

Kant's Answer to 'What is Enlightenment?'

As Non-Paradoxical

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In Immanuel Kant's essay "An Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment'" from 1784, Kant wrote out the most concerning elements of what he believed enlightenment was within the meaning of "The Enlightenment Period" of philosophy. Unlike expressions in Eastern philosophy, the Western period of enlightenment rose to enlighten societies of people in independent, rational thought rather than the single, spiritual, individual.

Of the concerning elements, Kant explained that enlightenment is the development of fearlessness to use one's own knowledge and rational ability to understand things; this would be without explicit leadership from a power above that person or society. Similarly to how a child uses the aid of their parents, Kant is suggesting that the unenlightened child would never question the authority of their parents. Another aspect of this is that society ought to be able to question the authority above them if their rational tells them so: if something seems to be unjust, a society with logical ethics would see it as such. And then within Kant's ideal world, the rational power above the people would take the sound arguments of the people to heart, if the people obey the power, ultimately coming to something mutually agreeable. To Kant, this could be seen as "paradoxical" – as obeying a power cannot include questioning it.

What can be argued against this is that this sort of enlightenment is not at all paradoxical, but is essentially what true democracy ought to be. If a society of people were to become boldly rational and formed sound reasons that were opposed to current laws, then it should follow that their governmental representatives should respect the changed values of the people they are representing. This organized way of change in government and law is what the people would be obeying. It is undeniable that this would take time, as laws cannot be gone unfollowed if they are deemed unjust by any single individual, but if a society of rational people were to all find the law unjust, then the government ought to be represented more closely to that society's values.

References:

Kant, I. An Answer to the Question: "What is Enlightenment?" 30 September 1784.