



Kant on Radical Evil: A Pragmatic Reading

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Abstract

One of the primary concerns of Immanuel Kant in his major works on Philosophy of Religion is the doctrine of radical evil. Although Kant claimed it to be a universal trait, he failed to give formal proof (evidence) to support it. However, he asserted that the conducts of human beings are enough to demonstrate the nature of radical evil. The complexity of the doctrine is further elevated by introducing the idea of the need for divine intervention for one to overcome such a moral/religious predicament. Critical responses from both Christian and secular scholars reflect an interesting take on his ethico-religious discourse of the prominent criticisms of Kant's doctrine of radical evil is its relapse to religious absurdity, reflecting the Christian doctrine of the 'fall of mankind' as narrated in the first book of the Bible. Consequently, the seriousness of the criticism not only affects the moral maxims but also the portrayal of its strong, religious affinity, rendering the doctrine even more allusive and perplexing. The article intends to throw some light on the pragmatic perspective of the doctrine with a special focus on the universality of the radical evil nature of humans.

Keywords: radical evil, propensity, predisposition

1. Introduction

Until recently, Kant's works on Philosophy of Religion did not really have the attention of the scholars compared to his celebrated critical philosophical works, mainly the three *Critiques*. Nevertheless, the significance of Kant's *Religion within the*

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Boundaries of Mere Reason (henceforth *Religion*)(*) and its impact upon the scholars and theologians cannot be denied. Even though it was not really received with open arms when it was published, it gave critical insights to theologians and scholars towards religious beliefs and practices. One of the major issues Kant tried to resolve in his *Religion* was the human nature that can even affect the maxims, the moral incentives – the radical evil. Perhaps, it is right to maintain that the doctrine of radical evil perplexed the Kantian scholars. Grimm (2002) avers that it was a scandalous move on the part of Kant, for he seems to be endorsing the Christian view of ‘original sin’ and at the same time placing an obstacle before his scholars in respect to his indecisive grounding of the radical doctrine. Although Kant had already placed himself within the philosopher’s hall of fame, he was nonetheless deeply perplexed by the seriousness of this aspect of human nature. He had not completely overlooked it in the three *Critiques*. Rather, he addressed it hesitantly when he laid down his ethical discourses, for he was very much aware of the implications of the *fall of mankind* as narrated in the book of *Genesis*. It is imperative to note that radical evil is not some religious concept that could be brushed aside and swept under the carpet of *noumena* because Kant considers it the most disturbing phenomenon, attacking moral incentives at the very spine of its maxim. Though Kant explicitly maintained the limits of reason in the first *Critique*, the idea of God as a postulate of his ethical discourse reverberates with the canon of pure reason as having a more pragmatic stand. Accordingly, the idea of God as a practical necessity for his moral discourse led him to affirm that “morality inevitably leads to religion” (Kant, 1998, p. 35).

1.1 Essence of Kant’s “Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason”

When *Religion* was first published in 1793, it was not received with an enthusiastic heart, especially by the Church and the clergies. With this at the back of his mind, in the second edition published in 1794, Kant tried to clarify the intention of his work on two levels. First, he gave a point-blank response to those who had criticized that it has the same difficulties of his critical philosophy (the three *Critiques*), Kant replied saying 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, 1998, p. 41). The second response is the general implication that runs in his *Religion*. As S. Palmquist rightly points out in Pluhar (2009), the message Kant wanted his readers to take home from his *Religion* was his sincere intention to create a more congenial platform for both the theologians and the philosophers where they could have critical yet constructive reflections on religion. This in a way was to solve the apparent conflicts between the faculty of faith on one hand and reason on the other. Kant’s *Religion* in its actual form was not a book, but rather an amalgamation of four articles on the issues central to religion, Christianity in particular. The *Religion* is divided into four parts. The first part considers the doctrine of ‘radical evil’ alongside the analogy of the ‘fall of man’, a concept central to the Christian faith (*Religion* 6:42). In the second part, Kant delves into the plausible medium for one to be freed from the predicaments caused by the radical evil. Even here, Kant used the Biblical analogies where Christ is implied as the *ideal* moral model, the archetype (*Religion* 6:61). In the Third part, Kant came up with the plausible ethical community, the Kingdom of God (*Religion* 6:95). It is a sort of safe haven for the moral incentives to be developed as interaction between individuals takes place. It is intended to foster a morally committed community. The Fourth part is somewhat a post-reflection of the preceding scenario. Kant seems to be suggesting that religion during his time is not what it ought to be, for it failed to cultivate morally inclined religious individuals within the community. On the grounds of this belief, he critiqued the religious institutions and clergies of his time. All he could see was servility in their faith. According to Kant, religion can be best understood through the lens of morality. It is in line with such reading, Kant avers that “morality inevitably leads to religion” (Kant, 1998, p.35). However, as to whether he reduced religion to morality or projected religion as having an autonomous claim of its own will be reserved for another time and will not be discussed in this article except for some elementary comments in relation to it. Kantian theology in abroad sense falls within the theology which propagates the affirmation of religious concepts through one’s moral endeavours and uprightness. This is one significant reason for the attack on Kant’s perspectives on religion by laymen and

