There are no adults: Kant's Misunderstanding of Childhood

[S] Immanuel Kant starts his essay "Answering the Questions, 'What is Enlightenment?'" with an attack. Adults who refuse to take up their autonomy, he says, are behaving like children: "Laziness and cowardice are the reasons why such a large part of mankind gladly remain minors all their lives, long after nature has freed them from external guidance. They [laziness and cowardice] are the reasons why it is so easy for others to set themselves up as guardians. It is so comfortable to be a minor."

[S] The attack is based on the assumption that energetic and brave people and societies can and should leave their comfortable heteronomous childhood behind, to become truly autonomous adults and peoples. In this talk, I will try to persuade you that this assumption is deeply flawed. To do that, I will look at two more realistic models of psychological and moral development. This first is from post-Freudian psychoanalytic theory: a simplified and somewhat sanitised version of Melanie Klein's good breast-bad breast model. The second is from the Christian tradition, the parable of the prodigal son.

Kleinians

[S] As far as autonomy is concerned, Kleinians have a very non-Kantian psychology. On one hand, they say that autonomy begins much earlier than Kant imagines. The initial separation of the child from the mother's body – when the baby is born – is a huge step towards autonomy, or **self-rule.** Over her first year, **she** learns the basics. **She** comes to **recognise that she is a** fully **separate person from her mother and** from **the other people she encounters.** Kleinians believe that this development of self-consciousness requires a great effort, because this basic self-hood comes with so much pain and fear.

As far as the rule in self-rule is concerned, the baby first has to learn what needs to be ruled. She does that by becoming **aware of having her own distinct and often unfulfilled desires.** Most important for Kantian development, by her first birthday s**he has started the long journey to controlling and judging the rightness of those desires. She should also have started the longer journey of recognising that other people are like her in having their own desires and lives, separate from hers.**

[S] So, on one hand, autonomy begins early. On the other hand, Kleinians say that heteronomy necessarily ends late. Indeed, it never really ends. We *must*, for deep psychological reasons, remain more or less dependent on the emotions, affections, worldviews, rules, and judgements of others. The Kantian goal of self-rule is inherently limited by the unchangeable reality of the web of human interactions,

In one sense, this claim of continued heteronomy **is ridiculous. Children eventually learn how to get their own food, clothing and so forth. Of more philosophical interest, eventually children stop depending completely on their parents for the interpretation of the world and – as Kant emphasised – for standards of good behaviour and clear**

thinking. In the simplest words, children are expected to, and mostly do, grow up to become adults.

But the psychoanalysts are onto something, I believe. I will summarise their argument in four steps.

[S] First, adults depend on and relate to the emotional and intellectual lessons provided by their mothers and by the constellation of significant others in their lives – even when those people are physically absent. In both presence and absence, the key people, or more accurately these key people as they relate to and are remembered by the child, become what the analysts call internal objects. They speak to us as they did when we were infants, sometimes with supporting love and sometimes with criticism. We have relationships with these objects that are entirely internal. **set up and to some extent control relationships that exist entirely inside us. This may sound peculiar – and some of the details of Kleinian theory are downright weird – but the basic idea is plausible.**

Think of it like this. Our responses to any person or a situation are shaped or at least strongly influenced by our previous experiences and existing ideas. In other words, our memories from the past are the starting point for our responses to the present. The Kleinian "object" is a sort of super-memory, a memory that consists of, or cannot be separated from, very strong emotions. The emotions are so strong, Kleinians say, because the object is created by the child in the first few months of life, before she has learned to reason clearly about her separate self. So, we argue with our parents throughout our lives.

[S] The first step of the psychoanalytic argument is that these super-memory objects exist. The second step is that they can never be fully removed. In how we think, feel, judge, and live, all of us always depend to a significant extent on our prerational understanding of our parents and quasi-parents. Even the most isolated and seemingly autonomous people, even the most advanced moral principles, are necessarily shaped and influenced by the "objects" created in infancy. To a greater or lesser extent, the initial inner family drama remains the drama of each life.

