I. Invoking Kant

When the great Italian historian of the Enlightenment Franco Venturi delivered the George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures at Cambridge University in 1971, he flirted with the idea of entitling them “Was ist Aufklärung?” In the end, he thought better of it, explaining that he feared that the debate over the question “What is Enlightenment?” has the tendency of “leading research away from its proper path.” He argued that the question typically prompts attempts to offer a “philosophical interpretation” of the Enlightenment and that such interpretations prompt a search for the philosophical origins of those ideas that were later put into practice in the popular writings of later Enlightenment thinkers. Venturi maintained that such an attempt to bring systematic coherence to the often baffling diversity of practical endeavors in which eighteenth-century partisans of enlightenment were engaged runs counter to the “fundamental character of Enlightenment thought,” which was distinguished by a “firm determination not to build philosophic systems, the complete distrust of their viability.”

He found these sorts of readings lacking, in particular, in their neglect of the political dimension of the Enlightenment. It was this aspect that he sought to capture in the title that he selected to replace the now discarded “Was ist Aufklärung?: Utopia and Reform in the Enlightenment.

Despite these reservations, Venturi nevertheless began his lectures with a brief discussion (which reprises his earlier, seminal essay in Italian on the topic) tracing the origins of the phrase Sapere Aude!, the quotation from Horace that Kant proclaimed as the “motto of enlightenment.” Venturi’s account is not without its peculiarities. First, while he grants that the German debate on the question “What is enlightenment?” might be “interesting,” he displays relatively little interest in it: he ignores the other answers to the question and focuses exclusively on Kant. Second, his discussion of Kant’s response is confined to an examination of the quotation from Horace. As a result, he ignores the rest of Kant’s essay, which was concerned with precisely the sort of political question that Venturi suggests tend to be overlooked by those who focus on Kant: the issue of what restrictions a government may place on the rights of its citizens to express dissenting ideas and what obligations its citizens have as members of organizations that require them, as a condition of their discharging their duties, to temper doubts about the practices in which they are engaged.

Venturi was not alone in this tendency to fix his focus on the famous opening paragraph of Kant’s essay and neglect almost everything else about it and the broader debate that it joined. While Kant’s response is regularly invoked by historians of the Enlightenment, discussions of the essay are often cursory and not infrequently accompanied by nagging errors. For example, Dorinda Outram opens what is one of the better brief overviews of the Enlightenment by informing her readers that “in 1783 the Berlinische Monatsschrift set up a prize competition for the best answer to the question ‘What is Enlightenment?’” But there was no such competition: Outram seems to have confused the famous prize competitions sponsored by the Berlin Academy with the much more modest request for clarification about the meaning of “enlightenment” in an article.

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that appeared in the journal. Louis Dupré begins his recent *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of the Modern Age* by stating, “In 1783 the writer of the article ‘Was ist Aufklärung?’ … confessed himself unable to answer the question he had raised.” But the title of the article that triggered the debate was not “Was ist Aufklärung?” – it was instead the much more cumbersome “Is it Advisable Not to Further Sanctify the Bonds of Marriage through Religion.” And its author was not himself attempting to answer the question of what enlightenment might be; he challenged others to answer the question for him.

These slips are, of course, minor and it would be pedantic to dwell on them were it not for the possibility that this lack of attention to the broader context that gave rise to Kant’s famous answer may have broader consequences. The failure to understand the particular question that Kant was attempting to answer typically leads to misunderstandings about what he was seeking to accomplish in his reply. And, because his answer has, in recent years, loomed so large in discussions of what the Enlightenment involved, these misunderstandings may have consequences for our own attempts to make sense of the period. In what follows I would like, first, to clarify, briefly, the question that Kant was answering. I will then, at somewhat greater length, say a few things about the ways that Kant’s answer has been understood today. Finally, I would like to explore, in somewhat more detail, a few of the implications of these ways of reading Kant’s answer by examining the use that Michel Foucault made of it in a famous series of essays written at the close of his life.

