

# ‘The Public Use of Reason’ A Philosophical Understanding of Knowledge Sharing\*

*Maurizio Borghi*

**Abstract:** Free access to knowledge and knowledge-sharing are among the most relevant claims of the so called ‘knowledge society’, whose beginnings can be found out in the Age of Enlightenment. As a matter of fact, in the thinking of Immanuel Kant these claims are explicitly assumed in a metaphysical perspective. Thus, the need of sharing knowledge, and in general the need of freedom in the communication of thinking, is not merely held as self evident or just empirically given: on the contrary, Kant asks about its transcendental meaning, and attempts to deduce this meaning a priori from the essence of human being itself. However, this task is not systematically developed, but rather exposed en passant in different passages of his work, where, facing phenomena such as the amazing expansion of book trade, the increasing diffusion of journals and newspapers, the growing role of public opinion and the fierce fighting for freedom of press, Kant tries to demonstrate their critical significance – and therefore also the threat they may represent – for the use of reason and thus for the manifestation of human nature as such. In this perspective, he elaborates the concept of the ‘public use of reason’, which will represent the (more or less unspoken) canon for the present understanding of the modern society as a knowledge-based society. The article analyses Kant’s thought on these topics, with particular reference to the concept of ‘enlightenment’ and of the sense of access to knowledge in a philosophical perspective. Then it considers the misleading transformation of these critical concepts in present day society as characterised by mass culture.

\* \* \*

<179> We often say that we live in a ‘knowledge society’. This widely used expression defines a world where scientific and technological knowledge play a central and primary role, a role which has never achieved such a level before. We speak of knowledge workers and of knowledge itself as a primary resource or as “the most important raw material”. We are therefore convinced that nowadays access to knowledge is crucial not only for economic development but also for democracy itself. In this line, the call to promote knowledge sharing grows steadily louder, since the access to knowledge represents the

---

\* In *The International Journal of the Humanities*, vol. 3, 2005/2006, pp. 179-186. (<http://www.humanities-journal.com>).

crucial factor towards the creation of a definitively fair and democratic world – a true “global cosmopolitan society”<sup>1</sup>.

What distinguishes this vision from the utopias and the dreams which have populated the imagery of the western world in the last centuries, is that this vision’s realisation seems to actually be within reach. We may say that never before has a vision appeared to be substantiated by *facts* and *reality*. The most relevant fact is represented by the Internet, “the greatest technological revolution that our culture has seen since the Industrial Revolution”<sup>2</sup>, the first “architecturally free” mass media, so-called because it is not externally adjustable. The most irrefutable reality is that, thanks to the Internet, a world is rising – as announced by Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales – “in which every single person on the planet is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge”<sup>3</sup>. A world in which *the sum of all human knowledge* is easily available to everybody, by a simple mouseclick, without any kind of barrier or censure.

In fact, the knowledge society, global and cosmopolitan, seems to be taking root everywhere with its incontrovertible power of the ‘reality of facts’. It remains, however, to question the *sense* of this reality. We may ask, for instance, if the meaning of what we call ‘knowledge sharing’ deserves to be questioned only as far as its technical implementation requires, or if rather it justifies a deeper and more radical questioning.

In this article, the following assertion will be discussed: the value which we nowadays call ‘knowledge sharing’ is the extreme deformation of a pure philosophical insight, an insight which overshines the whole of philosophical tradition and manifests itself most brightly in the thinking of Immanuel Kant. Moving from the Kantian concept of the public use of reason, I will try to draw some indications in order to understand the meaning of the present concerns <180> regarding knowledge sharing and accessing, and finally to shed some more light on what we call ‘knowledge society’<sup>4</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> Anthony Giddens *Runaway World. How Globalization is Reshaping our Lives*, London: Profile Books, 1999, at 31.

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Lessig *The Future of Ideas*, New York: Vintage Books, 2002, at XXII.

<sup>3</sup> Slashdot interview, July 28 2004 (<http://interviews.slashdot.org>).

<sup>4</sup> Here it is not a matter of ‘applying’ philosophical knowledge to present problems, in the same way as one applies a model to solve a problem. Nor is it a matter of simply tracing the historical origins of the current problems in the philosophical tradition. Philosophy is neither a tool for comprehension, nor a historical find. As Kant says, we can learn something from philosophy only by *philosophizing*, i.e. only if we ourselves do philosophize (see Immanuel Kant *Kritik von reinen Vernunft*, A 837, B 865). In what follows, then, we shall have to engage ourselves in the question that philosophy – namely Kant’s thought – displays to us, without assuming an external point of view, ‘historical’ or ‘critical’ as it may be.

