

What Is Enlightenment?

Coming of age is an Enlightenment problem, and nothing shows so clearly that we are the Enlightenment's heirs, whether we acknowledge that heritage or not. In the fifth century BCE Plato wrote at length about child-rearing; his *Republic* is studded with discussions of matters from the proper age for learning to play the flute to which tunes should be heard. Not until Rousseau would another philosopher turn his attention to such details. But Plato's attention to detail is not for the sake of the child or the adult she will become; his concern is more for the care and development of the state than of the individuals within it. In an age where traditional social roles began to loosen, the Enlightenment could begin to care about individual human development for its own sake – though political concerns were never very far in the background. Where traditional structures leave little room for deviation, it is no surprise that the Roman philosopher Cicero could describe the business of philosophy as learning how to die, one part of living that allowed for major variation. Once these structures were weakened, so that the course of coming of age was no longer straightforward, the right form of human development became a philosophical problem, incorporating both psychological and political questions and giving them a normative thrust. Thus enough basic features of growing up are common to modern Western societies – which are, for better and worse, increasingly models for growing up anywhere – for some general philosophical claims to make sense.

Kant would *define* Enlightenment as coming of age, so it would seem natural for him to write, in the 1786 essay 'Conjectural Beginning of Human History', that the first step of human reason is the realization that human beings have the capacity to choose their life's journey, unlike other animals, which are bound to just one. It's a capacity that loomed especially large to a man of the Enlightenment. Medieval French craftsmen or Polynesian chiefs had more choices to make about their lives than their horses or pigs did, but for the greater part of human history, individual choices about the paths a life could take were relatively few. Kant's world was just beginning to accept the open-endedness we take for granted, and he took every advantage of it. Had he been born a couple of generations earlier, the likelihood that the son of a barely literate saddle-maker would become a professor – not to mention one recognized in his lifetime as one of the world's major thinkers – would have been virtually nil. It is still far truer than it should be that even in countries that claim to promote equality of opportunity, what your parents do influences the number of choices you will be able to make in your life. Still, compared to pre-modern societies, your life is statistically but not inevitably determined by your position as an infant. (The odd exceptions are notably anachronistic: the few remaining members of royalty. Prince George has no career choices.)

The choices we must make require more experience and better judgement at the crucial junctures where we need them most. For a very long time, others must make them for us: unlike other animals, human beings need

education. Kant makes an exception for songbirds that, he says, are taught to sing by their mothers like children in school. Anyone who believes they learn to sing by instinct should, he suggests, put sparrows' eggs in a canary's nest and watch the baby sparrows learn to sing like their adoptive mother. Contemporary biologists have confirmed this.⁵ But we aspire to be more than one-hit wonders, so there's more to be learned than singing a tune. Indeed, says Kant, 'the human being can only become human through education'. But what about the educators? Even those with the best of intentions are themselves in part the product of choices others made. Moreover, education should be education for a future we can only partly foresee. Leave aside technological progress: if we have any hope for moral progress, we want the next generation to be better than we are. A version of that wish is expressed in a popular Israeli song that sighs, 'Take care of the world, child / For we didn't manage to do it.' One need not be so morose – or irresponsible – in hoping the next generation will become both wiser and braver than ours. Yet how can we possibly help to fashion capacities that are better than those we possess ourselves, even if we want to? No wonder Kant's *Lectures on Pedagogy* called education 'the greatest and most difficult problem that the human being can be given'.

