

## Some Notes for Discussion of Kant, “What is Enlightenment?”

What does Kant mean by “enlightenment?”

- He quotes Horace: Dare to be wise; have the courage to use your own mind; think for yourself.
- Note the references to respect for the dignity and worth of rational persons and the assumption that mature individuals should be capable of using their own reason and understanding.

Why does he think this is hard for individuals to accomplish? Why is courage involved?

- Notice the metaphor of being fettered or chained to dogmas, formulas, easy answers provided by experts and authorities—the yoke of tutelage.
- Even if such chains could be thrown off, the individual would be unaccustomed to freedom of thought and might easily fall prey to new prejudices.

What are the conditions for the gradual spread of enlightenment in a community?

- There will always be a few individuals who think for themselves and who can teach others the spirit of independent thinking.
- **Freedom:** freedom of communication is essential for freedom of thought  
**Consider why this is true: why are freedom of speech and freedom to publish so important?** How will we determine the truth if we give up appeal to authority? If everyone thinks independently, what will permit us to arrive at objective truth?
- An enlightened monarch. At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Kant is still living in the age of absolute monarchs and powerful Church authorities. He praises Frederick the Great, King of Prussia [1740-1786] who made no attempt to regulate religious life and permitted the “**public use of reason**”: “Argue as much as you like and about whatever you like, but obey!”

Kant’s examples are probably the best way to understand his distinction between the public and private use of reason:

**Public use of one’s reason must always be free:** this is intellectual freedom [“Argue as much as you like”]. As a rational citizen and member of a community, every person should be free to publish opinions, arguments, and criticisms for public discussion and debate.

**Private use of one’s reason may be restricted:** this is the lower degree of civil freedom that Kant refers to in the final paragraph. One should not be free to criticize or argue with one’s superiors in one’s job as teacher, military officer, clergyman, or civil servant. Basically, we should do our jobs without complaint [“obey”] in order to maintain civil order.

Kant was a reformer: freedom to publish and publicly debate would gradually help people develop the tendency to free thought. Once the tendency to free thought is developed, it will gradually affect the character of the people (who gradually become more capable of free action) and in the end will influence the principles of government—intellectual freedom must precede and prepare the way for greater political and civil freedom.

Notice Kant’s concern that a religious authority might try to shut off freedom of thought and his insistence that we must be free to think for ourselves in order to make progress towards truth.

Do we live in an *enlightened age* [200 years after Kant]? Why or why not?

Is Kant right? Do all persons have a duty to think for themselves? Should there be any limits on the freedom of speech or the right to publish one’s opinions?