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van den Auweele, Dennis

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Kant and Schelling on the ground of evil

Dennis Vanden Auweele¹

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Abstract

Schelling's views of evil in *Philosophical Inquiries into the Nature of Human Freedom* is usually thought of as a radicalization of Kant's argument for the propensity to evil in human nature in *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason*. In this paper, I argue that (1) Kant does not provide a full transcendental deduction for the ground of evil in human nature because this would give a rational reason for there to be evil (i.e. evil would not be its own ground), (2) Schelling provides a theological–metaphysical reconstruction of Kant's argument by providing a non-rational ground (Unground) for evil and (3) the difference between Kant and Schelling lies in how they conceive of the actualization of the ground of evil—through intelligible deed or protohistorical choice—which has repercussions for how they think of conversion.

Keywords Radical evil · Ground of evil · Schelling · Kant · Conversion

Schelling's masterful essay, *Philosophical Investigations into the Nature of Human Freedom* (1809; hereafter, *Freedom*), is widely recognized as an original and thorough engagement with Kant's views of freedom and evil in *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason* (1793; hereafter, *Religion*).¹ On the topic of evil specifically,

¹ Kant's work is referenced according to the *Akademie Ausgabe* (AA). Translations are taken from: Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*. Edited by Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996a); Immanuel Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*. Edited by Allen Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996b). References to Schelling's works follow *Sämtliche Werke* (SW): F.W.J. Schelling, *Sämtliche Werke*. Edited by K.F.A. Schelling (Stuttgart and Augsburg: J. G. Cotta'scher Verlag, 1856). Translations are my own, except for: F.W.J. Schelling, *Philosophical Inquiries into the Nature of Human Freedom*. Translated by James Gutmann (La Salle: Open Court, 1936).

✉ Dennis Vanden Auweele
Dennis.vandenauweele@kuleuven.be

¹ Center for Metaphysics, Philosophy of Religion and Philosophy of Culture, Institute of Philosophy, KU Leuven (University of Leuven), Leuven, Belgium

Schelling is usually seen to offer a more radical, quasi-Manichaeic interpretation of the reality and effects of evil than Kant. The general view, simply put, is that for Kant and his idealist successors, freedom signifies the capacity for good, while for Schelling freedom means the capacity for good *and* evil.² In a recent contribution, Sebastian Gardner expresses this dominant interpretation when discussing the demands Kant and Schelling make of a theory of evil:

For Kant, this obliges us only to construct a *representation* of the ground of evil that sustains the moral imputability of immoral actions. For Schelling, the account must explain evil in the considerably more substantial sense of making it *intelligible* that we are drawn to it, a datum for which inclination provides no explanation. This explains why Schelling cannot simply take over Kant's theory of radical evil: whether or not Kant's theory is in its own terms coherent, it does not do the work Schelling thinks is needed.³

While Gardner's argument is more nuanced than some others on the subject, this view remains somewhat of a simplification not only of Kant's view of freedom and evil, but also of Schelling's relationship to Kant's *Religion*. This paper argues that Schelling's criticism of Kant is more moderate than is commonly assumed and that a better way to characterise Schelling's relationship to Kant in *Freedom* is to say that Schelling provides a transcendental-theological reconstruction of Kant's doctrine of radical evil. This means that their respective analyses with regard to the ground, reach and severity of evil do not differ substantially but that Schelling provides a transcendental argument for a non-rational ground for evil, which is an avenue Kant does not consider. The difference in their respective approaches lies in how they conceive of the noumenal choice that actualizes the ground of evil into an evil *Gesinnung*, which has certain repercussions for how and whether an evil disposition can be contested.

² For one, Heidegger merely discusses the relationship between Schelling and Kant with regard to idealism and freedom and does not investigate their views of evil: Martin Heidegger, *Schelling's Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1985). More recent scholarship tends to emphasize the remarkable difference between Schelling and Kant on this subject: Bernard Freytag, *Schelling's Dialogical Freedom Essay. Provocative Philosophy Then and Now* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2008); Lisa Egloff, *Das Böse als Vollzug menschlicher Freiheit. Die Neuausrichtung idealistischer Systemphilosophie in Schellings Freiheitsschrift* (Berlin: Verlag de Gruyter, 2016), p. 97 ff.; Jean-François Courtine, 'Schelling. Le système de la liberté. De la liberté absolue à la métaphysique du mal'. In: *Schelling en 1809. La liberté pour le bien et pour le mal*. Edited by Alexandra Roux (Paris: Vrin: 2010), pp. 95–116; Oliver Florig, *Schellings Theorie menschlicher Selbstformierung. Personale Entwicklung in Schellings mittlerer Philosophie* (Freiburg: Verlag Karl Alber, 2010), p. 154.

³ Sebastian Gardner, 'The Metaphysics of Human Freedom: from Kant's Transcendental Idealism to Schelling's *Freiheitsschrift*'. In: *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 25 (2017) 142. Hans-Ulrich Baumgarten similarly reads *Freedom* as a response to a difficulty that arose in Kant's *Groundwork*: how can evil agency be free if autonomy is identified with morality? Baumgarten's reading is somewhat unlikely because Kant addresses this issue at length and persuasively in *Religion* so it cannot be that Schelling was oblivious to Kant's own solution, especially since Schelling takes over many of Kant's arguments. See: Hans-Ulrich Baumgarten, 'Das Böse bei Schelling. Schellings moralphilosophische Überlegungen im Ausgang von Kant'. In: *Kant-Studien* 91 (2000) 447–459.

Kant's analysis of the ground of evil in *Religion*

Kant's account of evil is widely believed to be an improvement upon previous rationalist accounts of evil. These earlier accounts would have resulted in the ultimate unreality of evil through describing evil as a privation of insight, resolve or intellect – which is respectively the view of Plato, Aristotle/Augustine and Leibniz. Kant revolutionized these accounts by pointing our attention to the self-sufficient reality of evil (by which I mean that it is non-parasitic upon an imagined good) where evil is not grounded in bodily finitude or sensuous distraction.⁴ Instead, to act in an evil fashion means that one knowingly and willingly subordinates the moral principle to the principle of self-love. This in turn signals that one knows the morally right way of acting but chooses to prioritize self-love; or, to behave in an evil fashion is a free act of the power of choice (*Willkür*).

