What is the Enlightenment?
Immanuel Kant, 1784, Critical of Practical Reason. Excerpts.

The European “Enlightenment” of the eighteenth-century was the expression of a new class of intellectuals, independent of the clergy but allied with the rising middle class. Their favorite words were “reason,” “nature,” and “progress.” They applied the systematic doubt of Descartes and the reasoning method of the scientific revolution to human affairs, including religion and politics. With caustic wit and good humor, they asked new questions and popularized new points of view that eventually revolutionized Western politics and culture.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), a university professor in the small town of Konigsberg, East Prussia (now Russia), was one of the most influential philosophers in European history. In this brief selection from his Critique of Practical Reason he shows us how Enlightenment’s quest for scientific reason meant a demand, sometimes revolutionary, for political freedom. Do we, as Kant suggests, impose restrictions on our intellectual freedom? Do we need courage to use their own reason? What does he mean by “the freedom to make public use of one’s reason”?

Enlightenment is man's release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man's inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. Sapere aude! [Dare to think!] “Have courage to use your own reason!”- that is the motto of enlightenment. Laziness and cowardice are the reasons why so great a portion of mankind, after nature has long since discharged them from external direction, nevertheless remains under lifelong tutelage, and why it is so easy for others to set themselves up as their guardians. It is so easy not to be of age. If I have a book which understands for me, a pastor who has a conscience for me, a physician who decides my diet, and so forth, I need not trouble myself. I need not think, if I can only pay - others will easily undertake the irksome work for me.

That the step to competence is held to be very dangerous by the far greater portion of mankind (and by the entire fair sex) - quite apart from its being arduous is seen to by those guardians who have so kindly assumed superintendence over them. After the guardians have first made their domestic cattle dumb and have made sure that these placid creatures will not dare take a single step without the harness of the cart to which they are tethered, the guardians then show them the danger which threatens if they try to go alone.

Actually, however, this danger is not so great, for by falling a few times they would finally learn to walk alone. But an example of this failure makes them timid and ordinarily frightens them away from all further trials. For any single individual to work himself out of the life under tutelage which has become almost his nature is very difficult. He has come to be fond of his state, and he is for the present really incapable of making use of his reason, for no one has ever let him try it out.

Statutes and formulas, those mechanical tools of the rational employment or rather

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1 Irksome: Brothersome
2 Arduous: Difficult
3 Placid: Not easily upset or excited.
4 Statutes: Laws
misemployment of his natural gifts, are the fetters\(^5\) of an everlasting tutelage. Whoever throws them off makes only an uncertain leap over the narrowest ditch because he is not accustomed to that kind of free motion.

Therefore, there are few who have succeeded by their own exercise of mind both in freeing themselves from incompetence and in achieving a steady pace. But that the public should enlighten itself is more possible; indeed, if only freedom is granted enlightenment is almost sure to follow. For there will always be some independent thinkers, even among the established guardians of the great masses, who, after throwing off the yoke\(^6\) of tutelage from their own shoulders, will disseminate\(^7\) the spirit of the rational appreciation of both their own worth and every man's vocation for thinking for himself. . . For this enlightenment, however, nothing is required but freedom, and indeed the most harmless among all the things to which this term can properly be applied. It is the freedom to make public use of one's reason at every point. But I hear on all sides, "Do not argue!" The Officer says: "Do not argue but drill!" The tax collector: "Do not argue but pay!" The cleric: "Do not argue but believe!" . . . Everywhere there is restriction on freedom. . . . If we are asked, "Do we now live in an enlightened age?" the answer is, "No," but we do live in an age of enlightenment.

As things now stand, much is lacking which prevents men from being, or easily becoming, capable of correctly using their own reason in religious matters with assurance and free from outside direction. But on the other hand, we have clear indications that the field has now been opened wherein men may freely deal with these things and that the obstacles to general enlightenment or the release from self-imposed tutelage are gradually being reduced. In this respect, this is the age of enlightenment, . . .

Thinking Questions:

1) What does Kant mean by Tutelage?

2) According to Kant, why has man remained unenlightened?

3) According to Kant, what is required for enlightenment?

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\(^5\) Fetters: A chain or manacle used to restrain a prisoner.

\(^6\) Yoke: A wooden crosspiece that is fastened over the necks of two animals and attached to the plow or cart that they are to pull.

\(^7\) Disseminate: Spread or disperse.