

# What is Enlightenment

Immanuel Kant

Excerpt published on August 3, 2025

*This excerpt is taken from Immanuel Kant's 1784 essay "An answer to the question: What Is Enlightenment?" (German: "Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?")<sup>1</sup> published at the magazine *Berlinische Monatsschrift* (Berlin Monthly). The English translation presented here is by Mary Campbell Smith, a work that is in the public domain. Minor updates have been made to modernize archaic language. The copyright notice below applies solely to the edited and formatted version presented here.*

In this essay Kant explains the meaning of Enlightenment by discussing the difference between public and private use of reason. He calls for intellectual independence and the courage to think for oneself, which is summarized in his famous Enlightenment motto: *Sapere Aude*, meaning dare to know. Kant's essay remains strikingly relevant today, as critical reason is increasingly abandoned in favor of intellectual complacency, with judgment ceded to political, ideological, or technological authorities.

Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. [...] This immaturity is self-imposed if its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in indecision and lack of courage to use one's own mind without another's guidance. *Sapere aude!* (Dare to know!) "Have the courage to use your own understanding," is therefore the motto of the enlightenment.

Laziness and cowardice are the reasons why such a large part of mankind gladly remain minors all their lives, long after nature has freed them from external guidance. [...] It is so comfortable to be a minor. If I have a book that thinks for me, a pastor who acts as my conscience, a physician who prescribes my diet, and so on—then I have no need to exert myself. I have no need to think, if only I can pay [...]. Those guardians who have kindly taken supervision upon themselves see to it that the overwhelming majority of mankind—among them all women—should consider the step to maturity, not only as hard, but as extremely dangerous. First, these guardians make their domestic cattle stupid and carefully prevent the docile creatures from taking a single step without the leading-strings to which they have fastened them. Then they show them the danger that would threaten them if

they should try to walk by themselves. Now this danger is really not very great; after stumbling a few times they would, at last, learn to walk. However, examples of such failures intimidate and generally discourage all further attempts.

Thus it is very difficult for the individual to work himself out of the immaturity which has become almost second nature to him. He has even grown to like it, and is at first really incapable of using his own understanding because he has never been permitted to try it. Dogmas and formulas, these mechanical tools designed for reasonable use—or rather abuse—of his natural gifts, are the fetters of an everlasting immaturity. The man who casts them off would make an uncertain leap over the narrowest ditch, because he is not used to such free movement. That is why there are only a few men who walk firmly, and who have emerged from immaturity by cultivating their own minds.

It is more nearly possible, however, for the public to enlighten itself; indeed, if it is only given freedom, enlightenment is almost inevitable. There will always be a few independent thinkers, even among the self-appointed guardians of the multitude. Once such men have thrown off the yoke of immaturity, they will spread about them the spirit of a reasonable appreciation of man's value and of his duty to think for himself. It is especially to be noted that the public which was earlier brought under the yoke by these men afterwards forces these very guardians to remain in submission, if it is so incited by some of its guardians who are themselves incapable of any enlightenment. That shows how pernicious it is to implant prejudices: they will eventually revenge themselves upon their authors or their authors' descen-

---

✉ [contact@resorttoreason.com](mailto:contact@resorttoreason.com)  
📄 [resorttoreason.com/ark:/\[ARK-ID\]](https://resorttoreason.com/ark:/[ARK-ID])  
ARK-ID: 76615/Excerpt20250803

Copyright © 2025 Resort to Reason  
Licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0



dants. Therefore, a public can achieve enlightenment only slowly. A revolution may bring about the end of a personal despotism or of avaricious tyrannical oppression, but never a true reform of modes of thought. New prejudices will serve, in place of the old, as guidelines for the unthinking multitude.

This enlightenment requires nothing but freedom—and the most innocent of all that may be called “freedom”: freedom to make public use of one’s reason in all matters. Now I hear the cry from all sides: “Do not argue!” The officer says: “Do not argue—drill!” The tax collector: “Do not argue—pay!” The pastor: “Do not argue—believe!” [...] We find restrictions on freedom everywhere. But which restriction is harmful to enlightenment? Which restriction is innocent, and which advances enlightenment? I reply: the public use of one’s reason must be free at all times, and this alone can bring enlightenment to mankind.

On the other hand, the private use of reason may frequently be narrowly restricted without especially hindering the progress of enlightenment. By “public use of one’s reason” I mean that use which a man, as scholar, makes of it before the reading public. I call “private use” that use which a man makes of his reason in a civic post that has been entrusted to him. In some affairs affecting the interest of the community a certain (governmental) mechanism is necessary in which some members of the community remain passive. This creates an artificial unanimity which will serve the fulfillment of public objectives, or at least keep these objectives from being destroyed. Here arguing is not permitted: one must obey. Insofar as a part of this machine considers himself at the same time a member of a universal community—a world society of citizens—[...] he may indeed argue, and the affairs with which he is associated in part as a passive member will not suffer. Thus it would be very unfortunate if an officer on duty and under orders from his superiors should want to criticize the appropriateness or utility of his orders. He must obey. But as a scholar he could not rightfully be prevented from taking notice of the mistakes in the military service and from submitting his views to his public for its judgment. The citizen cannot refuse to pay the taxes levied upon him; indeed, impertinent censure of such taxes could be punished as a scandal that might cause general disobedience. Nevertheless, this man does not violate the duties of a citizen if, as a scholar, he publicly expresses his objections to the impropriety or possible in-

