

Kantian Enlightenment as a critique of culture

La Ilustración kantiana como una crítica de la cultura

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«The scholarly estate [is] the most superfluous of all for mankind living in a state of simplicity, but the most indispensable in the condition of oppression by superstition and violence» (AA 20:10).

Abstract

It is puzzling to notice that in his 1784 essay on Enlightenment, Kant addresses every human being with his watchword « Have the courage to use your *own* understanding! », while at the same time he seems to restrict the access to the public discussion of matters of common interest to the learned persons (*Gelehrte*). This begs the question: Is the participation in the public debate part and parcel of Kant's conception of *Aufklärung*? A positive answer to this question is given by Katerina Deligiorgi in her *Kant and the Culture of Enlightenment*. A critical assessment of this book will lead us however to consider that Kant has a differentiated approach to enlightenment depending on whether someone is educated or uneducated. Following Rousseau, Kant has come to recognize as a matter of fact this inequality toward the products of culture. Now the two-level conception of enlightenment entailed by this inequality becomes explicit in the 1790s, especially in the very last work Kant has published: *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1798).

Key words

Kant; Enlightenment; Culture; Scholars; Common Understanding

Resumen

Es sorprendente advertir que en su ensayo de 1784 sobre la Ilustración, Kant se dirige a todo ser humano con la consigna «¡Ten el coraje de usar tu *propio* entendimiento!», mientras que al mismo tiempo parece restringir el acceso a la discusión pública de cuestiones de interés común a los doctos (*Gelehrte*). Esto propicia la pregunta siguiente: ¿La participación en el espacio público forma parte de la concepción kantiana de la *Aufklärung*? Una respuesta positiva a esta pregunta es ofrecida por Katerina Deligiorgi en su *Kant and the Culture of Enlightenment*. Un comentario crítico de este libro nos conducirá, sin embargo, a considerar que Kant muestra un acercamiento diferenciado a la Ilustración dependiendo de si la persona en cuestión cuenta con educación o no. Siguiendo a Rousseau, Kant llega a reconocer como un hecho esta desigualdad en relación con los productos de la cultura. La concepción en dos niveles de la Ilustración que comporta esta desigualdad se vuelve explícita en los años 90, especialmente en la última obra publicada por Kant, *El conflicto de las Facultades* (1798).

Palabras clave

Kant; Ilustración; cultura; doctos; entendimiento común

In her fascinating book *Kant and the Culture of Enlightenment*, Katerina Deligiorgi seeks to demonstrate the intrinsic interest and continuing relevance of Kant's concept of enlightenment. As was to be expected, she begins her investigation with the famous essay of 1784 *An Answer to the Question : What is Enlightenment?* and subsequently draws from many other sources from across the Kantian corpus in order to provide a full picture and a "cohesive account" (Deligiorgi 2005, p. 1) of Kant's appropriation of this well-known theme. We all remember the definition Kant gives of Enlightenment, in a wording that has almost become a commonplace: "Enlightenment is mankind's exit from its self-incurred immaturity." And the path to follow in order to leave this condition of immaturity is indicated in the watchword: "*Sapere aude!* Have the courage to use your *own* understanding!"¹

One of the most important aspects to stress in this motto is, according to Deligiorgi, the fact that it excludes no one. It makes no restrictions. In effect, everyone is invited to heed the call to think for oneself, to reject while thinking any form of tutelage. This leads however Deligiorgi to claim that Kantian enlightenment must be conceived as essentially "egalitarian" (p. 76) in the sense that everyone is equally invited to take part in the public discussion. To this statement we might reply that enlightenment certainly calls upon everyone, upon every human as a rational being, but does this mean that everyone is involved in the process at the same level? I would like to argue that Deligiorgi's egalitarian approach is sound, but that in order to be maintained it needs to be qualified. In

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¹ Kant, *Beantwortung der Frage : Was ist Aufklärung ?*, 8:35 ; trans. J. Schmidt, p. 58.

fact, the critical examination of her approach will lead us to realize that Kant has a differentiated concept of enlightenment. In order to address the questions left open by her exposition, the following thesis will be defended: for Kant, the real target of the enlightenment is *culture*. The word culture is understood here in the sense that J.-J. Rousseau gave it in his first *Discourse* (1750), namely as the sciences and the arts. Once we recall the decisive lessons that Kant learned from the citizen of Geneva, we will be in a better position, leaving Deligiorgi aside, to assess the precise tasks awaiting the enlightened person, tasks which are specified in much more detail in Kant's works of the 1790s.

In what follows, we will first examine some aspects of Deligiorgi's interpretation pertaining to the egalitarian character of Kantian enlightenment. In addition to *What is Enlightenment?* we will focus on two other sources also analysed by her: *What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking?* (1786) and section 40 of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790). Both are considered standard sources by commentators,² since each one contains an explicit definition and concise explanation of enlightenment. Secondly, we will measure the impact on Kant of Rousseau's severe criticism of the culture of his time in his two *Discourses*, the first on the progress of the sciences and the arts and the second on inequality. This influence led Kant to undertake an enlightenment of the enlightenment,³ so to speak, forcing him to reconsider the role of knowledge in the moral progress of humankind and to present a twofold conception of enlightenment that took into consideration both the educated as well as the uneducated. Thirdly, with the help of the *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793) and especially the *Conflict of the Faculties* (1798), we will find concrete examples of the manner in which the educated and the uneducated, in their own specific ways, have to behave towards the products of culture. In the final analysis, we will see that culture is the real issue of enlightenment for Kant, as it represents both the problem as well as part of the solution.

