

## Kant's Enlightenment<sup>1</sup>

### *La Ilustración de Kant*

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#### Abstract

I urge here that Kant's essay "What is Enlightenment?" be read in the context of debates at the time over the public critique of religion, and together with elements of his other writings, especially a short piece on orientation in thinking that he wrote two years later. After laying out the main themes of the essay in some detail, I argue that, read in context, Kant's call to "think for ourselves" is not meant to rule out a legitimate role for relying on the testimony of others, that it is directed instead against a kind of blind religious faith, in which one either refuses to question one's clerical authorities or relies on a mystical intuition that cannot be assessed by reason. Both of these ways of abandoning reason can be fended off if we always submit our private thoughts to the test of public scrutiny: which is why enlightenment, for Kant, requires *both* free thinking, by each individual for him or herself, *and* a realm of free public expression in which individuals can discuss the results of their thinking.

#### Key words

Enlightenment; Testimony; Public/Private distinction; Public Reason; Enthusiasm

#### Resumen

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Propongo en este artículo leer el ensayo de Kant “¿Qué es la Ilustración?” en el contexto de los debates de su tiempo sobre la crítica pública de la religión, junto con elementos de otros escritos de Kant, especialmente un opúsculo sobre la orientación en el pensamiento que escribió dos años antes. Tras desplegar los temas principales del ensayo con algún detalle, argumento que, leída en su contexto, la exhortación de Kant a “pensar por nosotros mismos” no debe entenderse llamada a descartar la función legítima de confiar en el testimonio de los otros, sino que está dirigida más bien contra un tipo de fe religiosa ciega, en la que o bien rechaza cuestionar las propias autoridades clericales, o bien descansa sobre una intuición mística que no puede ser evaluada por la razón. Ambas maneras de abandonar la razón pueden esquivarse si sometemos en todo momento nuestros pensamientos privados a la prueba del escrutinio público. Por ello, la Ilustración para Kant requiere *tanto* el libre pensamiento, de cada individuo por sí mismo, *cuanto* un espacio de expresión pública libre, en el que los individuos puedan discutir los resultados de su pensamiento.

### Palabras clave

Ilustración; testimonio; distinción público/privado; razón pública; entusiasmo

1. In 1712, Joseph Addison described the world as “enlightened by Learning and Philosophy.” Bishop Berkeley called his era an “enlightened age” in 1732, and David Hume contrasted barbarous” with “enlightened ages” when he discussed reports of miracles in 1748. Hume also contrasted those who “enlighten” the world with religious figures like Thomas à Becket in his *History of England*, lamenting that “pretended saints” receive so much popular attention while enlighteners do not (Addison 1837, p. 31, 419; Berkeley 1803, p. 97; Hume 1975, p. 119; Hume 1983, p. 337).

In all these cases, the words “enlighten” and “enlightened” are used to signify something that comes with learning, and contrasts with dogmatic religious belief. But these words appear rarely in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Britain— I’ve given their only appearance in Hume’s *Enquiries* and they don’t appear at all in his *Treatise* or *Dialogues* on religion — and there is no extended discussion in the Anglophone world of what “enlightenment” might entail.<sup>2</sup> Nor did the French *lumières* or the Italian *lumi* engage in any real debate over what mental processes or political conditions made their learning possible.

That debate was left to German-speaking lands, where, from 1783 onwards, a large number of articles appeared under titles like “What is Enlightenment?” One of these — by Kant — has become an icon, a piece by which students are introduced to the intellectual world of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and that is supposed to represent an ethos running through it. But we should bear in mind that Kant was writing in a very specific corner of the historical

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<sup>2</sup>And it names just a process, not a historical period, until quite late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Hegel seems to have been the first to use *Aufklärung* to designate the 18<sup>th</sup> century as a stage in intellectual history, and it was by way of translations of his works that the term came into English use. But *Aufklärung* was generally translated as “Illumination” (and sometimes as “Clearing Up”!) until the end of the nineteenth century. See Schmidt, J, “Inventing the Enlightenment: Anti-Jacobins, Hegelians, and the *Oxford English Dictionary*,” pp.421-443.

phenomenon we call today “*the Enlightenment*,” and responding to its specific challenges, not necessarily representing what characterized that period in, say, Edinburgh or Paris.<sup>3</sup>

What specific challenges did Kant face? Kant really wrote *two* pieces in defense of enlightenment, the famous one of 1784, and “What is Orientation in Thinking?,” in 1786. At that time, the long reign of Frederick the Great was drawing to a close and the intellectual circles to which Kant belonged were worried about what might happen next. Frederick was beloved by intellectuals for the free rein he gave to scholarly discussion, but there was reason to fear that his successor would not follow him in that respect. The future Frederick William II had joined a series of secret societies and was purported to believe that he had mystical visions; he was also close with a certain Johann Christof Wöllner, who harbored hopes of suppressing the open discussion of religion and “bringing back the ... country to the faith of Jesus Christ” (Frederick William II 1910, p. 64).<sup>4</sup> And indeed, immediately after coming to the throne, Frederick William would appoint Wöllner to high position, Wöllner would attempt to shut down the public expression of heretical views, and Frederick William would use his personal conversations with Jesus as a basis for further restrictive policies.<sup>5</sup> When Kant calls for the supreme importance of freedom of the pen, then, even in 1784 and especially in 1786, and when in 1786 he adds that being guided by personal religious experience can lead to the greatest of despotisms, we need to hear him as in part making a case for the policies of Frederick the Great, and warning his fellow intellectuals against giving aid to the repressive tendencies in Frederick William. Kant was reluctant to write the 1786 piece on orientation, which required him to intervene in a dispute among friends, but was eventually convinced that he had to do it in order to help fend off the political threat looming on the horizon (Beiser 1992, p. 52).

