MATURE KANTIANS

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INTRODUCTION: THE AUTONOMY PROBLEM

One of the many problems facing Enlightenment thinkers was the question of how to reconcile their claim that all humans have equal dignity by virtue of their autonomous agency with the fact that many people neither enjoyed the respect their dignity warranted nor acted in ways that would have suggested they were meaningfully autonomous.  

If the 18th century was the age of the Enlightenment, many people didn’t act their age. Part of the problem was political in the institutional sense: absolutism, feudal vestiges and religious authoritarianism made it difficult, even impossible, for people to be autonomous. But these didn’t account for all the problems, and as Kant suggested, another part had to with ordinary people themselves: the people’s “immaturity” was also “self-incurred.” This was a real pickle, both theoretically and practically: If another person’s autonomous agency is your goal, you had better be careful about what and how much you do for her. There is a real tension, if not an outright conflict, between paternalism and respect for autonomy. There is also a risk of elitism in concerning yourself with others’ autonomy. In the absence of a shared sumnum bonum — and I take it that part of what modernity means is the absence of a shared sumnum bonum — the apparent end of a person’s action doesn’t always tell you whether she chose the action or the end. Some people autonomously choose stupid actions and ends, or actions and ends that might look stupid to you.

So there was a moral and an epistemic reason for the Enlighteners to be careful about what they did in the promotion of people’s autonomy. At the same time — and

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1 I am very much in sympathy with Schmidt 2000 regarding the ambiguities in our use of the term “Enlightenment.” In this paper, I use it loosely but specifically: by “Enlightenment,” I mean primarily the German “Aufklärung,” i.e., the constellation of anti-absolutist, religiously tolerant, and politically reformist ideas in the latter half of the 18th century. By “Enlighteners,” I refer to the “Aufklärer,” i.e., people who were taken to be or who took themselves to be champions of the Enlightenment. This includes people on the fringes of the Enlightenment such as the Romantics.
this made it a practical problem — many took it as a given that something had to be done.

This project of reconciling the theoretical and normative idea of people’s autonomous agency with their empirical-historical non-autonomy — “immaturity” — is the backdrop for my specific focus on Kant. Kant is the author of one of the most sophisticated accounts of autonomy-based conceptions of agency, and the empirical autonomy problem is pressing for him. An exploration of his solution is useful in two ways. It offers us a new way of thinking about Kant’s political theory and so, I suggest, makes the Kantian theory of political agency more appealing for contemporary political theorizing than it has often appeared. Specifically, Kant’s conception of political agency is empirically richer and more dynamic than, for example, the versions of Kantianism that occur in arguments for deliberative democracy.

The paper proceeds by weaving together two underexplored aspects in Kant’s works. On the one hand, I explore Kant’s frequent use of childhood and child-rearing metaphors and images. On the other, I connect this language to Kant’s actual theories of childhood and the education of children. This analysis gives us a sense of how Kantian (or any similar) political rhetoric which attributes intrinsic dignity to agents can be squared with the empirical reality in which many people aren’t yet treated as if they had intrinsic dignity. It avoids both the explicit inegalitarianism which conservatives have historically advocated and the well-intentioned paternalism and elitism that plague Enlighteners more keen on a kind of latter-day Aristotelianism which focuses on the high-brow cultivation of humans we know as Bildung. One of the things Kant’s particular emphasis on the importance of education also shows is how teleological, quasi-Aristotelian views in which children are not yet agents and at the same time automatically future agents are misguided. The view we get from Kant, I argue, is exactly the opposite: children are agentic very early on, but their agency is not the same thing as mature, rational adult agency. It is, among other things, narrower.

The most controversial aspect of my argument, in terms of both Kant exegesis and political theory, is a new conception of autonomy: *ascriptive autonomy*. The idea may seem paradoxical: if autonomy means a person’s acting on reasons she gives
herself, her being the author of her actions, as it were, then it seems odd to say that someone else can decide the issue for her, that is, ascribe her autonomy to her. But Kant’s discussion of the concept of “maturity” (Mündigkeit), which he often uses as a metaphor for autonomy, shows that he does indeed think autonomy can be contingent on ascription. This interpretation does not make Kant’s theory relativistic, as one might worry, but it does open a space for politics and political contestation.

My focus on Kant is not to suggest that he was alone in articulating these views. His educational ideas, in particular, had important influences, and I explore some of them here. As Kant’s recent biographer Manfred Kuehn has plausibly argued, one of the influences was Kant’s own educational experience at the hands — the idiom is deliberate — of stern Pietists. The other influence — my focus here — was actual educational reformers, particularly the so-called Philantropinen and, among them, Johann Bernhard Basedow. Common to both Basedow’s and Kant’s thought is relatively radical anti-paternalism and the appreciation of children’s embodied budding agency.

Before I get into the actual arguments, a brief clarification on what I will not take on in this paper.

ii  ON WHAT KANT’S AUTONOMY PROBLEM IS AND ISN’T

There are numerous ways in which Kantian conceptions of agency already inform, even undergird, modern and contemporary political theory, particularly a variety of liberal theories. These can be categorized roughly into the Berlinesque, Habermasian, and Rawlsian approaches. The Berlinesque theories focus on Kant’s claim about the “crooked timber of humanity”; given that humans are imperfect beings, we ought to be skeptical of political reformers who hope to perfect us. What I call Habermasian theories highlight Kant’s arguments for rational public discourse. The Rawlsian approach draws from Kant’s theory of rational justification. Variants of these approaches can be found, for example, in contemporary debates about

deliberative democracy. Common to all, however, is unease with the psychological plausibility of the original theory, and the Kantian insights tend to be modeled into norms and institutions (Berlin, Rawls, early Habermas) or supplemented with non-Kantian conceptions of persons (late Habermas).

There are good and bad reasons to be uneasy with the psychological plausibility or appeal of Kant’s theory of autonomy. The most common reason — and a bad one at that — is that Kant’s theory postulates a mysterious and implausible metaphysics between the so-called noumenal and phenomenal worlds. The former is the realm of autonomy and freedom, the latter the realm of natural causality. Since they are two separate worlds (and the former sort of mysterious even on its own), whatever Kant has to say about autonomy more or less meaningless.

