

# Chapter 1 Kant: The Perversion of Freedom

Towards the end of his lecture course on the history of philosophy, delivered in Berlin during the 1820s, the dominant thinker of the age paid homage to the achievement of a great predecessor. It was Immanuel Kant's decisive insight, Hegel declared, that

for the will . . . there is no other aim than that derived from itself, the aim of its freedom. It is a great advance when the principle is established that freedom is the last hinge on which man turns, a highest possible pinnacle, which allows nothing further to be imposed upon it; thus man bows to no authority, and acknowledges no obligations, where his freedom is not respected.<sup>1</sup>

Hegel's encomium still succeeds in conveying the original impact of Kant's thought, the sense of a new philosophical dawn which the Critical Philosophy aroused amongst contemporaries. From the first, Kant's philosophy was recognized as revolutionary – and in a more than merely metaphorical sense. For as Hegel, with thirty years' hindsight, insisted in his lectures, the principle that inspired the storming of the Bastille, the principle of rational self-determination, was also the essential principle of Kant's thinking. The contrast between Hegel's homeland and France consisted only in the fact that the principle had been developed by philosophers in Germany, whereas across the Rhine a precipitate attempt had been made to bring political reality into line with it: 'The fanaticism which characterized the freedom which was put into the hands of the people was frightful. In Germany the same principle asserted the rights of consciousness on its own account, but it has been worked out in a merely theoretic way.'<sup>2</sup> Hegel is critical of the extent to which Kant's thought still embodies what he sees as the shallow rationalism of the Enlightenment.

But he deeply respects Kant's insight into the status of autonomy, as an aspiration intrinsic to human self-consciousness in its capacity to rise above all natural determinations: 'there is an infinite disclosed within the human breast. The satisfying part in Kant's philosophy is that the truth is at least set within the heart; and hence I acknowledge that, and that alone, which is in conformity with my determined nature.'<sup>3</sup>

For Hegel and his contemporaries, what Kant had demonstrated was that human beings do not possess freedom as a particular capacity (the power to choose a course of action – or to refrain from action – spontaneously, without any prior determination). Freedom must be construed as autonomy, as the capacity to think and act in accordance with principles whose validity we establish for ourselves through insight. And freedom in this sense is the rational core of human subjectivity as such. For Kant, however, there are different ways of acting in accordance with a self-determined principle; not just any action is free in the full meaning of the word. If the principle we accept tells us how we should act in order best to fulfil a specific need or desire, then the motive for our adherence to the principle stems from the need or desire which we happen to have. In this case we follow what Kant terms a 'hypothetical imperative': a command which tells us that *if* we want to achieve *b*, then we should do *a*. But Kant also thinks we are capable of acting in accordance with a *categorical imperative* – an unconditional command always to conform to a specific principle of action. We experience imperatives as categorical, however, only when they do not enjoin us to achieve any particular end. For questions can always be raised about the desirability of an end, however intuitively appealing it may be. To regard an imperative as unconditionally binding because of its particular content would be irrational, for this would amount to saying that I should do whatever I am ordered to do, simply *because* I am ordered to do it. Hence, an imperative which obliges us in detachment from any determinate end can do so only because of its form. If I obey an imperative *because of* its general form, I am doing what any other rational being (any being capable of understanding itself as an agent seeking to act – not just randomly – but on the basis of a rule) should do in the circumstances to which the imperative responds. In such cases, it is the universal form of the imperative as such that determines the action, independent of highly variable considerations of personal desire or interest. In Kant's terminology, pure reason itself becomes practical.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore – and this is Kant's next revolutionary step – 'practical reason', so understood, is the expression of morality. Duty in the moral sense can be defined in terms of adherence to a maxim, a subjectively chosen principle of action, which we can simultaneously will in good faith to be a universal law.

In other words, when we obey the categorical imperative, we act in a manner which we can will all other rational beings to adopt in the same circumstances, regardless of their particular social identities, desires, or aspirations. Of course, if all rational beings *were* to act consistently on the categorical imperative, their actions would harmonize with each other, since each would be acting in conformity with the will of all others.<sup>5</sup> As Kant expresses it, when we act morally, we think of ourselves as legislating as members of a ‘kingdom of ends’, an association in which the freedom of each individual could coexist with that of every other individual, without conflict or violence. We can see how the idea of the categorical imperative connects up with habitual expectations of what morality should achieve.

But there is a problem. In the society which we inhabit, to act on the categorical imperative does not necessarily bring us closer to happiness – indeed, in many circumstances we have reason to suspect just the opposite, since we cannot rely on our fellow human beings not treating our conscientiousness as exploitable naivety. At the same time, Kant regards the desire for happiness is an entirely legitimate, natural, and inevitable human desire, given that we are finite and embodied, as well as rational and reflective, beings. Or, to put this in another way, Kant considers that freedom cannot be fully realized if it forever pulls against the demands of our pre-given nature. Yet only if practical reason came thoroughly to imbue the way society is organized, and hence shaped our desires, could this conflict between reason and nature be overcome. Ultimately, then, Kant’s conception of practical reason entails that the world itself be progressively transformed to make the full realization of freedom possible. The achievement of collective autonomy, in the form of an ethical commonwealth, a social and political condition in which the autonomy of each person could be achieved without the sacrifice of happiness or self-fulfilment, is the fundamental project of the human species.

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Given this exhilarating, emancipatory thrust of the Critical Philosophy, it is hardly surprising that some of Kant’s most distinguished contemporaries were dismayed when, in 1793, he published an essay on ‘On the Radical Evil in Human Nature’ in the *Berlinische Monatschrift*. For Kant began his latest contribution to the leading organ of the German Enlightenment by contrasting the ancient belief that the world has fallen into evil, from an original state of perfection, with the ‘opposite heroic opinion, which has gained standing only among philosophers and, in our days, especially among the pedagogues:

that the world steadfastly (though hardly noticeably) forges ahead in the very opposite direction, namely from bad to better'.<sup>6</sup> Whenever Kant juxtaposes the arguments and proofs devised by philosophers with the deep-seated convictions of humankind, the comparison is likely to be to the detriment of the former. And such an unfavourable contrast is evidently intended here. If the optimistic outlook of some of his fellow intellectuals is meant to apply to *moral* goodness, Kant argues, as opposed to the progress of civilization, then they 'have not drawn this view from experience, for the history of all times attests far too powerfully against it'.<sup>7</sup>

Kant's refusal to equate moral progress with the progress of civilization must have a powerful resonance for us, living in the aftermath of the twentieth century and at the inauspicious beginning of the twenty-first, even though it may have bewildered some of his Enlightenment contemporaries. The devastating discrepancy between the two was registered early in the previous century, as artistic and intellectual movements from Dada to Freudian psychoanalysis responded to the unprecedented slaughter of the First World War; it was emphasized at its end – albeit in indirect ways – by the more melancholy versions of postmodernism. At the purely technological level, the exponential growth of productive capacity, and the power wielded through science and its applications, have far outstripped the capacity of humankind to use them responsibly. But economic and cultural development also often appear to intensify inequality and injustice, and the alienation and hostility between human groups and individuals, rather than reducing them.

