

Problem of Radical Evil and Kant's Turn to Religion: An Analysis from Pragmatic Perspective

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Abstract

One of the most significant works in the domain of philosophy of religion is Immanuel Kant's theory of radical evil which was published as an essay entitled as "On the Radical Evil in Human Nature" in 1792. Kant in his earlier works like "Ground Work of Metaphysics of Morals", "Critique of Practical Reason" emphasized on the issue of free will and opined that humans are free as far as controlled or determined by the moral laws. But Kant in his writings about religion expressed a radical approach to freedom by emphasizing good and evil. Kant emphasizing on the ineradicable propensity of human character thinks that radical evil is expressed through human behavior when human beings act against the moral law driven by natural inclination. At the same time, he introduced the concept of personal responsibility for the ground of a person's character. However, for Kant, theory of radical evil is of universal character still it lacks the evidence to support his claim hence it makes a stress within his own project of ethics. The introduction of the divine interference for humans to overcome the moral and religious issues, further, complicates this theory and thus it demands careful ethical perspectives. In this paper, we will discuss Kant's approach towards inevitable mystery and limitations of the theory of radical evil while addressing the pragmatic outlook of the doctrine on the basis of some contemporary reverberates on the conception of responsible freedom.

Keywords: Radical Evil, Propensity, Perversity, Christian Faith, Fall of Man

Introduction:

However, Kant's work in the domain of philosophy of religion got less attention by the ethicists in comparison to his work on Critiques still his book "Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason" (hereafter *Religion*) is succeeded to leave a long lasting impact on both the philosophers and theologians. At the same time, it encouraged the ethicists and theologians to have very critical insights to

prevailed religious customs and beliefs. One of the important point Kant raised in this book is the problem of radical evil that is human nature can go against the universal maxim of moral laws and perhaps it might bewildered many philosophers and critical thinkers. Grimm thinks that it is an ignominious move for Kant as he seems to be backing up the prevailed Christian ideology of original sin; hence it creates problem in respect to his irresolute foundation of the theory of radical evil (Grimm 162). Yet, Kant seems to be very much bewildered by such aspect of human character. Kant considers radical evil not merely as a part of religious issue but also as a very important part of ethical discourse which cannot be simply kept aside under the veil of noumena as it goes opposite direction to the nature to moral maxims. However, Kant analyzed the limits of human reason in his critiques still when considers God as one of the postulates of morality then it reverberates to have a practical perspective. Thus, considering God as one of the significant postulates of morality might lead him to accept that “morality inevitably leads to religion” (Kant, *Religion* 35). In “Religion” Kant did not seek to identify human free will with practical reason rather he considered “will” as one of the necessary element in the process of volition on the basis of which a person realizes himself as free. At the same time, it tries to sketch the boundaries of the intelligibility in the domain of moral religion. In the preface to *Religion on the Limits of Reason*, Kant wrote that he would begin his essay on evil because the central point of this work is very much connected to it. In fact, the explanation of radical evil cannot be separated from the main subject: the task of religion is to explore the possibility of an ethical-religious consciousness “within the limits of reason” (Gordon 246). As for the content and style of Religion, several issues must be addressed from the outset. First, Kant makes the fundamental claim here that morality necessarily leads to religion, a claim that may be philosophically problematic for a number of reasons. Second, Kant’s allusions to biblical stories may have contributed to the reader’s confusion. Some critics expressed disappointment at Kant’s reduction of religion to morality, while others questioned whether the book’s arguments and methodology could meet or even be consistent with Kant’s own very high standards of critic. In contrast to these two accusations, we understand that the unorthodox orientation of this work enabled Kant to deepen his study of morality and to discuss certain issues that were previously remained outside the scope, most importantly the problem of radical evil. Now, let us consider Kant’s Religion and concept of radical evil in detail.

