

Original Sin and Radical Evil: Kierkegaard and Kant

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Abstract

By comparing the theories of evil found in Kant and Kierkegaard, this article aims to shed new light on Kierkegaard, as well as on the historical and conceptual relations between the two philosophers. The author shows that there is considerable overlap between Kant's doctrine of radical evil and Kierkegaard's views on guilt and sin and argues that Kierkegaard approved of the doctrine of radical evil. Although Kierkegaard's distinction between guilt and sin breaks radically with Kant, there are more Kantian elements in Kierkegaard than was shown by earlier scholarship. Finally, Kierkegaard provides an alternative solution to the problem of the universality of guilt, a problem much discussed in the literature on Kant.

Keywords: anthropology, guilt, Immanuel Kant, Søren Kierkegaard, moral agency, sin

1. Introductory remarks

There can be little doubt that guilt and sin are central to Kierkegaard's thinking. While it is commonplace to point out that Kierkegaard relied on a Lutheran understanding of sin, his views on guilt are rarely explored and interpreted in detail. Nevertheless, it has become clear that Kierkegaard's views of guilt and sin are crucial for understanding his account of – and partial justification of – religiousness. In particular, the scholarship on the so-called first and second ethics in *Concept of Anxiety* has made it clear that the ethical problem of guilt is supposed to motivate the 'leap' to Christian ethics (e.g. Grøn 1997: 278–85). In the following I will try to make sense of Kierkegaard's views by comparing his notions of guilt and sin to Kant's. I first argue that there is a considerable *overlap* between Kant's doctrine of radical evil and

Kierkegaard's views of guilt and sin. Then I show that there is some evidence that Kierkegaard was not only familiar with the doctrine of radical evil but also that he approved of it (although somewhat reservedly). I suggest that Kierkegaard could very well have been influenced by Kant, although this point is difficult to establish definitely, since it is hard to rule out other sources. In any case, Kierkegaard's views lie closer to Kant than was shown by earlier scholarship, although Kierkegaard breaks with Kant's ethics of autonomy by endorsing theological voluntarism.

Throughout the paper I will refer to pseudonymous writings, as well as the writings Kierkegaard published under his own name, in order to show that these writings overlap when it comes to sin and guilt. To be sure, there are important differences between the different pseudonyms (and Kierkegaard himself), but I focus on important points where they present essentially the same view or supplement each other. My argument only requires that there is some overlap and consistency between the different works in Kierkegaard's authorship, not that the pseudonyms should be taken to represent the same voice or perspective.

2. Rigorism and the incorporation thesis

Kant and Kierkegaard share the view that the ethical requirement has an unconditional nature (Knappe 2004: ch. 3). This view provides the background for what Kant describes as the doctrine of moral rigorism (R 6: 22–5; cf. LE 27: 302; 29: 633):¹

It is of great consequence to ethics (*der Sittenlehre*) in general, however, to preclude as far as possible, anything morally intermediate, either in actions (*adiaphora* [morally indifferent]) or in human characters; for with any such ambiguity (*Doppelsinnigkeit*) all maxims run the risk of losing their determination and stability (*Festigkeit*). Those who adhere to this strict way of thinking (*Denkungsart*) are commonly called *rigorists* (a name intended to carry reproach, but in fact a praise); so we call *latitudinarians* those at the opposite extreme. (R 6: 22; Kant 2001a: 71–2)

Moral rigorism precludes the possibility that man is neither good nor evil. Additionally, it precludes the possibility that man is good in some respects and evil in other respects, both when it comes to actions and the character of man. Accordingly, any failure to subsume incentives (*Triebfedern*) under the moral law implies that man's actions are evil or that his character is evil.

On Kant's account, following inclinations involves freely incorporating these into one's maxim. Thus, any case of following inclinations rather than the moral law implies active resistance to the moral incentive. In what Henry Allison has dubbed 'the incorporation thesis', Kant claims that

[F]reedom of the power of choice (*Willkür*) has the characteristic, entirely peculiar to it, that it cannot be determined to action through any incentive (*durch keine Triebfeder zu einer Handlung bestimmt werden kann*) except so far as the human being has incorporated (*aufgenommen hat*) it into his maxim ... (R 6: 23–4; Kant 2001a: 73)

Kierkegaard (the pseudonym Anti-Climacus) has a similar approach when he says that 'sin is not the turbulence (*Vildhed*) of flesh and blood but the spirit's consent to it' (SKS 11: 196; SUD 84).² So rather than being a first order desire or incentive, sin is a second order desire to act on – or to identify with – a first order desire. Instead of understanding first order desires as evil or sinful, Kierkegaard sees sin as resulting from a choice. Evil or sinfulness does not thereby represent some given fact of human nature – otherwise it would not be clear how we could be responsible for it. Put in Kierkegaardian terms, this means that evil or sin is a category of *spirit*, not a category of nature. Put in Kantian terms, it means that evil is a concept of *freedom*, not a concept of nature. Like Kant, Kierkegaard sees moral responsibility as being conditioned by the agent's volition. Indeed, John Davenport argues that Kierkegaard's conception of the volitional conditions for moral responsibility overlaps with Kant's incorporation thesis.³ Although Kierkegaard is not very explicit on this matter, I believe he comes close to the incorporation thesis in his understanding of human agency, especially in the anthropological synthesis of finitude and infinitude, necessity and freedom, body and soul. Rather than having been established beforehand, this synthesis is something that must be posited by the individual. Positing the synthesis implies the necessity of an active relation to the given (e.g. inclinations or incentives) whereby one endorses or identifies oneself with it, or it involves modifying, changing or transcending the given.

Although Kierkegaard never refers to the so-called incorporation thesis, he was aware of Kant's moral rigorism. For instance, the ethicist (the pseudonym Judge William) explicitly mentions rigorism while discussing Kant and radical evil (SKS 3: 170–1, 173; EO2 174–5, 178). Also, ethical rigorism is explicitly mentioned in *Concept of Anxiety* and the publishers of the new critical edition refer to Kant as a source for this

term (SKS 4: 342; K4: 401; CA 36). *Concept of Anxiety* mentions briefly that rigorism overlooks the limit of ethics, something which – given the argument of the book – appears to refer to the reality of sin.

The Introduction to *Concept of Anxiety* sketches two different types of ethics, the so-called first and second ethics (SKS 4: 323–31; CA 16–24). First ethics is a philosophical ethics that does not appeal to divine grace. Since it is claimed that any failure or wrongdoing whatsoever implies that man is infinitely guilty (cf. SKS 4: 459–60; CA 161), first ethics presupposes rigorism, not latitudinarianism. Second ethics, by contrast, is a Christian ethics based on the existence of sin and divine grace. *Concept of Anxiety* assumes the validity of first ethics (and implicitly rigorism) but goes on to show that this type of ethics collapses due to guilt (and sin). The upshot is that the collapse of first ethics motivates the transition to second ethics. This argument only works if the validity of first ethics is presupposed in the first place.⁴

Although Kierkegaard's ethicist distances himself from Kant's rigorism, I believe Ronald Green (1992: 150) is correct to assert that Kierkegaard himself endorses moral rigorism. For the most part, however, Kierkegaard and the pseudonyms presuppose rigorism only implicitly. To illustrate: 'The ethical begins straightaway with this requirement to every person (*Memeske*): you *shall* be perfect; if you are not, it is immediately charged to you (*Regnes det deg*) as guilty' (SKS 24: 390, NB 24: 112; JP 998). On this rigorist view, ethics demands perfection; anything else implies that one fails completely, that one is infinitely guilty.

