# *Natural Conditions of (Kantian) Majority*
## A reflection about the nature of the enlightened mind.

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**Introduction**

In absolutist Prussia in the year 1784, Kant published a short essay in response to the question 'What is enlightenment?' This text contributed to a debate put forward by the journal *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, which had initially posed this question to a (mostly academic) public. In relation to Kant's major works, such as the three *Critiques*, this text certainly has a minor status. It does not focus on philosophical justifications, it is polemical in style, it is historical rather than *a priori*, and it is also, in some passages, a great piece of rhetoric. This absence of meticulous academic rigor, on the other hand, allows for a much more spontaneous and less refined reaction from the reader than, say, the attempt to understand the *Critique of Pure Reason*. It is no coincidence that this essay should have become one of Kant's most famous texts. Yet, it would be a mistake to say that this peripheral text is so well-known just because it lacks the philosophical content or weight of Kant's other, more central writings. On the contrary: as a more casual text, this essay has to be seen as an expression of Kant's philosophical insights. It is like a casual remark that often enough gives away more of the real character of a person than any elaborate, intellectual self-presentation.

This is, at least, the way I will treat Kant's answer to the question 'What is enlightenment?' I want to show how several key concepts of this minor work, in particular the idea of humanity's ascension to a state of 'majority' or 'maturity', are related to some of the central ideas of Kant's

critical philosophy. For Kant, the answer to the question, ‘What is enlightenment?’, has to focus on reason's outstanding ability to judge by itself, that is (in Kantian vocabulary), to judge autonomously. His philosophical corpus can now be seen as an extensive articulation of what it means to understand human reasoning as an essentially autonomous capacity. Thus, by tracking the connections of Kant's conception of enlightenment to the more theoretical framework of his major works, I want to shed light on some of the complications that arise when one tries to spell out the conditions, consequences and implications of this focal ideal of Western modernity. It will turn out that one recurring problem of Kant's theorization is the relationship between the alleged autonomy of reason to its natural origins: how can reason be, at once, autonomous *and* natural?[1]

**The two senses of *Unmündigkeit***

Kant famously opens his text giving a direct answer to the question asked: Enlightenment, he states, is ‘man's release from his self-incurred minority’. The English translation hides that this seemingly positive definition is in fact just a negation. The German word Kant uses, *Unmündigkeit*, signifies the absence of *Mündigkeit*. But what is *Mündigkeit?* It can be translated as ‘maturity’, ‘accountability', ‘responsibility', ‘self-ownership' or, what seems to be the best fit for Kant's specific use, ‘autonomy'. Accordingly, one can find several English versions of the opening sentence, in which enlightenment is defined as being man's release, variously, from ‘immaturity’, 'tutelage', or ‘minority’.[2] This linguistic difference between German and English allows for an interesting problematization of Kant's initial definition of Enlightenment. The two most common translations of *Unmündigkeit,* ‘immaturity' and ‘minority', belong to contexts which differ

1 There is currently a fair amount of debate on the question of the ‘normativity’ of nature, or ‘second nature’ (cf. Thompson 2008; McDowell 2000). This short text might be seen as an investigation into the Kantian origins of this discussion.

2 Thanks to Brandon Absher, who pointed this out and thus helped me substantially.

in a telling way.[3]

The first English term, ‘immaturity', expresses a normative judgment about the mental or general constitution of a person. An immature person is, for example, not willing to assume responsibility for what he or she has done. Even though it is possible to extend this judgment to persons old and young, its governing norm seems to be derived from an implicit ideal line of moral and mental development in human beings. An immature person – whether a child or not – behaves childishly, irrationally, just in the way grown-ups should not behave. The point here is that this moral judgment of maturity has an indirect link to the normal, natural path of human development. It can function as a normative criticism only if the persons accused of immaturity actually *could* display the signs of self-control, respect and responsibility which are tied to this concept. It is assumed that they have at least the capacity to act as they should act, that they are ‘mature’ in the sense of ‘fully developed’. Otherwise, the judgment of immaturity would lose its normative force. We will see that this mixture of naturalism and normativity plays an important part in Kant's global qualification of the Enlightenment.