The concept of radical evil and how Kant turns to religion:

It seems necessary to discuss the central theme of Kant’s “Religion” to adequately grasp the doctrine of radical evil. Kant’s “Religion” is actually not a book rather it is a combination of four essays on philosophy of religion, especially on Christian religious faith. “Religion” begins with an exposition of two commonly accepted but incomparable approaches. Firstly, it assumes that human existence started in good times but man’s moral declination “hurried

mankind from bad to worse with an accelerated descent” (Kant, *Religion* 10) The second approach contends that the world continuously moves in the opposite direction which is not good for the world or that “the predisposition to such a movement is discoverable in human nature” (Kant, *Religion* 15). Kant seems to be skeptical about this image of moral progress because he thinks that such a belief is in contradiction to our day to day experience. For Kant the moral dilemma between two hypotheses is “based on a disjunctive proposition: Man is either morally good or morally evil” (Kant, *Religion* 17). He further opines that human experience seems to support a middle path between these two points i.e., one extreme is that humans are neither essentially good nor bad or both at the same moment. After presenting these logical possibilities, Kant proceeds to explore an anthropological study looks for unveil that shrouds the mystery of our moral discourse.

When Kant’s book “Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason” brought in the doctrine of radical evil with a focus on propensity and imputable act, it seems to be paradoxical in nature and thus it attracts many criticisms for being inconsistent with Kant’s entire work on moral and religious philosophy. My aim is to show why the concept of radical evil plays a more important role in Kant’s moral theory than is commonly assumed. I argue that the concept of radical evil explains how agents may initially assume the responsibilities required by the moral law, yet tend to prioritize other motivations. By holding oneself responsible for the innate distance between incentives and laws, one becomes a truly moral person, although the person only takes responsibility for radical evil if she attributes it to her own freedom. Radical evil must therefore be understood as normative entity in the sense that in order to be responsible for our own moral state. Only through such acts of self-blame we can hold ourselves responsible for our moral failings, even though we did not choose to be imperfect creatures. In the second edition of “Religion”, Kant tried to reply to his critiques by stating that “only common morality is needed to understand the essentials of this text, without venturing in the practical reason, still less into that of theoretical reason” (Kant, *Religion* 41). Considering the practical implication of Kant’s response one might say that Kant perhaps desires to throw the message to his readers by his book “Religion” is to create a more comfortable platform for theologians and philosophers to engage in critical and constructive reflection on religion. It might solve the conflict between faith and reason. The deepest part of Kant’s analysis in religion is not the answer to this question about the origin of evil but the relationship between moral evil and human freedom, which is completely inexplicable for the same reason.

Kant’s Religion consists of four sections; in the first section Kant talked about the doctrine of radical evil along with one of the important aspect of Christian religious belief that is “fall of man”. In the second section, Kant looked for a reasonable way to get rid of the predicaments resulted from radical evil. Kant even considered Christ as an ideal moral being or archetype as presented in the

Bible. Third part of *Religion* consists of the discussion regarding “kingdom of God” which is considered as an ideal place for moral enthusiasm and where interaction between individuals occurs. In the final or fourth section of *Religion*, Kant Opined that religious belief or tradition, in his time, is not something related to ‘ought’ as it could not contemplate ethically enthusiastic beings under a community and on this ground Kant criticized religious institution and priests. Instead of such abject obedience Kant emphasized on morality and opined that religion can be best apprehended on morality. Hence Kant asserts that “morality inevitably leads to religion” (Kant, *Religion* 35). Kant’s morality in a broader sense comes under the domain of theology which disseminates religious ideologies in the light of human moral endeavors and thus it becomes cause to criticize Kant for his view about religion and religious organizations. Kant himself recognized the difficulties regarding his introduction to the doctrine of radical evil and the possible way out to get rid of such situations. With the introduction of radical evil Kant brings in the divine interference which makes a backlash towards his entire ethical understanding. Two important aspect of the question of radical evil, perhaps, might be the problem regarding the universality of radical evil and Kant’s ethical rigorism. Kant tried to achieve the moral rigorism through his concept of categorical imperative. But Kant remained ambiguous or fell in difficulties regarding the universality problem of radical evil. However, those who were defending his religion as something that adheres to Christian doctrine found solace in the similarities he drew from the stories of the Biblical account.