Matters look even worse when we consider how often the best of intentions are missing. I've been taking the perspective of the benevolent parent or the dedicated teacher, but those are hardly the only ones who determine how education proceeds. As Kant reminds us, govern-

ments prefer immature subjects to independent citizens. Contemporary expressions of that preference range from the growing practice of keeping us all under electronic surveillance, or industry's ability to keep us dazzled by a bewildering number of choices of automobiles or breakfast cereal – while keeping the far more important choices out of our hands. Think again of how we raise small children. We offer them very limited options between alternatives we have already chosen in advance. We say this keeps them safe and healthy, while teaching them to make decisions, but any parent of a raging toddler knows it's an excellent form of distraction. (*Not that one, but look: you can have one of these or those.*) In most cases, the immaturity that governments desire need not be achieved by force or stealth, for we willingly collude in it. It is easier, after all, to let others do our thinking for us than to think for ourselves. Totalitarian regimes are seldom necessary and often counterproductive, for wherever the mechanisms of control are clearly present, some bold souls will be moved to contest them. As cultural historian Neal Postman argued, by keeping our eyes on 1984 we neglected the fact that Huxley's *Brave New World* portrays a far more seductive dystopia. Nothing proves his point better than something he did not live to see: scores of people in several countries competing for places in a reality tv show named for the Big Brother that was Orwell's nightmare.⁶

Sooner or later, direct control leads to rebellion; indirect control leads to dependency. Simpler and subtler are the infantilizing processes of non-totalitarian societies

that encourage our natural laziness* by giving us comfort through an endless range of toys. Of course, neither smartphones nor automobiles are *described* as toys; crucially, they are portrayed as the tools without which no adult life is complete. By contrast, ideas of a more just and humane world are portrayed as childish dreams to be discarded in favour of the real business of acquiring toys, i.e., finding a steady job that fixes our place in the consumer economy. It's a perfidious reversal that leaves us permanently confused. No wonder Kant calls the exit from self-incurred immaturity the most important revolution human beings can undertake.

Let me summarize the problem Kant viewed as humankind's most important. We are born into a journey whose path is open, but whose contours ought to be self-evident. As our bodies and minds grow we are able to master them, and with them the world, in a series of stages that looks biologically and psychologically straightforward. It ought to be easy: we begin more helpless than the members of other species, gradually coming alive to the world and our place in it, increasingly gaining independence and experience till we become the self-determining adults our nature suggests we should be. But our own worst instincts, and a range of social forces, are all arrayed against it. Our own worst instincts: passivity is comfortable. Earlier ages minced no words and called us lazy; David Hume thought the majority of the world's evils could be cured if human beings were born a little more industrious. A range of social forces: even the best of governments will find it easier to rule immature and passive

subjects than active citizens. Call this an institutional kind of laziness, writ large.

Post-Enlightenment people will not be content without some form of activity that expresses the desire to choose our life's journeys, and the neoliberal way of fulfilling that need is far more effective than anything totalitarian regimes ever devised. We are kept dazzled by a wealth of small decisions; Steve Jobs revealed that the question of which washing machine to purchase could dominate his family's dinner table for weeks. (Nor did the brilliant inventor find this fact problematic; he offered it as an example of democratic deliberation.) Our capacities for decision-making utterly exhausted, we ignore the fact that the important decisions are made by others we cannot even name. Or did you choose a world in which oil companies profit from wrecking the planet? Women are stoned for adultery or murdered for going to school? Children die of easily preventable diseases or are collaterally damaged by drones? Do your choices make a difference to any of these?

Only free and equal grown-ups can build a free and equal society, but if society has an interest in cultivating mindless dependents, where are the grown-ups to come from? *Which came first: the chicken or the egg?* is a children's conundrum, but behind it lies the most serious riddle in political philosophy. You can't get the one without the other, so how could we ever begin? These were the questions that tormented Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the first philosopher to treat growing up as the philosophical problem it is, and the only one to propose a com-

prehensive and radical solution. After nearly a decade of agonizing over the problem, and driving most of his friends away in the process, Rousseau offered an answer: we must radically reconsider the way we raise children. We should raise the child apart from society, creating for him a little one in which *everything makes sense*. A child raised properly will come of age slowly and surely to become a self-determining adult who can create, on a larger scale, a world that makes sense.