2. So much for historical background; let's turn now to the texts. What was “enlightenment,” for Kant? Kant's piece on the topic is extremely short, but it contains a number of different elements and it is worth making sure we are clear about them. I'd like

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<sup>3</sup>Intellectual historians today tend to be leery of the very idea that there is a single period or movement properly called “*the Enlightenment*.” “There is no single or unifiable phenomenon describable as ‘the Enlightenment,’” says John Pocock, although he adds that “it is the definite article rather than the noun which is to be avoided. In studying the intellectual history of the late seventeenth century and the eighteenth, we encounter a variety of statements made, and assumptions proposed, to which the term ‘Enlightenment’ may usefully be applied, but the means of the term shift as we apply it.” (Pocock, J, “Historiography and Enlightenment: A View of their History,” p.83). See also the thoughtful discussion in Oz-Salzberger, F, “New Approaches towards a History of the Enlightenment”: in place of Gay's monolithic anti-religious Enlightenment, she says, contemporary intellectual historians have given us “a moderate Presbyterian Enlightenment in Scotland, a Latitudinarian Enlightenment in England, a radical Enlightenment of Spinozists and freemasons, a conservative Enlightenment which was largely Socinian, [and] a Jesuit Enlightenment,” among others (p.175).

<sup>4</sup> See also Schmidt, “Introduction”, *What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>5</sup> “In June 1791 Kieseewetter wrote Kant to inform him that attempts were being made in the Wöllner ministry to prevent him from publishing. Kieseewetter explained that the king, who was prone to mystical visions, had seen Jesus again, so that even more edicts could be expected.” Frederick C. Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution and Romanticism*, p.50.

to lay out five major themes of his famous essay, and then elaborate and defend two of them.

“Enlightenment,” Kant tells us in the opening line of his famous piece, “is the exit of human beings from their self-incurred immaturity.” And at the end of the first paragraph, Kant says that “Dare to know!,” or “Have the courage to use your own reason!,” is the watchword of enlightenment. So we have two themes right off the bat. First, the opposite of enlightenment is not a state of *ignorance* — a mere lack of information — but an emotional weakness, a state of immaturity; we cure this immaturity by taking responsibility for our own knowing, not by simply acquiring information. And second, our immaturity is self-incurred, and the way out of it is an act we must perform ourselves. Other people cannot enlighten us; we must enlighten ourselves. And we do that by “using our own reason” — whatever exactly that means.

We should pause to note that this is not the most obvious view of enlightenment. Many other thinkers in Kant’s time saw enlightenment as coming about when scientific knowledge, is cultivated and used to solve chronic human problems, or when the baleful rule of priests, enslaving the population by way of superstition, is brought to an end.<sup>6</sup> For Moses Mendelssohn, enlightenment consisted in theoretical knowledge, especially about religion (Mendelssohn in Schmidt 1996, pp. 54-55). For Karl Reinhold, it lay in the clarification of concepts, especially “those concepts which have a considerable influence on human happiness.” Mendelssohn, in Schmidt 1996, pp. 65-6). Christian Daniel Erhard, writing a few years after Kant, held that enlightenment consists in “the abolition of prevailing prejudices and errors among individuals and... peoples” (Knudsen in Schmidt 1996, p. 270). Kant too thought that enlightenment will improve science and lead us away from prejudice and superstition, but it was the courage to use our own reason, and not the improvement of science or the overcoming of prejudice and superstition, that he *identified* with enlightenment. It follows that he did not think people need the help of others, even scientific experts, to enter enlightenment — he regarded our reliance on others, including scientific experts, as precisely what keeps us *from* enlightenment — and he didn’t blame others, even clerics, for our lack of enlightenment. People with a great deal of theoretical knowledge, or skill in clarifying concepts, or understanding of what makes for human happiness or underpins prejudice, might be the source of enlightenment for Mendelssohn and Reinhold and Erhard, but not for Kant. The source of enlightenment lies within each of us, for him, not in any set of scholars. He puts the onus on each of us for achieving enlightenment, and he blames us for the immaturity that blocks us from doing so. He implies, thereby, that enlightenment is within reach of everybody.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For a modern account of the Enlightenment that sees it as primarily concerned to solve long-standing social, political, and economic problems, see Robertson, *The Case for Enlightenment*. For a modern account that sees the Enlightenment as primarily concerned to challenge traditional religious beliefs, see Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*.

<sup>7</sup> I believe that Kant’s enlightenment, for all that he talks at one point about a public realm in which “scholars” (*Gelehrten*) have the freedom to write what they will, is meant to be a very egalitarian affair — something that everyone, whether well-educated or not, can carry out for him or herself. This is, after all, what the admonition, “Think for yourself!” would seem to imply, and Kant condemns unquestioning reliance

3. What, now, is the immaturity that blocks our enlightenment? Kant describes it as “the inability to use one’s understanding without the direction of another.” He attributes this condition to everyone who thinks “I have a book which understands for me, a pastor who has a conscience for me, a doctor who decides on my diet.” We should stop and wonder at this. Does Kant mean to say we should never rely on authority? Am I to figure out everything on my own, ignoring even my doctor’s advice about diet? Surely not. But then what *does* Kant mean? Perhaps just that I must always stand *ready to question* my authorities, if what they say seems to me ill-considered or ill-informed. I need to have enough understanding of my own, and trust my understanding enough, that I can say, “This doctor seems to me a charlatan” in certain cases, and blame myself, rather than just the doctor, if I continue nevertheless to rely on him. Moreover, Kant’s main point doesn’t have to do with our attitude towards medical experts, or other experts on scientific matters. The pastor, not the doctor, is the main character in his list of examples. As we’ll see, Kant is concerned above all with the way we rely on authorities in matters of religion — an arena

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on any authority: it’s hard to imagine that why he wouldn’t include scholarly authority in this polemic. Kant also himself contrasts his notion of enlightenment with one on which it would consist in acquiring information, in the footnote from WDO AA 08. He says there that “there is less to” his notion of enlightenment than to one that identifies it with the acquisition of information, that *everyone* can carry it out for himself, and that a good educational system will ensure that everyone is trained in it from a young age.

There is other textual evidence that Kant sees enlightenment as something everyone, not just scholars, can and should accomplish. First, Kant’s rule for enlightenment is one of three maxims that he identifies with the “common understanding”— a mode of thought that all human beings share. Second, in his *Reflexionen* Kant says that while it can be good for people to be trained, for a while, by way of “coercion, authority or prejudice,” eventually “all these evils must have an end” (RGV 528 AA 15:229-30); he also says, in the same place, that philosophy, “if it shall have a use” at all, must “give the principles” by which immaturity can be ended everywhere. Moreover, he bitterly condemns the infantilization of the populace by kings and clerics, making no distinction between scholars and other members of the populace: “One first renders the people unable to govern themselves, and then excuses one’s despotism on the grounds that they cannot govern themselves.” (RGV 532 AA 15:231) And he compares academics to despotic rulers, saying that they make the people immature (RGV 1508-9 AA 15:820-26).