theologians alike. For it is through such approaches that Kant gave the impression of the human's capability to save themselves by relying on one's moral inclination alone. However, on further reflection, Kant did acknowledge the difficulties involved when he introduced the concept of radical evil and the plausible way out of such predicaments. It is with the introduction of radical evil, Kant inevitably made way for divine intervention. The problem in his doctrine of radical evil lies with the repercussion it has upon his ethical discourse. Perhaps, the two main impacts of the conundrum of radical evil that can be seen are his ethical rigorism and the problem of the universality of radical evil. Kant tried to fulfill his commitment to moral rigorism and to a certain extent, he succeeded at it with his categorical imperative. However, with regard to the second conundrum, the universality of the doctrine of radical evil, he was rather ambiguous in his arguments. Nevertheless, in spite of the conundrums and Kantian distinctive terminologies, the significance of Kant's philosophy of religion is invariably connected to the perplexity of the doctrine of radical evil. At the same time, the analogies he brought in from the narratives of the Biblical account acted as a relief to those defending his *Religion* as something that coheres to the Christian faith from the rational approach. This in a way, goes in line with his idea of bridging the gap between the faculty of faith and reason.

1.2 Kant's idea of *Evil* within the parameter of moral weakness

The concept 'evil' is a socio-religiously loaded term and it is perhaps, subjected to the same as it is reflected upon within the specific context. The online Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines 'evil' as "a force that causes bad things to happen; morally bad behavior". The term 'evil' has varied meanings within the societal scenario. From the religious perspective, it has certain ontological groundings; an evil being or spirit who delights in bringing harm and pain to people. Such a being is considered to be a malevolent spirit. The other side of the coin to such reading of evil is of course, the counter being or spirit that is benevolent. Such beliefs in spirits were a reality in almost all the humble beginnings of our civilizations. Within the general philosophical arena, it gave birth to the perennial debate on the conflict of good and evil coupled with the questions of rational proofs for the religious

concepts such as God and Evil. Kant's concept of evil on the other hand is not an ontologically grounded spirit or being but rather a moral weakness. The prefix '*radical*' to the term *evil* actually gave the perfect pitch to the tone of weakness in the moral sense. It is '*radical evil*' because it can corrupt the moral incentives to good, "the ground of all moral maxims" (Kant, 1998, p. 59). This suggests that radical evil affects us at two levels. First, it strikes at the core or the ground of all moral maxims and second, it shuts the plausible way out through human efforts. However, Kant remains optimistic because even though this radical evil is in the very nature of the human being, yet, it is within one who has rational autonomy – one who acts freely. On an interesting twist, Kant quoted from the Apostle (St. Paul), stating that, "there is none righteous (in the spirit of the Law), no, not one" (Kant, 1998, p. 61). (#) What the Apostle is referring to is the impossibility of being righteous without the divine intervention, for none can truly follow the Law in its totality for one to be upright. Kant avers that this assertion might hold true universally if human beings are susceptible of swaying to either of the side of good or evil at some point of time because of the radical evil nature.

This evil in human nature according to Kant has an innate character, that it is somewhat present from birth "not that birth itself is the cause" (Kant, 1998, p. 47). In order to explain this, Kant came up with three kinds of predispositions viz. predisposition to animality, predisposition to humanity and predisposition to personality. In the first two predispositions, Kant is inclined to believe that the self-love nature takes over but the third is where one has the sense of respect for the moral law. The crucial point here is that, though it is not enough for one to merely have the sense of respect for the moral law, it presupposes that such attitude towards the moral law is a predisposition, for they demand compliance to the Moral Law wilfully. Palmquist (Pluhar, 2009) is of the view that, this predisposition to good does not necessarily mean that we are actually good but establishes that we are "made to be good" (p. xxv). L. R. Pasternack (2014) also avers that this predisposition to personality can be linked to what Kant refers to as the "seed of goodness" (p. 96). If there is goodness or at least the capacity of being good within mankind then there must also be a

way to bring that out. But the question still remains as to whether the predisposition to goodness is enough to counter the radical evil nature of human beings. However, it has been established that there is also a predisposition of goodness that has the capacity to willfully correspond to the moral law.

