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## Triumph of Light or a Beacon of Hope: A Modernist Reevaluation of the Enlightenment

### Abstract

Between 1900 and 1907, Gustav Klimt produced *Philosophy*, *Medicine*, and *Jurisprudence*, three paintings that caused a major controversy in academic circles of Vienna. Representing Modernist thought that had evolved as a progression of the Enlightenment tradition, these paintings, especially *Philosophy* and *Medicine*, are philosophical works that correctly interpret and comment upon the role of Philosophy and Medicine as professed by the Enlightenment thinkers.

## Triumph of Light or a Beacon of Hope: A Modernist Reevaluation of the Enlightenment

*Mallika Kavadi*

Between 1900 and 1907, Gustav Klimt produced *Philosophy, Medicine, and Jurisprudence*, three paintings that caused a major controversy in academic circles of Vienna. Representing Modernist thought that had evolved as a progression of the Enlightenment tradition, these paintings, especially *Philosophy and Medicine*, are philosophical works that correctly interpret and comment upon the role of Philosophy and Medicine as professed by the Enlightenment thinkers.

In 1894, the Ministry of Culture invited Gustav Klimt to paint three murals celebrating ideals of the Enlightenment for the new hall at the University of Vienna. The assigned theme was “the triumph of light over darkness.”<sup>1</sup> Klimt’s *Philosophy and Medicine*, far from showing this triumph, displayed humans floating through clouds and darkness, suggesting humanity is drifting in the unknown. The paintings were characterised by their grim and grotesque images. The only symbols of light were the muses, *Das Wissen* and *Hygeia*, alert, cold and impartial, at the bottom of the paintings. The murals created a controversy in the academic circles of Vienna because of the bizarre and erotic nature of the human figures they portrayed. The professors at the University were especially displeased because they thought Klimt had strayed from the theme, which was to celebrate the ideals of the Enlightenment. The professors who took a different view of Enlightenment thought expected an optimistic portrayal of Philosophy, Medicine and Jurisprudence. Klimt’s dark, allusive and sceptical depiction of Philosophy and Medicine were contrary to the attributes they ascribed to these disciplines. The protesting professors accused Klimt of presenting “unclear ideas in unclear forms.”<sup>2</sup> The rector summarised this problem, saying, “In an age when philosophy sought truth in the exact sciences, it did not deserve to be represented as a nebulous, fantastic construct.”<sup>3</sup> Yet this “nebulous, fantastic construct,” so detested by the university faculty, was Klimt’s comment on the nature of human knowledge and closely kept with Enlightenment ideas.

It can be argued that Klimt’s paintings not only truthfully depict the legacy of the Enlightenment but also represent the larger intellectual tradition of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna as a progression of the Enlightenment. According to Carl Schorske, who has written about the dynamics of culture and politics in Vienna of that period, Klimt, like Sigmund Freud, Gustav Mahler, Arthur Schnitzler, and other leading intellectual figures of the time, was “groping for orientation in a world without secure coordinates.”<sup>4</sup> He further argues that the common ground in the

1. Carle E. Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna Politics and Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 227.

2. *Ibid.*, 231.

3. *Ibid.*, 232.

4. *Ibid.*, 226.

works of all these figures was an Oedipal revolt against the authority of classical liberalism of their paternal culture.<sup>5</sup> However, at the same time, it was the Enlightenment ideals of inquiry, scepticism of traditional beliefs, and commitment to truth that led the way for the Modernist's enquiry of the instinctual and the irrational.

In some ways, the Modernist movement was a logical culmination of the intellectual trends that appeared during the Enlightenment, but many scholars view the movement in Vienna as counter-culture that sought to break away from the Enlightenment tradition. Eric Kandel, a Nobel Prize-winning neuropsychiatrist, notes that Modernism was a movement characterised by introspection. Modernism in Vienna, he points out, had three major aspects: recognition of the human mind as largely irrational by nature, self-examination, and an attempt to unify and integrate knowledge and these according to him underlay the scientific and artistic works of the time.<sup>6</sup> It is true that in giving the instincts their fair due and vindicating passions, the Modernist movement in Vienna goes much farther than the philosophes of the Enlightenment. However, Modernists could explore the irrational and uncertain aspects of human nature only because Enlightenment thinkers had paved the way towards a rational and critical inquiry of human nature. The philosophes had also set the trend for accepting truth based on evidence. They had recognised the limits of human reason and accepted passions as a crucial part of human nature. Although they much desired that reason should lead towards progress, they were sceptical of their own hopes because they recognised how vital passions and instincts were to the human mind.

