

**Enlightenment, as a Project of Individual, Social, and Political Transformation.**

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When critically reflecting on the possibility for change or for transformation within the individual, the social, or the political, it is useful to return to Immanuel Kant's political and historical essays, written during the tumultuous and radical period of the American and the French Revolutions.<sup>1</sup> Although Kant himself considered aspects of this later period of writing as a form of "playing" with "Ideas" or a form of "healthy mental recreation", the playful essence of these of essays inherently contribute to Kant's ongoing contemplation of the nature of humankind, and humankind's inherent tendency for sociability (Kant, 1991b: 221) (Kant, 1991c: 75).<sup>2</sup> While these contemplative revelations can be criticised for their deterministic tendencies and for their teleological concerns, they similarly offer an important narrative that explores the conditions conducive to forms of individual, social, and political change or transformation.

This narrative on the possibility for change or for transformation begins with Kant's engagement with the contemporary question of, 'What is Enlightenment?' This question was raised in the eighteenth century public stage in an attempt to understand the emergence of radically new forms of public behaviour.<sup>3</sup> In the opening paragraph of the seminal essay 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?' Kant outlines his answer, by proclaiming that "enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity" (Kant, 1991a: 54)[1784]. Therefore, Kant defines "enlightenment" as a process of transformation. Specifically, it is a process, which involves a "reform in ways of thinking". Kant outlines this "reform in ways of thinking" by stating that enlightenment represents the ability to begin to think for oneself "without the guidance of another (Kant, 1991a: 54-55). Kant considers this individual capacity to begin to develop autonomous forms of thinking as "the most important revolution" that occurs "from within..." (Kant, 2006: 124). Therefore,

underlying Kant's definition of enlightenment is a narrative, which defines enlightenment as a process of self-transformation.

Kant founds this definition of enlightenment on a reflection on history. A reflection on history reveals that some individuals have been able to cultivate their own minds. Some individuals have been able to free themselves from "immaturity" by using their own understanding "without the guidance of another" (Kant, 1991a: 54). Therefore, this powerful reflection on history reveals, what Kant defines to be, "the germ upon which nature has lavished most care": this "germ" being that humankind has an inherent "inclination" as well as a "vocation to think freely" (Kant, 1991a: 59).

While Kant fails to explore the ground behind this most lavished germ of nature within this essay - if this "inclination" is considered within the context of the *Critique of Pure Reason* - then this "inclination" is grounded on transcendental concerns. As Kant reveals, the capacity for understanding and for reason, are founded on transcendental faculties of the self (Kant, 1929). If this revelation is considered within the context of Kant's definition of enlightenment, then enlightenment, as the ability to develop autonomous forms of thinking through the "one's own reason" and "one's own understanding", is a process that is inherent to all (Kant, 1991a: 54-55).

Within this exploration of the conditions conducive to enlightenment, Kant also introduces the idea that the process of enlightenment necessarily draws on some form of autonomy within the individual. Kant refers to the "motto of enlightenment". The motto, "*Sapere aude!* Have courage to use your own understanding" proclaims that while individuals have the transcendental "inclination" and "vocation to think freely" they similarly must have the "resolution and courage" to move themselves out of

“self-incurred immaturity” (Kant, 1991a: 54). In this respect, enlightenment is representative of an individual endeavor.

However, if this individual form of revolution is considered within the context of Kant’s philosophy of history, then enlightenment is not simply an individual process of change or self-transformation; it is representative of a project that is inherently tied to the social and the political. Kant states herewith that within a philosophy of history the “original destiny” of “human nature”, is not individual enlightenment, but “an age of enlightenment” (Kant, 1991a: 57). The move towards “an age of enlightenment” suggests that enlightenment is representative of a universal process that enables the development of all the “natural capacities” of humankind, a process that is linked, Kant states, to the “upward progress” of humankind. Kant considers this “upward progress” of humankind as representative of the “highest purpose of nature”. And through this process society becomes transformed, moving from a “*pathologically enforced*” form of social union into a form of social union which exists as “a *moral whole*” (Kant, 1991c: 44-45). In this respect, the individual, the social and the political are irrevocably intertwined.

Therefore, within a philosophy of history, the individual capacity for enlightenment on its own is not enough to encourage the move to an “age of enlightenment.” What is also required, Kant states, is a form of social freedom. Kant outlines this narrative through a consideration of the political rule engendered by the “century of Frederick”. Kant suggests that the ruling power of Frederick the Great is crucial to an “age of enlightenment” because as an enlightened ruler, Frederick the Great liberates humankind from religious and official forms of censure. This form of liberation encourages the emergence from “immaturity” by freely allowing the development of

the inherent capacity to reason. In this respect, the spirit of freedom in the social domain is integral to the development of humankind's "natural capacities" (Kant, 1991a: 58).