So I think there is good reason to say that for Kant enlightenment is something that all human beings can and should carry out, regardless of their scholarly training. Indeed, throughout most of WA Kant talks about how anyone can and should enlighten him or herself; he uses the term “scholar” quite rarely, although those occurrences are located, unfortunately for my purposes, in the midst of his central discussion of the right to a public use of reason. But I think we can make good sense of this fact: the occasional references to the right of “scholars” to address one another freely in WA have to do with the context in which it was written, in which there was considerable danger that scholarship was about to be put back under censorship. So in context Kant may either be saying that the writings of scholars *at least*, or *especially*, should be wholly free. He may also regard be using the word “scholar” in a loose, broad way by which anyone speaking or writing for the purpose of inquiry alone counts as a “scholar.” In any case, there is no reason to suppose that Kant thinks free speech should be *limited* to scholars, or that he regards enlightenment as something that flows from scholars to the people at large. Indeed, on his conception of enlightenment, that would be impossible.

Several commentators on Kant’s notion of enlightenment accept this egalitarian view of WA, but argue that Kant moves to a more elitist model in RGV and SF: see, especially, Laursen, “The Subversive Kant”, Lestition, “Kant and the End of the Enlightenment in Prussia,” and Deligiorgi, pp.76-7. I am not convinced that Kant drops his egalitarianism as much as these writers suggest, but I do think his RGV and SF offer a somewhat different model of enlightenment (see my *What is Enlightenment?* chapter 2).

where, he thinks, scientific knowledge is not available and relying on someone else's words is morally inappropriate.<sup>8</sup>

And what about the second idea, that our immaturity is “self-incurred”? We are responsible, according to Kant, for the very unwillingness to question that makes us vulnerable to manipulation by authorities. Many other people, in Kant's own time and since, would rather blame those *authorities* for the threats and manipulative ways of teaching that make it difficult for people to think for themselves. Kant blames us for our own mental slavery. Why? Well, Kant's fundamental principle of morality is based on the idea that we are all free: we have the ability, at all times, to follow a law we lay down for ourselves, and not to be led around by outside pressures. It follows that we bear responsibility even for the occasions on which we *renounce* our own responsibility, that we can be regarded as having in some sense freely taken on even conditions by which we are mentally enslaved. We are *wrong* to do this, of course, but it is nevertheless something we *do*, and not something that just happens to us. As applied to our failure to think for ourselves, the idea is that we ourselves attribute the aura of authority to others that enables them to shape our beliefs. Kant says in a later text that the public “surreptitiously attributes” a “magic power” to experts in medicine, law, and theology, regarding them as “miracle-workers” who will help them get what they want (SF AA 49-50). So *we* are the true source of the authority that others wield over us. If we but question that authority, it will disappear: we will see that there is nothing magical about experts, and that we have reason to rely on their authority only insofar as it is based on grounds we can accept. We will realize that we can and should see authority only in those to whom we are freely willing to grant it, that we never have reason to accept their word blindly.<sup>9</sup>

4. The third major point in the essay is a political one. Kant tells us that it is difficult for an individual to pull himself out of immaturity on his own — it is all too comfortable to recite “statutes and formulas” instead of thinking for ourselves — but that an entire society

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<sup>8</sup> Kant's essay, throughout, is about pushing off responsibility for decisions about how to guide my own life and the warning not to rely unthinkingly on the doctor has to be understood in that context. It is not that I should think that I *know* as much as the doctor, but that I have to take responsibility for the way the doctor's advice affects my own life, for the *actions* I take on the basis of what he or she says. This is not a matter simply of knowledge but of values: the value I place on having certain pleasures at the cost of shortening my life, for instance, or, by contrast, on *extending* my life at the cost of financial and emotional burdens I place on others, or of my own dignity or mental health. It is a shirking of responsibility, a mark of immaturity, to blame my doctor for these *uses* of the information she offers me.

<sup>9</sup>It is also a source for some important later ideas. Marx will try to show us how oppressed classes are themselves the source of the power that the ideology of the ruling class has over them. Nietzsche will say that our belief in God, and in traditional forms of morality (including Kantian morality) is a projection of our own fears and hatreds, and that these beliefs will fall away as soon as we have the courage to get rid of our childish feelings about them. Freud will locate the source of what he calls the “illusion” of religion in a projection of our relationship to our fathers. For all of these figures, and their many followers, enlightenment will involve something more than Kant's mere willingness to question — radical social change, for Marx; radical psychological change, for Freud and Nietzsche — but the core idea that we have enslaved ourselves, and can consequently redeem ourselves *from* our own slavery, remains the same.

can move towards enlightenment if only it allows freedom of expression.<sup>10</sup> Then the freedom of thought shown by some may inspire others to “throw... off the yoke of immaturity.”

And now, as Kant clarifies what he means by freedom of expression, he introduces what is probably the best-known element of the essay: a distinction between the private and the public use of reason. Everywhere we hear “Don’t argue!,” he says. Officers in the military tell their soldiers not to argue with their orders; tax collectors say, “Don’t argue; just pay!” Kant thinks that some sort of argument should be permissible in all these realms: even soldiers in the army should be allowed to raise doubts about the orders they receive. But they need not be permitted to raise those doubts *when and where* they receive these orders. We need to obey superiors in various spheres, even if we should also be allowed to dispute their orders in the public realm. The realm of argument, of free debate, must be separated from the realm of obedience. Making use of a slightly odd understanding of the words “private” and “public,” Kant says that in one’s private capacity — one’s role in a specific job or other limited aspect of society — one may not always have a right to speak freely, but that one should always be allowed to do this when addressing the public: when writing or speaking as a “scholar.” Those who have an official role are required to carry out the duties assigned to them in that role, Kant thinks, but he also calls for a realm of free public discussion in which everyone can criticize the duties assigned to them.

