There are as many takes on the Enlightenment as there are approaches to the emergence of the public sphere and civil society in pre-revolutionary Europe. What make these discussions so varied are not only their different disciplinary backgrounds, such as political theory, sociology, history, or literary studies; their geographical foci, be they France, the British Isles, North America, or the German-speaking territories; but also their political or ideological orientations, which resonate with the fact that by “Enlightenment” we can mean both a distinct historical period and a particular political, philosophical attitude. My own take on the Enlightenment public sphere should be considered in the way Gotthold Ephraim Lessing understood the speech genre of the “rehabilitation” (Rettung), that is, as the mobilization of philological and historical scholarship to defend a misunderstood text in order to intervene in a contemporary debate. The essays by Immanuel Kant and the two short texts by Lessing analyzed in this piece have been selected in view of their programmatic character; how they stage their arguments; and how they mobilize generic, stylistic, and rhetorical strategies in order to participate and intervene in a communicative situation. I shall discuss these texts in terms of how they recruit an active critical reader, challenge authority, and reflect on models of authorship. I consider these programmatic rather than typical texts because they mark a significant exception to what might be considered one of the most prevalent preoccupations of the Enlightenment in that they refuse to engage in a pedagogical program. For Lessing, as we shall see, shares Kant’s programmatic commitment to Enlightenment as “the exit from our self-imposed tutelage.”

ABSTRACT This essay analyzes programmatic texts by Lessing and Kant in terms of how they influence the public sphere of the Enlightenment. Sharing a programmatic commitment to enlightenment as “the exit from our self-imposed tutelage,” Lessing and Kant understood the enlightenment process as one that cannot be taught or imposed by some authority from above, nor can it ever be fully accomplished. For both philosophers, enlightenment calls for specific framing conditions that have to do with the abolishment of censorship, on the one hand, and with the recruitment of an active, critical audience, on the other. REPRESENTATIONS 111. Summer 2010 © The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 60-87. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintinfo.asp. DOI: 10.1525/rep.2010.111.1.60.
understood as such, cannot be taught or imposed by some authority from above, nor can it ever be fully accomplished. For Lessing and Kant, Enlightenment calls for specific framing conditions that have to do with censorship, on the one hand, and with the recruitment of an active, critical audience, on the other.

The critical public sphere analyzed in this article has little in common with the category of “public opinion.” Understood in the mid-eighteenth century as a relatively conservative category, as a consensus about common values and morality, by the end of the century public opinion became an increasingly important factor in political decisions, a critical instance to be reckoned with, that might require a certain degree of governmental transparency and disclosure. These aspects of a public sphere and public opinion that involve a collective and basically tacit attitude—be it consensual or be it factitious, partisan, or political in reaction to the press, newspapers and pamphlets, that of an (imagined) readership, which, at best, can “vote” with its feet by buying or reading a publication or not—will be bracketed for my purposes in this article. Instead, I shall focus on a model of contentious and individualistic readers who can challenge the authority of a publication in terms of a rebuttal or a correction. To put it simply: the model I am interested in involves an audience whose members are critical and active to the extent that they can respond to and challenge what they read, an audience that shares the same time and space as the written texts to which they can potentially reply in public. In that sense, we are dealing with a “live” audience that is modeled on the debate among equals as it has been practiced throughout early modern times in the scholarly community. In this spirit I have chosen three eighteenth-century texts for closer reexamination in order to make a case that not only allows us to see one aspect of a historically distant period differently but also provides an occasion to rethink issues we are concerned with in our own academic disputes here and now.

This article traces the programmatic conceptualization of a public sphere as a writing and publication practice that is open to, and even provokes, a reply from its readers, hence implying a model of a live audience. This audience model does not have to be imagined as a return to an exclusively oral/aural culture, however. Quite the contrary: throughout history these aspects of oral/aural culture have formed all kinds of alliances with written and print culture. Throughout early modern times the scholarly community relied on writing and print in its communications. Moreover, the second half of the eighteenth century, the period with which this article is primarily concerned, witnessed a sharp increase in both printed materials and the general literacy rate. These increases have led most studies to relate the emergence of the public sphere during the eighteenth century primarily or even exclusively to some aspect of print culture. What tends to be overlooked in those
studies, however, is how the oral/aural component, namely, the interventionist aspect of an audience that can “talk back” and challenge the authority of the written or printed text, figures in the emergence of an emphatically critical public sphere.\(^6\) I shall show how Lessing’s and Kant’s conceptualizations of a critical public work with two kinds of implied audiences that complement each other: an “ideal audience” modeled on the readership of a printed text, which means a primarily anonymous audience that is independent of the restrictions of time and place, and a “real audience,” which is modeled on the crowd that would attend a public performance or the debate between scholars, whether the latter is carried out orally or, more commonly, by way of letters.\(^7\)

Late into the eighteenth century the *res publica literaria*, the commonwealth of learning, referred to everybody who participated in the world of scholarship, science, and learning by way of publishing, being in touch, exchanging letters, and visiting one another. It comprised a mixed group of professions, including librarians, archivists, university professors, theologians, and historians holding public office but also independent private scholars, medical doctors, and naturalists. Whereas most of these people lived in actual monarchies, in their imagined community they conceived of themselves as inhabitants of an international, cosmopolitan republic, held together by its *lingua franca*, Latin. Beginning in the late seventeenth century, the republic of letters began to undergo major changes until it finally dissolved or was eventually replaced by the English speaking “scientific community.”

The main challenge to the traditional republic of letters came from its gradual acceptance of the vernacular as the language of scholarly communication and publication, for the switch to the vernacular extended the potential membership to previously excluded parties such as women and the less educated. On the one hand, the abolition of Latin quickly called for other criteria for exclusion and for evaluating the status of a publication (such as its scholarly validity, its market value, its popularity, or its originality). On the other hand, the switch from Latin to the vernacular also introduced other linguistic barriers, namely, those of national languages, which made the scholarly community much less cosmopolitan. Such changes were not introduced all at once. They occurred at different speeds, in different locales, at different times, and in the context of different institutional settings.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, universities, whose mission consisted primarily in teaching, were more or less dependent on the ruling government, more or less subject to the censorship of religious and governmental authorities.\(^8\) At the same time, especially in the eighteenth century, there were also numerous academies and learned societies that had their own set of relationships to the princely courts and cities. They were generally independent of the university, with its hierarchy of faculties and its
disciplinary structure. To some extent these academies were comparable to today’s “interdisciplinary” institutes. They were dedicated to research and learning; they varied in the degree of exclusivity in selection of their members, offering places to gather and discuss, but they generally had no salaried positions. Finally, there were also an increasing number and range of journals, including moral weeklies, fashion and luxury publications, arts and theater reviews covering a wide spectrum of interests and foci. What this overview of the changing and varied landscape of the institutions, venues, and associations of higher learning during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries should make clear is that participation in these institutions and their publications varied enormously not only in terms of the language of publication, the required knowledge and expertise, but of course also in terms of the specific editorial and submission policies, the particular specialization and mission. The point I want to make with this very brief sketch of this aspect of the institutional and publication context is simple: by the second half of the eighteenth century there was a changing, relatively deregulated situation for becoming an author and presenting oneself as a scholar and member of the republic of learning, a situation that in some ways might actually be comparable to the changes occurring today through the introduction of the Internet and Internet publishing, to the establishment of many interdisciplinary institutes, and to the changing editorial and submission policies of learned journals.

