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Weeding out the Critical Root – How Kant Thinks the Radical

It pays to be a radical today, particularly in theory. If so desired, one can have radical ethics, epistemology, hermeneutics, imagination, sex, and menstruation.¹ Another prestigious title to obtain, though perhaps with more difficulty, would be that of a “thinker of the radical.” Then we could at least be in great company: this phrase conjures up images of Marx and Engels, most certainly, Godwin, Badiou, or Althusser, and perhaps Hegel, in certain circles. Few, however, would think here of Immanuel Kant, ever the invoked figure of all manner of projects (from the UN to analytic deontological ethics), which, decidedly, no one likes to refer to as “radical” in any sense. And yet it is Kant, and only him, who among the great canon of philosophers ever wrote a text prominently featuring the term: *On Radical Evil in Human Nature*, the first essay of his *Religion Within the Bounds of Bare Reason* (1793). It is not some minor, forgotten tract either, only recently discovered in a hidden archive, but one that has influenced an entire legacy of ethical thought after Auschwitz and fuelled some of the (arguably) most impactful works originating out of Ljubljana at the turn of the millennium (Žižek 1996, Zupančič 2000).

¹ See Biederman and Mendieta 2014; Aragón and Macedo 2015; Caputo 1987; Khasnabish 2020; Holmes, Murray and Foth (eds.) 2020; Bobel and Lorber 2010.

And yet, if there is one point nearly all literature on the subject wants to convince us of, first and foremost, it is precisely that “‘radical evil’ does not refer to a special kind of evil that is especially ‘radical’” (Wood 1999, p. 284). To some extent, this impulse is understandable. Hannah Arendt’s short passage in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), while revitalizing the text for a whole new generation of thinkers,² undoubtedly also imposed an unfortunate connotation unto “radical evil”: “in the word [Kant] coined for it [...], he at least must have suspected the existence of this [kind of] evil [...], a *phenomenon* that [...] breaks down all standards we know” (Arendt 1973, p. 459, my emphasis). This rebranding was incredibly effective; consider the change in *Frankfurter* language from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (“The Jews [...] are branded as *absolute evil* by *absolute evil*”) (Adorno and Horkheimer 1987, p. 204, my emphasis) and *Negative Dialectics* (“The trouble is not that free men do *radical evil*, as evil is being done beyond all measure conceivable to Kant”) (Adorno 2003, p. 216, my emphasis) It was also, however, decidedly not what the Prussian philosopher had in mind, leaving (at least) a generation of scholars to dispel the notion from the mind of the reading public, over and over again. But most, if not all, take an additional, somewhat curious step, arguing that we shouldn’t even reflect on the word at all, that it is “defined by common sense” (Matušík 2008, p. 8). Nearly every commentator wants to convince us at some point that the term “radical” meant *nothing* to Kant, and as such *should not be paid any attention to*.³ It is “simply” and “strictly” a reference to the biblical *radix malorum est cupiditas* (greed is the root of all evil) and “nothing more” (Pasternack and Fugate 2020). This is precisely the kind of symptomatic insistence in discourse that should pique the attention of anyone preoccupied with radical thought.

2 Arguably including Kant scholarship itself, by way of John Silber’s *The Ethical Significance of Kant’s Religion*, who also penned the introduction to the new 1960’s English translation, which coincided with the resurgence in popularity; cf. Palmquist 2015, p. xiii.

3 One important exception here is certainly Steven Palmquist, who does *not* take this to be self-evident, but instead suggests that the notion of *radix* (as root) ought to be connected Kant’s preferred metaphor of man as a tree (Palmquist 2015, p. 84).

We can note therefore that the main claim of these interpretations is that “there is no evidence Kant means anything more” by the term (Bernstein 2002, p. 28). My previous work demonstrates that this claim is about as historically unfounded as it is oft repeated (see Keymeulen 2024). Rather, there is no reason to ascribe ignorance or clumsiness to Kant’s choice of term. If we no longer dismiss this option outright, a new path opens up before us: what if Kant’s text is actually working through the notion of radicality? Or, to put it more directly: how can we read *On Radical Evil* as a text not (solely) concerned with what is evil (as this is well-trodden terrain), but (also) what is *Radical*? This essay explores precisely this question. To do so, I will first establish some minimal starting points, including other uses of the term “*das Radicale*” elsewhere in Kant’s oeuvre (which have been ignored thus far). Then, we will closely go through the text with Kant, observing the role radicality plays within it. Finally, I will draw some conclusions on how this new reading relates to and could inform contemporary so-called “radical” philosophy. Doing so, I will sketch how one might bridge the gap between Kant and the most famous expression on radicality in the history of philosophy, namely Marx’s dictum that “to be radical is to grasp the matter by its roots [Radikal sein ist die Sache an der Wurzel fassen]” (Marx 1981a, p. 385).