What makes human beings capable of prioritizing self-love over the moral law? This question investigates the ground of evil behaviour, which becomes an issue for Kant early on in *Religion I* because there Kant establishes that human beings necessarily have a good predisposition (*Anlage*) as animal, human and personal beings (AA 6:26–28). This latter aspect is called is our susceptibility (*Empfänglichkeit*) to act upon respect for the moral law, which means that we ought to think logically of human beings as susceptible to the moral law and so potentially good. The moral law requires human beings to subordinate their incentives towards self-love (*Selbstliebe*) to the incentive to morality (*Achtung*). Next to their 'personality', human beings are equally 'animal' and 'human' beings that strive respectively to manifest their self-love individually and through comparison. Rationally speaking, these three layers of our good predisposition are under a normative hierarchy where personality ought morally to take preference over the others. This proper hierarchy is not always the case: instead of prioritizing the moral law over our incentive to self-love, human beings are prone to overturn the moral hierarchy. This very capacity can only be explained, according to Kant, if we assume a propensity to evil (*Hang zum Böse*), which is a universally acquired (yet contingent to human nature) tendency to choose positively to overturn the moral order by giving preference to the incentive to self-love over the incentive to morality (AA 6:29–31). Kant introduces the idea of a propensity to evil so as to explain and ground the widespread and universal opposition to the moral law. Initially, Kant presents this propensity as a brute fact and specifies

⁴ Some do contest whether Kant's account of evil is sufficiently radical. Responding to the evil of the Holocaust, Hannah Arendt initially applauds Kant for coining the term 'radical evil' as he "must have suspected the existence of this evil", but yet thinks of Kant's philosophical attempt to think this 'evil' as a failure, since he "immediately rationalized it in the concept of a 'perverted ill will', that could be explained by comprehensible motives" (Hanna Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1973), p. 459; see also: Richard Bernstein, *Radical Evil. A Philosophical Interrogation* (Cornwall: Polity, 2002) pp. 11–45). Similarly, Emmanuel Levinas attacks Leibniz, Kant and Hegel in his essay *Useless Suffering* for proposing a view of suffering that is overly rationalized and thus suffering is made "meaningful, subordinated in one way or another to the metaphysical finality envisaged by faith or by a belief in progress" (Emmanuel Levinas, 'Useless Suffering'. In: *The Provocation of Levinas. Rethinking the Other*. Edited by R. Bernasconi and D. Wood; Translated by R. Cohen (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 160).

that it can be expressed in three ways: the frailty of human nature (the inability to act morally because of other inclinations), impurity (the requirement to adulterate moral motivation with other interests) and depravity (the propensity to subordinate the incentives of the moral law to others). The logical conclusion from this initial discussion is that Kant thinks of human beings as constituted for the good, but that upon the nature of all human beings, “even the best”, there has been grafted a potentially debilitating propensity to evil, that is “woven into human nature [*mit der menschlichen Natur verwebt*]” (AA 6:30).

If this were the final analysis, Kant could be read as flirting with a sense of philosophical Manicheism where human beings are on a crossroads between an equally strong principle for moral goodness and evil. Kant’s further discussion of the propensity to evil complicates matters. The propensity to evil is not only “contingent for humanity” but also something “*acquired*, or (if evil) [...] *brought* by the human being *upon* himself” (AA 6:29). The reason for Kant’s emphasis on the propensity as contingent and acquired is twofold, namely to warrant the rational possibility to uproot the propensity (contingent) and to support the idea that human beings are responsible for the propensity and thus ought to overcome it (acquired). Despite the attractiveness of these results, this does offer up a dilemma: how can something acquired and contingent be universal to a species? Kant’s statement that the propensity to evil is ‘woven into human nature’ suggests that the acquisition of the evil propensity is not haphazard, but rather has a ground in human nature. In other words, if the propensity to evil is universally woven into human nature, it cannot merely be circumstance that brings it about but there must be something about human nature that is hospitable to a propensity to evil. The propensity to evil is the ground of evil behaviour, but what grounds the adoption of the propensity to evil? How do human beings acquire universally a propensity to evil? What is the reason for (the possibility for) evil?

Kant announces proof for this enigmatic concept in Section III of *Religion I*, which, ironically, starts with Kant noting that actually “we can spare ourselves the formal proof” because of “the multitude of woeful examples that the experience of human *deeds* parades before us” (AA 6:32–33). Some take this admission as that the widespread occurrence of evil is (tentative) proof of the propensity to evil: the fact that evil occurs can only be explained by means of assuming a propensity to evil. James DiCenso reads Kant’s argument in such a way, even drawing parallels with the *first Critique*: this “indirect, slightly uncertain correlation between maxims and actions is entirely in keeping with arguments formulated in the first *Critique* showing an inferential relationship between our intelligible and empirical characters.”⁵ To establish our evil propensity as a correlate of evil deeds does seem problematic because Kant later emphasizes that the ground of evil must be “be cognized a priori

⁵ James DiCenso, *Kant’s Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason: A Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 41. A more likely, alternative interpretation would be to liken the proposition ‘man is evil by nature’ to ‘there is objective and subjective purposiveness in nature’ (*Critique of the Power of Judgment*). This point is developed by Tom Spencer, ‘The Root of All Evil: On the Monistic Implications of Kant’s Religion’. In: *International Philosophical Quarterly* 56 (2016) p. 23–43.

from the concept of evil” and that he must investigate “the development of this concept” (AA 6:35). This is the case because the empirical fact that there is evil only indicates that there is a propensity to evil but does not offer an explanation or a ground for there to be such a propensity: nature simply is, reason explains. But in section III of *Religion I*, there is no clear development of the concept of evil that could justify grounding evil in human nature. What makes matters even more confusing is that Kant appends a footnote to the final sentence of section III in which he claims that “the appropriate proof is contained not in this section, but in the previous one” (AA 6:39n). Yet, Kant had suggested at the end of section II that the proof was in section III!

