ESSAYS
AND
TREATISES
ON MORAL, POLITICAL, AND VARIOUS
PHILOSOPHICAL SUBJECTS.

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ANSWER TO THE QUESTION,

WHAT IS ENLIGHTENING?

Enlightenment is, Man's quitting the nonage occasioned by himself. Nonage or minority is the inability of making use of one's own understanding without the guidance of another. This nonage is occasioned by one's self, when the cause of it is not from want of understanding, but of resolution and courage to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another. Sapere aude! Have courage to make use of thy own understanding! is therefore the dictum of enlightening.

Laziness and cowardice are the causes, why so great a part of mankind, after nature has long freed them from the guidance of others (naturaliter majoreânes), willingly remain minors as long as they live; and why it is so easy for others, to set themselves up as their guardians. It is convenient to be a minor. If I have a book, which has understanding for me, a curate, who has conscience for me, a physician, who judges of diet for me, etc. I need not give myself any trouble. I have no occasion to think, if I can but pay; others will
will save me the trouble of that irksome business. Those guardians, who have graciously undertaken the superintendence of mankind, take sufficient care; that by far the greater part of them (and all the fair) shall hold the step to majority, besides the trouble attending it, very dangerous. After these superintendents have first made them as stupid as their domestic animals, and carefully prevented those peaceable creatures from daring to venture a single step beyond the go-cart, in which they are inclosed; they point out to them the danger that threatens them, if they should try to go alone. Indeed this danger is not so very great, for, at the expense of a few falls, they would learn to walk at last; but an example of this sort renders timid, and commonly discourages from all further attempts. It is therefore difficult for every single man to extricate himself from the nonage, which is almost become natural to him. Nay, it is even become agreeable to him, and he is for the present actually incapable of using his own understanding, because he never was allowed to make the trial. Ordinances and formules, the mechanical instruments of a rational use, or rather misuse, of his gifts of nature, are the fetters of an everlasting minority. Whoever shook them off, would take but an uncertain leap over the smallest ditch; even, because he is not accustomed to such a free motion. Hence there are but few, who have succeeded to emancipate themselves from nonage by their own labour, and yet to walk firmly.
But it is sooner possible for a nation to enlighten itself; nay, when it has the liberty, it is almost infallible. For a few who think for themselves will always be found, even among the installed guardians of the multitude, who, after they themselves have thrown off the yoke of nonage, will spread about them the spirit of a rational estimation of the proper value and of the vocation of every man to think for himself. It is singular in this, that the public, which was formerly brought under this yoke by them, afterwards compels them themselves to remain under it, when this public is thereto stirred up by some of its guardians, who are themselves totally incapable of enlightening; so pernicious is it to fill with prejudices; as they are revenged at last on those themselves who, or whose predeceors, were their authors. Hence a nation can attain enlightening but slowly. A deliverance from personal despotism, and interested and tyrannical oppression, may perhaps be obtained by a revolution, but never a true reform of the cast of mind; new prejudices will serve, just as well as the old, for leading strings to the thoughtless multitude.