This meaning of *Unmündigkeit* as immaturity has to be distinguished from the other, purely legalistic meanings of ‘minority’ as ‘being a minor’. A minor, in this second sense, is a citizen excluded from certain public or legal affairs, most often due to his or her age. This exclusion might be justified with a moral reasoning using the same mixture of naturalism and normativity discussed above. It can be said, for example, that persons below a certain age are simply incapable of fulfilling the demands required of by full citizenship.[4] Such an explanation, however, is not coextensive with the

3 The German word *Unmündigkeit* is ambiguous with respect to the two meanings, ‘minor’ and ‘immature’. This is why we find diverging English versions of the first opening sentence, with Kant's definition of Enlightenment being translated as ‘man's release from his self-incurred tutelage’ (Lewis White Beck), ‘man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity’, and, finally, as ‘man's release from his self-incurred minority’ (Mary Gregor). I will refer to Mary Gregor’s translation, which renders *Unmündigkeit* in English as ‘minority’.

4 This sort of wisdom even found its way into the Constitution of the United States, which states that a only citizens thirty-five years old or older are eligible for the office. (Art. II, Sec. I.)

juridical distinction itself. One might well be legally excluded from the sphere of public affairs and yet be ‘mature’ in the sense of having fully developed the capacity of rational self-control. We could judge such a person as being ‘premature', thus indicating that the person has reached a level of maturity well ahead of his or her peers. Nevertheless, the legal status of minority would still hold.

Now, the German word *Unmündigkeit* does not allow for such a dissociation. A certain behavior is *unmündig* if it resembles the doings of a child, if it does not display the signs of mature, rational self-control. But you could also call a person *unmündig* in the second, formal sense. In this use, the *Unmündigkeit* describes a legal state, an exclusion due purely to formal criteria. As a consequence, the term *Unmündigkeit* requires a certain unpacking with respect to its proper meaning.

My thesis is that Kant's characterization of the Enlightenment relies on this double meaning. Kant tells his contemporaries that they do not live up to the possibilities offered by the Enlightenment, and such a charge always includes two separate judgments: 1) that a new space for action and thinking has been opened up, historically, promising new and better forms of life, and 2) that this new area could be occupied immediately, if only some of the obstacles could be removed. The historical transition of the Enlightenment is equivalent to the formal sense of *Mündigkeit*: the human being has finally reached a state where it has outgrown any dependence on an exterior ‘tutelage'. The civilization of the age of Enlightenment has grown up; it is now set free. But what is lacking, according to Kant, is the actual use of these newly gained possibilities: humankind as a whole still behaves immaturely, it still shies away from the new terrain. The ambiguity of the German *Mündigkeit* allows Kant to present this double diagnosis with great rhetorical and moral force: If we are still *unmündig* in the sense of that we don’t behave ‘maturely enough’, and if *Mündigkeit* is a state that has already been reached formally, then ‘us’ – that is, Kant's contemporaries – are all that is left to bear the blame for this ‘self-incurred minority’.

**The Paradoxical Nature of Emancipation**

How should we understand this thesis? The use of *unmündig* in Kant's writing is, of course, highly metaphorical. The legal meaning of this term can only be applied to 'humanity' as a whole as an analogy, since there is no such thing as a godlike legislator who releases the human species into the formal state of majority. But there is something very much akin to this sovereignty in Kant's text – Nature. Kant's use of *unmündig* rests on an implicit understanding of nature and of reason's relation to it, an understanding that is more explicitly stated in other 'minor' writings of the same period, like the 'Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose'. Kant sees Nature in the double-role of creator and legislator: it is both the source of our capacity to reason, and the normative standard of its proper application. The difficulties with understanding Kant's 'definition' of enlightenment, then, turn out to be the difficulties of this overloaded, if not paradoxical, concept of nature.

A closer look at 'What is Enlightenment?' might help to develop this point. In the first paragraph, Kant introduces the now well-known slogan *Sapere aude!*: 'Dare to be wise!' (AK 8:35). Slogans or mottoes were a commonly-used device to convey the goal or aspirations which unite a group of people – a family, a university, even a nation. The Enlightenment, Kant is implicitly saying, is a movement driven by a group of people who dare to emancipate themselves, who dare to think for themselves. Their courage distinguishes them from the immature masses, whose minority is 'self-imposed', Kant explains, because 'its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it [understanding] without guidance from another' (AK 8:35).

