

# Enlightenment and we

**A discussion**

**Thomas . Berker** @ ntnu . no

Centre for Technology and Society

Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU)

7491 Trondheim, Norway

# Enlightenment and anti-enlightenment

Does it (still) matter for our work? If yes, how?

- Is AI enlightenment in reverse? (I. Strümke)?
- What does it mean that political parties with anti-science agendas win elections?
- Crisis: Is there a crisis of SSH (thinking)? This time for real? And what does it mean?

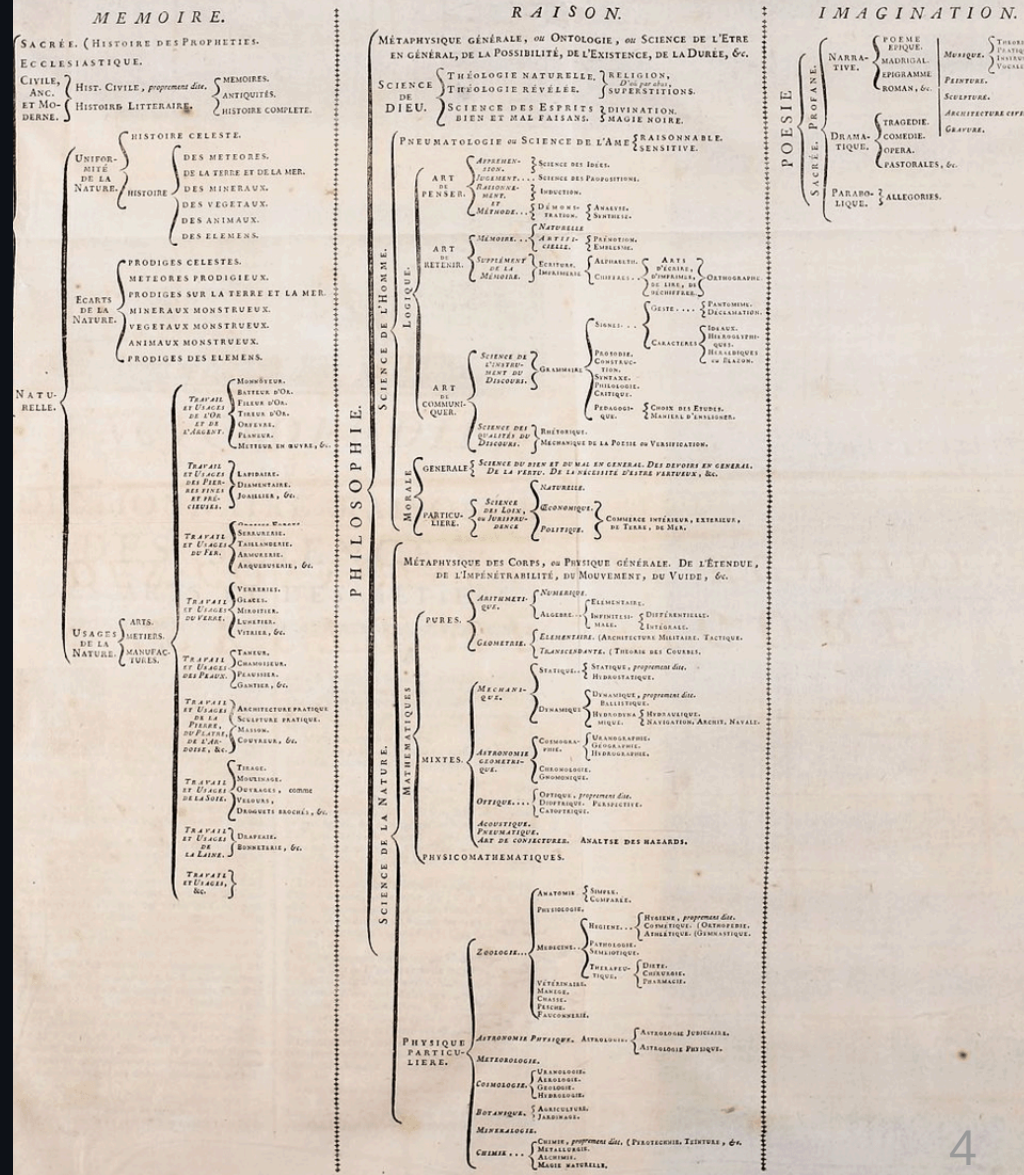
# Plan

1. Going back to the beginnings of modern science, SSH edition
  - Kant: Enlightenment
  - De Maistre: Anti-enlightenment
  - Hölderlin: Romanticism
2. Back to the present
  - Contemporary critiques of enlightenment
  - Contemporary enlightenment and beyond?

