

HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY QUARTERLY
Volume 35, Number 4, October 2018

SCHILLER ON EVIL AND THE EMERGENCE OF REASON

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Even Kant required a long lifetime to purify his philosophical mantle of many impurities and prejudices. And now he has wantonly tainted it with the shameful stain of radical evil [*mit dem Schandfleck des radicalen Bösen beschlabbert*] in order that Christians too might be attracted to kiss its hem.¹

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These words, written by Goethe in private correspondence, captured a sentiment many German intellectuals felt upon reading Kant's essay "On the Radical Evil in Human Nature" (1792), which later became Part I of *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793). To many, it seemed that Kant was betraying the spirit of Enlightenment thought that he had worked so hard to defend. His critique of reason had shown that all pretensions to know the nature of God and the soul—the topics of traditional metaphysics—are empty of cognitive significance. And Kant had argued that the only legitimate role for these concepts is practical: they are mere "postulates" for guiding our pursuit of virtue. So when the *Religion* first appeared, it shocked Kant's contemporaries to find him appealing to a doctrine many considered antithetical to everything for which his philosophy stood: the doctrine of original sin. All human beings, he now claimed, harbor a propensity within themselves to choose self-love over the moral law—and none of us, Kant added, is exempt from this propensity: "No, not one" (RGV, AA 6:39).

While the shock caused by the *Religion* was felt by many at the time, my aim in this article is to explore its effect on one of Kant's early followers: Friedrich Schiller. Like Goethe, Schiller was taken aback by the doctrine of radical evil, judging it "scandalous" for anyone who believed in human progress and perfectibility.² Nor did Schiller hesitate to make public his dissatisfaction with this new doctrine, writing in 1793 that

Kant's prejudice against human nature was reflected in his presentation of morality as a constraint. "Does humankind," he asked, "have to be accused and humiliated simply by the *imperative* form of the moral law, and does the most sublime document of its greatness also have to be certification of its frailty?" (NA 20:286/AW 151). Schiller did not think so, but he believed Kant was led to this mistaken conclusion:

Could one indeed, in this imperative form, have avoided a situation where a prescription given by humans to themselves as rational beings . . . took on the appearance of an unfamiliar and positive law—an appearance that could be reduced only with difficulty, because of their *radical tendency* [*radikalen Hang*] (of which they stand accused) to work against it? (NA 20:286/AW 151)³

For readers who missed the reference to Kant's doctrine, Schiller added the following note: "See Kant's creed on human nature in his latest work: *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Part I" (NA 20:286n/AW 151n).

On the basis of these negative remarks, it is tempting to conclude that Schiller rejected outright Kant's doctrine of radical evil.⁴ But there is much more to the story. When we turn to the details of Schiller's writings, it is clear that he did not simply dismiss the view that all human beings harbor a propensity to evil. Rather, he developed an alternative to this view, because he saw that Kant's *Religion* was attempting to fulfill an important task—that of explaining why we have a pervasive and seemingly ubiquitous tendency to act selfishly. What is striking about Schiller's alternative, on my reading, is that he wanted to trace the phenomenon of evil not to a willful subordination of the moral law to self-love but to an innocent misrepresentation of reason itself. In short, he wanted to reduce moral evil to cognitive error.⁵ In this respect, Schiller was advancing a theory of egoism that would satisfy the requirements Kant placed on his doctrine, without making human beings directly responsible for it. By reducing evil to error, Schiller was trying to rework Kant's psychology in a way that would justify a new conception of our moral development. Or so I shall argue.

Before we begin, two qualifications are worth highlighting from the outset.⁶ First, much of what we find Schiller trying to do becomes clear in light of Kant's claim from the first *Critique* (1781/1787) that our faculty of reason is beset with "natural and unavoidable" illusions. However, it is uncertain whether Schiller ever studied Kant's first *Critique* directly or whether his knowledge of it was mediated by Karl Reinhold, whose early work attempted to systematize and popularize Kant's theoretical philosophy. There is no question that some of Schiller's key concepts—such as our "drive toward the absolute"—reflect Reinhold's influence,

although we shall see that Schiller puts these concepts to novel use. Still, I want to propose that Kant's theory of illusion provides a useful interpretive framework for appreciating the subtleties of Schiller's alternative, without going so far as to claim that Schiller drew upon this theory in his writings. Second, while Kant's theory of evil must have struck a nerve for Schiller, prompting him to reflect more deeply about the problem of egoism in human action, it is worth bearing in mind that Schiller had struggled with the problem of evil long before Kant's 1792 essay appeared. A complete treatment of Schiller's view of evil would have to take this earlier work (both philosophical and literary) into consideration.⁷ That being said, my article shall focus primarily on the *Aesthetic Letters* of 1795, with the aim of contributing to a better understanding of this important text.

