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0521383978 - Fallen Freedom: Kant on Radical Evil and Moral Regeneration

Gordon E. Michalson

Excerpt

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Introduction

If there are Gods they will reward your goodness. If there are none, what does anything matter?

Clytemnestra to Achilles, *Iphigenia at Aulis*

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

Romans 7:15

Think of the history of religious thought in the West since about 1750 as an ongoing referendum on the idea of “otherworldliness.” From Enlightenment attacks on priestcraft and supernaturalism to the liberation theologies of our own day, key issues in religious thought often turn on the question of whether humanity’s proper understanding of itself and its hopes for fulfillment should be couched in “this-worldly” or “otherworldly” terms. Likewise, questions regarding God’s activity and sheer reality always occur against the background of the deeply problematic nature of all appeals in the modern world to anything that, in principle, eludes observation, measurement, and verification. A vote in the referendum over other-worldliness is ultimately a vote concerning the relevance or importance to human life of a transcendent power or a hidden, saving action.

A complex web of forces helped to bring about this referendum, but the most powerful of these was no doubt the new idea of nature that emerged in the seventeenth century and was eventually codified by Newton. For this new mechanistic view – “cleaner” and less “Gothic” than the heavily Aristotelian medieval view – eliminates the notion of a multi-tiered universe (including a “place” where God dwells and the “saved” go) while simultaneously discrediting the idea that the natural world is either subject to capricious divine intervention or pervaded with latent meanings and providential purposes. The new arena of meaning and purposiveness is neither a hidden, supernatural zone nor the world of nature taken by itself, but rather

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the world of human thought, intention, and control. God's central position and commanding role are gradually displaced by an increasing preoccupation with human subjectivity, crystallized in the Cartesian *cogito* in ways that we now associate with an emergent modernity. Biblical patterning of human experience gives way to disenchantment, and the divine will is set in competition with – if not eclipsed altogether by – an autonomous human subject. A “disenchanted world is correlative to a self-defining subject,” Charles Taylor reminds us, for our modern “categories of meaning and purpose apply exclusively to the thought and actions of subjects, and cannot find a purchase in the world they think about and act on.”¹

As we now know, this set of developments presented enormous difficulties for the thinker who wanted to embrace the new, scientifically based outlook while remaining, in some sense at least, “religious.” In particular, there seemed to be no obvious way in this new situation to articulate a concept of transcendence that would do justice to the powerful new sense of human subjectivity and control while still retaining meaningful continuity with traditional language about God and divine action. Consequently, intellectually sophisticated religious thought during the last two hundred years or so – what we might broadly term “liberal” religious thought – has become the sustained search for a substitute for supernaturalism in the account of faith and transcendence. As such, this liberal tradition has been remarkably inventive in its efforts to transpose the “real” point of the religious message out of traditional terms defined by supernatural intervention and into terms that find a secure fit in human consciousness and history. The external, visible miracle that involves a disruption of natural law and holds irresistible appeal for Cecil B. DeMille is gradually displaced by the internal, hidden miracle of subjective change or personal transformation, leading eventually to the peculiar marriage of Christianity and existentialism.

Immanuel Kant occupies a special place in relation to this referendum over otherworldliness, for he helped to insure that it would occur and defined more than a few of its key terms. It was Kant's genius to show how – that is, to show how to have both science and religion without obvious intellectual sacrifice. Moreover, it was a telling indicator of how things would go among his successors that he achieved this result by greatly enhancing the role of private, individual consciousness or subjectivity in his account of the religious life. Kant could afford to have both science and religion precisely because he located the assurance of the latter, not in the outer, observable world of either natural or supernatural occurrences, but in the inner, hidden world of rational beings always apprehending the pull of an invisible moral law. “Once we give up, as Kant did, on the idea that scientific knowledge of

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hard facts is our point of contact with a power not ourselves, it is natural to do what Kant did: to turn inward, to find that point of contact in our moral consciousness – in our search for righteousness rather than for truth.”² As a good Newtonian, Kant could not conceive of divine action involving an intrusion into the visible natural order, and as an ethical rationalist with a strong pietistic background he was temperamentally disposed to view something like personal character formation as the heart of the religious life. His strategy of separating science and religion thus went hand in hand with his strategy of moving to the interior recesses of subjectivity when depicting what was most important in human life. In the course of his pursuit of this twofold strategy, Kant made the individual’s consciousness of autonomy the very essence of religious faith.

