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Enlightening: Adorno's and Kant's Contrasting Answers to the Question “How to Write About the Enlightenment?”

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Abstract

The content of Kant's Enlightenment text has received much critical reception, but the very stance Kant takes as its author has been largely ignored. Similarly, there has been much critical discussion of Horkheimer and Adorno's “Dialectic of Enlightenment” in terms of the theses they (purportedly) endorse, while their authorial voice has mostly received either no attention or been criticised as problematically rhetorical. In this paper, I take a different approach, focusing on the two respective writerly stances. I suggest that Kant's text harbours an implicit epistemic authoritarianism, in contrast to the self-therapeutic stance Adorno and Horkheimer's text exemplifies.

Keywords: Kant; enlightenment; Hamann; writerly stance; Adorno

Kant's famous text ‘Answer to the Question: “What is Enlightenment?”’ [1784] has provoked legions of commentaries. There is therefore a risk that I will not be able to contribute anything new. Nevertheless, I will try to do so here by addressing a question of form that has been neglected up to now in relation to this text:

How, if at all, can a text contribute to the enlightenment of its readers—specifically, how can a text promote the development of their ability to think for themselves and the exercise of this ability?

This is a far-reaching question. Here I would like to make some progress towards addressing it by discussing Kant's (implied) answer in the above-mentioned text; and contrasting it with the approach Horkheimer and Adorno take in (the opening parts of) *Dialectic of Enlightenment* [1944/1947].¹

An important background consideration for this discussion is that Adorno and Horkheimer are often accused of a kind of authoritarianism—in particular, they are

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often accused of occupying (or seeking to occupy) an epistemically privileged position and criticising the (purportedly) failed Enlightenment from there.² They are painted as taking a kind of holier-than-thou attitude and then preach from their self-appointed pulpit—or at least from their cushy armchair in the Grand Hotel Abyss. Such epistemic authoritarianism would represent a self-defeating attempt to write a text aimed at furthering enlightenment by—however inadvertently—placing the authors into the role of guardians who are directing the use of the readers’ understanding.

Here I would like to try to turn the tables, so that in the end it is not Horkheimer and Adorno who are seen as authoritarian, but rather Kant, who is normally celebrated as a liberal philosopher who might have got some “details” wrong (cue, for example, his comments on the ‘entire fair sex’), but—so the normal story goes—produced an exemplary text for enlightening others, not just about the historical Enlightenment, but as a rallying cry for enlightened thinking in general.

Breaking with this normal story, I attend, first, to the writerly stance Kant takes in his famous text (section I). Then, I suggest a new interpretation of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and the writerly stance taken by its authors, in the hope of shifting our view of who among the contrasted writers we perceive as authoritarian and who as exemplary (section II). This is followed by a discussion of pertinent objections (section III), which leads to second pass at Kant’s text, this time tracing the complexity (and internal tensions) of what he says its opening pages by way of a close reading (section IV). In this way, it emerges that the earlier discussion is not bringing external considerations to bear on Kant’s text, but that Adorno and Horkheimer’s approach takes up differently what their predecessor already grappled with, but (however unconsciously) suppressed for his own rhetorical context. In the conclusion, I review the steps taken in this paper and end by briefly reflecting on my own writerly stance.

My primary aim is to shed light on Kant’s text with regard to his writerly stance in the context of the question, ‘How, if at all, can a text contribute to the enlightenment of its readers—specifically, how can a text promote the development of their ability to think for themselves and the exercise of this ability?’. To help with this, I propose to compare his text with *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. A secondary aim of my discussion is to present a non-standard reading of (the opening parts) of that book as an illuminating object of comparison to the writerly stance by Kant in his text. A tertiary aim is to show that there are tensions in Kant’s text that suggests that a different writerly stance is apt for responding to the question of form.

1. Kant’s (implicit) answer

Let us start with the famous passage with which Kant begins his text, a series of definitions and explications that didactically lay out the issues:

Enlightenment is the human being’s emergence from his self-incurred minority [*Unmündigkeit*]. Minority is inability to make use of one’s own understanding without direction from another. This minority is self-incurred when its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. *Sapere aude!* Have courage to make use of your own understanding! is thus the motto of enlightenment. (8:35; italics in the original)³

This opening passage raises important questions. For example, there is an interesting textual question whether Kant actually maintains his claim that immaturity is self-incurred throughout the rest of his text, given that he goes on to highlight the role of ‘guardians [*Vormünder*]’, who make ‘their domesticated animals dumb’, put them under a ‘yoke’, and ‘implant prejudices’ (8:35, 36). However, I will leave this tension in the text—and others—aside for now (and only take them up in Section IV). I am here primarily concerned with the above-mentioned question about how a text can contribute to the enlightenment of its readers, which I would now like to investigate further.

To find out what stance Kant (implicitly) takes as author in the 1784 article, we first need to read on. On the next page, Kant writes that ‘only a few have succeeded, by their own cultivation of their spirit, in extracting themselves from immaturity’. He then contrasts those ‘few independent thinkers’ with the ‘great masses [*großen Haufen*]’ (8:36). The few can, as long as there is freedom in the public use of reason, facilitate the achievement of enlightenment by the general public, the ‘great masses’ (8:36–37), and thus bring about the improvement of humanity (8:39). In particular, this task is intended for scholars—or at least it is to be brought about by those who address the whole ‘public of the reading world’ (8:37), indeed the whole world (8:38), even if they are not necessarily employed as scholars, but as officers, clergymen or other non-academic members of the social body.

Although Kant never explicitly claims to be one of the few who managed to emerge from their own immaturity on their own, it is quite clear that he implicitly counts himself among these few—and even that, according to his own understanding of things, he *must* count himself among them. For if Kant himself is one of the immature adults who cannot think for themselves, then it makes little sense for readers to pay attention to the text, except as a further example of how quickly people fall prey to some kind of prejudice implanted in them by guardians. Kant, however, clearly does not present himself as a case study of immaturity, but he assumes that his text is written by one of the few who are already enlightened. Moreover, Kant (implicitly) understands his text as a contribution by a scholar to the enlightenment of the ‘great masses’. His (implicit) ambition for the text, it is safe to say, includes *both* describing what being enlightened entails and promoting its development in others via that very text.

What Kant presumes to do in so contributing to enlightening the ‘great masses’ and how Kant’s (perhaps unconscious) wishes find expression in his text, can be seen clearly in a reaction by one of Kant’s contemporaries—in Johan Georg Hamann’s letter to Christian Jacob Kraus, written also in December 1784 after Hamann read Kant’s text.⁴ Hamann demonstrates a special sensitivity for the fact that Kant in his Enlightenment text was to a certain extent acting as a guardian himself—as someone who ‘reckons himself to the class of guardians and wishes thereby to attain a high reputation before immature readers’.⁵ It is not surprising that Hamann brings Plato and his idea of the guardians into play as early as the second paragraph,⁶ and then never completely lets go of this idea in the letter. In Hamann’s reaction, we can see reflected that Kant—perhaps unconsciously—seems to harbour the desire to set himself up as a new guardian in place of the existing guardians. Of course, one may respond that Kant’s aim is to be a better guardian—one who does not turn the ‘great masses’ into dumb domesticated animals or prevent them from using their own understanding, but who promotes their enlightenment and enables them to overcome prejudice. Indeed, as Kant notes in his text, the existing, subjugating

guardians are ‘themselves incapable of any enlightenment’ (8:36). This places them in explicit contrast to Frederick the Great, whom Kant portrayed as enlightened (8:41; see also 40); and in implicit contrast to Kant himself. Still, this possible response to Hamann misses the main point: Hamann’s key concern is about the implicit authoritarianism inherent in the *writerly stance* that Kant takes, i.e., inherent in, as Hamann puts it using scare quotes, the “‘Kantian style’”.⁷

Hamann also has a sense of how much Kant ingratiate himself with the authorities in his Enlightenment text, and even of how Kant reproduces patriarchal gender relations. Instead of behaving as an ideological organ (as a ‘lip servant’) and as part of the social machine (‘wage servant’),⁸ it is incumbent on the true critical spirit—Hamann’s counter-proposal seems to be—to show obstinacy and to rebel against existing authorities by all means, even by means that are decried as immature or even childish. To deploy the food metaphor that Hamann uses: instead of social criticism as the main course, the critical endeavour of enlightenment becomes, in Kant’s case, a mere dessert that follows social obedience.

