Papish, Laura. *Kant on Evil, Self-Deception and Moral Reform*.

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Laura Papish’s *Kant on Evil, Self-Deception, and Moral Reform* is an ambitious attempt to breath new life into old debates and a welcome contribution to a recent renaissance of interest in Kant’s theory of evil.

The book has eight chapters, and these chapters fall into three main divisions. Chapters 1 and 2 focus on the psychology of nonmoral and immoral action. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 focus on self-deception, evil, and dissimulation. And chapters 6, 7, and 8 focus on self-cognition, moral reform, and moral progress. I shall begin with a brief summary of these chapters. Then I shall turn to commentary.

In chapter 1 Papish embraces Kant’s apparent nonmoral motivational hedonism, the conjunctive thesis that (a) all actions are either from the moral law or from self-love, and (b) self-love is hedonistic. She argues that Kantian hedonism can be quite sophisticated for it takes into account, among other things, the pleasures associated with three different phenomena: pain removal; creative thought (including creative planning for future pleasure); and conflict avoidance.

In chapter 2 Papish discusses Kant’s psychology of evil especially as set out in the *Religion within the Boundaries of mere Reason*. She maintains that existing literature focuses too much on evil *qua* prioritization of self-love over the moral law. Papish develops an interpretation of the subordination thesis in terms of overdetermination, trying to incorporate both self-love *and* the moral law into one’s maxim.

Chapter 3 uses Kant’s logic lectures to advance a new account of Kantian self-deception. According to Papish, self-deception should be understood in terms of actively seeking evidence for what one wants to believe (and minimizing evidence against it) rather than in terms of attempting to convince oneself of something that is inconsistent with what one already believes. Chapter 4 then argues that self-deception is necessary for evil agency and, further, that self-deception serves to entrench such agency. And chapter 5 makes a case for the idea that evil, in the form of dissimulation, a phenomenon related though not identical to self-deception, is “a chosen and yet intractable aspect of our agency” (149).

Chapter 6 advances a hermeneutic model of Kantian self-cognition: we come to know our moral characters through self-interpretation based on observation of ourselves in different circumstances and in interaction with others. Chapter 7 offers an understanding of moral progress in cognitive (rather than motivational) terms. Papish argues that failure to act in conformity with the moral law after a moral conversion (often) results from failure to realize what a moral commitment means rather than from falling prey to temptation. And chapter 8 explores the ways in which being a member of an ethical community can play a role in moral reform, moral knowledge, and moral life in general, effectively rebutting those who criticize Kant for promoting an isolationist vision of morality.

In my view, the main flaw of Papish’s book is that the central arguments fail to connect. For example, consider her proof of the universality of dissimulation. Papish defines dissimulation as putting forward “an appearance of oneself that is not fully accurate or representative of one’s motives, intentions, or inner life more generally” (145). She then argues:

...even the best human being must be someone who is willing to act in a public, external context and make oneself [*sic*] vulnerable to failure, luck, misinterpretation by others, and a general inability to translate seamlessly her intentions into empirical action. Thus even when an agent is not acting from self-love and exhibits purity of will, she is still exercising an agency that is tainted by dissimulation...A  person must take responsibility for dissemblance because it is a product of her agency. Each human being...brings about seemings or appearances that fail to render fully evident the quality of her will. In other words, even the very best person *actively*—that is, through her actions—dissembles. (146)

I would like to say five things about this.

First, the fact that I am subject to failure, luck, and misinterpretation by others does not entail that my actions fall short of full transparency. Second, there is an equivocation in the last line of this quotation: even if my *actions* necessarily fall short of full transparency, this does not entail that residual opacity is *active* (in the sense of willful). Third, the connection between opacity and evil is tenuous at best, both because (as the previous point reveals) this opacity need not be willful (*pace* 150-151) and also because (as nonKantians are fond of pointing out) willful dissemblance is permissible if not laudable in some circumstances (surprise parties and murderers at the door are standardly appealed to in this context, but they are not unique).

Fourth, there are doctrinal reasons (to wit, Kant’s commitment to “ought implies can” and also his theory of imputation) for resisting Papish’s ideas here about responsibility. And fifth and finally, Papish’s claims about dissimulation sit uneasily with her claim about the necessity of self-deception for evil. That is, Papish contends, first, that dissimulation is evil; second, that dissimulation is a universal aspect of human agency; and third, that self-deception is necessary for evil. These contentions seem to entail that self-deception is a universal aspect of human agency, something Papish (for good reason) wants to deny.

There are also problems with Papish’s ideas about overdetermination and her defense of Kantian hedonism.

Papish repeatedly characterizes her discussion of overdetermination as an investigation of what kinds of “*formal* arrangements between the incentives of practical reason—self-love and respect for the law—are possible in an evil will” (39; also 6, 41, 55, and 63). She criticizes other commentators, like Wood, for offering “expansionist” accounts of evil: “Wood...endorses this expansionist reading, arguing that evil is found in ‘*anything* people do when they violate their duties and fail to live up to the dignity of their rational nature’” (42; italics in Wood are Papish’s).