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In 1789, Schiller delivered a lecture titled "Some Thoughts on the First Human Society following the Guiding Thread of the Mosaic Documents."⁸ As the title suggests, the lecture proceeded to give a genealogical story of our moral development, where we evolved from an unreflective mode of life guided by natural instinct to a reflective mode of life guided by "reason" (*die Vernunft*). Schiller also took it upon himself to unravel this narrative within the interpretive constraints of Genesis (the "Mosaic Documents"), just as Kant had done in his 1786 essay "Conjectural Beginning of Human History." Indeed, when we examine Schiller's lecture more closely, the influence of Kant is unmistakable.⁹ Both authors characterized instinct as the "voice of God" (*die Stimme Gottes*), and our turn away from this voice as the birth of reflective agency.¹⁰ "If we change that voice of God in Eden, which forbade to him the Tree of Knowledge, into a voice of his instinct, which pulled him back from this tree, his supposed disobedience against that divine order is nothing other than a fall away from his instinct" (NA 17:399/EM 389). This was, Schiller concluded, "the first declaration of his self-activity [*Selbstthätigkeit*]; the first daring deed of his reason; the first beginning of his moral being" (NA 17:399/EM 389).

Around the time of this lecture, Schiller viewed the emergence of reason in terms of our break from nature, and he went so far as to call it the "greatest event in the history of humankind" (NA 17:399–400/EM 389). When he later analyzed the consequences of this break, it was only to show that inequality in the first human society was the root of all conflict, competition, and war between persons.¹¹ I emphasize this because, when we turn to Schiller's major publication after Kant's *Religion—On the Aesthetic Education of Human Beings, in a Series of Letters*—we find

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a new version of the genealogical story, one that traces the phenomenon of evil not to inequality but to reason itself. Now, Schiller states quite clearly that the “first appearance of reason in the human being is not necessarily the beginning of his humanity” (NA 20:390/AB 24.5).¹² The first appearance of reason, he goes on to say, does not liberate us from the world of sense but rather binds us to this world—a “phenomenon,” Schiller adds, “which, for all its universality and importance, has still, so it seems to me, never been properly explored” (NA 20:390/AB 24.5). This is precisely the task Schiller assigns himself in letter 24, which outlines three stages of development the individual or human species at large must pass through “if they are to complete the full cycle of their vocation [*Bestimmung*]”: the physical, the aesthetic, and the moral (NA 20:388/AB 24.1).¹³

Schiller’s study of the emergence of reason in letter 24 concerns the transition from the physical to the aesthetic, and this marks a crucial step for the *Aesthetic Letters* as a whole.¹⁴ One of Schiller’s central aims in this text is to show that autonomy, in both thought and action, requires a prior cultivation of sensibility, since there is, he maintains, “no other way of making the sensuous human being rational except by first making him aesthetic” (NA 20:383/AB 23.2).¹⁵ Given the importance of this transition, Schiller’s new genealogical story is that much more provocative. What he now claims is that our initial capacity for reason does not emancipate us from the world of sense, the physical life stage, and elevate us directly to the world of ideas, the moral life stage. Rather, our initial capacity for reason enslaves us, as it were, to the world of sense, rendering our thinking and willing temporarily heteronomous. This happens, Schiller argues, because we first become aware of reason through its “demand for the absolute” (*Forderung des Absoluten*), a demand to raise the question “Why?” until we have found a condition that is not conditioned by anything else (what Kant called the “unconditioned”). However, rather than follow the unconditioned to the world of ideas directly—as should ideally happen—Schiller maintains that we inevitably misrepresent this demand as directing us to the physical world alone (NA 20:390/AB 24.5).

Schiller supports this claim by considering the details of our moral development. To begin with, he asks us to imagine a human being in the physical life stage, absorbed by his pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain, that is, a being whose relation to all objects of sense is one of “immediate *contact*” (NA 20:389/AB 24.2). The individual at this stage is like an animal or someone driven exclusively by the strength of his desires. “Either he hurls himself upon objects and devours them,” Schiller says, “or the objects press upon him to destroy him, and he thrusts them away in horror” (NA 20:389/AB 24.2). Next, Schiller asks us to imagine

this same individual acquiring a level of self-awareness, an ability to step back from his desires through reflection and distinguish “*himself* from things, so that objects reveal themselves at last in the reflected light of consciousness” (NA 20:389/AB 24.3). This is where the faculty of reason first manifests itself. As Schiller explains, once the individual begins to “use his intellect, and to connect the phenomena around him in the relation of cause and effect, reason, in accordance with its very definition, presses for an absolute connection [*absolute Verknüpfung*] and an unconditioned cause [*unbedingten Grund*]” (NA 20:391/AB 24.7).

