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Introduction: The Enlightened Mind

Immaturity and Public Reason

Kant's answer in 1784 to the question "What is Enlightenment?" is that it is a "human being's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity," which is the "inability to use one's own understanding without direction from another" (Ak VIII: 35). This immaturity is self-incurred when it is caused not by a lack of mental capacity, but by the "the lack of resolution [*Entschliessung*] and courage to use one's own understanding without direction from another." Thus for Kant, "*Sapere aude!* Have the courage to use your *own* understanding is the motto of the Enlightenment."

How can one overcome irresolution, commit oneself to using one's own understanding, and break away from the guidance of other people? Although "Dare to be wise!" is the motto of the Enlightenment, Kant writes, most people suffer from the effects of irresolution and are not enlightened. It is easier to remain in immaturity, and it has also been made safer by society's guardians, who treat human beings like "domestic cattle." First they ensure that "these placid creatures will not dare take a single step without the harness of the cart to which they are tethered" and then they "show them the danger which threatens if they try to walk alone" (Ak VIII: 35).

Rare individuals can manage to overcome irresolution and free themselves from self-imposed immaturity by "working on their own minds," but this is difficult. It is much easier to achieve independence of thought together with other people in public, especially when people are granted freedom. The freedom Kant has in mind is the freedom "to make *public use* of one's reason in all matters" (Ak VIII:

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36). In fact, he writes that enlightenment requires that the “*public* use of one’s reason must at all times be free” (Ak VIII: 37). Kant’s example of the public use of reason is the activity of a “scholar before the whole reading public.” Kant contrasts this with the private use of reason of someone in her role as a civil servant. As a civil servant, a person has to be a passive “part of a machine” and obey orders without reasoning on one’s own (ibid.). In this role people submit their own reason to the reasoning of those they are serving. But this role as a passive piece of machinery in the larger institutional mechanism is compatible with at the same time being a part of “the whole community or society of world citizens [*Weltbürgergesellschaft*]” in which a person actively uses his own understanding and “speaks in his own person” (Ak VIII: 37–8).

There are six striking features of Kant’s answer to the question “What is Enlightenment?”¹ First, reasoning is not something that is only hidden “in the head” away from public scrutiny. Human reasoning is principally a public activity, for instance, the activity of presenting one’s views to an audience and defending them. Second, the public exercise of reason leads to and in most cases is required for enlightenment. Inner liberation typically needs supporting outward activity. By exercising our reason in public we learn how to use it on our own, thus overcoming the causes of immaturity. These two features are expressions of a third feature of this essay as well of Kant’s whole philosophy, namely, that human enlightenment is not just a theoretical affair, but has practical dimensions. Unlike Mendelssohn (GSJ VI.1: 115–19), who argued that enlightenment was theoretical and could be separated from human practice, Kant believed that theory and practice depended on each other (Ak VIII: 275–6).

A fourth striking feature of Kant’s essay is that the lack of resolution (*Entschliessung*) is a philosophical and political topic. A certain psychological state of mind is seen as a hindrance to enlightenment because it keeps the mind passive and in submission to the guidance of others, and enlightenment requires overcoming this state of mind. Fifth, Kant assigns a role to human volition in the progress toward enlightenment. While indecision can keep people from using their

1. Schmidt (1996) is an outstanding anthology that brings together in one convenient place historical and recent material devoted to the question, “What is Enlightenment?”

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own understanding, the will to use one's understanding – either by the rare individuals “working on their own minds” or in the public use of reason – is a remedy for irresolution and encourages enlightenment. Finally, the mind when it is passive is characterized in terms of a machine or automaton, and Kant contrasts automatic reasoning with the voluntary use of one's own reason.

In Kant we find a remarkable conception of human enlightenment as the self-incurred liberation from immaturity and irresolution through the public exercise of one's reason. What are the sources of this confluence of themes about irresolution and volition, automation and mental activity, publicity and enlightenment? Obviously the factors that contributed to Kant's conception of enlightenment are complex and include facts about Kant's intellectual development as a philosopher, scholar and civil servant as well as Kant's 18th-century social and intellectual environment. In the following I wish to focus on one aspect of this complex story, namely the 17th-century European philosophical context that preceded Kant. The themes Kant brings together in his Enlightenment essay are not unique to Kant or the 18th century. As I will try to show in the remaining chapters, already in 17th-century philosophy we can find at least in a rudimentary but recognizable form the interplay of themes that culminates in Kant's conception of enlightenment.