Contemporaries of Klimt, Freud and Schnitzler were trained in medicine in the Enlightenment tradition. Medicine in Vienna had developed a highly empirical approach under the likes of Carl von Rokitanski, the modern father of anatomical pathology.<sup>7</sup> These developments in the medical discipline affected Viennese culture significantly. The intellectual salons of Vienna, such as the Zuckerkandl salon, provided a fertile environment for the free exchange of ideas. Schnitzler, Mahler and Klimt were regular visitors to the Zuckerkandl salon, and Freud was an acquaintance.<sup>8</sup> It was in the Zuckerkandl salon where Klimt grew familiar with the developments in biological and medical sciences that inspired his artistic style. Klimt incorporated this knowledge into his artwork by frequently using biological symbols. For example, in *Medicine*, a skeleton is wrapped in a cloak, and the cloak has Klimt's characteristic ovular symbols representing fertility. Similar symbols are used in *Hope I*, *The Kiss*, *Danae*, and many more of his paintings. It is clear that Klimt was part of a larger intellectual movement fascinated by discoveries in the natural sciences. The movement employed science for introspective purposes and was simultaneously

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5. *Ibid.*, xix.

6. Eric Kandel, *Age of Insight* (New York: Random House, 2012), 11-18.

7. *Ibid.*, 19-47.

8. *Ibid.*, 29.

inspired by rational and scientific inquiry of nature, a legacy of the Enlightenment. Louis Dupre's description of the Enlightenment fits the intellectual strand of self-consciousness that is common between Modernism and Enlightenment. He writes, "The Enlightenment was not so much an age of reason as an age of self-consciousness. People became more reflective about their feelings, their social positions, their rights and duties, the state of religion, and all that touched them near far."<sup>9</sup> If there is something that underlies all the different strains of thought during the Enlightenment, it is the spirit of enquiry. And it was this spirit that continued to drive Klimt and his contemporaries to go below the surface in their own areas of interest and specialisation in search of hidden truths.

Klimt was not only an artist but also an activist. As the first president of the Vienna Secession, he was not unlike the philosophes who believed that action should accompany philosophical thought. The slogan of the Secession was, "To the age its Art and to Art its freedom." The Secession, led by Klimt, challenged the concepts of art, beauty, and truth as they had emerged during the Renaissance and become the established canons through the course of the Enlightenment.<sup>10</sup> Here, the Modernists used freedom of expression and re-evaluation of values the two weapons of the Enlightenment in their Oedipal revolt. Klimt was at the forefront of this movement as an artist, a thinker and an activist. Schorske quotes the poet Peter Altenberg, who once said, "Gustav Klimt, you are at once a painter of vision and a modern philosopher, an altogether modern poet."<sup>11</sup> Schorske goes on to call Klimt "a questioner and a prober of the questionable, the problematical, in personal experience and in culture."<sup>12</sup> Thus, when Klimt painted the University murals, he was interpreting the relationship of *Philosophy* and *Medicine* to humanity as a philosopher and paying an accurate tribute to the Enlightenment ideals.

As Schorske points out, these works of art were slightly influenced by the philosophy of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, like other contemporary works in arts and sciences.<sup>13</sup> Yet there were some influences and ideas in Klimt's paintings that were a legacy of the Enlightenment and commentary on the relationship between the disciplines of philosophy and medicine to humanity as it emerged during this period. Although the Enlightenment is often considered "The Age of Reason," it is important to acknowledge that there were many strains of thought present in the philosophical breakthroughs of this era. Klimt's observations about the relationship of philosophy and medicine to humanity are in accordance with the views of the many philosophes of the Enlightenment.

Klimt does not show a clear victory of light over darkness in his paint-

9. Louis Dupre, *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 9.

10. Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle*, 208-245.

