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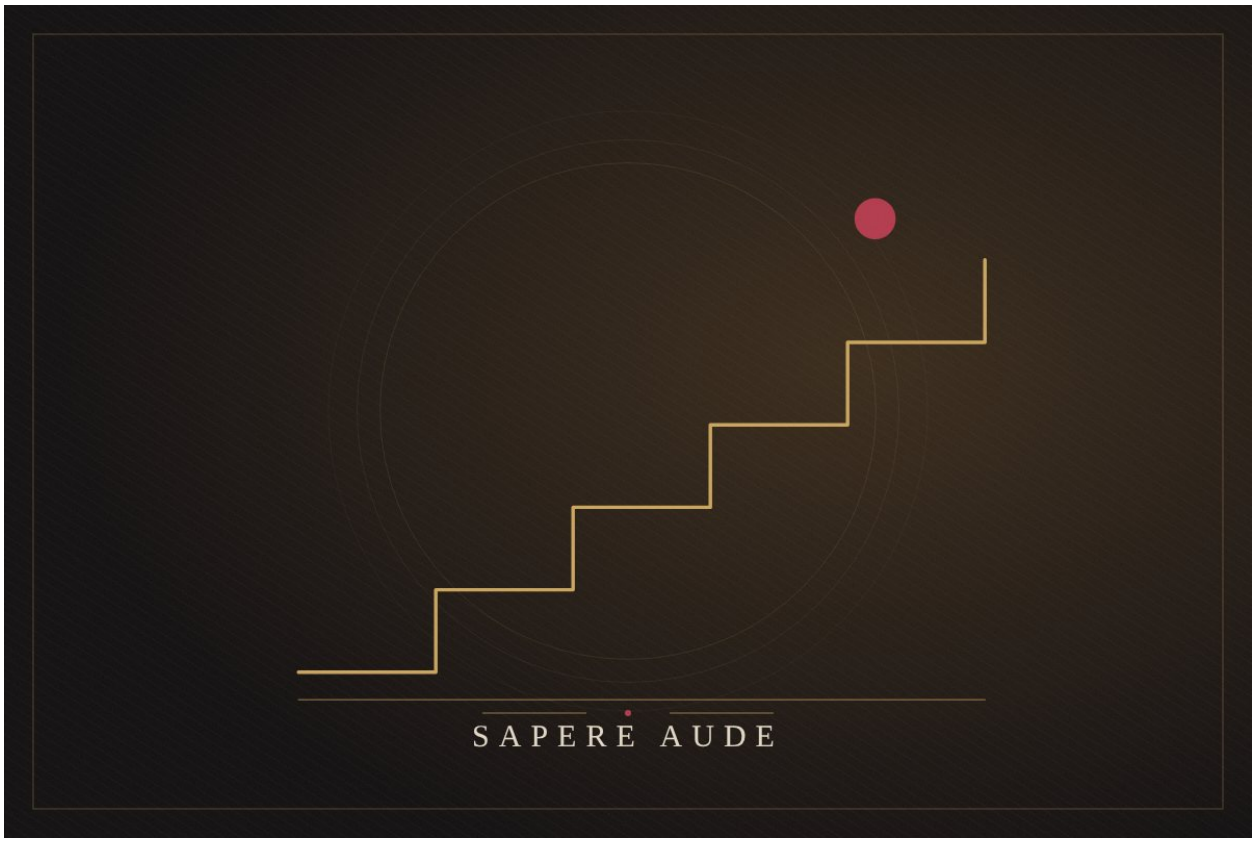
Wisdom

"Have the courage to use your own understanding": Immanuel Kant's essay on enlightenment

A short article from December 1784, "self-incurred immaturity", the laziness and cowardice that keep us under guardianship, and why Kant's question is still current

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Immanuel Kant was born in 1724 in Königsberg, in East Prussia, and lived almost his whole life in that city. He was a university professor and the author of works that changed philosophy, such as the Critique of Pure Reason (1781). It is said that he was so

regular in his daily walks that the townspeople could set their clocks by him, an anecdote that is probably embellished but shows his well-known discipline.

The journal's question

In 1783 a clergyman wrote in the journal *Berlinische Monatsschrift* that no one had yet explained what "enlightenment" really was, the intellectual movement that was changing Europe. Kant replied in December 1784 with a short essay: **"An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?"**.

Immaturity

The essay opens with a famous definition: enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity, according to Kant, is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another. It is "self-incurred" when its cause lies not in a lack of intelligence but in a lack of resolve and courage.

> *"Sapere aude! Have the courage to use your own understanding!" This, according to Kant, is the motto of enlightenment.*

Laziness and cowardice

Why do so many people remain in this state? Kant answers: **laziness** and **cowardice**. It is comfortable to be immature. If I have a book that thinks for me, a spiritual adviser who has a conscience for me, a doctor who decides my diet, I need not make any effort myself. And there are always "guardians" happy to persuade people that thinking for themselves is difficult and dangerous.

Public reason

Kant did not propose disobedience to every rule. He distinguished between the "private" use of reason, as in the duties of an official or officer, where orders must be carried out, and the "public" use, when someone as a scholar addresses the public in writing. For him this public use should always be free, because only in this way could a society gradually progress.

Why it is still current

Today we have more information than ever, but also more "guardians": algorithms that choose what we read, well-known figures who tell us what to think. Kant's question remains the same: are we thinking for ourselves?

1. **Before sharing an opinion, ask:** have I thought this through myself, or did I just

take it ready-made?

2. **Read the source,** not only someone else's summary.
3. **Accept the risk of error.** Thinking for yourself means you can be wrong, but also that you can learn.

Sources

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