As exemplar, Hamann implicitly offers us less Plato than his own three daughters, who, he wryly remarks, would not put up with Kant’s sneers.⁹ Kant’s accusation that immaturity is self-incurred takes on a different dimension in this context: it is revealed as functioning as an implicit justification for the fact that the few who are capable of self-enlightenment (including Kant) will become the enlightened guardians who will ultimately lead the masses into maturity, as long as these few are given enough freedom of speech and cultural hegemony. Kant’s text suggests that neither the masses (‘*der große Haufen*’) nor women (‘the entire fair sex’ (8:35)) are capable of enlightening themselves. Instead, they need scholars and (supposedly) enlightened monarchs who will then drive out their ‘laziness and cowardice’. Crucial for this process is that the few scholars must—as the German for ‘guardian’ literally has it (‘*Vormund*’)—put their mouths before those of others. Not insignificant in this context is the disparaging nature of the terms used in relation both to women and the general public: women are getting a backhanded compliment about their looks (fair-looking) but are denied the(ir) ability to think for themselves; and the general public are described in non-human terms as just a ‘massive heap’ (to go with the literal translation of ‘*großer Haufen*’).

Seen in this light, Kant’s text hints at a figure of thought that Marx, Lukács and Adorno later describe as a characteristic trait of bourgeois thinkers of that age: finding themselves in a situation in which the revolt against feudalism was still unfolding and yet the consolidation of bourgeois rule had already begun, bourgeois thinkers take back their own radicalism in the same breath in which they first—often timidly—express this radicalism.¹⁰ Otherwise the ‘great masses’ and ‘the whole fair sex’ could get ideas.

One important point in this is that the (epistemic) authoritarianism ascribed here to Kant (in his enlightenment text)¹¹ is located at the level of his writerly stance, not just or even necessarily at the level of the content of what he actually says. True, the content of Kant’s essay also includes, as I just pointed out with the help of Hamann, a kind of authoritarianism. However, first of all, it is of a different kind (not that he is an epistemic authority, but that we should be obedient to the political authority of Frederick the Great). Moreover, and more importantly, even if Kant did not recommend obedience to the rulers, my point would hold. That Kant does not tell ‘the great masses’ *what* to think but only *that* they should think for themselves (and what the conditions of possibility there are for everyone to do so), is not decisive.

What is decisive is that, in writing the kind of texts he wrote, he implicitly takes himself—and, in a sense, can't but take himself—to be already enlightened and fostering the enlightenment of the 'great masses'. In a sense, it is then not surprising that he excludes many (women and the 'great masses') from those who can think for themselves on their own, from being agents of enlightenment—his stance requires such passive recipients of his enlightening message.

One final important point in relation to Kant: the question of the stance that an author (implicitly) adopts may sound alien to Kant's work, but, in fact, it is not. Notably, in 'On the Common Saying: That may be Correct in Theory, But it is of No Use in Practice' (1793), Kant himself poses and answers this question when he critically examines Mendelssohn's thoughts on human progress and comes to the conclusion that Mendelssohn *must* hope for better times if and since he is actively intervening as an author in the debates about progress (8:309).¹² The kind of criticism I offered is, thus, an immanent one, not bringing external considerations to Kant's work. (Not bringing external considerations to Kant's work is a consideration that guides me again in section IV below.)

2. Horkheimer and Adorno's self-reflection (as their implicit answer)

The reception of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* has been very much shaped by Jürgen Habermas. He is, somewhat ironically, both the person who had long advocated—perhaps ultimately decisively—for the re-publication (in 1969) of this book and the person whose interpretation then blocked a genuine access to this book for many readers. The most important step in his interpretation is quite inconspicuous and, consequently, not thematised, but subtly at work. Habermas's attempt at reconstruction contains a side remark at a central point of his essay that sets the scene for the critique that he then develops. That side remark sets out the kind of reader that Habermas recommends to us to be: we should resist 'being overwhelmed by the rhetoric of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*' and step back and focus on its contents, taking 'seriously the thoroughly philosophical claim of the text'.¹³

Habermas then goes on to reproach Horkheimer and Adorno for not living up to their claim to justify the 'philosophical claim of the text'. Instead of developing such a justification, they become entangled in a 'performative contradiction'.¹⁴

I do not discuss this reproach here—it has been addressed sufficiently elsewhere.¹⁵ Instead, I would like to concentrate on the side remark—and on its presuppositions. Habermas's aside suggests that, in his view, *Dialectic of Enlightenment's* format of presentation is characterised by rhetoric in a particularly drastic way. This seems innocent as a presupposition; indeed, it is difficult to dispute. The important and more disputable second presupposition, however, is that we readers would do better not to allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by the form of presentation, but instead to take a step back and concentrate on the propositional content. That premise, in turn, is probably based on the assumption that it is never good—or at least not good in this case—to be overwhelmed by rhetorical form. Perhaps Kant's ideas about thinking for oneself and self-inflicted immaturity play an implicit role here. To allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by the rhetorical form of presentation means that we are immature, that we do not think for ourselves, do not make use of our own intellect and understanding, but—perhaps because we are too cowardly or lazy—are directed by guardians.

But what kind of assumption is it that it is never good—or at least not good in this case—to allow oneself to be overwhelmed by rhetorical forms of presentation? Which readers, with which abilities, is Habermas tacitly assuming here? It seems to me that Habermas assumes that, while the readers are already in possession of the *ability* to think for themselves, the rhetorical form of presentation could stop them from exercising this ability or otherwise interfere with it or even undermine this ability completely; and that this should be prevented—indeed, the implicit suggestion is that Habermas's text itself should serve as part of this prevention. (Habermas, the guardian of the Enlightenment, warns us not to be seduced by Nietzschean rhetoric—a danger he has already escaped).

Perhaps Horkheimer and Adorno are not entirely blameless for the fact that many have understood their book as Habermas understood it (I return to this below). But I do not think it takes much thought to realise that his reading, and especially the assumption it contains about the readers' ability to think for themselves, miss something important.

Let us look at Horkheimer and Adorno's book afresh then; and consider that what they are saying concerns not just the external consequences of a misfired enlightenment, but its very mode of thinking and, perhaps particularly, our own ability to think for ourselves and exercise this ability. Instead of entry into a truly human state, we would have 'enlightenment as mass deception'; instead of thinking for ourselves, anti-Semitism and other thinking in stereotypes; instead of true autonomy and happiness, mutilation of inner and outer nature.

The pill that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* offers us is therefore a bitter one: instead of standing at and being the culmination of a historical learning process, we find ourselves confronted by not just external calamity (such as the Nazi reign of terror), but also internal calamity of not yet being genuinely enlightened ourselves. Is it not surprising that we would rather spit out such a bitter pill than to digest it and take it to heart? Is it not more likely that our psychological defence mechanisms will intervene to protect us from the insult to our (narcissistically-inclined) ego? And is this not particularly to be expected if the failure of enlightenment has been accompanied by the fact that our egos have not developed in such a way that we are well-equipped to reflectively process (psychological) defence mechanisms and then let go of these mechanisms?

In this way, it makes more sense to assume that Horkheimer and Adorno have other readers in mind than Habermas implies: those who do not (yet) have the ability to think for themselves, but must first develop this ability. The analogy is therefore less to the conversation between those who are already enlightened and more to the psychotherapeutic context, in which it may well be a matter of being overwhelmed, or perhaps even having to be, so that the psychological defence mechanisms—which include not least various forms of rationalisation—do not stand in the way of self-reflection. (The analogy to psychoanalysis is also apt insofar as Horkheimer and Adorno do not view or present the inability to think for ourselves as something that is straightforwardly self-incurred. It is not that the self plays no role in this inability, but, unlike with Kant (at least, initially, in his text), the claim is not that it is mere laziness or cowardice which is at issue; rather, social forces play a major role in this—preventing us from thinking for ourselves or even attempting to think for ourselves).

A different reading of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*—or at least its opening essay and first excursus—is required in order to understand this approach by Horkheimer and Adorno. According to this new interpretation, the (opening of the) book is not about a prehistory of subjectivity,¹⁶ but about a kind of performative critique of the historical self-understanding of Western modernity and our critical capacities within it. For this reading, we cannot and should not ignore the writerly stance taken by Horkheimer and Adorno, and the rhetoric this involves. This is *not* to say that the only thing that matters is that stance or their rhetoric or their style; but, rather, it is to say that we need to think of form and content as so *intimately intertwined*, so inseparable, that we should not attempt to do what Habermas's aside calls us to do, viz. to separate them out, ignoring the rhetoric/form and concentrating only on the (validity of the) propositional content.