However, Schiller’s point is that the individual in question will misrepresent this demand. While he has acquired some distance from his desires, his entire occupation up to now has been merely physical (NA 20:390/AB 24.7). Consider what Schiller says more closely:

In the very midst of his animality the drive toward the absolute [*der Trieb zum Absoluten*] catches him unawares—and since in this state of apathy all his endeavor is directed merely toward the material and the temporal, and limited exclusively to himself as individual, he will merely be induced by that demand to give his own individuality an unlimited extension rather than to abstract from it altogether: will be led to strive, not after form, but after an unfailing supply of matter; not after changelessness, but after perpetually enduring change. . . . That very drive, applied to his thinking and activity, was meant to lead him to truth and morality, brought now to bear upon his passivity and feeling, produces nothing but unlimited longing and absolute instinctual need. (NA 20:390–91/AB 24.7)

What we are considering is how a drive for the absolute must appear to a being still caught up in his impulses and inclinations. Schiller’s claim is that, even though reflection has opened up a space between this individual and his desires, his volitional activity is still oriented to the physical world: his fundamental aim is still to pursue pleasure, avoid pain, and preserve his life. So when a demand to find the unconditioned appears to him, it is natural that he will mistake its direction: to seek the unconditioned in the sum-total satisfaction of his desires. As a result, it is unavoidable that this individual will strive toward the absolute by giving his own happiness unlimited extension—for that is the only interest he knows at this stage of his development. He will be mistaken, of course, but the mistake will be an innocent one.

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While Schiller is right to say that this phenomenon has “never been properly explored” (NA 20:390/AB 24.5), it is illuminating to compare his account against a theory Kant had already applied in the theoretical

domain: the theory of transcendental illusion. In the first *Critique*, Kant had argued that rational inquiry depends on principles that, if not carefully checked, will “incite us to tear down all those boundary posts” that condition our knowledge of objects (KrV A296/B352). The problem, he argues, is that we cannot readily distinguish between what is necessary for our cognition of things and what is necessary for things in themselves. That is why we are prone to mistake the former for the latter, owing to what Kant calls “transcendental illusion.” When philosophy falls under this spell, it yields the three disciplines of traditional metaphysics—rational theology, rational cosmology, and rational psychology—along with their respective objects—God, the World, and the Soul.

For Kant, the philosopher doing metaphysics is exposed to transcendental illusion because of his failure to distinguish appearances from things in themselves, a failure that leads him to claim knowledge of “objects” beyond the restricting conditions of experience. His own summary of the problem is revealing:

[I]n our reason (considered subjectively as a human faculty of cognition) there lie fundamental rules and maxims for its use, which look entirely like objective principles, and through them it comes about that the subjective necessity of a certain connection of our concepts on behalf of the understanding is taken for an objective necessity, the determination of things in themselves. (KrV A297/B535)

Due to our striving for knowledge, we find ourselves adopting a maxim to raise the question “Why?” until we have found an ultimate explanation—that is, until we have found the “unconditioned.”¹⁶ And yet, owing to transcendental illusion, we are prone to confuse this maxim for a principle that would somehow yield knowledge of the unconditioned itself. Even when we refrain from thinking the appearance is true, we cannot shake off the illusion it presents to us. Transcendental illusion, Kant says, is not something we can avoid, “just as little as the astronomer can prevent the rising moon from appearing larger to him, even when he is not deceived by this illusion” (KrV A297/B353–54).

The “rules and maxims” Kant mentions in the above passage refer to reason’s logical use. They tell us to strive for systematic unity of understanding and to stop only when we have found the complete explanation of things. But Kant’s point is that, in our precritical state, we are prone to confuse this demand for a principle of reason’s real use, as if the complete explanation is already given, a systematic unity out there for us to discover.¹⁷ What is more, this illusion will deceive us as long as we fail to distinguish appearances from reality. Without this distinction, nothing will prevent us from committing “metaphysical error,” that is, the error of thinking we can know things in themselves. Of course, this

error seems inescapable—and this point is worth stressing—since our failure to distinguish appearances from things in themselves marks a basic stage in the development of speculative reason. That is why, without a critical examination of reason itself, we have no position to see transcendental illusion for what it is. We have no protection from its deceptive power.

