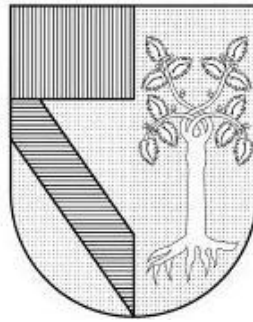


UNIVERSIDAD PANAMERICANA

FACULTAD DE FILOSOFÍA Y CIENCIAS SOCIALES

ESCUELA DE FILOSOFÍA



“THE I IN PHYSICS”

INFORME DE ACTIVIDAD PROFESIONAL

Q U E P R E S E N T A

MICHAEL PHIPPS

P A R A O B T E N E R E L G R A D O D E :

MAESTRO EN HISTORIA DEL PENSAMIENTO

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INDEX

INTRODUCTION	4
IF I AM TO ESTABLISH ANYTHING LASTING IN THE SCIENCES	5
DESCARTES.....	5
SOMETHING INSTEAD OF NOTHING.....	8
LEIBNIZ.....	8
KANT	8
SCHOPENHAUER	9
SO THAT BEHIND THE NAME SOMETHING, AS WE WERE, REMAINS.....	13
RUSSELL	13
STUART MILLS	13
LEVI	15
BIBLIOGRAPHY	18

Strip yourself of everything and justify your existence.

What is left is the I in physics.

INTRODUCTION

I am a physicist, but, despite that, this paper is not about physics – at least solely. And despite the degree for which this paper is written, it is not about philosophy – at least solely. It is about the relationship between the two: philosophy and physics; man and the external world.

As physicists, it is our job to passively observe the external world, but that is impossible. For it is us doing the observing. We are part of the story. We are active, biased observers who owe our observations to our very existence.

As philosophers, we strive to contemplate man in his true form, but once again, that is impossible. For his true form is intertwined with the world around him.

Philosophy and physics. Physics and philosophy. They are intimately connected, just like man to his external world. Without man, there is no external world; and without the external world, there is no man. As men, where does that leave us? That is what this paper is about.

IF I AM TO ESTABLISH ANYTHING LASTING IN THE SCIENCES

An individual's most fundamental problems are his own existence and that of the world in which he lives. Before all else, he must be assured that he indeed exists and that he exists as a body within the world he perceives. If he cannot prove these most basic facts, then he cannot trust the truth or reality of anything found in life.

As a scientist, Descartes saw this problem as a threat to the entirety of his life's work, and as a philosopher, it took shape at the heart of his writing. "If I am to establish anything firm and lasting in the sciences," he wrote, "I must once for all, and by a deliberate effort, rid myself of all those opinions to which I have hitherto given credence, starting entirely anew, and building from the foundations up."¹

Descartes discovered that his past notions of truth and reality had been those derived directly from the senses: That which he could perceive, he could believe. Yet, he also granted that there were many instances in which his senses had, in fact, deceived him: Was the sun really, as it appeared, many times smaller than the earth? And if he could not trust his senses at all times, then why should he trust them at all? Furthermore, he found very little to distinguish a sleeping state from, that which we normally consider, a waking moment. In a dream, man may find himself fully dressed and walking about, only to discover, upon waking, that he is, in fact, undressed and lying in bed. Why then should he assume that even the most banal and fundamental of perceptions are not indeed based off deception? In this manner, Descartes found reason to doubt everything of a composite nature—that which was contingent on some prior truth, such as physics, astronomy or medicine.

Relying then on purely logic, he stripped life of everything –sensations, experiences, etc., leaving only the most fundamental and incontrovertible of life's characteristics: thought. He reasoned: "If I am persuading myself of something, in so doing I assuredly exist."² Even if

¹ Descartes, Rene. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Pg. 33.

² Descartes, Rene. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Pg. 34.

the sum of everything in life were a deception – and a malignant God was the one doing the deceiving – the fact that He would be deceiving *me* proved my existence beyond a reasonable doubt.

