

IMMANUEL KANT'S IDEA OF RADICAL EVIL AS A SYSTEMATIC AND TERMINOLOGICAL PROBLEM

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ABSTRACT

The paper investigates the systematic connection between Kantian concept of radical evil and radical indeterministic idea of freedom. According to the presented thesis the systematically relevant interpretation of the radical evil concept requires considering not only philosophical ideas Kant's but also the historic background in which they were formulated. Particularly the specific situation of German philosophic terminology in the 17th and early 18th Century will be acknowledged as one of the most significant factors influencing the development of the radical evil concept. For the sake of methodological precision of the presented analysis, the differentiation between thick and thin concept of evil will be introduced. **Keywords:** Arendt; Freedom; Indeterminism; Kant; Molinism; Radical evil; Thick and thin concept of evil

The goal of the enquiry is to present some remarks concerning Kant's concept of radical evil, which may contribute to the improved understanding of its role in Kantian philosophic system. To begin, one methodological clarification is to be made: The research perspective of the presented analysis differs from the standard inquiries of radical evil conception. Namely, the idea of radical evil will be interpreted not only within the systematic frames of Kantian philosophy, but additionally some crucial facts concerning the history of German philosophy in the 17th and early 18th Century will be considered. More specifically: the process of the development of German philosophical terminology will be acknowledged as a factor, that significantly influenced the formulation of Kantian views. As one may see, some information can be found that shed a new light on the problem of correct interpretation of the radical evil concept.

The following inquiry will be presented in four following steps:

1. First, some common interpretation of the concept of radical evil will be shown as well as the most popular cliché, which seems to result from it.
2. Second, the systematic connection between Kantian idea of radical evil and the radical indeterministic view of human liberty will be presented.

3. In the third step it will be explained, why this affinity is often – if not almost always – overseen by the interpreters of Kant's philosophy. In order to do so, the differentiation between thick and thin concept of evil will be introduced. According to my thesis the Kantian idea of radical evil is falsely interpreted as thick concept of evil whereas it much more corresponds with its thin concept.

4. In the last step the main reasons of the presented misunderstandings will be clarified. Moreover, it will be shown, how they can be overcome by taking into account the genealogy of the concept of radical evil. In the concluding remarks it will be shown, what impact on the interpretation of Kant's idea of radical evil has the adoption of the proposed research perspective.

The Radical Evil and its cliché

It is probably to great extent due to Hannah Arendt's interpretation of radical evil that this Kantian idea is nowadays often connected with an extraordinary evil, being so overwhelming that one even cannot find proper words to express it in a relevant way.

In "The Origins of Totalitarianism" Arendt says the following:

It is inherent in our entire philosophic tradition that we cannot conceive of a "radical evil", and this is true both for Christian theology, which conceded even to the Devil himself a celestial origin, as well as for Kant, the only philosopher who, in the word he coined for it, at least must have suspected the existence of this evil even though he immediately rationalized it in the concept of a "perverted ill will" that could be explained by comprehensible motives. (ARENDR, 1968, 459)

Regarding the quoted passage, one may easily see that Arendt emphasizes the superlative aspect of the conception of radical evil. She is convinced that, even if Kant managed to discuss the idea of radical evil in a productive way, he must have been aware of the fact, that evil is a phenomenon, which clarification is overwhelming for our rationality. Radical evil is not regular, but extraordinary malice.

Already the fact, that Arendt discussed the idea of radical evil in the context of reflection concerning crimes of the totalitarian systems in the 20th Century, suggests that radical evil must be more than what one would usually call "evil". In the Preface to "The Origins of Totalitarianism" Arendt directly suggests the connection between the extraordinary character of evil

and the Kantian concept of radical evil, which she describes with a predicate "absolute".