II. What was the Question?

We can begin by recalling how the question that Kant answered arose in the first place. In December 1783 the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* published a rejoinder by the clergyman and educational reformer Johann Friedrich Zöllner to an article published in the journal a few months earlier that questioned whether it was necessary for clergy to officiate at marriage ceremonies. Zöllner was troubled by the article’s claim that much of the population found the presence of clergy at weddings “ridiculous.” Such an attitude, he suggested, testified to the corruption of public morals and confusion that had been wrought “in the name of enlightenment” in the hearts and minds of the citizenry. Yet if Zöllner was disturbed by the damage that had been done in the name of enlightenment, he did not appear to be entirely certain what “enlightenment” actually involved. So he inserted a footnote that asked, “What is enlightenment? This question, which is almost as important as what is truth, should indeed be answered before one begins to enlighten! And still I have never found it answered?”

Though Zöllner had reservations about removing clergy from wedding ceremonies, he was not at all opposed to the broader aims of the movement that we would characterize as “the Enlightenment.” In his own day he made a name for himself with his *Reader for All Classes*, a collection of essays on various disciplines aimed at introducing a diverse audience to many of the central ideas associated with the Enlightenment. He was not only a clergyman but also a Freemason and, most importantly, a member of the Berlin “Wednesday Society,” a secret society of “Friends of Enlightenment” that was closely linked to the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*. On December
17, 1783 — the month Zöllner’s request for a definition appeared in the pages of the journal — he joined his fellow members to listen to a lecture by Johann Karl Wilhelm Möhlsen, Frederick the Great’s personal physician and a scholar with wide-ranging interests in the history of science. on the topic “What is to be done toward the Enlightenment of the Citizenry.” The lecture presented six theses, the first of which proposed: “That it be determined more precisely: What is enlightenment?” Zöllner’s footnote would appear, then, to be less a testimony to his confusion about the idea of enlightenment than a sign of the intense interest in the question within the influential group of civil servants, clergy, and men of letters who made up the Wednesday Society.

The great German-Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn was also a member of the Wednesday Society and was an active participant in the discussions of Möhlsen’s lecture that went on within the society in the first months of 1784. In May he presented a lecture to the society on the question “What is Enlightenment?” and it is likely that this served as the basis for the response to Zöllner’s question that he published in the September issue of the Berlinische Monatsschrift, three months before Kant’s better-known response. Kant, as we know from the concluding footnote of his essay, was aware that Mendelssohn had responded to the question. But since he could not obtain a copy of the issue, he submitted his own response, “as an attempt to see how far agreement in thought can be brought about by chance.” The peculiar footnote that closes “What is Enlightenment?” would have readers believe that, had Kant actually been able to acquire the current issue of the Berlinische Monatsschrift, he would not have bothered to submit a response to the question, and did so now only as an experiment designed to see if his article might repeat the arguments of an article the journal had already published.

Recalling this context helps clarify what it was that Zöllner was looking for when he posed the question “What is enlightenment?” in the first place. He was seeking clarification about the meaning of a term that had been regularly employed in the Berlinische Monatsschrift to denote a set of practices that included, among other things, removing clergy from wedding ceremonies. He was requesting that those who saw themselves engaged in a variety of activities that, in differing ways, aimed at improving the society in which they lived step back from these efforts and try to explain, more generally, what it was that they were doing. He was challenging them, in other words, to clarify the broader project that these efforts at enlightenment allegedly served. As it turned out, those who answered him could not agree on how to characterize this project. In 1790 an article reviewing responses to Zöllner’s question catalogued twenty-one different meanings of the term and concluded that the word had become so divorced from any clear conventions of usage that its discussion had degenerated into “a war of all against all” between combatants who marshaled their own idiosyncratic definitions.