There also exist a few passages which somewhat more explicitly endorse rigorism. Consider this passage from *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*:

[O]ne cannot *simultaneously become* good and evil.... ethics immediately confronts him [the individual] with its requirement, whether he now deigns (*vil behage*) to become, and then he becomes – either good or evil.... that all human beings are good and evil is of no concern at all to ethics, which ... denounces every explanation ... that deceitfully wants to explain becoming with being, whereby the absolute decision of becoming is essentially revoked ... (SKS 7: 383; CUP 420–1)

Kierkegaard (the pseudonym Climacus) says that in existence the individual is immediately confronted with the ethical requirement,

a requirement that is unconditional. This confrontation leads to ‘the absolute decision’ in which one chooses between good and evil. Instead of being good or evil in himself, man becomes good or evil by virtue of performing this choice. This means that evil consists in an active opposition to the good rather than merely some lack of good. Under the subheading ‘That sin is not a negation but a position’, Kierkegaard (Anti-Climacus) later makes it clear that sin is not merely something negative or simply weakness, sensuousness, finitude, or ignorance. Quite the opposite, sin is something positive, a position or something posited by man through a deed (SKS II: 209, 212; SUD 96, 99–100).

3. Conditions of Possibility of Evil

According to Kant’s transcendental analysis, evil must take the form of letting the incentive of self-love override the moral incentive (that we see the moral law as making valid claims). If the moral incentive alone exists then we cannot choose to act immorally. Conversely, if we lacked the moral incentive, we would not be accountable, since we would be solely natural beings and not moral beings (cf. Allison 2002: 340). However, this merely shows that our capacity for good and evil presupposes (at least) two incentives. In Kant’s theory these two incentives mirror man’s dual nature: Whereas the moral incentive reflects the fact that man is a free and rational being, the incentive of self-love (self-interest) reflects that he is a sensuous and natural being. Since both incentives are necessary – they follow from man’s dual nature – man must adopt both incentives into his maxim (cf. R 6: 36). Kant concludes that

whether the human being is good or evil, must not lie in the difference between the incentives (*Triebfedern*) that he incorporates into his maxim (not the material of the maxim) but in their *subordination* (in the form of the maxim): *which of the two he makes the condition of the other*. It follows that the human being (even the best) is evil only because he reverses the moral order of his incentives in incorporating them into his maxims ... he makes the incentives of self-love and their inclinations the condition of compliance with the moral law – whereas it is this 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 (*Willkür*) as the sole incentive. (R 6: 36; Kant 2001a: 83)

What appears to correspond to Kant’s claim that evil presupposes two incentives and a dual nature is the claim in *Concept of Anxiety*

that animals and angels are not prone to anxiety, since anxiety (and presumably also evil) is made possible by the fact that man is a *synthesis* (SKS 4: 454; CA 155) – that is, according to the anthropological synthesis of body and soul, temporality and eternity, finitude and infinitude, necessity and freedom, reality and ideality (cf. Fremstedal 2010: article 2). Kierkegaard (Haufniensis) simply suggests that sin consists in prioritizing the former elements in the synthesis (the body, temporality, finitude, etc.) (SKS 4: 368; CA 64; cf. Grøn 1993: 36–7, 41), something which corresponds to Kant’s claim that evil consists in placing sensuousness over the moral incentive. For both Kant and Kierkegaard, evil consists in a choice, or Fall, in which man relates to his dual nature incorrectly by giving priority to sensuousness.

For Kierkegaard (Haufniensis), the existence of sin means that the anthropological synthesis is posited as a contradiction or incongruity (*Modsigelse*), and that it is a moral task to overcome this contradiction or incongruity (SKS 4: 353–4; CA 48–9). Whereas Kant interprets the task of being moral as putting morality above self-love, Kierkegaard interprets it as trying to realize ideality in reality, as realizing (moral) freedom in actuality. The first ethics wants to ‘bring ideality into actuality (*Virkeligheden*)’; ‘it points to ideality as a task and assumes that every man possesses the requisite conditions’. By contrast, the second ethics presupposes the reality (*Virkelighed*) of sin and ‘begins with the actual (*Virkelige*) in order to raise it up into ideality’ by relying on divine grace (SKS 4: 323–4, 326; CA 16, 19).

Both Kierkegaard and Kant contrast morality with selfishness. In Kant selfishness has two different meanings: the *incentive* of self-interest (sensuousness) that is a *precondition* for being evil, and selfishness as the *result* of placing the incentive of self-love (sensuousness) above morality. It is only the latter type that is evil. Kierkegaard (Haufniensis) refers to this type of selfishness when he, denying that sin results from selfishness, says that selfishness comes into being (*vorder*) by sin and in sin (SKS 4: 382; CA 79). However, this type of selfishness can include actions that are often considered altruistic. The point is simply that one does what is in one’s sensuous interest, that the ground of all action lies in sensuousness or inclinations, rather than in moral duty. Hence, someone who is good-hearted and wants to see others flourish can still act from self-love (Frierson 2003: 189, n. 19). This is important, since it can help us to make sense of Kierkegaard’s much-discussed claim that love that is not based on the

commandment to love thy neighbour (romantic love and friendship) is selfish (cf. *SKS* 9: 27; *WL* 19).

For both thinkers, the body and temporality are not sinful as such. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard (Haufnienensis) claims that *after* sin has been posited, temporality and the body *are* sinful (*SKS* 4: 394–5, cf. 388, 392; *CA* 91–2, cf. 85, 88–9; *Pap* III A118, X4 A173; *JP* 4004, 4047). The reason is presumably that sin corrupts man's whole nature. Here Kierkegaard relies on a Lutheran notion of sin, one which goes beyond Kant. However, Kierkegaard does not want to say that temporality and the body are sinful when one acts morally (after having fallen). Since Kierkegaard interprets our ability to act morally (after the Fall) as dependent upon divine grace, he can avoid this problem, seeing neighbour-love as an expression of divine love rather than sinfulness. Indeed, Kierkegaard states that we resemble God by loving our neighbour (*SKS* 9: 69–70; *WL* 62–3).

4. Empirical Evidence and the Inference from Acts to a Supreme Maxim

Referring to Julius Müller and I. H. Fichte, Kierkegaard says that since sin is something contingently given that is an expression of freedom, it must be experienced (*SKS* 23: 104, NB 16: 14; *JP* 3092). This corresponds to Kant's claim that we need experience in order to know that evil exists, since evil cannot be deduced from the concept of man (cf. *R* 6: 32). The propensity (*Hang*) towards evil is *contingently* true of man, not necessarily true, since humans are evil by their own doing. This provides the background for Kant's use of *empirical* evidence in order to show the existence of evil (cf. *A* 7: 331–2). Kant states: 'We can spare ourselves the formal proof that there must be such a corrupt propensity rooted in the human being, in view of the multitude of woeful examples that the experience of human *deeds* parades before us' (*R* 6: 32–3; Kant 2001a: 80). He goes on to give *historical* examples of evil, inferring from experience to an evil maxim that is underlying (*R* 6: 32–3, 35, 38). In *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* Kant says that experience

shows that in him [the human being] there is a tendency (*Hang*) to actively desire what is unlawful, even though he knows that it is unlawful; that is, a tendency to *evil*, which stirs as inevitably and as soon as he begins to make use of his freedom, and which can therefore be considered innate. Thus, according to his *sensible* character the human being must also be judged as evil (by nature). (*A* 7: 324; Kant 2009: 420)

We can infer from an evil act to an evil maxim that makes up the basis of the act:

In order, then, 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 particular morally evil maxims. (R 6: 20; Kant 2001a: 70)

This involves a two-step inference: first, an inference from an evil act to an evil lower-level maxim, and then an inference to the supreme maxim. The idea seems to be that it is only possible to explain some acts by assuming that the moral incentive is overridden by some other principle (i.e. the incentive of self-love). For instance, some acts, such as lying or killing, are not compatible with morality. Kant claims that we can *infer* from acts to an underlying maxim, albeit without certainty. Whereas an act that breaks with legality suggests an underlying evil maxim, an act that appears good does not necessarily have a good maxim as its ground (cf. R 6: 71, 63). This means that even if someone acts in the right way, we cannot know that it was done for the right reason. Kant elsewhere expresses the latter point by distinguishing between legality (acting in conformity with the law) and morality (acting out of respect from the law). On Kant's account there is an *asymmetry* between inferring to evil and good maxims: One needs a lot of observations in order to confirm that someone has a moral character, but only one observation is needed in order to know that there is no (moral) character (RA 15: 541, *Refl.* 1230; cf. 526, *Refl.* 1191; R 6: 20, 68).

