

Kant on Evil

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1. Introduction

The titular aim of this chapter is expressed in a conventional, but nevertheless somewhat misleading, way. So we should begin by heading off misguided expectations about our topic. One source of potential confusion stems from the fact that English ‘evil’ is cognate with the German *Übel*, which Kant pointedly distinguishes from *Böse* (CPrR 5:59-60) — *Übel* is something disagreeable in our physical condition, whereas *Böse* is something bad in our person or moral condition.¹ So, while some philosophical discussions about the ‘the problem of evil’ might express consternation about how ‘bad things’ — earthquakes, cancer — can happen to ‘good people’, for Kant the topic is exclusively to do with imputable badness, i.e. *Böse*, not *Übel*. The other source of potential confusion is that ‘evil’ in contemporary English generally carries the sense of extreme moral badness or depravity. But Kant is not especially fascinated by such extremity, and famously denies that a human being could be ‘diabolically’ evil, bent on pursuing evil for evil’s sake (Rel. 6:35). For Kant, evil is perfectly ordinary, since it is endemic in human nature.²

Our topic, then, is the ‘radical evil in human nature’ — Kant’s thesis about the human moral condition that he develops primarily in his 1793 *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. According to this thesis, the human moral condition is corrupt by default and yet by our own deed; and this corruption is the origin (root, *radix*) of human badness in all its variety, banality, and ubiquity. Since this corruption is ‘detectable as early as the first manifestation of the exercise of freedom in the human being’ (Rel. 6:38), it is understood to be coeval with coming into the use of one’s reason, and acquiring the resources of a genuinely practical point of view. The implication is jolting and bleak: just as soon as one counts as the imputable source of one’s own actions, one brings this corruption upon oneself, inevitably but culpably.

Now, for Kant, intentional actions are expressions of commitment to practical principles or ‘maxims’ — roughly, views about what is a reason for doing what — and rational agency is a kind of causality. In the *Religion*, as elsewhere, Kant supposes that we are endowed with basic incentives both of self-love and morality; and once we come into the use of our reason, we form principles to act on these incentives. But the metaphysics of agential causality — that a person is the imputable source of his own actions — requires there to be some overarching commitment

¹ Ruppel (2019) indicates that while the modern German terms do eventually assume, in the main, the significances that Kant proposes here, the development is gradual and largely postdates Kant.

² On this second kind of confusion, see Louden (2010).

that characterises the causality of his will.³ Kant then takes radical evil to be our default commitment to treat the principle of self-love as a condition of compliance with the moral law, rather than the other way around (Rel. 6:36). This commitment is itself imputable and thus must be understood as something we *do*: it is the *peccatum originarium* as opposed to any of the myriad manifestations of badness that draw from it, *peccata derivativa* (6:31).

Peccatum originarium is Augustine's term for original sin; and Kant's one use of this phrase is the closest he comes to referring to that doctrine explicitly in this context. As with any topic in Kant scholarship, controversy reigns — even on a point so basic as whether radical evil is equivalent to, or some critical rehabilitation of, the Augustinian doctrine. To give an idea of the range: where Allen Wood takes Kant's use of the phrase *peccatum originarium* to show that he 'does explicitly equate' radical evil with original sin (2014: 32n1), Paul Guyer regards the *Religion* as 'a work of the radical Enlightenment, a deconstruction of Christianity', and treats radical evil as an alternative to — but certainly no rehabilitation of — the doctrine of original sin (2009: 144-5). Moreover, Kant indicates his rejection of central points of the Augustinian doctrine, such as that we have passively inherited the sin of Adam (Rel. 6:40). Nevertheless, commentators since Goethe have been inclined to interpret radical evil in an Augustinian light, and then wrestle with the awkwardness of how this thesis could be integrated into Kant's ethics of autonomy.⁴ Continuing in this vein, Kant is then charged with deep ambivalence about his own philosophical project that he is deemed powerless to resolve.⁵

I am not going to pursue the question of Kant's relation to Augustine here;⁶ but I do want to draw an initial lesson from our sidelong glance at this swath of the secondary literature — particularly on the expression of puzzlement about the coherence of radical evil with the 'critical' works in ethical theory, such as the *Groundwork* and *Critique of Practical Reason*. It is certainly appropriate for commentators to seek interpretive coherence across texts; nevertheless, I think that a considerable share of confusion arises from the assumption that Kant's account of radical evil is a direct outgrowth of the ethical arguments of the *Groundwork* and the second *Critique*.⁷ This supposition should be rejected, since — as I will argue — the account of radical evil belongs to an argument that works in a different way, for different ends. Among Kant's chief aims in the critical ethical works is to make a case for the unconditional bindingness of the

³ Otherwise only some part of the person would be the source of the action — a good part if the action is good, a bad part if the action is bad — which Kant rejects in his defence of 'rigorism' (Rel. 6:23-5).

⁴ In an oft-mentioned 1793 letter to Herder, Goethe regards Kantian radical evil as a foul stain upon his critical philosophy, which he supposes Kant undertook to expand its audience to religious Christians; for some discussion see Fackenheim (1954).

⁵ See e.g. the set-up in Michaelson (1990: 8), or Wolterstorff (1991) on related questions about atonement and grace.

⁶ I could hardly hope to improve upon Pasternack (2020).