At first glance, the upshot of Kant's reflections, of his counterposing of two visions of the human moral condition, neither of which he fully endorses (although he is evidently more sympathetic to the first), might seem to be the notion that human beings are a mixture of good and bad impulses and motives, neither set of which clearly predominates in the majority of us. We might think of human beings as locked in a struggle between their somewhat unruly natural desires and the – socially imposed – constraints of morality. Much of Sigmund Freud's thought offers such a picture of the human condition, although made more complex by the introduction of the concepts of the unconscious, repression, and phantasy. Kant, however, rejects this viewpoint: the common sense of modern secularism. We do not stand equidistant between nature and reason, and we do not begin as moral *tabulae rasae*. On the contrary, Kant insists, human beings are characterized by a 'propensity to evil' (*Hang zum Bösen*); we find ourselves engaged, from the first, in an uphill struggle to do the right thing, against a deeply ingrained tendency to prioritize our particular interests over what we know to be morally required. Furthermore, this propensity cannot be explained as an expression of our biological

and psychological nature. Despite its universality, it is we who have allowed it to gain the upper hand, and we can therefore be held responsible for it. As Kant puts it, there is a ‘*radical innate evil* in human nature (not any the less brought upon us by ourselves)’.<sup>8</sup>

Given such formulations, it is scarcely surprising that some of the leading intellectuals of Kant’s day took him to be endorsing the Christian doctrine of original sin – and reacted with a revulsion appropriate to the Age of Enlightenment, whose character Kant himself had defined in a famous essay.<sup>9</sup> Schiller regarded Kant’s claims as ‘scandalous’. And Goethe wrote to Herder that Kant had ‘criminally smeared his philosopher’s cloak with the shameful stain of radical evil, after it had taken him a long human life to cleanse it from many a dirty prejudice, so that Christians too might yet be enticed to kiss its hem’.<sup>10</sup> The claim that there might be some intrinsic taint of human volition, thwarting our capacity fully to realize the potential of practical reason seemed to contradict the revolutionary conception of human freedom which Kant himself had struggled to frame throughout a long philosophical career. The great paladin of autonomy now seemed to be declaring that human beings were incapable of achieving the noblest goals prescribed to them by their own rational nature. Or rather, as became apparent, when the essay on evil was republished the following year as the first chapter of his book on *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant was now of the view that, since evil ‘corrupts the ground of all maxims’ (it is in this sense, and not with the modern colloquial overtones of extremity, that Kant describes it as ‘radical’), and is therefore ‘not to be *extirpated* by human forces’,<sup>11</sup> the moral efforts of human beings may require divine supplementation. Turning against the self-confidence of the age, Kant now appeared to believe that humankind was incapable of going it alone.

Yet the notion of divine assistance was not – in itself – a novelty in Kant’s thinking. Already in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, first published in 1781, Kant had put forward one version of an argument to which he was clearly deeply attached, since he repeatedly sought to improve it throughout his subsequent writings. The achievement of the ‘highest good’, the universal congruence of happiness and virtue, is a task to which we are objectively constrained by practical reason. For it is entirely rational for finite, embodied beings to desire happiness,<sup>12</sup> and legitimate for them to do so in proportion to their moral worth. Having to suppress this aspiration in favour of obedience to the moral law, which is also a rational requirement, would set human reason at odds with itself. In consequence, Kant argues, we *have* to conceive his version of the *summum bonum* or highest good, namely the perfect convergence of happiness and virtue, as achievable. If we did not, we would find ourselves in the

incoherent position of being morally obliged to attain the impossible. Yet at the same time we cannot anticipate that the glaring discrepancies between virtue and happiness which mar our world, and which morality demands should be overcome, will be reduced by human effort alone. Our weakness and finitude, our subjection to the morally impervious causality of nature, combined with the typical wavering of the human commitment to goodness, leaves a gulf between human delivery and moral demand. We can envisage this gap being bridged, Kant claims, only if we have faith in a benevolent and omnipotent creator, a 'moral author of the world', who completes whatever cannot be attained by human effort alone. Kant emphasizes, however, that such 'rational faith' (*Vernunftglaube*) supplies us with no knowledge of supernatural realities. It is rather a practical attitude towards the world which we cannot help but adopt if we are in earnest about the moral life, since otherwise we would be committed to a self-defeating enterprise.<sup>13</sup>

It should be noted that this moral explanation of the basis of faith in God was not regarded by Kant's German contemporaries as tantamount to an abandonment of Enlightenment values. On the contrary, for some of his early followers, such as Karl Leonhard Reinhold, Kant's great achievement was to have shown that a commitment to the power and dignity of human reason could be supported by – and in turn support – religious faith. In his influential *Letters on the Kantian Philosophy* Reinhold argued that the demolition of the traditional philosophical proofs of God's existence, which Kant had carried out in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, should not be regarded as damaging to religion. On the contrary, Reinhold asserted, it is precisely when belief in God is taken to rest on fragile philosophical 'proofs' that it remains vulnerable to dangerously sceptical reactions. By showing how religious faith is a necessary element of our moral orientation to the world, by disclosing its unshakeable 'practical' validity, Kant had in fact established religious belief on a far sounder footing.<sup>14</sup>

The notion of divine action, then, was not necessarily regarded by proponents of the new Critical Philosophy as threatening to human autonomy. But what was found shocking by many progressives of the day was the suggestion that human beings might be so constituted as to thwart progress towards the very goals that their own rational nature led them to strive for. Kant's disturbing – and, to many, unacceptable – thought was not simply that human beings are psychologically or even morally divided against themselves, but that human *freedom* is divided against itself. Kant seemed to be implying that his own great discovery, the realization that the human self *is* freedom, rather than merely possessing 'free will' as a capacity, was precisely what opened up the possibility of this inner diremption. For if we are freedom all the way

down, then we must be free to be unfree. Indeed, according to Kant, we seem to fall ineluctably into this unfreedom. But let us be more specific.

Kant's concept of 'radical evil' was, in part, a response to the objections that had been raised against his initial attempt to formulate the relation between freedom, reason and morality. The fundamental insight of Kant's mature practical philosophy is that acting morally means acting independently of those wishes and desires that we own as particular individuals. To do our duty is to act on a universalizable 'maxim': a subjectively adopted principle which we can also endorse as valid for any other human being (indeed, any rational being) who found herself in the same circumstances and subject to the same moral pressures, regardless of personal attachments and preferences. Our spontaneous impulses may sometimes point in the direction of what is objectively the right thing to do. But for our action to be moral, it must be the case that, even had our wishes pushed us in a different direction, we would still have acted in the same manner: as duty required. Kant does sometimes suggest that the moral worth of an action shines out more clearly when it goes against what we spontaneously desire. But, contrary to the assumption of some of Kant's critics, the thwarting of our natural inclinations is not a *condition* of acting morally – all that is required is that it should be the universalizable form of the maxim, not the private motive that may converge with it, which is decisive.

However, a crucial objection to this theory was raised by Reinhold, in the second volume of his *Letters on the Kantian Philosophy*. To Kant's leading follower and exponent, professor at the University of Jena, the tight connection Kant had established between freedom, self-legislation, and morality appeared to have the consequence that immoral actions could not be imputed to the agent.<sup>15</sup> For if it is only when we do our moral duty that reason is practical, and therefore that we raise ourselves above natural causality, it appears that we cannot be held responsible for acting immorally. For in such cases our desires and impulses, rather than reason, would determine the action. Hence, to counter Reinhold's objection, Kant needed to show that, even when we are desire-driven, we can be held accountable for being so compelled, charged with *not allowing* practical reason to take command.

Kant's answer to this difficulty (and one of the innovations first fully set out in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*) was to draw a distinction between 'will' in the sense of practical reason (reason capable of determining us to act for the sake for conformity with a universal principle – which Kant terms 'Wille'), and 'will' as our spontaneous 'power of choice' (which obeys a subjective principle only in order to achieve the goal it has selected – which Kant terms 'Willkür'). On this basis, Kant was able to argue that the practical

choices human beings make are never simply *determined* by their desires. Rather, the ‘freedom of the power of choice has the characteristic, entirely peculiar to it, that it cannot be determined to action through any incentive *except so far as the human being has incorporated it into his maxim* (has made it into a universal rule for himself, according to which he wills to conduct himself)’.<sup>16</sup> Even when we do wrong, in other words, we have *chosen* to allow some particular desire to dictate the content of our maxim, at the cost of its universalizable form. We have elected to behave in a self-interested, instrumental way. Rational calculation is never simply a mechanism triggered by our desires. To think otherwise would be to treat the person concerned not as a responsible agent, but as a creature helplessly driven by its bodily and psychological urges.