Two events were said to have shaken Kant so profoundly that he departed from his infamous routine and forgot to take his daily walk. (The routine makes for easy snickering, but how many of us slot a morning run or a yoga session into our day, knowing that if we don't make a regular appointment with our bodies we are likely to neglect them?) The second event was not surprising: the news of the French Revolution so thrilled the democrat Kant that it crowded every other interest out. A few years later, in the middle of the Terror, he would write that the natural excitement which uninvolved bystanders felt at the thought of the Revolution was proof of humankind's capacity to make moral progress. Most of us can understand how the sound of a distant revolution might disrupt our routine; three German newspapers quoted Kant on that score at the start of the Arab Spring. But the first event that interfered with Kant's walk is far less intuitive: Jean-Jacques Rousseau left him spellbound. It wasn't an easy experience. Kant later wrote that he had to read Rousseau's sentences several times in order to understand them, so stirred was he by the beauty of their prose. The

experience was liberating, as we saw in the note that said it was Rousseau who changed his life and taught him his true calling. He also called Rousseau the Newton of the mind, the highest form of praise the eighteenth century could muster. Though many readers mistook Rousseau's critique as a call for Romanticism, Kant's reading of his work places him squarely in the Enlightenment.

On the surface, the only thing the two men had in common was class background. Rousseau's father made watches, while Kant's father made saddles, which put each boy squarely in the class of small artisans who could not have expected to receive much by way of an education, let alone become a major force of Western thought. Surely a strong sense of the effort required to become independently thinking adults made each of them view growing up as an ideal, not as a given. Coming of age at a time when even the contributors to the *Encyclopaedia* – avowed engine, and product, of Enlightenment – could be offended by its editor Diderot's proposal to print their names without their titles, meant living in a world of class distinctions that were barely touched until the French Revolution. Rousseau always noticed, and commented on them keenly. Still in every other way Kant and Rousseau seem different souls. Kant's routine was so regular his townfolk set their watches by it; Rousseau threw away his own watch and was pleased to record the feeling of liberation that accompanied the act. Rousseau turned down a lifelong pension from the king of France to live the life of a (usually well-kept) vagabond; Kant became a Prussian professor. Rousseau's *Confessions* was the first work of

modern autobiography, and he often lets allusions to his own life intrude into places in his works you may think they had no business; with the exception of the comment that residence in Königsberg can be a substitute for travelling, Kant's personal references are confined to a couple of unpublished notes. Rousseau's erotic life, both in fantasy and reality, was as intense, varied and open as many today; the only suggestion of Immanuel Kant as a sexual being is a letter from a local matron asking him to wind up her clock. The reference is to the opening of *Tristram Shandy*, whose hero was conceived during the monthly household clockwinding, but there it is, that clock again. Rousseau's travels were extraordinary even for his time, for he was no tourist: sometimes from choice, sometimes from necessity, he changed countries often. Though he never fit into any of them, it wasn't for want of trying.

He began as a fifteen-year-old apprentice who left his native Geneva to cross the Alps on foot into Italy, where he worked as a sign painter and engraver before getting a post as a diplomat's secretary. Moving to France, he styled himself as 'Mr Greene from England', earning a living giving music lessons though he'd never received any of his own. Nevertheless his first opera, *Le Devin du Village*, made such an impression on Louis XV that he was offered the post of royal composer, a post he turned down in order to live, more or less independently, as a writer who alternately enchanted and enraged the salons of Paris, and went off to the countryside to escape them. Several of his travels were involuntary, such as the one from France to Switzerland after being warned that his Emile was

about to be burned by the public executioner in Paris, and advised to flee lest he meet a similar fate himself. There was also the ill-starred voyage to England as a guest of David Hume after the Swiss decided their native son was too wild after all, the return to France after it proved clear that David Hume was not his cup of tea. And these are only highlights: his journeys were so many that a very careful reading of the *Confessions* is required to keep track of them. Kant, as we know, never left his native town.

Yet Rousseau was Kant's guiding star, and his Königsberg house contained one piece of art: a portrait of the wild Swiss philosopher. Much as Newton's *Principia* is the background text for most everything Kant wrote about nature, Rousseau's *Emile* is the text Kant took for granted in most everything he wrote about humankind. Although, as I will argue, it is fatally flawed, Rousseau's attempt to solve the problem is so important that it deserves its own discussion below.