Finding the Soil

By asserting the possibility that Kant thinks the radical, we also do not want to force him to immediately fit into or respond to any kind of pre-conceived notion of radicality, but allow him to lead us down a path of his choosing. This is somewhat contrary to the majority of commentators, who claim that *On Radical Evil* has a *preset* goal, and it is that of justifying a certain kind of Christian morality.⁴ After all, is it not found in a book that

⁴ “There is no doubt that he wanted to ... defend ... the moral core of Christian religious faith” (Bernstein 2002, p. 19). “Kant ... translates the religious mode of sin into the moral language of radical evil” (Matušík 2008, p. 128).

is often literally shortened to *The Religion*?⁵ In a sense, this is a repetition of Goethe's first reactions to the text, in an infamous letter to Herder:

On the other hand, Kant, too, after having spent a long human life purifying his philosophical mantle of many a sordid prejudice, has been brazenly stained with the stain of radical evil, so that even Christians might be enticed to kiss its hem. (Goethe 1887, GW IV 10, pp. 131-132)

From this perspective, which takes *Radical Evil* (both as title and concept) a priori to mean a sinful human nature (in the quotidian, non-Kantian sense of the phrase), Kant performs a “deplorable concession to the unenlightened misanthropic Christian doctrine of original sin” (Wood 1999, p. 284). Though all might agree that Kant remains (at least somewhat of) a Kantian in his methodology, and thus would be unsatisfied with an anti-philosophical argument, this defense remains (at most) the kind of deductive justification that defines the Critiques (Caimi 2014, pp. 14-16). This kind of pre-limiting approach must be challenged in two ways.

The first requires a brief look at the relationship between Kant and the *Théodicée* tradition (“fait une apologie ... [de] l'origine du mal, par rapport à Dieu”; per the original Leibniz formulation) (Leibniz 1846, p. 44) by recognizing that the other half of the book's title, *Within the Bounds of Reason. On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy* (1791) is a tract whose title is frequently cited in secondary literature when one wants to make the point that Kant had a dislike for theodicies, even if the actual reasons often go unmentioned.⁶ It is not because, as one might expect, Kant holds that there is no evil in the world, but, on the contrary, he agrees with this observation (MpVT AA VIII, p. 254).⁷ What he criticizes

⁵ I would again point out that this ignores the actual publication history of *Die Religion* as essentially a collected volume, in which *Das Radicale Böse* even takes up an outlier position (Keymeulen 2024, pp. 244-48).

⁶ As Bernstein puts it: “Just the very title of this essay is significant” (Bernstein 2002, p. 3).

⁷ All citations of Kant in this text will follow the tradition of Kantian scholarship, based on the *Akademieausgabe von Immanuel Kants Gesammelten Werken*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1900, using the following abbreviations, the volume and page number:

is mainly the then-contemporary, 18th-century tradition of theodicies, in which authors posited themselves as lawyers defending God from a lawsuit (charged with an infinite number of atrocities). Kant contrasts these “doctrinal” theodicies with the “authentic” ones of the past (*ibid.*, p. 264). These would have been reasonable (*Redliche*) affairs, acknowledgments of one’s shortcomings: “[In] authentic [theodicy] it is not so much a matter of reasoning as of sincerity in noting the inability of our Reason” (*ibid.*, p. 267).

The writers of such theodicies lament, as it were, that they even have to produce such a text, but in their writing, they confront (and rediscover) Reason as something they have a capacity for rather than a *command* over (as would be the case in doctrinal theodicies).⁸ Crucially, Kant is skeptical about the practical deployment of Reason for the purpose of arriving at a pre-conceived truth or certainty. Indeed, this distorts both what Reason needs and what we need Reason for, harkening back to Kant’s intervention in the Lessing controversy: *What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking?* (1786). There, although Jacobi and Mendelssohn assigned a role to reason in their own way, they both eschewed “the need for Reason” (WDO AA VIII, p. 140, my emphasis). For Kant, even Mendelssohnian “healthy Reason [*gesund Vernunft*]” is a reading of Reason as something that we simply use and that does not require anything in return. Instead, though we often find ourselves in need of certain concepts (‘if only we could conceive of x or y’), the *need* is actually for Reason itself. The phrase performs double duty here. One longs for Reason and Reason itself also has an object of desire, namely concepts to reason *with*. Relating this to the history of theodicy, Kant argues for a similar shift from truth (*Wahrheit*) to veracity (*Wahrhaftigkeit*):

MpVT: *Über das Mißlingen aller philosophischen Versuche in der Theodicee*,
 KRV: *Kritik Der Reinen Vernunft (A/B)*,
 WDO: *Was heißt: Sich im Denken orientiren?*,
 RGV: *Die Religion Innerhalb Der Grenzen Der Blossen Vernunft*.

⁸ I capitalise ‘Reason’ throughout this essay to indicate the Kantian understanding of *Vernunft*, rather than the colloquial term.

One cannot always stand by the truth of what one says to oneself or to another (for one can be mistaken); however, one can and must stand by the truthfulness of one's declaration or confession. (MpVT AA VIII, p. 267)

Our first clue is thus as follows: Kant does not rule out the starting position of theodicies ('there exists such a concept as evil'), but wants to reverse their traditional relation to Reason. The initial starting point should *feed* Reason and prompt it to develop a reasonable thesis, and not the other way around. This is *veracity*. The consequences of pre-determining the aim of Kant's text can be taken even a step further. One would not be aware of this if one were to exclusively consult the secondary literature, but he actually uses the term "radical" elsewhere too, most notably in the first *Critique*:

