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Moral Autonomy and Radical Evil in the Philosophy of Kant

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MORAL AUTONOMY AND RADICAL EVIL

IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF KANT

BY

DAVID GEORGE HORNER

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT

OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

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THESIS ABSTRACT

The problem which this thesis proposes to treat is Immanuel Kant's attempt to frame an ethical system ultimately based on the postulate of moral freedom (i.e. moral autonomy), and at the same time to espouse what he describes as the doctrine of "radical innate evil in human nature." While the examination may well have significant implications for moral and religious theories beyond the boundaries of Kantian thought, generally these tempting vistas are not explored in the thesis. Indeed, the issue may also have broad repercussions for Kant's philosophy in general but this too lies beyond the scope of the thesis. The investigation is limited as much as possible to the presentation and analysis of Kant's specific argument for moral autonomy and radical evil as it is found in his two major ethical works Critique of Practical Reason and The Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Ethics, as well as his religious treatise, Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone. However, the major interpretations of Kant's doctrines of moral autonomy and radical evil are examined in some detail since the definition of these terms is crucial for any examination of their compatibility.

The first section of the thesis, "Moral Autonomy" consists of a presentation and analysis of some of the more prominent and differing interpretations of Kant's notion of moral autonomy. Primarily, the section deals with the views of Hans Vaihinger, W. T. Jones, John R. Silber, and Lewis White Beck. Both the "freedom as

fiction" interpretation of Vaihinger and the "freedom as personality fulfillment" interpretation of Jones are rejected as not accurately representing Kant's own view of moral autonomy. The "freedom as spontaneity" interpretation of Silber is endorsed, but it is also suggested that a full understanding of moral autonomy requires the additional insights of Beck with respect to the distinction between "freedom as spontaneity" and "freedom as autonomy." The interpretation of moral autonomy upon which the balance of the thesis is constructed is, therefore, a combination of the views of Silber and Beck.

The second section of the thesis, "Radical Evil," contains a systematic presentation of Kant's doctrine of "radical innate evil in human nature." There is much less controversy concerning the definition of this term than surrounds the definition of "moral autonomy." This is probably due to the fact that the only place where Kant fully treats this doctrine is in the Religion and his discussion of it there is thorough and reasonably straightforward.

The final section is an analysis of the compatibility of these two Kantian doctrines. First, it is argued that Kant was very well aware of the danger of contradicting his fundamental ethical postulate of moral autonomy in affirming the doctrine of radical evil. Second, due to his cognizance of this danger, he carefully and successfully defined radical evil in such a way that it does not contradict moral autonomy. Third, the compatibility of these two doctrines in Kant's philosophy may not ultimately be a satisfactory resolution of the general problem of affirming that man is both morally responsible and morally depraved because Kant's understanding of radical evil is dubious.

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INTRODUCTION

The long evolution of philosophical thought has been influenced and shaped by a multiplicity of creative minds. Among this multiplicity, however, a few philosophers enjoy a place of particular prominence owing to their overtly significant contributions to the development of philosophical inquiry. Immanuel Kant occupies such a position. His philosophy, along with that of Plato and Aristotle, stands among the most influential both in clarifying perennial philosophical problems and providing direction for future philosophical investigation. This thesis will concern itself with one aspect of Kant's rich philosophy, namely his attempt to construct an ethical system ultimately based on the postulate of moral autonomy, and at the same time to affirm a doctrine of "radical innate evil in human nature." The issue of man's moral freedom has been a topic of enduring debate among both philosophers and theologians, and its complexity has been compounded in the case of those who would wish to affirm not only that man is morally free but also that he is innately morally corrupt. Many scholars have rather lightly dismissed this latter position as being obviously contradictory, and yet such a dismissal becomes more difficult when a philosopher of the stature of Immanuel Kant is the proponent. The purpose of this thesis, is, therefore, to examine Kant's case for the compatibility of moral autonomy and radical evil.

With respect to Kant's writings, the examination will be drawn primarily from his two major ethical works, The Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Ethics and the Critique of Practical Reason, as

well as from Kant's religious treatise, Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone. The first section of the thesis will assess some of the more significant interpretations of Kant's understanding of moral autonomy. The second section will systematically present Kant's doctrine of radical evil as Kant, himself, articulated it in the Religion. Then, given the definition of these two terms the final section will attempt to evaluate their compatibility.

Although Kant wished to maintain a distinction between ethics and religion, he also recognized their interrelatedness. His comments concerning radical evil in the Religion, therefore, provide a helpful elucidation of the strictly ethical considerations which he undertook in the Metaphysic of Ethics and the Critique of Practical Reason. In much the same way, then, although the purpose of this thesis is to present a treatment of one specific issue (i.e. the compatibility of Kantian radical evil and moral autonomy) it is hoped that in this process, other concerns both within Kant's philosophy and beyond it will be highlighted. The consideration of these other issues, however, lies beyond the scope of this work, and therefore must be left unattended. Nevertheless, perhaps even these unattended questions, which are implicit in the particular issue before us, will be seen in a new light and will therefore receive the attention due to them on another occasion.

I. MORAL AUTONOMY

As mentioned in the Introduction, the Kantian understanding of moral autonomy must be explicated prior to the treatment of the specific problem with which this thesis is concerned (i.e. the apparent contradiction in Kant's concurrently affirming the notions of moral freedom and innate, radical evil). However, the issue of how Kant understood the term "moral autonomy" must itself be viewed within the context of Kant's discussion of another apparent contradiction: namely, the contradiction between moral freedom and natural law. Kant presumably held both "(i) that 'every action that takes place at a certain point of time is a necessary result of what existed in time preceding,' and so is completely conditioned in accordance with the general principle of causality, and (ii) that we are bound to do only what we are free to do."¹ In working towards a Kantian definition of moral freedom, therefore, we must keep before us the fact that Kant sought to define this freedom in such a way that it did not contradict natural necessity and man's place as a "phenomenon" within the natural order nor man's dignity as a moral agent. The task of this section is not to critically assess Kant's definition of moral autonomy. Rather, we shall attempt to discover and explain Kant's definition as it is presented primarily in the Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Ethics and the Critique of Practical

¹ William Thomas Jones, Morality and Freedom in the Philosophy of Immanuel Kant (Oxford University Press, 1940), p. 1.

Reason. In order to do this, it is necessary to consider several significant interpretations of Kant's use of the term 'moral autonomy' before one of these interpretations can be endorsed or a new one given. The three major interpretations which we shall consider are (1) Hans Vaihinger's theory of "moral freedom as fiction,"² (2) W. T. Jones' theory of "moral freedom as personality fulfillment,"³ (3) John R. Silber's theory of "moral freedom as spontaneity."⁴

In The Philosophy of 'As If' Hans Vaihinger presents his argument on behalf of the "freedom as fiction" interpretation. He begins by quoting from Kant's The Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Ethics:

Now I say: Everything that cannot act otherwise than "under the idea of freedom" is therefore in practical respects really free, that is to say, for him all the laws count which are inseparably connected with freedom, as if his will were of itself declared to be free and indeed by a proof acceptable in theoretical philosophy.

Now I maintain that to each being who has a will we must necessarily also attribute the idea of freedom by which alone he acts. For in such a being we conceive a reason that is practical, that has causality in reference to its objects. It is impossible to conceive a reason that in full consciousness would be directed in respect to its judgments by some outside source, for then the subject would ascribe the determination of his judgment not to reason, but to some impulsion. Reason must look upon itself as the originator of its principles, independent of foreign influences. Consequently it must, as practical reason or will of a rational being, conceive itself as free, that is to say, its will can be a will of its own only under the

²Hans Vaihinger, The Philosophy of 'As If', trans. by C. K. Ogden (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Co., Inc., 1924).

³W. T. Jones, Morality and Freedom.

