

Intellectual Freedom Today

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Kant's essay "Answering the question: what is enlightenment?" published in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* in 1784 offers a paradigmatic, now-classic, continental formulation of the problem and significance of "intellectual freedom".¹ The barrier to intellectual freedom is a near universal 'self-imposed immaturity' (Unmündigkeit). This condition of "being under the age of (intellectual) majority", that is, of being in a state of endless dependence, is due to a "lack of courage" to think for ourselves maintained by fears of doing so fostered by those who act as our "minders". For the Königsberg professor, intellectual freedom entailed "the free public use of one's reason at all times" that alone "can bring enlightenment to mankind". By "public", he refers to an autonomous scholar "before the reading public", while the converse refers not to the more usual private family or inner life but intends a "man's civic post", where he is heteronomous to the dictates of the institutions that permit the social stability so essential for the development of our own "maturity". Unfettered intellectual critique, however, generates public questioning and slow and steady transformations that ensure that intellectual dependence is not perpetual. His conclusion reinforces his political radicalism that "a large degree of civic freedom appears to be of advantage to the intellectual freedom of the people", while his Lutheran, conservative quietism recommends civic restrictions that will promote greater and robust freedoms to all over time. So intellectual freedom while absolutely vital for humanity's progress is dangerous unless institutionally moderated.

Underlying Kant's understanding of intellectual freedom was his ideas for a new university that would be the principal institutional vehicle for enlightenment. Governed by reason it would bring together the disparate

disciplines into a coherent unity of human knowledge (Wissenschaft). It would foster research, the free exercise of intellectual freedom, and be a major driver of political and social transformation.

His last two major publications, *Perpetual Peace* (1795) and *Conflict of the Faculties* (1798), focus on the relationship between the exercise of intellectual freedom and progressive peace. The former explores the role of reason in the context of relations between states while the latter looks specifically at the role of the university.²

In *Perpetual Peace*, Kant seeks to develop a framework for the resolution of conflicts between nations without, or at least greatly limiting, war and bloodshed. From a small group of founding states he hoped that the movement would grow eventually to encompass all nations. He wrote of the world of states becoming increasingly connected by greater communications and contact so that abuses and oppression in parts of the world became known in others. He had a most enlightened notion of hospitality and refuge offered to strangers fleeing from oppressive states. In a similar vein, the new communications would help promote the ideas of universal citizenship globally. Rationally, peace was in the best self-interest of everyone and recognition of this along with the right instruments would lead to 'world citizenship'. Kant advocated that when signs of conflict first arise and armies begin preparing for war ministers and generals should be required to go to the universities to consult with philosophers and others to debate and discuss the merits of their decisions and positions. He was not simply confident that the philosophers would out-debate their officials, but he did consider it vital that, as he saw it, the law faculty should give the philosophy faculty a fair hearing. Such debate, he thought, would greatly reduce the likelihood of wars and conflicts. Thus the university and its intellectual freedom was to play a significant role in peace-making and would be the main source of citizenship education.

Turning to *Conflict of the Faculties*, we find three essays on the four-faculty structure of universities. Kant argues for a new relationship between the 'lower' faculty (science, literature, classics and philosophy) and the three professional or 'higher' faculties (theology, law, and medicine). Each chapter of *Conflict* is devoted to the relationship between reason and one of the higher faculties. Rather than the medieval view of the first being a sound introduction to the other three, he sees them as having quite different functions and in need of different regulation. He considers philosophy to be answerable only to the dictates of reason (unlike, for example, theology which finally appeals to revelation) and this entails the untrammelled exercise of intellectual freedom necessarily uncensored and unregulated.

This unbridled academic freedom allows for innovations in science,

history, technology and so on and ensures that the state as a whole can benefit from these. In his view, philosophy's aim is understanding and truth. The state has a different interest in the three professional faculties; Kant considered, for example, that it had a direct responsibility for professional training. Such training, he argued, should be carefully regulated and bounds set to ensure the smooth running of the state.

Kant's idea of reason was not that it would allow better positions to undermine and destroy weaker ones, but a recognition that different points of view on an issue could generate new thoughts and possibilities that took us further in our thinking and development. This was true, he believed, for individual thinkers with their differences of background, the various faculties, and at the level of the different cultures and histories of nations. He insisted that mutual respect be the context for "creative conflict" argument and debate. So for Kant the university with its model of academic conflict and debate became the model for the peaceful resolution of international conflict. Intellectual freedom would influence the professions, and thereby the public, and would make the world a better and safer place, one less guided by past authority, prejudice and superstition and more directed by observable facts and critical strategic thought. Thus, the university had a vital role in bringing about peace in the 'real' world of power politics and economics. He saw the universities as vehicles for peace within a state, and for world peace between states, thereby creating a world community sharing reason and subscribing to its application.

