

An Answer to the Question: What is
Enlightenment?

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A German Reader, English Translation and Introduction

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Introduction

Introduction to Immanuel Kant's *Was ist Aufklärung?* (1784)

The Enlightenment formed the beginning of what is generally called the 'modern' period of Western history. All periodising in history provides for organisations of sympathy and expectation. An historian can speak of a certain feeling, a sense of possibility, for particular arcs of time. Alike, the accountant will acquire a sense of normal and abnormal transactions, such that they can find the anomalous record on a balance sheet without direct calculation. A man will come to know what his friend is like. By this knowledge, he will know without forethought whether the attribution of an action or an utterance should be plausible. This is how the historian feels about epochs in history. And, put backwards, it is the fact of our facility to come with one feeling for a period which inclines us to call it such.

One complicating element in history is that of reception. Or, let us put it differently, this is the problem of competing organisations. The philosophers of the Eighteenth Century self-styled, with a fair degree of uniformity, as being on the side of 'Reason'. Their conception of 'unreason', or of 'prejudice', was largely that of the Christian faith. This faith was understood to be constituted of 'dogma', rather than 'theology'. Even for those who might push back against the general thrust of the Enlightenment, they adopted the explanatory categories of their adversaries. And this is a good sign to the historian that there has been a shift in philosophical moment. It was not for nothing that Edmund Burke, in his monumental *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) should have framed 'prejudice' itself to be rational. The currency of the age was rationality, to be determined by public deliberation.

To understand a man, it is a good idea to listen to what he says of himself. But this is not absolutely authoritative. If we listen to the French *philosophes*, as they are known, then this is the picture of the Enlightenment which we receive. It was a bringing of illumination into the dark, unexamined innards of a religious continent. This is, more or less, what the mainstream of philosophers took themselves to be doing in the century. There are, even so, difficulties with this narrative which, elevated and separated by distance, we may see.

The confidence in Reason took much of its energy from science. Scientific method, in its modern, empiricist sense, is developed over the second half of the Seventeenth Century in England and Scotland. It is a curious feature that a significant number of both Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century philosophers were part-time scientists. That list includes: Descartes; Spinoza; Locke; Goethe; Schiller; Novalis. Were we to export Eighteenth-Century attitudes, not least those of Voltaire or of Diderot, then we should assume these men to be hostile to Christianity. This is, broadly, true in the Eighteenth Century. But it is not in the Seventeenth. Spinoza is a famously atheistic philosopher — a designation which earns him praise both from Bertrand Russell and from the Soviet Union. Locke and Descartes, an Anglican and a Jesuit, cannot, however, be described in this way. In a scientist such as Newton, we do not find a scrap of atheism. Indeed, he took the concordance of Anglican Church hierarchy with his system of physics to serve as proof of the latter's truth.¹

It does seem to be true, however, that a major shift did occur in Seventeenth-Century epistemology. This is the introduction of natural reason. In other words, the arguments of the philosophers of the Seventeenth Century, whilst not secular in target, rested upon not authority but reason. The sympathy between this outlook and a scientific one is quite apparent. To believe something because one can prove it through experiment, and to believe something because one can conceive it as a 'clear and distinct idea' (so Descartes and Spinoza called true knowledge), are each hostile to mystery, received habit, and prejudice. And it is tempting to think of Eighteenth-Century notions of public deliberation, and anti-clericalism, to be implicit. There may well

¹G. E. Lessing, *The Education of the Human Race Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts*, 1780.

be an historical link. But, of course, history moves more slowly than a chain of reasoning. That one thing should follow another is slow at one's desk and slower still when the ideas are new and unfamiliar. As for the sense of necessity, this is dangerous in the historian as it is in adolescent romance.

The great promise of natural reason was a basis for ethical obligation which did not partake in dogma. Dogma one may argue about. But, so it seemed, natural reason begged no bloodshed. Early in the Eighteenth Century, an important tradition of moral philosophy, closely related to the 'English Empiricists', promised such peace. For these philosophers, the natural sympathy one has with others could serve as the basis for public order. This promise was enticing. The Seventeenth Century, like the Sixteenth, had seen a great deal of war fought over Christian ground. (To such a degree was this true that in 1713 at the Peace of Utrecht, for the first time in diplomatic history, the term 'Europe' replaced the term 'Christendom'. This was not a gesture of unity but of disunity.) After the Thirty Years War, the French Wars of Religion, and the English Civil War, Europe had become tired of confessional war. Whether the 'sympathy' of Shaftesbury's *Characteristics of Manners and Men* (1711), or the sheer reason of later German thought, Enlightenment philosophers sketched the basis of public order in expressly secular terms.