[S] The third step moves from psychoanalysts to social theorists, for example Axel Honneth. It is that the dramas of societies and polities can be understood as family dramas lived on a large scale. Laws and social customs are to a significant extent the externalisations of part of the relationships with the internal objects. Wars and class systems are ways of coping with the tensions of these relationships.

[S] The fourth and final step of the argument is that neither the individual nor the social drama ever goes smoothy. People can never deal perfectly with either the internal objects or with their exteriorisation in rules and customs. The internal objects and the externalisations are necessary for the separation for the child from the parent. They allow children to be become adults, perhaps parents in due course. But their presence ensures that totally autonomy is impossible. The never fully resolved conflicts of infancy remain with people and in their communities forever.

This perspective on the ubiquity of human struggle and sadness is profoundly anti-Kantian. There never was a period of Kant's "comfortable" dependency, because from birth or even earlier, we were already very uncomfortably trying to find our own position in the world. There never can be a time of completely autonomous adulthood, because we always carry inside us the conflicts and challenges of the dependency of infancy.

[S] Kantians can dismiss the psychoanalytic objections as irrelevant to the most important aspect of autonomy: the conscious and reasoned rejection of any "external guidance" in matters of the intellect and of morality. They might say that **people and peoples** may well be **stuck in** some sort of **family dramas** left over from infancy, but they **can still choose whether to accept the particular guardianship of their governments or the particular teachings of their religion.**

The objection is reasonable, as far as it goes. Even if we are never fully autonomous in our responses to the world, we can always question, alter, or even totally reject the teachings of our own parents and all parent-like authorities. The history of beliefs, ideas and practices is a history of changes, changes that are always made because enough people decide that some new way is better than the one that they were raised to accept.

The family of the prodigal son

[S] This brings me to my second model of growing up, which demonstrates the possibility of change. The prodigal son's story (Luke 15.11-32) is well known. Very simply, it goes like this. A younger son asks his father for, receives, leaves with, and then squanders his share of the paternal estate. The prodigal son then returns in shame to his father, who welcomes him with an extravagant generosity. The generosity infuriates the prodigal's always obedient older brother.

[S] The parable has inspired great art [S] and much profound commentary. My interest today is relatively mundane. It is in the development of each of the three participants' moral psychology.

[S]I start with the prodigal younger brother. Kant would certainly disapprove of his wild behaviour, but his adventure shows real, if misguided, autonomy. He takes charge of his property, separates himself from the patriarchal heteronomy of childhood, and sets up and follows his own consciously and carefully chosen rule for the good life: sensuous pleasure is the highest good.

[S] This notion of the good is anathema to most philosophers and also to Jesus, who narrates the parable. Psychoanalysts would basically agree, seeing an adult's unbounded search for pleasure as the inappropriate expression of largely pre-moral infantile desires.

[S] The psychologists, along with the Christians and many philosophers, would be pleased when this man-baby does decide to become an adult – literally "he comes into himself" (v. 17). What about Kantians? They would see a step in the wrong direction, from misunderstood autonomy to the childish heteronomy of sheltering under paternal and divine authority.

[S] Kant might say that this child has been educated for continuing obedience, not eventual autonomy. The prodigal has certainly not absorbed the basic lesson of a book that may have influenced Kant, John Locke's then influential *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*. Locke explains that to become an adult is to move from obedience and imitation to friendship and equality. The goal is to "look on [their parents] as their best, as their only sure friends" (41). Any "reverence" (41) for them has to be earned.

Remembering the patriarchal household that was universal in the time of Jesus, **the returned prodigal** must **want to** return to the service of his father, not to **be his friend or equal. His adult decision is to accept and enter into the goodness of the father's continuing authority.** With this adult acceptance of authority, this heteronomy, he moves from an immature to a mature understanding of freedom, a true autonomy.