This rhetoric of a daring avant-garde raises the question of why this group does, in fact, *need* to unite under such a reassuring motto. Why is it daring, why does it require courage to emancipate oneself? Instead of an explanation, the following paragraph offers a list of all of the self-proclaimed guardians who aspire to hinder us from living up to the

Enlightenment ideal of a mature, or major, form of thinking. This list, of course, points at the usual suspects: the church, the physician or, more generally, the unquestioned authority of ‘a book’. This passage still echoes with the feud between the protestant church, to which the pietist Kant belonged, and the Roman Catholic Church. And it also alludes to the growing dissatisfaction with absolutist regimes throughout Europe.

Given this list, we might conclude that courage is required, because all these authorities were actively suppressing our minds. But even though the whole text is a plea for the freedom of academic, ‘public’[5] exchange, Kant does not develop a theory of ideological oppression. He remains focused on defining what Enlightenment is, and from this perspective, courage is not only required to fend off the influence of others, it is also, and above all, essential in the struggle of the rational subject with itself. According to Kant, the real problem is that we, as reasonable individuals, let those self-proclaimed supervisors take over too easily. We find it a burden, he claims, to think for ourselves; and these people readily jump in to release us from this burden. We must not put the blame entirely on them. Kant wants us to see that we are also part of the problem, since it is so much more comfortable to bow to these authorities—so comfortable that we are, as Kant explicitly says, even ready to ‘pay’ for our self-incurred minority (AK 8:35).

Why is it then, in Kant's opinion, so much more comfortable to live under the guidance of others? Kant offers us a short, but significant explanation: ‘it is because of laziness and cowardice that so great a part of humankind, after nature has long since emancipated them from other's people direction (*naturaliter maiorennes*), nevertheless gladly remains minors for life’ (AK 8:35). At a first glance, this phrase seems just to reinstate the diagnosed lack of courage. But the subordinate clause gives a

5 Kant does not use the word 'public' in this modern sense. His distinction between ‘public’ and ‘private’ in the essay is notoriously puzzling, since the word ‘private’ refers to the exercise of thought within the state, which, as a result of this, remains unconditionally bound to and by its laws and principles. The only real ‘public’ sphere is the sphere of academic discourse, which Kant regards, in modern terms, as a private business. (‘Think what you want, but obey!’)

hint as to why courage is required: laziness and cowardice become the only reasons left for the deplorable state of affairs *after the natural constraints on thinking have been lifted*. Thinking, be it major/mature or minor/immature, requires some sort of guidance for Kant. This is scarcely controversial in the case of a natural state of minority, as in childhood. When Kant talks about 'other people's direction', he is alluding to the natural fact that the first steps into the thinking world can never be made alone. To put it in a more modern language: the growing child, in order to develop its cognitive capacities, has to be *led* by the grown-ups it interacts with. The child acquires the necessary capacities only by the means of a *joint* attention and interaction with individuals who are more competent (Tomasello 1999). But Kant extends the requisite of guidance well beyond the development of the child. The movement to majority is a shift with respect to the *source* of the guidelines and principles, but not with respect to its very necessity. The grown-up is not devoid of (the need for) guidance, but rather has to guide herself. And this seems to be, for Kant, a hard and mostly unrewarding practice. Establishing your own guidelines is a cumbersome task, one that will most likely put you in an uncomfortable confrontation with those people who are used to treating you like a child.