Kant’s evil and moral weakness:

Kant tries to explain in “Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason” why a person’s will isn’t always in complete accordance with morality but it is marked by an internal struggle where the dimensions of duty and response diverge within the will itself. Nothing in the human will ensures that the moral law, the will’s objectively obligating moment, and incentive, the will’s subjectively responding moment, coincide. The will is in charge of either agreeing with or disagreeing with the moral claims placed upon it. Kant argues that this disjunction results from the fact that the moral law or the desires of self-love can both be the subjective grounds that determine the will. In this regard, Kant claims that “The law rather imposes itself on him irresistibly, because of his moral predisposition; and if no other incentive were at work against it, he would also incorporate it into his supreme maxim as sufficient determination of his power of choice, i.e. he would be morally good. He is, however, also dependent on the incentives of his sensuous nature because of his equally innocent natural predisposition, and he incorporates them too into his maxim” (McMullin 66). The true source of evil is revealed in an act of pure wisdom, we are not to search for it by listing all of the moods and wishes. Kant’s view that the real threat is moral evil as opposed to natural evil as he states, “Natural inclinations, considered in themselves, are good, that is, not a matter of reproach, and it is not only futile to want to extirpate

them but to do so would also be harmful and blameworthy” (Kant, *Religion* 51). Kant again opines that a man is evil not because his activities rather these actions can be inferred from bad or evil maxims. (Kant, *Religion* 51)

Evil refers to such a character trait of humans that is driven by bad will and results in bad behavior to others. The term “evil” has various meanings in social scenarios. From a religious perspective, it has a certain ontological basis. Evil is a fore that is driven by bad intention of harming people and causing them pain. In opposite of evil we imagine that there is always a benevolent character trait. In the domain of traditional philosophy, this, combined with the problem of rational evidence against religious ones, has led to eternal debates about the conflict between good and evil. Kant’s concept of evil on the other hand is not merely an ontologically grounded spirit but also a moral weakness. The term radical adds more significance to the idea of weakness in the moral sense. It is radical evil because it affects the moral incentives, “the ground of all moral maxims” (Kant, *Religion* 59). This explains that radical evil affects us in two ways, firstly it hits the heart of all moral maxims and secondly it ceases the way out of it. Yet, Kant is quite hopeful since human nature also enjoys autonomy or free will. In this context, Kant quoted from the Apostle (St. Paul), assumes that “there is none righteous in the spirit of the Law, no, not one” (Kant, *Religion* 61).

What the Apostle indicates to the impossibility of being righteous without the divine interference, for none can truly follow the law in its totality for one to be upright. Apostle mentions the difficulties in becoming righteous without the intervention of God, since no one can perfectly obey the moral law to become an ethical person. Kant argues that this claim might be universally valid if people have a fundamentally evil nature and therefore tend to turn to either the side of good or evil at some point. According to Kant, this evil in human nature is innate and is, so to speak, exists since birth as it is stated that “not that birth itself is the cause” (Kant, *Religion* 47). To explain this, Kant developed three types of predispositions; those are as follows: the predisposition to animality, the predisposition to humanity and the predisposition to personhood. The predisposition to animality encourages self-preservation through the reproduction of the species and encourages for societal coexistence with other human being whereas predisposition to humanity talks about self-love and predisposition to personality talks about inclination to respect moral laws. First two tendencies lead Kant to assume that the disposition of self-love takes precedence, while the third makes one feel like respecting the moral law. The key point here is that it is not sufficient to simply feel like one has respect for the moral law.

