

## Reason, Autonomy, and the Limits of Enlightenment: Kant and the Romantic Response

Rahul Sheet \*

Received: 30 March 2026 / Accepted: 31 March 2026 Published: 31 March 2026  
Journal homepage: <https://anubodhan.org>

### Abstract

Immanuel Kant's philosophy is often described as a synthesis of rationalism and empiricism, yet its deeper significance lies in his response to the broader challenges of the Enlightenment. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant defines transcendental philosophy as the study of the conditions that make knowledge possible a priori, thereby limiting reason to the bounds of possible experience and exposing the futility of transcendent speculation. His critical project arose within the intellectual climate of the Enlightenment, a period inspired by the scientific revolution, humanist traditions, and demands for political autonomy. The Enlightenment emphasized reason, critique, and independence of judgment, summed up in Kant's famous motto: *Sapere aude!*—"Have the courage to use your own reason."

Kant interprets Enlightenment as humanity's "emergence from self-imposed immaturity," a state not due to lack of intellect but to dependence, laziness, and cowardice. Overcoming immaturity requires intellectual courage, public discourse, and the cultivation of autonomy. Kant distinguishes between the "private use of reason," bound by institutional roles, and the "public use of reason," which must remain unrestricted for true progress. He argues that freedom of thought, open critique, and education are the essential conditions for enlightenment, which unfolds gradually rather than through violent revolution.

This study examines the concept of Enlightenment through three interrelated dimensions: its historical and philosophical context in Kant's thought, the role

---

\* Ph.D Research Scholar, Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandira  
E-mail: [rahulsheet786@gmail.com](mailto:rahulsheet786@gmail.com)

of autonomy and reason in the development of human maturity, and the complex relationship between Enlightenment ideals and the emergence of Romanticism. By situating Kant's philosophy within the broader intellectual debates of the eighteenth century, the discussion highlights the significance of Enlightenment thought in shaping modern ideas of freedom, rationality, and cultural development.

**Key Words:** Critique, Enlightenment, Immaturity, Rationalism, Empiricism, Transcendental Philosophy, Art

### **Introduction**

The Enlightenment is an intellectual movement in the history of modern Western thought. Emerging during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it endorsed the ideals of rational inquiry, intellectual freedom, and the autonomy of the individual. Enlightenment thinkers challenged traditional authorities in religion, politics, and philosophy, arguing that human reason should serve as the primary guide for knowledge and moral judgment. Within this intellectual climate, the philosophy of Immanuel Kant occupies a central position, providing one of the most systematic and influential articulations of the Enlightenment project.

Kant's philosophical work developed in response to the long-standing debate between rationalist and empiricist traditions represented by thinkers such as Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and David Hume. Through his critical philosophy, most notably in *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant sought to establish the limits and conditions of human knowledge while defending the essential role of reason in philosophical inquiry. His influential essay *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* further defined Enlightenment as humanity's emergence from "self-imposed immaturity," emphasizing the courage to think independently.

### **1. Historical Context and Kant's Essay**

Kant's basic project can be seen as an effort to resolve the conflicts between two opposing schools of thought, mainly G. W. Leibniz's (1646–1716) dogmatism and David Hume's (1711–76) scepticism. Kant critically analysed both these philosophies and proposed his "transcendental" philosophy as a better alternative. In *'Critique of Pure Reason'* Kant says – "I entitle transcendental all knowledge which is occupied not so much with object as with the mode of our knowledge of objects in so far as this mode of knowledge is to be possible *a priori*. A system of such concepts might be entitled transcendental philosophy."<sup>1</sup> According to Kant, transcendental principles are those whose application is confined within the limits of possible experience, while transcendent principles

---

<sup>1</sup> Smith K. Norman (Trans.), *Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, MacMillan & co Ltd., 1929, P.59, A12

are those whose application transgress the limits of possible experience. Although, Kant himself describes his work in these terms, this reconciliation of rationalism and empiricism is ultimately a secondary theme. More we can said that Kant's philosophy also responds to Enlightenment that shaped the eighteenth century.

