

# KANT'S OSTENSIBLE ANTITHESIS OF "PUBLIC" AND "PRIVATE" AND THE SUBVERSION OF THE LANGUAGE OF AUTHORITY IN "AN ANSWER TO THE QUESTION: 'WHAT IS ENLIGHTENMENT?'"

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In "An Answer to the Question: 'What Is Enlightenment?',"<sup>1</sup> written in 1784, Kant brought to the table of philosophical discourse what previously had been merely a political concern - the manner in which enlightenment ought to proceed (Schmidt, "The Question" 270). His essay was one of two<sup>2</sup> historically significant responses to Protestant clergyman Johann Friedrich Zöllner's query, posed in a footnote of an essay in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*: "What is enlightenment? This question, which is almost as important as [the question] *What is truth?* would seem to require an answer, before one engages in enlightening other people. . . ." (qtd. in Bahr 1-2).

The topic of social enlightenment was widely debated as Europe searched for a scientific identity, one which Kant was willing to supply with what he called his own "Copernican revolution." Kant's line of reasoning in "What Is Enlightenment?" is different and more compelling than those of his contemporaries in that Kant not only proposes both *definition of* and *method for* enlightenment, but conjoins the two in an intimate relationship, the essential link between them being free speech, but (as we will see) a qualified kind of free speech termed "the public use of reason." Consequently, Kant's argument is political in its aim but philosophical in its approach, appealing to the nature of the *polis* itself, the nature of historical progress, and the nature of reason. As such, its implications are deep and far-reaching. In this critique of "What Is Enlightenment?" I am not concerned with Kant's conclusion, that free speech is necessary for social enlightenment, but only with evaluating the structure of the argument and its epistemological underpinnings which are both presupposed and recommended in the language of the essay. I intend to show that Kant is making a political argument that is built around his manipulation of the grammatical relationship between "public" and "private."

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### I. The Public and Private Uses of Reason

Kant offers us "the public use of reason" as an object for our contemplation and proceeds to argue that this thing, by nature, is free. Kant's argument depends on the way he distinguishes the public from the private use of reason. He defines the private use of reason as "that use which one makes of his reason in a certain *civil post* or office which is entrusted to him." Kant provides three examples in which one operates by the private use of reason: the military officer on duty must obey the command of his superior, the citizen must pay the taxes imposed on him, and the clergyman must preach "according to the symbol of the church which he serves" (Kant, "An Answer" 60). Before we get to Kant's definition of the public use of reason, it is worth noting that although the distinction between "public" and "private" is strange if not counter-intuitive, Kant is to some degree warranted in his application of these terms. John Laursen shows the etymological grounds for Kant's uses of these words. The German word for "private" reflects its Latin heritage in that, after Cicero, *privatum* acquired a legal meaning, denoting the duty that an individual has to another entity by way of a contract or will, versus, more generally, "public" or state law (Laursen, "The Subversive Kant" 254). Thus, the emphasis on duty is reflected in Kant's use of the word "private" in "the private use of reason" - the private use of reason has as its job the duty to serve someone else or some other entity. The private use of reason is employed in cases in which a person's position, like a contract, obliges him to do certain things: for example, the military officer is obligated, because of his position in the military, to obey the command of his superior.

The public use of reason Kant defines as "that use which anyone makes of it [reason] as a scholar [*Gelehrter*] before the entire public of the *reading world*." In the public role one may raise criticism about those institutions or practices to which one is bound in one's private role: the officer criticizes the military; the citizen, the government; and the clergyman, religious and ecclesiastical affairs (Kant, "An Answer" 60). The Latin term *publicus*, the meaning from which the German adjective *öffentlich* ("public") is derived, was associated with both (1) the idea of the state or government, and (2) the notion of "that which is out in the open." In the Middle Ages *öffentlich* held more the latter of these connotations, but legal scholarship in Germany between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries strengthened the prior

connotation (Laursen, "The Subversive Kant" 254). It is in this sense that we call a government building a public building, not necessarily because it has public access, but because it is owned by the state (Habermas 1-2). Kant's employment of the term "public" with reference to that which the scholar brings "out into the open" was a kind of reversal of the prevailing usage of the times but was not completely unwarranted since "the wider meaning of 'public' had not died out entirely." (Laursen, "The Subversive Kant" 255).

