule lay in Kant's belief that monarchs could make more assertive decisions than republics, granting the state the "lesser degree of civil freedom" conducive to intellectual growth (3). From our modern standpoint, acceptance of this kind of authority seems a bit egregious. It is common in the West to vaunt the questioning of authority, the humbling of the powerful and rich, and it is relatively rare to find anyone who would openly advocate a return to monarchy. Casual disrespect of authority, however, can mask indifference. Such questioning can give a false impression of profundity and can actually discourage deeper thought on the matter. It would perhaps then serve us to question our relationship to authority and power more frequently and more seriously.

This is not to say that questioning can't be taken too far. Just as Kant describes necessary limitations for the use of reason, encouraging individuals to hold their tongues to fulfill the requirements of their jobs, I would say it is necessary to restrain oneself from becoming overly suspicious. Questioning one's world is not equivalent to always assuming deception. From all sides of the political sphere, suspicion is a prevalent attitude concerning current events, and groups like QAnon and COVID truthers exemplify how common and dangerous conspiratorial thinking can be. More than anything, such thinking eliminates the possibility to genuinely engage with new ideas. To speak from personal experience, I have noticed a tendency within myself to approach any new idea or reading with wariness. I find myself searching for some hidden trick or malarkey the author is trying to pull on me, and in doing so, I can end up misinterpreting a great deal. In justly trying to more critically engage with the text, I may also sometimes sabotage my ability to intelligently respond to the actual ideas at play. It is thus important to reserve judgment and honestly give the benefit of the doubt when engaging with differing ideas and viewpoints.

To this end, perhaps we should afford a little more trust to others. The Enlightenment advocated for the use of individual reason, this sentiment being exemplified in Kant’s call, “Have courage to use your own understanding!” (1). Naturally, honing one’s own ability to reason is a noble goal, and I agree wholeheartedly with the Enlightenment idea that society would be a better place if everyone was taught to think more critically and exercise that ability. However, I do not think such a purely individualistic approach can work in our modern age. Kant complains that relying on other’s judgment leads to “immaturity” (1), that even the consultation of books and doctors engender this loathsome quality, but relying only on oneself can only get one so far. In a world where one cannot possibly know and manage everything, a reliance on others is inevitable, if not beneficial. It is the cooperation of experts in various fields of study that allows for new advancements, and it is the compiled knowledge of previous generations that founds the wisdom of today. In looking solely to individualistic potential for Enlightenment, we would miss the equal potential within communal lines of thinking.

Kant, when asked if he believed if he lived in an Enlightened age, responded that they “still have a long way go” (3). Maybe we, too, are not truly living within an Enlightenment, but perhaps we are on our way and have been for a very long time. Also, it would be foolish to assume such Enlightenment will emerge only in the West. The next Enlightenment could begin in any place, in any country. If we want to be part of that when it happens, we need to be ready to listen to others, ask questions, and make honest use of our reason. ►►

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