⁷ Kant himself attempts to block this assumption in the second-edition Preface (Rel. 6:13-4).

moral law, which he achieves by proceeding from an examination of the nature of rational agency as such. Only once this case is made does Kant look to incorporate creaturely facts about the human being into his argument, such as our endowment for moral feeling.⁸ We could begin to register that matters might be quite different in the *Religion* by tracking the constant refrain about ‘the human being’ running throughout. Radical evil is a thesis about the *human* moral condition — a condition that is not strictly necessary, since in some important sense it can and should be otherwise.⁹

One way to understand this last point is to recognise that Kant’s thesis about radical evil belongs to a larger argument about human development. This teleological argument, I will argue, draws on distinctively Stoic ways of thinking about ‘the human being’. Commentators have not recognised this Stoic background, and as a result have misunderstood the nature of Kant’s thesis about radical evil and its argumentative context. Thus I begin by showing how the interpretive landscape has formed along two faultlines in recent decades: along one, commentators dispute the nature and justification of Kant’s thesis about radical evil; along the other, whether radical evil has fundamentally to do with human psychology or human sociality. My own position, which is developed in the remainder, takes sides on the first contest, and reveals the second to be spurious: the Stoic background helps us understand that radical evil has to do with human psychology and human sociality in equal measure, which casts fresh light on its ethical significance for Kant.

2. Two faultlines

Kant explicates radical evil as ‘the propensity to evil in human nature’ (*der Hang zum Bösen*, 6:28) in the second section (§II) of Part One of the *Religion*.¹⁰ As a result, commentators have tended to fix their attention on that part of Kant’s account, treating the real beginning of the argument as something of an afterthought. But Kant announces his premise in the first section (§I), ‘the original predisposition to good in human nature’ (*ursprüngliche Anlage zum Guten*, 6:26). With this, Kant signals that he assumes a conception of providence: namely, we are endowed with everything that we need to make ourselves good. We will examine this conception of the good, and this invocation of providence later. For now we just need to fix on an essential point of contrast: the predisposition to good is *original* — laid in us in the way we are created — whereas the propensity to evil, Kant claims, is acquired.

⁸ E.g. from the approximate midpoint of CPrR, at (5:72).

⁹ Hence the title of Anderson-Gold (2001), *Unnecessary Evil*, a work with which I stand in broad agreement.

¹⁰ Hereafter, Parts of the *Religion* will be indicated by succeeding Arabic numeral: e.g. *Religion* 1.

Commentators widely recognise this point of contrast, but sometimes suspect it to be a distinction without a difference.¹¹ Kant explains that by ‘propensity’ he means ‘the subjective ground of the possibility of an inclination’ (Rel. 6:29). So a propensity is some kind of underlying readiness to be inclined or attracted along certain lines, rather than the inclination itself. Kant recognises that a predisposition might be thought of in similar ways, and struggles a bit to mark the distinction that he wants. In a footnote, he offers an example along the following lines: someone who has had no exposure to or knowledge of the effects of alcohol could not be said to have any inclination for alcoholic drinks; but such a person could still have a *propensity* for this inclination, so that she accordingly develops the inclination once she is so exposed.¹² Conceptually, he is trying to distinguish the underlying readiness to be attracted along certain lines from the myriad ways a person might go on to be actually attracted: perhaps to gin, but not beer. That much fits the idea of a propensity to evil, which Kant conceives as a kind of underlying readiness to be attracted to badness — in effect, to attach oneself to one’s own faults or vices. This underlying propensity can be distinguished from whatever may turn out to be the particular faults or vices at issue, which are likewise found in such flourishing variety among us. But in another way the example does not suit the idea of a propensity to evil: for the propensity it describes is naturally understood to be a given fact about a person’s makeup — *not* the result of anything she does, and thus not anything imputable.¹³ Kant elaborates that he takes a propensity to be the sort of thing that can either be given or acquired; and the propensity to evil is certainly acquired — namely, ‘*brought* by the human being *upon* himself’ (6:29).

Of course, if we are freely self-determining creatures, goodness or badness alike could only ever be by our own doing. The question, then, is how Kant could justify the idea that we make ourselves bad *by default* — that this is the inevitable point from which we set out as persons, and from which we must try to become good. Kant’s remarks about how to understand this are among the most difficult in his whole account.

The remarks I have in mind are found in the third section (§III), titled: ‘The human being is by nature evil’ (Rel. 6:32). Call this *the old saying*. Kant endorses it as an expression of the thesis of radical evil, provided that it is correctly understood. The remarks at issue concern how it should and should not be understood. Kant first explains that the old saying ‘simply

¹¹ E.g. Michaelson (1990: 42).

¹² I have sanitised Kant’s actual example, which is ‘all savages have a propensity for intoxicants’ (6:28n).

¹³ The ensuing inclination she might form, however, is imputable. Kant explains inclination as ‘habitual desire’ (Rel. 6:28): an inclination is a desire that has become habitual through repeated gratification, and thus draws some of its motive force from the habit itself. This is why inclinations can seem to assail us, driving us against our will or contrary to our better judgment. But since inclinations are formed through repeated acts of gratifying a certain desire in a certain way, and our actions are expressions of (typically tacit) commitment to maxims, we are rationally complicit in them. See also Wood (2018: 100).

means that being evil applies to him considered in his species' (6:32). I interpret this to mean that radical evil is a species characteristic, the significance of which we will consider further in §3. For now it is enough to recognise that such a claim should in principle accommodate the possibility that not all human beings have this propensity — perhaps from somewhat similar considerations as it can be admitted that not all human beings are bipedal. Most commentators, however, take Kant to be asserting the universal proposition that all human beings have the propensity to evil. Since universality, necessity, and a priority stand together in Kantian thought, these commentators assume that Kant thinks this propensity is *necessary* in human beings: thus Morgan (2005: 64), for example, follows this line of thought, citing *Religion* (6:32). But his assumption that the propensity is necessary should seem strange when we look further at the text of *Religion* (6:32). Kant next tells us what the old saying *does not* mean: namely, that 'this quality may be inferred from the concept of his species [...] for then the quality would be necessary' (6:32). Rather than speaking as if this propensity is obviously necessary in human beings, as Morgan presents it, Kant instead speaks as if this propensity is *obviously not* necessary. Kant does not elaborate on his thinking here: but in this context, at the very least, it means that the old saying is not an analytic proposition. Commentators who take Kant to be asserting a universal proposition — all human beings have the propensity to evil — then suppose it to be a synthetic a priori claim that is 'crying out for a transcendental deduction that he does not provide' (Morgan 2005: 65). Their work is then cut out to reconstruct the missing transcendental justification on Kant's behalf.¹⁴

