

Evil and the Immaturity of Freedom:
An Existential-Ontological Inquiry into the Heart of Darkness

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I. Introduction

Whence comes the evil will?

I would like to begin my reflections by recalling a photograph I once saw in a Holocaust museum some years ago. It was a picture of three Nazi stormtroopers accosting an elderly Jewish man on a city street. The man's head is slightly bent over, strands of gray hair pushing out from under his hat, his eyebrows arched in an expression combining fear, worry, chagrin, sadness, and even something akin to shame. The stormtroopers hover over him, one fingering the rim of his hat as if about to tip it off, one glaring into his face, a third looking on approvingly with folded arms. The expressions on the faces of all three stormtroopers convey a sense of sheer, malicious, delight.

We do not know what happens next. Perhaps the stormtroopers knock the old man down with a blow. Perhaps they beat him to death. Perhaps they just walk away. For the purposes of our inquiry, however, it does not matter. The evil I wish to explore is fully evident in the photo itself, in the glint of delight in the stormtroopers' eyes. What stands behind this glint of delight? That is the question of my essay.

To examine this we will look at two accounts of the evil will which are quite different in both tone and substance, but which may, in the end, prove complementary. The first is Kant's discussion of radical evil in *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. The second is Kierkegaard's discussion of the origin of sin in *The Concept of Anxiety* and *The Sickness Unto*

Death. We will conclude with a look at Kierkegaard's notion of *faith*, as that which can lead us beyond the machinations of the evil will.

II. Kant and Radical Evil

In *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant gives an account of what he calls "radical evil." Radical evil, says Kant, is the propensity, which he believes can be found in all human beings, to invert the categorical imperative. The categorical imperative requires that we subordinate the "maxims of self-love," i.e., the rules of conduct by which we pursue our own individual happiness, to the maxims of morality, i.e., the rules that demand respect for the dignity and freedom of all. Both the demands of self-love and the demands of morality have their roots in our nature; the former in our sensuous nature and the latter in our rational nature. According to Kant, it is our own freedom, inherent to our rational nature, that demands of us that we respect freedom wherever it may be found and, thereby, issues the moral law. Further, at the rational level we are aware that this moral demand of freedom must take precedence over self-love. Nevertheless, the temptations of our appetites often induce us to choose what we know we ought not—to prioritize our own private happiness over right.

In *Religion* Kant gives a brief psychological account of how this inversion takes place. It begins with the relatively innocent error of supposing that morality and happiness are in full accord, that the demands of morality and the demands of "enlightened" self-interest amount to the same thing. From there it is a short, though morally catastrophic, step to the belief that the reason one should be moral is because it advances one's happiness. Morality comes to be regarded as merely a means to the end of happiness, which then, in a complete reversal of the

categorical imperative, allows us to adopt the maxim that we will observe the rules of morality only insofar as they further the ends of happiness.

This, according to Kant, is evil. In Kant's words, "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 indeed incorporates the moral law into those maxims, together with the law of self-love; since, however, he realizes that the two cannot stand on an equal footing, but one must be subordinated to the other as its supreme condition, he makes the incentives of self-love and their inclinations the condition of compliance with the moral law."¹

What makes such evil *radical*, says Kant, is not that we desire it for its own sake, but that we have an innate propensity for it. Our desire for happiness seduces us into believing, first, that the demands of happiness and the demands of morality amount to the same thing and, next, that, therefore, any apparent conflict between the two may rightly be settled in favor of happiness.

What I would now like to consider, however, is whether Kant's account of radical evil is indeed radical enough. As Kant would have it, though the good will is an end in itself, the evil will is such only as a means to another end: the gratification of appetite. No one subverts the categorical imperative for the sheer delight of doing so, according to Kant, but merely as an— itself undesirable—way of getting something else. By this account, evil is something incidental. If we could satisfy our inclinations without doing evil, this is what we would prefer. A conflict exists, says Kant, between the demand to respect the freedom of others and the demand to pursue our own happiness and, weak creatures that we are, we too often resolve this conflict in the direction of happiness.

But can this explain the glint of delight in the stormtroopers' eyes?

My contention is that Kant's account of evil as merely incidental does not plumb the depths of its darkest and most sinister modes. Alas, delight in another's pain is not as uncommon as we might wish and suppose. Although the example of the storm troopers is particularly arresting, the perverse delight we often take in ridiculing and humiliating another, in imposing our will upon another, in observing the failings of another, are milder forms of the same. In such actions and attitudes we see an interest in domination for the sake of domination, a desire for power, not for the sake of gaining something from it, but for the sheer thrill of exerting it over the other. It is this inclination that truly deserves the name of radical evil, for it is the direct counter to the moral imperative. Whereas morality demands that we respect the freedom and dignity of every other, in the evil will we see a deliberate desire to *violate* the other's freedom and dignity. Such evil is not rooted in mere weakness of will; whatever else Hitler was, he was not weak-willed. Where then is it rooted?