She says the following:

And if it is true that in the final stages of totalitarianism an absolute evil appears (absolute because it can no longer be deduced from humanly comprehensible motives), it is also true that without it we might never have known the truly radical nature of Evil. (ARENDDT, 2018, VIII-IX)

It is not my intention to claim, that Hannah Arendt was profoundly wrong in her understanding of the radical evil concept, but doubtlessly her interpretation of this idea contributed to the establishment of a cliché concerning Kantian understanding of radical evil. According to this cliché, "radical evil" may be used as a term designating only – or mostly – acts of spectacular and unusual cruelty both in qualitative and quantitative sense. In fact, – as we may see – according to Kant's understanding, radical evil does not have to be spectacular or unusual at all.

In order to figure out, what Kant does mean as radical evil, one should primarily look at what Kant himself was saying about it. In "The Religion within the Borders of Mere Reason" Kant says the following:

The depravity of human nature is [...] not to be named *malice*, if we take this word in the strict sense, namely as a disposition (a subjective *principle* of maxims) to incorporate evil *qua* evil for incentive into one's maxim (since this is *diabolical*), but should rather be named perversity of the heart, and this heart is then called evil because of what results. An evil heart can coexist with a will which in abstract is good. Its origin is the frailty of human nature, in not being strong enough to comply with its adopted principles, coupled with its dishonesty in not screening the incentives (even those of well-intentioned actions) in accordance with the moral guide, and hence it the end, if it comes to this, in seeing only to the conformity of these incentives to the law, not to whether they have been derived from the latter itself, i.e. from it as a sole incentive. Now, even though a lawless action and a propensity to such contrariety, i.e. *vice*, do not always originate from it, the attitude of mind that construes the absence of vice as already being conformity of the *disposition* to the law of duty (i.e. as *virtue*) is nonetheless itself to be named a radical perversity in the human heart (for in this case no attention at all is given

to incentives in the maxim but only to compliance to the letter of the law. (KANT, 2018, 60)

One of the most important terms in the quoted passage is the term „heart“. This term is not used in this context as a stylistic device, but rather as a reference to a theological technical term, which was a standard term in the theological discourses of the 17th century. Kant does explain himself what does he understand as a „heart“ as he relates to the idea of so called „change of heart“.²

He introduced this concept in his system in the following way:

(...) the transformation of the disposition of an evil human being to the disposition of a good human being is to be posited in the change of the supreme inner ground of the adoption of all the human being's maxims in accordance with the ethical law, so far as this new ground (the new heart) is itself now unchangeable. (KANT, 2018,71)

As one may see, the term “heart” has got a philosophic significance. According to Kant the heart means „the inner ground of the adoption of maxims“ or the “subjective first ground of maxims” (KANT, 2018,71). Therefore, the radical evil – namely the perversity in the heart – is nothing else, but the ability of individuals, to adopt volitionally and consciously such maxims, which do not correspond with the principles of the moral law.

Radical Evil as Freedom

My thesis is the following: The idea of radical evil in Kant's philosophy fulfils exactly the systematic criteria of the early modern definition of the radical indeterministic freedom of the will. Therefore the predicate „radically evil“ in Kant's philosophy means the same as „free“. The author of the radically indeterministic definition of freedom I am referring to was Luis de Molina (1535-1600) – the Jesuit thinker, who was one of the prominent represents of Spanish late scholastic thought and member of School of Salamanca. Molina is known as the philosopher, who introduced for the first time the radical indeterministic notion of human liberty, which is still actual in the debates concerning the possibility of freedom of will.³

In his treatise entitled “Concordia liberi arbitrii cum gratiae donis published” in 1588 Molina proposed the following understanding of a free agent:

Illud agens liberum dicitur quod positis omnibus requisitis ad agendum potest agere et non agere aut ita agere unum ut contrarium etiam agere possit. (MOLINA, 1953, 14)

According to such understanding of free subject, a subject is free, when – if all the criteria to perform a concrete action are fulfilled – can perform this particular action, but also can spontaneously decide to perform an alternative action or not to act at all.⁴ Or in other words: the free agent has got a choice.