## II. Kant's Grammatical Error in His Uses of "Public" and "Private"

### A. The Grammar of 'Opposition'

Despite the etymological roots from which Kant derives meanings for "public" and "private," his distinction is counter-intuitive. One would not typically describe something which is regulated by government as private, but that is what Kant does with the phrase "the private use of reason." However, I am arguing with John Laursen against the position that some have taken: that Kant exhibits in his distinction an exact reversal of the words "public" and "private." The different uses of the words "public" and "private" demonstrate that the counter-intuitive character of Kant's distinction is not the result of a definitional problem, but rather the result of a grammatical confusion (I mean "grammatical" in a broadly Wittgensteinian sense, i.e., a word has a grammar, meaning it is used in certain contexts in certain ways and not others).

John Laursen has argued for a subversive interpretation of Kant<sup>3</sup>, and to continue in the vein of his reading of the essay, I shall attempt to elucidate the grammatical mechanism itself which makes possible the subversive conceptual recommendations which follow from it. First, it is important to recognize that the words "public" and "private" share a grammatical feature which, we will see, is key to Kant's line of reasoning: this feature, we might call, "having an opposite" or "opposition." Now, we must take a short break from Kant and ask, in a Wittgensteinian spirit, What kind of a concept is 'opposition'? We find out by looking at how the word "opposition" is used in ordinary language.<sup>4</sup> The concept of opposition has a grammar which governs the ordinary use of it in language. Many words have opposites. Nouns include "top" vs. "bottom;" prepositions, "inside" vs. "outside;" verbs, "rise" vs. "fall;" adverbs, "happily" vs. "sadly;" conjunctions, "therefore" vs. "however;" interjections, "Yes!" vs. "No!"; and adjectives, "public" vs. "private." Many

words do not share this grammatical feature; for example, there is no definite opposite for the word "dog." If we were asked to give one and we said, "cat," for instance, we might as well have said, "puppy" or "enemy." These words might be opposites to "dog" in some contexts, but "dog," as such, has no opposite. To offer one is to perpetuate the mistaken assumption of the questioner.

I would like to point out three rules at work in the language-game of opposition. First, when two things are opposite to each other, on some level they share no common ground. They do not simply have generally different meanings or very different meanings, but rather, are severed from each other. Thus we cannot properly say that the words "food" and "drink" are opposites, for "drink" is contained in "food." Secondly, opposites not only lack common ground, but they also have a kind of antagonism toward each other. They face each other as if in a dual. Although "hamburger" and "thinking" share no common ground, there is nothing about them that makes them *necessarily* opposed to each other - nothing in one which anticipates the other. This kind of mutual exclusivity leads us to a third rule: on some level, the concept of opposition *does* presuppose a common ground, but a special kind. As we look at the word as it is used in ordinary language, we see that *relationship* is a necessary grammatical condition for things to be mutually exclusive, namely a relationship of antagonism, and that common ground allows the opposition to make sense. So, the third rule might be stated: It is only with respect to the issue about which the words are being played against one another that they share no common ground and are mutually exclusive, but the issue itself is a common ground. For example, it is with respect to temperature that "cold" and "hot" share no common ground, but both have a common ground as descriptions of temperature.

Not only do we find the meaning of a word by looking at its use in the language, we also find which meaning of a particular word is used by looking at its immediate context in a passage. Notice that a word like "alive" can have more than one line of opposition. "Alive" can be contrasted with both "inanimate" and "dead," two words whose grammars are very different. And the word "alive" itself has different grammars depending on which of these it is contrasted with. Consider these two statements: "Father is alive, but sand is not" (where the understood opposite is "inanimate"), and "Father is alive, but mother is not" (where the understood opposite is "dead").

The second statement may appropriately be accompanied with, for example, emotion, special memories, or vehement denials. None of these accompaniments are provided for in the grammar of the contrast in the first statement. Rather, we might expect some scientific explanation or further definition of what a thing must have or do to be considered "alive." In this way, we can speak of a line of opposition as being the determining factor in the grammar of the words being opposed. Like simple concept-words, different lines of opposition involving a single word are used in different language-games.

