On the origin of evil: Kant's concept of moral evil and its Schellingean critique

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Kant opens his *Religion* (R) with the bold claim that human beings are evil by nature. In this essay, I will present Kant's reasoning behind this proposition and analyse its clarity. I will argue that Kant's conception of evil provides a relevant contribution to moral philosophy by excluding certain common views on evil. However, he only succeeds to a limited degree in explaining evil due to the lack of a formal proof of its origin and his moral psychology that tries to keep morality and freedom distinct from nature. I will then turn to the *Freedom* essay of Schelling to show that the conceptualisation of evil can be placed on a more fruitful ground if Kant's dualism is relaxed. As such, the origin of evil reveals the inevitable difficulty of living as beings with freedom.

My analysis of Kant's conception of evil starts from his commitment to a form of moral rationalism in which the moral law is given to us by reason itself but we are still free to choose to follow it by including it into our maxims that guide our actions. Morality is therefore not concerned with actions but with the underlying choice of maxims – what we choose to act upon. This presupposes freedom as the idea of independence from antecedent conditions in space and time in us (Papish 2018, 40): everybody "must make or have made himself into whatever he is or should become in a moral sense, good or evil" (R, 44). Thus, a human being is good if she follows a maxim that respects the incentive of practical reason to act according to the moral law (R, 21). Further, actions not motivated by freedom follow the laws of nature (R, 23n) and are thus part of the natural and not moral realm.

Kant attempts to place evil into this structure in Part 1 of *Religion*. Here, Kant concentrates on the concept of *Gesinnung*[1] of his moral psychology which is the subjective ground – a supreme maxim – that serves to regulate all other maxims (R, 25). As a maxim, the decision about our Gesinnung lies in our subjective nature: it is "antecedent to every use of freedom given in experience (from the earliest youth as far back as birth)"

1. The translation of *Gesinnung* is 'disposition' in Kant (1998), whereas Palmquist (2016, 61) translates it as 'conviction'. Pasternack (2014, 125) notes that both translations are somewhat misleading because Gesinnung needs to be rather understood as 'mentality' or 'state of mind'. I will not further discuss this issue and follow Pasternack in using the German word instead.

(R, 22). Thus, the choice is always present in the phenomenal world but nonetheless chosen noumenally as a self-imposed condition (Muchnik 2010, 123–4). It must be a free choice in particular to avoid falling back to natural determination: "[I]f this ground were ultimately no longer itself a maxim, but merely a natural impulse, the entire exercise of freedom could be traced back to a determination through natural causes – and this would contradict freedom" (R, 21). Thus, our freedom is not one we can utilise to act morally but one that already includes a normative element: it must be utilised in all actions necessarily.

The first consequence of this moral structure is the exclusion of certain philosophical ideas about evil. In particular, indifference, the idea that human beings are neither good nor evil, fails because any morally indifferent act "would be one that merely follows upon the laws of nature" (R, 23n). Moral acts involve a choice which is always performed in the presence of the moral law intrinsic to reason so that an indifferent moral act becomes impossible. As such, evil can also not be the mere absence of the good in us as many theologians argued before Kant because a moral choice is inevitable (R, 22n-23n and Palmquist (2016, 53)): morality reveals to us our freedom such that as long as we are free, we are necessarily moral. Further, syncretism, the idea that human beings are both good and evil simultaneously, fails because the moral law is universally present and dominates our will normatively if chosen as the supreme maxim. Thus, we either hold a maxim that gives priority to morality over all other interests or we hold a maxim that subordinates morality to them[2] (Pasternack 2014, 92).

A second consequence arises from the noumenal character of our maxims and amounts to the implication that we cannot observe our maxims. Hence, "the judgement that an agent is an evil human being cannot reliably be based on experience" (R, 20). In particular, "[w]henever incentives other than the law itself are necessary to determine the power of choice to lawful actions, it is purely accidental that these actions agree with the law" (R, 30-1). This implies that an action can seem to be in line with the moral law despite being motivated by the wrong maxim. Exploring the nature of evil in more detail requires therefore an a priori analysis of the concept of evil instead (R, 35). This conceptual analysis

2. In this connection, it might be asked why Kant allows only a single maxim as the ultimate ground and not two, one good and one evil (compare R, 25). I think that Kant excludes the latter option because he wants to maintain a rational structure as much as possible, and it would be difficult to explain how we could include two supreme maxims logically without having another higher-level maxim to choose between the two.

has to be universally valid because it is concerned with the moral structure of reason as such, so common to the whole human species. At the same time, it needs to respect that an evil Gesinnung has to be a subjective choice for the individual.