⁴John R. Silber, "The Ethical Significance of Kant's Religion," in the Intro. to Immanuel Kant, Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone, trans. by Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1960).

idea of freedom, and this idea must therefore in every practical respect be attributed to all rational beings.⁵

Vaihinger takes this passage as a clear statement of Kant's "fictional view" of moral freedom for he (Vaihinger) writes ". . . here Kant clearly and unambiguously declares freedom to be but a mere idea without reality."⁶ It must not be assumed, however, that Vaihinger thought he was pointing out a deficiency in Kant's moral philosophy. Nor does Vaihinger suggest that Kant was unaware of this interpretation. Indeed, Vaihinger apparently believed not only that Kant consciously espoused this view of freedom as fiction but also that Kant saw it as an acceptable resolution of the apparent contradiction between natural law and moral autonomy. Vaihinger insists "Here we reach the highest pinnacle attained by Kantian thought, or indeed, by any human thought. Only a few, only an elite, can continue to breathe at all at this altitude: the vast majority need a different, a less rarefied atmosphere."⁷

A closer inspection of the passage which Vaihinger quotes, however, fails to lend strong support to either of Vaihinger's conclusions. First, it is not clear that Kant is stating or even implying that moral freedom is ultimately fictitious. Kant simply says,

. . . Everything that cannot act otherwise than "under the idea of freedom" is therefore in practical respects really free . . .

Reason must look upon itself as the originator of its principles, independent of foreign influences. Consequently

⁵Immanuel Kant, The Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Ethics, trans. by Otto Manthey-Zorn (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1938), p. 67.

⁶Vaihinger, 'As If,' p. 289.

⁷Ibid., p. 293.

it must, as practical reason or⁸ will of a rational being, conceive itself as free

In other words, man as a rational being must view himself as free (i.e. act "under the idea of freedom") and therefore is practically free. But this does not necessarily mean that man is not actually free both practically and theoretically. Rather, it simply states that even if man were not theoretically free (i.e. ultimately free) he would still be morally responsible, ". . . for him all the laws count which are inseparably connected with freedom."⁹ Therefore, Kant is willing to forego the question of man's theoretical freedom on the grounds that its resolution is not essential to the task before him. Indeed, he explicitly states this in a note to the very passage which Vaihinger quotes.

I am adopting this method of assuming as sufficient for our purpose that freedom is merely "as an idea" made the basis of all actions of rational beings, so that I may be relieved of the necessity of proving freedom in its theoretical respect also. For even when the latter is left undone, then for the being who cannot act otherwise than under the idea of his own freedom the same laws still apply which would bind an actually free being.¹⁰

Thus Kant was not suggesting that moral freedom is a fiction, but only that moral responsibility does not require the theoretical proof of freedom. Indeed, other passages, both in the Metaphysic of Ethics and the Critique of Practical Reason make it clear that Kant did not consider freedom to be fictitious. Kant states:

. . . it is an indispensable task of speculative philosophy to point out that the deception regarding this contradiction (between natural necessity and freedom) rests upon the fact that when we call a man free we think of

⁸Kant, Metaphysic of Ethics, p. 67.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

him in another sense and in a different relation than when we consider him as part of nature and subject to its laws. It must point out also that the two not only can go together very well, but must be regarded as necessarily united in the same subject¹¹

And in the Critique of Practical Reason, "Speculative reason does not herewith grow in insight but only in respect to the certitude of its problematic concept of freedom, to which objective, though only practical, reality is now indubitably given."¹² It is certainly true that for Kant moral freedom has a different epistemological status than the concept of nature (i.e. natural law) which "proves and necessarily must prove its reality in examples of experience."¹³ However, this is not to say that freedom is a fiction but only that its significance is primarily practical rather than speculative. For Vaihinger's interpretation to stand, it would have to be demonstrated that Kant equated the objective and the practical with the fictional, and to my knowledge no such equation is ever made in Kant's writings. Indeed, such an equation seems to be antithetical to the whole thrust of Kant's ethics. As W. T. Jones phrases it:

. . . to call a belief a fiction is to say that what is believed is not the case . . . Kant's whole inquiry was designed to explain the possibility of freedom and thereby to establish that obligation is an objective fact and not an illusion; and it is impossible to believe that Kant could have accepted as satisfactory the conclusion that it (freedom) is a false hypothesis to which nothing corresponds in fact.¹⁴

¹¹Ibid., p. 76.

¹²Immanuel Kant, Critique of Practical Reason, trans. by Lewis White Beck (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1956), p. 50.

¹³Kant, Metaphysic of Ethics, p. 76.

¹⁴W. T. Jones, Morality and Freedom, pp. 44-45.

It would seem, then, that neither the "letter" nor the "spirit" of Kant's writings tend to support Vaihinger's conclusion that Kant saw moral freedom as a useful fiction. It may be that such a view would resolve the contradiction between natural law and freedom. But, it would do so on terms unacceptable to Kant because it would forfeit the moral dignity of man by reducing moral obligation to an illusion.

W. T. Jones suggests another interpretation of Kant's view of moral freedom in his book Morality and Freedom In the Philosophy of Immanuel Kant.¹⁵ Jones' entire discussion of moral freedom pivots around the problem already referred to of understanding freedom in such a way that it satisfies the following criteria: "(i) compatibility with the principle of causality as laid down in The Critique of Pure Reason, and (ii) compatibility with the reality of morality and of obligation."¹⁶ Furthermore, Jones openly admits that the "Kantian" view of moral freedom for which he argues is not "Kantian" in the sense that it is the only interpretation which Kant explicitly affirmed, but only in the sense:

(i) that this "critical" theory was in fact held by Kant (together, however, with other theories from which he seems never to have distinguished it); (ii) that it satisfies Kant's own "Problemstellung," while these other theories do not; (iii) that it goes a long way towards being an adequate solution to our own conception of the problem.¹⁷

Jones begins his articulation of Kant's "critical" theory by a discussion of the "noumena/phenomena" distinction. Jones rejects the notion that noumena can be causally efficacious in the phenomenal world on the grounds that this would contradict natural necessity and

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.,

thereby preserve the reality of moral obligation at the unacceptable cost of denying the principle of causality.¹⁸ Jones willingly admits that at times Kant himself thought that noumenal causality was the key to an acceptable resolution of the antinomy between freedom and natural law. However, Jones insists that this view fails to satisfy either of his final two criteria; the satisfaction of Kant's own "Problemstellung" or the solution to our present view of the problem.

The best way to present Jones' argument is to quote it:

Let us suppose, in accordance with Kant's thesis, that a, b, and c are the antecedent events which condition the occurrence of a certain act p. Now if on a certain occasion, after the occurrence of a, b, c, the agent does q, what we assume, and what Kant himself assumes, is simply that some factor x has also occurred, that x is another event, at the moment unknown, and that a, b, c, x, conditions the occurrence of q. If we did not make this assumption, it would obviously be in principle impossible to predict human conduct with certainty, and we should have to abandon the thesis, on which Kant insists, that all events happen in accordance with unchangeable laws.

It is clear, moreover, not only that this assumption leaves no place for the hypothesis that there has been a manifestation of noumenal causality, but that the hypothesis itself is really meaningless. For, if q is noumenally caused, then x, the factor in the situation which brings it about that q rather than p occurs, is non-temporal. Therefore, though q is an event and occurs, there is no time at which x happens. But whether q happens or not is supposed to depend on whether or not x exerts its efficacious power, and this is really meaningless. It is quite impossible to attach any significance to the idea of x and q varying concomitantly where x does not "arise or begin at a certain time."

. . . Hence, on Kant's own terms, there seems but one conclusion to draw: that noumena are not causally efficacious with respect to phenomena.¹⁹

After rejecting the causal efficacy of noumena, Jones goes on to develop his interpretation of moral autonomy by considering the "will" not as a "spontaneous exercise of noumenal causality" but as

¹⁸Ibid., p. 4 and following.