Although Kant is his own worst enemy in that it is the obscurity of his own text that often licenses such interpretations, there is a relatively wide agreement among Kant scholars that the “two-worlds” view is demonstrably false. The noumenal and the phenomenal are two different perspectives on the same world.

However, Kant’s theory does face two real difficulties which make it reasonable for even a sympathetic reader to be uneasy about borrowing too much. However, Kant is fully aware of both, and does offer plausible solutions. Since only the second of these is of interest to me here, I only flag the first.

Although the “two-perspectives,” as opposed to the “two-worlds,” view does dispel some of the metaphysical problems ascribed to Kant’s theory, there still remains the problem of reconciling the two perspectives. Freedom is, for Kant, a “kind of causality,” and what he needed to do was to explain how “freedom’s causality” was compatible with natural causality, or how we could tell that human freedom actually did anything in the world. Kant made the solution for problem — the so-called Übergang from nature to freedom — the central goal of his third Critique, Critique of the Power of Judgment.

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3 The phrase “freedom’s causality” is from Ellis 2005, which explores compellingly how the question with regard to Kant’s political philosophy. Ellis’s approach is informed by Henry Allison’s work; see in particular Allison 2001. My other APSA paper, “The Hume(a) in Face of Kant’s Political Judgment,” written with Beth Fleishman, also explores some of those themes.
If the Übergang problem was the theoretical dimension of the question of how plausible Kant’s theory of autonomy is, it also had a historical-empirical component: the autonomy problem I introduced above. It had two parts. First: Was the conception of human agency Kant had advocated something that could historically be realized, given where humanity happened to be at that point? (I emphasize the clause to distinguish the problem from a more general, but more intractable one, viz. whether the conception was plausible, given human nature.) Second: If the answer to the first question was positive, how could it be realized? The question was far from trivial. As Bernard Yack has argued, even such an otherwise impressive theory as Rousseau’s ultimately seems to fail on that count: Rousseau can’t imagine the agent powerful enough that could get us from here, given the way we are, to where he hopes to end up politically.④

It is not that Rousseau is entirely without resources, and in solving the autonomy problem, Kant focuses on the same realm that gives Rousseau his greatest hopes: children.

iii ONTOGENY RECAPITULATES PHYLOGENY

A small detour to art. One curious feature about 17th- and 18th-century portraiture of children is that children often look like miniature adults. They often wear adult clothes, and even when they don’t, the proportions of their bodies, the expressions on their faces and their activities suggest they are not children, but small adults.⑤ This isn’t a coincidence. Early modern thinkers hadn’t yet heard Ernst Haeckel’s claim that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, but it would have been a good metaphor for how many of them thought about individual psychology and historical anthropology. Rousseau had suggested that the anthropological process whereby humanity had developed — and been corrupted — was more or less recapitulated in every (male) individual during his formative years. And as Rousseau had explicitly spelled out in his hugely influential works, most importantly in Émile, it was through education that the corrupting processes could be stopped and

⑤ This discussion draws heavily from Schama 1997.
autonomous agency fostered instead. Children could be enlightened, cosmopolitan and calmly confident, like the boy in Govert Flinck’s 17th-century portrait (Figure 1), or they could be mischievous little devils busy with sin, like the children in Judith Leyster’s and other Haarlem painters works (Figure 2).\(^6\)

\[Figure 1: \text{Govert Flinck, Portrait of a Boy}\]

\(^6\) The paintings are from ARTstor (http://www.artstor.org). They are used here subject to the terms and conditions of ARTstor.
Figure 2: Dirck Hals, Children Playing Cards

There are always new generations to be brought up, and it doesn’t take much beyond ordinary common sense to realize that insofar as one wants to effect permanent and generational change in prevailing attitudes, beliefs and types of personhood, childhood looks like a good site for intervention. The conventional focus of Enlightenment education has been on Bildung, or what we might call higher learning, or acculturation, or Education-with-a-capital-e. This makes sense for many reasons; one of them is many Enlighteners’ emphasis on a person’s autonomous exercise of his or her reason. However, I focus here on a less high-brow and far less talked-about component in Enlightenment ideals of education: the education of younger children, and the role of that education in creating autonomous agents.
iv  **BILDUNG AND ERZIEHUNG**

When people talk of the educational models and ideals of the German Enlightenment, they usually focus on Bildung. In his answer to the question to which Kant’s contribution is better known, What is Enlightenment?, Moses Mendelssohn had Bildung go hand in hand with enlightenment (Aufklärung) and culture (Kultur). Although the concept is broad, its modern conception points to education as a cultivation of higher learning, not for any instrumental purposes, but as intrinsically valuable. Furthermore, it is fundamentally a state of an individual’s inner landscape: his (or her) cognitive, moral and spiritual dispositions. Bildung does, to be sure, affect the person’s actions and even his physical habitus in the world, but only indirectly. Although the modern conception is decidedly more secular than the late-medieval conceptions of Bildung from which the modern one developed, there is a way in which one can reasonably talk of it as describing the state of a person’s soul.

There are many reasons why the Enlighteners would have had this emphasis. After all, regardless of the particular flavor of Enlightenment thought, most schools of thought valued some idea of a person’s autonomous exercise of her higher psychological faculties: reason, the aesthetic and the creative. Although there are many ways in which those may involve one’s use of one’s body, its highest forms were only indirectly physical, if that at all: literature was more valuable than painting, musical composition more valuable than musical virtuosity. And since the theory comes from scholars, it should not surprise us that among the highest forms of exercise for one’s reason were such cerebral things as philosophy, mathematics, and in general those forms of knowledge one might describe as sublime.

But this wasn’t just a straightforward appreciation of the cerebral over the physical: it involved, in some ways, a decided devaluation of the physical or corporeal. Part of the influence behind that idea had to do with the Christian — and particularly stern Lutheran — dislike of the body. Another was connected to social hierarchies: physicality, particularly the idea of having to use one’s body for one’s livelihood,

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7 Mendelssohn 1996, p. 53.
marked one as inferior. Behind both was a kind of metaphysical view in which the body belongs ineluctably to the realm of necessity and can thus never have intrinsic, but only instrumental value. And as Bildung represented, at least in some cases, the highest form of human freedom, physicality would not do.