There are some important consequences of adopting the molinistic criteria of free actions. It is significant, that an individual is acting freely, when it is performing its actions willingly and not under compulsion. At the same time, it is of stress, that it may act freely, but it must not be the case. Therefore, being a free agent does not imply performing free actions constantly. It is possible that a free agent performs such actions only from time to time or even that it does not perform them at all. Important is the ability to act freely and not such actual acting.

In the 16 and 17th Century the molinistic concept of freedom was a standard understanding of human liberty. Its reception and comments concerning it can be found in the writings of Kant's predecessors, for example Christian Wolff, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, etc. In most philosophic systems from that time the concept of freedom was systematically connected with the reflection on God's foreknowledge, the notion of metaphysical modalities, and the problem of evil. As philosophy of Kant emerged in this specific intellectual context, which was strongly influenced by scholastic views, it is legitimate to use the molinistic scope in order to evaluate Kant's views on freedom too. Interesting observation concerning Kantian reception of molinism provided Wolfgang Earlt in his analysis entitled "Luedwig Molina and Kant's Libertarian Compatibilism" (EARTL, 2014). Earlt investigated Kantian idea of freedom comparing it to Luis de Molinas radical indeterminism in order to prove the systematic compatibility of Kantian philosophy and molinistic radical indeterministic notion of freedom. However, Earlt considered also some further aspects of the systems of both philosophers, just like the theory of God's foreknowledge and metaphysical modalities. In the following analysis I will diminish the scope of my investigation and will focus primarily on the idea of freedom from the perspective of reflexion concerning human actions and theory of internal motivation. The theological elements, which can be legitimately involved in the investigation will not be discussed thoroughly.

Considering two facts opens the new perspective to interpret the concept of radical evil. First: according to Kant any individual can respect the moral law, and second: radical evil is an ability of any individual to adopt maxims contradicting with the moral law, therefore one may see, that according to Kant every individual is able to both either respecting or disrespecting the moral law at the same time. From the molinistic point of view, if the agent can at the same time perform an action and to perform an alternative action then he is free. To summarize one can say that the term „radical evil“ in Kant's philosophy relates to the ability of individuals to act against the causal mechanisms of moral motivation, which is he ability characterizing free agents.

Radical Evil - thick or thin concept?

Regarding the interpretation of the concept of „radical evil“ presented above, one may ask a question, if such reducing the idea of radical evil to human liberty in the libertarian incompatibilistic sense does not lead to missing some important aspect of the axiological qualification of the voluntary acts against the moral law. Namely, it does not seem to be legitimate to say that „evil“ actions are nothing more but an alternative to morally right actions. A systematic tool, that may be helpful in avoiding confusion in this matter is the differentiation between so called thick and thin concept of evil. Generally one could say that the term „evil“ is being used in a thick sense when it is understood both in descriptive and normative way, whereas it is being used as a thin concept when it is used only in a normative way. Let us refer to some remarks presented lately by Michael Wilby in his article „The thin moral concept of evil“.

EVIL is a thick moral concept. A moral concept is thick if it has a substantial degree of both evaluative and descriptive content, and it is thin if it has evaluative, but no (or very little) descriptive content. Concepts such as COURAGEOUS, MEAN, SELFISH and KIND are thick concepts – they tell us something factual about the action or about the psychology or motivation of the person carrying out the action; while concepts such as RIGHT, WRONG, GOOD and BAD are thin concepts – they tell us comparatively little, if anything at all, about the nature of the action or about the psychology or motivation of the person carrying out the action; they are almost wholly evaluative. (WILBY, 2022, 46)

Regarding the presented differentiation between thick and thin moral concepts, it is to see, that radical evil is a thick concept, since it combines both evaluative and descriptive perspective.