How should we proceed to assess Kant’s argument if we take for granted that there is a dearth of rational proof for grounding evil in human nature? Generally, the scholarship has dealt with this difficulty in two distinct ways, namely either to reconstruct a Kantian argument or to emphasize the impossibility of such an argument. The majority of scholars take the first approach and suggest that Kant’s transcendental deduction of human nature as evil is implicit in his account of practical agency. The most common reconstruction runs as follows:

Premise 1: What is possible, must have ground for its possibility;

Premise 2: Evil is real given the ‘multitude of woeful examples etc.’;

Conclusion: Evil must have a ground for its possibility in human nature.⁶

A different strategy has been to take the lack of proof at face value, indicating that evil is to be thought of merely in its empirical dimensions.⁷ Allen Wood, for instance, draws the conclusion that the propensity to evil is to be understood merely in its social dimensions, namely in terms of unsocial sociability.⁸ As I will show, the former group comes to the proper conclusion but lacks conclusive argumentation while the latter group makes the proper arguments but draws the wrong conclusion. As will be proposed in the rest of this section, Kant is forced to *assume* a propensity

⁶ In different forms, one can find this argument and others in Stephen Palmquist, ‘Kant’s Quasi-Transcendental Argument for a Necessary and Universal Evil Propensity in Human Nature’. *Southern Journal for Philosophy* 46 (2008) 261–297; Seiröl Morgan, ‘The Missing Proof of Humanity’s Radical Evil in Kant’s Religion’. *The Philosophical Review* 114 (2005) 63–114; Henry Allison, *Kant’s Theory of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 146–162. Gordon Michalson builds a similar argument from Kant’s theory of virtue; he claims that Kant “is simply deducing moral evil transcendently, since his theory of freedom clearly serves as the necessary condition of its possibility” (Gordon Michalson, *Fallen Freedom. Kant on Radical Evil and Moral Regeneration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 31). This means that moral virtue requires opposition, and therefore there must be a ground for this opposition. I take this as only a modified version of the argument outlined in the main text of this paper, since the ground of opposition to virtue is evil. As such, this argument equally depends on the possibility of detecting evil.

⁷ For instance, Christoph Schulte, *Radikal Böse. Die Karriere des Bösen von Kant bis Nietzsche* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1988), pp. 78–88. Robert Loudon, ‘Evil Everywhere: The Ordinarity of Kantian Radical Evil’. In: *Kant’s Anatomy of Evil*. Edited by Sharon Anderson-Gold and Pablo Muchnik (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 93–115.

⁸ Allen Wood, *Kant’s Ethical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 283–291. Jeanine Grenberg offers some very persuasive arguments against Wood’s position: Jeanine Grenberg, *Kant and the Ethics of Humility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 36–42. For an extensive survey of the scholarly discussion: Pablo Muchnik, *Kant’s Theory of Evil. An Essay on the Dangers of Self-love and the Apriority of History* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009).

to evil without being able to prove this by means of a conclusive transcendental argument (a strategy akin to many so-called problematic concepts such as freedom, the highest good, etc.).

A transcendental argument starts from a fact (e.g. the moral law) and investigates the enabling conditions of this fact by grounding it in human nature. I would argue, and some of these arguments are also made by the authors listed in the above footnote, that such a transcendental argument with regard to the propensity to evil is impossible for three reasons. First, the ground of evil must lie in the intelligible character of the human agent since the empirical character follows from the intelligible character, but the intelligible character is beyond the reach of knowledge for transcendental idealism. This results in how the propensity to evil can, at most, be assumed as an aspect of human nature (practical faith), not known. Second, a transcendental deduction of evil would result in an objective ground of evil in human nature, which in turn leads to the view that evil has a necessary connection to human nature (thereby cancelling the possibility for overcoming evil). Contrary to this option, Kant emphasizes that the propensity to evil does not logically belong to human nature but is contingent and acquired. Finally and most importantly, to inquire into the ground of the propensity to evil would mean to provide a reason for there to be a propensity to evil. While particular actions that are evil can be explained or understood through rational motives, the ground of evil cannot be rational; the ground of evil is without reason, because otherwise evil would have a rational justification but radical evil is its own ground or root. This means that one is using improper tools if one inquires rationally into the ground of evil.

Let us now attend to the pages in which Kant is supposed to provide his argument for the ground of evil. It can be helpful to distinguish first between the ground (*Grund*) and the origin (*Ursprung*) of evil, which are both possible answers to the question: wherefrom evil? If one answers by giving the origin of evil, one gives the historical, material and social conditions under which evil behavior has emerged. But this origin of evil must logically be preceded by an enabling ground which is a priori, formal and universal. Evil behavior emerges under certain conditions, but that evil is at all able to emerge is the real question which Kant must answer. Kant attends respectively to the ground and origin of evil in Section III and IV of *Religion I*, which he indicates by discussing respectively “the ground of evil” (AA 6:34) and the “origin of evil in human nature” (AA 6:39). These are separate discussions of separate topics, but can easily be conflated. Prior to section III, Kant had announced the importance of the distinction between ground and origin in terms of two ways to understand the acquisition of evil as a ‘deed’ (*Tat*):

The use of freedom through which the supreme maxim (either in favor of, or against, the law) is adopted in the power of choice, and to the use by which

the actions themselves (materially considered, i.e. as regards the objects of the power of choice) are performed in accordance with that maxim (AA 6:31).

If we apply this distinction to the issue at hand, this means that one can think of the first act of evil as either the origin of evil (the first temporal act of transgression) or the ground of evil (the intelligible act that adopts an evil *Gesinnung*). The first is a temporal deed dependent upon a preceding noumenal deed. Kant is clear that the temporal origin of any religious idea, whether it is evil or the archetype of humanity (*Urbild*), is of little consequence to him. In an illustrative letter to Jacobi on the topic of the idea of a ‘Son of God’, he writes that the universal, ahistorical idea of Christ is of utmost importance while the historical account is a side issue (*Nebensache*) of little relevance (AA 11:76).