I now elaborate on this alternative reading a little. Following Allen (2017) and Andreev (2022), we can identify the following as the key background premise of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: we moderns—or at least Horkheimer, Adorno and their contemporaries—have tended to have a self-conception of being the product of moral progress; indeed, perhaps even standing at the end of such progress.¹⁷ In other words, a particular conception of history, even a kind of (Hegelian) philosophy of history is integral to our self-conception. Similarly, we are also operating with a parallel, self-congratulatory conception of ourselves as already mature, already enlightened. In this way, the self-conception at issue involves a particular confluence of the supposedly phylogenetic and ontogenetic development of human beings to the modern individuals we take ourselves to be. That conception of (species and personal) history—that is the second background premise of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*—misunderstands itself as being driven by actual history, when in fact it is (largely) not, but instead by a certain psychological attitude (or set of attitudes: complacency, a sense superiority, narcissism, desperately clinging on to hope and affirmation) and defence mechanisms (notably splitting and projection).

Horkheimer and Adorno thought that a detailed actual history would not be suitable to dislodge the self-conception. Specifically, the thought is that rationalization is the biggest defence mechanism to process and let go of; and once we enter the game of a certain kind of argumentation, it will lead to an infinite dialectic—the kind of intractable state of debates we are familiar with when it comes to the “trolley problem”, and to which Horkheimer and Adorno allude when noting that it is impossible for (modern) reason to put an end to the discussion about whether or not murder can ever be justified.¹⁸ So, instead we need a different *form* of communication.¹⁹

There are a variety of ways in which this different form of communication could take place.²⁰ One suitable way to go is to deploy a *guard-lowering ruse* and this is, arguably, what is deployed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (and especially its opening essay):²¹ the text has to, *at first*, appear as if it is doing the ‘normal thing’—that is, that it is in some way(s) continuous with the self-conception and its philosophy of history, and seeking to meet it on its own grounds, such as by offering an alternative, negatively-turned philosophy of history, one of the fall—and only later, namely once the defences have been lowered, can the subversion and deconstruction begin, perhaps initially slowly before striking like lightning. As part of this, the authors have to (be seen to) appeal to the usual sources (such as the anthropological work

of Robert H. Lowie or the ethnography of Marcel Mauss). It has to *seem* like they are doing philosophical anthropology. The text has to have periodization and a story of progression, from pre-animism to animism to (Greek) mythology to the rise of modern science and thought. It has to have the feature of both continuity—the pre-Enlightenment has to be in a sense already a kind of (proto-)Enlightenment to secure that there is a learning process leading up to the Enlightenment properly speaking—and discontinuity—to ensure that the latter really is a radical break from the former.

Most importantly perhaps, the text has to *perform* the very thing it is aiming to criticize.²² Like the historical plank of the targeted self-conception, it has to oscillate between continuity and discontinuity claims—for it is not possible to stabilize the narrative completely, since it is mysterious how something can be both the outcome of a learning process and a radical break with what came before. Ultimately, the antidote has to present a fictional history as if it was a real one—performing the very fictionality of the ‘history’ inscribed in the targeted self-conception.²³

It is thereby a kind of immunization strategy.²⁴ Like vaccinations, it is hoping to stimulate the immune system by the very poison it is seeking to protect us from, so as to train the immune system for the real thing. It is not presupposing that readers have critical capacities, but seeks to foster the critical capacities—through puzzling them, though being both striking and seeming to say something impossible, through aporia and performative contradiction. Style, form, rhetoric are crucial for this fostering of a critical attitude and capacities.

One of the particularly striking formulations from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* may serve as an example here: ‘But only exaggeration is true’.²⁵ This sentence, which comes from ‘Excursus II: Juliette or Enlightenment and Morality’, presents something akin to the famous aporia according to which a Cretan says that all Cretans lie. If only exaggerations are true, then the sentence that says this is either untrue or an exaggeration and, at least in the conventional understanding, that also makes it (literally) untrue. But how can the sentence then be meant? Horkheimer and Adorno do not tell us this, but expect us readers to develop and practise our critical skills on the riddle that the sentence presents us with and, through this exercise, to arrive at an independent interpretation.²⁶ The enigmatic formulation is therefore no coincidence, but serves to encourage us to think for ourselves, to use our intellect without guidance from others. (In this context it is important to note (again) that this is not just a question of form—the content also plays an essential role, because without this puzzling content it would not be possible to encourage people to think for themselves in this way. Thus, I am “only” against reading the content independently of the form; and *not* in favour of simply ignoring the content).

Here, we can easily imagine someone objecting: if the above interpretation of what Horkheimer and Adorno sought to do is correct, does it not make it worse for the worry about (epistemic) authoritarianism? Does it not make this objection more pressing than the conventional interpretation of the book as a (literally meant) prehistory of subjectivity? Doesn’t the new reading mean that Horkheimer and Adorno are setting themselves up as (already enlightened) guardians who intend to liberate us from our immaturity with the publication of their text?

To respond to this objection, we need to consider a further dimension of the proposed new reading of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: it is neither necessary nor apt to

ascribe epistemic authoritarianism to Horkheimer and Adorno, since what they are doing, is best read as first and foremost a kind of *self-therapeutic* move—a genealogical working through to rid themselves of the icy grip of a certain self-understanding that they were subject to just as much as their contemporaries.²⁷ The ruse they are playing would then be, first and foremost, a ruse on themselves; and the immunization through building critical capacities one of self-inoculation.²⁸ There has been much discussion as to what kind of shift *Dialectic of Enlightenment* involves for the early Frankfurt School. Often, the shift is understood in terms of dropping either Marxism or the interdisciplinary project or both.²⁹ What I want to suggest is that it is, rather, something else: the key shift in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* compared to the 1930s writings is becoming critical of the implicit Hegelian philosophy of history (and of the concomitant conception of and relation to nature) to which Horkheimer and Adorno themselves had subscribed.³⁰ (In a sense, this means thinking of the published text as more continuous with the minuted discussions, on which it is based,³¹ than one might think otherwise—in that sense, the text itself is kind of a discussion of the authors with themselves.)

Thinking of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as first and foremost an exercise of self-therapy is not to deny that it can have a significance for others too—perhaps as exemplification of what (self-)enlightenment involves. Indeed, one might think that any enlightenment has to be—by its very nature—auto-didactical; otherwise, to return to Kant’s famous definition, one is not making use of one’s own understanding without the guidance of others, after all. If so, then the only writing that genuinely captures the spirit of enlightenment (the only *enlightening* writings), has to be of a performative, exemplifying form aimed foremost at self-enlightening. Such a self-therapeutic approach comes with special attention to language, specific forms one’s writerly stance needs to take, and a particularly dialectical relation between form and content, such that attending only to the content might make us miss or misconstrue what is going on in such texts. What we are looking for is not a moralising sermon to others, but a self-reflection in textual form, which may also be useful to others, but which must first and foremost be self-directed. It has to be written not from a perspective of already being enlightened (recall the contrast to Kant), but trying to perform the enlightening on oneself, perhaps with the hope—or ‘merely’ the side-effect—that this might inspire others to perform it on themselves, too. We have to, first and foremost, read ourselves, and, in the dual role of authors and readers, promote the development of the ability to think for ourselves and to practise it. The crux of the matter, thus, is that we as authors take ourselves as still (or always again) needing to develop this ability, rather than as already having it—and this implies a particular kind of text.

3. Discussion of (further) objections

In this section, I discuss two pertinent objections, first in relation to the new reading I just offered of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (III.1); and then regarding Kant’s text (III.2), the intended rhetorical dimension of which I might be said to have neglected so far, raising the question whether the sort of attention paid in the previous section to the rhetorical features of Horkheimer and Adorno’s text might help us to return to Kant’s text in a more productive way.³²

3.1 Quacks like a negative philosophy of history

One complication for my new reading of the opening essay (and first excursus) of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* might be thought to be that the book was received differently for a significant period: as a kind of negative philosophy of history telling the primordial history of subjectivity in a way that is meant literally. Perhaps it was meant as a self-therapeutic performing of the very fictionality of the 'history' inscribed in the modern Western self-conception, but if even Habermas, a close associate of Horkheimer and Adorno, did not receive it as such, then in which sense is the text really the different text my new reading suggests? If it quacks like a negative philosophy of history and it is received as such, then isn't it one?

This objection raises wider question about the meaning of a text, and what importance its reception plays in settling on what this meaning might be. Clearly, reception matters in some sense. Similarly, the intentions of authors alone do not settle the meaning their text has, even if and when we can ascertain them clearly (itself no small challenge!). Still, reception alone should also not be decisive. The meaning of texts exceeds how they are received, especially initially. (Here it helps also to think of artworks, such as how the paintings of the impressionists or the music of Schönberg were initially received.) Texts—or speech acts generally—always run the risks of being taken up in ways not intended by the authors or not in keeping with their writerly stance or not in the spirit of their content or as not doing justice to the novelty they offer. One need here only think of Socrates and the way his speech acts were taken up and understood.