However, freedom in the "age of enlightenment" is a condition that embodies restraint because Kant differentiates between the use of reason in the public and private domains. This boundary in the domains of reason is, according to Kant, fundamental to the good of society, and is based on the observation of the inherent human capacity to desire that which is other. Kant explores this inherent nature of humankind in the essay titled 'Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose' (Kant, 1991c)[1784]. In this essay, Kant demarcates between two forms of human desire that emerge out of the inherent sociability of humankind. This includes the desire or the "inclination to *live in society...*" and the desire or the "great tendency to *live as an individual.*" Kant makes the observation that in the social domain a form of antagonism develops within the individual because of the confrontation between these internal desires. The desire of the individual to live with others, representative of the desire or the "inclination" of a "rational creature", clashes with the desire of the individual to live alone, representative of the desire of an "animal" (Kant, 1991c: 45-46).

Kant defines this form of antagonism or this tendency for social incompatibility as the "unsocial sociability of men." He describes this form of antagonism as:

...[the] tendency [of men] to come together in society, coupled, however, with a continual resistance which constantly threatens to break this society up. This propensity is obviously rooted in human nature. Man has an inclination to *live in society*, since he feels in this state more like a man, that is, he feels able to develop his natural capacities. But he also has a great tendency to *live as an individual*, to isolate himself, since he also encounters in himself the unsocial characteristics of wanting to direct everything in accordance with his own ideas (Kant, 1991c: 44).

This individual tendency, as a form of conflict and tension between “rational” and “animal” desires, is integral to the project of enlightenment because it is through this antagonism that individuals develop their “natural capacities”. Yet, as Kant observes, this development, as representative of the “highest purpose of nature”, can only be fulfilled only through the construction and the delineation of the domains of freedom. He accordingly states:

This purpose [of nature] can be fulfilled only in a society which has not only the greatest freedom, and therefore a continual antagonism among its members, but also the most precise specification and preservation of the limits of this freedom in order that it can co-exist with the freedom of others (Kant, 1991c: 45).

Therefore, Kant demarcates the public and private domains of reason as a means to promote, rather than hinder, the process of enlightenment. Kant defines the public domain of reason as the arena for intellectual freedom in which the learned individual makes use of reason through “addressing the entire reading public”. In this capacity the individual draws on the ability to think freely and is free to explore this individual capacity within the domains of society. In contrast, Kant defines the private domain of reason as the use of reason “in a particular civil post or office with which he is entrusted”. In this capacity, the recognition of the individual as a “member of a complete commonwealth or even of cosmopolitan society” necessitates that “use of one’s reason” is constrained and hence enacted in a “passive capacity” (Kant, 1991a: 55-56). Although it restricts one’s freedom, the private domain of reason is a necessary boundary for the good of society.

Therefore, underlying this narrative on the possibility for enlightenment, as a form of individual, social, and political transformation, is the revelation of the fundamental role of the faculty of reason. Kant reinforces this narrative in the essay titled ‘Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose’ in the attempt to further

elucidate a philosophy of history. This is evident in the following paragraph where Kant explores the intimate form of relation between reason, freedom and enlightenment. He states herewith:

Nature gave man reason, and freedom of will based upon reason, and this in itself was a clear indication of nature's intention as regards his endowments. For it showed that man was not meant to be guided by instinct or equipped and instructed by innate knowledge; on the contrary, he was meant to produce everything out of himself (Kant, 1991c: 43).

This concept of humankind producing out of them-selves is crucial. The ability to produce meaning beyond innate forms is, Kant states, a potential of the transcendental faculty of reason. And in relation to the sociability of humankind, this potential to produce out of oneself, requires both the guiding, and the limiting boundaries of practical reason. Therefore, the faculty of reason plays a fundamental role in the move towards enlightenment.

However, in the later essay, titled 'Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History' Kant subtly, but significantly begins to alter this dominant narrative concerning the irrevocable link between enlightenment, freedom and the faculty of reason (Kant, 1991b)[1786]. Kant introduces this subtle change in narrative through a consideration and exploration of the methodology of conjecture, and in the development of a conjecture on the first beginnings of humankind. In the introduction to this essay, Kant explores the methodology of conjecture. Conjecture, Kant states, is not representative of a "serious activity" but is "...merely an exercise in which the imagination, supported by reason, may be allowed to indulge as a healthy mental recreation". However, in the context of producing a conjecture of the beginnings of humankind's history Kant suggests that the activity of conjecture, as a form of "pleasure trip" on the "wings of imagination", can be accordingly guided through experience and mediated by reason (Kant, 1991b: 221-222).