This means that the investigation into the ground of evil cannot inquire only into the historical, social and material factors that give rise to evil (which Kant has done, among other places, in *Idea for a Universal History*), but must inquire into the formal, logical and a priori conditions that make evil possible. This means that one ought to abstract from all possible empirical conditions and investigate the possibility of evil merely a priori. But is such an investigation possible on Kantian terms? Let us consider the reconstruction of Kant’s argument that was outlined above. The argument suggests that the general occurrence of evil deeds suggests a ground of evil in human nature. This argument is problematic within the whole of Kant’s moral philosophy, which explains why Kant does not offer it up himself. In *Groundwork*, Kant is clear that moral good and evil derive uniquely from maxims (a view repeated in the opening pages of *Religion*). This means that if and when a maxim is incorporated out of respect for the moral law, this maxim is morally good; when a maxim is incorporated with an incentive contrary to the law, it is morally evil (AA 4:400). Kant is equally clear that one cannot ever judge whether some maxim is incorporated in accordance with the law: “It is absolutely impossible by means of experience to make out with complete certainty a single case in which the maxim of action, otherwise in conformity with duty, rested simply on moral grounds and on the representation of one’s duty” (AA 4:407). This seems to imply that the same holds for a maxim contrary to duty, especially given Kant’s motivational agnosticism which suggests that we are perennially in the dark about our motivations (see for instance: AA 6:447, 6:51 and 6:63).

Strangely enough, Kant suggests at one point in *Groundwork* that actions that are contrary to the law cannot proceed from a good will: “I pass over all actions that are already recognized as contrary to duty [...] for in their case the question whether they might have been done *from duty* never arises, since they even conflict with it” (AA 4:397). But is this consistent? Actions that conflict with duty are not necessarily contrary to duty. For instance, one could say something that is not true, but have acted upon a maxim out of respect for the moral law or a maxim of indifference. The untruth that one tells could be the product of a good or neutral intention and Kant is clear that the “usefulness or fruitlessness can neither add anything to this [moral] worth nor take anything away from it” (AA 4:394). This implies that no amount of empirical observation of deeds that are contrary to the moral law can provide sufficient certainty that these proceed

from an incentive contrary to the law. Actions that empirically conflict with moral duties could equally have been done from thoughtlessness or indifference, but do not necessarily proceed from an incentive counter to the moral law.

A possible rejoinder to this difficulty reads as follows. Empirical observation of the outer world might not yield insight into an opposition to morality, but one can be self-consciously aware of a certain resistance towards the moral law in oneself. In other words, one could be conscious of having occasionally resisted the moral law. Because of this resistance, several deeds contrary to the law might follow and from being aware of the occasional deviation from the law, one cannot help but assume “an underlying evil maxim, and, from this, the presence in the subject of a common ground, itself a maxim, of all particular morally evil maxims” (AA 6:20). This rejoinder is equally problematic since it cannot guarantee that the propensity to evil is ‘woven into human nature’. Kant does not make this argument and it does not accomplish what he wants accomplished, simply because such an argument establishes, at best, that the person who observes an opposition towards the moral law in him or herself has a propensity to evil.

In the final analysis, Kant concedes the point that experience is useless when it comes to the propensity to evil: “Experiential demonstrations [...] do not teach us the real nature of that propensity or the ground of this resistance [against the law]” (AA 6:35). In fact, Kant had emphasized this point earlier in *Religion* as well, namely that “we cannot on this basis alone observe maxims [...] hence the judgment that an agent is an evil human being cannot reliably be based on experience” (AA 6:20). The nature and ground of resistance to the moral law can only be cognized “a priori from the concept of evil” (*Ibid.*) and “experience can never expose the root of evil in the supreme maxim of a free power of choice” (AA 6:39n). So, while it is clear that experience of whatever kind is without use, one would expect Kant to develop an argument for the propensity to evil from the concept of evil alone. Though Kant announces such an argument, it is nowhere clearly to be found. Above, I have detailed Kant’s likely considerations for not providing such an argument. The most charitable philosophical conclusion to be drawn from this is that the ground of evil cannot be known but must be assumed in order to make sense of the general occurrence of evil deeds. One of Kant’s more tacit considerations might have been that to provide a deduction for the propensity to evil would mean providing a rational reason for the existence of evil. As such, one is in danger of justifying evil within a larger, rational system of thought – something his term ‘radical evil’ aims to avoid. In the following section, we will attend to how Schelling sidesteps this difficulty by providing a non-rational ground – or non-rational reason, if you will – for evil in human nature.

Schelling's reconstruction of the ground of evil in *Freedom*

Schelling is not up front in *Freedom* about engaging with Kant's deduction of the ground of evil. Only towards the end of the essay, Schelling introduces the Kantian term "radical evil" and suggests that Kant had come to similar conclusions as he did, but Kant did so "by sheer faithful observation of the phenomena of moral judgment" which "led him to the recognition of a subjective basis in human conduct (as he expresses it) which precedes every act within the range of the senses, but which, in turn, has itself to be an act of freedom" (SW I/7:388). Most will find that Schelling's and Kant's analyses are further removed from another than alleged by Schelling, but we will take Schelling's claims at face value. Schelling agrees with Kant, namely, that one cannot provide a rational ground for the propensity to evil but this does not exclude a non-rational ground, and in this way he provides a much-needed addendum to Kant's incomplete deduction of the propensity to evil.

That Schelling has Kantian concerns from the start of his deduction of evil should be apparent from the statement announcing his investigation into the actuality of evil:

We have sought to deduce the concept [*Begriff*] and the possibility [*Möglichkeit*] of evil from first principles, and to discover the general basis of this doctrine which lies in the distinction between existence and that which is the ground of existence. But possibility does not include actuality [*Wirklichkeit*] [...]. And indeed what has to be explained is not simply how evil comes to be real in individual men, but its universal effectiveness and how it could have burst forth from creation as an unmistakable general principle, everywhere battling against the good (SW I/7:373).