This article argues that the relatively deregulated, open boundary between the group that constitutes an audience or readership and those people who can publish their positions, findings, opinions, and theories as polemicists, reviewers, scholars, or scientists provides the crucial background for Kant’s and Lessing’s models of a critical public that would further the cause of Enlightenment. In the case of Kant, with which I shall begin my analysis, that background is primarily the open boundary as it is modeled on the changing nature of the republic of letters, more specifically the format of the academic essay competition. In the case of Lessing, a much wider context and spectrum of publications comes into play. For Lessing inhabited and transformed various public spheres: the journalistic world of art and theater reviews in Berlin; the world of the theater, as director of one of the repertory stages (the Nationaltheater in Hamburg); and the world of the philologist, scholar, and editor/publisher as the Duke of Saxony’s chief librarian in Wolfenbüttel. Lessing, as we shall see, also engages with the model of learned disputes among scholars but with far more polemical edge and vehemence than Kant. Whereas Kant’s model of a public sphere as expressed in his essay “What Is Enlightenment?” could be also characterized as an essay on institution making, the two texts by Lessing on which I have chosen to focus capture some of the essential aspects of his writings on religion and theology. In the eighteenth
century it is the discourse on religion, the attacks and defenses of doctrinal
points, and the debates over the authority of scripture that constitute the
most fertile, because most incendiary, ground for public debate, an aspect
that most studies involved with histories, theories, and models of the public
sphere have so far overlooked.10

Was ist Aufklärung?

In 1784, the Berlin Academy awarded its prize to Kant’s essay in
response to the question “What is Enlightenment?” In his answer, Kant
chose not to address the problem of what he calls “our self-imposed tute-
lage” by proposing a pedagogical program. This refusal to seek recourse in
a scenario of education is highly significant and surprising, given the gen-
eral pedagogical bent of the era. It also makes perfect sense, of course, for
no teacher figure can wean us from our dependence on authority; in other
words, no teacher figure can undertake the task of Enlightenment in this
emphatic sense.11 Instead of pedagogy, Kant envisions a system in which all
reliance on authority figures has already been replaced by the process of
rational debate. This abolition of all authority figures, however, is not the
result of a drastic, violent revolution, but instead the effect of a suspension
of all forms of censorship on the part of the state. The state’s cessation of
censorship is to be achieved through a guarantee of institutional stability,
which ensures that all change will be gradual. Public officials, professionals,
and administrators will not criticize and change what they are called to do
as long as they are speaking from within their office. This safeguard could
also be described as a system of self-censorship: anybody who wants to partici-
pate in open, rational debate can do so provided he or she does not speak or
write from the position of an official or professional, relying on institutional
authority. Kant calls this speaking as a “private” person:

By “public use of one’s own reason,” however, I mean the use of it someone makes
as a scholar in view of the entire public of the reading world. I call “private” the use
someone is permitted to make of his reason in a certain civic post or office
entrusted to him. Now, some undertakings that affect the interests of the polity
necessitate a certain mechanism by virtue of which some members of the polity
need only conduct themselves in a passive way in order for the government to
direct them, by means of an artificial unanimity, toward public purposes or at least
to prevent them from foiling these purposes. Here, then, it is indeed impermissible
to reason; one must obey instead.12

Kant uses “private” to describe something entirely different from what is
commonly understood by the term (the realm of intimacy, family, or unoffi-
cial business). Kant’s use of it is still shaped by its Latin etymology: it means
“deprived” (the way someone holding the military rank of “private soldier” is
deprived of certain rights), describing someone to whom certain ways of expressing opinion can be legitimately denied. For Kant, someone in a “private” speaking position is deprived of the right to speak his or her mind. Instead, he or she is obliged to speak as a professional bound by loyalty to a specific institutional mission: the pastor who speaks from the pulpit and the public hygiene commissioner who gives advice on immunization matters, for instance, speak as private persons.

Kant’s significant turn away from the pedagogical paradigm of his time is marked by his seeking the solution to the problem of man’s self-imposed tutelage exclusively in the free debate of a public sphere. He conceives of the speaking role of the participant in this public sphere in traditional terms, describing him as a Gelehrter (scholar) who has recourse to rational faculties in order to address the totality of a reading audience, that is, who does not merely seek to recruit this or that local audience: “By ‘public use of one’s own reason,’ however, I mean the use of it someone makes as a scholar in view of the entire public of the reading world.” Significantly, Kant does not specify any subject area or special qualifications of the Gelehrter, such as the knowledge of ancient languages and the ability to communicate in Latin; instead the term stands for somebody who has qualified himself by publishing. The “entire public of the reading world” must clearly be understood in distinction from the audience of oral speech, a public that is limited in that it shares the same space and time with its speaker, or what Johann Gottfried Herder calls the reales Publikum (real audience). Kant, by contrast, defines the participants of his public sphere as speakers who address what Herder calls an ideales Publikum, or what we might call a virtual audience, to the extent that all possible potential readers are included. The scholar (Gelehrter) in Kant’s text is quite simply an “author.” The only other qualification required of aspiring participants in the public sphere is designated by a curious double negative: they must not speak from the officially restricted position of a “private” person.

Why, we might ask, does Kant choose not to characterize this speaker as someone who speaks as a human being in a fundamental sense, who adopts the position of a critic of civilization, imagining a natural human being, or of an unprejudiced observer? Are these not the typical speaker positions one would adopt when undertaking the project of Enlightenment? The contrast with these well-established speaking positions illustrates what Kant gains by his somewhat awkward double negative of the nonrestricted, the nonprivate: he designates the position of those who are to participate in public debate with a deliberate blank that can be filled in a variety of ways while steering clear of the restrictions of a specific institution or office. This openness permits Kant to optimize the inclusivity of his public sphere. Its participants need no special qualification or permission; quite to the contrary, they are
distinguished by not being explicitly authorized or charged in their speaking position. This qualification, which consists in not being qualified, is one feature the members of Kant’s Enlightenment public sphere share with the modern public intellectual.

Of course, the abdication of one’s speaking position as a “private” person as a precondition to participation in public debate implies that the aspiring author must not only make up his or her own mind but also give up the authority that comes with investiture into the “private,” institutionally sanctioned office. For the audience of this kind of public discourse, this means that any position needs to be examined precisely because it does not come with a stamp of preapproval. Public debate in a Kantian sense thus means a free, open, uncensored exchange in a sphere isolated against the pressures of decision making and immediate action. Speakers/authors and the audience occupy positions that are, at least in principle, exchangeable; no one holds privileged authority; no one is entitled to teach others—or everyone is entitled to adopt the position of instructor; in other words, as long as the participants do not speak from an official position, the ensuing public debate will be of the widest common interest and appeal.

To understand the significance of Kant’s essay we need to look more closely at its historical context. This prize-winning work captures an important Enlightenment model of the public sphere rooted in the historical reality of a specific social segment: the highly educated state officials trained in law, the medical doctors, the Protestant ministers, the schoolteachers, and the university professors, all of whom had to respect certain limitations when speaking within the institutional limits of their professions. Now it was this very same group whose members had sufficient learning to participate as scholars and authors in debates addressing such questions as “What is Enlightenment?”—“Was man, left to his own devices, without divine assistance, capable of inventing language, or must we assume that human language was a divine gift?”—“What is the origin of inequality among men, and is it authorized by Natural Law?”—“Which influence ought the government exercise on science and the liberal arts? And which influence ought the sciences and the liberal arts exercise on the government?”—“Ought the government to be permitted to deceive the people for the latter’s own good?”