The western world began to become an ‘information society’ during the 18th century<sup>5</sup>. Only two hundred years after the invention of printing, the circulation of books, journals and newspapers had already reached, mainly in France and in England, such a relevance that the way men related to each other and communicated their knowledge had deeply changed. Reading circles, literary and scientific academies, coffee-houses, salons, spread out in cities and towns. Music listening, poetry reading, pleasant intellectual conversation and the exchange of artistic, literary and scientific ideas became worldly activities just like entertainment. There were many occasions where, as Kant writes in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, you could find yourself in the middle of “mixed companies, consisting not merely of learned persons and intellectuals, but also of men of business or of women”. “When we attend to the course of their conversation” – Kant adds ironically– “we observe that, besides story-telling and jesting, another kind of entertainment finds a place in them, namely, reasoning”<sup>6</sup>.

But what does reasoning in public mean? And, in particular, what does it mean in the light of Kant’s characterizations? What does the public handling of thought imply? And more generally: what does it mean to communicate your own thought *by publishing*, i.e. to communicate it to an indefinite number of persons, virtually extended to the whole world?

Instead of considering these phenomena as the natural outcome of an age – of the ‘age of Enlightenment’ as it was already called by its contemporaries – Kant philosophically questions their *sense*. In this line of questioning, ‘communication to the public’ is understood moving from the comprehension of the very nature of man and thus grounded on its metaphysical necessity.

In Kant’s view, a man who communicate with the public is not merely expressing his authorship. He is rather making a *use* of his own *reason*, and, more precisely, he is making a ‘public use of reason’. This wording is explained in the 1783 essay *Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?*

By the public use of one’s reason I mean the use which anyone may make of it as a learned being before the whole reading world. Private use I call that which one may make of it in a particular civil post or office which is entrusted to him<sup>7</sup>.

Some examples explain this difference: an officer who has been given an order, cannot “openly debate its suitability or usefulness: he must obey”. But *as a learned being* he can make “remarks on

---

<sup>5</sup> See Peter Burke *A Social History of Knowledge*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Immanuel Kant *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, A 269.

<sup>7</sup> Immanuel Kant *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?* in *Kant’s gesammelte Schriften*, vol. VIII, de Gruyter: Berlin/Leipzig, 1902, at 35.

errors in the military service and lay them before the public for judgment”. A citizen “cannot refuse to pay the taxes imposed upon him”, but “*as a learned being* he can publicly voice his thoughts on the impropriety or even the injustice of these fiscal measures”. Similarly a clergyman “is bound to instruct his pupils in catechism conforming to the doctrine of the church he serves”. But *as a learned being* “he has complete freedom, even the calling, to impart to the public all his carefully considered thoughts on the mistaken aspect”<sup>8</sup> of that doctrine.

What does Kant mean by “as a learned being” (*als Gelehrter*)? We can find an answer in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. In every cognition, in all human knowledge, lies always a twofold possibility: on the one hand it is an instrument used to obtain some result, a skill serving the achievement of an aim; but, on the other hand, in any cognition or knowledge, independently of the aims for which it is *de facto* plied, there is an element which does not depend on its aims or on its empirical results, an element “in which all men”, i.e. every human being as such, “necessarily takes an interest”<sup>9</sup>. Kant states that in the first case knowledge is meant according to the “scholastic concept”, while in the second it is meant according to the “worldly concept”, where “worldly” means: regarding the “world”, i.e. every human being as such – or, as Kant says in the *Critique of Judgement*, “anyone who aims to be called ‘a man’”<sup>10</sup>. Now, while it is always possible to learn every <181> science, and even philosophy, according to the scholastic concept (which, in the case of philosophy, promotes a “historical learning”), there is no school able to teach any knowledge according to Kant’s worldly concept. The use of worldly knowledge cannot be reduced to the mere acquisition of even wide and erudite cognitions, nor to their spreading and sharing; it uniquely consists in the free use<sup>11</sup> of such cognitions in order to accomplish aims for which there are no schools nor instructors, only “an ideal teacher, who employs all those cognitions as instruments for the advancement of the essential aims of human reason”<sup>12</sup>. Now, the “essential aims” of human reason lie in the dimension Kant terms “transcendental” (“beyond any

---

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, at 35-6.