11. *Ibid.*, 225.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, 228-232.

ings, just as the Enlightenment thinkers themselves never expected such an ultimate triumph. It is interesting to note that in one of the compositional studies of Philosophy, Klimt shows Wissen fallen and defeated at the bottom. In both *Philosophy* and *Medicine*, Klimt depicts humanity as a flow of human figures, each representing a different age, sex and stage of human life. The floating bodies include men and women in different positions and gestures, expressing the varied realities of life. In *Philosophy*, at the top of the chain are a young woman, a young man and a baby. The chain then moves down to include women drifting, a couple embracing, what appears to be a woman in despair, some figures wrapped in dark shadows, and finally an old and decaying man hiding his face. Similarly, in *Medicine*, Klimt shows a mass of humanity drifting through mystical clouds and wisps. Here, Klimt's painting appears to imply the human cycle of birth, life, and decay. A figure drifting away from the flow is being held back by a man. The images and symbols he uses are characteristic of his other works. The juxtaposition of pregnant women and infants with skeletons and shadows in this mural, which foreshadows his later work *Hope I*, emphasize the ever present possibility of death. He also reverses this relationship by decorating the cloak wrapped around the skeleton with ovular symbols representing fertility. *Philosophy* and *Medicine* are not shown affecting this flow of humans. They neither elevate humanity to any otherworldly state nor do they show a significant impact on the human condition. This raises doubt on how much philosophy or medicine can affect the life of an individual or society as a whole. This seeming indifference to the human condition was contrary to the expectations of the University professors, but the philosophes had anticipated the limitations of these disciplines.

The Enlightenment is often perceived to be an age of optimistic hopes and utopian dreams that rest on the belief in reason. However, this optimism is not without a counter-balancing pessimism that attempts to hold the expectations of the philosophes to ground reality. As Peter Gay, a scholar on the Enlightenment, notes, "Far from basking in cheerful certainty, then, the philosophes qualified their hopes with reservations ... they pictured civilisations as individuals, with a distinct life cycle ending in death and decay."<sup>14</sup> The philosophes knew that ultimately everything has a life cycle ending in death. And, while holding reason and rationality in high regard, they were aware that human nature (and therefore humanity's nature) was not one-dimensional. There were many obstacles in the way of achieving real progress. Besides, they were concerned about the eventual decay of human civilisation. The philosophes did not expect a clear victory of light over darkness but hoped reason would illuminate the way while acknowl-

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14. Montesquieu is quoted by Peter Gay in *Enlightenment: An interpretation Vol. 2* (New York, Borzoi Books, 1969), as saying, "Almost all the nations of the world travel this circle: to begin with, they are barbarous; they become conquerors and well-ordered nations; this order permits them to grow, and they become refined; refinement enfeebles them, and they return to barbarism." Also, D'Alembert restates the view: "Empires like men must grow, decay, and die." 101.

edging its limitations.

A primary obstacle was the limits of reason on which they placed much hope. How much one can elicit through reason was itself subject to question. Therefore, Klimt's portrayal of Wissen as a small figure at the bottom of the entire picture shrouded in dark wisps is not surprising. Klimt's Wissen is not overbearing and heroic, illuminating the entire picture, but a small figure at the bottom, alert and looking up at the mass of humanity. The background is largely dark and the mysterious figure of a sphinx appears to loom overhead. The darkness and shading form the giant head of a crying baby. All this imagery represents humanity drifting through the eternal darkness surrounded by unknown and unknowable mysteries like the sphinx. Its level of knowledge may not even be more than an infant's. The only glimmer of hope in this vast unknown is philosophy, just a tiny beacon of light in the large picture, but still present.

The philosophes who had reservations about philosophy and reason were aware of metaphysics. This was an area that fell outside the scope of human reason and therefore held limited hope of offering an understanding of life. Voltaire in a letter to Frederick of Prussia, writing about the challenges before humans while hoping to learn from metaphysics compared humans to mice:

They are flashes in the midst of a dark night; and that, I think, is all we can hope of metaphysics. It seems improbable that the first principles of things will ever be thoroughly known. The mice living in a few little holes of an immense building do not know if the building is eternal, who is the architect or why the architect built it. They try to preserve their lives, to people their holes, and to escape the destructive animals which pursue them. We are the mice."<sup>15</sup>

Here, Voltaire compares humans to animals with primitive instincts for survival, not endowed with any special ability to comprehend the larger mysteries of life. In *Candide*, a major work of the Enlightenment, Voltaire writes the story of a simpleton and the friends he makes on his journey as they grapple with philosophical problems arising from their experiences of extreme misery. Their journey takes them to many lands where they meet many knowledgeable (so they think) people and find no answer. Their reason falls short. In the end, they have to accept defeat when they are unsuccessful in finding well-reasoned answers, and they decide to "work without theorising... tis the only way to make life endurable."<sup>16</sup> Theorising had let them down, and their search for answers to questions from different philosophies remained unanswered. *Candide* vividly shows the limitations of philosophy *vis-a-vis* the range of human experience and misery. This is not unlike how Klimt contemplated the depiction of Wissen.

