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Can Reason Liberate Itself in the Digital Age? Kant, Foucault, and the Crisis of Enlightenment

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ABSTRACT

The Enlightenment gave great importance to human reason and intellectual freedom. Immanuel Kant viewed Enlightenment as the escape from self-incurred immaturity. He encouraged people to use their own understanding. Michel Foucault later examined the relationship between power, knowledge, and human subjectivity. This paper brings their ideas together to examine intellectual autonomy in the digital age. Digital technologies have made information widely accessible. They have also expanded communication and knowledge production. However, digital life has created new challenges. Algorithms influence our choices. Digital surveillance affects our privacy. Online platforms also shape our thoughts and opinions. This raises an important question: Does access to information guarantee intellectual freedom? The paper argues that digital dependence can create new forms of intellectual immaturity. This can happen even when people have access to vast amounts of information. Drawing on Kant and Foucault, the paper develops the concept of Digital Critical Autonomy. It refers to the ability to think independently and question the forces that influence our thinking. The concept connects autonomous reasoning with critical awareness of digital power. It offers a framework for understanding intellectual freedom in technologically mediated life. The paper thus

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reconsiders the relevance of the Enlightenment in the digital age.

Introduction

The Enlightenment gave a central place to human reason and intellectual freedom. It encouraged people to question accepted beliefs and think through their own understanding. Immanuel Kant gave this idea a clear philosophical meaning. In his essay *An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?*, Kant (1784/1996) describes Enlightenment as humanity's emergence from self-incurred immaturity. He expresses its central message through the famous words, “Sapere aude!” (p. 17). This means having the courage to use one's own understanding. For Kant, intellectual freedom begins when people stop depending blindly on the guidance of others.

This question has gained new importance in contemporary society. Digital technology has changed how people receive information, communicate, and form opinions. Knowledge is now available through websites, search engines, and social media platforms. People can express their views and take part in discussions across the world. These developments seem to support independent thinking. Yet, the situation is not so simple. Digital platforms influence what people read and watch. Gillespie (2014) explains how algorithms select and recommend information according to users' interests and activities (pp. 167–169). As a result, people may have access to more information while becoming less aware of the forces that shape their choices.

This creates a problem for the Enlightenment ideal. Does access to information necessarily make people intellectually free? A person may use digital technology every day without questioning how it influences their thoughts and decisions. Such dependence can create new forms of intellectual immaturity. The problem is not simply the use of technology. It concerns the ability to think independently within an environment that constantly guides human attention and behaviour.

Michel Foucault provides another way to examine this problem. In his discussion of Kant's essay, Foucault (1984) connects Enlightenment with a critical examination of the present and the historical conditions that shape human existence. His analysis of power and knowledge also helps explain how individuals are influenced by social and institutional practices. These ideas are useful for understanding the hidden forms of influence within digital environments.

This paper brings Kant and Foucault into dialogue to examine the crisis of independent thinking in the digital age. Its central argument is that intellectual freedom requires more than access to information. It also

requires the ability to question the forces that shape human judgment. The paper develops the concept of Digital Critical Autonomy as its original contribution. It refers to the capacity to use reason independently while critically examining the technological systems and power relations that influence human thought. Through this concept, the paper seeks to reconsider the meaning of Enlightenment in contemporary digital life.

Kant's Understanding of Enlightenment and Autonomy

Kant's idea of Enlightenment begins with a simple but powerful demand. Human beings should have the courage to think for themselves. In his 1784 essay, *An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?*, Kant (1996) expresses this demand through the Latin phrase Sapere Aude, which means "Dare to know" or "Have courage to use your own understanding" (p. 17). For Kant, Enlightenment is not simply the growth of knowledge. It is a change in the way people use their reason. A person must learn to question accepted beliefs and make judgments through independent thinking.

Kant (1996) defines Enlightenment as "man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity" (p. 17). Immaturity, in this context, does not mean a lack of intelligence. It means the inability to use one's understanding without depending on another person's direction. Many people accept the opinions of authorities without examining them. They follow established rules and beliefs because independent thinking seems difficult or uncomfortable. Kant believes that this condition continues because people lack the courage to use their own reason.

He also points out that immaturity can continue even when people have the ability to think independently. Fear, habit, and dependence often prevent them from using that ability. This makes Enlightenment both an individual and a social concern. People must develop the confidence to question what they are told. They must also have the freedom to express their thoughts. For Kant, intellectual freedom cannot grow in an environment where questioning is discouraged.