<sup>9</sup> Immanuel Kant *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B 867 note.

<sup>10</sup> Immanuel Kant *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, B 156. The distinction between “school” and “world” is developed in *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A 839 fw., B 867 fw. In the *Anthropology*, Kant explicitly relates “scholastic knowledge” with the “lack of freedom in one’s own thought” (A 139). Knowledge according to the worldly concept is world-wise knowledge, i.e. philosophy (on this existential concept of world see Martin Heidegger, *Einleitung in die Philosophie* [1928/29], in *Gesamtausgabe*, Bd. 27, Klostermann: Frankfurt a/M, 2001, at 301-3).

<sup>11</sup> “Free use”, here, means “world-wise”, i.e. a “philosophical” use.

<sup>12</sup> “Him alone can we call philosopher”, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A 839, B 867.

experience”<sup>13</sup>) whose extension is defined by the three fundamental questions in which “the whole interest of reason” is centred:

1. What can I know?
2. What ought I to do?
3. What may I hope?<sup>14</sup>

Man “as a learned being” is not meant by Kant as indicating a particular profession or a *status* – for instance the category which is nowadays called ‘the intellectuals’. It is rather a human way of being vis-à-vis knowledge, and such a way of being can arouse and arise in every domain of knowledge. The learned being has freed himself from the “school”, has jumped beyond the empirical dimension towards the freedom of transcendence, bringing himself to the full exercise of his own thinking. While the private use of reason corresponds to the execution of an externally entrusted duty, and therefore is not a *free* use, the public use of reason is the very exercise of freedom, and as such it can only be limited by the bond of reason itself:

The use which an appointed indoctrinator [*Lehrer*] makes of his reason before his congregation is purely private [...]; with respect to it, he is not free, nor can he be free, because he carries out the orders of another. But as a learned being [*Gelehrter*], whose writings speak to a public, i.e. to the world at large, in the public use of his reason he enjoys unlimited freedom to use his own reason to speak in his own person<sup>15</sup>.

But how can this unlimited freedom be justified? We have already seen that the public use of reason is a way of exercising thinking, i.e. human freedom. Now, what distinguishes thinking from all other human ‘activities’ is the fact that it can be totally free only when it is somehow exercised in common with other men, i.e. when it is shared. Kant fully develops this topic in the second part of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, namely in the Transcendental Doctrine of Method where he elaborates the “formal conditions of a complete system of the pure reason”<sup>16</sup>. The freedom of “publicly exposing to [the others’] judgement one’s own thoughts and doubts that one cannot resolve by oneself”<sup>17</sup> is one of

---

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, A 464, B 492.

<sup>14</sup> Immanuel Kant *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A 805, B 833. In the *Logikvorlesung* a fourth question, “to which the other three aim”, is added: “What is man?” (A 25; see François Fédiér *Regarder Voir*, Les Belles Lettres/Archimbaud: Paris 1998, at 122)

<sup>15</sup> Immanuel Kant *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?*, *supra* note 7, at 37.

<sup>16</sup> Immanuel Kant *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A 707-6, B 735-6.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, A 752, B 780.

these formal conditions. In Kant's view 'thought', in line with the tradition, always means 'judging'<sup>18</sup>. But a judgement is true when it is *correct*, i.e. only when it is in accordance with the object on which it is formulated. Now, communication to the others is a means – even though only subjective – to test the correctness of one's own judgement (the accordance with the object) through the accordance with the judgements of others (which, if the judgement is correct, will also be in accordance with the same object):

For in this case [not the certainty, but] the presumption, at least, arises that the agreement of all judgements with each other, in spite of the different characters of the subjects, rests upon the common ground of the agreement of each with the object, and thus the correctness of the judgement is established.<sup>19</sup>

In the *Anthropologie* we can find the same principle, explicitly related to the freedom of the press:

It is so certain that we cannot give up this means [consisting of submitting one's own judgment to the others' intellect] of assuring ourselves of the correctness of our own judgment, that this is perhaps the principal reason why learned people fight so hard for the *freedom of the press*. If this freedom is denied, we would thereby lose a very potent means for proving the correctness <182> of our own judgments and we would be left to error<sup>20</sup>.

