the idea of evil

PETER DEWS

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Contents

List of Abbreviations

KSA XII   Friedrich Nietzsche, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, volume XII, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari

LPHI   G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction*, trans. H. B. Nisbet

LPR I   G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, volume I: *Introduction* and *The Concept of Religion*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, trans. R. F. Brown, P. C. Hodgson, and J. M. Stewart

LPR II   G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, volume II: *Determinate Religion*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, trans. R. F. Brown, P. C. Hodgson, and J. M. Stewart

LPR III   G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, volume III: *The Consummate Religion*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, trans. R. F. Brown, P. C. Hodgson, and J. M. Stewart

PhR   G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox

WW I   Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, volume I, trans. E. J. Payne

WW II   Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, volume II, trans. E. J. Payne

in memory of
François Châtelet (1925–95)
and Tony Manser (1924–95) –
for whom philosophy was custodian
of an undiminished world

Preface

As my friends and family know only too well, this book has been a long time coming. I must thank Richard Bernstein for planting the seed, by asking me to contribute to a Hannah Arendt Symposium while I was teaching at the New School for Social Research, in the autumn of 1996. The topic, 'Evil and Responsibility', resonated. Over time I became aware that I could use the idea of evil to access strata of our modern moral and existential orientation that often lie concealed, and to prise open significant rifts in the geology of the culture.

I would like to thank Alan Schrift for providing me with an excellent opportunity to pursue my thinking further, as a visiting professor in the Center for the Humanities at Grinnell College. The weekly faculty seminar on 'Modernity and the Problem of Evil', which I led there in the autumn of 2001, produced some tough, but amicable exchanges of views, and I am grateful to all those who participated. I am also grateful to Dorothea von Mücke, who invited me to spend a period in the spring of 2003 as Distinguished Visiting Max Kade Professor in the Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures, Columbia University. There I had the luxury of teaching an intense, rewarding graduate seminar on Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, and of thinking and writing late into the night about the theory of evil. Mark Anderson, who had succeeded as Chair of the Department by the time I arrived, went out of his way to provide office space and facilities, and I would like to record my thanks to him for being so accommodating to a philosophical interloper.

Over the past decade my thinking about evil has been exposed to the scrutiny of several generations of Essex graduate students. I am grateful to them for their alert engagement, and also to my department and its members for steadfastly protecting a micro-climate that encourages philosophical scope

Introduction

There are plenty of excellent reasons why no decent, thoughtful, progressive-minded person should have anything to do with the idea of evil. It is a notion, after all, that stands out in our modern moral lexicon by virtue of its potent, frequently dangerous, emotional charge. It hints at dark forces, at the obscure, unfathomable depths of human motivation. It seems to stand contrary to our widespread optimism that the behaviour of our fellow human beings can be accounted for in social and psychological terms, and so made amenable to improvement. If we understand the factors that condition people to do wrong – the twists and turns of personal history, the circumstances, oppressive or favourable, into which they are born – then presumably we will be able to alter them. Education and social intervention will eventually reduce the human penchant for harm and destruction. Against these assumptions, the idea of evil hints at some refractory element within us, some perversity lying beyond our control. It suggests the unwelcome conclusion that there may be sources of human behaviour, and so features of human society, which are resistant to betterment, to an enlightened effort to improve the cultural and material conditions of individuals and communities.

What is more, the label 'evil' often functions as an intellectual and ethical shrug of the shoulders. We do not need to question or ponder any longer: we just know that this human being, or that social or religious group, has an irrational commitment to chaos and moral mayhem. There is no requirement even to try to understand a different point of view (which is not the same, of course, as accepting its validity) – we must simply contain those who hold it, marginalize them, possibly even eradicate them. The invocation of 'evil' allows us to reduce the complexities of politics and history to the opposition of 'us' and 'them'. The idea of evil, precisely because of its intense semantic charge,

its mobilizing force, lends itself to exploitation in the hands of theocrats and rabble-rousers – not to mention cynical and unscrupulous politicians.

The most notorious example of this abuse in recent history is doubtless the phrase 'axis of evil', uttered by George W. Bush in his State of the Union Address on 29 January 2002, four months after the 11 September terrorist attacks.[1] President Bush employed the phrase to group together North Korea, Iran, and Iraq – three countries which he accused of developing, or seeking to develop, nuclear armaments and other weapons of mass destruction. As critics were quick to point out, these states had very little in common. The suggestion that they could be understood as engaged in some kind of alliance made scant sense. But it reflected the feeling of the American people that they were under some horrendous, unprecedented threat, menaced by a conclave of maleficent powers that had already achieved one grievous strike, and might be preparing for more. Bush's speech, made after the conquest of Afghanistan, and the installation of a hand-picked interim leader, marked the beginning to the propaganda build-up for the invasion of Iraq, which was launched just over a year later. It prepared the way for the United States to attack a leading Arab country, on a set of pretexts that turned out to be entirely false, and in contravention of international law. The bolstering of the image of the United States as a superpower fighting global evil in the name of freedom was an essential element in the legitimation of this enterprise (as Bush declared in his Address, 'I know we can overcome evil with greater good').

The intense reactions unleashed by Bush's speech, and the sharp-etched memorability of the key phrase itself, are surely connected with the peculiar role which the concept of evil plays in our moral vocabulary. To contemporary Western ears, at least, the term has an inherently antiquated ring about it. It seems to be a relic, a hangover from a worldview which even many people who – still today – think of themselves as religious would regard as an embarrassment. It suggests a vision of the universe as the stage for a battle of supernatural powers, which human beings may ally themselves with, but which they cannot ultimately control. It threatens the modern, enlightened conception of the world as moving towards a just and peaceable future, one which can be shaped by human will and intention. Bush's State of the Union Address dangled awkwardly between these possibilities. The President concluded by asserting that 'evil is real' – a claim which is not easy to decipher, but which seemed intended to suggest that there are indeed menacing forces at large in the world, working at a level deeper than individual human agency. But, at the same time, he reiterated the claim that it is 'freedom' which will overcome evil.

The question that confronts us, then, is: why should the archaic vision of a battle of moral forces have such resonance for many members of modern

societies? Part of the attraction of the concept of evil, I would suggest, is that it offers an experience of moral depth which otherwise so often seems lacking in our lives. It does so in two interconnected ways.

Firstly, we belong to a culture that has become habituated to relativity, to pluralizing its notions of the good. Our liberal political order is based on the premise that we are each entitled to pursue our own conception of the best life, but that we have no right to impose this conception on others. Yet it is difficult to match this tolerant, multivalent conception of the good with an equally relaxed view of what is morally bad. Multiculturalism struggles hard to process the dissonances which arise when the practices of minorities violate the norms of liberal individualism. Or, to put this the other way round, modern liberalism, not to speak of its postmodern offshoots, often has a bad conscience about its own implicit universalism. It is reluctant to put its cards on the table, for fear of appearing to promote some particular conception of the good. But there always comes a breaking point.

Predictably, only hours after the planes crashed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, on 11 September 2001, commentators began to clamour that the condition of the humanities in the American academy had deprived intellectuals of the will to identify and denounce blatant evil. On 15 October, a noted proponent of fashionable scepticism about principles and foundations, the critic and cultural commentator Stanley Fish, felt compelled to publish an article in the *New York Times*. He had been provoked by a journalist who telephoned him to ask whether 11 September meant the end of postmodernist relativism.[2] Fish denied that postmodernism leaves us with 'no firm basis for either condemning the terrorist attacks or fighting back'. Giving up on the 'empty rhetoric of absolute values', as he called it, needn't enfeeble our response. Like any community, Americans can invoke 'the particular lived values that unite us and inform the institutions we cherish and wish to defend'. Unfortunately, Fish did not confront the consequence of his argument – that the community of jihadists could do just the same. Of course, Fish could always respond that the mistake made by religious warriors is that they take their worldview to be absolute, rather than simply as an expression of their history and culture. But then he would have to add that this is only a mistake from 'our' point of view – interpreted from within, by their own criteria, religious viewpoints which claim unconditional validity can be self-sustaining. From our (self-consciously relativist) standpoint we have to admit that, from within the enemies' standpoint, the violence inflicted on us is justified, and that our outraged reponse is less legitimate than their destructive anger against us. These embarrassing philosophical tangles suggest that, even in our pluralistic world, the 'absoluteness' implied by the idea of evil requires

us to erect an unbreakable barrier – that not every practice or form of action can be morally defused by being set in its social and cultural context. Sometimes we feel compelled to draw the line, to respond with horror and denunciation to acts which violate not just social and moral convention, but our elemental conception of the human.

