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INTRODUCTION

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Introduction to J. B. Erhard's 'Devil's Apology' (1795)

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1.

Johann Benjamin Erhard (1766–1827) is one of the most interesting and philosophically significant of the early post-Kantians.[1] Born in Nuremberg into a humble family, Erhard taught himself philosophy and Latin before going on to study medicine and philosophy at, respectively, Würzburg and Jena. He enjoyed a successful career as a medical doctor and was appointed Chief Medical Officer in Berlin in 1823. His career as a published philosopher, although short-lived, was no less successful, and he was respected by, and in some cases exerted an influence on, the leading philosophers of his day. Erhard read the philosophy of Christian Wolff at a young age (he taught himself Latin to do so) and was initially committed to Wolffian rationalism. He converted to Kant's Critical Philosophy on reading the *Critique of Pure Reason*. However, like many of his contemporaries, the *Critique of Practical Reason* seems to have influenced him most profoundly. In his *Memoirs*, he describes his reading of the second *Critique* as follows:

> [A]ll pleasure that I obtained in life dwindled in comparison with the stimulation of my mind that I felt in [reading] certain passages of Kant's Critique of Practical Reason. Tears of the highest bliss fell from me onto this book, and afterwards even the memory of those happy days of my life moistened my eyes and consoled me every time adverse events and a sorrowful cast of mind obstructed any joyful outlook in this life.
>
> (Erhard, *Denkwürdigkeiten*, 20–1)

Having acquired a thorough knowledge of Kant's philosophy, Erhard decided to complete his philosophical training by travelling to meet leading contemporary philosophers. His travels, which began in 1790, took him to Jena,

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[1]The early post-Kantians include figures such as P. J. A. Feuerbach, the early J. G. Fichte, F. Gentz, S. Maimon, E. Reimarus, A. W. Rehberg, K. L. Reinhold, the early F. W. J. Schelling, F. Schiller, T. Schmalz and C. C. E. Schmid.

Copenhagen and Königsberg. In Jena, he studied philosophy with K. L. Reinhold, with whom he became close friends, and established himself as a prominent and talented member of Reinhold's intellectual circle (Frank, 'Unendliche Annäherung', 375; Perrinjaquet, 'Introduction', 19–20). Some sense of the impression Erhard made can be gleaned from the following excerpt from a letter by F. Schiller:

> He is the richest, most comprehensive mind that I have ever known, who not only has, as Reinhold says, an in-depth knowledge of Kantian philosophy, but has also developed entirely new perspectives in it through his own thinking, and in general combines extraordinary erudition with an uncommon power of understanding. He is a mathematician, a doctor who thinks, a philosopher, very enthusiastic about art, draws most excellently, and plays music equally well; yet he is not more than twenty-five years old.
> (Schiller to Körner, 10 April 1791. Cited in Frank, 'Unendliche Annäherung', 381)

After Jena, Erhard travelled to Copenhagen, where he met the poet Jens Baggesen, and then on to Königsberg, where he befriended Kant and met Fichte. Kant's letters suggest that he valued Erhard's company, and he refers favourably to Erhard in his 1798 The Conflict of the Faculties (Kant, Schriften 7, 87). Erhard and Fichte met on at least two further occasions (in Zurich and Stuttgart) and did not get along well personally due to their very different temperaments and philosophical outlooks (Perrinjaquet, 'Introduction', 40–1). (Baggesen reports that Fichte could 'neither understand nor abide' Erhard, and compares their meeting to the violent collision of two billiard balls (Cited in Frank, 'Unendliche Annäherung', 387).) Nevertheless, they respected each other as philosophers and shared similar political views.

Erhard produced the bulk of his philosophical work in the 1790s. Although he was interested in, and wrote on, theoretical philosophy (he was sceptical about Reinhold's and Fichte's attempts to derive a philosophical system from a first principle[2]), most of his writings deal with practical philosophy. Like many of the early post-Kantians, Erhard wanted to develop a distinctively Kantian 'philosophy of right' (legal and political philosophy) and to determine what the Kantian position on the French Revolution should be. Erhard wrote articles on 'autocracy' (Alleinherrschaft), the concept of the devil, human rights, the idea of justice and the theory of legislation. As regards the French revolution, Erhard sided with 'radical' or 'left' Kantians such as L. H. Jakob, J. A. Bergk and Fichte in defending rights of resistance and revolution on the basis of Kant's moral philosophy.[3] In On the Right of the People to a Revolution, written in 1794 and published in 1795, Erhard argues that a people has a

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[2]Although Erhard wrote an essay defending Reinhold's 'Elementary Philosophy', he was profoundly sceptical about the philosophy of first principles and dismissed it as chicanery. See his letter to Niethammer of the 19 May 1794 in Denkwürdigkeiten, 395.