Despite their differences these responses shared one feature: none of them understood Zöllner to be requesting a characterization of the particular historical period in which they were living. Their intent was to define a project, not to distinguish their particular historical epoch from earlier epochs. We can, of course, find occasional references to the character of the present age, but they are never the principal concern. Kant, for example, does reflect – in passing – on the question of whether his might be “an enlightenment age,” and responds by observing, “no but it is an age of enlightenment.” His use of an indefinite article is telling: it indicates that while this
might be an age of enlightenment, we will nevertheless find, if we look backwards through history, that there have been other ages that could make that same claim. Yet when Kant is invoked today at the start of histories of the Enlightenment there is a subtle modification in how this passage tends to be read and this modification changes everything: Kant is now seen as attempting to set out the general characteristics of what we call the Age of Enlightenment.

III. The Use and Misuse of Kant’s Answer

While those who invoke Kant’s answer today may note – if only in passing – that there were other answers to the question, those other answers are almost never discussed. This tendency to give pride of place to Kant’s response can be traced back to the end of the eighteenth-century: even at the time when the question of question of enlightenment was being debated, there were already signs that Kant’s answer was emerging as the most important response. How do we explain this?

Certainly his growing fame had something to do with it. The Critique of Pure Reason had been published three years earlier and had become a center of scholarly and, increasingly, popular discussion. But this alone does not explain why his answer trumped the others. After all, Moses Mendelssohn had an international reputation that, at the time, matched that of Kant (his work was known in England and France before Kant’s) and his response may have been viewed by the members of the Wednesday Society as their public answer to the question that Zöllner (echoing Möhsen) had posed. Personal connections also may have helped: Kant produced a number of talented students (e.g., Johann Adam Bergk and Johann Heinrich Tieftrunk) who had moved on to academic positions and, by the 1790s, were publishing contributes to the debate on the nature of enlightenment. Not surprisingly, their way of approaching the question borrowed much from that of their teacher. Finally, while Mendelssohn’s essay was deeply indebted to the general viewpoint of the so-called Wolff-Leibniz philosophy, Kant’s was – like the bulk of his contributions to the Berlinische Monatsschrift – free of technical language. Though it is possible to trace connections from Kant’s essay on enlightenment to certain arguments in the Critique of Pure Reason (consider, for instance, Onora O’Neill’s influential discussions of the role that public reason plays in both works), it is unlikely that anyone at the time or that many in the decades that followed would have pursued these links. Kant’s response to Zöllner is an essay that could have been read by readers who knew little or nothing about Kant’s system as a whole.

Whatever the explanation for its success, Kant’s response has gone on to inspire a secondary literature that has pursued two different sets of questions. Some commentators have reflected on how well his characterization of enlightenment matches up with the understanding that we, as retrospective observers, have of the period in which he lived. To understand him this way involves reading his attempt to answer a question that was seeking a characterization of a practice as if it was a response to a request for a characterization of a period. This tends to be what those historians who cite him at the start of their surveys of the Enlightenment are doing: they are reading him as if he was an historian who was attempting to answer the question “What was the Enlightenment?”
While such readings are not, as we have just seen, entirely faithful to Kant’s own concerns in the essay, they may not—pace Venturi—provide the worst of guides for an historian to follow in trying to make sense of the Enlightenment. One way of characterizing historical periods is to define them in terms of the general practices that might have defined them and one of the more striking things about Kant’s essay is that it does, indeed, highlight a feature of eighteenth-century life that helps to differentiate it from earlier periods: the emergence of eighteenth-century life that helps to differentiate it from earlier periods: the emergence of what Jürgen Habermas has termed the “bourgeois public sphere.” Like all generalizations about historical periods, historians have found much to criticize in Habermas’ account. But subsequent research has only served to emphasize the extent to which Kant may have been on to something: one of the things that distinguishes the period we call “the Enlightenment” from earlier epochs is the emergence of a new set of social institutions including coffee houses, scientific academies, salons, Masonic lodges, reading societies, philanthropic societies, as well as the various virtual publics who came together as the readers of journals, newspapers and encyclopedias. Thus, we may not go too far wrong as historians if, taking a cue from Kant, we define the Enlightenment as an age in which reason went public.