But secondly, the confrontation with moral phenomena that strain our powers of comprehension forces us to reconsider our habitual notion of human action as motivated by self-interest. To do evil, as the term is often understood these days, is to do more than pursue one's self-interest, even by morally unacceptable means. It is to be involved in some wilfully pain-inflicting, destructive, and – often – self-destructive enterprise, to be driven by forces that lie deeper than the familiar repertoire of unappealing human motives, such as greed, lust, or naked ambition. Confirmation of this widespread intuition can be drawn from a perhaps surprising source. In *A Theory of Justice*, the set text of normative political theory in the last third of the twentieth century, John Rawls devoted a passage to the categorization of negative moral worth. Here he distinguished between the 'unjust man', the 'bad man', and the 'evil man'. The unjust man, Rawls declared:

> seeks dominion for the sake of aims such as wealth and security which when appropriately limited are legitimate. The bad man desires arbitrary power because he enjoys the sense of mastery which its exercise gives to him and he seeks social acclaim . . . By contrast, the evil man aspires to unjust rule precisely because it violates what independent persons would consent to in an original position of equality, and therefore its possession and display manifest his superiority and affront the self-respect of others . . . What moves the evil man is the love of injustice: he delights in the impotence and humiliation of those subject to him and relishes being recognised by them as the author of their degradation.[3]

Rawls does not seek to clarify philosophically how a human being could come to love injustice. Indeed, it is clear from his brief account this it is not any injustice the evil man loves, but only the kind which offers him the gratification of exercising an extraordinary, transgressive power. And this possibility is hard to square with Rawls's advocacy of what he presents as the Kantian assumption that human beings, fundamentally, are not just calculatingly 'rational', but 'reasonable'.[4] Yet simply to read his laconic, matter-of-fact description is to catch a glimpse of the dizzying perversity of the human soul. On the rebound, as it were, such insights force us to reconsider the human potential for positive moral motivation – our capacity to strive towards the good as well as to wreak physical pain, mortification, and destruction.

This moral dialectic was an important facet of Bush's State of the Union Address, though one which drew far less attention in the media. The confrontation with evil, Bush suggested, had the power to shake his nation out of its hedonism and self-seeking: 'For too long our culture has said, "If it feels good, do it." Now America is embracing a new ethic and a new creed: "Let's roll." In the sacrifice of soldiers, the fierce brotherhood of firefighters, and the bravery and generosity of ordinary citizens, we have glimpsed what a new culture of responsibility could look like.' The shock of evil is seen as bringing out a depth of commitment and sacrifice in human beings that the pervasive promotion of hedonism by the surrounding culture, and the tranquillizing, trivializing effects of the mass media, positively discourage.

Of course, the most corrosive scepticism is called for here. We now know how short-lived the new sense of existential precariousness was, and how easily it could be harnessed in support of a new armed imperialism. It was not long before the number of civilian deaths caused by the bombing and invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq by the US and its allies outstripped by a shocking multiple the number killed in the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The lives and deaths of many of those who perished on 11 September were movingly commemorated in the page of photographs, accompanied by brief personal portraits, that appeared in the ensuing weeks, day after day, in the *New York Times*. The invading countries could not even be bothered to count the civilian victims of the bombing, conquest, and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq. Surely this proves that *any* introduction of moral categories – let alone the language of good and evil – into political discourse, indeed into our thinking about history and society in general, should be shunned as hypocrisy? If modern, enlightened citizens need to reflect on questions of moral motivation, especially in a political context, they should make use of a vocabulary compatible with our predominantly secular, naturalistic view of the world. The language of psychoanalysis, for example, seems to offer at least the promise of a certain depth of insight into the perverse complexities of human motivation.[5] Or perhaps we should just admit that the urge to be cruel and to destroy is an inbuilt propensity of some human beings.[6]

Yet, despite all these compelling reasons for caution, there has been a remarkable resurgence of interest in – and use of – the concept of evil in recent years, especially amongst avowedly secular philosophers and cultural critics.[7] It is not easy fully to account for this. Part of the explanation may be that, after the extinction of the residual, countervailing hopes attached to the ideals of socialism and communism, there is now little to relieve our evaluation of the twentieth century as a dark century, an 'age of extremes', the era of total war and mechanized murder. After the brief surge of (Western) optimism

that followed the disintegration of the Communist bloc, the world appears to be spiralling down into conflicts, which can no longer even be glossed – however misleadingly – as the expression of global rivalry between two post-Enlightenment visions of emancipation. The wars of the twenty-first century, it seems, will be driven by the forces of imperialism, ethnic rivalry, religion, and the scramble for dwindling resources.

Many of the seeds of this connection between the moral and political catastrophes of the twentieth century and the concept of evil were sown by Hannah Arendt, in the 1950s and 1960s, in her book on *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and in her account of the trial of Adolf Eichmann – one of the most philosophically suggestive pieces of reportage ever penned.[8] It was Arendt who, in these texts, made two moves whose consistency is still a matter of hot debate. She defined a new meaning for the Kantian term 'radical evil', and introduced an unforgettable phrase, 'the banality of evil', into the English language.[9] At around the same time Emmanuel Levinas was publishing his first major contributions to a rethinking of the fundamental questions of ethics. His own biography, Levinas subsequently claimed, was 'dominated by the presentiment and the memory of the Nazi horror',[10] of the Hitlerian world in which 'lies were not even necessary to an Evil assured of its excellence'.[11] Yet it took many years for the impact of his work, along with that of Arendt, to make itself fully felt. The orientations of philosophical thought in Europe in the final third of the twentieth century were not at first receptive to it.

On the one hand there occurred, during the 1960s and 1970s, an astonishing florescence of French thought, providing the philosophical lingua franca for the cultural mood-swing known as postmodernism. Within this intellectual ambit, developmental or progressivist philosophies of history went into crisis. In the famous formulation of Jean-François Lyotard, it was no longer possible to believe in the 'grand narratives', whether liberal or Marxist, which had determined the orientation of politics ever since the French Revolution.[12] Yet, along with other likeminded thinkers, Lyotard was remarkably sketchy and unpersuasive in his account of why these grand narratives had failed. The inclination of postmodernists was to suggest that the Western commitment to rationality, itself an offshoot of Western metaphysics, was the fundamental problem. The inherently universalizing impetus of reason was bound to coerce and crush the inherently pluralistic forms of human association, cultural practice, and embodied meaning. But this was always an unconvincingly one-sided diagnosis. It took some time, but eventually it became clear that the remedial celebration of the spontaneous, the anti-rational, and the particular had led into a moral and political cul-de-sac. Empires are particularistic, and despots habitually unreasonable. Postmodernism, it turned out, was tacitly

relying on a safety cordon of liberal toleration in its vision of the peaceful co-existence of incommensurable perspectives.[13]

According to a second major trend in European thought, one more prevalent in Germany, this postmodern naivety was the result of a foreshortened conception of reason itself. Instrumental rationality has indeed attained a dangerous preponderance in modern society and culture and, left to its own devices, it is a principle of domination. But reason in its other guise, as deployed in the socially indispensable task of communicating and reaching agreement across boundaries and barriers, has a different dynamic. This has expressed itself historically in the development of that universalistic moral outlook which is our only hope for preventing a repetition of the catastrophes of the twentieth century. Furthermore, in the eyes of many German philosophers, postmodernism was fatally compromised by its adoption of the critique of modernity to be found in Nietzsche and Heidegger – two thinkers whose style of thought showed unmistakable affinities with the authoritarianism, not to say totalitarianism, which postmodernism was supposed to undermine. The philosophical project of grounding reliably a universalistic morality, and liberal-democratic norms, was a far more appropriate response to the record of the twentieth century than celebrations of the heterogeneous and the local, no matter how generous the impulse behind them might be.

