

Do We Live in an Enlightened Age?  
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In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Immanuel Kant believed that mankind was not presently living in ‘an enlightened age,’ but was living in ‘an age of enlightenment.’<sup>1</sup> This statement was intended to show mankind’s potential for enlightenment because Kant had also said that “Men will of their own accord gradually work their way out of barbarism so long as artificial measures are not deliberately adopted to keep them in it.”<sup>2</sup> Kant was of the opinion that humanity had not reached enlightenment, but contemporary movements increasing civil and intellectual freedom were enough to develop man’s inclination and vocation to think freely and progress towards such a state. In this paper, I argue that humankind remains in an age of enlightenment, and that we have possibly achieved greater civil freedom while circumventing the necessary intellectual freedom required for the enlightened age.

It is necessary to begin with a clarification of what exactly is meant by enlightenment. In this paper, I consider enlightenment to be freedom from the willful ignorance that results from leading an unquestioned life, which is characterized by one’s inability to think for herself. This is the enlightenment Kant is referring to when he says “For enlightenment of this kind, all that is needed is freedom.”<sup>3</sup> He goes on, however, to clarify that “A high degree of civil freedom seems advantageous to a people’s intellectual freedom, yet it also sets up insuperable barriers to it. Conversely, a lesser degree of civil freedom gives intellectual freedom enough room to expand to its fullest extent.”<sup>4</sup> Kant is arguing that “The public use of man’s reason must always be free,”

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<sup>1</sup> Immanuel Kant, *An Answer to the Question: “What is Enlightenment?”* (Konigsberg, Prussia, 1784), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 1

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 3

<sup>5</sup> but complete civil freedom is not necessary, nor ideal, if the goal is to grow intellectual freedom to its maximum human potential.

If we accept this to be the case, we must next evaluate the degrees of intellectual freedom exercised by humankind in the modern age. To do so, I will call upon Frances Vaughan's discussion of the multiple types of intelligence, with spiritual intelligence being principally important but often underdeveloped. Vaughan defines spirituality as "the domain of ultimate concern" which requires an intelligence that "may be conscious or unconscious, developed or undeveloped, healthy or pathological, naïve or sophisticated, beneficial or dangerously distorted."<sup>6</sup> Kant would have accepted a measure of how "conscious" and "developed" humanity's spiritual intelligence had become as a good indication of our progress towards the 'enlightened age.' Vaughan goes on to discuss spiritual intelligence as "more than individual mental ability,"<sup>7</sup> which seems to mirror Kant's definition of enlightenment as liberation from willful ignorance. The question then becomes whether or not the majority of humankind has developed the courage and resolution to develop a conscious and beneficial understanding of existential questions. In other words, does the average 21<sup>st</sup> century human translate his or her "individual mental ability" into free thought, or does he or she remain intellectually suppressed? If the latter is the case, and I will argue that it is, how have we managed to become "less ignorant, barbarous, and ferocious than our fathers,"<sup>8</sup> while failing to develop a stronger inclination to think freely that Kant believed to be the natural trajectory of human life?<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 1

<sup>6</sup> F. Vaughan, "What Is Spiritual Intelligence?," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 42, no. 2 (April 1, 2002): 1.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 3

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Israel, "Progress and the Enlightenment's Two Conflicting Ways of Improving the World," in *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, n.d.), 4.

<sup>9</sup> Kant, *An Answer to the Question: "What is Enlightenment?,"* 3.

To answer this question, first we must consider Kant's analysis of humankind's self-incurred, convenient immaturity, in which all tasks are delegated to specialists in order to free one's mind from having to make any effort.<sup>10</sup> Kant argues that only a few have freed themselves from said immaturity "by cultivating their own minds," while the rest rely on spiritual advisors to cultivate their conscience, doctors to dictate their diets, and intellectuals to do their thinking.<sup>11</sup> This idea of intellectual delegation seems to be a valid outcome of widespread multimedia, news, and broadcasting in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.<sup>12</sup> I can only speculate as to what Kant's reaction to a 'Facebook News Feed' and the nightly news would be, but I imagine he would find them indicative of the ignorance characterized by the intellectual delegation which plagued his day, and agree that in their current capacity they are far from being tools useful for cultivating our minds.

The second line of evidence that may help us to answer why the 21<sup>st</sup> century remains an 'age of enlightenment' is the expansion and development of a heavily corporate free market. The result is a modern view of education as the means to a future in our capitalist world, a world that demands a specific skillset and suppresses intellectual creativity. The opposing view of academia, as a time of intellectual exploration and discovery, and an end in and of itself, appears to have been lost somewhere along the way.<sup>13</sup> It is not difficult to imagine which view would be more conducive to the intellectual freedom and spiritual intelligence which Kant and Vaughan so fondly speak about.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 1

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Neil Postman and Andrew Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, 20th ed. (New York, N.Y., U.S.A.: Penguin Books, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> David Brooks, "The Organization Kid," *The Atlantic* (The Atlantic), April 1, 2001, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2001/04/the-organization-kid/302164/>.

Examining the two critical aspects of modern intellectualism, the public distribution of knowledge and the purpose of higher education, must lead to the conclusion that an enlightened age remains out of reach. The next logical question is whether or not such an age will ever arrive.

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Voltaire observed that while man's capacity for reason had made great strides, his progress was occurring only amongst a small group of the elite.<sup>14</sup> This selective enlightenment, so to speak, was further concentrated "in the American model of democratic capitalism, which created all men equal but allowed some to rise above others through competition."<sup>15</sup> The world we live in is characterized by inequality and we spend many of our waking days fighting to "rise above" our peers. It is easy to think of this "rising" as a way out, if enlightenment means surpassing a gross value of knowledge and ability. If, however, enlightenment is actually a personal liberation from ignorance, measured only in terms of one's spiritual intelligence and understanding of complex existential themes,<sup>16</sup> then we may have missed the point.

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<sup>14</sup> Israel, "Progress and the Enlightenment's Two Conflicting Ways of Improving the World," 6.

<sup>15</sup> David Brooks, "The Empirical Kids," *The New York Times*, March 28, 2013, [http://mobile.nytimes.com/2013/03/29/opinion/brooks-the-empirical-kids.html?\\_r=0](http://mobile.nytimes.com/2013/03/29/opinion/brooks-the-empirical-kids.html?_r=0).

<sup>16</sup> Vaughan, "What is spiritual intelligence?," : 3.

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