There is, however, a second way in which Kant’s essay has been read. Other commentators have been concerned less with what Kant’s text might tell us about the eighteenth century than with the implications of the ideal that it articulates for our own age. In this reading, Kant’s answer becomes the jumping off point for an evaluation of the degree to which the aspirations of his age might still have a claim on us. To read Kant this way is to turn the question “What is enlightenment?” into the question “How viable is the Enlightenment project today?”

Much of this literature tends to ignore what Kant has to say about enlightenment in his answer to Zöllner and instead tries to put together a general characterization of “the Enlightenment Project” that draws chiefly on his moral philosophy. For example, Alasdair MacIntyre’s influential discussion of the failure of the “Enlightenment Project” focused on what he regarded as a rather specific shortcoming: the failure of the “Enlightenment project of grounding modernity.” MacIntyre’s book was followed by an explosion of literature that took aim at something called “the Enlightenment Project” but which offered a remarkable variety of characterizations of just what this project allegedly involved. There was also a proliferation of alleged founders of this project, with the usual suspects including Kant, Locke, Descartes, Hobbes, and Bacon.

This literature makes for very strange reading. As I have argued elsewhere, it tends to follow a few simple rules. First, critics of the “Enlightenment Project” usually pick some particularly troubling aspect of the present (e.g., ecological devastation, the decline of a collective sense of the good, the rise of totalitarian forms of rule, etc.). This troubling aspect of the present is then explained as a consequence of a more general intellectual transformation (e.g., the triumph of instrumental reason, the replacement of an ethic of duties with an ethic of rights, an increasingly individualistic conception of morality, etc.). Next, the origins of this transformation are traced to a particular thinker who is regarded as the purest expression of what is now baptized as “the Enlightenment Project” (usually the thinker chosen will be a familiar one; this is not a literature that is noted for much heavy lifting). Finally, some sort of connection is drawn between past thinker and present malaise (Albert O. Hirschman’s account of patterns of reactionary
rhetoric does a nice job of outlining the usual rhetoric ploys involved). While much of this literature is deeply flawed, the questions that it attempts to address are not insignificant. However ineptly, it raises some of the concerns with which Zöllner and his colleagues were wrestling: namely, what counts as enlightenment? And what are the consequences – positive and negative – of differing conceptions of what enlightenment demands?

Although these two different ways of reading Kant’s essay are analytically distinguishable, the history of the broader debate over the question of enlightenment shows that they have generally been intertwined: time and again, definitions of what the Enlightenment was tend to slide into assessments of the various projects it allegedly championed. As Darrin McMahon has shown, some of the earliest attempts to characterize the general aims of the philosophers came from their Catholic opponents in France, who constructed an image of the movement that was much more radical and coherent than it in fact was. Much the same can be said for the role played, throughout German-speaking Europe, by Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi’s contributions to the so-called “Pantheism Dispute.” Tracing the roots of the Leibniz-Wolff philosophy back to Spinoza, Jacobi invented an enlightenment that was at once radical and irresistible. While he intended to raise this specter as a warning to those who would start down this slippery slope, one of the paradoxical consequences of his work was that it alerted other, less timid, souls to the radical implications that might be drawn from a body of literature that, at the time, seemed anything but radical. Finally, as I have argued in a discussion of the peculiar definition of enlightenment that has appeared in the Oxford English Dictionary for well over a century, the history of the concept of enlightenment in English has much to do with ideological struggles over the role of the alleged conspiracy of “philosophes, Freemasons, and Illuminating” in sparking the French Revolution. From the start, then, definitions of what “the Enlightenment” was have been inseparable from hopes and fears about what the project it allegedly embraced.

This same intertwining of definition and evaluation can be found in the deeply problematic discussions of the relationship between the Enlightenment, modernity, and post-modernity that flourished during the 1980s. Explanations of what “modernity” is, how it differs from “post-modernity,” and what any of this has to do with “the Enlightenment,” tend to reprise many of the themes that can be found in the controversial literature from the late eighteenth century or, as Karlis Racevskis has shown, in the works of Diderot and Voltaire. But rather than take up this broader debate, what I would like to do now is to narrow my focus and consider only one rather striking series of essays: Michel Foucault’s repeated engagement with Kant’s response to Zöllner’s question.