Some Kantians have argued that this notion of responsibility is already implicit in Kant’s moral thinking of the ‘critical’ period, right from the beginning – that Kant never intended immoral actions to be understood simply as products of natural causality. The dispute about this issue continues.<sup>17</sup> But whatever one’s view, it is undeniable is that, in the *Religion*, Kant takes several new steps to clarify his position. In addition to codifying the crucial distinction of *Wille* and *Willkür*, he now also emphasizes that, if actions occur in an apparently random manner, out of keeping with what we know of the individual’s personality, this raises questions of imputability (we can see Kant’s point from the function of character testimony in a court of law). Full responsibility for our actions implies that these flow from our moral character. Or, to put this in another way, the moral quality of any particular maxim will be shaped by a more general underlying maxim, and this in turn by an even more fundamental maxim, until we reach a putative inaugural choice of principle, which sets the basic cast of our moral character. This Kant refers to as our ‘intelligible character’, or ‘*Gesinnung*’ (disposition).<sup>18</sup> *Gesinnung*, as Henry Allison puts it, ‘is to be construed as an agent’s fundamental maxim with respect to the moral law’.<sup>19</sup>

Intelligible character cannot be altered by empirical choices since it is, by definition, that which guides all choices. Kant is therefore obliged to portray it as the result of an act of moral self-choosing occurring in the noumenal realm. Kant’s concept of the noumenal refers to reality as it is ‘in itself’ – thinkable but not knowable. It contrasts with the notion of experienced reality, structured by the *a priori* subjective conditions – time, space, and the set of underivable concepts, such as that of causal connection – which enable any cohering world of objects and events at all. But this means, of course, that the term ‘act’ can here be employed only in a metaphorical sense, since acts necessarily occur in time, while for Kant the noumenal must be timeless

(as well as being, by virtue of a parallel argument, non-spatial). Yet one startling result of this strategy for defusing the objection raised by Reinhold is that our moral character can never be ‘mixed’ or indifferent. Any single incident of backsliding will indicate not simply a dropped stitch, but a rent running through the entire fabric of our moral character, since from any transgression it can be inferred that we have made an inaugural choice to override the claims of the moral law – at least on *some* occasions – in favour of our particular desires. And this means that we have *not* adopted the categorical imperative as our supreme principle of action – in other words, that our disposition is evil.

It is on the basis of this approach to moral character, which Kant himself describes as ‘rigorism’, that he then goes on to develop the arguments which so shocked his enlightened contemporaries. Given that the moral disposition of human beings must be either good or evil, the overwhelming balance of evidence derived both from the observation of human behaviour and from introspection, Kant suggests, is that all human beings are trammelled by an innate ‘propensity to evil’ (*Hang zum Bösen*) – an inclination to ignore the claims of the moral law, at least when our cravings are sufficiently strong, or when the going gets rough.

It is easy to see, then, why Kant was perceived as endorsing the doctrine of original sin. But in fact he explicitly repudiates this theological notion, understood in the sense of a corruption of the will, inherited from the first parents of the human race.<sup>20</sup> Clearly, to have adopted this conception would have ruined the whole point of introducing the distinction between rational will and power of choice, and of explicitly extending the scope of freedom to embrace both moral and immoral actions. If a debility or perversion of the will is part of our natural endowment, then the claim that we are fully responsible for the wrong we do would again become problematic. But Kant firmly sets himself against this view: ‘Whatever the nature, however, of the origin of moral evil in the human being, of all the ways of representing its spread and propagation through the members of our species and in all generations, the most inappropriate is surely to imagine it as having come to us by way of *inheritance* from our first parents.’<sup>21</sup> Indeed, in contrast to such a picture, Kant portrays individual moral responsibility in the starkest terms:

Every evil action must be so considered, whenever we seek its rational origin, as if the human being had fallen into it directly from the state of innocence. For whatever his previous behaviour may have been, whatever the natural causes influencing him, whether they are inside or outside him, his action is yet free

and not determined through any of these causes . . . He should have refrained from it, whatever his temporal circumstances and entanglements, for through no cause in the world can he cease to be a free agent.<sup>22</sup>

In view of this stark insistence on individual responsibility, Kant has to exercise caution in using the language of ‘innateness’ to describe our propensity for evil. He must block any inference that the tendency to violate the moral law is a consequence of our natural endowment. Such a conclusion would simply revive the problem of our freedom to do wrong, which led to the distinction between *Wille* and *Willkür* in the first place. Hence Kant states:

Now the ground of this evil . . . cannot be placed, as is so commonly done, in man’s *sensuous nature* and the natural inclinations arising therefrom. For not only are these not directly related to evil (rather do they afford the occasion for what the moral disposition in its power can manifest, namely virtue) we must not even be considered responsible for their existence (we cannot be, for since they are implanted in us we are not their authors). We are accountable, however, for the propensity to evil, which, as it affects the morality of the subject, is to be found in him as a free-acting being and for which it must be possible to hold him accountable as the offender – this, too, despite the fact that this propensity is so deeply rooted in the power of choice that we are forced to say that it is to be found in man by nature.<sup>23</sup>

The philosophical problems raised by this passage, and similar ones, are deep; and there has been a variety of attempts in recent years to explain how Kant can portray evil both as freely chosen and as humanly ineluctable.<sup>24</sup> In subsequent chapters, we will discover how Kant’s immediate successors sought to reformulate the theory of evil so as to reduce these internal tensions. But our first concern must be with Kant’s evidence for the claim that the bias of the human power of choice towards evil is so pervasive as to be tantamount to something inborn. In the first chapter of the *Religion*, Kant renounces any attempt to prove this pervasiveness by means of a purely philosophical demonstration. He asserts, apparently quite casually: ‘we can spare ourselves the formal proof that there must be such a corrupt propensity rooted in the human being, in view of the multitude of woeful examples that the experience of human *deeds* parades before us.’<sup>25</sup>

Keen to puncture contemporary illusions about an innocent ‘state of nature’, Kant first cites travellers’ and voyagers’ tales of the wanton cruelty of primitive peoples. But he then goes on to refute the suggestion that morality fares better in more developed societies:

If we are however disposed to the opinion that we can have a better cognition of human nature known in its civilized state (where its predispositions can be more fully developed), we must then hear out a long melancholy litany of charges against humankind – of secret falsity in the most intimate friendship, so that a restraint on trust in the mutual confidence of even the best of friends is reckoned a universal maxim of prudence in social dealings; of a propensity to hate him to whom we are indebted, to which a benefactor must always heed; of a hearty goodwill that nonetheless admits the remark that ‘in the misfortunes of our best friends there is something that does not altogether displease us’; and of many other vices that yet remain hidden under the appearance of virtue, let alone those of which no secret is made.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, in case this evidence should not be sufficient, Kant evokes ‘a state wondrously compounded of both the others, namely that of a people in its external relations, where civilised people stand vis-à-vis one another in the relation of a raw nature (the state of constant war) and have also taken it firmly into their heads not to get out of it’.<sup>27</sup>

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It is remarkable that contemporary thinkers influenced by Kant, and committed expositors of Kant’s philosophy, show a decided reluctance take this account of radical evil seriously. Paul Guyer, for example, has remarked that ‘In *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* [Kant] seems to go too far by assuming that evil-doing is not just *possible* but even necessary . . . This doctrine hardly follows from Kant’s previous argument, and seems instead to rest on an odd mixture of empirical evidence and the lingering grip of the Christian doctrine of original sin.’<sup>28</sup> But it is not simply Kant’s theory of evil, but any account of the sources of wrongdoing, which is strikingly absent in the contemporary philosophical literature. The enormous effort which has been devoted, in recent years, to the grounding of moral principles, and the general explanation of moral normativity, often seems out of all proportion to the amount of thinking devoted to the inner constitution of the moral subject, and the phenomenology of moral experience. Contemporary Kantians, particularly those committed to a ‘constructivist’ account of moral obligation, in the wake of John Rawls, tend to mention the problem of moral failure and evil only as an afterthought, if at all. The fact that the universalist stringency of the moral demand, as Kant understands it, entails that human beings are almost bound to fall short of what is required, and the implications of this persistent failure for the authority of morality in the first place, are almost never reflected on.<sup>29</sup> But it cannot be so easy to shrug off the criticism of a

figure such as Schopenhauer, one of the greatest of the nineteenth-century post-Kantians, who points out that the ineffectiveness of the moral demand necessarily throws a dubious light on its status: 'Thus in the Kantian school practical reason with its categorical imperative appears more and more as a hyperphysical fact, as a Delphic temple in the human soul. From its dark sanctuary oracular sentences infallibly proclaim, alas! Not what *will*, but what *ought* to happen.'<sup>30</sup> Of course, arguments concerning our moral nature, of the kind put forward by Kant, are always vulnerable to dismissal as dubious generalizations. But it should be noted that Kant himself does not rely primarily on supposed features of human moral psychology in making his case. Rather, he points to profound tensions between our basic modern ideals, and pervasive features of human history and society. Reflection on the discordances in current thinking about morality, history, and the fate of humankind, suggests that these tensions have not disappeared.

