

Speech at the Award Ceremony for the Immanuel Kant Essay Competition

"Sapere Aude – Dare to Know through Reason!"

of the **Goethe-Institut USA**

at the **German Embassy Washington**

with the German Ambassador to the United States, Andreas Michaelis

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Excellency, dear Mr. Ambassador,

Dear Mr. Vötter and dear members of the Goethe Institut,

Dear prize winners,

Dear students,

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to thank you, Mr. Ambassador, very much for inviting us to the German Embassy (to your residence) here in Washington DC and for hosting this award ceremony for the Immanuel Kant Essay Competition. This competition was kindly and jointly organized by the Goethe-Instituts in the United States.

And of course, I would like to congratulate YOU, dear prize winners, and complement you on your fantastic and stimulating contributions in this Kant Essay Competition. It is wonderful that you all could make your way to Washington today to receive your prizes.

Immanuel Kant was without doubt one of the most important representatives of European Enlightenment philosophy and is quite possibly the most famous German philosopher in history.

This year has been a very special year for Kant scholarship around the world, because we have been celebrating the 300th anniversary of his birth. This has given us an opportunity to reflect on the relevance of Kant's philosophy and the legacy of European Enlightenment thought more generally.

Let me mention at this point that my personal highlight of this Tercentennial year has been the staging of the play "Immanuel Kant" by the Austrian author Thomas Bernhard, which we – at Hopkins – produced together with the Goethe Institut Washington DC and brought to the stages in Baltimore and Washington. I've been very grateful for this opportunity to engage with Kant's philosophy in this playful way through an artistic and literary approach.

The European Enlightenment has left us with a complex and difficult legacy. The tradition of Enlightenment thought is not only rich in its philosophical and cultural depth; it has not only fundamentally shaped our lives and societies today, but it has also long been the subject of controversy and criticism.

On the one hand, the Enlightenment philosophers celebrate *reason, critique, freedom,* and *human dignity* as the universal core values of our personal lives and of the free and democratic constitution of our society. All of this would be unthinkable without the Enlightenment and its ideas.

However, on the other hand, many Enlightenment philosophers, including Kant, still advocated the exclusion of entire social groups from the principles of equality and freedom, such as people of color, Jews, and women. That Kant also harbored racist, antisemitic, and sexist beliefs is painfully documented in some texts he himself authorized as well as in lecture notes and fragments. The universalism that his philosophy promotes appears to have its limits, as it precisely appears not to include *all* people, *all* human beings regardless of their skin color, religion, or gender. This has been a central research question of today's Kant scholarship and has also been at the center of the discussion in this special Kant year...

So how should we deal with this complex legacy of such a great thinker?

In this essay competition, you have been called upon to actively engage with Kant's thinking. But in some places, one hears more and more the question, why should one still do that? Why is it so vitally important, especially today, to read Kant and engage with his philosophy? I would like to offer a few thoughts on this issue.

Kant expresses his idea of universalism – the idea that all people are free and equal – particularly vividly – in one of the formulations of his famous Categorical Imperative, that is, the moral law we are all obliged to follow. So he writes:

“Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means, but always at the same time as an end.” (*Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:429, translation amended)

So, every person is always an end in themselves! Every person has an inalienable dignity. This is central insight of Article 1 of the German constitution, the “*Grundgesetz*”:

“Die Würde des Menschen ist unantastbar!”

“Human dignity shall be inviolable!”

How could it happen and keep happening to this day that this principle is violated, that human beings are excluded from this dignity, mistreated as mere means, expelled, and harmed? I cannot give a sufficient answer to this important and difficult question in the short time available, but only offer a philosophical thought.

A few days ago, I had the privilege of attending a conference in honor of Professor emerita Patricia Kitcher at Columbia University – and there, too, the question came up in several talks as to who counts as a human being for Kant and why exclusion occurs, even though it seems to blatantly contradict his universalism. I was particularly moved by a talk on moral progress by my esteemed colleague, Professor Axel Honneth, which made a deep point: We never think from a neutral point of view, but always from a perspective, from a particular point in geographical space, a certain time in history, or a position in cultural space. And with this perspective, we face unavoidable limitations and blind spots. This also means that we always ever apply our moral principles from a limited perspective, which leads to flawed applications.

Hence, our abstract principles of morality must be applied and implemented in the concrete (life) to be effective, but this concrete is permeated by weakness, fallibility, lack of attention and care. The history of philosophy is not only a history of great ideas, but also a history of great errors and misapplications.

But should we throw in the towel in the face of these inevitable limitations? – No, these inevitable limitations should be precisely our incentive and aspiration to rethink the ideas and expose the fallacies in which we ourselves have become entangled.

Another central principle for Kant is, therefore, *critique* or *critical thinking*, and for Kant such a critique must never end, but rather each generation is entrusted anew with the task of critique. So one lesson I have learned from the recent debate about racism in the Enlightenment is not to stop reading Kant, but to become aware of our own short-sightedness and the flaws of our own time. The response to the multiple crises in our society should not be to abolish values such as freedom, equality and scientific rationality, but to establish them anew as *universally binding* through critical analysis of our own lives and our society.

Universalism is not a given, but it is given as a task!

We are constantly called upon to examine whether we are applying the ideas of freedom and equality in the best possible way and how we can improve their application in our concrete lives. This is the only way to recognize those whom we exclude today – be it, for example, future generations – and to correct ourselves through critique.

Your engagement, dear students, with Kant's philosophy in very different and extremely creative ways is a wonderful and vivid demonstration of and a tribute to how diverse and fruitful Kant's thinking still is today. In light of the multiple crises of our time, we are particularly called upon to make his core ideas relevant and vibrant again.

Philosophy is never a stagnant or idle undertaking, but very much a living endeavor and aspiration!

Thank you!