

Towards an Unfettered Critique: Adorno's Appropriations and Transformations of Kant's Enlightenment

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Abstract

Many recent commentators have noticed how Adorno, in his late works, borrows Kant's definition of enlightenment to define key areas of his own critical practice. These discussions, however, have failed to notice how these late borrowings present an image of Kant's enlightenment which is diametrically opposed to his previous discussions. By tracing the development of Adorno's engagement with Kant's essay, I discover Adorno deliberately subverting Kant's definition as to enable its incorporation into his own works. Further, the article will examine some problems which appear to arise for Adorno when borrowing Kant's definition of enlightenment in his late works, which coalesce around the topics of negativism and the prospects for societal change.

Keywords: enlightenment, Kant, Adorno, critique, autonomy, maturity

1. Introduction: Adorno and Enlightenment

1.1 *Adorno's Enlightenment(s)*

To discuss Adorno's work in connection with 'enlightenment' is to enter a complex field, in which the central term of the discussion, 'enlightenment', is overburdened with a variety of meanings. Such meanings emanate both from discussions external to Adorno's work, and from the multifaceted way Adorno himself employs the term.

To begin with the external meanings, many critics have understood that Adorno's critiques of modern society have something to do with the

historical Enlightenment and its legacy. Indeed, the dominant view for a long time, which persists to this day in non-specialist discussions of his work, depicts him as one of the Enlightenment's fiercest critics, painting such a dark picture of the period and its consequences that he veers on becoming counter-enlightened.

There have been two primary ways of reaching and justifying this verdict. Some have understood that the enlightenment critiqued in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which reverts into mythic oppression and is culpable for the horrors of modern society and the atrocities of the early twentieth century, refers directly to the historical Enlightenment and its legacy.¹ Others have reached a similar verdict by understanding that Adorno's critique of the process of rationalization which culminates in the creation of our modern society transgresses against some enlightenment values or project. For Habermas and the Habermasians, who expound the paradigmatic form of this latter view, since Adorno and Horkheimer view all modern developments through a myopic, Nietzschean lens, they become so 'unappreciative of the rational content of cultural modernity that all they perceive everywhere is a binding of reason and domination, of power and validity' (Habermas 1987: 121).² By constructing such a one-sided, self-defeating attack on the modern, Adorno and Horkheimer lose sight of the rational, communicative, emancipatory potential which, for Habermas, emanates from the Enlightenment itself (Habermas 1987: 112–13).

Yet, for others, like Michel Foucault, it is through creating a critique of modernity which investigates reason's culpability for the present state of domination that Adorno's works can be said to be enlightened. Towards the end of his career, Foucault famously claimed that his works are a continuation of a critical spirit introduced in Kant's essay on enlightenment. In 1978, Foucault claimed that the legitimate continuation of this spirit is found in a 'suspicious interrogation' of rationalization and reason (Foucault 1996: 388). And, in posing the question of the current *Aufklärung*, 'how is it that rationalisation leads to the rage of power?' (1996: 390), Foucault unambiguously states his proximity to the works of the first generation of the Frankfurt School, and by extension, to Adorno (1996: 391). That such similar themes can be used to justify such different conclusions demonstrates the malleability of the term 'enlightenment' in relation to Adorno's works.³

Further meanings proliferate throughout Adorno's works, with the most famous discussion appearing in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In this

text, enlightenment does not refer to a determinate historical period, but rather denotes a process of rationalization with its origins in prehistory. In a ‘highly speculative anthropology’, reason’s origins are discovered in the attempt to master a dangerous external nature as to enable self-preservation, made possible through a categorizing or classifying reason (Hammer 2006: 45). However, while enlightenment promises mastery and liberation, due to the dictatorial reason at its heart, enlightenment reverts into mythic oppression at every step of its development (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: xviii). By reflecting on the irrationality at the heart of this process, the authors wish to rescue enlightenment, and actualize its promise of creating a condition worthy of human beings (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: xiv–xvi).

Elsewhere in his works, Adorno frequently discusses thinkers or aspects from the historical period of the Enlightenment. Often, these are no more than throwaway comments, points in passing within the context of a larger argument. We discover Adorno’s fondness for the French enlightenment, with particular praise for D’Alembert’s differentiation between *esprit de système* and *l’esprit systématique* in *Negative Dialectics* (Adorno 1973: 24, 29). Such praise stands in stark contrast with his frequent statements on the failure of the German enlightenment, which is consistently presented as an ‘unsuccessful and lukewarm’ enlightenment, which was always too ready to ‘subordinate’ itself to whatever higher power (Adorno 1984: 152; see also Adorno 2001a: 58). Amid such scattered statements, we discover Adorno wrestling with Kant’s enlightenment essay, in a detailed and extended manner, throughout his whole life. These engagements which will be the focus of this article.⁴

1.2 An Overview of the Argument of This Article

Within the German Enlightenment’s attempt to offer a definition of the activity of enlightenment, one definition has eclipsed all others in fame: Immanuel Kant’s ‘An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?’ (1784). For Kant, enlightenment is seen as mankind’s emergence from its self-incurred immaturity, an emergence achieved through the individual gaining the courage to use his own understanding, to reason to the utmost of his ability without the guidance of another (WIE, 8: 35).⁵ This simple definition has been expanded from its original context, with historians such as Dan Edelstein referring to a ‘tendency among scholars today to brandish Kant’s famous essay as a one-stop shop for defining the Enlightenment’ (Edelstein 2010: 117), expanding Kant’s attempt to define a process of enlightenment into a definition of the whole historical period (Schmidt 2011: 45). Along with this, the essay has exerted a great

deal of influence on modern philosophy, with several major philosophers borrowing extensively from it to define aspect of their own critiques.