Along with the predispositions, Kant also maintains that there is the 'propensity' to evil. To Kant, propensity is "the subjective ground of the possibility of an inclination (habitual desires) insofar as this possibility is contingent for humanity in general" (Kant, 1998, p. 52). Before moving any further, it is imperative to note that even though Kant admitted the predispositions and the propensity are both innate, the latter is to be considered as 'acquired'. Pasternack (2014) rightly opines that the interpretation of propensity to evil is one of the core challenges for any interpreters of Kant. The basis for the possibility of choosing evil (propensity) can be categorized under three grades. First, the '*frailty*' of human nature or the weakness of the human heart. Kant quoted from the word of the Apostle to substantiate the first grade of evil propensity; "what I would, that I do not" (Kant, 1998, p.53). (\$) This statement also stands as an affirmation of Kant's clarity on the Biblical claims. Kant is in a way pointing out the difficulty involved in willing the good (law) into our maxim because human heart is corrupted and tends to tilt towards evil more often than the good. The second grade is the '*impurity*' of the human heart. Impure in the sense of not adopting the law alone as the sufficient incentive but also the reliance on other incentives – not duty for duty's sake. Lastly, the '*depravity or corruption*'. This is the most dreaded propensity of all. Kant calls it the "*perversity* of the human heart, for it reverses the ethical order as regards the incentives of a free power of choice" (Kant, 1998, p. 54). It is the propensity that has the capacity to incorporate evil maxims. This propensity is not physical (the power of choice as a natural being), rather has its roots in the core of the faculty of moral decision. This propensity to evil in the first place is completely 'our own deed', and at the same time it is a propensity in the sense that it is the "subjective determining ground of the power of choice that precedes every deed" (Kant, 1998, p. 55). Kant was inclined to believe that human beings are evil by nature. This is because he is of the view that even if one is

conscious of the moral law, they may yet choose to deviate from it occasionally. It is interesting to note that, Kant did not feel the need to give a formal proof of this nature. This is because according to him if we just take a moment and look at our society, this propensity is visible everywhere—such “human *deeds* parades before us” (Kant, 1998, p. 56). This statement perhaps, can be best understood from a pragmatic point of view. However, it can be argued that Kant failed to give a lucid account of its nature and a locus of this propensity. Neither did he give a formal proof for the universal claim of the doctrine of radical evil. It would indeed be a challenge to come up with an explanation of this propensity to evil within the context of *Religion* incorporating his ethical discourses.

1.3 Pragmatic Approach to Radical Evil

What has been discussed so far pertains to the manifestation of one’s exercise of free will which can either result in evil or good deeds in accordance to the nature of its propensity. The ambiguity of the ‘nature of propensity’ as having the character of being innate with universal implications, yet, the characteristic of something that is acquired makes the doctrine of radical evil one complicated topic in *Religion*. At the same time, even though this radical evil nature is an innate propensity, we are responsible for its manifestation because, according to Kant, we are the author of such manifestations or deeds. The question is whether this claim by Kant affects his commitment to moral rigorism. However, at the same time if the propensity to evil has an innate character, it suggests a universal claim. This is important because according to Kant, by introducing the propensity to evil which has an innate character that can affect the core of the moral maxims, one presupposed the plausible idea of the dichotomy of good and evil nature within us. No doubt, Kant is clear with the fact that rational autonomy is the defining factor of his ethical discourse but if radical evil is indeed universal, then, a suggestion of the propensity sharing the same locus at the unconditioned level is something that lacks coherence. All that Kant affirmed was 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. Yet it must equally be possible to overcome this evil, for it is found in the human being as acting freely (Kant, 1998, p. 59).