These comparatively fundamental powers [*Grundkräfte*] must once again be compared with one another, so as to discover their unanimity and thereby bring them close to a single *radical*, i. e., absolutely fundamental, power. But this unity of Reason is merely *hypothetical*. One asserts not that such a power must in fact be found, but rather that one must seek it for the sake of Reason... (KRV AA B677, my emphasis)

This is our second clue. A radical concept is something we seek for the sake of Reason itself. But how should we contextualize this within Kant's broader philosophy? The quote concludes Kant's discussion of the *hypothetical* use of Reason, which is when we use Reason to try to make sense of "problematic concepts" (ibid.). Thus, the term "radical" does not make a statement for Kant about whether something "really exists" (namely, if it is indeed "encountered"). Rather, it tells us something about a concept we turn to when we are thinking through a difficult hypothesis. A new possibility thus suggests itself: reading *On Radical Evil* not as a text with a purpose determined by the secondary author (a proper expression of Christian sin, etc.) in which radical evil plays a *role*, but as a logical/hypothetical text. One starts from a certain hypothesis and rolls out its consequences. This is how, in the next section, we will observe how evil is *radicalized* for Kant.

Digging into the Earth

Following a brief introduction, *On Radical Evil* is divided into four parts: (1) Concerning the Original Predisposition (ursprünglichen Anlage) to Good in Human Nature, (2) Concerning the Propensity (Hange) to Evil in Human Nature, (3) Man is by Nature Evil, and (4) Concerning the Origin of Evil in Human Nature. The next sections of this essay follow Kant's argument as it develops through these parts, up to his introduction of radical evil in (3), guided by the two proposed clues. For the sake of brevity, I will only highlight the elements that pertain to our interest in the question of the radical. As such, this should not be considered a complete account of a text that has a multitude of connotations and consequences for contemporary philosophy.

Rigor (Introduction)

Kant opens *On Radical Evil* with a classic theodicy formulation: “‘The world is in ruins’ is a complaint as old as time” (RGV AA VI, p. 19). Continuing, he argues one can either take *this* as the hypothesis to offer up to Reason, or, like many other philosophers (and “pedagogues”), its negation: “that the world is going in the opposite direction – from worse to better” (ibid.). As clarified in the following first *Remark*, taking up *one or the other* is unavoidable in the current moment; Kant writes, “The conflict between [these] two hypotheses is grounded in a disjunctive proposition: Man is (by nature) either morally [sittlich] good or morally evil” (RGV AA VI, p. 22). This might fire up any commentator seeking to immediately strike down Kant for (seemingly) involving Christian morality right away. But is this really the case? This is a claim about *hypotheses*; it does not refer to good and evil themselves (as existing phenomenal entities) but to a disjunction *about* the distinction between good and evil. It is the necessary, logical distinction that will help *orient* us in our thinking (in the sense of WDO). Kant introduces a crucial distinction between two possible attitudes, “rigorists ... and latitudinarians” (RGV AA VI, p. 22). This is clarified in the accompanying footnote, where Kant outright adopts the language of logic:

If the good = a, the opposite contradicting it is the ‘not-good.’ Then, this ‘not-good’ is the consequence either of the mere lack of a ground of the good, = 0, or of a positive ground countering [Widerspiels] the good = -a; in this latter case, the not-good can also be called positive evil. (Ibid.)

Here, a particular logical problem is displayed, as a result of Kant’s veracious position-taking. Ordinarily, one can distinguish between doing good (G), not doing good (G_0), and doing not-good/evil (E) – in more formalized Kantian terms, one might phrase it as pursuing a lawful maxim (G), not pursuing a lawful maxim (G_0), and actively pursuing an unlawful maxim (E). Of E, we know with reasonable certainty that it will always belong to the not-good, but what of G_0 ? This logical tension reveals itself when we, with Kant, choose to present the first hypothesis up to Reason, rather than the second. After all, then one should have to actively do good for good to occur – passivity only contributes to the ongoing catastrophe. One must therefore come to regard E and G_0 as one unity, a unity that can only be grasped as the strict negation of the active good ($\neg G$). This is a *rigorous* attitude. Rigorous towards the good, because Kant strictly excludes what can be signified by this concept under this concept and what cannot. There is only one articulation of the good and the rest follows therefrom. Contrast this with what Kant calls the “indifferentists” (ibid.), those who are not driven to the same point as he is and can therefore be *indifferent* to G_0 – they do not have this problem at all. The same applies to the “syncretists” (ibid.), who adopt the second hypothesis and can count G_0 to the good. Both forms of thinking, according to Kant, are “latitudinal.”⁹ In short, latitudinal attitudes deny the need of/for Reason. There is no *need* for Reason (the world is not in ruin after all), nor does one give Reason that which it itself needs, namely a problematic concept to take care of. Thus, we can posit that, in *On Radical Evil*, Kant’s general veracious attitude towards the world’s corruption turns into a rigorous attitude towards the concept of the good.

⁹ Undoubtedly a reference to the term used to describe heterodox 17th-century Anglican clergy, who in some sense preached ‘latitude’ (from the Latin *latus*) or other forms of religious political tolerance – which eventually found itself expressed in the writings of Locke and other forms of early liberalism (see Marshall 2016).