There is a great deal more that might be said of the Eighteenth Century. But I limit myself to two further, closely related remarks, before considering Kant directly. Firstly, it is worth remarking on the emergence of the notion of the 'self'. This is so very intuitive to the modern reader that the fact that this concept has a pre-history is almost unintelligible. Now, of course, the idea of the deliberating individual is hardly foreign to Christianity. David seems to have something we might call an 'inner life'. But, within the Aristotelian-Thomistic framework, or the Platonic-Augustinian framework, the Ego does not loom so large as it does by the time of Rousseau's monumental *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761). For Augustine, Christ is the deepest and purest voice within his heart. But it is, in this sense, not his own but Christ's voice. The Thomistic framing does not consider very important the inward

resonance of feeling (although, by contrast, the Vatican's other endorsed tradition, of 'Personalism', is rather more conciliatory).²

For Descartes, philosophy begins with the self. In both of the two great traditions of Western thought which span the period, c. 1650–1800, the self is a premiss. For the rationalist (or 'idealist') tradition, it is the Ego in which the given forms of thought are issued eternally. For the empiricist, it is the Ego which wanders the world and gathers knowledge, ever receptive to subtlety. Kant's greatness is his combination of these two schools. His 'transcendental idealism' illuminates what must be given in the mind, *a priori*, in order to have experience. That is to say, he asks what must be true of rationalism in order for empiricism to be possible. Two shibboleths of the age come together in his thought. This was the century of burgeoning exploration and encyclopaedic cataloguing. And it was the century of the sentimental Ego. The self needed to be educated. On the one hand implicitly egalitarian, since any claim to authority could increasingly be made on the strength of rationality, the lauding of reason also meant the recognition of immaturity. The self required cultivation. It was the beginning of thought, but it was not its end. The ambitions of the age were, rather, universal.

Kant has the reputation both of completing and of closing the Enlightenment. The optimism in Reason, characteristic of the period, finds a high point in the present work. It is the essential destiny of man to progress in his understanding, Kant declares. And, because this is so, the inhibiting of Reason is the inhibiting of mankind, as it moves from one age to the next. These views are hardly peculiar to Kant. It was the province of, for example, G. E. Lessing to urge, in 1780, the coming of a new age where ethics should be exhaustively rational.³ But Kant also closed the Enlightenment. Whatever the intentions of his great work, the *Critique of Pure Reason* (*Critic der reinen Vernunft*), 1781, it invited the suggestion that Reason might not be sufficient. That book, which provides the basis for modern 'relevance theory', in the

² Frederick Beiser, 'History of Ideas: A Defence', in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Methodology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). See also his classic work on the generation of German thinkers after Kant, *German Idealism: The Struggle against Subjectivism, 1781–1801* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002).

³ Quentin Skinner, 'Interpretation, rationality and truth' in *Visions of Politics: Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 42–43.

Beantwortung der Frage:

Was ist Aufklärung?

(S.[iehe] Decemb.[er] 1783. S. 516.)

Aufklärung ist der **Ausgang**^a des Menschen aus seiner selbst verschuldeten^b Unmündigkeit. Unmündigkeit ist das Unvermögen^c, sich seines Verstandes^d ohne Leitung^e eines anderen zu bedienen^f. **Selbstverschuldet** ist diese Unmündigkeit, wenn die Ursache^g derselben^h nicht am Mangelⁱ des Verstandes^d, sondern^j der Entschließung und des Muthes^k liegt, sich seiner ohne Leitung^e eines andern zu bedienen^f. Sapere aude! Habe Muth^k dich deines^l **eigenen** Verstandes^d zu bedienen^f! ist also der Wahlspruch der Aufklärung.

