

Evaluation

This is an overall good essay that outlines the most important aspects regarding the Age of Enlightenment, including information on two important persons, Kant and Wolff. The writing style is good but could be slightly more academic in certain parts. The outline of the paper is very nice. It follows a clear line of arguments, provides a table of contents, a satisfying introduction and summary.

One problem occurs with the in-text-references. Although, you give references for some passages and citations, they are lacking for other parts. You need to be more precise with these information, especially in your academic work.

Otherwise, your text will be considered plagiarized.

Considering that your text gives references for most parts - even if not always in a satisfactory manner - and the overall good fulfillment of the task, your paper will be marked with: 6.5/10 (65%)

Age of Enlightenment

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Introduction :

Aufklärung or the Age of enlightenment or Age of Reason refers to the era following the Renaissance in Western Europe and the American Colonies. Roughly from 1650 to 1780s cultural and intellectual arena in Europe began emphasising on reason , analysis and individualism rather than traditional lines of authority. The focus was now on rational thinking and independent thought. This era marked the beginning of a new chapter in Europe's scientific and cultural advancements. It also reduced the authority of the dogmas of the church. To quote Prof Peter Gay the Enlightenment broke through "the sacred circle,"^[1] whose dogma had circumscribed thinking.

Although the thinkers of this era shared similar values and placed importance on basic principles , their methodology was often different and many times contradictory. Empiricists , largely based in Great Britain emphasized that experience and ~~and~~ evidence that can be perceived by senses alone imparts knowledge. However most Philosophers in Germany perceived Reason as the primary source and test of knowledge. Many philosophers including the celebrated Immanuel Kant attempted to resolve the disputed between the two to find a common ground.

This era also received the support of princes , aristocrats and the middle class. Their support particularly of King Frederick the Great , was crucial for it's success and influence.



Background :

The german society was widely ignorant and relied heavily on guidance from the church and orders from authority. However all this began to change when the infamous 30 years war began. The primary reason of all the suffering was seen as religious superstition by many thinkers. The war although initially began as a religious conflict , inspired many people to a common cause. This resulted in a widespread discontent amongst the society as a whole. The cost of the war enormous , It resulted in death to about 20 percent of german population and 50 percent loss in food and timber^[2].

[1] : Wikipedia

[2] : The Reader's Companion to Military History. Edited by Robert Cowley and Geoffrey Parker.

Der abenteuerliche Simplicissimus Deutsch written by Hans Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen provides a great narrative of these troubled times.

All in all the era of enlightenment can be put as between the beginning of the 30 years war (1648) to end of French Revolution(1789). Protestant scholasticism by Lutheran and Calvinist divines began to take a proper shape in Germany^[3] after the end of the war. The idea was to base the moral values and ethics of the society on reason and rationality or personal experience and distancing it from religion and church. Thus the church was reduced into a private affair of the citizens with no official imposition. The public opinion now mattered greatly and this is what one could call a step towards modern day Democracy , Equality and Secular thought.

Enlightened Despots ! the

Many rulers in Europe including Friedrich the Great of Prussian Empire , Catherine the Great Empress of Russia , Leopold II Grand Duchy of Tuscany , Joseph II of Austria encouraged the ideas of Enlightenment and introduced major reforms. however they were staunch monarchs and this earned them the name “Enlightened Despots”. They advocated a strong and a rational leader was the most reasonable and effective way to rule the kingdom. Although this was not unique to Germany , Frederick the Great took the idea to heart^[4].

King Frederick the ruler of Prussian empire was fascinated by French contributions to enlightenment and wanted to revive the German thinking. He provided shelter to many French artists and intellectuals. He was also close to the french philosophers Voltaire, François-Marie Arouet de etc. This drove many writers and thinkers ~~and writers~~ to Enlightenment.

As goes the sanskrit saying : “*Yatha Raja tatha praja*” As the king , so the people.

[3] : Arthur Cushman McGiffert, *Protestant Thought Before Kant* (London: Duckworth & Co., 1911)

[4] : Encyclopedia

Enlightened Germans :

German Enlightenment was different from that of French or English enlightenment. While the English crown discredited enlightenment the French maintained a high degree of friction between the social classes. Enlightened Germans also rejected (to a great extent) Empiricism and advocated mysticism. Metaphysics and natural philosophy gained importance. For instance Calculus the basis of modern continuum mathematics was invented by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz , a rationalist with mystic beliefs.