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Returning now to the *Aesthetic Letters*, a set of parallels between Kant's theory of transcendental illusion and Schiller's analysis in letter 24 begins to take shape.¹⁸ In the first place, it is evident that the imperative Kant identifies with reason's logical use—the imperative to seek the unconditioned—is precisely what Schiller means by reason's "demand for the absolute." It is also clear, in the second place, that the illusion Kant believes we face in our search for knowledge—the illusion that the unconditioned is already given—is parallel to the way Schiller thinks reason appears to us as developing agents. The key difference is that, whereas transcendental illusion for Kant sends the philosopher headlong into the intelligible world of ideas (giving him the false hope that he can cognize these ideas without the restricting conditions of experience), the first emergence of reason for Schiller sends the developing agent headlong into the sensuous world of appearances (giving him the false hope that he can find the absolute in the field of his own impulses and inclinations¹⁹). Schiller makes this contrast explicit when he writes that one's intellect will go on "eternally asking questions without ever lighting upon any ultimate answer" as long as it limits itself to the world of sense; but since the developing agent "is not yet capable of such abstraction, that which he cannot find in his *sphere of empirical knowledge*, and does not yet seek beyond it in the sphere of pure reason, he will seek beneath it in his *sphere of feeling*" (NA 20:392/AB 24.7).

Against this backdrop, Schiller's diagnosis of reason is all the more intriguing. For while he does not speak of "evil" explicitly—for reasons we will soon discuss—he does extend his discussion to "what is most sacred in a human being, the *moral law*" (NA 20:392/AB 24.7; emphasis added). Not surprisingly, Schiller maintains that the moral law cannot escape the same "falsification" (*Verfälschung*) when it first appears on the horizon of a developing agent's consciousness (NA 20:392/AB 24.7). Since the agent in question still identifies with the interests of his animal self, the "voice" of this law is bound to be distorted. In his words,

[I]t is bound to seem like something external to himself so long as he has not yet reached the point of regarding his self-love as the thing that is really external to him, and the voice of reason as his true

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self. Hence he merely feels fetters that reason lays upon him, not the infinite liberation that she is capable of affording him. Without suspecting the dignity of the lawgiver within, he merely experiences its coercive force and feels the impotent resistance of a powerless subject. (NA 20:392–93/AB 24.8)

As before, the agent we are considering is preoccupied with the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. When he confronts a law that disregards those interests altogether, it is understandable why he would perceive it as something alien and external to himself. Additionally, the agent we are considering is familiar with his animal drive before the moral law makes itself known to him, so it is understandable why he would regard the concepts of right and wrong “as statutes introduced by some will, not as something valid in themselves for all eternity” (NA 20:393/AB 24.8). Taking up this agent’s point of view, we can then see why his own moral experience would be negative, at least initially. In this state, he has no basis to recognize the moral law for what it is: an expression of his “true self” (*wahres Selbst*) (NA 20:392/AB 24.8).

We need only glance at the *Religion* to appreciate just how much Schiller’s position departs from Kant’s doctrine of radical evil.²⁰ However much this doctrine is shrouded in mystery, it is clear that Kant thinks of evil as a product of free choice, which is why he says the propensity to evil “can also be called the *perversity* (*perversitas*) of the human heart, for it reverses the ethical order” (RGV, AA 6:30). If the principle of a good will consists of pursuing self-love only if it does not conflict with the moral law, the principle of an evil will consists of pursuing the moral law only if it does not conflict with self-love. For Kant, the reversal of incentives at the heart of evil is “something that a human being can be held accountable for” (RGV, AA 6:32). For Schiller, by contrast, evil involves no willful subordination of the moral law to self-love. What we call “evil” (the agent’s unrestricted pursuit of happiness) is nothing more than a cognitive mistake, the result of an unavoidable illusion. Due to our limited perspective as developing agents, we seek the unconditioned in our own desires “through a *misunderstanding* [*Mißdeutung*]” (NA 20:390/AB 24.5), and our perception of the moral law as external to us is the “most unfortunate of all errors [*Irrthümer*]” (NA 20:392/AB 24.9). In fact, Schiller is careful to say nothing of “perversity” (*Verkehrtheit*) as Kant understood the term, for, on his account, the problem is not that we are prone to evil but that we are susceptible to error.

Nor is it an accident, in my view, that Schiller developed an illusion model akin to Kant’s theory in seeking an alternative to radical evil. As we have seen, this theory contains a model for explaining error, on the one hand, without imputing blame, on the other hand. To be sure, Kant does not think transcendental illusion is something we can avoid in our search

for knowledge (“just as little as we can prevent the rising moon from appearing larger to us”). The demand of reason to find the unconditioned appears to be “more” than a maxim for guiding our cognitive faculties: it appears to be a principle for cognizing the unconditioned itself. This appearance, much like any ordinary perceptual illusion, does not dissolve the moment we apprehend it. We are guilty of metaphysical error when we claim knowledge of objects beyond the restricting conditions of experience. Yet this does not amount to full blameworthiness, since we are not consciously violating a given standard, principle, or norm. Similarly, I take Schiller’s point to be that we are guilty of cognitive error when we pursue the unconditioned in the field of our impulses and inclinations—yet this does not amount to full blameworthiness, since we are not consciously violating a given standard, principle, or norm. In both cases, the concept of “perversity” is out of place, for in both cases we are acting out of ignorance.