Irresolution, Will, and Inspiration

Irresolution and its remedies play an important role in 17th-century philosophy. As Popkin has stressed on many occasions, 17th-century Europe was dealing with a pervasive crisis of skepticism, an effect of which on the individual mind is vacillation and the inability to generate conviction.² Descartes's *Meditations* document a path from irresolution to commitment, and the topic of irresolution is explicitly mentioned in the *Passions of the Soul*. When 17th-century thinkers treat the passions of the soul, they almost invariably discuss irresolution, including the inability to make up one's mind about truth and

2. See Popkin (1979: 85), and for a more recent and more qualified defense of this thesis, see Popkin (1998). One can agree with Popkin that there was a skeptical crisis in the 17th century without maintaining that this was the only or even the main problem of 17th century intellectual life. See Larmore (1998).

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falsity. Hobbes, Spinoza, Locke, and Leibniz all discuss irresolution, including irresolution in our judgments, and offer various ways of overcoming lack of cognitive commitment.

While some call upon an exercise of willpower to overcome irresolution and attain commitment, others see in the denial of the will the key to greater insight and commitment. The role of volition in human belief formation divides 17th-century philosophy of mind. On the one hand, for Descartes, Hobbes, and Locke volition appears to play an immediate role in directing our thoughts and even in determining our beliefs and judgments. Human volition is a source of defects, as when we make judgments motivated by commitments to other things besides truth, but the exercise of will is also needed to overcome irresolution and acquire conviction. Since our thinking, including the acquisition of belief, can be voluntary, we can be responsible for our beliefs, doubts, and other judgments just as we are responsible for our voluntary interactions with the world around us. Consequently, 17th-century philosophy of mind comes with an ethics of belief and thinking,³ such as John Locke's *Of the Conduct of the Understanding*, and it is our duty to follow those rules and conduct our thinking appropriately.

On the other hand, for Spinoza as well as the philosophers that belong to what has aptly been called the “third force” in 17th-century philosophy (Popkin 1983), volition is only a hindrance to cognition. For these philosophers, self-improvement is achieved when through the renunciation of will we become inspired or, in the case of Spinoza, when we are like “spiritual automatons” automatically moving from judgment to judgment according to its own laws without any special role played by human volition. In this respect, Spinoza has something important in common with 17th-century enthusiasm, which denigrated the will and elevated conduct driven by divine inspiration. A simple and radical version of this conception of the inspired mind is developed by the 17th-century religious philosophies of Jacob Boehme and Henry More.

Seventeenth-century enthusiasm is a kind of Platonism, and as much else in philosophy, the distinction between human cognition

3. The phrase “ethics of belief” is due to the 19th-century English philosopher W. K. Clifford, whose principle that “it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence” (Clifford 1947: 77) was the target of William James's essay “The Will to Believe” (1956: 1–31). “Ethics of thinking” is due to Ryle (1971).

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as an artifact of voluntary human activity and cognition as infused in the sense of being a product of involuntary processes has its roots in Plato. In the *Ion*, Plato distinguishes between art and knowledge on the one hand and inspiration on the other, and suggests that good poetry is not art or knowledge, but divine inspiration. While knowledge is a power of the individual, inspiration is a “power divine, impelling you like the power in the stone Euripides called the magnet” (533d). However, Plato allows for a kind of knowledge that is inspired, and in fact it is the highest form of knowledge. According to the *Phaedo*, the seeker of wisdom wants to be released from pleasure, pain, fear, and desire, and achieves this by “contemplating the true and divine and unconjecturable, and drawing inspiration from it” (84a). The lover of wisdom is impelled by a divine power. Plato develops this in the *Phaedrus*, where philosophy is a kind of good madness (249d–e). While others have forgotten, philosophers remember the vision of truth that every soul once had, and are impelled toward it as if out of their wits.

An important consequence of the idea that the mind is a spiritual automaton is that it made room within immaterialist theories of mind for a key feature of materialist theories. We tend to look toward Hobbes for the roots of materialism because he is explicitly committed to the view that mental states and processes are physical. However, it is equally important that the idea that the mind is an automatic mechanism with respect to which we, as conscious selves with overt beliefs and desires, can be wholly passive is part of 17th-century immaterialism. As we see below, for both Spinoza and Leibniz, the mind is a spiritual automaton that is governed involuntarily by the laws of the intellect in much the same way that a physical machine is governed by the laws of motion.

Belief and Volition

Although both Leibniz and Spinoza emphasize automatic features of the mind, they disagree on the role human volition plays in the conduct of the understanding. While for Spinoza and 17th-century enthusiasm the denial of the will was the key to enlightenment, Leibniz found a place for volition and voluntary control over our minds. Leibniz offers a resolution to the 17th-century opposition between cognition as involuntary divine or intellectual inspiration

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and cognition as a voluntary achievement by suggesting a natural and acquired surrogate for inspiration. Leibniz develops Hobbes's notion of reason as the manipulation of public symbols, turning it into a remedy for irresolution. By manipulating symbols – a public and voluntary exercise of reason – we can increase the power of our own minds, guide our own meditations, settle our own doubts, and adjudicate conflicts between other people. The effort Leibniz expended on developing calculi that would serve both the art of discovery and the art of judgment or justification was in part motivated by his desire to play his part in resolving the conflicts and irresolution on religious and other matters that dominated 17th-century Europe.

