

## Experience Day Assignment – BA Arts and Culture

### What is Enlightenment?

What Enlightenment is has been debated for centuries. Many well-known historians, sociologists, literary theorists, and philosophers have attempted to trace its outlines and characteristics and describe both its history and its underlying logic.

The starting point for many of these thinkers is that the "Enlightenment" refers to a particular historical period (the Enlightenment) and a way of thinking and knowing (enlightened). From this, it is taken to be the basis upon which religious and monarchical authority was rejected as mere superstition and replaced by human reason, which was elevated to the highest rank. It is also seen as the foundation of modern science and the ideas of progress and a rationally organized social order that have shaped Western society since the eighteenth century.

One of the most important discussions of enlightenment is Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804) short essay "What is Enlightenment?" (1784). In his essay, Kant defines enlightenment as "man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity." Immaturity, for Kant, means the "inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another." The slogan of enlightenment, then, is *Sapere Aude*: Dare to Know!

For Kant, the enlightenment is realized in the individual—it is essentially *your* responsibility to achieve enlightenment, to throw off the yoke of authorities who are more than happy to guide your understanding. Those who do not want you to develop your own understanding Kant calls 'Guardians,' and he gives a few examples: having a book serve as understanding, having a pastor serve as one's conscience, and have a doctor determine one's diet. Interestingly, Kant argues that we willingly choose, and even want, guardians to select and choose things for us. We are happier letting others make decisions for us – given the choice, we do not choose enlightenment.

In this assignment, we will jump ahead to Susan Neiman's provocatively titled book "Why Grow Up? Subversive Thoughts for an Infantile Age" (2014). Drawing insight from Kant's essay, Neiman argues that we are far from the enlightened individuals that Kant wanted because we crave distraction and comfort over independent critical thinking.

### **Reading**

Neiman, S. (2014). "What is Enlightenment," in *Why Grow Up? Subversive Thoughts for an Infantile Age*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, pp. 36-51.