The idea that the (grown-up) human mind is still in need of guidance, and the corresponding notion that, in order to be called 'free', thinking has to guide *itself*, is central to Kant's entire philosophy. This connection of freedom, thinking and the idea of self-legislation laid the foundation for the rise of the German Idealism and its speculative force. Why is it necessary to exercise a philosophical *critique*, to launch into a critical examination into the powers of reason? The very first sentence of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* explains that reason has the 'peculiar fate' of being 'burdened by questions which … it is not able to ignore, but which … it is also not able to answer. The perplexity into which it thus falls is not due to any fault of its own' (A VII). A critique, then, forces itself upon us because the use of reason is *not* self-evident. Lacking natural guidance, reason can run into paradoxes and perplexities, thus 'precipitat[ing] itself into darkness and

contradictions' that create a 'battle-field of endless controversies ... called metaphysics' (A VII) The valuable instrument of reason has to be used the right way, or it might render itself useless, possibly even destroy itself.

It is important to distinguish this position from, for example, anthropological explanations of the human being's lack of freedom. There might be a human desire to be guided, a sort of psychological tendency to regression, but that is not Kant's point. Rather, Kant is claiming that the power of reason is of this 'peculiar' sort, a sort which needs reflexive guidance in order to *function* properly. This is not a psychological demand, but a logical prerequisite which establishes a normative conception of mind. Accordingly, Kant's critical philosophy sets out to determine the measures and standards to which a proper use of reason *should* conform in order to avoid confusions and endless dialectical quarrels.

In 'What is Enlightenment?', Kant explicitly connects the requirement of self-guidance with the image of a release from Nature which (acting here in the grammatical role of a subject) has 'emancipated' the lazy and cowardly people. Contrary to a widespread understanding of Kant's philosophical views, this construction does not allow a strict opposition between reason and nature. In claiming that Nature itself *emancipates* the human being, the text situates reason as a paradoxical continuation of the human being's natural origin. On one side, Kant appears to want to say that it is part of nature's plan that the human being acquires reason, and hence the possibility to guide itself. We are predetermined to become reasonable: that is how we mature. But, by definition, this natural determination falls short of its final goal. When Kant speaks of nature 'releasing' us from its 'direction', he claims that this natural overcoming of nature leads us to a realm where nature no longer has a hold on us – the realm of freedom. Consequently, there is no longer a way for *Nature* to ensure that we use this freedom in a proper way. In giving up its guiding role, *Nature* leaves us alone with our capacity to reason, allowing us to get tangled up in the dark fields of metaphysics. The last step has to be made by the human being, who has to find out how to use its freedom in a proper way: a critical

self-examination of reason, the work of the *Critiques*, becomes necessary.

Even though the human being is emancipated, the naturally given structure of its ripened capacity to think requires a new form of guidance and legislation to which it should conform. But this new form of guidance can, by the very definition of reason's new status as an *emancipated* power, be found only within reason itself. Nature can no longer help. Which means, of course, that there is no natural guarantee of *successful* emancipation, since the very need to guide oneself also implies the freedom to remain under other people's 'lifelong direction', of not living up to the possibilities conceded by nature. This is the paradoxical result of a teleology of emancipation.

I don't see how we can make sense of Kant's rhetoric and passion in this text without taking into account the paradoxical position of the human being with respect to its nature. It seems that nature has called on the human being to emancipate itself, but, like every mother, she cannot rely on her child to be obedient. For Kant, though, there are signs that we shall use this freedom in the *right* way. It is not only that the rational reconstruction of reason – the philosophical project of the *Critique* – allows us to understand that we have to live up to these consequences if we want to be true to our self-understanding as rational animals. There is also the speculation, put forth in the third thesis of Kant's 'Idea for a Universal History', a text he published the same year as the essay we are discussing. He writes there: 'For nature is not superfluous and is not wasteful in the use of its means to attend its ends. The mere fact that it gave human beings the faculty of reason and the freedom of the will based on this faculty is a clear indication of its intent with regard to its endowments. They were intended neither to be led by instinct, nor to be supplied and instructed with innate knowledge; they were intended to produce everything themselves' (AK 8:19). We will see how this double-structure touches, and in a way contaminates, the very idea of freedom Kant develops extensively in his critical philosophy – his understanding of freedom as autonomy.

