

RADICAL EVIL (*RADIKAL BÖSE*).

The doctrine of radical evil is the backbone of Kant's *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793). After introducing it in Part I, Kant uses it to organize his argument throughout the rest of the book: his Christology (Part II), eschatology (Part III), and critique of ecclesiastical organizations (Part IV), all owe their distinctive character to the claim that “the human being is evil by nature” (6:32).

By “evil,” Kant does not mean to designate any set of particularly pernicious acts, but the type of volition that underlies and makes possible immorality in all its forms. Such a volitional structure is present in “the multitude of woeful examples that the experience of human deeds parade before us” (R 6:33), no less than in the subterfuges of self-deception with which we excuse our misconduct and delude ourselves about our moral worth (R 6:38). In all cases, Kant believes, the evil person “makes self-love and their inclinations the condition of compliance with the moral law –whereas it is the latter that, as the *supreme condition* of the satisfaction of the former, should have been incorporated into the universal maxim of the power of choice as the sole incentive” (R 6:36).

Kant's view rests on two important assumptions. First, it presupposes a distinctive anthropological picture, according to which a finite rationality like ours, torn by the presence of two inextricable and yet incommensurably different types of incentives (self-love and duty), experiences morality as “necessitation” and “command” (Gr 4:413). Second, it presupposes a distinctive conception of human responsibility, according to which the “freedom of the power of choice (*Willkür*) has the characteristic, entirely peculiar to it, that it cannot be determined to action through any incentive *except so far as the human being has incorporated it into his maxim*” (R 6:24; see also MS 6:226). Together, these assumptions led Kant to conclude that “if the law fails (...) to determine somebody's free power of choice with respect to an action relating to it” (6:24), that agent must have made the opposite incentive her motivating ground. For, to the extent that she experiences both incentives and realizes that “the two cannot stand on equal footing” (R 6: 36), “the lack of agreement of the power of choice with [the moral law] is possible only as the consequence of a real and opposite determination of [that power], i.e., of a resistance (*Widerstrebung*) on its part” (R 6:23 n.).

From this follows that evil is not a mere lack or absence, as the *privatio boni* tradition used to believe, but a *positive* expression of human freedom, a choice for which we are responsible. Such a choice determines “whether the human being is good or evil,” not on the basis of

“the incentives that [she] incorporates into [her] maxim (not in the material of the maxim) but [on] their *subordination* (in the form of the maxim): *which of the two [she] makes the condition of the other*” (R 6:36). While the good person makes duty the limiting condition in the pursuit of inclinations, the evil person bestows her self-love with motivational priority and complies with duty when it does not interfere with her sensible goals. The maxims in each case do not differ in degree but in kind, since there is nothing intermediary between them. Kant calls this position “rigorism” and contrasts with the “latitudinarian” view, which, though at first blush agreeing with our experience, is ultimately inconsistent (R 6:22).

The upheaval of the ethical order of priority, it should be noted, does not entail the repudiation of “the moral law (...) in rebellious attitude (by revoking obedience to it). The law rather imposes itself on [the agent] irresistibly, because of [her] moral predisposition; and if no other incentive were at work against it, [she] would also incorporate it into [her] supreme maxim as a sufficient determination of [her] power of choice, i.e., [she] would be morally good” (R 6:36). There is, then, no place for devilishness in Kant’s anthropological picture: it is “absolutely impossible” for human practical reason “to extirpate within itself the dignity of the law itself” (R 6:35) and elevate immorality to the status of a self-sufficient incentive. “‘The human being is *evil*,’ cannot mean anything else than that [she] is conscious of the moral law and yet has incorporated into [her] maxim the (occasional) deviation from it” (R 6:32). Kant is well aware of the havoc that cruelty, jealousy, rivalry, ambition, and a multitude of vices can make, but attributes their cause to the passions (*Leidenschaft*), not to the incentive of doing evil for evil’s sake (R 6:37). “Passion always presupposes a maxim on the part of the subject, to act according to an end prescribed to him by his inclination” (A 7:266).

Thus, genuine evil consists in our *will* not to resist inclinations when they invite transgression” (R 6:58 n.), not in any kind of diabolical motivation which could escape the pressures of moral justification. Malice (*Bosheit*), then, is a certain “perversity (*Verkehrtheit*) of heart” (6:37), a mendacious attitude with which we try to justify to ourselves our unwillingness to submit our inclinations to the demands of morality. Evil people do not will the abrogation of the moral law, but take “the liberty of making an *exception* (...) (just for this once) to the advantage of [their] inclination” (4:424). This self-serving suspension of morality is a form of “dishonesty (*Unredlichkeit*), by which we throw dust in our own eyes and which hinders the establishment of a genuine moral disposition (*Gesinnung*)” (R 6:38).