[3]For an illuminating discussion of early post-Kantian defences of a right to resistance and a right to revolution, see Maliks, 'Revolutionary Epigones' and 'Liberal Revolution'.

moral duty to overthrow its government and change its constitution if these violate the requirements of morality or prevent it from attaining enlightenment. Erhard also wrote a review of Fichte's 1793–94 *Contribution to the Rectification of the Public's Judgement of the French Revolution*. Although broadly sympathetic to Fichte's overall position, Erhard makes several incisive criticisms of Fichte's philosophy of right. According to Perrinjaquet, Erhard's criticisms may have informed and influenced the subsequent development of Fichte's legal and political philosophy (Perrinjaquet, 'Introduction', 44–5).

Given the esteem in which Erhard was held by his contemporaries and the philosophical significance of his work, it is surprising that he is seldom discussed in Anglophone scholarship.[4] It is also surprising that none of his work has been translated into English until now. The translation offered here aims to promote the study of Erhard's philosophy by making one of his most important works accessible to an English-speaking audience.

2.

'Devil's Apology' ('*Apologie des Teufels*') was published in 1795 in F. I. Niethammer's *Philosophisches Journal einer Gesellschaft Teutscher Gelehrten*. Although the title might suggest that it is a treatise in angelology, it is best characterized as a work of practical philosophy. For while it aims to provide a satisfactory account of the devil, the purpose of that account is to demonstrate the superiority of Kantian ethics and to open up new perspectives in Kantian practical philosophy. My aim in what follows is to provide insight into those perspectives while sketching the broad contours of Erhard's discussion.

For exegetical purposes, the argument of 'Devil's Apology' can be divided into three stages. Erhard begins by demonstrating the possibility of the existence of the devil (Paras 1–38). He then considers the grounds for postulating the existence of the devil (Paras 39–40). He concludes by considering the utility of the concept of the devil (Paras 41–50). Let us discuss each stage in turn.

In the first stage, Erhard seeks to demonstrate the possibility of the existence of the devil by showing that the concept of the devil is conceivable— that is, capable of being thought coherently. He does this by showing that the conceptual elements ('moments') that the concept of the devil contains are separately and jointly consistent. Erhard argues that the concept of the devil is conceivable only within the framework of Kantian moral theory, which he opposes to moral theories that proceed from the concept of the highest good. Within the Kantian framework, the devil is to be understood

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[4]It is indicative of this neglect that there is no discussion of Erhard in Beiser's pathbreaking monograph on early post-Kantian political philosophy, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism*. Recently, there has been a growth of interest in Erhard's philosophy of right. See the aforementioned articles by Maliks, and Gottlieb, 'A Family Quarrel'.

as the 'ideal of wickedness'—the personification of the idea (*Idee*) of wickedness. Because ideals are personifications (for Kant, the Stoic wise man is an ideal), Erhard speaks of them as though they were persons ('subjects'), attributing beliefs, intentions and actions to them.

The ideal of wickedness (the devil) is diametrically opposed to – the inverted mirror image of – the ideal of morality and is to be characterized in contrast to it. Erhard therefore begins by outlining the ideal of morality. He starts by characterizing the 'moral disposition' (which is good in itself) and then identifies the features that a maxim must possess if it is not to contradict it. From these features, Erhard derives the fundamental practical principle that governs the actions of the moral disposition—the 'moral law' (the categorical imperative). He formulates it as follows: 'Act in such a way that the maxim in accordance with which you act can be followed by all other human beings at all times without conflict' (Para 15). According to Erhard, the ideal of morality is a subject who always acts in accordance with the moral law and does so solely for 'the sake of duty' (Paras 17, 47). This ideal can be thought of in two ways: as a divine ideal (God) and as a human ideal (Paras 17, 29, 36).

It is worth noting that Erhard's formulation of the moral law differs from Kant's formulations of it in foregrounding the way that the moral law co-ordinates the behaviour of rational beings so that they can act on maxims without interpersonal conflict. This idea might be thought to be implicit in (or at least suggested by) the universalization test associated with Kant's Formula of Universal Law (in a world in which your maxim is a universal law, everyone is able to act upon it) and in his idea of a kingdom of ends, but it is not foregrounded by Kant.