However, when Kant denies that the old saying is analytic, he does not say that it is synthetic a priori instead. The old saying, Kant continues, 'rather' means

that the human being, as one is acquainted with him through experience, cannot be judged otherwise, or [that] one can presuppose it [sc. the propensity to evil] as subjectively necessary in every human being, even the best. (6:32, translation modified)

Kant does not *assert* a universal proposition here, but rather appears to suggest that such a proposition may be presupposed. Recently, Allen Wood takes the upshot to be that we have

¹⁴ See the 'deduction' provided in Allison (1990: 152-57); others aim to supply a 'transcendental justification' (Morgan 2005), or 'an a priori proof' that 'should resemble transcendental argumentation' in taking as given only 'those features of human agency that are necessarily operative in any context of deliberation and choice' (Papish 2018: 134). Sometimes the reconstructed proof is deemed 'quasi-transcendental' because it must draw on 'anthropological assumptions about the workings of the human mind and the dynamics of social relations' (Muchnik 2009: 73); somewhat differently, the 'quasi-transcendental' proof reconstructed in Palmquist (2008) argues that radical evil is a condition of the possibility of religious experience.

sufficient epistemic warrant on empirical grounds — to which Kant adverts in a notorious gesture to the ‘multitude of woeful examples that the experience of human *deeds* parades before us’ (6:32-33) — to admit the thesis about radical evil for a practical purpose: ‘it is plausible enough to be assumed for the purpose of our strivings to become better human beings’ (Wood 2020: 61). But this does not entirely make sense. While the thesis might helpfully promote due humility among some who think of themselves as progressing towards goodness, it could just as well sow debilitating doubt about the point of such efforts among others.

Wood’s recent suggestion also passes over the difficult idea that radical evil should be thought of ‘as *subjectively* necessary in every human being’ (my emphasis). Presumably what Kant means is that from some ‘subjective’ perspective of human choice, we cannot but bring radical evil upon ourselves. Thus David Sussman (2005) argues that ‘[t]he peculiar necessity that Kant associates with radical evil is to be found in the special process that human beings must undergo if they are to acquire their characteristic powers of practical reason’ (154). The overarching idea here is that the thesis about radical evil should be understood in *developmental* terms. This need not focus entirely on the development of individuals: Sharon Anderson-Gold (2001) argues that the thesis of radical evil needs to be understood in the context of Kant’s account of the purposive development of humanity through history — and thus has to do with the development of the *species*. Either way, the approach in such cases can be broadly characterised as teleological and anthropological. (For shorthand, I’ll deem this approach simply ‘teleological’.)

The advantage of a teleological approach lies in the conceptual resources that it provides to make decent sense of Kant’s view that radical evil is inevitable — but not, for that, strictly necessary.¹⁵ A teleological approach explains the inevitability of radical evil in the context of an account of human development: it is part of a story about what we must do in order to develop appropriately, in a way that is ultimately — on the long view — oriented towards the completion of our essentially rational nature. Intuitively, our inevitably corrupted moral condition can and should be otherwise: indeed, this is the point of Kant’s ensuing argument that the species has a duty to put it to rights (*Religion* 3, 6:97-8).

Thus one divide in the literature separates transcendental and teleological approaches to radical evil. Where this divide concerns the nature of the thesis about radical evil and how it could be justified, the second concerns its fundamental subject matter. Since *Religion* 1 explains the radical evil in human nature in resolutely psychological terms, many commentators treat it as a topic in moral psychology: debates within this frame chiefly concern whether self-love or self-

¹⁵ Cf. Wood (2014: 54-5), who takes its superiority lies in its principled avoidance of reconstructive work.

deception better accounts for radical evil.¹⁶ Yet while *Religion* 1 presents radical evil as the corruption that each individual brings upon him or herself, the opening remarks of *Religion* 3 suddenly seem to suggest that we corrupt *one another* in society. Thus other commentators take the *Religion* 3 remarks as essential to Kant's account of radical evil, and argue that radical evil has an essentially social *context* (Anderson-Gold 2001) or even a social *origin* (Wood 1999) — finding therein a powerful corrective to assumptions about 'individualism' in Kant's ethics.¹⁷ Commentators in the first group then argue, by rejoinder, that the imputability of radical evil requires an explanation in terms of individual psychology.¹⁸

The remainder of this chapter develops a particular variant of the teleological approach to radical evil. For Kant, radical evil belongs to an account of human development that draws on distinctively *Stoic* ways of thinking about teleology and 'the human being' (§3). Among other things, this perspective shows why there is no real trade-off between psychological and social accounts of radical evil (§4) — and why this result is significant for Kant (§5).

3. Radical evil and human development in *Religion* 1

Radical evil is a thesis about the human moral condition, which for Kant belongs to a teleological way of thinking about 'the human being'. More particularly, it belongs to an account of human development that draws from a Stoic precedent. My aim here is to outline the key features of this Stoic precedent, and then explain what it tells us about Kant's argument in *Religion* 1.