For a long time, the dominant view of Adorno presented his works as succumbing to counter-enlightened themes. A movement away from such readings has steadily taken place, with the dominant tendency today, in specialist discussions of Adorno's works, emphasizing the enlightened aspects of his work. This latter view is typified by Espen Hammer who states that Adorno, no less than Habermas, subscribes to 'the values of the Enlightenment – to self-reflexive critique, rational self-reassurance, the exercise of autonomy, and the defence of some version of cultural modernity' (Hammer 2006: 145). Within this movement, several thinkers have noticed that Adorno repeatedly borrows Kant's definition of enlightenment throughout his final works (1966–9) to define the contours of his critique.⁶ These discussions focus on Adorno's appropriations of the Kantian concept of 'maturity' (*Mündigkeit*), which is presented in his works as the precondition and goal of critique, the precondition of democracy and the subjective element which could prevent the recurrence of atrocities like Auschwitz. The centrality of this concept in the later works of Adorno cannot be underestimated.⁷ Further, since Adorno emphasizes that Kant's enlightenment essay was not particularly well known during his time (Adorno 2001a: 59), it is fair to assume that Adorno is attempting to demonstrate something of importance about his own critical practice through such extensive discussions and appropriations of Kant's definition of enlightenment.

I will focus here on an aspect neglected in previous discussions: namely, the startling differences between the Kant Adorno appropriates and appreciates in 1966–9 compared to the previous reading offered in his 1959 lectures on the *Critique of Pure Reason*. In these lectures, Adorno emphasizes the contradiction between the utopian aim of Kant's enlightenment, which aims at an actualization of reason by means of a truly radical critique, and the simultaneous fettering and undermining of reason in his work. This fettering is achieved in two main ways: first, Kant's enlightenment is subjectively limited, and cannot target the objective societal structures which represent the true cause of our current immaturity, and, secondly, Kant's enlightenment is a purely theoretical endeavour, lacking a concept of practice or action. Yet, in the later works, Adorno repeatedly appeals to two aspects of Kant's essay on enlightenment: first, to his definition of maturity, presented here as the subjective element which enables a critique of objective political

structures, and, secondly, praise for the practical import of Kant's call to free ourselves from our own self-incurred immaturity.

These revisions seem far too specific to be merely accidental, or to be attributed to Adorno simply changing his mind. Instead, Adorno seems to be presenting a sublated image of Kant's enlightenment: his later appropriations attempting to rectify previous deficiencies in order to enable enlightenment to target the true, societal causes of our immaturity. Through these deliberate modifications, we see Adorno unfettering Kant's enlightenment, infusing Kant's words with a more materialist substance, to provide a more powerful answer to the same question Kant attempted to answer: 'what is enlightenment?' It is these precise modifications, and the problems which arise for Adorno as he appropriates Kant's definition of enlightenment, which will be our focus in this article.

2. Kant's Ambiguities: Adorno's 1959 Lectures

To justify the assertion that Adorno's appropriations of Kant's enlightenment are simultaneously transformations, we must examine his most in-depth engagement with Kant's essay, found in his lectures on the *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1959. Throughout these lectures, Adorno draws attention to various tensions running through Kant's works. The main tension identified is between the drive towards identity in Kant's works, emanating from his attempt to reduce all knowledge to the subject, and a recognition of the non-identical, understood as a recognition of a 'block' in the process of cognition, the inability of the mind to comprehend the 'thing-in-itself' from which appearances arise (Adorno 2001a: 66–7).

While Adorno sees much value in Kant's approach to enlightenment, following the broader pattern of these lectures, he ultimately sees Kant's enlightenment culminating in a series of irresolvable tensions which undermine the desired enlightenment. Two main sets of tensions are identified. The first set of tensions emanate from Kant's relationship with the general process of enlightenment, characterized here as a tension between identity and non-identity in his work. To these, Adorno introduces a second stream of criticisms specifically against Kant's essay on enlightenment. In this second stream, the tensions identified stem from Kant's desire for an unfettered critique and the simultaneous fettering of critique in his work through a subjectification of enlightenment, and a failure to connect enlightenment with practice.

Regarding Kant's relationship with enlightenment in the general sense, Adorno states that the 'programme that Kant proposes' in the first *Critique* 'is one of enlightenment', with enlightenment simultaneously denoting the historical Enlightenment, and a wider process of demythologization (Adorno 2001a: 56). Kant unites with the historical Enlightenment through two elements: first, by presupposing that reason is part of our natural constitution, with reason containing some potential within itself to achieve freedom or fulfil the destiny of mankind; and secondly, by believing that the task of reason is to destroy all 'dogma, delusion and knowledge that has merely been handed down' (ibid., 58). However, Adorno seems far more interested here in the manner this anti-dogmatism is applied to reason in Kant, locating his works within the wider, general movement of Western demythologization.

Kant's critical project partakes in this wider movement of demythologization through its critique of anthropomorphism (ibid., 65). Adorno appeals to the ideas of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* here, where enlightenment demythologizes by revealing the human origins of all phenomena. Like Oedipus's answer to the Sphinx's riddle, enlightenment, 'whether in response to a piece of objective meaning, a schematic order, a fear of evil powers, or a hope of salvation', offers the same answer, 'that being is man'. Through this a 'multiplicity of mythical figures' is reduced to a 'single common denominator, the subject' (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 4).

These ideas are repeated in these lectures, with Adorno using enlightenment to denote a 'general trend of Western demythologization' which begins in the fragments of Xenophanes. Demythologization unmasks assertions to which 'objectivity, existence and absolute dignity' have been granted by showing that they are no more than 'mere projections' of humanity: 'since it is merely man that has produced these concepts from within himself they are not entitled to any absolute dignity' (Adorno 2001a: 65). Kant's critique of metaphysics, by emphasizing that the objects of traditional metaphysics, be that the world, soul or God, are the mediate products of the human understanding, partakes in this larger movement. By such a critique, Kant reveals that these 'supreme metaphysical concepts are actually no more than a game played by reason with itself', the objects taken as immediately given, are 'nothing more than hypostatizations of human beings as rational creatures' (ibid.).