It is straightforward from the above to understand Kant's subsequent move to anchor evil in our Gesinnung because its included choice of the priority of our maxims enables grounding evil in an act we are responsible for. Here, Kant requires some mechanism to explain such an alteration of our Gesinnung. At first, Kant turns towards universal predispositions (Anlagen) as parts of our constitution as human beings. In regards to morality, Kant identifies three predispositions corresponding to a living, rational and moral trait. As living beings, we have a predisposition to animality that translates to a mechanical (non-rational) self-love or our individual self-preservation and social drive towards community with other human beings (R, 26). In contrast, the predisposition to humanity is self-love that includes reason to judge oneself in comparison to others. The third predisposition amounts to the existence of the subjective ground to incorporate the moral law into our maxims – the prerequisite for our personality, the idea of the moral law and respect for it, to be realised (R, 28). As constituents of human beings, none of these predispositions can be eradicated. On the contrary, they demand compliance (R, 28), at which personality ought morally to take preference over the other ones to make us good (Auweele 2019, 237). As such, none of these predispositions is inherently evil, and instead, all may be regarded as present in us for the good because they are necessary and we are capable of being good in general (compare R, 28). It is to be noticed that this excludes evil as arising from our predisposition to animality or personality, which contrasts with the common belief that evil arises from our animal nature. Our natural instincts involve no principle of choice, so we are ultimately not responsible for actions arising from them (R, 35). Further, the predisposition to personality cannot explain evil as its corruption would lead to a diabolical will that acts according to the resistance to the moral law. Yet, the moral law is linked absolutely to freedom for us, such that removing this link would amount to a cause operating without any law. This is a contradiction for human beings (R, 35).

Thus, evil must be linked to our predisposition to humanity but is not identical to it: evil amounts to a misuse of reason while incorporating our sensuous nature into our maxim (R, 36 and Wood (2010, 151)). As this incorporation is necessary for us, evil becomes at least universally possible for human beings. Kant links this mechanism to a propensity (Hang) which is generally "the subjective ground of the possibility of an inclination" (R,

29) so a 'natural', in the sense of universally present, influence of our Gesinnung. Here, if I have a propensity to a certain desire, then I have an inborn inclination to this desire, even before I have experienced it (R, 29n and Palmquist (2016, 73)) and once I have, I may find it hard to go back (Wood 2010, 158). As such, Kant defines the propensity to evil as a propensity for the contra-rational choice that "reverses the moral order of his incentives in incorporating them into his maxims"[3] (R, 36). Human beings have both, the moral law and the law of self-love at their disposal, and while they should only adopt the first, they can subordinate the first to the latter (R, 36) which happens if the propensity to evil determines our choice of the supreme maxim[4]. Evil therefore translates into a 'deed' in the sense that it is a decision of us in which way we use our freedom, and all vice deeds in the phenomenal world can always be traced back to this ultimate evil deed (R, 31).

Kant refers to the activation of the evil propensity as 'radical' to express the peculiar kind of necessity involved – one that is subjective in character, to avoid natural determination, but still not arbitrary or accidental (compare Muchnik (2010, 125)). In particular, this alteration cannot simply be an aspect of the concept of our species because it would render it necessary for us, but rather, we "may presuppose evil as subjectively necessary in every human being, even the best [...] according to the cognition we have of the human being through experience" (R, 32 [changed order]) and in addition, "can spare ourselves the formal proof [...] in view of the multitude of woeful examples that the experience of

3. In fact, Kant distinguishes between three different 'grades' of the propensity to evil: frailty, which is the "general weakness of the human heart in complying with the adopted maxims" (R, 29) such that we lie to ourselves that we are too weak to not give in to some desire when it comes to moral actions (Pasternack 2014, 119). Second, the impurity of motives or the tendency to "adulterate moral incentives with immoral ones" (R, 29), renders us tolerating that our actions that conform to duty are actually not motivated by duty alone (R, 30). Thirdly, perversity is the denial of the rightful status of the moral law and instead, the adoption of an evil maxim while ignoring the moral law (Palmquist 2016, 78). This distinction is not further relevant to my argument because I consider these not as different degrees or stages of evil. Rather, they provide some nuanced account of the different expressions of an evil Gesinnung, whereas "when it comes to the concept of evil itself, [Kant's] aim is to bring all cases of it [...] under a single concept [...] that applies in the same way to minor evils as it does to the worst evils" (Wood 2010, 156).