1 . Deligiorgi's Reconstruction of the Kantian model of Enlightenment

Although the three texts under scrutiny here (*What is Enlightenment?*, the essay on the *Orientation*, and section 40 of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*) are the privileged sources for characterizing Kantian enlightenment, they are not as explicit as one would wish, the last two being even rather sketchy. As for the first text, Kant's fellow citizen in Königsberg, Hamann, remarks that *What is Enlightenment?* does not contain an "explanation" of enlightenment so much as an "aesthetic" presentation of it.⁴ This is why Katerina Deligiorgi is motivated to reconstruct Kant's argument. With regard to these texts, I will take Deligiorgi as a guide, without hesitating to draw attention to elements

² Let us mention for instance Allison 2012 (228-235), and Ferrari 2001 (252).

³ I borrow the expression "*Aufklärung de l'Aufklärung*" from my colleague Luc Langlois 2009 (56).

⁴ J. G. Hamann, Letter to C. J. Kraus, 18 December 1784, in Hamann, *Briefwechsel*, vol. 5. A. Henkel (ed.) (Frankfurt-am-Main: Insel, 1965), pp. 289-292. Quoted in Deligiorgi 2005, p. 93.

which she left aside but which I deem important. I will single them out, since they call for the further developments that are to be found in the writings of the 1790s to which we will turn in the last part of this presentation.

Deligiorgi stresses two main features of the Kantian conception of Enlightenment: the use of one's own reason and the use of this reason in public. Both aspects are brought together in the formula that describes the gist of her reconstruction: Enlightenment places people in a position "in which [they] are free to make public use of their reason" (p. 71). Deligiorgi gives importance especially to the second aspect of the definition, i.e., that enlightenment involves access to public discussion. To be sure, the individual must always think for herself, but she is also invited to think with others and to submit her opinion to a public forum. Enlightenment entails a constant process of criticizing and revising opinions. This process can be characterized as "agonistic and dynamic" (p. 8). On Deligiorgi's account, two formal requirements are set at the basis of this public discussion: inclusion and publicity. As we have seen, enlightenment is inclusive in the sense that everyone is enjoined to think for oneself and is therefore, according to Deligiorgi, entitled on that very basis to have access to the public forum. This is a very important point in her reconstruction: the public sphere is in principle accessible to the "common mass of people." (p. 56) Enlightenment involves a communicative dimension that makes it possible to test the universalizability of the arguments that have been aired. This public aspect of the process of enlightenment is most explicit in *What is Enlightenment?* but, as we will soon see, it is not without certain difficulties. Let us start with the two other sources, i.e., the *Orientation* essay and the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. In these texts, the reference to the public sphere may not be as explicit as Deligiorgi might wish, but she manages anyhow to locate it in order to maintain the coherence of her reconstruction.

Enlightenment is treated in the last footnote of the *Orientation* essay. This note is often quoted because it contains the passage in which Kant contends – contrary to a widespread opinion at the time – that enlightenment does *not* consist in the possession of a great amount of information (*Kenntnisse*), nor in the "acquisition of knowledge."⁵ Deligiorgi takes this denial of the contemporary conception as a confirmation of the egalitarian character of enlightenment. And she is right. One does not need to know much to be enlightened. The motto of the enlightenment in the footnote simply takes the form of the maxim: "always think for yourself," and this accords well with *What is Enlightenment?* But here Kant gives a reason for his reservations about knowledge. He argues, albeit elliptically, that the people who possess a great deal of knowledge are very often those who use it in the least enlightened manner. He does not give any further details; consequently we may leave this question open and come back to it at a later stage. At any rate, Deligiorgi does not attend to it. On the other hand, with respect to the second feature of her model, i.e., access to the public sphere, we must admit that the only evidence that she finds in the footnote is a reference to the "universality" of the principle a person should adopt in

⁵Deligiorgi 2005, p. 56, 64; Kant, *Was heisst : Sich im Denken orientieren ?*, 8:146 n.

order to be enlightened. Kant's maxim is the following: when one is about to accept something as true, one has to ask oneself if the rule on the basis of which one makes this admission could become a "universal principle of the use of *one's* reason." As we can see, the universality of the principle concerns only my whole personal attitude when it comes to admitting something as true. It does not yet appeal to a universal consensus involving all rational beings, as Deligiorgi would like to see it.⁶ The fact is that here Kant remains "monological," as Habermas would say. So in order to maintain her thesis, she is forced to refer to the main text of the essay, which unequivocally states that it is impossible to think exclusively on one's own. To think involves confronting our opinions with those of others, it implies thinking with others. Deligiorgi thereby succeeds in making her point, albeit indirectly.

Again, her case regarding the public dimension of enlightenment is no easier to state when she turns to section 40 of the third *Critique* in which Kant enumerates the three maxims of the common understanding. They read as follows (5:294): "1. To think for oneself; 2. To think in the position of everyone else; and 3. Always to think in accord with oneself." The first maxim, it goes without saying, explicitly pertains to "enlightenment," which is not the case for the two others. The maxim of enlightenment is about a reason that is "never *passive*" (5:294). Now if Deligiorgi is to maintain her reconstruction of Kant's conception, she must find a reference to the second feature of her model, the public sphere. Yet no trace of it is to be found in Kant's short description of the first maxim.⁷ But this does not seem to be a problem, since she moves to the second maxim, which urges one to think while placing oneself in the position of someone else. This is a fair solution for getting at something like a public discussion, even though the second maxim does not deal with enlightenment *per se*. Indeed this strategy of linking the second maxim with the first has been adopted lately by Otfried Höffe, and it seems to be a legitimate way to complete the picture (Höffe 2012, p. 23). To think while adopting the position of someone else implies that one takes a certain distance from one's private opinion, and it at least suggests the readiness to submit oneself to the test of universalizability through a confrontation with others. The full concept of the enlightenment is reached, on this interpretation, once we read the first maxim together with the second. But what remains puzzling is that Kant does not in fact include the public dimension in the first maxim – the only one dealing explicitly with enlightenment – which leads us to suspect that this dimension does not belong to the core of his conception of enlightenment.