However, Kant's relationship to this general process of enlightenment is wrought by tensions, in which the enlightened, demythologizing impulse

is continually undermined by a simultaneous drive towards identity, understood here as the reintroduction of a mythological anthropomorphism. Identity thinking, in Adorno, refers to the ‘hubristic’ belief that the object can be made to correspond fully to a category or concept supplied by the subject (Adorno 1973: 149). By reducing all organized experience ‘to an analysis of the consciousness of the subject’ Kant typifies such a manner of thinking (Adorno 2001A: 66). Yet, Kant simultaneously incorporates non-identical elements. For Adorno, non-identity refers to reason’s awareness of its own insufficiency: ‘dialectics says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a reminder’ (Adorno 1973: 5). Kant ‘enshrines the validity of the *non-identical* in the most emphatic way possible’ by emphasizing the subject’s affectations from things-in-themselves, an element beyond the grasp of the human mind, and unknown to it (Adorno 2001A: 66). For Adorno, the greatness of Kant’s works emanates from his intense focus on these two conflicting elements, and from his ultimate inability to adequately resolve this tension (*ibid.*, 66).

Turning to discuss Adorno’s approach to Kant’s enlightenment essay, Adorno identifies a new set of tensions, discovering a ‘permanent conflict’ between utopianism and anti-utopianism, culminating in an ‘antinomic situation’ (*ibid.*, 73). For Adorno, Kant’s essay presents a truly utopian ideal, with the emergence from immaturity consisting ‘essentially in the demand for the unfettered use of reason and installation of reason as the supreme authority’ (*ibid.*, 62). However, Adorno views Kant as simultaneously fettering and undermining reason and critique, with his enlightenment ultimately demanding ‘submission to existing circumstances, regimes or governments, of whatever kind’ (*ibid.*, 73). This fettering is achieved in two main ways: first, through critique being subjectively limited, and secondly, through conceptualizing enlightenment as a purely theoretical activity, shorn from the practicality Adorno views necessary for its actualization.

Regarding the first aspect, then, although Kant’s enlightenment entails that thought is not dictated to, that the individual thinks for himself to the utmost of his ability, Adorno notes that this aim is ‘subjectively restricted from the outset’ unable to effectively target ‘whatever is not thought’, that is, the ‘objectification of spirit and therewith the institutions and arrangements of the world’ (*ibid.*, 62). Such a criticism rests on Adorno’s own diagnosis of our present predicament. For Adorno, the true causes of our present immaturity do not emanate from a lack of courage or laziness, but rather from external, societal pressures, such

as the standardized forms of thinking foisted upon us by the culture industry, or the conformity demanded by the capitalistic, societal totality. It is by failing to adequately engage with such phenomena that Kant's enlightenment is held to be lacking.

Secondly, Adorno asserts that Kant's enlightenment is marked by a further fettering, with enlightenment understood as a purely theoretical activity, lacking a concept of practice or action. This assertion is based on Kant's famous distinction between a public and a private use of reason. While a certain degree of freedom is necessary for the spread of enlightenment, it is only the public use of reason which must be free, the use made by an individual '*as a scholar before the entire public of the world of readers*' (WIE, 8: 37). The private use of reason, the use made by an individual in a 'civil post or office with which he is entrusted', can, and often should, be restricted quite narrowly, to ensure the functioning of the commonwealth (WIE, 8: 37). For instance, then, an officer must obey the orders of a superior without the use of a 'subtle reasoning', or a clergyman must deliver his sermons in accordance with the established doctrines of the church which has employed him (WIE, 8: 37–8). While, in this capacity, individuals are not permitted to question, the same individual remains free to reason publicly, as a scholar, about the validity of such orders or doctrines.

For Adorno, such limitations on a 'consistently critical reason' represent a fettering of enlightenment (Adorno 2001a: 73). Only the abstract, theoretical subject is 'free to be enlightened in a radical sense' (ibid., 63). The individual who would dare to be consistently critical, refusing the concessions Kant demands of critique, and who would engage in a 'practical criticism of given institutions', would be denigrated as 'grumbling', or as misusing reason (ibid., 63). For Adorno, such an ambivalence regarding reason is characteristic of the bourgeois tradition of thought of which Kant is a part. On the one hand, reason is declared to be supreme, and exalted as the 'only authority by which to regulate human relations', yet, on the other, reason is prevented from actualizing itself, limited and repeatedly warned 'not to be too extreme' (ibid., 64).

This discussion of Adorno's criticisms of Kant's relationship with enlightenment would be incomplete without mentioning Adorno's overarching enlightened intention. On the one hand, Adorno wishes to avoid the Romantic rejection of enlightenment: a tendency which, in turn, ensured that 'much of the enlightened thought that flourished in Germany actually assumed the shape imagined by the obscurantists'

(Adorno 2001a: 64). On the other hand, Adorno wishes to dismantle the popular cliché that saw Kant as the completer of enlightenment, a cliché which stems from a desire to stop ‘enlightenment in its tracks, to call a halt to the advance of reason’ (ibid.). In line with the general theme of the rescue of enlightenment throughout his work, the purpose of his drawing attention to the fettering of enlightenment in Kant is to prepare the way for an unfettered enlightenment: an enlightenment which aims at a consistently critical viewpoint, at the making real of reason.

Kant’s enlightenment culminates in a series of antinomical positions but hidden in the criticisms of this lecture series are the outlines of what would constitute enlightenment for Adorno. A true ‘making real of reason’ (Adorno 2001a: 73) would be an unfettered, practical critique of the social compulsions which hold us in present immaturity. In short, it would be a critique aiming at the creation of a wholly new, societal utopia: where the individual is not forced to conform to larger societal processes which determine his life, but, rather, would be free to rationally determine the course of his life in an autonomous manner. The Marxian provenance of such ideas is clear. And, in his later works, despite introducing similar criticisms of Kant’s approach to enlightenment, what are emphasized in far more detail are the elements of Kant’s essay on enlightenment which prefigure this more radical enlightenment.

3. Kant and Adorno’s Radical Enlightenment: Maturity, Practicality and the Critique of Society

The main goal of Adorno’s criticism is to break the ‘impenetrable’ spell that society has cast upon us (Adorno 2003: 125). By this, Adorno wishes to bring us to an awareness of the horrors of our present societies and identify the current fault-lines which might allow change (Adorno 2005: 247). Based on the reading offered in the 1959 lectures, Kant’s enlightenment would offer almost no resources to aid in this task. Kant’s subjectively limited enlightenment was fundamentally incapable of recognizing and critiquing the societal sources of our immaturity, precisely the elements Adorno wishes to focus on in his own works. Yet, in the process of presenting the most developed and sophisticated outline of his critical theory, in these final works (1966–9), Adorno frequently engages with and borrows Kant’s definition of enlightenment to define key aspects of his own critique.

