

Afterword.

On Enlightenment and the Most Difficult Problem of the Human Species

Epílogo.

Sobre la Ilustración y el mayor problema de la especie humana

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Abstract

In this Afterword, I discuss the papers contained in the *dossier* in regards to a central issue for Kant: leadership. The issue for Kant is the paradox of the human species' need for a master that is human yet morally perfect. This of course is an as-yet unobtainable requirement that Kant thinks can only be properly met through a civil constitution. The issues of elitism and the tension between a 'maximal' and 'minimal' Enlightenment in light of Kant's requirement will be discussed.

Key words

Kant; Enlightenment; Civil Constitution; Leadership; Master; Elitism

Resumen

En este epílogo comento los artículos recogidos en el *dossier* en relación con una cuestión central para Kant: el liderazgo. Kant plantea la cuestión de la paradoja consistente en la

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necesidad que la especie humana tiene de un jefe que sea humano, pero moralmente perfecto. Esta es sin duda una exigencia no alcanzable aún, que Kant considera plausible solo a través de una constitución civil. Se discutirá el elitismo y la tensión entre una Ilustración ‘maximalista’ y ‘minimalista’, a la luz de la exigencia de Kant.

Palabras clave

Kant; Ilustración; constitución civil; liderazgo; jefe; elitismo

In providing an afterword for this set of papers on Kant and the Enlightenment – drawn for our first Kant Conference at Memorial University –, I am conscious of the likelihood of merely adding my claims to the claims already put forth. Now all papers raise the question of elitism to some degree. And this seems a fitting point of departure. But I don’t want to raise an issue that is already raised (and dealt with) by the papers. As such, I intend to take a different tack: I want to see what theme(s), beyond the Enlightenment itself, these papers raise. I see one immediately spring forward--leadership. The problem of leadership as I construe it concerns Kant’s admonition that humankind needs a master, yet every (human) master requires a master, for the human species and every human being therein is morally imperfect. Because this condition cannot hold (we cannot have an infinite regress of leadership), humankind must rely on masters that are morally imperfect.

In what follows I will briefly outline Kant’s views on the matter and then discuss the problem in light of the various claims of the papers. I don’t intend on solving the problem here: I merely suggest that any discussion of the Enlightenment must face this question, and it is one that has no immediate solution—at least not in the short-term. As such, I think I can fairly say that for Kant, we belong to an Enlightenment that is as yet unfinished.

1. The Greatest Problem for the Human Species.

Kant is direct about the quandary in which the human species finds itself. He begins the Fifth Proposition of his “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitical Aim” with the following: “*The greatest problem for the human species, to which nature compels him, is the achievement of a **civil society** universally administering right*” (IAG AA 8:22).¹ In the Sixth Proposition he makes the claim that

¹ I follow for the most part the English translation of Kant’s works in the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*. These are: *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* Translated by M. Gregor, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; *Groundwork on the Metaphysics of Morals*, translated by M. Gregor, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996; *On the Saying: That may be Correct in Theory, But It is of no Use in Practice*, translated by M. Gregor, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996; *The Metaphysics of Morals*, translated by M. Gregor, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996; *Idea for a Universal History with Cosmopolitical Intent*, translated by A. Wood, Cambridge: Cambridge University

«This problem is at the same time the most difficult and the latest to be solved by the human species. The difficulty which the mere idea of this problem lays before our eyes is this: the human being is an animal which, when it lives among others of its species, has need of a master (*Herrn*). For he certainly misuses his freedom in regard to others of his kind; and although as a rational creature he wishes a law that sets limits to the freedom of all, his selfish animal inclination still misleads him into excepting himself from it where he may. Thus he needs a master, who breaks his stubborn will and necessitates him to obey a universally valid will with which everyone can be free. But where will he get this master. Nowhere else but from the human species. But then this master is exactly as much an animal who has need of a master...The highest supreme authority, however, ought to be just in itself and yet a human being».²

The solution to this latest problem of humankind, Kant suggests, lies in “correct concepts of the nature of a possible constitution,” together with “great experience practiced through many courses of life,” as well as “a good will that is prepared to accept it” (IAG, AA 8: 22-23).

“Idea for a Universal History” appeared in 1784--the same year as “What is Enlightenment?” “Idea”, both being published in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*. The one and the other deal with similar themes, including the political conditions required for any enlightened age to prosper. But “Idea” strikes a less sanguine note than “What is Enlightenment?” for it presents the problem of leadership of the species as obdurate. And herein lies the cautionary message regarding the prospects of an enlightened age I think Kant means for us to grasp: no matter how civil the Enlightenment is, it requires leadership. The paradox of the human species in need of a master yet supposedly free and capable of practicing autonomy is perhaps the most intractable controversy to arise from Kant’s “Ideas” essay. Kant doesn’t offer a solution to this paradox—at least not here. Indeed, Kant is quite clear about the nature of the problem—after all, it *is* the most difficult of all for the human species. But it is also clear Kant does not think the need for a master contradicts the autonomy or freedom of subjects; rather(to put it with more precision) he thinks a resolution to the paradox is forthcoming.

