Journal Title: What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions

Article Author: Johann Karl Molsen, Moses Mendelssohn, Immanuel Kant, and Christoph Martin Wieland

Article Title: 'What is to Be Done Toward the Enlightenment of the Citizenry?', 'On the Question, What is Enlightenment?', 'An Answer to the Question, What is Enlightenment?', 'A Couple of Gold Nuggets, from the...Wastepaper, of Six Answers to Six Questions'

Volume:

Issue:

Month/Year: 1996

Pages: 49-64 and 78-83

Imprint: Berkeley University of California Press

Trans. #: 651264

Call #: B802 .W47 1996

Location: Main Library

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What Is to Be Done Toward the Enlightenment of the Citizenry?

J. K. W. Möhnen

Translated by James Schmidt

Johann Karl Wilhelm Möhnen (1722–1795) was one of the most esteemed physicians of his day. Born in Berlin, he studied at Halle and Jena, returned to Berlin in 1742, and in 1778 became the personal physician of Frederick the Great. He cultivated an interest in the history of science and was a member of a number of learned societies, including the Berlin Wednesday Society, a secret society of Friends of Enlightenment that played a major role in the discussion of the question “What is enlightenment?” In the lecture translated here, Möhnen posed a series of questions about the nature of enlightenment that sparked intense debates within the Wednesday Society.

Our intent is to enlighten ourselves and our fellow citizens. The enlightenment of as great a city as Berlin has its difficulties, but once they have been overcome, light will spread not only into the provinces, but throughout the entire land, and how fortunate would we not be if only a few sparks, fanned here, came in time to spread a light over all of Germany, our common fatherland.

In order to achieve our goal, let it be proposed

1. that it be determined precisely: What is enlightenment?
2. that we determine the deficiencies and infirmities in the direction of the understanding, in the manner of thinking, in the prejudices and in the ethics of our nation—or at least of our immediate public—and that we investigate how they have been promoted thus far.
3. that we first attack and root out those prejudices and errors that are the most pernicious, and that we nurture and propagate those truths whose general recognition is most necessary.

It also would be worth investigating,

Originally delivered as a lecture before the Berlin Wednesday Society on 17 December 1783. Edited and first published by Ludwig Keller in “Die Berliner Mittwochs-Gesellschaft,” Monatshfte der Comenius-Gesellschaft 5, nos. 3–4 (1896): 73–76. Some preliminary and concluding comments, dealing with the immediate circumstances of the delivery of the lecture, have been omitted.
4. why the enlightenment of our public has as yet not advanced very far, notwithstanding that for more than forty years the freedom to think, to speak, and also to publish would seem to have ruled here more than in other lands,¹ and that the education of our youth has also gradually improved.

It is known that our great monarch has recently taken pains, in his essay on German literature,² to point out the deficiencies for which it can be reproached, the reasons for these deficiencies, and the means by which it may be improved. He has, on occasion, blamed the lack of enlightenment on defective instruction in schools and universities, on which a great deal has already been written.³

Since, however, he accuses our language of imperfection in expressing intelligibly the most accurate, vigorous, and brilliant ideas,⁴ then perhaps it should also be an object of our efforts,

5. to see to the improvement of our language, and to investigate how far these reproaches are deserved.

It is indeed not to be denied that our monarch has taken the enlightenment of the nation more to heart than the enlightenment of German literature. It appears, however, that at present he still has great reservations about this step.

Before the essay on German literature was published, the Academy had posed the Prize Question for 1778: "Is it useful for the common mass of mankind to be deceived, either by being misled into new errors or by being maintained in accustomed errors?"⁵ One sees from the distribution of the prize—which was divided, with half awarded to the affirmative prize essay and the other half to the negative essay—that the enlightened Royal Academy chose this expedient in order not to give offense with a definitive judgment. In the 1780 royal essay [De la littérature allemande], which appeared shortly after the Academy's question, one notes that the monarch—in spite of the fact that he prescribes the style and order of argument to all the faculties and sciences,⁶ and in spite of the fact that it could not have been entirely unknown to him that the learned clergy, through their sermons to their congregations and through their influence on the minds of men, could enlighten many more hundreds of people in a shorter time and uproot many more errors than all the treatises—passed over such matters entirely and excused himself by saying that he "would observe a respectful silence with regard to theology, since one says that it should be a holy science, into whose sacred realm the laity may not venture."⁷

From this arises the proposal:

6. whether or not a closer investigation of the two opposing prize essays, and those which received honorable mention,⁸ might be arranged, in
order to contrast the arguments for both sides and to consider if our efforts are useful or harmful, not only for the public, but also for the state and the government.

We can surely decide the last proposal according to our own insights, since we fulfill the duties of well-intentioned patriots under the seal of secrecy, our preeminent commandment. We have no Augustus as protector and no Maecenas and maecenatism among us, whom we might fear to offend with our remarks, we do not await the rewards of a house of Este, or Medici, of Francis I and Louis XIV, whom the monarch mentions, nor can our judgment be led by a thirst for honor or praise, for we remain anonymous, and our preeminent and sole reward is the inner conviction, to promote, as well as we can and without any further intention, the best for our fellow citizens and for posterity.

NOTES

1. Frederick the Great (1712–1786) assumed the Prussian throne in 1740 and began his reign with a general relaxation of censorship regulations. For a discussion of Frederick's stance toward censorship, see the essay by Möhnen's colleague in the Mittwochsgesellschaft, Ernst Ferdinand Klein, "On Freedom of Thought and of the Press," Berlinische Monatsschrift 3 (1784): 312–330, translated below, pp. 87–96.—TRANS.