There is a great deal more to be said about this version of the public/private distinction, but before we get there, I want to add points 4 and 5 to the summary I have been giving of Kant’s essay. The fourth point is that no church may fix its doctrines forever, binding future generations to accept without question the views it proclaims at one particular time. “One age cannot bind itself, and thus conspire to place the succeeding age in a situation in which it becomes impossible to broaden its knowledge.” Even the *unanimous* consent of a church’s members to such an arrangement would not make it legitimate: “[T]o renounce [enlightenment,” says Kant – to renounce the free questioning of dogmas — “is to wound and trample underfoot the holy rights of humanity.” Again we see that enlightenment is a moral act, for Kant — even a moral obligation. We also see that voluntary groups as well as the government can offend against this obligation, and that it should not be overridden even by communal consensus. It is, rather, a condition *for* any acceptable social contract, a condition without which no society can be seen as reflecting its members’ choices.

Which brings us to the fifth and final main thesis of the essay: the priority of intellectual over civic freedom. Governments should never forbid the free discussion of politics, says Kant. Such discussions are helpful to the government itself, as well as a condition for policies to be legitimate. Kant indicates that nothing *more* than public discussion is necessary, in the long run, to effect political change. Absolute rulers, he thinks, will eventually reform everything in a constitution that needs reforming — even

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<sup>10</sup> Whether freedom of expression was necessary for enlightenment was a recurring topic in the German literature on this subject. See the contributions of Möhsen, Klein, Bahrtdt, Moser and Fichte, in Schmidt (ed.), *What is Enlightenment?*

their own absolute powers — in the face of public criticism. Indeed, Kant suggests that it may be helpful to intellectual freedom if civic freedom is restrained for a while. Then ideas can be played out without leading to rash political changes, and the people can come to mental maturity before they rule themselves.

I think there is a nugget of truth to Kant's separation of public discussion from practical politics, but on the whole I don't want to defend Kant's political views here. What I do want to defend is 1) the idea that every human being everywhere has a duty to think for him or herself and not merely accept doctrines on authority, and 2) Kant's intriguing, complex picture of how this individual duty is interwoven with a realm of public debate. These theses do not constitute all that people have meant by "enlightenment," but they are central aspects of it, and aspects that have been central to the opposition that the term has aroused, in conservative circles and non-Western cultures. I am myself sympathetic to the religious and cultural groups who feel threatened by Western secularism. But I think the enlightenment Kant defined and urged in his famous essay is something more minimal than that. Kantian enlightenment, I want to say, is something we all can and should accept — even if some of us continue to resist what else and what more marches under the banner of "secularism" and "modernity."

5. Half the battle in defending something is explaining clearly what it means. Let's begin by trying to make clearer sense of the distinction Kant draws between the private and the public realms. That distinction is less puzzling if we look at the way Kant uses the word "private" in other contexts. "Private" derives from a Latin word meaning "set apart," "lacking," or "deprived": the "private" person was deprived of public office. Kant takes the term out of this political context and uses it to describe individuals insofar as they are "deprived of" their common humanity — insofar as they are *limited to* some specific aspect of themselves, which links them to just one community among others, rather than to humanity at large. Thus he distinguishes in his *Logic* between an absolute or universal and a private horizon of thought, identifying the latter with what we think as "particular and conditioned" beings and the former with what we think as, simply, *human* beings. "The determination of the private horizon," he tells us, "depends on various empirical conditions and special considerations, e.g., age, sex, position, way of life and the like" (46) — features of what today we might call our "identity," which can limit our thought or guide it towards limited aims.<sup>11</sup> From the absolute or universal horizon, by contrast — the public horizon — we are concerned with the question, "What can the human being, *as* a human being, ... know?" (41). And this question is not limited by any aim. It is the response of a shallow mind, says Kant, to ask of this kind of knowledge, "What is that good for?" (47). Elsewhere, in his lectures on *Anthropology* (AA 07: 219), Kant contrasts a "private sense" (*sensus privatus*) with a "communal sense" (*sensus communis*). We have "a sense for ideas peculiar to ourselves" as well as "a sense for ideas that are common to all," he says, and we

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<sup>11</sup>Onora O'Neill also stresses the connection between "private" and "deprived," for Kant, but understands a bit differently than I do: O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason*, pp. 17, 50.



correct the former by the latter; it is indeed insanity to rely on our private sense when it is contradicted by the communal one. The person who does that is the person who sees things “in broad daylight” that people next to him do not see, or hears voices that no-one else hears (§ 53; AA 07: 219). Relating our understanding to the understanding of others is “a subjectively necessary touchstone” of the correctness of our judgments, and we are on our way to madness if we “merely isolate ourselves within our own experiences.” Moreover, our private sense or understanding gets better the more we are able to test it against the judgments of others. For that reason, censoring books is not merely bad politics, but a serious obstacle to the growth of knowledge: “In this way we are deprived of ... the greatest and most useful means of correcting our own thoughts.”

If we plug all this back into the enlightenment essay, we see that the public realm is not a *political* realm for Kant, but a realm in which all our specific, historically located projects and identities — including our political projects and identities — are suspended and we are therefore able to think generally about them. And he wants to suggest that it is important even for our private identities themselves — our identities as lawyers or doctors, or representatives of a specific religious group — that we *have* a public realm in which we can suspend those identities and scrutinize them: in which we can check the judgments we make in our private capacities against the touchstone of a more broadly human kind of judgment, a *sensus communis*. In the public realm, Kant tells us, we write for “a society of world citizens,” for human beings in general. As scholars, as people interested in knowledge for its own sake, we are not bound by any specific role or limited community: and we all need to see ourselves this way some of the time.