Faulheit^m und Feigheitⁿ sind die Ursachen^g, warum^o ein so großer^p Theil^q der Menschen, nachdem sie die Natur längst^r von fremder^s Leitung^e frei gesprochen (naturaliter majorenes), dennoch gerne Zeitlebens^t unmündig^u bleiben;

-
- | | |
|--|---|
| 1 | j |
| a der Ausgang (-s, -e). exit; output, outcome. (3) | j sondern rather, but. (9) |
| b verschulden to be to blame for, cause (an accident); (refl.) get into debt. (3) | k der Mut (-es). courage, bravery. (2) |
| c das Unvermögen (-s). inability, incapacity. (1) | l dein your, thy. (1) |
| d der Verstand (-e)s). intellect, understanding. (7) | m die Faulheit (-, -en). laziness. (1) |
| e die Leitung (-, -en). management; cable, wire, conduit, pipe. (4) | n die Feigheit (-, -en). cowardice. (1) |
| f sich bedienen to help oneself. (8) | o warum why, for what reason. (2) |
| g die Ursache (-, -n). cause. (2) | p groß big, large, great; tall. (8) |
| h derselbe the same, selfsame. (6) | q das Teil (-e)s, -e). part, piece. (4) |
| i der Mangel (-s, -). lack, deficiency. (1) | r längst long ago, long. (1) |
| | s fremd strange, foreign. (2) |
| | t zeitlebens all of one's life, throughout one's life. (1) |
| | u unmündig underage, minor, immature. (3) |

und warum^a es Anderen so leicht^b wird, sich zu deren Vormündern^c aufzuwerfen^d. Es ist so bequem^e, unmündig^f zu sein. Habe ich ein Buch, das für mich Verstand^g hat, einen Seelsorger^h, der für mich Gewissenⁱ hat, einen Arzt der für mich die Diät^j beurtheilt^k, u. s. w. so brauche ich mich ja nicht selbst zu bemühen. Ich habe nicht nöthig^l zu denken, wenn ich nur bezahlen kann; andere werden das verdrießliche^m Geschäftⁿ schon für mich übernehmen^o. Daß der bei weitem größte^p Theil^q der Menschen (darunter^r das ganze schöne^s Geschlecht^t) den Schritt^u zur Mündigkeit^v, außer dem daß er beschwerlich^w ist, auch für sehr^x gefährlich^y halte: dafür sorgen schon jene^z Vormünder^c, die die Oberaufsicht über sie gütigst^{aa} auf sich genommen haben. Nachdem sie ihr Hausvieh zuerst dumm^{ab} gemacht haben, und sorgfältig^{ac} verhüteten^{ad}, daß diese ruhigen Geschöpfe^{ae} ja keinen Schritt^u außer dem Gängelwagen, darin^{af} sie sie einsperreten^{ag}, wagen^{ah}

- | | |
|--|--|
| a warum why, for what reason. (2) | r darunter below it/that; among these, including. (2) |
| b leicht ² light; easy. (1) | s schön ¹ beautiful, lovely, pretty; good, splendid, pleasant. (1) |
| c der Vormund (-(-e)s, -e). legal guardian. (6) | t das Geschlecht (-es, -er). sex, gender; genus, race, lineage, generation. (2) |
| d aufwerfen to raise questions, concerns; throw upwards. (1) | u der Schritt (-(-e)s, -e). step, footstep; crotch. (2) |
| e bequem comfortable, convenient, easy. (1) | v die Mündigkeit (-). |
| f unmündig underage, minor, immature. (3) | maturity. (1) |
| g der Verstand (-(-e)s). intellect, understanding. (7) | w beschwerlich onerous, burdensome. (1) |
| h der Seelsorger (-s, -). pastoral caregiver, counsellor. (1) | x sehr very, a lot, much. (5) |
| i das Gewissen (-s, -). conscience. (3) | y gefährlich dangerous. (1) |
| j die Diät (-, -en). diet. (1) | z jener that, that one. (6) |
| k beurteilen to judge. (1) | aa gütig kind, gracious, benign, benevolent. (1) |
| l nöthig necessary. (2) | ab dumm dumb, stupid. (1) |
| m verdrießlich morose, sullen, grumpy, disgruntled. (1) | ac sorgfältig carefully, meticulously. (2) |
| n das Geschäft (-es, -e). shop, store, business, transaction. (3) | ad verhüten to prevent, avert. (2) |
| o übernehmen to take on/over. (1) | ae das Geschöpf (-(-e)s, -e). creature, creation. (1) |
| p groß big, large, great; tall. (8) | af darin in it/that, therein. (9) |
| q das Teil (-(-e)s, -e). part, piece. (4) | ag einsperren to lock up, imprison, jail. (1) |
| | ah wagen to dare, venture, risk, jeopardize. (2) |

