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The New Enlightenment

A Summary

What seems urgently necessary today is the conception of a "new," "reflexive" Enlightenment, that will critically develop the indispensable groundwork of historical Enlightenment further. Enlightenment, as a task that can never be completed and as a principle of thought, sees itself as self-enlightenment, as becoming oneself through free thinking, but also as enlightenment of things in the sense of removing spiritual and real obstacles of self-enlightenment. Enlightenment as thinking for oneself (I. Kant) is directed against arrogated authority and prejudices, as directional thinking against misconceptions, irrationalism, and superstition, against absolutizations and ideologies, and against dogmas and absolute truths. The permanent topicality of Enlightenment results from permanent need for enlightenment. It is a continually renewed attempt to overcome the continuous regrowth of pseudo-truth and to work critically towards ideology. Enlightenment as a modern theory of thought must, however, also not neglect Enlightenment regarding itself, otherwise it will degenerate into pseudo-Enlightenment or ideology and thus destroy itself.

For "reflexive" Enlightenment, Kant's self-criticism of reason is elementary. As Critique of Reason, Kant understands self-critique of reason and posits that there is no superior or divine authority that could hold the human understanding of reason accountable. From the viewpoint of anthropology this speaks to the problem of human self-image. The old definition of humans as rational beings receives a new dimension through Enlightenment. In the infinity of options that humans have, lies the potential for self-endangerment. Theoretical rationality, according to Holzhey, is about a self-criticism of reason which is fragile and which preserves itself as critical reason through self-restraint. Critique of reason in the form of self-criticism is an exemplary type of thinking for oneself. "Thinking for oneself means looking for the topmost touchstone of truth in oneself and the maxim of thinking for oneself at any time is Enlightenment." This maxim applies to theoretical and practical use of reason. Thinking for oneself has, however, nowadays become a mental and social overload in many cases due to the incredible complexity of living conditions. Kant endeavors a purely rational foundation of moral knowledge based on reason. In today's condition of ethics, use of reason, that is thinking for oneself specifies itself in the use of judgement. Criticism isn't moored in self-assertiveness of philosophical thinking but in a philosophical ethos. From Kant's perspective, this ethos would be determined by the enlightened or enlightening attitude of thinking for oneself.

Kant developed his theory of Enlightenment mainly in his "Critique of Practical Reason." In his "Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View," he calls "Man's leaving his self-imposed nonage" a "revolution inside Man" and elevates it as a superlative. In his Enlightenment essay "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose," he mentions Enlightenment and calls it a great purpose. Kant's interest in Enlightenment is oriented in a very ethical-practical way, but also in a theoretical way as a tool for practice. Enlightenment as bookishness holds no special meaning to him. However, the relationship that humans have with themselves in the sense of morality and life practice is important for Enlightenment and it especially emphasizes its emancipatory significance. A paramount condition for Enlightenment is thinking for oneself, the critical reflection of

Enlightenment, the recognition of undesirable developments and the boundaries of enlightened thinking. In this context, Kant thinks that the power that propels Enlightenment is not just closely tied to morality but also criticism.

The term "reflexive" Enlightenment was introduced within the Masonic Academy of the Grand Lodge of Austria in reference to Ulrich Beck's "Risk Society." In his book, the German sociologist talks about "reflexive" modernization. Practical Ethics can also be characterized as practical Enlightenment, whereby one can also see connections to Kant. The quest for practical reason is a form of dealing with conflicts in civilized society. This emphasizes why ethics has become more of a science of integration and orientation in the past decades, thereby pushing the boundaries of the academic discipline of philosophy. On its own, however, it cannot accomplish this achievement of integration and orientation. The skills for individual and institutional realization of responsibility can only develop within a frame of interdisciplinary and social discourse.

Critical Rationalism has also contributed significantly to the emergence of a new sense of Enlightenment. For its philosophy, three aspects are decisive: the self-concept of Critical Rationalism as Enlightenment, the concept of reason, and the potential for ideological criticism of Critical Rationalism. The idea of self-liberation through knowledge is a programmatic topos in the tradition of Enlightenment. In the critical-rational concept of Enlightenment, three demands are especially emphasized:

1. That as a matter of principle, no area of life, no social-political entity, no traditional authority may be withdrawn from critical testing through empiricism and rationalism;
2. That critical reflection may not stop short of the implications and consequences of Enlightened endeavors of thought;
3. That the process of critical reflection and self-reflection is to be seen as an interminable task.

At the center of the concept of reason of Critical Rationalism is the fallibility thesis that fundamentally, the human ability for knowledge and reason is fallible and prone to errors. Final instances that make the truth of knowledge apparent and at the same time absolutely guarantee them, are decidedly rejected in Critical Rationalism. It is directed against a dogmatization of knowledge and against a limitation of the development of knowledge. The critical-rational point of view in regard to questions of value meets the requirements of the basic idea of Enlightenment of self-liberation through knowledge, because it highlights the possibility that through the acquisition of factual knowledge, one can also emancipate the self from hitherto unquestioned authorities of value also in the area of ethics, without excluding the commitment to an ethical principle. The institution of Enlightenment of Critical Rationalism also encompasses the potential for criticism of ideology that critically examines worldviews and ideologies. In this way, the critical-rational thesis of the fundamental fallibility and the susceptibility for error that reason has plays a critical part. The school of thought of Critical Rationalism is – as the possibilities explained here show – well qualified to effectively work against today's rising anti-progressive tendencies.

There were attempts in the 20th century to move the by no means outdated program of Enlightenment into a broader, world-historical perspective. Enlightenment as progressive thinking was not just seen as an epoch, but also depicted as a historico-philosophical issue (for instance by Max Weber, Wilhelm Nestle, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno). These historico-philosophical approaches introduced a qualitatively new self-reflection of enlightened thinking. Reason in conflict with itself plays an important role in Horkheimer's "Critique of Instrumental Reason." By that, he understands the tendency of progress to destroy humane ideas during the modern Industrial Age. Technological civilization threatens its own findings. Horkheimer and

Adorno's thesis consists of the idea that the self-destructive tendency of reason was already inherent in enlightened thinking in the 18th century. If Enlightenment wants to save itself from complete self-destruction, it must reflect on its immanent "regressive moment." This way, a positive definition of Enlightenment, one that will remove it from its entanglement in blind authority, should be prepared despite any criticism.