If this interpretation of letter 24 is correct, then Schiller’s adoption of the illusion model makes sense, and this brings us to the core claim of my article. Despite calling the idea of radical evil “scandalous,” Schiller saw that Kant was trying to fulfill an important task in the *Religion*, that of explaining why we have a pervasive and seemingly ubiquitous tendency to act selfishly. Schiller for his part wanted to provide an explanation of this tendency that did not rehabilitate the Christian doctrine of original sin. At the same time, he wanted his account to satisfy the requirements Kant had placed on his theory, with one crucial exception. He wanted to show why all of us have a tendency to act selfishly, and why this tendency really affects us, without making human beings directly responsible for it. This is, I believe, why Schiller turned to an illusion model. If all of us distort the voice of reason in the course of our development, then our misrepresentation of the moral law must be universal, since it must happen to any being who develops from an unreflective to a reflective stage of life. The illusion model thereby explains why cognitive error is universal without making it a product of free choice.

At this point, however, one could object that Schiller’s theory loses the explanatory power of Kant’s doctrine of radical evil, which is well suited to account for the presence of vice and wrongdoing in the world.²¹ However, I think Schiller’s model is effective on this issue, since his starting point is, much like Kant’s, the condition of our original self-love. To see why, consider once again how he describes a human being immersed in the physical life stage:

Unacquainted as yet with *his own* human dignity [*Menschenwürde*], he is far from respecting it in others; and, conscious of his own savage greed, he fears it in every creature that resembles him. He never

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sees others in himself, but only himself in others; and communal life, far from enlarging him into a representative of the species, only confines him ever more narrowly within his own individuality. (NA 389/AB 24.3)

That is to say, an individual at this stage behaves in ways that fall short of respecting others as ends in themselves. Yet this behavior involves no explicit transgression, since the individual in question has no awareness of dignity at all (in himself or others). Given the condition of our original self-love, it is understandable why our subsequent misrepresentation of reason's demand (that is, to seek the unconditioned in the physical world) only produces a greater degree of selfishness. As Schiller explains, the physical world reveals nothing to a human being that is truly absolute, "but it does show him something that knows of no cause and obeys no law":

Since, then, he cannot appease his inquiring intellect by evoking any ultimate and inward cause, he manages at least to silence it with the notion of *no-cause* [*Grundlosen*], and remains within the blind compulsion of matter since he is not yet capable of grasping the sublime necessity of reason. Because the life of sense knows no *purpose* other than its own advantage, and feels driven by *no cause* other than blind chance, he makes the former into the arbiter of his actions and the latter into the sovereign ruler of the world. (NA 392/AB 24.7)

All of this occurs, right up to the elevation of one's own self-advantage, without a conscious choice to subvert the moral law from its proper place of authority and so without the "deliberate guilt" that Kant had imputed to an evil heart (RGV, AA 6:38).

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For Schiller, the emergence of reason, rather than liberating us from the world of sense, binds us to our impulses and inclinations that much more. On the reading I have offered, this servitude is the product of an illusion, much like Kant's idea of transcendental illusion, making it unavoidable for anyone who moves from an unreflective to a reflective stage of life. Before concluding, I want to gesture to the larger significance of this reading for understanding the *Aesthetic Letters* at large.

Let me note, to start with, that if the emergence of reason is responsible for binding us to the world of appearances, then something other than reason must be the source of our liberation—and only "beauty" (*Schönheit*), as Schiller understands it, is capable of playing this role.²² On my reading, the theory of egoism we find in letter 24 goes to the core of Schiller's philosophical project, namely, to defend the aesthetic as a necessary life stage in our transition from nature to freedom. In

the experience of beauty, we are able to cultivate a kind of character that, while not governed by laws of reason, is an essential prelude to the latter. As Schiller puts it, “The transition from a passive state of feeling to an active state of thinking and willing cannot take place except via a middle state of aesthetic freedom” (NA 383/AB 23.2). To approach the moral life stage, then, we must first transform our relationship to the world of appearances. There is, for Schiller, no other way to autonomy.²³