So “I am, I exist”³, but what am I? I appeared to have a body, a body that, among other things, had hands and feet, which were used to eat and walk. But what attributes could be ascribed to the external body, and which were reserved for the internal soul? Descartes wrote that man’s physical characteristics were clearly of the body, while the impetus to use that body came from the soul. Taking this idea one step further, Descartes tried to imagine the soul without the body and, in this world, he had no use for eating or walking, ideas contingent on the body’s existence. Instead, at our most fundamental level, Descartes saw that man was, above all else, a thinking thing. “I am, I exist” and I exist every time I think. Existence and thinking were two ideas linked closely together, for if man ceased to think he also ceased to exist: “[Man] is a thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, abstains from willing, that also can be aware of images and senses.”⁴ Since, to Descartes, the mind provided understanding and the body provided sensation, man truly and safely used his most basic tools to understand— rather than sense—the external world. In making this concession, Descartes gave himself the fixed point – the safe ground—from which he could proceed with his examination.

While Descartes may have eventually appeased his own doubts, what about ours? To start, it seems relatively apparent that I am and I exist, but what am I? Descartes identified himself as a thinking thing but made a marked point to distinguish between that which thinks – the mind – and that which senses – the body, but can we really separate the two? About two hundred years after Descartes’ death, Charles Darwin published his book *On the Origin of Species* that claimed all animals – including humans – evolved from common ancestors. The empirical evidence of evolution and modern advances in science make it difficult to uphold classical notions of a human soul and the distinction that Descartes makes between mind and body. Sure, like Descartes wrote, man is clearly a thinking thing, and *I* am the conscious motor behind my body. And this is, in fact, what makes man privileged among the animal

³ Descartes, Rene. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Pg. 36.

⁴ Descartes, Rene. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Pg. 36.

species. Yet, it should also be clear, that man is an aggregate thing, a thing that cannot divorce itself from its ability to think, in much the same manner that it cannot separate itself from its body.

To make this point more apparent, let's examine what it means to think. For example, how does man first learn the concept of darkness? He learns it upon first learning the concept of light, since darkness is nothing in itself but the negation of light. In a very similar way, man stumbles upon all of his knowledge, but from there, it is up to him to take his aggregate knowledge and form the complex connections necessary to think and understand his world. The idea then that man is, above all else, a thinking thing acknowledges the fact that he has previously perceived an external world and has used these perceptions to form complex thoughts, which he in turn recognizes as consciousness.

Descartes tried to eliminate all of his biases and think of life as if he were a neutral observer lying outside of his body, but he failed because such a task is impossible. Though he may have been able to ignore his active senses while conducting his examination, everything he was, up until that point, was the product of his past perceptions— his mind's ability to remember those events and to form complicated connections thereof. Thus, when Descartes said he doubted his senses, he was admitting doubt of his very existence. By itself, there may not seem to be a reason for sensory perception and an external world, but when it is connected to the idea of *I* it is given all new meaning. Everything we perceive has meaning relative to our own existence. "I am, I exist" because of that fact alone, and so does the external world. Reflecting on Descartes' system as a whole, he clearly overlooked the relativity of day-to-day life. Space and time are not absolute ideas external to our existence. They are very much embedded in our understanding of ourselves and in our perceptions of the external world. It is not enough to say that I am a thinking thing: I am a thinking thing in relation to the world around me. Any sensation that I feel— heat, pain, etc—is only sensational in relation to my normal state. Any distance I travel or time it takes is only relative to my place in the universe as a whole. What I am left with is an assurance of my own existence but one that is also inextricable from the world around me.

SOMETHING INSTEAD OF NOTHING

As we can see, the logical necessity for everything I experience is my own existence; but what is the reason for my existence – the reason why, as Leibniz asked, there is something instead of nothing?⁵ An answer to this question would show purpose in man’s life, outside of the narrow confines of his existence. In doing so, it would give him direction and an end through which he could guide his actions. The only way to answer this question, however, is by better understanding the source of our knowledge and conditioning ourselves to better perceive the world around us – and since our lives are one and the same with that external world, better understanding ourselves. This process will, in effect, work in the opposite direction as Descartes, by first assuming the existence of an external world and then pushing the frontiers of our knowledge.

In Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, he distinguished between the World as it is in itself and the world as it appears to man. To aspects related to the former he gave the name, *noumenon*, and to those related to the latter—to those things capable of being directly observed by our senses—phenomenon. Man was capable of submitting the phenomenal through a process in which his innate filters—or as Kant called them, a priori categories—interpreted the sensory input and then regurgitated its meaning. As for the noumenal objects, man could provide no such meaning, since he could never receive sensory input from such an object, and they, therefore, remain forever unknown in a separate world pertaining to understanding and ideas. The world which man does experience is one subject to determinability and an infinite causal chain, and, as such, he has no knowledge of origin or spontaneous creation. This world he observes, however, can still be thought of as originating from somewhere or something else and that world is the world of understanding and noumenal objects. It is one that man can never fully know but one which he is justified in thinking *may* exist.

Extending further the ideas of Kant – and Descartes before him, Schopenhauer wrote that the individual’s life was so inextricably bound with that of the world that the idea of one dies with that of the other. In other words, the individual’s external world is dependent on his

⁵ Leibniz, G.W. “Principles of Nature and Grace, Based on Reason.”

existence, but his existence is only significant through the external world. Schopenhauer wrote, “No object without a subject” is the principle which renders all materialism forever impossible. Suns and planets without an eye that sees them, and an understanding that knows them, may indeed be spoken of in words, but for the idea, these words are absolutely meaningless.⁶ From here we observe the close interaction between man and his world, in a relationship that is incredibly personal and subjective.

This world, in Schopenhauer’s words, is a dichotomy between will and idea. Ideas were those objects and phenomena manifest in the external world and connected by laws of nature, while the will was the subjective motor that compelled man to action. Once again, it is impossible to speak of one without the other, for as Schopenhauer wrote:

Every true act of [man’s] will is also at once and without exception a movement of his body. The act of will and the movement of the body are not two different things objectively known, which the bond of causality unites; they do not stand in the relation of cause and effect; they are one and the same, but they are given in entirely different ways . . . The action of the body is nothing but the act of the will objectified, i.e., passed into perception. Thus in a certain sense we may also say that will is the knowledge a priori of the body, and the body is the knowledge a posteriori of the will.”⁷

As we can see, each individual has a sort of double knowledge of his own existence: that of his will and that of its manifestation in his body. He clearly understands the will and the idea of his being and, as a result, can see his body as it is in itself, not merely as an idea. Though this double knowledge acts as a sort of omniscience, it extends only as far as the body. Man can never see the will behind any other idea or object in nature, never thoroughly knowing that object as it is in itself. Mixing in Kantian terms, the individual can be said to have a singular knowledge of nature’s phenomena – the knowledge of its idea, or how it appears in nature. Of the noumenal, he has neither assurance. In this way, we see how Schopenhauer’s theoretical model makes the distinction between two types of Kantian phenomena: that of the self – of which he possesses a double knowledge – and that of objects in nature – of which he possesses a singular knowledge. Similarly, the Kantian theoretical model adds greater specificity to Schopenhauer’s framework by labeling man’s ideas in nature as phenomenal

⁶ Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Idea*.

⁷ Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Idea*.

and everything else outside of nature as noumenal. By recognizing this distinction, we can better accept our place in nature – holding the capabilities of our self in high regard while, at the same time, clearly categorizing our thoughts and accepting any limitations.

In their theoretical systems, both of these thinkers clearly rejected the unknown. Kant did so by acknowledging the inherent limit to man's knowledge and a separate world of form, full of objects as they are in themselves, in which man could never fully be a part. Schopenhauer went further by acknowledging that his "philosophy does not by any means seek to know whence or wherefore the world exists, but merely what the world is."⁸ In this respect, the theoretical models of both of these authors only purport of partial truths, neither addressing the existential question of why there is something instead of nothing, and neither settling on man's ultimate purpose in life.

What they insist, however, is self-awareness and full autonomy from the individual. In fulfilling these demands, Kant's individual could learn to access the noumenal world, reaching out and grabbing freedom and applying it to his life within a deterministic world. Any man or beast that fell short of self-awareness, also fell short of freedom, since the law of causality guided his life, like it does every other object in nature. Freedom, in this sense, is only available to man if he is fully distinct from nature, not just another phenomenal object but one that is also noumenal – seeing life as it appears and at least a small sliver of how it is in itself. Man's noumenal knowledge is of his own existence, and, as such, it is a part of the noumenal world in which no one else can access. It acts as an individual sanctuary in which the self-aware man can bask and hold onto something meaningful and lasting that stands in sharp contrast to the ephemeral and impersonal life that he finds in nature. As an omniscient being – one who can understand a small piece of life as it is in itself — he is able to assert his will on nature and feel truly unique from anything else known in the universe.