Taking into account the general intuitions concerning the differentiation between thick and thin concepts can help to understand the difficulties with the proper evaluation of the idea of „radical evil“. The problem with the analysis of the Kantian conception of radical evil is that it contains the term „evil“, which suggests that it should be situated in the moral dimension. At the same, one can treat the idea of radical evil from the perspective of the theory of motivation, and reflection on human freedom. Those two angles must be differentiated, but usually they are not. For that reason, it may not seem to be a proper way to discuss the radical evil only as a matter of human freedom, that is from the perspective of the reflection on human motivation. It seems to lead to the omittance of the normative aspect of evil. On the other hand, as one could see, Kant himself made the attempt – as Hannah Arendt said – to rationalize the radical evil and to discuss it in the context of reflection concerning the motivational mechanisms of rational agents. And, as we could see, understood in this way, radical evil is to be identified with the ability of individuals to perform free actions.

Regarding such observations, there arises a problem, that must be resolved, namely: If radical evil relates to the idea of freedom, why did Kant not call it by its very name saying that radical evil actions were just free actions. In the context of his moral philosophy such solution does not seem to be a problem: Kantian ethics provides quite exact criteria of differentiation between good and evil. Talking about radical evil even seems to bring some confusion as it may suggest that radical evil is the worst kind of evil, which was already presented in the first step of his examination. One may ask then, for what reason did Kant decide to adopt the term „radical evil“ to talk about freedom?

The Genealogy of the Concept

The search for the solution of this problem must take place on two levels. The first one is the level of the systematic implications of the terminology adopted by Kant in his whole philosophic system. On this level one can find direct reasons for Kant not to identify radical evil with freedom. Kant cannot call evil actions performed by an individual consciously, willingly and under no compulsion against the moral law as free, since the term freedom had already a different, specific meaning in his philosophy.⁵ There are various aspects of freedom that are important, but in the

discussed context the most relevant understanding of freedom would be that individual's freedom is the ability to plan, govern and perform actions based on rational reflection and not because of desire. The additional factors that exclude the possibility of free actions are for example compulsion or weakness of will. Therefore, one can say that according to Kantian terminology free decisions and actions are those, that are made and performed from respect to the moral law. Free actions are thus morally right actions.

It is easy to see, that it is exactly the opposite of what turns out, when one adopts the molinistic criteria of freedom. From the molinistic perspective both morally right and morally wrong actions can be qualified as free. Even if in Kantian system the morally wrong actions do fulfil the systematic criteria of being acknowledged as free, one cannot call them simply like that, because the term „free“ is being limited to actions which are morally right. It is however significant, that Kant is aware of the connection between evil and freedom understood in the molinistic way, since mentions himself the aspect of free choice when he talks about the motivational mechanisms behind the evil actions.

Kant says the following:

(...) the depravity (*vitiositas, pravitas*) or, if one prefers, the corruption (*corruptio*) of the human heart is the propensity of the power of choice to maxims that subordinate the incentives of the moral law to others (not moral ones). It can also be called the *perversity (perversitas)* of the human heart, for it reverses the ethical order as regards the incentives as a *free* power of choice; and although with this reversal there can still be legally good (*legale*) actions, yet the mind's attitude is thereby corrupted as its root (so far as the moral disposition is concerned), and hence the human being is designated as evil. (KANT, 2018, 54)

The impossibility to describe evil actions as free without limitation implies that one has to do with a terminological self-limitation of Kantian system. For the reason that the term „free“ was already reserved for the class of actions performed in accordance with the moral law, Kant could not use it in any other way without causing incoherence of his philosophy. And that was something he needed to avoid, if his goal was to construct the coherent system of thoughts.

The second level, on which one can find a possible answer to the mentioned question, why radical evil cannot be identified with freedom in Kant's terminology, relates to the genealogy of this concept as well as the

situation of German philosophic terminology in the 17th and early 18th Century. Taking into account the history of the evolution of German philosophic terminology helps to find an indirect answer to the question, why did Kant need to specify the meaning of the term „freedom” to morally right actions only.