However, although Bildung was the most important aspect of Enlightenment education, it wasn’t the only one. The other German term for education, Erziehung, connotes something slightly less high-brow than Bildung. There is no consensus on the exact relationship — or difference — between Bildung and Erziehung, but the rough-and-ready distinction is that while Bildung culminates in the higher education, Erziehung is something you might receive even in elementary or vocational school.⁹ It may have an instrumental relationship to Bildung, but it may also have an instrumental relationship simply to making ends meet as a cobbler, welder, accountant or a lawyer. It can, in short, be directed toward an end set not by the agent himself, but by someone else, and so it can also involve non-voluntary aspects. This also meant that Erziehung was the proper education for a person who was not yet taken to be mature enough for the autonomy-emphasizing Bildung. Where that line went was — and remains — a matter of controversy, but it was clear that at least for children, Erziehung was the appropriate approach.

Given the “soul-centeredness” of the Enlightenment as well as its focus on the intrinsically valuable, it is easy to see why this type of education would have seemed less important than Bildung. But Erziehung still made an important difference: some ways of conceiving it had better chances of getting a person ready for Bildung and, in general, Enlightenment claims about people’s intrinsic worth obviously influenced the way one should think of any kind of education. Among the most radical — and ultimately influential — educational reformers were the so-called Philantropinen.

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⁹ For a discussion of the difference between the two concepts, see Brunner, Conze, and Koselleck 1972, p. 511.
v EARLY CHILD-CENTERED LEARNING:
THE PHILANTROPINEN

The Philantropinen movement emerged in the 1770s, when its founder Johann Bernhard Basedow opened a school in Dessau. The school, the Philantropinum, was based on the educational ideas Basedow had outlined in a 1768 pamphlet, “Vorstellung an Menschenfreunde” (“A Presentation to Friends of Humanity”). Basedow’s ideas, in turn, had been heavily influenced by the educational theories of Locke and Rousseau, although — importantly — Basedow wasn’t just parroting Locke or Rousseau (although he sometimes quotes both at great length). Rather, there are many ways in which Basedow modified the earlier ideas and even went against them, particularly in the case of Rousseau. My goal here is not to compare Basedow with his intellectual influences, but to focus on his ideas and their influence on Kant’s thinking about children. Furthermore, even though other Philantropinen may have had more lasting or direct influence, it was Basedow whose educational methods Kant explicitly endorsed throughout.

There were three central and very radical ideas in Basedow’s thinking. First, he saw education as a collective good which was in the state’s interest, and argued that therefore the state, not the church, should be in charge of it. Second, he argued for a common education, almost (though not fully) independent of social class (MB, 17). Finally, he and the Philantropinen in general were in favor of pedagogy we might call “child-centered”: learning was to resemble play and it was to be on the children’s terms (MB, 42–47; EW, 259–260). All are very much in keeping with and inspired by Enlightenment ideals, and it is worth saying a bit more about each, although I will focus on the final aspect.

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10 It might be worth noting here that the term Philantropinen does not have the connotation we most commonly associate with it these days, namely the financial support of worthy public causes. It did involve varying degree of paternalism — though far less in Basedow’s case than in, say, the slightly later Swiss variants. The key idea, however, is a general concern for humanity, and if a convenient term were available, the best translation would evoke a kind of hybrid between humanists and humanitarians.

11 Basedow 1893, §3. Hereafter, I will refer to the Vorstellung with the in-text parenthetical VM and then to the section number. MB will refer to his Methodenbuch and EW to Elementarwerke, both of which are in Basedow 1880 and to which the page numbers refer.
Basedow was not opposed to religious education, but because the goal of all education was the happiness of the state and its citizens, its oversight had to be the state’s responsibility (VM, §§3–7, 20; MB, 21–27, 185–208). It was fine and in fact desirable that state religion be taught in schools, and schools had no obligation to offer religious education which was critical of state religion. However, even state religion had to be taught tolerantly, and the children from religiously dissident families could not be kept from attending schools simply on the grounds of their religion. (VM, §§20–22) Moreover, as we’ll see in greater detail below, religious education should not begin until a child was capable of understanding it — after the child had already learned many other things (MB, 135–147). At the same time, the development of patriotic feelings was an important goal of education (MB, 42). But even this was not just for mindless obedience, but so that all even minimally educated people would have appropriate civic virtues — and a civic voice (VM, §§46, 49). (As a sign of how radical the demand was, Basedow’s 1893 editor Hermann Lorenz laments the fact that it is nowhere near realized in the Germany of his day.)

It was this idea of the reciprocity between the collective happiness of the state, on the one hand, and the citizens that constituted the state, on the other, that undergirds Basedow’s second central idea: an education that is far more independent of social class than any previous and many later educational theories had it. At the level of elementary education, he introduced the idea of “people’s school” (Volksschule), a variant of which ultimately became and remained the key model of elementary education in Germany and northern Europe well past mid-20th century. (My first four grades in 1973–77 in Finland were in such a school.) The Volksschule was for all children, and education in it did not differentiate between social class. The idea was that at an early age, it was impossible to tell whether someone was going to become more highly educated, and so everyone needed to be offered the same basic skills for practical life. (MB, 17) In regions with sufficient resources, Volksschule could be followed by bürgerliche Schule — “citizen school” — at what we could call middle-school level (VM, passim.). Even though this began to differentiate educational opportunities, it didn’t do it on the basis of any given individual’s resources, but

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12 Basedow 1893, 11.
geography. And, again, even in these schools the assumption was that it wasn’t predetermined whether a child would become more highly educated. The emphasis was also on education for practical life, not for further schooling. (VM, §§ 23, 39; MB, 42) Only at age 15 would there be enough evidence, in Basedow’s view, of whether a child should be even more highly educated. (And, ironically, perhaps, at that age financial resources came directly back into the picture: only absolute geniuses from poor families should be offered a free high-school and university education at state cost; all others had to show sufficient economic resources to be able to support themselves. Presumably Basedow wasn’t after too radical changes in people’s economic mobility. Furthermore, the number of people allowed to pursue higher education, i.e., schooling past their 15th year, would be strictly set by the state. [VM, §19])

These were Basedow’s ideas for the infrastructural organization of education. Bringing about such changes alone or even by a small movement, even if the ideas had been less radical, would naturally be slow and difficult process, and the early *Philantropinum* never saw these ideas realized on a large scale. However, the “micro-educational” ideas, namely, the actual pedagogy, could be put in practice much more easily. Basedow argued for the immediate establishment of experimental schools, and that is the kind of purpose the *Philantropinum* tried to fulfill. Although experimenting was important because it was impossible to know fully in advance what kinds of methods would work best at different levels, he did have important principles in mind.