Now Kant is not out to deny that scholarly writings, like other writings, always respond to the questions and pre-suppositions of a specific historical context. Kant's own essay was written for a Berlin journal read by a limited set of scholars, and he filled the piece with allusions to local concerns and events of which only that community was likely to be aware. Kant could also not have expected, at this point in his life, that any literal society of world citizens would read his work. His reputation had begun to grow in Germany since the publication of his *Critique of Pure Reason*, three years earlier, but he was still fairly obscure, and he could not have expected his writings to reach an international audience. So by saying that the scholar writes for a society of world citizens, Kant does not mean to deny that the scholar *also* writes for a more local community: of Germans or Frenchmen, Christians or Jews, professors or clerics. The point is that anything written *as* a piece of scholarship<sup>12</sup> is implicitly opened up by that fact to the judgments of all humanity, even if it is also directed to the judgments of a particular group. When considering a piece in our capacity just as beings who pursue knowledge, we implicitly regard our local norms of judgment as open to correction by the *sensus communis* of all human beings. *As* pure inquirers — members of the “public,” in Kant's sense — we recognize that the standards of argument that our intellectual community employs, to be standards of argument at all, must be capable of being corrected by more general tests of

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<sup>12</sup> Which here means anything written as a contribution to human knowledge at large, rather than to meet the needs of a specific institution.

epistemic adequacy. As Germans or Christians or lawyers, we may place limitations on what our fellow group members may *say*. But we cannot limit what they, or we, will count as *true*. To do that is to act like the person who sees things that no-one else sees — to drift towards a kind of group madness.

We can make ready sense of these points. As the contemporary Kantian, Christine Korsgaard, has stressed, we need to be able to ask, from a place beyond each of our specific identities, why we are committed to each one, what its limits are, and which of the demands it makes on us are legitimate. If I occupy a specific “civil post or office,” to take one of Kant’s examples, I need to be able to ask myself why I have been willing to accept that post — what purposes I think it serves and why I support those purposes — and in what circumstances I might feel obliged to renounce it, or to challenge the requirements that go with it. And this is good *for* my specific identity itself. It is good *for* the civil service — it makes the civil service less prey to corruption — if its employees think independently about its rules and practices, if they can evaluate those rules and practices from an independent perspective.

Similarly, if I adhere to a specific “way of life,” to take another of Kant’s examples — the way of life of a specific culture or religion, say — I need to be able to ask myself, from a position beyond that *of* the way of life, why I find it worthwhile or in line with my moral duties. Again, it will be good *for* my culture or religion if its members can think out of the box like this — it is most likely to live up to its own ideals if its members can think about what they are doing on their own. And the position making such assessment possible is that of a human being in general, in which neither the questions we ask nor their answers are limited by any “private” — specific — ends.

More broadly, Kant thinks that the public or general point of view can serve as a test for the correctness of our beliefs even on ordinary empirical matters. It can of course happen that everyone’s views on a certain subject are mistaken or corrupt, and we shouldn’t overlook the importance of individuals like Copernicus, who defy common sense correctly on some issue. But for the most part Kant is surely right that the understanding of those around us is a healthy corrective for our private judgments, and that one who refuses to check in with the judgments of others, when he thinks he sees or hears something, is on the way to madness.

6. How does all this go with Kant’s demand that we think for ourselves? In the first place, as I’ve already noted, by “think for yourself,” Kant cannot and does not mean that we are to figure everything out on our own. The subject of testimony has become a philosophical topic of great importance, in recent years; philosophers have become very interested in the fact that much of what we know comes from other people’s testimony. That’s the source of your beliefs about your name and birthplace, as well as the vast majority of your other common-sense and scientific views. If belief based on testimony had to be excluded from knowledge, we would know hardly anything: we would not even have the premises from which we could readily *find out* anything. Consequently, we must regard

the word of others as an independent source of knowledge, right up there with perception and our various modes of reasoning.<sup>13</sup>

Now, partly because of what he says in “What is Enlightenment?,” Kant is often represented as a philosopher who didn’t grasp this point. But that turns out to be false. In a brilliant essay called “Kant on Testimony,” Axel Gelfert has shown that Kant put testimony on a level with perception as a source of knowledge. Drawing on texts from Kant’s logic lectures that are rarely read even by Kant scholars, Gelfert brings to light passages like the following: “[W]e can just as well accept something on the testimony of others as on our own experience. For there is just as much that is deceptive in our experience as in the testimony of others. ... To be sure, the testimony that we accept from others is subject to just as many hazards as our own experience is subject to errors. But we can just as well have certainty through the testimony of others as through our own experience.”(V-Lo/Weiner AA 24.2 895-6 in Gelfert 2006, p. 633).<sup>14</sup> Testimony is subject to “hazards”: the people giving it to us may be lying or misinformed. But what we see and hear is also subject to error. So in both cases, we need to use our cognitive faculties critically. Kant says that “[h]istorical belief is reasonable if it is critical,” in this sense (Gelfert 2006, p. 641).

But Kant limits the appropriate epistemic place for testimony to empirical matters. Truths of reason are a different matter. “[S]omething [may] be considered historically true,” he says, “purely on the strength of testimonies, as in the belief that there is a city called Rome.” By contrast, “a *purely rational belief* can never be transformed into *knowledge* by any natural data of reason and experience” and hence cannot rightly be held on the basis of testimony (WDO AA 8: 141).<sup>15</sup> When it comes to truths of reason, Kant thinks, there is something deficient in our understanding if we merely accept what others tell us (Gelfert 2006, pp. 627, 637, 641). The person who doesn’t work out claims of logic or mathematics for him or herself doesn’t properly grasp them, and can’t be said to know them in the way that someone who has worked through the proofs does. “If a cognition is constituted in such a way that it can ... be made out by one’s understanding,” says Kant, “then the authority of others is no genuine ground of holding [it to be true]” (Gelfert 2006, p. 641).

<sup>13</sup> See Coady, *Testimony* for an excellent overview of this subject.

<sup>14</sup> As quoted in Gelfert, “Kant on Testimony,” p.633.Indeed, Kant thinks we have an *obligation* to trust others — prima facie, at least: “It ... indicates a very bad mode of thought if one never trusts anyone in anything, but instead ... wants to see everything that is promised and pledged to him present and fulfilled.” And again: “[w]ithout fidelity and belief no *republique*, no public affairs would be able to exist.” (in Gelfert, “Kant on Testimony,” pp. 634-5).