All that Kant needs in order to establish the existence of an evil lower-level maxim is some act that is incompatible with morality. Once the existence of an evil lower-level maxim has been established, rigorism implies that the higher-level maxim must be evil as well, since otherwise there would be no possibility of occasionally deviating from morality. In short, any evil deed is indicative of an evil character.

Taking radical in its original sense, that is, as ground or root (Latin *radix*), Kant says that 'This evil is radical, since it corrupts the ground of all maxims' (R 6: 37). Thus, radical evil has corrupted the disposition (*Gesinnung*) in general. Whereas the lower-level maxim is a subjective rule that makes evil acts possible, the higher-level maxim represents one's overall character, supreme subjective principle or life-rule (*Lebensregel*). Kant needs at least these two levels since he talks about

evil both at the level of man's character and his acts (or the lower-level maxims that are the ground of acts).

If an individual has valued the incentive of self-love over the moral law just *once*, this is sufficient for it to have a subsequent debilitating effect on the will, since it leads to a propensity towards evil in human nature (Marina 1997: 396). Because of this debilitating effect, Kant depicts a propensity (*Hang*) as 'the *predisposition* (*Prädisposition*) to desire an enjoyment which, when the subject has experienced it, arouses *inclination* to it' (R 6: 28–9 n.; Kant 2001a: 76 n.). Kant uses the example of freely trying an intoxicant, a choice that leads to 'an almost inextinguishable desire' for intoxication.

Having a propensity towards evil means being inclined or tempted to perform evil acts.⁵ One is drawn towards putting self-love above moral duty, especially in cases where duty is costly and goes clearly against self-interest. Kant takes radical evil to imply that everybody has a point at which they will choose self-interest rather than doing their moral duty (R 6: 39). Although every human agent is capable of performing evil acts, this potential is only unleashed in certain situations, that is situations that are above what one might call the 'moral threshold' of the individual. If the threshold is not met, having an evil character seems compatible with performing good acts (or having good lower-level maxims).

When man actively desires what is known to be unlawful, this can be considered the result of having actively placed self-interest above the moral law (cf. R 6: 29, 37–8; A 7: 324). Thus, the propensity (*Hang*) towards evil is something man has brought upon himself; it is not some predisposition (*Naturanlage*) that is simply given. The propensity towards evil is something acquired that will greatly affect one's first order desires (Marina 1997: 397). Allison (1996: 169–82, 210–12, 178–9) describes the propensity towards evil as a moral frailty man has put upon himself. He writes:

The point, of course, is not that one creates one's inclinations but rather that one allows them to become obstacles to morality by placing a higher value on their satisfaction than is placed on the fulfillment of duty. (Allison 1995: 164; cf. Marina 1997: 396–7)

What appears to correspond to this in Kierkegaard is his (Haufniensis's) view that forbidden fruit only tempts when man already has fallen

(SKS 4: 346; CA 40), meaning that temptations are contingent upon the Fall. Indeed, temptations themselves are our own fault (SKS 8: 397, cf. 4: 411; UD 303, cf. CA 109). Rather than merely saying that the Fall results in a propensity towards evil as Kant says, Kierkegaard believes that it corrupts man's whole nature and leads to a new type of anxiety, a type that is different from anxiety found prior to the Fall (SKS 4: 359, cf. 357; CA 54, cf. 52).

5. Original Sin and Sinful Acts

Since Augustine, theories of hereditary sin and original sin have distinguished original sin from sinful acts themselves. Kant's and Kierkegaard's analyses of evil both follow this Augustinian distinction. Kierkegaard, for instance, distinguishes between essential sin and different sinful acts (SKS 8: 380–1, cf. 11: 218–20; UD 285–6; cf. SUD 106–8), suggesting that the former makes the latter possible. Corresponding to this is the distinction in *Concept of Anxiety* between *peccatum originale* (the original sin, the first sin, hereditary sin) and *actual sin* (sin as real or realized, i.e. as a specific sinful act) (SKS 4: 333–4; CA 27–8). This distinction (from Melanchthon) corresponds to the traditional Augustinian distinction between *peccatum habituale* (habitual sin, i.e. sin as a state, attitude, or property) and *peccatum actuale* (sinful acts) (SKS K4: 390–1). Kant reinterprets this traditional distinction within his Critical philosophy when he distinguishes between the corrupted supreme maxim and lower-level maxims which undergird evil deeds. The former is called original sin (*peccatum originarium*) and the latter derivative sin (*peccatum derivativum*):

[T]he term 'deed' (*That*) can in general apply just as well to the use of freedom through which the supreme maxim (either in favor of, or against, the law) is adopted in the power of choice (*Willkür*), as to the use by which the actions themselves (materially considered, i.e. as regards the objects of the power of choice) are performed in accordance with that maxim. The propensity to evil is a deed in the first meaning (*peccatum originarium*), and at the same time the formal ground of every deed contrary to the law according to the second meaning, [i.e. of a deed] that resists the law materially and is then called vice (*peccatum derivativum*); and the first indebtedness remains even though the second may be repeatedly avoided (because of incentives (*Triebfedern*) that are not part of the law). The former is an intelligible deed, cognizable through reason alone apart from any temporal condition; the latter is sensible,

empirical, given in time (*factum phenomenon*) [phenomenal deed]. (R 6: 31; Kant 2001a: 79)

Kant's distinction between the evil character and evil deeds (with their respective maxims) corresponds to the distinction between total guilt and particular wrongdoings in *Postscript*. Kierkegaard (Climacus) makes it clear that rather than being an empirical qualification (*Bestemmelse*) that refers to particular wrongdoings or acts (SKS 7: 481; CUP 529–30), *total, infinite or essential guilt* makes particular wrongdoings possible. Essential guilt is a *qualitative* concept of guilt that makes possible *quantitatively* different burdens of debt, in the same way that essential or original sin makes possible different sinful acts.

Merold Westphal takes total guilt to be a *transcendental* guilt, although *Postscript* does not say so explicitly. As transcendental, this guilt is not only prior to particular faults; it is also the *condition of the possibility* of particular faults.⁶ Put in terms of sin, this means that I sin because I am a sinner, not the other way around (Barrett 1984: 228; Westphal 1996: 173). Kierkegaard (Climacus) says that it is 'this totality of guilt that ultimately makes it possible for someone to be guilty or not guilty in the particular (*i det Enkelte*)' (SKS 7: 480–1; CUP 529). What corresponds to this in Kant is radical evil, the corrupted character, as a condition of possibility of evil acts. The fact that evil corrupts the ground of all maxims means that the moral agent is *infinitely guilty* and thus carries a debt that cannot be extirpated by one's own effort (R 6: 37, 72). Both in Kant and in Kierkegaard, this transcendental point *presupposes rigorism*, since otherwise the smallest wrongdoing does not necessarily imply infinite guilt.

However, Kierkegaard (Climacus) radicalizes this Kantian point about the conditions of the possibility of evil by claiming that I can only understand whether I am guilty in the particular if I am already essentially guilty (SKS 7: 480–1; CUP 528–9). That is, the question of guilt in a particular instance (e.g. 'Were you late for your appointment?') only gives meaning if essential guilt is presupposed as its *condition of possibility*. Accordingly, there is no need of wrongful acts in order to deem someone guilty since essential guilt can be attributed to anyone who understands questions about guilt. By denying guilt in the particular (e.g. 'I did not come too late'), you thereby show that you are essentially guilty, since the latter is the condition of possibility of understanding the question in the first place.