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 7-8.

a causal, phenomenal, psychical event. The psychical emphasizes the will's cognitive power. The causal aspect extends the definition of will beyond the merely cognitive. "Practical reason . . . does not merely contemplate its objects as non-existent; it contemplates them as objects which we propose to do something about."²⁰ Finally, will is phenomenal, which means that it is governed by and subject to the laws of nature. Jones is confident that such an understanding of the will is consistent with the demands of natural necessity, and he therefore proceeds to discuss the adequacy of this interpretation within the context of moral obligation.

Jones begins by noting that however loosely one interprets Kant's ethics, it is at least certain that any ethical system which claims to be "Kantian" must contain the concept of the "a priori" character of the moral law (i.e. that the moral law is both a universal and necessary end for all men). Jones suggests that there is only one legitimately moral end which fully satisfies this criterion: personality, itself. "Our account of a morally good act of will is now complete. What distinguishes such an act, as regards its content, is that it is the kind of act by which personality is realized."²¹ The ethical command towards the fulfillment of human personality is universal because reason, as the distinctive part of human personality, is possessed by all men, and it is necessary in the sense of "felt" necessity, because of the peculiar worth of reason.²²

Thus, it is not from the concept of a rational being that we should try to deduce the moral law, but

²⁰Ibid., p. 29.

²¹Ibid., p. 97

²²Ibid., pp. 80-85. Jones rejects the possibility of a logically necessary moral imperative.

upon the value (or worth) of such a creature that we should reflect if we would understand both the categorical form and the a priori end, which are the distinguishing characteristics of the morally good act of will.²³

With this definition of the moral imperative as the categorical and a priori command towards the fulfillment and realization of personality, and with the concept of will as a phenomenal, psychological event, Jones is able to construct a "critical" theory of freedom. This critical theory is, according to Jones, not only a satisfactory resolution of the contradiction between natural necessity and moral freedom on grounds which eliminates neither, but is also "Kantian" in the sense that the theory can be found in Kant's writings in at least embryonic form. The key question for Jones is, "Does Kant ever give an account of freedom which consists in saying that to be free means to be moved by the kind of thought which we have just described?"²⁴

This thought contains in the first place, the representation of a certain change in the state of affairs as being one by means of which personality can be realized, and, in the second place, the recognition that the worth of personality has as an end in itself a sufficient ground for producing the change.²⁵

Jones believed that he found such an account of freedom in Kant's discussion of the autonomy of the will. This aspect of the will which relates to its "self-legislating" function is certainly central to Kant's ethics, and Jones understands Kant to mean by it, that the will is not only the means by which the moral end is realized but is also the moral end itself. In order to realize this end, it is not necessary, according to Jones, that the will be free in the

²³Ibid., p. 100.

²⁴Ibid., p. 101.

²⁵Ibid.

sense that it is capable of initiating acts while at the same time being unaffected itself by previous events in time (i.e. it is not necessary that the will be "spontaneous"). Rather,

To call an act free is not, in a word, to deny that it is an act, for then, indeed, "a free will would be an absurdity." It is simply a way of characterizing an important kind of practical thought which sometimes moves us. Practical thoughts are, by definition, causes which are, without exception, the effects of antecedent events in time. What distinguishes those which we call free is not, therefore, the way in which they are causes or effects; but the kind of thought that they are.²⁶

Hence, "freedom . . . is not incompatible with material necessity, because freedom does not mean 'not-determined.'"²⁷ At the same time, freedom understood in this way confirms the legitimacy of moral obligation which is both categorical and a priori. On this basis, then, Jones concludes that a successful resolution of the contradiction between natural necessity and moral freedom is, indeed, possible while still remaining within the general framework of Kant's own philosophy.

Thus there are not two different acts--a noumenal act and a phenomenal act. There is one act (taken as a sequence of events in time), which is through and through natural, and which differs in no essential way from any other causal series. But in virtue of being the particular kind of act which it is, a value of a certain distinctive kind is realized . . . Moral goodness, in a word, is just that kind of value which is experienced whenever a certain kind of thought turns practical. . . .²⁸

And as it is the concept of freedom which gives expression to this value which reason has in itself, Kant's claim is essentially justified: it is precisely the concept of freedom which reconciles morality and natural necessity.²⁹

²⁶ Ibid., p. 109.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 120.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 137.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 139.

Despite the initial persuasiveness of Jones' argument, it does seem that his position is susceptible to numerous objections. As stated earlier, Jones admits that the theory which he develops with respect to freedom is "Kantian" only in a limited sense. Jones proposes that Kant held the "freedom as fulfillment of personality" view, although he (Kant) espoused other views as well. Second, Jones contends that his (Jones') concept of freedom satisfies Kant's own "Problemstellung." We shall not be concerned with Jones' third assertion, that his interpretation is a reasonably adequate solution to "our own conception of the problem" between freedom and natural necessity, for this issue lies beyond the scope of our investigation. However, the first and second of Jones' assertions do lie within the bounds of this work and therefore require comment.

Jones begins the development of his own view by rejecting the notion of noumena as being causally efficacious in the realm of phenomena. He states,

. . . if q is noumenally caused, then x, the factor in the situation which brings it about that q rather than p occurs, is non-temporal. Therefore, though q is an event and occurs, there is no time at which x happens. But whether q happens or not is supposed to depend on whether or not x exerts its efficacious power, and this is really meaningless.³⁰

Now, it may be that after a thorough philosophical analysis the idea of noumenal causality is "really meaningless," yet a number of passages suggest that this (noumenal causality) is precisely what Kant means. Kant writes in the Critique of Practical Reason:

In the concept of a will, however, the concept of causality is already contained; thus in that of a pure will there is the concept of causality with freedom, i.e. of a causality not determinable according to natural laws and

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 7-8.

consequently not susceptible to any empirical intuition as proof . . . Now the concept of a being which has a free will is that of a "causa noumenon."

In Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone, Kant states, "To seek the temporal origin of free acts as such (as though they were natural effects) is thus a contradiction."³²

It is clear that Kant not only affirmed the efficacy of noumenal causality but also that he was able to allow for the possibility of events in the phenomenal world being the results of noumenal causes which are themselves non-temporal. Nor is this a "meaningless" assertion if one is willing to accept, as Kant surely was, that time is a category of cognition which applies to appearances (i.e. phenomena) but not necessarily to things-in-themselves (i.e. noumena). Kant never suggests that such non-temporal, noumenal causes can be "known," but this by no means excludes the factual possibility of noumenal causality which is all that Kant wanted to establish. It simply means that such causes can never be "known" in the strict sense in which Kant defined "knowledge." Therefore, it does not seem that Jones' refutation of noumenal causality is cogent on Kantian terms. The quotation from the Critique of Practical Reason is also evidence, contrary to Jones' view, that the will was not considered by Kant to be merely a phenomenal, psychical process which is subject to all of the natural laws. Kant expressly states that the concept of the will with which he is operating is one of a will which is "not determinable according to natural laws."

³¹ Kant, Practical Reason, pp. 57-58.

³² Immanuel Kant, Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone, trans. by Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1960), p. 35.

We must now turn to a consideration of Jones' "critical" theory of freedom. Again, it would seem that this view is neither true to Kant nor adequate for moral responsibility. While it is true that the notion of autonomy (i.e. self-legislation) is at the core of Kant's ethics, it is not true that heteronomous action for Kant (i.e. action which is not self-legislative and personality fulfilling) is necessarily un-free action. And yet, if we accept Jones' view of freedom, heteronomous action must be un-free. Indeed, Jones himself states this:

The assertion of man's freedom is therefore not an assertion about the way in which certain events are caused. It is an assertion about a certain kind of value. Hence, we may not say at all that Cain's act of killing Abel was "free," since we can be reasonably certain that it was not a sense of duty which moved him to do this act.³³

But what are we to say of Cain's action? Can he be held morally responsible for an act which is not free? Jones never challenges the "I ought implies I can" rationale, yet neither does he ever supply us with an answer as to how we are to consider acts which do not contribute to the fulfillment of personality and thus cannot be considered free. Kant had no such problem for he saw both the autonomous and the heteronomous as expressions of a free, morally responsible agent.³⁴

On balance, then, Jones' view of freedom as the fulfillment of personality is unsatisfactory because it fails to fulfill even Jones' own criteria. It is neither Kantian in the sense that Kant espoused such a view; nor is it an adequate solution to Kant's "Problemstellung" because it erodes the very basis of moral responsibility: the ascription

³³ Jones, Morality and Freedom, p. 136.

