

## 16:02 Do you have a moment to talk about Enlightenment?

by Pastor Manul Laphroaig

Howdy neighbors. Do you have a moment to talk about Enlightenment?

Enlightenment! Who doesn't like it, and who would speak against it? It takes us out of the Dark Ages, and lifts up us humans above prejudice. We are all for it—so what's to talk about?

There's just one catch, neighbors. Mighty few who actually live in the Dark Ages would own up to it, and even if they do, their idea of why they're Dark might be totally different from yours. For instance, they might mean that the True Faith is lost, and abominable heretics abound, or that their Utopia has had unfortunate setbacks in remaking the world, or that the well-deserved Apocalypse or the Singularity are perpetually behind schedule. So we have to do a fair bit of figuring what Enlightenment is, and whether and why our ages might be Dark.

Surely not, you say. For we have Science, and even its ultimate signal achievements, the Computer and the Internet. Dark Ages is other people.

And yet we feel it: the *intellectual tyranny in the name of science*, of which Richard Feynman warned us in his day. It hasn't gotten better; if anything, it has gotten worse. And it has gotten much worse in our own backyard, neighbors.

I am talking of foisting computers on doctors and so many other professions where the results are not so drastic, but still have hundreds of thousands of people learning to fight the system as a daily job requirement. Yet how many voices do we hear asking, "wait a minute, do computers really belong here? Will they really make things better? Exactly how do you know?"

When something doesn't make sense, but you hear no one questioning it, you should begin to worry. The excuses can be many and varied—Science said so, and Science must know better; there surely have been Studies; it says Evidence-based on the label; you just can't stop Progress; being fearful of appearing to be a Luddite, or just getting to pick one's battles. But a tyranny is a tyranny by any other name, and you know it by this one thing: something doesn't make sense, but no one speaks of it, because they know it won't help at all.

<sup>1</sup>unzip pocorgtf016.pdf ehrevents.pdf



Think of it: there are still those among us who thought medicine would be improved by making doctors ask every patient every time they came to the office how they felt "on the scale from 1 to 10," and by entering these meaningless answers into a computer. (If, for some reason, you resent these metrics being called meaningless, try to pick a different term for an uncalibrated measurement, or ask a nurse to pinch you for 3 or 7 the next time you see one.) These people somehow got into power and made this happen, despite every kind of common sense.

Forget for a moment the barber shops in Boston or piano tuners in Portland—and estimate how many man-hours of nurses' time was wasted by punching these numbers in. Yet everyone just *knows* computers make everything more efficient, and techno-paternalism was in vogue. "Do computers really make this better?" was the question everyone was afraid to ask.

If this is not a cargo cult, what is? But, more importantly, why is everyone simply going along with it and not talking about it at all? This is how you know a tyranny in the making. And if you think the cost of this silence is trivial, consider Appendix A of *Electronic Health Record-Related Events in Medical Malpractice Claims* by Mark Graber & co-authors, on the kinds of computer records that killed the patient.<sup>1</sup> You rarely see a text where "patient expired" occurs with such density.

Just as Feynman warned of intellectual tyranny in the name of science, there's now intellectual tyranny in the name of computer technology.

Even when something about computers obviously doesn't make sense, people defer judgment to some nebulous authority who must know better. And all of this has happened before, and it will all happen again.

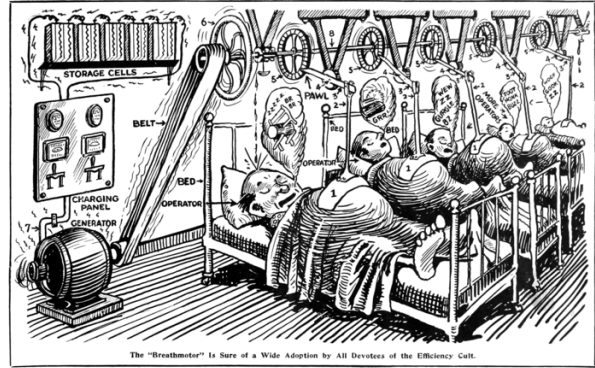
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And in this, neighbors, lies our key to understanding Enlightenment. When Emmanuel Kant set out to write about it in 1784, he defined the lack of it as self-imposed immaturity, a school child-like deference to some authority rather than daring to use one's own reason; not because it actually makes sense, but because it's easier overall. This is a deferral so many of us have been trained in, as the simplest thing to do under the circumstances.

The authority may hold the very material stick or merely the power of scoffing condescension that one cannot openly call out; it barely matters. What matters is acceding to be led by some guardians, not out of a genuine lack of understanding but because one doesn't dare to set one's own reason against their authority. It gets worse when we make a virtue of it, as if accepting the paternalistic "this is how it should be done," somehow made us better human beings, even if we did it not entirely in good faith but rather for simplicity and convenience.

Kant's answer to this was, "Sapere aude!"—"Dare to know! Dare to reason!" Centuries later, this remains our only cry of hope.

Consider, neighbors: these words were written in 1784: *This enlightenment requires nothing but freedom—and the most innocent of all that may be called "freedom:" freedom to make public use of one's reason in all matters. Now I hear the cry from all sides: "Do not argue!" The officer says: "Do not argue—drill!" The tax collector: "Do not argue—pay!" The pastor: "Do not argue—believe!" Or—and how many times have we heard this one, neighbors?—"Do not argue—install!"*



And then we find ourselves out in a world where *smart* means "it crashes; it can lie to you; occasionally, it explodes." And yet rejecting it is an act so unusual that rejectionists stand out as the Amish on the highway, treated much the same.

Some of you might remember the time when "opening this email will steal your data" was the funniest hoax of the interwebs. Back then, could we have guessed that "Paper doesn't crash." would have such an intimate meaning to so many people?

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So does it get better, neighbors? In 1784, Kant wrote,

*I have emphasized the main point of the enlightenment—man's emergence from his self-imposed non-adulthood—primarily in religious matters, because our rulers have no interest in playing the guardian to their subjects in the arts and sciences.*

Lo and behold, that time has passed. These days, our would-be guardians miss no opportunity to make it known just what we should believe about science—as Dr. Lysenko turns green with envy in his private corner of Hell, but also smiles in anticipation of getting some capital new neighbors. I wonder what Kant would think, too, if he heard about "believing in science" as a putative virtue of the enlightened future—and just how enlightened he would consider the age that managed to come up with such a motto.

But be it as it may, his motto still remains our cry of hope: "Sapere aude!" Or, for those of us less inclined to Latin, "Build you own blessed bird-feeder!"

Amen.