2. Frederick's *De la littérature allemande* was published in Berlin in 1780.—TRANS.

3. Frederick devoted part of *De la littérature allemande* to a discussion of the failings of German schools and universities. See Oeuvres de Frédéric le Grand, ed. Johann David Erdmann Preuß, (Berlin, 1846–1857), 7:98–101.—TRANS.

4. Möhnen refers here to Frederick's claim in *De la littérature allemande* that the German language could not do justice to "les pensées les plus justes, les plus fortes, les plus brillantes." See Preuß, Oeuvres, 7:97, and the more sustained discussion on pp. 101–108.—TRANS.

5. Frederick proposed this question, which he had previously addressed in chapter 18 of his *Anti-Machiavel*, to the academy in 1777. The prize was divided between the affirmative response by Frédéric de Castillon and the negative response of R. Z. Becker.—TRANS.

6. A reference to Frederick's extended discussion, in *De la littérature allemande*, of the proper language and presentation of arguments within the various academic disciplines.—TRANS.

7. "Je me renferme également dans un respectueux silence à l'égard de la théologie. On dit que c'est une science divine, et qu'il n'est pas permis aux profanes de toucher à l'encensoir." *De la littérature allemande*, in Preuß, Oeuvres, 7:100.—TRANS.

8. In addition to the two winning essays, three other essays answering the question in the negative and six answering the question in the affirmative were included in the academy's Accessit. Three of these essays were eventually published.—TRANS.

9. Caius Maecenas was a Roman statesman who served as adviser to the emperor Augustus and, on his retirement, a patron of Horace, Virgil, and Propertius—
hence the use of his name as a synonym for a patron of the arts (in German, Mäzen) and for patronage of the arts (in German, Mäzenaten). The Este were a noble family and patrons of the arts in Renaissance Ferrara and Modena; the Medici played the same role in Florence. Francis I (king of France from 1515 to 1547) was the patron of Rabelais, Marot, and Budé and the founder of the Collège de France, while Louis XIV (who reigned from 1643 to 1715) was the patron of Molière, Racine, La Fontaine, and Le Brun, among others. For Frederick's discussion of the absence of such patrons in Germany, see De la littérature allemande, in Preuß, Oeuvres, 7:95–96.—Trans.
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Fontaine, and Le Brun, among others. For Frederick's discussion of the absence of
such patrons in Germany, see De la literature allemande, in Oeuvres, 7-95-96. —
Trans.

On the Question: What Is Enlightenment?

Moses Mendelssohn

Translated by James Schmidt

Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786) was one of the most important figures in the Berlin
Enlightenment. Born in 1729 in the Dessau ghetto, he came to Berlin in 1743, em-

barked on a study of the works of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Christian Wolff,
published a number of highly regarded works, entered into a lifelong friendship with
Lessing, and— at the end of his life— was Jacob's antagonist in the “Pantheism
Controversy.”

The essay translated here had its origins in a lecture delivered before the Wednesday
Society on 16 May 1784 near the end of the series of discussions sparked by Moksem’s
lecture of the previous December. It was the only one of the contributions to the debate to
be published in the Berlinische Monatschrift and may be regarded as an attempt to
summarize the main concerns that arose in the course of those discussions.

The words enlightenment, culture, and education are newcomers to our language.1
They currently belong only to literary discourse. The masses scarcely under-

stand them. Does this prove that these things are also new to us? I believe not.
One says of a certain people that they have no specific word for “virtue,” or none for “superstition,” and yet one may justly attribute a not
insignificant measure of both to them.

Linguistic usage, which seems to want to create a distinction between
these synonymous words, still has not had the time to establish their bound-
aries. Education, culture, and enlightenment are modifications of social life,
the effects of the industry and efforts of men to better their social condi-
tions.

The more the social conditions of a people are brought, through art and
industry, into harmony with the destiny of man,2 the more education this
people has.

Education is composed of culture and enlightenment. Culture appears to
be more oriented toward practical matters: (objectively) toward goodness,
refinement, and beauty in the arts and social mores; (subjectively) toward

Originally published as “Über die Frage: Was heisst aufklären?,” Berlinische Monatschrift 4 (1784):
facility, diligence, and dexterity in the arts and inclinations, dispositions, and habits in social mores. The more these correspond in a people with the destiny of man, the more culture will be attributed to them, just as a piece of land is said to be more cultured and cultivated, the more it is brought, through the industry of men, to the state where it produces things that are useful to men. Enlightenment, in contrast, seems to be more related to theoretical matters: to (objective) rational knowledge and to (subjective) facility in rational reflection about matters of human life, according to their importance and influence on the destiny of man.³

I posit, at all times, the destiny of man as the measure and goal of all our striving and efforts, as a point on which we must set our eyes, if we do not wish to lose our way.

A language attains enlightenment through the sciences and attains culture through social intercourse, poetry, and eloquence. Through the former it becomes better suited for theoretical usages, through the latter for practical usages. Both together make it an educated language.

Superficial culture is called “polish” [Politur]. Hail the nation, whose “polish” is the consequence of culture and enlightenment, whose external splendor and elegance have a foundation of internal, genuine truth!

Enlightenment is related to culture as theory to practice, as knowledge to ethics, as criticism to virtuosity. Regarded (objectively) in and for themselves, they stand in the closest connection, although subjectively they very often are separated.

One can say: Nürnbergers have more culture, Berliners more enlightenment; the French more culture, the English more enlightenment; the Chinese much culture and little enlightenment. The Greeks had both culture and enlightenment. They were an educated nation, just as their language is an educated language. Overall, the language of a people is the best indicator of its education, of culture as well as of enlightenment, in both breadth and intensity.

Further, the destiny of man can be divided into (1) the destiny of man as man and (2) the destiny of man as citizen.

With regard to culture these two coincide; for all practical perfection has value only in relation to social life and so must correspond only to the destiny of man as a member of society. Man as man needs no culture: but he needs enlightenment.