⁶Although he usually provides a careful and nuanced reading of Kant's texts, Henry Allison defends here a position very close to Deligiorgi's. See his "Kant's Conception of *Aufklärung*," p. 233. In my opinion, the text of the footnote does not support this reading. In order to maintain it one has to extrapolate from a principle adopted for my personal use and transform it into the principle of every other rational being. Here is what the footnote stipulates: "To make use of one's *own* reason means no more than to ask oneself, for whatever one is supposed to assume, whether one could find it feasible to make the ground of the assumption, or also the rule following from the assumption, into a universal principle for the use of *one's* reason. This test is one that everyone can apply *for oneself* [...]" *Was heisst :Sich im Denken orientieren ?*, 8:146-147 n. (my italics); trans. A. Westra.

⁷In the footnote related to the first maxim (5:294) there is in fact a furtive allusion to the "public" dimension of *Aufklärung*, but it is a mere parenthesis, and Deligiorgi does not pay attention to it.

Before leaving the *Critique of the Power of Judgement* and returning to *What is Enlightenment?* I would like to focus on a point raised in the short description of the first maxim. What I have in mind is the definition of superstition. Deligiorgi mentions the word in passing but does not pay attention to it. She sees that the maxim of enlightenment is characterized by Kant as the maxim of the “absence of prejudice” and that the greatest prejudice of all is “superstition.” In Deligiorgi’s defense, it must be said that the definition of superstition offered by Kant immediately afterwards is quite compressed and convoluted: superstition means: “to represent nature to oneself as not being submitted to the rules that the understanding puts at its basis through its essential law.”⁸ To be sure, this is quite abstract, but the basic meaning of the formula might be reformulated in the following way: never accept to interpret phenomena of nature as if they escaped the laws of the understanding. In other words, I am not allowed to bypass the formal laws of nature prescribed by my mind. Any and every natural phenomenon must comply with them. This is an implicit prohibition against introducing the supernatural into nature. One must not allow the presence of mystery in nature – and if I may complement this observation with the footnote of the essay on *Orientation*: I am not obliged to oppose an objectively grounded refutation to someone who tries to make me accept something like a mysterious phenomenon; I merely have to rely on my understanding, on my sound understanding. It is the guarantor of my intellectual autonomy. And in this sense the maxim of enlightenment is no more than a negative principle in the use of one’s faculty of cognition.

At first sight, this description of enlightenment contained in section 40, i.e., resisting superstition, may seem quite standard. Yet it must be recalled that this formulation of the maxim of enlightenment especially concerns the *common* understanding, an attribute of ordinary people. Earlier in the same section, Kant claims that this common human understanding, also designated as a sound understanding, is the least that we can expect of someone who lays claim to the name of a human being. Nevertheless, such an understanding, while not scientifically trained, is not deprived of implicit knowledge of the main laws of nature since, for instance, the principle of causality in its most basic form, according to the first *Critique*, is already present and operative in the most common understanding.⁹ Therefore, the depiction of the task of enlightenment

⁸ Kant, *Kritik der Urtheilskraft*, 5:294, mytranslation. Guyer’s and Matthews’ translation is not accurate here.

⁹ Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B3; see also the following passage on the “Typik” in the *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, 5:69-70, trans. M. J. Gregor and A. Wood: “If the maxim of the action is not so constituted that it can stand the test as to the form of a law of nature in general, then it is morally impossible. This is how even the most common understanding judges; for the law of nature always lies at the basis of its most ordinary judgments, even those of experience. Thus it has the law of nature always at hand, only that in cases where causality from freedom is to be appraised it makes that *law of nature* merely the type of a *law of freedom*, because without having at hand something which it could make an example in a case of experience, it could not provide use in application for the law of a pure practical reason.”

contained in section 40 is not intended for the learned, but rather for the uneducated. The description remains cryptic but, as we will see, it will be fleshed out in Kant's later works.

What can we conclude from the two short passages of 1786 and 1790 on Enlightenment? We have noticed that Deligiorgi was forced to refer to other parts of these texts in order to maintain her interpretation, in particular the second feature of her model (access to a public forum). Once again, could it be that this component does not belong to the core of Kantian enlightenment? I am afraid that we will have to come to this conclusion. But for now, let us consider *What is Enlightenment?* in which this feature is prominent.

From the outset, the essay *What is Enlightenment?* emphasizes the inclusive character of enlightenment. No one is left aside when it comes to autonomous thinking; and the same goes, according to Deligiorgi, for access to public discussion. She makes her point in the following way:

«Kant defines the public use of reason as “that use which anyone may make of [reason] as a man of learning addressing the entire reading public” (AA 08: 37, *What is Enlightenment?* 55). It possesses two key features: it is public and it is inclusive. Irrespective of rank or occupation, all are equally invited to participate». (Deligiorgi 2005, p. 62)

It is interesting to notice that in the explanations she gives following this quote, Deligiorgi does not pause on the persons “of learning” who are, according to Kant, the only ones who seem allowed to take part. Hence the three examples of enlightened people mentioned in the essay, namely the army officer, the tax inspector and the priest. If the three of them are authorised, when they are not on duty, to play a part on the public stage in order to express their thoughts on military command, tax legislation and religious dogmas, it is in virtue of their status as “scholars.” Kant uses the word *Gelehrter* here in order to indicate that these men have received an education (a *higher* education, in fact) and can therefore be considered to be erudite persons, men of learning, or in a word, scholars. Tellingly, the term *Gelehrter* occurs no less than seven times in this short essay.