Kant makes an important distinction between the public and private uses of reason. The private use of reason refers to the duties a person performs within a particular position or institution. The public use of reason means expressing one's ideas as a scholar before the reading public. Kant (1996) argues that the public use of reason must remain free because it allows people to examine existing beliefs and social practices (pp. 18–19). This freedom is necessary for the progress of Enlightenment.

This distinction remains useful in contemporary society. Digital platforms have created new spaces for public discussion. People can express opinions, question authorities, and share knowledge with others. Yet,

the freedom to speak does not always ensure the freedom to think. Online discussions can be influenced by popular opinions, platform rules, and algorithmic recommendations. Kant's argument reminds us that public expression should also involve reasoned judgment and the freedom to question accepted views.

Kant's understanding of Enlightenment is closely connected with the idea of autonomy. Autonomy involves the ability to use one's own reason and make judgments without blind dependence on others. A person should not accept an opinion simply because it comes from an authority or a popular source. Every claim should remain open to examination. This does not mean rejecting all forms of guidance or knowledge received from others. It means using reason to judge what one accepts.

This idea provides an important foundation for the present study. Digital technology offers enormous amounts of information, but information alone cannot make people autonomous. Individuals may depend on online recommendations and popular opinions without examining their influence. Kant's demand for independent reasoning therefore remains relevant. However, the digital age also raises a further question. How can people think independently when technological systems influence what they see and how they make decisions? This question leads to Foucault's analysis of power, knowledge, and critique, which offers another way to understand the conditions of intellectual freedom.

Foucault's Understanding of Enlightenment, Power, and Critique

Foucault offers an interesting interpretation of the Enlightenment. He does not simply reject Kant's ideas. In his essay *What Is Enlightenment?*, Foucault (1984) returns to Kant's question and examines its meaning for modern philosophy. He understands Enlightenment as a way of thinking about the present. It is also a way of questioning the historical conditions that shape human life. For Foucault, the task of philosophy is not limited to understanding the past. It must also examine the present and ask how people have become what they are.

Foucault (1984) connects this approach with a critical attitude towards ourselves and our society. He is interested in the ways historical events, social institutions, and systems of knowledge shape human subjectivity. This point creates an important connection with Kant. Kant asks people to use their own understanding. Foucault takes the discussion further by asking how that understanding itself is shaped by different forms of power. People may believe that they are thinking freely, but their ideas and choices are often influenced by social conditions. Therefore, freedom also requires an examination of the forces that shape human thinking.

The relationship between knowledge and power is central to Foucault's philosophy. He argues that knowledge does not develop separately from relations of power. Institutions and social practices help decide what counts as true, normal, or acceptable. In Discipline and Punish, Foucault (1977) examines how modern institutions use observation, examination, and discipline to regulate human behaviour. Schools, prisons, hospitals, and other institutions develop methods of controlling individuals. These methods do not always depend on direct force. People gradually learn to follow rules and monitor their own conduct.

Foucault's discussion of the Panopticon offers a clear example of this process. The Panopticon is a model of prison observation in which individuals can be watched without knowing exactly when they are being observed. Foucault (1977) explains how this arrangement encourages people to regulate their own behaviour because they may be under constant observation (pp. 200–201). The important point is that power can operate through continuous visibility. Individuals begin to control themselves even without direct orders from an authority. This idea becomes useful when examining modern digital surveillance and online behaviour.

However, Foucault's understanding of power does not mean that human freedom is impossible. He believes that power relations also create possibilities for resistance. His idea of critique is important here. Critique means questioning the practices and systems that guide human conduct. Foucault (1997) describes critique as an attitude that asks how people are governed and whether they can be governed in different ways. It involves examining the limits placed upon human thought and action. People must question these limits and consider the possibility of changing them.

This understanding of critique has a clear connection with the present digital situation. Online platforms, algorithms, and systems of surveillance influence how people receive information and present themselves. Foucault's approach encourages us to examine these influences instead of accepting them as natural or unavoidable. His ideas also help extend the discussion of autonomy beyond the simple ability to make individual choices. Intellectual freedom requires awareness of the power relations within which those choices are made. This perspective provides an important foundation for developing the idea of Digital Critical Autonomy in the following sections.

Digital Age and the Crisis of Enlightenment Reason

The digital age has changed the way people think, communicate, and make decisions. Technology has made many activities easier and faster. People can search for information, read different opinions, and communicate with others across the world. However, these changes also raise questions about independent

thinking. Digital systems do not simply provide information. They also influence what people see, how they receive it, and how they respond to it. This creates a new challenge for the Enlightenment ideal of reason.