This rigorous attitude offers up a question to Reason. It is easy to consider the good and this “new” evil ($E' : \neg G$) separately, because it is a completely exclusive disjunction. If we ask what the first is, it seems we are left with a circular articulation (what is E' ? $\neg G'$, what is G ? $\neg E'$). But the question that remains is what this means for their *point of distinction*, the ground of division between good and evil. This introduces the notion of *Gesinnung* (disposition), “the first subjective ground for the adoption of certain maxims [as drives]” (RGV AA VI, p. 25) *Gesinnung* is the point where the subject is first confronted with the moral law. It “applies universally to the entire use of Reason” because the subject would be free in *this* choosing act. Moral judgment comes only *after* it embraces (or fails to embrace) a certain maxim, regardless of disposition. *Gesinnung* is thus free by its condition of possibility, the “spontaneity of arbitrariness [*Spontaneität der Willkür*]” (ibid., p. 24). In this way, it also has a black box functionality, something we cannot consider good, evil, or even neither/both. It is “indifferent” (ibid.), a chrono-logical point that enables the differentiation between good and evil (because a moral decision follows from it) but does not do so itself (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Disposition of a Latitudinarian Attitude

This is a reflective process, as *Gesinnung* must also rely on *previous* moral choices (these are also part of our *Willkür*). If we now, with Kant, opt for a rigorous approach, there are only two moral choices – *for* the law, or *not*. How are we to understand the implications of this for *Gesinnung*? After all, it then no longer relies on a set of indistinguishable influences, some of which were previous moral choices. When it wants to include previous choices made, they are always coded strictly binary – *for* the law or *not*. This suggests that there might be something more to the inclusion

of moral choice; one cannot redefine *Gesinnung* as some sort of sorting mechanism, as that would deprive it of its status as a free, subjective basis for decision-making. One can only explore this notion further by staying strictly on the side of the spontaneity of *Willkür*, although this begets another difficulty. In a system of classical ethics, one could perhaps easily determine the conditions under which a maxim or decision is the right one. Now, however, we find ourselves before the decision and point of divergence (Figure 2).

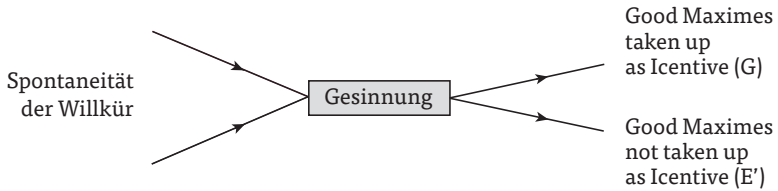


Figure 2. Disposition of a Rigorous Attitude

Without a notion of why Kant is writing this essay, it would indeed be difficult to understand why we now find ourselves in this position. Only by approaching *On Radical Evil* without presuppositions can we properly understand Kant's next step: the need of/for reason to reassert itself. Instead of writing off this line of inquiry, he considers what questions can still be asked. For this, he presents us with yet again another sterling bit of transcendental reflection: rather than pondering how *Gesinnung* functions, one can ask *under what conditions* can good or bad maxims be reincorporated into it as the spontaneity of arbitrariness. These maxims then need not necessarily result in the reacquisition of certain principles; it is only required that the possibility *show itself* at the level of *Gesinnung*. Thus, we preserve the freedom of the subjective ground of decision. The following parts of *On Radical Evil* address precisely this new line of questioning, given a rigorous attitude.¹⁰

¹⁰ We realize this only *retroactively*, after going through the different parts.

Anlage and Hang (Parts 1 and 2)

In *On Radical Evil*, one hypothesis drives the next, and so on. The introduction is followed by two sections on the (re)inclusion of good and evil in *Gesinnung*, respectively. At first glance, these two parts seem to have little to do with each other – Kant is “just” listing some typical, respective properties of good and evil. The first part deals with the “predisposition [Anlage] towards the good” and the second with the “propensity [Hange] to evil” (ibid., pp. 26, 28). It is these two sections that take center stage in the text’s scholarly interpretation; they give us Kant’s distinction between good and evil. But such an exegetical approach could be flawed. Focusing on two concepts in this way is like believing that we orient ourselves to the pole star – it only holds if we understand that this is because the pole star is given a *function* by Reason. Similarly, these concepts do not get their function inherently but serve them for the purpose of Reason.

Let us thus begin by examining the similarities and differences in treatment between the two parts of the text (*Anlage* and *Hang*). In both, Kant goes over three potential “stages [Stufte]” of what we might call “(re-)absorption.”¹¹ They are not gradations of good or evil *itself*, but of how good or bad decisions can be regarded as the *Willkür* of a subject. Put differently, one could also say that Kant is searching here for how the concept of “good” or “evil” *can* operate at the level of *Willkür*. In this search, he is ever vigilant to keep the need of/for Reason central. In the first Critique, Kant tells us that one way to ensure a critical attitude and avoid dogmatism is to employ Reason as a tool of “purification” (KRV AA B25). We take what initially shows itself as the good (as it functions for *Willkür*) and purify it. We eliminate stage by stage what is not strictly necessary, like “a business trying to save money” (ibid., p. Bx).