In many ways Schiller had prepared the reader for this idea earlier in the text. Wanting to justify a study of aesthetics during a time of such violent political upheaval, he wrote in letter 2 that “it is only through beauty that one makes his way to freedom” (NA 312/AB 2.5).²⁴ From the outset of his investigation, Schiller framed his broader task in terms of finding a bridge from the physical to the moral, claiming that we must seek an intermediary stage between the two in the realm of beauty.²⁵ But Schiller was sensitive to the fact that this claim would require justification. For we must ask: Why is the aesthetic life stage a necessary prelude to the path of freedom, or why is “there is no other way of making a sensuous human being rational except by first making him aesthetic”? Anticipating these questions in letter 23, we find Schiller responding as follows:

But, you will be tempted to object, can such mediation really be indispensable? Should truth and duty not be able, of and by themselves alone, to gain access to the sensuous human being? To which I must answer: they not only can, they positively must, owe their determining power to themselves alone. . . . But for them to be able to do this at all, for such a thing as a pure form to exist for the sensuous human being at all, this, I insist, has first to be made possible by the aesthetic attunement of the mind. (NA 383–84/AB 23.3–4)

My final proposal is that Schiller’s theory of egoism, as I have presented it in this article, contains a hidden premise to justify the aesthetic as a necessary stage of our development. The emergence of reason misleads us to seek the absolute in the physical world alone, where our relationship with sensibility is defined by desire. And that is why the experience of beauty is the key to our liberation: it affords us the opportunity to enjoy appearances for their own sake, to experience pleasure without desire.²⁶ As a means for transforming our sensibility and our relationship to the world of appearances, “aesthetic education” (*ästhetische Erziehung*) is how our drive for the absolute can be brought on course to its higher vocation. Without such education, Schiller argues, the bridge to autonomy will remain impassable, and one will never suspect the dignity of the lawgiver within.

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CONCLUSION

Schiller was one of many early post-Kantians who wrestled with Kant's doctrine of radical evil,²⁷ a doctrine that continues to provoke and puzzle commentators today. Schiller's own explanation of why we are prone to pursue happiness without restriction is, as we have seen, subtle and multilayered. It offers us a new genealogy of reflective agency, linking our tendency to egoism to the first emergence of reason within human beings. Our drive for the absolute, once awakened, does not lead us to the world of ideas right away. Instead, our transition from nature to freedom involves an unavoidable detour, whereby we seek the absolute in the field of our impulses and inclinations. However, since this detour is the result of cognitive error, it involves no willful subordination of the moral law to self-love, and so nothing bears the mark—or what Goethe called the “shameful stain” (*Schandfleck*)—of radical evil.²⁸

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Keywords: Schiller, Kant, radical evil.

NOTES

1. Goethe to Herder, June 7, 1793; quoted in Fackenheim (1954, 340).

2. “It is true,” Schiller wrote to his friend Körner in 1793, “that I find one of his first principles in this essay on religion scandalous (as you probably do as well), namely his assertion that the human heart has a propensity to evil”; quoted in Morgan (2000, 163). As one commentator puts it, Schiller “viewed the claims of the *Religion* as arbitrary and unjustified concessions to pre-Enlightenment prejudice in a particularly pernicious form, that of a broadly Augustinian theology of original sin” (Morgan 2005, 63). Of course, it is another question whether Schiller's interpretation is well founded, since Kant argued explicitly that “of all the ways of representing” the origin and development of evil in human beings, “the most inappropriate is surely to imaging it as having come to us by way of inheritance from our first parents” (RGV, AA 6:40). But it is clear that Schiller viewed Kant's doctrine of radical evil as coming far too close to this orthodox view. Keeping this in mind is helpful, I believe, for understanding the shape of his alternative theory. Thanks to an *HPQ* reviewer for requesting me to address this issue and for reminding me of RGV, AA 6:40. See Loncar (2013) for further discussion.

3. See Winegar (2013) for an excellent discussion of the misrepresentation problem.

4. This is a familiar story one hears in the body of literature devoted to his philosophical writings. Anne-Margaret Baxley, for example, writes that Schiller considers Kant's doctrine of radical evil an "embarrassment" (2010, 118n13). "It is important to see," she explains, "that Schiller himself is aware that Kant's doctrine that humanity has a 'radical tendency' (*radikalen Hang*) to act in opposition to the moral law underlies and supports the idea that the moral law must always take the form of an imperative even for the best of us, but Schiller apparently sees no reason to endorse Kant's doctrine of evil" (118). For similar remarks, see Allison (1990); Appelmann (1917), Fackenheim (1954), Rieder (1966); Stern (2011), and Zimmermann (2001). In general, the recent literature has centered almost exclusively on the question of whether Kant and Schiller disagree, if at all, in their moral and aesthetic principles. See, for example, Beiser (2005), Deligiorgi (2011), Gauthier (1997), Guyer (1993), Henrich (1957), Loudon (2000), Munzel (1999), Roehr (2003a), Timmermann (2007), Wildt (1982), and Winegar (2013). My aim in this article is to open up a new conversation within this otherwise rich body of scholarship.

