

Extrait du livre «Enlightenment Now»

Steven Pinker - 2019

DARE TO UNDERSTAND

What is enlightenment? In a 1784 essay with that question as its title, Immanuel Kant answered that it consists of “humankind’s emergence from its self-incurred immaturity,” its “lazy and cowardly” submission to the “dogmas and formulas” of religious or political authority.

Enlightenment’s motto, he proclaimed, is “Dare to understand!” and its foundational demand is freedom of thought and speech. “One age cannot conclude a pact that would prevent succeeding ages from extending their insights, increasing their knowledge, and purging their errors. That would be a crime against human nature, whose proper destiny lies precisely in such progress.”

A 21st-century statement of the same idea may be found in the physicist David Deutsch’s defense of enlightenment, *The Beginning of Infinity*. Deutsch argues that if we dare to understand, progress is possible in all fields, scientific, political, and moral :

Optimism (in the sense that I have advocated) is the theory that all failures—all evils—are due to insufficient knowledge... Problems are inevitable, because our knowledge will always be infinitely far from complete. Some problems are hard, but it is a mistake to confuse hard problems with problems unlikely to be solved. Problems are soluble, and each particular evil is a problem that can be solved. An optimistic civilization is open and not afraid to innovate, and is based on traditions of criticism. Its institutions keep improving, and the most important knowledge that they embody is knowledge of how to detect and eliminate errors.

Extrait de l'article « Three Reasons to Affirm Free Speech »

Steven Pinker - 2014

Educated people should :

1. know something about the 13-billion-year prehistory of our species and the basic laws governing the physical and living world, including our bodies and brains.
2. grasp the timeline of human history from the dawn of agriculture to the present
3. be exposed to the diversity of human cultures, and the major systems of belief and value with which they have made sense of their lives
4. know about the formative events in human history, including the blunders we can hope not to repeat
5. understand the principles behind democratic governance and the rule of law
6. know how to appreciate works of fiction and art as sources of aesthetic pleasure and as impetuses to reflect on the human condition
7. make certain habits of rationality second nature
8. be able to express complex ideas in clear writing and speech
9. appreciate that objective knowledge is a precious commodity, and know how to distinguish vetted fact from superstition, rumor, and unexamined conventional wisdom
10. know how to reason logically and statistically, avoiding the fallacies and biases to which the untutored human mind is vulnerable
11. think causally rather than magically, and know what it takes to distinguish causation from correlation and coincidence
12. be acutely aware of human fallibility, most notably their own, and appreciate that people who disagree with them are not stupid or evil
13. appreciate the value of trying to change minds by persuasion rather than intimidation or demagoguery

The more deeply a society cultivates this knowledge and mindset, the more it will flourish.