Status and vocation in civil life determine each member’s duties and rights, and accordingly require different abilities and skills, different inclinations, dispositions, social mores and customs, a different culture and polish. The more these correspond, throughout all the estates, with their vocations—that is, with their respective destinies as members of society—the more culture the nation possesses.

Each individual also requires, according to his status and vocation, dif-
different theoretical insights and different skills to attain them—a different degree of enlightenment. The enlightenment that is concerned with man as man is universal, without distinction of status; the enlightenment of man as citizen changes according to status and vocation. The destiny of man remains as always the measure and goal of these efforts.

Accordingly, the enlightenment of a nation is proportional to (1) the amount of knowledge, (2) its importance—that is, its relation to the destiny (a) of man and (b) of the citizen, (3) its dissemination through all estates, (4) its accord with their vocations. Thus the degree of a people's enlightenment is determined according to an at least fourfold relationship, whose members are in part once again composed out of simpler relations of members.

The enlightenment of man can come into conflict with the enlightenment of the citizen. Certain truths that are useful to men, as men, can at times be harmful to them as citizens. The following needs to be considered here. The collision can arise between the (1) essential or (2) accidental destinies of man and the (3) essential or (4) accidental destinies of citizens.

In the absence of the essential destiny of man, man sinks to the level of the beast; without the unessential destiny he is no longer good and splendid as a creature. In the absence of the essential destiny of man as citizen, the constitution of the state ceases to exist; without the unessential destiny it no longer remains the same in some ancillary relationships.

Unfortunate is the state that must confess that for it the essential destiny of man is not in harmony with the essential destiny of its citizens, in which the enlightenment that is indispensable to man cannot be disseminated through all the estates of the realm without risking the destruction of the constitution. Here philosophy lays its hand on its mouth! Here necessity may prescribe laws, or rather forge the fetters, that are applied to mankind, to force them down, and hold them under the yoke!

However, if the unessential destiny of man comes into conflict with the essential or unessential destiny of the citizen, rules must be established according to which exceptions are made and cases of collisions decided.

If the essential destiny of man has unfortunately been brought into conflict with his unessential destiny, if certain useful and—for mankind—adorning truths may not be disseminated without destroying prevailing religious and moral tenets, the virtue-loving bearer of enlightenment will proceed with prudence and discretion and endure prejudice rather than drive away the truth that is so closely intertwined with it. Of course, this maxim has become the bulwark of hypocrisy, and we have it to thank for so many centuries of barbarism and superstition. Whenever one has desired to apprehend the crime, it sought refuge in the sanctuary. Nevertheless, the friend of mankind must defer to these considerations, even in the most enlightened times. It is difficult, but not impossible, to find the boundary that separates use from misuse.
The more noble a thing is in its perfection, says a Hebrew writer, the more ghastly it is in its decay. A rotted piece of wood is not as ugly as a decayed flower; and this is not as disgusting as a decomposed animal; and this, again, is not as gruesome as man in his decay. So it is also with culture and enlightenment. The more noble in their bloom, the more hideous in their decay and destruction.

The misuse of enlightenment weakens the moral sentiment and leads to hard-heartedness, egoism, irreligion, and anarchy. Misuse of culture produces luxury, hypocrisy, weakness, superstition, and slavery.

Where enlightenment and culture go forward in step, they are together the best shield against corruption. In their manner of destruction they are directly opposed to one another.

The education of a nation, which according to the foregoing clarification of terms is composed of culture and enlightenment, will therefore be far less subject to corruption.

An educated nation knows of no other danger than an excess of national happiness, which, like the most perfect health of the human body, can in itself be called an illness, or the transition to an illness. A nation that through education has come to the highest peak of national happiness is just for that reason in danger of collapse, because it can climb no higher.—But this leads us too far from the question at hand.

NOTES

1. The three terms Mendelssohn employs create problems for the translator since, as he himself goes on to note, the contemporary reader could well regard them as synonymous. Bildung is a particularly difficult term, capable of being translated as “culture,” “development,” “formation,” or “education.” I have chosen the latter to preserve the contrast with Kultur, but the reader should bear in mind that the term has a wider range of meanings than the English term: to possess “Bildung” is to be educated, cultured, and distinguished by a “proper” upbringing.—Trans.

2. Mendelssohn appropriated the concept “destiny of man” (Bestimmung des Menschen) from a book by Johann Joachim Spalding, a fellow member of the Wednesday Society, Betrachtung über die Bestimmung des Menschen (first published in 1748). Mendelssohn’s most comprehensive discussion of Spalding’s concept is to be found in his Orakel, die Bestimmung des Menschen betreffende, an essay he published along with his friend Thomas Abbt’s Zweifel über die Bestimmung des Menschen in 1763. In notes to this edition, Mendelssohn pointed to an ambiguity in the German Bestimmung, noting that the word connotes both “determination” (the “establishment of one predicate from among the many that could belong to a subject”) and “destination” (“the establishment of a goal, to which something serves as a means”). Mendelssohn suggested that “Bestimmung” should be reserved for “determination,” while the sense of “destination” is better captured by the German Beruf (“calling” or “vocation”) (Mendelssohn, Gesammelte Schriften 6/1:35).—Trans.
3. Mendelssohn gave an even pithier formulation of the distinction between Aufklärung and Kultur in his letter to August v. Hennings of 27 November 1784: "Aufklärung is concerned only with the theoretical, with knowledge, with the elimination of prejudices; Kultur is concerned with morality, sociality, art, with things done and things not done." Mendelssohn, Gesammelte Schriften 13:234.—Trans.