These are only some of the most famous questions formulated and announced as essay competitions by eighteenth-century academies ranging from Dijon and Berne to Berlin. To a certain extent, especially if one looks at the kind of questions and the kind of people who participated in these academy competitions, they seem not much different from the traditional debates within the republic of letters. And yet, in the ways they provide an interface between the egalitarian and exclusive debate among equals and an anonymous print audience of readers, such competitions demarcate a decisive
moment in which the medium of print and the vernacular are mobilized to confront the traditional republic of letters with the kind of change that will ultimately mean its dissolution, a dissolution that occurs once the issue of quality control is entrusted to the literary market. The republic of letters is at this threshold, but it has not yet crossed it.\textsuperscript{15}

The format of the essay competition is distinguished by the fact that it constrains an anonymous, potentially unlimited print audience into an equally anonymous but limited group of readers of the journals that announce the academy questions and the conditions for manuscript submissions. Such competitions serve not only to initiate a debate but also to situate it in real time and introduce pragmatic pressure by setting a deadline and announcing that the best manuscript will be published. This format automatically infuses the issue under debate with a certain aspect of relevance and urgency. Kant’s public sphere presupposes the medium of print to the extent that it is based on the model of free exchange among enlightened authors who circulate and debate their positions (which they could also do via oral communication or private letters) but simultaneously aims at a more general reading public that is not overly restricted either spatially or temporally (in Herder’s words, an “ideal audience”). The historical case of the academy competitions shows us a fascinating way of combining the medium of print with an aspect of orality. Both the concrete question and the specific deadline of the competition interpellate a “live audience” of potential authors. The format thus calls attention to the threshold separating an anonymous readership from those who are known as authors of prize-winning contributions. It is relevant in this context that the manuscripts sent in for the essay competitions are anonymous to the jury until the winner has been determined. (Instead of the author’s name, the jury merely gets to see a motto that serves as an encoded identifier.) This means that authorship is, at least in principle, accessible to anybody who submits a manuscript. We might characterize Kant’s model of the public sphere as based on a particular historical transformation of the republic of letters in the age of printed journals: for a while, the expansion of print and the adoption of the vernacular among scholars and philosophers open this republic to a wider, more general audience.\textsuperscript{16}

This historical phase of opening up what had been until then fairly exclusive debates among scholars to a wider audience is not restricted to the culture of the academies and learned societies. It is a phenomenon that has also left traces in the history of philosophy as a discipline. In the wake of Christian Thomasius’s programmatic use of the vernacular, philosophy sought to reach out to a wider audience. The popular philosopher Christian Wolff even coined the German word \textit{Weltweisheit} (worldly wisdom) as an alternative to \textit{philosophy} that would mark the attempt to free the discipline from its dogmatic enclosure in the university setting as well as the tutelage exercised over it by

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the religious authorities. Yet philosophy did not last long in this dual role of “worldly wisdom” and “popular philosophy.” Although Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (1776) and the subsequent two *Critiques* did not abandon the ambition to be accessible to a general readership, they placed such high demands on the audience’s capacity for abstract thought that at least their “real” audience became again quite limited. Still, Kant also managed to appeal to an “ideal” audience, which has continued until today to read this “classic” of philosophical thought. After a relatively short phase of exotericism, philosophy thus became again a much more exclusive enterprise and a terminologically highly codified academic discipline. And even during the time when popular philosophy flourished, the term *Weltweiser*, or philosopher, did not carry the provocative or programmatic weight its French equivalent, *philosophe*, had in the same period.17

The concrete historical example of the essay competitions illustrates that the great advantage of the format—its openness to a larger public and the appeal to any reader to become a contributing, active author—comes at a price with regard to possible critical, interventionist aspects of these debates. The actual choice and phrasing of the questions was the prerogative of powerful academy members and sometimes had to be negotiated with government officials. Usually these questions were framed as issues of very broad general interest, pertaining to the domain of philosophical anthropology or the philosophy of language or culture. The questions posed by the Academy of Göttingen can be considered an exception in that they sought fairly concrete advice in legal, economic, and governmental issues, obviously assuming that “someone out there,” quite possibly a perfectly unknown someone, a layperson, might have the best answer. In this sense, the Göttingen Academy betrayed an astonishing trust and openness toward the nonexpert general public for advice on concerns that today would be instantly relegated to the authority of the expert, whose advice is hardly ever subjected to critique by nonexperts.18 However, even in the case of the Göttingen Academy, the decisive element is the fact that the question is already predefined. An even more critical position would be achieved if the author had the opportunity to raise and frame the issue in the first place. Obviously, this is not the case with the academy competitions.

Yet if we return to Kant’s own essay in response to the question “What is Enlightenment?” we can trace a concern with intervening in current discursive practices—a reflection on constructions of the public sphere with the goal of changing them. Kant’s initial definition of the public sphere as a debate among nonprofessionals and nonofficials, unrestrained by any form of censorship and marked by its exemption from pragmatic pressure, describes it as a unique situation. Only one master in the world (“nur ein einziger Herr in der Welt”), whose name or title Kant deliberately does not
mention, says: “reason as much and about what you wish; but obey!” (räsonnirt, so viel ihr wollt, und worüber ihr wollt; aber gehorch!)19 Only toward the end of his essay, exactly where Kant addresses the modalities of the impact these debates have, does he mention the Prussian Prince (Fürst) by name and title as the ruler who must also submit to reason and is thus obliged to respect the directions established by this kind of free, rational debate. Kant’s “What Is Enlightenment?” provides a uniquely systematic account of a public sphere conceived along strictly egalitarian, nonauthoritarian principles. The interventionist power of the public critic—if we turn to the example provided by Kant’s own essay—resides in the way he radically reframes and readdresses an issue of common concern. He severs Enlightenment from pedagogy and makes it dependent exclusively on the possibility of uncensored reasoning. He does not create the institutional reforms he demands but instead describes realities as though they had already been implemented, and appeals to the Prussian Prince to subscribe to their efficacy.

In what follows, I shall trace exactly this problematic of the public critic’s interventionist role in more detail. Lessing, like Kant, is committed to the project of Enlightenment as a persistent challenge to all authority and to the refusal to arrogate to himself the position of a teacher. He addresses the problem of the scholar’s or public speaker’s intervention by taking up the traditional value-coded opposition between “mere” verbal reasoning and significant action. The two texts by Lessing at the center of my analysis present religion as the domain in which action has been valued more highly than mere reflection and talk. In the eighteenth century, debates over religion offer a fertile medium for attempts to stir up and intervene in constructions of the public sphere as well as for reflection on the role and moral make-up, and hence authority, of the speaker or writer.

*Gelehrte Streitigkeiten/Learned Battles*

Victories determine the outcome of wars. But they are very ambiguous proofs of a just cause; or rather they are no such thing at all. Learned battles are just as much a kind of warfare as the little Zuzus are a kind of dog. What difference does it make whether the battle is over a territory or an opinion; whether it is fought at the cost of blood or ink?20

These are the opening sentences of an unpublished 1750 manuscript in Lessing’s hand. Its title, “Über die Herrnhuter,” is somewhat misleading: the Pietist community founded in 1720 by Count Nikolaus von Zinzendorf in Herrnhut is addressed only toward the very end of this short text, whereas the preceding pages engage in a general fashion in a rather polemical argument about “the use and abuse” of man’s rational faculties. The analogy between little lapdogs and scholarly debates seems to reject the activity of reasoning as
a frivolous, ultimately dispensable luxury. Ought one then to consider the engagement in scholarly debate a pure waste of time and turn to more practical, ethically relevant activities? As I shall show, this kind of conclusion is not what Lessing advocates. Indeed, throughout the text he debunks the very construction of such an alternative, as if it were possible to ignore the realm of verbal reasoning and focus instead exclusively on the realm of universally valid truths and the domain of ethically relevant action. Despite all the vanity, aggression, and frivolity they may involve, rational inquiry and learned debate cannot be left behind. However, we need to cultivate critical perspectives toward learned debates while engaging in them.

Instead of providing instructions for the development and cultivation of a critical perspective, Lessing confronts his readers with a text that remains entirely opaque unless one enters into a critical dialogue with it. Already in this early manuscript can we find a characteristic strategy of this Enlightenment author. He stages the argument of his text in such a way that his readers are provoked into exercising their capacity for critical reasoning. And it is here that I situate the decisive difference between a pedagogical role and Lessing’s critical performance, which rejects precisely this pedagogical role. The statement, for instance, that “man was created for action and not for idle reasoning” (Der Mensch war zum Tun und nicht zum Vernünfteln geboren) has frequently been quoted as if it provided a summary of Lessing’s position on the tension between reason and action. A more careful analysis of how Lessing presents this statement, however, reveals that it does not permit this kind of appropriation. Instead, the apodictic tone suggesting a claim to universal truth offers Lessing an occasion to demonstrate the necessity of critical engagement.

Man was created for action and not for idle reasoning. But exactly because he was not created for the latter does he prefer it to the former. His evil nature always leads him to undertake what he ought not to do, and his daring, what he cannot do. Should he, man, allow himself to be constrained?