Deligiorgi may thus have overlooked the reference to *scholars* in the quoted passage, but she comes back to this problem in the following section of her chapter when she raises the question of “who” takes part in the public discussion. On her account, the requirement to be a “learned” person in order to participate in the public debate is, despite first appearances, no real obstacle to the inclusive character of enlightenment:

«Those who express their thoughts in public are invited to speak as men of ‘learning’ or as ‘learned’ individuals who address the ‘reading’ public. These qualifications appear to restrict the public use of reason to a small circle of educated individuals and thus to revise downward, so to speak, the real reach of the domain of application of the requirement of inclusion». (Deligiorgi 2005, p. 71-72)

To be frank, it seems to me that this restriction on the participation in Enlightenment does not only ‘appear’ to narrow the access to public discussion, but that it actually does just that. If Kant indeed reserves the public forum for the scholars, then participation definitely concerns “a small circle of educated individuals.” And the defense that Deligiorgi goes on to provide just after this passage is not entirely convincing. She argues that we must interpret this qualification as “inclusive” since nothing more is expected of the participants than being educated. This minimal requirement would then contribute, according to her, to overcoming “the traditional barriers of birth, wealth, standing, or professional specialisation” (p. 72). This might be true; and if it were, it would show the modernity of Kant’s approach to society. However, this requirement nonetheless excludes the masses. Discussion in journals of matters of public interest is clearly reserved to the educated classes. Kant seems to think that the citizens as scholars are the best suited to express their thoughts, especially in their respective fields of competence.

At any rate, Deligiorgi maintains her position on inclusion by reading Kant’s essay in ways that are sometimes questionable. Let me give two examples. First, she writes that “soldiers” (p. 71; see also p. 97) could publicly voice their thoughts concerning the military command. But the fact is that Kant does not speak of the ordinary *soldier*, but of an army *officer* – who has received an education. We know, for instance, that early in his career Kant himself had occasion to teach Russian as well as Prussian officers.¹⁰ Second, Deligiorgi rightly notes that it is not the tax inspector who expresses his thoughts on tax legislation, but the “citizen,” the “overtaxed citizen,” (p. 71) as she says. Again, a few remarks are in order here. The overtaxed individual cannot be just any citizen since, as Deligiorgi knows (p. 73), a citizen who pays taxes is likely to be what Kant calls in his philosophy of right an “active” citizen, that is : a citizen with the right to vote. To be entitled to this status, one has to be one’s own master – a criterion that excludes for instance the children, the housewives and the private tutors, who are all dependent on someone else for their subsistence and, on that account, are considered “passive” citizens. Furthermore, the citizen who complains about the level of taxation cannot be any independent citizen: the requirement of being a “scholar” (8:37) applies here as well. So even here, we remain within the higher classes of society, and it seems that Kant takes this state of affairs for granted.

What is fruitful about Deligiorgi’s discussion of the three sources we have examined along with her is that she puts her finger on issues which are crucial for Kant but which are nevertheless not systematically developed by him. For instance, she is right to complain that in *What is Enlightenment?* Kant “only cursorily” touches the question of “who” can intervene on the public scene. Whence her praise worthy efforts to reconstruct a

¹⁰Kuehn 2001, p. 114: “He [Kant] not only taught many officers in his lectures, especially in mathematics, but also gave them private instructions (or *privatissima*), which were, as he himself points out, very well paid.” See also Gouliga 1985, p. 44, 65. Samuel Fleischacker, who is sympathetic to Deligiorgi’s egalitarian approach, also trusts “*soldiers* to scrutinize military discipline.” See his otherwise excellent book *What is Enlightenment?* 2013, p. 20.

coherent argument. Yet in the end we are left with an important question: If access to public discussion is reserved for a small circle of educated persons, to the people of culture, does that mean that the person of mere common understanding is excluded from enlightenment altogether? We have seen in section 40 that this is not the case, since the maxim of enlightenment also concerns the person of common understanding. So we are compelled to conclude that participation in public discussion is only one element of a differentiated concept of enlightenment. In sum, we are left with one model of enlightenment in the third *Critique* aimed at a common understanding prone to superstition, and another model, promoted by Deligiorgi, centered on the requirement of public discussion, but with limited accessibility.

2. Enlightenment in a Rousseauian situation of inequality

In order to develop this differentiated concept, we have to face the facts and admit that such a conception must take due account of social inequality. This was the concrete situation Kant was facing in his country and in Europe in general: a civilization of high culture produces inequalities. This he learned from Rousseau, who had such a tremendous impact on him as a young philosopher. In fact, for Rousseau, the dichotomy we have encountered between the educated and the uneducated, between the scholar and the person of common understanding, is precisely a factor that characterizes inequality, as we can read in the *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men*: “education introduces a difference between the minds that are cultivated and those that are not.” (Rousseau 1755, p. 160). Culture becomes a crucial issue here, indeed a divisive one. Incidentally, one finds in section 40 of the third *Critique* that the “sound” common human understanding is precisely the one that is “*not yet cultivated*.” (5:293) Thus we are left with two main social classes – the educated and the uneducated – separated in addition by economic, political and juridical inequality.

In a way, Kant is prepared to admit this fact and to take the situation diagnosed by Rousseau as his starting point. He is ready to take it for granted because he realizes that such a condition renders the development of culture possible and that it is the price to be paid if humanity is to fulfil its ultimate vocation. In section 83, especially devoted to the concept of culture, Kant will make the following admission:

«Skill cannot very well be developed in the human race except by means of inequality among people; for the majority provides the necessities of life as it were mechanically, without requiring any special art for that, for the comfort and ease of others, who cultivate the less necessary elements of culture, science and art, and are maintained by the latter in a state of oppression, bitter work and little enjoyment [...]. (5:293)

Although this inequality is an unavoidable condition for the development of culture, it must be recalled that culture as such does not constitute the ultimate end of humankind. Culture consists merely in the development of all human capacities, enabling the individual

to attain any goal whatsoever – good, bad, or morally neutral. It becomes evident that the full vocation of humanity is defined only in the following section (§84), in which noumenal freedom and the specifically moral vocation of humankind are introduced. And in this regard, the theoretical autonomy vindicated by enlightenment can be interpreted as a kind of mediation between the two sections, between culture and morality.