These ideas were undoubtedly the most radical part of Basedow’s program. I have already mentioned Basedow’s idea of the first two stages of education as a preparation for practical living, not for school. Later reformers, even the Swiss *Philantropinen*, turned this back into a more class-differentiated system, where it was obvious that practical life and specifically motor skills made sense for commoners and, in general, the types who would need to make their living by some kind of physical work. For Basedow, however, the emphasis on the practical wasn’t in the

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13 I have not been able to find material on this in English, and so I am relying here on the discussion in Ahonen 2003.
first instance because it was all the common classes would be needing in the future. After all, these stages of education were for everybody. Rather, the idea was that the practical was something everyone would need, regardless of the station in life and future plans. That wasn’t just an empirical observation, but in fact had its own causal efficacy: it would bring about a more egalitarian, republican state. Furthermore, as contemporary conservatives observed, the lack of social differentiation would primarily serve to elevate the common classes, which they opposed.\(^{14}\) It would, in their view, give commoners’ children skills that would make the uppity, demanding, and it would, at worst, promote revolution and at best lead to unhappy and frustrated commoners.

The practical was achieved through a set of key principles. The central notion was that learning, especially early learning in the Volksschule, was to be on the child’s terms. In general, all education should happen with means appropriate to the child’s developmental stage. This meant that early teaching should resemble play as much as possible. A full half of a child’s day in the Volksschule should be some kind of physical (körperlich) play or “work” (VM, §38). The subjects of the Volksschule were the same for all: reading, writing, arithmetic, Realien (history and what we would now call elementary social and natural sciences), practical knowledge of nature and of the law. Rote memorization was absolutely banned; instead, children should learn through “real” remembering via playful exercises and practices (MB, 95–100). Basedow opposed physical punishment, but did think that physical education was important, both through simple gymnastic exercises as well as physical games (MB, 62–65).

Radically, and in keeping with the child-centeredness, Basedow thought religious education could only begin in the middle-school when the child had developed a sufficient understanding to make any real sense of it. Otherwise, Basedow suggested, the child’s proper understanding and thus real faith would be threatened or impeded. He outlined these ideas in eight lengthy pieces of advice to parents and educators (MB, 135–147); we can get a good sense of their logic from a letter Kant wrote to Christian Heinrich Wolke, the director of the Philantropinum, in

\(^{14}\) Epstein 1966, pp. 79–81.
support of a friend’s son’s application to the school. The view Kant outlines is ostensibly his friend’s, Robert Motherby’s, but what he says captures the school’s (and Basedow’s) own pedagogical idea:

In matters of religion, the spirit of the Philantropin agrees perfectly with the boy’s father. He wishes that even the natural awareness of God (as the boy’s growth in age and understanding may gradually make him arrive at it) should not be aimed at devotional exercises directly but only after he has realized that these are valuable merely as a means of animating an effective conscience and a fear of God, so that one does one’s duties as thought there were divinely commanded. (C 10:192)

However, although religious education should be postponed, it didn’t mean that children’s moral development was unimportant. It was simply that a proper moral development would be hindered by too early religious education, especially if it took the form of religious memorization. Instead, moral education was based on experience and proceeded through relaxed play as well as through instructive moral conversations (MB, 102–107). Perhaps the most famous example of this is Joachim Henrich Campe’s reworked edition of Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe, in which Campe interjects helpful instructional conversations between a teacher and a child reader between the narrative chapters.15

This model of education, I want to suggest, provides a richer and sociologically more promising solution to the agency problem of Enlightenment than the emphasis on Bildung. This isn’t, of course, a replacement for Bildung in any of its forms. After all, Basedow and the Philantropinen did also have an account of higher education, and the more elementary forms aimed at ensuring well-prepared students at those higher levels. All I want to suggest, though, is that if we think Bildung cashes out the greatest value of Enlightenment conceptions of education, we’ll run the risk of ending at something ‘high-falutin’ but either elitist or naïve — at Hegel or Schiller, respectively.16

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15 Campe 1781. The book, first published in Hamburg 1779–1780, was immensely popular and was available in more than dozen languages before 1800.

16 For Hegel’s views, see Wood 1998. For the Romantics, see Schiller 1967 and also Beiser 1998.
Furthermore, I want to suggest that thinking of Kant’s ideas regarding the autonomy problem via Basedow’s educational theory offers a specifically rich and interesting conception of Kant’s theory.

vi CRITIQUE OF EDUCATION

The locus classicus for Kant’s idea of Enlightenment is his short 1784 essay “An Answer to the Question: ‘What is Enlightenment?’” To many readers, Kant comes across as somewhat uneasy about how much and what kind of freedom it would be wise to offer at that particular historical moment. Furthermore, for our purposes, he might look like someone for whom Bildung is very important. The essay emphasizes people’s free use of their reason, but it is notoriously squeamish about other freedoms. Kant infamously quotes a claim attributed to Frederick the Great: “Argue as much as you will, but obey!” (WE 8:41) That claim could have served as the bumper sticker slogan for enlightened absolutism and, in general, for a kind of paternalism that would make elite-centered Bildung look like the most attractive realization of Enlightenment ideals. Even further, Kant’s negative attitude in that essay and elsewhere about the legitimacy of revolution and other kinds of radical social change only makes that interpretation seem more likely.\(^\text{18}\)

However, I want to suggest that such an emphasis gives us an incomplete and, at worst, misleading picture of Kant’s thinking of how social transformation to Enlightenment would best come about. He does think, following Rousseau and many others, that the way to Enlightenment at the macrosocial level lies in the enlightenment of individuals. And children are among the key individuals. So it is significant, I want to claim, that Kant explicitly rejects “slow reformism” and favors a “speedy revolution” in its stead when it comes to education (APB 2:449). To be sure, Kant’s claim is at least partly metaphorical — he certainly isn’t hoping for some 18\(^{th}\) century version of Paris 1968 — but only partly: a thorough and prompt change in the way children should be educated is, Kant thinks, necessary.

