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Book Review

- 1 Laura Papish, *Kant on Evil, Self-Deception, and Moral Reform*
- 2 Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018
- 3 Pp. xvii + 280
- 4 ISBN 9780190692100 (hbk) \$85.00
- 5 doi:10.1017/S1369415419000104

6 Laura Papish's new book comes in the wake of a series of studies of Kant's
7 conception of evil. Two features distinguish her approach: its emphasis on the
8 connection between evil and self-deception (chapters 1–5), and its attentive-
9 ness to the role of self-cognition in moral reform (chapters 6–8). Lucidly writ-
10 ten and conversant with recent debates in social and moral psychology,
11 Papish's book expands the range of topics that typically worry Kantians.
12 Its most important contribution is perhaps to have shown that self-deception
13 and self-cognition are countervailing concepts, which together shed light on
14 the neglected, epistemic dimension of Kant's practical philosophy. My review
15 will adopt the three-part structure of the book indicated in its title.

16 **1. Part I – Evil**

17 Instead of shunning the implications of Kant's dualistic view of human moti-
18 vation (the claim that there are only two incentives structuring our conduct,
19 self-love and respect for the moral law), Papish begins her account by devel-
20 oping an interpretation of the self that self-loves which preserves Kant's com-
21 mitment to hedonism but avoids its reductionistic aspects. This balancing act
22 is meant to oppose Andrew Reath's interpretation, according to which pleas-
23 ure is the source of non-moral action, but is gradually superseded by non-
24 hedonistic considerations. Reath's picture, Papish believes, overlooks an
25 essential feature of Kant's moral psychology, namely, the fact that pleasure
26 'inform[s] us of our well-functioning, whereas pain or displeasure speaks
27 to the presence of some sort of hindrance to life' (p. 20). Hedonism, so con-
28 strued, is not a transient motivator, but the expression of an underlying *ego-*
29 *ism*, of an inextricable 'drive or tendency to affirm the ego' (p. 20). The
30 feelings of pleasure and displeasure, therefore, are themselves part of 'a
31 largely interpretative and manufactured experience' (p. 23), which an agent
32 uses to determine how her life is going 'according to the terms she has laid out'
33 (p. 24). This view has two important interpretative consequences: it loosens
34 the connection between self-affirmation and pleasure-maximization (pleasure
35 is important *indirectly*, as a sign of flourishing, not as an end in itself), and it

36 broadens the type of motivation that can fall under self-love (choosing the
37 path of least resistance can sometimes be the most effective way to protect
38 the self).

39 With this broader conception of self-love in place, Papish turns in chapter
40 2 to Kant's account of evil. To accommodate cases like Eichmann, suicide-
41 bombers or the Milgram experiment, Kantians have scrambled to expand
42 the range of immoral motivation. Papish suggests an alternative: rather than
43 expanding the *content* of self-love, we should expand its possible *formal*
44 arrangements instead. Interpreters (myself included) have so far characterized
45 an evil will in terms of an inversion in the order of priority between the ethical
46 incentives. But straightforward subordination, Papish argues, is not the only
47 possible pattern. To the extent that the two incentives are inextricably present
48 in a will like ours, we cannot possibly 'avoid at least trying to negotiate the
49 competing pulls of respect for the moral law and self-love' (p. 45). This gives
50 rise to a new volitional arrangement: as we try 'to incorporate the moral
51 incentive *alongside* the incentive of self-love' (p. 47), our will becomes
52 *overdetermined*.

53 This kind of arrangement seems to characterize, for example, the subjects
54 in the Milgram experiment. It would be a mistake to conclude (as situationists
55 do) that participants lacked moral character, or that their self-love paid no
56 heed to the demands of morality (their actions were accompanied by regret,
57 pain and protests). More accurate is to say that these subjects were 'engaged
58 in a frantic effort at overdetermination, caring both about the right thing and
59 a pleasing ease in social interactions (i.e. with the authority figure overseeing
60 the administration of shocks)' (p. 52). They experienced an 'agonized state of
61 conflict' (pp. 45–6) because they were trying to serve two masters. Unlike
62 'straight prioritizers' who at least get what they want, 'someone with an over-
63 determined will remains deeply unsatisfied', for they desire to harmonize com-
64 peting goods by giving up in sacrificing both (p. 52). This is why overdetermined
65 agents are so resistant to moral self-criticism: they appear, in their own
66 eyes, as selfless and morally blameless, doing their best in the worst of
67 circumstances.

68 Such self-conception, however, should give us pause with respect to
69 Papish's interpretative strategy for two main reasons. First, to reconcile over-
70 determination with Kantian rigorism (the claim that there are no moral inter-
71 mediaries), Papish inadvertently conflates an agent's empirical and noumenal
72 characters, assuming that 'the agonized state of conflict' of which we are con-
73 scious replicates, and must also be present, at the level of the *Gesinnung* (the
74 supreme maxim that governs our freedom). Second, this flattening of the voli-
75 tional structure not only contradicts the Kantian view, but is also notoriously
76 problematic in this case. The illusion of blamelessness nurtured by the over-
77 determined agent is a pretext, part of a strategy of moral self-protection.