4. Palmquist (2016, 55) finds this subordination mechanism paradoxical as it strives against rationality itself. However, I think that Kant is clear that his solution does not deny reason. Rather, we need to include our animality and personality necessarily, and it is in this process where evil can occur: we are not only rational beings but also 'animals' and 'persons'. As such, instincts can still be called 'causes' of evil actions, but only because self-love was freely chosen first.

human deeds parades before us" (R, 32). These passages are however puzzling to me because Kant relies on anthropological probing which contradicts his argument cited above that empirical data cannot provide evidence for evil[5]. One could try to defend Kant by arguing that he only refers to the possibility of evil in human nature, which "still do[es] not teach us [...] the ground of this resistance" (R, 38). Here, the empirical evidence for evil makes it at least likely that all human beings have something like a propensity to evil, and Kant's elaboration of this propensity fits well into his overall moral psychology so that its existence is a useful bet for him. As a consequence, the grounds are irrespective of empirical evidence "of such a nature that there is no cause for exempting anyone from it" (R, 25).

Irrespective of the success of this defence, Kant still needs to identify the origin of this propensity to fully explicate the reasons for its choice by evil beings. Kant generally argues that such an 'origin' is always "the descent of an effect from its first cause" (R, 39) and thus, can be either understood intellectually, by reason, or phenomenally, in time. In the case of evil, Kant has already established that its cause needs to be rational for us to remain morally responsible so that a temporal explanation necessarily dissolves in the depths of reason[6] (compare (Palmquist 2016, 107)). However, reason must confess that a

5. It might be noted that Wood (2010, 163) develops a historical, social account of the universality of evil in our nature from these anthropological remarks. Here, he draws upon our predisposition to humanity in order to claim that our original self-centred anxiety to protect ourselves against the ascendancy of others is transformed into a desire for superiority over them. As such, this inclination is not directly arising from nature but from the development and use of reason (159). However, I draw upon Grenberg (2010, 175) to dismiss Wood's idea: his account implies that the societal context has some causal influence on our choice, one that undermines our moral freedom again. Instead, human beings need to bring this nature with them into the social world, where they then express that general tendency to evil – to place the self above morality – towards others and society at large (194). It could be argued that Wood presents a Hegelian reading of Kant, and he seems to have some evidence for his position from other writings of Kant. However, it seems nonetheless unlikely that this is what Kant has intended here, simply because he could have easily expressed this idea within *Religion*.

6. Kant therefore also dismisses the Christian doctrine of an inherited sin as a possible answer (R, 40). According to this view, parents pass on evil as an inheritance through birth such that all human beings can be traced back to the first sin committed by Adam and Eve, which is however an empirical, temporal explanation. The Genesis narrative is still not incompatible with Kant's rational system as long as it is read symbolically. Here, the sin of Adam and Eve was that they led their inclinations rather than the moral law determining their choice after becoming aware of the moral law through God (R, 41-2). Thus, the propensity to evil still has its place as the transcendental explanation of how such an empirical choice

rational origin for the propensity to evil remains inexplicable to us (R, 43): "[W]e are just as incapable of assigning a further cause for why evil has corrupted the very highest maxim in us, though this is our own deed" (R, 32). I think that Kant arrives at this conclusion because any full chain of causation would either render the propensity as necessary and thus, not part of his conception of freedom, or as a reasonable choice, which contradicts the moral law that is given by reason (see the discussion of diabolical will or syncretic mind above). Therefore, "one is using improper tools if one inquires rationally into the ground of evil"[7] (Auweele 2019, 240).

