

# Intellectual Freedom and Kant

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Immanuel Kant's "What Is Enlightenment" is a text often presented to undergraduate students to help them to consider the notion of freedom of expression in both its historical and ethical contexts. Worth mulling over are Kant's dare to think as well as his prediction that all that is required for enlightenment--this age when all human beings "worthy" of the appellation will have both the courage and the diligence requisite to think for themselves—is the public freedom to speak the voice of reason--one's inner conscience, presumably tapped into Pure Reason. Herein, then, is the key to autonomous judgment and individual responsibility, namely, the assumption that reason is universal and that allegiance to its categorical dictates is a duty no one who is not out of tune with reality can fail to acknowledge.

One of the key points that surprises, but the nuance and implication of which are often lost, is the distinction Kant makes between the public and the private use of reason. It is one's public use of reason that ought to be free in every case. Otherwise put, only when one speaks on behalf of the cosmopolitan point of view is one's speech free. In every other situation, one's freedom must be curtailed to the measure of one's private function, whether that be as pastor, civil servant, or presumably, as father too, since that would be a variant from the universal ideal rational human being. What is more, not only is one free to speak one's mind only when one speaks from the viewpoint of the citizen of the world and for his sake, but also, in such capacity, one is bound by one's duty to Pure Reason to do just that. Autonomy and individual responsibility go hand in hand with free speech. As citizen of the world, your integrity depends on your courage to voice that internal voice of reason so that, eventually, it may be writ large and our world will become a kingdom of ends—a world where every

human being is an end in himself, possesses that courage and fortitude to think rationally, in accord with Pure Reason, impelled by the categorical imperative of practical reason.

So really, when you take Kant's distinction between the private and public use of reason out, you surreptitiously also take out the elephant in the room, Pure Reason aka a secular, phallo, logo, Christo, Euro, hetero, anthropo-centric god. The notion that we ought to respect the natural right of rational creatures to determine themselves, this notion that any infringement on another's freedom is a strike against reason and human nature, our own included, sounds good until you lift the veil to reveal its underside. And until you do that, somehow you think that freedom of expression is supposed to mean that you have a right to your opinion no matter what. In fact, that's usually what your typical American sophomore thinks, or your Trump supporter, or even your Go Hillary fan, for that matter. That's why, here, in the United States, we have vanity license plates on our vehicles if we want to pay the premium price, or bumper stickers.

But, we don't have Pure Reason. In the US, we have the so-called separation of Church and State, or otherwise put, faith and law, and our Constitution. And this is all very confusing once you allow for any critical interpretation of the voice of conscience. Pick your critique: feminist, Lacanian, postmodern, post-structuralist, or decolonial, it does not matter for in the end your conscience is not yours alone. You are a parrot to society and its biases.

But then, it is all really a matter of opinion. Of the United States people often say: "It's a free country," usually when they want to underscore that you can say what you want (within reason). The part in the parenthesis is left out, but it is that part that legitimates the freedom. Take the parenthetical reason out, and you have a tyranny of the majority, with all its biases, that passes for conscious deliberation. Put the parenthetical reason back in, and you have the same thing!

If Pure Reason were so, we would have no need of laws against hate speech (or speech inciting to violence, as hate speech is legally defined in the US). But this is a free country and I can publicly deny the Armenian genocide without penalty or rebuke. And I can do that because Pure Reason is not universal and it is not pure either, but it is always assumed as the ground of any public assertion. So that, I am free to lie. This freedom to lie is reasonable. I am free to lie, no less than this free country is free to deny its own genocidal policies and crimes against its own indigenous population.

What's the alternative? Being forced to lie, or to live in a country where one is forced to deny one's country's genocidal past. I am free to depict the prophet Mohamed, the Lord Jesus, Greek gods and goddesses, or the myriad of Hindu deities. Free to ignore why this might offend

some, infuriate others, or amuse the rest.

I am free to perform black face, walk the fine line of harassment with racial slurs and epithet, or sell confederate flags and Nazi swastikas.

But dare to question such freedom and you will be compared to a dictator.

What's the alternative?

Back to Kant, alas. Yes, here in the U.S., I may be as free to lie as I am to fight for my version of the truth, but once again, this public freedom does not apply to my workplace, and my workplace somehow can extend even beyond its physical place, so that if my institution finds that what I do on my own free time has unwanted repercussions on its public image, that will be cause enough for dismissal. Academic freedom (within reason) means that decorum trumps all.