The “radical” nature of this tendency has nothing to do with the intensity or magnitude of human wrongdoing. Drawing from the etymology of the word, Kant means “*radikal*,” which derives from the Latin “*radix*” (“root”), primarily as a spatial metaphor to indicate the “locus” of evil in an agent’s “disposition (*Gesinnung*), i.e. the first subjective ground of the adoption of [her] maxims.” (R 6:25). This ground determines the use of freedom in general, for it establishes an agent’s principle of maxim formation and selection, functioning as the highest-order principle which guides and informs the adoption of an agent’s maxims of action. “In order (...) to call a human being evil, it must be possible to infer *a priori* from a number of consciously evil actions, or even from a single one, an underlying evil maxim, and, from this, the presence in the subject of a common ground, itself a maxim, of all particularly moral evil

maxims” (6:20). Evil is “radical,” then, because it is lodged at this most fundamental volitional level, from which it corrupts the whole “mind’s attitude (*Denkungsart*) (...) at its root (so far as the moral disposition is concerned)” (R 6:30).

To the extent that the disposition is itself chosen (since otherwise the human being “could be neither *morally* good nor evil” (R 6:44)), we must represent it as “inscrutable” and “innate.” Inscrutable, because “the adoption is free” and hence “its ground (e.g., why I have adopted an evil maxim and not a good one instead) must not be sought in any incentive of nature, but always again in a maxim; and, since any such maxim must have its ground as well, yet apart from a maxim no *determining ground* of the free power of choice ought to, or can, be adduced, we are endlessly referred back in the series of subjective determining grounds, without ever being able to come to the first ground” (6:22 n.). The disposition is innate, not because it “has not been earned by the human being who harbors it, i.e., that he is not the author,” but because it “has not been earned in time ([she] has been the one way or the other always, from [her] youth up)” (6:25).

The “radical” nature of evil, however, has an additional meaning beyond its foundational role in an individual’s morality. It refers to the universality of the “propensity to evil” (*Hang zum Bösen*), i.e., to the claim that the subversion of the ethical order of priority between the incentives is a tendency “entwined (*verwebt*) with humanity itself and, as it were, rooted (*gewurzelt*) in it” (R 6:32). For, “according to the cognition we have of the human being through experience (...), we may presuppose evil as subjectively necessary in every human being, even the best” (R 6:32). So construed, evil is “radical,” because it “constitutes the foul stain of our species” (R 6:38).

The fact that the propensity to evil can be said to hold without exception, however, should not be construed to mean that every human being has an evil disposition: “by the ‘human being’ of whom we say that he is good or evil by nature we are entitled to understand not individuals (for otherwise one human being could be assumed to be good, and other evil, by nature) but the whole species (...), if it transpires from anthropological research (...) that there is no cause for exempting anyone from it, and that the character therefore applies to the species” (R 6:25). The universality of the propensity, Kant believes, can coexist with the fact that some people are good and virtuous (i.e., have a good disposition). Otherwise, biological membership, not freedom, would determine the individual’s moral character, dismissing as illusory our responsibility for it. The consistency of Kant’s doctrine, therefore, stands or falls with the distinction between the kin notions of “evil disposition” and “propensity to evil,” which refer to two different units of moral analysis, the individual and species.

The second sense of “radical” expresses what is perhaps the most baffling aspect in the Kantian view, namely, the claim that the presence of evil is compatible with good conduct. “So far as the agreement of actions with the law goes...there is no difference (or at least there ought to be none) between a human being of good morals...and a morally good human being ... except that the actions of the former do not always have, perhaps never have, the law as their sole and supreme incentive, whereas those of the latter always do” (R 6:30). To the extent that wrongdoing is a sure sign of the propensity to evil, and good conduct cannot disprove it,

Kant has grounds to agree with the Apostle: “There is no distinction here, they are all under sin –there is none righteous (in the spirit of the law), no, not one” (R 6:39).

ABSTRACT: By “evil,” Kant does not designate any set of particularly pernicious acts, but the type of volition that underlies and makes possible immorality in all its forms. The evil person, Kant believes, “makes the incentives of self-love and their inclinations the condition of compliance with the moral law –whereas it is the latter that, as the *supreme condition* of the satisfaction of the former, should have been incorporated into the universal maxim of the power of choice as the sole incentive” (R 6:36). This inversion of the ethical order of priority does not entail the repudiation of “the moral law (...) in rebellious attitude (by revoking obedience to it)” (R 6:36), but its *conditional* respect. This fraudulent relation to morality is based on complex strategies of deception, self-deception, and rationalization. The “radical” nature of these tendencies has nothing to do with the intensity or magnitude of observable wrongdoing. Evil’s radicalism is a *spatial* metaphor intended to designate the locus of immorality (its “root”) in an agent’s “disposition (*Gesinnung*). What is most baffling the Kantian view is that evil so construed is perfectly compatible with good conduct. Indeed, under the conditions of civilization, Kant believes, it is impossible to distinguish a *man of good conduct* from a *morally good man* (RGV 6:30), for the dictates of self-love generally overlap with the prescriptions of duty. The persistence of war, poverty, oppression, and the infinity of vices which cast a dark shadow over the contemporary world speak of the prescience of the Kantian approach.

KEYWORDS: self-love, inversion of the order of priority, moral incentive, rigorism, devilishness, disposition, propensity to evil.

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NOTES

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² Cf. J.J. Rousseau, *The Discourses and other early political writings*, V. Gourevitch (ed.), Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 218 (note xv).

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