78 Overdetermination for Kant is not a genuine alternative to subordination – it
 79 is, rather, one of the ways subordinators use to preserve the primacy of their
 80 self-love intact.

81 2. Part II – Self-Deception

82 This objection places us at the heart of Papish’s book, namely, the problem of
 83 self-deception (chapter 3). Although Kant himself is the first to do it, Papish
 84 thinks it best not to apply the model of lying to self-deception (*Metaphysics of*
 85 *Morals* (MM), 6: 429–31), since ‘lies to others do not invite the paradox or
 86 “contradiction” that deception of oneself involves’ (MM, 6: 430) (p. 70). A
 87 person who deceives herself regarding the good qualities of a beloved, for
 88 instance, is not only aware of her motives (something the liar does not have
 89 to be), but also ‘partly observant of norms of belief formation. She does not
 90 fully lack the evidence for the positive she sees in her beloved, nor . . . [does]
 91 she simply manufacture evidence for her view. Instead, she is *selective* in
 92 how she reads or interprets the evidence available to her’ (p. 71). While external
 93 lies flout norms of evidence and contradict what we believe to be true, self-
 94 deception misinterprets available evidence to support what we would like to
 95 hear. Even if what we believe is not ‘under any form of straightforward control’
 96 (p. 73), we nonetheless exert *mediate* influence on our belief-formation: we can
 97 mitigate ‘the sense of being compelled to accept a certain proposition by explor-
 98 ing, and to some degree constructing, a cognitive basis for assenting to some
 99 alternative proposition’ (p. 73). Although this alternative cognition would
 100 not survive the test of public scrutiny, the process of *rationalization* is not totally
 101 groundless. By shifting our attention to the corroborative evidence, it introduces
 102 ‘a desirable cognition or hoped for justification into the reasoning process’
 103 (p. 74). Despite the fact that this type of reasoning is a blatant misuse of our
 104 rational capacities, it is not thoughtless: ‘[w]hat characterizes rationalization
 105 . . . is not the search, *per se*, for new and different grounds of cognition but
 106 the *improper* search for such grounds’ (p. 78). Self-deception, therefore, entails
 107 ‘a sophisticated and rationally mindful form of irrationality’ (p. 79), a turning of
 108 reason against itself without which evil would not be possible.

109 Papish’s account of self-deception is sophisticated and insightful.
 110 Chapters 4–5 address the question of evil’s radicality. The metaphor of ‘root-
 111 edness’, Papish argues, has three different meanings. Kant believes self-decep-
 112 tion is ‘rooted’ because (i) it is a necessary condition for immorality, (ii) it has a
 113 firm and intractable quality and (iii) it is universal. The two first senses
 114 become clear once we understand that self-deception silences the pangs of
 115 conscience, and thus removes the agent’s hindrances to self-esteem. This
 116 removal increases our feeling of vitality and flourishing, and ‘allows evil to
 117 become *liked*, or subjectively valued, in a manner that is distinct from its

118 raw instrumental power to bring about our personal, morally impermissible
119 ends' (p. 105).

120 To understand the universality of evil Papish suggests we consider the
121 widespread phenomenon of dissemblance or dissimulation. This phenome-
122 non creates conditions of 'moral hazard', since it leads us to put forward
123 an appearance that 'is not fully accurate or representative of one's motives,
124 intentions, or inner life' (p. 143). Whether the agent is virtuous or not, social
125 interactions require some degree of opacity and concealment, the production
126 of which inadvertently contributes to the moral corruption of the species. As
127 social creatures, human beings are both 'fallen and falling', continuously col-
128 luding in the loss of their innocence. This ineluctable complicity, Papish
129 believes, explains why evil for Kant is both universal and freely chosen.

130 3. Part III – Moral Reform

131 The last piece of Papish's triptych is 'moral reform' (chapters 6–8). Although
132 self-cognition is necessary 'to transcend the epistemic failures of evil and tran-
133 sition to the subsequent cognitive accomplishments required for moral
134 progress', Papish argues that 'not all obstacles to self-cognition derive from
135 self-deceptive indulgence' (p. 154). 'Struggles for self-knowledge are endemic
136 to human life ... regardless of the specific quality of one's will' (p. 156).
137 Following J. G. Hamann, Kant describes such struggles as 'hell' (*MM*, 6:
138 441; *Conflict of the Faculties*, 7: 55), partly because the moral law humiliates
139 our self-love (an experience that is necessarily painful), and partly because the
140 task of self-cognition lacks clear standards of correctness.

141 Although Kant raises important doubts about our capacity to know our-
142 selves, Papish's Kant is not a full-blown sceptic about self-cognition. This is so
143 because the point of self-knowledge is not to achieve certainty about who we
144 are in ourselves – the point is self-interpretation. Self-cognition, therefore, is
145 different from other forms of self-cognition: getting it right about ourselves is not
146 to discover 'an independent and in principle available fact of the matter'
147 (p. 166), but to *change* who we are. Self-knowledge, so understood, is as
148 much an epistemic as a practical activity. Its goal is not contemplation but
149 self-transformation: '[w]e seek such self-knowledge not as part of a theoretic-
150 al inquiry but for the sake of goodness' (p. 173).