Part 1 covers the good. Here, the only question one can ask is what conditions would make it possible for the right maxims to *always* be absorbed by *Gesinnung*? Here we, with Kant, must be careful to remain rigorous

¹¹ The three stages of the good are often not thus recognized in the literature, but they are referred to in the term Kant first uses, *Klassen* (in the sense of “kinds”). However, we shall still argue why we consider this a correct equation. Cf. Wood 1999, pp. 402-3.

thinkers: the absorption of the right maxims is necessary if we are to save the world from ruin. Broadly speaking, there is (I) the possibility of doing so for “one’s animality ... as a living being” (RGV AA VI, pp. 26-7): we can count good maxims to our *Willkür* for “physical self-love” (i. e. in order to stay alive).¹² Yet this possibility is still too “impure” and it still covers too many situations in which we might not be able to recognize the moral law. Something more specific (II) is the possibility that one does so “for one’s humanity, as a living and at the same time rational being.” Indeed, we can absorb the right maxims into our *Gesinnung* if we want a reasonable life (entailing, for example, love for and respect of others). However, this too is insufficiently pure for Kant, since a reasonable life may also (at times) tolerate the non-absorption of certain moral principles (G_o). There is thus once again a need for the purification of (III) the possibility of doing so “for one’s personality, as a rational and at the same time accountable being.” This, according to Kant, means a “receptivity of respect for the moral law [Empfänglichkeit der Achtung für das moralische Gesetz].” This is the stage of possible conditions when the right principles are recognized with certainty.

In Part 2, the stages of purification take a slightly different turn. After all, we should not be wondering under what conditions we would include *wrong maxims* or reject good maxims. To investigate E' ($=-G$), the question must be under what conditions can one *not include* (good) maxims in one’s *Gesinnung*? First, there is the first level (I’) “*fragilitas*,” the possibility that we fall short of principles; “I have the will, but not the ability” (RGV AA VI, pp. 28-30).¹³ However, this should again be purified. Indeed, strict *defectiveness* as a condition implies that one can at most *temporarily stop obeying* a law, something insufficient for grasping E' . Thus, one arrives at (II’) “*impuritas*,” which is when “dutiful acts are not done purely out of duty.” This takes away the temporal dimension, as strictly impure duties can always be recognized, but it still suggests that we must always *partly* recognize the moral law. Ultimately, Kant arrives at (III’)

¹² The rest of this paragraph solely refers to RGV AA VI, pp. 26–27

¹³ The rest of this section solely refers to RGV AA VI, pp. 28–30.

“*corruptio*” or “*perversitas*.” What could guarantee that we cannot include good maxims is when we are presented with *all* maxims as if they were not maxims. After all, a maxim must be able to be recognized as a maxim to be a good maxim.

These conditions *are* forms of good and evil, in the strict sense that they capture a certain kind of functional logic of good and evil in a given context. The crucial insight is that good and evil *function structurally differently* with respect to *Willkür* and *Gesinnung*. The functioning of evil, unlike the good, does not even require knowing what the laws are (specifically). This is the distinction between *Anlage* and *Hang*. Evil can actively create possibilities of its own (through corruption or perversion). It must therefore, in some sense, (strictly) *precede* any particular tendencies. This is what is captured by the term “*Hang*”. By contrast, the good can only passively evaluate *Willkür* (by demanding something *justify* itself) (*ibid.*, p. 28). It is therefore always secondary, an *Anlage*. Though it could indeed be argued that this echoes various existing ethical theories, Kant presents it to us here as a crucial *logical* asymmetry. In fact, this is a direct consequence of the rigorous attitude. It is the rigorous attitude that assigned the good its one articulation while leaving evil free to run its logical course. Another possible articulation of this would be to say that evil can “speak the language of the good/law”, whereas the reverse is impossible. Evil is thus *negatively* defined by rigor. This can be sketched (somewhat clumsily) by Figure 3:

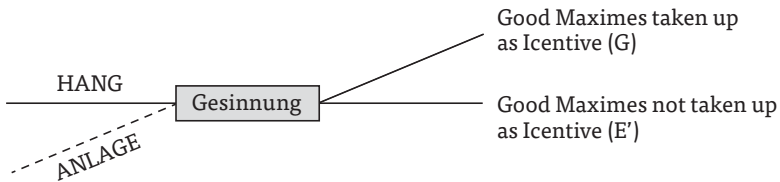


Figure 3. Disposition of a Rigorous Attitude (On Closer Inspection)

Radical Evil (Part 3)

Only now does Kant introduce the notion of “radical evil” (ibid., p. 32) but this does not undermine the reading of this essay, on the contrary. In the previous part, the good disappeared completely, so only one question now remains: what is evil? By this “evil,” Kant is no longer referring to the evil from the *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* (meaning E), but rather this new conceptualization (E') that has unfolded here asymmetrically and, one could say, unexpectedly. To this question of “is,” he provides two answers. Namely, evil is “*angeboren*” (‘innate,’ roughly) and *radical*. Thus, we finally have radicality in our sights. I will first examine what is meant by the first term, “*angeboren*.”