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz :

Leibniz was born in 1648 towards the end of the thirty years war in Leipzig , Saxony. He is widely credited with invention of calculus independently alongside Newton. he was a rationalist , thinker and a mathematician. He emphasized on optimism of the universe and also strongly believed in God. His book Théodicée influenced thinkers such as David Hume. He was one of the three popular 17th century rationalists , other two being René Descartes a frenchman and Baruch Spinoza a dutch. He also advocated that "application of basic first principles and reason were important than empirical proof."

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Immanuel Kant:

Immanuel Kant was and remains to this day, the most influential philosopher in the school of western philosophy , epistemology , metaphysics and logic. He was born in a remote Königsberg, to Anna Regina Reuter and Johann Georg Kant. Young Kant was a solid, albeit unspectacular, student. He was brought up in a Pietist household that stressed religious devotion, humility, and a literal interpretation of the Bible^[5]. His education was strict, punitive and disciplinary, and focused on Latin and religious instruction over mathematics and science.

The philosophers of that time were pondering over the basic existential questions of man. "What can be known ? " is the question that Kant precisely tried to answer. Kant advocated that our knowledge is limited by the Empirical world. Thus the mind is limited to time and space.

[5] : Wikipedia

Although this sounds as an empirical approach, it is not. Kant rejected the empiricist views that dictate that mind is a blank paper that is written upon by the natural experiences. He also did not subscribe to the rationalist idea of an apriori mind-independent universal existence.

When the Berliner Monatsschrift invited for essays on the topic of answering the question of “What is enlightenment?” Kant sent his own views which were published. He defines enlightenment as “Man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity”. In his strong criticism of the laziness and cowardice that have infested the German community, he calls upon them to break their chains from the ball and wishes for a truly enlightened society. He emphasises that freedom is the only necessity for a society to become enlightened. He also distinguishes between personal and private freedom, in which he points out correctly that private form of freedom may be restricted for obvious reasons. He strongly speaks out against any form of revolution, for he says, enlightenment can be achieved only gradually. Any revolution, he says, can only merely replace one generational prejudice with another. He points out that any religious or an ecclesiastical synod cannot impose a set of unalterable doctrines for all generations to come. Every generation has its right to progress and to make corrections where they see fit. He advocates his famous maxim “*Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.*”^[5] He is all in praise for King Frederick the Great, who said “*Argue as much as you like and about whatever you like, but obey!*”.

He even calls the era the Century of Frederick, and concludes that the societies shall find it profitable to treat men with the dignity they deserve rather than treating them as machines.


In this way Kant pointed out some serious flaws in the arguments of Empiricists and rationalists and attempted to reconcile rationalism and religious belief, individual freedom and political authority. The project of the *Critique of Pure Reason* is also challenging because in the analysis of the mind's transcendental contributions to experience we must employ the mind, the only tool we have, to investigate the mind. We must use the faculties of knowledge to determine the limits of knowledge, so Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* is both a critique that takes pure reason as its subject matter, and a critique that is conducted by pure reason^[6].



[5] : Critique of Pure Reason, trans. Werner Pluhar. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996.

[6] : Kant's metaphysics by Matt McCormick

He also dictates a categorical imperative to morality. He bases it on reason and rationality and points out that merely results of one's actions cannot define its moral stature. The issue is the motive behind that action. He also establishes this in his famous three maxims, a cornerstone of modern philosophy :

1. "Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law." (*Ibid.*, 422)
2. "Act as though the maxim of your action were by your will to become a universal law of nature." (*Ibid*)
3. Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only." (*Ibid.*, 429) 

Kant also criticised the arguments put forth by Utilitarians, who argued that morality of an action can be decided by looking at the number of people it makes happy. However Kant who staunchly believed in individual dignity of man, was of the opinion that this would reduce the status of man to means rather than the end in themselves^[7]. Kant's insight in this matter was so splendid that his theories came into wide acceptance. His objection to this idea was that sacrificing a person for the good of a society would be moral if we followed such a system, but this was against the Christian, or for that matter natural morals of man.

