



Vidyankur: Journal of Philosophical and Theological Studies XXIV/1 Jan 2022 | ISSN P-2320-9429 | **8-17**
<https://www.vidyankur.in> | DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.5593251
Stable URL: <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5593251>

“People’s Situation is Self-imposed:” An Expose Based on Immanuel Kant’s “What is Enlightenment?”

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Abstract: The enlightenment has been blamed for many things. Immanuel Kant in his famous article tells, that the lack of enlightenment is self-imposed. In other words, he is telling that man has the innate capability to use his own reasons. If he does not use his own reason without the guidance from others, he is in bondage. Is this people’s situation self-imposed? Or does he alone the cause of his nonage (immaturity)? Has it got anything with one’s own upbringing and one’s own culture, and tradition? The author tries to argue that how a child is brought up to use his reason play a vital role for this enlightenment.

Cite as: Vayalil, Shimmy Joseph. (2022). ‘People’s Situation is Self-imposed:’ An Expose Based on Immanuel Kant’s ‘What is Enlightenment?’ (Version 2.0) Vidyankur: Journal of Philosophical and Theological Studies. Jan-June 2022 XXIV/1 www.doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5593251 **8-17**.

Keywords: Enlightenment, Self-imposed, Nonage, Reason, Upbringing, Immanuel Kant

Introduction

In his famous Essay on, “What is Enlightenment? Immanuel Kant defines, “Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed nonage. Nonage is the inability to use one’s own understanding without another’s guidance. This nonage is self-imposed if its causes lies not in the lack of understanding but in indecision and lack of courage to use one’s own mind without another’s guidance (Kant, what is enlightenment?).” Some of the translations use the word ‘immaturity instead of the word ‘nonage.’ The focus of this essay is on this ‘immaturity is Self-imposed’ (or some of the English translations use the construction, ‘self-incurred’) My intent is to explore how does Kant justify his claim that people’s situation is self-imposed? what does it mean by ‘self-imposed’? and what are the causes for self-imposed immaturity?

Before discussing the real argument, it is always apt to clarify some of the problems in translations. Immaturity and nonage are not a right word to express the real crucial concept ‘*unmundigkeit*’. It is more likely to misconstrue the real meaning. In normal English language ‘Immaturity’ is always linked or associated with behavior or in a psychological context. Here the author does not sense that. Likewise, ‘*Vormund*’ is translated as “guardian” or “tutor” in most English translations. Their common root ‘*Mund*’ (mouth) indicates that the underlying meaning of ‘*unmundig*’ is being unable to speak on one’s own behalf. For that purpose, one has need of a ‘*Vormund*’, a legally sanctioned “mouthpiece” to stand in front of (*vor*) him or her-as official spokesman (Green, 2020). Our concern is this situation, as Kant says, one needs to have a mouthpiece in order to speak, is self-imposed.

The Literal Meaning of the Word ‘Self-Imposed’

What does it mean by self-imposed? In literal sense ‘self-imposed’ means to become liable or subject to through one’s own action; bring or take upon oneself. One is responsible for his own actions. Kant is telling that inability to use one’s own understanding, and therefore making guardians as mouthpiece is self-imposed. In the beginning, at times, with common sense viewpoint of view, we may tempt to think that Guardians make us slaves to their thoughts and we just follow them. We may think that the real cause of this imposition is the guardians. But Kant proves that it is self-imposed.

Here I try to elaborate his arguments to say that this situation is self-imposed.