“This [new] evil [E'] is *radical* because it corrupts the ground of all maxims [Dieses Böse ist *radical*, weil es den Grund aller Maximen verdirbt]” (RGV AA VI, p. 37). The sentence overflows with meaning. Especially crucial is the last term: “corrupts” (*verdirbt*). In addition to radical evil, Kant also writes of “radical wrongness” (*radikale Verkehrtheit*) (ibid.). Thus, what makes evil radical is precisely that it *corrupts* or *perverts*. To the extent that this evil *does* anything, it “spoils” or “inverts” things and “reverses the hierarchy” (Zupančič 2000, p. 89). It takes maxims and presents them as something else. Thus, although both G and E' are functional, only evil's logic is genuinely *structurally reflective*. It knows what the good *needs* given the context (a maxim must be able to be recognized as a maxim) and has adapted itself accordingly. It asserts something *only* by manipulating other theses to its liking. Evil is *benevolent* in its defense of different principles in different situations so long as it leads to the subordination of maxims. Unlike the good, its articulation is open; it can speak whatever language is needed. Here, we are again reminded of a contemporary analogy, namely the *virus*, which silently seizes the cells of its unsuspecting host for its own purposes.¹⁴ What this allows, upon reflection, is the fact that evil, at the beginning of this venture, was only *negatively* and *dividedly*

¹⁴ This is in reference to my investigation into the symptomatic use of the term ‘radical’ in contemporary scholarship more broadly; particularly recalling the assertion in the historiography of security studies that ‘radicalisation’ entered that particular lexicon when ‘terrorism’ came to be considered a “social virus”; see Keymeulen

defined – it was *not* allowed to be the good and had to be able to bring together a variety of different definitions of evil (E).

Evil is also radical because it specifically perverts the *ground of all maxims*, what we now understand as *Gesinnung*. Why is this such a crucial aspect of its radicality? *Gesinnung* was the limitation, the boundary, that we put on Reason at the beginning of this study, for two reasons. First, it was the only concept that was strictly *indifferent*. This meant that it was the *ground of differentiation* between good and evil. Similarly, it was literally indifferent, in the sense of “tolerant,” towards both concepts. The disposition *itself* does not differentiate between good and evil but is strictly its ground. Secondly, it of course grounds itself in freedom (of Reason). These two points caused us to regard the disposition as a black box, a concept that specifically did not invite adaptation. Kant thus reminds us that evil is radical because it not only “perverts” the space within which we have shaped it, but it also seeks to bend the limits of the very inquiry into its will.

Evil (E') corrupts this subjective “ground of decision-making” (*Entscheidungsgrundlage*) in the sense that it also *functionally* distorts *Gesinnung*. In the abstract, e.g. for the latitudinarian ethicist, it seems as if the first distinction between good and evil is made at the point of the ground of subjective decision-making. However, now we can see that the first distinction was already made somewhere before this, by *Hang*. This uncovered evil is also “indifferent” towards the good, as it also does not make this distinction. Because it inverts *all* maxims, Kant writes that it “can co-exist with a generally good will” (RGV AA VI, p. 37). Indeed, it (E', not E) does so unencumbered, something that is not the case the other way around. Evil also grounds itself in freedom, more specifically the freedom of Reason. Indeed, it is through Kant's recognition of the *need for Reason* that we have been able to articulate E'. Without it, we could not have gone through this logical sequence and evil would still be in its initial, uncorrupted role. Notice that evil assumes this role but does not thereby make it *disappear*. On the contrary, freedom and indifference are only strengthened by this development.

(2025), “The Infinite Virus – On the Discourse and History of the Concept of Radicality,” *Theory & Event*, forthcoming.

It is here, moreover, where Kant again rules out the possibility that evil would not only be *radical* but also “devilish” (*teuflisch*) – a now famous distinction.¹⁵ Indeed, the preceding description, namely “to include evil as evil as a driving force in one’s maxims” (*ibid.*), is often interpreted in the literature as an assertion that it is impossible for man to do evil *for the sake of* doing evil. Although such a thesis can indeed also be read elsewhere in Kant (see, for instance, *ibid.*, p. 35), that is not what we are highlighting here. At this juncture, Kant emphasizes that an evil *Hang* does not also mean that the disposition itself can *only* be evil. It is not because evil (E’) is always active that it always *succeeds* in its intent. This is precisely the main point, after all. What has made evil radical is precisely that it lets *Gesinnung* be. The disposition must remain precisely “not malice [Bosheit]” (*ibid.*, p. 37).

Thus, one could formulate a general theory: a concept is *radical* when it *corrupts* or *perverts* other concepts. In doing so, it considers itself *functional* and *reflective*. We see this especially in how it also perverts the reasonable limits we initially imposed on it. It is able to do so primarily by being *indifferent* and using the freedom (of Reason) to develop itself – thereby maintaining this very capacity. One can also formulate a theory of radicalization by observing what has happened in the text. Kant began with one explicit hypothesis, namely that the world is in ruin. This hypothesis, we believe, is grounded in that Kant considers it *veracious*, rather than it being *true* in a strict sense of the term. This produced a *rigorous attitude*, which reformulated evil (E) as the strict negation of good. Then, this new conceptualization was undetermined (E’) and had to be worked out within a few strict parameters. This resulted in a transcendental and functional analysis of the concept. Finally, we arrived at a conceptualization of E’ as radical, with the structural properties just described.

Pulling Out the Stump – Conclusion

Next, tragedy strikes – both in the text and in history. Kant himself admits that the remaining Part 4 of *Das Radicale Böse* is somewhat different in its approach. It takes its wonderfully developed thesis of the radicality of evil and flattens it; evil is not just radical, but also *angboren* (‘innate’). His only argument is the following:

¹⁵ He also did this a few pages earlier (RGV AA VI, p. 35).