Concept of Anxiety makes an equally extreme claim about sin: you can only understand sin if you are a sinner (SKS 4: 355; CA 50). If I were neither guilty nor a sinner I would understand neither guilt nor sin. This goes beyond the Kantian idea that you need empirical evidence in order to show that evil exists, although it does not deny that evil is something contingent that man has brought upon himself. However, it is far from clear that this thesis is more plausible than Kant's appeal to empirical evidence, since no justification for it is offered.

6. The Universality of Evil

Kant says that man 'cannot be judged otherwise [than evil], in other words, we may presuppose evil as subjectively necessary in every human being, even the best' (R 6: 32; Kant 2001a: 80) And 'there is no cause for exempting anyone from' the propensity to evil (R 6: 25; Kant 2001a: 74). One way Kant's formulates the universality of evil is by endorsing the saying 'Every man has his price, for which he sells himself.' To this saying Kant adds

If this is true (and everybody can decide for himself) ... then, what the Apostle says might indeed hold true of human beings universally, '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: 38–9; Kant 2001a: 85)

Here Kant seems to be saying that everybody can decide for themselves. Kierkegaard would have appreciated this since he maintains that, instead of focusing on difficult problems associated with the universality of sin, you should focus on your own sinfulness (SKS 23: 104, NB 16: 14; JP 4037).

However, Kant still thinks that there may be one particular person who is not evil like the others. Immediately before quoting a passage from John 14:30 ('in him [Jesus], therefore, the prince of the world had no part'), Kant writes: 'To conceive the possibility of a person free from the innate propensity to evil by having him born of a virgin mother is an idea of reason consistent with, as it were, a moral instinct difficult to explain yet undeniable' (R 6: 80 n.; Kant 2001a: 119).

Kant appears to claim that it is reasonable on the basis of anthropological research to assume that everybody has a propensity towards evil, although not everybody has committed evil acts (R 6: 20, 24–6, 30, 32, 35; Wood 1999: 286, 402). However, this claim appears to require

an *a priori* argument rather than the empirical evidence Kant invokes. Empirical evidence may show that evil is widespread but it cannot establish strict universality. Although Kant may think that he has given an argument for the universality of evil (R 6: 39 n.) commentators have failed to locate it. Nevertheless, several attempts have been made to reconstruct this argument. Most of these attempts are disputed and so far none appears to have won critical acceptance.⁷ Christoph Schulte (1991: 84, 87–8) even thinks that it is impossible to produce such an argument, since evil is something contingent that is the result of the free decisions of individuals. In any case, it is clear that the universality of evil should not be taken in the sense of something that is necessarily true of all human beings:

‘He is evil *by nature*’ simply means that being evil applies to him [man] considered in his species; not that this quality may be inferred from the concept of his species ([i.e.] from the concept of a human being in general, for then the quality would be necessary), but rather that according to the cognition we have of the human being through experience, he cannot be judged otherwise, in other words, we may presuppose evil as subjectively necessary in every human being, even the best. (R 6: 32; Kant 2001a: 80)

Unfortunately, it is not perfectly clear why we could not judge otherwise. The reason does not seem to be that experience shows that everybody acts against morality. However, it could be that we cannot judge otherwise insofar as we experience morals in terms of duty and as imperative, as something we are inclined or tempted to break with. This suggests that our being subject to temptation is indicative of an evil disposition.⁸ The doctrine of radical evil can be seen as a theory that tries to explain why we are inclined to violate the moral law and why the moral law must appear as a categorical imperative for humans (Serck-Hanssen 2005). Kant says that an inclination (habitual desire, *concupiscentia*) is made (subjectively) possible by a propensity (insofar as this possibility is contingent for humanity in general). Indeed, this is the definition of a propensity offered in *Religion* (R 6: 29). In *Anthropology* propensity is defined as ‘The subjective *possibility* of the emergence of a certain desire, which *precedes* the representation of its object’ (A 7: 265; Kant 2009: 367).

Kierkegaard says that the idea that we need experience in order to say that sin exists (since sin cannot be deduced from the concept of man)

runs into problems commonly associated with the universality of sin. If the existence of sin must be experienced, then I would have to know everybody, in which case (since the world persists) the universality of sin is merely an *hypothesis* that may be valid up to now (SKS 23: 104, NB 16: 14; JP 4038). However, in *Postscript* Kierkegaard (Climacus) presents at least six reasons which suggest – but do not actually prove – that guilt is universal:⁹

1. When we – sometime after birth – take up the ethical task, we have *already* failed to do our duty (completely). Thus, we always start too late. This appears to correspond to Kant's claim that radical evil is 'antecedent to every use of freedom given in experience (from the earliest youth as far back as birth)' (R 6: 22; Kant 2001a: 71). Also, it suggests that 'the absolute decision' whereby we become evil (guilty) is something that is always already performed, rather than something performed at a particular time.
2. Although we need some time for deliberation and preparation, we deliberate and prepare too much, and the result is that we waste time instead of acting (cf. SKS 7: 478, CUP 526).
3. When we try to realize the ethical ideal *in concreto*, we have to exercise a determinative judgement that is prone to error. Failures are thus inevitable. Here one might object that if trial and error are necessary, why is this something we are to be blamed for? To this Kierkegaard (Climacus) might reply that we fail more than is strictly necessary.
4. We can never be sure we have done our best. It is impossible to be entirely certain of what we are capable of. It is impossible to decide *in concreto* whether there is a lack of ability or merely a lack of will (SKS 7: 444; CUP 490). However, this means that we are potentially guilty rather than actually guilty.
5. Although we need some rest, diversion and forgetfulness (exemplified by going to Copenhagen's Deer Park, *Dyrehaven*), this tends to take more of our time than necessary. However, we can never know with certainty exactly how much rest, diversion and forgetfulness are necessary *in concreto*. This results in an uncertainty that leads to diversion, something which again adds to the burden of guilt (SKS 7: 448–88; CUP 494–537).
6. The fact that we understand what guilt is displays that we *are* guilty.

These reasons deal with our objectively *being* guilty as well as our subjective *feeling* of guilt. The three first reasons deal with objective guilt, whereas points 4 and 5 say that our subjective feeling of guilt is

related to our inability to determine whether or not we have done our very best. Additionally, point 5 implies that *subjective guilt contributes to objective guilt*, since subjective guilt leads to contemplation and deliberation rather than action.

Concept of Anxiety can be interpreted as making a very similar point, claiming that *being anxious about sin brings forth sin* (SKS 4: 377–8, cf. 410–11; CA 73–5, cf. 108–9). Anxiety is a middle term (*Mellembestemmelse*), that is, a term or determination (*bestemmelse*) which connects two different concepts. More specifically, the role of anxiety is to mediate between the possibility and reality of sin (Grøn 1993: 31). Kierkegaard (Haufniensis) claims that being anxious about choosing incorrectly leads to an incorrect choice. Also, if man is anxious about being considered guilty, this leads to guilt. Presumably, the point is that instead of facing anxiety and doing the good right away, man postpones action and lets himself be ruled by anxiety. Thus instead of actively pursuing evil, man hesitates and avoids choosing. But this act of *omission* is itself a choice (SKS 8: 301–2; 4: 410–11; UD 205–7; CA 108–9), a choice incompatible with the conception of the moral good found in rigorism. Nevertheless, that anxiety actually eventuates in sinfulness in all individuals belongs to dogmatics rather than psychology.¹⁰ This suggests that *Concept of Anxiety* ultimately tries to solve the universality problem by relying on dogmatics.