The freedom of the press is a condition for the practice of the public use of reason. The unlimited freedom of which the latter benefits is justified by the need for man to be free *from error* and, thus, to be in the truth. Man cannot call himself completely free as long as he is left to err. To be left to err is a particularly insidious lack of freedom, because it can easily appear as freedom itself and can be taken as such. There are several ways of being left to err, but there is a specific one where man is not only fundamentally in error, but is even unable to feel the need for truth: in such a situation he is deprived of the very possibility of distinguishing truth from error, and is therefore in a state of indifference to both. Here thinking (judging) no longer has any other function than that of satisfying empirical needs. Man can give up thinking, since, for the empirical necessities to which it is devoted, he can hand such an 'activity' over to someone else – he can practice the outsourcing of thinking, as we might currently say. In his essay on enlightenment, Kant terms this condition *Unmündigkeit*, "a state of tutelage", and its motto reads: "I need not think, if I can only pay; others will easily take this irksome

---

<sup>18</sup> "We can reduce all acts of understanding to judgements, so that understanding may be represented as the faculty of judging. For it is, according to what has been said above, a faculty of thought." (Immanuel Kant *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A 69, B 84). Judging means connecting a predicate to a subject in the form 'S is P'.

<sup>19</sup> Immanuel Kant *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A 821-1, B 848-9.

<sup>20</sup> Immanuel Kant *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*, A 128-9.

job over for me”<sup>21</sup>. The public use of reason is the sphere where man can free himself from the apparent freedom of this self-incurred tutelage. Man’s release from tutelage is exactly what Kant calls enlightenment.

For any single individual, to work himself out of this state of tutelage, which has become almost his nature, and of which he has even come to be fond, is very difficult. [...] Dogmas and formulas, those mechanical tools of the rational employment or rather misemployment of his natural endowments, are the fetters of an everlasting tutelage. [...] But that a public should enlighten itself is more than possible; indeed, if only freedom is granted, enlightenment is almost inevitable<sup>22</sup>.

We can see how Kant’s understanding of enlightenment is path-breaking and not comparable to any of the views of his contemporaries, nor to our usual way of understanding it. First of all, for Kant enlightenment is not a historical concept, a ‘process’ in which men of a given age are somehow involved, a change which can be described, for instance, with Fontenelle’s words: “A brand new philosophic esprit has recently spread out, a light which had not enlightened our ancestors”<sup>23</sup>. Enlightenment is rather for Kant the name of a fundamental way of being human, in which man has the courage to use his own intellect. And this way has to be continually achieved, it is never acquired once and for all: it is a task each generation has to carry out again and again, a task with respect to which our generation is never ahead compared to “our ancestors”.

Similarly, the public use of reason, as an essential condition for enlightenment, is not a sociological concept, and thus has nothing to share with what we nowadays call ‘public opinion’ – indeed it is not a question of expressing an opinion; rather it is a matter of *being in the truth*<sup>24</sup>. Kant’s

---

<sup>21</sup> Immanuel Kant *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?*, supra note 7, at 33.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, at 34. *Unmündigkeit* is explained in the *Anthropology* as the “natural or legal incapacity of a man, even though in good health, to use his own intellect in civil affairs”, and this incapacity is specifically termed *Minderjährigkeit*, “minority”, when “it is grounded on the age immaturity” (Immanuel Kant *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*, A 208).

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Antonio Santucci *Interpretazioni dell’Illuminismo*, Il Mulino: Bologna, 1979.

<sup>24</sup> Opinion (*Meinung*) is for Kant the lowest degree of “holding to be true”: it is “a conscious holding-to-be-true, which is insufficient both subjectively and objectively” (Immanuel Kant *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A 822, B 850). A “public opinion”, i.e. a doubly insufficient holding-to-be-true passively shared by everybody, could only be termed by Kant *Aberglaube*, “superstition” (see *Kritik der Urteilkraft*, B 158-9). According to this, Habermas’ reading of Kant’s *Öffentlichkeit* as an essential step in the construction of the “sphere of the bourgeois’ public opinion”, appears totally mistaken (see Jürgen Habermas *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*. Luchterhand : Neuwied-Berlin, 1962).

enlightenment cannot be understood by moving from a historical, political or even sociological plane<sup>25</sup>.