*B. The Ostensible Antithesis of "Public" and "Private"*

In light of the above sketch we can see how Kant both capitalizes on and manipulates the grammatical features of opposition in his use of the words "public" and "private." For any use of the word "public," there is an opposite use of the word "private." But note that these words are antonyms only in so far as they are being put to use in opposite ways in a given context of the language. Kant's sneakiness is in his drawing his purportedly opposite terms "public" and "private" from different lines of opposition. (A) For the word "public," Kant adopts a usage derived from the "out in the open" connotation, but for the word private, he adopts a usage derived from the "contractual" connotation. If Kant had obeyed normal usage in pairing these words, he would have used either the word "private" to mean "indoors, not accessible to the public at large," or the word "public" to mean "having to do with state (public) law and not private contracts." In either of these cases, the pair of words would have been equal and opposite, so to speak. (B) By identifying "private" with its contractual "duty" connotation, Kant can then exploit the fact that religious as well as military and legal affairs operated (in his time) under the auspices of the state, thus contracting the private use of reason to governmental control. So it is in one's private military, citizenry, or religious role that one must strictly obey the state authority despite the fact that the idea of 'state' would not ordinarily have been a connotation of the word "private." (C) Thus, Kant suggests an identity between one use of the word "private" and one use of the word "public," which happen to be opposites.

The result is that we have the two meanings of "public" set against each other as if they were opposite. What had been merely

a dual meaning of one word, "public," Kant made into an (apparent) antagonism by giving one of those meanings the name which was already, on the surface, opposite to it, i.e., "private." Because the two meanings of the word "public" are not, in fact, opposite to each other, the opposition that Kant suggests exists between *his* words "public" and "private" is an illusion based merely on the ostensible antithesis between those words.

To summarize, the pair "public" and "private" contains two lines of opposition. Kant makes a grammatical error in his uses of the words "public" and "private" by confounding these lines of opposition, joining the two words in a single context as if their meanings were commensurate, when, in fact, their grammars are different. The evidence of this error is seen in the mistaken opposition between "scholar" and "citizen" or between "reading world" and "civil post." Like "public use of reason" and "private use of reason" the words in these pairs share no common ground which they can divide up into mutually exclusive parts, distinguishing themselves from each other in a characteristically opposite way.

Now the question: So what? The significance of the ostensible antithesis is that, on a general level, it gives the false illusion that the spheres of activity to which the words "public" and "private" refer are as mutually exclusive as the words themselves, and, more specifically, it gives the false illusion that the private use of reason is by nature bound to an authoritative (ecclesiastical or governmental) Other, while the public use of reason is by nature free. Thus, Kant's political agenda hinges on his manipulation of the grammatical feature of opposition in "public" and "private."

### *III. Redefining the Authority Structure*

#### *A. Hamann's Critique*

Johann Georg Hamann, friend and critic of Kant, wrote in a letter to Christian Jacob Kraus a sharp review of "What Is Enlightenment?" He was one of the first to make a criticism of Kant's distinction which would be repeated by many: If the public and private uses of reason are separate, the public use being free while the private use is controlled, the free public use of reason can do nothing to relieve whatever societal oppression is being suffered under an absolutist government. At some point, the people must be empowered to use more compelling, practical means to help themselves than just words. Hamann writes, "... the public use of reason & freedom is

nothing but a dessert, a sumptuous dessert. The private use is the *daily bread* that we should give up for its sake" (148). "What good to me," he asks, "is the *festive garment* of freedom when I am in a slave's smock at home?"<sup>5</sup>

At first blush, Kant's distinction does seem to welcome a passivist interpretation. Kant supports the state's and church's claim to authority throughout the essay, even praising the Frederick's "large, well-disciplined army as a guarantee of public peace" (63). Kant's argument for the freedom of the public use of reason is presented as greatly beneficial to the interests of the throne. The free, public use of reason can only help the government and is not a threat. As if addressing Frederick himself, Kant employs reassuring words saying that the free public use of reason is "harmless" (59); it works without "harming the affairs" of the private sphere (60); it is something to "have little fear from" (62); and it presents "no danger" (63). "For this enlightenment, Kant writes, "... nothing more is required than *freedom*; and indeed the most harmless form of all the things that may be called freedom: namely, the freedom to make a *public use* of one's reason in all matters" ("An Answer" 59). The public use of reason is harmless because it is separated from the duty every citizen has to obey the government in his private role, for in his private role, the citizen is "part of the machine" (60).

But we ought to take issue with the view that, in Kant's scheme, the "private sphere," as James Schmidt puts it, "could remain undisturbed by the 'innocuous' freedom of an unrestricted public use of reason..." ("What Enlightenment Was" 99). The public use of reason *would* disturb the relationship between the people and the governing authorities and at the same time leave them unharmed. Though the effects of the free, public use of reason may be harmful to the stability of Frederick's structure of authority, they would be considered improvements by the truly enlightened government of a mature society. For such a status is required for anyone who would judge what is good for society. Note that Kant remarks that his is not yet an enlightened age, but an age coming to enlightenment. How can Kant presume to appeal to the hypothetical judgment of the mature mind of an enlightened government? We will come back to this in a moment.