Before turning to it, however, it's worth addressing the question: why turn to the Enlightenment at all? If we do not locate our own assumptions in history, we are likely to suppose they belong to nature itself, and unlikely to examine them at all. Or we err by locating them too easily: it's sometimes suggested that the '60s generation is responsible for our valorization of youthful culture. Weren't they the ones so callow as to invent the slogan 'Don't trust anyone over thirty', without imagining it could bite them back? The tenacity of *Peter Pan* shows us that our current predicament is much older, but in fact it's even older

than that: the problem of coming of age first came of age itself in the Enlightenment.

Nowadays far more people are inclined to look to the Enlightenment, if at all, as a source for understanding where we went wrong than as a source of assumptions we wish to own. For though we live in a world increasingly forged by new bits of technology, its dominant rhetoric is anti-modern. Even thoughtful and original writers may suddenly turn to tirades blaming the Enlightenment for everything from a general rejection of learning to hurricanes, and everything else in between. Enlightenment-bashing has become such a popular sport that it's hard to count the number of charges made against it.

Since I've devoted another book to an extended defense of the Enlightenment, here I will discuss only three.⁷ The Enlightenment is often dismissed as Eurocentric. In fact it was the first modern movement to attack Eurocentrism and racism, often at considerable risk. Today Christian Wolff's name is known only to scholars, but in the early eighteenth century he was the most famous philosopher in Germany, and a major influence on the young Immanuel Kant. Yet in 1723 he was given forty-eight hours' notice to vacate his professorship at Halle, and the territory of Prussia, or face execution. His crime? Wolff had publicly argued that although the Chinese were a people without Christianity, they were a people with morals. Wolff's experience was not exceptional: nearly all the canonical Enlightenment texts were burned, banned, or published anonymously. For however different they were, all seemed to threaten established authority in the name

of universal principles available to anyone, whether Christian or Confucian, Persian or French. To be sure, offensive remarks about Jews or Africans can be found in many an Enlightenment correspondence, or even a publication. Such remarks are often emphasized today, while passages like Kant's attack on colonialism are overlooked:

Compare the inhospitable actions of the civilized and especially of the commercial states of our part of the world. The injustice which they show to lands and peoples they visit (which is equivalent to conquering them) is carried by them to terrifying lengths. America, the lands inhabited by the Negro, the Spice Islands, the Cape, etc., were at the time of their discovery considered by these civilized intruders as lands without owners, for they counted the inhabitants as nothing . . . [they] oppress the natives, excited widespread wars among the various states, spread famine, rebellion, perfidy, and the whole litany of evils which afflict mankind. China and Japan, who have had experience with such guests, have wisely refused them entry. (Kant, *Perpetual Peace*, 1795, Third Article)

Anyone who praises China and Japan for keeping out predatory Europeans cannot fairly be accused of blindly imposing Western ways on the rest of the world. Enlightenment thinkers were men of their time, educated by men of earlier ones, and their struggle to free themselves of prejudice and preconception could never be final. But it is fatal to forget that those thinkers were not only the first

to condemn Eurocentrism and racism; they also laid the theoretical foundation for the universalism upon which all struggles against racism must stand.

It's also common to attack the Enlightenment for its elevation of human reason. The Enlightenment in general, and its greatest philosopher Kant in particular, are accused of holding reason in the sort of uncritical adulation earlier ages had for God. The frequency of the charge is puzzling in view of the fact that you needn't read much to see its foolishness – the very first sentence of the *Critique of Pure Reason* is a statement about reason's limits. Enlightenment thinkers never held reason to be unlimited; they just refused to let church and state be the ones to set the limits on what we can think. They could not have imagined that the market might take over the functions once reserved for church and state, and do so far more efficiently. If you restrict information, people will eventually long for it; if you provide them with a glut they will simply want the noise to stop. This is not, however, an argument against the importance of reason, but an argument for taking it up where the Enlightenment left off.