As a matter of fact he writes:

A [political] revolution may perhaps accomplish the fall of personal despotism and of tyrannical or power-seeking oppression, but it can never enhance a true reform in the way of thinking. Instead, new prejudices will serve as well as old ones to harness the great unthinking masses<sup>26</sup>.

Kant opposes to political revolution a “reform in the way of thinking” (*Reform der Denkungsart*) – a sentence recalling the explicit aim of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. In the Preface to the second edition, Kant explains this reform as the necessary condition in order that thinking no longer “keeps on groping its way out” “but “strikes into the sure path of science”<sup>27</sup>. After what we have said about the “worldly” meaning of science, it would be reductive to read <183> these sentences only in an epistemological sense. If science regards every human being as such, the reform of the way of thinking, and thus enlightenment, is a transformation of the *entire* human being.

Kant’s enlightenment cannot therefore be reduced neither to an epistemological notion. It is rather a wholly philosophical concept, and as such it cannot be understood outside philosophy itself. It echoes what, in Plato’s thinking, and throughout the philosophical tradition which follows, is termed ‘eidetic sight’. The release of men from tutelage is a movement comparable to that, which in Plato’s simile of the cave (*Politeia*, 7th book), leads the human being from the state of captivity to the freedom of seeing into ‘the most un-concealed’ (*to alethéstaton*)<sup>28</sup>, i.e. into ideas. To accomplish this movement is the aim of *paideia*, i.e. ‘education’ in the sense of the *periagogè holes tes psyches*: the guidance in the (trans)forming of the entire human being in his core. In such a metamorphosis, man experiences a radical change of his own ‘being in the truth’, a change by which what appeared as the only real dimension of truth, reveals itself as the realm of the most wicked appearances, i.e. of the absolute ‘un-truth’. *Paideia* displays itself in a constitutive nexus with *aletheia*, the truth, since the latter marks its path and rhythm, and orients its whole movement<sup>29</sup>. *Aletheia* marks the motion of *paideia*, primarily in

---

<sup>25</sup> For a political reading of Kant’s notion of enlightenment see for instance Onora O’Neill “The Public Use of Reason”, *Political Theory*, 14, 1986 (interpreting toleration toward public use of reason as a means of building a self-regulating system of shared rationality).

<sup>26</sup> Immanuel Kant *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?*, *supra* note 7, at 35.

<sup>27</sup> Immanuel Kant *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B XV.

<sup>28</sup> Plato *Politeia*, 484 c.

<sup>29</sup> This constitutive nexus between *paideia* and *aletheia* was discovered and interpreted by Martin Heidegger (see “Platons Lehre von der Wahrheit” [1931/32, 1940] in *Wegmarken*, Klostermann: Frankfurt a/M, 1976). When Plato speaks of the way men can be led from the darkness of the cave to the light (*phos*), he carefully distinguishes this motion from a mere revolution: “It is not like turning a shell upside down, but it is a

the sense of a fight against one's own *apaideusia*, a fight which must continually be fought and in which man is always engaged. The prisoner released from the cave only slowly and with difficulty, "feeling pain and anger"<sup>30</sup>, gets used to the sight of the things outside the cave, in the light of the sun; similarly, the minor freed from tutelage, only with great difficulty starts taking his first steps on his own, "because he is not accustomed to that kind of free motion". "Therefore – continues Kant – there are few who succeed in freeing themselves from tutelage by their own exercise of mind and in achieving a steady pace"<sup>31</sup>.

Enlightenment is the freeing of man, the beginning of a possible 'being in the truth', where truth, however, is no longer *aletheia*, unconcealment, but correctness of judgement, i.e. accordance of the judgement with the object. The public use of reason, as a dimension free from empirical concerns, or, as we might say, 'empiric free zone', where correctness of judgement can be submitted to scrutiny, corresponds to that *synousia peri to pragma auto* – "to be together by the thing itself" – which Plato, in the well-known passage of the *Seventh Letter*, indicates as the necessary condition for a spark called "philosophy" to light in man's mind enlightening it<sup>32</sup>.