To enable this borrowing, Adorno fundamentally modifies his reading of Kant’s enlightenment. It must be noted that these later revisions are not complete reversals: some elements, such as Kant’s tendency to undermine

critique by denigrating the unfettered critic as a grumbler, continue to be emphasized even in Adorno's most appreciative moments (Adorno 1998a: 282–3). However, two central aspects are reversed, with Adorno crediting Kant with the precise elements which he claimed were lacking in the previous discussion. First, whereas Kant's enlightenment was previously understood as a purely theoretical endeavour, lacking in practicality, in these late works, he is praised for the practicality of his attempt to free us from tutelage. Secondly, whereas Kant's enlightenment previously failed to recognize the objective social structures, he is now presented not only as a thinker who wished to free society from its immaturity, but also delineates the precondition for any social critique: a mature individual who can resist the heteronomous influence of the total society. With at least some of the previously identified fetters unlocked, Adorno discovers a useful ally in Kant as he attempts to delineate the nature of his own critique.

To fully demonstrate the nature of Adorno's later engagements with Kant's essay, I will examine three main topics. First, I will provide a brief overview of Adorno's critique of society, in order to provide some much-needed context to these later appreciations of Kant's enlightenment. Secondly, I examine the praise and appropriations of Kant's definition of enlightenment. The bulk of the discussion will centre on the concept of maturity, used in these final works for two main purposes: to prevent the recurrence of the worst forms of barbarity, and as a precondition for critique itself. Finally, while Adorno has modified his reading of Kant, I will examine whether his works are themselves modified in the process of incorporating Kant's enlightenment. The main focus of this section are the implications of Adorno's repeated identifications of autonomy and maturity for his negativism, and whether Adorno's belief that the critical maturity instilled in others through a process of education represents a reversal from his more pessimistic statements on the possibility of change discovered elsewhere in his works.

3.1 Adorno's Social Critique: Heteronomy and Immaturity

First, we must examine the nature of Adorno's social critique to better understand the context of his interactions with Kant throughout his late works. Adorno's central philosophical concern is to investigate, and challenge, the damage caused by identity, be that on the theoretical or societal level. On the theoretical level, identity refers to the belief that the object can be fully identified by a category or concept supplied by the subject. Instead of true receptivity to the object of cognition, the category is set prior to engagement with it, forcing the object to conform

to the pre-set category (Adorno 1973: 149). The unfortunate side-effect of this process is that the aspects incommensurable to the category or concept, the non-identical elements which cannot be comprehended, are ‘amputated’ (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 9).

While nearly all Western philosophy embodies such identitarian tendencies, the paradigmatic form is found in the idealistic systems of the past. Such systems aim at total comprehension and control, at realizing (as Brian O’Connor notes) a complete identity between their concept and objects: ‘disparate objects are forced into an harmonious totality or whole’, with the side-effect of destroying the individuality of the object (O’Connor 2013: 34). However, this coercive attempt at achieving total identity necessarily fails due to its inability to adequately capture the unruly non-identical elements: ‘objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a reminder’ (Adorno 1973: 5). As such, the manic attempt at creating a system which can fully grasp the totality is marked by ‘rage’ at these non-identical elements which consistently undermine its hubristic delusions (ibid., 23).

Adorno’s critique of philosophical systems is far from unique. Nietzsche, to offer one example, declared his hatred for all systematizers, declaring that ‘the will to a system is a lack of integrity’ (Nietzsche 2005: 159). However, the novelty of Adorno’s position is his claim that society, as a counterpoint to the decline of the philosophical system, comes to resemble the philosophical systems. Through the identitarian logic of commodity exchange, society almost succeeds at realizing the ideal of all-encompassing control, of forming a seamless totality (Adorno 1973: 23). Following Marx, Adorno asserts that, for a commodity to be exchanged, one must abstract from its use value, that is, from the qualitative aspects of the object, transforming these into exchange value. This process mirrors identity: the incommensurable is made commensurable, but at the cost of shearing away the particularity which cannot adequately be captured.⁸ Society begins to appear as a seamless totality, capable of controlling all its disparate elements through the exchange principle: ‘the bourgeois *ratio* really approximated to the systems whatever it would make commensurable with itself, would identify with itself- and it did so with increasing, if potentially homicidal, success. Less and less was left outside’ (ibid., 23).

In our present societies the damage caused by identity, on the theoretical level, is mirrored by the damage caused to the individual on the societal level, understood here as the overwhelming pressure placed on the

individual to conform with a society which strips of him all individuality and autonomy. Adorno argues that ‘behind the reduction of men to agents and bearers of exchange value lies the domination of men over men ... The form of the total system requires everyone to respect the law of exchange if he does not want to be destroyed’ (Adorno 1970: 149). Several implications arise from this highly oppressive form of social integration. The overwhelming heteronomous influence of society prevents the formation of a strong ego which could resist its compulsion and forces us to uphold a situation which Adorno has no qualms in calling ‘radically evil’ (Adorno 1973: 218–19), or even frequently compares to hell (Adorno 2005: 28). Indeed, Adorno consistently claims that the violence implicit in the current forms of societal integration is but a milder form of a tendency which discovers its culmination in the Holocaust: ‘Auschwitz confirmed the philosopheme of pure identity as death’ (Adorno 1973: 362). The Jewish victims were stripped of all individuality, comprehended as mere instantiations of a general, worthless category, ‘in the concentration camps it was no longer an individual who died, but a specimen’ (ibid., 362). With such tendencies towards atrocity woven into the very structure of our society, the recurrence of the most horrific forms of barbarism is a genuine possibility for Adorno.