Therefore, even though man thinks by nature, his intelligence must be such that he is resolved, self-assured and committed to making decisions on principle alone. He must learn to control his will and constantly contemplate his existence. If he falls short of completing

⁸ Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Idea*.

his theoretical model and never finds an ultimate purpose to life, he can still find freedom and meaning in life itself.

In this sense, if he is to ever truly know himself, he must try at all times to understand –and not just sense – the world around him. Despite the immense scale of both time and space – a universe that stands over 14 billion years old, with more than 170 billion galaxies—and the minuscule duration and extent of man’s knowledge – 80 years and six feet of dust, the potential to thoroughly understand his own existence is no small matter and fully within his reach. This type of self-aware life is one in which time and space abandon their visceral nature and allow man to grasp something permanent and inalienable: his freedom.

Under Kant’s idea of morality, this required self-enforcement of a moral code free from external stimulus and independent of circumstance. The only such morality, to Kant, was one of categorical imperative – unconditional duty to act in a certain way, and that way was “in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.”⁹ The maxim itself, which prescribed how man *ought* to act, could only be upheld for its own sake—an end in itself, not merely as a means. In this way, the self-aware man was truly autonomous and guided by his own free will, distinct from external stimulus and lying somewhere beyond the laws of nature.

The problem in Kant’s imperative lies not with its reasonableness but with man’s ability to distinguish a certain act as universally imperative. That is to say, man’s knowledge of the noumenal extends only as far as his body, and he is far from finding purpose on a universal scale. Kant acknowledged as much with his theoretical model that accepted the unknown and remained only partially complete. Given this uncertainty, we are left to derive such moral impositions from our own will and in accord with our personal understanding of man’s purpose in life. Due to the certainty of our existence, which we have established above, and to the nature of our relationship with our world, we are compelled to act in some way, but we cannot be certain of the justice of such actions until we know the ends which they ought to pursue. This requires a completed theoretical framework and the only way to complete this model is by continuously furthering our knowledge. This, in turn, can be done in two ways:

⁹ Kant, Immanuel. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Pg. 31.

by better understanding the phenomena of which we have a singular knowledge and by expanding science's frontiers and learning that of which we have no knowledge. The former is limited by man's ability to communicate and transcribe meaning to his fellow man, while the latter is limited by time and space and advances in technology.

Nevertheless, Kant's moral framework succeeds in capturing the importance of self-consciousness and individual autonomy, while providing us with a model from which man can strive to proceed further. The questions we are left with: Given the uncertainty of purpose, necessity of action, and the importance of individual autonomy, how is man to live his life? And toward what ends should he censure his actions?

SO THAT BEHIND THE NAME SOMETHING, AS WE WERE, REMAINS

In this paper, I am not telling one how he ought to live, only how he ought to decide how to live. It is in that respect that we see the consequences of universal uncertainty and the importance of the individual to himself. We have also established the individual's existence and his interconnectedness with the world at large, and we have upheld Kant's categorical imperative, while acknowledging its limitations. As such, the best manner to help the individual find universal purpose within his own personal existence and thus direction for his actions, at large, may be through an abstract discussion of such a subjective idea as happiness.

According to Bertrand Russell, a man who lives a happy life is one who lets his interests bloom and cultivates his intelligence to the greatest degree possible. In this way, he not only furthers himself in relation to the sensory world but he maximizes the intensity of those pleasures he derives during his existence. Because as we have seen, man's life is a complex interchange between mind, body and world, and a successful life must therefore be one which recognizes all three – using his intelligence to understand his self and his world.