It goes without saying that Kant was very receptive to Rousseau’s first *Discourse*, in which the progress of the sciences and the arts is associated with the growth of evils, vices and ills of all kinds. In the following passage Rousseau establishes a link between his two *Discourses*:

«It follows from this exposition that inequality, being almost non-existent in the state of nature, owes its strength and its growth to the development of our faculties and to the progress of the human mind, becoming stable and legitimate with the establishment of property and laws». (Rousseau 1755, p. 193)

It is in statements such as this one that the young Kant began to distance himself from the value of science; until then, he had thought that the development of science was the sole source of the highest dignity of humanity.¹¹ No wonder, then, that the *Orientation* essay claims that real enlightenment does not have to do with the acquisition of knowledge. Knowledge for its own sake belongs precisely to the “Lumières” legitimately fought by Rousseau (1755, p.170). If Kant is to maintain a conception of enlightenment, it will have to include a flexible stance toward science and culture. It will have to be an enlightenment of the enlightenment. Cultural progress does not necessarily go hand in hand with moral progress, as the seventh Proposition of the essay on *Universal history* (1784) reminds us: “We are *cultivated* in a high degree by art and science. [...] But very much is still lacking before we can be held to be already *moralized*.” (8:26) Culture remains the main concern here, and anyone transitioning from the state of bare common understanding to culture is then exposed to the danger of using the products of civilisation as a smokescreen to hide moral misconduct and to produce the illusion of virtue.¹²

This means that Kant was led to distinguish two strands in the process of enlightenment: 1) an enlightenment for the learned designed to critically assess knowledge and culture in general, and 2) an enlightenment for the underprivileged class, fighting superstition. In the first case, we can think of *What is Enlightenment?* Where the priest, the army officer and the taxpaying citizen adopt a critical stance toward church dogmas, military orders, and fiscal legislation. Kant does not, however, give a clear view of the orientation their critique must take. In the second case, there would be an enlightenment for the lower class, for the common people. And in the latter case Kant would reiterate the

¹¹ See the famous passage on Rousseau in the *Bemerkungen zu den Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen*, 20:44.

¹² Such a dialectic is likely to arise in an age of culture. See the following passage from the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (4:405, trans. A. Westra): “So there develops unnoticed in common practical reason as well, when it cultivates itself, a *dialectic* [...]”.

conventional concept of enlightenment directed specifically at the people living in a dark age, or, if one prefers, in an “enchanted world,”¹³ filled with good and bad spirits. It is a world of magic and mystery in which individuals can shift the responsibility for their misdeeds onto the witch of the village who had ostensibly put a curse on them, or onto the Devil who had ostensibly possessed them and incited them to commit a crime.¹⁴ This would be the meaning of the injunction addressed to them: Abjure superstitious beliefs and instead become autonomous! Stop shirking your own moral responsibility by foisting it onto mysterious forces.

However, Kant’s recognition of social inequality as a concrete state of affairs seems to jeopardize my thesis that the common concern of Kantian enlightenment as a whole is culture. At first sight, it looks as though only the educated were concerned by culture’s shortcomings and were thus led to criticize it.

3. Kant’s twofold concept of Enlightenment

In order to show that the masses are also concerned by culture in their own particular way, we must turn to the works of the 1790s, starting with the *Conflict of the Faculties*. This book is a privileged source for our purpose since it gives a concrete form to Kant’s plea in favour of enlightenment and helps to answer the questions left open in the texts of the critical decade. The topic of the *Conflict*, it might be recalled, is the learned world of the German university and it exposes the dynamic interaction that should ideally prevail between the lower faculty, philosophy, and the three higher faculties, namely theology, law and medicine. As an institution sponsored by the state, the university has specific duties to fulfil, and the government has a specific interest in promoting its superior faculties since they have important functions in society by respectively managing a number of portfolios (so to speak): the citizens’ souls and their hope for a life after death; private property in civil society; and the physical health of the population. In order to accomplish this, the higher faculties provide training to the clergymen, the jurists, and the doctors according to definite programmes established by the professors within each faculty and sanctioned by the government.

On the other hand, the lower faculty is presented as the “free” faculty, devoted exclusively to the advancement of science and to the “public” (7:20) search for truth in collaboration with the other faculties. Now, according to Kant, the faculty of philosophy has, in comparison, very simple teachings to impart to the layman regarding the three spheres to which the higher faculties are dedicated. These teachings originate from practical reason, and they amount to nothing more than the imperative: lead a moral life

¹³ Kant, *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft*, 6:88 n.

¹⁴ See Kittsteiner 1995, pp. 22, 51, 55, 303-312. It is interesting to notice that in his investigation of the Modern Times, Kittsteiner comes to establish a distinction between the “Gelehrtenkultur” and the “Masse der Bevölkerung,” p. 17.

and be an autonomous agent in each of these realms. That is to say, first, that if someone wants to be pleasing to God, nothing more is expected from her than to scrupulously perform all of her moral duties; second, if someone desires to be a decent member of civil society, she simply has to abide by the law; and third, if someone wants to live a long and healthy life, she must take personal responsibility for her health and show due moderation in everything.

These preliminary considerations set the stage for a very interesting discussion of the attitudes of the masses toward religion, law and medicine. Surprisingly, it is *superstition* that comes to the fore here, although it is not the kind of superstition that brings us back to the dark ages. On the contrary, Kant envisages another form of superstition, turned this time not toward the occult powers present in nature but toward culture, toward the sciences, and more precisely toward the specific disciplines of the higher faculties. It must be remembered that Kant wrote the *Conflict* at the very end of the eighteenth century, i.e., the century of the *Encyclopédie* whose goal was to diffuse knowledge on a large scale in order to promote the extensive application of recent scientific breakthroughs. Kant himself writes in the third *Critique*, just after having taken notice of the unavoidable fact of social inequality, that the benefits of these advances “gradually spread” to the lower classes – again, the classes that provide the higher ones with the leisure to develop the arts and sciences, i.e., the products of high culture (5:432). To be sure, in Kant’s times, there were certainly some people still prone to interpret thunder and lightning as an expression of the divine wrath. But, after the invention of the lightning conductor by Benjamin Franklin in the middle of the century, for instance, people were gradually led to consider that those phenomena might very well be natural after all. The lightning conductor is in reality a fairly simple device which, together with other experiments on electricity, proves that lightning is ultimately nothing more than a natural phenomenon. As we can see, this is the classic theme of the disenchantment of the world: there seems to be no more place within nature for the supernatural.