In this context, L. R. Pasternack also argues that this disposition to character is related to what Kant calls, “the species of the good” (Pasternack 96). The question that still remains is whether predispositions for good are sufficient to counteract a fundamentally evil human nature. But there is also a predisposition for goodness and we are shown to have the capacity to willingly obey the moral law. Kant also argues that in addition to predispositions, there are also

“tendencies”. To Kant, propensity is “the subjective ground of the possibility of an inclination insofar as this possibility is contingent for humanity in general” (Kant, *Religion* 52). It is also important to note that Kant acknowledged that both dispositions are innate. Pasternack further believes that the interpretation of the tendency to evil represents one of the central questions for Kant’s interpreters. The grounds for the tendency of choosing evil can be divided into three degrees “what I would, that I do not” (Kant, *Religion* 53). This statement of also confirms Kant’s clarity regarding the claims of in the Bible. In a sense, Kant indicates towards making the law a maxim, since the human heart is corrupt and more inclined to evil than good. The second stage is the “impurity” of the human heart. It is impure in the sense that it cannot accept the law alone as a sufficient incentive, but it is not a duty for duty’s sake and also depends on other incentives. Finally, Kant considers “fall” as the “perversity of the human heart, for it reverses the ethical order as regards the incentives of a free power of choice” (Kant, *Religion* 54).

Practical approach towards the doctrine of radical evil:

What we have discussed so far concerns the manifestation of the exercise of free will which can lead to evil or good deeds depending on the nature of the tendency. The ambiguity of the nature of inclination might be considered with universal significance and it makes the doctrine of radical evil in religion a complex topic. This radical evil nature is an innate tendency, but according to Kant, we are responsible for its manifestation, since we are the agents of such manifestations and acts. Kant’s radical evil incorporates the idea that the self itself is evil. Evil is radical in precisely this sense: it permeates the deepest roots of the self. There is no self at the center of pure, practical reason, separate from radical evil. There is no self in the innermost mind. Therefore, we must avoid the idea of a metaphysically separate self that at some point mistakenly committed an evil act. Instead, evil reaches into the deepest ground of the self that works in this way and is present in since birth. Individual character is our destiny or necessity that we are who we are. We are bound to it, but the character itself is not bound to anything. The question is whether this claim of Kant affects his commitment to moral rigorism. At the same time, if the tendency to evil is innate, this suggests a universal claim. According to Kant, this is important because, although the tendency to evil may have an innate nature and affect the core of moral maxims, its introduction presupposes in us a plausible idea of a dichotomy between good and evil natures.

Arguably, Kant makes it clear that rational autonomy is a crucial element in his ethical discourse but if radical evil is indeed universal then the assumption that tendencies are in the same place at an unconditioned level is inconsistent. In this context, Kant claims is that “This evil is radical, since it corrupts the ground of all maxims; as natural propensity, it is also not to be extirpated through human forces, for this could only happen through good maxims...something that cannot take if the subjective supreme ground of all maxims is presupposed to be

corrupted” (Kant, *Religion* 59). Kant asserts that human beings are generally essentially evil. At the same time, he also claims that humans cannot be “be morally good in some part and at the same time evil in others” (Kant, *Religion* 49). It does not have any middle way. Humans are either good or evil which is called Kantian rigorism. Perhaps F Schiller and W. von Goethe rightly assumed that Kant, in his attempt to understand Christian doctrine, “fallen nature and original Sin” (Bernstein 25) And Kant tried to maintain an ethical commitment to rigor in religion, but this was unconvincing due to his notorious radical tendency to evil. Here again, the basis of his moral argument is based on the universal assertion of moral maxims.