Kierkegaard can be seen as developing Kant's scattered remarks on anxiety (*Angst*) in order to shed light on evil. Like Kant, Kierkegaard (Haufniensis) holds that the possibility of freedom leads to anxiety (Taylor 1975: 220 n.). When discussing the Fall, Kant writes:

He [Man] discovered in himself a faculty of choosing for himself a way of living and not being bound to a single one, as other animals are. Yet upon the momentary delight (*Wohlfallen*) that this marked superiority might have awakened in him, anxiety and fright (*Angst und Bangigkeit*) must have followed right away, concerning how he, who did not know the hidden properties and remote effects of any thing, should deal with this newly discovered faculty. He stood, as it were, on the brink of an abyss; for instead of the single objects of his desire to which instinct had up to now directed him, there opened up an infinity of them; and from this estate of freedom, once he had tasted it, it was nevertheless wholly impossible for him to

turn back again to that of servitude (under the dominion of instincts). (CBH 8: 112; Kant 2009: 166)

Kant suggests that fear and anxiety are *qualitatively different*: ‘Fear concerning an object that threatens an undetermined ill (*Übel*) is *anxiety* (*Bangigkeit*). Anxiety can fasten on to someone without his knowing a particular object for it: an uneasiness arising from merely subjective causes (from a diseased state)’ (A 7: 255, cf. 187; Kant 2009: 357). Kant is anticipating Kierkegaard’s (Haufniensis’s) distinction between fear and anxiety as referring to something determinate and undetermined, respectively (cf. SKS 4: 348; CA 42).

Concept of Anxiety agrees with Kant that the choice of evil cannot be explained causally, since it depends on how we use our freedom (SKS 4: 366, cf. 327; CA 61, cf. 20). Nevertheless, anxiety can explain the Fall, not in the strong sense of necessitating it but in the weak sense of providing a background. In Kant it is highly mysterious why man performs the ‘original choice’, since man does not seem to have a real motive for this choice. In Kierkegaard, the role of anxiety, as something that mediates between the possibility and actuality of sin, is to make this choice slightly less mysterious by giving a psychological explanation. Philip Quinn believes that, whereas Kant puts the atemporal choice of the evil propensity outside the reach of empirical influences, Kierkegaard regards anxiety as a psychological influence on the qualitative leap (Fall) that nevertheless does not necessitate it. Quinn points out that, if this strategy is to have any chance of success, it is both because the qualitative leap is temporal, and so occurs after a prior period of anxious influence, and because anxiety is an ambiguous attitude, and so does not impel the anxious person in just one direction.¹¹ Anxiety both repels and attracts; it is famously described as an ‘antipathetic sympathy’ and a ‘sympathetic antipathy’.

Whereas Kant interprets the Fall as an ‘original choice’, Kierkegaard (Haufniensis) sees it as a result of an intermediate state between being seduced *and* having chosen, between being passive *and* active. Anxiety is described as something one sinks into, as something one loves (SKS 4: 349; CA 43). The passive aspects are described as a feminine (*qvindelig*) powerlessness in which one faints or sinks down guiltlessly, while the active aspects are described in terms of selfishness and guilt (SKS 4: 366, 377; CA 61, 73). Arne Grøn (1993: 30) interprets this duality by saying that on the one hand one becomes dizzy and tired, while on the other hand one deals with anxiety incorrectly or gives way to anxiety (*giver man efter eller griber forkært*).

Peter Koslowski (2007: 8–9) says that in *Concept of Anxiety* Kierkegaard

takes again an intermediate position in the question of *concupiscentia* as the origin of evil as he already took it in the question whether choice was the origin of evil. Since the origin of evil is an intermediate state between being seduced and having chosen, a leap out of anxiety, *concupiscentia*, is and is not the origin of evil. Kierkegaard grants the correctness in the view of the Protestant orthodoxy which uses *concupiscentia* as ‘the strongest, indeed the most positive expression ... for the presence of hereditary sin in man’ ... But he also insists with Baader: ‘We do not say that sensuousness is sinfulness, but that sin makes it sinfulness.’ [This refers to SKS 4: 377; CA 73.] The solution is that the accumulation of sin in history creates the inclination of sensuousness to sin, but that each individual by positing sin makes sensuousness sinful.... Individually, it is sin that makes desire, *concupiscentia*, sinful, but in the collective and in the history of mankind there is a hereditary disposition for sinful desire or *concupiscentia*.

The sinfulness of sensuousness is posited essentially by the leap (Fall) of the individual and only inessentially by mankind (SKS 4: 363; CA 59). In the individual there is a qualitative leap into sin, whereas in mankind sin develops in quantitative determinations (sin is spread and accumulated). On the level of the individual, sensuousness is not the origin of evil or sin. Rather, the leap by which one chooses *and* is seduced is the origin. But on the level of mankind, there is an inclination of sensuousness to sin. However, the spreading (*Forplantelse*) of sinfulness in mankind predisposes the individual towards sin although it does not make him guilty or sinful (SKS 4: 352; CA 47). When the individual is confronted with the sin of others, it becomes anxious of becoming a sinner itself, because the sin of others presents to the individual its own possibility (cf. SKS 4: 378; CA 75; Barrett 1984: 310–12, 315, 176). Mankind can only have this kind of influence if the individual is already anxious. Furthermore, this influence only leads to sin if being anxious about sin leads to sin. Thus *Concept of Anxiety* goes beyond Kant by interpreting evil in temporal and historical terms. Nevertheless, Kant appears to agree with Kierkegaard that evil has a social dimension, since Kant associates radical evil with ‘social unsociability’. However, rather than being the source of evil, social unsociability is an expression of the propensity towards evil.¹²

7. The Distinction between Guilt and Sin

Sin includes more than moral evil, since it undermines man's relation to God (cf. Hare 2002: 219). In Kierkegaard's theory, sin is disobedience against God, and only in relation to the Christian God can one speak of sin proper (cf. *JP*, vol. 4, p. 657; Schulte 1991: 309). Whereas evil is the opposite of good, sin is the opposite of faith, not the opposite of virtue (*SKS* 11: 195–6; *SUD* 81).

In Kant, sin – in contradistinction to guilt – presupposes that the law is taken as a divine command (cf. *R* 6: 72). That said, Kant often uses guilt and sin almost synonymously, something which is displayed by his use of the term *Sündenschuld* – quite literally, sin-guilt (*R* 6: 145, 74). With the exception of the earliest *Journal* entries, we find a much more radical distinction between sin and guilt in Kierkegaard (although *Concept of Anxiety* does not distinguish explicitly between the two). In *Postscript*, Kierkegaard (Climacus) claims that guilt-consciousness belongs to immanent (natural) religion, whereas sin-consciousness belongs to transcendent (revealed) religion. This means that, although man is capable of realizing that he is guilty, the reality of sin must be *revealed*, since man on his own is not capable of realizing that he is a sinner (cf. *SKS* 7: 483–5; *CUP* 532–4).

Kierkegaard himself makes essentially the same point about sin in the *Journals* (and *Sickness unto Death* – *SKS* 11: 202, 207, 209, 213; *SUD* 89, 95–6, 101), ascribing it to the Augsburgian Confession: “[O]riginal sin” is an expression of the fact that Christianity uses God’s standard (*Maalestok*). God sees everything *in uno* [as a whole].’ The first consequence of using God’s standard

is that we are under a standard which no man by himself dreams or thinks about (here the Augsburg Confession is masterly in declaring that on his own a man has no true idea of how deep a corruption sin is, that he must be informed of this by a revelation) – and quite rightly so, because it is part of sin to have only a shallow notion of sin and also because God, the Holy One, has the truly divine idea. (*SKS* 23: 100, NB 16: 6; *JP* 4035; cf. *SKS* 11: 197; *SUD* 83)

Seeing myself as a sinner implies adopting God’s standard, one that is revealed in order that I can realize my true nature (and that I stand in need of redemption). Sin-consciousness relies on God’s scrutinization of hearts and reins (*Nyrer*) by seeing everything as a whole. This soul-searching

amounts to nothing less than intellectual intuition (cf. *R* 6: 47–8). Although Kierkegaard does not rely on Kant's technical terms (e.g. intellectual intuition), he uses the same biblical terms as Kant, saying that only God can know heart and reins (cf. *SKS* 20: 325, *NB* 4:78; *JP* 6112). Kant stresses that this kind of knowledge or self-understanding is unavailable to us. Kierkegaard, by contrast, may believe it is made possible by revelation, although man on his own does not possess intellectual intuition.¹³ This is not to say that divine knowledge is simply given to us in revelation. Elsewhere, Kierkegaard writes that revelation is obscure or opaque (*dunkel*) even to the believer (*Pap* IV C1, 355, 368). While Poul Lübcke (2006: 411) takes this to say that revelation is obscure to believer and non-believer alike, I take Kierkegaard to say that it is *less* obscure to the believer than to the non-believer, that the believer has an essentially truer representation of sin than the non-believer.