The words underlined are quintessentially Kantian. From this, one can also deduce that Schelling's investigation in *Freedom* up to this point – which includes his discussion of pantheism and the distinction between existence and the ground of existence – has been at most a conceptual analysis of the possibility of evil. The next step, which Kant did not complete, will be to show how one can provide a ground for why evil is a general and universal principle in human beings.

Schelling comes to the topic of evil through a revision of the modern idea of freedom and determinism, which has to be introduced here to understand the contours of his argument. Schelling's project in *Freedom* is a revision of the idealistic approach to freedom in order to come to a more dynamic, animated understanding of nature. Schelling starts with a general critique of traditional metaphysics, directed especially against Spinoza and Parmenides, which sees reality as governed uniquely by a principle that seeks its own affirmation (*conatus essendi*) or that is pure act (*actus purus*). This mistake is based on a "general misunderstanding of the law of identity or of the meaning of the copula in judgment" (SW I/7:341). According to Schelling, traditional metaphysics has read the proposition 'God is the world' as suggesting a relationship of identity between God and world, which has led to Spinoza's materialist fatalism, a "total identification of God with

all things, a confusion of creature and creator” (SW I/7:340). Schelling believes it to be more appropriate to read the copula in terms of “antecedent and the consequent” (SW I/7:341), which means that God expresses or manifests as the world – like in the proposition ‘the sky is blue’, we do not identify ‘sky’ with ‘blueness’ but suggest that the sky manifests as blue. This means that God emerges as existence from something that is not existence, that is not world, which is what Schelling calls, following Jakob Böhme, the ungrounded ground (*Ungrund* or *Urgrund*).

The repercussions of this change of perspective for our thinking about reality is that there are two necessary and competing aspects of reality, namely ‘existence’ and ‘ground of existence’. In *Freedom*, he clarifies this by applying this twofold perspective to God where, as existing, God is the spirit that illuminates the world and, as ground of existence, God is nature in need of illumination. This is not Manicheist dualism (*Zweiheit*) but doubleness (*Doppelheit*): “This is the only correct dualism, namely a dualism which at the same time admits a unity” (SW I/7:359n). This is further clarified by a helpful analogy: “Gravitation precedes light as its eternally dark basis, which is itself not *actual*, and flees into the night when light (which truly exists) appears. Even light does not completely break the seal by which gravity is held” (SW I/7:358). This means that God, insofar as he exists, must necessarily have a basis of existence that is other than existence: God must emerge out of something that is the ground of his existence. The difference between God and created things is that God contains the ground of his existence within himself while created things have the ground of their existence outside of themselves (in God).

These two aspects of God manifest themselves differently: the will of God as existence is love or self-expansion; the will of the ground is egoism or self-retraction. These two principles are in unity in God and the (natural) history of the world is the play of these two principles. While never being taken up into a higher unity, these principles counterbalance each other, thereby generating a third principle of equilibrium (these are the three *Potenzen*). For example, God’s love might have the superior hand for a certain period of time, during which there is a great amount of differentiation and expansion in the world (in terms of God providing existence to all sorts of things). At one point, the will of the basis might become more prominent and there is a move to greater unity and univocity (for instance in an event of mass extinction).⁹ Just as moral goodness is the elevation of love over egoism, so creation is the elevation of light over darkness, which Schelling calls the process by which “God separates his actual from his non-actual self. This can only happen by elevating one principle over the other. The subordination of divine egoism to divine love is the beginning of creation.”¹⁰

Schelling’s discussion of ground and existence leads to a total rethinking of idealism, a position which Schelling in *Freedom* and the unpublished drafts of *The Ages*

⁹ For more on the relevance of the *Naturphilosophie* to the later Schelling: Jason Wirth, *Schelling’s Practice of the Wild* (New York: SUNY Press, 2015).

¹⁰ “Der erste Schritt dazu ist auch hier die Scheidung, dass Gott die Liebe in sich, d.h. sein wahres und eigentliches Selbst, von dem uneigentlichen scheidet. Diese Scheidung kann aber nur so geschehen, dass er das eine Prinzip über das andere erhöht, und dieses andere dagegen jenem unterordnet. Die Unterordnung des göttlichen Egoismus unter die göttliche Liebe ist der Anfang der Kreation” (SW I/7:439).

of the World calls a ‘higher realism’ (SW I/7:351). According to Schelling, the traditional divide between idealism and realism led to a stale, non-dialectical understanding of the relationship between freedom and nature. In a draft of *The Ages of the World*, Schelling would argue that

It is not difficult to observe that the main weakness of all modern philosophy lies in the lack of an intermediate concept and hence, just that, for instance, everything that does not *have being* is nothing, and everything that is not spiritual in the highest sense is material in the crudest sense, and everything that is not morally free is mechanical, and everything that is not intelligent is uncomprehending.¹¹

This means that nature and freedom, or reason and unreason, were thought of in dualistic, exclusive terms: “Reason is found only in man, the conviction that all thought and knowledge are completely subjective and that Nature altogether lacks reason and thought, and also by the universally prevalent mechanistic attitude” (SW I/7:333). One of the consequences of this view is then not only that nature is deprived of a participation in freedom, but also that rational/moral behaviour was closely linked to freedom in such a way that being autonomous and being moral were equivalent terms.¹²

From the foregoing, it should be clear that Schelling wants to develop a more lively understanding of autonomy as navigating between light and darkness, good and evil. His discussion of ground and existence might suggest that goodness is related to God as existing while evil is related to God as ground of existence. This is a simplification, however, as the sheer presence of darkness is not sufficient for there to be evil (such as, for Kant, the inclinations are in themselves good). Evil, however, occurs when one dislodges the dialectical and hierarchical bond between the principle of light (universality) and darkness (individuality). While these principles form a dialectical unity in God, human beings have fallen from such a harmonious unity. They are removed from ‘the centre’ of being and now find themselves on ‘the periphery’, where they oppose the harmonious development of the whole. One sign of humanity’s opposition to the harmony of the whole is violence. Schelling suggests that violence expresses the desire to stave off development and recede into a more primal state of being. Through violence, human beings attempt to halt development by “constituting themselves as a world on their own.”¹³ Like Kant,

¹¹ F.W.J. Schelling, *The Ages of the World*. Translated by Jason Wirth (New York: SUNY Press, 2000) 64 [286].