Beginning with a statement of what man is supposed to do and what his limits are, this short paragraph ends only two sentences later in free indirect speech, stating that same human being’s defiant challenge against any imposition of constraints. By the end of the paragraph, provided the reader engages each of the four sentences critically, the first sentence will have lost the appeal of a universally valid dictum and stand revealed as an authoritarian statement with a complex history. Already the second sentence—“But exactly because . . .”—appears to introduce a false conclusion, an illogical non sequitur: how can a creature who has been assigned a firm purpose in life choose to disregard his or her own limitations within the overall teleological plan? The sheer fact of transgression calls the validity of the initial assumption
into question and turns what first seemed to be a statement about purposes
and limitations set by nature or the creator into a statement about human
injunctions and prohibitions that merely employ the rhetoric of teleology to
create a semblance of authority.

The suspicion that this is indeed the thrust of Lessing’s critical perfor-
mance is heightened by the lexical choice of the moralistic term Bosheit (evil
nature). With this term, Lessing switches the text’s tonal and discursive regis-
ter. An apparently objective, value-free discourse of philosophical anthropol-
ogy and psychology is suddenly revealed to be value-coded, arising from a
traditional interpretation of the Fall that negotiates the theological problem
of defending a divine order of creation in its infinite goodness while acknowl-
edging man’s fallen state. Without attribution and actual quotations, Lessing
evokes this account of the origin of evil not only to discredit and criticize the
arbitrary imposition of a moral code through a definition of man but also to
provide a provocative and productive definition of man. In this sense, he
gives an account of the origin of freedom by conceiving of man as capable of
turning away from divine love and the well-ordered garden of paradise,
which—were it not for its moralizing investment—would not be all that dif-
ferent from a philosophical anthropology that conceives of man as the crea-
ture of self-fashioning, capable of overcoming any limitation.

There is no doubt that Lessing is a firm advocate for the active use of rea-
son. What arouses Lessing’s criticism, even scorn, is not the activity of rea-
soning per se but rather the way this activity has been cultivated in the
history of philosophy: its professionalization, the formation of rival schools,
and its ever-increasing specialization. Lessing concludes his overview of the
history of philosophy with a desperate image of contemporary philosophy—
its practitioners offer mathematical descriptions of the remotest astronomi-
cal problems but remain silent on moral issues: “So füllen sie den Kopf, und
das Herz bleibt leer. Den Geist führen sie bis in die entferntesten Himmel,
unterdessen da das Gemüt durch seine Leidenschaften bis unter das Vieh
gerunter gesetzt wird [Thus they fill the head, and the heart remains empty.
They lead the mind into the most remote skies while the soul [Gemüt], with its
passions, is ranked even beneath the beasts].”23 The practice of contempo-
rary philosophy, according to Lessing, has become an entirely self-absorbed
activity of hyperspecialists; it is cognitively inaccessible to the layperson and
seems not to care about its impact, whence its inability to recruit a general
audience.

For an entire paragraph, Lessing asks his reader to imagine a radically
different kind of philosopher, one who would not be subject to disciplinary
constraints and the interest of schools but would instead focus all his efforts
on teaching the pursuit of happiness through virtue:
He would teach us to forgo wealth, even to flee it. He would teach us to be unre-
lewing toward ourselves and lenient toward others. He would teach us to respect
merit even when it is overpowered by misfortune and ignominy and to defend it
against brutish power. He would teach us to perceive the vivid voice of nature in our
hearts. He would teach us not only to believe in God but—what is most important—
to love him. He would teach us, finally, to face death without fear, and to prove by a
dignified departure from this stage that we are convinced that wisdom would not
ask us to put down our mask if we had not played our role to the end.24

Lessing continues with the thought experiment and asks his reader to imag-
ine that this kind of philosopher
would have none of that knowledge that is the less useful the more it boasts itself.
He would be an expert neither in history nor in the languages. . . . Nonetheless
would this man lay claim to the title of a philosopher [Weltweiser]. Nonetheless
would he have the courage to contest the same claim asserted by people on whom
public offices have conferred the right to this dazzling sobriquet.25

We might initially be tempted to argue that Lessing does after all appear to
introduce a teacher figure as an example for the new, publicly effective
philosopher. Yet this kind of teacher does not teach any specific content or
doctrine but rather teaches techniques for living, techniques of the self that
strengthen the autonomy of the individual. Moreover, this kind of teacher,
who not incidentally seems to be modeled in many ways on a secular under-
standing of Jesus, figures within the argument primarily to mark a critical
countermodel to the deformations of disciplinary philosophy. In this respect
it is also important to note how Lessing distinguishes this man of worldly wis-
dom (Weltweiser) from both the traditional scholar and the speaker who is
authorized by his specific institutional function or office.

Lessing concludes his thought experiment with bitter sarcasm:
Thank God that such a bold friend of the laity has not yet arisen and probably will
not arise in our times: for the gentlemen who have so much to do with the reality of
things will see to it that this fantasy of mine will never be realized.26

According to Lessing, Enlightenment is the business of laypeople in a dou-
ble sense. The new kind of philosopher must not be a member of the clergy,
certainly not a theologian, for as such he would not be free in his rational
inquiry but bound by the interests of the church and religion. It is for this
reason that Lessing insists that this new kind of philosopher would claim the
title of Weltweiser, which emphasizes the secular aspect of the pursuit of wis-
dom. But he would also be a layman in the sense of someone who is not an
expert in any particular area. This opens philosophical discourse to a gen-
eral audience, threatening the status of specialists.

Throughout his career, Lessing pursued a critical practice that is already
clearly recognizable in the argumentative style of this early piece. Instead of
telling people what to do or what to think, Lessing undertook to foster the practice of critical habits. And he did so not just by virtue of the manner in which he presented a certain argument, as we have seen in the early manuscript “Über die Herrnhuter,” but also, later on in his career, by structurally intervening in a public discourse, by radically reframing how certain issues can be addressed, and, even more drastically, by influencing who can address which kinds of topics. Indeed, Lessing’s active intervention in the nature of the public sphere through publication strategies, carefully staged speaking positions, and rhetorical and lexical registers, as well as the projection and “staging” of the speaking situation shaped his entire career as an independent writer, playwright, scholar, critic, editor, librarian, and commentator.

Even if not all of the texts that Lessing published while serving as chief librarian in Wolfenbüttel were concerned with religion, these writings certainly elicited the most lively and even vehement reactions from his audience. In the world of eighteenth-century print culture, the topic of religion was quite hot.27 Lessing’s publication of a series of carefully selected passages as “Fragments of an Unnamed Author” (Fragmente eines Ungenannten) caused a wide debate. Participants in this debate included theologians, pastors, and laymen, and its format was highly varied, involving the publication of scholarly counterarguments and defenses, anonymous pamphlets distributed in the streets, and pastoral admonitions from the pulpit.28

Lessing had obtained the provocative, unpublished manuscript from his friend Elise Reimarus, the daughter of its author, the well-known and respected Hamburg orientalist, mathematician, and natural philosopher Samuel Reimarus. He published it in parts under the misleading label of “findings” from the ducal library. Eventually, when the debate over these publications had reached an unprecedented degree of aggression, the manuscript was confiscated. Lessing also lost his exemption from censorship. For fear that his own involvement in the battle over these fragments would likewise be subject to publishing restrictions, Lessing attempted to move the place of publication of another attack on his main opponent, the Hamburg pastor Melchior Goeze, beyond the duke’s reach to Berlin. This move challenged the Duke of Saxony to assert his authority and “tolerate” Lessing’s publishing activities under the condition that they would take place in his own Saxon territory, that is, in Wolfenbüttel. To the duke, this became a matter of asserting his authority and saving face vis-à-vis the imperial authorities with their own censorship regulations.29 Embittered over having been muzzled and over the nastiness in the fight with Goeze, who had somehow managed to usurp all of his attention, Lessing was thwarted in his hopes for a broader debate that would also involve the representatives of “progressive,” rationalist theology. In this spirit, he wrote to his brother Karl that he was forced to return to his other
pulpit, the theater.\textsuperscript{30} When he did so, he wrote what was to become his most famous play, the drama about religious tolerance \textit{Nathan der Weise (Nathan the Wise)}. 

