Renaissance and Enlightenment

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# “What Is Enlightenment?” by Immanuel Kant –

# The professor believes every college - worldwide - should be required to read this essay. Why?

To say that college is a once-in-a-lifetime experience will be putting it mildly, especially if one is doing it right. The number of meaningful experiences one is able to gather in these four years alone is capable of serving them well for the rest of their lives. However, the recollection of these experiences can certainly be more meaningful, if a little bit of Kant’s Enlightenment was added to the mix.

The man did not have much going on for him, but he knew what he was talking about and served as a living proof of what social graces and a little bit of forward-thinking can do for a person. He wrote an essay on the concept of enlightenment in response to a question by Reverend Johann Friedrich Zöllner, an official working with the Prussian government. His essay was released in 1783 and was titled, “Proposal, not to engage the clergy any longer when marriages are conducted”. While a number of individuals responded to this essay, it was Kant’s essay on Enlightenment (Kant, 1784) that still stays one of the most impactful and famous at the same time.

In Kant’s opinion, according to the opening sentences of the essay, people lack enlightenment not because of their ability to think intellectually or even come up with a practical solution, but because they lack the courage to do so. Kant calls it a “self-incurred tutelage” along with giving a sound reason as to why man needs to release himself from these shackles. It is this tutelage that takes away his ability to think in a progressive and useful manner, which results in an acute lack of resolution and courage on his part. Having students read and study this material in college has the benefit of bringing awareness to the flaws of their ways, allowing them to reflect on what is holding them back from reaching their full potential. If only they can let go of self-doubt and take that much-needed leap of faith, their lives will only improve for the better.

Furthermore, another aspect of college life that keeps students from reaching their full potential and conquer their world is procrastination and laziness. The problem always begins when they think they have the time, and it keeps on following them wherever they may go or wherever they may be. In Kant’s opinion, this lack of reasons and aspects with regard to a task at hand only and only stems from laziness alone. A college is a place where people come to learn more and broaden their horizons by learning new things that may prove to be relatively fruitful from that point onwards. However, for Kant, a man finds it increasingly difficult to widen their horizons by obtaining knowledge and question all that they see. He stated cowardice as the reason why men don’t want to use their reason to explore their option, but also supplemented how laziness also adds to the matter. This essay can serve as an apt means to not only study the matter in vivid detail but also be courageous while making a decision.

The third reason why Kant is adamant about the enlightenment of the common man is the monopoly held by the elite on knowledge. They deprive the common, ordinary people of obtaining knowledge and preventing them from actually taking meaningful and progressive decisions that can potentially improve their lives for the better, if not worse. This autonomy of knowledge is kept among the elite segments of society, which takes away the basic natural right of an individual to make sound decisions and live their life on their own terms. College is that one place where no matter where you come from or what socioeconomic class you belong to, you are able to access the sort of education that you want and need. Here, Kant’s essay on Enlightenment sheds light on those aspects of life which most of us take for granted, such as quality higher education. This will make any college student understand the privilege it is to obtain knowledge in its raw and true form, which will provide them with the courage to make sound decisions and the freedom to follow their hearts.

Once the need for enlightenment is established in the essay, Kant moves on to discuss what is needed for an individual to be considered enlightenment. For Kant, freedom was the most important aspect. He held that one’s ability to express oneself freely and honestly was essential for enlightenment. When men start expressing their thoughts and opinions freely and without fear of any sort of punishment, reasoning and new ideas surface, which is paramount to enlightenment. In other words, freedom of speech is one of the pillars of enlightenment. In Locke’s opinion, this freedom to make expressed sound decisions is vital and an essential part of the natural law, which intended man to be free, not only to live life on his own terms but to express his opinion without the fear of being ostracized (Cranston, 1986).

Finally, in his essay, Kant questions the monarchy and argues upon their divine right to rule the man, especially if they chose to take away his free will and the freedom to voice his opinions. This is in complete violation of the Declaration of the Rights of Man, which allows him to remain free and equal in rights, especially if he chooses to do good with his life (Robinson, 1899). Thus, Kant stresses the factor that a sound and productive society needs sound leadership to encourage its people to do good and stay away from evil forces. They should not blindly follow a leader into the dark spheres of the world but make constructive decisions necessary to live a life where laziness, blind obedience, and cowardice are kept at bay.

Ultimately, college education and the study of Kant at least once in every instruction departing higher education across the globe is rather necessary. It is more than enough to bring students out of the shadows of obscurity and open their eyes to see how the world around them works. This measure will only improve the quality of their life and help them be mindful individuals and citizens of the nation.

# References

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