The Stoic precedent is the theory of *oikeiōsis*, described by one prominent commentator as nothing short of 'their novel theory of the basic state of affairs which grounds all human and animal action' (Inwood 1985: 184). While we are interested in the specification of this theory for the human being, to understand it correctly we need to start with the general picture. And since we are effectively dealing with the Stoic view of what it is to be an animal, we can make our approach by observing first how Stoics distinguish animals from plants: while both animals and plants have natures, only animals are ensouled, and thereby alive.¹⁹ As a result, an animal is most fundamentally conceived as an agent: an animal is the sort of creature that has to *do* certain things — act appropriately — if it is to complete its nature. This will prove an important point

¹⁶ Papish (2018) provides an overview of these debates in the context of arguing for the particular significance of self-deception.

¹⁷ See also Rossi (2005).

¹⁸ E.g., Grenberg (2010: 175) arguing against Wood's social view. In fact, Wood's own view is disjunctive: though he takes radical evil to have a social origin, he also thinks that its imputability can *only* be understood in individual-psychological terms (Wood 1999: 288-90). But Wood provides no textual evidence for the latter point; while my account in §4 indicates he may be wrong on this point, limits on space prevent my arguing against him on the issue.

¹⁹ See e.g. Cicero (Deorum 2.120-121) for this distinction in play; Kant evidently takes it for granted in his explication of the concept of life (CPrR 5:9n).

for the specification of the thesis: the Stoic idea of appropriate action (*kathêkon*, *officium*) is fundamentally teleological. To act appropriately is to act in completion-promoting ways.

The particulars of the theory of *oikeiōsis* concern how such action is possible.²⁰ Seneca argues that it is only possible if the animal has some kind of sense of its ‘own constitution’, which of course is not any articulate, theoretical conception of it; rather, it is a felt self-awareness that is manifest in the concrete practical know-how of appropriate action, situation by situation and over the course of a life. Appropriate action is possible because the animal has an affinity for, or sense of kinship with, the objects and actions that preserve it in its own constitution.²¹ Hence the term *oikeiōsis* borrows a standard term for expressing relations of individuals and property within a household, and extends it to express the thought that animal action is oriented by a sense of what is properly one’s own.²² Finally, since teleology and theology both belong to the Stoic study of nature or ‘physics’, the animal is conceived as a *creature* that is looked after in being set up this way: ‘Nature brings forth her offspring, she does not toss them aside’, in Seneca’s memorable words (Epistulae 121.18). Animals are providentially endowed with somatic and psychological predispositions that compel appropriate action.

In this way, on the Stoic theory, divine nature (or Nature) leads animals to complete their natures. This is also true for the human being, going back to Zeno: ‘nature leads us’ to the telic goal of virtue (Diogenes Laertius, 7.87). Two basic points about the specifics of human *oikeiōsis* need to be made here: one concerns the conception of this telic goal as *good*, the other the complications of our being led to it. The first point is relatively straightforward, provided we take on board the Stoic conception of the cosmos as a rationally-governed whole. While non-rational animals can only be complete according to their own kind, Seneca explains, the rational animal is called to be ‘complete in accordance with the nature of the cosmos’ (Epistulae 124.14); on this basis, the completion of our essentially rational nature is taken to be genuinely, or unqualifiedly, *good* (Epistulae 124.23). We are not created good, but rather endowed with everything we need in order to make ourselves so.

The idea that Nature leads us to complete our essentially rational nature is complicated by the Stoic understanding of what it is involved with the acquisition of reason.²³ To acquire the

²⁰ My brief sketch of *oikeiōsis* here draws mostly on Seneca (Epistulae 121 and 124), and Cicero (Finibus 3.16-24, 3.62-63) — sources which Kant certainly knew, and remain among our best sources of the doctrine. On Kant’s access to and understanding of Stoic texts relevant to the *Religion*, see Merritt (2020).

²¹ Seneca (Epistulae 121.15-17) conceives of the primary attachment to one’s own constitution (and in that sense to oneself) as a constant underlying developmental changes in the constitution itself; see Inwood’s commentary in Seneca (2007: 339-341).

²² On the significance of the term in relation to the substantive doctrine, see Chapter 6 of Inwood (1985) and Long (1996).

²³ The acquisition of the resources of reason must not be confused with the development of those resources to completion, or virtue.

resources of reason is to come into a genuinely practical point of view, so that one's actions are then expressions of assent to evaluative propositions. Once this happens, we can no longer be directly compelled by our predispositions to act in the appropriate, nature-completing ways: now we can only act on our own initiative.²⁴ Nature may lead us to virtue, but only by endowing us with uncorrupted starting points (ἀφορμὰς ... ἀδιαστρόφους, Diogenes Laertius 7.89). Indeed, in the memorable words of Seneca, 'nature does not predispose us to any fault' (*nulli vitio conciliat*, Epistulae 94.56) — but predisposes us to the good. If we do become good, it can only be by our own doing. By the same providential dispensation, any badness can only be own work, as well.

Moreover, according to a report of Alexander of Aphrodisias (1991: 122.3-5), Stoics suppose that we invariably make ourselves bad at the very moment we acquire the resources of reason, and so are no longer children.²⁵ It is easy to see that we wouldn't invariably make ourselves good at this point: goodness is the telic goal of our development, which we can only reach if we acquire a conception of the good that we would not yet have.²⁶ But why should we invariably make ourselves bad, by Stoic lights? The answer lies in the considerations just adduced. As we acquire the resources of reason, our actions are now expressions of assent to evaluative propositions, to views about what is good and bad; and these views are bound to be mistaken before we have acquired a genuine understanding of the good. To be sure, it has been debated since antiquity how Stoics can really explain human badness, given their assumptions about providence. While we cannot take up those debates here,²⁷ we can draw attention to a simpler fact: Stoic accounts of human *oikeiōsis* — such as Cato's in Cicero's *De Finibus* — do not consider human corruption.²⁸ Cato indirectly justifies this omission when he explains that he is concerned only with what follows from 'natural principles' (Finibus 3.20). Human corruption is the perversion of those very principles, and thus lies somewhere outside the story of how nature leads us to virtue.

