

# There are no adults: Kant's Misunderstanding of Childhood

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# The essay

- “Answering the Questions, ‘What is Enlightenment?’”

-- Immanuel Kant, 1794

# Kant's attack

- “Laziness and cowardice are the reasons why such a large part of mankind gladly remain minors all their lives, long after nature has freed them from external guidance. They [laziness and cowardice] are the reasons why it is so easy for others to set themselves up as guardians. **It is so comfortable to be a minor.**”

-- Immanuel Kant

# Kant's faulty (I claim) assumption

- Energetic and brave people and societies can and should leave their comfortable **heteronomous** childhood behind, to become **truly autonomous**.

# Melanie Klein's good breast-bad breast model

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- Heteronomy ends late (with death)

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  2. These objects cannot be removed: **the initial inner family drama remains the drama of each life**



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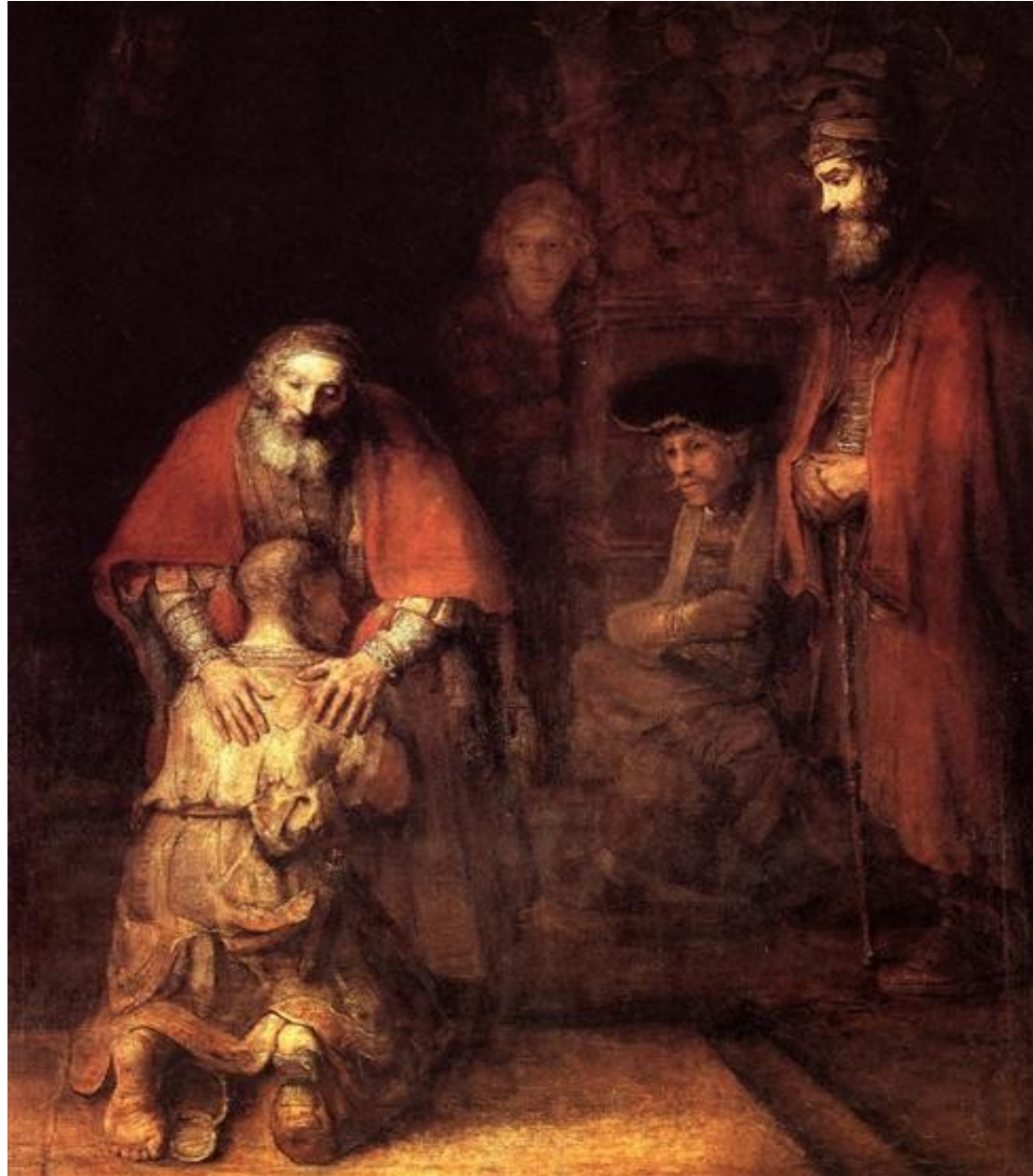
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  3. The dramas of societies and polities are family dramas lived on a large scale
  4. The dramas never go smoothly
- *Autonomy is real, though*

# The family of the prodigal son

- Luke 15: 11-32
- Son takes fortune
  - Son squanders fortune
    - Son is sorry, goes home
      - Father is welcoming
        - Older brother is unhappy







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  - Infantile desires
  - Reversion to heteronomy ????

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- The morality of the prodigal son
  - Are parents supposed to be friends, or authorities?
  - The hard journey to mature autonomy

# The family of the prodigal son

- The older brother
  - Slavish heteronomy, or bad autonomy?

# The family of the prodigal son

- The father
  - Two sons, two different fathers?

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- The father
  - Two sons, two different fathers?
  - The unavoidable authority
  - Rejection is not erasure
  - “There are no adults”



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  - Pushing children into too much freedom

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  - Nearly endless adolescence

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  - Autonomy is rough, especially for the heteronomy-deprived
  - Many people want to escape from freedom

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  - Freedom from authority is an impossible goal
  - Children need lots of moral support from authorities
  - Adults should develop an autonomous response to authority – make it my own

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- Kant's simplistic understanding of the human predicament
  - Bad things happen when people are too free: excessive autonomy creates withdrawal, conformity, and/or a thirst for control

# Conclusion

- We are all always children striving to be adults
- The autonomy-heteronomy divide is unhelpful
- We should look for eunomy: good law!