Having characterized the moral ideal, Erhard characterizes the ideal of wickedness. Whereas the moral ideal is 'a subject who always acts in accordance with the moral disposition through freedom', the wicked ideal is 'a subject who acts against the moral disposition in order to act contrary to it' (Para 19). Like the moral ideal, the wicked ideal acts on a fundamental principle. Erhard derives this principle from the wicked disposition. Whereas the moral disposition is completely selfless and acts in a way that is compatible with the free actions of all other rational beings, the wicked disposition is completely selfish and strives to subjugate all other rational beings. The fundamental principle upon which it acts is: 'I want to act in such a way that my self is the only possible end of my action and appears as the only free being' (Para 20).

This principle, which is the malign counterpart of the moral law, is opposed to it in three respects. First, the moral law is universally valid – binding on all rational beings – and can be followed by all rational beings without conflict. The principle of wickedness, by contrast, is binding only on one rational being – the being who acts in accordance with it – and cannot be 'followed by two

beings at the same time without conflict' (Para 27). Because it is not universally valid, it is not, strictly speaking, a 'law' (which would be binding on all), but an 'intention' (*Vorsatz*) (Para 20). Second, whereas the moral law is a formal principle, the wicked intention is a material principle, which is to say that it presupposes the subject's desire for the end that the principle aims to bring about (cf. Kant, *Schriften* 5, 21ff). Third, the moral law is an imperative, commanding the subject to do something. The wicked intention, by contrast, is not a command that constrains the agent, but the expression of a want.

From the wicked intention, Erhard derives a set of wicked, contra-moral maxims (Para 22). He claims that on the basis of these maxims one can determine how, in any given case, 'consistent wickedness' will act. According to Erhard, the ideal of wickedness, or the devil, would act on these maxims with complete consistency in order to attain dominance over all other free beings.

Erhard's portrayal of the ideal of wickedness is great fun and shows considerable philosophical ingenuity and literary flair. Indeed, the poet and philosopher Friedrich Schlegel considered the discussion of the 'devil's maxims' to be the best thing about the whole essay (Schlegel, *Jugendschriften*, 107). However, Erhard's portrayal of the ideal of wickedness is noteworthy for two other reasons. The first concerns Erhard's claim that the ideal of wickedness would act with complete consistency on its contra-moral maxims. This claim was picked up by Fichte, who uses it to undermine the view (probably due to C. C. E. Schmid) that the principle of morality is that the 'manifold actions of the free will' ought to be consistent with each other. As Fichte rightly points out, Erhard's account of the devil provides a *reductio* of that view, since the devil (who is a free being) is completely consistent in his *rejection* of morality (Fichte, *Foundations*, 11, notes f and 7).

The second reason why Erhard's portrayal of the ideal of wickedness is noteworthy relates to his revolutionary politics and, more generally, to the issue of what position a Kantian should adopt on political revolution. According to Erhard, the ideal of wickedness strives to be the sole free being and to dominate all other rational beings. Now, as G. A. Walz points out, the devil, on this view, is an 'all-subjugating despot', and it is possible to read Erhard's discussion as a thinly veiled critique of 'absolutist despotism' (Walz, *Die Staatsidee*, 468, note 4). In this connection, it is interesting to note that Kant, in his discussion of tyrannicide in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, appears to deploy Erhard's account of the devil in his argument against the 'formal execution' (as opposed to the 'assassination') of a monarch (Goyard-Fabre and Renaut, 'Introduction', v, note 3). The formal execution of a monarch is so horrific to us, Kant argues, because it invokes the idea of a supremely wicked agent whose 'maxim is diametrically opposed to the law, as contradictory to it (hostile to it, so to speak)'. For Erhard, the devil is the tyrannical monarch; for Kant, he is the revolutionary usurper 'who makes it his rule to act contrary to the law' (Kant, *Schriften* 6, 320, note*; Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, 464 note*).

Having shown that the concept of the devil is conceivable, and therefore that his existence is possible, Erhard considers the grounds for postulating his existence (Paras 39–40). He argues that whereas there are theoretical and practical grounds for postulating the existence of God, or the highest ideal of morality, there are neither theoretical nor practical grounds for postulating the existence of the devil. There are no theoretical grounds for postulating the devil's existence because the assumption that an absolutely wicked creature exists is not necessary to explain natural phenomena or to satisfy any other interest of theoretical reason. As regards practical grounds, Erhard argues that the moral human being has no interest in believing that the devil exists (since such a belief is clearly not a necessary presupposition of moral agency) and that the wicked human being has an interest in denying the existence of the devil. The latter is the case because the existence of an extremely powerful being who strives to subjugate all other beings would seriously threaten, if not undermine completely, the wicked human being's attempt to realize its wicked intention (Para 40).