[S] Both Kleinians and Christians might notice a psychological-moral nuance. The prodigal's decline into hedonism (for Kleinians) or sin (for Christians) was wrong, but it could have been a first step **towards real adulthood. Perhaps the bad behaviour, the "sowing wild oats", was the best available way for him to achieve genuine moral maturity, that is the active and reasoned internal acceptance of good rules set by a just external authority.**

The prodigal's journey is the stuff of literature as well as art. In the human condition, the path to moral maturity, like the paths to emotional and economic maturity, is often rocky and twisted. Psychoanalytic theory argues that the temptation to live out infantile fantasies is ubiquitous. If that theory is even halfway right, we can sympathise with the prodigal's struggle to accept Locke's sensible description of what children should learn: "the principle of all virtue and excellency lies in a power of denying ourselves the satisfaction of our own desires, where reason does not authorize them." (38)

[S] The obedient older brother lacks exactly this sympathy. That is why many readers find him to be a self-righteous prig. I would argue, though, somewhat ironically, that his moral rigidity makes him more Kantian than his younger brother. True, he takes pride in his supposed heteronomy– "these many years…I have never disobeyed your command" (v. 29)". However, the father who gives those commands clearly thinks that the older son has actually set his own rules. If he were really following the father's rules, he too would have rushed to forgive his repentant brother.

In Kleinian terms, the older son has accepted **an internal object that (or who) limits his ability to transcend his fear of doing wrong and that supports his self-satisfaction at doing right. His problem is actually the opposite of excessive dependency or heteronomy. He suffers from an autonomy that might be even more flawed than the prodigal's crude hedonism.**

[S] What of the third character, the father? Christians rightly focus on the father's overwhelming mercy and love, but I think a Kleinian interpretation adds insight. For Kleinians, there is a gap between the internal object of the father and his reality, or external

object. The sons' internal father was unpleasantly domineering, but the real one was complaisant and forgiving.

[S] This ambiguity may well be familiar – how many of us find that we feel we have different parents from those we acted as if we **had some years ago!** But both sons have to **recognise that they must have *some* sort of ongoing dependent relationship with the rules set by their father, simply because he is one who set them.**

This moral relationship is uncancellable, as the younger son discovered when he tried to "call it quits" by taking his share of the money. It is not Kant's "laziness and cowardice", or Locke's too indulgent child-rearing, that keep each of us and all of us tethered to our own parents' ethical standards and to those of the parental authorities of societies and governments. It is the human condition.

[S] These heteronomous authorities shape much of our lives, whether we accept, alter, or reject their rules. Our autonomy, which is also part of the human condition, ensures that we will generally do some of all three: accept, alter, and reject.

[S] The struggle to find our adult place in the world, a place that is simultaneously under and separate from parents and parental authorities, is lifelong. I think of the story of a wise Catholic priest who was asked what he had learned from his decades of hearing confessions. He paused and answered, "There are no adults".

Implications

[S] Kant's simple duality of childish other-rule and adult self-rule misses all the moral richness and difficulty of the human predicament. We are not constituted to be able to stop being like children, in either their emotional complexity or their dependence on the ethical authority of others. Nor are we constituted to obey blindly, either as children or as adults. We are always and everywhere both certain and confused, autonomous and heteronomous.

My complaint here is not merely theoretical. The practical applications of the Kantian confidence in the achievability of total and rightly directed autonomy has harmed both children and adults.

[S] I start with the children. The difficulty is clear in Locke's advice to educate children to take up the full freedom of rational adult life as soon as possible. This requires a period of non-freedom since, "Liberty and indulgence can do no good to children; their want of judgment makes them stand in need of restraint and discipline" (40). However, the period of heteronomy should be as short as possible, and the restraints and discipline as light as possible, for it is crucial to avoid creating a "servile" (44) mentality. Parents should try to find "a way how to keep up a child's spirit easy, active, and free." (46)

Locke, at least, was cautious about the dangers to children of excessive autonomy. Later popular writers on child-rearing and education have pushed for ever-earlier, ever-greater respect for children's budding autonomy.

[S] The result is that children are increasingly raised with a combination of a light and quickly vanishing heteronomy and early and rapidly expanding autonomy. The goodness of letting the children make their own rules is considered so great that many parents worry about "indoctrinating" their children in the familial religious or political beliefs.