Contra these other commentators Papish wants to show that a maxim of overdetermination (a maxim to perform only actions that satisfy both self-love *and* the moral law) can lead to evil. She defends this by appeal to Kant’s remarks about the addition of forces in Newtonian mechanics (65). The idea seems to be that just as antagonistic forces may be summed to determine the resultant force and, thus, the way in which a body will move, so the incentives of self-love and the moral law may be added in order to determine an agent’s subsequent action. Thus a maxim of overdetermination can lead to evil action insofar as self-love might overpower the moral incentive. I would like to say three things about this.

First, Papish’s criticism of Wood is misplaced. Papish might be right that Wood endorses an expansionist account of *self-love* (more about this shortly). But if there is an issue here with Wood’s account of evil it is precisely *not* a formal one; it is a *substantive* one. Indeed, the quotation Papish uses seems particularly ill-suited for her purposes: Wood’s claim (or at least the first conjunct of his claim) easily can be construed as analytic.

Second, Papish’s discussion of antagonistic forces undermines the Incorporation Thesis, a thesis she does not seem to want to give up (40). That is, if the Incorporation Thesis is correct, then the analogy between forces and motives breaks down exactly at the point of maxim adoption: the Incorporation Thesis is the centerpiece of a model of agency that is based on an agent’s ability to *choose* one or another principle of action rather than the principle’s capacity to emerge from and supervene on his/her actions on the basis of the summation of psychological forces.

Third and finally, because of this second point Papish’s discussion of overdetermination does not give us a formal account of evil. Given nonmoral motivational hedonism, there are only two motives for action, (hedonic) self-love and the Moral Law. Overlooking epistemic issues, the moral law cannot lead to maxim-based immoral action. So overdetermination cannot lead to maxim-based immoral action. Only self-love can lead to maxim-based immoral action, and it can do so only when in conflict with the moral law. So formally speaking, maxim-based evil presupposes prioritization of self-love over the moral law. Papish’s discussion of overdetermination contains valuable psychological insights into how some kinds of nonmoral action arise. But given how she frames it, it fails on its own terms.

Concerning Papish’s endorsement of Kantian hedonism I shall be brief. As Papish acknowledges, one of the reasons for adopting an expansionist account of Kantian self-love is that the alternative, a hedonistic theory of nonmoral action, seems subject to obvious counterexample: Eichmann, for instance, does not seem to have been motivated by the pursuit of sensual pleasure (3).

Papish maintains, however, that we can avoid such counterexamples without adopting expansionism. Instead and as noted above, Papish offers a more nuanced account of hedonism, “one where hedonism takes shape through a passive and uncritical willingness to be amenable” (33). Thus Papish asserts that “Eichmann achieves a consistency that a person vulnerable to situational factors does not, but both have in common how they can feel subjectively unhindered by adapting easily to socially recognized norms or behavioral prompts” (33).

But I suspect that this portrayal of Eichmann will be repellant to many. Not only does it give Eichmann too much credit (he was not so much consistent; he was more just stupid and unreflective), but it also does not do justice to the depth of Eichmann’s evil. This was a person who arranged for thousands of Jews to be transported to death camps even when the official word was that these transports should cease, who declared that he could go to the grave happily with the knowledge that he was personally responsible for the deaths of millions. This, I submit, is not behavior that even as sophisticated a hedonistic theory as that advanced by Papish’s Kant will have an easy time with.

These hermeneutic questions about Eichmann *et al*. might bottom out in intuitions, and plainly mine do not align with a hedonistic account of nonmoral action. But insofar as we are attempting to develop a plausible Kantian moral psychology for the present, there also might be room here for empirical investigation. And I suspect that neither current psychology nor current neurology will buttress the idea that all nonmoral action is based in pleasure-seeking considerations. Neither will do that, I suspect, even when we take into account the manifold ways in which pleasure might be generated. So perhaps we should not be so quick to reject an expansionist account of Kantian self-love.

In any case, I would like to conclude now on a more positive note. Readers might take issue, as indeed I have been doing, with Papish’s arguments. But hopefully they will not lose sight of two undeniable facts: First, Papish *has* arguments, something which some philosophers seem to avoid in favor of the bare assertion of intuitions coupled occasionally with a just-so story; and second, Papish’s arguments are sufficiently clear to allow her readers to engage with them, something which some philosophers seem to avoid in favor of a protective cloud of opacity: Dissemblance might not be as universal as Papish asserts, but it is sadly if understandably common in contemporary philosophy.

In sum: Papish’s book engages with debates unfolding right now in Kant scholarship and in the wider world of philosophy; it offers a novel take on difficult textual and philosophical issues; it is admirably well-informed; and it strikes a nice balance between exegesis and philosophy. In three words, it is a good read. So you should read it.

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