4. Mendelssohn’s distinction between the "essential" destiny of man and the "unessential" [außerwesentlichen] or "accidental" [zufälligen] destinies of man is derived from Christian Wolff’s ontology. As Mendelssohn explained in his letter to v. Hennings, "The essential destiny of man is a matter of existence [Daseyn], the unessential destiny is a matter of improvement [Besserseyn]." Mendelssohn, Gesammelte Schriften 13:236.—Trans.

5. This point was further developed by Mendelssohn in a subsequent essay, "Soll man der einreisenden Schwämerey durch Satyre oder durch äussere Verbindung entgegenarbeiten?" Berlinische Monatsschrift 5 (February 1785): 133–137 (Gesammelte Schriften 6/1:139–141). Here he argued, "Nothing is more opposed to the true good of mankind than this sham enlightenment [Afteraufklärung], where everyone mouths a hackneyed wisdom, from which the spirit has already long vanished; where everyone ridicules prejudices, without distinguishing what is true in them from what is false.” —Trans.

6. In the notes to the critical edition of Mendelssohn’s works, Alexander Altman suggests that Mendelssohn might be referring to the tractate Yadavim (IV.6), one of the parts of the Talmud: "The level of defilement corresponds to the level of esteem." (See Mendelssohn, Gesammelte Schriften 6/1:240.)—Trans.
An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?

Immanuel Kant

Translated by James Schmidt

Immanuel Kant's 1784 essay is by far the most famous of the responses to Zöllner's request for an answer to the question "What is enlightenment?" Dated 30 September 1784, it was written, as Kant explained in a footnote at the close of the essay, without knowledge of the contents of Mendelssohn's response, which appeared in the Berlinische Monatsschrift as Kant was completing his own answer. The essay was the second of the fifteen articles Kant wrote for the Berlinische Monatsschrift in the years between 1784 and 1796.

Enlightenment is mankind's exit from its self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to make use of one's own understanding without the guidance of another. Self-incurred is this inability if its cause lies not in the lack of understanding but rather in the lack of the resolution and the courage to use it without the guidance of another. Sapere aude! Have the courage to use your own understanding! is thus the motto of enlightenment.

Laziness and cowardice are the reasons why such a great part of mankind, long after nature has set them free from the guidance of others (naturaliter majorrennes), still gladly remain immature for life and why it is so easy for others to set themselves up as guardians. It is so easy to be immature. If I have a book that has understanding for me, a pastor who has a conscience for me, a doctor who judges my diet for me, and so forth, surely I do not need to trouble myself. I have no need to think, if only I can pay; others will take over the tedious business for me. Those guardians, who have graciously taken up the oversight of mankind, take care that the far greater part of mankind (including the entire fairer sex) regard the step to maturity as not only difficult but also very dangerous. After they have first made their domestic animals stupid and carefully prevented these placid creatures from daring to take even one step out of the leading strings of the cart to which

they are tethered, they show them the danger that threatens them if they attempt to proceed on their own. Now this danger is not so great, for by falling a few times they would indeed finally learn to walk; but an example of this sort makes them timid and usually frightens them away from all further attempts.

It is thus difficult for any individual man to work himself out of an immaturity that has become almost natural to him. He has become fond of it and, for the present, is truly incapable of making use of his own reason, because he has never been permitted to make the attempt. Rules and formulas, these mechanical instruments of a rational use (or rather misuse) of his natural gifts, are the fetters of an everlasting immaturity. Whoever casts them off would still take but an uncertain leap over the smallest ditch, because he is not accustomed to such free movement. Hence there are only a few who have managed to free themselves from immaturity through the exercise of their own minds, and yet proceed confidently.

But that a public [Publikum] should enlighten itself is more likely; indeed, it is nearly inevitable, if only it is granted freedom. For there will always be found some who think for themselves, even among the established guardians of the masses, and who, after they themselves have thrown off the yoke of immaturity, will spread among the herd the spirit of rational assessment of individual worth and the vocation of each man to think for himself. It is notable that the public, which had earlier been brought under this yoke by their guardians, may compel them to remain under it if they are incited to do so by some of their guardians who are incapable of any enlightenment. So it is harmful to implant prejudices, because they ultimately revenge themselves on those who originated them or on their descendants. Therefore a public can achieve enlightenment only gradually. A revolution may perhaps bring about the fall of an autocratic despotism and of an avaricious or overbearing oppression, but it can never bring about the true reform of a way of thinking. Rather, new prejudices will serve, like the old, as the leading strings of the thoughtless masses.