In systematic inquiries concerning Kant`s philosophy it is often omitted, what role did a language play for Kant. Mostly the terminological solutions adopted by Kant are being accepted by Kant`s interpreters without considering, why did Kant decide to use some concrete terms to express his thoughts. Kant did not mention this issue himself, however the language was doubtlessly a crucial matter for him. The reason was pragmatic – namely, Kant needed to construct the philosophic language in which he formulated his thoughts by himself. One should not forget the fact, that the German philosophic nomenclature started to exist less than 70 years before Kant wrote his treatises. It is assumed that the first thinkers, who held lectures and published in German language are Christian Thomasius (1655-1728) and Christian Wolff (1679-1754). By considering this fact one may easily imagine the linguistic challenge that Kant needed to face while formulating his ideas. Formulating such innovative philosophic ideas as those Kant`s in this specific linguistic context required both the invention of new terminology and adopting the old terms to new systematic context.

Concluding remarks

The presented investigation is not meant to be merely a comment on possible interpretation of Kantian concept of evil. There are especially two observations, which result from it, that may contribute to the enhancement of standards of studies concerning Kant`s philosophy – or at least, that should be reminded regularly in order to keep those standards on the actual level.

The first aspect refers to the cliché concerning radical evil concept, according to which, radical evil seems to be more than just regular act of voluntary disobedience against the moral law. By interpreting the radical evil of human nature as individual freedom in the molinistic sense one`s interpretation gets less susceptible to clichés like the one resulting from Hannah Arendt`s comments.⁶ Radical evil may be interpreted as a feature of a general human condition, which does not require any spectacular acts of insulting the moral principles, but may refer to everyday life voluntary acts against the moral law. The radicality of evil is therefore not to be identified with its absolute character, but much more with its very nature.

The radical evil is a motivational feature, which is rooted in human condition, and may reveal in most inconspicuous way.

The second aspect relates to the proper understanding of the Kantian philosophic language. Considering the historic context of the evolution of German philosophic terminology, in which Kant adopted his specific philosophic nomenclature, allows to treat his linguistic solutions as a part of philosophical terminology being still in progress. It does not mean that the Kantian philosophic terminology was not well considered, but rather that the linguistic solutions adopted by Kant cannot be deliberately adopted as accomplished and interpreted in reference to modern linguistic intuitions.⁷ Instead, the relevant understanding and interpretation of Kantian terms may require the analysis of its genealogy and etymological origin. Considering the linguistic challenge Kant had to face in order to express his innovative ideas, allows it, to evaluate the specific Kantian terms in a relevant way – which may differ from the linguistic intuitions of modern interpreters – and therefore to reduce the risk of misinterpretation.

Notas

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² It is significant, that Kant refers to the theological concept of Renewal (Wiedergeburt, Restoratio, etc.), which was standardly used by early modern protestant theologians in their investigations concerning the possibility of enhancement the spiritual condition of an individual. Renewal was meant as a restoration of positive features of the human nature primarily corrupted by Original Sin.

³ For the overview of current studies concerning Molina see for example: "Companion to Luis de Molina" edited by Alexander Aichele and Mathias Kaufmann, or monographies "Molinism: The Contemporary Debate" by Ken Perszyk and "Luis de Molina: The Life and Theology of the Founder of Middle Knowledge" by Kirk MacGregor.

⁴ Action is understood in a broad sense, not only as external but also as internal activities, like thinking.

⁵ For example, transcendental freedom, practical freedom, etc.

⁶ The term "radical" should not be interpreted according to the modern linguistic connotations, but to its etymological origin. "Radical" comes from the Latin word "radix", which stands for a "root".

⁷ As an example of such irrelevant interpretation of the meaning of Kantian terms one can treat the already mentioned term "heart". Despite its theological origin this term relates to the crucial aspects of Kantian theory of motivation. However, it is seldom analysed in this context by modern interpreters.

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Received/Recebido: 13/07/2023
Approved/Aprovado: 10/11/2023