

Lessing and Enlightenment

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What does this word mean? What do we think when we say “Enlightenment”?

Here in America, we think of the Constitution as a product/ result of the Era of Enlightenment. Or, if we are Virginians, we may think of the Bill of Rights, and I think of my other patron saint, George Mason, who had a big pen in that document. We think of the Founding Fathers: Jefferson, Adams, Madison etc – men, yes: men – of the 18th century who for us represent that historical era and its spirit.

We also think of Enlightenment as “progressive tradition.” (Now is that an oxymoron?) “Progressive tradition” means an assortment of principles and opinions that tend to emerge around commencement time from normal-life obscurity. Such as the report on an address given by a professor of political economy to the Harvard Alumni last April (when Harvard had lost one third of its endowment in the “crisis”); the report titled that speech: “Enlightened thinking on Dark Times.” [‘Show!]

In Germany, and in Europe generally today, the word “Enlightenment/ Aufklärung” carries a more current meaning. It sounds like the name of an endangered species that is going to die out unless we make some pretty radical changes. Terry Eagleton, one of the founding fathers of literary and social theory, wrote in an essay published in the German weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*:

[I paraphrase:] “If we, the West, continue to consider culture as a marker of ethnic or religious identity, it will serve as foundation of ‘culture wars’. This will mean **the end of the era of Enlightenment**, an era when Western culture was founded on universal principles, not on conflict-generating identities and differences.” [end paraphrase]

As we see in Eagleton’s essay, the word “Enlightenment” in Europe and Germany does point toward history. In history, it means the dominant intellectual movement in England and France of the late 17th and 18th centuries. From there, it – **Enlightenment** - spread into Germany – not least thanks to Lessing’s labors, and eventually Enlightenment produced the great age of German classical philosophy and literature with Kant, Goethe and Schiller as the outstanding figures.

Enlightenment also became a **political** category in the German 18th century, with the term “enlightened absolutism.” (Is that an oxymoron or what?) Some

absolute monarchs, of which multiply split Germany had a lot, adopted some “enlightened” policies, especially in education, farming, and commerce, all in order to better grow their “absolute” powers. History books name Frederick II (the Great) of Prussia and Joseph II of Austria as representatives of “enlightened absolutism.”

And finally, if you ask a German what Enlightenment means, she will point to philosopher Immanuel Kant’s famous essay, “Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?” [Answering the question: What is Enlightenment?] Kant’s answer is baldly stated at the outset: “Aufklärung ist der Ausgang des Menschen aus seiner selbstverschuldeten Unmündigkeit.” [Enlightenment is the egress of human from his self-inflicted non-autonomy.] And then the philosopher takes many pages to explain what his answer means (In modern, close and almost small print, it’s 7 pp). **[Show!]**

But Kant’s essay was late. Published in 1784, it stood at the end of the century which had seen Enlightenment grow to dominance. Kant was drawing the conclusion from living through his own historical era and from accumulated Enlightenment thought. It was also three years after Lessing’s death, who more than anyone in Germany had worked to establish Enlightenment there.

So now we come to Lessing.

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, born in 1729 (this is an anniversary year) to a protestant pastor's family in Kamenz near Dresden, Saxony. He died in 1781 as head librarian of the famous Ducal Library of Wolfenbüttel in the Duchy of Brunswick. The library still exists today as a major archival and research institution. Its head librarian is always an outstanding scholar in his field. (I don't think I can say "her field" yet.)

Lessing was what we would call today a "public intellectual." And he was an unabashed advocate for his cause, which was, simply stated: modern thinking of his time -- Enlightenment as practiced in England and France. (Lessing's knowledge of foreign languages, including the ancient ones, was phenomenal.) His advocacy was so blatant that some critics today consider all of his non-fictional prose writings to be "polemics."

In order to write effective polemics, Lessing needed a new language. For unfortunately, the German language of his time, as written by the educated **for** the educated, was clumsy and long-winded in the extreme. It reads as what it probably was: translated from the Latin, which most scholars then still used for scholarly writing. Mark Twain could really have had fun with "The Awful German Language" of Lessing's day! But open a page of Lessing and you are

amazed: this is modern German, the German we still hope to write and read today.

Lessing wrote in a new, simpler style because he wrote for the general reader, the public – not his scholarly colleagues. As an example, this is what he wrote about art criticism (1767). Art criticism is not a specialized scholarly skill reserved for experts. Any man of taste, i.e. every reasonably educated middle-class person, is qualified. As Lessing states it in a down-to-earth (down-to-the-hearth) comparison:

“Ich finde meine Suppe versalzen: darf ich sie nicht eher versalzen nennen, als bis ich selbst kochen kann?” [I find my soup too salty: am I not allowed to call it too salty until I myself can cook?]

Lessing encountered however, a huge problem: There was no “public” when he began his advocacy in the 1740s. So his first job was to create, to educate a public. He did that by stimulating readers to **think for themselves**. What a change from the customary “preaching” in the tradition of Reformation and Counter-Reformation writing! Lessing’s readers were not being **talked at** or even **talked to**. They were drawn into a discussion; they were assumed to be thinking subjects themselves, who had minds of their own to make up. This is exactly the position of the Enlightenment.

The best way, the most immediate and effective way to create and educate a public, of course, was through the theater. That is the main reason why Lessing became primarily a dramatist. But here he hit upon another big problem: there was no public theater in Lessing's time. In today's Germany, every city and state maintains and finances the theater as an important social and cultural institution, "selbstverständlich." [goes without saying]

In Lessing's 18th century, there were lots of court theaters, just as there were lots of courts: royal, ducal, archepiscopal, and below. Yet not until the late 1770s did some of these court theaters open their doors to "the public." Among the first were Vienna, Munich, Mannheim, and Weimar. When Lessing started out as a dramatist in the 1740s, court theaters staged Italian operas and French comedies – shows and spectacles, amusements for court society. Other than that, there were itinerant theater troupes who stopped in larger cities and played what the uneducated "folk" wanted: clowneries -- "Hanswurst" pieces.