The kind of texts with which my new reading aligns the opening essay (and first excursus) of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* run the risk of being misunderstood particularly. By employing a guard-lowering ruse, by writing self-therapeutic texts as if they were sermons to convert the great heap of ignorant people, one inherently runs that risk. Indeed, insofar as the text involves a guard-lowering ruse of coming across, at least initially, as traditional philosophical anthropology and sermonising, then it is not simply a fault (and, thereby, not a simple fault) on behalf of readers—perhaps Habermas included—to be taken in by this ruse. Thus, with such texts the meaning and success of them are even harder to gauge from how they are received than gauging this with other texts.

Another consideration is that self-therapeutic writerly stance I attributed to Adorno and Horkheimer makes one success condition of their text not the reception of readers in general, but the *reception of it by them as both readers and authors*. In this context, it might help to draw briefly a parallel to Michel Foucault's work. In a 1978 interview, Foucault looks back at his works, and notes that he has been writing experience books, not demonstration books.³³ Crucial to this distinction is to think of writing texts not as a process of knowledge transfer, merely communicating what one thought before writing, driven by the orientation to demonstrate its validity. Instead, writing texts—for Foucault following Nietzsche and, if my new reading is correct, for Adorno and Horkheimer, at least in the opening texts of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*—is about coming out transformed, thinking something differently than one did before, even wrenching oneself from oneself. This—as noted in towards the end of the previous section—might have a certain value, a certain exemplarity for others, but first and foremost the success of these sorts of texts depends on the transformative

experience they provided for the authors. By this criterion, I think Horkheimer and Adorno, clearly, succeeded—they came out transformed from writing *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. This is so by the reckoning of everyone, but if my reading is correct, then the transformation was not dropping Marxism or interdisciplinary research, but rather working their way through and out of a self-congratulatory view of Western modernity and its place in human history they had still subscribed to before embarking on the writing process.

Yet another consideration deserves brief mention here. I started with a question of form: ‘How, if at all, can a text contribute to the enlightenment of its readers—specifically, how can a text promote the development of their ability to think for themselves and the exercise of this ability?’. I then suggested that the kind of texts which can contribute to this is one with a performative, exemplifying form aimed foremost at self-enlightening. Now, an important qualification is in order: it seems to me extraordinary that there can be and are texts at all that can promote developing and exercising the ability to think for oneself in readers, but I also think such *texts can only go so far*. Here the parallel to psychoanalysis is apt again. Psychoanalysis often does not work; gets abandoned; or the like. Even where psychoanalysis works, it is a long and often painful process involving all sorts of projections, missteps, dead alleys, etc. It requires a lot from both parties, including a willingness to engage not just cognitively, but affectively, with all the risks and perils this brings. Compared to the intricate relational processes of working through issues together between actual persons over an extended period, a text (or even a series of texts) is typically (albeit not necessarily) going to be even more limited in what it can achieve from its “dialogue” between authors and readers. Notably, whereas in the therapeutic process a more receptive soil can be slowly co-produced in a way that caters for the individuals involved, texts tend to be more like seeds carried with the wind and falling where they do, which can be a non-receptive soil. Walter Benjamin’s *Deutsche Menschen* [‘German Human Beings’] is a case in point: in 1936, he published this collection of letters (under a synonym) in an attempt to remind his German co-citizens of the humanist heritage and impulses inherent in German culture that the Nazi regime was seeking to eradicate. Should its lack of success in stemming the tide of Nazi propaganda and persecution (and eventually eradication of people) be taken to mean that it was not a text that can promote developing and exercising the ability to think for oneself in readers? I think that an affirmative answer to this question would be mistaken. If that is correct, then this should give us pause in thinking that the reception of a text should be determinative of its meaning and success.

One final consideration is relevant when thinking about the specific text in question, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. As has been demonstrated elsewhere, there are good reasons to believe that Habermas’s influential interpretation of the text was not simply an understandable misunderstanding arising from its specific rhetoric or form (notably, its use of a guard-lowering ruse in the opening essay), but, in a sense, a wilful misrepresentation, reflecting academic and wider politicking in the context of his attempt to re-establish himself in Frankfurt in the 1980s.³⁴ This, too, should give us pause in judging the meaning and success of this text too much by how it was received.

3.2 *Writerly stance, author intention, and rhetorical context*

This leads me to discussing the second objection. One might think that I read Kant's text too literally and failed to pay attention to its rhetorical dimension and context, when, in contrast, I lavished such attention onto Adorno and Horkheimer's text. Might there not be more going on in Kant's text than I have so far allowed? And might attention to its rhetorical features help us to return to Kant's text in a more productive way?

In response, I want to start by noting a distinction that was merely implicit so far. I have emphasised the writerly stance taken by both Kant and Adorno (and Horkheimer) in thinking afresh about the two texts. Such a stance is not exactly the same as the author's intention, at least not the same as their conscious or overt intention. The two can be and often are connected. Indeed, one might intend to take a certain writerly stance. But one can fail in that; and in any case, the two can come apart. For example, an author may have the intention of making a humble contribution to learning, but still take a writerly stance that is anything but humble, perhaps because of the particular upbringing or training they had. (Here, reception can be a helpful tell-tale sign—as, I suggested earlier, is the case with Hamann's reaction to Kant's essay within the same month of its publication.)

Having said that an author's intention and their writerly stance are not the same, in both cases, reconstructing them is importantly going beyond literal readings. For example, in the case of someone who intends to be ironic or takes a writerly stance of an ironist, just reproducing what someone literally writes will not do in reconstructing their intention or stance. Similarly, often such reconstruction involves paying great attention to what they are *not* explicitly saying. Thus, in my reconstruction of Kant's writerly stance, I was not only leaning merely on what he literally says, but also—and more importantly—on what is presupposed by what he says, even if it is not actually made explicit (namely, Kant's taking himself to be one of the few who managed to emerge from immaturity on their own). Generally, in thinking about an author's writerly stance, we need to think about *what authors do* in saying what they are saying and in not saying certain other things; *how* they are saying the things they do say and avoid saying others; and in *what position* they thereby place themselves vis-à-vis readers. In that sense, my focusing on Kant's writerly stance was not—and perhaps could not be—about taking him just literally (or about taking him too literally).

A remark is in order on the different historical contexts of the texts under discussion and on what this might mean for their different rhetoric. In a sense, both Kant, on the hand, and Adorno (and Horkheimer), on the other, are responding to a crisis in Western modernity. It is not far-fetched speculation to think that Kant's 1784 intervention is, at least in part, written with the designated successor of the then ailing Frederick II (aka "Frederick the Great")—the future Frederick William II—in mind. Kant was, not without reason, concerned that Frederick William would reverse the liberal reforms of his uncle, and curtail freedom of the press and religious freedom once he came to power—such reversals would, indeed, come from 1788 onwards and with his *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* Kant sought once again to influence the conduct of his then king, bringing them on a collision course.³⁵ In effect, Kant's 1784 text was an attempt to consolidate the reforms by appealing to

the future kingly authority; by enlightening that would-be guardian. I leave open here whether the rhetoric of praising the uncle was effective on the nephew who was going to become king, but it is clear that even in this respect Kant is taking himself as enlightened and speaking to someone he thinks (or at least fears) is not. That is different, so I have suggested, from the writerly stance and use of rhetoric taken by Adorno (and Horkheimer). In part this difference might be due to the different historical context. The crisis facing Western modernity in the early 1940s, when Adorno and Horkheimer were completing *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, was not just a potential one, but a real and much more devastating one. For them, it was, accordingly, not a matter of consolidating what had just unfolded, but breaking with it—and breaking, if my reading is correct, with their own subjectivities shaped by a certain self-conception of Western modernity, which, on their view, was tied up with ‘triumphant calamity’ with which ‘the wholly enlightened world is radiant’.³⁶

Finally, there is a sense in which Kant’s text needs to be read *more literally* than it often is. As I go on to show in the next section, his text is beset by tensions, perhaps even aporias. Yet, these tensions and aporias are in the text, *despite* his writerly stance and the rhetoric effects he intended for this text—they come through despite Kant, which is, ultimately, also to his credit (and might explain why Hamann engaged with Kant’s text at all, rather than ignore it altogether). This is different from what I ascribed to Adorno (and Horkheimer), for whom aporias, performative contradictions, and the like are included *because* of them and their specific writerly stance. Aporias are not accidentally included, but an essential part of the (self-therapeutic) transformative experience, the fostering of a critical attitude and capacities, that is being sought in writing the text and of the stance taken in writing it.