IV. Foucault on Enlightenment

Towards the end of his life, Foucault invoked Kant’s essay on a number of occasions. The best-known discussion appears in the essay published, several months after Foucault’s death, in The Foucault Reader under the title “What is Enlightenment?” Shortly before his death, a somewhat different discussion of Kant’s essay – drawn from the opening lecture of his 1983 course at the College de France on “The Government of Self and Others” – appeared in the issue of Magazine Littéraire that marked the
publication of volumes two and three of his History of Sexuality. Other reflections on Kant’s response can also be found in various lectures, interviews, and occasional writings throughout the period immediately before his death: the essay seems to have become a touchstone of sorts for him.

Foucault’s first sustained consideration the question dates from a 1978 lecture to the Société française de Philosophie. Among other things, the lecture provides what is perhaps the clearest indication of what led him to reflect on Kant’s response. Foucault took his point of departure from his ongoing investigations of the arts of governance – a research project that spawned a considerable body of writing that would only make its way into print posthumously. The immediate focus in the lecture was with the origins of what he termed the “critical attitude” – an attitude that he linked to the question “How not to be governed?” Inquiring into the various areas where governance had been questions – i.e., scriptural critique, juridical controversies, and broader concerns about the grounds on which truth claims rest – Foucault drew a parallel to the concerns that Kant had raised in his 1788 essay.

In the 1978 lecture, Foucault was less concerned with Kant’s answer than with the changing relationship between critique and enlightenment in the nineteenth century. He argued that Kant’s discussion had been taken up by two different traditions of inquiry. Among French scholars, he saw a tradition that, beginning with inquiries in the philosophy of science, moved on to raise questions of signification, truth, and rationality that culminated in the question, “How is it that rationalization leads to the rage of power.” The German reception of Kant’s concerns took a different trajectory, focusing on the relation between “the fundamental project of science” and the “forms of domination proper to the form of contemporary society.”

As an account of the history of the question that Zöllner raised, Foucault’s sketch leaves much to be desired. His discussion confirms, in part, Venturi’s suspicion about what happens when attempts to discuss “the Enlightenment” focus on Kant’s essay: Foucault tends to ignore the intense political polemics that accompanied debates over the nature and advisability of enlightenment and, instead, pitches his discussion on the level of the evolution of philosophical and scientific representations. The lecture does, nevertheless, capture the trajectory of Foucault’s own thought rather nicely, and this trajectory may help explain the significance he saw in Kant’s response to Zöllner’s question. For all of their novelty, Foucault’s first works can be seen as products of the peculiar French tradition in the history of science that, in the lecture, he saw as culminating in the work of Bachelard and Canguilhem. His point of departure, in other words, had been with the culmination of the “French” side of reflections on the questions of critique and enlightenment. His subsequent shift in focus from considerations of systems of representation to studies of the implications of such systems for the development of power relationships (a shift that is usually summarized in terms of a move from “archaeology” to “genealogy”) moved him from the concerns that had marked the “French” side of the ledger to those concerns that he associated with the questions that had been raised on the “German” side. This may explain, in part, his declaration in the opening lecture of his course on “The Government of the Self and Others” that his own work might best be situated in that “form of philosophy that, from Hegel, through Nietzsche and Max Weber, to the Frankfurt School” had been engaged in attempts to
construct “an ontology of ourselves, an ontology of the present.”29 This declaration of loyalties sparked a flood of article on the so-called “Foucault-Habermas Debate”30 – a debate of a rather strange sort, since one of the participants was dead before it really began in earnest. But instead of taking up these discussions, I would like to look more closely at the relationship of Foucault’s last essay to an even earlier debate and see how it understood (and, in a few cases, misunderstood) Kant’s response to Zöllner’s question.

