

## Evil, Freedom and Responsibility: An essay on Kant's Moral Philosophy *Joaquim Siles i Borràs*

The notion of evil has become common currency in political speeches, newspaper articles and everyday discussions. Nonetheless, this is not a new debate. The question of evil has haunted philosophers for centuries. Questions such as 'why do human beings commit evil acts?' or 'how does evil happen?' are some of the questions that philosophers have been asking for a long time. Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher from the XVIII Century, dedicated much time to thinking some of those questions through. Kant's moral philosophy is usually introduced as made up of duty and law, but, as this essay will show, it is also about evil and responsibility.

The present essay attempts to give a brief account of Kant's thoughts on evil, and the necessary relationship that such a notion maintains with the questions of freedom and responsibility. The aim of this discussion will be to show that Kant's moral philosophy sees morality as the most original dimension of the human being, and how, consequently, a philosophical understanding of what it is to be a human being requires an exploration of this moral dimension. For Kant, evil is not a question of religion and of the divine, but of reason and of the human.

### *Evil and the Question of Freedom*

In 1792 Kant wrote an essay called 'On The Radical Evil in Human Nature'.<sup>1</sup> The first remarks on evil in this essay are fundamental. He says: 'we call a human being evil [...] not because he performs actions that are evil (contrary to law), but because these are so constituted that they allow the inference of evil maxims in him'.<sup>2</sup> In other words, there are what Kant calls evil maxims underlying evil acts, and what makes a human being evil is our choice of evil maxims or principles; i.e., one is not evil because he or she performs evil acts, but because one chooses evil maxims. What Kant seems to be saying with this argument is that evil is not innate in human beings as a species, and that, instead, it is we who bring it on ourselves by choosing evil maxims, which, in their turn and by default, lead us to commit evil acts. But whilst Kant maintains that evil is not innate in human nature, at the same time he suggests that we do have a natural or innate disposition towards the adoption of maxims (good or evil) that guide our actions. It is in human nature to choose maxims or principles before acting, rather than simply acting without awareness of what and why we are doing what we are doing.

To choose maxims prior to acting means that we decide first and then act according to our decisions. Nonetheless, and although it is in our nature to choose and adopt maxims, whatever maxim we choose depends entirely on our freedom. Kant, therefore, posits evil with our decisions because they are free, instead of with our acts which are the result of such decisions. Freedom is, then, the exercise whereby we constantly adopt moral maxims through which we act and live our lives. It is in the free exercise of adopting evil maxims (rather than good moral ones) that evil comes about. Evil, in other words, is the result of our own freedom. But how and why do we choose evil maxims rather than always choosing 'good moral maxims'?

Even though Kant argues that it would be impossible to try to explain why our freedom makes us choose good or evil maxims, he gives an account of how we choose evil over good and how evil comes about.<sup>3</sup> Kant begins this discussion by saying that there is ‘an original predisposition to good in human nature’.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, and at the same time, he also says that human beings have a ‘propensity to evil’.<sup>5</sup> How can we have both, and what is the difference between predisposition and propensity? We shall deal first with the question of the predisposition to good.

Kant thinks that our natural predisposition to the good has three levels. The first level belongs with the dimension of what Kant calls the ‘animality’ of the human being; i.e., the human being as a physiological living being.<sup>6</sup> In this physiological sphere, we have a propensity to selfpreservation, to propagation of the human species (through the sexual drive), and to live in community with other human beings through our social drive. Kant calls the predisposition to animality a ‘mechanical inclination’ to our physiological needs, or a ‘self-love’ (for myself, my species or my family), which, insofar as it is mechanical or merely instinctive, does not require reason.<sup>7</sup> Whilst Kant stresses that the non-rational nature of these mechanical inclinations does not necessarily mean that they are negative, he says that such inclinations can be perverted and lead to ‘the bestial vices of gluttony, lust and wild lawlessness (in relation to other human beings)’.<sup>8</sup>

The second level of predisposition is a predisposition towards ‘humanity’, this being ‘an inclination to gain equal worth in the opinion of others’ by means of comparing ourselves to others.<sup>9</sup> We could understand this as a socio-political predisposition to gain respect from others and even a respectable position in society in relation to others. Even though reason is a requirement for a socio-political life (for we need to reason in order to compare ourselves to others), here reason can be at the service of our socio-political purposes. As a result, Kant emphasises that the predisposition to humanity may also lead to ‘unjust desires’ such as jealousy, rivalry and even hostility to other human beings, and, in extreme cases, can even lead to ‘diabolical vices’ such as envy or joy in others’ misfortunes.<sup>10</sup> But if these two predispositions in our physiological and socio-political dimensions of the human being are good in themselves, as Kant seems to be arguing, what makes them become vices?