Leadership puts the problems of an enlightened age—those of fractiousness and disagreement (Foster), the problem of an aristocracy of the *Gelehrten* (Foster, Piché), the problem of autonomy and subjectivity on the part of the enlightened (Rajiva), the problem of the scope or reach of the Enlightenment (Fleischacker), and that of courage (Madore) in context. For an answer to each of these is partly dependent on the response to the problem of leadership. And the problem of leadership has no facile solution, for until the conditions for a civil society and constitution are fully met, the fact remains that humankind will need

Press, 1999; *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, translated by A. Wood, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

²I have somewhat adjusted Wood’s translation.

a (imperfect) master. I will take up each of these problems in the context of the problem of leadership, in turn.

2. The Need for a Master.

The insistence on a master for the human species in no way precludes Kant's claim in "What is Enlightenment?" that the public has the right to participate in scholarship. Nor does it preclude the public from disagreement with its sovereign, as Kant also maintains the *Rechtslehre* (RL AA 06: 318). And it is well in accord with Kant's republicanism. But it does place limits on what autonomous human subjects can do for themselves. The condition of civil society can never merely be a matter left up to the autonomous subject; while a subject certainly has (and must practice) autonomy in Rajiva's sense, there is no guarantee that the practice of this autonomy by itself will lead to civil society administered under a civil constitution.³ This is a message I think Kant makes clear in "Idea for a Universal History:" there must be in place *correct concepts* of a possible constitution.

A constitution is valid for all who would claim the rights enshrined therein. This much is self-evident. Beyond the mere claiming of rights enshrined in a constitution, however, lies the need for the practice of those rights. This, I think, accounts for Kant's insistence that great experience is needed in many spans of life. It is not enough to have rights; we must practice them if we are to get good at asserting them and undertaking our (reciprocal) obligations. Enlightenment is a continuing process, not a once-and-for-all destination. Regardless of how procedural the Enlightenment turns out to be, this is the thinking behind the claim that the project of the Enlightenment is unfinished—and likely never to be complete.⁴ Madore is correct regarding the need of courage, as it will take resolve on the part of those members of civil society—let's call them citizens—that carry forth the ideals of Enlightenment and the practice of their rights and obligations. The sort of courage I think Kant has in mind (beyond the 'courage of convictions' discussed in the opening paragraphs of "What is Enlightenment?") has to do with virtue: that is, self-constraint. To have a good will is to make obligations the ground of one's will, and not incentives. Self-constraint is the wherewithal to prevent those incentives from becoming the grounds of our wills. And this resistance—this struggle--takes courage. Even the

³Thus I am saying that without a civil constitution, it is less likely that subjects can practice their (moral) autonomy effectively. As such, the civil constitution enshrines what is a sort of political 'kingdom of ends.' I realize that this is a controversial issue in Kant scholarship and I don't want to make light of it by such a facile assertion. However, given the stress Kant places on both enacting a civil constitution and incorporating that constitution into the (good) wills of humans in communities, I think that, at least in 1784, Kant did think the two ran together.

⁴See for example, *Cultural-Political Interventions in the Unfinished Project of Enlightenment*, edited by A. Honneth, T. McCarthy, C. Offe, and A. Wellmer (Cambridge, Ma: MIT Press, 1992). I am here thinking of Habermas and the attempts of German social theorists to construct a legal-political discourse from conditions of universality and reciprocity. While this view is controversial—it seems to deny the sense of *Bildung* Kant maintains regarding the Enlightenment in favour of a more procedural accounting of rights—it does seem to me to fairly represent at least part of what Kant is trying to get at.

formation of a disposition to self-restraint in the face of ceaseless un-moral incentives is no cause for the slackening of one's vigilance, as Kant makes clear in the *Religion* (R AA 06: 43-47). The citizens of a civil society, acting under a civil constitution will need an abundance of courage in the guise of self-constraint to enact the conditions of *Recht*.

This raises the thorny issue of the role of the *Gelehrten* under such a constitution. We have seen that scholars are to be granted the right to publicize their disagreements with the sovereign. There is suspicion, however, that the *Gelehrten* belong to a distinct social class and/or require a specific and even elite education. Foster's paper trades on this suspicion, as does Piché's in suggesting an aristocracy of the enlightened. If this is the case, it augurs against the 'minimal' Enlightenment endorsed by Fleischacker. Fleischacker's 'minimal' Enlightenment concerns the scope of freedom of speech as well as the responsibility of and for, thinking.⁵ However, if there are two or more classes of peoples in Kant's Enlightenment, and the only 'public' that is granted access to the presses ("scholarship") is the *Gelehrten*, only the *Gelehrten* will be able to challenge the sovereign. And this serves to curb the reach of any 'minimal' program of Enlightenment speech and thought.