³⁴ We shall say more about this in our discussion of Silber's view of freedom as spontaneity.

of moral praise and blame. It allows us to praise but not to blame by defining immoral acts as un-free acts. To call such a view Kantian, would be to fundamentally misunderstand the thrust of Kant's entire ethical endeavor.

The final view of moral freedom which we must now inspect is the "freedom as spontaneity" view presented by John R. Silber in his essay "The Ethical Significance of Kant's Religion."³⁵ In opposition to Jones' strong refutation of spontaneous causation, Silber explicitly states, "Responsibility cannot be personal unless it can be concentrated in free individuals who can act without being determined to action by external and antecedent causes."³⁶ And Silber takes this not simply as a statement of his own personal conviction, but one which is absolutely consistent with Kant's own view. He quotes Kant:

What we wish to understand and never shall understand is how predeterminism, according to which voluntary actions, as events, have their determining ground in antecedent time (which, with what happened in it, is no longer within our power), can be consistent with freedom, according to which the act as well as its opposite must be within the power of the subject at the moment of its taking place.³⁷

Freedom then for Silber and for Kant implies spontaneity (i.e. the independence of the will from external influences and antecedent determination).

As we noted earlier, Jones' view of freedom precludes the possibility of heteronomous action being free action, because heteronomous action fails, by definition, to be a "personality-fulfilling" experience. Silber has no such problem. For him, "Heteronomy and autonomy are

³⁵ Silber, "Ethical Significance," pp. lxxix-cxxxiv.

³⁶ Ibid., p. lxxxvii.

³⁷ Kant, Religion, p. 45.

the two primary modes of expressing transcendental freedom."³⁸ Even if one chooses to act on the basis of his strongest passion or desire, this is done, according to Silber, on the basis of the freely chosen maxim of choice, which says that "I shall act according to my strongest desire." This act, therefore, is spontaneous (i.e. free), and yet it is not a "fulfilling realization of transcendental freedom."³⁹ While heteronomous action is as much the actualization of transcendental freedom as is autonomous action, it denies this freedom in principle by acting as if no such freedom were possible. For example, an animal presumably acts, on the basis of its strongest desire. However, an animal, according to Silber, is not free. But, it is important to note that the animal is not free not because it acts heteronomously but because it does not have a will which is free from external influences and previous determination. Man, who is free, may choose to act like an animal (merely on the basis of his strongest desire); in which case man acts heteronomously. But man, even in acting in this way, nevertheless remains free because his action is the result of a maxim of choice, whereas the animal's action is not. Heteronomy and autonomy, are, therefore, both expressions of man's freedom. The latter confirms man's freedom by practically exhibiting its possibility. The former denies it by acting as if freedom were not possible.

With this understanding of freedom as spontaneity, Silber goes on to explicate Kant's definition of the will. As one might expect, this definition is radically different from Jones' theory of the will. Silber states that although Kant construed the will as a "unitary

³⁸ Silber, "Ethical Significance," p. lxxix.

³⁹ Ibid., p. xc.

faculty," nevertheless he thought it helpful for purposes of analysis to distinguish three separate functions of the will. The first function of the will is denoted by the word, "Willkur": the power to choose between alternatives. In the fulfillment of this function, the will is a faculty of desire, "for Kant held that Willkur is determined according to the strength of the pleasures or displeasures it anticipates in connection with the alternatives open to it."⁴⁰ However, Willkur must not be understood as a sort of animal instinct, for this would deny the very freedom which Kant was attempting to establish. What Willkur does imply is that man's will is influenced by impulses and determined by the strongest impulse, but that Willkur is free in the decision as to which impulse is to be the strongest. Only after this choice has been made can we say that man's choice is determined by the strongest impulse. Thus, Willkur does not deny human freedom but presupposes it.

Whereas Willkur refers primarily to the capacity of the will to choose, Silber suggests "Wille" is introduced by Kant as representing the "purely rational aspect of the will."⁴¹ Willkur is free to choose those maxims which are in accord with the moral law, thereby affirming its freedom, or to adopt other maxims inconsistent with the moral law thereby abnegating its freedom, but Wille constitutes the will's own demand for self-fulfillment. As such, Wille implies an incentive towards self-realization, internal to the will. It is precisely because Wille is a part of man's will, that moral experience is "autonomous"

⁴⁰Ibid., p. xcv.

⁴¹Ibid., p. civ.

in the sense that the categorical imperative is a self-imposed demand. The function of Wille, then, is to provide an incentive to Willkur to adopt these maxims which are consistent with the moral law. As an incentive towards the moral law, the desire which Wille arouses in Willkur is described as a "moral feeling" which consists in the "simple respect for the moral law." "The predisposition to personality (Wille) is the capacity for respect for the moral law as in itself a sufficient incentive to the will (Willkur). This capacity for simple respect for the moral law within us would then be moral feeling."⁴² Wille, then, is a sufficient incentive to motivate Willkur to choose maxims in accordance with the moral law, but it is important to notice that Wille is only an "incentive." That is, Wille does not predetermine Willkur, which is always free to go against Wille and the dictates of the moral law. Finally, although Willkur can choose to ignore the incentive of Wille and fail to fulfill its own freedom, Willkur can never be entirely devoid of Wille for "when the incentives which can spring from freedom are taken away, man is reduced to a merely animal being."⁴³ Such a reduction would render moral experience meaningless and is, therefore, unthinkable for Kant.

The final function or faculty of the will which Silber describes is what Kant denotes by the word, "Gesinnung." He (Kant) describes it as "the ultimate subjective ground of the adoption of maxims."⁴⁴ Gesinnung is freely chosen by Willkur, and thus every man is morally responsible for his Gesinnung. As the "ultimate subjective ground

⁴² Kant, Religion, pp. 22-23.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 30.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 20.

of the adoption of maxims," Gesinnung is the underlying maxim which promotes the choice of particular maxims. Thus any given moral act is traceable not only to a "superficial" maxim but also to an underlying maxim. In so far as we are able to see beyond the particular maxims to the level of the Gesinnung, we can perceive not only the morality of the specific maxim but also of the underlying maxim as well. In the Metaphysic of Ethics and in the Critique of Practical Reason, Kant analyzed man's moral experience almost exclusively in terms of specific or "superficial" maxims. It is only when we come to the Religion and Kant's fullest articulation of his understanding of the will that we see him locating the heart of morality at a deeper level, the level of Gesinnung. This new dimension however, is extremely significant for Kant's concept of radical evil, as we shall see later.

This then is Silber's view of moral freedom. He begins by defining freedom as spontaneity (freedom from external and antecedent causes) and from there goes on to present the process by which this freedom is operative through the compound functions of the will. Any critical comments which could be made about Silber's interpretation of Kant's view of freedom would indeed be brief, because it would seem that his explication of Kant's writings, as far as it goes, is fundamentally correct. However, Lewis White Beck in his commentary on Kant's Critique of Practical Reason helpfully expands Silber's position, particularly with respect to the interrelation of Willkur and Wille.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Lewis White Beck, A Commentary on Kant's Critique of Practical Reason (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1960), pp. 176-209.