5. As I am using these terms here, moral evil requires conscious violation of a standard, principle, or norm, but cognitive error does not. However, I mean only to limit the question of blame, imputation, and responsibility to the source of our tendency to pursue happiness without restriction. While Schiller is silent on this issue, we may assume that an agent would still stand guilty for failing to overcome this tendency, since Schiller thinks we are responsible for cultivating (or failing to cultivate) a state of harmony between our rational and sensible drives. The contrast I am drawing, then, is foundational: Kant ties the imputation of evil to our adoption of a maxim that subordinates the moral law to self-love, but no such imputation is present in Schiller's theory of egoism. Thanks to an *HPQ* reviewer for pressing me to clarify this point.

6. Thanks to an *HPQ* editor for prompting me to address these issues.

7. In a helpful study devoted to this question, Eva J. Engel has argued that, from "his first essay, *Philosophia Physiologiae*, to his last, unfinished play, Schiller's imagery and thought explore the 'erhabene Verbrecher' (the lofty criminal), the 'Ungeheuer mit Majestat' (the monster with majesty) in their many manifestations of evil, in order to see whether they would, or indeed could, reveal 'das ganze innere Raderwerk,' 'die Mechanik des Lasters' (the whole inner machinery, the mechanism of vice)" (1967, 36). Although Engel touches on Schiller's reaction to Kant's *Religion* in passing, she does not explore its influence on the *Aesthetic Letters*, which is my main concern in this article.

8. The subtitle of the lecture contains an important clue for understanding Schiller's aims: "Transition [*Übergang*] of Human Beings to Freedom and Humanity."

9. We know Schiller had read Kant's essay from another letter he wrote to Körner (August 29, 1787):

Compared to Reinhold you are a scorner of Kant, since he [Reinhold] maintains that in a hundred years time Kant will have the reputation of Jesus Christ. But I must confess that he speaks with reason, and has already

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brought me Kant's little essays in the *Berliner Monatsschrift*, among which I found the idea for a universal history extraordinarily satisfying. That I will read and perhaps even study them seems to me quite decided (NA 24:43).

Note that Kant's "Conjectural Beginning" essay was published in *Berliner Monatsschrift* in January 1786.

10. That was, in Kant's words, the moment the first human being "stood, as it were, on the brink of an abyss . . . and from this estate of freedom, once he had tasted it, it was nevertheless wholly impossible for him to turn back again to that of servitude (under the dominion of instinct)" (MAM, AA 8:112; cf. 8:115).

11. Schiller's optimism in human progress and perfectibility was firmly in place during the late 1780s. However, as an *HPQ* reviewer points out, Schiller became more pessimistic around the mid-1790s.

12. The German reads: "Die erste Erscheinung der Vernunft in dem Menschen ist darum noch nicht auch der Anfang seiner Menschheit."

13. Schiller warns us against reading these stages too literally, as if they described specific epochs in the course of one's actual life. They are, for Schiller, idealizations of a necessary developmental sequence, "which experience is, in certain particulars, in complete accord" (NA 20:389/AB 24.4).

14. While Schiller had long pondered the tension between reason and sensibility, it was only in the *Aesthetic Letters* that he explains human egoism in terms of our drive for the absolute. In this connection, it is worth noting that, in the *Augustenburger Letters* dated from February to December of 1793, which served as the model for the *Aesthetic Letters*, Schiller speaks of the present age as being trapped in a "bosom of laziness" (*Schoße der Trägheit*) and "slackness of spirit" (*Schlaffheit des Geistes*). Yet none of the *Augustenburger Letters* points to the genealogy of reflective agency we find in letter 24. Thanks to an *HPQ* reviewer for pressing me to address this issue.

15. The German reads: "Es gibt keinen andern Weg, den sinnlichen Menschen vernünftig zu machen, als dass man denselben zuvor ästhetisch macht."

16. In this light, we may also recall Kant's ominous words from the 1781 Preface: "Human reason has the peculiar fate in one species of its cognitions that it is burdened with questions which it cannot dismiss, since they are given to it as problems by the nature of reason itself, but which it also cannot answer, since they transcend every capacity of human reason" (KrV Avii), to which he adds: "Reason falls into this perplexity *through no fault of its own*" (emphasis added).