durften^a; so zeigen sie ihnen nachher die Gefahr, die ihnen drohet^b, wenn sie es versuchen allein zu gehen^c. Nun ist diese Gefahr zwar eben so groß^d nicht, denn sie würden durch einigemahl Fallen wohl endlich gehen^c lernen^e; allein ein Beispiel von der Art^f macht doch schüchtern^g, und schreckt^h gemeinlichⁱ von allen ferneren^j Versuchen^k ab.

Es ist also für jeden^l einzelnen Menschen schwer, sich aus der ihm beinahe^m zur Natur gewordenen Unmündigkeit herauszuarbeiten. Er hat sie sogar lieb gewonnen, und ist vor der Handⁿ wirklich^o unfähig^p, sich seines eigenen Verstandes^q zu bedienen^r, weil^s man ihn niemals den Versuch^k davon machen ließ. Satzungen^t und Formeln^u, diese mechanischen^v Werkzeuge^w eines vernünftigen^x Gebrauchs^y oder vielmehr^z Mißbrauchs seiner Naturgaben, sind die Fußschellen einer immerwährenden^{aa} Unmündigkeit. Wer^{ab} sie auch abwürfe^{ac}, würde dennoch auch über den schmalesten^{ad} Graben einen nur unsicheren^{ae}

a **dürfen** to be allowed, be permitted. (8)

b **drohen** to threaten. (1)

c **gehen** to go, walk, leave. (3)

d **groß** big, large, great; tall. (8)

e **lernen** to learn, study. (1)

f die **Art** (-, -en). kind, type; nature; species; behaviour; way, method. (1)

g **schüchtern** shy, timid, bashful. (1)

h **abschrecken** to scare, repel. (1)

i **gemeinlich** commonly, generally. (1)

j **ferner** furthermore, in addition. (1)

k der **Versuch** (-(-e)s, -e). attempt, experiment, test, trial. (3)

l **jeder** each, every. (6)

m **beinahe** almost, nearly. (2)

n die **Hand** (-, -e). hand. (3)

o **wirklich**² real, really, actually. (1)

p **unfähig** incapable, unable, inept, incompetent. (2)

q der **Verstand** (-(-e)s). intellect, understanding. (7)

r **sich bedienen** to help oneself. (8)

s **weil** (subord.) because, given that. (7)

t die **Satzung** (-, -en). statute, bylaw, charter. (2)

u die **Formel** (-, -n). formula. (1)

v **mechanisch**¹ mechanical, mechanically. (1)

w das **Werkzeug** (-(-e)s, -e). tool. (1)

x **vernünftig** reasonable, sensible. (2)

y der **Gebrauch** (-es, -e). use, usage, application. (7)

z **vielmehr** rather, on the contrary. (1)

aa **immerwährend** perpetual, everlasting. (1)

ab **wer** who. (1)

ac **abwerfen** to throw down, let fall. (2)

ad **schmal** narrow, slender, meagre, scarce. (1)

ae **unsicher** uncertain, unsafe, insecure. (1)