But Lessing lucked out. Precisely in Leipzig, where he was sent to university at age 17 (1746), there was a stationary theater: a formerly itinerant troupe headed by the famous impresario Caroline Neuber. And Lessing found his calling, creating at amazing speed his so-called "youth dramas". He wasted no time; his first drama was staged at Leipzig in January 1748.

His plays were comedies – it was what the public expected. But they came with a serious message – thus Lessing created his first specialty for German literary history: *die ernste Komödie* – serious comedy. And the message was entirely in the Enlightenment spirit. The two best-known of his early plays, *Der junge Gelehrte* and *Die Juden* [The Young Scholar; The Jews], advocate against ignorance and anti-Semitism.

Not content with writing just comedies, Lessing set out to **create a public for tragedy** – by creating a new kind of tragedy for the large potential public of the rising middle-class. The middle-class were the population supporting Enlightenment in England and France. In Germany the middle-class were still outside of the “educated elite.” So Lessing gave them their own, serious literature in the tragic genre and their own tragic heroes or heroines, roles that had hitherto been restricted to the upper classes. Tragic heroes had to come from aristocracy, court society, or classical mythology.

To start out his tragedy project, Lessing wrote *Miss Sara Sampson* : the first bourgeois or domestic tragedy (*bürgerliches Trauerspiel*) in German literature. He wrote the play in 8 weeks in a garden house in Potsdam in 1755; it premiered with big success in Frankfurt / Oder, the other Prussian university city at the time (besides Königsberg), staged by an itinerant troupe of course. (July 1755)

Lessing continued his creative work of "Enlightenment" in the theater, with his so-called **model plays** in the three main dramatic genres [so-called in German literary history]. His comedy: - *Minna von Barnhelm* ; his tragedy: - *Emilia Galotti*; his serious nontragic play: - *Nathan der Weise* . It is because of Lessing's foundational work for the stage that the drama became the major, the most respected genre of German literature in the 18th and 19th centuries. All I need to say to prove this point is "*Faust*."

Another point has to do with Lessing's work in the theater. Not only was he the author of model dramas, he also created theater criticism-and-theory, and he invented the profession of dramaturg, all of it in his job at the new Hamburg National Theater 1767 .

But more important: Because Lessing was a theater practitioner he emphasized the **emotions** as essential in the project of Enlightenment. Here Lessing went decisively beyond English and French Enlightenment that placed reason, rationality, and rational argument in the center.

It's clear if we think about it. A drama on stage does not just convince us by well-reasoned argument, it moves us to new thinking also by engaging our emotions: our senses and sensibilities, feelings and memories, fears and joys. The Ancients

knew all about “catharsis”, and the moderns, including Lessing’s predecessors and contemporaries in Enlightenment, including Lessing himself, debated endlessly the meaning of that term: “catharsis.” All agreed, however, that catharsis – the **crucial moving event** in the theatergoer – has to do with emotions, not reason alone.

From his basis in the theater, Lessing developed a view of the goal of Enlightenment that could be reached only through the **mutual enlightenment** of reason on one side and spiritual feeling (also called religion) on the other. At the end of this project and process of Enlightenment would stand “reason as wisdom.” It is this view and tradition of Enlightenment that today is seen as the particular German development – a German **Sonderweg** – in European intellectual history.

And now, my final point.

Lessing did not share what we feel is the somewhat facile optimism of Enlightenment. The optimism that Voltaire famously satirized in his *Candide* and that he aimed at the idea of “the best of all possible worlds”, an idea of the German Enlightenment philosopher Leibniz (1646-1716).

For Lessing, mankind's path into a better future is rather more difficult and possibly never-ending. It's important to realize that Enlightenment was definitely future-oriented. We have here another point of contact with our own era, as we think about the future with anxious questions, such as: what kind of Earth are we leaving to our children and grandchildren, and what mountains of debt? So was Lessing thinking about the future, at a moment in his life when he thought he would have a family -- children and grandchildren.

That's when he wrote that strange last work, his philosophical testament: *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* (The Education of Mankind). In a brief preambel, he places himself on a moderately high point - a hill (*Hügel*), not a mountaintop from where prophets speak. From this hill he can look a little ways into the past and into the future: "beyond the present day." And this is what he reports. He is examining Judaeo-Christian history as a sample of mankind's life experience. He sees a number of "historic moments" when either a surge of revelation or a surge of reason moved humanity an important step forward in the development toward a higher, nobler, intellectually more advanced, and morally improved stage.

Lessing's Now, in the Age of Enlightenment, is a moment for reason to **aufarbeiten** (catch up with, work out) what revelation has already supplied in the biblical texts. Reason has to get to a transcendental understanding of God,

and even more importantly, of the “Soul”. The soul for Lessing is the individual or **the subject** which the 18th century actually began to discover and which we have explored ever since. [[Well, at least until postmodernism declared the Death of the Subject.]] And we, as Americans, have developed “individualism” from this “subject” as one of our foundational ideologies.

And yes, Lessing sees a good ending to this historical-intellectual development. He calls it “**Zeit der Vollendung**” = Age of Fulfillment or Perfection. Its mark is very simple: it will be reached when humans do good because it is good – not because they fear or expect reward or punishment – in this or another life.