Therefore, Kant himself draws on this inherent role of imagination in the methodology of conjecture in order to *produce* an historical yet intelligible account of the first beginnings of humankind, an account that is deduced from experience (Kant, 1991b: 221). However, in the process of producing this intelligible account, Kant similarly disrupts his prior narrative on the conditions conducive to enlightenment, outlined in his earlier essays. This disruption begins through Kant's exploration of the first moment in time when humankind developed the ability to move beyond instinctual forms. Following the book of *Genesis* (Chapters II-VI), Kant initially proclaims that the first move away from the "guardianship of nature", and away from the "leading-strings of instinct" is representative of a moment in time "whereby man became conscious of his reason as a faculty which can extend beyond the limits to which all animals are confined" (Kant, 1991b: 222-223, 226). Reason is portrayed here as the faculty that enables freedom of will because it represents the capacity of the self that transcends the limitations of experience and subjectivity.

Yet Kant also states that this historical moment in time represents a moment in time that is dependent on the ability to desire "difference". In this respect, it is the desire for something other than the instinctual and the innate that encourages humankind to move beyond the "leading-strings of instinct". While Kant previously explored this role of desire in relation to the unsocial sociability of humankind, in this essay Kant suddenly introduces the irrevocable link between desire, reason and the role of the faculty of imagination. This critical link appears in Kant's exploration of humankind's first move out of the guardianship of nature, where he states herewith:

But it is a peculiarity of reason that it is able, with the help of the imagination, to invent desires which not only *lack* any corresponding natural impulse, but which are even *at variance* with the latter (Kant, 1991b: 223).

Therefore, the ability to invent desires, which are at “variance” with natural impulse, also involves the faculty of imagination. In this respect, the experience of the sensory world leads to a form of internal resistance, that is, an internal form of resistance between natural impulses and desires, and what Kant defines as, “unnatural” or “superfluous” impulse or desires (Kant, 1991b: 223). The role of imagination in the invention of “superfluous” desires clearly introduces the faculty of imagination as also playing a fundamental role in the first move away from the “guardianship of nature”. Because of this, Kant suddenly introduces, albeit in the form of a “play” with “Ideas”, imagination as a faculty that also participates or allows for humankind’s freedom of will. The invention of something other, as the invention of desires beyond that of instinctual forms, grants the imagination an integral role in the ability of humankind to begin to *produce* out of them-selves and move from the “leading-strings of instinct” to the ” “guidance of reason”; from the “guardianship of nature” to the “state of freedom (Kant, 1991b: 226).

Although an important revelation on the role that imagination plays within individual enlightenment, Kant fails to address the role that imagination may play in relation to the antagonism that arises from the “unsocial sociability” of humankind. As Kant states, the “desire for honour, power or property,” encourages individuals “to seek status among [their] fellows, whom [they] cannot *bear* yet cannot *bear to leave*”. In this respect, the rousing of desire within the social domain, is crucial to transformation within the social domain and to the move towards an “age of enlightenment (Kant, 1991c: 44). While Kant develops a narrative on the role of reason in relation to the emergence of desire within the social domain, in the remaining political and historical essays, he fails to develop a similar narrative on the role of imagination in relation to the rousing of desire within this social domain.

Therefore, Kant's political and historical essays offer an important narrative that outlines the conditions conducive to the possibility for individual, social, or political transformation. This narrative includes a consideration of the concepts of reason and freedom in relation to the internal conditions conducive to "enlightenment" and in relation to the external conditions conducive to an "age of enlightenment". However, as discussed, Kant also introduces the fundamental role that imagination plays in the capacity of the individual to *produce* something other than innate forms of desire. While this sudden introduction to imagination undermines the irrevocable link between enlightenment in the individual and the faculty of reason, Kant does not develop this idea of the role of imagination within the realm of the social. Rather, Kant develops this role of imagination, in his later text, the *Critique of Judgment*. With this in mind, perhaps the playful essence of the political and historical essays played a significant role in contributing to Kant's own enlightened thinking on the role of imagination both in the transformation of the individual, the social, and the political.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> These series of essays appear as collections in the texts:  
Kant I. (1963) *On History*, Indianapolis and New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc.  
Kant I. (1991d) *Kant Political Writings*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Kant refers to the terms "man" and "mankind" throughout the political and historical essays. However, in this discussion the terms "human" and "humankind" will preferably be used.  
Kant I. (1991a) An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment. In: Reiss HS (ed) *Kant Political Writings*. Second ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>3</sup> James Schmidt provides a summary of how the question "What is Enlightenment?" appeared within the public stage. He suggests that the question was first asked in a rejoinder by Johann Friedrich Zollner as a response to the questioning, by the public, of the role of clergymen in marriage ceremonies. Zollner asked the question "What is Enlightenment?" within a footnote to his text. The question was also raised in the "Wednesday Society" by Johann Mohsen, Frederick the Great's

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personal physician. Schmidt suggests therefore that the question was of intense interest amongst civil servants, clergy and intellectuals of the time.

Schmidt J. (2012) Misunderstanding the Question: 'What is Enlightenment?': Venturi, Habermas, and Foucault. *History of European Ideas* 37: 43-52.

<sup>4</sup> Kant outlines this idea through the concept of the "*sensus communis*".

Kant, I, (1987) *Critique of Judgment*, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 294.

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