In the *Journals* Kierkegaard writes that it has been shown (by Julius Müller) that sin and guilt are *correlates* – ergo, where there is sin there is also guilt (*SKS* 23: 100, *NB* 16: 5; *JP* 4034). Lübcke (2006: 411–12) goes beyond this correlation thesis by claiming that once the leap into the Christian way of life has been performed, the pre-Christian problem of ethical guilt can be *reidentified and redescribed as sin*, using specifically Christian language. There is but one original choice ('absolute decision'), and this choice can be described in terms of guilt (without relying on revelation) and in terms of sin (by relying on revelation). The latter is supposed to give a deeper insight into the Fall than is available to human cognition on its own.

The leap to Christianity is motivated by the pre-Christian problem of guilt. But even though guilt-consciousness is necessary, it is not supposed to give a sufficient reason for becoming a Christian. Only sin-consciousness can provide a *decisive* motive for becoming a Christian (*SKS* 21: 163, *NB* 8: 39; *JP* 493). So although there is supposed to be a pre-Christian motive for becoming a Christian, the decisive motive is internal to revealed faith itself. Basically, the role of philosophical ethics lies in leading to an *aporia*, or a problem we cannot get out of on our own. Philosophical ethics provides a negative argument; revelation, by contrast, provides the real (positive) motive for becoming a Christian.

8. Can Sin and Guilt be Inherited?

Kant suggests that theories of hereditary sin (*Ersünde*) try to find the origin of evil in time, because they interpret evil within a temporal and empirical perspective. Kant himself argues, however, that we should

look for the origin of evil within the atemporal, intelligible perspective, in the representations of reason (*Vernunftvorstellungen*) (R 6: 40ff.). The doctrine of hereditary sin conflates a concept of nature (i.e. heredity) with a concept of freedom (i.e. sin). Kierkegaard, on the other hand, is explicit that while ‘guilt’ is an ethical category of spirit, ‘heredity’ is a category of nature. How is it possible for something which ‘according to its concept’ cannot be inherited (i.e. the guilt corresponding to sin) to be hereditary (SKS 23: 103, NB 16: 13; JP 1530)? If guilt and sin are correlates, this goes against the very idea of hereditary sin (SKS 23: 100, NB 16: 5; JP 4034). If guilt cannot be inherited, then neither can its correlate, sin. Here and elsewhere, Kierkegaard distinguishes between categories of nature and categories of spirit, and this resembles Kant’s distinction between concepts of nature and concepts of freedom. Like Kant, he sees hereditary sin (*Arvesynden*) as a *category mistake*. Kierkegaard relies on a broadly Kantian dualism here.

As we have seen, Kant is clear that moral guilt cannot be inherited: For me to be guilty I would have to have done something wrong. I cannot be guilty because of what Adam or someone else has done (cf. *CBH* 8: 123; *R* 6: 40, 97–8, 126). Basically the same view is found in *Concept of Anxiety* (SKS 4: 333, 337, 339, 342–4; *CA* 26, 31–3, 35–8). While Augustine’s doctrine of hereditary sin implies that only Adam had the opportunity not to sin (Latin *posse non peccare*) both Kant and Kierkegaard (Haufniensis) stress that we must all have had this opportunity. Whereas Augustine believed that sin is inherited, Kant and Kierkegaard (Haufniensis) hold that man is only evil (guilty and sinful) because of what he himself has done. It is noteworthy that Augustine’s view became the orthodox Christian view. This makes it all the more surprising that *Concept of Anxiety* sides with Kant (and Julius Müller – Axt-Piscalar 2007: 149) on this crucial point.

9. Evil as Innate

Kant says that when self-interest is prioritized above morality, evil can be considered to be ‘innate’ in the sense that it ‘is posited as the ground antecedent to every use of freedom given in experience (from the earliest youth as far back as birth) and is thus represented in the human being at the moment of birth – not that birth itself is its cause’ (R 6: 22, cf. 32, 38, 42–3; Kant 2001a: 71).

The innate here refers to an ‘intelligible action’ (cf. R 6: 31), an original and timeless act of reason that is conceptually prior to the use of freedom in experience. This is an original choice of evil that is made

beyond time, with the result that the individual comes into the world as guilty. Allison (2002: 341) comments:

Unlike ordinary, first-order maxims, however, the meta-maxim or propensity cannot be thought as self-consciously adopted at a particular point in time. On the contrary, it is found already at work when moral deliberation begins and must be presupposed in order to conceive of the possibility of immoral actions in beings for whom the moral law provides an incentive. It is in this sense alone that it is to be viewed as timeless and intelligible.

Paul Formosa (2007: 233) explains:

Kant only claims that such a supreme choice must be ‘posited’ and thus ‘represented’ as being present at birth. It is not as if we adopt our supreme maxim first, at birth say, and then reason downward. Rather the reverse is the case. We begin to use our freedom by adopting some lower-level and unimportant maxim, such as to ‘obtain shelter during the winter.’ But *any* maxim already presupposes a complex hierarchy of maxims, in terms of which that maxim can be understood, which the agent may not, indeed is very likely not to be, explicitly aware of at the time.

Formosa (2007: 233) agrees with Allison that all that is required is that it ‘must be possible in subsequent reflection to discover and articulate ... the maxims on which one acts’. This reflection shows that we are *always already evil*, not that we made a choice in some kind of pre-existence (as Julius Müller claims).

Besides one statement in which he says that Kant places radical evil outside of thought (SKS I: 161; CI 107–8), Kierkegaard does not comment explicitly on Kant’s theory of the original choice. However, Kierkegaard does criticize the idea of a pre-temporal Fall found in the post-Kantian theologian Julius Müller, saying that Müller has invented the theory ‘that original sin (*peccatum originale*) is traceable (*at føre... tilbage paa*) to a timeless fall before the lives of all men in time’ (SKS 23: 116, NB 16: 33; JP 3093). Kierkegaard claims that, rather than solving the problem, Müller’s approach only provides a shift to another level (Axt-Piscalar 2007: 155–6), suggesting that one simply moves the decision from our existence in time to some kind of ideality prior to temporality. The problem persists, namely how ‘an eternal blessedness

or unblessedness is decided in time by a relation to something historical' (SKS 23: 116, NB 16: 33; JP 3093). Kierkegaard maintains that the problem is that of an eternal decision *in time*, not an eternal decision outside of all time. This decision cannot be comprehended or grasped since it is paradoxical. Kierkegaard goes on to praise Kant on the grounds that his theory of radical evil did not claim to grasp the Christian problem in a speculative manner (SKS 23: 117, NB 16: 33; JP 3093).