**The Call for Autonomy**

Kant would not have pursued the task of critical philosophy – i.e., to establish guidelines for a *free* capacity of reasoning which, because of this very freedom, is always vulnerable to paralyzing perplexities – if he had not thought that he had figured out a possible resolution to this paradox. The fact of Nature's emancipation of reason does not leave reason, as it were, utterly at a loss. On the contrary: the path that leads to a way out of the dialectical self-misunderstandings that stump reason (the antinomy between freedom and law, for example) is a *reflection* of this very condition. This reflection leads Kant to a position that links freedom (and free reasoning) to autonomy. Even though we seem to have lost something (having been 'freed' from other people's direction), we find that our new condition has its own structure, even its own law. The result is a transition from a negative conception of freedom to a positive, determinate one. Freedom, then, is not just the absence of determination. It is also positively defined as the possibility of reason fully (that is, rationally) to determine itself. The fact that nature releases the human being from its tutelage is intrinsically tied to the obligation (if not the call or vocation) to *use* reason in the correct and proper way.

Seen from this perspective, the *Critiques* are reflexive exercises of reason in which reason learns how to stay earnest. Human reasoning moderates its speculative ambitions and thus finds its proper way of operating. The concept of *autonomy* is intrinsic to this conception. Autonomy is the capacity of reason to judge according to its own measures, and, for Kant, reason *is* autonomous by definition: 'the power to judge autonomously—that is, [judging] freely (according to principles of thought in general)—is called reason', Kant says in the *Conflicts of the Faculties* (AK 7:27). The passage shows that Kant's idea of free reasoning has nothing to do with the liberal conception of negative freedom. There is no such thing

for Kant as unregulated thought.[6] Free reasoning is different from heteronymous reasoning only with respect to the source, or determination, of its standards. This construction is, of course, normative: autonomy depicts an ideal, one to which our rational thinking does not always conform —precisely Kant's point in the text about Enlightenment. But every judgment that claims to be reasonable in that demanding sense has to fulfill this requirement: it must meet the standards that reason has legislated to itself.

We have reached the point from where we can see that the claim of reason's autonomy pervades the whole of Kant's philosophy. His more technical philosophical theses all reflect the idea that autonomy is not just an ideal, but is *in fact* the reality about any conduct that can properly be called rational. In his epistemological writings, Kant argues that we are able to understand nature because what happens in science, when we look closely at it, is that reason understands itself. Science, to put it in a formula, is reasonable for Kant not because it talks about the world out there, but because it talks about, and thus represents, the very way that reason organizes our experience in order to make it intelligible. In Kant's moral philosophy, every determination of the will is morally good which takes reason's law (the categorical imperative) as the standard measure of all action. Here again, autonomy is the explicit key to an understanding of the fact of morality. And the third *Critique* defends the idea that the capacity of judgment, while not reducible to the legislative reason with which the other two critiques are concerned, still has an autonomous sphere of legislation – which opens it to philosophical analysis.[7] To sum it up in an appropriately ambiguous formula: for Kant, autonomy is the nature of reason.

## Conditions of autonomy

6 Cf. Kant's description of the genius as someone who is not just lawless, but who gives himself his *own* laws (AK 8:145). A good discussion of this can be found in Onora O'Neill (2003, 13ff.).

7 For a discussion of the role of '*Urteilskraft*' and its relation to Kant's moral and theoretical philosophy, see Wieland 2001, paragraph 10.

I have introduced the topic of Kantian autonomy by way of an analysis of Kant's claim that Nature emancipates the human being. In order to live up to this expectation of emancipation, Reason has to find its proper way of operating. That is what Kant's critical philosophy is about. Now, Kant is a typical representative of traditional European philosophy in one sense: the only way that reason can, and eventually does, find its own autonomy is through reasoning, through the act of *thinking*. This is implicit in the theoretical framework of Kant's epistemological theory, and it is made explicit in Kant's moral philosophy.[8] There is also an hint at this in his text about the Enlightenment, where he claims: 'For this Enlightenment, however, nothing is required but freedom […] namely, freedom to make *public use* of one's reason in all matters' (AK 8:36). The public use of force, for example, is not part of that requirement.