# \* SYSTÈME FIGURÉ DES CONNOISSANCES HUMAINES.

ENTENDEMENT.

France 1784



## Kant's answers (1784)



## **Definition enlightenment**

Enlightenment is humanity's exit from self-imposed immaturity, meaning the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred because it stems not from a lack of intelligence but from a lack of courage and resolve.

## **Why people remain immature**

Laziness and cowardice make it convenient for most people to let others (guardians, pastors, doctors, books) do their thinking for them.

## Public vs. private use of reason

The *public* use of reason (addressing the reading public as a scholar) must always be free, while the *private* use (carrying out the duties of a civic or ecclesiastical office) may legitimately be restricted.

## **No binding contract against progress**

No generation may bind a future one to an unalterable set of doctrines, for such an agreement against further enlightenment is null and void.

## **Religion as the key battleground:**

Religiously justified immaturity is the most harmful and dishonourable form, and therefore the chief field in which enlightenment must assert itself.

## Bonus: The Four Stages of Development

1. **Primitive state:** Natural freedom, no law, constant conflict
2. **Civil society:** Legal order, property, but still driven by self-interest
3. **Republic:** Constitutional government, separation of powers, rule of law
4. **Cosmopolitan federation:** States in peaceful federation, universal law

(in *Idea for a Universal History*, same year)

## Regarding Kant's "answers to the question"

- Is Kant's cosmopolitanism still on the table? What does it mean for our work if it is not?
- Are Kant's ideas about public reason still valid in the digital age? If not: what does this mean for your project?
- What are Kant's blind spots?
- Is reading Kant today different from reading him 20 years ago? What has changed?



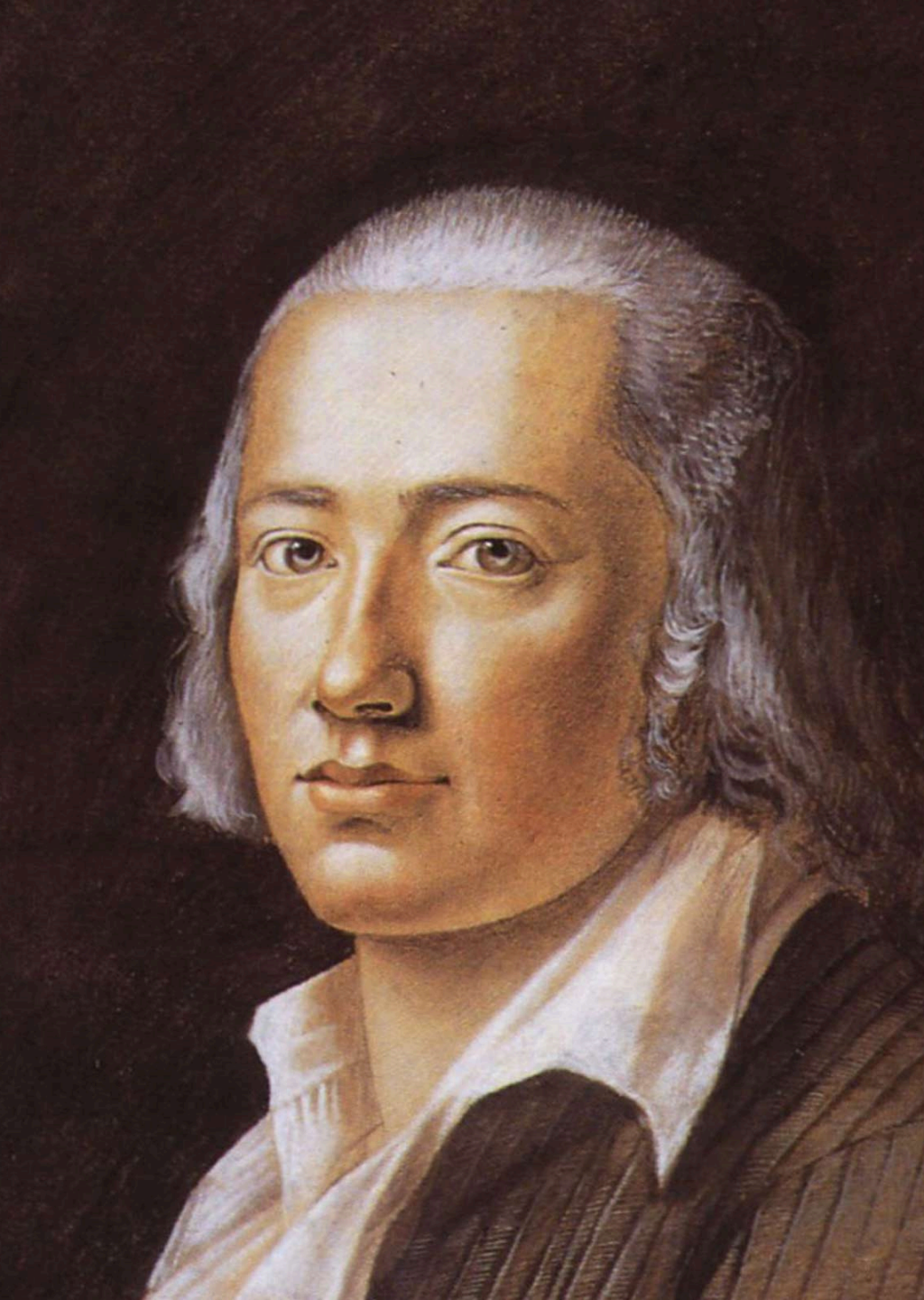
## De Maistre's Anti-enlightenment (1797)