¹² For further discussion of Schelling’s rethinking of realism and idealism: Thomas Buchheim, *Eins von Allem : die Selbstbescheidung des Idealismus in Schellings Spätphilosophie* (Hamburg: Meiner Verlag, 1992); Dale Snow, *Schelling and the End of Idealism* (New York: SUNY Press, 1996); Roswitha Dören-dahl, *Abgrund der Freiheit: Schellings Freiheitsphilosophie als Kritik des neuzeitlichen Autonomie-Projektes* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2011).

¹³ “Der Beweis dieser Übermacht des Seins über den Menschen, seines Zurücksinkens auf die erste Potenz liegt vorzüglich in der Gewalt, die das Äussere in diesem Leben über das Innere hat. Nachdem einmal das Dasein der Natur durch den Menschen gefährdet und die Natur genötigt war sich als eigne Welt zu konstituieren (SW I/7:459–460).

Schelling simply asserts that human beings have fallen from a greater harmony and that this is somehow related to freedom. Because of their freedom, Schelling finds that human beings are always at odds in forming these principles into a unity. While non-sentient beings are determined by these principles, the human being has “been placed on that summit where he contains within himself the source of self-impulsion towards good and evil in equal measure” (SW I/7:374).

Schelling believes that the only valid assumption for human nature is to hold that human beings are indecisive about good and evil. From the beginning, they are impelled towards good and evil in equal measure because they are co-constituted by these two principles, the will of love and the will of the ground. Only through adopting a certain character – either good or evil – as an intelligible choice can human beings become good or evil (SW I/7:383–384). But while the foregoing might account for the potential good or evil of the intelligible character, it does not demonstrate why it is necessary for the human being to feel the “solicitation [*Sollicitation*] to evil” (SW I/7:374). Once again, the question of the ground or reason for there to be evil at all comes up. It is answered concisely by Heidegger in his lectures on Schelling’s *Freedom*:

But where does this attraction of the ground come from? In the attraction of the ground the ground is in a way left to itself in order to operate as ground. But this is only an essential consequence of the Absolute, for the ruling of love must let the will to the ground be, otherwise love would annihilate itself.¹⁴

The solicitation to evil can only be explained in terms of showing how evil is a non-rational requisite to enable the possibility of God’s self-revelation: evil “was necessary for God’s revelation” (SW I/7:373). Since the principle of light must necessarily build from the abyss of the will of the basis, God’s self-expansion can only take effect on a nature that is determined by the will of the basis: only what is dark, can be illuminated. That ground must persevere and cannot be determinatively overcome since otherwise love could not develop itself. Through the principle of love, humanity is elevated to a position where the choice for good *and* evil is possible.

This means that the ground of evil is the will of the basis in the ground of God. But this will of the basis is not in itself evil. God’s love is his revelation while the will of the basis is will to revelation. These principles are beyond good and evil since they exceed the rational system of reality, and therefore God is not complicit in human evil. Even after revelation has occurred, reality remains influenced by the will of the basis, which inclines it “back to chaos” (SW I/7:374). In Schelling’s view, evil then is the desire to stave off the harmonious development of the dialectical principles of God. This means that evil has both a dimension of negativity in regressing into chaos but also positivity since this regression happens willingly. In his *Stuttgarter Privatvorlesungen*, Schelling uses the image of illness to illustrate

¹⁴ Heidegger (1985, p. 151).

this doubleness: “Evil in the moral world is like illness in the bodily world; it is the most decisive non-being and yet it has a horrible reality”.¹⁵

Where the difference lies: choosing evil and religiousness

The parallels between Kant and Schelling’s formal analyses of evil ought to be apparent: both agree that there is a universal evil in human nature, inducing particular human beings to elevate their particularity (e.g. inclinations) over universality (e.g. the moral law). But this simply establishes the formal ground of evil and does not explain how and why evil actualizes in human nature. Human beings are not evil simply by virtue of having a ground of evil in their nature, this ground has to actualize by means of a noumenal rather than phenomenal act. This act is beyond time which means, for Kant, that it is intelligible and, for Schelling, that it is protohistorical. This difference – which comes at a late point in their respective analyses – has impressive consequences for the way they conceive of overcoming evil through religiousness (*Religiosität*).

Kant emphasizes that “we must not seek an origin in time of a moral character for which we are to be held accountable” (AA 6:43). Instead, we must inquire into a ‘rational origin’ (*Vernunftursprung*) or ‘ground’ that must have something to do with a non-temporal choice, which “remains inexplicable to us” (*ibid.*). Schelling has previously explained the non-rational ground for the attraction to creaturely particularity as the so-called dark ground of being which “arouses egotism and a particularized will” (SW I/7:381). The appeal of particularity arises because of the “terror of life” which induces human beings to stand opposed to and on the periphery of the centre of ever-evolving universal life (*Ibid.*). But while there is always a clear attraction towards private particularity, giving into this seduction is a matter of choice: “Evil ever remains man’s own choice: the basis cannot cause evil as such, and every creature falls through his own guilt” (SW I/7:382).