The appropriate proof of this condemnation by Reason, sitting in moral judgment, is not to be found in this section, but in the previous one. This section contains only the confirmation of it through experience. (RGV AA VI, p. 39)

As other authors have also noted,¹⁶ this seems like almost an outright deception by Kant, because said “previous section” only gives us this argument:

There is no need to give formal proof of this, in view of the multitude of glaring examples that experience presents to us in the deeds of men. (RGV AA VI, pp. 32-33)

After all his logical explorations exploring the radicality of evil, Kant turns around and decides it actually means something else (‘man is evil by nature’), as this would be “proven by experience.” How was this written by, of all people, the critical philosopher himself? Why would he even entertain such a suffocating argument?

As put so memorably by Bernstein, *On Radical Evil* is where Kant is “at war with himself” (Bernstein 2002, p. 33) and centering the radical in the reading of the text shows exactly why. It is common to read in the above descriptions that concepts such as “evil” do or did X, Y, or Z. I would maintain, however, that such formulations are only intended at being economical with our language; it is, nevertheless, a phraseology that presents itself with force. The text’s approach, which through its very hypothetical nature and its commitment towards veracity and *need* for Reason, starts to move dangerously close to the position that “concepts move.” This, no doubt, would be dogmatic, Spinozist, and/or absurd to Kant – he acknowledges as much in the closing *General Remarks* of the text (RGV AA VI, pp. 46-50). But the question still stands: what changed between E, G, and E’? Did evil not, through the drives of Reason yet unarticulated at the time, find itself at the same time both *driven to its root* and *unrooted*.

¹⁶ See, for example, Formosa 2007, p. 228: “Does Kant deliver on the promised proof elsewhere in the text? He does not.”

Kant has very little room to account for this, for that would invoke not only dogmatism but also *speculative Reason*. That bogeyman of the introduction of the B *Critique* tempts us to “venture beyond the bounds of experience” Bernstein, sticking by the old Kant, concurs, saying, “the concept of radical evil is a dialectical illusion (*dialektischen Scheins*); it seduces us into thinking that we can explain something that we cannot possibly explain” (Bernstein 2002, p. 35, referring to KRV AA B88). Kant’s solution to ward off this terrifying spirit is to (post factum) foreclose the text’s hypothetical origins and *naturalize* them. Thus, in addition to being radical and *angeboren*, evil now also must be something of *human nature* for Kant; something *sensible* (RGV AA VI, p. 32) It indicates that one is not reasoning dialectically, but retroactively describing the internal steps prior to an *effective moral decision*. The whole text would then function with the “limitation” that one is only interested in evil as it relates to humans, more specifically the human “species [Gattung]” (*ibid.*, p. 21). Therefore, if something new is discovered during this research, it stands to reason that this would be the “character” of the human species. This character could thus be called “innate” (in the sense of *angeboren*) (*ibid.*). This would eliminate any explanation of that tricky “need” for/of Reason – any need is that of nature itself. Thus, the earlier mentioned commentators (Goethe included) are certainly not *wrong* to characterize Kant’s text as ultimately forcing a justification of some kind, though it is perhaps of a slightly different nature. By accepting Kant’s own ultimate resignation, they too smother the (literally) radical thought that led him there.

The elephant that has slowly appeared in the room here is, without question, named “German Idealism.” The development of a radicalizing notion is, even if not ultimately approved by Kant himself, certainly *in the spirit of Kant* as it would be understood in the early 19th century. It has been written that *On Radical Evil* was “not taken up by Schelling or Hegel” (Van Eekert, Van Herck and Lemmens 2010, p. 255). This is hardly defensible now, given we can read Schelling’s *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom* (or *Freiheitsschrift*, 1809), which describes precisely the point we have developed:

The only correct conception of evil ... [must] be based on a positive perversity or inversion of principles ... and explained by profound physical analogies, especially that of disease. (Schelling 1997, p. 366)

Schelling did not yet have access to the term “virus,” but if he did, perhaps he would have deployed it here.¹⁷ Two of the *Freiheitsschrift*'s foremost commentators, Žižek and Heidegger (the latter from his 1930s lectures), also pick up on this. Heidegger is right to identify that Schelling's aim as to write “a metaphysics *after* evil” (Heidegger 1988, p. 169). – that is, a metaphysics after Kant demonstrated the radicalization of evil. Žižek, despite not granting one bit of it to Kant (who would be too caught up in dispelling the notion of “diabolic evil”), also picks up on this same motif:

Schelling's basic definition of [radical] Evil as the “*Verkehrung*” [...] of the proper relation [...]. (Žižek 1997, p. 63)

[a] perverse economy [is] not merely the background of Good [or] the opposite principle which the Good needs in order to assert itself, but maintains and supports the Good in a much more direct and uncanny way. (Ibid., p. 30)

Where Kant backs away, Schelling persists, shifting from pre-Critical Christian *Sinn* (sin) to the German Idealist, modern *Wahnsinn* (madness).¹⁸ The hypothesis that started it all becomes *the* foundational starting block for a new philosophy: the world is in ruins, not in a naturalized, phenomenal sense, but a metaphysical one; it is *out of joint*. From this position, all concepts become available to radicalization. Perhaps this is also why the “radicalization” of concepts would not prove to be an operative concept in either Schellingian or Hegelian thought. Nevertheless, German philosophy eventually found its way back to it again.