To this enlightening however nothing is required but liberty; and indeed the most harmless of all that may be named liberty, to wit, that, to make a public use of one’s reason in every point. But I hear exclaimed from all sides: don't reason! The officer says: don't reason, but exercise! The financier: don't reason, but pay! The clergyman: don't reason, but believe! (Only one master in the
world says: reason, as much as you please, and on what you please, but obey! Here is everywhere restriction of liberty. But what restriction is a hinderance to enlightening? what not, but even favourable to it? — My answer is this: the public use of one's reason must always be free, and that only can bring about enlightening among men; but the private use of it may often be very strictly limited, without much hindering the progress of enlightening. By the public use of one's own reason however I understand that, which every one as a man of letters makes of it in the eyes of the whole reading world. I name the private use that, which he may make of his reason in a certain civil post, or office, intrusted to him. There is necessary to many businesses, which run in with the interest of the commonwealth, a certain mechanism, by means of which some members of the commonwealth must conduct themselves passively merely, in order, by an artificial unison directed by the government to public ends, to be withheld at least from the destruction of these ends. Here indeed it is not allowed to reason; but one must obey. But so far as this part of the machine considers itself at the same time as a member of the whole commonwealth, nay, even of the cosmopolitical society, consequently in the character of a man of letters, who addresses himself by writings to the public in the proper sense; he may by all means reason, without doing any injury thereby to the business, to which he is appointed, partly as a passive member. It would be
be very hurtful, if an officer, to whom his superior gives an order, should in actual service reason loudly on the conformity-to-end, or expediency of this order; he must obey. But he, as a man of letters, cannot in justice be hindered from making his observations on the faults of the military service, and from submitting these to the judgment of the public. The citizen cannot refuse to pay the taxes imposed on him; even a forward censure of such taxes, when they are to be paid by him, may be punished as a scandal (which might occasion universal opposition). The very same person, notwithstanding that, does not act contrary to the duty of a citizen, when he, as a man of letters, publishes his thoughts on the unfitness or even the injustice of such imposts. In like manner is a clergyman bound, to deliver himself to his congregation in all points according to the symbol of the church, which he serves; for he was ordained on this condition. But as a man of letters he has full liberty, nay, it is his call, to communicate to the public all his carefully proved and well-meant thoughts on what is faulty in that symbol, and to make his proposals for the better regulation of the affairs of religion and of the church. There is nothing in this, which can be burdensome to the conscience. For, what he teaches pursuant to his office, as agent of the church, he represents as something, in respect of which he has not a free power to teach according to his own sentiments, but he is ordered to propound that according to precept and in the name of another. He may say:
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SAY: our church inculcates this, or that doctrine; these are the arguments it makes use of. He then draws all practical profit to his congregation from ordinances, to which he himself would not subscribe, perhaps with full conviction, to whose propounding however he can bind himself, because it is not quite impossible that truth may lie therein concealed, but at all events nothing is found in them inconsistent at least with the internal religion. For, did he believe to find in them anything repugnant to this, he could not administer his office with a safe conscience; he must resign it. The use, therefore, which an established teacher or pastor makes of his reason before his hearers, is a private use merely; as this is never but a domestic congregation, though ever so great; and in regard to which he, as a priest, is not free, and dare not be so, because he executes the commission of another. Whereas, as a man of letters, who speaks by writings to the proper public, namely, the world, consequently the ecclesiastic, in the public use of his reason, enjoys an unlimited liberty, to use his own reason and to speak in his own person. For it is an absurdity, which tends to the perpetuating of absurdities, that the guardians of the people (in spiritual things) shall themselves be again in a state of nonage.

But should not a society of clergymen, for instance, a church-assembly, or a reverend class (as the Dutch clergy name themselves) be intitled to bind one another by oath to a certain unalterable symbol, in order to exercise
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cise an incessant supreme guardianship over every one of their members and by their means over the people, and even to eternize this? I maintain that that is totally impossible. Such a contract, entered into for the purpose of withholding for ever all farther enlightening from the human species, is absolutely void; and should it be confirmed by the chief power even, by diets of the empire, and by the most solemn treaties of peace. An age cannot league itself, and by oath too, to put the following age into a state, wherein it must be impossible for it to enlarge its knowledge (especially a knowledge so very important), to purge away errors, and in general to make progress in enlightening. That were a crime against human nature, whose original destination consists directly in this progression; and posterity is therefore completely entitled to reject those resolutions, as at once incompetently and presumptuously formed. The test of all that can be finally determined with regard to a nation, lies in the question, Whether a nation itself could institute such a law? This would, as it were, in the expectation of a better, be possible for a determinate short time, with a view to introduce a better order; if at the same time all the citizens, principally the clergy, had the liberty, in the character of men of letters, to make their observations publicly, that is, by writings, on that which is faulty of the present economy, but the established order might still continue, till the insight into the nature of these things attained such a degree, that they (the citizens)
by uniting their voices (though not of all) could make a proposal to the throne, to take under its protection those congregations, which had united themselves in an altered economy of religion according to their conceptions of a better introspection, without however molesting those, who rather choose to continue with the old. But to unite one's self in a permanent constitution of religion, to be questioned by nobody publicly, even but during the life-time of one man, and thereby, as it were, annihilate a period in the progress of humanity to amendment, to render it fruitless and by that means even detrimental to posterity, is absolutely not allowed. A man may indeed, as to his own person, defer, and even then but for a time, the enlightening in that, which is incumbent on him to know; but to renounce it, let it be for his own person, but still more for posterity, is to violate and to trample on the sacred rights of humanity. But what a nation cannot finally determine with regard to themselves, still less can the monarch determine that finally with regard to the nation; for his legislative dignity rests upon his uniting in his own will the common will of the nation. If he but takes care, that all true or opiniative improvement be consistent with the civil order; as for the rest, he may let his subjects themselves do what they find necessary to be done for the sake of the welfare of their own souls; that does not concern him, but it concerns him to take care that the one shall not violently prevent the other from labouring with all his strength at the
the determination and furtherance of that welfare. He derogates from his own majesty, when he interferes with the writings, by which his subjects endeavour to perfectionate their insights, and thinks them worthy of the inspection of his government, as well as when he does this from his own profound introspection, where he exposes himself to the exprobration, *Cæsar non est supra grammaticos*, as also, and still more, when he humbles his supreme power so far, as to support the ecclesiastic despotism of a few tyrants in his state against his other subjects.