*Paideia*, as metamorphosis of the *apaideusia*, remains in a constitutive liaison with this latter, to such an extent that the movement of *paideia* cannot be considered to be wholly accomplished without the "return journey into the cave"<sup>33</sup>. Similarly, every single man's enlightenment involves the task of the *Volksaufklärung*, the enlightenment of all those who are still caught in the state of minority:

To enlighten the people means to publicly instruct them in their duties and rights vis-à-vis the state to which they belong. Since only natural rights and rights arising out of the common human understanding are involved, their true natural heralds and interpreters among the people are not lawyers officially appointed by the state, but free jurists, i.e. philosophers, who, precisely because of this freedom they allow themselves, are a scandal for the state, which wants only to keep under submission, and they are decried, under the name of enlighteners, as persons dangerous for the state<sup>34</sup>.

---

transforming of the human being in his essence (*psychés periagoge*), a translation from an almost nightly day to the clear day where beings unconceal themselves in their being – and this translation is what we call 'true philosophy', i.e. philosophy committed to unconcealment (*philosophia alethé*)." (*Politeia*, 521 c).

<sup>30</sup> Plato *Politeia*, 516 a.

<sup>31</sup> Immanuel Kant *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?*, *supra* note 7, at 34.

<sup>32</sup> See Plato *Seventh Letter*, 341 c-d.

<sup>33</sup> Plato *Politeia*, 516 e.

<sup>34</sup> Immanuel Kant *Die Streit der Fakultäten*, in *Kant's gesammelte Schriften*, vol. VII, de Gruyter: Berlin/Leipzig, 1902, at 254.

They are “persons dangerous for the state” because they threaten the *status quo*, the peaceful and quiet staying under tutelage. “And should someone try to release them and lead them out [of the cave], could they get hold of him and kill him, don’t you think they would?”<sup>35</sup> – thus ends Plato’s simile.

The ways and the means of hindering and stopping the work of those “dangerous persons”, who, in every time, provoke “scandal” and whom one would willingly kill, are many and difficult to foresee. Kant often goes back to this matter to explore it more deeply and define it more completely. In the article *What does it Mean to Orient oneself in Thinking ?*, <184> written two years after the essay on enlightenment, Kant distinguishes three fundamental forms of opposition to the “freedom of thinking”<sup>36</sup>. The first one is “social coercion”, that is to say censorship, the closure of public spaces, the despotic deprivation of the freedom of speech and of the press. We could say they are all means of acting ‘from the outside’, which remove or limit the material conditions of the public use of reason. But there are also less evident, and consequently more efficacious means, which do not need to deny the public use of reason, because they – in a subtle way – prevent it from taking place. By those means the public use of reason corrupts ‘from the inside’, through its distorted use. Kant calls this second way “the coercion of consciousness”. As previously seen, the condition of tutelage derives its strength from the false principle according to which others can think in one’s own place. Showing this step towards the release from tutelage as being “not only difficult, but also very dangerous”, is the business of “those guardians” who “so kindly assume superintendence”<sup>37</sup> over the people. These guardians are themselves “unfit for any enlightenment”; they are only able to spread “statutes and formulas” (“the fetter of an everlasting tutelage”), to sow the “seeds of prejudices”<sup>38</sup>, moved by “the anxious fear of the danger of an autonomous questioning”<sup>39</sup>. And since they show themselves as the ones to whom that “irksome work” which is thinking has been handed over, they appear as *philosophers*, although they are not philosophers at all, because – as we have just seen – the very task of philosophy is to enlighten, i.e. to make each human being able to think *by himself*, in the widest freedom. In the age of ‘publicity’, the guardians play the role that in the Greek *polis* was played by the sophists, that is to say, as Plato writes

---

<sup>35</sup> Plato *Politeia*, 517 a.

<sup>36</sup> Immanuel Kant *Was heißt sich im Denken orientieren?* in *Kant’s gesammelte Schriften*, vol. VIII, de Gruyter: Berlin/Leipzig, 1902, at 145.

<sup>37</sup> Immanuel Kant *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?*, *supra* note 7, at 33.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, at 34.

<sup>39</sup> Immanuel Kant *Was heißt sich im Denken orientieren?*, *supra* note 36, at 146.

in *Politeia*, “to instruct men to know nothing but what everybody wants to know (*ta ton pollon dogmata*)”, an instruction they call “the highest knowledge (*sophia*)”<sup>40</sup>.