Another Enlightenment figure, Julien Offray De La Mettrie, a prominent physician and materialist, had this to say about the big questions:

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15. Ben Ray Redman, *The Portable Voltaire* (Kingsport: Penguin Books, 1977), 441.

16. *Ibid.*, 328.

Furthermore who knows whether the reason for man's existence is not simply the fact that he exists? Perhaps he was thrown by chance on some spot of the earth's surface, nobody knows how or why, but simply that he must live and die, like mushrooms that appear from one day to next, or like the flowers which border ditches and cover walls."<sup>17</sup>

There were many sceptical strains of thought during the Enlightenment, such as this almost nihilistic thought of La Mettrie, which kept optimistic expectations from reason grounded in reality. The only reality that they could be certain of was that humans exist and have a conscious mind.<sup>18</sup> There appears always a strain of pessimism that sought to keep expectations from reason realistic.<sup>19</sup> In a context such as this, Klimt's depiction of humanity as lost in darkness, surrounded by uncertainties and unknowable mysteries does not seem a wrong representation of Enlightenment thought.

Another constraint on the capacity of human reason, which the philosophes were well aware of – and, to an extent, afraid of – lay within the realm of the passions. Many would consider the issue of irrational passions as the departing point between the philosophes and the Modernists in Vienna. However, as Gay points out, “In its treatment of the passions as in its treatment of metaphysics, the Enlightenment was not an age of reason but a revolt against rationalism.”<sup>20</sup> Enlightenment thinkers not only acknowledged the power of passions but also detached it from the stigma of traditional rationalism, which had considered sensual experiences an inferior phenomenon. In a letter to Fredrick the Great Voltaire wrote, “We are not born solely to read Plato and Leibnitz, to measure curves and to arrange facts in our heads; we are born with hearts which must be filled, with passions which must be satisfied without our being dominated by them.”<sup>21</sup> Even Voltaire knew that suppression of the passions was definitely not a solution. David Hume went further, noting, “We speak not strictly and philosophically when we talk of the combat of passions and of reason. Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.”<sup>22</sup>

As Enlightenment thought began to be dominated by scepticism of every-

17. La Mettrie, *The Portable Enlightenment Reader*, Ed. Isaac Kramnick (New York: Penguin Books 1995), 208.

18. Not unlike Descartes' “I think therefore I am” but without Descartes' concept of preexisting ideas put in mind by God. Descartes' introduced the ultimate scepticism to the Enlightenment and then stepped back to avoid too much subjectivity, his thought, however, was picked up later by the likes of David Hume.

19. Gay in Enlightenment: An interpretation demonstrate how various thinkers of the Enlightenment Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot, Hume and Kant amongst others were skeptical about the possibility of progress through reason. He also shows they were not utopians and did not have utopian expectations of reason.

20. Gay, *Enlightenment*, 189.

21. Redman ed., *The Portable Voltaire*, 446.

22. Gay, *Enlightenment*, 188.



thing, it was inevitable that this thinking should at some point be used against reason itself. Enlightenment thought at its most sceptical of philosophy is evident in La Mettrie's remark:

We were not originally made to be learned; we have become so perhaps by a sort of abuse of our organic faculties, and at the expense of the State, which nourishes a host of loafers whom vanity has adorned with the name of ; 'philosophers'. Nature created us all solely to be happy—yes, all, from the crawling worm to the eagle that soars out of sight in the clouds."<sup>23</sup>