Another way to put the point is to suggest that restricting the freedom of the press to the *Gelehrten* is tantamount to endorsing a 'maximal' program of Enlightenment. I think both Foster and Piché are suggesting Kant moves in this direction. Even if we set aside the hermeneutics of suspicion regarding Kant's intention with respect to the *Gelehrten*, there remains the larger and ever-looming concern of humankind's need for a master—a concern that seems to me to push Kant even further in the direction of a 'maximal' Enlightenment. This is a concern unlikely to resolve itself in the near future. And therefore we must, if we agree with Kant, accept that a master to rule over humankind must be our fate.⁶ Our need for leadership in the face of an imperfect civil constitution and the ongoing struggle to obtain and maintain a good will necessitate this because our tendency to self-love and self-deception is built into what it means to be a rational animal. While a 'minimal' Enlightenment can likely operate with a sovereign that allows expansive freedoms (especially freedom of speech), a 'maximal' Enlightenment will place restrictions on these in the name of maintaining civil order and the rule of law until such time as a civil constitution is enacted in practice and the rule of law takes its place in the hearts of humankind.

A 'maximal' Enlightenment need not accept Piché's premise that an aristocracy of *Gelehrten* has and should have the only access to freedom of the press. I do not think he meant to endorse this, as seems sufficiently clear in his (later) essay on Theory and Practice, where Kant makes it abundantly clear that "freedom of the pen" belongs to the

⁵ Fleischacker brings this out with particular clarity in the final chapter of his book, *What is Enlightenment?* See Samuel Fleischacker, *What is Enlightenment?* New York: Routledge, 2013.

⁶ At least in the short-to-intermediate term. Regardless of Kant's gesture towards a less rhetorically hierarchical ordering of the human species in the *Doctrine of Right*, it is the case that here he is unequivocal.

“peoples” and not simply a distinguished social or learned class (TP AA 08: 304). But it does, I think, require us to extend beyond the reach of the Enlightenment that Fleischacker wants to say stops at the borders of censorship. A master has the right to dictate what speech is permitted and what denied through a civil constitution. Does this restrict the “freedom of the pen?” No. It doesn’t restrict this freedom, as it nowhere inhibits or implies the inhibition of scholarship; rather it provides penalties to those that contravene the sovereign. In a ‘maximal’ Enlightenment of the sort Kant lays out in “Idea for a Universal History,” the sovereign through the civil constitution has the wherewithal to lead.

The example I want us to think about is that of hate speech codes. Fleischacker discusses these most fully in *What is Enlightenment?* There, the argument turns on the assumption that obstruction to access of speech or works results in a net restriction of free speech. So, if restriction of free speech (say, restriction of sexist posters in the workplace) takes place, there will be a “burden on whoever imposes that restriction to create other spaces where the restriction is lifted.”⁷ In other words, a corresponding obligation is owed to those whose free speech is restricted—an obligation that must be carried out by the sovereign under the civil constitution. But this is not the ‘minimal’ Enlightenment towards which Fleischacker gestures; it is ‘maximal.’ And it is ‘maximal’ because the civil constitution works through a sovereign—a civil constitution works through a master.⁸

3. Autonomy, Subjectivity, and “Freedom of the Pen”.

The upshot of the pressing need for sovereign leadership is we cannot understand Kant’s discussion of public and private, nor his insistence on having the courage of our convictions, apart from his concern that the human species requires a master. This is a historical condition to be sure; but it is also a universal condition of the human species. It is a condition involving more than the merely empirical situation we find ourselves in, for it involves and invokes *Recht*. The very possibility of a perfect civil constitution hangs on lawful internal relations within states and external relations between states (IAG AA 08: 24-25). And this is a condition of Public and Cosmopolitan Right (RL AA 06: 318-320; 352-353). We would do well to heed Kant’s words regarding an inquiry into the nature of the sovereign, here: once the issue of the General Will (civil constitution) is settled, the proper activity the people are to undertake is obedience (RL AA 06: 318-319). “Freedom of the pen” must be understood in the context of this claim.

⁷ Fleischacker, *What is Enlightenment?*, p. 178.

⁸Of course, Kant allows for the civil constitution itself to be the sovereign—the master. This is what ideally takes place in a full-fledged republic. However, as Kant makes clear in “Idea for a Universal History,” humankind is not yet ready for this. There will, one hopes, come a time when a fully enacted civil constitution operates *as* sovereign, but that time had not yet come for Kant. And judging by the shenanigans (Donald Trump is a front-runner in the race leading to President of the United States of America at the time this is written) in the leadership of many liberal-democratic nations, it still hasn’t come.

The question remains: does this ‘maximal’ Enlightenment demand infringe on the autonomy and subjectivity of the person, as Rajiva worries? I answer, no. It does not because, to best operate, autonomy and subjectivity must function under conditions of *Recht*, which is a Categorical Imperative (RL AA 06: 6: 230-231). Indeed, autonomy and subjectivity are possible *only under the Law*, and the Law is *Recht*. Autonomy and subjectivity will require the practice of “freedom of the pen,” but this requires more than simply enlightened scholarship. The hard business demanded of us is to strive for a “perfect” civil constitution and to practice this constitution (likely through judicial cases, though Kant does not say in the context of “Idea for a Universal History”), together with accepting this constitution into our wills (IAG AA 08: 23) and in so doing, making the constitution and the laws enshrined therein the principle of our maxims. When we have such a constitution, and we incorporate that constitution into our wills, then and only then we will have the master that will bring the human species to its perfection.

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