When the public use of reason is thus distorted, a peculiar deformation of what is meant by “freedom of thinking” occurs. A third way of hindering thinking arises. It is the “lawless use of reason”, the use of a reason “unwilling to submit itself to the law it gives to itself”<sup>41</sup>. The kind of freedom thinking believes to have thus achieved is actually the shiftest slavery, because reason, deprived of its own law and of the boundaries it gives to thinking, ends up by “totally submitting itself to facts”. Once this submission has taken place, the explicit opposition to the freedom of thinking actually becomes superfluous, since thinking is by now deprived of its proper element. Empirical concerns have somehow dried up transcendence. Thinking (i.e. judgement), which as such cannot give up a criterion of correctness, and can only look for an accordance (of the judgement it consists of) with the thing itself (to which judgement refers), finds no “object” before itself other than “exterior facts endorsed by evidences”<sup>42</sup>, and, still trusting to find there an orientation, ends up by totally submitting itself to them. Thus begins an age where thinking is uniquely and peremptorily summoned to the ground of “facts”, and where all knowledge is at the service of this peremptory summoning<sup>43</sup>.

Kant’s concept of the public use of reason leads us into what we nowadays call the ‘knowledge society’. If, as I have tried to show, what Kant says about enlightenment is essentially philosophical, and therefore “new each day”<sup>44</sup>, then we should be able to recognize it in our present condition as well. We should still find today the way to ask the same question Kant asked two centuries ago, that is: is our age enlightened?<sup>45</sup>

In order to at least lay the ground for an answer, I think we must start by asking what is actually ‘knowledge’ in our age – an age which conceives itself as a ‘knowledge society’. As noted above, this expression commonly means that knowledge is currently the ‘main resource’, and that the freedom of

---

<sup>40</sup> Plato *Politeia*, 493 a.

<sup>41</sup> Immanuel Kant *Was heißt sich im Denken orientieren?*, *supra* note 36, at 146.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>43</sup> “It is rather easy to root enlightenment in *single subjects* through education [*Bildung*] [...] But it is very difficult to enlighten *an age*.” (Immanuel Kant *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?*, *supra* note 7, at 34). On the submission of thinking to facts see also *Über den Gemeinspruch: Das mag in der Theorie richtig sein, taugt aber nicht für die Praxis* in *Kant’s gesammelte Schriften*, vol. VIII, de Gruyter: Berlin/Leipzig, 1902, at 273-314.

<sup>44</sup> See Heraclitus, fragm. 6. The characteristic of a philosophical question is that it never becomes ‘out of date’.

<sup>45</sup> Kant’s answer is: “no, but it certainly is an age where an enlightenment is possible” (Immanuel Kant *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?*, *supra* note 7, at 40). Today our matter is to question about this *possibility*.

accessing and sharing it is the most fundamental value we have to promote. Thanks to Kant's analysis we can now spot a peculiar ambiguity in this common understanding. This ambiguity corresponds, somehow, to the distinction Kant highlights between knowledge according to the scholastic concept and knowledge according to the worldly concept. As we <185> have seen, in the public use of reason we are primarily concerned with the latter, and this means: public use of reason is never merely a matter of sharing and spreading scholastically acquired notions, but a question of the *free use* of those notions in order to accomplish "the essential aims of human reason", i.e. to accomplish transcendence.

When we look at knowledge as 'main resource' or raw material, we are implicitly articulating its scholastic concept – where, however, 'school' is no longer simply the depository of practical and dogmatically applicable know-how, but, so to say, the store of specialized knowledge from which to draw in order to carry out all kinds of performance.

When we speak about 'knowledge sharing' we are instead articulating the 'worldly' concept. But here too lies an essential difference: the 'orientation' is no longer the "world", the "reading world" (*Weltleser*), the sphere that essentially transcends the thinking subject, the pure and simple transcendence; what is targeted is now rather the indistinct mass of 'individuals' composing 'society', the 'global society', an empirical sum of users and consumers of knowledge<sup>46</sup>.

In this condition, *what* we know and the *way* we come to know it is far less relevant than the fact of being 'in the know', a 'know' as far as possible easy to draw from and to share. By now, the primary call of every scholar is to make the access to knowledge – both 'scientific' and 'humanistic' – as easy as possible. A new kind of 'guardians' carefully interpret this calling. It is not only journalists and professional popularizers, but, as Hannah Arendt asserts:

a special kind of intellectual, often well-read and well-informed, whose sole function is to organize, disseminate, and change cultural objects in order to make them palatable to those who want to be entertained or – and this is worse – to be 'educated', that is, to acquire as cheaply as possible some kind of cultural knowledge to improve their social status<sup>47</sup>.