17. In Kant's more obscure language, the prescription says, "Find the unconditioned for the conditioned cognitions of the understanding, with which its unity will be completed" (KrV A307/B364). But given our limited point of view, we naturally mistake this for a kind of description: "When the conditioned is given, then so is the whole series of conditions subordinated one to the other, which is itself also given (i.e., contained in the object and its connection)" (KrV A307/B364). For detailed discussions of this topic, see Allison (2004), Grier (2001), and Proops (2011).

18. As an *HPQ* reviewer correctly observes, “Schiller’s focus fell initially on Kant’s essays on the philosophy of history and subsequently centered on the *Critique of Judgment*. His knowledge of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (like that of many of his contemporaries, especially at Jena) was chiefly derived from his reading of Reinhold.” There is also evidence to show that Schiller borrowed elements from Reinhold’s concept of a “rational-sensible drive” (*vernünftig-sinnliche Trieb*) from his 1789 *Essay on a New Theory of the Human Capacity for Representation*. For Reinhold, the matter of this drive is determined by sensibility, and, for that reason, it aims at the satisfaction of its empirical desires. Yet its form is determined by the understanding, and, for that reason, its activity “extends to the *unconditioned*” (*zum unbedingten erweitert*) (1789, 564), that is, to the “idea of happiness” (1789, 565). However, there is no mention in Reinhold of a *mistaken search* for the absolute in the field of empirical desires, and to this extent Schiller’s account in letter 24 does advance novel material. For helpful treatments of Reinhold’s influence on Schiller, to which I am much indebted, see Roehr (2003a; 2003b).

19. That being said, see what Kant has to say about “self-conceit” (*Eigendünkel*) in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) for some suggestive parallels (KpV, AA 5:70–73). For further discussion of self-conceit in Kant, see Ware (2014).

20. Kant’s doctrine of radical evil has been the site of much controversy in recent years. For the most part, scholars are divided into two camps, with some claiming that Kant wanted to explain evil in transcendental features of noumenal agency (see Allison 1990; Morgan 2005) and others claiming that Kant wanted to explain evil in anthropological features of human society (see Anderson-Gold 1991; Wood 1999). While the status of Kant’s doctrine goes beyond the scope of this article, it is worth noting that Schiller’s position is closer, though not identical, to the anthropological reading.

21. Relatedly, one could object that Schiller’s account does not qualify as a genuine alternative to Kant’s doctrine of radical evil. Kant’s doctrine seems aimed at explaining our pervasive tendency to make exceptions for ourselves (to follow the dictates of self-love instead of the demands of duty). Schiller’s account, by contrast, seems aimed at explaining our pervasive tendency “to see reason primarily as an instrument for gaining mastery over the external world,” as an *HPQ* reviewer puts it. However, I see common ground between Kant and Schiller with respect to the question of why we all engage in the unrestricted pursuit of happiness—with Schiller locating this tendency in a misrepresentation of our drive for the absolute.

22. Schiller speaks of an aesthetic drive within human nature that is neither sensuous nor intellectual but draws on aspects of the two: what he calls the “play drive” (*Spieltrieb*) (see especially letters 14–15). For further discussion of this concept in Schiller’s aesthetics, see Beiser (2005), Dahlstorm (2008; 2010) and Wilkinson and Willoughby (1967).

23. For Schiller, the necessity of aesthetic education is visible only when we adopt the “complete anthropological view,” a perspective that takes into consideration our twofold nature as sensuous rational beings. If we limit ourselves to

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the “one-sided moral point of view,” he argues, we only see what is demanded by reason, and then the realm of beauty escapes our grasp altogether (NA 316/AB 4.3).

24. The German reads: “es die Schönheit ist, durch welche man zu der Freiheit wandert.”

25. Kant had asserted a weaker version of this claim in §59 of the *Critique of Judgment* (1790), titled “On Beauty as a Symbol of Morality.” At the end of this section, he writes, “Taste as it were makes possible the transition from sensible charm to the habitual moral interest without too violent a leap by representing the imagination even in its freedom as purposively determinable for the understanding and teaching us to find a free satisfaction in the objects of the senses even without any sensible charm” (KU, AA 5:354). Previous to this remark, Kant had characterized beauty as that which pleases us (1) immediately and (2) without desire. Scholars have recognized the importance of the third *Critique* for Schiller’s philosophical work in the 1790s. For a recent analysis, see Tauber (2006).

26. In this context, Schiller also explains that, once we have the capacity to distinguish appearances from reality, we can exercise a kind of sovereign power in the realm of our imagination, combining what nature separates and separating what nature combines (NA 401/AB 26.8).

27. For Fichte’s response to Kant’s doctrine of radical evil, see Ware (2015).

28. This article benefited greatly from the feedback of two *HPQ* referees. I am grateful for their help, as well as for excellent guidance provided by the journal editor, Aaron Garrett.

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