3.2 *Adorno’s Appreciation of Kant: Practicality and Maturity*

This theme of the damage caused to the individual by the current forms of coercive socialization in late capitalistic societies runs through all of Adorno’s work. Yet, while Adorno wishes to challenge and transform this situation, substantial barriers stand in the way. Society, as a delusive totality, has cast a spell on its subjects, preventing them from gaining a full understanding of the depths of their current predicament. Further, due to the weakened ego produced by the current form of socialization, the individual is especially susceptible to such heteronomous societal influences (Adorno 1998d: 111).

Following from this diagnosis, then, fostering a critical individuality which can resist this societal spell has to be foremost amongst Adorno’s concerns. And, within this context of outlining the nature of such resistance, Adorno repeatedly appeals to two elements of Kant’s essay on enlightenment: first, that Kant provides a model of practical thinking which does not bend to the demands of the present society, and, second, Kant’s concept of maturity provides a model of the critical individual who can withstand heteronomous influences. By modifying his previous reading, Adorno unleashes Kant’s enlightenment, allowing

Kant to play a role in criticizing the structures which prevent the individual from determining his life ‘in accordance with reason’ (Adorno 2001a: 64).

The first element Adorno praises in his later engagements with Kant’s enlightenment, which is the practical import of Kant’s attempt to realize enlightenment, is often neglected due to its brevity. The context of this praise, in ‘Marginalia to Theory and Praxis’, is illuminating. Adorno identifies a dangerous tendency in contemporary political movements towards ‘actionism’ (Adorno 1998c: 273). As a ‘reflex reaction’ to the current overwhelming societal pressure, these movements demand immediate and blind action, with a complete denigration of theory (ibid., 270). However, in so doing, such movements embody the same hostility to theory prevalent in our societies, and as such, fail to negate current societal trends. In contrast, Adorno attempts to establish a true communication between theory and praxis, which, by his reckoning, divided at the end of Renaissance (ibid., 261). While blind and compulsive action, uninformed by theory, invariably supports and reproduces the present conditions, Adorno’s goal is a thinking ‘which offers resistance’, a thinking which, as it is not instrumentalized by the demands for praxis, might more adequately resist the present situation (ibid., 263).

Adorno’s appeal to Kant within this context is surprising, due to Adorno repeatedly presenting Kant elsewhere in his works as a thinker who reinforces the present conditions. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, for instance, Kant is explicitly located as a step in the enlightenment’s regression into positivism, the myth of ‘that which is the case’, in which ‘the actual is validated, knowledge confines itself once more to repeating it, thought makes itself mere tautology’ (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 20). Similar conclusions were reached in the lectures in 1959 and are repeated throughout the final works. Yet, when Adorno turns to defending the practical import of a type of thinking which can truly challenge the present formations, it is to Kant’s definition of enlightenment he appeals:

Those alone think who do not passively accept the already given: from the primitive who contemplates how he can protect his small fire from the rain or where he can find shelter from the storm to the Enlightenment philosopher who construes how humanity can move beyond its self-incurred tutelage by means of its interest in self-preservation. (Adorno 1998c: 264–5)

However, Adorno is not quite finished with Kant in this essay. Towards the end of the essay, Adorno states that the ‘dissolution’ of forms of false consciousness, through critical reflection, ‘inaugurates a certain movement towards political maturity (*Mündigkeit*) and that, in any case, is practical’ (ibid., 278). The contrast with the previous readings is obvious. The Kant whose enlightenment previously lacked a concept of practice or action is presented here as an example of the type of thinking which is capable of negating prevailing trends, in the practicality of the attempt to free humanity from its tutelage. Indeed, since Adorno wishes to conceptualize his own critique as a form of practice, by emphasizing the practicality of Kant’s critique, Kant becomes a truly important predecessor for his own work. Such appreciation, and reversals, set the tone for the rest of Adorno’s later engagements.

The second element which Adorno praises, and appropriates, is the Kantian idea of maturity. For Kant, an individual is immature when, through laziness or a lack of courage, he abrogates from his duty of reasoning to the utmost of his ability, depending on guardians to form his opinions on his behalf. Enlightenment is defined, then, as an exit from this immaturity; the enlightened individual ‘dares to know!’ (*Sapere Aude!*) (WIE, 8: 35), fully embracing the ‘maxim of always thinking for oneself’ (WOT, 8: 146). This maturity comes to play a central role in Adorno’s later work. Only the mature individual, capable of reasoning for himself, can withstand the heteronomous influence of the societal totality. I will examine these various uses of maturity in the later works, before raising some questions about potential problems facing Adorno’s work at this point.

The centrality the Kantian concept of *Mündigkeit*, in conjunction with critique, in Adorno’s final works, should not be underestimated. For Adorno, the modern concept of reason is defined by nothing other than critique. Yet, the precondition of critique is maturity. In order to define this maturity, Adorno paraphrases Kant’s definition of enlightenment: ‘Politically mature is the person who speaks for himself, because he has thought for himself and is not merely repeating someone else; he stands free of any guardian’ (Adorno 1998a: 281). This maturity, in turn, is framed exclusively as the capacity to resist societal heteronomy: maturity is ‘demonstrated in the power to resist established opinions and, one and the same, also to resist institutions, to resist everything that is merely posited, that justifies itself with its existence’ (ibid., 282). Since Adorno conceptualizes his works in their entirety as critique, this maturity, in turn, is the foundation for his, and, indeed, for any, critical theory.

The contrast here with the previous reading of Kant, in the 1959 lectures, is startling: the Kant whose enlightenment, a decade earlier, could not even recognize the objective structures of society comes to provide the very element necessary for a critique of societal structures. Indeed, Adorno even states that Kant was the thinker who ‘wanted to see *society* emancipated from its self-incurred immaturity’ (ibid., my emphasis).

This critical maturity becomes central to all kinds of modern phenomena. To offer one example, Adorno emphasizes its centrality to democracy in two important senses. First, he claims that the core of any democratic society is the system of checks and balances, understood here as the reciprocal critique of the separated powers minimizing the tendency of the unchecked, individual element towards despotism (Adorno 1998a: 281). In the second, Adorno insists that the ‘capacity and courage of each individual to make full use of his reasoning power’, a goal to be achieved by the ‘education of each individual in political, social, and moral awareness’, is the prerequisite of democracy, the element guarding the representative vote at its core from regressing into ‘irrationality’ (Adorno and Becker 1999: 21).

