



Enlightenment by [Douglas R McGaughey](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#).

Enlightenment:

Reflections on Michel Foucault's *Was ist Aufklärung?*  
in Eva Erdman, Rainer Forst, Axel Honneth (eds.):  
*Ethos der Moderne* (Frankfurt a.M.-New York: Campus Verlag, 1990): 35-54<sup>1</sup>

At least since the French „Encyclopedists,” the notion of enlightenment has been associated with knowledge of the correct facts. As a consequence, even Kant's famous aphorism for labelling enlightenment, *Sapere Aude!* (Dare to know for oneself!), has been frequently taken to mean: assume responsibility for your own knowledge of the facts (i.e., don't trust authorities to be providing you with the true facts)!

In his “What is Enlightenment?,” Michel Foucault emphasizes an additional theme in Kant's essay of 1784, “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?,” that *Sapere aude!* involves a reversal of the location of owed obedience (39). The 16<sup>th</sup> Century spoke of owing obedience to public authorities by submission to public authority even in one's private sphere. Foucault points out that Kant's examples of the soldier, politician, and pastor shift the focus of obedience to the private sphere with the right to state one's opinion publically without having to fear the loss of one's “public” office. However, by his dismissal of “metaphysics” (49), Foucault shifts the discussion of enlightenment and freedom to Charles Baudelaire and the notion that freedom involves self-determination as a “break from tradition” in response to the proper determination of the facts. To be sure, Foucault is fully aware that facts can never be separated from power, and he proposes a notion of enlightenment that is grounded in “negative” and “positive” character (*ethos*) that acknowledges the “limits to reflection” and embraces an open-ended exercise of knowledge as genealogical and archaeological.

What follows claims that Kant's answer to the question of enlightenment begins precisely where Foucault ends: acknowledgment of the ambiguity and skepticism that reigns over all factual (i.e., empirical) knowledge. Rather than speak of character building, Kant calls his own strategy “methodological skepticism,” which engages in the Copernican Turn of *critique* (not mere criticism) to identify the *necessary conditions of possibility* for us to experience a “world of facts” as well as “doubt about the facts,” in the first place. The careful reader of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* of 1781 and *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* of 1783 would have recognized that Kant was not merely interested in identifying how limited or ambiguous theoretical reflection is,<sup>2</sup> but, far more importantly, he was interested in identifying the *necessary* (not hypothetical) limits to both forms of reason: “theoretical” and “practical” reason – with theoretical reason being subordinate to practical reason.

---

<sup>1</sup> The reader is strenuously encouraged to read Otfried Höffe's comments on enlightenment in Part One of *Kants Kritik der praktischen Vernunft. Eine Philosophie der Freiheit* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2012). Höffe drew to my attention that Kant is engaged in a “critique” (not a criticism) of enlightenment. I have no hesitancy to say that I am profoundly indebted to Höffe's works on Kant. However, any errors in what follows are solely mine.

<sup>2</sup> For example, that all of our experience and understanding inescapably commences with appearances whose *Dinge an sich* are inaccessible to us.

However, one must recognize that reason for Kant is by no means limited to instrumental or pragmatic reason.

The actual conditions for the exercise of reason of all kinds are limited and must be structurally and logically limited in order for there to be reason. Furthermore, reason can be exercised *only by the individual*. Limited reason is by no means a condemnable *fault* in the individual. Kant's answer to his question "how can one get the crooked wood of humanity to grow straight" was not a condemnation of the irreversible, moral corruption of the individual. Rather, his answer was to emphasize the *necessary* role of "culture" for improving humanity. Here, too, one must be careful and not overlook Kant's critique (not mere criticism) of Rousseau's notion of culture as "second nature" superimposed upon nature. True culture for Kant is not humanity's technical transformation of nature, but true culture involves that community that understands and exercises the capacities of the invisible, supersensible, intelligible realm. In other words, thoroughly acknowledging that the individual is an animal, culture encourages the individual to be human, not merely an animal in pursuit of physical and intellectual self-interest. Kant proposes that true culture, then, is like a forest of trees that leaves it up to the individual tree to grow according to its capacities but encourages it to grow straight toward the common light.

Unlike a forest of trees, though, human capacities constitute a hierarchy of supersensible, intelligible elements that Kant sketched out in his three critiques:

First Critique: "theoretical" reason (e.g., those intelligible capacities not found in the phenomena themselves that makes it possible for us to understand phenomena: for example, "pure" in contrast to "empirical" perception and the schema of the categories of understanding) as well as "pure" reason (i.e., those intelligible conditions that are independent of, but not separable from, empirical phenomena and necessary for theoretical and practical reason: "God," autonomous freedom/cosmos, and an enduring identity)

Second Critique: "practical" reason (i.e., those intelligible capacities *grounded* in what makes it possible for us to initiate sequences of events that nature on its own cannot accomplish, which he calls "autonomous freedom," and makes it possible for us to hold ourselves morally responsible for those sequences)

Third Critique: what Kant calls the capacity of *aesthetic judgment* from the Greek word *αἰσθησις* (aesthesis/aesthetic), which means sense perception. Judgment involves subordinating a set of perceived phenomena under a concept. When we already possess the concept, the judgment is a *determining judgment*. When we don't already possess the concept, the phenomena are perplexing until we can find the appropriate concept for judging what they are, the judgment is a *reflecting judgment*. Kant stresses that all determining judgments were at some point originally reflecting judgments. In short, unlike other species that we experience as pre-programmed by instincts, humanity has to engage its intelligible capacities to *learn the appropriate invisible concepts* for making sense of phenomena and for the exercising of its autonomous freedom responsibly.