The final stage of Erhard's discussion deals with the utility of his account of the concept of the devil (Paras 41–50). According to Erhard, the concept of a supremely wicked being is of great use to morality (where this includes moral theory) and to the 'aesthetic presentation' of virtue. Erhard's discussion of the aesthetic implications of his account is fairly straightforward and turns on the thought that the only way that we can provide an adequate aesthetic depiction of virtue is by contrasting it with the ideal of wickedness. His discussion of the implications of his account for morality is of far greater interest because it foreshadows a thesis that played a significant role in the development of early post-Kantian practical philosophy—namely, the thesis that the theory of right (and its domain) is independent of moral theory (and its domain). This 'independence thesis' is significant because it constitutes a break with early post-Kantian attempts to derive the concepts and principles of the theory of right from Kantian moral theory.

The independence thesis is usually associated with Fichte, who argues for it in his 1796/7 *Foundations of Natural Right*.[5] However, Erhard claims that the theory of right enjoys a certain independence of morality (where 'morality' denotes morality as conceived of by Kantian moral theory), and it is very likely that his views on this matter influenced Fichte. Indeed, in the Introduction to the *Foundations*, Fichte refers to some 'excellent hints by Dr. *Erhard* in several of his most recent writings' (Fichte, *Foundations*, 12, original emphasis). Although Fichte's independence thesis has been discussed extensively by Anglophone scholars, there has been no in-depth discussion of Erhard's

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[5]For discussion of Fichte's independence thesis and its relation to early post-Kantian attempts to derive the theory of right from Kantian moral theory, see Clarke, 'Fichte's Independence Thesis' and Gottlieb, 'A Family Quarrel'.

views. In the remainder of this introduction, I want to help initiate that discussion by shedding some light on the 'hints' that occur in 'Devil's Apology'.

The first thing to discuss is Erhard's conception of the theory (or 'doctrine'—*Lehre*) of right. Erhard's account of the theory of right in 'Devil's Apology' is not terribly informative. However, on the basis of his comments here and elsewhere, it seems that the distinctive task of the theory of right is to provide an account of the rights that human beings must possess if they are to live without conflict in a community with each other (Paras 44–8; *Über das Recht*, 13–14, 67). This task involves determining what rights are necessary for peaceful co-existence and then assigning them to persons. Erhard's comments here also suggest that the determining and assigning of rights is achieved by the use of a principle—the 'principle of right' (*Grundsatz des Rechts*) (Para 42). The latter seems to play a role analogous to that played by the moral law in Kantian moral theory.

Having discussed Erhard's conception of the theory of right, let us consider his account of the relationship between the theory of right and morality. It is important to note that Erhard does not claim that the theory of right is completely independent of morality. He claims that it is dependent on morality in certain respects and independent of it in others.

Erhard holds that the theory of right is dependent on morality in that the 'concept of right' (the concept of what is rightful) is derived from morality. This is so because the concept of right is the concept of those general ways of acting that are morally permissible ('morally possible') and the moral law determines which ways of acting are morally permissible (Paras 41–42). Erhard also holds that the theory of right is dependent on morality in that morality exerts normative authority over the theory of right. This happens in two ways. First, morality imposes normative side-constraints on the theory of right in that any rights or laws derived by the latter are valid only if they are morally permissible and would not, when acted upon, 'annul' the capacity for morality in 'any human being' (Para 43; cf. *Über das Recht*, 13–14, 99).[6] Insofar as it is subject to these constraints, the theory of right is 'answerable' to morality. Secondly, the theory of right is 'sanctioned' by morality insofar as the latter demands that morality be realized in the world and the theory of right derives the norms that make that realization possible by securing the conditions under which alone human beings can act morally (Para 43; cf. *Über das Recht*, 68, 99, 156).

Although the theory of right is dependent on morality, it is also independent of it in certain respects. These respects relate to the distinctive task of the theory of right. As we have just seen, the concept of right is derived from, and dependent on, morality. Now, since this is the case, one might

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[6]In *On the Right of a People to a Revolution*, Erhard asserts that 'It is the inner condition of the validity of any law given to human beings that it not contradict the moral laws' (*Über das Recht*, 15).

assume that morality would – by means of the concept of right – determine what rights persons should possess if they are to co-exist peacefully. However, this assumption would be mistaken. For while morality determines what general ways of acting are morally permissible and hence right, it does not determine the 'distinguishing characteristics' that allow us to identify the rights that persons should possess. (In other words, morality determines what is '*right in general*', but not what *rights* we have (Para 42).[7]) Those characteristics, Erhard claims, can be determined by theoretical reason independently of morality. He further claims that 'right' can be derived independently of morality because determining what rights persons should possess is simply a matter of figuring out a system of legal norms that allows self-interested agents to pursue their goals without interpersonal conflict, and that can be done without any reference to moral concepts or principles. Of course, once we have derived this system of legal norms, we should subject it to moral scrutiny (since the theory of right is subject to the normative authority of morality) and, if necessary, revise it. But the determining and assigning of rights can be carried out without any appeal to moral concepts or principles.