However, this critical maturity, in turn, plays another important role in Adorno, supplying him with the criterion which could prevent the recurrence of the worst barbarity, and thus fulfil the new categorical imperative of ‘never again Auschwitz’ (Adorno 1998b: 191). Since Auschwitz is the culmination of a societal process, preventing its recurrence ultimately depends on changing society. However, since society seems impervious to change, Adorno focuses on changing the subjective aspects which enabled the catastrophe (ibid., 192). In ‘Education After Auschwitz’, Adorno claims that the subjective precondition for the killings in the Holocaust is the subject’s incapacity to withstand outward influences: those responsible for the killings were placed ‘under a kind of permanent compulsion to obey orders’, their ‘superego or conscience’ replaced ‘by external authorities’ (ibid., 195). As such, Adorno claims ‘the single genuine power standing against the principle of Auschwitz is autonomy, if I might use the Kantian expression: the power of reflection, of self-determination, of not cooperating’ (ibid., 195). While Adorno uses the term ‘autonomy’ here, the correspondence with the concept of ‘maturity’ is clear, as the element preventing the recurrence is, ultimately, the subject’s reflective capacity to withstand the heteronomous influence.⁹

3.3 *Maturity, Autonomy and Adorno's Negativism*

The final element of the discussion above – that Adorno repeatedly uses the terms ‘maturity’ and ‘autonomy’ in these late works as though they are synonymous – bears further discussion. Such synonymity, in the wider context of Adorno’s works, seems inherently contradictory for two main reasons. First, Adorno insists that individual autonomy, understood as the capacity of the individual to actively determine the course of his or her life, is dependent on the wider social condition. Since our current lives are structured by an ‘unfree’ condition (Adorno 1973: 262, 365), we cannot consider that the individual is currently autonomous: the idea of individual freedom ‘presupposes the freedom of all, and cannot even be conceived as an isolated thing, that is, in the absence of social freedom’ (Adorno 2001c: 176). Such a claim, however, does not amount to a complete denial of freedom. Some forms of negative freedom remain available to the individual within this society: to resist, withstand and critique.¹⁰

Secondly, Adorno insists that we cannot currently offer a description of autonomy, nor the type of society in which the individual would finally be autonomous, nor even offer concrete guidance towards realizing such a social condition. This theme can cautiously be termed Adorno’s negativism: a secularized version of the Judaic ban on images, adapted in his work to be an injunction against creating positive images of a reconciled condition from within the antagonistic present (Adorno 1973: 207). For Adorno, the societal influence is so far reaching that the positive images created from within the current societal totality would be distorted by its influence; the deformed images surreptitiously carrying within them traces of the barbarity which was to be transcended. As such, autonomy, as a positive concept which belongs to the reconciled condition, cannot even be delineated by Adorno: it is a ‘thing that comes to be, not a thing that is. It would be a betrayal to incorporate it into existence by description, even by the most cautious description’ (ibid., 298). The critic, then, must immerse herself in the darkness of our present society without the guiding light of the positive (Adorno 2001b: 144): yet, with the negation of the current reality containing the promise that ‘the false, once determinately known and precisely expressed, is already an index of what is right and better’ (Adorno 1998a: 288).

For Adorno, then, autonomy as the positive freedom to determine the course of one’s life cannot exist in the present society, and no positive descriptions of it can be offered. Rather, only negative forms of freedom can be appealed to and bolstered. Why, then, does Adorno repeatedly

equate ‘maturity’ with ‘autonomy’ throughout these later works, and further, give examples of forms of this maturity which can be brought into existence in the present society, as a subjective or psychological element? The following section will demonstrate that Adorno does equate the two terms and explain this strange usage.

The first instance of Adorno equating the two terms is seen obliquely in ‘Education After Auschwitz’. As mentioned, the ‘autonomy’ which stands against the repetition of Auschwitz corresponds quite neatly with the ‘maturity’ discussed elsewhere: both terms being used to denote a critical resistance to heteronomous influence. Yet, this autonomy can only play a restricted role in preventing such a repetition. The only way to ensure that Auschwitz is not repeated is to change society as a whole, yet, since such change seems impossible, ‘attempts to work against the repetition of Auschwitz are necessarily restricted to the subjective dimension’ (Adorno 1998b: 199). Adorno offers concrete guidance on how such autonomy can be brought into existence within the present society, namely, through a type of education which aims at changing the consciousness of the individual as to render him more capable of resisting heteronomous influences (*ibid.*, 192–3).¹¹

Similar themes reappear in Adorno’s radio discussion with Becker. In the course of discussing the process of maturation (*Mündigwerden*), with particular focus on early childhood experiences, Adorno explicitly equates ‘maturity’ with ‘autonomy’, while continuing to restrict these once again to the psychological dimension. Following in Freud’s footsteps, Adorno argues that the individual ‘psychologically speaking – becomes an autonomous, and therefore mature, responsible person’ not by kicking out against ‘every kind of authority’ but, rather, through a painful detachment from and overcoming of the authoritative father figure (Adorno and Becker 1999: 26). Again, the substance of this autonomous maturity consists in the capacity to withstand external influence. Drawing on the empirical research of Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Adorno states that the autonomy achieved by these ‘good children’ makes them more likely to ‘take a stand’, as opposed to ‘refractory children’ who revert to conforming with authority within adulthood (*ibid.*). Again, Adorno offers several concrete suggestions as to how such maturity can be brought into existence within present society through a certain kind of education. I will return to these momentarily.

It is indisputable, then, that forms of this maturity, which Adorno equates with autonomy, are already in existence, or can be brought into existence,

within the present society. For instance, if maturity and autonomy correspond in any manner, and maturity is the precondition of critique, then merely by his capacity to produce a critique of society, Adorno demonstrates the current existence of this maturity-autonomy dyad. Yet, in so doing, Adorno seems to fundamentally contradict his more consistent assertions about the lack of autonomy within the present society and of our incapacity to adequately describe autonomy.