With this in mind, let me now offer a close reading of the opening pages of Kant’s text. It emerges that some of the considerations that are at play in Adorno (and Horkheimer’s) different approach are already foreshadowed in Kant’s text. This also means that what I am trying to do in this article is less preaching from the outside than working from the inside out—not just as the attention to writerly stances that we also find foreshadowed in Kant’s work, but also in terms of the content of the very text in relation to which I criticised Kant’s writerly stance.

4. Tensions running through Kant’s text – a close reading

In the following, I want to suggest that there are three tensions running through Kant’s text:

1. A tension as to whether being enlightened—being mature [*mündig*—is thought of as a result, which, once achieved, continues until some external circumstances intervene (say the onset of severe dementia), or as an ongoing process of constant renewal.
2. A tension as to whether remaining in a state of immaturity is (only) self-incurred or (also) other-incurred.
3. A tension as to whether being enlightened, mature, is something each person would have to achieve on their own or whether we can become enlightened by others.

Engaging in close reading and analysis of the opening pages of Kant's text, in this section I trace each of these three tensions in turn (IV.1-3).

My main point here is to suggest that we might learn more from attending to and, in a sense, preserving these tensions than from moving quickly to a reading which resolves the tension in one or the other direction. In taking this approach, I follow Jonathan Bennett, who famously suggested that Kant is interesting but wrong on nearly every page, and that, indeed, what makes Kant's texts interesting is where and how he goes wrong.³⁷ Deflationary attempts to render Kant maximally coherent lose, Bennett suggests, what is interesting about his texts. If this is correct, then we might have a case of where being maximally charitable as readers is actually uncharitable to the spirit and importance of the text (and the philosophical problems it contains). (This also puts Hamann's letter in a new light.)

What I am suggesting is that Kant has an inkling about key issues that drive what Horkheimer and Adorno are doing much later, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. His grappling with certain tensions points us towards the different path—the one that they have later taken. In that way, this section brings a little closer the two texts discussed in the first two sections by way of contrast.

4.1 Result or process?

Let me begin by reviewing the evidence that Kant thinks (or at least presents) 'maturity [*Mündigkeit*]' as a persisting result.

First, the very term used—'*Mündigkeit*', usually translated as 'maturity'—suggests this. Both in German and in English, it has the legal connotation of coming of age and assuming full legal powers of an adult. These powers we then possess indefinitely, unless special circumstances arise, such losing our mental capacity temporarily or permanently, as in the case of advanced dementia. There is a danger here of projecting this picture back into the late 18th century, but the legal distinction between minority and majority was around then already, going back at least to Ancient Roman law; and Kant would have been aware of this.

Secondly, consider one of the key metaphors Kant uses for becoming enlightened: that of learning to walk (8:35f). The thought is that children are initially not able to walk, but eventually learn how—perhaps, at the beginning, with a walking aid ('walking cart [*Gängelwagen*]'), of which Kant also speaks (8:35). Once learned, one is able to walk for the rest of one's life—unless and until disability or infirmity strike.

Thirdly, other formulations in Kant's text suggest this picture. Notably, he speaks of the few independent thinkers who reach maturity by themselves (8:36) in a way that suggests a persisting result: these few have 'succeeded ... in extricating themselves from minority and yet walking confidently' and have 'cast off the yoke of minority' (8:36). That sounds like it is final or at least a persisting result, not an ongoing challenge.

Thus, the evidence seems very clearly in favour of ascribing to Kant the view that once we reach maturity, we persist in having it—at least, unless and until some unfortunate circumstance (severe dementia, infirmity, or death) intervenes.

However, as soon as one scratches the surface ever so slightly, cracks appear. Let us start with a possibility Kant mentions later in the text, where he seeks to defend the view that enlightenment of the public will not come through a revolution, but

only through gradual, indeed ‘slow’ reform. In this context, Kant mentions the possibility that ‘new prejudices will serve just as well as old ones to harness the great unthinking masses’ (8:36). This might be taken to suggest that being enlightened, being mature, is more like an on-going process than a persistent result. Especially if we are in the context of other people’s stirring up prejudices (‘implant prejudices’ (8:36)), using one’s own understanding without the direction of others would be a continuing challenge. We would have to always be vigilant, and sometimes, perhaps even always, re-establish such self-directed use.

This reading fits with Kant’s initial characterisation of immaturity. Emerging from it, requires using one’s own understanding without direction from another – or, as Kant puts it later in the text, thinking for oneself (8:36). This could be at stake on each occasion—just because I thought for myself about what to have for breakfast, does not mean that I can ignore how (for example) advertising is directing my use of understanding at lunchtime. Thereby, being mature, being enlightened, would be an on-going process, a continuing challenge, rather than a persistent result.

Now, one might respond here as follows. There is not a tension in the text between presenting maturity as persistent result, on the one hand, and on-going process, on the other. There is no such tension because in a sense both are true: once we have acquired the ability to think for oneself, having this ability is a persistent result, but still requires an on-going process of *exercising* this ability. The advertising that is directing my use of understanding at lunchtime is not invalidating my ability to think for myself, although on this occasion I may be said to fail to exercise this ability. (Similarly, in legal contexts of liberal democracies, I only need the ability to make wise choices to be legally protected from many instances of paternalistic state interference; I do not have to actually exercise that ability and choose wisely.³⁸)

This connects with the next tension—regarding whether remaining in a state of immaturity is (only) self-incurred or (also) other-incurred—but before we turn to it, let me note why I am not sure the above response is entirely successful in removing the first tension. If we read Kant as saying that the ability, once acquired, is a persistent result (rather than an on-going process, where we can be lacking maturity on each occasion), then it is puzzling what he says about immaturity in the first sentence of the second paragraph of his text:

It is because of laziness and cowardice that so great a part of humankind, after nature has long since emancipated them from other people’s direction (*naturaliter maiorennes*), nevertheless gladly remains minors for life, and that it is so easy for others to set themselves up for their guardians. (8:35)

Here it sounds like we acquire the ability to think for ourselves as part of our natural maturation, and then forego exercising it. So, if maturity was the persistent result of having the ability to think for ourselves without direction of others, then adults typically would have that ability, not just a few individuals. Indeed, the public use of reason and freedom of the press would not be necessary in getting the public, the masses, to become enlightened. Laziness and cowardice might then explain why they do not *exercise* their maturity. Yet, Kant says that the great part of humankind is meant to be still in a state of immaturity. This, in turn, only makes sense if we think of maturity instead of the on-going process of actually thinking for oneself on each

occasion or at least regularly.³⁹ In sum, we are back with the first tension – between thinking maturity as a persistent result and as an on-going process.

4.2 Self-incurred or other-incurred?

As we saw, Kant's text starts with the striking claim, in the first paragraph, about how immaturity is 'self-incurred' (8:35), having its causes 'in lack of resolution and courage to use it [i.e., the understanding] without direction from another'. As we just saw in the longer quoted passage above, the first sentence of the second paragraph reinforces this claim: 'laziness and cowardice' are there presented as the cause for why 'so great a part of humanity . . . gladly remains minors for life' (8:35).

However, starting with the rest of the second paragraph, Kant starts to muddy the water. While the opening half of the second paragraph continues in the vein of attributing the cause of immaturity to laziness and cowardice, the tune changes in the second half. Notably, the guardians are then presented as not just a convenient option that people can choose to follow instead of undertaking the cumbersome business of using their own understanding without the direction of others. Instead, they are now presented as actively keeping people down: 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 in which they have confined them' (8:35). Admittedly, Kant can be taken to still be mainly suggesting here that people are at fault for letting the guardians get away with frightening them off, when in fact the 'danger is not in fact so great, for by a few falls they eventually learn to walk' (8:35). This sounds as if it is a problem of being too placid and timid. Still, his own choice of language militates somewhat against this: while the opening sentence suggested that human beings naturally develop the ability to think for themselves, the later talk of 'domesticated animals' suggests that the guardians have turned people (back?) into non-rational (and, in a sense, non-human) animals incapable of this. At the very least, it now seems like the causal nexus is broader than mere laziness and cowardice. After all, would we say of non-human animals that it is *merely* their own laziness and cowardice that got them domesticated (and not also the actions of us human animals)? And, even more implausible, would we say that what prevents domesticated animals from thinking for themselves are these two vices?