Lessing never explicitly stated his religious beliefs. Generations of Lessing scholars and admirers have nonetheless attempted to establish the nature of Lessing's relationship to Christianity, and whether he might even have become a covert Spinozist late in life.\textsuperscript{31} Lessing's discretion about his religious beliefs, however, makes perfect sense. Public confessions of one's beliefs do not help promote religious tolerance.\textsuperscript{32} Far better is a critical, historicizing attitude toward all forms of religion—especially those that base their doctrinal claims on the authority of divine inspiration. It is this historicizing attitude that can be found throughout Lessing's writings on religion. Lessing's position, of course, was hardly unique in the eighteenth century. Interestingly, it even gained a certain amount of acceptance within the Enlightenment-friendly wing of the Lutheran church. The so-called Neologians found ways to downplay the dogmatic claims that the writers of the gospels were divinely inspired or that Jesus was literally the Son of God.\textsuperscript{33} In other words, the positions that Lessing brought into play through the debate over the fragments were neither unheard of nor all that radical even within the Lutheran Church. They were, however (and this seems to be the far more important aspect of Lessing's intervention), positions reserved for specialists within the church who were engaged in exclusive and learned debates.\textsuperscript{34} Lessing's affront, then, consisted not in making statements that were against the core doctrine promulgated by the orthodox wing of the Lutheran Church but rather in his dragging a debate that should have been internal to the institution of ecclesiastical authority out into a common public sphere, where readers were invited to exercise their own power of reasoning and make up their own minds. It was in order to lay claim to this space for debate and critical thought that Lessing “staged” the debate over the fragments.\textsuperscript{35}

On the one hand, Lessing’s goal was the secularization of the terrain of the debate: to ensure that this discussion would not be conducted under the institutional authority of the church. On the other hand, Lessing’s publication of the fragments gives a certain shape and focus to this discourse about religion by questioning the authority of the written word in a more principled and more fundamental fashion that went beyond Reimarus’s specific scholarly arguments. The latter had merely amounted to a demonstration that there was no way of proving the divine inspiration of the evangelists, the Resurrection, or the status of Jesus as the Son of God—arguments that would eventually initiate the historical research into the life of Jesus.\textsuperscript{36} For Lessing, by contrast, their publication not only offered a perfect opportunity to launch a public debate beyond the controls of the church; they also provided him with an occasion to challenge Luther’s principle of \textit{sola scriptura}, both by
casting doubt on the absolute authority of the New Testament and by calling attention to an ethical sphere, such as the one inhabited by Jesus and his disciples, that existed independently of its written codifications. In this sense, Lessing’s publishing activities permitted him to “stage” a fundamental discussion over the mediation and tradition of ethics and the media of religion that found its culmination in his publication of the “Testament of John.”

In the Beginning Was the Word

In the history of Christian theology, the beginning of the Gospel of John has come to be established as a key passage containing a paradigm of how to read the Bible and how to understand the nature of Jesus. Two issues are at stake: the status of the “word” and the status of the “flesh.” Turning away from Manichaeism, Augustine adopts a belief he later comes to reject as a form of Platonism. This false conversion leads him to read the Bible merely allegorically, that is, in the spirit, focusing exclusively on the beginning of the passage, “In the beginning was the Word” and refusing to read to the end: “and the Word became flesh.” This criticism prepares what, by contrast, will constitute Augustine’s true conversion, which will consist in picking up the Bible and applying the content of what he reads directly to his own life: for it is only thus that belief is truly redemptive, in this literal application of the historical truth of the Bible made possible by the miracle of the Incarnation.37

In Protestant Christianity, the beginning of the Gospel of John also serves as synecdoche for the salvific authority and status of scripture, as it involves a specific model of reading. Beyond theology, in the domain of secular literature, we can also find an acute awareness of the key role played by this passage. Most prominently, there is Goethe’s Faust. Goethe’s frustrated scholar escapes from the prison of his study with the aid of the devil Mephistopheles, who, it should be noted, first appears to Faust at the very moment when the latter attempts a “liberal” translation of the beginning of the Gospel of John through a series of substitutions for “logos”: word—thought—force—deed. In other words, Goethe stages the appearance of the devil as the result of an incantation that takes the shape of a mistranslation of John.38 Lessing’s “Testament of John” must be seen in the same context, as another secularizing appropriation of the Gospel of John.

This short text, which Lessing published under the title “Das Testament Johannis,” appeared in the following sequence of publications: Lessing had initially published a fragment by Reimarus that treated the writers of the gospels as mere human historians. This publication was countered by the theologian Johann Daniel Schumann, who mobilized the traditional theological “proof of the spirit and the force” in order to demonstrate the divine inspiration
of the gospels. Lessing responded to Schumann with two texts. He first addressed Schumann’s objections directly, arguing that this supposed “proof” rested on a fundamental category mistake, a confusion of accidental truths of history with necessary truths of reason. Then he announced the “Testament Johannis,” a text that, according to Lessing, would be able to reunite all those who had been divided over the interpretation of the Gospel of John. Still, the short text must be read not only as a peace offering but also, as I will show in the following analysis, as a provocation and a catalyst that would serve to heighten disagreements and to let latent differences rise to the surface.39

Lessing’s “Das Testament Johannis” consists of a dialogue between characters Lessing calls simply He and I. Asked about the mysterious “Testament of John,” I explains to Him that the reference is to John’s last will, as reported by Saint Jerome in an apocryphal anecdote. The frail old apostle had issued to his parishioners the simple injunction: “Children, love one another!” The anecdote appears in Latin at the end of Lessing’s text and is retold within the dialogue. He is bothered by the fact that this story is not part of the official canon. His objection, however, is anticipated and countered by another Latin quote from Saint Jerome, printed directly under the title “Das Testament Johannis,” which refers to John as the favorite disciple of Jesus, the one closest to the source. On the one hand, this reference can be considered an attack on the exclusivity of the canon, an argument for other, possibly even more authentic traditions and means of transmission. On the other hand, Lessing demonstrates by way of the untranslated Latin texts the historicity and possible opaqueness to which any form of linguistic transmission and tradition is subject. This is why we cannot just read Lessing’s text as an argument, with which we could easily agree, for altruism and Christian love as the core of Christianity.40 Of course, that reading does not render the text a pamphlet against Christian love. However, as Saint Jerome’s anecdote already suggests, even the simplest, most appealing injunction must not be merely repeated verbatim. For as we know from Jerome, when Saint John did not pass on after first pronouncing this injunction but repeated the same words each subsequent time he spoke to his parishioners, they became bored and impatient and asked if he had nothing else to say; the apostle answered in the negative.

The question, then, that Lessing’s “Testament of John” asks is the following: What is the ultimate efficacy of the most beautiful, simple, and convincing pronouncement? Even the fact that the Latin of the quotations is now a dead language confronts Lessing’s reader with the fact that any linguistic utterance will eventually require interpretation, translation, and adjustment to new specific contexts. And this would seem to apply to even the most basic ethical precepts. Lessing scholars who see in this text yet another proof that Lessing advocated the importance of ethical action in lieu of doctrinal sophistication miss half of the point: even if this were the case, even if we
could find a common ethical principle capable of universal comprehension and assent, the problem would remain how this principle is to be translated into action. Just repeating it verbatim will not do the trick; if anything, repetition will weaken its power of persuasion.

There is no question that I argues that Christian love is the core of Christianity against His objection that it is worth little without acceptance of Christian doctrine with its salvific benefits. What is interesting, however, and what seems to be the core of Lessing’s dialogue, is that immediately after telling Him in his own words the apocryphal story about the dying apostle, I introduces the topic of mediation in its relationship to Christianity:

I: Augustine reports that a certain Platonist said that the beginning of the Gospel of John, In the beginning was the word etc., deserved to be put up in golden letters in all churches in the most visible place, so that it would immediately strike anyone’s eyes.

He: Indeed! The Platonist was quite right.—O, these Platonists! And Plato himself could certainly not have written anything more sublime than this beginning of the Gospel of John.