However, Adorno's use of the term 'autonomy' seems to be a terminological oddity, rather than constituting some fundamental change in his work. 'Autonomy' is used in a purely contrastive manner to denote the subjective or psychological capacity to resist and critique within the current society, in contrast to an uncritical immaturity in which the subject is passively guided by heteronomous societal influences. Such an assertion is supported by Adorno's own description of Kant's account of autonomy: Kant 'taught autonomy, that is, judgement according to one's own insight in contrast to heteronomy, obedience to what is urged by others' (Adorno 1998a: 282).

With this, it seems safe to state that there are two different levels of maturity and autonomy in Adorno, which are often alluded to within these discussions, but never sharply distinguished. First, there is the idea of a mature individual, who is subjectively or psychologically 'autonomous' in the restricted sense of being able to resist societal heteronomy to some degree. All the examples of the forms of the maturity which can exist, or be brought into existence on this level, are invariably examples of negative freedom: resisting, critiquing, withstanding. As reactions to the wrong state of things, the exact state which must be transcended as to actualize full autonomy, these cannot possibly amount to autonomy in the full sense.

This becomes clear in the examples of the forms of autonomous maturity which Adorno, in his discussion with Becker, believes can be brought into existence. Adorno is clear that society as a whole must be transformed as to enable maturity or autonomy to have the desired effect, yet he nonetheless opines that there is a way in which 'maturity could be put into a concrete form today ... the only real concrete form of maturity would consist of those few people who are of a mind to do so working with all their energies towards making education an education for protest and resistance' (Adorno and Becker 1999: 30–1). Adorno offers surprisingly straightforward and achievable examples of how this maturity could achieve its goal of breaking the ongoing universal deception, by

demonstrating to secondary school students the exploitative nature of popular culture: how they are being taken ‘for a ride’. For example, Adorno suggests that a close reading of a magazine could take place with the students, demonstrating to them how their ‘inner needs and desires’ are being exploited, or a musicologist could demonstrate how pop music ‘considered objectively, is so incomparably worse than a movement from a Mozart or Beethoven quartet or a really authentic piece of modern music’ (ibid., 31). Yet, in such examples, the forms of maturity and autonomy gain meaning only in contrast to the societally imposed heteronomy, and never as positive concepts in and of themselves.

In contrast with these forms of maturity and autonomy, which can come into existence in the present society, there exists a second idea in Adorno’s works of a ‘mature society’, the creation of which is the overall goal of his critical theory. It is only in this fully reconciled utopia that the individual could become autonomous in the full, positive sense: free from societal compulsion, he would be able to actively determine the course of his own life. Adorno pens no definite content to this, nor offers definite guidance as to how this autonomy could be actualized. This aspect of Adorno’s thought will become clearer in the following section. However, we can safely conclude that, despite the strangeness of Adorno’s terminology, his late correspondence of autonomy and maturity does not amount to a breaking of his injunction on describing autonomy in the full sense, nor does it lead to a contradiction in his work.

3.4 *Education for Maturity: A Transformed Adorno?*

Some critics have noted that as Adorno incorporates Kant’s definition of enlightenment into his later works, his works become infused with a more positive outlook for societal change. O’Connor, for instance, notes a ‘striking contrast between the lectures of the social democratic public intellectual who thought a mature society could be realized through education and debate and the co-author of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* who appeared to find no hope in any of the social arrangements produced by Western history’ (2013: 13). The reasons for such assertions are clear. Since the goal of Adorno’s work is to create a mature society, by noting that maturity can be instilled in others through a certain type of education, Adorno appears to set out a definite path for change, a far cry from the pessimism so commonly imputed to his works.

However, as we have seen, the situation is not this simple. The maturity which Adorno believes can appear in the present society by means of education is no more than the subjective, psychological capacity of the

individual to withstand the heteronomous influence of the present societal totality. This maturity, as an attempt to ameliorate the influence of the present society, is of a wholly different order from the actualization of full maturity and autonomy, which requires a complete societal transformation which cannot even be currently foreseen. As the final part of this essay, I will examine this theme of educating for maturity, since it is within this precise theme that we can discern the simultaneous proximity to Kant's original endeavour and the unbreachable distance in Adorno's works. Far from Adorno's works being infused by a more optimistic substance with his incorporation of Kant's definition of enlightenment, it is Kant's more optimistic approach which becomes infused with a more pessimistic substance.

Such a proximity and distance can be demonstrated by turning to 'What is Orientation in Thinking?'. Here, Kant displays a clear interest in the prospects of education for enlightenment:

Thus it is quite easy to ground enlightenment in *individual subjects* through their education; one must only begin early to accustom young minds to this reflection. But to enlighten an age is very slow and arduous; for there are external obstacles which in part forbid this manner of education and in part make it more difficult. (WOT, 8: 146)

There are many notable parallels here with Adorno's ideas on education for maturity. Kant, albeit in a different manner to Adorno, recognizes enormous external impediments to enlightenment, an aspect of his work that Adorno has not sufficiently grappled with. There is a notable parallel in the focus on childhood in the works of both authors, with Adorno, albeit in a more Freudian manner, emphasizing that early childhood experiences are a crucial step in the development of an ego which can withstand external authorities.

Yet, the differences in the understanding of the external obstacles to enlightenment introduce an unbreachable distance between the two thinkers. Such a difference is seen in Adorno's discussion of Kant's famous distinction, that while we do not live in an enlightened age, we nonetheless live in an age of ongoing enlightenment (Adorno and Becker 1999: 29; WIE, 8: 40). Whereas Kant believes he can discern clear signs of the dissolution of 'hindrances to universal enlightenment' all around him (WIE, 8: 40), the faint rays of the dawn of an enlightened age appearing on the horizon, Adorno cannot share such optimism.

For him, the idea that we are in an age of ongoing enlightenment ‘must be questionable in the light of the enormous pressure which is exerted on people simply through the way the external world is arranged and also through the methodical control of the whole inner world by the culture industry in its widest sense’ (Adorno and Becker 1999: 29).