Thus the will can play an indirect role in the acquisition of conviction for Leibniz. Calculation is a voluntary action, and thus the inspiration achieved through calculation is not itself voluntary, but an indirect product of voluntary activity. So it is a kind of inspiration or infusion, but a natural, not supernatural, infusion of knowledge. Moreover, we achieve conviction not simply through internal mental activity, but with the aid of bodily activity, be it computing an equation on paper or the physical search for evidence. Thus we “can work on our own minds,” as Kant puts it, not simply by thinking alone, but by thinking in public, using our bodies and their environments.

The question about the role of volition in belief fixation is not just of historical interest (Losonsky 2000). Divergent philosophers such as H. H. Price (1954), C. I. Lewis (1955), William James (1956), Roderick Chisholm (1968), and, more recently, Bas van Fraassen (1984) have given a central role to volition in belief formation.⁴ What ties these positions is the view that to believe a proposition, which involves assigning to it some chance of its being true, is a mental action that directly involves an act of will on the part of the believer. What this means is that we can believe a proposition because we have some inducements to believe it, that is, we believe it because we have some practical reasons, such as that belief satisfies a certain desire. Moreover, since belief fixation turns out to be a voluntary action, there is an ethics of belief that gives us the norms for proper belief fixation.

Although much of our language of belief treats beliefs as if they are actions, many, if not most, philosophers today reject the view that

4. Also see Nagel (1969) and Naylor (1985).

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beliefs are actions. Instead, they hold that belief and belief acquisition are involuntary events or states of mind (Hampshire 1959; Williams 1973; Curley 1975; Bennett 1990; Cohen 1992).⁵ In fact, it is the involuntary nature of thought that supposedly makes thinking exhibit lawlike regularities that can be discovered by a science of the mind (Fodor 1987: 100), and it seems that voluntary behavior is to be understood in terms of these involuntary internal states of the mind (Nagel 1969).

Nevertheless, even philosophers who deny that belief is an action will grant, with Leibniz, that volition at least plays an indirect role in belief formation. For instance, Edwin Curley (1975) distinguishes between belief, which is a state one finds oneself in, much like a headache, and inquiry, which is an action. He writes that “though belief is not a voluntary action, we must allow that it is often connected with activities of reflection and inquiry which are or can be voluntary,” and adds that the fact that we can have an “indirect influence of the will on belief” and “produce belief in ourselves by our actions, or preserve it by our inactions” is sufficient to justify the moral appraisal of belief (183–4).⁶ Although we cannot control our belief directly, we can use voluntary activity to indirectly influence our beliefs.

Thinking in Public

But how can our actions influence our beliefs? What is significant about Leibniz is not simply the recognition that volition can control beliefs indirectly, but that Leibniz develops this view by finding a place for thinking in public. Thus Leibniz sets the stage for Kant’s notion of the “public use of reason” and the role it plays in enlightenment, particularly in the overcoming of irresolution and indecision. The starkest case of this, and the case to which Leibniz devoted much of his thinking, is calculation, where we externalize our thinking in order to improve our understanding. It is as if in the 17th century the

5. Also Pojman (1985) and Montmarquet (1986).

6. Also see Pojman (1985) and Bennett (1990). Curley’s essay is on Descartes and Spinoza, and he sides with Spinoza’s views on involuntary belief, but emends this position with the idea that beliefs can be under the indirect control of voluntary activity. He does not notice that this emendation is precisely the one Leibniz offers and develops.

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automatic and voluntary functions of the mind are being sorted out, and that as internal mental activity is seen more and more to be automatic and passive with respect to human volition, voluntary mental activity is located in our external and bodily interactions with our environments.

The idea that thinking can take place in public in our actions and in turn have an effect on our internal mental states is also one that has a place in contemporary thinking about the human cognition. Recently, many philosophers and cognitive scientists have come to defend and develop the view that we develop and change our cognitive capacities through the use of environmental structures (Clark 1989: 63–6 and 132–5). For example, David Rumelhart et al. (1986) have argued that our capacity to perform complex calculations and other forms of serial reasoning in the head is a result of our capacity to model and change our environment. We are able to create and manipulate public symbolic structures, and by modeling these structures and manipulations internally we augment our capacity for serial reasoning.

