

Foucault's Engagement with Kant: A Critical Analysis of Enlightenment Philosophy

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Abstract: This paper delves into Michel Foucault's critical examination of Immanuel Kant's philosophy of enlightenment, primarily through Foucault's essay *What is Enlightenment?* It summarizes Kant's conception of enlightenment as the liberation from self-imposed immaturity through the courageous use of reason, and highlights Kant's distinction between public and private reason. Foucault critically assesses Kant's views, questioning the universality of enlightenment and the dichotomy between public and private reason. By integrating insights from Charles Baudelaire on modernity, Foucault reframes enlightenment as a critical spirit intrinsic to modernity, emphasizing perpetual questioning, innovation, and identity formation. The paper concludes that Foucault's critical ethos advocates for an ongoing, radical examination of enlightenment and rationality, safeguarding against complacency and fostering independent thought.

Keywords: Foucault; Kant; Enlightenment; Modernity; Critical ethos

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1. Introduction

In 1984, Foucault published an essay titled *What is Enlightenment?* in which he offers a distinctive critique of Immanuel Kant's perspectives on enlightenment. In this essay, Foucault deftly summarizes Kant's principal theses concerning enlightenment, poses critical inquiries regarding Kant's philosophy, and assimilates the essence of Kant's thought. Through this analytical process, Foucault reexamines the fundamental nature, significance, and practical application of enlightenment. While scrutinizing the interplay between enlightenment and modernity, Foucault also references the insights of Charles Baudelaire, who perceived modernity as a dynamic and ever-evolving force that embraces the novel, the fleeting, and the ephemeral. Baudelaire celebrated the urban landscape, the rapid pace of life within the city, and the uninterrupted transformations that characterize modern society. This paper endeavors to compare and contrast Foucault's perspectives on enlightenment and modernity with those of Kant and Baudelaire, thereby illuminating the stakes involved in comprehending

these concepts within contemporary society. Through this examination, the study aims to achieve a deeper understanding of the evolving nature of enlightenment and modernity, along with their respective influences on our worldview.

2. Philosophy of enlightenment

Foucault highlights two pivotal aspects of Kant's enlightenment thought. First, Kant broadly conceptualizes enlightenment as the liberation of individuals from self-imposed tutelage, advocating for the imperative that individuals "have the courage to use your own reason" ^[1]. From Foucault's perspective, the crux of Kant's advocacy for the exercise of reason resides in individuals' willingness to consistently apply their rational faculties, even in the absence of external guidance or encouragement. This endeavor ultimately facilitates their gradual emancipation from an immature condition. In this context, Foucault underscores that Kant emphasizes the internal spiritual prerequisite necessary for individuals to shed immaturity and cultivate a will for freedom, characterized by the will for self-determination ^[2].

Secondly, Kant distinguishes between the public and private use of one's reason. Kant contends that when individuals engage in specialized occupations or are tasked with specific duties (as members of society or as components of a mechanism), they must adhere to the directives of their superiors (private use of reason). However, fulfilling these tasks does not impede individuals from reflecting on their actions. In other words, individuals can execute tasks according to instructions while simultaneously articulating their doubts and opinions regarding them (public use of reason). For Kant, "the public use of one's reason must always be free", as it has the potential to "bring about enlightenment among men" ^[1]. From Foucault's vantage point, Kant's discourse on the public and private use of reason centers on the contexts provided by systems and power structures. Consequently, Foucault concludes that enlightenment is intricately linked to "will, authority, and use of reason" ^[2].

Foucault subsequently identifies three perplexing issues in Kant's essay. Firstly, Kant employs the grand term "Menschheit", portraying enlightenment as a historical process that ostensibly pertains to "the entire human race" ^[1]. However, Foucault questions whether enlightenment truly impacts all mankind or rather interrogates the notion of "what constitutes humanity" ^[1]. He stresses that enlightenment ought to be an act ultimately executed by and within an individual. Furthermore, Foucault notes that while Kant views enlightenment as a "way out", he introduces this concept ambiguously, viewing it both as a process and an obligation ^[1]. Lastly, Foucault expresses dissatisfaction with Kant's distinction between the public and private use of reason, marking a significant divergence between their viewpoints.

In Foucault's judgment, Kant proposes two modes of reason utilization, which may also be perceived as two forms of freedom exercise. One mode allows individuals to raise doubts and objections without ideological constraints; the other mandates that individuals actively impose boundaries on their exercise of reason (freedom). Nevertheless, Foucault argues that the free use of reason and the articulation of objections should not undermine obedience. He contends that "the public and free use of autonomous reason will be the best guarantee of obedience" and that "the political principle must obey itself be in conformity with universal reason" ^[1]. Adopting a relatively radical stance, Foucault believes that a truly free individual should not constrain or limit themselves based on moral considerations, but rather contemplate methods of resisting power and oppression. Once individuals impose limitations upon themselves, they are unable to fully exercise their freedom or sustain

the spirit of criticism. For Foucault, freedom inherently involves the transgression of boundaries, as this is the sole means through which individuals can transcend established norms.

