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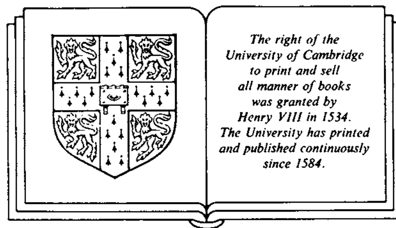
Kant on radical evil and moral regeneration

GORDON E. MICHALSON, JR.
Oberlin College, Ohio



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To the memory of Hans W. Frei
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Preface

This book has its origins in embarrassment. The embarrassment was my own and would occur every year with uncanny regularity, as I taught the first semester of a year-long survey course in modern religious thought in the West. Invariably, as we worked through Kant's *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, astute class members would ask questions such as the following: "What exactly is the difference between an 'original predisposition' to good and a 'natural propensity' to evil?" "If moral evil is produced by human freedom, why does Kant say it is 'innate'?" "If moral evil is 'radical' in the way Kant says it is, how can human freedom get rid of it?" "If Kant is a Newtonian, why does he talk about 'supernatural cooperation' when he discusses moral regeneration?" "What exactly is the relationship between human freedom and divine grace in Kant's view of salvation?"

In response to such questions, I became very adept over the years at mumbling vague replies that skillfully alluded to the "profundity" of the Kantian teaching while also having the effect of redirecting my students' attention toward other parts of Kant's book, with which I was more comfortable and about which I had already written. As much at home as I was with certain of Kant's views, I frankly had no idea how to answer many of the questions that arose in connection with his theories of radical evil and moral regeneration. As I reflected on these matters, I developed a more complex attitude toward Kant and toward the eighteenth century in general, and I began to regard in a new light Richard Rorty's comment that the "Enlightenment has been a favorite target ever since Adorno blamed it for Los Angeles."

Moreover, as I surveyed the secondary literature for help, I gradually realized that discussions of these matters – when they occurred at all – were either subsidiary to larger-scale accounts of Kant's moral and religious views (and thus given very short shrift) or else the sorts of summaries that have the effect of laying out one's puzzlements in neat narrative order, rather than solving them. Furthermore, it seemed very peculiar to me that, though there is one book-length study of Kant's view of moral evil in French, there are no others. Although I am keenly aware of the implications of what, in a different

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context, Jonathan Bennett once referred to as a "welcome gap in the literature," I eventually decided to try to produce a book-length study of the issues that had so puzzled my students, and me as well.

The result is what I would characterize as a piece of textual analysis set in an interpretive framework that indicates why we should be interested in Kant's views on radical evil and moral regeneration, even if he turns out to be wrong on every point he takes up. We should be interested, not because of anything Kant finally claims about evil or salvation, but because the sheer instability of his position is a telling indicator of difficulties facing religious thought in our own day as well as his. This wider interpretive aspect came to me only slowly, as I worked on the text of the *Religion* and struggled with Kant's shifting of idioms as he developed what frankly seemed like a thinly disguised recasting of the Christian doctrine of original sin, framed for the most part in the language of his ethical rationalism. To a great extent, the most severe challenge in dealing with Kant's account of radical evil and moral regeneration is figuring out how to integrate, or otherwise reconcile, his Christian language and his rationalist-Enlightenment language. The approach that other theories in the book invite (such as his view of the institutional church) – an approach that understands his rationalist idiom as exercising a progressive moral reductionism on traditional Christian teachings – is useful to an extent and is of course in keeping with the overall intentions that Kant announces in his two Prefaces. But that approach founders, finally, on the fact that moral evil is for Kant lodged mysteriously in the human will in ways that make it impossible to expel through human effort alone: in this case, the translation of an orthodox Christian claim into an ethical-rationalist substitute will solve no problems, since the will is the source of its own difficulty. Kant would have saved both himself, and his interpreters, a great deal of trouble if he had only joined the bulk of his enlightened peers and claimed that moral evil has its source in ignorance, not the will. As it is, moral evil is for him no mere epistemological failing, but something much deeper and more mysterious.

Ibsen once said that "we are sailing with a corpse in the cargo." Similarly, Kant's disturbing account of the way the free will turns against its own best interests suggests that each of us carries a malevolent stowaway that could come to life at any moment, without cause or explanation. More puzzling still is the unsettling fact that, though the moral crippling thus produced apparently renders us incapable of saving ourselves, we remain under the obligation to do so. There is thus something profoundly equivocal about Kant's position, as he weaves his way between idioms and attempts to balance out the proper proportions of innateness and free election in the emerg-

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ence of moral evil, and of human effort and divine assistance in the recovery from it. Rather than simply accusing Kant of holding contradictory views – as though he could have seen and solved his problem if he had only looked harder – I am suggesting that the instability in his thinking is the inevitable result of a divided cultural inheritance – something which even a brilliant thinker such as Kant could not clearly see, no matter how hard he looked. His difficulties are the difficulties of his historical setting rather than of philosophical argumentation. The awkwardness of his position is thus symptomatic of the fate of every religious liberal, whose lot it apparently is to live in a zone of discomfort, somewhere between modernity and tradition. Kant is not closing off an era with his equivocal and unstable account of the relation between human capacities and divine aid, but inaugurating one.

Portions of this work have previously appeared in somewhat different form in the following articles: "The Non-Moral Element in Kant's Moral Proof of the Existence of God," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 39 (1986); "The Inscrutability of Moral Evil in Kant," *The Thomist* 51 (1987); and "Moral Regeneration and Divine Aid in Kant," *Religious Studies* 25 (1989). My thanks to the editors of these journals for permission to use material from those articles in this book.

As in the past, I have been greatly aided in the work on this book by the National Endowment for the Humanities and by Oberlin College. An N.E.H. Summer Stipend helped to get the project off the ground, while an N.E.H. Fellowship for College Teachers made possible its completion. My colleagues in Oberlin's Religion Department have shown not only gratifying and ongoing support for my research interests, but uncommon tolerance toward my leave patterns as well, while Dean Al MacKay took welcome initiatives that generously supplemented my N.E.H. funding. Kenneth Surin of Duke University was good enough to bring this project to the attention of Cambridge University Press, where I have had the good fortune to have the well informed and efficient assistance of editor Alex Wright. I am grateful to all of these parties for their help and for their implicit confidence in my efforts.

For almost two decades now, virtually everything I have thought and written about has been filtered through my ongoing contact with Malcolm Diamond, Henry Levinson, and Jeff Stout. Their importance to me as conversation partners is surpassed only by their value to me as friends. In the Preface to one of her books, Judith Shklar has said that there "is, of course, something silly about thanking one's friends for being one's friends" – but I am happy to follow her example and do so anyway. I look forward to the next twenty years.

I completed this work while enjoying several months as a Visiting Senior

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Member of Linacre College, Oxford, during Trinity Term, 1989. My thanks to the Principal and permanent Members of Linacre for their kind hospitality during that period, and especially to Robert Morgan, who was good enough to nominate me for membership.

Finally, my earliest research for this project got under way while I was a Visiting Fellow in the Religious Studies Department at Yale University. My host on that occasion was the late Hans Frei, who was then the Department Chairman. All those who came under his extraordinary influence as a mentor and friend – and I realize there are many – will appreciate at least some of the feeling that lies behind the dedication of this volume, while sharing in the sadness that he is not here to witness its completion.

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