Humanity, then, is quintessentially a species that must be educated because these supersensible capacities and their exercising are not given in the senses and must be learned. Enlightenment is precisely the individual's assumption of the responsibility not simply to acquire proper facts but to exercise for her-/himself all of the *necessary*, supersensible (i.e., imperceptible), intelligible capacities

that makes it possible for an individual to be-come human. In short, enlightenment is the individual's conscious pursuit of the supersensible, intelligible "illumination" of the imperceptible realm (the mind). Because this is something that only a "rational" animal (i.e., an animal capable of exercising theoretical and practical reason on the basis of the assumption of the three "pure" ideas of reason and aesthetic judgment) can accomplish for itself as an individual – to be sure, with the support of that community aware of the supersensible, intelligible capacities that makes it all possible.

Enlightenment, above all, means to assume moral responsibility for one's decisions and actions as the exercise of practical reason. *Critique* (not criticism) takes as *necessary* on the part of the understanding of theoretical reason that physical phenomena are governed by a set of physical laws that we do not perceive directly in the phenomena but whose understanding we must *add to the phenomena*. These physical laws are incapable of universal proof (or disproof) because we experience only their effects and because we cannot experience all times and places. Analogously, we must *necessarily* assume that there is a set of moral laws that govern our practical reason, and these moral laws, too, must be held as if they were universal just as in the case of physical laws. Without physical and moral laws there is no possibility of understanding anything or holding of ourselves responsible for what we decide and do. This total system of *assumed laws that are necessary* for us to exercise the supersensible, intelligible capacities that make it possible for us to be rational beings within profound limits, this total system of capacities is something that each individual must exercise for her-/himself.

For this reason, Kant talks about a shift in location for "obedience" that transforms one's role as enlightened in the public sphere. Now, one is obedient to those imperceptible, supersensible, intelligible structures and capacities that makes obedience of any kind possible in the first place and, as practical reason, places the individual under obligation to the universal, moral law.

One is not to confuse the categorical moral laws of virtue for hypothetical necessities either in the form of physical or civic law. Categorical moral laws can occur only if the individual views her-/himself as capable of exercising autonomous freedom: that is, capable of initiating sequences of events that nature cannot accomplish on its own (See "Freedom on This and the Other Side of Kant" at [www.criticalidealism.org](http://www.criticalidealism.org)). We can ignore the hypothetical necessities of the physical law (those necessities imposed upon us by the particular, exclusively material conditions of life) only at our own material peril so that all decisions and actions must be obedient to them. However, the hypothetical necessities of the civic law that govern a particular society are culturally relative *and subordinate to the categorical necessities of the moral law*. One is obligated to the categorical law for proper conformity with the civic law. One is not dependent upon the commanding officer, magistrate, or pastor for the determination of one's moral obligation. The hypothetical, civic law may not demand an obedience that is contrary to the moral law that is accessible exclusively internally.

We now can see that Kant's aphorism for enlightenment: *Sapere aude!*, necessarily invokes those transcendental elements of experience, in other words, the imperceptible, supersensible capacities and conditions of possibility necessary for any and all experience and responsibility that must be not only assumed but can be accomplished only by the individual for her-/himself. The necessary conditions for enlightenment are metaphysical, that is, transcendental, in the sense that they "go beyond" the physical phenomena and, therefore, must be assumed if there is to be any understanding and responsibility.

A final comment on “metaphysics:” As noted in the second paragraph above, Foucault dismisses out of hand any and all metaphysics. He writes:

... Kritik [ist] nicht länger als Suche nach formalen Strukturen mit universaler Geltung geübt wird, sondern eher als historische Untersuchung der Ereignisse, die uns dazu geführt haben, uns als Subjekte dessen, was wir tun, denken und sagen zu konstituieren und anzuerkennen. In diesem Sinne ist die Kritik nicht transzendental, und ihr Ziel ist nicht die Ermöglichung einer Metaphysik: sie ist in ihrer Absicht genealogisch und in ihrer Methode archäologisch. (49)

[... Critique no longer consists of the search for formal structures with universal validity but is, preferably, the historical investigation of events that have led to the constitution and acknowledgement of ourselves as the subjects who do, think, and say what we do. In this sense, critique is not transcendental, and its goal is not the possibility of a metaphysics: critique is in its intent genealogical and in its method archaeological. (McGaughey translation)]

Foucault, as with the French Encyclopedists, has reduced enlightenment down to the proper knowledge of the facts and liberation from external authority. To be sure, he insists that that proper knowledge is not absolute and that it is subject to power constellations that the enlightened must also illuminate. For this reason, Foucault insists that the enlightened character is engaged in what he calls the genealogical and the archaeological elements and processes that shape us today. Despite the ambiguity of those genealogical and archaeological elements, enlightenment is an epistemological activity directed outwardly to empirical phenomena. In fact (irony intended), Foucault rejects any universal, “transcendental” or “metaphysical” dimension to experience. However, his transcendental and metaphysical dimension is not Kant’s. Foucault’s transcendental and metaphysical dimension is Rationalism or Platonic Idealism or Hegelian Metanarrative. Kant’s metaphysics involves only those imperceptible, supersensible elements that must *necessarily be assumed* in order for us to experience and to act responsibly in the world in the way that we can and do. Kant doesn’t hesitate to say that we embrace them on “faith,” but he is adamant that this is a faith driven by *necessities*, not by wild speculations. Kant’s metaphysics is anti-metaphysical!