Annette Karmiloff-Smith has concluded from her work in child development that innate and domain-specific predispositions are developed by “a dynamic process of interaction between mind and environment” (1992: 9). During development “the environment acts as much more than a trigger . . . it actually influences the subsequent structure of the brain via rich epigenetic interaction between the mind and the physical/sociocultural environment” (1992: 15). On the basis of infant development, Julie Rutkowska (1993) has argued that thinking must be understood not only in terms of internal processing, but also in terms of interaction with the environment, and that a proper modeling of certain kinds of cognitive capacities must include the environment in the model.

This turn in our understanding of the mind is a confluence of two currents in 20th-century thinking about the mind. The first half of this century was dominated by views that, roughly speaking, explained the mind and its properties in terms of human action, including interaction with the environment. Pragmatism, beginning with Charles Sanders Peirce’s characterization of a belief as a habit of action (1955: 29), has always been associated with the view that mind must be characterized in terms of human practices (Dewey 1931). Other major trends in philosophy and psychology that believe that human

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thinking is embedded in our behavior and its environment are behaviorism (Watson 1930; Ryle 1949), Piagetian constructivism (Piaget 1952; Beilin 1989), the philosophy of the later Wittgenstein (1953), Heideggerian philosophy (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1986), and the thinking of ecologists (Gibson 1979). According to this trend, to use Gilbert Ryle's well-known distinction, *knowing how* to perform some activity is the more basic notion in terms of which we must explain and understand *knowing that* something is the case, that is, propositional or theoretical knowledge (Ryle 1949: 27–32).

Although this view had the edge during the first half of the 20th century, the latter half of the century saw a swing to a competing mentalist or cognitivist conception that reversed the dependence and made *knowing that* fundamental. Cognitivism, which was primarily a response to the hegemony of behaviorism, came to understand thinking as a process internal to us – usually somehow part of the brain – and action as an effect of this internal and mostly subconscious process consciousness, as is the case for the mental states that guide our eye movements when we scan something (Haugeland 1978: 243). On this view, action, to again borrow a phrase from Gilbert Ryle, is a “step-child” of thinking (1949: 26), and actions are like conclusions of internal cognitive processes (Cummins 1991: 94). The major proponents of 20th-century cognitivism are classical computationalists, according to which these internal mental states are like the formal information-processing states of a digital computer (Haugeland 1985).

The cognitivist reaction to behaviorism often placed 17th-century rationalism on its banner, particularly in the name of Descartes (Chomsky 1966). Although this is not wholly false, it is misleading because in important respects 17th-century rationalism is much closer to a synthesis of cognitivism and behaviorism than either of these two approaches. From Descartes to Leibniz we can see the development of the idea that thinking, at least sometimes, for instance when we calculate, unifies both internal mental states and external bodily behavior (Dascal 1978, 1987; Sutton 1998). As I try to argue, this idea is part of a larger network of ideas that finally come together in Kant's conception of public and voluntary reason as the source of enlightenment. When manipulating a symbol system, including our own language, we are not only thinking in public, but also engaging in voluntary activity that contributes to the making of our minds. If

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the symbol system we use is a good one, then we are also improving our understanding and overcoming the debilitating influence of irresolution.

Enlightenment, Politics, and Progress

For Kant, the mind's enlightenment had a political dimension. If we are to contribute to enlightenment, we must ensure a social and political context in which reason can be exercised in public. We need to build a community of cosmopolitan citizens in which the public exercise of reason is free in all matters. We need to be able to "speak in our own person," but speak freely and in public in a community of people who are equally committed to the free and public exercise of reason.

The defense of freedom of speech is not new to Kant. Spinoza already defended it in his *Theologico-Political Treatise*, and his defense is not based in law or morality, but in his metaphysics and psychology. Inner conviction cannot be controlled, and inner conviction and speech are bound tightly together. Unfortunately, Spinoza shows little concern for those weakened by irresolution and offers no remedies that human beings can apply to strengthen the mind. Freedom of speech, in effect, is for those with convictions, but Spinoza fails to see that freedom of speech is also important because it is a means for gaining conviction and overcoming irresolution.

Leibniz recognizes the role language and, more generally, symbol systems can have in strengthening our capacities to reason, and accordingly he begins to tie the idea of enlightenment to publicity. Leibniz believes that you maintain your own enlightenment best in the company of other people and in the quest for the common good, which includes contributing to the enlightenment of other people as well as freeing them "from annoying inconveniences, in so far as this is feasible" (PW: 107). Princes and ministers should make extraordinary efforts toward this end, and Leibniz himself saw his quest to improve the art of reasoning with a public symbol system – the universal characteristic – part of his contribution to the improvement of the human lot.

Nevertheless, Leibniz does not recognize the significance of the political freedom of speech. Thus Kant appears to be the first major philosopher who explicitly brings together political freedom of