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Kant, as we have seen, clinches his argument for the reality of radical evil by pointing to the character of interstate relations, where primitive violence combines with the kinds of destructive rivalry typical of the vices of culture. The basis on which states actually operate in their relations with each other – as opposed to the ideals they publicly proclaim – consists of principles which 'No philosopher has yet been able to bring into agreement with morality or else (what is terrible) suggest [how to replace with] better ones, reconcilable with human nature'.<sup>31</sup> The dilemma still confronts us today. On the one hand, the ever-increasing economic interdependence of humankind, the emergence of international political institutions, and the speed and global scope of the media, have made the issues of poverty and inequality among nations more tangible than ever before. Demands for global justice do not just express the aspirations of the exploited and disadvantaged, but find a broad resonance among the populace in the developed world, as the groundswell of activism prior to the G8 summit in Scotland in July 2005 – to take just one of many examples – suggests. On the other hand, the hierarchical organization of the international system of states, and an increasing concentration of power in the hands of non-state actors such as multinational corporations, typically in alliance with the most powerful countries, appears to be threatening the degree of democratic control, modest as it may have been, which had been achieved historically by the most economically advanced nation states.

This situation has given rise to two inadequate responses amongst those who aspire to a more just international order. On the one hand, some theo-

rists of globalization have done all in their power to interpret recent historical developments in a positive light. The political theorist David Held, for example, has repeatedly argued that globalization highlights the need – and opens the possibility – for a new, cosmopolitan democratic order. Since ‘Processes of economic internationalisation, the problem of the environment, and the protection of the rights of minorities are, increasingly, matters for the world community as a whole’,<sup>32</sup> what the world presently requires is the further democratization and strengthening of existing international institutions, as well as the creation of new supranational forums, for example at the regional and continental level. In the long run, Held asserts, ‘the formation of an authoritative assembly of all democratic states and agencies – a reformed General Assembly of the United Nations, or a complement to it – would be the objective’.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, thinkers affiliated to the Marxist tradition, and so equally committed – presumably – to an ultimate vision of universal justice, have sought to expose the whole rhetoric of global governance, and indeed of globalization itself, as dangerous wish-fulfilment. Peter Gowan has argued that the jargon of globalization merely serves to obscure the fact that one country, the United States, ‘has acquired absolute dominance over every other state or combination of states on the entire planet, a development without precedent in world history’.<sup>34</sup> In short, ‘the reality is an asymmetrical change in the field of state sovereignty: a marked tendency towards its erosion in the bulk of states in the international system, accompanied by an accumulation of exceptional prerogatives on the part of one state’.<sup>35</sup> Globalization theorists, Gowan concludes, with a classically Marxist flourish, ‘confuse juridical forms with social substance’.<sup>36</sup>

Such critiques offer a sobering corrective to the naive optimism of some globalization theorists, revealing how an understandable desire to interpret world history as moving, however painfully and ponderously, in the direction of peace and economic justice encourages a self-deceptive construal of current developments. Theorists such as Held write persistently in the optative mood. But when one takes a sober look at the evidence, it cannot be said to support their wishful scenarios. To his credit, Jürgen Habermas, another leading advocate of supranational governance, has honestly admitted the ambivalence of the historical record: ‘The contemporary world situation can be understood in the best-case scenario as a period of transition from international to cosmopolitan law, but many other indications seem to support a regression to nationalism.’<sup>37</sup>

Gowan, by contrast, presents a view of the current world situation shorn of all conditionals. The global hegemonic power uses all necessary means, including its unprecedented military might, to preserve its dominance. But,

at the same time, we can ask: what practical perspective is opened up by this account of the international system? Gowan comes close simply to endorsing the approach of the ‘neo-realist’ tradition in the theory of international relations, which regards relations between states as inevitably exemplifying a Hobbesian war of all against all. He dismisses the idea that this dynamic might in any way be modified by the pressure of public opinion in liberal democratic states, or by a growing sensitivity, within a global public sphere, to issues affecting the fate of humanity as a whole, as simply naive.<sup>38</sup> According to the official ideologies of the current period, Gowan asserts, ‘either we are presented with the apparition of a “democratic peace”, after the imaginings of Kant, in which the leading capitalist states of the epoch have forsworn violence forever, as an unthinkable departure from the civil harmony among them; or we are offered a vision of “postmodern” or “market” states, that have put the vulgar ambitions of modern nation states behind them, as they cooperate to build a civilized “international community” in the North, and wage implacable battle with rogue states and terrorist cells outside it in the barbarian South’.<sup>39</sup> Yet if the idea of a peaceful and democratic international order can never be more than an ‘apparition’, what political goals are to be pursued with the greater clairvoyance made possible by Gowan’s analysis? He is presumably not so naive as to tie armed hostility between human societies to the existence of capitalism, and we already have historical evidence – for example, in the case of China and Vietnam – that socialist countries can go to war against each other. To counter by arguing that *genuinely* socialist polities would not act ruthlessly on the international stage risks sinking into tautology. Hence Gowan’s perspective not only exemplifies the pessimism typical of any Marxism bereft of an emancipatory agent. In the end it merges with the global realpolitik to which it is ostensibly opposed.

On first inspection, Kant’s own conception of history may appear to be susceptible to Gowan’s strictures. Certainly, optimistic globalization theorists often draw inspiration from the cosmopolitan dimension of Kant’s writings on the philosophy of history. For Kant is acutely aware of the problem posed by the ‘state of nature’ which obtains between sovereign states, and tries to envisage a process, based in human self-interest, through which a peaceable legal regulation of interstate relations might be established in a more or less remote future.<sup>40</sup> Yet, in another sense Kant can be seen as close to a disabused realism. In a footnote to the first book of the *Religion*, he observes that human history appears to have a cyclical structure, with empires successively rising, brutally expanding, and then collapsing as a result of their overextension.<sup>41</sup> And he repeats a similar point in the third book, where he suggests that this long-term tendency of states to overextend their domination and then frag-

ment is actually beneficial. So long as the moral character of human beings has not been reformed, it prevents the consolidation of a universal despotism.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, with regard to the prospect of the constitutional law of states being brought into line with ‘an international law which is universal and *endowed with power*’, Kant affirms that ‘experience refuses to allow us any hope in this direction’.<sup>43</sup> Yet, of course, there is a crucial difference between Kant’s perspective and the realist theory of international relations. For whereas the Hobbesian approach considers mutual fearfulness and competition as inherent in the relation between sovereign states, Kant, at least in the final phase of his thought – as his comments in the *Religion* make clear – regards the lawless conduct of international affairs, and the continuing scourge of war, as reflecting the entrenched evil propensities of human beings (and, in turn, as reinforcing those propensities: he is fond of remarking that war makes more evil human beings than it destroys).

In fact, Kant’s position combines elements of both the cosmopolitan and the realist perspective. At times he writes as though self-interest will gradually lead states towards the renunciation of war as destructive and counterproductive. This is a thought which recurs in one of his last writings on the topic, ‘An Old Question Raised Again’, where he suggests that moves could be made towards a ‘cosmopolitan society’, ‘without the moral foundation in mankind having to be enlarged in the least’.<sup>44</sup> Suspicious of any naive form of utopianism, yet committed to the goal of cultural and political progress, Kant is at pains to envisage how far the natural motor of self-interest could carry nations towards the institutionalization of a global peace. He advocates a reflectively teleological perspective, which does not involve making knowledge-claims about the process or purposes of history, but enables us to discern indications of progress from the standpoint of our moral interest in the improvement of the human condition. Such a standpoint, then, discloses only *tendencies* arising from the social dynamic of unreformed human nature – and there is no suggestion that these can do the work without supplementation by moral effort. As Kant’s summary of his speculations on the future course of history, at the end of the first supplement to his essay ‘Perpetual Peace’, reveals, the relation between natural and moral purposes, and the reliability of the outcome remain murky, to say the least: ‘In this manner nature guarantees perpetual peace by the mechanism of human passions. Certainly she does not do so with sufficient certainty for us to predict the future in any theoretical sense, but adequately from a practical point of view, making it our duty to work towards this end, which is not just a chimerical one.’<sup>45</sup>

Kant argues, then, that we inhabitants of modernity cannot durably renounce the ideal of a just world. And the lip service that politicians – and

the daily newspapers – feel obliged to pay to the aspiration to secure human rights, and the provision of the essentials of a tolerable life, for all human beings, suggest that he is right. But, in the last phase of his thinking, Kant no longer believes that ‘nature’ or ‘providence’ alone can guide history towards this goal. Moral exertion is required. But we now know that human beings are plagued by a perversion of the will, which hinders them from making the required effort, even though such exertion would fulfil their rational destiny. Though at times Kant writes as if advancement towards global justice is simply a matter of human beings asserting their good will against the tug of their selfish interests,<sup>46</sup> such statements do not represent his fundamental sense of the direness and difficulty of the human situation.