Like all extended periods in the history of ideas, the unity of the Enlightenment, or Age of Reason, becomes visible only when the detailed doctrines of individual thinkers are allowed to go somewhat out of focus: the epoch was of course far from homogeneous and consisted more in a commonality of approach than subscription to any single set of beliefs. With that qualification, it may be said that the Enlightenment received its chief inspiration from the successes of the scientific revolution in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and was concerned with defending what Western thought now takes for granted: the right of each to make up his own mind on matters of theoretical or practical substance, in place of appeal to established authority or tradition. An identical Reason was held to exist immanently in human nature, needing only to be brought to the light of day through appropriate pedagogic means. Enlightenment thinkers sought to promote civic and political institutions that would respect individual autonomy and foster the growth of knowledge, happiness and virtue. From intellectual emancipation, political emancipation would follow.

In his seminal essay Kant defining Enlightenment, Kant describes it as "man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity,"<sup>2</sup> adopting the motto *Sapere aude!* — "Have the courage to use your own reason!" The Enlightenment thus advocated developing what Hume termed "the science of man" and subjecting all traditions and practices to rational scrutiny. For Kant the death of speculative metaphysics and the birth of the rights of men were not independent events. Together they constitute the resolution of the Enlightenment. Kant encapsulates the spirit of his age with the assertion:

"Our age is, to a special degree, the age of criticism, and to criticism everything must submit. Religion, through its sanctity, and law-giving through its majesty, may seek to exempt themselves from it. But they then awaken just suspicion, and cannot claim the sincere respect which reason accords only to that which has been able to sustain the test of free and open examination."<sup>3</sup>

Another hallmark of the Enlightenment was its boundless optimism: a belief that the process of human enlightenment was well underway. Advances in

---

<sup>2</sup> Kant, Immanuel. Trans., Ted Humphrey, *An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?* Hackett Publishing, 1992, P.1

<sup>3</sup>Smith K. Norman (Trans.), *Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, Macmillan & Co LTD., 1929, p. 9, Axi

natural science—especially Isaac Newton's (1642–1727) monumental achievements—along with growing religious tolerance, diminishing church authority, and the social ascendance of the bourgeoisie, seemed to confirm that humanity had irrevocably embarked on the path of progress.

Germany did not participate in the original phase of Enlightenment thinking. Lying directly behind it were the ideas of John Locke (1632-1704) and Newton, and leading figures of the Scottish Enlightenment were Hume and Adam Smith (1723-90). By the middle of the century its centre was firmly located in France, concentrated around the *Encyclopaedia* edited by Denis Diderot (1713-84) and Jean d'Alembert (1717-83), contributors to which included the *philosophes* C. de Montesquieu (1689-1755), Voltaire (1694-1778), E. de Condillac (1715-80), ~ d'Holbach (1723-89), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78) and M. de Condorcet (1743-94). In Germany the Enlightenment took hold relatively late, owing to unpropitious (still largely feudal) social and political conditions, and it was strongly associated there with philosophical rationalism. The representative and dominant *Aufklärung* philosophy was that of Leibniz, as propagated by Christian Wolff (1679-1750) and his followers. Wolff had recast Leibniz's philosophy in an explicitly systematic form, and in the first half of the eighteenth century the so-called 'Leibniz-Wolffian philosophy' became standard fare in German universities. It was not, even at its zenith, without its critics, and the German philosophical landscape of course encompassed other trends. C. A. Crusius (1715-75) submitted the Wolffian school to sharp criticism, and it later lost ground to Popular philosophy, an eclectic, intellectually flaccid movement hostile to its esotericism (dismissed by Kant as 'a pretentiously free manner of thinking'). But the Leibniz-Wolffian system had no rival of comparable philosophical stature until Kant's Critical philosophy burst upon the scene late in the century. By then, the prestige of the Enlightenment had been tarnished, as over the course of the eighteenth century it became clear that the project of a rational reconstruction of humanity had weaknesses and involved costs.

In Germany particularly, thinkers aimed not to abolish religion but to reform it rationally, relying on natural theology — using the order of nature as proof of God's existence rather than relying on revelation. But natural theology proved inadequate: it diminished the authority of scripture and yielded a deistic view of God too cold for spiritual life. Increasingly, the scientific worldview seemed in conflict with religion, with morality caught in the crossfire. One famous confrontation illustrating these tensions was the Leibniz-Clarke correspondence (published in 1717), effectively a philosophical duel between Leibniz and Newton (via Newton's spokesman, Samuel Clarke, 1675–1729). The upshot was that on numerous fundamental points Leibniz's reasoning from the principle of sufficient reason arrived at conclusions about the structure of reality diametrically opposed to those to which Newton had been led by his 'Deduction from the phenomena'.