The evidence of this Stoic background is apparent from the beginning of *Religion* 1, starting with the preamble to the main argument (6:19-20). Kant considers an optimism about human moral progress that he associates with Enlightenment pedagogues such as Rousseau, and traces to Seneca: the world is moving 'from bad to better' — or, if it should be allowed that this is not immediately apparent, then 'at least there is in the human being the predisposition to move

²⁴ On the Stoic psychology briefly mentioned here, see Inwood (1985) and the overview in Brennan (2003); for discussion of its role in the emergence of a conception of free will in later Stoicism, see Frede (2011).

²⁵ I discuss the passage in Merritt (2020). Stoics suppose that we acquire reason once we acquire 'the stock of common notions naturally shared by all human beings', around age fourteen (Frede 1996: 11).

²⁶ On this point see Cicero Finibus 3.21-22, and Frede (1999) for discussion.

²⁷ For some discussion see Long (1968), Cooper (1999).

²⁸ Cato only briefly mentions the *pathē* as manifestations of this corruption at Finibus (3.35), outside either part of the account of *oikeiōsis* (3.16-24 and 3.62-63).

in this direction' (6:20). Kant does not reject the very idea that we are providentially endowed with such a predisposition, but rather that it provides sufficient ground for the optimism of this tradition. We can begin to appreciate this point if we take a look at the line of Seneca with which Kant concludes this passage:

Sanabilibus aegrotamus malis, nosque *in rectum genitos* natura, si sanari velimus, adiuvat.

[We are sick with curable ills, and if we are willing to be restored to health, nature lends a hand, for we are *born to be upright*].

(Seneca, *De Ira* 2.13.1, slightly misquoted at Rel. 6:20)²⁹

The providential assumption is expressed in the image of nature lending us a hand, guiding us toward our telic goal of virtue, or 'uprightness'.³⁰ Progress is ours, Seneca intimates, if we are only 'willing to be restored to health'. But Seneca has overlooked a genuine difficulty, Kant thinks: the human being is not normally so willing. 'Radical evil' is the name of this endemic unwillingness.

When we turn to Kant's own argument, we see that he never asks *whether* there is a 'predisposition to good in human nature'; he rather assumes that there is, and immediately sets out an explication of this idea. The predisposition has three aspects which can be seen as 'elements of the determination of the human being [Elemente der Bestimmung des Menschen]' (6:26). Kant alludes here to an eighteenth-century debate about the vocation or destiny (*Bestimmung*) of the species, which he takes to consist in the perfection, i.e. completion, of our essentially rational nature (Anth. 7:321).³¹ From this we can see that 'good' is understood teleologically, just as it is in Seneca's account of human *oikeiōsis*. To say that the predisposition is 'original' is to say that it is laid in us in the way we are created: we are providentially endowed to feel affinity for those objects and actions that preserve us in our constitution, and are thereby oriented towards the completion of our essentially rational nature. Two further points about Kant's conception of the human *Bestimmung* are important for his account of human development in the *Religion*. One draws from the Stoic recognition that our appropriate action cannot be directly compelled by our predispositions: as Kant puts it, 'the human being' can complete his essentially rational nature only by acting on his own initiative, 'according to ends he himself adopts' (Anth. 7:321). The second point does not have a Stoic antecedent, however.

²⁹ I've presented Kant's slight misquotation of the Latin, which he leaves untranslated, and my own translation based on that in Seneca (2010). For more on this Seneca quotation, see Merritt (2020).

³⁰ Consider Kant's similar usage of *Rechtschaffenheit* ('uprightness') e.g. at CPrR (5:77).

³¹ See Kuehn (2009) on the *Bestimmung* debate, and Brandt (2003 and 2007) regarding neo-Stoic influences on it.

Kant contends that this completion can be reached only by the species, not the individual (Anth. 7:333, UH 8:19).

At this point we should revisit the aim, announced in the title of *Religion* 1, to give an account of ‘the radical evil in human nature’ (6:18). Why should the ‘original predisposition to good’ come first in this account? The answer is that radical evil is the corruption *of this predisposition* (6:43). Now, the Stoic background reveals that the original predisposition is conceived as the basis of appropriate action: it concerns our affinity for the objects and actions that, as a Stoic would say, preserve us in our constitution. Kant breaks this down into the affinities that guide us to act appropriately (1) in our animality, as living beings; and then (2) in our humanity, as creatures capable of freely setting ends and acting on them;³² and finally (3) in our personality, as morally imputable agents (6:26). The idea of affinity or kinship is reflected in the details of these elements. The first is an affinity for what preserves one as a living being, and which does not as such require the resources of rationality. While Kant puts this under the heading of ‘physical ... self-love’ (6:26), it is not a narrowly conceived self-care: it includes not only the sexual drive, but also to care for our offspring, and to join in community with other human beings (6:26). The second is also presented as a ‘physical’ self-love, but one that does require the resources of rationality, since it consists in taking a developmentally appropriate interest in one’s own agency. It can thus be understood as an affinity for those ways of acting that develop the powers of our own agency, which Kant takes to require comparison and competition in a social context (6:27). The third element is our inborn readiness to be moved simply by our recognition of what morality requires (6:27-28), or moral feeling, and can thus be understood as an affinity for such actions as appropriate to one’s status as an imputable person.

Radical evil, then, is the corruption of this entire package. To consider what this means, we first need to take account of a further feature of Kant’s account of the original predisposition to good. Kant devotes at least as much space to the kinds of vices that ‘can be grafted’ onto the first two elements of this package (6:26, 27) as he does to those elements themselves.³³ Now, a graft takes the energy of the rootstock and turns it to some other end — as, for example, the developmentally appropriate interest in the powers of one’s own agency may find twisted expression in the envy and Schadenfreude that Kant mentions in this context. Radical evil is not itself the graft, but what enables the rootstock (the original predisposition) to take the graft, and become perverted in whatever myriad ways. A graft is thus an unnatural or inappropriate

³² On the humanity/animality distinction, see also MM (6:392).