Beck distinguishes between two modes of freedom: spontaneity and autonomy. Freedom in the sense of spontaneity refers to the operative functioning of the will as Willkur. Freedom in the sense of autonomy relates to the exercise of the will as Wille. Wille is always free in that its decrees follow from its own nature necessarily. This type of freedom Beck calls "'freedom in the positive sense,' or autonomy."⁴⁶ The spontaneity of Willkur is "'freedom in the negative sense' or freedom from nature."⁴⁷ While Wille is always free, Willkur is not. In the sense of spontaneity (i.e. freedom from external influences and antecedent determination) Willkur is free even in evil actions, but Willkur can be free in a "complete" sense only when spontaneity and autonomy join in a truly moral action. Therefore, heteronomous acts are free, and Beck's view does not suffer from the same deficiencies as Jones'. But at the same time Beck's view has the virtue of accounting for the "necessity" of the categorical imperative by showing that only in moral acts can full freedom be realized. Thus man can be both morally praised and blamed, and yet the moral law is still the necessary condition of man's fullest realization of himself. Beck's view, then, does not contradict Silber's but amplifies it. The two, when taken together, accurately represent the views of Kant which he developed throughout the Metaphysic of Ethics, Critique of Practical Reason, and the Religion.

Moral freedom for Kant, then, is not a fiction; nor is it defined in such a way that evil acts cannot be attributed to a free and responsible moral agent. Rather, the freedom required by morality

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 197.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 196.

and consistent with natural necessity sees man as a "causa noumenon," whose freedom is spontaneous in the exercise of Willkur and autonomous in the decrees of Wille. Man fully actualizes his freedom, however, only when the "obligation-creating" function of Wille is united with the "obligation-executing" function of Willkur.⁴⁸ Thus the categorical imperative is both autonomous to man and necessary for the realization of his fullest humanity. We must now go on to discover how Kant defines innate, radical evil in order to see if it is consistent with this understanding of moral autonomy.

⁴⁸The terms 'obligation-creating' and 'obligation-executing' are introduced by Beck in A Commentary, p. 199.

II. RADICAL EVIL

In his essay "The Ethical Significance of Kant's Religion," Silber remarks, "So close then, in Kant's thinking is the relation of religion to ethics and so dependent is the former upon the latter, that Kant could scarcely have written a book on religion without simultaneously illuminating and expanding his ethical theory."⁴⁹ This same point was made in our introduction and indeed the vital relationship between Kantian ethics and Kantian religion is basic to the rationale implicit in the purpose and methodology of this thesis. However, we must be careful to understand that ethics and religion for Kant are connected but not identical. Kant, himself, emphasized this in his preface to the first edition of the Religion. "So far as morality is based upon the conception of man as a free agent who, just because he is free, binds himself through his reason to unconditioned laws, it stands in need neither of the idea of another Being over him, for him to apprehend his duty, nor of an incentive other than the law itself, for him to do his duty."⁵⁰ Therefore, the first thing that ought to be noted about the significance of Kant's religion for Kant's ethics is that ethics is not dependent upon religion, and in fact, the reverse is much closer to the case. However, in the Religion and most particularly in the discussion of "radical evil," Kant expands the ethical and metaphysical considerations already expressed in the

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Silber, "Ethical Significance," p. lxxx.

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Kant, Religion, p. 3.

Metaphysic of Ethics and the Critique of Practical Reason. As

Donald Freeman has put it, Kant's "understanding of human freedom comes to its fullest expression in his doctrine of radical evil and is further illumined by his treatment of the biblical account of the fall."⁵¹ We must now turn to an examination of Kant's doctrine of radical evil to find whether it is indeed the "fullest expression" of Kant's understanding of human freedom or whether it involves the contradiction of this understanding.

From Kant's earliest comments about radical evil, one thing is clear: we must understand radical evil in such a way as not to deny the reality of moral experience. "Man himself must make or have made himself into whatever, in a moral sense, whether good or evil, he is or is to become. Either condition must be an effect of his free choice; for otherwise he could not be held responsible for it and could therefore be morally neither good nor evil."⁵² Radical evil, therefore, cannot mean that man possesses a corrupt Willkur which enables him to adopt only evil maxims because this would deny the meaning of moral experience. Nor, however, can man be said to possess a corrupt Wille, for the incentive towards fulfillment of the moral law, which Wille represents, is also a necessary condition of moral freedom. Therefore, since the source of evil, just as the source of good, must lie within the will, and since we have eliminated Willkur and Wille as potential sources of evil, the source of radical evil must be within the Gesinnung. Kant lays the groundwork for

⁵¹ Donald Dale Freeman, Radical Evil and Original Sin: Kant's Doctrine of Freedom in Existential Perspective, Doctoral Thesis for Drew University (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms, Inc., 1969), p. 7.

⁵² Kant, Religion, p. 40.

locating radical evil in Gesinnung by discussing three "predispositions" implicit in man's nature.

The first predisposition is the "predisposition to animality." This predisposition manifests itself in man as the desire for self-preservation, propagation of the species, and community with other men (i.e. the social impulse).⁵³ The second is the "predisposition to humanity" which manifests itself as an inclination to compare oneself with other individuals and to judge one's worth and happiness in those terms.⁵⁴ That is, the "predisposition to humanity" represents a kind of social consciousness. The third predisposition, is the "predisposition to personality," which represents "the capacity for respect for the moral law as in itself a sufficient incentive of the will (Willkur)."⁵⁵ Kant labels all three of these predispositions as original in man in that human nature presupposes all three. That is, a man could not be a man without possessing all three of these predispositions. These predispositions are not only original in man, but they are also good because they "enjoin the observance of the law." The first two predispositions (i.e. to animality and to humanity) can lead to vices: for example, gluttony and drunkenness in the case of the predisposition to animality and envy in the case of the predisposition to humanity. However, these vices are not described as "rooted" in the predispositions but rather "grafted" upon them.⁵⁶ That is, although a vice such as envy can be traced ultimately to the desire to compare oneself with others, which is the manifestation of

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 21-22.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 22-23.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

the predisposition to humanity, envy is not a necessary result of the predisposition to humanity. Thus, while human nature presupposes all three predispositions, the vices which are traceable to the first two predispositions are not essential to man's nature. Therefore, they are not described as "rooted" in human nature, but rather "grafted" upon it. The predisposition to personality can never lead to evil since it expresses the very essence of moral goodness (i.e. respect for the moral law). In the sense that all three predispositions are inclined towards the good, in that they "enjoin the observance of the law" and in the case of the third predisposition in that it expresses moral goodness itself, man can be said to possess an "original predisposition to good."⁵⁷ In stating that these predispositions are towards the good, Kant rejects what was then the popular notion that the sinful is to be identified with the sensual.

Kant, therefore, along with Kierkegaard, "parries the rationalistic view that the sensual itself is sinful." . . . Sin is not for Kant, as it was for Ritschl, "the contradiction in which man finds himself, as both a part of the world of nature and a spiritual personality claiming to dominate nature." . . . Certainly the contrast between man's finitude and his rationality, his sensible needs and inclinations and his unconditional moral destination, is of great significance for Kant's view of man and his condition. But this contrast itself does not make man an evil, a sinful being. Here again, Kant repudiates the stoical rationalism with which he is usually charged. The valiant stoics, he said, were mistaken in seeing evil only in "undisciplined natural inclinations," where in fact evil is really "an invisible foe who screens himself behind 58 reason and is therefore all the more dangerous." . . .

Nevertheless man can choose to ignore the dictates of these predispositions and turn himself towards evil rather than good. And it is

⁵⁷Ibid., pp. 22-23.

⁵⁸Allen W. Wood, Kant's Moral Religion (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1970), p. 210.

here that we begin to see the unfolding of Kant's understanding of radical evil.