Kant does not seem to be further concerned with this lack of formal proof. A possible explanation for this is, as Stern (2023, 14) explains, that as long as theoretical reason does not render a view impossible, practical reason might be able to give us grounds to believe it is true, even though we cannot really explain and hence properly understand it. For example, "[i]t is therefore the moral law, of which we become immediately conscious (as soon as we draw up maxims of the will for ourselves), that first offers itself to us and, inasmuch as reason presents it as a determining ground not to be outweighed by any sensible conditions and indeed quite independent of them, leads directly to the concept of freedom" (CPrR, 29-30). Thus, morality first discloses to us the concept of freedom, and since morality demands an 'ought', this implies a 'can' – our freedom to choose our maxims irrespective of its ground. Therefore, I follow Gressis (2018, 68) in arguing that Kant might introduce the innate propensity to evil as a tool that needs to be accepted by practical reason: we need to see ourselves as capable of and responsible for evil – not because of some evidence but because it is a necessary assumption to help us become morally good by avoiding blaming some natural evil trait in us and denying responsibility.

This further implies that Kant subordinates the concept of evil to his previously es-

is possible, given our predisposition to good (Palmquist 2016, 113).

7. As such, I am also sceptical about attempts to reconstruct the missing a priori, universal and formal ground of evil from Kant's text. For example, Palmquist (2016, 48) traces the following deduction in *Religion*: if a person is aware of performing one or more acts that he or she regards as evil and if such a judgement is correct, then we can infer that the person must have adopted, as a rational basis for choosing, a maxim that made the action evil. This would however again end up with the impossibility of a diabolical will. Muchnik (2010) provides a more elaborated attempt by arguing that the preface of *Religion* suggests that the propensity to evil concerns the failure of the highest good in humanity. Irrespective of the justification for this derivation, I find it doubtful that Kant gives the key to understanding his theory as an implicit argument in the preface while explaining in the main text that an ultimate ground cannot be given. Further critique of Muchnik can also be found in Papish (2018, 126 and 130).

tablished concepts of morality and freedom. Support for this is given by his demand that "if the moral law commands that we ought to be better human beings now, it inescapably follows that we must be capable of being better human beings" (R, 50) even though the resulting account of evil leaves it inexplicable "[h]ow it is possible that a naturally evil human being should make himself into a good human being surpasses every concept of ours" (R, 44). What practical reason, according to Kant, needs to accept is that we at least tend to be morally evil, that we have brought this problem upon ourselves, and that the problem can be overcome only through transforming our Gesinnung (Gressis 2018, 72). This transformation cannot occur gradually as it demands a change of the supreme maxim which is a single decision (R, 47). This point is used by Kant to move from morality to religion: the change is a revolution in as much as God, as the one that can access the ground of all maxims, can judge us good or evil on the basis of our Gesinnung (R, 48). Grace by God plays therefore at least some role: "[W]e only make ourselves receptive to a higher assistance inscrutable to us" (R, 45). Again, Kant needs to be cautious to not close the door for the transition from evil to good without external help, as it must lie in our possibility as free moral agents. Therefore, it is rather such that we cannot know our Gesinnung, as it is noumenal, and the idea of grace can help us stay motivated in light of our uncertainty (compare R, 66-9).

I want to set aside the issue of grace and rather concentrate on the question of the origin of evil as it at least implicitly underlies this issue. Particularly, my main concern arises from the gap between the individual Gesinnungen and the universal propensity of the species in Kant's system. This gap is necessary because taking the evil character of the species to entail the evil Gesinnung of the individual leaves the particular agent no room to exercise her freedom (R, 32 and Auweele (2019, 238)). Yet, keeping the gap too wide detaches the importance of the propensity for our individual moral struggle (Muchnik 2010, 125–6). However, the sought link is not found in the individual: an evil Gesinnung might be implied empirically, but this 'proof' of particular immorality does not demonstrate that the species, universally, is evil – only that this particular agent is (134). Further, the origin of the propensity remains unknown to Kant such that the link between the propensity and the experience of evil Gesinnungen in the world cannot be explained from the universal side either. The lack of a link is particularly painful when trying to understand how something acquired and contingent, our Gesinnung, can still be universal to a species that consists of these individuals. If the propensity to evil is universally woven into human nature,

it cannot merely be a circumstance that brings it about, but there must be something about human nature that is hospitable to a propensity to evil (Auweele 2019, 238). This is however not possible to explicate as long as freedom and morality are strictly opposed to nature and necessity.