In his classic study of Kant’s philosophy of history, Yirmiyahu Yovel notes this shift in Kant’s thinking, from a notion of historical progress as being driven solely by ‘nature’, to one in which moral commitment plays a role. For Yovel it is Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* which marks the turning point. For after the introduction of the concept of ‘reflective judgement’, which allows the idea of purposiveness to be applied to the world for its epistemic benefits (but without commitment to its metaphysical reality), Kant can accommodate a teleological interpretation of history as progressing towards the realization of reason, without attributing this progress to a suprahuman power. In turn, this means that Kant is able to emphasize the role which moral commitment and moral action play in furthering humanity’s historical goals. However, Yovel portrays moral action as consisting *simply* in the effectivity of practical reason. He does not consider Kant’s argument that there lies, within the subjectivity of human beings, a fundamental, self-imposed blockage to the assertion of practical reason. Indeed, he says almost nothing about Kant’s theory of ‘radical evil’, except to equate it – misleadingly – with the earlier notion of ‘unsocial sociability’.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, Yovel does not consider what could make such a remote and intangible goal as the achievement of a cosmopolitan moral community significant for the lives of contemporary human beings. After all, at the beginning of the twentieth century, in ‘Science as a Vocation’, Max Weber argued that the modern progressive view of history tends to hollow out the meaning of the individual’s existence. Formerly, a human being could die feeling that he had experienced what life had to offer. But now he can no longer regard his own existence as anything more than a link in an endless historical chain. The result, Weber bleakly concludes, is that, ‘because death is meaningless, civilized life as such is meaningless’.<sup>48</sup> But of course, one of the reasons why Yovel avoids considering the theory of radical evil, and its implications for the philosophy of history, is that he would have to confront the role which ‘rational faith’ plays in Kant’s

account of morality, and the possibility of moral conversion. Like many contemporary philosophers, Yovel is attracted by Kant's philosophy of freedom, reason, and progress, but is reluctant to take the full measure of its religious dimension.

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We have already considered Kant's argument that faith in a 'moral author of the world' is implicit in an earnest moral life. In the *Critique of Practical Reason* the idea of God features as one of three 'postulates of practical reason' – 'transcendent *thoughts* in which there is nothing impossible'<sup>49</sup> – in whose objects we must have faith if the moral law is not to be exposed as pointless. Another of the postulates, freedom, is allotted a distinctive status by Kant. In considering ourselves as capable of acting for purely moral motives, something we *must* do in experiencing the moral law as binding on us, we necessarily postulate our own freedom. In other words, we can have insight into the fact that, without freedom, there could be no moral law in the first place, even though we cannot comprehend freedom's reality. This account of human freedom has received a new lease of life in recent decades, in the wake of the 'two-aspect' construal of Kant's transcendental idealism popularized by interpreters such as Graham Bird and Henry Allison.<sup>50</sup> After all, the fact that, as morally conscious beings, we generally regard ourselves and others as responsible for our actions, and so by implication as free agents, is scarcely contentious. The real argument concerns the status to be given to this consciousness. Hard-boiled naturalists must dismiss it as an illusion. But the minimal or 'deflationary' position now frequently attributed to Kant is that our practical self-understanding need not be regarded as making metaphysical claims that *compete* with the worldview of the natural sciences: all we need to assert is that it expresses a viewpoint which we necessarily take on ourselves as self-conscious agents, and which no empirical discovery could undermine. Clearly, the same could not be said of the concept of God. As Kant puts it, through the moral law we have insight into the reality of freedom, but in the case of God we cannot even have insight into his *possibility*. The existence of God is not a condition of the moral law, but only of the necessary object of a will *determined by* such a law.<sup>51</sup>

Kant ascribes a similar status to his third postulate: that of the immortality of the soul. Here he enquires into the conditions of meaningfulness of the struggle to act morally throughout my finite, unrepeatable, earthly existence. On Kant's account, it is only if we have faith that death does not arbitrarily cut short our moral striving, that our effort to reverse the fundamental

decision which has corrupted our power to frame moral maxims can continue indefinitely towards its goal, that the moral life can be saved from futility. More specifically, I cannot be objectively obliged to achieve something, in this case the perfection of my moral character, or what Kant terms 'holiness' (the spontaneous purity of the moral will), which is in fact unachievable. But as with the two other postulates of practical reason, there is no question, for Kant, of trying to demonstrate philosophically the immortality of the soul. His position is rather that the distinction of phenomenal and noumenal realms allows space for faith in modes of existence and agency about which we can only speak through 'symbolic anthropomorphisms', to employ Emil Fackenheim's phrase.<sup>52</sup> Since time is an a priori form of our empirical intuition, whatever 'immortality' means, it cannot be a matter of endless duration. Perhaps it could be minimally construed – in Allen Wood's formula – as the 'fulfilment of immanent moral strivings in a transcendent existence'.<sup>53</sup>

Yet given what Kant says about the intractability of the propensity to evil, it seems that, however such a transcendent existence is conceived, it would not enable human beings to effect their own moral conversion. For a being whose will is corrupted at its root cannot repair the damage solely through an act of this same will. Hence, in the *Religion*, Kant finds himself compelled to allow a role for divine 'grace', which could perhaps even be regarded, or so Allen Wood has argued, as a 'fourth postulate'.<sup>54</sup> But here Kant has to walk a difficult line. It would be fatal to his moral thought to admit that divine grace could substitute for a lack of human effort, and he is therefore relentlessly critical of all religious rituals and practices (including prayer) which are interpreted by their followers as a 'means of grace'. As Kant states, 'there is no other means (nor can there be any) [for a human being] . . . to become worthy of heavenly assistance, except the earnest endeavour to improve his moral nature in all possible ways, thereby making himself capable of receiving a nature fit – as is not in his power – for divine approval, since the expected divine assistance itself has only his morality for its aim'.<sup>55</sup> Human beings may *hope* for divine assistance, but only if they do their absolute best: 'we can admit an effect of grace as something incomprehensible but cannot incorporate it into our maxims for either theoretical or practical use'.<sup>56</sup>

Kant's theory of the postulates of practical reason, his account of what we are entitled to hope – indeed, on some of his formulations, *must* believe as earnest practitioners of morality – depends on his distinction between phenomenal and noumenal worlds, and therefore on the validity of transcendental idealism. But as we have just noted, the metaphysical meaning of this form of idealism, indeed the question of whether it is a metaphysical doctrine at all, or rather the antidote to metaphysics, is still a matter of hot dispute.<sup>57</sup>

And the various construals of the phenomenal/noumenal distinction that can be defended on the basis of Kant's texts are reflected in the notoriously unstable status of the postulates. At one extreme, Kant has been understood as proposing a philosophy of the 'as if', arguing that we must behave as though certain morally necessary fictions were truths. An intermediate interpretation presents the postulates as having truth from the practical point of view, a standpoint that is necessarily ours as finite, rational agents, but as adding nothing to our knowledge of reality (on this reading, there is no 'fact of the matter' regarding the noumenal realm). But it is difficult to defend these readings as the definitive account of Kant's intentions, since he sometimes writes as though what is postulated may or may not have objective reality. Our limitation is simply that we can never know, since 'We are dealing . . . here simply with Ideas which reason itself creates, the objects of which (if it possesses any) lie completely beyond our vision'.<sup>58</sup> To go by such statements, what Kant calls the 'primacy of practical reason' means simply that it is the *practical relevance* of the 'Ideas' (his term for concepts of non-experienceable, but rationally legitimate, objects) that supremely concerns us in living our lives, and that no theoretical considerations can dethrone them. It does not mean that practical reason has a general priority over theoretical reason, or is even in a position to define the validity of its counterpart's mode of access to reality. Given this chronic elusiveness of what the 'practical' standpoint is supposed to make available (which would remain even if transcendental idealism itself were less contentious), coupled with the rise in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries of a secular, naturalistic worldview, it is scarcely surprising that many attempts have been made to interpret Kant's account of the progressive transformation of the world by reason in social, political, and historical terms, dispensing with its religious dimension. Such attempts do not so much abandon the postulates, or at least not all of them, as seek to bring them down to earth.

