

# Die Macht der Aufklärung

## *Walking with Kant*

AN ART INSTALLATION  
BY SASKIA BODDEKE  
& PETER GREENAWAY

PRODUCED BY THE  
EINSTEIN FORUM  
POTSDAM



# INTRODUCTION

The Enlightenment, that progressive movement which influenced science, culture, and politics from the 18th century to our own times, has become an object of suspicion and scorn. Today, many critics on the left and the right hold the Enlightenment responsible for much of modern misery. Weren't its thinkers naïve optimists? Didn't they blindly worship the kind of reasoning and technology that led to Auschwitz and Hiroshima? Weren't they racists who claimed universal validity for European values – in order to impose them by force on non-European peoples?

Such questions are raised today wherever the Enlightenment is mentioned. We are told that the Enlightenment was at the very best ambivalent: while it may have been an age of reason, it was also an age of slavery and colonialism. This argument ignores the fact that, like progressive intellectuals everywhere, Enlightenment thinkers did not win all their battles. It also neglects the fact that they fought for them anyway, despite the risks of censorship, exile, and even death.

To celebrate the 300th birthday of Immanuel Kant, the Enlightenment's greatest philosopher, the Einstein Forum is presenting a multi-part festival that will avoid the clichés and encourage the public to wrestle with the fundamental issues. This is not a historical project, for the questions which the Enlightenment raised are more relevant than ever. Abandoning the Enlightenment, as many urge us to do, means abandoning our efforts to cultivate our capacities to reason. It also means abandoning three principles at the core of any progressive worldview: a commitment to universalism over tribalism, a belief in a distinction between justice and power, and a belief in the possibility of progress itself.

Why celebrate Kant's birthday at all? One of the philosopher's rare autobiographical remarks provides an answer. As the son of a saddle maker, Kant would have



led a workman's life himself had a pastor not suggested the bright lad deserved some higher education. He came to love his studies and "despise the common people who knew nothing" until "Rousseau set me right," he wrote. Kant rejected his earlier elitism and declared his philosophy would restore the rights of humanity – otherwise it would be more useless than the work of a common laborer.

This claim will puzzle those who have only read a random page of his texts, but Heinrich Heine wrote that Kant was more ruthlessly revolutionary than Robespierre. Not only did Kant dethrone religion from its position of absolute authority. He was also driven by questions that still preoccupy us: are ideas like freedom and justice utopian daydreams, or are they more substantial? Their reality can't be proven like that of material objects, for those ideas make entirely different claims on us – and some people are completely impervious to them. Could philosophy show that acting morally, if not particularly common, is at least possible?

At the heart of Kant's metaphysics stands the difference between the way the world is and the way the world ought to be. His work is an answer to those who argue that we are helpless in the face of pleasure and can be satisfied with bread and circuses – or artisanal chocolate and the latest iPhone. If that were true, benevolent despotism would be the best form of government.

But if we long, in our best moments, for the dignity of freedom and justice, Kant's work has political consequences. It's no surprise he thought the French Revolution confirmed our hopes for moral progress – unlike the followers of his predecessor David Hume, who thought it was dangerous to stray from tradition and habit.

This provides an answer to contemporary critics whose reading of Kant's work focuses on the ways in which it violates our understanding of racism and sexism. Some of his remarks are undeniably offensive to 21st-century ears. But it's fatal to forget that his work gave us the tools to fight racism and sexism, by providing the metaphysical basis of every claim to human rights. He insisted that when we think



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morally, we should abstract from the cultural differences that divide us and recognize the potential human dignity in every human being. This requires the use of our reason, for Kant saw reason's potential as a tool for liberation.

He also argued that political and social relations must aim toward justice rather than power, however often those may be confused in practice. We've come to better understand how racism and sexism can preclude genuine universalism. Should we discard Kant's commitment to universalism because he did not fully realize it himself – or rather celebrate the fact that we can make moral progress, an idea which Kant would wholeheartedly applaud?



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- 02 Vitaly Nevar: Statue of Kant splattered with paint, Kaliningrad (2018) © IMAGO/ITAR-TASS
- 03 Nicolas-Henri Jaurat de Betry: An Allegory of the Revolution (1794) © Alamy





# DIE MACHT DER AUFKLÄRUNG – WALKING WITH KANT

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Throughout most of his life, Kant spent two hours every day walking around his native Königsberg. This walk was so regular that many townspeople set their watches by it. Only twice in his later life did he diverge from routine: the first time when he was engrossed in reading Rousseau's book *Émile*, which he later compared to Newton's revolution in physics, the second time when he heard the news of the French Revolution. In this exhibit, the artists Saskia Boddeke and Peter Greenaway invite you to walk with Kant to discover the power of the Enlightenment. The five lavishly created rooms offer a journey through major aspects of Enlightenment thought.



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Before entering Kant's study we are introduced to four of the most central concepts of the Enlightenment. The first is the claim that every human being is equally endowed with reason. Rather than depending on church and state authority to determine our actions, the Enlightenment urged the importance of education and the use of reason to decide our own fates. *Reason and freedom* are connected: knowledge should liberate people from superstition and prejudice, poverty and fear.