For Kant, man is confronted by a choice between two kinds of good both of which are related to the three predispositions inherent in every human being. All three predispositions are good, but man is said to be evil when and if he reverses the priority of these goods. That is, a man is evil if he adopts maxims which subordinate the incentive of the moral law to the incentive of the "natural" impulses (i.e. the predispositions towards animality and humanity). Conversely, a man is good if he recognizes the priority of the moral law and chooses maxims which subordinate the "natural" impulses to it. Once again we need to emphasize that the basic morality of an individual is located at the level of Gesinnung. Therefore, the subordination of the natural impulses to the moral law or the reverse takes place at this level. A man whose Gesinnung is oriented towards the adoption of maxims which affirm the priority of the moral law is good, and a man whose Gesinnung is oriented towards adoption of maxims which subordinate the moral law to the natural impulses is evil. For Kant, there is no neutral ground; one is either good or evil. One either recognizes and affirms the priority of the moral law and is good or subordinates this law to other incentives and is evil.⁵⁹

Thus, we understand the meaning of the term 'evil' for Kant. A man is said to be "evil" when he subordinates the incentives of the moral law to the incentives of his natural impulses at the level of Gesinnung.

⁵⁹Kant, Religion, p. 20.

We call a man evil, however, not because he performs actions that are evil (contrary to law) but because these actions are of such a nature that we may infer from them the presence in him of evil maxims In order, then, to call a man evil, it would have to be possible "a priori" to infer from several evil acts done with consciousness of their evil, or from one such act, an underlying evil maxim; and further, from this maxim to infer the presence in the agent of an underlying common ground, itself a maxim, of all particular morally-evil maxims.⁶⁰

But Kant wished to do more than define 'evil,' he also wanted to demonstrate that this evil is "natural" in man, a concept which is expressed by the phrase "propensity to evil."⁶¹ A "propensity" is distinguished from a "predisposition" in that a propensity is acquired, whereas a predisposition is "given."⁶² Again, this propensity to evil is located in man's Gesinnung. Although moral evil relates to Willkur in that a man becomes morally good or evil only through the exercise of his active will (i.e. Willkur), this activity is manifested in the orientation of Gesinnung. Man's propensity to evil is, therefore, acquired but at the same time Kant describes it as "natural" or in man "by nature." To some, the assertions that man acquires his propensity to evil and that this propensity is in man "by nature," would seem to be blatantly contradictory. But, Kant defines nature in such a way as to incorporate within it the exercise of freedom rather than excluding it.

Least difficulty at once be encountered in the expression "nature," which, if it means (as it usually does) the opposite of "freedom" as a basis of action, would flatly contradict the predicates "morally" good or evil, let it be noted that by "nature of man" we here intend only the subjective ground of the exercise (under objective

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 16.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 23.

⁶² Ibid., p. 24.

moral laws) of man's freedom in general, this ground-- whatever is its character--is the necessary antecedent of every act apparent to the senses. But this subjective ground, again, must itself always be an expression of freedom (for otherwise the use or abuse of man's power of choice in respect of the moral law could not be imputed to him nor could the good or bad in him be called moral).⁶³

This means that the propensity to evil can be considered as "belonging universally to mankind"⁶⁴ or "can be predicated of man as a species,"⁶⁵ although not in the sense "that such a quality can be inferred from the concept of his species (that is, or man in general)--for then it would be necessary; but rather that from what we know of man through experience we cannot judge otherwise of him, or that we may presuppose evil to be subjectively necessary to every man, even to the best."⁶⁶ Kant sometimes refers to this propensity as "innate," but this is not to be understood as denying the fact that man acquires his evil disposition.

We shall say, therefore, of the character (good or evil) distinguishing man from other possible rational beings, that it is "innate" in him. Yet in doing so we shall ever take the position that nature is not to bear the blame (if it is evil) or take the credit (if it is good), but that man himself is its author. But since the ultimate ground of the adoption of our maxims, which must itself lie in free choice, cannot be a fact revealed in experience, it follows that the good or evil in man (as the ultimate subjective ground of the adoption of this or that maxim with reference to the moral law) is termed innate only in this sense, that it is posited as the ground antecedent to every use of freedom in experience. . . .⁶⁷

⁶³Ibid., pp. 16-17.

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 25.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 27.

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 17.

Finally, the evil disposition is termed "radical" precisely because man must bear the responsibility for its presence in him. "Hence we can call this a natural propensity to evil, and as we must, after all, ever hold man himself responsible for it, we can further call it a 'radical' innate 'evil' in human nature (yet none the less brought upon us by ourselves)."⁶⁸

Finally, we must comment on the possibility of a "restoration . . . of the original predisposition to good."⁶⁹ Thus far we have established that man possesses a propensity towards evil which corrupts his Gesinnung. However, since man is commanded to attain the "good," it must be possible for him to do so, ". . . duty bids us do this (i.e. become good), and duty demands nothing of us which we cannot do."⁷⁰ Therefore, there must be some way for man to reorient his Gesinnung and become morally good by adopting maxims which affirm the priority of the moral law. Kant confesses that this is a problem which is not easily solved. "How it is possible for a naturally evil man to make himself a good man wholly surpasses our comprehension for how can a bad tree bring forth good fruit?"⁷¹ Although he obviously did not feel confident that he had an entirely satisfactory explanation for man's moral regeneration, Kant did suggest that it must be understood as a "revolution" or "rebirth."⁷² That is, man's Gesinnung must be

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 28.

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 40.

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 43.

⁷¹Ibid., p. 40.

⁷²Ibid., p. 43.

reversed from its orientation towards the subordination of the moral law to a new perspective which recognizes the priority of this law. Kant views this revolution as being effected by the individual although once again he admits his failure to fully comprehend the mechanics of this self-renewal.

This, then, is Kant's explanation of "radical innate evil in human nature." Evil is freely chosen by man. Nevertheless, this evil is universal and thus can be predicated of all men. Through Willkur man freely chooses to orient his Gesinnung towards the adoption of maxims which subordinate the moral law to natural incentives. Thereby, man's will becomes morally evil. This evil, though "in human nature," is attributable to man's free choice and is, therefore, moral evil. Despite the possession of this "radical evil" man is commanded to follow the "categorical imperative" by reorienting his Gesinnung. This can only be accomplished through a personal "rebirth."

III. THE ISSUE OF RECONCILIATION

As stated earlier, Kant held that we are obligated to do only what we are able to do. Thus, the reality of moral experience demands that man is a free and responsible agent,

. . . the moral principle itself serves as a principle of the deduction of an inscrutable faculty which no experience can prove This is the faculty of freedom, which the moral law, . . . shows to be not only possible but actual The moral law is, in fact, a law of causality through freedom and thus a law of a supersensuous nature.⁷³

In the first section of the thesis, a definition was suggested of this problematical concept of freedom. It was concluded that for man to be genuinely free, in the Kantian sense, his will must be viewed as a "causa noumenon," capable of initiating events in the "phenomenal" world, while at the same time immune from determination by external influences and antecedent occurrences (i.e. the will of man must be spontaneous). Additionally, the categorical and "a priori" status of the moral law requires that man's "fullest" freedom be defined not merely as the spontaneous exercise of Willkur but also as the autonomous dictates of Wille. That is, man realizes his "fullest" freedom and humanity when Willkur spontaneously chooses the autonomous incentive of Wille and fulfills the categorical imperative by adopting maxims which are consistent with that imperative out of pure respect for the moral law.

In the second section of the thesis we articulated another significant Kantian notion: "radical innate evil in human nature."

⁷³ Kant, Critique of Practical Reason, pp. 48-49.

Here Kant appeared to portray the universal condition of man as being one of pervasive moral corruption. That is, all men have chosen to subjugate the dictates of the moral law to the demands of the "natural" impulses. By insisting that this is a universal, innate and inextirpable condition of man, Kant has been accused by some of falling into a contradiction which is similar to the antinomy between natural law and freedom. It is charged that Kant defines man's moral condition in such a way that he (i.e. man) is morally determined, and this is, indeed, as great a problem for Kantian ethics as is the issue of man's determination within the realm of nature. The task of this final section is, therefore, to consider carefully the implications of both Kant's definition of freedom and his definition of radical evil in order to discover whether they are, in fact, irreconcilable, or whether Freeman is correct in his belief that "Kant's understanding of human freedom comes to its fullest expression in his doctrine of radical evil."⁷⁴

One place in Kant's discussion of radical evil at which it might seem that Kant is committed to a view of man which denies moral autonomy, is in his treatment of man's "sensuous nature."⁷⁵ It has been suggested that because the "sensuous nature" motivates man to adopt other incentives into his maxim than the moral law, it must be considered as a predisposition towards evil since the moral law requires that it (i.e. the moral law) be adopted as the "sole incentive." Moreover, since Kant defines the "sensuous nature" as a given part of man's personality, this nature must be considered as an orientation towards

⁷⁴Donald Freeman, Radical Evil, p. 7.