Consequently, Kant’s position in the referendum over appeals to otherworldliness in religious matters would seem to be squarely on the side of those voting for a purely “this-worldly” account of religion. More specifically, his accent on the ethical dimensions of authentic religion – his insistence that faith is primarily a matter of practical doing rather than of theoretical believing – would appear to transform traditional beliefs about divine activity into an emphasis on a strictly human moral capacity in the account of salvation. On this reading of Kant, the result of his position would be the reconfiguration of the dichotomy between the otherworldly and worldly, or between the supernatural and natural, into a dichotomy between divine transcendence and human autonomy, with humanity’s hopes for fulfillment clearly packed into the latter. Presumably, “salvation history” becomes naturalized in terms of the domain of autonomous human effort, and the functions of the divine will are transferred to a moral law that rivets our attention to the world that is immanent.

The matter is not so simple, however, and Kant in fact relates to the referendum in an utterly complex way. For despite what we might automatically think about him, certain features of Kant’s moral and religious stance leave him not quite knowing how to vote, and his indecisiveness is a telling indicator of a certain ambivalence running through subsequent religious thought. More than most, Marx would accurately grasp this feature of Kant’s position, perceptively linking it with the insight that, unlike the French and the English, the Germans were not very good at having political revolutions. The “impotent German burghers did not get any further than ‘good will,’ ” claims Marx, and Kant himself “was satisfied with ‘good will’ alone, even if it remained entirely without result, and he transferred the *realization* of this good will, the harmony between it and the needs and impulses of individuals, to *the world beyond*.”³ Despite the element of caricature, Marx’s com-

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ment is not bad as a description of Kant's second postulate of practical reason – the postulate of the immortality of the soul – which, in a certain light, appears to be a crude grafting of an outmoded idea, borrowed from the repudiated religion of otherworldliness, to his own ethically based and presumably immanent rational religion. The difficulties that commentators traditionally have in making sense of this postulate in the context of Kant's moral theory in general (especially the role played by the idea of "happiness") are both well known and a symptom of the instability in his thinking – or of an enfeebling half-heartedness, as Marx himself would no doubt suggest. The half-heartedness lies in Kant's unwillingness to transform the positive result and content of the good will into purely historical and social terms, rather than project human perfection into an infinitely distant noumenal realm, with no practical bearing on our present circumstance. Marx thus appreciates that Kant's vote in the referendum is not so obvious after all, for Kant has not totally left heaven for earth.

Without question, the most significant signal that Kant's profile on these matters is not as clear-cut as we might have supposed is the way he handles the problem of moral evil. In his late (1793) work, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Kant develops a theory of what he calls "radical evil" that is sufficiently problematic in itself that Karl Barth once called it absolutely "the last thing one would expect" to find Kant writing about, following his earlier ethical writings.⁴ The theory looks suspiciously like the Christian doctrine of original sin, just the sort of thing the thinkers of the Enlightenment normally prided themselves on eliminating from the roster of traditional ideas worthy of serious consideration. To make matters worse, Kant so defines radical evil that it appears to confront humanity with a problem that it cannot solve through its own worldly autonomous powers, making this the key point where the tension between the this-worldly and the otherworldly enters in, in the form of a tension between human autonomy and transcendent assistance. What gives the expression "radical" evil its point is what Kant calls the corruption of the underlying ground of all our maxims, and our dilemma becomes clear once we realize that the only way out of radical evil is through the production of good maxims. In other words, in order to save ourselves we have to call on precisely the resource that we ourselves have spoiled.

This evil is *radical* because it corrupts the ground of all maxims; it is, moreover, as a natural propensity, *inextirpable* by human powers, since extirpation could occur only through good maxims, and cannot take place when the ultimate subjective ground of all maxims is postulated as corrupt...⁵

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In other words, radical evil is defined in such a way as to put in question our ability to save ourselves – an odd result for a thinker who makes human autonomy the heart of his philosophical vision. It is the logic produced by such a train of thought – set in motion by the aging Kant’s utterly unfashionable lodging of the source of evil in the will, rather than in ignorance – that leads to his even more surprising language about divine aid, grace, and what he calls “supernatural cooperation” in his subsequent account of moral regeneration (p. 44; p. 40). Yet Kant does not cease to be Kantian, as exemplified by his own conclusion to the thought quoted above: “[Y]et at the same time it must be possible to *overcome* [radical evil], since it is found in man, a being whose actions are free” (p. 37; p. 32). Obviously, however, he saves his Kantian credentials only at the cost of appearing deeply ambivalent about the relationship between divine action and human autonomy, or between hope for salvation placed outside ourselves and hope placed in our own natural capacities. It is this ambivalence that finally makes Kant’s vote in the referendum so problematic.

