What is Enlightenment?

„Enlightenment is the exit of humans from their self-inflicted dependence.“

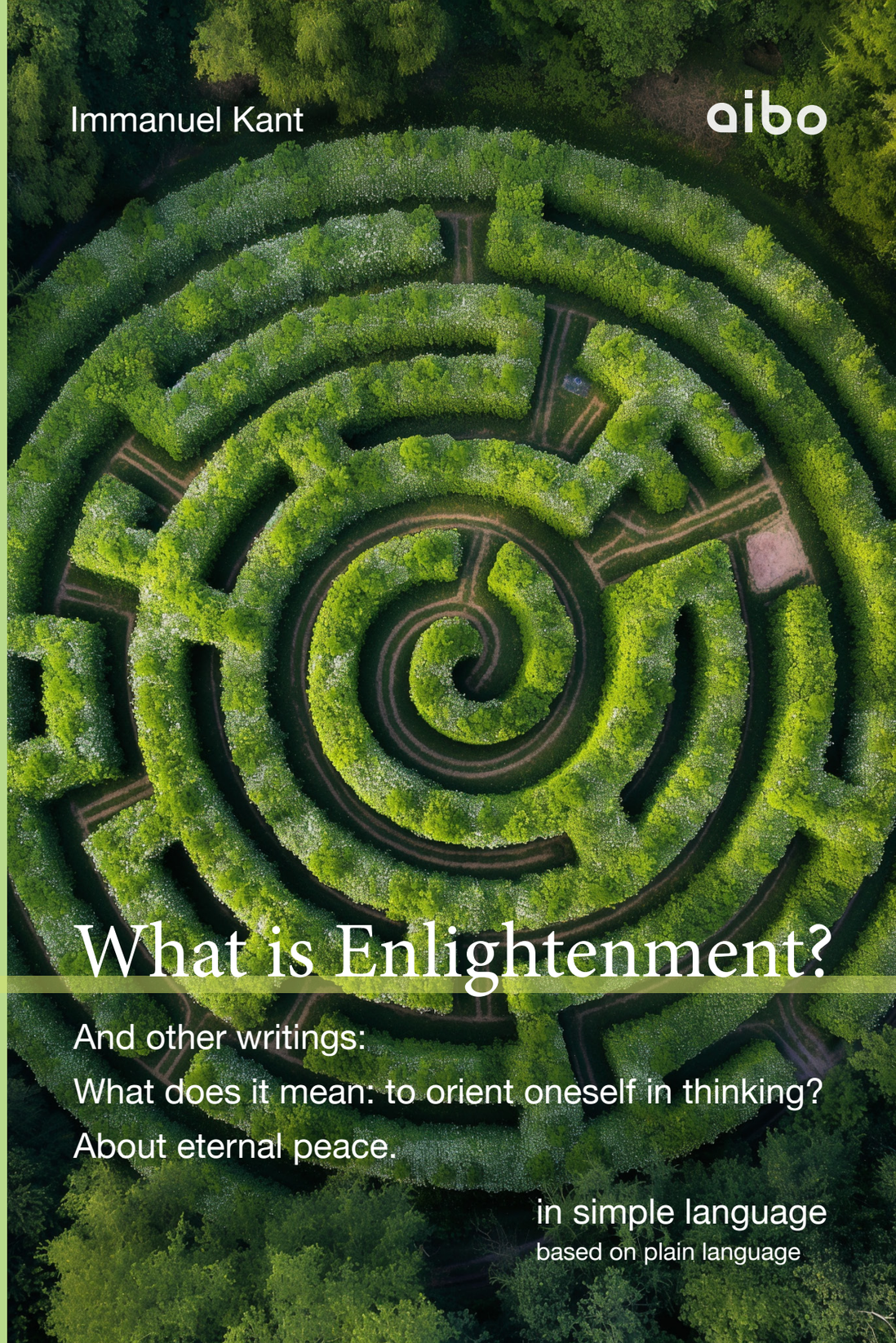
Immanuel Kant lived in the Age of Enlightenment.
The church and the state dictated how people should live and think.
Many poets and thinkers rebelled against this. Scientists had already shown the church many mistakes. Poets like Voltaire and thinkers like Rousseau said: people should not believe everything.
Then they are not free. They enlightened people about their own power: their intellect and their reason.

About eternal peace.

There were many wars and revolutions in Kant‘s time.
Kant believed that human reason could end wars forever.
He thought about the prerequisites for this. The result is his treatise „On Perpetual Peace“. It is intended to establish peace throughout the world. They say it could really work. That is why it is still valid today.