The fact is, Kant equivocates on the phrase "use of reason." It is not a constant of which "public" and "private" are two variations. Kant draws his public/private line of distinction in order to alter his

reader's conception of the nature of those spheres which it separates, and the public and private uses of reason are not two uses of the same thing, namely reason, but two altogether different things. There is one use of reason, and that is the public use of reason. To Kant, "Reason depends on . . . freedom [of inquiry] for its very existence" (qtd. in Laursen, "Scepticism" 449). For Kant, reason is by nature free, objective, scientific, self-legislative, truth-seeking, active, and above all, autonomous (Schmidt, "What Enlightenment Was" 93).

Kant's typical Enlightenment view of true reason is that it is purified of prejudice. Prejudice comes about by its being taught; thus, to purify oneself from prejudice, one must not take for granted what one is told, but rather use one's own, autonomous faculty of reason to find truth. The opening lines of Kant's essay read, *Enlightenment is mankind's exit from its self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another. Self-incurred* is this inability if its cause lies not in the lack of understanding but rather in the lack of the resolution and the courage to use it without the guidance of another. *Sapere aude!* ["Dare to know!"] Have courage to use your *own* understanding! is thus the motto of enlightenment. (Kant, "Answer," 58)

The notions of privateness and duty are foreign to this description of reason. How much reasoning, we might ask, does it really take to pay one's taxes? The point, it is clear, is *not* to reason about it in the private role, but just to pay them. What Kant calls "the private use of reason" amounts to no more than passive subservience to an authoritative Other. It is a surrendering of one's ability to properly reason at all. The motto which Kant commends to Frederick is, "Argue, as much as you want and about whatever you want, *but obey!*" (Kant, "An Answer" 59). This sentence, which pictures the division between the public and private uses of reason, makes plain the incommensurateness of the words "private" and "reason." To the degree that true reasoning is autonomous, the "private use of reason," under the auspices of a regulating Other, is not a use of reason at all. In fact, Kant's description of the private use of reason matches his description of those things which reason must correct - opinion, prejudice, superstition. The whole of the private sphere, then, is not one concerned with truth. It is concerned with, as Hamann puts it, "the daily bread" - the practical matters of living (148). Only the public sphere deals with truth.



*B. The Reversal of Hamann's Critique: Kant's Appeal to His Own Reason*

So, to return to our question from above, how can Kant presume to appeal to the mind of an enlightened government? He is, I believe, appealing to his own, autonomous reason. For he is one of the few who has "thrown off the yoke of immaturity," and, as such, is able to reason without prejudice (59). He is a representative of the enlightened age, and he assumes the privileged place of judge over all authorities by virtue of his own ability to reason. Furthermore, he is enacting the free, public use of reason in the very essay in which he espouses it, and the freedom of expression in his essay is proportionate to the political freedom that the public use of reason has attained in his not-yet-but-becoming "enlightened age."

Because of the way Kant's ostensible antithesis of "public" and "private" capitalizes on the grammatical features of separation and antagonism in opposition, but neglects that of having a common ground, the public/private distinction serves as a redefinition of the authority structure. Kant uses the antithesis like a balance. Whatever concept Kant predicates on the private sphere, the opposite automatically accrues to the public sphere. The more Kant binds the private use of reason to the authority, the more he frees the public use from it. But the public and private spheres are tiered, not equal, in their opposition. The more private and practical the private sphere is, the more control government has but the less it deals with truth. Hence, the degree of privateness in the private sphere is proportionate to the degree that the private sphere needs the public sphere as its authority.

Hamann's critique, that the public use of reason is worthless for having no affect on the private sphere is reversed by the fact that government, as the embodiment of the private sphere, is *itself* obliged to an authority, and that authority is none other than reason, of the free, public variety (the agents of which include Kant). The state, which is charged with the care of its people, is bound, obligated in its own right, to the ultimate guiding principle and authority: the Truth of reason. It must then, by duty, grant freedom to the public use of reason and accept the guidance of it. If the government is the embodiment of the private sphere, Kant is the symbol of the public sphere. As a philosopher, he himself is bound by private obligation to serve the state by freely reasoning to inform the state on how it

should be run (Laursen, "Subversive" 261-2). The philosopher's private use of reason is his public use of reason<sup>6</sup>. Consequently, the authority is only an authority in a qualified way.<sup>7</sup> According to Kant's scheme, it is perfectly reasonable for one, in the private role, to completely submit to the authority. This is a direct appeal to the interests of Frederick and his government, but notice that even in this appeal, it is reason that gives the authority its authority.