Kant's positive affirmation of the force of reason squares perfectly with the polemical description of 'sectarian philosophy' given by Christian Thomasius (1655-1728), an early Enlightenment jurist, philosopher and social reformer. Thomasius fiercely attacked any species of philosophy which holds that 'man's nature consists in thinking and that the welfare and happiness of the whole human race depends on the correct arrangement of thought'.[9] Sectarian philosophers of that ilk, he continues, believe that 'the will is improved through the understanding', and moreover 'that it is within human capacity to live virtuously and happily'.

Kant would, of course, have agreed with all of this. Certainly, it is within the capacity of the human being to find its own way to a virtuous, maybe even happy, life: the way to that is paved by *thinking*. Kant knows that thinking cannot perform magic, but he also holds that it and it alone can show us the way to go. This capacity is constitutive of human dignity. We do

8 Kant does not deny the Aristotelian idea that it is necessary to cultivate oneself in order to learn to act 'the right way' in unforeseen situations, but there is, for him, no constitutive link between this *habitus* and the idea of morality, which is purely rational. To put it differently: even though freedom and moral law are 'facts' of reason, they are still facts of *reason*.

9 This and the following passage from Thomasius are to be found in Hunter (2000, 598).

not just follow authorities: we are able to judge for ourselves.

This view, however, raises a general problem which Kant's systematic conception of autonomy allows us to articulate. Autonomy, we have said, is understood as reason's capacity to judge according to its *own* measures and principles. This construction presupposes that there is something like a *realm* or a *space* in which reason is occupied with itself alone. This condition is semantically reflected in Kant's repeated use of expressions like *pure* reason or *pure* willing. These metaphors indicate that a line is drawn, a line that separates the possible content of autonomous (reasonable) reflection from its correlate. Empirical knowledge, for example, can only be valid knowledge for Kant if certain categorical conditions are met *independently* of the empirical disposition of the subject. Even though Kant calls the structure of these forms of intuition 'subjective', this transcendental subjectivity is independent of our empirical subjectivity and thus should better be called 'objective'.[10] Reason (in the form of *understanding*, *Verstand*) is the guarantee of objectivity. In reflecting about the conditions of possibility of such objectivity, reason just meets itself, becoming 'pure' reflection.

We have seen that this sort of self-reflection is Kant's way out of the paradox of emancipation. Even though mature reason is devoid of Nature's guidance, it can establish its own guidelines by reflecting upon its condition. The notion of a 'pure' subjectivity encapsulates this solution. The very structure of this argument relies on the idea that any non-rational contamination of such a pure reflectivity has to be dismissed as an 'alien' or 'foreign' factor that would destroy reason's autonomy, and thus its essential capacity to find its own way after Nature has released it from its tutelage.[11]

The Cartesian motivation behind this aspiration to 'purity' is evident. In the name of the autonomy of reason, everything that is thought to be indispensable for certain cognitive and volitional tasks must be put on the side of reason. Otherwise, the ideal of self-legislation by means of *thinking*

10 For a clarification on this line, see Daston and Galison (2007, 207ff.)

11 Onara O'Neill identifies the negation of 'alien' forces as the key point of autonomy (2003, 10). John McDowell uses the same metaphor in *Mind and World* (2000, 8).

would be crucially undermined and underdetermined. The price to be paid for this extension of reason is a continuous alienation from the human being's empirical nature. The whole system eventually requires the construction of a transcendental subjectivity which is not only outside the empirical sphere, but, in order to maintain the rational intelligibility of knowledge as such, serves as its very condition. A transcendental subject is a fine thing, because it allows one to place 'reason' and its pure acts in an isolated sphere where it does not interfere with empirical reality, thus guaranteeing at least the *possibility* of autonomy. But, at the same time, this construction requires us to swallow some strong philosophical claims – for example, about the 'thing in itself', or about the purely rational nature of morality. Chief among these claims, I would argue, is the problem we have encountered in Kant's definition of the enlightenment: what exactly is the nature of this transcendental subjectivity, which seems to be *part* of nature and its teleology at the same time that it is *distinct* from it to the degree that it can be called autonomous?