Digital platforms depend heavily on algorithms to organise information. These algorithms select, rank, and recommend content according to different patterns of user activity. Gillespie (2014) explains how algorithms play an important role in deciding which information becomes visible to users (pp. 167–169). This process can make information searching easier. At the same time, it can influence individual choices without users fully understanding how these systems work. People may believe that they are making completely independent choices, although their options have already been shaped by technological systems. The problem becomes more serious when users accept recommended content without questioning its source or purpose. Independent thinking then becomes closely connected with the ability to examine how digital information is selected and presented.

Digital surveillance creates another challenge for intellectual freedom. Online activities often produce personal data through searches, messages, browsing habits, and social media interactions. These digital traces can be collected and used by different organisations. Rettberg (2016) explains that digital technologies allow governments and commercial companies to gather information about individuals, often without their full knowledge (pp. 79–88). This raises questions about privacy and personal freedom. People may also change their behaviour when they believe that their activities are being watched. Foucault's discussion of the Panopticon becomes relevant here. Continuous observation can encourage individuals to regulate their own conduct. In digital society, this form of influence may operate through online monitoring and data collection. Therefore, surveillance is not only a question of privacy. It can also affect how freely people express themselves and make decisions.

Social media has also changed the way people form opinions. These platforms allow users to share information and participate in public discussions. Yet, the same platforms can spread misleading information and strengthen existing beliefs. Flaxman et al. (2016) examine how online news consumption can create conditions for filter bubbles and echo chambers (pp. 298–320). Users may repeatedly encounter information that supports their existing views. As a result, they may become less willing to consider different opinions. Rhodes (2022) also discusses how filter bubbles and echo chambers can make people less critical of political misinformation. This situation creates a serious problem for independent judgment. People may accept information because it is popular or repeatedly shared. They may not examine its truth or reliability. Kant's demand for the independent use of reason becomes important in this context. People need to question information before accepting it as true.

Digital platforms also influence the formation of human identity. Social media allows individuals to present themselves through photographs, personal opinions, and online activities. People can create a public image and receive responses from others. Van Dijck (2013) explains how social networking sites shape the ways individuals present themselves and manage their online identities (pp. 199–215). This process can influence how people understand their own value. The number of likes, comments, and followers may become important measures of social recognition. Some individuals may begin to shape their behaviour according to the expectations of online audiences. Their sense of identity can gradually become connected with digital approval. This does not mean that all online self-expression is false or harmful. The concern is that people may lose sight of their own judgment while trying to maintain a particular image.

These developments reveal a deeper problem within digital society. People have more information and greater opportunities for communication, but these advantages do not automatically produce intellectual freedom. Their choices, opinions, and identities can be influenced by systems that remain partly hidden from them. Kant's idea of Enlightenment asks people to use their own understanding. Foucault's approach encourages them to examine the power relations that shape their lives. Both perspectives help explain why independent thinking requires more than access to information. It also requires the ability to question digital influence. This problem leads to the need for a broader understanding of autonomy under contemporary technological conditions.

Towards Digital Critical Autonomy: A Dialogue Between Kant and Foucault

Kant's idea of autonomy remains important for understanding intellectual freedom in the digital age. For Kant (1996), enlightenment requires individuals to use their own understanding without depending completely on the guidance of others. This requires courage, independent judgment, and the ability to examine beliefs through reason. In digital life, however, the exercise of independent judgment has become more complicated. People do not always choose the information they encounter. Search engines, social media platforms, and recommendation systems influence what appears before them. As a result, the freedom to access information does not always lead to the freedom to think independently.

Foucault's account of power helps to extend this Kantian understanding. Kant emphasises the individual's capacity to reason, while Foucault draws attention to the conditions that shape the individual as a thinking subject. Foucault (1984) asks us to examine the historical and social conditions that influence how people understand themselves and the world. His analysis of disciplinary power also shows how observation and surveillance can encourage individuals to regulate their own behaviour (Foucault, 1977). These ideas have particular relevance to digital environments. Online platforms collect personal data, organise information,

and influence patterns of attention. Their power does not always operate through direct restrictions. It can also work through ordinary features such as recommendations, personalised content, and systems of ranking. Individuals may gradually accept these arrangements without examining how they shape their choices.

