

Think for Yourself but Think!
Considering the Right and Responsibility to Reason

By
Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof
November 5, 2023

In his essay explaining the Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant said, “Nothing is required for this Enlightenment ... except *freedom*; and the freedom in question is the least harmful of all, namely, the freedom to use reason publicly in all matters.”¹ These words, written in 1784, refer to what we now call freedom of speech. Such freedom, “the freedom to reason publicly in all matters,” is one of the defining qualities of liberalism and is a fundamental principle of our liberal Unitarian religion.

Statements like this, along with his categorical imperative—that no person should be used as a means to another’s end but should be considered an end within themselves—and the fact that he lived in the 18th century, would seem to put Kant squarely in the category of Enlightenment philosophers. In her recent book, *Left is Not Woke*, contemporary philosopher Susan Neiman, who studied philosophy at Harvard and taught it at Yale, not only counts Kant among the Enlightenment philosophers but claims the era ended with his demise. “*Enlightenment* is a contested concept which means different things even to those of us who study the subject,” Neiman says, “but here I use the word to refer to an intellectual and political movement that came to flower in 1698 with the publication of Pierre Bayle’s *Historical and Critical Dictionary* and ended in 1804 with the death of Kant.”²

Given what I know of Kant’s writings, I agree with Neiman, but am also persuaded by philosopher Stephen Hick’s argument that Kant was the first counter-Enlightenment philosopher. Hicks agrees, in his words, that “Reason is a faculty of the individual, and respect for reason and individualism had developed together during the Enlightenment. The individual is an end in himself, the Enlightenment thinkers taught, not a slave or servant of others.”³ Again, other Enlightenment thinkers may have agreed, but it was Kant who considered this principle categorically imperative. So, it’s surprising that Hick’s goes on to argue that “Immanuel Kant is the most significant thinker of the Counter-Enlightenment,”⁴ not the Enlightenment, because, he says, his “attack on Enlightenment reason more than anyone else’s opened the door to the postmodernism irrationalists and idealist metaphysicians.”⁵ Hence, he continues, “Kant marks a fundamental shift from objectivity as the standard to subjectivity as the standard⁶ ... [and] was the decisive break with the Enlightenment and the first major step toward postmodernism.”⁷ Postmodernism is a 20th century ideology that rejects all Enlightenment principles, and is, as Hicks says, “the end result of the Counter-Enlightenment attack on reason.”⁸

Since I recently spoke on postmodernism and have already spoken often on the Enlightenment, today we’ll leave it with Hick’s very simple explanation that the Enlightenment, which marks the beginning of modernism, is rooted in reason and objectivity. Hence, the rejection of reason and objectivity, in favor of emotionalism and subjectivity, is a very succinct explanation of postmodernism.

For our purposes today, all of this leaves us with a different question to resolve. If reason is a fundamental Enlightenment value, and if the Counter-Enlightenment is defined by its attack on reason, and if Kant said Enlightenment means “the freedom to use reason publicly in all matters,” how can anyone conclude he was against reason and call him a Counter-Enlightenment thinker?

To be as succinct as possible, Hick’s argues this is so because Kant did not believe that reason is capable of connecting us to objective reality. Most Enlightenment philosophers, like the early Greek philosophers who inspired them, believed that reason enables us to grapple with objective reality. But Kant believed we can only reason about our perceptions of reality, which are different from reality itself. This gave the Counter-Enlightenment thinkers and, later, the postmodernists, all the justification they needed to discount the validity of all reason and any rational arguments they happened to disagree with or that conflicted with their own logically unsubstantiated ideas. As Hicks says:

With Kant, then, external reality thus drops almost totally out of the picture, and we are trapped inescapably in subjectivity—and that is why Kant is a landmark. Once reason is in principle severed from reality, one then enters a different philosophical universe altogether⁹

For some, this means a Universe of anything goes, anything is possible, believe whatever you want and reject anything you don’t. As Hicks puts it, “If the rules of the game have nothing to do with reality, then why should everyone play by the same rules?”¹⁰

These two interpretations themselves show a limitation of reason. Both Stephen Hicks and Susan Neiman make sound arguments about the same topic, yet they have come up with conflicting conclusions. Notice I said they both make “sound” arguments, not merely “valid” arguments. A valid argument is an argument that is logically structured but has untrue premises. All ducks are mammals. Daffy is a duck. Therefore, Daffy is a mammal—is logically valid, but it is unsound because ducks are not mammals. Although Hicks and Neiman point to different instances of Kant’s writings, they both use premises that are true but lead them to very different conclusions about him. Neiman considers him a crucial Enlightenment philosopher, while Hicks concludes he was “the most significant figure of the Counter-Enlightenment.”