Jürgen Habermas, doyen of Critical Theory, and the pre-eminent German philosopher of the postwar generation, was the leading representative of this view in Europe. Much of his philosophical work, from the 1970s onward, was devoted to providing a grounding for the universalism he advocated. But Habermas's approach was also mirrored by a resurgence of normative moral and political theory in the English-speaking world. In both cases the primary source of inspiration was often the thought of Immanuel Kant. Yet the Enlightenment moral philosopher who enjoyed such a revival of influence in the final decades of the twentieth century was often a pale after-image of the historical original. This was a Kant largely shorn of his interest in the phenomenology of moral experience, and the inner conflicts of the free but finite acting subject, a Kant apparently unconcerned with the immense gap between what morality, on his account, demands of human beings, and what humanity, on the whole, appears capable of achieving. In short, this was normative theory travelling light, insouciant about its conditions of application. Self-styled Kantians seemed reluctant to consider the implications of the fact that human beings, as rational, self-reflective agents, are necessarily oriented towards moral norms, that moral ideals are intrinsic to their identity, and yet that they consistently fail to realize those ideals, or even deliberately work against them. This was not, of course, simply a result of distaste for or

disinterest in the subject matter of wrongdoing and malice. For an approach to moral theory which established such a strong equation between freedom and moral autonomy was bound to have difficulties in accounting for the imputable, and so presumably free, choice of immoral courses of action. Despite the many pages which Kant himself devoted to wrestling with the ensuing problem of evil, the issue barely surfaced in the work of Habermas and other representatives of the Frankfurt School, or in that of the most distinguished Kantian moral philosophers in the English-speaking world.[14]

It would not be entirely wrong to infer from this that postmodern thought was better equipped to address the question of evil. Undoubtedly, the great forerunners of postmodernism, Nietzsche and Heidegger, had a profound sense for the dynamics of the relevant phenomena. But the hostility to moral categories that typifies their work, and in Nietzsche's case the explicit attempt to supersede the concept of evil, limits the serviceability of their thought for an attempt to transcend the contemporary impasse.

What is the nature of this deadlock? The basic opposition between postmodernist and universalist thinking, in the final quarter of the twentieth century, mirrors very closely the oscillation analysed by the French philosopher Jean Nabert in his *Essai sur le mal*, first published in 1955.[15] One of profoundest treatments of the topic in postwar European thought, Nabert's book opens with a direct appeal to the phenomenology of evil: 'Neither the foresight of the coolest kind of thinking, nor the most cynical calculations of politics, nor familiarity with history, will ever prevent the beginning of a war from arousing in us the feeling that the destiny of humanity has escaped, once more, from the guardianship of the will.'[16] It is the sense of fatality, of desperate ineluctability, associated with man-made disaster, which Nabert underlines in his opening pages. But, at the same time, as Nabert's reference to the failure of the will reminds us, we do not regard such occurrences as though they were simply natural catastrophes. On the contrary, we experience them as forms of what he terms 'the unjustifiable' (*l'injustifiable*). No matter how historically inevitable the acts that bring suffering and destruction may appear to have been, we respond to them as that which *absolutely should not have occurred*. Human possibility should have followed another path after all.

It is this almost paradoxical sense of the unjustifiable, Nabert argues, which slips through the gap between the predominant tendencies of modern thought. A normative idealism, centred on the concept of the responsible, self-determining subject, can only understand the unjustifiable in its acutest form – moral evil – as a failure to live up to our own standards, a deplorable lapse of volition. Lacking an adequate explanation for this failure, and of its apparent compulsiveness, normative idealism is all too ready to fall into the

arms of its ostensible opponent, naturalism. And naturalism, in a wide variety of guises, is only too ready to take the strain. Indeed, as Nabert's description makes clear, any philosophical view which – for understandable reasons – denies the purely rational and normative any independent effectivity in the empirical world, perhaps even dismisses the ideal as an illusion, can be regarded as a form of naturalism. This includes forms of thought which, in the last decades of the twentieth century, were most likely to have been characterized as postmodernist: 'will to power, love of power, the sexual instinct, sympathy with its limitations; there is no instinct which does not lend itself to an interpretation of history, and of the glaring gap between the endless increase in the goods of civilization and the real condition of morality in the individual and in humanity'.[17] Yet, though it may provide a compelling explanation for our persistent moral failure, a thoroughgoing naturalism of whatever kind – Nabert insists – simply cannot account for the experience of choice, or for the dismay we feel in the face of what we are unable to dismiss merely as 'explosions of instinct'.[18] Indeed, in our efforts to confront the unjustifiable, we find ourselves oscillating between two equally inadequate responses: 'If it is, in fact, inconceivable that a freedom in command of itself could wish evil with the degree of continuity which experience reveals, it is no less so that nature could demonstrate its power with a regularity which renders freedom illusory.'[19] Hence, according to Nabert, 'We see thought hesitating between two contrary interpretations of man and his history, oscillating from one to the other, as if it were a question of choosing between a freedom whose integrity no failure can alter, and a causality always overrun by nature.'[20]

For of those who have no feeling for what Nabert means by 'the unjustifiable', there may not be much point in reading any further. For the rest of this book proceeds on the premise that Nabert has formulated (or rather, reformulated) a crucial insight, one which contemporary philosophy is in grave danger of forgetting. My argument will start from the assumption that, unless we are seeking to understand a potential which is deeply rooted in the structure of human agency, and yet results in actions and processes that, from an ethical perspective, *absolutely should not be*, then – for all the cogent reasons outlined above – we should not invoke the idea of evil. For any other approach to ethical issues, the notions of wrongdoing, moral failure, perhaps transgression, should be sufficient, if not simply the concept of a clash between the natural and the normative. It appears, though, that in recent years an increasing number of thinkers have begun to feel the limitations of such categories. For they do not take account of the fact, recognized by Kant, that the source of moral normativity – and not unalterable facts of nature or society – is at

the origin of our repeated failure to live up to moral demands. A proper reckoning with our history, it is felt, as well as due regard for the phenomenology of the moral life, seem to call for a return to the idea of evil, no matter how problematic and emotionally laden it may be. Evil is somehow chosen, not a matter of lapse or default.

Yet we find there are typical limitations to these contemporary returns of the concept of evil. Firstly, there is the relentless concentration on the Nazi Holocaust as the paradigm of evil, a focus which is often accompanied by the use of the Kantian term whose meaning Arendt transformed: 'radical evil'.[21] The most obvious weakness of this approach is that it leads to ultimately fruitless attempts to distinguish between 'radical evil' and some lesser, common-or-garden variety. Frequently, this is done – following Arendt's own suggestions – by arguing that the Nazi programme of totalitarian control and mass murder (and perhaps also its equivalents in other political arenas) embodied a pursuit of evil for its own sake, rather than the pursuit of a delusional good by grossly immoral means. Behind it lay nihilism, rather than self-interest.[22] The twentieth century would therefore have introduced a new form of wrongdoing – wrongdoing committed not for any of the familiar range of ugly human motives, but sheerly in order to violate the moral law, or in order to demonstrate the superiority of the human will to any normative constraint.[23]

However, as numerous commentators have replied, there is simply no way to establish the absence of a misguided conception of the good in such cases, or to show that such evil did not result from horrific, culpable, self-deception. As John Milbank has argued, 'the suppression and finally liquidation of the Jews was not articulated in nihilistic terms, but could be viewed as "rational", given that one's objective was to secure a German power absolutely untainted by socialism and the influence of international commerce, and a German identity based on cultural uniformity and the demotion of the Christian and Biblical legacy in favour of a Nordic one.'[24] This is not to deny, of course, the special status of the Holocaust, the privileged, paradigmatic role of industrialized mass murder in revealing deeply embedded tendencies of modernity. But any attempt to claim that the Holocaust exemplifies a unique, unparalleled form of evil, which shatters our confidence in humanity in a way no other historical event has done or could do, can only end in circularity or special pleading.[25] Furthermore, the indexing of evil, in its supposedly most radical or virulent form, to an era that is now well over half a century ago has the effect of a kind of consolation. Ever-increasing historical distance allows us to reassure ourselves that the worst is behind us, to entertain the thought that some progress may have been made. It allows us to voice expressions of confidence in a morally better future.

This leads us on to a second deficiency of the focus on totalitarianism and genocide, one which occurs in many self-declared 'humanist' responses to the horrors of the twentieth century. Here the problem is not so much the claim for the historical emergence of a new form of positive evil, as a failure to take the difficulty of finding a remedy seriously. To give one example, in the concluding chapter of his book, *Facing the Extreme*, Tzvetan Todorov, a prominent ornament of the North Atlantic liberal intelligentsia, undertakes to draw some general conclusions from his investigation into the moral life of the concentration camps. Along with many other writers on this topic, Todorov observes that human nature itself has not changed. What has changed, however – expanded enormously – is our technological capability, with which our moral imagination has simply failed to keep pace; 'fragmentation of the world we live in and the depersonalisation of our relations with others' have 'increased immeasurably a potential for evil probably not so different from that of earlier centuries'.[26] The prospects do not look good: 'This development is tragic because one cannot imagine it ever ending; the tendency towards increasing specialisation and efficiency has made its indelible mark on our history, and its devastating effect on what is properly the human world cannot be denied.'[27] But, despite this prognosis, Todorov's conclusion is remarkably upbeat: 'a code of ordinary moral values and virtues, one commensurate with our times, can indeed be based on the recognition that it is as easy to do good as to do evil.'[28]

The feebleness of Todorov's argument is obvious. If it is as easy to do good as to do evil, then it is also as easy to do evil as to do good. The appeal to empirical moral psychology, even if enriched by historical evidence, provides no basis for assuming that, in the future, the beneficent tendencies of human beings will begin to predominate over the destructive ones, especially when our 'tragic' depersonalization continues apace. If the 'hope' that Todorov invokes is to be genuine, it must be founded on something more than a naive optimism, on simply wishing for the best. Hope must rest on some support, some evidence, albeit non-conclusive; it must draw on a reflective account of our moral experience, one that takes such experience to be more than a sum of empirically determinable tendencies. Otherwise, lamely appealing hope, simply urging humanity to make a greater moral effort, like a headmaster signing off the end-of-year report, reveals a failure to take the problem of evil seriously. For to take evil seriously one must squarely confront the gap between human propensities, the condition of the world, and what our moral intuitions demand. And the problem is that the empirical course of history, including the history of the last half-century or so, provides, even on the most affirmative interpretation, no conclusive evidence either way.