According to Kant, however, the supernatural and the magical that constitute the essence of superstition are likely to take on new forms. There are other ways of short-circuiting the laws of nature even *within* the phenomenal world, and this is precisely what the common understanding does when it transfers the supernatural from the physical world to the domain of culture, or more precisely, when it attributes magical virtues to religion, law and medicine. This is the most important point in the *Conflict of the Faculties* for our understanding of Kantian enlightenment. If, as we have seen, superstition used to allow the common person to dodge her guilt and shirk her moral responsibility, the same pattern might very well reoccur when this person comes into contact with the professionals educated in the higher faculties, that is, with the priest, the lawyer and the doctor. There is a great temptation to confer magical powers on them and to expect them to perform miracles of sorts. In the eyes of the common person, these professionals very often appear, as Kant writes, like “*Wundermänner*”, miracle-men, if I may use this term. Now that

nature is increasingly disenchanting, it is culture that becomes enchanted. Phenomena taking place in the sensible world, such as a church ritual, a trial in court, or medical surgery are in fact likely to be interpreted by the common person as having supersensible effects: each can be seen as a substitute, as an ersatz, for my failing moral conduct. For example if, according to practical reason, salvation can only be hoped for through scrupulous moral behaviour, why wouldn't the performance of a simple religious ritual in the sensible world (like confession) produce the same result, and thus be equivalent to exercising my freedom at the level of my intelligible character?¹⁵ The following passage, certainly worth being quoted *in extenso*, is highly revealing of the manner in which superstition re-emerges in the realm of culture. One has to pay attention to the fact that it is the people (*Volk*) who exert pressure on the graduates of the higher faculties to perform these miracles. The *Volk* rejects the lessons of the philosophical faculty, which imposes a burden seemingly much too heavy to bear: the exhortation to lead one's life morally.

«So the people [...] invite the higher faculties to make them more acceptable proposals. And the demands they make on these scholars [*Gelehrte*] run like this. 'As for the philosophers' twaddle, I've known that all along. What I want you, as scholars, to tell me is this: if I've been a scoundrel all my life, how can I get an eleventh-hour ticket to heaven? If I've broken the law, how can I still win my case? And even if I've abused my physical powers as I've pleased, how can I stay healthy and live a long time? Surely this is why you have studied – so that you would know more than someone like ourselves (you call us idiots), who can claim nothing more than sound understanding».

As we can see, the professionals to whom the people turn are asked to neutralize, or better, to erase the consequences of their misconduct and to discharge them of their moral responsibility of leading a virtuous life. But if the people are deaf to the summons of philosophy, then the higher faculties on the other hand should be open to the remarks of the philosopher, because otherwise they run the risk of encouraging superstition, the greatest prejudice, as we know, that enlightenment must combat. Here the superstitious character of the people's demands could not be more explicit. Let us read Kant's comments:

«But now the people are approaching these scholars as if they were soothsayers and magicians, with knowledge of supernatural things; for if an unlearned person expects something from a scholar, he readily forms exaggerated notions of him. But we can naturally expect that if someone has the effrontery to give himself out as a such a miracle-worker, the people will flock to him and contemptuously desert the philosophy faculty. But the business people [*Geschäftsleute*] of the three higher faculties will always be such miracle-workers, unless the philosophy faculty is allowed to counteract them publicly – not in order to overthrow their teachings but only to deny the magic power that the public superstitiously [*abergläubisch*] attributes to these teachings and the rites connected with them – as if, by passively surrendering themselves to such skilful guides, the people would

¹⁵ In the *Religion*, Kant describes this “sorcery [*Zauber*]” as an art “of achieving a supernatural effect through entirely natural means,” 6:177. See also on superstition, *Der Streit der Fakultäten*, 7:64, 65 n. For the intelligible character of the human being, see *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A 538/B 567.

be excused from any activity of their own and led, in ease and comfort, to achieve the ends they desire». ¹⁶

Here superstition takes on a very definite shape, that nevertheless reminds us of the formal definition that we read earlier in the third *Critique*. The phenomena in the sensible world are all subject, without exception, to the laws of nature, and it is not permitted to attribute them supernatural properties. The laws of nature are basically the laws of the understanding common to all individuals, and hence we can appreciate why the maxim of the enlightenment in the *Orientation* essay is characterized as the maxim of the “self-preservation” (8:147n.) of reason. Invoking the miraculous is not permissible because one thereby “forfeits” one’s own reason. As we can see, the sound common understanding is clearly concerned by the call to enlightenment in that it must resist overestimating and overburdening the products of culture and their repositories.

But we must admit that the professionals, the “business people” as Kant calls them, are also intimately concerned by enlightenment since they are themselves often at fault by accepting to play the role the people urge them to play. There is indeed a strong temptation on their side, too. Through their very functions they exercise a certain authority over the people, and so they must be careful. If we turn for instance to Kant’s book on *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, we discover that there is room for what Kant calls a “true enlightenment” in religious matters. It consists in considering things in their proper order: what the priest has primarily to teach are the fundamentals of the religion of reason, which simply amount to the fulfilment of all moral duties (as if they were commands originating from God). And then there is the part that Kant calls church belief. It consists of statutes and observances which were revealed in ancient times and have been transmitted to further generations through historical documents. Now what matters here is that the simple precepts of the religion of reason must maintain precedence over the statutes and the rituals, because the authentic manner to be pleasing to God lies exclusively in the first part of the teachings, the purely rational part to which everyone has access. However, if the priest gives precedence to the second part as the means for salvation, he becomes the proponent of a false cult (*Afterdienst*). ¹⁷ This reversal of the

¹⁶ Kant, *Der Streit der Fakultäten*, 7:30-31. On this topic, see Norbert Hinske 1980, p. 78-80.