The essay exhibits a number of the misreadings of Kant’s essay that we have already discussed. Like others before him, Foucault seems to have had little understanding of the origins of the question Kant was answering: he seems to think that Kant was responding to a question that had been posed by the journal’s editors – allegedly in line with an eighteenth century custom of questioning “the public on programs that did not yet have solutions.” While he notes that Mendelssohn also responded to the question, he has little to say about the response beyond suggesting that it represented an attempt to demonstrate that the German enlightenment and the Jewish *Haskala* were part of the same history. But, while Mendelssohn’s essay was much indebted to traditions of thought that had come to characterize the Berlin Enlightenment, it had less to say about the particular concerns of the *Haskala* – when Mendelssohn addressed those interests, he wrote in Hebrew, not German.31 Nor is Foucault’s ominous suggestion that, in Mendelssohn’s text, we find the *Aufklärung* and the *Haskala*, “announcing the acceptance of a common destiny – we know to what drama that was to lead” particularly helpful. Foucault surrenders here to the tendency to see everything in German history as slouching towards the Third Reich. Such a perspective is probably not the best angle from which to understand what Mendelssohn was doing: if he was concerned with a “common destiny” in his essay it had less to do with the relationship of Jews to Germans than with a destiny that he, borrowing a concept from the enlightened Christian theologian Johann Joachim Spalding, saw as common to all human beings.

Foucault’s misunderstanding of Kant’s essay is further compounded in the well-known passage in which he refused what he termed “the backmail of the Enlightenment” – the idea that it is necessary to take a stand for or against the Enlightenment – and went on to insist that “we do not break free from this blackmail by introducing ‘dialectical’ nuances while seeking to determine what good and bad elements there may have been in the Enlightenment.” His target here was, presumably, Jürgen Habermas, who had just given a series of lectures in Paris that would form the basis of his *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*.32 But the particular way in which Foucault sought to evade this blackmail may have blinded him from appreciating the broader debate that Kant’s essay had joined. After all, Zöllner’s question touched off a series of efforts to distinguish the positive consequences of enlightenment (e.g., the educational and ecclesiastical reforms that he championed) from what he saw as its less positive consequences (specifically, the idea that there was something “ridiculous” about having clergy at wedding ceremonies). As Werner Schneiders has argued in his classic study of the debate, one of its central issues was how to distinguish “true enlightenment” from “false enlightenment.”33 To isolate Kant’s essay from this set of questions is thus to miss what was at stake, for Kant, in writing it.
Finally, as if to confirm once again Venturi’s reservations about what happens when Kant’s answer is taken as the key to interpreting “the Enlightenment,” Foucault quickly narrows his focus to consider the way in which Kant’s essay “raised the philosophical question of the present day.” The focus on this “philosophical question” leads Foucault into a discussion of the way in which “philosophical thought” – from Plato to Vico – has “sought to reflect on its present.” To read Kant’s essay in this way is to view it as primarily concerned with interpreting the defining features of a particular epoch. Such a reading runs the risk of misunderstanding Kant’s attempt to explain “what enlightenment is” as an attempt to characterize the distinctive features of “the Enlightenment.” To see the consequences of such an interpretation, we need only look at the opening lecture of his course on government, which makes a similar move. There, he saw Kant’s answer to the question “What is enlightenment?” as an attempt to answer the questions “What is my present? What is the meaning of this present? And what am I doing when I speak of this present?” He asked his audience to “consider the following fact: the Aufklärung calls itself Aufklärung. It is certainly a very singular cultural process that became aware of itself by naming itself, by situating itself in relation to its own past and future, and by designating the operations that it must carry out within its own present.” To wrestle with such questions, he explained, was a stance towards the present that was uniquely associated with modernity.

In this characterization there is an important insight, but it is saddled with an old misconception. It is well past time to put the old saw that the Enlightenment is “the first period that names itself” to rest. It didn’t; as we have seen, answers to the question “Was ist Aufklärung?” were attempts to explain a process, not define a period. The fact that German nouns are inevitably accompanied by articles does not mean that those articles should always be translated. Kant was answering the question “What is enlightenment?” (or, as his first English translator would have it, “What is enlightening?”) not “What is the Enlightenment?” It is only in 1820s, in Hegel’s lectures on the history of philosophy and the philosophy of history, that we begin to see “die Aufklärung” used as a designation for an historical period – and, even then, there is a good deal of hesitation about whether this “infamous name” should really be ascribed to the period in question.