The answer to this question seems to reside in the third dimension of the human being; i.e., the predisposition to what Kant calls ‘personality’.<sup>11</sup> This is the human predisposition to respect what is morally good or what Kant calls ‘the moral law’ (I shall return to this later). Personality is the level at which the human being is not a mere physiological and socio-political being, but a moral being. The human being is not only a being that has an instinct to physiological and social self-preservation and that can use its rational faculty strategically to gain respect and equality in society, but is also a moral human being that has the predisposition towards the acceptance of the moral law. The acceptance of the moral law also implies speaking of reason, with reason now being an end in itself rather than as a means to acquire our social aims (as it could be the case in the predisposition to humanity). What this means is that human beings do not only act according to their own interests and in order to reach their individual and social aims. Furthermore, they can also choose to act rationally, regardless of whether the outcome suits their interests or not. When the human being

chooses to act rationally, then he or she is acting according to what they ought to do, according to their moral duty.

To posit the predisposition to respect the moral law at the highest of the three levels is not to say that we must obliterate our predispositions to animality and humanity (because they could lead us to horrible vices) in favour of our moral predisposition. The human aim is not to live solely on a moral pedestal. Kant is clear about this point when he emphasises that: 'all these predispositions in the human being [...] are predispositions to the good'.<sup>12</sup> In fact, and even though we can use our predispositions to animality and humanity 'inappropriately', these predispositions cannot be 'eradicated' for a human being is the combination of the three predispositions and would not be a human being without the three.<sup>13</sup> Our physiological instincts to self-preservation and our political interests are not negative per se, but they 'demand compliance with the moral law'.<sup>14</sup> In other words, the source of evil does not reside in the fact that we, as humans beings, have animal and socio-political needs, but in the priority we grant to such needs and inclinations in detriment of the moral law. What Kant is saying here is that our morality, our predisposition to respect the morally good, must guide our predispositions to animality and humanity. When this is not the case, when we push the moral law into second place, and choose instead to act according to our physiological inclinations and socio-political interests, then we are choosing evil maxims and our inclinations turn into diabolical vices.

Kant's argument so far shows that we can only speak of evil within the framework of freedom. The freedom of my will resides in the fact that I may choose to obey the moral law in the same way that I may choose evil maxims and let myself be driven by my individual, social or political interests. Nonetheless, such an original freedom also means that one is equally aware of the morally good and the morally bad and that we are aware that we are acting in accordance with the moral law or not. This implacable freedom is what makes the human being be a moral being. The question of freedom, thus, occupies a key role in Kant's moral philosophy. If we are to speak of evil at all, and if to act morally means anything at all, this is because the human being is free. Evil is evil because I am free to choose it. If I did not have the capacity to choose to act according to my interests and if I were only able to act according to the moral law, then I would not be free, I would not be a moral being and the moral law would mean absolutely nothing.

### *The Moral Law*

But what does Kant understand by the moral law and what does it mean to obey it? Simply put we can say that Kant understands a moral law to be an a priori rational maxim, rather than what we could call an a posteriori maxim deduced from sensible experience.<sup>15</sup> When I formulate a maxim that is going to guide my acts, this can be either an a priori rational maxim that is to be universally valid for all human beings at any time or a subjective maxim derived from experience. If it is subjective and derived only from experience, then it will be a relative maxim, and, therefore, a maxim that is to be obeyed only on certain occasions. We can think of the maxim that says that it is permitted to kill on certain occasions. When this is the case, such a maxim cannot be considered a moral law, because it is not universally valid for all human beings in every place and time. When a maxim is only applicable to the one or ones who have formulated it or to everyone but only on certain occasions, then we can

say that the maxim is not properly rational, for even though we have to employ reason in order to formulate it, reason is here a means to an end. In this case, we would be formulating a maxim that guarantees us our interests; we would be using reason in order to justify killing. When this is the case, we cannot speak of laws but only of maxims, or, more precisely, evil maxims. So, what is the requirement for a maxim to become a law, and, thus, a moral law?