Michel Foucault hit upon a nice expression to capture the problem at the heart of Kantian anthropology: the human being, as described by Kant, is, Foucault says, an 'empirico-transcendental double'.[12] The divide between the transcendental subject and the empirical subject is not as clear as Kant would like to have it. There are numerous inconsistencies and tensions once one tries to articulate their relation. One way to get hold of the dubious nature of the transcendental subject is its lack of a body. The Kantian subject, as McDowell puts it, is reduced to nothing more than a 'mere point of view', a pure transcendental perspective.[13] As a 'mere' point of view or a fleshless eye, it shares none of the material factors that are the usual requirements for human knowledge. The transcendental subject is neither identical with its brain, nor with any individual body in general; it is not even associated with a soul. The transcendental subject is a *formal* subject, a formalized notion of subjectivity that nevertheless relies heavily on the

12 Foucault (1970, chap. 9).
13 McDowell (2000, 102).

possibility of the ‘I think’, which, Kant argues, must be able to accompany all representations.

Such a formal notion of subjectivity was a hard sell even in Kant’s own time. For us, in the age of neuroscience, sociology and Darwinian biology, it is hard to believe that the body and its structure have nothing to do with the functioning of reason.[14] The Kantian insistence that the analysis of reason has nothing to do with its ontogenesis since it is just articulating the *form* of a meaningful world begs the question, since the categorical division of form and content is precisely the problem. Take, for example, the pivotal role Kant attributes to the notion of synthesis, which he defines as the ‘action of the understanding on sensibility’ (B 151).[15] Synthesis is supposed to arrange the manifold of sense in such a way that it ‘matches' the form provided by the understanding, thus rendering it intelligible. Contemporary Kantians like McDowell tend to downplay the role of synthesis, emphasizing instead the logical requisite for knowledge to be traceable to rational concepts *and* to sensible intuitions (empirical representations). But this less metaphysical presentation of Kant renders his philosophy much more commonsensical, and thus misrepresents its conceptual problem. Kant's claim is not only that we need a categorical system in order to understand an empirical claim at all; the more challenging proposition is that philosophical reflection can reveal the necessary forms of *all* possible representations, independent of time and space. In the absence of this strong claim, the pivotal role of *reflection* would be undermined, making the very definition of rationality, and thus our self-understanding as rational beings, vulnerable to the contingent influence of 'alien' forces such as history, chance and causal arrangements. Hume's skepticism looms. In order to find its true autonomy, reason has to find a place beyond the determination of the material world.

14 For the ‘cognitivist’ approach of embodied cognition, see Gallagher (2005), Evan Thompson (2007), and Noë (2005). The whole discussion, of course, is not new. More traditional philosophical approaches can be found, among others, in the works of Spinoza, Hegel, Wittgenstein, Merleau-Ponty, Deleuze and Foucault.

15 Cf. for a good discussion along these lines, the chapter entitled ‘Synthesis’, in Bubner (1992).

The essentially atemporal structure of mind expresses Kant's solution to the paradoxical teleology of emancipation. Thus, the problematic nature of Kant's formal notion of subjectivity is shown particularly clearly if one follows Kant's own conviction that it is *Nature* which emancipates us (or, at least, that it is *Nature* which prepares the way for us to emancipate ourselves). If reason is a natural gift, it must be linked, it seems, to the development of the organized living body. A mature reason is a reason that has grown *with* the body, according to its intrinsic bodily teleology. And even if we accept the idea that the resulting mind has reached, in some way, a certain formal independence with regard to its bodily origins, the question remains whether even this autonomy is not still structurally dependent on its very embodiment.

We should note here that Kant is not saying that the ‘body’, or more generally the material structure of the world, does not *influence* the way we think. Kant would never have denied that; his whole ethical philosophy tries to come to terms with the affective influence [*Neigung*] of the empirical subject by its bodily nature. But he claims that this influence can be seen as an 'alien' force in the aforementioned sense, that is, as something which *deflects* the way we think, but does not destroy, or even touch, the constitutive *norms* governing the very nature of reason properly understood.

The problem is a tension that we can bring out through the opposition of two claims. For one, Kant reproduces the classical intellectualist hierarchy of body and soul. He suggests that mind, even though it is in one way or another empirically dependent on the body, supervenes on it in such a way that it can *emancipate* itself from its bodily ties. There might be influence, but there is also the possibility of a separate ('pure') terrain where thinking regains its sovereignty—Plato's Cave is one vivid articulation of this deeply rooted conviction of Western thought. It is not surprising, then, that we should find a close connection between the emanicipatory idea of Enlightenment and Kant's articulated theory of the thinking mind.