151 Even if the task of self-interpretation is open-ended, it is not thereby free-
152 wheeling, for it aims at unifying an extended set of experiences under the con-
153 cepts of good and evil. Although this act of unification is not fully determined,
154 it is aided by moral concepts (the 'thick vocabulary' of vices and virtues)
155 which put a limit to our confabulatory tendencies. In this respect, Papish sug-
156 gests, self-interpretation is akin to reflective judgements (p. 168), and this
157 gives a 'provisional and experimental character' (p. 170) to the activity of
158 fathoming the depths of our hearts.

159 Moral reform, framed in this way, is inextricably linked to self-
 160 knowledge. In *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Kant famously
 161 envisions moral transformation as involving two stages: ‘a first stage of moral
 162 *conversion* in which respect for the law alone is incorporated into one’s
 163 maxim and a second stage of moral *progress* in which an agent attends to
 164 her behavior and actions for evidence of her new disposition’ (p. 177). The
 165 connection between these two stages, however, remains mysterious and
 166 has long been a matter of dispute among Kant scholars. Much clarity can
 167 be gained, Papish maintains in chapter 7, by interpreting the relation between
 168 the phenomenal and noumenal aspects of choice in terms of the notion of
 169 ‘commitment’, as well as by emphasizing the cognitive (as opposed to the
 170 volitional) dimension of the second, gradualistic stage.

171 The idea of ‘commitment’ is useful to understand the experience of con-
 172 version and its aftermath because a commitment (e.g. marriage) not only
 173 involves the adoption of a new principle, but also the ‘reordering of one’s
 174 identity and practices’ (p. 191). Temporality is important here, for a person
 175 entering a commitment is also seeking opportunities to convey in action what
 176 the commitment *means* for her life (p. 192). This explains why Kant thinks
 177 that the person after conversion will find her deeds ‘*every time* (not generally,
 178 but at each instant) defective’ because commitments need to be differently
 179 expressed over an indefinite duration in order to come closer to perfection
 180 (p. 193). It is impossible for creatures like us, Papish contends, to understand
 181 fully what this commitment involves and how it will evolve: ‘It is only in the
 182 mode of sense – through living out a commitment, working through tough
 183 situations, and having limited means for securing everything we care about’
 184 (p. 194) that we come to terms with the meaning and implications of our com-
 185 mitments. When we fail to live up to them this is not because our past selves
 186 exert a causal grip on who we now are, but rather because we have ‘an incom-
 187 plete or weaker-than-needed understanding of what we have committed our-
 188 selves to’ (p. 196) and of how that commitment affects the other goods we
 189 care about.

190 The last chapter of Papish’s book (chapter 8) examines the role of the
 191 ethical community in overcoming evil. The primary function of this commu-
 192 nity, Papish claims, is to address a lingering obstacle to moral reform, namely,
 193 the need to overcome the presence of ‘discordant moral judgments’ (p. 205).
 194 Such a discord characterizes the ‘ethical state of nature’, which resembles its
 195 political counterpart because the individual is here judge in her own case. The
 196 source of conflict in both cases, Papish argues, is the absence of a non-
 197 arbitrary arbiter. To understand the problem of the state of nature, therefore,
 198 we can discard the ‘presumption of badness’ (p. 214) – it is not our natural
 199 malevolence, but the problems associated with the proliferation of competing

200 centres of value judgement, which force people to seek an authority capable of
 201 settling disputes and thus enter political and ethical communities.

202 Here again I must part ways with Papish's reading. As I see it, aban-
 203 doning the 'presumption of badness' is the counterpart of abandoning
 204 self-suspicion in the case of overdetermination: just as blamelessness is the
 205 favourite illusion individuals develop to exculpate themselves from the evil
 206 they do, discounting malevolence is the way the species protects itself from
 207 the radical evil it harbours. After all, does not the primacy of self-love entail
 208 the refusal to acknowledge an objective way to *judge* our desires and inclina-
 209 tions? Is not the propensity to evil a dismissal of the moral law as the limiting
 210 condition of our subjective conceptions of the good? Even if by discarding a
 211 'presumption of badness' we need not embrace a 'presumption of goodness',
 212 for a book built upon the notion of self-deception these are questions that can-
 213 not be eschewed. For it is at these very junctures that we are most prone to
 214 'throw dust in our own eyes' (*Religion*, 6: 38).

215 I do not mean with this line of objection to cast doubt on the value of
 216 *Kant on Evil, Self-Deception, and Moral Reform*. On the contrary, I think
 217 that Papish's is an important and well-crafted book, sure to shape the way
 218 we interpret how immorality operates within the Kantian framework. My res-
 219 ervations are only a reminder that, just as with the mythical hydra, killing the
 220 monster of self-deception is more difficult than cutting off a few of its heads.

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