\(^{17}\) Abbreviations to Kant’s works are listed at the end of the paper.

\(^{18}\) I have discussed Kant’s views on revolution LaVaque-Manty 2002. See also Korsgaard 1997.
That call comes in a pair of short essays — pamphlets, really — Kant wrote in 1776 in explicit support of the *Philantropinum*. I mean explicit support: at the end of the essay, there is information on how to support the school financially through subscriptions — which Kant himself was selling (APB 2:449, 452). That rhetorical purpose may naturally make us take the strength of the claim with a grain of salt. And we might also note the year: this is Kant still in his pre-Critical period, though only formally so. The first Critique, to be published in 1781, is very much in the works. So there is no reason for us to think that what Kant says in 1776 is in any significant way inconsistent with his more mature philosophy, certainly not with the 1784 essay.

**Metaphors**

Still, actual children do not make any appearance in “What is Enlightenment?” But metaphorical children do. I want to pursue two sets of these metaphors both in that essay and elsewhere in Kant’s corpus before returning to his explicit discussion of actual education and the *Philantropinum*. “Enlightenment is the human being’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity (*Unmündigkeit*)” (WE 8:35) Kant famously begins the essay. This is explicitly metaphorical. People are immature even though they are no longer children: “nature has long since emancipated them from other people’s direction” (ibid.).

**Immaturity**

We might stop to think, for a moment, about the translation of *Unmündigkeit*. Mary Gregor translates it as “minority,” Lewis White Beck as “tutelage.” I prefer Richard Nisbet’s “immaturity,” but none of these alone fully captures what Kant has in mind. Given that the second sentence of the essay defines the term — “inability to make use of one’s own self-understanding without direction from another” — it does not matter overmuch for understanding Kant’s general point. But it matters somewhat. “Minority” is a normative category: it points to a boundary separating what a person may do without the supervision or the authorization of another. “Immaturity” (and “maturity”), on the other hand, seems to refer, as does Kant’s definition, to what a person can do. We all know mature minors and we know
immature adults. The latter type, Kant thinks, characterizes “so great a part of humankind” and “by far the greatest part of humankind” (ibid.). Strictly speaking, of course, given Kant’s specific stipulative definition, there are two sets of capacities here: nature has made people mature enough that they can manage their lives without their parents or guardians, but in the important philosophical sense, they remain immature: they don’t think for themselves. Kant clearly doesn’t mean any purely internal capacities of the mind; these are capacities that might be influenced by one’s will in various ways or even by what we might call the furniture of the world: other people, institutions, rules, norms, practices.

In one way, then, we can think Mündigkeit as “having the authority” to think for oneself. It is helpful to observe that in the Scandinavian languages (Swedish, Norwegian, Danish), the equivalent term — myndighet — also means “authority,” as in “the authorities prohibit rollerblading on the sidewalk.” Etymologies aren’t arguments (pace Hanna Pitkin), but they can help arguments, and here, I claim, the connection is not coincidental.  

We need to be careful about what me mean when we make a distinction between “natural” and “normative” capacities, between what a person “can” and what she “may” do. This is because our conception of nature is itself not given, but, in important ways, normative, as Kant argues in his third Critique. So the point is not that there is one notion of capacity that is purely given — “natural” in an empiricist sense, we might say — and a purely normative conception. The distinction between capacity and authorization is meaningful because the types of contingency are different: the contingency of our conception of natural capacities is, to be sure, related to the mind-independent, real world of cause and effect, whereas authorization is related to the perspective of human freedom. The latter is completely fair game, as it were, for a normative debate — What does it mean to have the authority to think for oneself? Who should have it? — but because the former is transcendent, it is also an

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19 The question is beyond the scope of this paper, but Hegel plays an interesting role in that etymological argument. I am grateful to Baard Skogrand for this point.

20 I develop this argument with Beth Fleishman in my other APSA paper.
open question, and can never automatically ground any answer to the purely normative questions.

Kant’s most extensive discussion of Unmündigkeit comes in his Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View. There, it is clear that there is a distinction between immaturity and minority, although not in any completely straightforward way.

The (natural or legal) inability of an otherwise healthy human being to use his own understanding in civil affairs is called immaturity (Unmündigkeit). When this is based on the immaturity of age (Unreife des Alters — literally “unripeness”) it is called being under age (minority). However, when it has to do with legal arrangements in light of civil affairs, it can be called legal or civil immaturity. (A 7:208–209)

Kant next turns to examples, and his tone is interestingly light while the examples are odd. First, in keeping with the times (and his infamous sexism), Kant thinks women are legally immature. However, given “the nature of her sex,” a woman is good enough at mouthing off (nach der Natur ihres Geschlechts Mundwerks genug hat) to represent her and her husband even legally, so that she might in fact be called “over-mature” (übermündig). Kant means this as a joke: women can’t really defend their property rights legally (even though they may own property), just as they can’t be drafted into military service. This peculiar situation may nevertheless lead them to have more power domestically: their sharp tongue makes them good at directing at least their husbands around, but their legal immaturity also at the same time makes their husbands protect their honor. (A 7:209, also 7:210)

After this, Kant returns to themes that echo, though apparently oddly, “What is Enlightenment?” from more than 15 years earlier.

