

“What is Enlightenment?”

Philosophy 157

G. J. Mattey

©2002

Kant on the Enlightenment

- Kant responded to a newspaper question about the nature of enlightenment
- “Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity”
- The motto is: “think for yourself,” rather than being kept immature and under control
- The individual is sunk in immaturity, and even prefers it, and so self-cultivation is largely unsuccessful

The Enlightenment

- Common name for the culture of 18th century Europe
- Philosophical rationalism spread to an educated public of some size
- Philosophy popularized by *philosophes*
- Voltaire, Diderot, Condorcet, and others
- Most influential source of ideas was Locke

Public Enlightenment

- For Kant, freedom to argue is the condition of enlightenment
- This freedom is appropriate at the level of public policy-making
- The pastor or military officer should be free when acting as a “scholar”
- But it is not appropriate at the “private” level, in which they carry out their prescribed functions and justly demand obedience

Themes of the Enlightenment

- Reason was opposed to faith and thought to be the ultimate source of knowledge
- Nature was considered accessible to reason, in a form uncorrupted by religion, social structure, etc.
- The destiny of human beings was progress, as opposed to other-worldly salvation (Christianity) or cycles of progress and regress (Greeks)
- Rationalizing reforms were made in the treatment of criminals and the insane

Human Dignity

- Frederick the Great of Prussia has set up the model state for enlightened thinking
- “Argue as much as you want and about what you want, but obey!”
- Eventually, freedom in thinking will make people more capable of acting freely
- Then the government can treat people with dignity, rather than as no more than machines

Modern Philosophy

- Foucault notes that philosophers to the present day have tried to answer the same question Kant did
- Modern philosophy can be understood as the philosophy that seeks to answer this question

Obedience and Freedom

- Kantian free-thinking is restricted to those realms where obedience is not required
- This is different from the sixteenth century Protestant conception of a free conscience
- At the private level, people must adapt their reason to pre-existing ends
- At the public level, people may reason as a member of reasonable humanity
- Kant implicitly proposes “the contract of rational despotism with free reason”

Foucault on Kant

- Kant’s reflection on the current state broke from the three previous forms of understanding it:
 - Placement in a certain era of the world (one of progress or regress)
 - Interpretation as presaging some future event
 - Transition to a new world
- Kant defines it as a “way out” (*Ausgang*) from past practices

Critique

- Freedom of thinking requires critique, which determines its limits and assures its autonomy
- The Enlightenment is the age of critique
- Kant connected the popular movement and the deeper philosophy
- This may help us understand what “modernity” is

Some Features of Kant’s Text

- Kant focuses on finding a way out of a pre-existing relation of will (submission) and authority (paternalism) to the use of reason (abandoned)
- The way out is presented both as an ongoing process and as a task
- How widespread is enlightenment?

Modernity

- Modernity is usually seen as a period in history, following the Enlightenment, and perhaps followed by a troubling post-modernity
- But Kant’s clue is that it is instead an attitude
- Baudelaire is taken as an example of modernity

Charles Baudelaire

- 1821-1867
- French poet and critic
- Advocated “modernity” in art
- His model was Constantine Guys

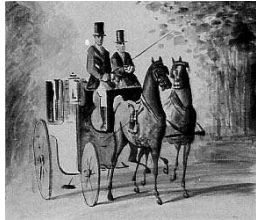


“Heroizing” the Present

- Baudelaire understands modernity as “the ephemeral, the fleeting, the contingent”
- An attitude is adopted toward this: to find something eternal in the momentary
- Foucault: “Modernity is the attitude that makes it possible to grasp the ‘heroic’ aspect of the present moment”
- An example: paintings of people in black, expressing public obsession with death

Constantine Guys

- 1802-1892
- Belgian painter, sketcher, lithographer
- Depicted scenes of ordinary life
- Horse-drawn carriage
- Pen and wash



The Spectator and the Man of Modernity

- The posture of the spectator is to harvest the moment as a curiosity
- The posture of the man of modernity is to transform what is present into something higher, though by grasping what it is
- “Extreme attention to what is real is confronted with the practice of a liberty that simultaneously respects this reality and violates it”

Another Guys

- “Portrait”
- Chromo-lithograph



Relationship to One’s Self

- The man of modernity takes himself to be a complex and difficult elaboration
- There is an element of asceticism
- The body, behavior, feelings, passions, existence, are made into a work of art
- The modern man invents himself
- “This modernity does not ‘liberate man in his own being’; it compels him to face the task of producing himself”

Generalizations

- A certain attitude arose in the Enlightenment: to make a problem of the relation between the present and man's autonomous being
- What has resulted is an attitude of permanent critique of one's historical era

The Enlightenment and Humanism

- Some people think that the Enlightenment is a form of humanism
- Humanism takes on many forms
- Humanism borrows its conception of the human from religion, science, politics
- This is opposed to autonomy, which is the core principle of the Enlightenment

The "Blackmail" of the Enlightenment

- The Enlightenment remains a privileged domain of analysis
- It tries to marry history and liberty, has left us with a philosophical question to consider, and has given us a new way to philosophize
- But this does not mean that when one criticizes the Enlightenment, one rejects rationality
- To think that it does is to submit to a kind of blackmail

Limitation and Transgression

- Kant emphasized the limitations of reason, that are uncovered by critique
- He urged that we not transgress those limits
- The critique of necessary limitation has been transformed into an examination of possible transgression
- How has the singular, the contingent, the arbitrary led to the way we constitute ourselves?

The Modes of the Enlightenment

- Focus so far has been on the mode of reflection
- But there are many others:
 - Elements of social transformation
 - Types of political institution
 - Forms of knowledge
 - Projects of rationalization of knowledge and practices
 - Technological mutations

Historical Critique

- The criticism which uncovers how we became what we are is not metaphysical
- Instead, it is archeological, in that it reveals historical events rather than universal structures
- It is also genealogical, in that it seeks in what has made us what we are, ways in which we can become what we are not

Localized Inquiry

- The critique must not be global in its form, but rather local, and precise
- Utopian visions end in the return of dangerous traditions
- Examples of transformations that have occurred as the result of criticism are in relations to authority, between the sexes, and to insanity or illness

Generality

- The stakes of the inquiry are great, in that it is directed toward the struggle of freedom against power: growing capacities are connected with intensifying power relations
- We find forms of organization in practical systems
- Systematically, there are three issues:
 - Knowledge
 - Power
 - Morality
- The practices are continually recurring, which allows us to analyze questions of general import

Summary

- “I shall thus characterize the philosophical ethos appropriate to the critical ontology of ourselves as a historico-practical test of the limits that we may go beyond, and thus as work carried out by ourselves upon ourselves as free beings.”

Conclusion

- We may never reach mature adulthood
- The critical ontology of ourselves is a way of philosophizing
- We critique what we are through historical investigation of our limits and experimentation with ways of overcoming them
- The task is one that has its coherence
- It may not require faith in the Enlightenment

An Objection

- It may be that localized inquiry will disguise the control that is imposed at some more general level
- One response is to accept this, recognizing that we are always beginning again
- The second is to reject the conclusion that the work can only be done in disorder and contingency