¹⁷ Kant, *Religion*, 6:153, 165, 170. J. B. Schneewind (2006, p. 345-347) explains Kant’s conception of enlightenment with the help of the *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, which is in itself perfectly legitimate. He interprets the reversal of the order between the moral effort and the ritualized service leading to fetishism in terms of “radical evil,” according to which the egoistic motives are taking precedence over the moral ones. Now he transposes to religion the *pervertitas* (7:30) proper to radical evil in such a strict manner that he considers that the religious practices (observances and rituals) that gain precedence over the ethical conduct have to be in themselves immoral, if the parallel is to be maintained. And this would also apply to three of the examples of *What is Enlightenment?*: “Perhaps our pastor directs us to prosecute members of a group he thinks ungodly and despicable ; perhaps our commanding officer tells us to kill the wives and daughters of the enemy as well as their soldiers ; perhaps our physician urges us to bribe the pharmacist to give us priority for some important medicine in very short supply... Enlightened agents can, however, accept church ceremonies or political directives or medical advice as long as these do not require overruling morality. The agent is free to decide by using prudential reason whether to accept or reject

order of priority is very tempting for the clergyman because in this way he gains a form of control and “domination”¹⁸ over his parishioners, a dominion that may easily become “despotic.”¹⁹ In principle, the priest is a “servant [*Diener*],” (6:152-153) but this is an empty word if he claims to be the exclusive depository of rites and statutes that lead to salvation. Kant notes for instance that Protestantism as a historical religion is based on an impressive amount of “erudition (*Gelehrsamkeit*)” in order to maintain access to the historical sources of revelation, i.e., extensive knowledge of ancient languages, of geography and history. So this means that historical religions are viewed as sophisticated objects of positive knowledge, of erudition – in a word: of *culture*. And because this specialized knowledge is accessible only to the learned priests, the risk of responding to the superstitious demands of the people, fascinated by this esoteric knowledge, by this erudition to which they do not have access, is all the greater.

We are now in a position to re-examine some aspects of the texts of the critical decade that appeared somewhat elliptical in the first part of this paper. By considering what we have just learned from the temptation facing the clergyman, it becomes easier to understand why Kant could argue in *What is Enlightenment?* that the guardians are always prone to accept the authority conferred on them by the people. The erudition possessed by the priest, a knowledge that ought to be put in the service of the faithful for the accomplishment of their moral duties, is instead turned into an instrument of domination, provided that the learned person consents to play this role. This is surely what Kant meant in the *Orientation* essay when he argued that enlightenment does not have to do with the acquisition of information and that the people who possess a great wealth of knowledge are often the ones who make the least “enlightened” usage of it. In this regard, the person of learning has to answer the call to *sapere aude!* as much as the uneducated person. The latter was characterized in *What is Enlightenment?* by his laziness and cowardice. We can now interpret this to mean that the sound human understanding should not abandon its intellectual autonomy, nor its ethical responsibilities. Reason must “never be passive,” as we have learned from the third *Critique*, in the sense that it must never sink into magical thought. The simple laws of the understanding apply without exception everywhere in nature. They are the safeguard against superstition – whose specific form we came to know – and the basis of one’s autonomy: a theoretical autonomy that is closely linked to practical autonomy.²⁰ Finally, we can answer a very relevant question raised by Deligiorgi concerning the refusal to listen to the advice of the doctor mentioned at the very beginning

directions from any authority, insofar as their directives concern the use of means that lie within the bounds of morality. And he can decide simply to take the authority’s advice without trying to think for himself about it any further than to see that it is morally permissible.” According to Kant however, in religion church ceremonies can be good in themselves if they come in the second place, and even when they gain precedence over the exercise of virtue, they can remain *per se* morally perfectly neutral (see *Religion*, AA 06, 169, 172). It is not because they overrule morality that they have to be rejected. The rituals and observances become condemnable by the mere fact they are used as substitutes that replace the moral conduct by taking precedence over virtue.

¹⁸ Kant, *Religion*, 6:165; *Der Streit der Fakultäten*, 7:33.

¹⁹ Kant, *Religion*, 6:180; *Der Streit der Fakultäten*, 7:28.

²⁰ On this difficult question, see Kubsda 2014, p. 35, 155; and Zöller 2009, p. 90.

of *What is Enlightenment?* In this particular passage, the individual who is enjoined by Kant to disregard the advice is not characterized as learned, but simply as someone who has to resist the authority of the spiritual advisor, of the doctor and of the book. Here an ordinary individual is faced with what we have characterized as persons or products of culture. And these people and products of learning have an authority that one is warned to approach with caution. In the case of the doctor, Kant's demand certainly seems to "border on the foolhardy," as Deligiorgi concedes (p. 61). Why resist the advice of such a learned person? But it must first be reminded that, for Kant, taking care of one's own health is an ethical duty. The *Metaphysics of Morals*, under the heading "Man's duty to himself as an animal being", mentions only three prohibitions (committing suicide, mutilating one's body and immoderately consuming food and alcohol), yet taken together, these prohibitions conversely entail an implicit command to take responsibility for one's own health.²¹ This is the sense in which we must interpret the example of the doctor in *What is Enlightenment?* When it comes to choosing my diet or lifestyle, I should be my own best judge as well as my own best doctor. Or at least so claims Kant in the *Conflict of the Faculties*, in which he presents a "philosophical," albeit idiosyncratic, approach to health that mobilises the power of reason in order to "become master of one's sensible feelings with the help of a principle determined by oneself."²² This proactive attitude toward the care of his own health was already present in Kant's correspondence with his friend Markus Herz in the 1770s and 1780s.²³