Even though all moral laws emerge from a maxim formulated by a subject, the moral law is not solely deduced from my own experience, but is reasoned on behalf of all human beings. What is formulated, is formulated bearing in mind all human beings ever to exist: the ones I know, the ones I do not know and the ones I will never know. This is the difference between formulating maxims and formulating laws. The formulation of a law is the formulation of a maxim that I wish to be applicable to everyone at any time. Kant says that whenever we make a moral decision and we choose a maxim that is to guide our actions, 'I ought never to act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law'.<sup>16</sup> In other words, every time I choose a maxim I should measure the maxim I am choosing not according to whether it fits my purposes and avoids certain undesirable consequences, but according to its universality; i.e., as if it would have to be followed by all human beings at any time. This is what makes a maxim a law, and therefore moral. A maxim is a law when it is universally valid, and it is moral because it is not formulated with regards to ends but because it is rationally good in itself. Thus, under no circumstance can I morally formulate a law that says that I can kill in such and such a case. If I decide to kill in certain circumstances, then I am formulating a maxim that serves my purposes here and now, rather than formulating a moral law. When this is the case, and according to Kant's argument, I am an evil human being.

Kant understands the moral law to be a command or what he calls a 'categorical imperative' that we must follow because it is our moral duty to act according to what is good for the whole of humanity.<sup>17</sup> As Kant says, 'act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law'.<sup>18</sup> But to speak of the moral law in terms of a command that one must obey does not imply the loss of our freedom. To obey the moral law is not a mere act of obedience in which I follow a command emptily. Far from it, every time I choose to obey the moral law for duty's sake I am formulating the law myself or, in other words, I am legislating it. The moral law is not just inscribed in me before I can think but, on the contrary, is formulated as a result of my autonomous reasoning and my freedom. The human subject legislates every time she or he chooses. To obey means here to legislate a law for the whole of humanity.

### *Moral and Radical Evil*

Now that we have dealt with the questions of the predisposition to the good, freedom and the moral law, we can return to the question of evil. According to Kant's argument, I either act in accordance with the moral law (what is good for the whole of humanity), and I do so because it is my moral duty towards all other human beings, or I subordinate the moral law and what is universally good to my own interests (whether these are aims, ambitions or fears). It is for this reason that the question of evil is important for Kant. For every time I choose not to obey the moral law and I obey instead an evil maxim, I am perpetrating evil against the whole of humanity. By

adopting an evil maxim that says that I can kill in a particular situation, I am prescribing that it is good to kill on such occasions and, therefore, that to kill can be good and that, as such, we ought to do it. What I am therefore doing is condemning the whole of humanity to an evil principle. Evil, as we said at the beginning, does not reside in our acts but in the immoral maxims that we choose as principles on which our actions are grounded. This is why Kant says that evil is always 'moral evil'.<sup>19</sup>

It is at this very moment of the argument that Kant speaks of moral evil as 'the propensity of the power of choice [freedom] to maxims that subordinate the incentives of the moral law to others (not moral ones)'.<sup>20</sup> Whilst Kant believes that we have an original predisposition to the good (as we have seen above), at the same time he thinks that we have a propensity to evil. This propensity is the propensity to moral evil, and it consists in the free subversion of the moral law for other inclinations, aims or interests. Even in cases in which the subversion might appear to be necessary and even in line with what is considered to be legal, the subversion of the moral law leads to evil in a moral sense. Thus, we can imagine a case in which my country asks me to join the army. It would be my legal obligation to comply with and obey the state law. Simultaneously, I am aware that to obey such a legal requirement would contravene the moral law, for it is universally good that I should not kill under any circumstance, and therefore I should not go to the army to learn to kill. It is clear that, according to Kant's moral philosophy, we ought to say 'no' and stick with the moral law, regardless of any other reason or any punishment the state may threaten us with. Failure to stick with the moral law would make us evil human beings. To comply with the state law in this specific case would mean to renounce our moral obligation to the whole of humanity, no matter what reason we give. To put the whole of humanity in second place with regard to our own interests means, according to Kant's position, to commit evil against the whole of humanity.