But while the privileging of the Holocaust can be seen as allowing an evasion of the problem of evil, one can also understand the gravitation of philosophers towards such monstrous crimes. For the very scale and enormity of the cruelties committed by the Nazis, and by other initiators of genocide since, challenge the habitual normativism of our approach to moral issues. The invocation of such events reawakens our half-buried sense that moral violation cannot be reduced to the infraction of a rule. As Nabert reflected:

> There is no doubt that the differentiation of mental functions, accompanied by the specification of their respective norms, has encouraged the fragmentation and erosion of a primitive sense of the unjustifiable, a few traces of which we find in exceptional circumstances, as when – for example – very great miseries suddenly overwhelm an individual or a people, which one cannot understand as sanctions related to the transgression of imperatives, or when crimes go beyond the measure of what can be judged according to these same imperatives.[29]

In line with this thought, many writers – from Hannah Arendt onwards – have suggested that the basic notions of offence and punishment, of transgression and forgiveness, seem to lose their grip in the face of profound, far-reaching desecrations of the human.[30] Or, as the philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch once famously declared: 'Le pardon est mort dans les camps de la mort'.[31] It requires an event of unusual scope and force to compel us to question our post-Enlightenment approach to the human world in terms of principles, on the one hand, and of our success (or failure) in enacting them, on the other. Habitually, for the modern outlook, 'the irrational conspires with the norm in the very constitution of the real'.[32] We find it difficult to imagine, argues Nabert, that our 'normative *a prioris* encounter an invincible resistance on the side of the real, one which might testify to a limit to the intelligibility of the world, lend some consistency to the idea of the unjustifiable and of evils refractory to all assimilation, and which would ultimately legitimate doubts concerning the coherence and goodness of the world'.[33] Just occasionally, though, we feel we have no choice but to say – like Jankélévitch – that forgiveness, or – like Levinas – that 'Justice' has died.[34] And it is then that we struggle to orient ourselves: an empirical event, unthinkably, has wounded the ideal.

It is easy to understand the resistance of secularist and humanist thinkers to the idea that such expressions are any more than figures of speech, metaphors for extreme – but also extremely subjective – moral experiences. For such thinkers are rightly suspicious of the traditional means by which the acute tension, the inner diremption, produced by the experience of evil has been eased – through religious belief. This is not simply a matter of rejecting

religious tenets because they lack any evidential foundation, or because they refer to an empirically inaccessible dimension, other than the everyday world we inhabit. There is also the ethical consideration that any faith that the world, despite all appearances, will ultimately come good, any positing of a transcendent reality supposed to compensate for the deficiencies of the one in which we dwell, can be seen as a trivialization of human suffering. As Theodor Adorno put the matter, with paradoxical concision: 'whoever believes in God cannot believe in God . . .'.[35] If the secular humanist can be accused of succumbing to the temptation to downplay the 'moral gap' between demand and delivery (not between 'ought' and 'is', but between 'ought' and 'does'),[36] then it could equally well be argued that it is the very essence of religious belief to offer a false, imaginary bridge across the chasm. Furthermore the notion that, ultimately, a benevolent God will set the world to rights seems to undermine those most irrevocable achievements of modernity – our freedom and autonomy. If the world is to be made better – as its pain and injustice tell us it must be – then surely human beings should accomplish this for themselves, or not at all. Better not to overcome evil, than to do so as marionettes in some divinely scripted play with a guaranteed happy ending.

It will be the central contention of this book that such conflicting responses to the idea of evil continue to generate deep tensions in contemporary culture. We are torn between a commitment to freedom and autonomy and a due recognition of the intractability of moral evil, its refusal to fit into common conceptions of rational agency; between the responsibility to preserve a soberly empirical sense of human potential, and the need for an existential buttressing of moral motivation, for the impetus of transcendent hope. My aim is to explore the thought that religious belief, as traditionally understood, need not be the exclusive alternative to an obstinately secularist approach to evil (an approach which, arguably, must miss the essential nature of evil). For there may be a third possibility: to re-work formerly religious conceptions of evil, and religious versions of the hope for its overcoming, in more strictly philosophical terms. Perhaps it may be possible to articulate a basis for hope that is no longer dependent on any specific dogma or revelation, but is inherent in our moral orientation to the world. Or perhaps the experience of reconciliation, of a world in which evil is ultimately defeated, can itself be articulated in a philosophical mode. And if such projects prove impossible, perhaps there is a way for the philosopher to teach us how to live without delusory expectations – even to show that evil itself is merely a shadow cast on reality by a hope which struggles hopelessly to deny the world.

These are not simply proposals for philosophical projects. The decline of physical evil as a philosophical issue from the late eighteenth century onward,

which paralleled the decline of belief in a benevolent Creator, did not – as it is now common to assume – put paid to all of the issues once addressed by theodicy. As we shall discover, many of the greatest European thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were preoccupied in new ways with a range of those issues – probing the extent to which an anticipation of the defeat of moral evil, despite all we know and have learned about humankind's powers and propensities, can be made compatible with our modern commitment to freedom and rational insight. To Kant and the great Idealists, to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, to post-Holocaust thinkers such as Levinas and Adorno, it was evident that, unless we pose the question in these terms, we are not seriously confronting the idea of evil.

Notes

1   See President George W. Bush, 'State of the Union Address, January 29, 2002', at http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html
2   See Stanley Fish, 'Condemnation without Absolutes', *New York Times* (15 October 2001).
3   John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 439.
4   See John Rawls, 'Themes in Kant's Moral Philosophy', in Eckart Förster (ed.), *Kant's Transcendental Deductions* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989).
5   See Mary Midgley, *Wickedness* (London: Routledge, 1984), ch. 8.
6   See Colin McGinn, *Ethics, Evil and Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), ch. 4.
7   For a survey which includes references to recent as well as older literature, principally in German, see Ottfried Höffe, 'Kant über das Böse', in O. Höffe (ed.), *Schelling: Über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1995), pp. 11–34.
8   See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Cleveland, OH: Meridian, 1958); Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977).
9   For the case that Arendt's notions of 'radical evil' and of the 'banality of evil' are compatible, see Richard J. Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), ch. 7.
10 Emmanuel Levinas, 'Signature', in *Difficult Freedom*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 291.
11 Emmanuel Levinas, 'Nameless', in *Proper Names* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 119.
12 See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001).

13 See Peter Dews, 'Post-Modernism: Pathologies of Modern Society from Nietzsche to the Post-Structuralists', in Terence Ball and Richard Bellamy (eds), *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

14 In one of the few direct engagements by a distinguished contemporary Kantian with the problem posed by moral evil for the theory of agency, Christine Korsgaard simply admits that, on Kant's assumptions, 'evil is unintelligible' ('Morality as Freedom', in *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 171).

15 Jean Nabert, *Essai sur le mal* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1997).

16 Ibid., p. 22.

17 Ibid., p. 77.

18 Ibid., p. 79.

19 Ibid., p. 78.

20 Ibid., p. 82.

21 See for example Joan Copjec (ed.), *Radical Evil* (London: Verso, 1996).

22 In the Preface to the first edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt wrote: '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' (pp. viii–ix).

23 For a version of this argument, see Jacob Rogozinski, 'Hell on Earth: Hannah Arendt in the Face of Hitler', *Philosophy Today*, 37: 2 (Summer 1993), pp. 257–74.

24 John Milbank, 'Darkness and Silence: Evil and the Western Legacy', in John D. Caputo (ed.), *The Religious* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p. 279.

25 Emil Fackenheim's influential book *To Mend the World* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994) revolves obsessively around the problem of explaining why it should be the horror of the Holocaust, and not some other immense atrocity, which has ruptured the continuity of Western philosophy, and of Christian and Jewish religious thought.

26 Tzvetan Todorov, *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1999), p. 290.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid., p. 291.