Further challenges emerged during the Enlightenment. Hume's radical empiricism, often considered its greatest internal critique, shook confidence in reason. By arguing that belief in causality, the external world, and even the self rested not on reason but on habit, Hume dissolved the close association between reason and nature. His skepticism left religion and metaphysics without rational foundations, famously concluding that all treatises on divinity or metaphysics should be consigned "to the flames." Though many resisted Hume's conclusions, refuting them proved exceedingly difficult. His challenge demanded a serious philosophical response. Rousseau, like Hume, is numbered among the giants of the Enlightenment, though he too can hardly be said to have exalted reason in the standard Enlightenment sense. In its place, he rooted morality and religious faith in feeling (*sentiment intérieur*) rather than rational argument, and he criticized the influence of arts and sciences. The net result of Rousseau's philosophy was, at the very least, to create a doubt: had the activities of reason – including perhaps the metaphysics of philosophers – played a part in corrupting and immiserating humanity, and warping its moral understanding of the world?

The Counter-Enlightenment drew inspiration in part from a force outside philosophy - Pietism, an evangelical Lutheran movement that had originated in Germany towards the end of the seventeenth century as a reaction against Protestant dogmatism. Once established, Pietism tended to fossilise and became dogmatic in turn, but in its inception it was a religion of the inner spirit rather than outward forms, which set store by personal experience of conversion, cultivation of an inward devotional life and the manifestation of a morally good will in charitable works. The anti-intellectualism of the Counter-Enlightenment reflected this religious sensibility. Pietism had, as it were, anticipated the crisis into which the Enlightenment would lead religion, and it lay ready with a solution: the independence of religion from reason. The movement provided a constant source of resistance to the Enlightenment (the arch-rationalist Wolff was temporarily banished from Prussia as a result of charges of godlessness levelled at him by his Pietist colleagues). Hamann, Herder and Jacobi were all deeply influenced by Pietism, as was Crusius. The further significance of Pietism in the present context is that it was the religion in which Kant was brought up.

The conflict between the Enlightenment and its detractors exploded in Germany after the death of Gotthold Lessing (1729-81) - a great cultural figure who had held the banner of *Aufklärung* with the so-called *Pantheismusstreit* ('pantheism controversy'). Initially it consisted of a heated epistolary exchange between the polemical Jacobi and Moses Mendelssohn (1729-86), a rationalist philosopher. Beneath the surface question about Lessing's personal beliefs lay a deeper philosophical crisis: whether reason could truly support religious faith, or whether, as Jacobi insisted, pure rationality inevitably culminated in atheism.

Eventually, nature itself seemed to put a question to the proponents of Enlightenment. In 1755 an appalling earthquake devastated Lisbon. This event, which appeared to flatly contradict the Enlightenment assumption of the rational purposiveness of nature, ramified spiritually throughout Europe, and added fuel to the debate that already existed concerning Leibniz's theodicy, his claim that this is the best of all possible worlds.

These mounting tensions—both internal and external—pervaded the intellectual climate in which Kant worked. They shaped the concerns of his early writings and set the stage for his mature philosophy. It was felt by Kant that Enlightenment grappling with its internal contradictions, he recognized its project could not endure.

At the heart of this movement lies Immanuel Kant's seminal 1784 essay, "*Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?*" ("An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?"). In this brief but profound piece, Kant defines Enlightenment as "*man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity.*"<sup>4</sup> For Kant, enlightenment represents the process where humanity emerges from self-imposed immaturity. This immaturity refers to who unable to use his/her understanding without taking help due to a lack of courage. Many individuals prefer the comfort of allowing others — pastors, doctors, and rulers — to make decisions for them. This comfort creates a dependency that becomes entrenched over time, with guardians warning of the dangers inherent in independent thought. Although mistakes are inevitable when first learning to reason independently, only through these errors can true autonomy be achieved. Yet, societal prejudices, deeply established over generations, make many fearful of taking the initial steps toward maturity.