Is there an evil impulse within us, alongside the impulse for happiness and right? Kierkegaard and other existentialist writers suggest that we can find the provenance of evil in the same place that Kant finds the provenance of good: in human freedom. To examine this we will turn to Kierkegaard's account of sin in *The Concept of Anxiety* and *The Sickness Unto Death*.

II. Anxiety and Freedom

In *The Concept of Anxiety* Kierkegaard locates the origin of sin, and hence of evil, in the anxiety native to freedom itself. I should make one caveat before I continue. Kierkegaard's writing is notoriously difficult and dense and, like all such writing, subject to a great variety of interpretations. In the below I provide my own, in my own words. In doing so I am less

concerned with being “true” to Kierkegaard than in using Kierkegaard—my take on Kierkegaard, anyway— as a launching pad into the heart of the matter.

Kant discusses freedom in its relation to autonomy. Because we are free we are ends-in-ourselves, and hence self-legislating, i.e., under our own law: *auto-nomos*. Such autonomy bestows upon the human being an intrinsic worth, a unique dignity, a dignity that freedom itself demands we respect in ourselves and all others.

Kierkegaard now points out, however, that this very freedom, this capacity for self-determination and self-legislation, makes us *anxious*.

“Anxiety,” writes Kierkegaard, “is the dizziness of freedom.”² It is “freedom’s actuality as the possibility of possibility.”³ Anxiety is a dizziness, or, as we might say, a *vertigo*, resulting from the disorientation that accompanies freedom’s realization that it has nothing to stand upon but itself. But even this does not express the problem fully, for in freedom we don’t so much stand upon ourselves as stand *out* from ourselves—into the nothingness of sheer possibility; a nothingness that we, in our freedom, are ever again responsible for turning into something.

Anxiety, of course, is akin to fear, and the two are often, and naturally, confused. But, as Kierkegaard was perhaps the first to point out, anxiety and fear can be distinguished. Fear is the feeling we have in the face of a threat from without. Fear is evident throughout the animal kingdom. The gazelle fears the lion. The mouse fears the cat, etc.

Anxiety, on the other hand, arises from within and bears a specific relation to freedom. We are anxious in the face of tasks for which we, in our freedom, feel responsible. The degree of our anxiety is in direct proportion to the importance of the task, the extent of our responsibility for it, and the adequacy or inadequacy we feel in respect to it. The greater the importance, the greater the responsibility, and the greater our felt inadequacy, the greater the anxiety.

Still, though anxiety and fear can be distinguished in this way they remain related. We feel fear when faced with the prospect of deprivation. But freedom itself may be seen as a *kind* of deprivation. Just to the extent that freedom places us in our own hands, it also separates us from everything else. Just to the extent that freedom makes us distinctly ourselves, it also deprives us of any direct continuity with the world around us. Freedom separates our world into a realm of I and not-I. As free, my being is now up to me. Will *I* be up to the task of being? This is the anxious question freedom asks.

III. Ontological Anxiety and Despair

Let us call the anxiety we have in respect to the task of being *ontological anxiety*. Ontological anxiety underlies, and yet may be conceptually distinguished from, the simple anxiety we have with respect to specific and concrete goals—anxiety that we will perform poorly on a test, that we will be unable to make a living, that we will not be well received by others. Ontological anxiety fuels these other anxieties and yet is more fundamental; it is the anxiety that we will prove inadequate to the task of being as a whole, a task for which we, in our freedom, feel responsible.

What is this task of being? Of course, it is not so easily put into words, but perhaps we may think of it as the task of establishing the foundation from which we can achieve the fulfillment of our fundamental potentialities. We have a basic desire for such fulfillment. To the extent that we are satisfying it we feel invigorated, enlivened, empowered. To the extent that we are not we feel deflated, diminished, enervated. The problem is that our status as finite beings, together with the vicissitudes of the finite world, make it impossible for us to fulfill this task in any complete or definitive way. We are perennially subject to the threats of rejection, failure, loss, illness; and, of

course, we are ultimately subject to the inevitability of death. The realm of the *not-I* is vast and uncompromising. In the end it must, inevitably, overtake us—or so it seems. As a result, our freedom is ever haunted by its own inadequacy. For the most part, says Kierkegaard, our freedom is in a state of (mostly unacknowledged) despair.