Enlightenment thinkers were committed to an ethics of *equality*, though they did not always stay true to their commitments. For Kant, the moral law requires us to treat every person as an end in themselves, and never as a means. It took him some time to understand that this required condemning racism and colonialism; and though he never condemned sexism, his moral theory requires it. Most Enlightenment thinkers were outspoken in condemning the slavery and colonialism that flourished in their day.



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Enlightenment thinkers used empirical investigations to explore everything from the lowliest plants and animals to the movements of heaven. *Science* could be used to challenge oppression that was based on a supposed natural order. Were poverty and illness the result of divine Providence, as religion and state claimed? Or could advances in medicine and agriculture show that human beings have the power to improve our own lives? Science could demystify forces that had seemed overpowering. Lightning, which religion attributed to the wrath of heaven, was a form of electricity that could be harnessed and tamed. The discovery of the smallpox vaccine and progress in hygiene prevented millions of deaths.



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The Enlightenment was an *age of exploration*; its thinkers were fascinated by knowledge of other cultures. This led to large collections of flora and fauna from distant lands. More importantly, information about non-European social and political customs was often used to criticize European society. Most philosophers of the Enlightenment condemned the colonialism that often occurred in the wake of such voyages. Kant wrote that the colonizers “oppress the natives, excite widespread wars among the various states, spread famine, rebellion, perfidy, and the whole litany of evils which afflict mankind. China and Japan, who have had experience with such guests, have wisely refused them entry.”



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- 06 Francisco de Goya: The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters (1799) © Public Domain
- 07 Jean-Michel Moreau: Illustration Candide (1787) © Alamy
- 08 Anon.: Toussaint Louverture on Horseback (1802) © Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain
- 09 Jean-Honoré Fragonard: To the Genius of Franklin (ca. 1778) © National Gallery of Art, Public Domain
- 10 Claude Manigaud after Edouard Hamman: Edward Jenner Vaccinating his Child (late 19th century) © Alamy
- 11 John Webber: Episode in Captain Cook's Voyages (late 18th century) © Alamy
- 12 Georg Forster: Pacific Parrot (1772–1775) © Alamy



## WALKING WITH KANT

In his essay "What is Enlightenment?" Kant argues that Enlightenment is less a matter of knowledge than of courage. "*Sapere aude* – Dare to think for yourself!" he urged. The video installation by Boddeke and Greenaway explores what this means. Laziness is one reason we refuse to take responsibility for our thoughts and actions, but Kant also is aware that state authorities work to make us afraid of freedom, since docile citizens are easier to control.



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## H IS FOR HOPE

Even if religious dogmas no longer play a role in many cultures, the four horsemen of the apocalypse may haunt even atheist dreams. Though it has offered tools for liberation, the Enlightenment created new dangers. Can we use its tools to overcome the threats to humankind? Without the certainty of progress, what can we hope? Kant argued that hope is not an emotion but a moral obligation; without it, we cannot act to overcome war and injustice.



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13 p. 10, Saskia Boddeke: Walking with Kant, Film Still (2024) © Saskia Boddeke

14 Saskia Boddeke: Walking with Kant, Film Still (2024) © Saskia Boddeke

15 Saskia Boddeke: H is for Hope Film Still (2024) © Saskia Boddeke



Kant was a generous and lively host who invited guests to dine at mid-day before taking his afternoon walk. The last room shows the table they might have left after a full meal and spirited conversation. While he generally refused to discuss philosophy at table, the subjects of discussion often returned to the three questions he believed to drive all reason's endeavors: What can I know? What should I do? What may I hope? Any answer we may give must navigate between the demand to see the world as it is without forgetting the way the world ought to be.



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## CONFERENCES

### ENLIGHTENMENT IN THE WORLD

The Enlightenment, we are often told today, was a Eurocentric project that imposed European ideas on a reluctant world in order to promote or justify various colonialist projects. This conference seeks to question and examine these assertions.



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#### Speakers

Aziz Al-Azmeh (Wien); Bipasha Bhattacharyya (Cambridge);  
Amber Carpenter (London); Subhas Ranjan Chakraborty  
(Calcutta); El Hadji Ibrahima Diop (Dakar); Jonathan Keir  
(Aichtal/Tübingen); Teresa Koloma Beck (Hamburg);  
Sankar Muthu (Chicago); Carlos Peña (Santiago de Chile);  
Keidrick Roy (Cambridge, Mass.); Mithu Sanyal (Düsseldorf);  
Olúfémi Táíwò (Ithaca); Anna Vinkelman (Nijmegen);  
Raef Zreik (Jerusalem)

A cooperation with the Stiftung Humboldt Forum im Berliner  
Schloss

**29.–31. AUG 2024**

Program

[www.einsteinforum.de](http://www.einsteinforum.de)

Location

Einstein Forum, Potsdam  
Humboldt Forum, Berlin

Admission is free

## THE UNIVERSALISM OF PAUL ROBESON

The activist and artist Paul Robeson whose own father was born in slavery rose to become the most famous performer in the world. His songs and films were played on every continent, and his passionate engagement for justice and peace inspired many millions. Yet his socialist activism led the United States government to withdraw his passport and prevent him from speaking or performing for many years, leaving his fight for universalist solidarity nearly forgotten. By inviting speakers and singers who will discuss Robeson's impact on their countries, we intend not only to honor his memory, but to inspire others to take up his spirit.