What follows is an attempt both to shed light on, and draw lessons from, Kant’s views on radical evil and moral regeneration, with a particular emphasis on the delicate interplay between human freedom and transcendent action in the recovery from radical evil. Kant’s position is a nest of tangles, but they are instructive tangles, especially for those concerned with reconciling traditional theological preoccupations with the characteristically modern demand for intellectual and moral autonomy. Kant’s difficulties in successfully treating the topics at hand suggest ways in which the age is running ahead of itself while still bearing the weight of its Christian inheritance. As a result, no matter where Kant turns in his efforts to domesticate his own problem of radical evil, he meets with awkwardness. While a certain part of my aim in this study is simply to state his position as clearly as possible, my larger aim is to show that this awkwardness is not the result of philosophical shortsightedness or argumentative limitation, but of historical transition. Kant’s problems are the problems of a thinker who is straddling worlds but who cannot possibly possess the historical perspective to assay the terrain causing his uncomfortable posture.

Moreover, despite the surprise expressed by Barth concerning the appearance of the doctrine of radical evil, there is an important sense in which it is no surprise at all, but rather the systematic working out of an issue already latent in the critical philosophy.⁶ In the background here is the grounding perspective animating Kant’s moral and religious philosophy, a powerful vision that is far more a matter of unspoken sensibility than of clear-cut conceptual commitment or explicit argumentation. We might say that, at

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its most general, comprehensive level, Kant's philosophical vision involves a kind of human–divine partnership in the creation of a moral universe; something such as this is, for Kant, the very point of reality. Moreover, the infinite approximation toward, if not the full realization of, this moral universe must be possible in fact as well as conceivable in principle, if certain “needs of reason” are not to be frustrated or revealed to be the product of mere subjective wish. For Kant, reason finally frames itself in the form of hope; reason's pervasive teleological tendencies are ultimately rendered in meaningful shapes, shapes that hint at why life is worth living. As a result, if serious questions can be raised concerning the actual possibility of the emergent moral universe embodied in reason's drive toward what Kant calls the highest good, then questions can be raised as well about the very process of rational thought that leads toward the postulates of practical reason themselves – freedom, immortality, and God. Doubt could only be thrown on one if it could also be thrown on the other.

But radical evil does in fact throw doubt on the approximation or actualization of the moral universe toward which Kant's philosophy moves – that is just the sort of thing evil does. Consequently, even though the doctrine of radical evil emerges within the critical philosophy due to implications arising out of Kant's own theory of freedom, it poses a genuine threat to his entire outlook: radical evil threatens to make the universe inexplicable and incomprehensible.⁷ This is why Kant's efforts to respond to his own theory are so crucial, since a resolution of the problem is required if the rational hope that is at the center of his moral and religious philosophy is to be truly rational and if our sense of moral striving is not to turn out to be in vain. Because of Kant's deep-seated and unshakeable trust that the universe is not absurd – because, that is, of his conviction that our sense of moral obligation truly has purchase on reality, and does not just spin free – he is evidently satisfied that moral evil is overcome. But what is profoundly revealing is the fact that, in his explicit effort to spell out how this overcoming occurs, Kant seems to call into question the competence of human autonomy to deal with its self-made problem.

A cardinal indicator of this last point is the highly provocative vacillation that goes on as Kant attempts to sort out the exact relation between transcendent assistance and human autonomy in his depiction of the proper objects of human hope. It is almost as though he is intentionally previewing a century that will somehow manage to produce both a Kierkegaard and a Marx. Or, viewed retrospectively in terms of the received traditions with which he is working, it is as though Kant has not fully thrown off the thought forms of the Reformation even as he tries to do justice to the newly emergent claims