The impression that Kant changes his tune regarding whether immaturity is (only) self-incurred, gets confirmed, indeed strengthened, when we look to what he writes in the third and fourth paragraph. In the third one, it again starts off as if it is due to something like laziness or cowardice that the masses are in a state of minority. Kant even speaks of how people become fond of minority. But in the very same sentence Kant writes that a single individual 'is really unable for the time being to make use of his understanding, because he was *never allowed* to make the attempt' (8:36; my emphasis). If that is so, then it is puzzling to ascribe the cause of their minority to laziness and cowardice. It is not as if the individuals had previously made use of their own understanding, and then became lazy or afraid. They never made such use in the first place—indeed, they were 'never allowed' to even make the attempt! In the fourth paragraph, Kant then introduces the point—briefly encountered before—about how guardians 'implant prejudices' (8:36).

Perhaps, there is a way to get Kant out of the tension that seems to beset his position in the text. Maybe, what Kant means is to say that immaturity is *in part* self-incurred; or that it is self-incurred insofar as its original causes may lie elsewhere, but we all have it, in principle, in our power to overcome the being directed by others, albeit only few of us will ever succeed on our own. The claims about laziness and cowardice are then not claims about all states of minority, but only about those states that involves some element of being self-incurred. In those cases, laziness and cowardice are the cause—either of entering the state of minority or of staying in it.

One textual difficulty arises for this reply: the first sentence of his text seems to build the self-incurred aspect into the very definition of enlightenment as ‘emergence from his self-incurred minority’ (8:35). So, then one wants to ask, what about emergence from other-incurred minority? Would this not be enlightenment? Yet, it would also involve moving from using one’s understanding under the direction of another to using it without such direction.

One might think that Kant is driven here to a position involving tensions because he wants to both

- a) acknowledge—perhaps under the influence of Rousseau—the existence of pernicious social influences; and
- b) exempt certain social influences (notably the purportedly enlightened rule of Frederick the Great) from criticism.

Out of this emerges an oscillation between, on the one hand, presenting immaturity as being self-incurred; and, on the other hand, making statements that suggest that it cannot be that simple—statements to the effect that immaturity is, at least in part, imposed by others and thus (also) other-incurred.

4.3 On one’s own or helped by others?

Kant, as we have already seen, claims that the ‘great part of humanity ... gladly remains minors for life’ (8:35) and there are ‘only a few who have succeeded, by their own cultivation of their spirit, in extricating themselves from minority’ (8:36). The key point that follows next in the text is the claim that it is nevertheless possible for ‘a public to enlighten itself ... indeed this is almost inevitable, if only it is left its freedom’ (8:36). This then relates to his claim that we need unrestricted public use of reason, for that is the freedom that ‘alone can bring about enlightenment among human beings’ (8:37).

Let us scrutinise these claims—leaving aside the issue that has so long been the focus of scholarly discussion, that is, the issue of what the public use of reason is (and whether Kant was right that restricting the private use is not detrimental to the public’s enlightening itself).

To start with, it is noteworthy how there is a shift in Kant’s description of the process of enlightenment in regard to the general public—or as he also calls them rather condescendingly ‘the unthinking big heap [*des gedankenlosen großen Haufens*]’ (8:36; translation amended). Kant initially speaks of the public’s ‘enlighten[ing] itself’ (8:36; my emphasis). But when it comes to defending that the public use of reason should never be restricted, Kant switches to a construction in which the public seems

more like a passive recipient than a self-enlightening agent: it is the (unrestricted) public use of reason that ‘alone *can bring about* enlightenment among human beings’ (8:37; my italics). Here the few enlightened seem to enlightening the ‘the unthinking big heap’ of the public through their—that is, the few’s—public use of reason.

Even more important, perhaps, is to scrutinise Kant’s initial claim that a few (purportedly) succeed on their own in becoming mature. That there are a few who do so is crucial for Kant at least for one reason: otherwise, his story about how public use of reason can further enlightenment of the public cannot get off the ground. For without the few, there is no one who can ‘disseminate the spirit of a rational valuing of one’s own worth and of calling of each individual to think for himself’ (8:36).

However, if we probe deeper, the existence of the few who succeeded on their own – and particularly the (purported) way they succeeded—actually presents problems for Kant’s account of how the public should enlighten itself. In the case of the few, becoming enlightened and mature is said to be achieved ‘by their own cultivation of their spirit’ (8:36). This raises two conceptual issues:

1. *Pulling oneself up by one’s own bootstraps*: If maturity consists in using one’s own understanding without the direction of another, then how can anyone achieve this by their own cultivation of their spirit, where such cultivation seems to be naturally read to imply using one’s own understanding without the direction of another? Wouldn’t this mean that they have already to be mature to become mature?
2. *As we cannot be directed to be self-directed, others cannot help our being self-directed*: How can the few who (purportedly) succeeded to enlighten themselves—that is to think for themselves—help others, indeed, the public, to enlighten itself, without thereby directing their use of the understanding and, thus, keeping them under the ‘yoke of minority’ (8:36)? How is ‘disseminat[ing] the spirit of a rational valuing of one’s own worth and of the calling of each individual to think for himself’ (8:36) not a way of directing others in the use of their understanding? How can others help one in using one’s own understanding without direction from others, without this help being a form of directing understanding?

We might even think that there is a kind of dilemma or paradox lurking here, such that becoming enlightened is impossible:

Enlightenment paradox: either one directs the use of one’s understanding without the direction of another, such as to become able to direct the use of one’s understanding without the direction of another, but then one has to be already mature to become mature; or others help one to make use of one’s understanding without the direction of another, but then one is using one’s understanding with direction of another. Thus, one cannot become mature on one’s own; and one cannot become mature by being helped by others. Hence, becoming mature is impossible.

Kant does not seem to notice these conceptual problems—or at least, he is not thematising them.

One might think that I am being uncharitable here, and perhaps doubly so. To take the above purported conceptual problems in reverse order, it is true that (on pain of contradiction) others cannot direct us to use our understanding without the direction of others, but they can help us in ways other than directing our understanding. Kant's own text provides an important case in point. Disseminating 'the spirit of a rational valuing of one's own worth and of the calling of each individual to think for himself' (8:36) is *not to direct* our use of understanding, but something else. There are several options here. Let me concentrate on three:

1. *Serving as an exemplar*, a role model, of self-directed use of the understanding. Such exemplars are not directing us, but inspire us, or give us hope, or the like.
2. *Removing obstacles* to our thinking for ourselves. Freedom of the press, in particular, can make it possible for prejudices to be revealed as such and critically dissected, so that we are not (so much) under their sway. This is a propitious condition for our thinking for ourselves; not directing it.
3. Providing a condition of possibility for our thinking for ourselves, specifically *providing the enabling condition* of our rational valuing our own worth and the calling to think for ourselves. The few who succeeded to achieve maturity on their own display this normative orientation of rational valuing and calling, and this makes possible for us to think for ourselves, but does not direct it.

I note first that the three options are, in principle, compatible with each other—what the few are doing could be all three: serving as exemplar, removing obstacles, and providing the enabling condition of valuing our own worth. And in none of these instances—whether considered one by one or in combination—are we faced with directing another in their use of understanding.

Similarly, regarding the purported first conceptual problem: the few's own cultivation of their spirit is not the same yet as using their own understanding without the direction of another. Instead, what might be going on, is their rational valuing their own worth on their own, and thereby putting in place, on their own, the condition of possibility to think for themselves. They are the rare ones who believe in themselves and do so in a way that they can learn how to think for themselves; and so they do learn that. This in turn enables others to believe in themselves, thereby developing the courage and putting in the effort to (learn to) think for themselves.

Thus, to summarise the response to the objection I raised ("the Enlightenment paradox"): we neither have to be mature to become mature; and others can help us in becoming mature. This response is, thus, deflating the issues in a way that avoids the conceptual problems and dilemma or paradox.

By way of starting on the rejoinder, let me begin by noting that it is unclear how we can engage in 'rational valuing'—at least in Kant's picture of what this would mean—without already using our own understanding without the direction of others. Put differently, how can we become and be reason-responsive while in the grip of one prejudice or another? How can we become and be reason-responsive, while being domesticated animals (recalling that reason-responsiveness is not the same as simply being 'abgerichtet', tamed)? It might be true by way of development psychology that we typically have to value ourselves to mature into adults who think for ourselves.

However, Kant cannot simply help himself to this point because what matters to him is not just any valuing of one's own worth, but *rational* valuing. Moreover, valuing one's own worth is typically dependent on being valued by others—notably our primary care-giver(s)⁴⁰—not something we simply do or cultivate by our own spirit. So, while valuing one's own value might indeed play an important role in coming to think for oneself, it is not the kind of valuing that would get Kant out of the conceptual problem about self-enlightenment of the few—or at least not in a way that would not burst the framework of his theory.