The public dimension is no longer the sphere in which the correctness of judgement can be submitted to scrutiny; it is the place where the 'intellectuals' in charge uniformly spread an already-manufactured and packaged judgement. With this "special kind of intellectual" a new form of Kant's

---

<sup>46</sup> According to Hannah Arendt, "society", as formed on an agreement of interests, is a way of instituting men's being together which leaves out any relationship to the "world", i.e. to transcendence. Mass society is the accomplishment of the "wordlessness" (See Hannah Arendt *The Human Condition*, University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1958, at 54).

<sup>47</sup> Hannah Arendt "Society and Culture", *Dedalus*, 1960, at 285.

“dogmatic sleep” arises. It consists of considering science only with regards to its results, culture only according to its effects, and both only as valuable factors in the perspective of their social utility. This is a dogmatism, because it reduces the access to knowledge to an entirely *un-problematic* dimension, where it can appear only according to a standard perspective, inflected in a wide range of patterns – and, according to Hannah Arendt, when the world “is permitted to present itself in only one perspective”, “the end of the common world has come”<sup>48</sup>.

This standard perspective is the fulfilment of social needs. What is relevant is no longer the truth of knowledge, but its capacity for complying with the necessities of society. Journals and newspapers, as *possible* instruments of the public use of reason, turn into *real* devices for establishing the standard perspective. As a means of a possible enlightenment, they turn into effective mechanisms for keeping men under tutelage. This ‘realization’, whose first effects were experienced by Kant himself<sup>49</sup>, is nowadays accomplished to such an extent that ‘mistrusting’ journals and newspapers has become commonplace. The harmfulness of this situation consists in the fact that – as Simone Weil clearly saw fifty years ago – “one feels almost afraid to read” and that “one reads as though he were drinking from a contaminated well”:

The public is suspicious of newspapers, but its suspicions don’t save it. Knowing, in a general way, that a newspaper contains both true and false statements, it divides the news up into these two categories, but in a rough-and-ready fashion, in accordance with its own predilections. It is thus delivered over to error<sup>50</sup>

‘Predilections’, according to which the public orients its suspicious reading, are in their turn oriented and determined by the reading of journals, which – according to Martin Heidegger – “set public opinion to swallowing what is printed, so that it becomes ready, on demand, to receive a set configuration of opinion”<sup>51</sup>.

In recent years, this contaminating guardianship of journals seems to be tottering under the pressure of the so called ‘new media’ and their capacity for spreading knowledge by bypassing the

---

<sup>48</sup> Hannah Arendt *The Human Condition*, *supra* note 46, at 55.

<sup>49</sup> See Immanuel Kant *Philosophical Correspondence 1759-1799*, ed. Arnulf Zweig, University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1967, in particular the letter of 7th august 1783 to Ch. Garve, where he discusses the way journals have publicly treasured the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

<sup>50</sup> Simone Weil *The Needs for Roots*, Routledge: New York/London, at 36-7.

<sup>51</sup> Martin Heidegger *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, Günther Neske / Cotta: Stuttgart, 2000 [1954], at 22.

control of the <186> ‘guardians’<sup>52</sup>. However, as long as knowledge is not understood in its “worldly concept”, even though knowledge sharing is effectively implemented through “architecturally free media” such as the Internet, man will firmly be kept in his “state of tutelage”, that is, at the bottom of the “cave”. But the worldly concept can shine only where a *world* is. Now, no world can *be* without transcendence. In our age, which is caught in the grip of urgencies and needs, to be men of knowledge means to give full scope to the transcendence, that is to the ‘empiric free zone’ where those devoted to thinking – without being peremptorily summoned on the ground of ‘facts’ and of ‘results’ – may publicly communicate “without being decried on that account as turbulent and dangerous citizens”<sup>53</sup>. Or, even worse, as being socially useless.

*April-June 2005*

---

<sup>52</sup> See for instance what recently happened in France with the last outbreak of the so called ‘Heidegger-and-nazism affair’, following the publishing of E. Faye’s book *Heidegger: l’introduction du nazisme dans la philosophie* (Paris: 2005): see the whole documentation in <http://www.zagdanski.com>.

<sup>53</sup> Immanuel Kant *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A 752, B 780.