But to make oneself immature, however degrading it might be, is nevertheless very comfortable. Naturally, leaders do not fail to notice this docility of the masses, and they take advantage of it (as it is difficult for the masses to unite themselves), especially since they know that letting people use their own understanding without the guidance (Leitung) of others is very dangerous, even deadly. State leaders call themselves the fathers of the country because they understand, better than their subjects themselves, how to make the subjects happy. The people, however, are sentenced to a permanent immaturity with regard to their own good. (A 7:209).

If we took this at face value, it would seem inconsistent with the earlier essay, but it is quite clear from the discussion that Kant is being sarcastic. In the next paragraph, he seems to praise the fact that the clergy also keeps the laity in permanent immaturity
when it comes to matters of faith, and he ends by saying that the "mechanical management of people (mechanische Handlung der Menschen) is everywhere the most certain means for keeping legal order" (A 7:210).

What is the general point? I want to suggest two: First, immaturity and maturity are contingent and context-dependent categories. However sarcastically he means the point about women’s natural glibness, and however much it is motivated by nothing other than his sexism, the point still conveys the idea that women can think (because they can speak) for themselves, even while by some other criteria they don’t count as legally mature, i.e., can’t think for themselves without the direction of another. I want to call this conception of mature ascriptive autonomy: whether someone is autonomous depends on whether and on what terms we can ascribe self-authorization to her. It is open on how such ascription goes, but it is not completely up for grabs; there are better and worse argumentative resources. We can, for example, challenge Kant’s sexist understanding of women’s autonomy simply by drawing from his own arguments: claims nature are not automatic givens.

Second, however, Kant also urges us to be skeptical about such claims of immaturity in general, as the discussion of political and religious authorities taking advantage of people’s immaturity suggests. Such claims serve, altogether too conveniently, paternalistic and conservative desires about status quo and, worst of all, risk becoming permanent constraints. So, even though autonomy is ascriptive, pre-existing authority of one kind does not authorize all ascription. To put this in other words, ascription is not a matter of power, but reasons, i.e., authority.

About 20 pages later, Kant returns to the theme, now without sarcasm. Quoting his own earlier essay, he concludes his discussion of human cognitive faculty:

The most important revolution inside the human being is his "liberation from self-incurred minority." Instead of letting others think for him, instead of following others or letting them lead him in a harness (am Gängelbande), he now dares to stride forward, if still a bit shakily, on his own feet on the ground of experience. (A 7:229)

Here Kant connects the language of immaturity with the metaphor of learning to walk without some kind of artificial device. This, too, is an echo from “What is Enlightenment?” and I now turn to Kant’s fascination with those child-rearing implements.
Walking Carts and Leading Strings

The term Kant uses in the Anthropology is actually a hybrid of two other terms he more commonly uses: Gängelwagen, or walking cart, and Leitbande, leading strings. Gängelbande actually doesn’t occur anywhere else in Kant’s published writings, but the two do, quite frequently in fact. In “What is Enlightenment?” both occur several times; the first instance is on the first page. Although Kant blames people themselves for their immaturity — it is a result of their laziness and cowardice — its maintenance is fostered by well-intentioned “guardians.” Here, child metaphors get mixed with animal images: “…after [the guardians] have made their domesticated animals dumb and carefully prevented these placid creatures from daring to take a single step without the walking cart (Gängelwagen) in which they have confined them, they then show them the danger that threatens them if they try to walk alone” (WE 8:35).

Before I catalogue further instances, a word on these two implements. Both the walking cart and leading strings were child-rearing devices commonly used at least in northern central Europe. Both were tools meant to help children to learn to walk while balancing parents’ desire to foster the child’s self-direction with her safety. One doesn’t have to be a parent to understand what a crucial watershed an child’s learning to walk is. It is, of course, not the first instance of pretty sophisticated intentionality — that has come earlier, in all sorts of ways. And it isn’t the first instance where the child successfully combines intentionality with his or her motor abilities. But it is crucial in terms of its scale: the entire physical object, i.e., the child’s body, is now under control of her intentionality, in a way that allows her to move to new places and new heights while leaving her use of her hands for other purposes. As a result, of course, come an exponential number of new risks. Similarly, the very process of learning to walk comes with numerous risks: the child may hurt herself in new ways and, in particular, the risks to her head from falling new heights make things more dangerous than before. And so the understandable dual pull on parents: walking has to be her activity, and so ultimately unaided, but, at the same time, she by

21 For a fascination discussion along the same lines, although in the context of 17th-­century Netherlands, see Schama 1997, pp. 486–496.
definition does not yet have all the skills necessary to do it and thus also to avoid the risks involved.

*Gängelwagen* is simply a child-sized version of what we know as a walker, commonly used these days by motion-impaired disabled adults and the elderly. *Leitbande* are a kind of harness. There is a hierarchy of sorts between the two: the former allows for more de facto freedom to the child than the latter. The *Gängelwagen* supports; *Leitbande* support and constrain. But, of course, the freedom of the *Gängelwagen* can be made illusory with a sufficiently strong indoctrination: if I convince my child bad things are going to happen if he tries to let go, I don’t have to do anything physical to keep him from trying to walk without the support. (If you are like me, you were terrified when your parents first took your training wheels off.)

This is why, for example, in the early part of “What is Enlightenment?” the *Gängelwagen* metaphor serves Kant’s purposes better. However, the difference doesn’t seem ultimately very important. Kant uses both metaphors, and as we saw, he also talks of *Gängelbande* in the *Anthropology*. And in the Enlightenment essay it is as soon as on the second page that we encounter *Leitbande*:

> A revolution may well bring about a falling off of personal despotism and of avaricious or tyrannical oppression, but never a true reform in one’s way of thinking; instead new prejudices will serve just as well as old ones as the leading strings of the great unthinking masses. (WE 8:36)

In other contexts, the metaphors do more or less the very same work. In the first *Critique*, *Leitbande* help make an epistemological point:

> They [17th-century scientific revolutionaries] comprehended that reason has insight only into what it itself produces according to its own design; that it must take the lead with principles for its judgments according to constant laws and compel nature to answer its question, rather than letting nature guide its movements by keeping reason, as it were, in leading strings… (CPR B:xii)

And, later, in the Transcendental Analytic, he notes that “examples are the *Gängelwagen* of the power of judgment, which he who lacks the natural talent for judgment can never do without” (CPR B:174). In both cases, the need for the devices suggests a lack of cognitive autonomy, as it were. In the 1786 essay, “Conjectural Beginning of Human History,” Kant makes a similar point, although now in terms of a kind of conjectural historical anthropology: the development of humankind will
ultimately free humanity “from the Gängelwagen of instinct to the guidance (Leitung) of reason” (CBH 8:115).