[S] This freedom from authority is debilitating. It is easy enough for children to set their own rules – or refuse to – **on childish things, say eating ice cream or, later, having non-procreative sex. However, the children are likely to set rules that harm them later, as adults. The refusal to provide sufficient heteronomy deprives children of sound Kleinian internal objects, or, if you prefer, of helpful Christian or other absolute moral standards. Without these supports, it is very hard to take on the full responsibility of autonomous adulthood.**

[S] Quite understandably, if not very courageously, these under-prepared children show an increasing reluctance to grow up. The term adolescence was developed early in the 20th century to capture the newly prolonged muddle between heteronomy and autonomy. In the 21st century, the uncertainties and non-commitments of adolescence frequently last until children are in their mid-30s.

[S] This brings me to the effect on adults of today's Kantian expectations for autonomy. Those expectations make it much harder to be a good adult than when some sort of heteronomy was considered both normal and basically good. Heteronomy was never comfortable, but it was not paralysing. By current standards, people who were expected to do what the authorities told them mostly had enough courage and conviction to grow up: get a job, get married, have children, worship their god or gods, take care of their old parents, and so forth.

[S] It is all different now. People are expected to make their own minds up about what is right, balancing reason and emotion. This is a lot to ask, especially of people who are heteronomy-deprived.

[S] Even when people do manage to take on adult responsibilities, they are rarely very Kantian about it. Yes, some people treasure the various freedoms that support Kantian extreme autonomy: freedom of speech, religion, assembly, employment, consumption, and political choice. However, many more people largely ignore these freedoms, and are not much bothered when controlling bureaucratic systems erode them. I believe that this indifference to autonomy is the best explanation for the current widespread alienation from traditional democratic politics.

[S] Indifference to autonomy easily becomes what the psychoanalyst Erich Fromm called a "fear of freedom". Fromm was trying to explain what drove common citizens to welcome the total heteronomy of the Nazi and Soviet systems. I believe that the same fear drives people to support so-called populist leaders today.

[S] For Fromm, as well for followers of Kant and Locke, the rise of the fear of freedom is a terrible development. These thinkers all assume that fastest possible spread of the

fullest possible freedom, the freedom of moral and political autonomy, is a good thing for each person and for all communities.

The Kleinian and Christian insights point to quite different analysis and practical judgements, for both children and adults. Since people cannot thrive with near-total freedom, the goal is inhuman. We are, as Alistair MacIntyre says, *dependent* rational animals.

[S] Children, in this anti-Kantian understanding, should work to become good people who make good decisions based on principles and traditions that they are given and accept. Children are as lost ethically without those principles and traditions as they are lost psychologically without loving care, or lost practically without food and warmth. The imposition of excessive autonomy on children often leads to some combination or despair or a frantic search for new authorities.

[S] It is similar but slightly different for adults. They should also work to be good people who make good decisions, initially based on principles, rules, and traditions that they have received. However, the fully adult life requires an autonomous response to this moral inheritance – to make it my own by turning what has been given to me into something that I can understand, approve of, and pass on to the next generation.

That "making my own" requires hard psychological work, because it involves questioning my basic relations with the world. There is only so much adjusting that any of us can manage.

[S] Excessive demands for unimpeded autonomy will necessarily lead many people to give up: to some combination of withdrawal from the challenges of life, clinging conformity to some set of widely accepted beliefs and behaviours, and enthusiasm for some seemingly supportive heteronomy.

[S] In conclusion, Kant was wrong to think that the great human challenge is to choose between childhood and adulthood. At any age, people are all children learning to be adults. He was also wrong to suggest that there is a clear choice between heteronomy and autonomy. At any age, people all freely, autonomously want and need authorities to guide and unite them.

[S] Perhaps we can say that the great ethical challenge is to make heteronomy autonomous. Or perhaps that the right law (nomos) is neither our own (auto) nor another's (hetero). The right law is the good law. I endorse eunomy.

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