Kant argue that the journey toward self-enlightenment is fraught with difficulties because individuals often become attached to their state of dependence. Deprived of early opportunities to practice independent judgment, they rely on mechanical aids and rigid formulas that stifle their intellectual development. Freedom, therefore, is not something easily attained but is the result of persistent effort in cultivating one's intellectual faculties. Despite the challenge faced by individuals, the enlightenment of the public is more feasible. Public enlightenment progresses when a few courageous individuals inspire others through their exercise of reason. Thus, enlightenment must be a gradual, steady evolution rather than a sudden upheaval. Kant also said that freedom is the essential condition for enlightenment, particularly the freedom to make public use of one's reason. In the context of one's civic duties, private reason may need to be constrained to maintain social order — a soldier must obey, a citizen must pay taxes — yet, as scholars, individuals must be free to voice

---

<sup>4</sup> Kant, Immanuel. Trans., Ted Humphrey, *An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?* Hackett Publishing, 1992, P.1

critiques and engage in open discourse. The flourishing of enlightenment depends on the preservation and encouragement of this public exercise of reason. The notion of eternal guardianship, whereby societies bind themselves to fixed principles that future generations cannot question, stands in direct opposition to human progress.

Paradoxically, lesser civil freedom does not always incontinently lead to lesser spiritual freedom. In some cases, restrictions on civil liberties may produce a space in which intellectual independence matures still. Once the disposition toward free study is cultivated, it gradationally reshapes not only particular character but also the broader structures of society. Eventually, enlightened personalities supported by their governments help to create a more flexible and wealthy state.

Thus, the actual road to enlightenment is not via a violent revolution but rather by the relentless, ferocious, public exercise of reason, fostered by a political system that values and protects intellectual freedom. Crucially, Kant's generality of Enlightenment is both a particular and collaborative design. It requires the civilization of independent study, but also depends on the presence of a public sphere in which reason can be freely exercised. This vision places a heavy emphasis on the ethical and political responsibility of individualities to suppose for themselves, especially in matters of faith and governance. In doing so, Kant lays the philosophical root for ultramodern generalizations of republic, civil liberties, and education. He provides a foundational philosophical frame for moment's ideas about republic, civil liberties, and education. Kant claims that achieving Enlightenment requires the courage to use one's own reason, a call for independent thinking that's crucial to liberal popular principles. Likewise, Kant considered education as a vital process for creating rational and independent people who can positively affect a moral and enlightened society, not only as a means of passing on knowledge. therefore, Kant's Enlightenment perspective challenges despotism and dogma as well as supports the institutions — popular government, civil rights, and education that help a free and logical society.

## **2. Autonomy, Reason, and Maturity**

In Kant's moral and political theory, autonomy—the ability to rule oneself in accordance with reasoned principles as opposed to outside orders—is inextricably linked to enlightenment. Autonomy is the active use of reason to shape one's beliefs, actions, and responsibilities; it is not just the absence of coercion. For Kant, this rational self-legislation is what distinguishes maturity from childhood. Maturity is not simply a matter of age or knowledge, but of moral and intellectual self-reliance. Reason, also, becomes the central faculty of Enlightenment. It enables individualities to notice entered dogmas, examine the legality of institutions, and share in public converse. Reason is both an

individual compass and a universal medium, allowing individualities to transcend private interests and communicate in the realm of the “public use of reason,” which Kant deems essential for societal progress. Kant’s ideal of maturity also implies a temporal process — an unfolding of mortal eventuality over time. He states that poltroonery, shiftlessness, and the pleasant paternalism provided by organizations that require obedience impede this process. As a result, the Enlightenment is a movement rather than a state, a continuous fight for liberty and accountability. It’s a moral dedication to the culture of moral autonomy, critical thinking, and group participation.

In Kant’s moral and political philosophy, the concept of Enlightenment (*Aufklärung*) is fundamentally articulated as the “emergence of the human being from his self-imposed immaturity”<sup>5</sup> (*selbstverschuldete Unmündigkeit*).

In the political realm, this concept translates into a strong defence of the freedom of public reason. Kant distinguishes between the “private use of reason” (within a particular civil post or institution) and the “public use of reason” (as a scholar addressing the reading public). While the former may be constrained by duties and rules, the latter must be entirely free, for it’s through the public and open exchange of ideas that society moves toward Enlightenment. Political structures, also, should not aim to put virtue or direct the moral lives of citizens, but must give the conditions under which individual can develop innocently — vicelike, freedom, equality, and the rule of law.

Thus, the conception of Enlightenment in Kant’s moral- political study encapsulates a singular yet rich point it’s the progressive consummation of human autonomy through the free and public use of reason, which forms the foundation of both moral obligation and licit political authority. Enlightenment is not a historical endpoint, but a nonstop, rational seeking toward the ideals of self- governance, dignity, and universality.