Of course, the basis of such a programme can already be found in Kant himself. The principle of Kant's *summum bonum* (the proportionality of happiness and virtue) is a definition of justice. And Kant makes every effort he can to portray humankind as moving historically towards – at least – the political precondition of this goal: a perfect civil constitution, either in the form of a cosmopolitan state, or an association of republics bound by international law. As we have seen, he does not think this progressive movement of history can be theoretically demonstrated, but believes that we can assemble scattered evidence into a teleological conception of history, from the standpoint of our practical interest in the realization of this ideal.

From such a perspective, the evil that plagues human history arose through human beings, in their first primitive state, allowing the power of their animal impulses to continue dictating the use of their emergent reason. The detachment from instinct made possible by rational reflection opens up a vast new world of possibilities. But although these possibilities, under the domination of the natural drives, are pursued selfishly and competitively, this pursuit nonetheless stimulates the development of human culture. On this account, which Kant proposed during the 1780s, evil is not counterproductive in the long term for human society. As he puts it, 'The history of *nature*, therefore, begins with good, for it is the work of God, while the history of *freedom* begins with wickedness, for it is the work of man. For the individual, who in the use of his freedom is concerned only for himself, this whole change was a loss; for nature, whose purpose with man concerns the species, it was a gain.'<sup>59</sup> Around the same time that Kant penned these reflections, in the context of a philosophical interpretation of the third chapter of Genesis, he also formulated his famous doctrine of 'unsocial sociability', the notion that the volatile mix of interdependence and rivalry typical of the human world is ultimately turned to good purpose in developing our capacities. As Kant writes, 'Man wishes concord; but Nature knows better what is good for the race; she wills discord. He wishes to live comfortably and pleasantly; Nature wills that he should be plunged from sloth and passive contentment into labour and trouble, in order that he may find means of extricating himself from them.'<sup>60</sup> Indeed, Kant even argued around this time that belligerence can play a progressive role. 'In the present state of human culture, then, war is an indispensable means to the still further development of human culture. Only in a state of perfect culture would perpetual peace be of benefit to us, and only then would it be possible.'<sup>61</sup> In general, his impulse was to hold on as long as he could to the idea that self-interest may bring us, in the very long term, to the point of achieving a just and peaceable world.

In recent years, a powerful reading of Kant's philosophy of history along these lines has been proposed by Allen Wood. Kant's theory of unsociable sociability, Wood suggests, explains how the human 'fall' into evil proves ultimately beneficial, by providing the motor for advance towards the full institutionalization of freedom. As he puts it, 'Kant's ethical thought is fundamentally about the human race's collective, historical struggle to develop its rational faculties and then through them to combat the radical propensity to evil that alone made their development possible. It is precisely because human beings must in this way turn against their own nature that their history is one of self-conflict, self-alienation, and consequently self-liberation.'<sup>62</sup> Put at its most compressed, Kant's sketch of a universal history assumes that self-

interest will eventually bring the members of some polities to regulate their conflicts through the establishment of a republican constitution (a form of government which respects individual freedoms and legislates in the interests of all). Thereafter, states with such constitutions will gradually desist from settling their disputes by armed conflict, because of their sensitivity to the opinion of a public concerned about the danger and expense involved in warfare, and in the constant preparation for it. They will seek to establish a peaceful federation of states. This federation can in turn can be expected to play the lead in ushering in a comity of free nations under international law, and hence a perpetual peace. At this stage of history, on Wood's interpretation, an epoch of freedom will replace the epoch of nature, since further development of the human race will occur under the conscious direction of human beings themselves. He summarizes: 'In this sense, human history works backwards: It makes us rational through an irrational society, leaving us the task of remaking society through reason.'<sup>63</sup>

A major difficulty with Wood's approach, however, is that he has to insist on a social genesis of evil. For it is only if evil is the product of specific structures of social interaction that we can envisage its overcoming through the collective transformation of those structures. Wood puts great emphasis on what Kant describes as the 'diabolical vices' of envy, ambition, and rivalry, vices that can be regarded as expressions of a competitive society, and which distort our 'disposition to humanity': our innate drive to seek social recognition. (He is far less interested in Kant's treatment of those vices, such as lust and gluttony, that distort our 'disposition to animality', our drive to satisfy our biological needs.) Of course, Kant would have to have been foolish to deny the influence of society over the morality of individuals, whether for good or for ill. And in his conception, religious communities figure essentially as a means of counteracting the negative effects of human association. But Kant also makes clear that portraying society as the cause of evil would be circular, presupposing the vulnerability to corruption it is meant to explain, unless one asserts that *any* form of human association must give rise to evil.<sup>64</sup>

In the *Religion* Kant takes pains to avoid this implication, arguing that the vices of culture, such as '*envy, ingratitude, joy in others' misfortunes*', are 'grafted upon' our inclination to compete with others, and are not intrinsic too it. This is why he states that 'nature itself wanted to use the idea of such competitiveness (which in itself does not exclude reciprocal love) as only an incentive to culture'.<sup>65</sup> In other words, our 'disposition to humanity' (to compare our condition with that of others, and to obtain recognition as of equal worth with them), *need not* have led inevitably to destructive

forms of rivalry and hostility. Wood cites this passage, but he misunderstands its purport. He takes it as a further statement of Kant's doctrine of unsociable sociability, as formulated in the 1784 'Idea for a Universal History'. But the point Kant is making in the *Religion* is that an *amiable* form of competitiveness could have stimulated cultural development *just as well* as the destructive forms which we have witnessed in human history, and could – in principle – have prevailed. Thus the root of evil must be sought at a deeper level than the dynamic of human association. This is also made clear by that fact that, on Kant's account, the 'bestial vices' of gluttony and lust are similarly 'grafted' onto our disposition to animality, without any social contribution.

The shift in Kant's position must surely be attributed to deep moral concerns about attributing a positive role to evil in historical progress. A year before the publication of the first part of *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant had published an essay 'On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials of Theodicy'. Here he assessed and rejected a series of tactics which thinkers have employed to reconcile the existence of moral evil with divine goodness. The first argument Kant considers runs as follows: 'There is no such thing as an absolute counterpurposiveness which we take the trespassing of the pure laws of our reason to be, but there are violations only against human wisdom; divine providence judges these according to totally different rules, incomprehensible to us, where, what we with right find reprehensible with reference to our practical reason and its determination might yet perhaps be in relation to the divine ends and the highest wisdom precisely the most fitting means to our particular welfare and the greatest good of the world as well.'<sup>66</sup> Significantly, Kant rejects this defence out of hand: 'This apology, in which the vindication is worse than the complaint, needs no refutation; surely it can be freely given over to the detestation of every human being who has the least feeling for morality.'<sup>67</sup> It might be countered that Kant is here objecting to the suppression of spontaneous moral condemnation in deference to a functionality of evil which *transcends* our comprehension – the implication being that, if we understood what long-term benefits evil action produced, our repugnance could be legitimately overcome. However, it is clear both from the argument in this passage, and from other sections of the essay, that Kant is opposed to the quashing of moral judgement with an eye to *any* advantage, whether known to us or not. He defines 'the morally counterpurposive' or 'evil proper (sin)' as 'the absolutely counterpurposive, or what cannot be condoned or desired either as ends or means'.<sup>68</sup> In other words, evil is what Nabert calls 'the unjustifiable'. This view would not make sense if human cultural and moral development *had* to occur through the

perpetration of evil acts. But as we have seen, by the time of the *Religion* Kant no longer admits this necessity.

