Enlightenment: The Ideas Of Kant And Voltaire

During the 18th century, extraordinary changes began making way through almost every sector of European society. Population growth, scientific revelations, and economic development created a newfound culture unlike any preceding it. Inspired by the principles of rational thinking, many intellectuals began questioning authority and societal traditions. This intellectual movement became known as the Enlightenment, and it was spearheaded by a group of men known as the philosophes. Although the philosophes all sought ways to improve and educate the world around them, they often differed in their approach to create this Enlightened public. For example, Immanuel Kant and Voltaire were both philosophes who had very significant impacts on the Enlightenment movement and on the foundation of modern philosophy. Although Voltaire and Kant both sought the same end goal for the Enlightenment, their propositions for how to achieve this phenomenon greatly differed.

Kant believed the Enlightenment to be an individual's escape from their self-incurred immaturity and the ability to think on their own without any guidance. Kant believed that the Catholic Church forced certain dogma and traditions onto the public, and therefore restricted the people's freedom to use their own understanding. For Enlightenment to be achieved, Kant concluded that men must stop being lazy and gain the confidence to use their own reason publicly. He pointed out that it is often tiring to use one's own mind and it is easier to just take someone else's word for it, thereby reinforcing the continuation of outdated traditions, prejudices, or rules. Additionally, most people during this time are shunned away from developing their own ideas because of the fear of what may happen to them if they do speak out. Therefore, men must rid themselves of this cowardice and idleness. Kant also proclaimed the necessity of having an enlightened leader or guardian who supports the spread of Enlightenment and the freedom to use reason publicly, even if it means critiques will be made towards their rule. Enlightened rulers will accept this because they know the critiques made towards current legislation will be made in hopes of bettering society.

On the other hand, Voltaire preached almost exclusively the importance of religious toleration and the freedom to apply reason to religion publicly. To achieve this state of Enlightenment and the freedom to use reason, Voltaire believed society must abandon intolerance, ignorance, religious fanaticism, and narcissism. People must use reason to justify religious toleration and to realize that they are not superior or more valid due to their religion. Furthermore, people must respect other religious groups' rights to have their own beliefs, and understand that just because others' beliefs are different does not mean they are any less moral. When individuals are exposed to various diverse ways of life and faith, their perspective on life is broadened, and therefore it is easier for them to use reason to realize the innate equality of all humans. Voltaire believed that through this logic, society would become a more open-minded and less sorrowful enlightened place.

Ultimately both Kant and Voltaire are striving towards the same end goal-- a better world with less misery. Voltaire believes this is accomplished by using reason to eliminate torture due to religious intolerance. However, Kant believes this is accomplished by completely reforming the approach to thinking. First and foremost, Kant believes people should be allowed to use their own understanding and apply it publicly so that they can argue about controversial ideas so as

to improve the world around them. He believes legislation should be a living document, subject to change as ages go by, with no prejudice or tradition set in stone. In essence, Voltaire has a more public perspective on Enlightenment and believes it can be achieved through social change, while Kant believes Enlightenment begins on a very personal level for each individual that requires self-reliance and internal rationale. Voltaire preaches religious liberty while Kant preaches mental, intellectual and individualistic liberty. Voltaire trumpets a specific use and type of reason while Kant seems to care less about whether an individual's ideas are reasonable as long as he or she is using their own reasoning. Voltaire in himself goes against Kant's beliefs; Voltaire is known for not formulating his own ideas but instead just reiterating the ideas of past philosophers.

As seen by just a few of the works of the philosophes, there is clearly not a single definition for the Enlightenment, let alone a single course of action to get there. For Kant, he hoped people would gain the resolve to form their own opinions and ideas so that the public could debate ways to better society. Voltaire hoped society would use reason to abolish religious intolerance and fanaticism so that they could create a more blissful world with less torture and misery. Although their differences regarding Enlightenment are prevalent, at the end of the day, they both see the Enlightenment as an opportunity to create a happier and more progressive world.