Although Kierkegaard does not speak of timeless acts as Kant does, he comes close to Kant's original choice with Climacus's 'absolute decision' and Haufniensis's 'leap' (cf. Barrett 1984: 228–9). As we have seen, Climacus says that in existence the individual is immediately confronted with the ethical requirement, a confrontation that leads to 'the absolute decision' whereby one chooses between good and evil (SKS 7: 383; CUP 420–1). Rather than saying that this decision is performed at a particular time, Climacus claims that the existing individual is always already guilty. Without referring to Kant, Westphal (1996: 173) interprets essential guilt in *Postscript* as saying that 'My guilt goes deeper than any act I can remember ... I discover that every event I can remember is conditioned by a posture whose temporal origin I cannot discover.' Put in Kantian terms, every use of freedom in time is conditioned by an original choice that is conceptually prior to the use of freedom given in experience.

10. Divine Grace

Kierkegaard takes original sin as having the consequence that natural man is evil and that he is in the wrong or untruth (theoretically and practically – cf. SKS 4: 224; PF 15). Man is so corrupted that he cannot even realize that he is corrupted. Man is incapable of improvement on his own as a result of his total sinfulness. Nevertheless, man can improve by trusting God and accepting his grace.

Kant on the other hand says:

This evil is radical, since it corrupts the grounds of all maxims; as a natural propensity, it is also not to be extirpated through human forces, for this could happen only through good maxims—something that cannot take place if the subjective supreme ground of all maxims is presupposed to be corrupted. (R 6: 37, cf. 45; Kant 2001a: 83)

Since radical evil cannot be extirpated by human forces, Kant does not seem to completely rule out that divine grace is necessary in order for

one to become a good person. Still, Kant views this problem as theoretically unsolvable. He insists that we cannot make any practical use of this type of grace, because it bypasses the agency of the individual (cf. Marina 1997: 386–7). Instead of disentangling the problem theoretically, he wants to cut the knot by means of a practical maxim (R 6: 119). This approach takes the form of an *inference from 'ought' to 'can'*: since man knows for practical purposes that he *should* do his duty, it must also be *possible* for him *to do* his duty. Therefore, for practical purposes Kant dismisses the claim that our ability to do good depends on grace. Instead of denying that natural man is capable of grasping the truth or his duty (as Kierkegaard tends to do), Kant insists that man is receptive to the good (R 6: 36–8, 45–6, 49–50, 57, 144–5).¹⁴ Kant claims that the good disposition (the revolution in *Denkungsart*) must ground faith rather than the other way around. So for practical purposes, we should start by establishing moral character and doing good to the uttermost of our capability. This appears to separate Kant from Kierkegaard, since Kierkegaard sees faith as a condition for genuine improvement.

11. Kierkegaard's Explicit Comments on Radical Evil

Even though the ethicist distances himself from rigorism and the doctrine of radical evil (*SKS* 3: 170–1, 173; *EO2* 174–5, 178), Haufniensis, Climacus and Kierkegaard himself do not appear to dismiss rigorism and the doctrine of radical evil. In 1847, Kierkegaard wrote that the only thing wrong with the doctrine of radical evil is that Kant lacks the category of the paradox or the inexplicable (*Uforklarelige*):

Kant's theory of radical evil has only one fault: he does not definitely establish that the inexplicable is a category, that the paradox is a category. Everything turns on this. It is customary to say something like this: To say that we cannot understand this and that does not satisfy scholarship and science, which insists on comprehending. Here is the error. We must say the very opposite, that if *human* scholarship and science refuse to acknowledge (*erkjende*) that there is something they cannot understand, or, more accurately, something that they clearly understand that they cannot understand, then everything is confused. It is specifically the task of human knowing (*Erkjenden* [cognition]) to understand that there is something it cannot understand and to understand what that is. Human knowing usually has been occupied with understanding and understanding, but if it will also take the trouble to understand itself, it must

straightway posit (*etablere*) the paradox. The paradox is not a concession but a category, an ontological qualification (*Bestemmelse*) which expresses the relation between an existing cognitive (*erkjendende*) spirit and the eternal truth. (SKS 20: 88–9, NB: 125; JP 3089).

Rather than taking the paradox in a Christological sense, Kierkegaard makes a Socratic claim to the effect that we should seek to understand that there is something we cannot understand (cf. SKS 20: 89). However, this makes it hard to understand why Kierkegaard faults Kant for lacking the category of the inexplicable, since Kierkegaard generally views Kant as a Socratic and honest thinker who understands that there is something we cannot understand, comprehend or mediate (cf. SKS 6: 142; 23: 117; 19: 139ff., 167, NB 16: 33; Not 4: 11–12, 44; SLW 152; JP 3093, 2252; Green 1992: 161).

In the context of radical evil, the paradox that cannot be explicated (*Forklaret*) could possibly refer to the inscrutability of the original choice (cf. R 6: 21 n.). However, when Kierkegaard accuses Kant of lacking the category of the inexplicable, he appears to be doing more than pointing to the inscrutability of the original choice. Kierkegaard's wording in the passage quoted above, as well as in similar passages (SKS 4: 323–4, 23: 70–1, NB 15: 101; CA 16–17; JP 4030–1), suggests that he holds *sin* to be *the paradox* or the inexplicable. *Sickness unto Death* insists that sin is a dogma and something revealed which must be believed, not something that can be understood or conceived (*begripes*) by speculative thinking (SKS 11: 209, 230–1; SUD 97, 119). This indicates that sin is an 'ontological qualification' that 'expresses the [mis]relation between eternal truth and an existing spirit' (SKS 20: 89, NB: 125; JP 3089). Thus, it is Kierkegaard's view that Kant lacks the ontological qualification that expresses this misrelation. Both in the 1847 note and elsewhere, Kierkegaard can be read as saying that *Kant ignores the distinction between guilt and sin* (and perhaps also the related distinction between immanent and transcendent religiousness).

Ronald Green (1992: 161, cf. 17), the leading scholar on Kant's influence on Kierkegaard, refers to this passage from 1847 but fails to note that Kierkegaard *approves* of the doctrine of radical evil. Although Kierkegaard faults Kant for lacking the paradox, he seems to accept that there is a propensity towards evil in human nature (although Kierkegaard goes beyond Kant by relying on a Lutheran doctrine of sin). Green does not provide an interpretation of this 1847 passage,

confining himself to saying that Kierkegaard views Kant as a Socratic and honest thinker. Green's general assessment is that Kierkegaard's explicit references to Kant 'strongly suggest that Kierkegaard was familiar with Kant's conception of "radical evil"'.¹⁵ I contend that this claim is too weak, since Kierkegaard approves of the doctrine of radical evil and appears to have a fairly good understanding of it. This note is not an anomaly that is easily ignored, since there is a strong overlap between Kierkegaard's views and Kant's doctrine of radical evil.

12. Conclusion

The following elements are found in both Kant and Kierkegaard:

1. A dualism wherein freedom (spirit) is radically different from nature.
2. The doctrine of moral rigorism.
3. The conception of volitional conditions for moral responsibility is in line with the incorporation thesis.
4. Evil is something positive, an active resistance or opposition to good.
5. Evil is made possible by man's dual nature and takes the form of prioritizing sensuousness over moral freedom.
6. Evil stems from an original choice, absolute decision or Fall that is *always already* performed.
7. The choice of evil cannot be explained (causally) since it depends on our use of freedom.
8. Hereditary sin involves a category mistake, since it confuses freedom with nature; evil is the *result* of an individual choice, not something inherited or innate.
9. Evil is contingently true of all humans.
10. The corruption of one's character is the condition of the possibility of evil acts.
11. Evil cannot be extirpated through human means; the Fall leads to a propensity towards evil in human nature; temptations are contingent on the Fall and are therefore indicative of being evil; similarly, selfishness is a result of the Fall.
12. The distinction between anxiety and fear.
13. The idea that the possibility of freedom leads to anxiety.