Yet if Foucault gets much wrong in this essay, he nevertheless understood one important aspect of what Kant was doing. We can begin to appreciate this by noting how his final discussion of Kant’s essay differs from his 1983 lecture. First, the claim that the Enlightenment allegedly named itself is absent from Foucault’s 1984 essay. Second, while his 1983 lecture sought to link Kant’s essay on enlightenment to Kant’s reflections on history and, ultimately, to his assessment of the significance of the French Revolution, the 1984 essay takes a sudden and, initially, perplexing turn: it examines Baudelaire’s characterization of “modernity.” Finally, the 1984 essay emphasizes that he is not proposing that Kant’s essay be seen as “constituting an adequate description of Enlightenment.” Instead he takes Kant’s essay to reveal a certain “attitude” towards the present, an attitude that – he argues – can be seen as paralleling, in some ways, the attitude towards the present that one finds in Baudelaire. One important consequence of approaching Kant’s essay in this way is that it serves as a check on the tendency to view Kant as seeking to characterize a particular historical period. Foucault is quite explicit that he is skeptical of attempts “to distinguish the ‘modern era’ from the ‘premodern’ or
‘postmodern.’” Instead, he suggests, “Thinking back on Kant’s text, I wonder whether we may not envision modernity as an attitude, rather than as a period of history.”

This different approach to Kant’s essay leads Foucault to an intriguing insight about Kant’s response to Zöllner. Foucault rightly notes that, for Kant, “enlightenment” denoted “neither a world era to which one belongs, nor an event whose signs are perceived, nor the dawning of an accomplishment.” He observes that Kant defines Aufklärung in an almost entirely negative way, as an Ausgang, an ‘exit’ or ‘way out.’” In this final essay Foucault emphasizes the differences between Kant’s reflections on enlightenment and his other essays on history and argues that his essay on enlightenment “deals with contemporary reality alone.” Foucault sees Kant as wrestling with the question “What difference does today introduce with respect to yesterday?” And, Foucault reflections on how Kant saw this “difference” fastens onto something that is fundamental for understanding what Kant was doing: Kant, as Foucault reads him, viewed enlightenment as “an ongoing process” which he framed in terms of “a task and an obligation.”

It is in this context that Foucault calls attention to a peculiar feature Kant’s use of the phrase from Horace as the “motto of enlightenment” – Sapare Aude! For Kant, “Enlightenment must be considered both as a process in which men participate collectively and as an act of courage to be accomplished personally.” Foucault highlights an aspect of Kant’s use of the motto that other commentators have tended to overlook. In his essay on the motto, Franco Venturi provided an insightful and erudite investigation of the various places where this phrase, which was ubiquitous in the eighteenth century, was employed. He placed particular emphasis on a medal containing the phrase that was cast by the “Société des Aléthophiles” — “The Society of the Friends of Truth” – a secret society of churchmen, lawyers, and civil servants dedicated to the dissemination of truth in general, and the philosophy of Leibniz and Wolff in particular who met in Berlin in the 1730s. The parallels between this group and the Wednesday Society are well worth pursuing. Both brought together clergymen, civil servants, and men of letters with the intent of advancing the cause of enlightenment through the influence they had in the state bureaucracy. Meeting under the protection of secrecy, both groups hoped that they could attempt, in the words of the statutes of the Aléthophiles, “to seek truth with candor, and to defend it with reasonable frankness.” Yet understanding how the Aléthophiles understood the phrase from Horace does not, necessarily, aid us in understanding the implications of Kant’s invocation of the motto.