### 3. Enlightenment and Romanticism

The Romantic movement, which emerged in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, was partly a reaction to what it saw as the limitations of Enlightenment rationalism, whereas Kant's Enlightenment exalts reason and autonomy. By embracing emotion, imagination, and the indescribable aspects of existence that reason alone could not grasp, romantic thinkers and artists aimed to expand the scope of human experience without completely rejecting the ideals of freedom and individual expression.

For the Romantics, the Enlightenment’s focus on universal reason occasionally seemed to flatten the rich diversity of human life and reduce the

---

<sup>5</sup> Kant, Immanuel. Trans., Ted Humphrey, *An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?* Hackett Publishing, 1992, P.1

individual to a rational agent abstracted from nature, history, and feeling. Figures like Goethe, Schelling, and Novalis emphasized the significance of subjectivity, creativity, and the spiritual dimension of mortal experience. They advocated for a more holistic understanding of the self—one that acknowledged passion, intuition, and the mysteries of the natural world. Yet, Romanticism was not merely a negation of Enlightenment ideals. Rather, it engaged them dialectically. Romantic thinkers admired the Enlightenment's valorisation of human dignity and its critique of oppressive authority, but they also sought to correct what they saw as its overemphasis on analytic reason and its neglect of the aesthetic, emotional, and historical dimensions of life. In this sense, Romanticism can be seen as both a persistence and a critique of the Enlightenment.

For over a century, it has been common to see the rise of German Romanticism at the end of the eighteenth century as signalling the death of the *Aufklärung* (Enlightenment). Romanticism has frequently been portrayed as its conscious antithesis — a response that marked the Enlightenment's end. This idea has been participated by both critics and followers of Romanticism nineteenth-century German liberals and left-Hegelians condemned it as reactionary, while conservatives and nationalist latterly celebrated it as a rejection of Enlightenment values, which they saw as foreign and exaggeratedly rationalistic. After World War II, Romanticism again came under criticism, this time for its supposed ties to fascist ideology, leading liberals and Marxists to renew their opposition. Scholars have cited three main reasons for Romanticism's break with the Enlightenment: first, its replacement of rationalism with aestheticism, elevating feeling and intuition over reason; second, its rejection of Enlightenment individualism in favour of communal ideals; and third, its turn toward conservatism, particularly religious traditionalism. These contrasts have made Romanticism appear irrational, anti-individualistic, and anti-liberal in contrast to Enlightenment ideals.

However, this interpretation is a misleading oversimplification. German Romanticism was far from a monolithic movement—it evolved through several phases: Early Romanticism (*Frühromantik*) (1797–1802), High Romanticism (*Hochromantik*) (to 1815), and Late Romanticism (*Spätromantik*) (to 1830). While some late Romantics did adopt conservative positions, this cannot be generalized across the entire movement, especially not to its early phase.

Here I also focus on that formative phase of Romanticism, between 1797 and 1802, when figures like Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis, Schleiermacher, and Tieck gathered in Berlin and later in Jena. These young thinkers—philosophers, poets, and critics—formed what would be known as the Romantic circle. Though often harsh toward the Enlightenment, particularly toward the French *philosophes* and Berlin thinkers like Garve and Nicolai, their criticism was

directed at specific features—materialism, utilitarianism, dogmatic metaphysics, and blind faith in absolutism. But this critique did not challenge the basic ideas of the Enlightenment. Early Romantics actually held on to two of its key principles: the right of individuals to think freely (*radical criticism*) and the importance of public education (*Bildung*). Their aim was not to destroy Enlightenment ideals, but to deepen and revive them in response to a rising internal crisis. By the late 1780s, the Enlightenment faced a dilemma. Its relentless criticism seemed to lead to skepticism or nihilism, yet its ideal of educating the public presupposed belief in stable moral and aesthetic truths. If reason disproved all norms, how could we promote education and personal growth? The ancient question raised during Socrates' trial highlighted this conflict: how can a life of questioning bring about both deep ignorance and true understanding? Critics like Hamann and Jacobi brought these issues to the forefront again. The Romantics did not reject Enlightenment values; instead, they confronted their contradictions. They saw themselves not as enemies of the Enlightenment but as its successors. They aimed to preserve its spirit while also addressing its limitations.