Kant divided the workings of our mind into several different functions. This wasn't a new sort of project, nor is it an obsolete one, as current attempts to map the brain make clear. Plato tried out models that reflect how we think, and modern philosophers since Descartes spent considerable energy trying to understand how the mind works. They described differences between reasoning, imagining, intuiting, understanding, judging, common

sense, and a host of other intellectual activities in taxonomies that were as diverse as they were fluid. Those textbooks were guided by a simple assumption: understanding how we think will make us think better, and who could be opposed to that? Kant's goals were similar, if more ambitious, though his explanation of how the mind works was more careful and systematic than that of his predecessors – if never quite as systematic as he or his critics believed. His most important work, the *Critique of Pure Reason*, divides the mind into three basic functions. Through sensibility we receive raw data in space and time; through understanding we process that data into objects with mass and substance and other qualities; only by using reason do we actually think about them. As we will see in more detail, it is reason's removal from simple knowledge of reality that allows it to step back and ask why reality is this way rather than that – the condition on creative activity and social change alike. Whether or not you actually get them, it is reasonable to expect justice and joy. What makes you condemn parts of reality is not a childish inclination to daydream, but the first law of reason itself. The principle of sufficient reason is simply the demand that the world should make sense. Injustice does not.

Nor is reason opposed to passion, a subject to which Enlightenment thinkers devoted nearly as much space as to thought. Theirs was an age, after all, in which men and women wept in public over melodrama. For calling reason our highest faculty, Kant has been compared to the Reign of Terror and the Marquis de Sade, or less dramatically dismissed as dour, severe, and slightly mad. Readers who do

so misunderstand his conception of reason entirely. It's a large conception, embracing the capacity to do logic and mathematics and figure out the best means to getting whatever end you may happen to want tomorrow. But these, for Kant, are banal sorts of reasoning. Far more important is what he calls the real use of reason: the ability to form ideas of goodness, truth and beauty that orient us in action. Through those ideas, reason can make claims on nature and validate thereby our deepest longings. Pace fashionable caricatures, the Enlightenment's icon is not the cold, rule-obsessed technocrat but Mozart's self-possessed Figaro – the servant who uses his own reason to get the better of his feudal master in order to realize the passion that is deeper and truer than any the aristocracy knows.

Finally and most recently, it's common to blame the Enlightenment for ecological disaster. Critics charge that Enlightenment thinkers' inclination to defend what they considered reasonable over what was considered natural set up an opposition between reason and nature which encouraged the human domination of nature that has so dramatically backfired in recent years. This objection ignores the fact that the Enlightenment appealed to nature more often than not, arguing that the claims of reason were more natural than the claims of arbitrary convention. Even more importantly, where reason was opposed to nature, it was in the interest of questioning conventions that tradition insisted were natural. Consider some of the things generally held to be natural at the start of the eighteenth century: poverty, slavery, the subjection of women, feudal hierarchies and most forms of illness.

As late as the nineteenth century English clerics argued that efforts to relieve the Irish famine contravened the natural order willed by God.

What is natural is contested. As Enlightenment thinkers realized, you cannot abolish slavery, overthrow existing hierarchies or cure illness unless you can show that they are not necessarily part of the way the world is. The ability to question what is natural and what is not is the first step towards any form of progress. The Enlightenment sought moral progress; technological progress was only desirable insofar as it brought humankind more happiness and freedom. To be sure, it was impossible to foresee every consequence of the technological advances the Enlightenment set in motion. But before you blame the Enlightenment for some of the technological advances we might do without, you might pause to be grateful for the processes it set in motion that doubled the lifetime you have in which to complain about it.

Why turn to the Enlightenment? There is no better option. Rejections of the Enlightenment result in pre-modern nostalgia or postmodern suspicion; where Enlightenment is at issue, modernity is at stake. A defense of the Enlightenment is a defense of the modern world, along with all its possibilities for self-criticism and transformation. If you're committed to Enlightenment, you're committed to understanding the world in order to improve it. Twenty-first century Enlightenment must extend the work of the eighteenth by examining new dangers to freedom, and extending social justice. Growing up depends on both.