29 Nabert, *Essai sur le mal*, pp. 26–7.

30 See Arendt, 'Postscript', in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, pp. 280–98.

31 'Forgiveness died in the death camps' (Vladimir Jankélévitch, 'Pardonner?', in *L'imprescriptible* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1986), p. 50.

32 Nabert, *Essai sur le mal*, p. 30.

33 Ibid., p. 29.

34 'Who will say the loneliness of those who thought they were dying at the same time as Justice . . . ?' (Emmanuel Levinas, 'Nameless', p. 119). See also the remark

of Emil Fackenheim: 'the destruction of humanity remains possible, for in Auschwitz it was actual' (*To Mend the World*, p. xxxix).

35 Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), p. 401.

36 See John E. Hare, *The Moral Gap: Kantian Ethics, Human Limits, and God's Assistance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

Chapter 1   Kant: The Perversion of Freedom

Towards the end of his lecture course on the history of philosophy, delivered in Berlin during the 1820s, the dominant thinker of the age paid homage to the achievement of a great predecessor. It was Immanuel Kant's decisive insight, Hegel declared, that

> for the will . . . there is no other aim than that derived from itself, the aim of its freedom. It is a great advance when the principle is established that freedom is the last hinge on which man turns, a highest possible pinnacle, which allows nothing further to be imposed upon it; thus man bows to no authority, and acknowledges no obligations, where his freedom is not respected.[1]

Hegel's encomium still succeeds in conveying the original impact of Kant's thought, the sense of a new philosophical dawn which the Critical Philosophy aroused amongst contemporaries. From the first, Kant's philosophy was recognized as revolutionary – and in a more than merely metaphorical sense. For as Hegel, with thirty years' hindsight, insisted in his lectures, the principle that inspired the storming of the Bastille, the principle of rational self-determination, was also the essential principle of Kant's thinking. The contrast between Hegel's homeland and France consisted only in the fact that the principle had been developed by philosophers in Germany, whereas across the Rhine a precipitate attempt had been made to bring political reality into line with it: 'The fanaticism which characterized the freedom which was put into the hands of the people was frightful. In Germany the same principle asserted the rights of consciousness on its own account, but it has been worked out in a merely theoretic way.'[2] Hegel is critical of the extent to which Kant's thought still embodies what he sees as the shallow rationalism of the Enlightenment.

But he deeply respects Kant's insight into the status of autonomy, as an aspiration intrinsic to human self-consciousness in its capacity to rise above all natural determinations: 'there is an infinite disclosed within the human breast. The satisfying part in Kant's philosophy is that the truth is at least set within the heart; and hence I acknowledge that, and that alone, which is in conformity with my determined nature.'[3]

For Hegel and his contemporaries, what Kant had demonstrated was that human beings do not possess freedom as a particular capacity (the power to choose a course of action – or to refrain from action – spontaneously, without any prior determination). Freedom must be construed as autonomy, as the capacity to think and act in accordance with principles whose validity we establish for ourselves through insight. And freedom in this sense is the rational core of human subjectivity as such. For Kant, however, there are different ways of acting in accordance with a self-determined principle; not just any action is free in the full meaning of the word. If the principle we accept tells us how we should act in order best to fulfil a specific need or desire, then the motive for our adherence to the principle stems from the need or desire which we happen to have. In this case we follow what Kant terms a 'hypothetical imperative': a command which tells us that *if* we want to achieve *b*, then we should do *a*. But Kant also thinks we are capable of acting in accordance with a *categorical* imperative – an unconditional command always to conform to a specific principle of action. We experience imperatives as categorical, however, only when they do not enjoin us to achieve any particular end. For questions can always be raised about the desirability of an end, however intuitively appealing it may be. To regard an imperative as unconditionally binding because of its particular content would be irrational, for this would amount to saying that I should do whatever I am ordered to do, simply *because* I am ordered to do it. Hence, an imperative which obliges us in detachment from any determinate end can do so only because of its form. If I obey an imperative *because of* its general form, I am doing what any other rational being (any being capable of understanding itself as an agent seeking to act – not just randomly – but on the basis of a rule) should do in the circumstances to which the imperative responds. In such cases, it is the universal form of the imperative as such that determines the action, independent of highly variable considerations of personal desire or interest. In Kant's terminology, pure reason itself becomes practical.[4]

Furthermore – and this is Kant's next revolutionary step – 'practical reason', so understood, is the expression of morality. Duty in the moral sense can be defined in terms of adherence to a maxim, a subjectively chosen principle of action, which we can simultaneously will in good faith to be a universal law.

In other words, when we obey the categorical imperative, we act in a manner which we can will all other rational beings to adopt in the same circumstances, regardless of their particular social identities, desires, or aspirations. Of course, if all rational beings *were* to act consistently on the categorical imperative, their actions would harmonize with each other, since each would be acting in conformity with the will of all others.[5] As Kant expresses it, when we act morally, we think of ourselves as legislating as members of a 'kingdom of ends', an association in which the freedom of each individual could coexist with that of every other individual, without conflict or violence. We can see how the idea of the categorical imperative connects up with habitual expectations of what morality should achieve.

But there is a problem. In the society which we inhabit, to act on the categorical imperative does not necessarily bring us closer to happiness – indeed, in many circumstances we have reason to suspect just the opposite, since we cannot rely on our fellow human beings not treating our conscientiousness as exploitable naivety. At the same time, Kant regards the desire for happiness is an entirely legitimate, natural, and inevitable human desire, given that we are finite and embodied, as well as rational and reflective, beings. Or, to put this in another way, Kant considers that freedom cannot be fully realized if it forever pulls against the demands of our pregiven nature. Yet only if practical reason came thoroughly to imbue the way society is organized, and hence shaped our desires, could this conflict between reason and nature be overcome. Ultimately, then, Kant's conception of practical reason entails that the world itself be progressively transformed to make the full realization of freedom possible. The achievement of collective autonomy, in the form of an ethical commonwealth, a social and political condition in which the autonomy of each person could be achieved without the sacrifice of happiness or self-fulfilment, is the fundamental project of the human species.

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Given this exhilarating, emancipatory thrust of the Critical Philosophy, it is hardly surprising that some of Kant's most distinguished contemporaries were dismayed when, in 1793, he published an essay on 'On the Radical Evil in Human Nature' in the *Berlinische Monatschrift*. For Kant began his latest contribution to the leading organ of the German Enlightenment by contrasting the ancient belief that the world has fallen into evil, from an original state of perfection, with the 'opposite heroic opinion, which has gained standing only among philosophers and, in our days, especially among the pedagogues:

that the world steadfastly (though hardly noticeably) forges ahead in the very opposite direction, namely from bad to better'.[6] Whenever Kant juxtaposes the arguments and proofs devised by philosophers with the deep-seated convictions of humankind, the comparison is likely to be to the detriment of the former. And such an unfavourable contrast is evidently intended here. If the optimistic outlook of some of his fellow intellectuals is meant to apply to *moral* goodness, Kant argues, as opposed to the progress of civilization, then they 'have not drawn this view from experience, for the history of all times attests far too powerfully against it'.[7]

Kant's refusal to equate moral progress with the progress of civilization must have a powerful resonance for us, living in the aftermath of the twentieth century and at the inauspicious beginning of the twenty-first, even though it may have bewildered some of his Enlightenment contemporaries. The devastating discrepancy between the two was registered early in the previous century, as artistic and intellectual movements from Dada to Freudian psychoanalysis responded to the unprecedented slaughter of the First World War; it was emphasized at its end – albeit in indirect ways – by the more melancholy versions of postmodernism. At the purely techological level, the exponential growth of productive capacity, and the power wielded through science and its applications, have far outstripped the capacity of humankind to use them responsibly. But economic and cultural development also often appear to intensify inequality and injustice, and the alienation and hostility between human groups and individuals, rather than reducing them.