A dialogue between Kant and Foucault therefore offers a broader understanding of intellectual freedom. Kant reminds us that individuals should not surrender their capacity for independent reasoning. Foucault adds that this capacity must include an awareness of the forces that influence thought and behaviour. Independent thinking is difficult when individuals remain unaware of how information is selected, presented, and circulated. Gillespie (2014) explains the importance of algorithms in organising and ranking information. Such processes may affect what users notice and consider important. The issue is not simply whether people can access information. It is also whether they can question the systems through which information reaches them.

On this basis, the paper proposes the concept of Digital Critical Autonomy. It refers to the capacity of individuals to exercise independent reason while critically examining the digital systems, power relations, and technological conditions that influence their thoughts, choices, and decisions. The concept brings together two important concerns. From Kant, it takes the demand for independent reasoning and intellectual courage. From Foucault, it takes the need to question the forms of power that shape knowledge, conduct, and subjectivity. Digital Critical Autonomy does not mean rejecting digital technology or imagining that individuals can remain completely free from external influence. It means developing the ability to recognise such influences and respond to them through critical judgment.

This form of autonomy requires more than basic digital knowledge. Individuals need to question why certain information appears in their feeds, examine the reliability of online sources, and remain aware of how personal data may be collected and used. They should also be able to recognise how online platforms can influence their opinions and self-understanding. These responsibilities cannot rest on individuals alone. Digital institutions and platforms must also be open to scrutiny and accountable for the systems they create. Digital Critical Autonomy thus connects personal responsibility with critical awareness of technological power. It offers a way to reconsider the Enlightenment ideal of intellectual freedom under contemporary digital conditions.

Conclusion

The Enlightenment ideal of intellectual freedom remains relevant in the digital age, but its meaning needs to be reconsidered. Kant (1996) understood enlightenment as the courage to use one's own understanding without depending on the direction of others. This ideal continues to offer an important foundation for independent thinking. However, contemporary digital life has introduced new conditions that complicate the exercise of reason. Algorithms influence access to information, surveillance affects personal freedom, and online platforms shape patterns of thought and behaviour. Access to information alone, therefore, cannot guarantee intellectual autonomy.

Foucault's analysis of power and knowledge helps explain these challenges. His work draws attention to the ways social and institutional forces shape human conduct and subjectivity. When applied to digital environments, this perspective encourages a closer examination of the systems that organise information and influence individual choices. The dialogue between Kant and Foucault thus suggests that intellectual freedom requires both independent reasoning and an awareness of the forces that shape it.

To address this concern, the paper has proposed the concept of Digital Critical Autonomy. It refers to the capacity to think independently while examining the digital systems and power relations that influence thought, choice, and decision-making. The concept extends the Kantian ideal of autonomous reason through a Foucauldian awareness of power. It does not demand withdrawal from technology. It calls for a more reflective and critical engagement with digital life. Ultimately, the challenge of the digital age is not simply to gain access to more information, but to preserve the capacity to judge, question, and think freely. In this sense, the Enlightenment remains an unfinished project.

Digital Critical Autonomy also has a wider significance for contemporary society. It encourages a shift in how intellectual freedom is understood. Freedom cannot be measured only by the amount of information available or by the number of choices offered by digital platforms. A person may have access to thousands of sources and still depend heavily on algorithmic recommendations. Similarly, the ability to express an opinion online does not necessarily mean that the opinion has been formed through independent reflection. What matters is the ability to examine the conditions under which information is produced, selected, and circulated. This requires individuals to question familiar sources, recognise possible biases, and consider alternative perspectives before forming judgments.

The concept also raises questions about the responsibilities of digital institutions. Critical thinking by individuals is necessary, but it cannot address every problem created by technological systems. Platforms

that collect personal data and influence the circulation of information should also be open to public examination. Greater transparency and accountability are essential for creating conditions in which independent judgment can develop. Thus, Digital Critical Autonomy involves both individual awareness and a broader concern for the social conditions of digital freedom.

The present discussion does not claim that Kant or Foucault provided direct answers to the problems of contemporary digital technology. Their philosophical ideas offer resources for examining these problems from different but connected perspectives. Kant establishes the importance of independent reason, while Foucault reminds us to question the power relations that shape our understanding of ourselves and the world. Bringing these perspectives together provides a basis for rethinking intellectual freedom today. Digital Critical Autonomy is proposed as one possible framework for this task. It seeks to preserve the Enlightenment demand for independent thought while recognising that freedom in the digital age also depends on the ability to question the technological conditions of everyday life.

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