When there is such disagreement, logic tells us there are three possibilities; they are *obviously genuine*, *merely verbal*, and *thought to be merely verbal but are really genuine* disagreements. When we have the same definition of the terms we are using and continue to disagree, then our disagreement is *obviously genuine*. If disputants agree about what the term “gun regulations” means, for example, yet one party is for them and one isn’t, the disagreement is obviously genuine. If, however, they both come to realize the gun regulations they are arguing about refer to better background checks, and both are for better background checks, then their disagreement is merely verbal and can be resolved by clarifying the terms. If, on the other hand, the disputants think their argument is merely verbal, but upon clarifying the terms, realize they still disagree—that one is for better background checks and one isn’t—then their disagreement was thought to be merely verbal but is really genuine.

In the case of Kant, I believe the argument is merely verbal, although I'm not sure if the argument is between Nieman and Hicks, Hicks and Kant, or Hicks and me. The problem is sophisticated and has to do with our understanding of Kant's quality of commitment to reason. Most of the time, when we talk about reason as a value, we are referring to our responsibility to use reason, that is, to justify our beliefs with sound reasoning. That is, we ought to hold and explain *why* we hold certain ideas in ways that make logical sense and are supported with verifiable evidence. This is what Susan Neiman seems to mean when she says Enlightenment thinking is "based on reason not revelation,"¹¹ and what she means when agreeing with Hicks that reason is something disparaged by Counter-Enlightenment philosophers and postmodernists alike. And it's what Hicks seems to mean when criticizing Kant for rejecting objectivity and, thus, severing reason from reality.¹²

But I do not believe this is what Kant meant by saying we must be free to use reason publicly in all matters. Nor do I believe that simply using reason means we are enlightened, not even when using reason that is both valid and sound. The point Kant was making is that an enlightened society allows its citizens to think for themselves and to express themselves without fear of being ostracized or punished. This is so because, more foundational to the Enlightenment than reason, freedom, or tolerance, is individual dignity. Reason, in this sense, isn't about sound thinking, but about all of us respecting the right of every person to think and speak for themselves, whether we, or the masses, or the authorities like what they have to say or not.

When liberals speak of reason, that's mostly what we mean—freedom to think and speak for ourselves. Of course, we should use reason to consider the quality of all thinking, ours included, which is why liberalism relishes and relies upon science and evidence. But our reliance upon reason is based more fundamentally upon our belief that human beings can reason, and should reason, and should be free to do so without any authority forcing or forbidding what we think. Nieman and Hicks may come to different conclusions based upon the same facts, but neither should be disrespected, silenced, and certainly not fired, because of this. In truth, Hick's claims about Kant are most unorthodox and he is unfairly attacked by postmodernists, as postmodernists are prone to doing of their critics. But, among his peers and within his profession, he remains highly respected.

That's liberalism, letting people reason for themselves, whether we agree with them or not. And this was what Kant was talking about in his essay, not that we should reason, but that we should allow others to reason without our intervention, "the freedom to reason publicly in all matters." This is a vital difference to grasp, the difference between thinking well and allowing others to think for themselves. In advocating for "the freedom to reason publicly in all matters," Kant isn't suggesting we should all be more logical, but that we should all be more tolerant of those we disagree with. In this sense, Kant was indisputably enlightened.

Where, however, he uses his own reasoning to argue that reason cannot assure us of anything that is true, Hick's is right to conclude he fundamentally diverged from mainstream Enlightenment

philosophers who valued reason's ability to help us better understand objective reality. So, between Kant's categorical imperative, based on the humanistic ethic and idea of human dignity, rooted in the Enlightenment belief in our universal common humanity, and his insistence that an enlightened society must allow its citizens to think and speak for themselves, I must conclude, like so many historians and philosophers have, that Kant was an Enlightenment philosopher, and an inspiring and important one at that. On the other hand, in light of the evidence Hick's puts forward, I must also agree that Kant's arguments diminishing the value of reason itself, makes him a landmark that fueled the Counter Enlightenment ideology that led to irrationalism and emotionalism that predominantly characterizes the poor quality of thinking in our postmodern society.

I've gone to such lengths to discuss the difference between Neiman and Hicks because I want you to understand that, yes, our beliefs ought to be based upon sound reasoning. But this is no guarantee that our conclusions will be true. Two rational people may come up with very different conclusions and when this happens, we need the kind of society Kant advocated for, in which every person is free to reason publicly in all matters. Today, this idea might seem obvious, but saying it, let alone writing it down, in 1784 was a tremendous act of courage. In fact, less than eight years after writing them, the Prussian King issued an edict forbidding Kant from writing or speaking publicly about religion. In his essay, *Religion Within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, Kant argued that religion ought to be grounded in reason and morality rather than revelation and church authority. King Friedrich Wilhelm II specifically complained that Germany's most prized philosopher was thinking independently of the church's official dogma and institutional power. So, understand, that when Kant called for freedom of expression, doing so was dangerous, and no such right existed or had ever existed. It was a novel idea that had yet to be experienced.