For this enlightenment, however, nothing more is required than freedom; and indeed the most harmless form of all the things that may be called freedom: namely, the freedom to make a public use of one's reason in all matters. But I hear from all sides the cry: don't argue! The officer says: "Don't argue, but rather march!" The tax collector says: "Don't argue, but rather pay!" The clergyman says: "Don't argue, but rather believe!" (Only one ruler in the world says: "Argue, as much as you want and about whatever you want, but obey!"") Here freedom is restricted everywhere. Which restriction, however, hinders enlightenment? Which does not, but instead even promotes it?—I answer: the public use of reason must at all times be free, and it alone can bring about enlightenment among men; the private use of reason, however, may often be very narrowly restricted without the
progress of enlightenment being particularly hindered. I understand, however, under the public use of his own reason, that use which anyone makes of it as a scholar [Gelehrter] before the entire public of the reading world. The private use I designate as that use which one makes of his reason in a certain civil post or office which is entrusted to him. Now a certain mechanism is necessary in many affairs which are run in the interest of the commonwealth by means of which some members of the commonwealth must conduct themselves passively in order that the government may direct them, through an artificial unanimity, to public ends, or at least restrain them from the destruction of these ends. Here one is certainly not allowed to argue; rather, one must obey. But insofar as this part of the machine considers himself at the same time as a member of the entire commonwealth, indeed even of a cosmopolitan society, who in the role of a scholar addresses a public in the proper sense through his writings, he can certainly argue, without thereby harming the affairs in which he is engaged in part as a passive member. So it would be very destructive, if an officer on duty should argue aloud about the suitability or the utility of a command given to him by his superior; he must obey. But he cannot fairly be forbidden as a scholar to make remarks on failings in the military service and to lay them before the public for judgment. The citizen cannot refuse to pay the taxes imposed on him; even an impudent complaint against such levies, when they should be paid by him, is punished as an outrage (which could lead to general insubordination). This same individual nevertheless does not act against the duty of a citizen if he, as a scholar, expresses his thoughts publicly on the inappropriateness or even the injustice of such taxes. In the same way, a clergyman is bound to lecture to his catechism students and his congregation according to the symbol of the church which he serves; for he has been accepted on this condition. But as a scholar he has the complete freedom, indeed it is his calling, to communicate to the public all his carefully tested and well-intentioned thoughts on the imperfections of that symbol and his proposals for a better arrangement of religious and ecclesiastical affairs. There is in this nothing that could burden his conscience. For what he teaches as a consequence of his office as an agent of his church, he presents as something about which he does not have free reign to teach according to his own discretion, but rather is engaged to expound according to another's precept and in another's name. He will say: our church teaches this or that; these are the arguments that it employs. He then draws out all the practical uses for his congregation from rules to which he himself may not subscribe with complete conviction, but to whose exposition he can nevertheless pledge himself, since it is not entirely impossible that truth may lie concealed within them, and, at least, in any case there is nothing in them that is in contradiction with what is intrinsic to religion. For if he believed he found such a contradiction in them, he could not in conscience conduct
his office: he would have to resign. Thus the use that an appointed teacher
makes of his reason before his congregation is merely a private use, because
this is only a domestic assembly, no matter how large it is; and in this
respect he is not and cannot be free, as a priest, because he conforms to the
orders of another. In contrast, as a scholar, who through his writings speaks
to his own public, namely the world, the clergyman enjoys, in the public use
of his reason, an unrestricted freedom to employ his own reason and to
speak in his own person. For that the guardian of the people (in spiritual
matters) should be himself immature, is an absurdity that leads to the per-
petuation of absurdities.

But would not a society of clergymen, such as a church synod or a vener-
able classis (as they call themselves among the Dutch), be justified in
binding one another by oath to a certain unalterable symbol, in order to
hold an unremitting superior guardianship over each of their members, and
by this means over their people, and even to make this eternal? I say that
this is completely impossible. Such a contract, concluded for the purpose of
closing off forever all further enlightenment of the human race, is utterly
null and void even if it should be confirmed by the highest power, by
Imperial Diets, and by the most solemn peace treaties. One age cannot
bind itself, and thus conspire, to place the succeeding age in a situation in
which it becomes impossible for it to broaden its knowledge (particularly
such pressing knowledge), to cleanse itself of errors, and generally to pro-
gress in enlightenment. That would be a crime against human nature, whose
original destiny consists in this progress; and posterity would be fully justi-
fied to reject these resolutions as concluded in an unauthorized and outra-
geous manner. The touchstone of everything that can be concluded as a
law for a people lies in the question: could a people have imposed such a
law upon itself? Now this would be possible for a specified brief time
period, in order to introduce a certain order, as it were, in expectation of
something better. At the same time, all citizens, especially the clergy, would
be left free, in their capacities as scholars—that is, through writings—to
make remarks on the failings of the current institutions. This provisional
order would continue until insight into the nature of these things became so
public and so reliable that through uniting their voices (even if not unan-
imously) they could bring a resolution before the throne, to take those con-
gregations into protection who had united into an altered religious organi-
ization according to their conception of better insight, without hindering
those who wish to remain with the old. But it is absolutely forbidden to
unite, even for the lifetime of a single man, in a permanent religious con-
stitution that no one may publicly doubt, and thereby to negate a period of
progress of mankind toward improvement and thus make it fruitless and
even detrimental for posterity. One man may indeed postpone, for his own
person and even then only for a short time, enlightenment in that which it
is incumbent for him to know; but to renounce it, for his own person and even more for posterity, is to violate and to trample on the sacred rights of mankind. What even a people may not decide for itself can even less be decided for it by a monarch; for his lawgiving authority consists in his uniting the collective will of the people in his own. If only he sees to it that all true or alleged improvements are consistent with civil order, he can allow his subjects to do what they find necessary for the well-being of their souls. That does not concern him, though it is his concern to prevent one from forcibly hindering another from laboring with all his capacities to determine and to advance this well-being. It detracts from his own majesty if he meddles in this by finding the writings through which his subjects seek to put their insights into order worthy of governmental oversight. He does so if he acts out of his own exalted insight, where he exposes himself to the reproach *Caesar non est supra Grammaticos,* and does so even more if he degrades his supreme power so far as to support the ecclesiastical despotism of a few tyrants in his state against the rest of his subjects.

If it is asked "Do we now live in an enlightened age?" the answer is "No, but we do live in an age of enlightenment." As matters now stand, much is still lacking for men to be completely able—or even to be placed in a situation where they would be able—to use their own reason confidently and properly in religious matters without the guidance of another. Yet we have clear indications that the field is now being opened for them to work freely toward this, and the obstacles to general enlightenment or to the exit out of their self-incurred immaturity become ever fewer. In this respect, this age is the age of enlightenment or the century of Frederick. A prince who does not find it unworthy of himself to say that he regards it as a duty to prescribe nothing to men regarding religious matters but rather to allow them full freedom in this area—and who thus declines the haughty title of "tolerant"—is himself enlightened and deserves to be esteemed by the grateful world and by posterity as the first, with regard to government, who freed mankind from immaturity and left them free to use of their own reason in everything that is a matter of conscience. Under him venerable clergy, in their role as scholars and irrespective of their official duties, freely and publicly present their judgments and insights—which here or there diverge from the established symbol—to the world for examination. Those who are not restricted by the duties of office are even freer. This spirit of freedom spreads further, even where it must struggle with the external hindrances of a government which misunderstands itself. For it is an illuminating example to such a government that public peace and unity have little to fear from this freedom. Men work their way by themselves bit by bit out of barbarity if one does not intentionally contrive to hold them in it.