Kierkegaard writes: “The human self is . . . a derived, established relation. . . This is why there can be two forms of despair in the strict sense. If a human self had itself established itself, then there could be only one form: not to will to be oneself, to will to do away with oneself, but there could not be the form: in despair to will to be oneself. This second formulation is . . . the expression for the inability of the self to arrive at or be in equilibrium and rest by itself.”⁴

Here we have Kierkegaard’s summary of the ontological inadequacy of the human being considered as an isolated entity. As “a derived, established relation,” the human being is not, ontologically, the basis of itself. Nevertheless, our freedom, in its self-entanglement, feels driven to provide this basis, a drive that yields two complementary modes of despair. The first—not to will to be oneself—arises from our sense of failure in respect to the second—to will to be oneself: “This second form of despair (in despair to will to be oneself) is so far from designating merely a distinctive kind of despair that, on the contrary, all despair ultimately can be traced back to and be resolved in it.”⁵ At the core of freedom’s desperation, in other words, is its futile project to establish itself as its own foundation, to be itself *through* itself, on its own terms and through its own power.

Freedom, thus, in making us distinctly ourselves and *thereby* separating us from all else, presents us with an all but intolerable dilemma: It both makes us responsible for ourselves and, at the same time, severs us from that through which we might acquit ourselves of this

responsibility. Ontologically speaking, the *ought* of freedom does *not* imply can. This *ought* is like the sadistic taskmaster who constantly demands of one what it is not in one's power to do.

Our most customary response to this situation, says Kierkegaard, is to deny it, which we do either by trying to persuade ourselves that we have the ontological power we do not have, or by denying to ourselves that we have the freedom we do. Both responses involve an inability to accept ourselves for what we are.

It is in these responses to the dilemma of freedom, I believe, that we find the spring of the evil will.

IV. The Evil Will

Freedom yields ontological anxiety insofar as it appears to place the responsibility for establishing our being in our own hands. But now we must take this a step further and recognize that our anxiety itself makes us anxious, for it stands as testimony to our insufficiency. Thus anxiety is already a sign of weakness, fragility. Anxiety is itself anxiety-arousing. Freedom seeks to shield itself from its anxiety by persuading itself of its ability to bring whatever may oppose it—the realm of the not-I—under the dominion of the I. This seems to be what Kierkegaard means by “in despair, to will to be oneself.” Freedom seeks to ground its *being* in its volition; to be itself through itself. And, of course, what *most* opposes our freedom, what opposes our freedom *essentially*, is precisely the freedom of others, for the freedom of others eludes the control of *our* freedom by its very nature. Freedom is thus anxious in the face of the freedom of others. We can respond to this anxiety in three ways: We can seek to flee from others, we can seek to join with them, or we can seek supremacy over them. This latter is the choice of the evil

will. The evil will, in its anxious endeavor to be itself through itself, seeks supremacy over the freedom of others.

What this implies is that radical evil is not, as Kant would have it, a mere disregard for the freedom of others in pursuit of one's own separate ends; it is the deliberate attempt to subvert the freedom of others. The evil will seeks the subjugation of others as an end in itself. Evil says, not simply, "Let *my* will be done," but, "Let your will be *subordinate* to mine." Through this, evil seeks to persuade itself—of course always self-deceitfully, always in bad faith—of its indomitable ontological potency and, thereby, to escape the anxiety of its felt inadequacy. This is the provenance of that malice—that *delicious* malice—that thrills at its power over others, and rages, like a spoilt child, at every obstruction to that power.

Let us recall the photo of the stormtroopers. What could possibly account for the delight these stormtroopers take in tormenting this poor, old, man? It is certainly not anything like the delight one might take, say, in winning a football game against a worthy opponent. The old man in this picture is no match at all for these three young stormtroopers. He is weak, scared, fatigued, beaten. He cannot hope to defend himself. Indeed, he appears—in his weakness, in his oldness, in his frightened, pleading eyes—a testimony to human frailty.

But perhaps this is *just* what explains it. Nazism, at its core, was a monstrous rejection of human frailty, made monstrous by that rejection itself. We may conjecture that the very appearance of the weak, old, man arouses in the stormtroopers, at a level of awareness they actively suppress, their own feelings of ontological inadequacy, for which they have cultivated a deliberate contempt. Their delight in tormenting him comes from the exhilaration of feeling themselves triumphant over this inadequacy, a triumph they make evident to themselves through the act of torment itself.

At the dark heart of the evil will, in other words, is a hatred of the human condition—a hatred of—in Shakespeare’s words—“our mortal coil.” We hate our vulnerability, our poverty, our weakness, our susceptibility to harm, rejection, illness, isolation, death. Evil is not simply the failure of the Golden Rule, it is its negative image: In evil, we hate our neighbors as ourselves.