These three Kant key texts are reproduced here in plain language.
They largely correspond to general standards, and we have also adapted them for plain language. The book is therefore also suitable for readers with limited reading ability, German as a second language or cognitive impairments. This means that everyone can now understand the most important German thinker.

Immanuel Kant.
For the 300th birthday (2024) in plain language.



Kant‘s life

Immanuel Kant was born on April 22, 1724 in Königsberg on the Baltic Sea. He died there on February 12, 1804.

Kant was the son of a saddler. He became an important German thinker. He taught logic and metaphysics at the university in Königsberg for a long time. His book “Critique of Pure Reason“ is very important. It processed the entire old philosophy and founded his Enlightenment on it. He was also known as the “crusher of everything“.

Kant stayed in Königsberg all his life. He took the same walk every day, right on time. People said: “You can set your watch by Kant.“
He only wanted to concentrate on his work. He was never married. Kant allegedly said: “It‘s like practicing the violin. It takes too much time.“ He only wanted to practise thinking.

Kant was also often funny. He liked to invite merchants, sailors, soldiers and others for lunch. They told him about the world. The battles for freedom such as the peace between his country Prussia and France, the French and American Revolutions made a great impression on him. Everyone loved him. The whole town and many others came to his funeral.

Kant‘s philosophy

Kant‘s work is divided into two parts: Before and after his book “Critique of Pure Reason“. Before that, Kant thought similarly to other thinkers. He called this period “dogmatic slumber“.
In 1770, his thinking changed. He only worked on a new theory.

In his “quiet time“, Kant spent eleven years writing the book “Critique of Pure Reason“. By “critique“ he means a precise examination. It deals with the prerequisites for cognition.
The “Critique of Pure Reason“ made him famous.
The second “Critique“ deals with action. The third “Critique“ is about judgment. Kant also wrote about astronomy, religion, law and history.

Kant changed the way we think about knowledge and life.
His ideas are still valid today.

For Kant, philosophy has only four questions:
What can I know?
What should I do?
What can I hope for?
What is human?

Answering the question: What is enlightenment?

Enlightenment is man's exit from his self-inflicted immaturity.

Immaturity means dependence. Here it means: We do not think for ourselves. Our thoughts are those of others. We often don't have the courage to think for ourselves. That's our own fault. That doesn't make us stupid. But we are a bit cowardly and indecisive.

The motto of the Enlightenment is: "Have the guts! Think for yourself!". You just need courage. But most people are lazy or cowardly. Thoughts are actually free. But they prefer to remain immature. Then others decide about them.

Being a minor is much more comfortable. A book can teach me. A pastor can clear my conscience. A doctor can assess my condition. I don't have to make an effort myself. I can pay for it. Others then do the thinking for me.

Many people find thinking for themselves difficult and dangerous. But they have only been told this by others. These people want to take control of them. They then hold us captive like pets. They think they can't walk around outside on their own. They give them a walking aid. But the pets think they can walk themselves.

But walking yourself is not particularly dangerous. You fall down a few times and get up again. Then you can walk yourself. It's the same with thinking.

It is difficult for individuals to manage without the guidance of others. We prefer to take on the thoughts of others. This has become almost normal for us. We have become accustomed to it. We even like it. We may never have tried it before.

We prefer to stick to general rules and formulas. They supposedly come from nature. But they are our shackles. We are used to them. That‘s why we stumble without shackles. We don‘t know this freedom.

Only very few people can free themselves alone and feel safe right away. It is much easier for several people to clear up together. In fact, that is very likely. Even their leaders will join in. Because they will all feel their own freedom. They will all feel more valuable.

Sometimes even an enlightened people want to remain controlled. Especially when it is incited by some of its leaders. Such leaders know nothing about enlightenment themselves. They prefer to spread prejudice. That is bad. In the end, people suffer from these prejudices.

A people is therefore only slowly enlightened. A revolution can end oppression. But it does not change people‘s thinking. New prejudices and old prejudices will guide the people.

Enlightenment only requires freedom. Above all, the freedom to use one‘s reason and not to listen to others. But instead you hear: Don‘t think! An officer says: Don‘t think, obey! A financial advisor says: Don‘t think, pay! The priest says: Don‘t think, believe! (The highest Lord in the world says: Think as much as you want. As long as you obey!). Here freedom is restricted everywhere. But the public use of reason can bring about enlightenment among people. In private, enlightenment can remain very limited. But a scholar in front of an audience thinks publicly.