What should we conclude from all this about Katerina Deligiorgi's account according to which Kant is the proponent of an "egalitarian" conception of enlightenment? On the one hand, we can easily subscribe to this reading to the extent that it pertains to the core of Kant's conception: Have the courage to think for yourself in all circumstances! It is obvious that this call does not exclude any human being. Everyone is equally concerned. On the other hand, through our critical assessment of the sources to which Deligiorgi refers, we have been led to consider that the concept of enlightenment in Kant has two branches, or two different ways of making use of one's understanding. This is incidentally confirmed by the *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, where we learn that both the common person and the learned person need enlightenment (6:181), although in a differentiated manner. In both cases, however, the central concern or target is, as I have tried to demonstrate, *culture*. For the sound common understanding, the injunction means to refrain from magical thinking. The individual of common understanding is urged to decide once and for all to cease seeing in the products of culture physical means to exempt

²¹Kant, *Metaphysik der Sitten*, 6:421. See for the interpretation of prohibitions as implicit prescriptions: Höffe 1993, p. 106.

²² Kant, *Der Streit der Fakultäten*, 7:100-101; see also *Kritik der Urtheilskraft*, Section 54, 5:332 where the soul is said to be the doctor of the body. For a critique of Kant's idiosyncratic approach to medicine, see Unna 2012.

²³See for example Kant's letters to M. Herz of June 7, 1771, of the end of 1773, of August 20, 1777, of the beginning of April 1778, of August 28, 1778 and of May 11, 1781, in *Briefwechsel*, 10:123, 143, 212-213, 231, 241, 270.

herself from fulfilling her ethical duties. Physical means like religious rituals are no substitutes because they cannot produce effects in the supersensible realm of morality and freedom. To be sure, the decision to elevate oneself to intellectual autonomy can only be taken by the individual. In fact Kant envisages this decision as a real personal “revolution.”²⁴ In this regard, Kant could definitely not agree with Hamann, who strongly criticised the main thesis of *What is Enlightenment?* According to Hamann, it is not permissible to accuse the masses of being responsible for their immaturity.²⁵ They are literally held in a state of submission by an absolutist regime and they cannot be accused of not breaking the chains in which the guardians hold them. Immaturity cannot be said to be self-incurred; it is imposed from the outside. But Kant cannot agree. If enlightenment in the end amounts to intellectual autonomy, one cannot emancipate an individual without her participation or against her will. Enlightenment is precisely a matter of courage and personal decision, and therefore it cannot be understood as a top-down process for Kant. As for the learned, on the other hand, enlightenment means adopting a critical attitude toward the products of culture and especially toward the sciences taught in the higher faculties in order to prevent this knowledge from being fetishized by the people.

That being said, the following question comes to mind: why did Deligiorgi not exploit the important passages of the *Conflict of the Faculties* concerning enlightenment? To be sure, this is not an oversight on her part. Leaving this later work aside is a deliberate and understandable choice. In fact, the developments of the *Conflict* do not fit well with the image of enlightenment that she tries to extract from the texts of the critical decade, according to which *Aufklärung* should entail a free and open access to public discussion for everyone and without censorship. Her project of showing the present-day relevance of this approach to enlightenment is certainly legitimate, especially in view of the new channels that have recently opened up, if only for what Kant calls the “world of readers” (*Leserwelt*). The public sphere has expanded to proportions that were totally unimaginable for Kant. And in this regard Deligiorgi is right when she sees in Kant’s last published work a “narrowing down of the scope of public argument” (p. 77). In 1798 Kant was in fact led to revise²⁶ his position of 1784 in that, from then on, he confers the status of men of learning (*Gelehrte*) exclusively upon the university teachers, not anymore upon the professionals who come out of their faculties. This means that the priests, lawyers and doctors are no doubt learned persons, but they now deserve the title of mere “literate.”²⁷ Because they are appointed by the government to apply a definite corpus of religious dogmas, laws or medical prescriptions, they do not, in Kant’s view, enjoy the freedom to adopt a reflexive critical stance vis-à-vis these doctrines – a marked demotion, so to speak, compared to the priest, the army officer, and the tax inspector in *What is Enlightenment?* whom Kant did deem capable of stepping outside of their civic functions

²⁴ Kant, *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*, 7:228-229.

²⁵ Hamann, Letter to C. J. Kraus, December 18, 1784, *Briefwechsel*, vol. 5, p. 289-292.

²⁶ This revision had already been adumbrated in the Foreword to the first edition of the *Religion* (1793), 6:8-9.

²⁷ Kant, *Der Streit der Fakultäten*, 7:18. See also Braeckmann 2008, p. 296.

and making a public use of their reason. This change is perhaps related to the limited scope of the *Conflict of the Faculties*, as Deligiorgi thinks, but it becomes clear that the public discussion from then on takes place between the faculty of philosophy and the teachers of the higher faculties, in order to incite the latter to continually question their scientific knowledge for the benefit of truth – and for Kant, that means for the benefit of the citizens’ freedom.

While we are accustomed to understanding enlightenment as a struggle against obscurantism, we have discovered that with Kant it is rather turned against the “Lumières” themselves. This, Kant has retained from Rousseau. But he feels the need to go beyond the two *Discourses*, in which culture is severely criticized against the background of the state of nature. For Kant, culture is here to stay and is in reality a crucial condition for the attainment of the moral vocation of the humanity. Yet he knows that culture is still at an early stage, that is, in a phase involving its lot of hardships for individuals. In an essay published the same year as the *Orientation* article, the *Conjectural Beginning of Human History*, he even writes that culture “has not yet really begun,” even though he remains confident that it will one day come to its “full completion” (8:116,121). Meanwhile enlightenment has to play a role of supervision toward culture. Enlightenment must bring about what Gerhard Krämling calls a “critical concept of culture” (Krämling 1985, p. 294; see also 135,141, 163, 296). Or if I may allow myself to invert the title of Deligiorgi’s book, rather than speaking of “Kant and the culture of enlightenment,” we should say “Kant and the enlightenment of culture.”

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