One of the main characteristics of early German Romanticism was the importance it placed on art. In general, Romanticism began in Europe in the late 18th century and was a broad intellectual and artistic movement. It responded to the rationalism of the Enlightenment and the mechanical perspective of the Industrial Revolution. It emphasized the importance of emotion, the sublime, nature, and personal imagination in the human experience. German Romanticism, however, distinguished itself from its counterparts elsewhere by acquiring its own literary and philosophical characteristics. It blended the aesthetic, the ethical, and the metaphysical by fusing philosophy and art. German Idealism, especially the works of Schelling, Fichte, and Kant, had a significant influence on it. German Romanticism was more introspective and imaginative. In contrast to general Romanticism, which usually concentrated on personal feeling and artistic expression, German Romanticism was more contemplative and speculative, highlighting the unity of mind and nature, the never-ending pursuit of the self, and the idea of universal harmony via poetic and philosophical reflection. This difference highlights the intellectual orientation and depth that define German Romanticism among the larger Romantic movement. Thinkers such as Friedrich and A.W. Schlegel, Schleiermacher, Schelling, Novalis, and Hölderlin regarded artists—painters, poets, composers, and novelists—as central to cultural reform and moral education. This aesthetic elevation was, in many ways, a reversal of Plato's view in the *Republic*, where he proposed banishing artists from the ideal state. The Romantics, by contrast, wished to enthrone them. Novalis famously asked: what is the best prince but the artist of artists, orchestrating the state as a grand drama? But why did art hold such significance for these thinkers? To

understand this, we must place their aestheticism in its political context, particularly their response to the French Revolution. The Revolution deeply affected their thinking and raised their political awareness while shaping their social ideals. Most early Romantics, except for A.W. Schlegel, embraced the Revolution's promise of liberty, equality, and fraternity. They supported the downfall of the *ancient regime* and envisioned a republic where true humanity could flourish. Remarkably, their enthusiasm endured even through the Revolution's darker episodes—the September massacres, the king's execution, the Rhineland invasion, and the Terror. It was only around 1798 that key figures like Novalis and Schelling began to critique the Revolution's outcomes. They attributed the growing egoism, materialism, and utilitarianism of modern society to the excesses of the Revolution and became cautious of mob rule. However, their solution was not reactionary: they wanted a balanced republic that combined democracy, aristocracy, and monarchy, led by the educated elite. This change reflected broader European trends in the late 1790s, showing a general pullback from revolutionary radicalism. Still, the Romantics did not give up on their commitment to liberty and reform. Unlike many Enlightenment thinkers, who still believed in an enlightened monarchy, the Romantics moved more steadily toward republican ideals, though they did not support violent revolution. Except perhaps Hölderlin, they believed Germany was unprepared for a republic due to its low educational level and incomplete Enlightenment. Gradual, top-down reform was preferable to violent upheaval. Thus, art became central to their mission.

Their journal *Athenäum*, like many Enlightenment publications, aimed to foster public moral, intellectual, and aesthetic development. In this light, early Romanticism appears as a continuation of the *Aufklärung's* core mission—public education and enlightenment—albeit in a postrevolutionary context. The young romantics remained deeply committed to the Enlightenment (*Aufklärung*) ideals of *Bildung* and radical criticism. Their main complaint against Enlightenment thinkers was their failure to apply reason thoroughly, often compromising with traditional norms. Radical criticism was central to the *Athenäum*, expressed both in direct critique and through irony—a form of continual self-critique. Friedrich Schlegel's respect for Lessing, the boldest critic of his time, showed the Romantics' commitment to intellectual independence. Schlegel aimed to be the Lessing of the 1790s. This commitment was clear during the *Pantheism Controversy* in (1786), where Jacobi argued that rationalism led to atheistic Spinozism, which one could escape only by taking a leap of faith. The romantics rejected this idea, holding that abandoning reason for belief was dishonest. While open to mysticism, they insisted that beliefs must never contradict reason, even if they lack evidence. Criticism was, for them, a tool of liberation. They championed individualism—what they called “divine egoism”—believing that self-development required independent

thinking. Radical criticism protected the sovereignty of the self. Yet the romantics also recognized its dangers. Schlegel warned that reason must eventually question itself. By the late 1790s, radical critique had led to growing skepticism, with thinkers like Maimon and Hamann doubting Kant's answers to Hume. Some even saw Kant's thought leading to nihilism—the belief that only fleeting impressions are knowable. Scientific rationalism further alienated humans from nature, reducing it to a mechanical system. Technology stripped nature of beauty and mystery, making it either a tool or an obstacle, but no longer a source of belonging.