I have placed the main point of enlightenment—mankind's exit from its
self-imposed immaturity—primarily on religious matters since our rulers have no interest in playing the role of guardian to their subjects with regard to the arts and sciences and because this type of immaturity is the most harmful as well as the most dishonorable. But the manner of thinking of a head of state who favors such enlightenment goes even further and sees that even with regard to his own legislation there is no danger in allowing his subjects to make public use of their reason and to lay publicly before the world their thoughts about a better formulation of this legislation as well as a candid criticism of laws already given. We have a shining example of this, in which no monarch has yet surpassed the one we honor.

But only a ruler who, himself enlightened, does not himself fear shadows, and at the same time has at hand a large, well-disciplined army as a guarantee of public peace, can say what a republic cannot dare: argue, as much as you want and about whatever you want, only obey! Here is displayed a strange and unexpected tendency in human affairs, so that, generally, when it is considered at large, almost everything in it is almost paradoxical. A high degree of civic freedom appears advantageous to the spiritual freedom [Freiheit des Geistes] of a people and yet it places before it insuperable restrictions; a lesser degree of civil freedom, in contrast, creates the room for spiritual freedom to spread to its full capacity. When nature has, under this hard shell, developed the seed for which she cares most tenderly—namely, the inclination and the vocation for free thinking—this works back upon the character of the people (who thereby become more and more capable of acting freely) and finally even on the principles of government, which finds it to its advantage to treat man, who is now more than a machine, in accord with his dignity.11

NOTES

1. The phrase selbstverschuldeten Unmündigkeit is central to Kant’s entire argument. As Kant explained in his Anthropology, Unmündigkeit designates both “minority of age” (Minderjährigkeit) and “legal or civil immaturity” (AA VII.208–209 [Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View, trans. Mary J. Gregor (The Hague, 1974), 79–80]). Those who are legally immature—a group that includes children, so long as they remain “naturally immature,” and women, no matter what age—must be represented in legal proceedings by a “curator” (Kurator), a “proxy” (Stellvertreter), or a “guardian” (Vormund). (All of these designations have their origins in Roman law and were given exhaustive definitions in Christian Wolff’s Grundsätze des Natur- und Völkerrechts §§898–912.) Kant’s use of these terms echoes that of Ernst Ferdinand Klein, who in an article on freedom of the press published a few months earlier in the Berlinische Monatsschrift had called on those kings and princes who had taken on the role of Vormüdern over their unmündigen Kinder to follow the example of Frederick the Great and grant them freedom of expression (translated above, pp. 90–91). Enlightened theologians such as Semler and Spalding had also used the term.
Unmündigkeit in their criticisms of clergy who kept their congregations in a state of "immaturity" (see Steven Lestition, "Kant and the End of the Enlightenment in Prussia," *Journal of Modern History* 65 [March 1993]: 77–78). Verschuldten carries implications of guilt and blame, hence *selbstverschuldet* designates a guilt that is self-incurred.—Trans.

2. The Latin phrase *Sapere aude!*—Dare to know!—is taken from Horace’s *Epistles* 1.2.40. Franco Venturi has traced the history of the phrase, noting that it was used on a medal struck in Berlin in 1736 for the Société des Aléthophiles—Society of the Friends of Truth—a group of clergy, lawyers, and civil servants dedicated to the spreading of truth in general and the Leibniz-Wolff philosophy in particular. See Venturi, “Was ist Aufklärung? Sapere Aude!” reprinted in Venturi, *Europe des lumières* (Paris, 1971), 39–42. The phrase was widely used in the eighteenth century; for example, Kant’s friend Johann Georg Hamann used it to close a 1759 letter to Kant.—Trans.

3. The phrase “leading strings of the cart” is an attempt to translate Kant’s “Gängelwagen,” a small, bottomless carriage with casters that was used, like our present-day baby-walkers, so that children might move around without the danger of falling. Jean Mondot’s French translation of Kant’s essay notes that the image of the Gängelwagen was used by Kant, Lessing, Wieland, and Mendelssohn as a metaphor for mankind’s immaturity. See *Qu’est-ce que les Lumières?* (Saint-Étienne, 1991), 85. Rousseau may have been a possible inspiration for the metaphor: in *Emile*, he states that Émile will not be tied to “leading strings” (*lisières*).—Trans.

4. The phrase here is *räsoniert nicht!*—which carries connotations of both “reasoning” and “quibbling.”—Trans.

5. By the end of the essay, it is clear that this “*einziger Herr*” is Frederick the Great.—Trans.

6. In the months preceding Kant’s essay, there had been a heated debate over the propriety of requiring Lutheran clergy to swear oaths of conformity to their confession’s “Symbolic Books”—the basic principles or Creed of their faith. Mendelssohn had argued against such oaths in his *Jerusalem* and in the January 1784 issue of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* had responded to criticism of his argument.—Trans.

7. The term *classis* was employed by the Dutch Reformed Church to designate a subdivision of a synod.—Trans.

8. “Caesar is not above the grammarians.”—Trans.

9. A reference to Frederick the Great, king of Prussia from 1740 to 1786.—Trans.

10. An allusion to Julien Offray La Mettrie’s *L’Homme machine* (1747), a book whose materialism and atheism prompted such opposition in Leyden (to which La Mettrie had fled in 1745 after his *Histoire naturelle de l’âme* had caused similar problems for him in Paris) that, at Frederick the Great’s invitation, he moved to Berlin, where he was a member of the Royal Academy until his death in 1751.—Trans.