"In short, the more one examines the apparently most active personages in the Revolution, the more one finds in them something passive and mechanical. We cannot repeat too often that men do not lead the Revolution; it is the Revolution that uses men. They are right when they say it goes all alone. This phrase means that never has the Divinity shown itself so clearly in any human event." (p.30)

## Central points

- **Divine punishment:** The French Revolution as God's judgment on Enlightenment hubris
- **Authority over autonomy:** Sovereignty resides in God, not the people
- **Rejection of rationalism:** Reason is limited; tradition and revelation superior
- **Organic society:** Society as living organism, not rational construct

What kind of PhD thesis would De Maistre appreciate?



## Hölderlin visits "the Germans"

- no real human beings, even religion makes them worse
- they are "all-calculating barbarian" as opposed to "the ancients", who had "a childlike, a beautiful spirit, and nothing they did was done without soul."
- pities the poets/artists that live like strangers among them

## Is Hölderlin anti-enlightenment?

- How does Hölderlin's nostalgia relate to Kant's optimism?
- What is the poet's/philosopher's role for Hölderlin?
- What kind of PhD would Hölderlin write?

# Classicism vs Romanticism (Gouldner)

Classical	Romantic
Universal reason	Particular experience
Objectivity, detachment	Subjectivity, engagement
System, structure	Fragment, expression
Progress, teleology	Decay, loss, nostalgia
Cosmopolitanism	Regionalism, rootedness
Public reason	Private feeling

Where do you locate your own work on this spectrum?

# Back to the present

Six forms of enlightenment-critique

# 1. Postmodern skepticism (Foucault, Lyotard)

- Critique of grand narratives, universal reason
- Power/knowledge nexus undermines claims to objective truth
- **Possible connections** to Kant/De Maistre/Hölderlin?

## 2. Identity politics & standpoint epistemology

- Knowledge is situated, embodied, partial
- Universal reason masks particular interests (white, male, Western)
- **Possible connections** to Kant/De Maistre/Hölderlin?

### 3. Post-humanism & new materialism

- Human exceptionalism rejected
- Reason as human-centered, exclusionary
- **Possible connections** to Kant/De Maistre/Hölderlin?

## 4. Populist-nationalist movements

- Explicit rejection of cosmopolitanism
- "Real people" vs. "elites" (echoes de Maistre)
- **Possible connections** to Kant/De Maistre/Hölderlin?

## 5. Digital anti-rationalism

- Conspiracy theories, misinformation, "alternative facts"
- Epistemic relativism: "your truth vs. my truth"
- **Possible connections** to Kant/De Maistre/Hölderlin?

## 6. The Dark Enlightenment (Neoreaction)

- **Origins:** Online movement (2000s-2010s), blogosphere, 4chan
- **Key figures:** Curtis Yarvin, Nick Land
- **Core claims:**
  - Democracy is **inherently dysfunctional** — produces mediocrity, short-termism, instability
  - Enlightenment egalitarianism = **error**, not moral achievement
  - Solution: **Neocameralism** — corporate-style governance, technocratic authoritarianism, network state

## Enlightenment today?

1. *"Science is just liberal ideology dressed up as objective truth. Your PhD is liberal propaganda."*
2. *"Universities are ivory towers run by elites who don't understand real people. Your research is irrelevant."*
3. *"All knowledge is power. Your science is just politics."*
4. *"The Enlightenment was a mistake. Democracy produces mediocrity. We need technocratic rule by experts."*

Good riddance, revival, or is there something "beyond"?