If it is now enquired, do we live at present in an enlightened age? The answer is, No, but by all means in an age of enlightening. There is still a great deal wanting to men, as things are at present, on the whole, to be in a state, or to be but able to be put in a state, to make a safe and a good use of their own understanding in affairs of religion without the guidance of another. But we have distinct proofs, that the field is now opened for them to labour in freely, and the hinderances of universal enlightening, or of quitting the nonage occasioned by themselves, become by degrees fewer. In this respect the present age is the age of enlightening, or Frederick's century.

A prince, who does not think it unworthy of himself to say, that he holds it duty, not to prescribe any thing to men in matters of religion, but to allow them full liberty therein, who declines, even the lofty name of being tolerating, is himself enlightened, and merits
merits to be esteemed as such by the grateful world and by posterity, a prince, who first freed the human species from nonage, at least on the part of government, and gave them liberty, in all that is an affair of conscience, to use their own reason. Under him could respectable clergymen, in the character of men of letters, without prejudice to the duty of their office, freely expose to the world to be proved their judgments and insights, here and there deviating from the received symbol; and still more every other person, who is limited by no duty of office. This spirit of liberty diffuses itself outwardly also, even where it has to struggle with external impediments of a government misunderstanding itself. For it gives an example to that government, that it needs not, on account of liberty, be under the smallest solicitude for the tranquillity, and union of the commonwealth. Men naturally extricate themselves insensibly from the state of rudeness and barbarity, when invention is not purposely plied to keep them in it.

The stress of the principal point of enlightening, that of men's quitting the nonage occasioned by themselves, I have laid upon matters of religion chiefly; because, with regard to arts and sciences, our rulers have no interest in playing the guardian over their subjects; besides, that state of nonage is not only the most pernicious, but the most dishonourable of any. But the way of thinking of a head of the state, who favours enlightening penetrates farther and perspects, That even
even in regard of his *legislation* there is no
danger in allowing his subjects to make a
*public* use of their reason, and to lay before
the world their thoughts on a *better consti-
tution*, and even a free and honest criticism
of the present; we have an eminent example
of this, in which no monarch ever surpassed
him, whom we honour.

But only he, who, enlightened himself, is
not only not afraid of his shadow, but has at
hand a well-disciplined numerous army as a
security for the public tranquillity, can say,
what a free state dares not risk: *reason as
much as you please, and on what you please,
but obey!* Thus a strange unexpected course
of human affairs prevents itself here; so that,
when it is contemplated in the *grofs*, almost
every thing is paradoxical in it. A greater
degree of civil liberty seems advantageous to
the liberty of the spirit of the *nation*, and
yet places insuperable barriers to it; whereas
a degree less of that gives this full scope to
extend itself to the utmost of its faculty.
When nature has then unfolded under this
rough rind the germe, of which she takes
the most tender care, namely, the propen-
sity * and the call to *thinking freely*; this
gradually reacts on the minds of the people
(wherby they become by degrees more capa-
pble of the *liberty of acting*), and finally,
even on the principles of the government,
which finds it profitable for itself to treat

*See the proper signification of this word in the translator's
preface (page XXXV.) to *The Principles of Critical Philoso-
phy* by H. *Kant.*
man, who is now more than a mere machine, conformably to his dignity. *

* In Buesching's weekly Intelligencer of the 13th. Sept. I read today (the 30th inst.) the notice of the Berlin monthly publication of this month (Sept. 1784), wherein Mr. Moses Mendelssohn's answer to this very question is mentioned. It has not yet reached me; else it would have prevented the present, which may now remain for the purpose of experimenting, how far chance can effectuate a consonancy of sentiments.