What is the solution? Has freedom a way out of its dilemma? A story is told of the infant Buddha. At his birth seers prophesied that he would become either a great world-conqueror or a great spiritual sage. In this prophecy we see betokened the two paths freedom might take in addressing its ontological anxiety. The path of world-conquest lies at the root of evil and despair. It is only the spiritual path, the path of faith, writes Kierkegaard, through which freedom can finally arrive at peace with itself.⁶

V. Faith

In *The Sickness Unto Death* Kierkegaard gives what he calls his “formula of faith” as follows: “In relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it.”⁷

Kierkegaard’s claim is that it is only due to our divorce from our ontological foundation, a divorce effected by freedom itself, that the simple anxiety native to finite life—anxiety over this-worldly tasks understood as *non*-ultimate—becomes the aggravated anxiety of despair. In the absence of faith, in other words, freedom becomes grotesque. It takes upon itself a task it cannot hope to accomplish, the task of compensating for the missing God. Now, it seems, we are required to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps, to make of ourselves our own foundation, to stand upon our own two feet which, themselves, stand upon nothing—and in this endeavor we

are impelled to violate the freedom of others, to bring their freedom under the dominion of our freedom, to establish *our* freedom as ontologically supreme.

The path of faith involves the renunciation of this effort. In honestly relating ourselves to ourselves and in willing to be the *finite* self to whom we honestly relate, we accept our vulnerability for what it is, along with the anxiety it arouses. Such acceptance is the essential meaning of humility. On the spiritual path we accept ourselves—with all our warts, imperfections, vulnerabilities, limitations, and anxieties—as given to ourselves by that which gives; in Kierkegaard’s words, by “the power that established us.” We may not know the nature of this power in any full or definitive way. Nevertheless, we know ourselves as given by it. And it is just this humble acceptance of ourselves as *given* that allows us to renounce the path of domination and, thereby, open ourselves to the acceptance of others—with all *their* warts, vulnerabilities, imperfections, limitations, and anxieties. Thus, self-acceptance, in humility, yields the acceptance of others, in compassion.

VI. Conclusion: Faith as the Maturation of Freedom

In light of the above we might identify *two* distinct, though intertwined, species of evil: the incidental evil of which Kant writes, and the malicious evil of the stormtrooper photo. Incidental evil occurs when we violate the other’s freedom in pursuit of our own separate ends. Malicious evil occurs when we actively seek to deface the other’s freedom as an end-in-itself. As we now see, these two species of evil are entangled: Our appetites tempt us to exploit others, our malice thrills at our ability to do so.

At the core of the problem is the very self-sovereignty—and hence, ironically, the very *dignity*—that freedom imparts. As Kant would have it, freedom, as self-legislating, is impelled

by its own self-respect to enact laws accordant with freedom as such; which is to say, laws respectful of any and every free being. This gives us the categorical imperative. But, as Kierkegaard shows us, in the desperation of its felt isolation, freedom is unable to *inhabit* its dignity. Freedom must overcome its sense of isolation to do so; must *grow* into its dignity through self-understanding and self-acceptance; a growth process requiring intellectual, moral, and spiritual maturation. Indeed, it is just in this context that we can understand the *historical thrust* of the so-called ‘historical religions’: Humanity is in the process of *learning* to be free; a process that is still very much underway. Evil is the *immaturity* of freedom.

This immaturity appears pervasive among human beings; it is not an aberration, it is human nature as we know it. Further, it is not strictly, or even primarily, an *intellectual* immaturity; it is an immaturity of our guts, of our terrors and delights, i.e., of our affective dispositions. The great spiritual sages—Buddha, Jesus, and others—invite us to tread with them the path to human maturation. It is only freedom in its maturity that issues Kant’s categorical imperative of *respect* for freedom. Freedom in its immaturity is the enemy even of itself.

But, finally, there is good news at the end of this grim story of evil. The good news, the hopeful news, is that we can indeed envision a *maturity* of freedom, a freedom that affirms itself, celebrates itself, and affirms and celebrates in every other the good it finds within itself. Radical evil, however horrific, is not *ontologically* radical; it is the panic of a freedom still in gestation, still just learning its true nature and place in the challenging world of self and other. Thus, at the very *heart* of the heart of darkness we can discern a spark of light. This is the light that shines in such luminaries as Jesus, Buddha, and even Kant. Our work is to learn to see this light ever more clearly, within ourselves and within each other, and to use this light to make our way beyond the darkness.

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, translated and edited by Allen Wood and George Di Giovanni (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998), 59.

² “Anxiety may be compared with dizziness. He whose eye happens to look down into the yawning abyss becomes dizzy. But what is the reason for this? It is just as much in his own eye as in the abyss, for suppose he had not looked down. Hence anxiety is the dizziness of freedom, which emerges when the spirit wants to posit the synthesis and freedom looks down into its own possibility, laying hold of finiteness to support itself.” Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, edited and translated by Reidar Thomte with Albert B. Anderson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 61.

³ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 13-14.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶ “Now the anxiety of possibility holds him as its prey until, saved, it must hand him over to faith. In no other place can he find rest, for every other place of rest is mere chatter, although in the eyes of men it is sagacity.” Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 158.

⁷ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 44.