Before Darwin or Freud, La Mettrie underscored the common instinctual pursuit of all living animals and also certain scepticism about the role of philosophy.<sup>24</sup> The philosophes not only had to accept the power of the instincts and passions, but, as is evident in the works of Voltaire, Hume, La Mettrie and Diderot, they also sought to liberate it from traditional rationalism that considered passions, especially sexual passions, impure.<sup>25</sup> With regard to the Enlightenment's relationship with passions, Gay observes, "The dialects of history confronted the Enlightenment with an apparent paradox which was, in actuality, a magnificent opportunity; as the power of conscience had grown, the passions had become safer; as reason tightened its hold, sensuality improved its reputation."<sup>26</sup> Enlightenment thought thus paved the way for an acceptance of sensuality for what it is. It also extended the inquiry of nature to the human mind and made it acceptable to explore taboos such as sexuality, on which Freud and even Klimt would base much of their works. When Klimt depicts men and women in the flow of bodies in *Philosophy* and *Medicine* in different states of mind, anxiety or pain or in a passionate embrace, indifferent to the sphinx in the background and Wissen as a small figure at the bottom, he is only describing a truth well known by the philosophes: that reason will be subject to instinctual and emotional drives.

It is also important to note the different portrayals of the muses Wissen and Hygeia. Only the head of Wissen is shown in *Philosophy*, and it is wrapped in dark wisps. On the other hand, Hygeia stands tall and confident in *Medicine*. This difference could be ascribed to the fact that medical progress is more evi-

23. La Mettrie, *The Portable Reader*, 207.

24. In *Man a Machine*, La Mettrie extensively argues for the emancipation of biological and psychological from traditional dogma and emphasises studying the human mind the same way. At one point, he says, "From animals to man, the transition is not violent, as good philosophers will admit. What was man before the invention of words and the knowledge of tongues? An animal of his species, who, with much less native instinct than the others... Reduced to bare 'intuitive knowledge' of the Leibnizians he saw only shapes and colors, without being able to distinguish between them; the same, old as young, child at all ages, he stammers out his feelings and needs, like a dog who asks for food when he is hungry or, tired of sleeping, wants to be let out." 207.

25. Gay in *Enlightenment: An Interpretation* argues that philosophes like Diderot, Voltaire, Hume and others thought of passions as uncertain blessings. There were also some thinkers whose thoughts were forerunners of many Freudian concepts like the Oedipus complex and interpretation of dreams.

26. *Ibid.*, 205.

dent and obvious than philosophical progress in the course of history as well as in the everyday lives of humans. The role of medicine was also significant in the thinking of the Enlightenment. According to Gay, "The most powerful agent in the recovery of nerve was obviously the scientific revolution... the most tangible cause for confidence lay in medicine... It was in medicine that the philosophes tested their philosophy by experience; medicine was at once the model of new philosophy and proof of its efficacy."<sup>27</sup> Medical developments not only inspired the philosophy of the Enlightenment but, as seen earlier, were also a source of inspiration for the Modernists. This may be the reason why Hygeia occupied more space and has a more dominant presence than Wissen in the murals.

Looking at *Philosophy* and *Medicine*, it is easy to get an impression that darkness, decay, and misery dominate the scene. It is, however, important to note that Klimt places hopeful imagery in a realistic fashion. For every symbol of death there is a symbol of birth, as discussed earlier, but the manner in which the muses Wissen and Hygeia are illustrated is also interesting. They are strong images; they are not defeated by darkness and misery. Even though there are several unknown entities such as the darkness surrounding humanity and inevitable realities like decay and death, both the muses are alert and conscious figures. Thus, the paintings imply acceptance of harsh realities, uncertainties and limits of humanity while at the same time acknowledging that reason employed in philosophy and medicine can be of some help to humanity.

Logically, all the principles of the Enlightenment of inquiry, scepticism, and believing evidence had to lead towards accepting the unknown, the uncertain, and the subjectivity of human experience on which Modernists later based their work. The philosophes too had not expected a clear victory of light over darkness, of reason over passions, or hoped for a Utopian society. They had, however, insisted on examining the reality and interpreting and reinterpreting it based on evidence and reason irrespective of common beliefs. Furthermore, this inquiry must also culminate in acceptance of the results of rational and empirical enquiry. If enquiry leads to the knowledge that there will always be much that will remain in darkness and much that will be determined by passions which reason cannot govern, then accepting the irrationality of the human mind can be the only inference of the process. Klimt rightly alluded to this in his University murals much to the displeasure of the professors.

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27. Gay, *Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, 13.