To better understand the relationship between intelligence and happiness, look out the window and observe creatures much simpler than man. In doing so, listen to the birds singing gaily, enamored by each other's presence and the environment around them. These birds cannot be described as intelligent, at least in relation to man, but they do appear happy. On the other hand, watch man miserably searching for the smallest trace of happiness, and then account for John Stewart Mills' peculiar observation:

few human creatures would consent to be changed into any of the lower animals for a promise of the fullest allowance of a beast's pleasures; no intelligent human being would consent to be a fool, no instructed person would be an ignoramus, no person of feeling and conscience would be selfish and base, even though they should be persuaded that the fool, the dunce or the rascal is better satisfied with his lot than they are with theirs.¹⁰

¹⁰ Mills, John Stuart. *Utilitarianism*. Pg. 101.

Many men, on the other hand, if given the chance to change positions with a man more intelligent or more accomplished than he, he would readily consent – since he imagines this man to be happier than he. In this way, we see how man intuitively prefers unhappiness to simple ignorance, while actively hoping for a happy *and* enlightened life. While appearing slightly paradoxical on the surface, man realizes, as an intelligent creature, that simple pleasures are not sufficient for his happiness. As Mills writes, “A being of higher faculties requires more to make him happy, is capable probably of more acute suffering, and certainly accessible to it at more points, than one of an inferior type.”¹¹ This man can observe the carefree and content life of the birds outside his bedroom window, and while jealous of their peace of mind, never wish that fate upon himself, since its minimal intensity could never assuage his high intelligence. The intelligent man is one who has high aspirations, since he has a wide variety of intellectual tastes and bides his time by indulging those interests and fomenting his intellect. In the process, he takes his pleasure from greater and greater accomplishments and the knowledge and peace of mind they deliver. The hopeless man, on the other hand, who has lost his curiosity and love for the life around him, no longer aspires for the dreams he had as a child and, instead, finds his pleasures in more baseless pursuits - as a result of convenience or a lack of motivation.¹² In this way, the pleasures that man may take from life grow exponentially as a function of his intelligence, which, in turn, stems from his ambition and intellectual curiosity.

Meaning in life, in this sense, can be found through man’s success in observing, interpreting and then filing away the sensory information he derives from the external world; in short, his mental development. And this development, as just outlined, complements man’s very internal struggle for freedom described above. The self-aware man, with a rabid curiosity and a sharp intellect, finds happiness in his day-to-day life through his indulgence in the world around him and finds meaning, in the long term, through advancing his intellect and, thus, heightening his pleasures. The enjoyment through which this man lives his day-to-day life is tangible, and his greater purpose in life is fulfilled.

¹¹ Mills, John Stuart. *Utilitarianism*. Pg. 102.

¹² Mills, John Stuart. *Utilitarianism*. Pg. 105.

On the other hand, let us imagine a man worn thin by life and its trying conditions. It may certainly be more difficult for this man to learn his self and find happiness in his life, but once there, he is a man who can challenge his world, exclaiming "let fate and fortune do their worst they have not power to subdue [me]."¹³ In this manner, we see that the enlightened individual can only be free when his happiness or direction in life is no longer dictated by external sources.

The most striking example of this came from World War II in the Nazi concentration camps. Inside these camps, prisoners had their rights and all of their possessions deprived. With their lives stripped of everything, the only way to retain some semblance of life was by fighting against feelings of hopelessness and self-worthlessness and, in the process, retaining their knowledge of self. If they abandoned that, they abandoned life, and of this experience, Primo Levi, who was a prisoner himself, wrote:

Then for the first time, we became aware that our language lacks words to express this offense, the demolition of a man. In a moment, with almost prophetic intuition, the reality was revealed to us: we had reached the bottom. It is not possible to sink lower than this: no human condition is more miserable, than this, nor could it conceivably be so. Nothing belongs to us anymore; they have taken away our clothes, our shoes, even our hair; if we speak, they will not listen to us, and if they listen, they will not understand. They will even take away our name: and if we want to keep it, we will have to find ourselves the strength to do so, to manage so that behind the name something of us, as we were, remains...¹⁴

The best and easiest way to heal pain is by removing the external problem, but by turning inward and understanding his self, that man can be immune from pain altogether. Even in the worst situations, the individual ought to remember that the world can do no worse to man than man can do to himself. In this regard, Russell wrote, "the man who can centre his thoughts and hopes upon something transcending self can find a certain peace in the ordinary troubles of life"¹⁵, and this transcendental self aligns nicely with Kant's noumenal world. It is from there where freedom originates and leaks out to the world around us. Yet for the average man who never learns to access this world, true freedom is impossible and his life takes its place in the causal chain of the external world. Man's impetus then must be to impose

¹³ Mills, John Stuart. *Utilitarianism*. Pg. 107.