It is because of this notion of the subordination of the moral law for our own interests that Kant says that moral evil is always 'radical evil'.<sup>21</sup> According to the argument followed here, the human being is constantly located at a junction whereby one must take moral decisions on behalf of the whole of humanity. This decision is always either-or and there seems to be no room for any middle ground. One could think now of the following situation. Confronted with the legal obligation of having to join the army, one could say 'no' to the legal demands (and thus comply with the moral law), but then choose the moral law not for its own sake (because it is good for the whole of humanity) but because going to the army would interrupt one's career or personal interests. In such a case, and even though one's personal interests coincide with the moral law, this decision is not morally better than simply joining the army against the command of the moral law. On the contrary, it would be equally evil.

For in both cases we are subordinating the moral law to our own interests. The human being making such a decision would be 'evil because he [or she] reverses the moral order of his [or her] incentives in incorporating them into his [or her] maxims'.<sup>22</sup> In other words, moral evil is always radical because what we do when subordinating the moral law to our own particular interests is to eradicate the moral law from the maxims that guide our actions.<sup>23</sup> The eradication of the moral law signifies for Kant that one freely 'corrupts the [moral] ground of all maxims' by uprooting the moral ground from the maxims that make us act one way or another.<sup>24</sup> The result of this is that our actions are left to be guided by naked interests. Moral evil is always radical

evil, not because of the high degree of suffering that it brings, but because we make it the root of our maxims and, consequently, of our actions.

### *Responsibility and the Moral Dimension of the Human Being*

Kant's moral philosophy does not seem to leave us with any advice that would help us to live an easy life. Either we choose the moral law and, therefore, the whole of humanity, or we put our well-being above the whole of humanity and choose evil. Against this, one could argue that Kant's position is naïve, given that it is difficult to imagine a human being that is not or that has never been evil. At some point or other we are bound to disobey our reason and commit ourselves to our own interests, either due to the fact that we put our survival before everything and everybody else, or due to the interests of our whole nation or culture. Kant would not deny that. In fact, this is why he emphasises that even though we have a predisposition to the good, we also have a propensity to evil. On the one hand, evil is not innate in the human being, on the other hand we seem destined to bring evil on ourselves at some point in our lives. Nonetheless, this does not imply that evil is simply part of the human condition and, therefore, we must accept it as it is. This is an important point. To speak of the human propensity to evil does not mean to postulate that since we cannot avoid bringing evil upon ourselves, then our responsibility is only a responsibility 'in theory' and that it is justifiable to take some time off from our moral duties. Propensity to evil is not a pretext that authorises us to choose evil maxims when we wish, and thereby subvert the moral law for our inclinations, interests or fears. Far from it, propensity to evil (however unavoidable it might be for us human beings) is precisely what situates us at a moral junction every time we must choose. Or, in other words, propensity to evil shows the depth of the human responsibility that Kant wants to emphasise. Without such a propensity, human freedom and responsibility would not have any depth. The avoidance of evil is ultimately in everyone's hands every time we have to make a moral decision that concerns the whole of humanity, and that is the responsibility that Kant wants every human being to face. Even though for Kant we have a propensity to evil, the commitment to evil is not justifiable in any case.

Whilst we must admit that this argument has a resonance with Christian belief, Kant's moral philosophy cannot be restricted within the limits of religion and god. Kant's notion of the propensity to evil does not simply assert the impotence of the human being and the ultimate need of god. By acknowledging that human beings cannot avoid bringing evil upon themselves, Kant is not suggesting that it is therefore necessary to put our trust in god in order to avoid evil. On the contrary, Kant aims to constrain religion within the boundaries of reason, of human freedom and, above all, of human responsibility towards the moral law and the whole of humanity. As we have seen in this essay, the human being is a moral human being, and it is moral insofar as it is a wholly free being that has the capacity to choose rationally and autonomously. In other words, god cannot tell us what to choose, what is good or what is bad, for if that were the case then the human being could not be considered an autonomous rational being and, therefore, a wholly free moral being.