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Refusing to Think for Yourself

We all are endowed with the capacity to think. Kant speaks, “Nature has freed them from external guidance (Kant, 2021).” By the time of adulthood, with the guidance from our parents and teachers, the development of mental operations forms our intellect into a full adult intellect even to think more on abstract principles. Afterwards, we are free to think for ourselves, even we are free to question the authority or the parents what they have imparted on us

and to choose what our intellect tells us. A few authors would say Kant uses the metaphor of adulthood in his essay on Enlightenment. It is the passage from the status of minor child to the status of adult. Enlightened modernity is the adulthood of the human race (Green 2020: 292). The contention is that the adults can take decision for themselves and use their own understanding, they are endowed with the grown potentialities of intellect. But on the contrary to the expectations, Kant says, a large part of mankind remains minors all their lives. This situation is self-created, because we refuse to think for ourselves, although we are endowed with reason. Are we living to this potential? What is the use of the reason then? So, Kant is absolutely right if we do not use our reason and therefore still in immaturity, the mistake is our part, we refuse to use our reason and just blindly follow our Guardians.

Kant holds that one of the reasons to be in Immaturity is Laziness, this laziness is a form of intellectual laziness. Thinking for yourself is not so easy. It is like a sport, you have to exert, you have to exercise. Sometimes you have to take the path the others have not trodden. Sometimes you will be left alone, but it is your decision. We have to train our intellect to think and ask questions. We have to cultivate this quality. If we just blindly follow others, there is no sweat of your brow; just loaf around. Kant uses the word, “it is always easy to be minor (Kant, 2021).” To be a minor in thinking is one’s own decision,

Kant holds that one of the reasons to be in Immaturity is Laziness, this laziness is a form of intellectual laziness. Thinking for yourself is not so easy. It is like a sport, you have to exert, you have to exercise. Sometimes you have to take the path the others have not trodden.

Kant is telling “....which has become almost second nature to him. He has even grown to like it (Kant, 2021).”

Duty to Think for Himself

For Kant the term duty is very much important, according to him, the rightness or wrongness of actions does not depend on their consequences

but on whether they fulfill our duty. As we are endowed with reason, we have a duty to think for oneself, without worrying its end results. Those who do not think for themselves will never question anything that had been told to them. Every thought that originated in their mind comes from an outside authority. They don't think for themselves. They just flow like a piece of wood that flows in a river. Kant says, “It is a state of inability, it is a state of indecision” (Kant, 2021).

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Often our thinking is circumscribed by feelings, emotions, beliefs, politics and social contract. As a result, we are biased to follow our guardians. Kant narrates, “These guardians make their domestic cattle stupid and carefully prevent the docile creatures from taking a single step without the leading-strings to which they have fastened them (Kant, 2021).” .” What we required is courage. Kant says lack of courage is another cause to be in Immaturity. When one feels his worth through his logical thinking, and he feels that he can think for himself. He can stand on his own feet. Courage is something that which comes from within. Aristotle defines the courageous person thus: “The

courageous man withstands and fears those things which it is necessary [to fear and withstand] and on account of the right reason, and how and when it is necessary [to fear or withstand] them, and likewise in the case of being bold (Moore, 2015).” Courage and Reason are both interlinked. Reason tells us to avoid irrational fear and stand for our logical convictions instead of blindly following anyone. Kant advocates what is very essential for Enlightenment is freedom. He says, the public use of one’s freedom must be free at all times, and this alone can bring enlightenment to mankind. He further clarifies what does mean by ‘Public use of reason’. He adds, “I mean that use which a man, as scholar, makes of it before the reading public (Kant, 2021).” In short, he is telling that one must use his intellect and should defend his position all that are against his reason. When one becomes a scholar, he has full freedom and an obligation, and his views does not contradict his own conscience. If one does not indulge in public use of reason means, he is in immaturity and the cause for it, is he-himself.

Some Observations and Conclusion

Till now I have been focusing on how the peoples’ situation is self-imposed, however here I would like to bring out a few observations that can subside Kant’s linkage of guilt with self. The basic requirement or foundation for free use of one’s own understanding depends on how one has been brought up in one’s life. ‘Upbringing’ plays a crucial role. For example, Gladwell in his famous book ‘Outlier’ writes basing on the idea of Middle-class parenting from the Sociologist Annette Lareau, how important is a child’s upbringing to take decision in one’s own life (Gladwell, 2008: 69).”