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of the Enlightenment, producing a mingling of idioms that is sometimes exasperating but always telling. When we discover, for example, that, at the key moment in his depiction of moral regeneration, Kant drops the vocabulary of his ethical rationalism and adopts the Johannine language of “rebirth” and “new creation” (p. 47; p. 43), we are at the heart of the lesson Kant is teaching us, however unwittingly. What is finally noteworthy is that not even Kant can smoothly and completely integrate the language of divine action and the language of human autonomy – the other worldly and this-worldly – a point helpfully compressed in Emil Fackenheim’s remark that, for Kant, religion “culminates at the point at which the finite moral agent recognizes his radical inability to understand the relation between that which must be achieved by himself and that which can be expected only from God.”⁸ With the doctrine of radical evil and the related account of moral regeneration, we find Kant discovering the limits of his own Pelagianism. It may be that we also discover that he is at his most interesting when he is least Pelagian.⁹

The chapters that follow, then, constitute an attempt to chart a course through Kant’s views concerning the nature and definition of moral evil, the relation of moral evil to human nature, the meaning of the expression “radical evil”, and the process of moral regeneration. My ultimate aim is to highlight the vacillation in Kant’s thinking that occurs as he attempts to work his way out of the doctrine of radical evil, with a view to understanding both the historical significance and theological implications of this vacillation. In a way, my account amounts to an explication of Kant’s soteriology – a term not often associated with him – insofar as I am tracing his view of a condition from which he thinks we need to be saved, together with his account of how we are in fact potentially saved or delivered from the situation thus depicted. Kant’s soteriology pivots on the terrible paradox that our fallenness is of our own doing – terrible, because within the Kantian framework this amounts to reason virtually turning against its own best interests, and freedom freely producing its own most severe debility. Kant concentrates the results of this paradox in a pair of claims: an evil that is “radical” involves the corruption of the means by which we might freely regenerate ourselves, meaning, as we have seen, that radical evil is “inextirpable by human powers” (p. 37; p. 32); but radical evil does not absolve us of our obligation to make ourselves good again, meaning, among other things, that even a fallen freedom is still freedom. Once fallen, we thus live under an impossible command that might be phrased this way: “Make yourself good again, even though the condition producing this imperative in the first place appears to make it impossible for you to do this.” This vaguely tragic, Sisyphian dimension to Kant’s total

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vision runs through the account of radical evil and moral regeneration, giving his mature anthropology a richness often missed in superficial portraits of Kant as the philosopher who says everything will be all right if we simply act “on principle.”

The paradox compressed in Kant’s impossible command is an instance of a series of telling wobbles that surface in Kant’s account and that will help to organize my narrative. On the one hand, these wobbles simply denote a certain cumbersomeness, making even more problematic and difficult to follow a piece of writing that, though stylistically quite different from the three *Critiques*, possesses an organizational scheme that sometimes appears haphazard and makeshift. On the other hand, however, these wobbles convey what appears to be a deep ambivalence on Kant’s part concerning the most important issues covered in his discussion:

- 1 Humankind has an “original predisposition to good” but a “natural propensity to evil.” (pp. 26–32; pp. 21–27)
- 2 Radical evil is “innate” but “brought upon us” by our own freedom. (pp. 32, 38, 42; pp. 28, 33, 38)
- 3 We are morally obligated to deliver ourselves from radical evil, even though it is “*inextirpable* by human powers.” (p. 37; p. 32)
- 4 We must “make ourselves” good again, but divine aid “may be necessary” to our actually becoming good. (p. 44; p. 40)

The progression of this wobbling from numbers one through four has the effect of recasting in fresh terms the instability already latent in Kant’s treatment of the postulate of immortality in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, where his awkward ambivalence about this-worldly versus otherworldly dimensions of human hope finds initial expression. Moreover, all of the wobbling in the *Religion* has an idiomatic counterpart in Kant’s oscillation between the language of his ethical rationalism and the language of the Bible. I am taking the view that this entire set of wobbles – including the idiomatic one – signals the tension between human autonomy and transcendent assistance with which Kant appears ultimately to be struggling and which signals the transitions through which the culture as a whole is moving. Viewing Kant’s struggle is like watching a great thinker practicing to be Promethean, but he is doing so at a time when the shadows of the biblical heritage still fall heavily on the practice grounds. It is perfectly clear what Kant *wants* to do in the *Religion*, as in his moral and religious thought generally: he wants human autonomy to take over the role traditionally played by divine action in the creation of a good universe, with a corresponding displacement of the supernatural world by the noumenal realm where Kantian freedom enjoys its

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possibility. Kant's own desires in the matter are boldly signalled in the remarkably telling comment that "godliness is not a surrogate for virtue" (p. 185; p. 173). In principle, Kant wants human effort to inherit both the role and the prerogatives traditionally enjoyed by God, for he has a clear glimpse of the emerging insight, characteristic of a certain intellectual community in the modern West, that a full theory of autonomy is incompatible with any appeal to divine action. What is noteworthy is that not even Kant can quite pull off this transposition, and the reason he cannot do so is to be found in the cluster of difficulties produced by his own theory of radical evil. The theory of radical evil is finally symptomatic of the fact that Kant has not totally thrown off the habits of mind produced by Christian culture, yet these habits of mind are in many ways antithetical to his deepest philosophical instincts.