The obvious question would be, how could something that is corrupted at the core of its moral maxims overcome itself? Nevertheless, the major concern for now is not the moral regeneration but the problem of the dichotomy of good and evil propensity which affects his dictum of rigorism and the universal claim. Kant affirms that humans are by and large, evil in nature. At the same time he avers that the human being cannot “be morally good in some part and at the same time evil in others” (Kant, 1998, 49). There is no middle way. Human beings are either good or evil. This is Kantian rigorism. S. Morgan (2005) opines that given a choice, many would rather deny propensity to evil than threaten his rigorism. Perhaps, F. Schiller and W. von Goethe are right in postulating that Kant, in his attempt to endorse Christian doctrine of the “fallen nature and original *Sin*” (Bernstein, 2002, p. 25) lands himself in a scandalous situation. Although Kant tried to maintain his ethical commitment to rigorism in *Religion*, it was not convincing because of the notorious propensity of radical evil. Again, the ground for his moral claims rests in the universal assertion of the moral maxims. This is challenged by the innate claims of the propensity of radical evil. However, it must be noted that Kant did affirm two kinds of innate ideas as mentioned earlier and accordingly, the propensity to radical evil is to be considered from the ‘acquired’ perspective. Nevertheless, the reason for Kant’s failure to give an articulate picture for the problem lies in its root in the unconditioned deeds, that it is “woven into human nature” (Kant, 1998, p. 54). I agree with Morgan, who finds the idea quite problematic precisely because Kant never really explains how something that is “woven into our nature can simultaneously be a freely chosen deed” (2005, p. 95). R. J. Bernstein is perhaps right in asserting that “Kant is at war with himself” (2002, p. 26) by introducing the doctrine of radical evil. In the same vein, Michalson opines that Kant is never clear as to the source of radical evil or its universality claims which ultimately lands him in a

“conceptual logjam” (1990, p. 67) beyond the reach of rescue. The claim of universal evil by Kant is indeed another big puzzle. Kant, as mentioned earlier, seems to be inclined towards the Christian theological doctrine of the fallen nature of mankind by affirming the Apostle’s statements. According to commentators like Quinn (1988, p. 111), Kant’s claim of universal evil can be considered from the empirical evidence available universally to mankind. Kant was affirmative that we need not have a formal proof of radical evil because of the plentiful empirical evidence. However, as Grimm suggests that this doctrine of human corruption may be best understood only as “widespread” (2002, p. 165) and not universal, the question becomes, if it’s just widespread, does it mean that there are humans who are morally perfect from birth itself? The problem lies in the very nature of this doctrine, something that projects itself as being subjectively inherent in every human. If one is to read Grimm’s idea of ‘widespread’ as some human being morally perfect from birth, then there is a possibility of undermining the conundrums of radical evil, as Kant asserted. Another approach to this universal conundrum is the anthropological perspective mainly propagated by Allen Wood. Wood (1999) contends that, “the doctrine of radical evil is anthropological, not theological. Its basis is not religious authority but naturalistic anthropology” (p. 291). However, Grimm is of the view that the basis of Wood’s thesis rests in the “unsociable sociability” (2002, p. 166), the concept where he equates Kant with Rousseau’s idea of the evil emerging only through the social contracts. The basis for Wood’s anthropological perspective lies in the following statement of Kant;

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, 1998, p. 105).

If this be the case, then, it is only at this point of interaction, the window was opened for evil propensity to creep into our moral character for the very first time. This definitely captures Wood's contention that it is our association with others which makes our moral reflection more complex and challenging. However, as Grimm points out, Wood's account failed to consider the possibility of evil prior to the appearance of societal picture. To consider the propensity to evil only as an event of the societal setup, Kant could be accused of being inconsistent with his view based Biblical references because he is very much aware of the doctrine of the fall and the sinful state of mankind. The problem with Kant is the failure to substantiate his view even after having believed and asserted that the world indeed is filled with the manifestation of evil deeds. P. Formosa (2007, p. 244) also contends that Wood's anthropological approach tried to equate radical evil with unsocial sociability when in fact, they are complementary to each other. Grimm (2002) further opines that Wood's approach failed to answer the pre-societal setup and so gave an alternative anthropological approach to the doctrine through Kant's predisposition of 'animality'. Grimm's argument is mainly drawn from the 'Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion' where Kant states that,

This predisposition to good, which God has placed in the human being, must be developed by the human being himself before the good can make its appearance. But since at the same time the human being has many instincts belonging to animality, and since he has to have them if he is to continue being human, the strength of his instincts will beguile him and he will abandon himself to them, and *thus arises evil*, or rather, when the human being begins to use his reason, he falls into foolishness. *A special germ toward evil cannot be thought, but rather the first development of our reason toward the good is the origin of evil.* And that remainder of uncultivatedness in the progress of culture is again evil...Evil is also *not a means to good*, but rather arises as a *by-product*, since the human being

has to struggle with his own limits, with his animal instincts. (Kant, 2001, pp. 411-412).