I: That may well be.—Still, as someone who doesn’t care much for the sublime scribbling of a philosopher, I think that what would be far more deserving of being put up in golden letters in all our churches in the most visible place, so that it would immediately strike anyone’s eyes, is—the Testament of John.41

In this passage, I tests Him with regard to his commitment to the core of Christian doctrine by offering Him the opportunity to reenact Augustine’s pseudoconversion, the fixation on the word in conjunction with a reading in the spirit. He walks into the trap and reveals that what He takes to be the essence of Christian doctrine is actually the mere unfounded belief in the “scribbling” of what He takes to be an authority. In fact, His belief even misses the core Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. That His commitment to dogmatic partisanship actually undermines His ability to practice Christian love is proven when he counters his interlocutor’s quote from Mark (9:40), “For he who is not against us is for us” with one from Matthew (12:30): “He who is not with me is against me.” What He takes to be the essence of religion is revealed to be a sectarian, divisive form of self-aggrandizement based on the reification of the written word.

According to Lessing, even if we accept the dying apostle’s last will and words as the essence of Christian ethics, this essence cannot be delivered in its pure, naked form or by spreading the message everywhere in “golden letters.” It needs to be packaged and performed according to specific local contexts: there is the anecdote, which already calls attention to the problem of mere literal repetition; there is the retelling of this anecdote within the
dialogue; but then there is also the entirety of the text including the Latin quotes, which Lessing chose to entitle “The Testament of John.” If we return with this in mind to Lessing’s hope, expressed in the conclusion to his letter to Schumann, that all those who have been divided over the Gospel of John will be reunited by the Testament of John, we cannot but realize that such reconciliation would not be achieved by subscription to a single-sentence precept such as “Children, love one another!” It implies, instead, recognition of the need for the ongoing work of mediation. Nothing ought to be set in stone or golden letters; nor should any text be endowed with particular truth-value just because it has been attributed to any specific authority.

At this point, I can sum up the sort of position Lessing adopts in debates over religion. He does not preach a simple precept, nor does he advocate any particular position; instead, he takes on and orchestrates multiple roles and functions. There is, first, the role of the editor who makes an important manuscript available to a wider public. It was in this role that Lessing obtained exemption from the duke’s censorship so that he could publish “findings” from his library. As an editor, he offers a selection of texts as documents worthy of examination and discussion. As an extension of this role, second, he also published editorial comments on some of these texts, comments that show him in the position of the learned scholar who uses his expertise to make the documents more accessible to a general public and to encourage their critical, active examination. It is in this extended role that he projects and models a critical distance toward the printed documents. Besides being an editor and commentator, Lessing also appears, third, as an active participant in an ongoing debate. Here he is not the neutral, objective commentator and scholar of printed texts but invokes instead the imaginary orality of a combative debate before a live audience. It is in this latter role that Lessing spends quite a bit of energy dramatizing and modeling personal, affective reactions to both the content and the form of the debate, possibly in the attempt to recruit the sympathy of his audience and to invest his critical position with individualized indices of authenticity. The first person singular of these polemical pieces is very similar to the I of the dialogue in “The Testament of John”: he stands outside the official, institutionally sanctioned space; he distrusts authority; instead, he stakes the quest for truth on the scenario of a personalized exchange, speaking strictly as an individual, not as a representative of any institution. He puts his faith in reciprocal face-to-face dialogue as an (imaginary) oral scenario that is watched and judged by an audience that takes an interest in this display of outspoken audacity. For this audience, he uses his considerable erudition to trick his interlocutor into betraying his mistaken, authoritarian belief and prejudice. He does not aim to “teach” his immediate interlocutor but rather to present a drama to the external audience. Lessing never deploys the first person singular to promote a personal,
private agenda of self-aggrandizement or for betraying intimate details of a
confessional nature; still, with his audacity, polemic, and display of affects, he
puts himself on the line in a way that exposes him to potential injury. It
almost seems as though he provokes such injury by forcing the polemic with
Goeze exactly to the point where the duke would attempt to shut him down
by withdrawing his exemption from censorship.

Lessing intervened in a public debate over religion by changing the condi-
tions of what could be debated and by whom, and in particular by making
arguments critical of scriptural authority available to a broader lay audience.
He assumed, moreover, a more expansive public persona beyond the restricted
role of the traditional scholar through the vehemence and audacity of the
personalized exchanges he engaged in, prompting further reactions and
inciting partisanship that found its expression in scholarly publications, admo-
nitions from the pulpit, and anonymous pamphlets. Finally, Lessing con-
structed for himself the position of an independent authority. He did not
invoke the institutional backup of an academic discipline, nor did he assume
the asymmetrical role of a public teacher with an instructional or pedagogical
mission. Instead, he designed a speaking/writing position that distinguished
itself in its reckless audacity as a selfless passion for the ongoing process of
critical inquiry.

Conclusion

Both Kant and Lessing were engaged in the transformation of the
traditional republic of letters. My analysis has traced their endeavors to
recruit a broad, general public of independent-minded, critical nonspecial-
ists. In the discussion of the uses and abuses of verbal reasoning and learned
debates, Lessing develops strategies for sowing distrust of established author-
ities and specialists and for challenging his readers to think for themselves.
As Kant argues, only if verbal reasoning is free from the interference of cen-
sorship can it engender a decisive critique and subsequent reform of exist-
ing institutions. Structurally, the construction of a general lay audience—an
audience of nonspecialists as well as an audience beyond the restrictions of
the official church—is crucial for the speaking position of the members of a
critical Enlightenment public. Hence Kant’s stipulation that anybody who
wants to participate in that public can do so as long as he or she does so
without official sanction.

Debates about and constructions of a critical public sphere tend to both
couple and decouple the medium of print with oral scenarios, which invoke
a live audience and introduce real time and the pressure of decision making
in action. On the one hand, the medium of print is appreciated because it
unburdens communication of this pressure and discourages the articulation
of personal, subjective concerns, offering instead a means to generate a 
broad audience for issues of universal concern. In this sense, print projects 
an “ideal audience” as a critical instance and norm in contrast to partial 
interests and camp mentalities. On the other hand, print and writing more 
generally are reproached for fostering dogmatic thought, orthodoxy, and 
intolerance along with a blind belief in authority. The introduction of oral 
components into a debate can accelerate and politicize a discussion and 
make it appear livelier and more relevant to its specific context.

With regard to the specific author-function of participants in the critical 
public sphere, we can conclude that there is, first, a strict separation between 
the biographical figure of a specific speaker/writer and his or her official posi-
tion within a particular institution. Lessing also severs the text from the bio-
graphical authorial persona when he publishes parts of Samuel Reimarus’s 
manuscript as “Fragmente eines Ungenannten” or plays the role of editor or 
commentator. Only if the speaker/writer in the public sphere does not speak 
from an officially sanctioned position can he or she assume a truly critical posi-
tion, and only then can this position be radically questioned and criticized 
by the audience. But from where, one might ask here, should such a 
speaker/writer who is precisely not officially authorized take the authority to 
speak up? In the particular case of Lessing, we were able to observe a striking 
procedure of coupling the public speaker to a biographical persona. Lessing 
has none of the features of a confessional subjectivity then on prominent dis-
play in the figure of Rousseau: to the contrary, he enjoys a good polemic—is 
feisty, even combative. By staging personal, affective reactions such as indigna-
tion, pride, vulnerability, elation, compassion, or disappointment, Lessing 
not only personalizes and individualizes specific arguments; the projection of 
a speaker’s specific personality renders argumentative strategies tangible and 
facilitates affective involvement on the part of the reading audience. Whether 
he constructs speaking roles such as those of I and He or writes an erudite let-
ter to a theologian in the quasi-autobiographical authorial persona of “Less-
ing” himself, Lessing interpellates his readers as a sort of theatrical audience 
and does not hesitate to cater to its emotions. On the other hand, and this 
marks the fundamental difference between such strategies and a theatrical 
model, Lessing does put himself on the line; the debates he engages harbor 
a risk of real consequences. In Lessing’s staging of the debate over the 
Reimarus fragments, we can see him challenging the censorship authorities 
and hazarding the security of his position with such daring that he gains the 
authority of an authentic maverick.