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### Speakers

Breyten Breytenbach (Paris); Margaret Burnham (Chicago); Peter Carroll (Los Angeles); Korey Garibaldi (South Bend); Victor Grossman (Berlin); Susan Neiman (Potsdam); Nell Painter (Newark); Susan Robeson (New York); Albie Sachs (Cape-town); Penny M. Von Eschen (Charlottesville); Daniel Williams (Swansea); Benjamin Zachariah (Potsdam)

**26.-28. SEPT 2024**

Program

[www.einsteinforum.de](http://www.einsteinforum.de)

Location

Einstein Forum, Potsdam

Einsteinhaus, Caputh

Admission is free



# MUSICAL EVENTS

## LORD OF THE AIR

Christian Dawid, Daniel Kahn, Stella Morgenstern

A musical play based on Daniel Kehlmann's *Tyll*

With brilliant lyrics in German and English by the troubadours Daniel Kahn and Stella Morgenstern, unforgettable melodies composed by Christian Dawid, and devilish drawings by Jerry Merose, this musical play tells the story of Tyll, the titular Lord of the Air, and Claus Oylenspiel, whose curiosity and stubbornness proved to be his doom.



The world premiere of this production, commissioned especially for the Einstein Forum's celebration, is based on Daniel Kehlmann's masterpiece *Tyll*.

**13./14./15. SEPT 2024,  
19:00**

Location

Orangerie im Neuen  
Garten, Potsdam

Tickets

[www.einsteinforum.de](http://www.einsteinforum.de)

## MOZART'S THE MAGIC FLUTE

Produced and performed by *Wild Arts*

The Einstein Forum is proud to present a new German-language production of Mozart's classic opera, performed by an exquisite ensemble of chamber singers and musicians from the UK-based opera company Wild Arts. Founded in 2022, Wild Arts has received international acclaim for its "refreshing" productions and "superb" singing (*The Guardian*) and for the "utter delight" (*Opera Now*) of its performances. Wild Arts aims to make music fresh, enjoyable, and available to everyone. The historic Hall of Palms, with its enchanting acoustics, is the perfect backdrop for the company's one-of-a-kind productions.



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## MOZART AND THE FREEMASONS

A lecture by Martha Nussbaum



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Mozart's work exemplifies opera's engagement in political thought. A proponent of republicanism, Mozart understood that realizing enlightenment values involves more than outward institutional reform; it also requires that we become a new type of person, one who doesn't rely on fear or anger but on compassion. Beyond the libretti, his work expresses a deep commitment to the Freemasonic ideas of brotherhood, equality, and mercy.

19./21. SEPT 2024, 19:00

22. SEPT 2024, 14:00

Location

Orangerie im Neuen  
Garten, Potsdam

Tickets

[www.einsteinforum.de](http://www.einsteinforum.de)

20. SEPT 2024, 19:00

Location

Einstein Forum, Potsdam

Admission is free

## EXPERIMENTAL SALON

*This Situation* von Tino Sehgal

Throughout the Age of Enlightenment and into the 19th century, the salon was a central place for the exchange of ideas in Europe. The Einstein Forum was established in part to continue this important work. As part of its Illuminations celebration, the Einstein Forum will host a more experimental kind of salon: Tino Sehgal's *This Situation*. Consisting of people rather than objects, paintings or other visual media, the artwork confronts visitors with philosophical arguments from the last four hundred years. The aim is to encourage active dialogue rather than passive consumption. This edition of *This Situation* will focus on progress, a topic that preoccupied many Enlightenment thinkers.



No registration is required and visitors are welcome at any time during the three scheduled sessions.

6./7./8. SEPT 2024

For more information and session times  
[www.einsteinforum.de](http://www.einsteinforum.de)

Location  
Einstein Forum, Potsdam

Admission is free

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Denkfest

- 17 James Webb Space Telescope: Pillars of Creation (2022) © NASA
- 18 Bettmann: Actor Paul Robeson with Albert Einstein (1948) © Gettyimages
- 19 Jerry Merose: Lord of the Air © Jerry Merose
- 20 Emily Perkins: Poster The Magic Flute (2024) © Wild Arts
- 21 Martha Nussbaum © privat
- 22 Edd Horder: Tino Sehgal © Blenheim Art Foundation



# CREDITS

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Artefakt Kulturkonzepte

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Saskia Boddeke

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EINSTEIN  
FORUM



Die Beauftragte der Bundesregierung  
für Kultur und Medien

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Karl Schlecht  
Stiftung



24.08.—25.09.2024  
MON—SUN  
11:00—17:30

AT THE NEUER  
GARTEN ORANGERY,  
POTSDAM