

I Kan't Understand: A Fondness for Immaturity in a World of Enlightenment

Emma Melton

Dr. Tamura

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The desire to reach enlightenment motivates man to do better. As one works to achieve a deeper understanding of the world, man seeks out education from a variety of sources. According to Immanuel Kant in “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment,” immaturity is the exigency for “guidance” from another to reach a greater understanding.¹ Depending on the approach of reason, enlightenment is granted to man in varying degrees. After reading Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave,” my interest in Kant was reinvigorated as I reflected on this fondness he speaks of. As a person who enjoys staying informed on present issues surrounding our world, I questioned how one could fancy the powerless position of immaturity. A position where no idea is purely yours, but implantations from others. How could one ever be content in immaturity when it is such an impotent and uncertain place of being?

Kant conveys a distaste for the conditioned dogmas that conquer society and lead one to seek information from a limited source. He delineates that over time, a person becomes “fond” of this position of knowledge by the hands of others.² Through this acceptance of immaturity, man becomes “incapable” of creating “his own reason.”³ Plato qualifies this view through his Allegory that this “kind of lack of insight” causes need for a “forced” action— a need for forced enlightenment because one cannot find it alone.⁴ This suggests the tolerance of accepting what is, quite literally, right in front of one’s face. Perhaps this is due to a lack of knowledge on where to go next. Notwithstanding, the implied contentment of foolishness is a Gordian knot that one becomes intertwined in due to a growing comfort.

¹ Kant, Immanuel. *Answering the Question: What Is Enlightenment?*, ed. James Schmidt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 58.

² Kant, “What is Enlightenment?”, 59.

³ Kant, “What is Enlightenment?”, 59.

⁴ Plato, “Allegory of the Cave” in *The Republic VII*, ed. Thomas Sheehan (Independent Publishing Platform, 2017), 3.

While Kant communicates this fondness of ignorance, he does not speak on why one finds it so congenial. However, Plato reveals a set of possible answers. He implies that perhaps one is frightened of the future, so one finds residing in ignorance ever more secure. Plato explains that if “[the cave-dwellers] could kill [the enlightened] ... they certainly” would.⁵ This outcome spurs from a fear of the unknown, influencing one’s liking to immaturity. The cave-dwellers know nothing other than when the past-dweller was “forced to stand up suddenly, to turn around, [and] to walk—” a frightening experience.⁶ This doubt, built in fear, implies a feeling of uncertainty that Kant does not communicate much within his work. Rather, Kant argues that man becomes accustomed to an immaturity that is now “almost natural to him.”⁷ Confidence in original thoughts appears superfluous when one adapts this perspective. One can be “fond” of immaturity because there is no uncertainty within it.⁸ In contrast, Plato exemplifies the due fear that could alter one’s journey to enlightenment, like that caused by pain. Plato asks, “would [the enlightened man’s] eyes not hurt him,” to which Glaucon answers that there is an inevitable pain.⁹ This inevitable suffering is implied to come as a consequence of the new knowledge. For instance, the affliction on the cave-dweller when gaining enlightenment was significantly more harmful than the “clearer” shadows he could see before, without support.¹⁰ The fright of a bright, futuristic item to his infant eyes sparked a fear response— a desire to flee. Kant would argue this is the lack of confidence to explore is instilled in those that are deprived and left in immaturity. He would state that the cave-dweller’s desire to hastily retreat is unsurprising as “only a few...[manage] to free themselves from immaturity.”¹¹

⁵ Plato, “Allegory of the Cave,” 6.

⁶ Plato, “Allegory of the Cave,” 3.

⁷ Kant, “What is Enlightenment?,” 59.

⁸ Kant, “What is Enlightenment?,” 59.

⁹ Plato, “Allegory of the Cave,” 3.

¹⁰ Plato, “Allegory of the Cave,” 3.

¹¹ Kant, “What is Enlightenment?,” 59.

On the contrary, the fondness of immaturity may erupt from a simple rejection of support— an unawareness that there is any new knowledge to learn. The cave-dwellers “have never managed...on their own or with the help by others” to comprehend and view the objects that move along the wall.¹² Therefore, the cave-dwellers may understand that new, truthful knowledge can only come from an external source. This disappointment is unknown to Kant, as people of his realm learn from others, a prime example being the clergymen. Kant illuminates the enlightenment gained through guidance of both prescribed teachings and secular thought, where clergy are “left free” and those being taught are left to rely on an outside source.¹³ Man knows no other way to learn more than to look to the powerful, enlightened groups. Plato further denotes how man needs to be helped “by others” to reach this enlightenment.¹⁴ After all, one cannot make a mistake if always guided by another. Both Kant and Plato would argue either that the immediate world is sole reality, or the postulation of the unknown is too unsettling and fearful to determine such.

Through “Allegory of the Cave,” Plato told a story of a search for enlightenment— a man lost in immaturity and stuck within his own self-incurred confusion and ignorance. Kant, on the contrary, incorporates anecdotal examples in his explanation of enlightenment and the process to achieve it. He focuses on the need for freedom of use of reason. Kant concluded we have not achieved enlightenment, and that deduction still pertains to today. In our present society, many people fear novel information. It is this unknown that should motivate us to discover, not hinder us nor encourage us to hide. We should not be fond of immaturity, but rather intrinsically motivated to learn more— to become enlightened— on a variety of topics. Perhaps Plato

¹² Plato, “Allegory of the Cave,” 2.

¹³ Kant, “What is Enlightenment?,” 61.

¹⁴ Plato, “Allegory of the Cave,” 2.

illuminated us on why we have not achieved enlightenment. Perhaps we need to be less fearful. Perhaps we need to explore more concepts. Whatever the idea, immaturity is not the solution, and leaving the cave might illuminate an answer. We must investigate, freely and openly.

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