If Kant can make people speak the way he speaks in "What Is Enlightenment?" he has done something to subvert the language of absolutism, as Laursen puts it ("The Subversive Kant" 253). The public/private division is a division between truth (discovered by pure reason) and practical affairs, and the private sphere, or the practical matters of governing the nation, must be subsumed itself under the governance of the public sphere for the same reason that human action must be directed by a human mind. The greatest changes occur during revolution, but they only last if they are accompanied by a fundamental shift in a people's way of thinking. Kant shows his cleverness in discouraging physical revolution, which could only achieve temporary and inconsequential freedoms, and bolstering the government's authority over the private sphere. His argument is aimed at a conceptual revolution in the politics of communication. Instead of installing a new king on the throne, he installs new meanings into words and, thus, controls the ways in which we use those words.

### *Conclusion*

In this reading of Kant's essay, I have tried to elucidate the mechanics and implications of what I take to be a subversive argument for free speech. In "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?" Kant is doing political philosophy politically - with a view to influencing the political state of affairs - and, believing that government must grant freedom of speech in order for enlightenment to proceed and human history to progress, he has engineered his language to that end. Kant wants to convince us of this because the nature of reason, upon which the progress of the human race depends, is such that human society must be constituted in a certain way, namely, one which allows for free, public use of reason - free, both legally and conceptually, of private, practical hindrances. What makes Kant's argument for the freedom of the public use of reason

different than other historical arguments for the freedom of speech is that it seeks to free only a certain kind of speech, and the criterion for this kind of speech is that it is produced by unprejudiced reason. The result is that, although this reason is supposedly "free," it is self-regulating against all "authoritative" language from the government or the church.

We have seen that Kant's opposing of the terms "public" and "private" is misleading, his use of the word "use" is dubious at best, and his matching of the words "reason" and "private" is inconsistent with his own definition of reason. That freedom is associated with the public use of reason and lack of freedom is associated with the private use of reason is not justified because Kant grounds the antithesis 'free' vs. 'not free' in a merely ostensible antithesis 'public' vs. 'private.' Kant is outwardly bolstering government and religious authority by championing strict obedience to them in their domains, but Kant is delicately redefining those domains so that while the state and religion do not directly deal with truth, they depend on public free speech and the reasoning of philosophers like Kant to direct them. Thus Kant's public/private antithesis is a philosophically-camouflaged strategy for normative, conceptual recommendations about political and religious authority.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Originally published 12 December 1784 as "Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?" *Berlinische Monatsschrift* 4 (1784): 481-494.

<sup>2</sup> The other was written by Moses Mendelssohn, originally published as "Ueber die Frage: Was heisst aufklären?" *Berlinische Monatsschrift* 4 (1784): 193-200.

<sup>3</sup> In "The Subversive Kant: The Vocabulary of 'Public' and 'Private.'" See Works Cited.

<sup>4</sup> "Our investigation is . . . a grammatical one," Wittgenstein writes (*Philosophical Investigations* § 90). "Such an investigation sheds light on our problem by clearing misunderstandings away. Misunderstandings concerning the use of words, caused, among other things, by certain analogies between the forms of expression in different regions of language." In order to relieve the philosophical confusion of such analogies (for example, the explanation of 'understanding' as 'a mental process'), Wittgenstein shows that a word's meaning is simply its use in the language. Analogies are not the only causes of philosophical confusion. Kant's critical distinction between "the public use of reason" and "the private use of reason" is, I believe, an example of a mistake (which I will call "ostensible antithesis") similar to that of misapplying analogies and properly dealt with by

grammatical investigation.

<sup>5</sup> Garret Green comments that to Hamann, "Kant's distinction amounts to taking away with the left hand the freedom that he has just granted with the right. . . . Kantian 'public' freedom is of little use to a civil servant like Hamann, who is 'privately' enslaved in the king's service" (296, 297).

<sup>6</sup> Kant's *On the Conflict of the Faculties*, written after the 1788 censorship edicts under Minister Woellner, is even clearer in its prescription of the government's job as not being concerned with reason or truth so that the philosopher's uncensored judgment is more needed.

<sup>7</sup> Foucault points out this paradox saying that Kant proposes "what might be called the contract of rational despotism with free reason: the public and free use of autonomous reason will be the best guarantee of obedience, on condition, however, that the political principle that must be obeyed itself be in conformity with universal reason" (37).

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