Indeed, due to the intensity of the external impediments to enlightenment, Adorno expresses great scepticism about the capacity of the enlightened, mature individual to appear. Even the individual who has become mature, be that through fortune or education, can revert to immaturity, due to the overwhelming external pressure (Adorno and Becker 1999: 31). For the maturity to have any effect, it needs to be ‘established everywhere, really in every aspect of our lives’ (*ibid.*, 30). Yet, such ‘serious attempts to intervene in order to alter our world in any specific area immediately come up against the overwhelming force of inertia in the prevailing situation, and seem condemned to impotence’ (*ibid.*, 31). While the lesser forms of maturity, then, can appear within the present society, Adorno emphasizes that the larger societal context renders such maturity instable and nearly impotent. There is little wonder that this is the case: after all, Adorno consistently emphasizes that ‘the objective theory of society, in as much as society is an autonomous totality confronting living individuals, has priority over psychology, which cannot address the decisive factors’ (Adorno 1998c: 270). Yet, while these lesser forms serve important roles in terms of resisting the current barbarity, the ultimate goal remains the creation of a societal utopia, in brief, the ideal of a ‘mature society’, which would enable the maturity to be established everywhere.

Since Adorno identifies such extreme barriers to the establishment of any form of maturity, the optimism imputed to these later works seems overstated. Yet, one cannot characterize his position as one of pessimistic resignation. While there is no guarantee of progress, and while the enlightened age which Adorno wishes to create can scarcely be discerned in the thick darkness of our present societies, there is yet hope to be found, precisely in reflection on our own incapacity to effect the necessary changes (Adorno and Becker 1999: 32). A qualified optimism shines through Adorno’s works, thoroughly imbued with an awareness of the near impossibility of realizing enlightenment, of creating a societal utopia. To give Adorno the last word, despite the overwhelming societal pressures, and despite the seeming futility of our attempts, ‘education and enlightenment can still manage a little something’ (Adorno 1998b: 304).

4. Conclusion: The Enlightened Adorno

At the beginning of this article, we saw how Adorno has frequently been depicted as a counter-enlightened figure. According to these critics, the experience of the horrors of the Second World War, in which it appeared that the ‘last sparks of reason’ were ‘being extinguished from this reality’, reverberates through his entire works, leading his critical theory to a pessimistic dead-end in which all hope in the rational potential of the Enlightenment and modernity is lost (Habermas 1987: 117).

The untenability of this reading has been demonstrated in this article. In his engagements with Kant, a far more enlightened Adorno appears. In the 1959 lectures, far from rejecting the rational potential of enlightenment, it is the tepidity of Kant’s conception which is subjected to criticism: how the subjective and theoretical fetters Kant places on enlightenment prevent the conceptualization of a radical enlightenment which aims at the full actualization of reason. In the later works, we saw Adorno attempting to unleash Kant from the previously identified fetters, enabling Kant to adequately target what are, for Adorno, the societal causes of our immaturity. This newly unleashed Kant comes to play a central role in these later works, with Adorno borrowing the concept of maturity repeatedly to define the precondition and goal of his own critical theory. In these engagements the clear, enlightened intention of Adorno’s works shines forth. Far from surrendering to hopelessness, throughout the course of this discussion we saw how Adorno ultimately discovers in Kant’s enlightenment some sparks of reason which the darkness of our present society has not extinguished, and which, one day, might yet be fanned into flames.

Notes

- 1 This claim is repeated in such a wide range of texts that it is impossible to provide an exhaustive overview here. Some of the more recent examples can be found in Ferrone 2015: 30; Outram 2013: 6; Bronner 2004: 3. Such a claim is even found in specialist discussions: see Rose 1978: 138. However, the dominant (and correct) view, found in many specialist discussions of Adorno, note that the *Dialectic* addresses processes far too expansive to be confined to a historical period. For one example see Shuster 2020: 251.
- 2 A similar idea is found in Axel Honneth’s work from the same period, in which Adorno is understood as one of the most radical critics of the European Enlightenment by viewing the rationalization of society (and modernity as a whole) as nothing more than ‘the infliction of violence on the human body’ (Honneth 1986: 48).
- 3 This malleability is explained by the fundamental disconnect between the historical period of the Enlightenment and later philosophical and political discussions. As James Schmidt correctly notes, ‘everyone . . . winds up inventing the Enlightenment their account requires’ (2012: 45; see also Edelstein 2010: 116–18).

- 4 It is important to note that I will not discuss the critique of Kant's enlightenment found in the chapter 'Juliette, or Enlightenment and Morality' from the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Despite Adorno and Horkheimer claiming full responsibility for 'every sentence' of the *Dialectic* (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: xi), many critics have noted that the chapter in which the criticisms of Kant's enlightenment appear is primarily penned by Horkheimer. See, for instance, Hammer 2006: 43. Since Adorno does not seem responsible for this critique of Kant, it falls outside the bounds of this article.
- 5 Parenthetical references to Kant's writings refer to the volume and page number(s) of the Royal Prussian Academy edition (*Kants gesammelte Schriften*), which are included in the margins of the translations. English translations are taken from the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*. I will use the following acronyms in this paper: WIE = 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?' (in Kant 1996a: 15–22); WOT = 'What is Orientation in Thinking?' (in Kant 1996b: 1–18).
- 6 For instance, MacDonald 2011: 670; Finlayson 2002: 6; Schmidt 2014; Cook 2018: 123–51.
- 7 For instance, J. G. Finlayson, when delineating the virtues at the heart of Adorno's ethics of resistance, places his emphasis on maturity in a central role, along with humility and affection (2002: 6).
- 8 Deborah Cook usefully summarizes this idea as follows: 'Adorno claims identity thinking and exchange relations are isomorphic because thought mirrors the prevailing mode of exchange in a given society' (2011: 5).
- 9 The similarity of the two terms is doubtless to blame for Finlayson's misquotation in which 'autonomy' (*Autonomie*) is replaced by 'maturity': "'the single genuine power standing against the principle of Auschwitz is *Mündigkeit* [...]" (Finlayson 2002: 6).
- 10 The distinction between negative and positive freedom in this section is borrowed from Freyenhagen 2013: 87.
- 11 One of Adorno's concrete, if somewhat ludicrous suggestions, is that due to the greater barbarity of the countryside, roving bands of educators should be sent from the cities as to enlighten them (Adorno 1998b: 196).

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