Gladwell quotes Lareau, “[Even in fourth grade, that middle-class children were appeared to be acting on their own behalf to gain advantages...”] By contrast, the working-class and poor children were characterized by [“an emerging sense of distance, distrust, and constraint.”] They didn’t know how to get their way,...” (Gladwell, 2008: 69).¹

Gladwell also narrates an incident which he owes to Lareau in his book, a nine-year-old boy’s visit to see the Doctor. His parents are well educated and wealthy professionals. While his mother drives him in her car to the doctor. She prepares the son how to articulate before the doctor. She tells her son, “You are free to ask whatever you wish to ask before the doctor.” The boy is telling that he has got bumps on his under arm.

Mother is replying to him. “you must tell the doctor.” Upon meeting the doctor, the doctor tells the boy, “you are ten years old” But the boy tells that, “I am not ten” Doctor replies him, you are nine years and ten months, and we count the closest year.” But the boy asserts again, “I am

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¹ Gladwell, 2008: 69. The texts within the square brackets are originally from the Sociologist Annette Lareau and it is given in double inverted commas in Outlier. The author Gladwell does not give a proper citation for this quotation. He just tells Lareau means or calls. I am under the impression that he quotes Lareau from her lectures or talks, while we come across the phrases like, ‘in one telling scene’

not ten.” Further, they had some conversation with regard to his sickness and boy succeeded in asserting himself (Gladwell, 2008: 69).”²

At times we may be apprehensive to ask? is it a stubbornness of child? But my point is, how the parents taught him how to articulate and how defends himself. “It is not genetic....Alex (the boy’s name) has those skills because over the course of his young life, his mother and father-in the manner of educated families-have painstakingly taught them to him, nudging and prodding and encouraging and showing him the rules of the game right down to that little rehearsal in the car on the way to doctor’s office (Gladwell, 2008: 70).”³

Philosophers like William James, and Amelie Oksenberg Rorty also say that our desire, emotions and functionality do play a role in our course of life, not reason alone. We are forced not to rule out these dimensions where we are prone to follow the Guardians.

Children seldom get this kind of upbringing, hence they are not able to assert or articulate themselves especially against the authority. Not everyone is educated, not everyone has the ability to think for themselves. Hence, we cannot accuse some of the adults for not using their own reason as Kant envisages. Philosophers like William James, and Amelie Oksenberg

2 See, Gladwell, 2008: 69, I have paraphrased the incident in my own words. The author Gladwell owes this incident to Lareau.

3 Gladwell, 2008: 69. The texts within the square brackets are originally from the Sociologist Annette Lareau and it is given in double inverted commas in Outlier. The author Gladwell does not give a proper citation for this quotation. He just tells Lareau means or calls. I am under the impression that he quotes Lareau from her lectures or talks, while we come across the phrases like, ‘in one telling scene’

Rorty also say that our desire, emotions and functionality do play a role in our course of life, not reason alone. We are forced not to rule out these dimensions where we are prone to follow the Guardians. Johann Georg Hamann, a contemporary to Kant, raised some serious question about Enlightenment. He accuses the Guardians as the guilt for ‘self-imposed’ situation, if they as individual engage in ‘Public use of the Reason’ they may not act as guardians. So, the real culprits are Guardians. “...Kant is right that the problem is the liberation of the immature, but he chooses the wrong target for his critique. It is not the women and other voiceless groups who incur guilt but rather the “enlightened” monarchs and their court philosophers (Green, 2020: 299).”

People are individual who have sacred right to think freely and to be free, and to decide the course of life freely and that is everything. The value of human being lies more in using his own intellect. Kant identifies enlightenment with the process of undertaking to think for oneself, to employ and rely on one’s own intellectual capacities in determining what to believe and how to act. Although, there are cultural and structural exceptions to Kant’s linkage of guilt with ‘self-imposed’, Kant is right, to a greater extent the lack of enlightenment is due to refusal to use one’s own reason and hence the situation is self-imposed.

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Article Received: Aug 24, 2021: Accepted Oct 12, 2021: Words: 2080



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