This public display of a passion for the pursuit of truth or of an intense 
interest in a cause of common concern—this kind of partisanship—is what 
distinguishes the Enlightenment public critic from merely outspoken, popu-
lar, or even notorious public figures. Kant’s essay “What Is Enlightenment?”
primarily emphasizes unmarked, unauthorized, egalitarian access to the public sphere. Already for this essay, Kant chooses not to specify this speaking position as disinterested, neutral, or objective. Twelve years later, after the French Revolution, he describes a form of public utterance marked by the display of a passionate interest that is yet utterly unselfish and in this respect truly free. The public display of this kind of passion, a partisanship that risks the loss of a position and the intervention of the censorship authority, serves in Kant’s *Contest of Faculties* as the only manifest example of the actual realization of freedom in history. 43 Again, what seems to be consistent is that the authority of the speaker/writer in the critical debate of the Enlightenment, the legitimacy of the participation of the public, seems to be primarily derived from an oral or live component. Rather than some apolitical and abstract rational, logical, or linguistic standard, this authority is exclusively tied to a speaker’s or writer’s willingness to take risks and put him- or herself on the line. We have seen this element enacted in Lessing’s famous struggle over his publication of the “Fragments of an Unnamed Author,” but we can also see it theorized by a postrevolutionary Kant, who had run into trouble with Frederick III’s censorship with his *Religion Within the Limits of Pure Reason* and went on to explain to his king in the preface to the *Contest of Faculties* the institutional reforms necessary to prevent the faculty of theology from hampering the truth-finding process within the faculty of philosophy.

Notes

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1. For two of the most quoted classical discussions of an Enlightenment public sphere see Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (Cambridge, 1988), and Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, 1989). Both have been extremely influential, although both have suffered from serious shortcomings and misunderstandings. For detailed discussion of each of these texts in terms of their value for political theory and models of civil society, see Andrew Arato and Jean Cohen, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (Cambridge, 1992).
2. Lessing’s “Rettung des Horaz” (The Rehabilitation of Horace) mobilizes a certain amount of historical and philological scholarship in order to make a point that he considered of utter contemporary importance: he was going to “rescue” Horace from the “attack” by one recent biographer, who provided a detailed discussion of the poet’s sexual practices involving boys and mirrors. Lessing not only pokes fun at the biographer’s prudery but also uses this case to argue for a deliberate and strict separation between the poet’s work, on the one hand, and constructions of the poet’s biographical persona, on the other. For a discussion of this text see my “Vor dem Spiegel des Dichters—Biographie und Autorfunktion der Aufklärung,” in Aufklärung als Form: Beiträge zu einem historischen und aktuellen Problem, ed. Helmut Schneider and Helmut Schmiedt (Würzburg, 1997), 29–45.

3. Immanuel Kant, Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung? (1784), in Werke (Akademieausgabe), vol. 8, Abhandlungen nach 1781 (Berlin, 1912), 35–42, here 35. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.


5. In a very recent piece, Habermas discusses today’s public sphere, especially the function of an “educated journalistic press,” which is threatened by the loss of advertising due to the Internet. He articulates his fears for the loss of the foundations of a deliberate democracy, for democracy needs public debate, which is forming opinions, bundling and sorting and prioritizing public concerns in a critical fashion, a process that is different from the mere representation of interests and different from the mere opinion that can be polled. See Jürgen Habermas, “Zur Vernunft der Öffentlichkeit,” in his Ach Europa: Kleine Politische Schriften XI (Frankfurt am Main, 2008), 131–91.

6. Most interesting in this context is the work of James Siegel (building on the work of Benedict Anderson) for a colonial context and, more recently with regard to an American context, Michael Warner. See James Siegel, Fetish, Recognition, Revolution (Princeton, 1997), and Michael Warner, The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America (Cambridge, 1990), and his Publics and Counterpublics (Cambridge, 2002).


8. See Rudolf Stichweh, “Universität und Öffentlichkeit: Zur Semantik des Öffentlichen in der frühneuzeitlichen Universitätsgeschichte,” in Öffentlichkeit im 18. Jahrhundert, ed. Hans-Wolf Jäger (Göttingen, 1997), 103–16. Stichweh argues that the main structural transformation of the university during the eighteenth century consisted in its changing self definition as “public” (öffentlich) versus private institutions, which meant initially more specific, more specialized, but also more elementary as opposed to the institutions of learning that addressed a very wide, general audience that extended beyond local constituents. Eventually, according to Stichweh, the “public” nature of the university was entirely transformed by its increasing disciplinarization and exclusivity.


11. It is exactly in this respect that I differ considerably from Heinrich Bosse, who relates Kant’s prizewinning essay to the project of Enlightenment pedagogy. Whereas Bosse constructs a continuity between Thomasius, Herder, and the pedagogical reforms affecting the universities as a top-down pedagogical program ultimately directed by Frederick II, I would like to emphasize the discontinuity between stealth pedagogy and “Populärphilosophie” on the one hand and the transformation and mobilization of the republic of letters under Enlightened absolutism on the other. The criterion of distinction between the two concerns what I describe as the arrangements of the communicative situation: whereas the transformation of the republic of letters operates with an exclusive but egalitarian model that encourages the critique of authority, stealth pedagogy operates with an inclusive but authoritarian model. See Heinrich Bosse, “Der geschärfte Befehl zum Selbstdenken: Ein Erlaß des Ministers v. Fürst an die preußischen Universitäten im Mai 1770,” in *Diskursanalysen II—Institution Universität*, ed. Friedrich A. Kittler et al. (Opladen, 1990), 31–61.


14. Rudolf Stichweh explains Kant’s unusual use of the terms “private” and “public” as Kant’s intervention in a university setting where the university scholars had become too specialized and professionalized and had lost their appeal to a general audience, which, according to his argument, constituted the earlier mission of the university. To a certain extent my argument agrees with Stichweh’s take, i.e., to the extent that Kant seems to favor an imagined “ideal” audience of the generally educated reader. However, Stichweh does not comment on the aspect of the institutional, official “authorization” of the “private speaker,” and Kant’s apparent opposition to such authorization, which demands a critical reader who can potentially talk back, an element that appears grounded not in the didactic, hierarchical university setting but rather in the egalitarian republic of letters that fosters lively exchanges.

media of mass publication: literary authorship, no longer predicated on acquired knowledge (of Latin and Greek) and skills (such as rhetorical facility), became universally accessible—anyone could become an author who had “genius” or was able to satisfy the market.

16. This was not a linear process. When, for instance, the first Berlin Academy (The Electoral Brandenburg Society of Sciences) under Prince-Elector Frederick III of Brandenburg (1657–1713) was created in 1700, Leibniz, its founding president, made it part of the academy’s mission to cultivate German as a language of learning. In 1744, however, when Frederick II (1712–86) founded the Académie Royale des sciences et belles-lettres, he made French the official language and chose a francophone Secretary of the Academy. In practice, submissions to the academy tended to arrive in three languages: a small minority of generally quite learned submissions in Latin, with the remainder fairly evenly divided between German and French. Some of the French submissions, however, were barely legible, as their authors were obviously quite incompetent in the language and wrote a fantastic French of their own invention. See the analysis of the submissions in response to the question of 1771 in Cordula Neis, Anthropologie im Sprachdenken des 18. Jahrhunderts: Die Berliner Preissfrage nach dem Ursprung der Sprachen (1771) (Berlin, 2003), 70–82 and 102–4.

17. Regarding popular philosophy in Germany, and especially the programmatic aspects that led to the falling-out between Kant and his student Herder over Kant’s critical turn—which, according to Herder, betrayed the mission of philosophy as a widely accessible enterprise—see John Zammito, Kant, Herder, and the Birth of Anthropology (Chicago, 2002), esp. chaps. 2–4. For the fate of the French terms, see the article by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Rolf Reichardt, “Philosophe, Philosophie,” in Handbuch politisch-sozialer Grundbegriffe in Frankreich 1680–1820, ed. Rolf Reichardt and Eberhard Schmitt (Munich, 1985), 3:7–88.