³³ The predisposition to personality, however, admits no vicious graft (6:27, 6:45).

attachment; and radical evil is conceived in turn as a fundamental corruption of our sense of what is appropriate to us as human beings.

Moreover, the fact that Kant considers grafted vices in this context — i.e. while expositing the original predisposition to good — is significant against the background of prominent Stoic accounts of *oikeiōsis*, such as that of Cicero's Cato, that omit consideration of our corruption. This omission can be justified, I noted, on the ground that our corruption does not flow from 'natural principles'. Indeed, the metaphor of the graft is Kant's way of nodding to this point, as is his distinction between the *predisposition* to good (an endowment laid in us in the way we are created) and the *propensity* to evil (which we bring upon ourselves). However, Kant also speaks freely of both as lying 'in human nature' (6:26, 6:28); and we may be likewise puzzled by his repeatedly speaking of radical evil as 'innate' (6:32, 38, 42-3). But if radical evil can be traced to 'the first manifestation of the exercise of freedom in the human being' (6:38), then we cannot be evil from the cradle, just as we do not passively inherit the sin of Adam (6:40). In all these passages, Kant indicates that 'innate' is just shorthand for 'lies in human nature' — and *that* claim is understood in terms of its being inevitably brought upon ourselves in the course of our development.³⁴ For Kant, contra Cato, any account of human development that passes over the fact of our corruption cannot really be an account of *the human being*.

Radical evil must then be understood in terms of the practical commitments of a human being who has come into the use of her reason. (Pre-rational human beings, we may suppose, act perfectly appropriately, guided by the predisposition to animality.) The two basic incentives on human action, self-love and morality, are attributed to the original predisposition (6:36); imputable agents act on practical principles that incorporate these incentives. And, as noted above (§1), there must be some overarching practical commitment that characterises the causality of an imputable agent's will. Kant then explains radical evil as the freely undertaken commitment to treat self-love as the condition that must be satisfied in any action complying with the moral law (6:36). Although he claims that we cannot explain *why* we make this choice (6:32, 43), its inevitability can nevertheless be appreciated from a developmental perspective. For while the incentives of self-love and morality are laid in us in the way we are created, we only form principles to act on these incentives once we come into the use of our reason. At this point, any human being will have plenty of practice acting — pre-rationally — from the incentive of self-love. But no human being will have had practice acting on the incentive of morality, since by Kant's lights this is not possible at all before the resources of self-conscious rationality are at hand. The human being who is just come into the use of her reason is not

³⁴ See also his remark on usage at (6:46.33-4).

developmentally prepared to choose in any other way than to bring on the propensity to evil, at least as Kant understands this.³⁵

In this way, radical evil corrupts the agent's entire evaluative outlook: it 'corrupts the ground of all maxims' (6:37).³⁶ Thus a person cannot overcome this corruption by tinkering piecemeal with elements of this evaluative outlook; she can only entirely overthrow it, in an equally incomprehensible act of free choice (6:44-5), in a move Kant deems a 'revolution', and links to the sort of spiritual rebirth invoked in Biblical sources (6:47).³⁷ But this point should also be linked to the Stoic teleological background of Kant's argument, as well. Since radical evil is the corruption of the original predisposition to good, it follows that everything we do while thus corrupted is inappropriate (*zweckwidrig*): completion-hindering rather than completion-promoting. Only when we overthrow radical evil — only when we 'restore' the original predisposition 'to its power' (6:44) — will we stand to act appropriately, in completion-promoting ways. Only then, as Kant puts it, can a human being be 'a subject receptive to the good' (6:48). This is a point about engaged *attraction*, which Kant encourages his audience to read in a Christian light as a 'change of heart' (6:47), but which can equally, again, be read in the light of Stoic *oikeiōsis*, as a transformation in what one regards as most dear, most properly 'one's own'.

My aim in this section was to set out a particular version of a teleological account of radical evil. Generally, a teleological approach allows us to consider radical evil as inevitable in the course of the development of 'the human being' — but not strictly necessary.³⁸ We now need to look further into that account of human development, which, as we are about to see, does not concern 'the human being' simply as an individual, but also as a *species*. Hence the psychological account of radical evil in *Religion* 1 presents only one side of the story about the inevitability of radical evil in 'the human being'.

4. Radical evil and human sociality in *Religion* 3

Religion 1 offers a psychological account of radical evil as the corruption of the original predisposition to good, and concludes with remarks on the possibility of overthrowing this

³⁵ A differently elaborated version of these ideas can be found in Merritt (2020).

³⁶ Commentators devote much discussion to Kant's claim there are three 'different grades' to the propensity to evil: frailty, impurity, and depravity (6:29-30); Muchnik (2009, 15-161) takes each grade to be a corrupted form of a corresponding element of the original predisposition to good. But this will not work for two basic reasons: radical evil is the corruption of an entire evaluative outlook, not some part of it; and depravity cannot be the corruption of the predisposition to personality, since Kant takes this element to be incorruptible as such (6:27, 45). As Kant later indicates that depravity captures the core idea of radical evil (6:37), I forego further comment here.

³⁷ Kant mentions John (3:5) and alludes to Colossians (3:9-10).

³⁸ In this rationale I am closest to Sussman (2005). While I would contest Sussman's account on interpretive details, it chiefly suffers from being one-sidedly psychological (as my remaining remarks may be taken to attest).

corruption, or ‘restoring’ the original predisposition ‘to its power’. In this account, radical evil is a corruption that *we each* bring upon ourselves. Indeed, since both this corruption and its overthrowing are possible only in acts of free choice, the *Religion 1* account appears to be entirely concerned with the doings of individuals.