But there is another argument against Wood's interpretation, besides the strictly moral one. Wood asserts that we human beings are 'capable of gradually reshaping our deeply corrupt social life by revolutionizing and uniting the hearts of individuals through the free power of reason'.<sup>69</sup> In short, that it is the 'moral law' itself which can overcome evil.<sup>70</sup> Yet, what *is* our 'deeply corrupt social life' if not an expression of the fact that our power of reason is not free but enslaved? The 'moral law' *tout court* cannot overcome evil, because evil is precisely our deep tendency to override the claims of the moral law. Wood seems here to overlook the fact that, on Kant's account, our selfish inclinations have such power over us only because of the fundamental self-choice that we have made. As Henry Allison has put it, for Kant 'The conflict is not between psychic forces but between principles, each of which claims to be the supreme ground for the selection of maxims . . . it is self-conceit, not inclination or even self-love, that is opposed to the moral law and . . . this is because it makes the satisfaction of inclination into a matter of unconditioned right, thereby affirming a principle that is contrary to this law'.<sup>71</sup>

This disagreement is not primarily a dispute over rival interpretations of Kant. The real problem for Wood's position is that, while asserting that 'the demand of reason is not merely to subordinate our inclinations to reason's principles but also to reconstitute our disordered social relationships',<sup>72</sup> he offers no explanation of why human beings do not conform to this demand *now* – or indeed why they have not already conformed to it long ago. After all, Wood knows as well as Allison that our inner moral conflicts are not clashes between opposing forces, let alone between a force and a principle, which would be an incoherent thought. Kant's conception of moral subjectivity differs fundamentally from the popular view of human beings as torn between their rational and their sensuous nature.<sup>73</sup> The point is that, while the instrumental, strategic, and communicative uses of reason have a history, recorded in the development of civilization and culture, it is not clear – on Wood's account – why *practical* reason should have a history. For one of Kant's great innovations was to insist on the universality of moral consciousness, and to deny that moral capacity has anything to do with theoretical knowledge, philosophical insight, or level of culture.

In Kant's own thinking morality has a history because human beings must struggle painfully to free themselves from the evil principle which they have inaugurally chosen, and which has corrupted the will. He emphasizes that this struggle will have no hope of success unless human beings combine for mutual moral support in the kind of association that we know as a 'church'. Of course

it could be argued that, since Kant accepts the basic choice for evil is unintelligible, he is just as bereft in the face of the historicity of practical reason as Wood. But the difference is that Kant can at least *describe* a noumenal perversion of the will, which makes sense of the need for a long-term combat with evil, even though he cannot ultimately account for it. By contrast, Wood's position acknowledges only a *diversion* under empirical pressures, but not a *perversion* of the will. 'The doctrine of radical evil', he asserts bluntly, 'is anthropological, not theological. Its basis is not religious authority but naturalistic anthropology.'<sup>74</sup> In consequence, he can offer no philosophical description of the recession of our consciousness of the moral law, and cannot accommodate reason's failure to take nature in hand.

Obviously, this is not to suggest that Kant's approach is devoid of deep problems. As we have seen, the tracing back of evil to a noumenal act of self-choosing leads to severe difficulties in explaining how human beings can ever achieve a moral conversion, and set themselves on the path towards the good. And it is in this context that Kant appeals to the idea of divine 'grace', while seeking ways to mitigate the difficulties posed by this explicitly religious concept. In the final part of the *Religion* Kant argues that the concept of grace need not be regarded as any more inherently problematic than the concept of freedom, 'since freedom itself, though not containing anything supernatural in its concept, remains just as incomprehensible to us according to its possibility as the supernatural [something] we might want to assume as surrogate for the independent yet deficient determination of freedom'.<sup>75</sup> Yet at the beginning of the book Kant himself had underscored the difference between freedom and other postulates, arguing that we know the *possibility* of freedom a priori, since this is a condition of our moral consciousness (and this is presumably what he means in asserting that there is nothing 'supernatural' about the concept of freedom); there is nothing self-contradictory about taking ourselves to be free, from a practical point of view. But just as we can have no insight even into the possibility of God or immortality, neither can we make sense of the action of grace, which is supposed to solve an apparently insoluble problem, namely how 'by a single and unalterable decision a human being reverses the supreme ground of his maxims by which he was an evil human being (and thereby puts on a "new man")'.<sup>76</sup> Of course, this decision is only the beginning of the story. Kant continues: 'he is to this extent, by principle and attitude of mind, a subject receptive to the good; but he is a good human being only in incessant labouring and becoming; i.e., he can hope – in view of the purity of the principle which he has adopted as the supreme maxim of his power of choice, and in view of the stability of this principle – to find himself upon the good (though narrow) path of constant

*progress* from bad to better. The transformation of intelligible character, then, corresponds to a slow struggle towards the good in the world of sense.<sup>77</sup>

The incomprehensibility of this process is due in part to the fact that it makes no sense to think of the act of conversion as *subsequent* to the original act of self-choosing, since acts of freedom – being noumenal – can have no temporal index (indeed, even the notion of a noumenal ‘act’ is scarcely intelligible). As Gordon Michalson has written, Kant has

no obvious way of making sense of the ‘before and after’ of the process of moral conversion. Kant’s theory of moral conversion or regeneration culminates in the paradox that an act having no relation to time produces a moral agent who is materially different ‘after’ the act from ‘before’.<sup>78</sup>

This problem does not similarly occur if we consider an empirical chain of actions carried out by a rational agent. For whatever the metaphysical difficulties involved in regarding such a sequence as the expression of noumenal freedom, the notion is at least not internally incoherent. But in the case of Kant’s intelligible character, or moral ‘disposition’, we are dealing with a structure of subjectivity which is itself ‘timeless’ – it underlies all empirical actions. Here the very notion of change or moral revolution becomes hard to make sense of at all, even metaphorically. Furthermore, as Leslie Mulholland has argued, ‘There is no reason whatsoever for the person to make a different choice on the second occasion from on the first occasion. It is as if one person at one occasion made two choices of incompatible supreme maxims . . . Only if we allow past experience to have an influence on the present decision can this be avoided.’<sup>79</sup> Indeed, some commentators have drawn precisely this conclusion, conceding that ‘[Kant’s] images of revolution and conflict are, of course, no less temporal than the idea of progress. They must be taken to refer to a timeless condition of the self as it is in itself, in which both a good disposition and a morally defective disposition are present, and the good disposition is stronger.’<sup>80</sup> Yet it is easy to see that Kant could not accept this construal – for it would amount to a denial of radical evil in the first place.

The philosopher Emil Fackenheim once summarized Kant’s conception of religion as ‘justified hope’.<sup>81</sup> But perhaps in the end Kant’s attempt, unrivalled in its dignity and profundity, to combine a steadfast confidence in human progress with a disabused sense of the intractability of human evil, leads into philosophical perplexities which the appeal to rational faith does not alleviate, but simply intensifies. It became one of the tasks of the first great post-Kantians to preserve a due sense of the depth of evil, while finding a way both of justifying hope, and of keeping hope humanly intelligible.