His '*Critique of Pure Reason*' also known as the first critique is [?]arguably his major contribution to western philosophy and rationality.

[7] : Kant's metaphysics by Matt McCormick.

To quote Lord Kelvin :

"Kant pointed out in the middle of last century, what had not previously been discovered by mathematicians or physical astronomers, that the frictional resistance against tidal currents on the earth's surface must cause a diminution of the earth's rotational speed. This immense discovery in Natural Philosophy seems to have attracted little attention—indeed to have passed quite unnoticed—among mathematicians, and astronomers, and naturalists, until about 1840, when the doctrine of energy began to be taken to heart."



This shows his passion towards natural philosophy as well. Kant continued to write prolifically throughout the 1780s, publishing almost all of his most important works in that decade: the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* in 1783, the *Groundwork for the Metaphysic of Morals* in 1785, the *Critique of Practical Reason* in 1788, and the *Critique of Judgment* in 1790 ^[8].

Christian Wolff :

Christian Wolff , a student of Leibniz was an important philosopher who emphasised on simple reasons of first principles just like his master. He had his career at the peak of german enlightenment and held an esteemed position in the intellectual circles. He was a staunch rationalist in the lines of his teacher and defined philosophy as science of the possible, and applied it in a comprehensive survey of human knowledge to the disciplines of his time ^[9]. Until Kant , his views on these matters had a strong sway in Germany and Europe in general. In the footsteps of his teacher , he also subscribed to world optimism but also had a real big picture in mind. It was perhaps this right mixture of optimism and realism that made Wolff an important figure in German lands. He was offered a position by the King of Prussia , Frederick the Great which he initially refused but accepted later. He advocated that humans can achieve perfection and that society could reform itself till it achieves a total state of enlightenment by reason and reason alone. He was an ardent user of the principle of contradiction and all his writings emphasize the same.

[8] : Kant, I., 1781, 2nd ed., 1787. *Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. and ed. by P. Guyer and A. Wood, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

[9] : Wikipedia , the free encyclopedia

Influence and Conclusions :

Europe had been ravished by wars and religious superstitions for the entire period of the medieval era. Although Renaissance helped to restore the greek and roman traditions , it did not however impart a sense of independence and freedom in the minds of her people. Reformation was a first step towards this goal. It formed an foundation for the enlightenment yet to come. The political arena in Europe changed. The divine right of monarchs was called into question although the rulers did manage to meld into the ongoing changes in the society. People with independent thoughts flourished with no threat from the authorities or the church. The secular fabric of Europe began to form. The society recognised that religion was not the only basis for morality but reason was too.

Towards the end of the era , the varying schools of enlightened thought viz Empiricism and Rationalism found a common ground. Philosophy became more and more important and the concepts of nationality , ideology began to develop. This resulted in a counter-enlightenment era towards the end called now ~~as~~ Romanticism. The ideas that we take for granted today , including Democracy , liberty and freedom the most important of all have their origins traced back to this era. Some of the greatest writers of Germany including Goethe have had their inspirations in this era. A strong nationalistic voice emerged in Germany that would unify all the germanies to one nation in 1871. The general understanding the nature of man changed. The goal was to now to unroot the self incurred immaturity as Kant calls it , from the german society. It also inspired a people's revolution in France and a movement for independence in the American colonies. This in turn inspired many revolutions including the Independence war in India. Irony here being most of the writers and enlightened philosophers of this era were opposed to the idea of revolution. This era was followed by the later Sturm and Drang where plays and novels took the place of Essays and Philosophical deliveries. The most important amost them was Johannes Goethe. Although he was not a philosopher himself , the basic theme and idea of his books remians the same core philosophy of the era , that of reason and rationality. The books of this era were translated to Latin and then to many European languages and obtained critical acclaim.

This does not mean that the ideals were always achieved or that it was accessible to all. This development was restricted largely to the middle class, which though a small part of the society was expanding quickly. The ideas were debated, discussed and propagated but the actual reality of the society did not change as quickly as the ideals were put forth. It took a long time for people to be truly rational and enlightened, but nonetheless this era was certainly a huge jump from the ignorant middle ages. Many kings also abolished serfdom, and others introduced liberal reforms, but the concept of divine kingship persisted. However regardless of when the enlightenment began and when it ended, Europe was never the same.

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