11. I read today in Büsching’s *Wöchentliche Nachrichten* of 13 September a notice for the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* of this month, which cites Mr. Mendelssohn’s answer to this same question. I have not received this issue, otherwise I would have held back the present essay, which is now presented only as an attempt to see how far agreement in thought can be brought about by chance.
A Couple of Gold Nuggets, from the... Wastepaper, or Six Answers to Six Questions

Christoph Martin Wieland

Translated by Kevin Paul Geiman and James Schmidt

Christoph Martin Wieland (1733–1813), one of the more prolific writers of the German rococo, published prose, poetry, and political essays. He was the editor of the influential journal Der Teutsche Merkur, which—along with the Berlinische Monatschrift and Nicolai’s Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek—was one of the principal organs for the dissemination of enlightened opinion in Germany. This essay was written on the eve of the French Revolution and is thus untroubled by the problem of the relationship between enlightenment and revolution, a question that would dominate subsequent discussions of the Enlightenment’s political implications.

It is known all too well that even good books sometimes become maculature.¹ A chance sheet of maculature, from a book unknown to me, has occasioned this essay, and thus in calling it “maculature” I do not want to demean the honor and worth of the book or its author. The book may be an entirely good, or at least a well-meaning, book. I cannot judge it, since I have read nothing of it except a single sheet of maculature, which served as the wrapper for a small brochure sent to me from Leipzig several days ago. In the current, inconvenient fashion, it had not the slightest typographical markings from which one could see the title of the book to which it belonged.² It is enough that the book, or at least the sheet, is now maculature, and since everyone knows what maculature is, for what it is used, and what usually happens to it, if it is printed on good, white, soft paper (which was exactly the case with this paper), the gentle reader only needs to recall the adepts who made the attempt (whether it was successful or not, I do not know) to derive the stone of wisdom from a certain unnamed material in order to find the above title to be as clear as the circumstances will permit.

First published under the pseudonym “Timalethes” as “Ein paar Goldkröner aus... Maculator oder Sechs Antworten auf sechs Fragen,” Der Teutsche Merkur (April 1789): 97–105.
By the way, whether I have distilled true gold from this page of maculature can be shown if it is brought to the chapel, where everyone should welcome me warmly.

Nothing could be more accidental than the origin of this little essay. I thought indeed, as I was tearing about a page from the maculature, that nothing less than fate had destined it to be honored with an elevated use far above its usual destiny. But enough of this! I cast one glance on page 214 of the sheet that I held between the three first fingers of my right hand, when, on the first half of this page, so weighty in content, I found—not without a slight shudder of astonishment—the following six questions posed:

1. What is enlightenment?
2. Over which objects can and must it extend itself?
3. Where are its limits?
4. What are the safe means through which it is advanced?
5. Who is authorized to enlighten humanity?
6. By what consequences does one recognize its truth?

These questions (in the opinion of the author) were still not resolved in the way they must in order to be content with the concept of enlightenment and its course among us, and they must be answered purely and simply and unequivocally if we do not wish to roam about in an eternal chaos of arrogance, error, and darkness.

In my humble opinion, his six questions had, for the last thousand years, been no longer in question for all reasonable men, and if, thought I, we roamed about in spite of this in an eternal chaos of arrogance, error, and darkness, this must have an entirely different cause. Nevertheless, because the good man regards the matter as so important, why should the editor of the Teutsche Merkur deny me two or three pages on which I may venture to answer these six questions so "purely and simply" that with regard to the seventh question—whether I have answered them correctly—there should be but one voice? I thus dedicate myself at this point to this good work, and—so that my preface will not be as long as this essay itself—now proceed immediately to the explanation.

I. "WHAT IS ENLIGHTENMENT?"

Answer: This is known to everyone who, by means of a pair of eyes that see, has learned to recognize the difference between brightness and obscurity, between light and darkness. In the dark one either sees not at all or at least not so clearly that one can correctly recognize objects and distinguish them from one another. As soon as light is brought, things are cleared up [klären sich die Sache auf], become visible, and can be distinguished from one another. But in addition two things are necessarily required: (1) that
enough light be at hand and (2) that those who ought to see by it are neither blind nor jaundiced, nor through any other cause prevented from being able to see or from wanting to see.

II. "OVER WHICH OBJECTS CAN AND MUST ENLIGHTENMENT EXTEND ITSELF?"

The oddest question! Over what, if not over all visible objects? But certainly that is obvious, I would have thought. Or must it be proven? Now then! In the dark (a single laudable and communally useful activity excepted) there remains nothing for honest people to do but to sleep. In the dark one does not see where one is, nor where one goes, nor what one does, nor what happens around us—particularly at some distance. With every step one runs the danger of bumping one’s nose, with every movement of knocking something over, of damaging or touching what one should not touch, in short, one runs the danger at every moment of blundering and misstepping, so that whoever wanted to carry out his usual affairs in the dark would carry them out very badly. The application [of this metaphor] is child’s play. The light of the mind of which we speak is the knowledge of true and false, of good and evil. Hopefully everyone will admit that without this knowledge it is just as impossible to carry on mental matters correctly as it is impossible without material light to carry on material matters properly. Enlightenment—that is, as much knowledge as is necessary to be able always and everywhere to distinguish truth and falsehood—must therefore extend itself without exception over all objects over which it can extend itself, that is, over all that is visible to the outer and inner eye. But there are people who will be disturbed in their work as soon as light comes; there are people for whom it is impossible to carry out their work other than in the dark or at least in the twilight: for example, whoever wants to give us black for white, or pays with counterfeit money, or wants to let ghosts appear; or also (which is very innocent in itself) whoever likes to seize whims, builds castles in the air, and takes trips to Cockaigne or the happy islands—he can naturally not perform this as well in bright sunshine as at night, or in moonshine, or in an expediently self-arranged twilight. All these brave people are thus natural adversaries of enlightenment, and neither now nor ever will they let themselves be convinced that light must be spread over all objects that can become visible through it. Obtaining their agreement is therefore a pure impossibility; but fortunately it is also not necessary.