<sup>15</sup> See also Gelfert, “Kant on Testimony” p.637. There may be an echo in this last passage of a distinction Lessing drew between truths of history and truths of reason. Lessing argued that the historical claims of traditional religions under-determine their doctrines about God and the nature of the soul — “[I]f I have no historical objection to the fact that Christ raised someone from the dead, must I therefore regard it as true that God has a Son who is of the same essence as himself? What connection is there between my inability to raise any substantial objection to the evidence for the former, and my obligation to believe something which my reason refuses to accept?” (Lessing, “On the proof of the spirit and of power,” p.86) — and Kant is concerned with much the same issues in WDO. The inappropriateness of reliance on testimony in religious matters is a central theme in 18<sup>th</sup>-century writings on testimony (in, for instance, Hume’s much-quoted chapter on miracles in the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*). This context tends to be overlooked by 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>-century philosophers when they look back at the 18<sup>th</sup>-century discussions. Coady, for instance, entirely leaves out this context: see Coady, *Testimony*, pp.179-82; 186-8.

This point takes a yet sharper form when it comes to moral issues. Not only are moral claims matters of reason, for Kant, but they are the direct expression of our autonomy. It follows that accepting moral claims merely on authority is not just a cognitive failing but a moral one as well: we betray our autonomy when we do that.

This brings us back to “What is Enlightenment?” When Kant admonishes us to think for ourselves, he has in mind moral issues in particular: the examples he gives are almost entirely political or religious ones, and religion, for Kant, is at bottom a form of morality.<sup>16</sup> That is why reliance on testimony, here, is inappropriate.

We may still think Kant has gone too far, however, and forgotten his own wise comments on testimony in the logic lectures. One of his examples, remember, is that of relying on doctors when it comes to diet, yet medicine is surely an empirical science to which testimony is appropriate. He also urges soldiers to scrutinize military discipline, and all of us to take a critical stance towards the system of taxation under which we live — but many of the questions that arise about taxation and military discipline are empirical ones. And even as regards religion, surely there is a place for expertise, hence testimony, when it comes to, say, the historical claims that various religions make; surely religion is not *only* a moral matter.

Kant’s point, I believe, is that even as regards empirical facts, we must at some point think hard about which authorities we can reasonably rely on and which we should suspect or reject. As we’ll see in a bit, Kant eventually translates “think for yourself” into a principle to seek grounds we can uphold universally for each source of belief we accept. That means we need to think through the sorts of reasons we have for relying on perception *or* testimony, or for rejecting both in favor of a priori argument. It also means, as regards testimony in particular, that we need to figure out the features that make one source of testimony more reliable than another. Modern philosophy begins with Descartes’s doubts about the church authorities from whom he learned astrophysics, and Descartes was right to harbor such doubts. More generally, we all must choose *among* authorities, and assess them, accordingly, for trustworthiness. Some authorities are more reliable than others, and there are at least some general guidelines we can use to sift out the former from the latter. But that means that we can “think for ourselves” about the grounds on which we accept authoritative claims, and how those grounds favor some authorities over others. This is already not to rely on authorities in virtue of an instinctive or socially-inculcated fear or awe of them: it is already to rely on them *in an enlightened way*. And I think that that is all Kant wants, when he calls on us to think for ourselves. We should not be cowed by the aura of superiority with which certain people or institutions appear to us. We should realize instead that we are responsible for the power that that aura has over us, and have the courage to resist that power.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Compare *Anthropology* § 43 (Anth AA 7:200): “[T]o require that a so-called layman ... should not use his own reason in religious matters, particularly since religion is to be appreciated as moral ... is an unjust demand because as to morals every man must account for all his doings.”

<sup>17</sup>We do *have* such good reason, of course: indeed, for me to rely on my own individual experience over that of scientific experts when it comes to matters of, say, astrophysics or ancient history would be for me *not* to

There is a further point that could be made. Kant's main concern in his enlightenment essay, as I've noted, is with religious questions: with the views we hold about what, overall, we should be doing with our lives. It is *here*, above all, that Kant thinks each of us needs to think for him or herself, and here he is surely right. It is one thing to rely on experts for factual information, but quite another to borrow one's fundamental values from other people.<sup>18</sup> There are at least three deep problems with relying on testimony for our beliefs about our ultimate goals and orientation in life. One is that there is very limited expertise to be had in such matters: the questions about them are unlikely to be settled by empirical facts, or by the sorts of abstract reasoning in which some people excel over others. A second is that the reasons by which we differentiate between where we will and where we will not rely on authorities, and determine what sorts of authorities to accept, are very likely to depend significantly *on* our ultimate values, on the over-arching goals by which we orient our lives. A person with a religious orientation may treat scientific authorities far more skeptically than a person of secular orientation would, at least when they issue proclamations on religious subjects. And a person with one kind of religious orientation may accept very different authorities from a person with a different religious orientation. So authority cannot reasonably settle the question of which authorities on value to accept, or whether one should rely on authorities, here, at all.

Finally, when it comes to truths on which the shape of my entire life may depend, I am responsible for the answer I give myself in a way I am not for many of my other beliefs. I can decide to delegate responsibility for determining the right answer to many factual questions, and even some moral ones, after I determine how on the whole I will orient my life. But I can't (responsibly) *delegate* responsibility until I first *take* responsibility for the decisions by which I figure out what to delegate and to whom. I can't *decide* to trust authorities, as opposed to trusting them blindly, until I first figure out what, for me, will count as good reason to trust someone. At some point, as Wittgenstein might have said, trusting must come to an end.

7. I hope it is beginning to become clear that "think for yourself," for Kant, can go along with a great deal of respect for the thought of other people. This is even clearer if we look at Kant's use of that phrase outside of the enlightenment essay. Kant describes "think for yourself" as the motto of enlightenment in several places, but elsewhere it goes along with two other maxims: "Think in the position of everyone else" and "Think in accord with

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have good (universalizable) grounds for these beliefs: *not* to think for myself, as Kant understands that idea. We'll see later that Kant regards "think for yourself" as a motto that should keep us *from* relying unduly on our own private feelings and experience: "*think for yourself*" is meant as an antonym to, among other things, "rely on your personal *feelings*." Often, thinking for myself not only allows me but requires me to rely on the thoughts of others.