¹⁴ Levi, Primo. *Survival in Auschwitz*.

¹⁵ Russell, Bernard. *The Conquest of Happiness*. Ch. 5.

his will on the sensory world around him, since only in this way may he be free. Similarly, only in this way can he ever achieve lasting happiness, since that emotion accompanies the knowledge that man's internal self is something safe and distinct from whatever the external world can impose.

Once man recognizes this self and understands his freedom, the key to happiness is through "mental discipline."¹⁶ In order to achieve this, man must trust his self and distrust irrationality, and when confronted by it, take a deep look and expose it for what it really is. The sensory world in which we live tries, too often, to impose itself on us and turn us into machines, another link in its infinite causal chain. But if man has freedom, or the potential for freedom, he must, above all else, not be guided by prejudice, pressure or even his own conscience, since his conscience is merely the ideas and prejudices unconsciously embedded in him as a child by his parents. As Russell wrote, "they seemed to you then strong and wise because you were weak and foolish; now that you are neither, it is your business to examine their apparent strength and wisdom, to consider whether they deserve that reverence that from force of habit you still bestow upon them."¹⁷ The free man is not one who follows anything, or anyone, blindly, and while he must impose upon himself a moral code, it must be his own moral code that has been formed through enlightened self-reflection.

Reason, then, may be an end in itself to the free and enlightened man's life. Yet, this does not imply a life devoid of human emotion, one that ignores the needs of body and world. On this point, Russell wrote:

In passionate love, in parental affection, in friendship, in benevolence, in devotion to science or art, there is nothing that reason should wish to diminish. The rational man, when he feels any or all of these emotions, will be glad that he feels them and will do nothing to lessen their strength, for all these emotions are parts of the good life, the life, that is, that makes for happiness both in oneself and in others.¹⁸

Reason is not reason, in itself, to diminish the good but, better, to diminish the bad that man experiences. It is a calming and confident state of mind, and, as such, must pay reverence to and cultivate his mental development. He must use the external world to stimulate his brain

¹⁶ Russell, Bertrand. *The Conquest of Happiness*. Ch. 6.

¹⁷ Russell, Bertrand. *The Conquest of Happiness*. Ch. 7.

¹⁸ Russell, Bertrand. *The Conquest of Happiness*. Ch. 7.

and learn in what ways it can be better accessed, since its potential is limited by only what he believes it can accomplish. Furthermore, the greater man succeeds in tapping into his intelligence, the greater the intensity of mental pleasure he receives. In this sense, the suffering man portrayed in the beginning has come full circle and realized his pleasure while eliminating his pain – rewarding himself with an intense and permanent sense of happiness, one which realizes his freedom and allows him to proceed further in his life.

The happy, self-aware and intelligent man we have portrayed thus far is fully matured at this point. He listens to his senses and allows them a great number of interests and pursues them with great zeal. Yet he has cultivated his mind, above all else, and has used the information and interpretations he has drawn from the sensory world to think for himself and employ reason at all times. He is free because he knows his self and is the author of his own actions, which originate from the self; independent of the world around him. In short, he is enlightened – an idea Kant defined as:

Man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another. Sapere Aude! [dare to know] "Have courage to use your own understanding!"--that is the motto of enlightenment.¹⁹

To this thought, I can only add that the enlightened and self-aware man will surely feel the pressure to address life's existential questions. Whether or not he is successful in answering them, he does believe that these answers exist. He will do his best – while never allowing his curiosity to exceed his reason – to search the extent of the cosmos and the limits of his being to find these answers. Yet if he is ultimately unsuccessful or the least bit uncertain of his result, he will have lived a good life and found freedom, happiness and a fundamental peace of mind through his discovery of the self, its relationship to his external world and the way in which the two have flourished as one.

¹⁹ Kant, Immanuel. "What is Enlightenment."

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