But this impression is challenged at the start of *Religion 3*, where we learn that the ‘morally well-disposed human being’ — the post-revolution hero of *Religion 1* — labours under constant assault from ‘the evil principle’ (6:93). This ‘perilous state’ appears to be nothing other than ordinary human society, wherein we corrupt *one another*, without trying or intending, but simply by existing alongside one another in a social condition:

it suffices that they are there, that they surround him, and that they are human beings; they will mutually corrupt each other’s moral disposition and make one another evil (6:94).³⁹

Restoring the original predisposition ‘to its power’ is not the end of the story: an individual’s predisposition may be so restored, but our common situation in the world remains inappropriate, *zweckwidrig* — completion-hindering rather than completion-promoting. Moreover, ‘the human being’ is in this condition ‘through his own fault’ (6:93): the situation itself is culpably bad (*böse*), which essentially distinguishes it from some unfortunate circumstance (something *übel*) that we could reasonably look to escape, as one might migrate from inhospitable terrain. *Religion 3* thus begins with a renewed expression of pessimism: evil is everywhere, and the hero of *Religion 1* — indeed even a legion of such heroes — may be powerless against it.

How should we make sense of this abrupt turn in Kant’s account? The answer lies in further examination of the premise of Kant’s argument in the *Religion*. The original predisposition to good consists of the creaturely endowments by which we are induced (but not directly compelled) to act in the appropriate ways; *and we situate ourselves in the world* through the exercise of those predispositions. Now, the Stoic natural teleology that informs this assumption is distinctively *comprehensive*: not only must a creature be suitably endowed, psychologically and somatically, to act in the ways that will enable it to manifest fully as a creature of a certain kind; a creature must also be suitably situated, in its environment and in relation to other creatures, for this end.⁴⁰ In the case of non-rational animals, this distinction is notional at best: thus Cicero

³⁹ Punctuation altered for clarity. Wood (1999: 283-300) and Wood (2010) take the *Religion 3* preamble to draw directly from Rousseau; but the language of this passage closely echoes Seneca, who captures the workings of the social forces of corruption through a metaphor of proximate, mechanical force (thus not requiring individuals’ intentions). See especially *De Vita Beata* 1.4 (Seneca 2014: 240-1), but also the metaphors of contagion at *Epistulae* (7.2-5) and *De Tranquillitate Animi* 7.4 (Seneca 2014: 193). Unfortunately, I cannot explore this connection here.

⁴⁰ We should therefore not confuse it with Aristotelian natural teleology, which is not normally understood to be comprehensive in this way. For helpful background on the interpretation of Aristotle on this issue, see Henry (2015).

observes that bees do not swarm for the purpose of building honeycombs, but swarm because they are ‘gregarious by nature’, which finds determinate expression in (among other things) the building of honeycombs (*Officiis* 1.157).⁴¹ He also twice points to the cooperative arrangement between the *pinna nobilis*, a kind of Mediterranean bivalve, and the little shrimp that lives inside of it, and nips at it to alert it to threats, as well as to the availability of food, tiny fish that they apparently eat in common (*Finibus* 3.63, *Deorum* 2.123-4).⁴² They are directly compelled by their predispositions to take this arrangement, and find it appropriate.

These passages consider how social animals — creatures with an inborn affinity⁴³ to congregate — are unified as this affinity expresses itself in cooperative action, whereby these creatures are situated in the world in some determinate way. We are like such creatures, Cicero says — but we are bound by *deliberating* and acting together (*adhibent agendi cogitandique sollertiam*, *Officiis* 1.157). With characteristic sanguinity, Cicero takes this to mean that our ties are stronger than those binding other social creatures,⁴⁴ since — as part of an account of human *oikeiōsis* that abstracts from our corruption — it can be supposed that our ties are forged in cooperative action that is self-consciously aimed at benefitting human beings (*Finibus* 3.64).

But by Kant’s lights no account of human development can bracket our corruption, as if it were merely some distracting complication. For this corruption is inevitable in the course of our development, even on the supposition that we have been providentially endowed with everything we need to complete our essentially rational nature. As we have seen, Kant argues in *Religion* 1 that we inevitably corrupt this endowment, the original predisposition to good, in the course of our development as individuals. Now Kant adds another detail from the general Stoic theory of *oikeiōsis*: this providential endowment determines how a creature is situated in the world. This yields a new perspective on radical evil in *Religion* 3, one that considers how we, in the necessary exercise and development of our predispositions, collectively create social conditions that countermand the telic drive in question.

To understand Kant’s move in *Religion* 3, it helps to look back to his 1784 ‘Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim’. That essay also provides an account of human development that proceeds from the broadly Stoic natural teleology we have been considering. He thus begins with a conception of animals generally as creatures providentially endowed with predispositions to complete their natures; and then, in extending this conception of the animal to the particular case of the human being, marks the essential difference that in us this completion

⁴¹ Cicero is widely understood to be expressing the Stoic position of Panaetius in *Officiis* 1-2 (see the commentary of Griffin and Adkins, in Cicero [1991, vxiii-xix]).

⁴² From the speeches of Cato and Balbus, respectively, as representatives of Stoicism.

⁴³ *commendatio* (*Finibus* 3.63).

⁴⁴ This is explicit at *Officiis* (1.57), which helps explain Cato’s remark to this effect at *Finibus* (3.63).

is possible ‘*only in the species, but not in the individual*’ (8:18). He takes this to be the case on grounds familiar from Cicero: namely, that the particular determination of how we should live and be situated in the world is not fixed by our predispositions. If predispositions lead a creature to act appropriately, then the human being must be induced to act on his own initiative. Hence, Kant reasons, Nature has been miserly in the dispensation of our creaturely endowments of the animal sort, so that we are driven to exercise ingenuity to solve the problem of how we should live — and thereby develop ‘those predispositions whose goal is the use of [our] reason’ (8:19-20). We develop these predispositions by coming up with solutions, and learning from others, diachronically over generations.