<sup>18</sup>In the words of Carl Friedrich Bahrdt, a contemporary of Kant's, "If ... I tried to verify every report of a flotilla, ... I would act absurdly, wasting too much time and effort on things that are unimportant for me. But when we are talking about truths that ... [affect my civil welfare or] decide the salvation of my soul, that is quite a different case. There I must examine the truth with the greatest obstinacy if I do not wish to gamble foolishly with my well-being." — "On the Freedom of the Press and its Limits ...," in Schmidt, *What is Enlightenment?*, p. 103.

yourself.” Collectively, Kant calls these three the maxims of the “common human understanding” (KU AA 05: 294-5).<sup>19</sup> He also has specific names for each maxim. The first is the “maxim of enlightenment,” although he also calls it “the maxim of a reason that is never passive,” “the maxim of unprejudiced thought,” the maxim that opposes “the heteronomy of reason,” and the maxim that liberates us from “superstition.” He equates enlightenment, that is, with active thought or autonomy, and contrasts it with prejudice and superstition.

The other two he calls the maxim of “broad-minded” thought and the maxim of consistency. The maxim of broad-minded thought, says Kant, requires us to “put [ourselves] into the standpoint of others” (CJ § 40). This echoes Adam Smith, who held that moral judgment requires us to project ourselves into other people’s situations. For Kant, such projection enables us to attain the universal or “public” horizon described earlier, and to communicate with others.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, the third maxim — don’t contradict yourself — which seems the most obvious of the maxims, is in fact the hardest, Kant says, and can be achieved only if we develop long habits of thinking in accordance with the first two.<sup>21</sup> The idea seems to be that a motley of prejudices can easily contain all sorts of contradictions, so if we simply mouth what we hear from others we will contradict ourselves without knowing it, while a merely private kind of thought — “isolated within our own experience” — will also lead us to think now one thing, now another, depending on our moods and the different things we seem to see or hear at different times. So only an active attempt to adjust the opinions we receive from others to our own experience, and vice versa, will keep us from inconsistency.

We should now see more clearly how Kant means to bring “private” and “public” thought together. I am to think for myself — I am never to allow my reason to be merely “passive,” always actively to apply my own conception of good argument to any claim proposed to me — but I am also always to *aim* this thinking towards standards I can share with all other human beings. I am to take the modes of reasoning that I share with other human beings — *as* human beings, not as fellow Germans or Christians or lawyers — to be a “touchstone” for my own thought, even while never allowing what other people tell me to become my own beliefs just on their say-so. This double-sided guide for thinking directs us to respect general modes of reasoning we share with other people without necessarily respecting any *particular* shared belief: the fine line between taking on a belief as a “prejudice,” and failing to respect the common understanding of the world, can be found by focusing on *methods* of justification rather than particular claims that purport to be justified by those methods.

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<sup>19</sup> See also Anth AA 7:57, Introduction § VII; Anth AA 7:200 § 43; and R AA 15: 715,1486 and R AA 15: 820-22, 1508.

<sup>20</sup> To “set [ourselves] apart from the subjective private conditions [*Privatbedingungen*] of the judgment” — KU AA 5:295. On the importance of communication, see Anth AA 7: 200, 219, § 43, 53.

<sup>21</sup> “The third maxim, namely that of the **consistent** way of thinking, is the most difficult to achieve, and can only be achieved through the combination of the first two and after frequent observance of them has made them automatic.” (KU AA 5:295)

Which is pretty much what Kant himself says, when, at the end of his essay on “orientation,” he translates “think for oneself” into a concrete guide for thought:

«*Thinking for oneself* means seeking the highest touchstone of truth in oneself (i.e., in one's own reason), and the maxim of always thinking for oneself is **enlightenment**. Moreover, there is less to this maxim than those who locate enlightenment in information imagine, since it is instead a negative principle in the use of one's capacity for knowledge, and often a person rich in information is the least enlightened in his use of it. Employing one's own reason means nothing more than always asking oneself, about everything one is supposed to accept, whether one finds it possible to make the ground on which one accepts it, or the rule that follows from accepting it, into a universal principle for one's use of reason. Everyone can apply this test for himself, and he will see superstition and enthusiasm immediately disappear with this examination, even if he is far from having the information with which to refute them on objective grounds. For he is simply using the maxim of the *self-preservation* of reason» (WhDO? AA 08: 146-7n).

It's worth noting that Kant here explicitly rejects the notion of enlightenment as a mere spread of information, as if it could be showered down on an unthinking populace by brilliant and well-educated experts; he even says that one can be well-informed and still not enlightened. Kantian enlightenment is egalitarian, focused on *how* we know rather than *what* we know.<sup>22</sup> But the main point of interest in this passage is that it gives us a sort of cognitive equivalent to Kant's famous basic moral rule, the Categorical Imperative: accept only claims whose grounds you could use universally as a basis of belief.

What might this mean? Well, to begin with, it *doesn't* mean, “accept only those specific claims that everyone else might accept.” Kant's basic rule is not aimed at the *content* of what we believe, but at its *form*: the *grounds* on which we believe it. We are supposed to ask whether the grounds on which we accept something as true are the sort of grounds we would use for any other belief; this is the maxim of reason's “self-preservation” presumably because it fends off contradiction, the greatest threat to reasoning. In practice, what Kant seems to have in mind are two sorts of cases: first, cases in which you are inclined to believe something just because some strong emotion inclines you to believe it, or on the basis of a set of sensations — a dream or mystical vision, perhaps — that no-one else shares. And second, cases in which you are inclined to believe something because you have heard it from a religious teacher or read it in a supposedly sacred text. These are what Kant, earlier in the orientation essay, calls “enthusiasm” and “superstition.” Enlightenment views of religion were resisted on the one hand by people committed to a personal, mystical faith, in which direct experience of God rather than reason is supposed to let one know what God wants, and on the other hand by people committed to a traditional religion, in which sacred texts and creeds rather than reason were supposed to represent the will of God. Kant finds

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<sup>22</sup>The charge of elitism often brought against Kant's notion of enlightenment seems to me misplaced: see above, note 9.

both these sorts of religious commitment a threat to reason, and therefore to true freedom, and the paragraph to which the note above is appended appeals to all “friends of the human race and what is holiest to it” — for Kant, of course, freedom is what is holiest to human beings — to “accept what appears worthy of belief after careful and sincere examination of facts or rational grounds,” rather than rejecting reason as the test of truth.<sup>23</sup> Given this context, it seems clear that Kant expects his cognitive universalization test to rule out claims to knowledge that depend either on unshareable personal experience or on authoritative texts. We will recognize that we could not make such grounds of belief into “a universal principle for [our] use of reason.” I couldn’t generally get around the world by accepting my private experiences as true even when everyone around me thinks I am wrong. That way lies seeing lamps in broad daylight that nobody else sees, and hearing voices that nobody else hears. Nor could I get around the world in general by accepting without question everything I read or hear from others: that way lies buying the Brooklyn bridge from friendly strangers.<sup>24</sup> So both the maxim for grounding a belief that runs, “This is the way things look to me; hence it must be correct” and the maxim for grounding belief that runs, “This is what an impressive person said to me; hence it must be correct” cannot be universalized.