Kant and Schelling therefore agree that the allure of evil does not, by itself, establish moral guilt in human agents. This can only happen through a positive choice to give into temptation. Throughout one’s life, one develops a character to good or evil, what Kant calls a *Gesinnung* (translated as either disposition, attitude or conviction).¹⁶ The propensity to evil is the ground which enables the adoption of an evil *Gesinnung*. According to both Kant and Schelling, human beings can develop an evil *Gesinnung* because they actualize the propensity to evil in their daily activities through self-deception.¹⁷ For Kant, morality requires that one categorically assigns

¹⁵ “Das Böse ist in der moralischen Welt, was die Krankheit in der körperlichen ist; es ist das entschiedenste Nichtwesen von Einer Seite betrachtet, und hat doch eine schreckliche Realität” (SW I/7:436–437).

¹⁶ For discussion of the merits of either translation: Stephen Palmquist, “What is Kantian *Gesinnung*? On the Priority of Volition over Metaphysics and Psychology in *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*.” *Kantian Review* 20 (2015) 235–264.

¹⁷ For more on self-deception in Kant’s account of evil: Joel Madore, *Difficult Freedom and Radical Evil in Kant*. *Deceiving Reason* (London: Continuum Publishing, 2011), pp. 72–81; DiCenso (2012, p. 65).

absolute precedence to the moral law over sensuous inclinations. This means that other incentives cannot play a role in incorporating the moral law into one's maxim, and certainly cannot preponderate over the moral law. Yet, as Kant had previously pointed out in *Groundwork* (AA 4:405), human beings are prone to

question the stringency of the command that excludes the influence of every other incentive, and thereupon to rationalize [*vernünfteln*] downgrading his obedience to the command to the status of the merely conditional obedience as a means (under the principle of self-love), until, finally, the preponderance of the sensory inducements over the incentive of the law was incorporated into the maxim of action, and thus sin came to be (AA 6:42).

To the word 'rationalize', Kant adds a footnote in which he clarifies that

any profession of reverence for the moral law which in its maxim does not however grant to the law – as self-sufficient incentive – preponderance over all other determining grounds of the power of choice is hypocritical, and the propensity to it is inward deceit [*innere Falschheit*], i.e. a propensity to lie to oneself in the interpretation of the moral law (AA 6:43n).

Human beings are prone to take the duties of the moral law as merely conditional, which means that they observe those duties only insofar as they accord with their principle of self-love. To act in such a way is to deceive oneself because one makes oneself believe one is acting righteously, while one is actually straying from the categorical commands of duty. Schelling similarly claims that “the spirit of man lays itself open to the spirit of lies and falsehood through false imagination and learning oriented towards non-being” (SW I/7:391). Schelling equally understands the allure of evil to depend upon the working of a false imagination that paints morally questionable behaviour as morally good.

All human beings have a propensity to evil which they actualize through self-deception. Whenever human beings deceive themselves for a sufficiently long period of time, they become evil. This is the essence of human freedom for Schelling, namely that human beings act in accordance with their own being, one that they have chosen for themselves: “Man's being is essentially *his own deed*” (SW I/7:385). From the very beginning, human beings choose, or better have chosen, between good and evil, and are equally attracted to both the ground of being and being itself. In this “state of innocence” only a human being “can determine himself”, a determination that “occurs outside of time” (*Ibid.*). Schelling cautions that this should not be read as a prehistorical choice which “precedes life in time” but as something that “occurs throughout time as an act eternal by its own nature” (SW I/7:385–386). The consequence of this view is that human agency naturally flows from the self-chosen being of man. There is a protohistorical choice that determines whether man is good or evil. Schelling believes that with this point of view he has given expression to Kant's account of radical evil in *Religion* (SW I/7:388).

But, there is an impressive difference between their views, which is not acknowledged by Schelling. Schelling admits that his view “cuts out all conversions from

good to evil and vice versa for man, at least in this life” (SW I/7:389).¹⁸ If it were so that “human or divine aid – for some aid man always needs – determines him to change his conduct to the good”, the very capacity to accept such aid (*Hilfe*) would have to be “found in that initial act because of which he is this individual and not another” (*Ibid.*). And yet, Schelling does not appear to dismiss all possibility for conversion: anyone who has not experienced this “transmutation” is exposed to an “inner voice” which “never ceases to urge him to accomplish this transmutation” (*Ibid.*). Assuming that the good principle can never die out entirely, there will always be a solicitation to convert to the good, but the very capacity to respond to this must already be an aspect of the human being’s protohistorical choice that determines his own being. This means that conversion from evil to good is possible (and, supposedly, vice versa) but that this as an option must be part of the protohistorical choice. Insofar as human beings do not “positively shut out” this possibility, there will be hope (*Ibid.*).

Schelling’s mind dwells towards something which he calls religiousness (*Religiosität*) after discussing conversion. In his view, evil is a disturbance of a harmonious link (which ought to have been there) between the principles of light and darkness. Instead of allowing light and dark to cooperate, evil disturbs this link by elevating the principle of darkness and particularity over light and universality. Schelling then thinks of religiousness as “conscientiousness, or acting in accordance with one’s knowledge, and not acting contrary to the light of understanding” (SW I/7:392). The light of understanding allows one to recognize that light and darkness ought to be linked. Schelling here refers to one possible etymology of religion, namely *re-ligare*, meaning to re-establish a link. Religiousness then is the awareness of the intimate link between light and dark, and the subsequent elevation of the principle of love over egotism.

Kant has developed a similar point, but in a more convincing and elaborate fashion. He believes that rational religion can be of assistance to practical morality and therefore it can add something to moral deliberation beyond practical reason. In Kant’s view, moral faiths can provide a moral education (his term in *Religion* is *Bildung*) that cultivates the moral incentive.¹⁹ Without overtly spelling this out, Kant could be taken to rely on a different possible etymology of religion, namely *re-eligere*: the *choice* to re-establish a connection to the good. Kant’s account is highly nuanced – and I cannot attend to all the nuances here²⁰ – but the whole discussion

¹⁸ This position is likely the main dividing line between Kant and Schelling. Kant allows us to change our noumenal character from evil to good while Schelling believes that the noumenal choice is permanent. For further discussion: Michelle Kosch, ‘Idealism and Freedom in Schelling’s *Freiheitsschrift*’. In: *Interpreting Schelling*. Edited by Lara Ostarić (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 147.