As Kant affirms two types of innate ideas and therefore the radical tendency to evil must be viewed from an acquired point of view. But the reason Kant was unable to give a clear picture of the problem is that at its root is unconditioned action that it is “woven into human nature” (Kant, 1998, p. 54). He further asserts that “woven into our nature can simultaneously be a freely chosen deed” (Kant, *Religion* 95). R. J. Bernstein might perhaps right in asserting that “Kant is at war with himself” (Kant, *Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view* 26) by introducing the doctrine of radical evil. Wood states that, “the doctrine of radical evil is anthropological, not theological. Its basis is not religious authority but a naturalistic anthropology (Kant, *Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view* 291). The reason for Wood’s anthropological understanding founded in the following opinion of Kant that “Envy, addition to power, avarice and the malignant inclinations associated with these, assail his nature, which on its own is undemanding, as soon as he is among human beings nor is it necessary to assume that these are sunk into evil and are examples that lead him astray: it suffices that they are there, that they surround him, and that they are human beings, and they will mutually corrupt each other’s moral disposition and make one another evil” (Kant, *Religion* 105). In summary, the main problem with Kant’s doctrine of radical evil is his inability to provide a clear explanation and solid evidence for this doctrine. Nevertheless, since evil acts are real in human society and it makes sense from a practical point of view without actually adhering to Kant’s strict structure or themes. Whether he was committed to ethical rigorism or to the universality of the tendency to radical evil, the impact of this doctrine on his ethical discourse troubled Kant. However, what is perhaps noteworthy is that the seriousness Kant portrayed in the doctrine of radical evil shows his marked tendency towards religious ideas and teachings, even when he disagrees with the “fall” of Christianity and its ideas, in order to give a rational justification for sin (Rimai 73).

Conclusion:

Considering the above, we think that Enlightenment thinkers who fear that Kant’s radical evil is a departure from the basic Kantian scheme of rational morality are actually bewildered by the false hope that his idea of a universal tendency to evil is more morally discouraging than the fact that pure altruism and perfect

goodness are impossible. The question seems to be not so much whether Kant's propensity to evil is truly universal rather it is really evil from the point of view of common sense. Even more complicated is that if we discover that Kant still believed there was a way to get rid of the tendency to evil through a single, unalterable decision to overturn the supreme reason of his maxim that he was an evil man and thereby become a new man that attracts man. Kant seems unfortunately unhelpful in explaining how exactly this choice is possible when our nature is already impaired by the choice to subordinate good maxims. But such a lack does not replace the fact that there is no need to blame Kant for proposing the opposite belief about Christian original sin. Indeed, we might think that weakness and impurity or evil in the Kantian sense, are essentially inevitable even for the best among us. In this respect, Kant's theory of radical evil still seems consistent and well-suited to contemporary theology that is not based on Augustine's idea of original sin. Kant looks for a stoic pursuit of a ethically good life that corresponds to the paradigm of moral goodness presented by the Christian. The human nature is characterized by a moral gap between man and God. Without rejecting religion, Kant enlightens his readers by leading them aside from dogmatic judgments about sin.

For this reason, it is very difficult to provide a solution to the problem of radical evil. Evil is so intimately tied up with the self-constitutive foundations of the human nature that it can be overcome if it turns radically inward. On the other hand, it is clear from the above discussion that Kant's appeal to Bible is not dogmatic and it does not explain Kant's inconceivability of evil. Kant leaves the balancing act at the border to his religious readers, who can ask without apology or evasion about the possibility of a qualitatively different ethics that combines the powers of mere reason with the powers of imaginative history.

From this point of view, it is better to leave the doctrine of radical evil and its tendencies in the realm of mystery. At the same time, given its apparent prevalence in our society, we can at best assume that it is, if not universal in itself, then at least widespread. Nevertheless, this doctrine was widespread even before the "birth of our freedom". It is interesting that Kant did not raise the doctrine of radical evil outside of religion. Whatever the reason, one of the most important and plausible explanations may be his intention to leave room for belief through his moral theory. Humans have moral tendencies and are rational beings, and while temptations and evil deeds are not immune to anyone, they are not inconceivable to anyone either. Thus, a practical perspective on the doctrine of a fundamental evil nature has its basis in the manifestation of such behavior within the human community.

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