Despite their differing opinions, Foucault uniquely identifies the peculiarity of Kant's stance on enlightenment: "regard the reflection on 'today' as difference in history and as motive for a particular philosophical task"^[1]. Kant does not endeavor to "understand the present on the basis of a totality or of a future achievement" but rather seeks to discern "what difference does today introduce with respect to yesterday"^[1]. At this level, Kant prompts individuals to contemplate the significance and uniqueness of the "present": who we are, what we are doing, and how we find ourselves in our current situation. Foucault further extends these inquiries to examine various "relationships" within contemporary reality. He scrutinizes the dynamics between the present and the past, between the individual and their times, and between the individual and their inner self. Foucault posits that to thoroughly observe "modernity", one must possess the courage and capacity to form judgments grounded in one's reason, disregarding the prejudices of others and the pressures of popular opinion. Furthermore, it requires the fortitude to confront reality and strive for independent transformation of existing circumstances. In this context, Foucault manifests his critical spirit, effectively reorienting the discourse on "enlightenment" into an exploration of the essence of the "critical spirit", highlighting the intrinsic connection between "enlightenment" and "modernity"^[3].

The importance of the critical spirit within "contemporary reality" is intricately associated with the characteristics of modernity. Foucault illustrates this connection by referencing Baudelaire's perspective on modernity. Firstly, modernity is characterized as "fleeting and contingent", situating individuals in a state of perpetual change, compelling them to break from traditional constraints while simultaneously inspiring creativity and innovation^[1]. Secondly, modernity urges individuals to capture "heroic moments" in real life, fostering the will to "heroize" the present. Lastly, individuals in modern contexts are prompted to scrutinize the relationship between themselves and reality, as well as the relationship with their inner world, to constantly investigate their own strengths and shape their identities.

Foucault resonates with Baudelaire's views on modernity while elaborating on them further. Through the concept of the "flâneur", Baudelaire reveals a fascination with instantaneity, advocating for a playful mentality that embraces and appreciates the pleasures arising from spontaneous events. Moreover, Baudelaire posits that individuals should engage in creative endeavors while confronting a "sleeping world" in solitude. Foucault places significant emphasis on this latter notion, asserting that a modern individual should aspire to an objective loftier than that of a mere flâneur—an aspiration that transcends the ephemeral pleasures of circumstantial events.

Indeed, Foucault underscores that "heroic temperament" and "modern courage" encompass two distinct stages. Initially, individuals should immerse themselves in the "present" moment, endeavoring to extract the eternal and poetic elements from transient experiences. Subsequently, utilizing these elements, they should re-engage with reality to reconstruct and reshape it. For Foucault, mere passive participation in a flowing reality, characterized by transient enjoyment, is insufficient. What is paramount is that individuals capture the potentially eternal beauty and inspiration from these fleeting moments, or grasp the characteristics of such a dynamic reality, and then re-immense themselves in this reality to engage in ongoing creation. This process of creation not only preserves the vitality of these instantaneous experiences but also empowers individuals to shape their identities, albeit in a manner that, according to Baudelaire, can embody both creativity and self-torture.

Ultimately, for Foucault, modernity signifies a critical approach through which individuals observe, construct, and reconstruct themselves. The imperative for such individuals is not merely to explore what exists or what may remain unknown but to persistently observe, refine, question, innovate, construct, and rebuild.

Foucault derives a distinctive critical ethos from his interpretation of Kant's enlightenment thought and his evaluation of the characteristics of modernity. The uniqueness of his critical disposition lies in his focus on concepts of "ceaselessness" and "permanence." In this framework, Foucault not only inherits Kant's critical tradition but also transcends it. By emphasizing the relentless nature of criticism, Foucault elevates his critical ethos to a positive and radical dimension. While Kant's critical spirit primarily seeks to delineate specific boundaries and promote rational thought within those confines, Foucault's critical perspective endeavors to illuminate the processes by which such boundaries are constructed and to explore possibilities for transcending them ^[4]. For Foucault, the aim of enlightenment is not to confine humanity within a static and rigid framework, but to inspire individuals to consistently examine, question, critique, and, crucially, create. enlightenment is not conceived as a singular event; rather, the process and outcomes of enlightenment should remain open-ended. Ongoing criticism necessitates an examination of enlightenment and rationality themselves, preventing individuals from erroneously accepting the "fixed outcomes" of enlightenment and the dominance of rationality, while also safeguarding against the complacency and conservatism that can accompany enlightenment. On the other hand, such perpetual criticism may compel humanity to actively engage with modernity, critically scrutinizing the relationship between the contemporary moment and their own identities, ultimately fostering a diligent approach to identity formation. The critical ethos espoused by Foucault serves both as a safeguard for individual liberty and as a vigilant response to various forms of human control. Such control may arise from power, technology, or even from enlightenment and modernity themselves. In this regard, Foucault's insights into enlightenment maintain their relevance in contemporary discourse, prompting individuals within this era to reflect upon whether the space for critical and independent thought is expanding or contracting.

3. Epilogue

In the first half of the twentieth century, intellectuals such as Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno began to examine the impact of mass culture on humanity and the arts. Despite their apparent differences in attitude, they articulated similar concerns: as mass culture assumes a preeminent role in the emergence of modernity, do individuals, overwhelmed by mass culture, possess more or fewer choices regarding aesthetic preferences and spiritual attachments? Although mass culture presents individuals with an array of exotic "material products" and diverse messages, they frequently encounter second-hand or third-hand "life experiences" orchestrated by others. In this epoch, modernity appears not only as "fleeting" but also as "fragmented". When contemporary individuals immerse themselves in these "fragments" with a paralyzed mindset and diminished cognitive capacities, they inevitably forfeit their ability for independent thought, judgment, and critique, thereby losing the vitality to observe and shape both reality and their own identities ^[5]. Baudelaire's notion of "heroism" may resonate with greater significance in this context, as humans appear to require heightened courage and wisdom to navigate various appearances, maintain a critical distance from contemporary society, and constantly engage in the processes of self-critique, recreation, and intellectual enlightenment.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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