¹⁹ For a more elaborate account of this claim, see my ‘Kant on Religious Moral Education’. In: *Kantian Review* 20 (2015), 373–394.

²⁰ For the traditional assessment of Kant’s philosophy of religion: Allen Wood, *Kant’s Moral Religion* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1970); Gordon Michalson, *Fallen Freedom. Kant on Radical Evil and Moral Regeneration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Peter Byrne, *Kant on God* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007). More recently, there have been several accounts that attempt to bridge the gap between Kant’s philosophy of religion and Christianity: Stephen Palmquist, *Kant’s Critical Religion. Volume Two of Kant’s System of Perspectives* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000); Chris Firestone and Nathan Jacobs, *In Defense of Kant’s Religion* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University

has one vital premise: that “the human being must make or have made *himself* into whatever he is or should become in a moral sense, good or evil” (AA 6:44). This is similar to Schelling’s view that the being of a human being is essentially his or her own choice. But can this choice be reversed?

Human beings are, for Kant, created *for the good*, which means that “the original *predisposition* in him is good; the human being is not thereby good as such, but he brings it about that he becomes either good or evil” (AA 6:44). By the phrase ‘made for the good’, Kant means to point out how human beings ought to be good, but what they are is completely their own choice. If it is possible then for someone who is created *for the good* to choose evil, it must equally be possible for someone who has chosen evil to ascend back to the good. While Kant recognizes that this “surpasses every concept of ours”, the “possibility cannot be disputed” (AA 6:45). In an attempt then to make some sense of restoring the goodness of human beings, Kant claims that this must consist in the “recovery of the purity of the law” (AA 6:46). This point relates directly to the original self-deception that was the explanation for the fall into evil. Evil masquerades as good, and we very willingly rationalize our self-love. To undo such self-deception, we must once again find ourselves in the light of pure morality. This is what Schelling called, in the quote above, ‘the light of understanding’. Recovering that purity is not a matter of gradual reform or habitual accommodation, but it must occur in a similar fashion that the choice for evil occurred, namely as a radical choice to revolutionize our *Gesinnung*. In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, he calls this a decision that happens “all at once and completely [*auf einmal vollständig genommen werden muss*]” (AA 6:477).

Kant allows human beings who have adopted an evil *Gesinnung* to recant. He notes that a human being can reverse the supreme ground of his maxims “by a single and unalterable decision” (AA 6:48). This decision is a change of heart wherein one resolves to progress endlessly towards holy morality. Whether or not that revolution in the disposition has effectively uprooted the propensity to evil will remain unknown to finite agents. In fact, Kant admits that human beings by themselves cannot uproot the propensity to evil, but if they exhaust their own means, they can legitimately hope for “a higher assistance inscrutable to us” (AA 6:45). In order to assist in the endless struggle for good morality, Kant believes that human beings can benefit greatly from the pedagogical potential of rational religion. While Kant obviously does not spell this out as exhaustively in book I of *Religion*, his argument in books II–IV is that rational religion can provide certain tools to cultivate moral resolve.

Footnote 20 (continued)

Press, 2008); Jacqueline Mariña, “Kant on Grace: A Reply to His Critics,” *Religious Studies* 33 (1997) 379–400. My own account, which seeks a middle ground between these extremes, can be found in full here: ‘For the Love of God: Kant on Grace’. In: *International Philosophical Quarterly* 54 (2014), 175–190. There have recently been a number of commentaries on Kant’s *Religionschrift*: James DiCenso, *Kant’s Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason: A Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Lawrence Pasternack, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Kant on Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason: An Interpretation and Defense* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014); Steven Palmquist, *Comprehensive Commentary on Kant’s Religion Within the Bounds of Bare Reason* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2016).

More specifically, these tools are good examples of perfect morality (book II), an ethical community that is inclusive and strives towards cooperation rather than adversity (book III), a number of good practices that cultivate resolve (book IV). All of these practices serve one very practical aim, i.e. to provide the energy and courage to combat the propensity to evil continuously and thus phenomenally actualize a firm change of heart that one hopes has taken place noumenally. This makes it so that the end of religion is “to make us other human beings and not merely better [*uns andere, nicht blos bessere*] human beings” (AA 7:54). This is, obviously, premised on the idea that we are able to make ourselves into different human beings.

The decisive difference between Schelling and Kant in their views on evil comes out only at the end of their analyses. Schelling believes that an evil being has protohistorically chosen a certain way of being, which must already include conversion else it would be impossible. This appears to be difficult to support: some of the most inspiring individuals in history, and many stories in the literary canon, are all about moral growth and change. Kant allows for this possibility in a more robust sense – even though it is clouded with noumenal mystery – by reading the choice for good or evil in terms of a firm resolve. One may not know the exact date and time of one’s moral revolution, but this does not mean that it is absolutely beyond time. Indeed, the only way to understand great life changes in individuals is to view their changing behavior as giving expression to a profound choice to alter their ways.

Conclusion

One of the objectives of Schelling’s *Freedom* is to provide an explanation of the ground of evil. Schelling shares many views with Kant, most importantly that the ground of evil cannot somehow be explained by rational argument. This point is probably where Kant and Schelling are most innovative, namely in showing how evil as such is an important characteristic of human nature that cannot be explained by rational principles. Specific agency that appears evil will always involve prudential or even rational considerations (human beings are not devils), but the very possibility to commit to evil is beyond rationality. If one does explain the ground of evil by rational principles, one is at risk of justifying evil in the face of these rational principles. Schelling’s transcendental reconstruction of a ground of evil does not fall into this pitfall, mainly because evil is the expression of a non-rational principle. This is also why Schelling is so emphatic that human beings, and not God, are responsible for evil (SW 1/7:394–403). Schelling’s account of evil in *Freedom* then has a decisive advantage over Kant in providing a fuller deduction of the ground of evil, but Kant conversely has the advantage of being to account more robustly for moral conversion.

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