Kant thus ends up straddling two worlds.¹⁰ One effect of this awkward posture is that, through the lens of radical evil, Kant perceives that a free will is not simply a problem for itself but is a virtual mystery to itself. However elaborate his explanatory apparatus may appear to be, Kant cannot fully understand his own position. *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* not only contains a revealing set of wobbles, it contains frequent use of the word "inscrutable" (*unerforschlich*) and an almost systematic employment of an argumentatively timely agnosticism. For Kant, the things we do *not* know are the big things, not the little ones: we neither know why we fall into radical evil nor exactly how it is that we get out again, given the unspecifiable mixture of human effort and divine cooperation needed for the salvation process. Any given individual – no matter how insightful or morally alert – does not even know for certain if he or she is good or evil, since Kant's account leaves profoundly opaque the deepest motivations not only of others, but of ourselves as well. Such a limitation on moral self-knowledge would seem to entail yet another infringement on Kant's own theory of freedom, since it suggests we can never be absolutely certain we are doing what we "ought" to do. As a result, the process of character-building begins to look like a game of Sartrean darts, with no sure thing either before or after the toss.

An ambivalent wobbling, a suggestive agnosticism, and hints of severe limitations on both self-knowledge and freedom thus provide the deep structure of Kant's account of radical evil and moral regeneration. Taken together, these themes imply that Kant's moral philosophy culminates in the suspicion that human reason is not master in its own house. In peculiar ways, Kant is both heir to the Reformation and precursor to Freud, as well as a proponent of Enlightenment. Stanley Cavell's insight, though intended for quite a different context, is nonetheless apt: "If Freud's unconscious is what is not avail-

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able to knowledge (under, let us say, normal circumstances) then Kant's Reason projects a whole realm of the self or mind which is even more strongly unavailable to knowledge...¹¹ Our common picture of Kant often keeps this side of his thinking from coming into full view, partly the result, no doubt (as Mary Midgley has shrewdly observed), of a tendency to "treat a few quotations from the rather dramatic opening sections of the *Groundwork* as his last words on both individuality and freedom."¹² Likewise, it is typically assumed that the fundamental tension in Kant's world view is between freedom and determinism (or necessity). In Ernest Gellner's memorable expression, Kant's philosophy is animated by two great fears: "The first fear is that the mechanical vision does *not* hold; the second fear is that it *does*."¹³ With the emphasis here, studies of Kant's religious thought invariably concentrate on how he reconciles his moral theism with a scientific account of a physical universe that, taken by itself, would leave all human actions strictly predetermined and morality therefore impossible.

The lesson of this study, however, may be that a deeper and more troubling tension in Kant's world view is that between freedom and something more like original sin than Newtonian necessity. Freedom is more fundamentally in conflict with itself than it is threatened by a mechanistic universe. It is this tension, finally, that keeps Kant's vote in the referendum on otherworldliness from being clear cut. Whereas the first, more commonly addressed tension is what we might call a "conceptual" difficulty that is the natural spin-off of Kant's efforts to have both Newton and morality, the second tension is more existentially urgent and intrinsically tragic, for it is produced by freedom itself as a problem for itself. The first tension is something we *discover* as we try to make sense, simultaneously, of a physical universe and human action; but the second tension is something we *create* as, in a life filled with moral promise, we turn inexplicably against ourselves and subvert our original predisposition to good.

It is often said in connection with Kant's view of freedom that what makes us "human" for him is our ability to "oppose our ends to those imposed upon us by nature."¹⁴ The chapters that follow constitute an attempt, not to repudiate, but to expand upon this common view. For the theory of radical evil suggests that what also makes us human is our ability to oppose not only the ends imposed upon us by nature, but also the ends that our own reason would freely give to itself.