it be confirmed by the highest power even, by parliaments and by the most solemn peace treaties. An age cannot come together and vow to put the following age into a state wherein it must become impossible for it to enlarge its knowledge (especially a knowledge so very important), to purge away errors, and in general to make progress in enlightenment. That would be a crime against human nature, whose original purpose consists directly in this progression; and posterity is therefore completely entitled to reject those resolutions, as at once incompetently and presumptuously formed. The touchstone for all that can be decided as a law for the people lies in the question of whether a people can in fact impose such a law on itself? This would, in the expectation of a so-to-speak better law, be possible for a short, determined time in order to introduce a better order; if at the same time all the citizens, principally the clergy, had the liberty, in the character of men of letters, to make their observations publicly, that is, by writings, on that which is faulty of the present establishment, but the established order might still continue, till the insight into the nature of these things attained such a degree, that they (the citizens) by uniting their voices (though not of all) could make a proposal to the throne, to take under its protection those congregations, which had united themselves in an altered religious establishment according to their conceptions of better insight, without however molesting those, who would rather choose to continue with the old. But to unite one's self in a permanent constitution of religion, to be questioned by nobody publicly, even but during the life-time of one man, and thereby, as it were, annihilate a period in the progression of humanity, to render it fruitless and by that means even detrimental to posterity, is absolutely not allowed. A man may indeed, as to his own person, defer, and even then but for a time, enlightenment in that which is incumbent on him to know; but to renounce it, be it for his own person, let alone for posterity, is to violate and to trample on the sacred rights of humanity. But what a people cannot finally decide about themselves can a monarch still less finally decide about the people; for his legislative dignity rests upon his uniting in his own will the common will of the nation. If he but takes care that all true or supposed improvement be consistent

with the civil order; so concerning his subject he may only let them themselves do what they find necessary for the sake of the salvation of their own souls; that does not concern him, but it does concern him to prevent the one from violently hindering the other from labouring with all his strength at the determination and furtherance of that salvation. He tarnishes his own majesty, when he interferes in this by dignifying the writings through which his subjects endeavour to clarify their insights with government supervision, even if he does this through his own profound insight, exposing himself to the reproach 'Caesar non est supra grammaticos', just as much and still more when he debases his supreme power so far as to support the ecclesiastic despotism of a few tyrants in his state against his other subjects.

If someone now asks, do we live at present in an enlightened age? The answer is: no, but by all means in an age of enlightenment. There is still a great deal wanting in order that men, as things are at present, would on the whole be in a position, or could even be put in a position, to make a safe and a good use of their own reason in religious matters without the guidance of another. But we have distinct proofs that the field is now open for them to labour in freely and that the hinderances of universal enlightenment, or of quitting their self-imposed nonage, are gradually becoming fewer. In this respect the present age is the age of enlightenment, or Frederick's century.

A prince, who does not think it unworthy of himself to say that he holds it to be a duty not to prescribe anything to men in matters of religion, but to allow them full liberty therein, who declines even the lofty name of tolerance, is himself enlightened, and merits to be praised as such by the grateful world and posterity, a prince, who first freed the human species from nonage, at least on the part of government, and gave every man the liberty to use his own reason in all matters of conscience. Under him respectable clergymen would be allowed, in the character of men of letters and without prejudice to the duty of their office, to freely and publicly leave their judgements and insights that at times deviate from

Demonstrative Pronouns

	Masc.	Fem.	Neut.	Pl.
Nom.	dieser	diese	dieses	diese
Acc.	diesen	diese	dieses	diese
Dat.	diesem	dieser	diesem	diesen
Gen.	dieses	dieser	dieses	dieser

Adjectives

Strong inflection

	Masc.	Fem.	Neut.	Pl.
Nom.	neuer	neue	neues	neue
Acc.	neuen	neue	neues	neue
Dat.	neuem	neuer	neuem	neuen
Gen.	neuen	neuer	neuen	neuer

Mixed inflection

	Masc.	Fem.	Neut.	Pl.
Nom.	ein neuer	eine neue	ein neues	meine neuen
Acc.	einen neuen	eine neue	ein neues	meine neuen
Dat.	einem neuen	einer neuen	einem neuen	meinen neuen
Gen.	eines neuen	einer neuen	eines neuen	meiner neuen

Weak inflection

	Masc.	Fem.	Neut.	Pl.
Nom.	der neue	die neue	das neue	die neuen
Acc.	den neuen	die neue	das neue	die neuen
Dat.	dem neuen	der neuen	dem neuen	den neuen
Gen.	des neuen	der neuen	des neuen	der neuen

Nouns

	-(e)s, -e	-(e)s, -er	-(e)s, -en	-s, -
Nom.	Berg	Bild	Staat	Fahrer
Acc.	Berg	Bild	Staat	Fahrer
Gen.	Berg(e)s	Bild(e)s	Staat(e)s	Fahrers
Dat.	Berg(e)	Bild(e)	Staat(e)	Fahrer
Nom-Gen	Berge	Bilder	Staaten	Fahrer
Dat.	Bergen	Bildern	Staaten	Fahrern