Foucault seems to have been unaware of Venturi’s work, but what he has to say about Kant’s use of the motto from Horace sheds some light on an aspect that Venturi – for all his erudition – neglected: the connection between Kant’s invocation of the motto at the start of the essay and his subsequent discussion of the differences between public and private uses of reason. It is likely that Foucault’s understanding of Kant’s essay was colored by the other work he was doing at this time: a series of lectures at Berkeley – the last he would deliver – that were concerned with the Greek notion of parrhesia – the idea of “frankness in speaking the truth.” In the lectures, Foucault focused on the power relations implied by the concept: an individual of inferior status requests the permission to speak frankly, withholding nothing, from a superior. This permission constitutes what he characterized as the “parrhesic contract.” Foucault framed what was at stake in Kant’s
essay on enlightenment in strikingly similar terms: “The question … is that of knowing how the use of reason can take the public form that it requires, how the audacity to know can be exercised in broad daylight, while individuals are obeying as scrupulously as possible. And Kant, in conclusion, propose to Frederick II, in scarcely veiled terms, a sort of contract – what might be called the contract of rational despotism with free reason ….” Unfortunately, Foucault did not live long enough to continue his inquiries into the art of speaking frankly into the eighteenth century, but the parallels between the “contract of rational despotism with free reason” and the various examples of the “parrhesic contract” that he found in ancient authors would be worth pursuing. Such inquiries might help us to understand the particular significance that Kant found in Horace’s words and also shed light on the broader implications of Kant’s contribution to the debate that Zöllner started.

Discussions of Foucault’s interpretation of Kant’s essay have been dominated for too long by attempts to contrast his relationship to the Enlightenment with that of Jürgen Habermas. Such a focus has tended to focus attention on the set of themes that Habermas sketched in the critique of post-structuralist thought that he offered in The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity. Such an emphasis may be understandable, especially in light of the attention devoted to Baudelaire in the last of Foucault’s essays on Kant’s response. But the time has come to consider these last reflections in light of what they might tell us about Foucault’s affinities with Kant, rather than his differences with Habermas. In an interview with Paul Rabinow, conducted shortly before Foucault’s death, Foucault spoke of his desire to develop what he termed a “history of thought” that would be distinct from “both the history of ideas (by which I mean systems of representation) and from the history of mentalities (by which I mean the analysis of attitudes and types of action.” His proposed “history of thought” would be concerned with what he termed “problematizations.”

Thought is not what inhabits a certain conduct and gives it its meaning; rather, it is what allows one to step back from this way of acting or reacting, to present it to oneself as an object of thought and to question it as to its meaning, its conditions, and its goals.

Perhaps we can find an explanation for Foucault’s fascination with Kant’s response to Zöllner here: for what does the debate over the question “What is enlightenment?” represent if not a moment when certain modes of thought and action became problematic, forcing those who were engaged in these practices to step back and think about what it was that they were doing and reflect on how their efforts at enlightenment were implicated in a complex “domain of acts, practices, and thoughts, that … pose problems for politics.”
Notes


10. Kant, “An Answer to the Question ‘What is Enlightenment?’” in Ibid., 64.

Kant, “An Answer to the Question,” 62.


For a collection of critical essays, see Craig J. Calhoun, Habermas and the Public Sphere, Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992). For a response to some of these critics, see Harold Mah, "Phantasies of the Public Sphere: Rethinking the Habermas of Historians," The Journal of Modern History 72, no. 1 (2000).

For a discussion of the Enlightenment along these lines, see James van Horn Melton, The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).


For a selection of some of these texts, see Sylvère Lotringer and Lysa Hochroth, *The Politics of Truth* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1997).


Werner Schneiders, *Die Wahre Aufklärung: Zum Selbstverständnis Der Deutschen Aufklärung* (Freiburg: Alber, 1974).

For a particularly forceful reminder of this simple fact, see the discussion in Philip Nicholas Furbank, *Diderot: A Critical Biography*, 1st American ed. (New York, N.Y.: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 450.

Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech* (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2001).

For one example of a work that offers such a perspective, see Béatrice Han, *Foucault's Critical Project: Between the Transcendental and the Historical* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002).


Ibid., 114.