The breakdown of community was even more concerning. Despite their strong individualistic views, the romantics recognized the importance of community for people to flourish. By transforming accepted norms into repressive authorities and potentially leading to anarchism, radical criticism undercut this. This raised up a central dilemma: how to reconcile *Bildung* and the Enlightenment ideals of reason. If criticism destroys all foundations, what values guide education and society? If it severs our ties with nature and others, how can we maintain humanity and cohesion? The romantics rejected reactionary appeals to “prejudice” and instead sought a way to preserve both critical reason and the ideals of self-cultivation and community.

They saw art as creative and positive, able to self-consciously restore what early humans had once had—moral and religious belief, harmony with nature and community—in contrast to reason, which they saw as negative and analytical. Art could re-enchant nature with mystery and beauty, restore moral and religious faith, and strengthen social ties by arousing love through a new mythology. This aesthetic approach was the Romantics' response to the Enlightenment's collapse. While they accepted the value of criticism in challenging dogma, they believed only imagination—through art—could supply the deeper truths and values needed for *Bildung* (self-cultivation).

Yet, there was a key ambiguity in their program: Did art replace or merely support reason? If art was to replace reason, they transcended it. If art was only a complement to reason, they remained within its bounds. In truth, their stance toward reason was ambivalent. Though influenced by Enlightenment critique, they didn't simply continue it—they transformed it. Romanticism, then, was both a continuation and a reaction to the Enlightenment—its destruction and its rebirth.

### **Conclusion**

The concept of Enlightenment, as articulated by Immanuel Kant, represents a foundational moment in the development of modern philosophical thought. By defining Enlightenment as the emergence from “self-imposed immaturity,” Kant emphasized the moral and intellectual responsibility of individuals to

exercise their own reason rather than rely on external authorities. Enlightenment, therefore, is not merely a historical epoch but an ongoing process grounded in the ideals of rational autonomy, critical reflection, and the public use of reason.

Kant's critical philosophy offered a powerful response to the epistemological tensions generated by earlier traditions, particularly the rationalism of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and the skepticism of David Hume. By redefining the limits of human knowledge, Kant sought to preserve the Enlightenment's commitment to rational inquiry while addressing the philosophical crises that threatened its foundations.

At the same time, the Enlightenment project encountered significant cultural and philosophical challenges that contributed to the emergence of Romanticism. Early Romantic thinkers such as Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis did not simply reject Enlightenment ideals but sought to expand them by incorporating imagination, emotion, and aesthetic experience into the understanding of human life. Consequently, the relationship between Enlightenment and Romanticism should be viewed not as a simple opposition but as a dynamic intellectual dialogue that continues to shape modern discussions of reason, culture, and human freedom.

## References

1. Beiser, Friedrich, C - *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2003
2. Jephcott, Edmund, (Trans.) - *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, Stanford University Press, California, 2002
3. Guyer, Paul (Edi.) – *The Cambridge Companion to Kant and Modern Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2006
4. Guyer, Paul, *Kant*, Routledge, New York, 2006
5. Kuehn, Manfred – *Kant A Biography*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2001
6. Smith, Norman, K (Trans.) - *Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, MacMillan & co Ltd., London, 1964
7. Bernhard. J. H., (Trans.) – *Immanuel Kant's Critique of Judgment*, Prometheus Books, New York, 2000
8. Schelling, F. W. J. Von - *Of Human freedom*, Trans. By James Gutmann, The Open Court Publishing Company, Chicago, 1936
9. Kneller, Jene – *Kant and the Power of Imagination*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007

10. Roy, Pabitrakumar, *Kant's Concept of the Sublime: A Pathways to the Luminous*, Decent Books, New Delhi, 2005
11. Saul, Nicholas, *The Cambridge Companion to German Romanticism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009
12. Berlin, Isaiah, *The Roots of Romanticism: Second Edition (A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, Bollingen)*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2013
13. Beiser, Friedrich, C, *The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995
14. Millán, Elizabeth (Trans.), *Manfred Frank: The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism*, State University of New York Press, New York, 2012

Copyright © 2026 Author(s). Published by Siri Research Foundation. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).