	-s, -e	-s, -s	-ns, -n	-en, -en
Nom.	Lehrling	Radio	Name	Student
Acc.	Lehrling	Radio	Namen	Studenten
Gen.	Lehrlings	Radios	Namens	Studenten
Dat.	Lehrling	Radio	Namen	Studenten
Nom-Gen	Lehrlinge	Radios	Namen	Studenten
Dat.	Lehrlingen	Radios	Namen	Studenten

	-, -e	-, -e	-, -en	-, -s
Nom.	Mutter	Kraft	Meinung	Kamera
Acc.	Mutter	Kraft	Meinung	Kamera
Gen.	Mutter	Kraft	Meinung	Kamera
Dat.	Mutter	Kraft	Meinung	Kamera
Nom-Gen	Mütter	Kräfte	Meinungen	Kameras
Dat.	Müttern	Kräften	Meinungen	Kameras

	Irregular	
Nom.	Herr	Herz
Acc.	Herrn	Herz
Gen.	Herrn	Herzens
Dat.	Herrn	Herzen
Nom-Gen	Herren	Herzen
Dat.	Herren	Herzen

gewinnen to win, be
victorious, gain, win over. (1)

glauben to believe. (2)

gut¹ good. (4)

gut² well; easily. (1)

H

haben to have, hold. (20)

halten to hold; stop, halt;
support. (2)

heute today. (1)

I

ich I. (17)

ihr² her, its, their. (19)

immer always, every time, all
the time, constantly. (4)

in in, inside, within. (43)

J

ja yes; obviously, certainly, of
course; just; as you know. (5)

das **Jahrhundert** (-s, -e)
century. (1)

jetzt now. (4)

K

kein no, not one, not any. (4)

kommen to come, arrive. (3)

können to be able to. (20)

L

lassen to allow, permit, let. (7)

laufen to run, jog, walk. (1)

leben to live, be alive, dwell,
reside. (1)

legen to lay, put, place. (1)

leiden to suffer, endure, be in
pain. (1)

lieb lovable, dear, sweet,
kind. (1)

liegen to lie (down). (3)

M

machen to make, produce,
create. (13)

man one, you, they (people in
general). (9)

mehr more. (4)

der **Mensch** (-en, -en) man,
humankind, person. (13)

menschlich human, manlike,
humane, kind. (3)

mit with. (6)

möglich possible, potential. (2)

der **Monat** (-es, -e) month. (1)

müssen to have to. (6)

N

- nach** after, past; behind; to, towards. (10)
- nachdem** after (that). (3)
- nachher** afterwards, later. (1)
- die **Natur** (-, -en) nature, natural world. (4)
- nehmen** to take. (4)
- nein** no. (1)
- nennen** to name, call. (2)
- nicht** not. (32)
- nichts** nothing. (5)
- niemals** never (at no time). (2)
- niemand** nobody, no one. (1)
- noch** still, yet, additionally. (10)
- nun** now, at this moment; then (logical consequence). (7)
- nur** only, just, merely, simply. (17)

O

- ob** (subord.) whether, if. (1)
- oder** or; (tag question) right? (14)
- öffnen** to open. (1)
- ohne** without. (7)
- die **Ordnung** (-, -en) order, orderliness, arrangement. (3)

R

- der **Raum** (-(*e*), -*e*) space, room. (1)
- das **Recht** (-(*e*), -*e*) right, privilege, title, law. (1)

S

- die **Sache** (-, -*n*) matter, affair. (2)
- sagen** to say, tell. (6)
- scheinen** to shine, gleam, seem, appear, look. (1)
- schließen** to shut, close, lock. (1)
- schon** already, previously, before. (4)
- schwer** heavy, weighty, difficult, hard. (1)
- sehen** to see. (2)
- sein¹** to be. (64)
- sein²** his, its. (44)
- die **Seite** (-, -*n*) side, face; page. (2)
- selbst¹** personally, by oneself. (22)
- setzen** to set, put, (refl.) sit down. (4)
- sicher** safe, secure, sure, certain. (2)