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*Abstract*

**The Question of Enlightenment: From Mendelssohn and Kant  
to Foucault and Habermas**

In 1784, Moses Mendelssohn and Immanuel Kant attempted to answer the question “What is Enlightenment?” Two hundred years later, Jürgen Habermas and Michel Foucault planned to explore the same question, but their discussion was cut short by Foucault’s death. My talk will examine a few of the ways in which the question “What is Enlightenment?” was transformed during the two centuries that separate these two discussions and consider the implications of these changes for more recent accounts of both “enlightenment” and “the Enlightenment.”

While Mendelssohn and Kant went about answering the question “What is Enlightenment?” in somewhat different ways, they both understood the question they were answering as having to do with policies and processes rather than with the characteristics that defined a particular historical period. The task, as they saw it, was to clarify what counted as “enlightenment” and, by implication, to indicate how “true” enlightenment could be distinguished from various misguided conceptions. In contrast, for Habermas and — to a somewhat lesser degree — for Foucault, the question of enlightenment was bound up with claims about the significance of an historical period (“the Enlightenment”) and the projects allegedly associated with it. Three decades after the interrupted discussion between Foucault and Habermas, we still tend to understand the question of enlightenment much as they did. My goal in this talk will be to suggest a few possible alternatives.