Where does this leave us with the second conceptual problem, regarding how it is possible to help others to use their own understanding without the direction of others, whereby this help is not itself such direction? Well, if it is not possible for the few to become enlightened on their own, then there is no one to help the general public to enlighten themselves, even assuming for the time being that such help would be different from directing their understanding. There would be no role-models or exemplars, no one removing obstacles, and no one providing the conditions of possibility. Freedom of the press would be in vain.

Kant's discussion can give the impression of taking up a theme that had emerged about twenty years prior to his writing the text in Adam's Smith's work. Smith suggests that there is a tendency for wealth at the top to defuse down and make everyone better off, such as because that wealth makes possible creating markets for luxury products and services, which then provides employment and income for others.⁴¹ One 20th century metaphor often used to describe this idea is, 'a rising tide lifts all boats'. However, it is important to note that this metaphor sits uneasily, to say the least, with the idea of self-enlightenment by the public. Even leaving aside whether it is generally true that economic wealth gained at the top trickles down to the bottom and thereby makes everyone well off, it is clear that this trickling down, this "tide", is providing the general population with material wealth, not with entrepreneurial capacities or the spirit of innovators or the capacity to think for themselves. These metaphors rely on a distinction between what the few do and achieve (purportedly) on their own, on the one hand; and what (purportedly) positive effects this has on the great masses, on the other. In Smith's case, this could hardly be clearer: the few are what we have come to call 'entrepreneurs' in later centuries, and the masses are benefitting from their wealth production by becoming employed by them. Here the idea of enlightenment, of maturity, turns underhand from a process each person needs to engage in (and potentially needs to continue to engage in indefinitely) to one which a few achieve (those not lazy and not lacking courage), who then distribute the fruits of having reached this persistent result to others, thereby bringing about enlightenment in them, albeit enlightenment now understood in yet a different sense, which can perhaps be approximated by the idea of having certain knowledge transferred to us (such as being enlightened about the function of human sexual organs and how various contraceptive devices are meant to work). In this way, enlightenment or maturity as the use of one's understanding without the direction by another dissolves in Kant's hands, in the very attempt of his making a case for it—that is, it dissolves in his very attempt to enlighten us, the unthinking "big heap". This suggests—and motivates—a different approach, which, if my earlier musings are right, requires, first and foremost, self-enlightening and a different writerly stance and form of communication than Kant's.

5. Conclusion

We have now come full circle. I started with a critical discussion of Kant's 1784 text, particularly the writerly stance he takes in it, showing it—with the help of Hamann's reaction to the text—to be one of (epistemic) authoritarianism. Kant (implicitly) takes himself to be one of the few who managed to reach maturity on their own—and, in a sense, must take himself to be that, given the kind of text he is writing. I then turned to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and offered a new reading of it, or at least of its opening essay (and the first excursus). Importantly, on this new reading, it is the kind of text which, actually, can promote thinking for oneself because the writerly stance taken is, first and foremost, one of self-enlightening, of the authors playing a ruse on themselves as part of a process of writing that is transforming them. Next, I discussed the objection that the fact that the book was received differently means that it, ultimately, is a different book than my reading presents it to be. I suggested that, as important as reception of texts is for the meaning and success of them, it cannot be decisive in general, and is not decisive in this particular instance for a variety of specific reasons. Moreover, I also addressed the objection that, in contrast to Adorno and Horkheimer's text, I read Kant too literally. I noted how a focus on an author's writerly stance exceeds focusing on what they literally say. This led to me suggesting that we might actually gain from reading Kant's text more literally than it usually is, uncovering a series of tensions within it which, in fact, point to the approach taken by Adorno and Horkheimer in their later text—and attention to which also closes the gap between the texts.

This, in a way, concludes my own text. However, it would be amiss to not at least ask the following questions: what form of a text is mine? Does my own text operate more in the mode of a sermon than that of self-clarification? Is it performing the danger I seek to build critical capacities against? And what writerly stance have I taken, and does it involve any kind of epistemic authoritarianism? I do not have answers to these questions that satisfy me. Perhaps, the kind of text it is and the kind of writerly stance I take is, in this context, permissible or even apt as a countermove to Kant's moralising sermon on what enlightenment is (and to Habermas's similarly moralising sermon on the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*). Or, perhaps, that is making it too easy for myself. Time will tell what its readers—me included—make of what I wrote and *how* I wrote it.⁴²

Notes

1 In my title, I mention only Adorno, not both Adorno and Horkheimer. In part, this is just to avoid clunkiness. More importantly, I want to suggest, although I will not attempt to demonstrate it here, that the writing stance and specific form of communication that I ascribe to Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectics of Enlightenment* is particularly characteristic of Adorno, about whom Habermas notes that he 'took the aphoristic mode of philosophizing to extremes' (Dews (ed.) 1986: 56).

2 See, notably, Cooke (2006, 41).

3 Parenthetical references to Kant's writings give the volume and page number(s) of the Royal Prussian Academy edition (Kant's *Gesammelte Schriften*), which are included in the margins of the translations. English translations are by Mary J. Gregor in Kant (1996: 15-22, here 17).

4 In Schmidt (ed.) (1996: 145-153, here 148).

5 *Ibid.*, 146. See also 148, where Hamann alludes to Kant's 'supremely self-incurred guardianship' (Hamann's emphasis).

6 The opening of the second paragraph reads: 'To the "Sapere aude!" there belongs also from the very same source the "Noli admirari!" *Clarissime Domine Politice!* You know how much I love our Plato and with what pleasure I read him; I will also gladly yield myself up to his guardianship for the guidance of my own

understanding, though *cum grano salis*, without incurring any guilt through lack of heart.' (*ibid.*, 145–6; Hamann's emphasis). Hamann's letter is a collage of quotes – some amended from the original on purpose – puns, and allusions, a virtuoso firework of a text. The notes by the translator, Garrett Green, are helpful in decoding it for audiences today.

7 *Ibid.*, 145.

8 *Ibid.*, 148.

9 *Ibid.*

10 See, for example, Adorno's metacritique of Kant's conception of freedom: '[Kant's] timid bourgeois detestation of anarchy matches his proud bourgeois antipathy against tutelage [*Bevormundung*]. Here, too, society intrudes all the way into his most formal reflections. Formality itself is a bourgeois trait: on the one hand, it frees the individual from the confining definitions of what has come to be just so not otherwise, while on the other hand it has nothing to set against things as they are, nothing to base itself upon except dominion, which has been raised to the rank of a pure principle' ([1966] 1973: 250f). See also: 'Ever since the seventeenth century, freedom has been defined as all great philosophy's most characteristic interest. Philosophy had an unexpressed mandate from the bourgeoisie to find transparent grounds for freedom. But that concern is antagonistic in itself. It goes against the old oppression and promotes the new one, the one that hides in the principle of rationality itself' (*ibid.*, 214).

11 To be clear, I am not making a claim about Kant's writerly stance in his corpus as a whole or in other texts, but a specific claim about the particular text in question.

12 For a critical discussion of this purported 'must', see Freyenhagen (2020b).

13 Habermas ([1985] 1987: 110).

14 *Ibid.*, 119f, 126.

15 Freyenhagen (2023) and (2024b).

16 Another reason why we should reject reading (the opening essay of) *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a prehistory of subjectivity is that we thereby avoid ascribing a blatant inconsistency to Adorno (and Horkheimer) across their texts. Thus, Adorno (and Horkheimer) in other texts clearly reject the very possibility to engage in the kind of prehistory that they seem to be doing in (especially the opening essay of) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*—see, for example, Adorno's remark in *Against Epistemology*, that 'What ... fancies itself origin is simply archaizing' ([1956] 2012: 33; translation amended). Put more generally, Adorno and Horkheimer are best read as quite strong historical contextualists, as perhaps most explicitly epitomised in Horkheimer's statement (in 'Traditional and Critical Theory') that 'No one can turn himself into a different subject than he is at this historical moment', meaning that we should reject 'the assumption of an absolute, trans-historical subject or the possibility of substituting subjects, as though a person could remove himself from his present historical juncture and truly insert himself into any other he wished' ([1937] 1972, 240; translation amended). On Adorno's contextualism, see Freyenhagen (2024a).

17 It is not just them and their contemporaries. For a striking recent example, consider how Honneth (2015) commits to an end of normative history.

18 Horkheimer and Adorno ([1944/1947] 2002: 93). On Adorno's idea that (modern) reason on its own ends up in an infinite dialectic, see Freyenhagen 2013: Chapter 7.

19 It is important to note that this different form of communication is not understood as a kind of second-best, compared to the purely rational one of which we are—alas—not (yet?) capable. It is, instead, the case that an implicit commitment of the approach is that something like Habermas's (later) distinction between mere rhetoric and the unforced force of the better argument is itself dubious.