## Notes

- 1 G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol. 3: *Medieval and Modern Philosophy*, trans. E. S. Haldane and Francis H. Simson (Lincoln, NE and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 459.
  - 2 *Ibid.*, p. 425.
  - 3 *Ibid.*, p. 458.
  - 4 See Immanuel Kant, *The Moral Law: Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. H. J. Paton (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 107–23; Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 17–30.
  - 5 See Paul Guyer, ‘The Form and Matter of the Categorical Imperative’, in *Kant’s System of Nature and Freedom: Selected Essays* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005).
  - 6 Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings* trans. and ed. Allen Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 45.
  - 7 *Ibid.*
  - 8 *Ibid.*, p. 56.
  - 9 See Immanuel Kant, ‘An Answer to the Question: “What is Enlightenment?”’, in *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 54–60.
  - 10 Goethe’s and Schiller’s comments are cited in Emil L. Fackenheim, ‘Kant and Radical Evil’, in *The God Within: Kant, Schelling, and Historicity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), p. 21.
  - 11 See *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, p. 59.
  - 12 Kant defines the Idea of happiness in terms of ‘an absolute whole, a maximum of well-being in my present and every future state’ (*The Moral Law*, p. 81). He affirms that it can be ‘presupposed surely and *a priori* in the case of every human being because it belongs to *his essence*’ (*ibid.*, p. 79).
  - 13 Kant makes this argument, in different forms, in all three of his *Critiques*. But the conception of God (as well as immortality) as religious ‘postulates’ of practical reason is most thoroughly worked out in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (see pp. 90–122, ‘Dialectic of Pure Practical Reason’).
  - 14 See Karl Leonhard Reinhold, *Letters on the Kantian Philosophy*, ed. Karl Ameriks, trans. James Hebbler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), Letters 1–5 (pp. 1–75).
  - 15 See Karl Leonhard Reinhold, ‘Erörterungen des Begriffs von der Freiheit des Willens’, in Rüdiger Bittner and Conrad Cramer (eds), *Materialien zu Kants Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975), pp. 310–24.
  - 16 *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, p. 49.
  - 17 Henry Allison defends the consistency of Kant’s position throughout the critical period in *Kant’s Theory of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 133–4. But this is unconvincing. In the *Groundwork* Kant affirms that
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- ‘on the presupposition that the will of an intelligence is free, there follows necessarily its *autonomy* as the formal condition under which alone it can be determined’ (*The Moral Law*, p. 121). Kant subsequently has to concede that such a will can also be determined heteronomously.
- 18 See *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, pp. 47–50.
  - 19 Allison, *Kant’s Theory of Freedom*, p. 140.
  - 20 The German term for ‘original sin’ is *Erb­sünde* (‘inherited sin’), which makes the target of Kant’s objection more explicit.
  - 21 *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, p. 62.
  - 22 *Ibid.*
  - 23 *Ibid.*, pp. 57–8.
  - 24 For a critical assessment of some of these attempts, see Stephen R. Grimm, ‘Kant’s Argument for Radical Evil’, *European Journal of Philosophy*, 10: 2 (August 2002).
  - 25 *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, p. 56.
  - 26 *Ibid.*, pp. 56–7.
  - 27 *Ibid.*, p. 57.
  - 28 Paul Guyer, ‘Immanuel Kant’, in Edward Craig (ed.), *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 192.
  - 29 To give just an indication, the index to Barbara Hermann’s *The Practice of Moral Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993) contains no entry for ‘evil’; likewise Onora O’Neill’s *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant’s Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). Christine Korsgaard’s *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* discusses the problem of evil-doing at pp. 171–6, though Korsgaard here accepts Kant’s view that evil is ‘unintelligible’. (By contrast, in her second book, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Korsgaard does sketch an explanation of evil (pp. 102–3, pp. 250–1), but the term is still not regarded as meriting an entry in the index.)
  - 30 Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), p. 79.
  - 31 *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, p. 57.
  - 32 David Held, ‘Cosmopolitan Democracy and the Global Order: A New Agenda’, in James Bohman and Matthias Lutz-Bachman (eds), *Perpetual Peace: Essays on Kant’s Cosmopolitan Ideal* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), pp. 235–51.
  - 33 *Ibid.*, p. 247.
  - 34 Peter Gowan, ‘Neoliberal Cosmopolitanism’, *New Left Review*, 2nd series, 11 (September–October 2001), pp. 79–93.
  - 35 *Ibid.*, p. 85.
  - 36 *Ibid.*, p. 88.
  - 37 Jürgen Habermas, ‘Kant’s Idea of Perpetual Peace, with the Benefit of Two Hundred Years’ Hindsight’, in Bohman and Lutz-Bachman (eds), *Perpetual Peace*, p. 130.

- 38 See Peter Gowan, 'A Calculus of Power', *New Left Review*, 2nd series, 16 (July–August 2002), p. 47.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 67.
- 40 See Immanuel Kant, 'Perpetual Peace', in *On History*, ed. Lewis White Beck (New York: Macmillan, 1963), pp. 85–135.
- 41 *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, p. 57.
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 129n.
- 43 *Ibid.*
- 44 Immanuel Kant, 'An Old Question Raised Again: Is the Human Race Constantly Progressing?', in *On History*, p. 151.
- 45 Immanuel Kant, 'Perpetual Peace', p. 114.
- 46 See Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. and ed. Robert B. Loudon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 238.
- 47 See Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Kant and the Philosophy of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 149.
- 48 Max Weber, 'Science as a Vocation', in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (London: Routledge, 1970), p. 140.
- 49 *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 112.
- 50 The pioneering works in this regard are Graham Bird, *Kant's Theory of Knowledge: An Outline of One Central Argument in the Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Humanities Press, 1962), and Henry Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism: An Interpretation and Defense* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983).
- 51 See *Critique of Practical Reason*, pp. 3–4.
- 52 Fackenheim, 'Kant's Philosophy of Religion', in *The God Within*, p. 16.
- 53 Allen Wood, *Kant's Moral Religion* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1970), p. 124.
- 54 See *ibid.*, pp. 232–48.
- 55 *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, pp. 183–4.
- 56 *Ibid.*, p. 73.
- 57 A defence of a 'modest' metaphysical reading of Kant's transcendental idealism can be found in Karl Ameriks, *Kant and the Fate of Autonomy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). For a nuanced and deeply insightful appraisal of the metaphysically deflationary approach, focusing on Bird and Allison, see Sally Sheldon, 'The Problematic Meaning of Transcendental Idealism', PhD thesis, University of Essex, 2003.
- 58 Immanuel Kant, 'The End of All Things', in *On History*, p. 151.
- 59 Immanuel Kant, 'Conjectural Beginning of Human History', in *On History*, p. 60.
- 60 Immanuel Kant, 'Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View', in *On History*, p. 16.
- 61 Immanuel Kant, 'Conjectural Beginning of Human History', p. 67.
- 62 Allen Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 296.

- 63 Ibid., p. 295.
- 64 Wood cites the opening of book 3 of the *Religion* to support his case for the social origin of evil. Here Kant states of the individual, ‘Envy, addiction 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*’ (*Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, p. 105). Basing himself on this, Wood goes so far as to assert that ‘Evil for Kant is therefore a product of human reason under the natural conditions of its full development, which are found in the social condition. The radical evil in human nature is an inevitable accompaniment of the development of our rational faculties in society’ (Allen W. Wood, ‘Religion, Ethical Community and the Struggle against Evil’, *Faith and Philosophy*, 17: 4 (October 2000), p. 504). Yet Kant begins the paragraph from which the above citation is taken by reaffirming that ‘The human being is nevertheless in this perilous state through his own fault’. Kant goes on to admit that the human being can ‘easily convince himself’ that the threats of evil ‘do not come his way from his own raw nature, so far as he exists in isolation’, but he does not affirm that this is the truth of the matter. For further criticism of Wood’s argument for the social origin of evil in Kant, see Grimm, ‘Kant’s Argument for Radical Evil’.
- 65 *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, p. 51.
- 66 Immanuel Kant, ‘On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy’, in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, p. 20.
- 67 Ibid.
- 68 Ibid., p. 18.
- 69 Wood, *Kant’s Ethical Thought*, p. 320.
- 70 Ibid., p. 300.
- 71 Henry Allison, ‘Duty, Inclination and Respect’, in *Kant’s Theory of Freedom*, p. 126.
- 72 Wood, *Kant’s Ethical Thought*, p. 295.
- 73 On this see Yirmiyahu Yovel, ‘Kant’s Practical Reason as Will: Interest, Recognition, Judgement, and Choice’, *Review of Metaphysics*, 52: 2 (December 1998), p. 289.
- 74 Wood, *Kant’s Ethical Thought*, p. 287.
- 75 *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, p. 183.
- 76 Ibid., p. 68.
- 77 Ibid.
- 78 Gordon E. Michalson Jr, *Fallen Freedom: Kant on Radical Evil and Moral Regeneration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 85.
- 79 Leslie Mulholland, unpublished paper, cited in *ibid.*, p. 87.
- 80 Robert Merrihew Adams, ‘Introduction’, in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, p. xx.
- 81 Fackenheim, ‘Kant’s Philosophy of Religion’, p. 4.