The notion of deep responsibility for the whole of humanity that Kant wants us to face cannot be reduced, however, to a mere question of 'good conscience'. One does not say 'no' to the legal demand of joining the army just because we aim to be satisfied with ourselves or because we simply want to avoid a bad conscience. If one chooses

depending on self-satisfaction then this decision is not taken according to the moral law and what is good for the whole of humanity but only according to the consequence of the decision, and, therefore, according to what is good for ourselves. In such a case, one is still subverting the moral law for one's inclinations towards one's own individual preservation, and therefore, and following Kant's argument, one is still an evil human being.

This argument emphasises the rigour that Kant assigns to the moral dimension of the human being. This moral rigour resides not just in human freedom, but in the unconditional responsibility that every human being holds with every single moral decision. Every moral decision belongs to every one of us, and must be conditioned by absolutely nothing or nobody else. Emil Fackenheim captures this idea beautifully when he writes with regards to this moment in Kant's moral philosophy: 'Nothing in heaven or earth is more important than the man – any man – makes himself good or bad. And whenever a man makes such a decision, the universe, so to speak, holds its breath'.<sup>25</sup> All our moral decisions are of the highest importance. It is as if the future of the whole of humanity depended on every one of us and on every one of our moral decisions. What is at stake in Kant's discussion on evil is the notion of the human condition and the ethical value of human life in all its moral radicalness. Kant's moral argument could be read as an attempt to make us think morality as the ultimate and deepest realm of the human being; as that which makes us fully human. This deepest realm is life at a constant moral junction in which every one of us must freely choose what we ought to do. To be a human being is, however, not an easy matter for Kant, for every time we make a moral choice, the future of the whole of humanity is held in suspense, awaiting our decision. Such is the depth of the moral dimension of the human being according to Kant.

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<sup>1</sup> Immanuel Kant (1792) 'Of the Radical Evil in human Nature', published in: *Religion within the Boundaries Of Mere Reason and other writings* (Cambridge, translated by Allen Wood and George Di Giovanni, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). This text will be referred to as Religion, followed by the page of the English translation.

<sup>2</sup> Religion, p. 46.

<sup>3</sup> See Religion, p. 47 footnote. Kant's argument here seems to be that if we could give an account of why our freedom makes us choose good or evil, then freedom would not be the free power of choice, and, instead, we would be saying that freedom is determined by a previous ground. Were such the case, freedom would not be a free power but a ground conditioned by a deeper ground. See Religion, p. 47 footnote.

<sup>4</sup> Religion, p. 50

<sup>5</sup> Religion, p. 52

<sup>6</sup> Religion, p. 50-51

<sup>7</sup> Religion, p. 51

<sup>8</sup> Religion, p. 51

<sup>9</sup> Religion, p. 51

<sup>10</sup> Religion, p. 51

<sup>11</sup> Religion, p. 52

<sup>12</sup> Religion, p. 52

<sup>13</sup> Religion, p. 52

<sup>14</sup> Religion, p. 52

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<sup>15</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Moral Law. Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*. Translated by H.J. Paton. (London: Routledge, 1991) p65-66. This text will be referred to as Groundwork, followed by the page number of the English translation.

<sup>16</sup> Groundwork, p. 67

<sup>17</sup> Groundwork, p. 68

<sup>18</sup> Groundwork, p. 84

<sup>19</sup> Religion, p. 54

<sup>20</sup> Religion, p. 54

<sup>21</sup> Religion, p. 56, p. 59

<sup>22</sup> Religion, p. 59

<sup>23</sup> We must bear in mind that Kant is using the term 'radical' in a literal sense. The term radical comes from the Latin 'radix radice', which translates into English as 'root' or 'root of roots'. Evil, for Kant, would always have to be radical insofar as it eradicates the moral root of our actions and subverts it for evil maxims.

<sup>24</sup> Religion, p. 59

<sup>25</sup> Emil L. Fackenheim, 'Kant and Radical Evil': *University of Toronto Quarterly*, volume XXIII (1953-4), p. 353