18. See Jürgen Habermas, Technik und Wissenschaft als “Ideologie” (Frankfurt am Main, 1969).


21. This, of course, was the choice made by Count Nikolaus von Zinzendorf, who decided to abstain from all engagement with theological debates in order to devote his energies exclusively to the far more relevant domain of ethical action by founding the Pietist community in Herrnhut in 1722. Lessing’s choice of title for this manuscript and the fact that the text ends with a discussion of Zinzendorf has led some Lessing scholars to argue that Lessing advocated the equivalent of Zinzendorf’s choice: a return to basic ethics and abstention from learned debate.

22. “Der Mensch ward zum Tun und nicht zum Vernünfteln erschaffen. Aber eben deswegen, weil er nicht dazu erschaffen ward, hängt er diesem mehr alsjenem nach. Seine Bosheit unternimmt allezeit das, was er nicht soll, und
seine Verwegenheit allezeit das, was er nicht kann. Er, der Mensch, sollte sich Schranken setzen lassen?"; Lessing, "Gedanken über die Herrnhuter," 936.

23. Ibid., 938.

24. "Er lehrte uns, des Reichtums entbehren, ja ihn fliehen. Er lehrte uns, unerbit-
tlich gegen uns selbst, nachsehend gegen andre sein. Er lehrte uns, das Verdi-
enst, auch wenn es mit Unglück und Schmach überhäuft ist, hochachten und
gegen die mächtige Dummheit verteidigen. Er lehrte uns, die Stimme der Natur
in unsern Herzen lebendig empfinden. Er lehrte uns, Gott nicht nur glauben,
sondern was das vornehmste ist, lieben. Er lehrte uns endlich, dem Tode uner-
schrocken unter die Augen gehen, und durch einen willigen Abtritt von diesem
Schauplatze beweisen, daß man überzeugt sei, die Weisheit würde uns die Maske
nicht ablegen heißen, wenn wir unsere Rolle nicht geendigt hätten"; ibid., 942.

25. "besäße nichts von aller der Kenntnis, die desto weniger nützt, je prahlender
sie ist. Er wäre weder in den Geschichten, noch in den Sprachen erfahren. . . .
Gleichwohl mache dieser Mann Anspruch auf den Titel eines Weltweisen. Gleich-
wohl wäre er so beherzt, ihn auch Leuten abzustreiten, welchen öffentliche
Ämter das Recht dieses blendenden Beinamens gegeben haben"; ibid., 943.

26. "Gott sei Dank, daß so ein verwegener Freund der Laien noch nicht aufges-
tanden ist, und zu unsern Zeiten auch nicht aufstehen möchte: denn die
Herrn, welche mit der Wirklichkeit der Dinge so viel zu tun haben, werden
schon sorgen, daß meine Einbildung nimmermehr zur Wirklichkeit gelangt";
ibid., 944.

27. In the first half of the eighteenth century, theological writings dominated the Ger-
man book market, and even in 1750, new publications in theology and religion—
ranging from learned theological debates in Latin to speculations about
Christian doctrine and religion by church people and laypersons to anony-
mous invectives against religion—outnumber those in philosophy. Regarding
the quantitative shifts between religious/theological and philosophical/secular
writings, see the tables in Wilfried Barner et al., Lessing: Epoche, Werk, Wirkung,

28. See William Boehart, Politik und Religion: Studien zum Fragmentenstreit (Reinarus,
Goeze, Lessing) (Schwarzenbek, 1988).

29. Bodo Plachta, Damnatur—Toleratur—Admittitur: Studien und Dokumente zur liter-

12, Brieve von und an Lessing 1776–1781, ed. Helmuth Kiesel (Frankfurt am
Main, 1994), 185–86.

31. See Hans Blumenberg, Arbeit am Mythos (Frankfurt am Main, 1979), 443–50.

32. Regarding Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s reflections on the genres of the public pro-
fession of faith (the credo) as well as the confession and their transformation
into a scenario of intimacy, see my “Profession/Confession,” New Literary His-
tory 34, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 257–74.

33. See Karl Aner, Die Theologie der Lessingzeit (Halle [Saale], 1929).

34. Cf., e.g., Johann Gottfried Herder, Vom Erlöser der Menschen: Nach unsern drei
ersten Evangelien (1796), in Werke, vol. 9/1, Theologische Schriften, ed. Christoph
Bultmann and Thomas Zippert (Frankfurt am Main, 1994), 609–724. Herder
articulates a position regarding the gospels and the nature of Jesus that is no
less radical—but he does so in a homiletic mode and in his official function as
a supervisor of the training of Lutheran theologians.

36. Lessing’s most sustained argument on how to deal in specific terms with the claims of revealed religion, his “Education of the Human Race” (Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts), is largely an immediate extension of his commentary on Reimarus.

37. See book 7, chap. 9 of Saint Augustine’s Confessions and cf. the conversion beneath the fig tree in book 8, chap. 12.


39. “The Testament of John” provoked extremely contradictory reactions: Goeze immediately recognized it as an attack on core Christian doctrine and indicted the arrogance inherent in Lessing’s offering his text as a substitute for the divinely inspired gospel. Goeze or Lessing was highly sensitive to the way in which this text, by way of generic hybridity and the staging of various speech situations, ridiculed any kind of authoritative proclamation, a fundamental challenge to the authority of the gospel. See Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Über den Beweis des Geistes und der Kraft (1777) and Das Testament Johannis (1777), in Werke und Briefe, vol. 8, Werke 1774–1778, ed. Arno Schilson (Frankfurt am Main, 1989), 437–45 and 447–54. For Goeze’s reaction see the commentary, ibid., 1003. By contrast, Martin Bollacher accepts the conciliatory tone of Lessing’s announcement of the text at face value. See his Lessing, Vernunft und Geschichte: Untersuchungen zum Problem religiöser Aufklärung in den Spätwerken (Tübingen, 1978), 145.

40. According to Bollacher, Lessing, Vernunft und Geschichte, the text can be reduced to the last will and hence to the testament of John, articulated by the dying evangelist: “Children, love one another!” (Lessing, Das Testament Johannis, 451). As such, Bollacher argues, “The Testament of John” stands in direct relation to Lessing’s early manuscript about the Moravians in that it insists on the utmost importance of a Christian ethic, in view of which all doctrinal strife becomes irrelevant. In the case of the early manuscript, we have seen that Lessing invokes the dichotomy of scholarly or doctrinal debate and relevant ethical action only to undermine the simple opposition and to insist that—even though individual discursive articulations of any kind of position cannot lay claim to ultimate truth and must not be mistaken for a valid substitute for ethical action—the exercise of human freedom must pass through verbal reasoning despite the latter’s inevitable pitfalls. It would be strange if the mature Lessing had abandoned this commitment to critical engagement with the forms of verbal reasoning and instead preached a simple, consensus-inviting precept.

41. Lessing, Das Testament Johannis, 452:

Ich: Augustinus erzählt, daß ein gewisser Platoniker gesagt habe, der Anfang des Evangelii Johannis Im Anfang war das Wort u.s.w. verdiene in allen Kirchen, an dem sichtbarsten in die Augen fallendsten Orte, mit goldenen Buchstaben angeschrieben zu werden.

Er: Allerdings! der Platoniker hatte sehr recht.—O die Platoniker! Und ganz gewiß, Plato selbst hätte nichts Erhabeners schreiben können, als dieser Anfang des Evangelii Johannis ist.

42. See also Wolfram Mauser, “Toleranz und Frechheit: Zur Strategie von Lessings Streitschriften,” in Friemark et al., Lessing und die Toleranz, 276–90.

43. The actual historical examples Kant points to are exactly those observers of the French Revolution who watched the events with great interest and passion and articulated their partisanship (“Theilnehmung”) so clearly as to risk losing their professional posts. See Kant, Der Streit der Fakultäten (1798), in Werke (Akademieausgabe), vol. 7, Der Streit der Fakultäten: Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht (Berlin, 1917), 85.