At first glance, the upshot of Kant's reflections, of his counterposing of two visions of the human moral condition, neither of which he fully endorses (although he is evidently more sympathetic to the first), might seem to be the notion that human beings are a mixture of good and bad impulses and motives, neither set of which clearly predominates in the majority of us. We might think of human beings as locked in a struggle between their somewhat unruly natural desires and the – socially imposed – constraints of morality. Much of Sigmund Freud's thought offers such a picture of the human condition, although made more complex by the introduction of the concepts of the unconscious, repression, and phantasy. Kant, however, rejects this viewpoint: the common sense of modern secularism. We do not stand equidistant between nature and reason, and we do not begin as moral *tabulae rasae*. On the contrary, Kant insists, human beings are characterized by a 'propensity to evil' (*Hang zum Bösen*); we find ourselves engaged, from the first, in an uphill struggle to do the right thing, against a deeply ingrained tendency to prioritize our particular interests over what we know to be morally required. Furthermore, this propensity cannot be explained as an expression of our biological

and psychological nature. Despite its universality, it is we who have allowed it to gain the upper hand, and we can therefore be held responsible for it. As Kant puts it, there is a '*radical* innate *evil* in human nature (not any the less brought upon us by ourselves)'.[8]

Given such formulations, it is scarcely surprising that some of the leading intellectuals of Kant's day took him to be endorsing the Christian doctrine of original sin – and reacted with a revulsion appropriate to the Age of Enlightenment, whose character Kant himself had defined in a famous essay.[9] Schiller regarded Kant's claims as 'scandalous'. And Goethe wrote to Herder that Kant had 'criminally smeared his philosopher's cloak with the shameful stain of radical evil, after it had taken him a long human life to cleanse it from many a dirty prejudice, so that Christians too might yet be enticed to kiss its hem'.[10] The claim that there might be some intrinsic taint of human volition, thwarting our capacity fully to realize the potential of practical reason seemed to contradict the revolutionary conception of human freedom which Kant himself had struggled to frame throughout a long philosophical career. The great paladin of autonomy now seemed to be declaring that human beings were incapable of achieving the noblest goals prescribed to them by their own rational nature. Or rather, as became apparent, when the essay on evil was republished the following year as the first chapter of his book on *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant was now of the view that, since evil 'corrupts the ground of all maxims' (it is in this sense, and not with the modern colloquial overtones of extremity, that Kant describes it as 'radical'), and is therefore 'not to be *extirpated* by human forces',[11] the moral efforts of human beings may require divine supplementation. Turning against the self-confidence of the age, Kant now appeared to believe that humankind was incapable of going it alone.

Yet the notion of divine assistance was not – in itself – a novelty in Kant's thinking. Already in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, first published in 1781, Kant had put forward one version of an argument to which he was clearly deeply attached, since he repeatedly sought to improve it throughout his subsequent writings. The achievement of the 'highest good', the universal congruence of happiness and virtue, is a task to which we are objectively constrained by practical reason. For it is entirely rational for finite, embodied beings to desire happiness,[12] and legitimate for them to do so in proportion to their moral worth. Having to suppress this aspiration in favour of obedience to the moral law, which is also a rational requirement, would set human reason at odds with itself. In consequence, Kant argues, we *have* to conceive his version of the *summum bonum* or highest good, namely the perfect convergence of happiness and virtue, as achievable. If we did not, we would find ourselves in the

incoherent position of being morally obliged to attain the impossible. Yet at the same time we cannot anticipate that the glaring discrepancies between virtue and happiness which mar our world, and which morality demands should be overcome, will be reduced by human effort alone. Our weakness and finitude, our subjection to the morally impervious causality of nature, combined with the typical wavering of the human commitment to goodness, leaves a gulf between human delivery and moral demand. We can envisage this gap being bridged, Kant claims, only if we have faith in a benevolent and omnipotent creator, a 'moral author of the world', who completes whatever cannot be attained by human effort alone. Kant emphasizes, however, that such 'rational faith' (*Vernunftglaube*) supplies us with no knowledge of supernatural realities. It is rather a practical attitude towards the world which we cannot help but adopt if we are in earnest about the moral life, since otherwise we would be committed to a self-defeating enterprise.[13]

It should be noted that this moral explanation of the basis of faith in God was not regarded by Kant's German contemporaries as tantamount to an abandonment of Enlightenment values. On the contrary, for some of his early followers, such as Karl Leonhard Reinhold, Kant's great achievement was to have shown that a commitment to the power and dignity of human reason could be supported by – and in turn support – religious faith. In his influential *Letters on the Kantian Philosophy* Reinhold argued that the demolition of the traditional philosophical proofs of God's existence, which Kant had carried out in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, should not be regarded as damaging to religion. On the contrary, Reinhold asserted, it is precisely when belief in God is taken to rest on fragile philosophical 'proofs' that it remains vulnerable to dangerously sceptical reactions. By showing how religious faith is a necessary element of our moral orientation to the world, by disclosing its unshakeable 'practical' validity, Kant had in fact established religious belief on a far sounder footing.[14]

The notion of divine action, then, was not necessarily regarded by proponents of the new Critical Philosophy as threatening to human autonomy. But what *was* found shocking by many progressives of the day was the suggestion that human beings might be so constituted as to thwart progress towards the very goals that their own rational nature led them to strive for. Kant's disturbing – and, to many, unacceptable – thought was not simply that human beings are psychologically or even morally divided against themselves, but that human *freedom* is divided against itself. Kant seemed to be implying that his own great discovery, the realization that the human self *is* freedom, rather than merely possessing 'free will' as a capacity, was precisely what opened up the possibility of this inner diremption. For if we are freedom all the way

down, then we must be free to be unfree. Indeed, according to Kant, we seem to fall ineluctably into this unfreedom. But let us be more specific.

Kant's concept of 'radical evil' was, in part, a response to the objections that had been raised against his initial attempt to formulate the relation between freedom, reason and morality. The fundamental insight of Kant's mature practical philosophy is that acting morally means acting independently of those wishes and desires that we own as particular individuals. To do our duty is to act on a universalizable 'maxim': a subjectively adopted principle which we can also endorse as valid for any other human being (indeed, any rational being) who found herself in the same circumstances and subject to the same moral pressures, regardless of personal attachments and preferences. Our spontaneous impulses may sometimes point in the direction of what is objectively the right thing to do. But for our action to be moral, it must be the case that, even had our wishes pushed us in a different direction, we would still have acted in the same manner: as duty required. Kant does sometimes suggest that the moral worth of an action shines out more clearly when it goes against what we spontaneously desire. But, contrary to the assumption of some of Kant's critics, the thwarting of our natural inclinations is not a *condition* of acting morally – all that is required is that it should be the universalizable form of the maxim, not the private motive that may converge with it, which is decisive.

However, a crucial objection to this theory was raised by Reinhold, in the second volume of his *Letters on the Kantian Philosophy*. To Kant's leading follower and exponent, professor at the University of Jena, the tight connection Kant had established between freedom, self-legislation, and morality appeared to have the consequence that immoral actions could not be imputed to the agent.[15] For if it is only when we do our moral duty that reason is practical, and therefore that we raise ourselves above natural causality, it appears that we cannot be held responsible for acting immorally. For in such cases our desires and impulses, rather than reason, would determine the action. Hence, to counter Reinhold's objection, Kant needed to show that, even when we are desire-driven, we can be held accountable for being so compelled, charged with *not allowing* practical reason to take command.

Kant's answer to this difficulty (and one of the innovations first fully set out in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*) was to draw a distinction between 'will' in the sense of practical reason (reason capable of determining us to act for the sake for conformity with a universal principle – which Kant terms '*Wille*'), and 'will' as our spontaneous 'power of choice' (which obeys a subjective principle only in order to achieve the goal it has selected – which Kant terms '*Willkür*'). On this basis, Kant was able to argue that the practical

choices human beings make are never simply *determined* by their desires. Rather, the 'freedom of the power of choice has the characteristic, entirely peculiar to it, that it cannot be determined to action through any incentive *except so far as the human being has incorporated it into his maxim* (has made it into a universal rule for himself, according to which he wills to conduct himself)'.[16] Even when we do wrong, in other words, we have *chosen* to allow some particular desire to dictate the content of our maxim, at the cost of its universalizable form. We have elected to behave in a self-interested, instrumental way. Rational calculation is never simply a mechanism triggered by our desires. To think otherwise would be to treat the person concerned not as a responsible agent, but as a creature helplessly driven by its bodily and psychological urges.