However, in his controversial *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, the logic is the same, but now at issue is the development of the rational religion Kant hopes will allow humans to go beyond “historical,” i.e., positive institutional religion:

The integuments with which the embryo is first formed into a human being must be laid aside if the latter is to see the light of day. The *Leitband* of holy tradition, with its appendages, its statutes and observances which in its time did good service become a bit by bit dispensable, yea, finally, when a human being enters upon his adolescence (*Jünglingsalter*), turn into fetter. (R 6:121)

Some ten pages later, he again notes in a footnote that historical faith needs a holy book as leading strings in the historical moments before humankind is sufficiently advanced for pure rational religion (R 6:135n). And a few years later, in the very late *Conflict of the Faculties*, he once more makes a similar point about historical religion as a kind of leading strings, although this time as a warning:

If the government were to neglect that great means [i.e., of treating the Bible as if it is divine revelation] for establishing and administering civil order and peace and abandon it to frivolous hands, the audacity of those prodigies of strength who imagine they have already outgrown this *Leitbande* of dogma (*Kirchenglaubens*) and express their raptures either in public churches devoted to theophilanthropy or in mysticism, with its lamp of private revelations, would soon make it regret its indulgence. (CF 7:65)

In other words, these particular passages suggest, at some historical moments leading strings seem like a good idea.

**Real Children**

What did Kant think of real leading strings and walking carts? The discussions are somewhat ambiguous. Given his ideas of immaturity, it seems Kant might think that they are indeed useful and perhaps even necessary at some appropriate stage in the child’s development and that things are problematic only when their use is artificially prolonged beyond the need. But, in fact, Kant thinks they are more or less bad idea, always.
And he has quite a bit to say about them. In his lectures on education, published in 1800 under the title *Pädagogik*, he spends several pages discussing the common methods of teaching children to walk, and both *Gängelwagen* and *Leitbande* get a thorough condemnation. *Leitbande* in particular he singles out for an attack; they are not only not useful, but they are “in particular very harmful (*besonders sehr schädlich*)” (P 9:461). They can, in Kant’s view, cause permanent damage to the child’s upper body by distorting and deforming the still soft bones in his or her ribcage. In general, such “aids” (*Hülsmittel*) teach children bad habits: children don’t learn to walk as steadily on their own feet if they get used to being helped (ibid.). “It is best,” Kant says, “to let the children crawl on the ground until they eventually start walking on their own” (ibid.). To parents who worry about the children’s falling, Kant suggest they put wool blankets and the like on the floor to cushion the falls. However, he also thinks people have exaggerated worries about how hard children fall. And, he suggests, letting them fall a few times teaches them better to move lightly and to turn their bodies in ways that the fall is not damaging when they do. (Ibid.) Furthermore, Kant wants to disabuse people of the particularly problematic belief that children should never be allowed to fall forward because they will hurt their faces that way. Quite the contrary, letting them to fall forward, he thinks, teaches them to use the most important “natural tool” they have: their hands (P 9:462).

And that gets Kant to his overall point: the more “artificial tools” one uses in teaching children, the more dependent they will remain of “instruments.” “In general, it would be better if one used fewer instruments right from the start and just let the children learn more things by themselves. That way, they would learn things more thoroughly” (ibid.). Children’s free exercise of their bodies, on their own terms and at their own pace makes them stronger, teaches them independence and gives them ownership of their actions and behavior.

This sounds much like Basedow’s ideas, and indeed, only 10 pages earlier, Kant has grounded these practical points about child-rearing and teaching with a general discussion about how we discover good methods of education. The discussion might surprise those who expect heavy emphasis on reason and *a priori* reason in particular from Kant:
We tend to convince ourselves that experiments aren’t necessary in education (Erziehung), but that one can just figure out using one’s reason whether something would be good or bad. However, this is a great mistake, and experience teaches us that our attempts often produce the very opposite effects from what we would have expected. We should also realize that when it comes to experiments, no age can create a complete educational plan (Erziehungsplan). The only experimental school which made a real beginning to break some new ground was the institute in Dessau [i.e., the Philantropinum]. (P 9:451)

Freedom to experiment and the freedom to learn from one’s mistakes, both for the child and for her teachers, is Kant’s general message about education. Children learn by trial and error; society figures out its methods of education not by a priori reason but by learning as it goes. As Kant says in the Doctrine of Virtue, a well-designed teaching context “provides occasions for the teacher himself to learn how to question skillfully, according to the saying docendo discimus,” that is, by teaching we learn (DV 6:477).

What should we make of all this? I want to draw together several themes. First, remember that Kant is not a Cartesian dualist: it is one of the central ideas of his philosophy that we are embodied, finite rational wills and not pure rational wills like angels or, perhaps, God. We are, to use his delightful metaphor, hybrids of angels and cattle. Our wills are then, necessarily, exercised through our embodiment and, in the first instance, literally via our bodies. Our will is a “kind of causality,” as Kant says in the Groundwork (G 4:446). It is well-known and much discussed that, in Kant’s theory, our awareness of our autonomous agency, that is, of our own will, comes to us through our discovery of choice. However, I want to focus on the other aspect of that formula, namely on the causality: my first experience of my being able to cause something — whether freely or not — is from my experience of my body being able to do something in the world.