Sometimes you have to do as you‘re told. At work, for example. Otherwise it won‘t work. You can‘t always disagree. But as part of a larger community, you can speak your mind. There are no problems at work either. But you are also part of a machine, a member of a whole or a person in a world. And some things have to work.

For example, a soldier should follow orders and not discuss them. But a scholar can write down mistakes in the military and let others judge. A citizen must pay taxes. But he cannot discuss taxes. That could be punished. But a scholar is allowed to criticize. A pastor must teach his students and his congregation the Bible and the rules of the church. That's what he was hired for. But as a scholar, you are also allowed to freely express your thoughts about errors in religion. He is also allowed to say what would be better. He doesn't have to have a guilty conscience. Because in his job in the church, he only explains the church. He does not express his own opinion. He says: "Our church believes this and that." He explains the rules of the church to his congregation. Perhaps he is not completely convinced himself. Maybe he thinks some things are completely wrong. Then he actually has to give up his job. He can give his private opinion to his congregation. But he should only do his job.

But scholars speak to the whole world in their texts. They should speak as their own person. They should calmly publish their rational thoughts. They think for themselves. That is why they are free.

But should we decide together to always spread the same things? I say: that is quite impossible. A contract that is not intended to educate people is null and void. Even if governments decide so.

In the future, people should expand their knowledge, correct errors and make progress in enlightenment. Anything else would be a crime against human nature. It is supposed to progress. Laws against enlightenment should be rejected by descendants. A great society writes its own enlightenment. Then you can distinguish a good people from a bad people.

Would people give themselves this law? Perhaps for a short time, to create order. Then every scholar would publicly criticize the church, for example. If many have the same opinion, the criticism can be

brought before the government. So you can change the church, for example. Or you can leave everything as it is. But if you don‘t want humanity to be better off, you are actually doing something forbidden.

A single person could simply postpone enlightenment. But then he doesn‘t think about others. For example, his children and the future. He violates the sacred rights of humanity and tramples them underfoot.

Even a king is not actually allowed to make decisions for the people alone. He must represent the will of the people. Only the recognition of the people makes him powerful. The king should do what is good for people‘s souls. He should make sure that one person does not prevent the other from getting on in life. He harms himself if he interferes. People should talk to each other. The king cannot order everyone to think and act like him. Because a king is not above such discussions. Nor may he turn his ideas or a religion against his subjects.

Are we now living in an enlightened age? The answer is no:
No. But we are living in the age of enlightenment.

At the moment, we cannot yet explain religion without the guidance of someone else. But now the field is open. Everyone can move freely within it. And the obstacles to enlightenment are becoming fewer and fewer. There are many signs of this.

We live in the Age of Enlightenment. In the century of Prince Frederick the Great. My prince does not want to dictate to people when it comes to religion. He sees this as his duty. The prince wants to give them freedom. He doesn‘t just want to “tolerate“ others. He would find that arrogant. That is why he himself is enlightened. He deserves praise from the world and from later generations. Because he was the first ruler to free people from their dependence. Under him, every person is free. Everyone is allowed to use their own reason.

Clergymen and scholars are also free to express their opinions in addition to their official duties. They can put forward their own ideas for consideration. And everyone else even more so. This freedom spreads everywhere. Even when the government gets something wrong and you have to fight for your ideas. You know that: Where there is peace and unity, they have peace. People become better on their own if they are not deliberately kept ignorant.

I say: education is important. Enlightenment means that people think for themselves. I was speaking particularly for religion. Because in art and science, one‘s own views are of no interest. Even the rulers don‘t want to determine people there. But the determination of others over me in religion is bad and humiliating.

A head of state who allows free thought understands something crucial. It allows people to express their opinions. They are allowed to think about laws and criticize them. Such rulers no longer need to use force. Because they themselves are free. And we revere them.

A clever ruler without fear and with a lot of power can of course easily say: Think as much and about what you want, as long as you obey!
But that would be a contradiction.

More freedom can restrict people‘s minds. Less freedom can allow the spirit to grow. Because with more freedom, you don‘t even notice it. With less freedom, you want more freedom. Nature allows our freedom to grow like a plant. Free thinking then becomes ever greater and extends to the whole people and then also to the government.
It then finds it much better to treat people better itself.
Because people are more than machines.

Written in Königsberg, Prussia, on September 30, 1784, by I. Kant.

PS
Today I realized that my colleague Moses Mendelssohn had already answered the question “What is enlightenment?“ earlier.
I didn‘t know that. I haven‘t read his text yet. Perhaps I wouldn‘t have written my attempt at an answer if I had. Because perhaps we are thinking the same thing.