This explains why such freedom must be linked to reason, because it is reason that those with unsubstantiated ideas fear most, and it is why authoritarians, who dictate what we ought to believe, spurn reason at every turn, and demonize those who use it. Just this week, I discovered a passage in *The Oppermanns*, a 1934 historical fiction about a Jewish family in Nazi Germany. "In Nationalist Germany," the passage states, "there was no worse crime than the profession of reason, peace, and honourable sentiments. The government required everyone to keep a sharp eye on his neighbour to see whether he showed due allegiance to the creed prescribed by the Nationalists."¹³ This is historically true. Adolph Hitler carried out a purge of his nation's intellectuals and academics along with his other atrocities. So did Joseph Stalin during Great Purge in the 1930's, as to Pol Pot in the 1970's Cambodian genocide known as "the killing fields." In Maoist China, also in the 60's and 70's, intellectuals were subjected to public humiliation, re-education, and even death. During Iran's so-called revolution in 1979, intellectuals were associated with western education and were, thus, persecuted, executed, or forced to flee the country. Examples like these continue in different places in various ways and go all the way back to well before Kant dared to say that people should be free to think and speak for themselves.

To borrow again from the wisdom of Susan Neiman, we must not “forget that the Enlightenment emerged from a blasted landscape, on a continent soaked with blood”:

It was a history of waves of plague without cure, and ever-returning religious wars in which countless people died ... Women were regularly burned alive as suspected witches, men thrown chained into dungeons for writing a pamphlet ... Into this landscape the Enlightenment introduced the very idea of humanity that its critics ... were unable to recognize. Enlightenment thinkers insisted that everyone, whether Christian or Confucian, Parisian or Persian, is endowed with innate dignity that demands respect.¹⁴

Keeping this brutal history in mind, and the recurring tendency of authoritarian regimes to rid themselves of those most likely to think for themselves, we can begin to understand the great courage it took for Kant to write about freedom of conscience 240 years ago! It was not a casual statement. He wasn't merely pontificating or thinking out loud, he was risking everything out loud, his freedom, maybe even his own life. In light of this history, it is particularly tragic that many on the left today are disparaging reason, along with human dignity.

Today, many on the extreme Left claim they have a right to be protected from hearing ideas they disagree with because such ideas can harm them by making them feel unsafe. Those on the extreme Right, who like to ridicule these sorts as “snowflakes” and label them as “woke,” have no room to talk. They have proven to be just as, if not more, intolerant of ideas they disagree with and are also quick to demonize and dehumanize those who express them.

Today, we too live in a time, like Kant's, where it takes courage to use reason and to do so publicly. Whether our ideas are called “dangerous” by those on the Right, or “harmful” by those on the Left, there is tremendous social pressure to just keep our mouths shut, including the potential loss of our reputations and livelihoods. This is ironic in light of Kant's full statement, which I read at the start. Let me read it again now: “Nothing is required for this Enlightenment ... except *freedom*; and the freedom in question is **the least harmful of all**, namely, the freedom to use reason publicly in all matters.” It is especially troubling and tragic to hear so many on the left now claiming the opposite, that the freedom to reason publicly is “harmful” after all, and that reason itself is a form of oppression. As Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt write in *The Coddling of the American Mind*, “Their focus on ‘emotional safety’ leads many of them to believe that ... ‘one should be safe from not just car accidents and sexual assault but from people who disagree with you.’”¹⁵

Reason is the least harmful of all rights, yet it is the opposite of how dictators think, by which I mean anyone who feels they are justified in dictating what others can and cannot say. Liberalism, and or historic liberal religion, side with Kant, that we should be free to use reason publicly in all matters. And, today, as in the 18th century, it takes some bravery to speak our minds. It's easier to just go along to get along, as the saying goes. That's a strategy, but it's not liberal, and it's not Unitarian. We have to be better and braver than that because that's what the world needs us to be and it's what our religion calls us to be.

So, think for yourself, but think. Reason publicly, even if your reasoning isn't always perfectly sound. Reason isn't about getting it right in an Enlightened society, it's about freedom and courage to say what we think about whatever we want. Kant said, "Immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is *self-imposed* when its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another. 'Have courage to use your own understanding'—this is the motto of enlightenment."¹⁶ Or, as fashion designer and businesswoman Coco Chanel more recently put it, "The most courageous act is still to think for yourself. Aloud."

¹ Kant, Immanuel, *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment*, Konigsberg, Prussia, September 30, 1784.

² Neiman, Susan. *Left Is Not Woke* (pp. 32-33). Polity Press. Kindle Edition.

³ Hicks, Stephen R.C., *Explaining Postmodernism*, Ockham's Razor Publishing, 2004, 2018, p. 26.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹¹ Neiman, Susan. *Left Is Not Woke* (p. 34). Polity Press. Kindle Edition.

¹² Hicks, *ibid.*, p. 41.

¹³ Feuchtwanger, Lion, *The Oppermanns*, (1934), Carrol & Graf Publishers, Inc., New York, NY, 2001.

¹⁴ Neiman, *ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁵ Lukianoff, Greg and Haidt, Jonathan, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, Penguin Press, New York, NY, 2018, p. 30f.

¹⁶ Kant, *ibid.*