But, on the other hand, there is also what would we could call Kant's empiricism, which unremittingly turns the emancipated mind back to its

(empirical, and thus ‘alien' or 'foreign') origins. Contrary to Plato (or to what is generally perceived as Plato's position[16]), Kant takes great pains to incorporate the empiricist insight that we can only learn *from* nature, that we can only learn via (in the case of science: experimental) *interaction* with the world, and not by thinking alone. And so, while there might be, in Kant, the possibility of a withdrawal from the exigencies of the world, this territory of 'pure' subjectivity has no standing on its own. Kant's intellectualism is inconsistent in that it grants our empirical nature a *necessary* part in the constitution of knowledge. We might retreat from the world of appearances in order to clean up our own house; but we cannot stay inside.

If this reconstruction of Kant's central ideas is right, it is not surprising that the concept of nature turns out to be the Achilles' heel of his philosophy. Form and content have to be related to each other, there has to be some kind of *access* or *connection* between them.[17] For Kant, this relation and its stability seem to be implicitly guaranteed by the natural teleology we have distilled out of Kant's text about the Enlightenment.

The paradoxical structure of Kant's 'solution' to the problem of emancipation turns out to be the echo of a still more deeply rooted ‘paradox of autonomy’, as David Forman calls it. If we take Kant seriously, we come to the conclusion that the theory of transcendental subjectivity demands that ‘thought remains autonomous even with respect to the world from which it gains empirical content’ – that is, ‘thought must be autonomous from the world but also externally constrained by or, more generally, integrated into the world’.[18] The relation of body and mind is just a very prominent example where this tension comes to the fore.

**In Place of a Conclusion**

It should be clear by now that we cannot dispel the paradoxes we have encountered simply by accepting a certain ‘bodily’ influence on our

16 An alternative understanding of Plato's ‘ideas’ can be found in Wieland (1982).
17 This, of course, is exactly what Hegel argues against Kant.
18 Forman (2008, 565).

thinking. Such a proposal just reiterates the problematic assumption that there are 'two' spheres to begin with – two separate realms, call them body and mind, call them thinking and empirical content. But is there a way to think 'autonomy' or, to return to the subject of the conference, an emancipated 'majority' of thought without such a supposition?

One way to proceed would be to refuse this question. The problem of emancipation, and therefore of 'majority' and 'autonomy', should not be thought of in terms of *thinking*. Both the demand of autonomy, as well as our criteria for its fulfillment, are relative to a certain historical movement and have to be accepted as such. In short, Enlightenment and its ideal of autonomy are tightly wedded to the rise of bourgeois liberalism, and if we want to understand the political implications of 'majority', we have to relate it to this historical situation.[19] If we are more interested in the ethical implications, we should note the family resemblances between Kant's notion of a self-standing capacity to think and act and the long tradition of ethical perfectionism and character molding.[20] If we are grappling with the epistemological aspect of 'autonomous thinking', we should question the underlying image of science and compare it with the reality of research that has, of late, been receiving much attention.[21]

Kant's philosophy is, as is often the case, of great use in that it gives a philosophical intuition a strong and consequent articulation. This helps us all the better, more than two hundred years later, to see the problems and pitfalls associated with it. In the end, Kant's attempt to link autonomy, legal 'majority', natural 'maturity' and epistemology shows us that 'these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all, but that they are related to one another in many different ways. [..] For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all,

19 I would like to thank Oliver Marchart for this reminder.

20 An alternative to the conception of autonomy could be the notion of 'self-governance'. Cf. Jacobs (2003); Volbers (2009); Hadot (1981). For a discussion of perfectionism, see Cavell (1990), Henning (2009), and Raz (1986).

21 Cf. Rouse (2002).

but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that'.[22]

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22 Wittgenstein (1967, para. 65ff.). I would like to thank Emiliano Battista and James M. Fielding for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.