Discoveries of what my body can and cannot do play a crucial role in my developing a sense of myself as an agent. Errors and failures are important for learning to understand the limits of that exercise, “for one cannot straightaway do all that one wants to do, without having first tried out and exercised one’s powers” (DV 6:477). This is true of all aspects of our agency, but it is, again in the first instance, when we think of children, it is particularly true of physical abilities. And so it makes sense, if we return to the Basedowian Volksschule, that half of the children’s
day is spent on physical play and exercise, and it makes sense that Kant approves of it. Young children aren’t yet fully rational agents, but there is a way in which they can be “mature” on their own terms: there are some things in which they themselves can be the sources of their actions, and where it is only harmful to have their minds be under the direction of another. Leading strings for the toddler, just as rote memorization or physical punishment for the Volksschüler, are externally imposed forms of immaturity. However well intentioned, they are, in the Kantian theory, a kind of tyranny.

vii EXERCISING AGENCY

Finally, cultivating the powers of his body (gymnastics in the strict sense) is looking after the basic stuff (the matter) in a human being, without which he could not realize his ends. Hence the continuing and purposive invigoration of the animal in him is an end of a human being that is a duty to himself. (DV 6:445)

Is my discussion in the previous sections about children, or about the metaphorical children whom the Enlighteners, to their great chagrin, see all about themselves? I would like to say “both,” and in several ways. As I suggested at the beginning of this paper, every generation does have to think about the upbringing of its children, and if a generation finds its own degree of rational autonomy wanting, it ought to do something about its children. And many Enlighteners took this idea seriously. Children are also literally the future, and so they are also a means of social transformation. I have tried to argue that the Philantropinen had one quite interesting approach and that Kant’s endorsement of it in particular gives us a useful way of thinking not only about the 18th century, but about children’s agency in general and the way it relates to the conditions of possibility for rational adult agency.

Finally, I want to suggest there is a way in which the discussion might have us see Kant’s moral psychology in, if not radically new, at least slightly richer way than in the standard version. Again, our embodiment is an inescapable condition, and whatever the pinnacle of our rational autonomy means, it never means freedom from our embodiment. This doesn’t mean we should reject those Enlightenment thinkers who valued Bildung, particularly its higher forms, as the realization of our freedom, and we needn’t agree with Bentham about the equivalence of pushpin and
poetry. But the Kantian view is that we also can’t forget our embodiment. As the passage from the *Doctrine of Virtue* at the top of this section reminds us, the cultivation of our bodies — “gymnastics in the strict sense” — is a moral duty we have to ourselves. It is an imperfect one, that is, the duty does not spell out what we must do to carry it out, only that we must do something. By way of slightly conjectural conclusion, I want to suggest that Kant was very mindful of this aspect of our agency.

At the end of the *Doctrine of Virtue*, Kant talks about the two ways virtue is cultivated in people. The first one is through the moral education of children, the second is through people’s adopting a kind of “ethical ascetics.” Despite the austere ring this has, Kant is not advocating anything vaguely monastic. He explicitly condemns monastic moral ascetism, which “cannot produce the cheerfulness that accompanies virtue, but much rather brings with it secret hatred for virtue’s command” (DV 6:485). Kant’s favored version is far more positive:

> With regard to the principle of a vigorous, spirited, and valiant practice of virtue, the cultivation of virtue, that is, moral ascetics, takes as its motto the Stoic saying: accustom yourself to put up with the misfortunes of life that may happen and to do without its superfluous pleasures…. This is a kind of regimen (Diätetik) for keeping a human being healthy. But health is only a negative kind of well-being: it cannot itself be felt. Something must be added to it, something which, though it is only moral, affords an agreeable enjoyment to life. (DV 6:484–485)

Key for my purpose here is the talk of health. To be sure, something “must be added to it” in the Kantian system for it to have the moral weight it needs to have. But while we do not really notice our health when we have it, as Kant says, it is far from trivial that we always have it. Although he lived to an impressively old age by contemporary standards (and even by ours), he never took his health for granted. He suffered from many small ailments — including constricted chest, one of those things leading strings may also cause — and from general hypochondria, which wasn’t anything to laugh at in 18th-century medical science. And so he was well aware of the constraints nature tried to put on his exercise of his agency and which he actively — and, we might say, successfully — tried to resist by exercises both physical, social and intellectual.

There are many reasons to be leery of too strong or too enthusiastic a connection between physical and what we might call moral health. The 19th and
particularly the 20th century would remind us of that. But it is equally problematic, I want to claim, to err on the opposite side.

viii CONCLUSION

I have explored Kant’s solution to what I called the autonomy problem, namely the question of how to reconcile the theoretical claim of human beings’ inherent capacity for autonomous agency with the fact that they might not be autonomous in reality. Kant’s solution turns on thinking about children, both metaphorically and in reality. He is not alone in this; children were important for other Enlightenment thinkers, too. His solution, however, I have suggested, is in some ways more promising than paternalistic and elitist solutions, which in the German context focused on Bildung as the ideal form of human cultivation. Kant’s view makes autonomy a contingent, ascriptive category, which we can find to some extent even in young children and which we ought to respect. I called this conception of autonomy ascriptive and suggested that, instead of undermining Kantian conception of agency, it opens a promising space for politics.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abbreviations to Kant’s works.

The following lists the abbreviations to Kant’s works I have used in the text. The two numbers in the textual references point to the volume and page number in the standard edition published by the Akademie der Wissenschaften (Kant 1902-), except in the case of the first Critique, in which the alphabet distinguishes between the first (A) and second (B) editions. The parenthetical reference indicates which translation I have used, if any. My source for the German has been the electronic version provided in the PastMasters internet database. The texts are listed in the order of the publication.

APB: ”Aufsätze, das Philanthropin betreffend” (”Essays on the Philanthropinum”).

C: Correspondence (Kant 1999).

CPR: Critique of Pure Reason (Kant 1998).

WE: “An Answer to the Question: ‘What is Enlightenment?’” (Kant 1996).

G: Groundwork of The Metaphysics of Morals (Kant 1999).

CBH: ”Mutmaßlicher Anfang der Menschengeschichte” (”Conjectural Beginning of Human History”).

R: Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason (Kant 1996).


CF: The Conflict of the Faculties (Kant 1996).

A: Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht.

P: Pädagogik.

Texts cited