While this development will require cooperative action of some sort, the development of any individual’s predisposition nevertheless requires her to take an appropriate interest in the powers of her own agency. There are problems to be solved in the face of the fact that nature gave us ‘neither the horns of the steer, nor the claws of a lion’ (8:19) and so forth; and to be the source of a solution to those problems has a value more fundamental than that of the utility of any solution itself — at least from a teleological perspective, one concerned with appropriate, or completion-promoting, action in an essentially rational animal (8:20). This developmental imperative gives each ‘a great propensity [Hang] to *individualise* (isolate) himself’ (8:21). As a result, the bonds of human fellowship are not formed in the unadulterated expression of our deliberating and acting together, as Cicero suggested. We are, rather, bound together in ‘unsociable sociability’: we are driven to congregate, as this is the condition in which we feel ourselves human, and can develop our natural predispositions; but we are sociable in an unsociable way, since the developmentally appropriate interest any human being takes in the powers of her own agency finds expression in a drive to distinguish these powers over against those of others (8:20-21).

Let us bring this to bear on the *Religion 3* preamble. To recap: the post-revolution hero of *Religion 1*, who on the terms of that account should now be oriented ‘to good’, sees that our social situation is itself inappropriate (*zweckwidrig*) for this telic goal. Yet this situation is one that the human being has brought upon himself. How? His situation is further analysed as follows:⁴⁵

His needs are but limited, and his state of mind in providing for them moderate and tranquil. He is poor (or considers himself so) only to the extent that he is anxious that other human beings will consider him poor and *will despise him for it* [darüber verachten möchten]. Envy, addition to power, avarice, and the malignant inclinations associated with these, assail his nature, which on its own is undemanding, *as soon as he is among human beings*. (6:93-4; first emphasis mine)

⁴⁵ Here Kant suggests that human corruption largely finds expression in ‘the *passions* [*Leidenschaften*]’ as ‘malignant inclinations’ (6:93); for reasons of space, I cannot explore this point (and its relation to the Stoic doctrine of the *pathe*) directly here.

The passage turns on the idea of his being *despised* for being poor: this is to regard his poverty as a fault of his agency, for which he may be blamed. As we have just seen, the human being has a developmental imperative to take an interest in the powers of his own agency. Here Kant points to envy, addiction to power, and avarice as some of the twisted ways we respond to this imperative: first, by treating wealth and powers as proxy for genuine resources of agency; and then by treating their possession as genuinely *good*, and their absence as genuinely *bad*.

One point of the passage, then, is to indicate how socially manifested evaluative authority induces evaluative confusion in individuals. But this can only be one half of a mutually sustaining relation. From the other side, the evaluative confusion of individuals corrupts social relations — for example, if, in the very attitude of ‘considering himself poor’, the man subordinates himself to the masters of these proxy goods.⁴⁶ Thus, as Sharon Anderson-Gold deftly puts it: ‘The propensity to evil is not something that is simply ‘within me’ or ‘within you’, but something that operates within our very mode of association’ (2001: 46). This result follows naturally when we recognise that Kant understands radical evil to be the corruption of the original predisposition to good, and conceives of that predisposition as in broadly Stoic terms as the psychological and somatic affinities that orient us towards the completion of our nature, and includes our being drawn into community with other human beings.

5. Conclusion: inevitable, but not necessary

I have been arguing that Kant’s claims about the inevitability of radical evil should be understood in teleological terms — specifically, in terms of an account of human development that draws on the Stoic doctrine of *oikeiōsis*. This teleology is providential: it starts with the thought that we have been endowed with everything we need to complete our essentially rational nature. But if we inevitably corrupt ourselves at some point in the course of our development from this ‘natural principle’, how is there not a developmental imperative to do so? And if this is the case, how does Kant meaningfully avoid thinking of radical evil as something *mandated* by our nature, and thus as *necessary*?

One might attempt to respond to these worries by treating radical evil as a kind of by-product of acting on these developmental imperatives. But the developmental imperatives in question are issued only once the human being has come into the use of her reason, just as she

⁴⁶ Relatedly, see Frede (2011) on the Stoic view of the social context of human corruption, and (e.g.) Epictetus *Discourses* (1.4.19) for a fitting example of this point.

corrupts the original predisposition to good. As we are compelled by corrupted developmental imperatives, so we act and situate ourselves in the world inappropriately.

But radical evil is unnecessary. We understand this point in the context of the full story of human development. Radical evil is unnecessary because it can be otherwise: we can overcome it. But only the *species* can overcome radical evil, because we must associate on new terms, or ‘congregate under’ the principle of virtue (Rel. 6:94). Kant calls this association the ‘ethical community’, a corporate body of all humanity united for the telic goal of virtue, as a good common to all (6:94-100). Although the ethical community is a complex topic unto itself, for our purposes we can note two things about it. The duty to enter into the ethical community is not one that individuals have to other individuals, but one that the species has to itself (6:97). Second, it can only be fulfilled through profound evaluative transformation: for the individual who enters into the ethical community acts as a member of a corporate body, and no longer values virtue as if it might be her own possession, the good she might wreak in her own soul. This tells us why the psychological and social accounts of radical evil, and its overcoming, must be of a piece: for ultimately, it is not *my* virtue, or *your* virtue that matters in the ethical community. If we find it hard to fully comprehend such a thought, let alone manifest it in our social condition, it can only be due to the entrenched propensity of each to value her own agency in fundamentally perverted ways.

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