A possible solution to Kant's shortcomings is then connected to this very distinction of nature and freedom. In particular, his dualistic claim that our cognition of the moral law "cannot start from freedom, for we can neither be immediately conscious of this [...], nor can we conclude to it from experience, since experience lets us cognize only the law of appearances and hence the mechanism of nature" (CPrR, 29) is criticised by Schelling. To him, Kant falsely assumes that "[r]eason is found only in man, [...] thought and knowledge are completely subjective and [...] [n]ature altogether lacks reason and thought" (SW VII, 333): not only deprives Kant nature of participating in freedom, but he also links our moral behaviour to freedom in such a close way that being autonomous and being moral become more or less equivalent terms (Auweele 2019, 245). The first aspect is untenable after developments in biology and chemistry that pointed towards some form of creative normativity in all living beings, so the latter idea seems at least not a necessary proposition because all beings might be free to a certain degree but not all of them are moral[8]. In his *Freedom* essay, Schelling therefore explores the possibility to discuss evil beyond Kant's principle distinction by combining Kant's critical with nature philosophy.

Inspired by the emerging understanding of organisms, Schelling's nature philosophy could be called a proto-process philosophy because its ontology consists of a continuous process of becoming driven by the interaction between two opposing forces of will. Their existence is presupposed by Schelling from his dynamic understanding of 'identity statements' that mistakenly were assumed to express the identity of two parties. Instead, they are propositions that still express an antecedent and a consequent (SW VII, 341). Starting from the Spinozean monotheism expressed as 'God is the world', Schelling therefore denies the identity of God and the world and, rather, claims that God manifests as the world. This necessarily means that God emerges as existence from some ground that is not world (Auweele 2019, 244). As such, the ground of God's existence cannot have positive being, cannot be existence, but still needs to be conceptualised as real. Schelling (2006, 62) calls this ground therefore pure darkness or 'non-ground': a dynamic ground that immediately

8. Stern (2023) also shows that the close link between morality and freedom that follows from Kant's 'ought implies can' argument can be questioned as well.

"divides [itself] into two equally eternal beginnings, not that it can be both at once, but that it is in each in the same way, thus in each the whole" (70). As such, the reality of the non-ground is manifested in the emergence of the two wills: the will of God as his existence – universal love or self-expansion – and the will of the ground – particular egoism or self-retraction. Here, it is the continuous creative act of God's self-expansion that brings forth light from darkness and "reveals the life hidden in the ground from non-being and lifts it from potentiality into actuality" (66). Thus, the subordination of divine egoism to divine love is the beginning of creation (Auweele 2019, 244) and, further, only what is dark can be illuminated: God's self-expansion can only take effect on a nature that is determined by the will of the ground (246).

As a consequence, good arises if creation is enclosed by the universal will of love and self-expansion (SW VII, 400). However, creation is also the source of "general evil [...] which, though it never becomes real [...] continually strives toward that end" (Schelling 2006, 47). This general evil is not willed by God but arose when God willed to give birth to light (SW VII, 402-3) and yet, only if there were no God, there would be no general evil. As such, the potential for evil exists necessarily in all creation because God gained his existence from the very ground this evil is rooted in. In fact, good and evil "are [thus] the same thing only seen from different sides, or evil is in itself, that is, considered in the root of its identity, the good, just as the good, to the contrary, considered in its turning from itself or non-identity, is evil" (63–4). Here, the dynamic understanding of identity is important because it shows that Schelling does not simply collapse good into evil but maintains that the existence of one implicitly depends upon the existence of the other (Rae 2017, 10).

One could argue that Schelling's relation of good and evil coincides therefore with Kant who places the ground of evil close to our humanity as one of our predispositions to good, as explained above. However, Schelling goes further than Kant by not simply presupposing the existence of the propensity to evil but explicating its ground at the level of existence as such. In particular, each individual as a created being is a particular manifestation of the general process of becoming. Therefore, all beings have both, universal love and particular self-concern as two distinct forces included, and the potentiality of general evil can gain reality as manifestations of particular evils committed by self-concerned individual beings (11). As a further consequence, Schelling can be very explicit about the evil nature of human beings as they necessarily start from the dark ground that allows existence at

all (Schelling 2006, 47) "because the disorder of forces engaged by awakening of self-will in creatures already communicates itself to them at birth" (47) in contrast to Kant who attempts to place evil in his pre-existing system of morality and freedom.