Kierkegaard can be seen as using these elements analysed above to underpin his Christian convictions. Several of these elements are Kantian in the sense of being central to Kant's theory and a few are Kantian in the sense of originating with Kant. For instance, 10 goes beyond the ordinary

distinction between sinful acts and a sinful character by implying a transcendental argument. Although Kierkegaard and Kant both see our overall ethical orientation as being defined by our disposition, Kierkegaard does not explicitly follow Kant on this matter. Nevertheless, the elements above support the view that the framework and meaning of Kierkegaard's thinking is *in agreement* with the framework and meaning of Kant's thinking. Given this considerable agreement or overlap, we should take the 1847 note where Kierkegaard approves of the doctrine of radical evil more seriously than previous scholarship has.

Unfortunately, it is not clear the extent to which Kierkegaard is influenced by Kant or exactly which sources he relies on when developing his views on evil. Kierkegaard's knowledge of Kantian philosophy is likely to have been mediated by secondary sources and different post-Kantian thinkers. Although it seems clear that Kierkegaard knew Kant both from reading primary and secondary sources (Green 1992: ch. 1), it is generally difficult to trace his knowledge of Kant and to identify the sources with certainty (Fremstedal 2010: 185–6, 34–7). However, in this case, *Religion* seems like a good candidate, because Kierkegaard appears to have such a good understanding of radical evil and because it is a single source for all of the elements above (except 12–13).¹⁶ Nevertheless, Kierkegaard's knowledge of Kant is likely to have been mediated by later thinkers. Kierkegaard appears to draw not only on Kant but also on Müller, Baader, Schelling and others when developing his views of evil. However, these thinkers were themselves influenced by Kant and the doctrine of radical evil (Stewart 2007a, 2007b; Schulte 1991: part II). Thus, even if there is little direct influence there is indirect influence. Kierkegaard's views belong to a post-Kantian context, and there is a stronger overlap between his views and those of Kant than is acknowledged in the relevant literature.¹⁷

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Notes

- 1 *A = Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*; in Kant 2009. *CBH = Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History*; in Kant 2009. *LE = Lectures on Ethics*; in Kant 2001b. *R = Religion within the Boundaries of Bare Reason*; in Kant 2001a. *RA = 'Reflexionen zur Anthropologie' (Reflex. refers to numbering of Reflexionen)* in vol. 15 of the Academy edition. When quoting Kant I refer both to the Academy edition and a translation (e.g. *R* 6: 22; Kant 2001a: 71–2). However, I only refer to the Academy edition when paraphrasing Kant (e.g. *R* 6: 22).
- 2 I use the translations in *Kierkegaard's Writings* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1979–97), unless otherwise stated: *CA = Concept of Anxiety*; *CI = Concept of*

- Irony*; CUP = *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, vol. 1; EO2 = *Either/Or*, part 2; JP = *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, vols 1–6 (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press 1967–1978; unless otherwise stated, references are to the numbering of the passages); K = *Kommentarer* (in SKS); NB = *Journal(s) NB* (in SKS); Not = *Notebook(s)* (in SKS); Pap = *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1968–78); PF = *Philosophical Fragments*; SKS = *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter* (Copenhagen: Gad, 1997ff.); SLW = *Stages on Life's Way*; SUD = *Sickness Unto Death*; UD = *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*; WL = *Works of Love*.
- 3 Although Davenport (2001: 83–5, cf. 88–91) focuses on the ethicist, this point appears to hold for Kierkegaard's views of evil in general (with the possible exception of the aesthetes). Jamie Ferreira (2008: 94) makes a similar point when discussing Hannay's interpretation of *Works of Love*. According to Ferreira, Hannay suggests that, 'on Kantian and Kierkegaardian terms, instinctive responses like erotic desires and feelings of attraction and sympathy are not willed and therefore cannot be subject to moral judgment'. However, Davenport (2001: 91, 83) also says that Kierkegaard follows Kant and that Kierkegaard's views have their philosophical *origin* in the incorporation thesis. I prefer to speak of overlap, since it is hard to prove that Kierkegaard was influenced by Kant.
 - 4 Poul Lübcke (2006: 411, cf. 412) shows that 'both Johannes de silentio and Climacus present the transformation from the pre-religious way of life to a religious one by pointing at anomalies [notably the problem of guilt] in the pre-religious person's interpretation of life'. This means that *Concept of Anxiety, Fear and Trembling, Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* all argue that the pre-religious problem of moral guilt can motivate the leap to Christianity.
 - 5 While Allison (1995, 1996, 2001, 2002), Marina (1997), and Caswell (2006: 656) defend the view that temptations are indicative of an evil disposition, Formosa (2007: 240) denies this. The former interpretation is in line with Kierkegaard's view whereas the latter is in line with Franz Baader's view.
 - 6 Westphal (1996: 172–4). The following transcendental argument appears to be implicit:
 - We have particular faults.
 - Essential guilt (as a concept with non-empirical origin) is a necessary condition for particular faults.
 - Therefore, essential guilt.
 - 7 However, Allison's reconstruction has some followers (e.g. Caswell 2006; see also Serck-Hanssen 2005). For other reconstructions see Morgan (2005); Muchnik (2009: 17).
 - 8 This is suggested by Caswell (2006); Marina (1997); Allison (1995, 1996 and 2002).
 - 9 I am indebted to Christoph Schulte for clarifying comments on this point. The presentation of points 1–5, especially the interpretation of point 3, draws upon Kosch (2006: 162–3).
 - 10 Barrett (1984: 312, cf. 320–1). By psychology is meant a descriptive philosophical discipline which is the doctrine of subjective spirit. As *subjective*, psychology deals with the individual rather than the public or social (cf. SKS 4: 331; K4: 380–1; K20: 202). As *descriptive*, it is not only different from normative ethics; it is involves some type of empirical science or 'experimental' psychology (Schultz 2007: 182–5; Hannay 2003: 220). Its subject matter 'must be something that is and remains in a state of transition or a transitional state and as such admits of, and calls for, psychological observation and description' (Schultz 2007: 185).
 - 11 Quinn (1990: 238). However, the leap cannot be merely temporal, since both consciousness and spirit involve something atemporal or eternal according to Kierkegaard

- and *Haufniensis* (SKS 8: 292, 4: 392–3, 389–90; UD 195; CA 89–90, 86–7). Also, it is not clear that anxiety is merely an empirical influence or that empirical influences can affect freedom (spirit) directly.
- 12 See the critique of Wood (1999: 135–9, 288–9, 334) in Allison (2001: 605–10). However, Kant speaks not merely of the disposition of the individual, but also of the propensity of mankind. Kant commentators disagree about whether or not Kant distinguishes between the two. See Muchnik (2009: 2, 12–13, 24, 27); Firestone and Jacobs (2008: 141–51).
 - 13 Westphal (1991: 89) has argued that if ‘the Kantian distinction between the noumenal and phenomenal worlds is that between the ways one world appears to God and to us, then the Kantian dualism is fundamental to Kierkegaard’s epistemology too’. Unfortunately, Westphal does not discuss revelation in this context.
 - 14 However, some have argued that this need not completely eliminate the need for grace. Cf. Marina (1997: 390, 398–9); R 6: 72–6, 44; Allison (1995: 174–5, cf. 173).
 - 15 Green (1992: xiv). However, Green elsewhere makes more general points about how Kierkegaard wrestles with Kant’s treatment of evil and grace in *Religion and Conflict of the Faculties* (e.g. Green 1998: 269–74). For a discussion of Green’s work and more references, see Fremstedal (2010: esp. 22–3, 34–8, 212–13).
 - 16 Also, Green (1992: xiv, 17–18, 156–66) argues that Kierkegaard was familiar with *Religion*.
 - 17 I am indebted to audiences in Trondheim, Oslo, and Munich for comments on earlier versions of this paper. The following deserve special thanks: an anonymous referee, Ronald Green, Lars Johan Materstvedt, Bjørn Myskja, Kjell Eyvind Johansen, Christoph Schulte, Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Marius Mjaaland, Omri Boehm, the Nordic Network for German Idealism, and the Norwegian Kierkegaard society.

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