All of this might sound straightforward. However, on further reflection, Erhard's position is somewhat perplexing. Given his claims about the normative authority that morality exerts over the theory of right, one might expect the actual process of deriving a system of legal norms to involve constant reference to moral standards. Yet Erhard flatly insists that this is not the case: 'right is not derived from morality' (Para 44). Moreover, he appears to assume that we can, provided that we proceed with sufficient rigour, derive a system of legal norms that satisfy the side-constraints of morality. How is all of this possible?

To answer this question, we need to consider the deliberative procedure that is used to determine and assign rights. More specifically, we need to consider the way that the 'principle of right' constrains and guides deliberation about rights.

The principle of right requires that human beings be consistent in their judgements about right, and it arises from the 'demand for complete consistency' which self-interested rational beings reciprocally address to each other (Para 42). Erhard's discussion of the principle of right is abstruse, but we can make sense of it if we interpret it as follows: Insofar as human beings are motivated by self-interest (i.e. are motivated by their 'selfish drive'), they seek their own advantage and would, if there were no repercussions to fear, subjugate other human beings in pursuit of that advantage. However, human beings' self-interest also leads them to fear being dominated by others and to fear

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[7]Cf. Erhard's claim, in *On the Right of a People to a Revolution,* that 'Morality […] determines what is right, and the theory of right determines what the right of a certain person is' (*Über das Recht*, 14).

legal and political arrangements that facilitate domination. This fear motivates them to collaborate to establish a system of legal norms that prevents 'the expression of the wicked disposition in actions' (Para 46). In reasoning about these norms, human beings demand consistency from each other in the sense that anyone who judges an action to be right in her case must judge it to be right in *all* cases (and must therefore be prepared to accept any adverse consequences arising from its legitimate exercise), and anyone who condemns an action performed by another as unrightful must condemn it in *all* cases, including her own (which means that if she performs the right-violating action, she must accept the penalty attached to it). (This, I take it, explains Erhard's puzzling invocation of the legal dictum '*volenti non fit iniuria*' ('*to a willing person, no injury is done*').) This deliberative constraint ensures that no one arrogates to herself a privilege that she alone can enjoy and entails that a norm can be a right only if it can be a right 'reciprocally'.

This deliberative procedure appeals to no moral concepts or principles and simply relies on human beings' ability to reason consistently, an ability that is grounded in the capacity of theoretical reason. If followed with sufficient rigour, this procedure will generate a system of legal norms that co-ordinates the behaviour of human beings and does so in a way that ensures that each person's pursuit of her self-interest is 'reciprocally compatible' with each other person's pursuit of her self-interest. But this is to say that it co-ordinates the behaviour of human beings so that they can pursue their goals without inter-personal conflict. Now, as we know, this kind of co-ordination also results from deliberation in accordance with the moral law, which requires us to act in such a way that our maxims 'can be followed by all other human beings at all times without conflict'. This suggests that there is considerable overlap and congruence between the system of norms generated by the principle of right and the system of norms generated by the moral law. If that is correct, it explains why Erhard thinks that the norms of right would satisfy the side-constraints of morality even though they are not derived from morality: such norms would be morally permissible because they would be norms that all human beings could follow without interpersonal conflict. (It also helps explain Erhard's otherwise perplexing reference, in paragraph 48, to the production of 'an *analogue* of a moral legislation' (my emphasis).)

The ideal of wickedness is of utility in this context because it highlights, through contrast, the fact that deliberation in accordance with the moral law and deliberation in accordance with the principle of right both result in norms that can be followed consistently by all human beings. (The devil is, as we saw, completely consistent in his wicked deliberations and actions, but those deliberations and actions are based on maxims that *cannot* be followed consistently by all rational beings.) By highlighting this fact, the ideal of

wickedness arouses the interest of theoretical reason (which is concerned with consistency) in practical reason (Paras 41, 48).

This concludes our discussion of 'Devil's Apology'. I hope that the preceding has shed some light on Erhard's arguments and has conveyed some sense of their philosophical significance. I also hope that it has helped to make the case for regarding Erhard as an important and innovative figure in the history of post-Kantian philosophy.

Acknowledgements

Funding

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