justice of such levies. A pastor, too, is bound to preach to his congregation in accord with the doctrines of the church which he serves, for he was ordained on that condition. But as a scholar he has full freedom, indeed the obligation, to communicate to his public all his carefully examined and constructive thoughts concerning errors in that doctrine and his proposals concerning improvement of religious dogma and church institutions. [...]

But should a society of ministers, say a Church Council, have the right to commit itself by oath to a certain unalterable doctrine, in order to secure perpetual guardianship over all its members and through them over the people? I say that this is quite impossible. Such a contract, concluded to keep all further enlightenment from humanity, is simply null and void even if it should be confirmed by the sovereign power, by parliaments, and the most solemn treaties. An epoch cannot conclude a pact that will commit succeeding ages, prevent them from increasing their significant insights, purging themselves of errors, and generally progressing in enlightenment. That would be a crime against human nature whose proper destiny lies precisely in such progress. Therefore, succeeding ages are fully entitled to repudiate such decisions as unauthorized and outrageous. [...]

A man may postpone his own enlightenment, but only for a limited period of time. And to give up enlightenment altogether, either for oneself or one’s descendants, is to violate and to trample upon the sacred rights of man. What a person may not decide for itself may even less be decided for it by a monarch, for his reputation as a ruler consists precisely in the way in which he unites the will of the whole people within his own. If he only sees to it that all true or supposed (religious) improvement remains in step with the civic order, he can for the rest leave his subjects alone to do what they find necessary for the salvation of their souls. Salvation is none of his business; it is his business to prevent one man from forcibly keeping another from determining and promoting his salvation to the best of his ability. Indeed, it would be prejudicial to his majesty if he meddled in these matters and supervised the writings in which his subjects seek to bring their (religious) views into the open, even when he does this from his own highest insight, because then he exposes himself to the reproach: Caesar is not above scholars<sup>a</sup>. [...]

When we ask, Are we now living in an enlightened age? the answer is, No, but we live in an age

<sup>a</sup>Caesar non est supra grammaticos.

of enlightenment. As matters now stand it is still far from true that men are already capable of using their own reason in religious matters confidently and correctly without external guidance. Still, we have some obvious indications that the field of working toward the goal (of religious truth) is now opened. What is more, the hindrances against general enlightenment or the emergence from self-imposed immaturity are gradually diminishing. In this respect this is the age of the enlightenment [...].

A prince ought not to deem it beneath his dignity to state that he considers it his duty not to dictate anything to his subjects in religious matters, but to leave them complete freedom. If he repudiates the arrogant word “tolerant”, he is himself enlightened; he deserves to be praised by a grateful world and posterity as that man who was the first to liberate mankind from dependence, at least on the government, and let everybody use his own reason in matters of conscience. Under his reign, honorable pastors, acting as scholars and regardless of the duties of their office, can freely and openly publish their ideas to the world for inspection, although they deviate here and there from accepted doctrine. This is even more true of every person not restrained by any oath of office. [...] When one does not deliberately attempt to keep men in barbarism, they will gradually work out of that condition by themselves.

I have emphasized the main point of the enlightenment—man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity—primarily in religious matters, because our rulers have no interest in playing the guardian to their subjects in the arts and sciences. Above all, immaturity in religion is not only the most harmful but the most dishonor-

able. But the disposition of a sovereign ruler who favors freedom in the arts and sciences goes even further: he knows that there is no danger in permitting his subjects to make public use of their reason and to publish their ideas concerning a better constitution, as well as candid criticism of existing basic laws. [...]

But only the man who is himself enlightened, who is not afraid of shadows, and who commands at the same time a well disciplined and numerous army as guarantor of public peace—only he can say what (the sovereign of) a free state cannot dare to say: “Argue as much as you like, and about what you like, but obey!” Thus we observe here as elsewhere in human affairs, in which almost everything is paradoxical, a surprising and unexpected course of events: a large degree of civic freedom appears to be of advantage to the intellectual freedom of the people, yet at the same time it establishes insurmountable barriers. A lesser degree of civic freedom, however, creates room to let that free spirit expand to the limits of its capacity. Nature, then, has carefully cultivated the seed within the hard core—namely the urge for and the vocation of free thought. And this free thought gradually reacts back on the modes of thought of the people, and men become more and more capable of acting in freedom. At last free thought acts even on the fundamentals of government and the state finds it agreeable to treat man, who is now more than a machine, in accord with his dignity.

---

## References

1. Immanuel Kant, “Beantwortung der frage: Was ist aufklärung?” *Berlinische Monatsschrift* (1784).