Now it is not clear from all this whether Kant believes we will necessarily give up on the *content* of a religious claim that we had hitherto held on enthusiastic or superstitious grounds, once we apply his cognitive universalization test. Kant says a person can apply the test who “is far from having the information” to refute superstition and enthusiasm objectively, but this leaves open whether such a person, after applying the test, will reject everything that a superstitious or enthusiastic religion claims as *false*, or merely cease to believe in that religion *superstitiously* or *enthusiastically*. Suppose I am a lapsed or half-hearted Lutheran and you, a fervent Lutheran who thinks you have experienced God’s presence, try to bolster my faith by appealing to your mystical experiences or inducing experiences of that sort in me. I respond, much to your dismay, by applying Kant’s cognitive universalization test — even to rhapsodies I myself experience. Now what happens? Do I *give up* on Lutheranism, or do I simply refuse to come to the faith *on an enthusiastic basis*? I think the casual quality of Kant’s treatment of this issue, and the assumption that we will see his test as something obvious, indicates strongly that he did not regard it as a means of *refuting* traditional religious faiths, just of dismissing a certain way of holding them. I think it is clear, that is, that in the scenario just sketched, I could remain

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<sup>23</sup> The context here is a debate over the nature of freedom: Kant is arguing against those who think freedom requires a willingness to suspend reason itself — that we need freedom, among other things, *from* reason itself, and can find that in the fancies of a poetic or religious “genius.”

<sup>24</sup> These quick pragmatic arguments are of course not all that Kant would say in defense of the claim that private experience and authority can’t be universalized as grounds for belief. The first *Critique* shows, rather, that we cannot so much as distinguish between the subjective and the objective unless we bring our private sensations in line with rules for organizing experience that others can share as well. There is also a social analogue to this claim: we cannot, as a society, regard propositions as true simply because they are upheld by people invested with authority without losing all grip on the distinction between what we *hold* true and what really *is* true.



a Lutheran, even become a more believing one, and still be quite enlightened, for Kant: as long as I did not *rest* my religious beliefs on enthusiastic or superstitious grounds. Perhaps I have other grounds for my belief — rational ones that I can easily universalize. Perhaps I even believe that “private” experience of some sort has a legitimate role to play in the religious life: but my grounds for *that* belief, for my very view of private experience, are ones I regard as shareable with others, and try in fact to share with others, in order to be corrected if I am mistaken or confused. In that case, I would still count as “enlightened” for Kant.

These points get at the core of what Kant means by “think for yourself.” Thinking for yourself is not for Kant the adoption of any specific mode of argument — it does not, in particular, require one to adopt Kant’s own critical theory. It is just a refusal to accept any mode of argument, in one case, that one would reject elsewhere. The enlightenment Kant describes in his journal pieces of 1784 and 1786 is a broad and a thin one — an attitude towards knowledge that practically anyone could accept — and not, like his full critical theory, a method thick enough to rule out many specific beliefs.<sup>25</sup> The rule of Kantian enlightenment is that one must always pull one’s private thoughts toward a publically-shareable touchstone, not that one has to have any particular set of such thoughts or endorse any particular public standard.

8. To sum up. Kant’s notion of enlightenment has two central components. On the one hand, it requires of each of us that we seek reasons for what we believe that we can expect everyone else to share — that we never accept beliefs blindly, or on a basis, like our private sensations, which we could not regard generally as a reason for believing. On the other hand, it requires of the society in which we live that it permit, and to the extent necessary foster, a public realm of debate to which people can bring anything they are inclined to believe for examination. We each have a duty to our societies and our societies have a duty to each of us. We must aim to be publically reasonable regardless of what we privately feel; our society must allow us to say what we want, regardless of whether it is based on public reason. And a public realm structured by these reciprocal duties, Kant thinks, will eventually be free of fanaticism and dogmatism. If society keeps its part of the bargain, no powerful institution or elite will be able to block good new ideas from coming forward, or preserve bad old ones, and if each of us keeps our part of the bargain, mass hysteria will be unable to squelch new ideas, and the popular hold of bad ones will wither away. Taken together, the two sides of this vision of enlightenment should ensure that the public realm remains both lively and thoughtful.

This vision of enlightenment — the two complementary sets of responsibilities, on each of us to our societies and on our societies to us — is something that can I think be

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<sup>25</sup>Many other commentators, including Michel Foucault, draw a distinction between “enlightenment” and “critique” in Kant’s writings: see, for instance, Foucault, “What is Critique?”.

defended as a good for all human beings in all cultures. It is a minimal conception of enlightenment, one that doesn't require us to accept Kant's critical system, or purely moral reading of religion, or rationalistic understanding of morality. There are more maximal notions of enlightenment, to which Kant himself was tempted in some moods, and on which later figures insisted — notions on which nobody can count as enlightened unless they give up traditional religion, for instance, or rise beyond merely conventional morality, or live in a radically egalitarian society. But these ideas are far more problematic than the minimal notion of enlightenment to be found in Kant's journal pieces of 1784 and 1786. Kant was quite right, I think, to present "enlightenment," there, as something that people could endorse despite deep differences over the overall human good. The freedom that comes of thinking for oneself in Kant's sense simply insures that all our views, including the ones on which we most profoundly differ, are accepted freely, and kept open to further discussion. Any community with a view of the human good can gain by endorsing such freedom, and will flourish only in a world where that freedom is secured. Far from offending against them, Kantian enlightenment is the precondition for a healthy proliferation of cultures, political movements, and religious faiths.

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