In the opening of this essay, I mentioned perhaps the most famous of all puns on radicality: “to be radical is to grasp the matter by its roots [Radi-

¹⁷ As it was only in the late 19th century that pioneers such as Louis Pasteur and Dmitry Ivanovsky would lay the foundations of virology.

¹⁸ I owe this pun to Žižek 1997, p. 76.

kal sein ist die Sache an der Wurzel fassen].” In his contemporary study of radicalism, Paul McLaughlin notes that, despite the tidal wave of pro forma references to Marx and Marxism, “few thinkers have tried to develop an analysis [of the term ‘radicality’] along these lines” (McLaughlin 2014, p. 18).¹⁹ Thus, it might be fitting to make some broad observations of interest here. First, there is a stark contrast between Marx’s *philosophical* deployment of the term and that of his collaborator. Engels mainly writes “*Radikal*” with a capital letter and thus as a noun, most likely referencing the 19th-century English *Radicals* (see Engels 1981a, p. 465; Engels 1981b, pp. 573, 581). In Marx, however, another kind of usage prevails: *radikal* (lowercase) as a predicate. Ironically, he returns to the Kantian notion in precisely the text some introductory authors (Singer 2000, pp. 28-31) attribute to his break with German Idealism, his introduction to Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*.²⁰ Some examples include:

A *radical revolution* can only be the revolution of *radical needs*. (Marx 1981a, p. 387, my emphasis)

So where is the positive possibility of German emancipation?

Answer: In the formation of a class with *radical chains*, a class of bourgeois society which is not a class of bourgeois society. (ibid., p. 390, my emphasis)²¹

We have a radical German revolution, which requires radical needs of a class with radical chains (ibid., p. 386).²² One could interpret these as simply referring to the contemporary meaning, as Marx insisting on “real,” “hardcore” revolutions, needs, and chains. But are they not instead expressions of the very concept just observed in Kant, denoting a

¹⁹ Following this observation, McLaughlin will argue that the quote bears witness to a “political humanism” in the conclusion of the book (ibid., p. 182).

²⁰ Written separately from the main body and published postmortem.

²¹ For another example of this use of the term, see Marx 1981b, p. 361: “Wir sagen also nicht mit Bauer den Juden: Ihr könnt nicht politisch emanzipiert werden, ohne euch radikal vom Judentum zu emanzipieren.”

²² From the earlier “*Einer radikalen deutschen Revolution scheint indessen eine Hauptschwierigkeit entgegenzustehen*,” (Marx 1981a, p. 386, my emphasis).

profound, mobile negativity? The German revolution corrupts and perverts its French predecessor, releasing the latter's established rules in favor of adaptability to the specific pre-1848 conditions of the Prussian state. The chains and needs in question are those that, per the famous phrase from the Manifesto mentioned earlier, the proletariat has "nothing to lose but." Like Kant's evil, they can seemingly be annihilated and self-subverted, as they are only shaped by their united opposite, the class of bourgeois society.

Still, one cannot help but note the stark difference between Kant's operation and Marx's "grasping the matter by its roots," which must be explained through interim between the two. Hegel did not grace us with his own conception of radicality or radicalization, but his interpreter for the 21st century, Slavoj Žižek, did:

Hegelian sublation (*Aufhebung*) or negation of negation: in it, radical change (negation) overlaps with the pure repetition of the same. (Žižek 2012, p. 483)

My characterization runs both in complete agreement and exactly counter to this. Radicalization or radical change is, arguably, already negation and pure repetition; Evil becomes radicalized for Kant in its negation of the good, but equally in its persistence. With Hegel, we could term chemism as a "radical mechanism," just as we could every determination, category, and concept in the *Logic* as "radical Being." But we must also recognize that such an account, strictly limited to Kant, is equally incomplete in capturing Hegel's dialectics as we have come to read them today. Žižek actually notes the very missing dimension right after:

The New emerges when, instead of a process just "naturally" evolving in its flow of generation and corruption, this flow becomes stuck, an element (a gesture) is fixed, persists, repeats itself, and thus perturbs the "natural" flux of (de)composition. (Ibid.)

There is, at the end of the day, no conception of *this* New in *On Radical Evil*. Evil is radicalized, threatens to become unrecognizable, and then

Kant gives up his pursuit.²³ What Schelling realized (and Hegel systematized) is that in order to *rigorously think through*, in the spirit of Kant, the radicalization of any concept, it must ultimately entail the radicalization of *thinking itself*. Thought itself seeks to become corrupted, to infect and adapt. Marx heeds this advice and fully embraces the New in all quotes cited above. The New of the radical revolution is termed “communism” and the New of the radical chains and needs the “proletariat.” *On Radical Evil* remains crucial in understanding this dimension, even though its author ultimately backs away from its outcome. Kant ends up as modernity’s first *thinker of the radical*, even though he ultimately declined to become a *radical thinker*.

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²³ As argued above, this is more likely already because of the “flow of generation and corruption,” rather than a direct threat of anything “new,” but the critique still stands.

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