The possibilities for world peace could be tested in the conflict of the faculties within universities. The university, for Kant, therefore provided the perfect conditions and context for a conflict of views about the nature of reality to be aired, debated, discussed and even resolved. Both sides in an intellectual conflict must be open to their views being challenged, publicly scrutinised and subjected to the light of reason. They must also be open to the possibility of changing their perspectives as they integrate different views into broader and more comprehensive categories. The process in the universities is from conflict to rational agreement via 'safe' conflict, and this Kant considered to be the same process and framework for resolving conflict between nations.

He calls on us to recognise that while we are divided by culture, language and religion we are all part of humanity. He did not advocate the overcoming of these differences, but rather bringing them out clearly into the light of day, as it were. These differences provide both the basis of initial conflict and the possibilities of later agreement. Kant was optimistic, perhaps hopelessly so, that the use of reason in the rational scrutiny of political positions and the proper training in the exercise of reason and rational morality for politicians and clergymen would lead to perpetual progress towards peace. Kant's is such a

noble view of the university.

Kant's legacy via the Humboldt University of Berlin includes the very model for the modern research university and laid the foundations for our increased academic specialisation that has served to fracture the claimed intellectual unity of German idealism. Intellectual freedom has given way to academic freedom, increasingly restricted to permissible public interventions by permanent university staff limited to their academic areas of expertise. This freedom even in an attenuated form of course is still vitally important, however, as a minimum protection against the next McCarthyite witch hunt.

Kant's understanding of intellectual freedom and the related role of the university have provided the basis for a series of reflections of contemporary concerns about intellectual freedom and its institutional context from Schelling via Nietzsche to Foucault and Derrida. Schelling, for example, rejected Kant's reworking of the medieval faculty structure as undermining both intellectual freedom and the unity of intellectual enquiry.³ For Nietzsche it is not the theologian nor the medic that is the dangerous guardian preventing intellectual freedom but the philosopher himself; and, "maturity" should be avoided at all costs.⁴ Foucault, following Nietzsche, challenges Kant's radical politics and his inability to distinguish different forms of rationality but shares the German philosopher's "impatience for liberty" but understands that this is set within a dynamic historical context that redefines freedom and autonomy. He considers Kant naïve in terms of power and the ability of power to safely incorporate resistance within its frameworks.⁵ Derrida highlights Kant's contradiction between the operation of the higher and lower faculties as necessarily rendering the universities totally subservient to the state and further that he dislocates "philosophy" somewhere between method and substantive, historical tradition.⁶

As contemporary academics, knowledge workers, in late capitalist universities, as we think about intellectual freedom and our role in our changing institutions, we need to consider that our disciplinary specialisations create a gap between our academic work and our role as public intellectuals challenging Kant's educated citizenry. Kant's elitist enlightenment excluded many more than it included and demanded that we trust "their" direction of the increasing freedoms of others. The contemporary commodification of knowledge, and in particular its application as policy, as undertaken by think-tankers, policy and risk consultants and others driven by supporting pre-determined results and policies that others are willing to pay for appears as the antithesis of Kantian intellectual freedom. The dominance of neo-liberal policies and costly compliance regimes ensure that while half of the Kantian framework still operates, that is, the university is subservient to the state; the other dimension that the justification for this was that it promoted an unrestricted intellectual

freedom that served to slowly undermine that very state control, has been lost.

The significance of the Kantian problematic is that it fully acknowledges that intellectual freedom both confirms and disturbs the established order and thus entails political responsibility. This is a richer formulation in terms of political development than the dominant Anglo-American individual rights theory, often limited to access to others' knowledge rather than potential autonomous capability.

Kant insisted that the "main point of the enlightenment", man's overcoming of his "immaturity" ... "was primarily in religious matters" as there were few minders of the "arts and sciences", a claim clearly no longer evident. Kant provokes us to consider and reconsider the value of intellectual freedom and the public role of the university diminished as limited to training for employment rather than playing an essential role in the promotion of the freedom.

¹ Immanuel Kant, "Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?", *Kants gesammelte Schriften. Akademie-Ausgabe* (Berlin 1904ff), VIII, 35; "What is Enlightenment?", Peter Gay (trans), *Introduction to Contemporary Civilization in the West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954), 1071-1078.

² Immanuel Kant, "Perpetual Peace", Lewis White Beck (trans), in Lewis Beck (ed), *On History* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963); Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, Mary Gregor (trans) (New York: Abaris Books, 1979).

³ F. J. Schelling, *On University Studies* (1803), (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1966).

⁴ Fredrick Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (R.J Hollingdale (trans), (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 186.

⁵ Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in Paul Rabinow (ed), *The Foucault Reader* (New York, Pantheon, 1984) 32-50.

⁶ Jacques Derrida, "Mochlos, or the conflict of the faculties", *Who's afraid of philosophy?* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 83-112.