⁷⁵Kant, Religion, pp. 21-23.

evil for which man is not responsible. Therefore, man is determined to be evil in that an essential part of his personality is, by definition, oriented towards evil.⁷⁶

However, upon a closer inspection of the text, it becomes clear that Kant's definition of man's sensuous nature does not in fact commit him to this position of moral determinism (or perhaps more correctly, moral predeterminism). The evil in man is not the result of his adopting maxims which include the incentives of the sensuous nature. Rather, it is the result of man's choosing to give the moral law a lower priority than the natural incentives.

Hence the distinction between a good man and one who is evil cannot lie in the difference between the incentives which they adopt into their maxim (not in the content of the maxim), but rather must depend upon subordination (the form of the maxim), i.e. which of the two incentives he makes the condition of the other. Consequently man (even the best is evil only in that he reverses the moral order of the incentives when he adopts them into his maxim. He adopts, indeed, the moral law along with the law of self-love; yet when he becomes aware that they cannot remain in a par with each other but that one must be subordinated to the other as its supreme condition, he makes the incentive of self-love and its inclinations the condition of obedience to the moral law; whereas, on the contrary, the latter, as the supreme condition of the satisfaction of the former, ought to have been adopted into the universal maxim of the will as the sole incentive.⁷⁷

It would seem, then, that Silber is right in his conclusion that, "Many moralists and theologians have sought the condition or occasion of evil in man's sensible nature. Kant, however, explicitly rejects this position and argues that man's sensible nature, neither evil in itself nor the occasion of evil, is good and worthy of fulfillment."⁷⁸

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This opinion was advanced by the author of this thesis in an earlier paper on this topic.

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Kant, Religion, pp. 31-32.

⁷⁸

Silber, "Ethical Significance," p. cxii.

Thus, if man's sensuous nature does not contradict moral freedom, any contradiction between Kant's doctrines of radical evil and moral autonomy must be found elsewhere. However, the search for such a contradiction ultimately proves fruitless, because Kant was very well aware of the danger of contradicting himself and skillfully avoided it. This is not to say that Kant's concept of radical evil or his concept of moral autonomy is thoroughly satisfactory (we shall have more to say about this later), but it is to say that Kant defines these two terms, and particularly "radical evil," in such a way as to systematically avoid any contradiction of freedom. At every crucial point where Kant comes close to defining radical evil such that a contradiction with moral autonomy would be generated, he demonstrates a clear understanding of this threat. At first glance, the introduction of the term "radical innate evil in human nature" seems to present genuine difficulties for moral freedom, but after Kant's definition of this term is understood, the difficulties are resolved. For instance, we generally consider something which is "innate" as something which is "given." Indeed, Kant defines man's evil as "innate" in the sense that this evil "is posited as the ground antecedent to every use of freedom in experience."⁷⁹ But he gives this definition only after clearly stating that the evil in man is attributable to "man himself" as its "author."⁸⁰ Therefore, man's evil is not "innate" in the "given" sense, but only in some special sense which Kant, himself, defines. And this definition precludes the possibility that "innate" evil in man can contradict man's moral freedom, because Kant makes this

⁷⁹Kant, Religion, p. 17.

⁸⁰Ibid.

innate evil in man the result of man's freedom (i.e. man is the author of it). Now, it is not clear how man is responsible for this evil, if the evil is "antecedent to every use of freedom in experience." Kant attempts to resolve this problem by stating that it is a ". . . contradiction to seek the temporal origin of man's moral character, so far as it is considered as contingent, since this character signifies the ground of the exercise of freedom; this ground (like the determining ground of the free will generally) must be sought in purely rational representations."⁸¹ Therefore, Kant believed that man could be held responsible for the evil in him, while at the same time this evil could be described as "antecedent to every use of freedom in experience." While the adequacy of this explanation may be doubtful, nevertheless, the crucial point is that Kant defines 'innate' in such a way that it does not violate the concept of moral freedom by being beyond man's control.

The same situation arises with respect to Kant's definition of "human nature." Rather than something "given" to man for which he bears no responsibility, "human nature" for Kant is, "the necessary antecedent of every act apparent to the senses. But this subjective ground, again, must itself always be an expression of freedom . . ."⁸² As above, the Kantian reconciliation of these two apparently contradictory assertions that man is morally responsible for his "human nature" and that this nature is "the necessary antecedent of every act apparent to the senses," lies in Kant's insistence that man's moral character does not have a temporal origin. Therefore,

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 35.

⁸² Kant, Religion, p. 17.

responsibility for "human nature" can be attributed to man, despite the fact that this nature is necessarily antecedent to every temporal act. Again, the philosophical efficacy of Kant's defense might be called into question, but the salient point remains that Kant defines 'innate' and 'human nature' such that their definitions do not deny the reality of moral autonomy.

We conclude therefore that Kant's definition of radical evil is not in fact contradictory with his notion of moral freedom. But this is not all that needs to be said about the problem, for at the same time that Kant qualifies his definition of radical evil in order to avoid contradicting moral freedom he attempts to do full justice to his notion of radical evil. Thus Kant sought an understanding of radical evil which not only fails to violate moral freedom but also fairly represents what Kant took to be man's universal, sinful condition. Therefore, if any criticism of Kant's two concepts is to be given, it ought to be centered not around the incompatibility of radical evil and moral freedom but around the adequacy of the former as a meaningful and cogent description of man's state.

However, before we consider the adequacy of Kant's doctrine of radical evil, we must point out a possible contradiction with another of Kant's metaphysical postulates besides the postulate of human freedom. In the Critique of Practical Reason, Kant begins with moral experience and derives from it the "a priori" truth of the moral law. From the certainty of the moral law, Kant derives three metaphysical postulates: (1) human freedom, (2) the immortality of the soul, (3) the existence of God.⁸³ The argument for the immortality

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Kant, Critique of Practical Reason, p. 126 and following.

of the soul is rather simple. Kant suggests that the attainment of the highest good is a necessary condition of the moral law. However, the attainment of the highest good implies as its necessary condition, the "complete fitness of intentions to the moral law." Since, the attainment of the highest good is a necessary condition of the moral law, the necessary condition (i.e. "the complete fitness of intentions to the moral law") of this necessary condition (i.e. the attainment of the highest good) is also necessary. But, this "complete fitness" implies "holiness" which is unattainable in this life. Therefore, the attainment of "holiness" requires the existence of an "endless progress to that complete fitness." In turn, this "endless progress" requires (1) "an infinitely enduring existence" and (2) the "personality of the same rational being." Taken together, these two characteristics define the immortality of the soul. In short, the immortality of the soul is proved by showing that it stands at the end of a series of necessary conditions ultimately traced back to the "a priori" existence of the moral law.

However, in the Religion and specifically in his discussion of Gesinnung, Kant suggests that there is a gap between man's moral disposition and his actions which are carried out through his "sensuous nature."

That is, if a man reverses, by a single unchangeable decision, that highest ground of his maxims whereby he was an evil man, . . . he is, so far as his principle and cast of mind are concerned, a subject susceptible of goodness, . . . But in the judgment of men, who can appraise themselves and the strength of their maxims only by the ascendancy which they win over their sensuous nature in time, this change must be regarded as nothing but an everlasting struggle toward the better . . .