Schelling maintains that outside humanity, living beings express their freedom as instincts that provide an automatic union of the will-powers – they are 'at home' in the world and compose a unified system without morality. In contrast, human freedom is manifested in spirit that demands a choice between the affirmation or destruction of the bonds of forces that its existence depends upon (Vater 2021, 133–4): human beings have a choice of will to choose whether the contractive will of the ground remains subject to the universal will or asserts itself against it as particular self-concern. Here, the appeal of particularity is strong because "the fear of life itself drives man out of the center in which he was created, for this center is, as the purest essence of all will, a consuming fire for every particular will; man must [...] attempt to step out of it into the periphery in order to seek rest there for his selfhood" (SW VII, 381). In any case, only this choice renders the individual's actions as moral (Rae 2017, 12). In contrast to Kant, Schelling then locates morality – good and evil – in a particular, human form of freedom and not vice versa as proposed by Kant[9].

Here, anchoring the two wills at the origin of existence bypasses Kant's failed attempt to relate evil to the predispositions to good while allowing for the choice between good and evil at any time. For Schelling, evil is an inevitable orientation of life through an unconscious choice that "occurs throughout time as an act eternal by its own nature" (SW VII, 385–6). Here, it is decisive to overcome the Kantian barriers and unite nature and humanity, necessity and freedom, because it allows us to maintain moral responsibility from an essential choice that is realized in time according to necessity: "precisely this inner necessity is itself freedom; man's essence is essentially his own deed; freedom and necessity are one being which appears as the one or the other only when viewed from different aspects; in itself it is freedom, formally it is necessity" (Schelling in Vater (2021, 134)). This shall also explain why those who commit evil actions find it so easy to do so: rather than struggle against himself, he "performs his actions in accordance with rather than against his will" (Schelling 2006, 51). As a final consequence, the problem of explaining the possibility of a change of our Gesinnung is avoided by Schelling as he renders it impossible (Auweele 2019, 249): we always act necessarily according to our previously chosen character, but we are

9. As explained above, morality reveals freedom to us – ought implies can – for Kant, and as morality can be both good and evil, our freedom needs to be structured in an according way.

still responsible because it was a choice of our unconsciousness. In contrast to Kant, this necessity again does yet not deny but constitutes our freedom such that we are nonetheless morally responsible for our actions.

In conclusion, I presented Kant's analysis of evil as mostly negative in as much as it explains away ideas that either deny evil or link it to external inclinations or natural instincts. Further, Kant elaborates an account of evil that is coherent with his overall moral philosophy because it leaves open the free choice to step towards a morally good Gesinnung at least to a certain degree despite our evil nature. This balance is particularly important for him as it renders us morally responsible in any case. However, Kant cannot ultimately prove the ground of evil or why we choose it. I identified the gap between universality and particularity in Kant's moral system as a potential cause for this failure. Therefore, I turned to Schelling who concludes that moral evil emanates from the dark unconscious recesses of the particular human cognition, which itself is a manifestation of the overall structure of reality and universal existence. As such, the link between universality and particularity is secured. Also, freedom is no longer a choice without antecedents but a process of acting according to oneself, manifested in the own will that is chosen unconsciously. This will is inevitably good or evil because of our finitude as created beings that demands a choice of orientation – we need to risk evil to exist. Ultimately, Schelling is unable to explain why some individuals unconsciously choose evil and others do not, in particular, because the unconsciousness seems inaccessible to him. Nonetheless, his system cleared the way for psychoanalysts to explore the interaction with our unconsciousnesses and thus, arrive at an even more dynamic formation of good and evil characters.

Abbreviations

R *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* taken from Kant (1998).

CPrR *Critique of Practical Reason* taken from Kant (2015).

SW VII *Philosophische Untersuchungen über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit* taken from Schelling (1976 ff).

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