III. "WHERE ARE THE LIMITS OF ENLIGHTENMENT?"

Answer: Where, with all the light possible, there is nothing more to see. The question is exactly of the same kind as "where is the world boarded up?" And this answer is really still too serious for such a question.
IV. “WHAT ARE THE SAFE MEANS THROUGH WHICH IT IS ADVANCED?”

The most infallible means of making it become brighter is to increase the light, to remove as many dark bodies as possible that block its passage, and especially to illuminate painstakingly all the dark corners and caverns into which the light-shy person mentioned in Section II drives himself.

All objects of our knowledge are either events or representations, concepts, judgments, and opinions. Events become enlightened when one investigates, to the satisfaction of every impartial researcher, whether and how they occurred. Representations, concepts, judgments, and opinions of men become enlightened when the true is separated from the false, when the entangled is disentangled, when the complex is dissolved into its simple components, when the simple is pursued to its origin, and, above all, when no representation or claim passed off by men as true is granted a reprieve from unrestricted scrutiny. There is—and can be—no other means than this of diminishing the mass of mistakes and pernicious deceptions that darken human understanding.

The discussion here cannot be one of safety or of danger. No one can have anything to fear when it becomes brighter in the minds of men—except for those whose interest it is that it should be and remain dark. Should, however, no consideration be taken for the safety of these latter in answering the question? Truly, we can be completely silent on their account; they will take care of their own security. In the future, as up until now, they will do everything they can to obstruct, to nail shut, and to stop up all openings, windows, and crevices through which light can come into the world. They will not fail, as soon as they are stronger, to smash the lanterns which provide us and others with some light with which to see; and when they are not strong enough, they will not fail to use every imaginable means to bring enlightenment at least into bad repute. I do not like to think badly of my fellow men, but I must confess the safeness of the means of enlightenment, so dear to our enquirer, could make me—against my will—suspicious of his integrity. Does he mean that there are respectable things that cannot endure illumination? No, we do not want to think so ill of his understanding! But perhaps he will say, “There may be cases where too much light is harmful, where one should allow it to shine in only cautiously and gradually.” Good! only this cannot be the case, at least in Germany, with the enlightenment produced by the distinction between the true and the false; for our nation is not so blind that she must be handled like a person whose black cataract is operated upon. It would be mockery and shame if, after having for three hundred years little by little gotten used to a certain degree of light, we should not finally be in the position of being able to bear bright sunshine. It is obvious that these are mere evasions by the dear people who have their own reason why it should not be bright around them.
V. "WHO IS AUTHORIZED TO ENLIGHTEN HUMANITY?"

Whoever can!—"But who can?"—I answer with a counterquestion: "Who can't?" Well my good man? Do we stand there and stare at one another? Thus, because there is no oracle to render a verdict in ambiguous cases (and if there were one, how would it help us without a second oracle that elucidated the first to us?), and because no human tribunal is authorized to arrogate to itself a decision which would by its discretion let so much or so little light reach us as pleased it, so it must no doubt remain that everyone without exception—from Socrates or Kant to the most obscure of all supernaturally enlightened tailors and shoemakers—is authorized to enlighten humanity however he can, as soon as his good or evil spirit incites him to it. One may consider the matter from whichever side one wants; one will find that human society is infinitely less endangered by this freedom than when the illumination of the minds and the actions and the inactions of men is treated as a monopoly or as an exclusive concern of a guild. Only I would possibly want to advise, ne quid Res publica detrimenti capiat, the declaration of a most innocent restriction; and this would be to renew the very wise penal law of the old emperors of the first and second centuries against clandestine conventicles and secret fraternities, and, following this, to allow all who are not called to teach in pulpits and rostrums no means for the enlightenment of humanity other than the printing press. A fool who preaches nonsense in a conventicle can make mischief in civil society; a book, on the other hand, whatever its content might be, can today do no harm that either would be worth mentioning or that would not soon be compensated ten- and hundredfold by others.

VI. "BY WHAT CONSEQUENCES DOES ONE RECOGNIZE THE TRUTH OF ENLIGHTENMENT?"

Answer: When everything becomes brighter; when the number of thinking, inquiring, light-bringing people becomes ever greater, and when, in particular, the mass of prejudices and delusions becomes visibly ever smaller in the class of persons who have the most to gain from nonenlightenment; when the shame for ignorance and unreason, the desire for useful and noble knowledge, and especially when the respect for human nature and its rights in all classes increases unnoticed; and (in what is certainly one of the most unambiguous characteristics) when several freight wagons full of brochures against enlightenment are imported and exported in Leipzig. For the figurative night birds are on this point precisely the opposite of the genuine ones: the former first become audible at night; the latter, in contrast, screech most shrilly when the sun pricks them in the eyes.

Say, am I right? What do you fancy from the matter, good neighbor with the long ear?
NOTES

1. "Maculature" (Makulatur) refers specifically to spoiled pages of a press run and more generally to waste or surplus pages. It is also a German idiom for writing nonsense.—Trans.


3. This admits of some exceptions, as I well know; but in most cases, it remains the rule.

4. An allusion to the childish belief that, on traveling to the end of the world, one would find the path on which one had been traveling boarded up, preventing one from going any further.—Trans.

5. Cicero, Against Lucius Sergius Catilina 2,1: "that the republic should not suffer."—Trans.

6. Leipzig was a center of the German book trade.—Trans.