Some Kantians have argued that this notion of responsibility is already implicit in Kant's moral thinking of the 'critical' period, right from the beginning – that Kant never intended immoral actions to be understood simply as products of natural causality. The dispute about this issue continues.[17] But whatever one's view, it is undeniable is that, in the *Religion*, Kant takes several new steps to clarify his position. In addition to codifying the crucial distinction of *Wille* and *Willkür*, he now also emphasizes that, if actions occur in an apparently random manner, out of keeping with what we know of the individual's personality, this raises questions of imputability (we can see Kant's point from the function of character testimony in a court of law). Full responsibility for our actions implies that these flow from our moral character. Or, to put this in another way, the moral quality of any particular maxim will be shaped by a more general underlying maxim, and this in turn by an even more fundamental maxim, until we reach a putative inaugural choice of principle, which sets the basic cast of our moral character. This Kant refers to as our 'intelligible character', or '*Gesinnung*' (disposition).[18] *Gesinnung*, as Henry Allison puts it, 'is to be construed as an agent's fundamental maxim with respect to the moral law'.[19]

Intelligible character cannot be altered by empirical choices since it is, by definition, that which guides all choices. Kant is therefore obliged to portray it as the result of an act of moral self-choosing occurring in the noumenal realm. Kant's concept of the noumenal refers to reality as it is 'in itself' – thinkable but not knowable. It contrasts with the notion of experienced reality, structured by the *a priori* subjective conditions – time, space, and the set of underivable concepts, such as that of causal connection – which enable any cohering world of objects and events at all. But this means, of course, that the term 'act' can here be employed only in a metaphorical sense, since acts necessarily occur in time, while for Kant the noumenal must be timeless

(as well as being, by virtue of a parallel argument, non-spatial). Yet one startling result of this strategy for defusing the objection raised by Reinhold is that our moral character can never be 'mixed' or indifferent. Any single incident of backsliding will indicate not simply a dropped stitch, but a rent running through the entire fabric of our moral character, since from any transgression it can be inferred that we have made an inaugural choice to override the claims of the moral law – at least on *some* occasions – in favour of our particular desires. And this means that we have *not* adopted the categorical imperative as our supreme principle of action – in other words, that our disposition is evil.

It is on the basis of this approach to moral character, which Kant himself describes as 'rigorism', that he then goes on to develop the arguments which so shocked his enlightened contemporaries. Given that the moral disposition of human beings must be either good or evil, the overwhelming balance of evidence derived both from the observation of human behaviour and from introspection, Kant suggests, is that all human beings are trammelled by an innate 'propensity to evil' (*Hang zum Bösen*) – an inclination to ignore the claims of the moral law, at least when our cravings are sufficiently strong, or when the going gets rough.

It is easy to see, then, why Kant was perceived as endorsing the doctrine of original sin. But in fact he explicitly repudiates this theological notion, understood in the sense of a corruption of the will, inherited from the first parents of the human race.[20] Clearly, to have adopted this conception would have ruined the whole point of introducing the distinction between rational will and power of choice, and of explicitly extending the scope of freedom to embrace both moral and immoral actions. If a debility or perversion of the will is part of our natural endowment, then the claim that we are fully responsible for the wrong we do would again become problematic. But Kant firmly sets himself against this view: 'Whatever the nature, however, of the origin of moral evil in the human being, of all the ways of representing its spread and propagation through the members of our species and in all generations, the most inappropriate is surely to imagine it as having come to us by way of *inheritance* from our first parents.'[21] Indeed, in contrast to such a picture, Kant portrays individual moral responsibility in the starkest terms:

Every evil action must be so considered, whenever we seek its rational origin, as if the human being had fallen into it directly from the state of innocence. For whatever his previous behaviour may have been, whatever the natural causes influencing him, whether they are inside or outside him, his action is yet free

and not determined through any of these causes . . . He should have refrained from it, whatever his temporal circumstances and entanglements, for through no cause in the world can he cease to be a free agent.[22]

In view of this stark insistence on individual responsibility, Kant has to exercise caution in using the language of 'innateness' to describe our propensity for evil. He must block any inference that the tendency to violate the moral law is a consequence of our natural endowment. Such a conclusion would simply revive the problem of our freedom to do wrong, which led to the distinction between *Wille* and *Willkür* in the first place. Hence Kant states:

> Now the ground of this evil . . . cannot be placed, as is so commonly done, in man's *sensuous nature* and the natural inclinations arising therefrom. For not only are these not directly related to evil (rather do they afford the occasion for what the moral disposition in its power can manifest, namely virtue) we must not even be considered responsible for their existence (we cannot be, for since they are implanted in us we are not their authors). We are accountable, however, for the propensity to evil, which, as it affects the morality of the subject, is to be found in him as a free-acting being and for which it must be possible to hold him accountable as the offender – this, too, despite the fact that this propensity is so deeply rooted in the power of choice that we are forced to say that it is to be found in man by nature.[23]

The philosophical problems raised by this passage, and similar ones, are deep; and there has been a variety of attempts in recent years to explain how Kant can portray evil both as freely chosen and as humanly ineluctable.[24] In subsequent chapters, we will discover how Kant's immediate successors sought to reformulate the theory of evil so as to reduce these internal tensions. But our first concern must be with Kant's evidence for the claim that the bias of the human power of choice towards evil is so pervasive as to be tantamount to something inborn. In the first chapter of the *Religion*, Kant renounces any attempt to prove this pervasiveness by means of a purely philosophical demonstration. He asserts, apparently quite casually: 'we can spare ourselves the formal proof that there must be such a corrupt propensity rooted in the human being, in view of the multitude of woeful examples that the experience of human *deeds* parades before us.'[25]

Keen to puncture contemporary illusions about an innocent 'state of nature', Kant first cites travellers' and voyagers' tales of the wanton cruelty of primitive peoples. But he then goes on to refute the suggestion that morality fares better in more developed societies:

If we are however disposed to the opinion that we can have a better cognition of human nature known in its civilized state (where its predispositions can be more fully developed), we must then hear out a long melancholy litany of charges against humankind – of secret falsity in the most intimate friendship, so that a restraint on trust in the mutual confidence of even the best of friends is reckoned a universal maxim of prudence in social dealings; of a propensity to hate him to whom we are indebted, to which a benefactor must always heed; of a hearty goodwill that nonetheless admits the remark that 'in the misfortunes of our best friends there is something that does not altogether displease us'; and of many other vices that yet remain hidden under the appearance of virtue, let alone those of which no secret is made.[26]

Finally, in case this evidence should not be sufficient, Kant evokes 'a state wondrously compounded of both the others, namely that of a people in its external relations, where civilised people stand vis-à-vis one another in the relation of a raw nature (the state of constant war) and have also taken it firmly into their heads not to get out of it'.[27]

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

It is remarkable that contemporary thinkers influenced by Kant, and committed expositors of Kant's philosophy, show a decided reluctance take this account of radical evil seriously. Paul Guyer, for example, has remarked that 'In *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* [Kant] seems to go too far by assuming that evil-doing is not just *possible* but even necessary . . . This doctrine hardly follows from Kant's previous argument, and seems instead to rest on an odd mixture of empirical evidence and the lingering grip of the Christian doctrine of original sin.'[28] But it is not simply Kant's theory of evil, but any account of the sources of wrongdoing, which is strikingly absent in the contemporary philosophical literature. The enormous effort which has been devoted, in recent years, to the grounding of moral principles, and the general explanation of moral normativity, often seems out of all proportion to the amount of thinking devoted to the inner constitution of the moral subject, and the phenomenology of moral experience. Contemporary Kantians, particularly those committed to a 'constructivist' account of moral obligation, in the wake of John Rawls, tend to mention the problem of moral failure and evil only as an afterthought, if at all. The fact that the universalist stringency of the moral demand, as Kant understands it, entails that human beings are almost bound to fall short of what is required, and the implications of this persistent failure for the authority of morality in the first place, are almost never reflected on.[29] But it cannot be so easy to shrug off the criticism of a

figure such as Schopenhauer, one of the greatest of the nineteenth-century post-Kantians, who points out that the ineffectiveness of the moral demand necessarily throws a dubious light on its status: 'Thus in the Kantian school practical reason with its categorical imperative appears more and more as a hyperphysical fact, as a Delphic temple in the human soul. From its dark sanctuary oracular sentences infallibly proclaim, alas! Not what *will*, but what *ought* to happen.'[30] Of course, arguments concerning our moral nature, of the kind put forward by Kant, are always vulnerable to dismissal as dubious generalizations. But it should be noted that Kant himself does not rely primarily on supposed features of human moral psychology in making his case. Rather, he points to profound tensions between our basic modern ideals, and pervasive features of human history and society. Reflection on the discordances in current thinking about morality, history, and the fate of humankind, suggests that these tensions have not disappeared.

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Kant, as we have seen, clinches his argument for the reality of radical evil by pointing to the character of interstate relations, where primitive violence combines with the kinds of destructive rivalry typical of the vices of culture. The basis on which states actually operate in their relations with each other – as opposed to the ideals they publicly proclaim – consists of principles which 'No philosopher has yet been able to bring into agreement with morality or else (what is terrible) suggest [how to replace with] better ones, reconcilable with human nature'.[31] The dilemma still confronts us today. On the one hand, the ever-increasing economic interdependence of humankind, the emergence of international political institutions, and the speed and global scope of the media, have made the issues of poverty and inequality among nations more tangible than ever before. Demands for global justice do not just express the aspirations of the exploited and disadvantaged, but find a broad resonance among the populace in the developed world, as the groundswell of activism prior to the G8 summit in Scotland in July 2005 – to take just one of many examples – suggests. On the other hand, the hierarchical organization of the international system of states, and an increasing concentration of power in the hands of non-state actors such as multinational corporations, typically in alliance with the most powerful countries, appears to be threatening the degree of democratic control, modest as it may have been, which had been achieved historically by the most economically advanced nation states.