⁸⁴Kant, Religion, p. 43.

The reversal of man's Gesinnung from the propensity towards evil to an orientation towards the good is the key to moral goodness. It is in fact, the essence of moral goodness, for Kant. However, even when this reversal or revolution is effected it somehow fails to manifest itself in overt actions due to man's sensuous nature. Thus, man sees himself as progressing "toward the better," when in the sight of God, he has already attained goodness.⁸⁵

However, this calls into question the entire notion of the connection between Gesinnung and action as it relates to moral status. Presumably for Kant, actions are irrelevant to morality because "good" actions can result from evil maxims. Therefore a man's moral status is entirely dependent upon the inclination of his Gesinnung. However, if this is the case one wonders why Kant thinks it necessary for man to possess immortality in order to attain "holiness." Kant's proof for the immortality of the soul rests upon the assumption that since holiness is commanded by the moral law, it must be attainable. But, since it is not attainable in the "world of sense," the immortality of the soul is necessary to fulfill the moral law. The key to this proof and its application to Gesinnung is the definition of "holiness." There are two alternative ways of understanding this term. The first is to make "holiness" synonymous with the concept of a "holy will" which Kant defines as a "will incapable of any maxims which conflict with the moral law."⁸⁶ However, if Kant intended to use "holiness" in this way when applied to man's moral development, then it would seem that the immortality of the soul is totally irrelevant to the attainment

⁸⁵Ibid.

⁸⁶Kant, Critique of Practical Reason, p. 32.

of such a state. The attainment of "holiness" is represented as an evolutionary process which requires an infinite amount of time to effect; thus, the necessity of the immortality of the soul. But, if "holiness" is understood as man's becoming "incapable" of adopting any maxims which conflict with the moral law, then what is necessary is not an infinite amount of time for man's moral evolution but rather a miraculous event. To make man "holy" in this sense would require a supernatural act which would change the essence of man's personality. At times Kant comes close to suggesting that this is exactly what is necessary, but if this is the case then there is no reason why the immortality of the soul is essential. The other alternative is, that Kant understands "holiness" as something different from a "holy will" when he describes "holiness" as the complete fitness of the will to the moral law:⁸⁷ namely holiness is synonymous with what Kant describes in the Religion as man's "rebirth" or "revolution in . . . man's disposition"(i.e. Gesinnung).⁸⁸ That is, holiness consists in man's reversing his basic moral orientation from evil towards the good and adopting maxims out of pure respect for the moral law (i.e. man's becoming morally good). However, Kant represents this "revolution" as a possibility and even a fact in "this life." And it is precisely because this revolution is realizable in man's mortal existence that there is a conflict between man's interior goodness (i.e. in the Gesinnung) and his actions. Thus, if the attainment of holiness means the achievement of moral goodness, then there is no reason to posit an immortal soul because men can evidently reverse his Gesinnung before

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 126.

⁸⁸ Kant, Religion, p. 43.

death and thus become holy. The only thing that is not perfected is the correlation between Gesinnung and actions, which, causes man to see himself as progressing towards the good rather than already having attained it. But, as we have seen, actions are incidental to morality and therefore do not effect man's moral goodness or holiness. If man's actions did effect man's Gesinnung then one could see why holiness could only be attained in an after life in which man is free from the limitations of the sensuous nature. But, since the external actions of the sensuous nature are not influential or even relevant in the determination of moral goodness or holiness, then the rationale behind the immortality of the soul is undermined. By separating morality from man's sensuous acts Kant seems to contradict one of his three fundamental, metaphysical hypotheses: the immortality of the soul. However, the immortality of the soul is not crucial for Kant's ethical system as a whole, and therefore the alleged contradiction between it and radical evil is serious but not fatal. We must now return to our discussion of the adequacy of Kant's understanding of radical evil.

The first thing that ought to be noted is the means by which Kant establishes the fact of "radical evil." Kant writes, "That such a corrupt propensity must indeed be rooted in man need not be formally proved in view of the multitude of crying examples which experience . . . puts before our eyes."⁸⁹ In other words, the certainty of the existence of radical evil is established by experience. However, appeals to experience or history generally demonstrate nothing more than personal

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 28.

preference and are conclusive only for those who are predisposed towards accepting the very conclusion under consideration. That is, if one is inclined to believe that there is "radical innate evil in human nature," then one will most likely see this belief confirmed in experience. If, on the other hand, one is not inclined towards such a belief, experience is broad enough to afford persuasive "evidence" to deny the existence of such evil. Of course, experience could never establish a strictly logical connection between "radical evil" and human nature. Kant saw this and was content with the informality and limitations of such a proof, " . . . even if the existence of this propensity to evil in human nature can be demonstrated by experiential proofs of the real opposition, in time, of man's will to the law, such proofs do not teach us the essential character, of that propensity or the ground of this opposition."⁹⁰ But it is not clear that an appeal to experience can be regarded as forceful even if taken as the most informal of philosophical proofs for "radical innate evil in human nature." Nevertheless this is the only proof which Kant offers on behalf of a view of man which proposes to locate evil at the very core of man's personality. If Kant had appealed to experience to verify the fact that men commit some moral misdeeds, then his proof would be more palatable. But Kant not only wished to establish this, but also that all men possess a fundamental propensity towards evil. It would seem that the establishment of this conclusion requires a much more stringent proof than the one Kant offers.⁹¹

⁹⁰Ibid., pp. 30-31.

⁹¹It is, however, possible that the general religious climate of Kant's time would have made the appeal to experience more powerful, both for Kant and his contemporaries, than it is for us today.

The final point which we would like to make with respect to Kant's doctrine of radical evil relates to its ultimate weakness. To say that man is plagued by "radical innate evil in human nature" is to make a very strong and far reaching comment upon the nature of man. Indeed, the alleged contradiction between radical evil and moral freedom is almost obvious if we take Kant's description of radical evil at "face value." However, as we examine more closely the way in which Kant defines the terms in his definition of radical evil, it becomes clear that what seemed to be a very serious charge against man's nature, is in fact little more than the mere recognition that all men are immoral to a limited extent. Kant writes, "Man (even the most wicked) does not, under any maxim whatsoever, repudiate the moral law in the manner of a rebel (renouncing obedience to it)."⁹² And yet, this is precisely what many theologians and philosophers (e.g. St. Paul, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, etc.) who hold to a view of man approximating radical evil would suggest: namely, that the radical nature of man's sin lies precisely in the fact that he does "repudiate the moral law in the manner of a rebel." Yet Kant felt it necessary to reject this possibility because he was, as we have already suggested, intensely aware of the possibility of violating his fundamental ethical presupposition: human freedom. "Kant, like Plato before him, explicitly considered the data which seemed contrary to his theory and, like Plato, used his theory to dismiss the contravening evidence as illusory. He gave his theory momentary support, but he exposed its ultimate weakness."⁹³ The ultimate

⁹²Kant, Religion, p. 31.

⁹³Silber, "The Ethical Significance," p. cxxix.

weakness in Kant's understanding of radical evil is, that for him evil is, in fact, neither radical, innate or a part of human nature in the common understanding of these terms. Rather, Kantian radical evil seems to represent an attempt on Kant's part to remain faithful to the religious tradition of his time. But, Kant's basic concern was never as much religious as it was ethical. And as it was clear to him that a strong definition of radical evil would indeed contradict moral autonomy, he qualified his definition in order to remove the contradiction. The result is a consistent view of moral autonomy and radical evil, but one which does not do justice to a view of man which could appropriately be described as "radical, innate evil in human nature."

Moral freedom, understood as the union of spontaneity and autonomy, and radical evil, understood as Kant defines it, are in no way contradictory. Nevertheless, the issue of their compatibility outside of their Kantian definitions remains an unanswered question. And the consistency of Kantian religion with Kantian ethics is not likely to be of great satisfaction to those who wish to take the notion of radical evil as seriously and as literally as they do the concept of moral autonomy.

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