Although this passage is from Kant's post-critical works, a similar pattern of thinking flows in his *Religion* and Grimm did capture the pre-societal idea of the propensity to evil by pointing out that *animal elements* in human could perhaps throw some light on the contention. Human beings are rational animals who are endowed with the predisposition of being *good*. However, although there is moral predisposition, Kant observes "experience nevertheless also shows that in him there is a tendency actively to desire what is unlawful, even though he knows that it is unlawful; that is, a tendency to *evil* ..." (Kant, 2006, p. 229). To Grimm (2002), the desire of humans to pursue happiness is what drives us to actions initially, but things change when *reason* dawns in us and our whole moral perception gets altered accordingly. Perhaps, it is in the light of reason being made aware, Kant endorsed the words of Apostle that states, sin follows upon the law because the idea of lawlessness is made visible through the introduction of law. So according to Grimm (2002), and following Kantian idioms, it is when we first realized that we ought to be obeying the moral law, that our natural needs and inclinations rebelled, and consequently, the first evil role emerged. In this manner, the idea of the propensity to evil, according to Grimm did not originate at the entrance to the societal agreement as Wood would contend, but rather at our conflict of reason with our animal needs and inclinations prior to the societal setup. Grimm's perspective is closer to Kant's theory because the clash of conflicts between our animality and reason is a plausible common converging point from a pragmatic approach. In the same vein, Formosa contends that when Kant speaks of disposition 'at birth' it is to mean "at birth of our freedom" (2007, p. 233) which according to Kant, occurs somewhere at the age of 20 years. Formosa (2007) further avers that it is not possible to consider the universality of evil through an anthropological approach. At best it could be 'widespread', which Grimm is also inclined to. Although the idea of 'widespread' suggests a better reading of the universal claim of Kant's doctrine of radical evil, it is still not enough as it fails to explain the dormant radical nature in human before being exposed to law. As such, at its best, the term 'widespread' can be

read encompassing two points. First, radical evil nature is widespread in the sense it is inherent in every human being even before the dawn of law or reason. Second, it is widespread in the sense of the failure to wilfully submit to the categorical imperative or the Moral Law after having been exposed to it. Subsequently, the doctrine of radical evil nature is at best, widespread from the above two points.

Conclusion

In sum, the primary issue of the conundrum of Kant's doctrine of radical evil lies in his failure to come up with a clear-cut explanation and substantial proofs for the said doctrine. Nevertheless, from a pragmatic point of view without really conforming to strict Kantian structures and themes, it makes sense because evil deeds are a reality in every stratum of human society. Whether committing to his ethical rigorism or the universality of the propensity of radical evil, the impact it had upon his ethical discourse plagued Kant. However, it may be worth noting that even if it was to give rational grounding to the Christian doctrines of the 'fall of man' and the idea of *sin*, the seriousness which Kant portrayed in his doctrine of radical evil shows his acute inclinations towards religious thoughts and doctrines. Nevertheless, as Grimm (2002) points out, Kant maintains that the cause to this evil is 'inscrutable' (*Religion*, 6:21), 'incomprehensible' (*Religion*, 6:44), 'unfathomable' (*Religion*, 6:60), and 'forever shrouded in darkness' (*Religion*, 6:59). From this perspective, it is better to keep the doctrine of radical evil and its propensity within the domain of inscrutability. At the same time because of its rampant manifestation in our society, we can at the most assume that, if not universal *per se*, it has the nature of being *widespread*. Nevertheless, the doctrine is widespread even prior to the 'birth of our freedom'. It is interesting to note that Kant did not bring up the doctrine of radical evil outside of religion. For whatever reason, one main plausible theory could be his intention to give room for faith through his moral theory. Although, humans are morally inclined rational beings, temptations or evil deeds are no stranger to anyone but it is not beyond everyone. Subsequently, the pragmatic perspective of the doctrine of radical evil nature has its rationale in

the manifestation of such actions within the community of mankind.

End Notes

(#) - The Apostle here is St. Paul. The abstraction of the text of the Apostle is from the book of *Romans 3: 10*.

(\$) - It is interesting to note that Kant chose *Romans 7:19*, a Biblical passage which has a specific religious connotation in a book that aims to give a reason - based religion. This clearly suggests his genuine concern to bridge the gap between the faculty of theology and philosophy. The idea of the 'frailty of human heart' as Kant asserts is very much inclined to the Biblical account of 'heart' referred to as the 'inner man'.

(*) - All the direct quotations of Kant's statements from Religion are taken from " Kant, I. (1998). Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and other Writings. (Allen Wood and George DI Giovanni, Trans.). Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press."

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