20 Adorno uses more than one such way. For example, in 'The Essay as Form' (1958), he can be read as using a move that is more like pulling the rug from underneath the reader (and author)—see Falomi (2025).

21 If this reading is correct, then it would be surprising and counterproductive if the authors explicitly announced that what they are doing is a ruse. Thus, we have to look for more indirect evidence that they are offering a performative critique of the kind I ascribe to them. I consider some of this indirect evidence—the 'clues' contained in the text—in Freyenhagen (2024b: 252–5). For example, the original Preface to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* contains a clear statement that suggests the need for different forms of communication insofar as there are no terms available that are innocent and any critical approach needs to refuse obedience to the existing norms of how to proceed in constructing texts (Horkheimer and Adorno ([1944/1947] 2002, xiv–xv). See also note 16 above.

22 Evans (2020) also offers a performative reading of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, albeit a different one than the one proposed here. According to Evans, the book offers ‘parodies of anti-enlightenment ideas that were common through the first half of the 20th century’ (2020: 482). On my reading, the book extends something like (self-)parody to Enlightenment ideas.

23 Importantly, while the primordial history (or anthropology) is fictional for this purpose, this does not imply that the account of modern society is fictional—just the opposite, the social theory of that society is clearly not (meant to be) fictional, but a background condition for the kind of satirical performative critique in question. This also means that what I reported here as new reading concerns particularly the opening essay of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and perhaps also the two excurses, especially the first one; but not so much (or perhaps not even at all) the essays on culture industry and antisemitism or the notes and sketches at the end of the book. They come, in an important sense, after the (ruse and fictional history involved in the) performative critique.

24 Talk of immunization might seem to sit strangely with Horkheimer and Adorno’s texts and approach. But, in fact, it is language which they themselves employed. See, notably, the 1949 Preface that Horkheimer co-authored with Samuel H. Flowerman, to the book series *Studies in Prejudice*, in which they note that presenting the psychological tricks of agitators can ‘immunize [immunisieren]’ us against falling victim to propaganda (Horkheimer 1987: Volume 5, 410; my translation). Adorno picks this up later in his 1959/1960 text ‘The Meaning of Working Through the Past’, when he also speaks of these tricks and how they can be used as a ‘vaccine’ (see Adorno 1998: 102; he also speaks here of ‘antidote’). And in the minutes of a 1946 discussion between Horkheimer and Adorno about a follow up project to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno remarks that ‘reason [Vernunft]’ is ‘ill [erkrankt]’ and that the possibility of ‘healing [Gesundung]’ reason requires working through the illness (see Horkheimer 1987: Volume 12, 604; my translation).

25 Horkheimer and Adorno ([1944/1947] 2002: 92).

26 For example, in my most recent rereading of the Excursus, my mind was stimulated by the textual context of the sentence to understand it as follows. Horkheimer and Adorno are commenting here on a passage from de Sade’s *Juliette*, which is about someone feeling rewarded by the world for unjust behaviour – for ‘abominations’ (Horkheimer and Adorno ([1844/1947] 2002: 92). Now it is true that the unjust world does not only reward abominations – sometimes, although, actually, always too rarely, it rewards resisting abominations and exercising solidarity instead. This is factually possible and, as I just noted, sometimes, albeit rarely, really the case. I understand Horkheimer and Adorno’s sentence as inviting us, among other things, to reflect on the fact that we are missing the point if we allow ourselves to be misled by the rare reality that abominations are not always rewarded in this false (social) world into not seeing this world as false. The true nature of this world is to reward abomination; and Horkheimer and Adorno’s phrase captures this. It invites us to reflect on how thinking, especially in a false world, can never stop at the factual (and especially any exceptional cases), if it is to be truly (independent) thinking. And it sharpens our sense of the ideological misuse of appeals to factuality. Reflection may also help us to adopt a different practical attitude and, for example, to reduce our use of rationalisation or defence strategies, such as engaging in nipping at a response to criticism.

27 Here might be a parallel with or inspiration by Nietzsche, whose Preface to *On the Genealogy of Morals* famously starts: “We are unknown to ourselves, we knowers.” ([1887] 2006, 3)

28 This raises further questions which I cannot address here. In particular, we might want to know how the text can be *both intricately constructed* in a way that seems to presuppose critical capacities *and a form of self-therapy* through which the very critical capacities are meant to be developed. One part of the answer would be about the somewhat peculiar, collective process of Adorno and Horkheimer (and various people around them, notably Leo Löwenthal and Gretel Adorno) in which the work emerged over many years. Another part might be about how such self-therapy endeavors involve—or perhaps even *must* involve—playing ruses on oneself and related strategies, and perhaps also a kind of “fake it to make it” move. And yet another would be that enlightenment might be better understood as an on-going process of (second) reflection and self-critical questioning than a status we can achieve once and for all. (See also Section IV below.)

29 See, for example, Habermas ([1985] 1987: 118); or Honneth ([1985] 1991). Regarding the purported break with the interdisciplinary research program, see Freyenhagen (2020a) for an interpretation which places “Elements of Anti-Semitism”—the penultimate part of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*—firmly within

the on-going interdisciplinary research program envisaged but only partially carried out by Horkheimer, Adorno, and other members of the Institute for Social Research in exile.

30 This is not the place to evidence this, but I would suggest that this shift owes much to Benjamin's 1940 "On the Concept of History" (aka "Theses on the Philosophy of History") Benjamin ([1940] 2005). It is this text, which reached them after Benjamin's death, that alerted them to the danger of the self-conception dominant in modernity—including amongst the socialist critics thereof, and themselves. It brought them into contact in a different way with the historical experiences of the time (and their own biography). Here, too, the rhetorical form of presentation played an important role: it is not Benjamin's argumentation viewed abstractly as propositional content, but his use of word images, not least that of Klee's artwork as the Angel of History, that makes the difference here. And it cannot be denied that Benjamin's text can also be understood as self-therapeutic—and not only because Benjamin, given the circumstances in which he wrote it, could hardly assume that anyone else would ever get to read it.

31 These minuted discussions are available in Horkheimer (1987: Volume 12).

32 My thanks to one of the anonymous referees for pressing me on these matters.

33 Foucault (2000: 238–46).

34 Freyenhagen (2024b).

35 Kuehn (2001: 371, 378–82, 404).

36 Horkheimer and Adorno ([1944/1947] 2002: 1).

37 Bennett 1966: xi; see also 'Introduction' to Bennett 2001.

38 For example, in the legal context of contemporary England and Wales, the Mental Capacity Act 2005 includes the explicit principle that 'A person is not to be treated as unable to make a decision merely because he makes an unwise decision' (§1.4).

39 There is another consideration here: the legal use of maturity is clearly in part guiding Kant and especially today's readings of Kant's text, but it might actually be misleading us – and perhaps even Kant – in one respect. In liberal democracies, a core commitment is – as already mentioned – to let people make their own mistakes (to act unwisely), as long as they had the ability to avoid them (the ability to make wise decisions). The rationale for this is, in good part, to do with worries about giving the state too much power in surveying and interfering with us, along with the counter-productive results any attempts of the state to micro-manage people might have. However, that we have good reasons for the state not to interfere with all instances where we act unwisely, does not mean that outside of the legal context, we should settle for a view of maturity as a persistent result. Both in educational setting and in personal interactions, it might be more apt to think of it in terms of an on-going process.

40 See, notably, Winnicott 1965.

41 While there are dangers in reading back 20th century formulations like 'trickling down' and 'a rising tide lifts all boats' into Smith's work, the particular idea in question can be found in it. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), Smith claims that the rich, by having as their 'sole end the gratification of their own vain and insatiable desires, . . . divide with the poor the produce of all their improvements. They are led by an invisible hand to make nearly the same distribution of the necessities of life, which would have been made, had the earth been divided into equal portions among all its inhabitants, and thus without intending it, without knowing it, advance the interest of the society, and afford means to the multiplication of the species' ([1759] 1976), Bk IV, Chapter 1, paragraph 10).

42 For reading Kant's and Hamann's texts together, critical comments on earlier drafts, and discussion of the wider issues, I am grateful to Polona Curk, Dan Watts, Matteo Falomi, and Plamen Andreev. The text also draws on previous discussions at the Critical Theory Colloquium at Essex, the 2024 Cardiff Workshop on Left-Kantianism, and the 2024 Oldenburg workshop "80 Jahre *Dialektik der Aufklärung*". My thanks for comments and helpful suggestions received in these contexts as well as to the anonymous referees and the editors of this journal for their thoughtful and constructive engagement.

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