This situation has given rise to two inadequate responses amongst those who aspire to a more just international order. On the one hand, some theo-

rists of globalization have done all in their power to interpret recent historical developments in a positive light. The political theorist David Held, for example, has repeatedly argued that globalization highlights the need – and opens the possibility – for a new, cosmopolitan democratic order. Since 'Processes of economic internationalisation, the problem of the environment, and the protection of the rights of minorities are, increasingly, matters for the world community as a whole',[32] what the world presently requires is the further democratization and strengthening of existing international institutions, as well as the creation of new supranational forums, for example at the regional and continental level. In the long run, Held asserts, 'the formation of an authoritative assembly of all democratic states and agencies – a reformed General Assembly of the United Nations, or a complement to it – would be the objective'.[33] On the other hand, thinkers affiliated to the Marxist tradition, and so equally committed – presumably – to an ultimate vision of universal justice, have sought to expose the whole rhetoric of global governance, and indeed of globalization itself, as dangerous wish-fulfilment. Peter Gowan has argued that the jargon of globalization merely serves to obscure the fact that one country, the United States, 'has acquired absolute dominance over every other state or combination of states on the entire planet, a development without precedent in world history'.[34] In short, 'the reality is an asymmetrical change in the field of state sovereignty: a marked tendency towards its erosion in the bulk of states in the international system, accompanied by an accumulation of exceptional prerogatives on the part on one state'.[35] Globalization theorists, Gowan concludes, with a classically Marxist flourish, 'confuse juridical forms with social substance'.[36]

Such critiques offer a sobering corrective to the naive optimism of some globalization theorists, revealing how an understandable desire to interpret world history as moving, however painfully and ponderously, in the direction of peace and economic justice encourages a self-deceptive construal of current developments. Theorists such as Held write persistently in the optative mood. But when one takes a sober look at the evidence, it cannot be said to support their wishful scenarios. To his credit, Jürgen Habermas, another leading advocate of supranational governance, has honestly admitted the ambivalence of the historical record: 'The contemporary world situation can be understood in the best-case scenario as a period of transition from international to cosmopolitan law, but many other indications seem to support a regression to nationalism.'[37]

Gowan, by contrast, presents a view of the current world situation shorn of all conditionals. The global hegemonic power uses all necessary means, including its unprecedented military might, to preserve its dominance. But,

at the same time, we can ask: what practical perspective is opened up by this account of the international system? Gowan comes close simply to endorsing the approach of the 'neo-realist' tradition in the theory of international relations, which regards relations between states as inevitably exemplifying a Hobbesian war of all against all. He dismisses the idea that this dynamic might in any way be modified by the pressure of public opinion in liberal democratic states, or by a growing sensitivity, within a global public sphere, to issues affecting the fate of humanity as a whole, as simply naive.[38] According to the official ideologies of the current period, Gowan asserts, 'either we are presented with the apparition of a "democratic peace", after the imaginings of Kant, in which the leading capitalist states of the epoch have forsworn violence forever, as an unthinkable departure from the civil harmony among them; or we are offered a vision of "postmodern" or "market" states, that have put the vulgar ambitions of modern nation states behind them, as they cooperate to build a civilized "international community" in the North, and wage implacable battle with rogue states and terrorist cells outside it in the barbarian South'.[39] Yet if the idea of a peaceful and democratic international order can never be more than an 'apparition', what political goals are to be pursued with the greater clairvoyance made possible by Gowan's analysis? He is presumably not so naive as to tie armed hostility between human societies to the existence of capitalism, and we already have historical evidence – for example, in the case of China and Vietnam – that socialist countries can go to war against each other. To counter by arguing that *genuinely* socialist polities would not act ruthlessly on the international stage risks sinking into tautology. Hence Gowan's perspective not only exemplifies the pessimism typical of any Marxism bereft of an emancipatory agent. In the end it merges with the global realpolitik to which it is ostensibly opposed.

On first inspection, Kant's own conception of history may appear to be susceptible to Gowan's strictures. Certainly, optimistic globalization theorists often draw inspiration from the cosmopolitan dimension of Kant's writings on the philosophy of history. For Kant is acutely aware of the problem posed by the 'state of nature' which obtains between sovereign states, and tries to envisage a process, based in human self-interest, through which a peaceable legal regulation of interstate relations might be established in a more or less remote future.[40] Yet, in another sense Kant can be seen as close to a disabused realism. In a footnote to the first book of the *Religion*, he observes that human history appears to have a cyclical structure, with empires successively rising, brutally expanding, and then collapsing as a result of their overextension.[41] And he repeats a similar point in the third book, where he suggests that this long-term tendency of states to overextend their domination and then frag-

ment is actually beneficial. So long as the moral character of human beings has not been reformed, it prevents the consolidation of a universal despotism.[42] Furthermore, with regard to the prospect of the constitutional law of states being brought into line with 'an international law which is universal and *endowed with power*', Kant affirms that 'experience refuses to allow us any hope in this direction'.[43] Yet, of course, there is a crucial difference between Kant's perspective and the realist theory of international relations. For whereas the Hobbesian approach considers mutual fearfulness and competition as inherent in the relation between sovereign states, Kant, at least in the final phase of his thought – as his comments in the *Religion* make clear – regards the lawless conduct of international affairs, and the continuing scourge of war, as reflecting the entrenched evil propensities of human beings (and, in turn, as reinforcing those propensities: he is fond of remarking that war makes more evil human beings than it destroys).

In fact, Kant's position combines elements of both the cosmopolitan and the realist perspective. At times he writes as though self-interest will gradually lead states towards the renunciation of war as destructive and counterproductive. This is a thought which recurs in one of his last writings on the topic, 'An Old Question Raised Again', where he suggests that moves could be made towards a 'cosmopolitan society', 'without the moral foundation in mankind having to be enlarged in the least'.[44] Suspicious of any naive form of utopianism, yet committed to the goal of cultural and political progress, Kant is at pains to envisage how far the natural motor of self-interest could carry nations towards the institutionalization of a global peace. He advocates a reflectively teleological perspective, which does not involve making knowledge-claims about the process or purposes of history, but enables us to discern indications of progress from the standpoint of our moral interest in the improvement of the human condition. Such a standpoint, then, discloses only *tendencies* arising from the social dynamic of unreformed human nature – and there is no suggestion that these can do the work without supplementation by moral effort. As Kant's summary of his speculations on the future course of history, at the end of the first supplement to his essay 'Perpetual Peace', reveals, the relation between natural and moral purposes, and the reliability of the outcome remain murky, to say the least: 'In this manner nature guarantees perpetual peace by the mechanism of human passions. Certainly she does not do so with sufficient certainty for us to predict the future in any theoretical sense, but adequately from a practical point of view, making it our duty to work towards this end, which is not just a chimerical one.'[45]

Kant argues, then, that we inhabitants of modernity cannot durably renounce the ideal of a just world. And the lip service that politicians – and

the daily newspapers – feel obliged to pay to the aspiration to secure human rights, and the provision of the essentials of a tolerable life, for all human beings, suggest that he is right. But, in the last phase of his thinking, Kant no longer believes that 'nature' or 'providence' alone can guide history towards this goal. Moral exertion is required. But we now know that human beings are plagued by a perversion of the will, which hinders them from making the required effort, even though such exertion would fulfil their rational destiny. Though at times Kant writes as if advancement towards global justice is simply a matter of human beings asserting their good will against the tug of their selfish interests,[46] such statements do not represent his fundamental sense of the direness and difficulty of the human situation.

In his classic study of Kant's philosophy of history, Yirmiyahu Yovel notes this shift in Kant's thinking, from a notion of historical progress as being driven solely by 'nature', to one in which moral commitment plays a role. For Yovel it is Kant's *Critique of Judgement* which marks the turning point. For after the introduction of the concept of 'reflective judgement', which allows the idea of purposiveness to be applied to the world for its epistemic benefits (but without commitment to its metaphysical reality), Kant can accommodate a teleological interpretation of history as progressing towards the realization of reason, without attributing this progress to a suprahuman power. In turn, this means that Kant is able to emphasize the role which moral commitment and moral action play in furthering humanity's historical goals. However, Yovel portrays moral action as consisting *simply* in the effectivity of practical reason. He does not consider Kant's argument that there lies, within the subjectivity of human beings, a fundamental, self-imposed blockage to the assertion of practical reason. Indeed, he says almost nothing about Kant's theory of 'radical evil', except to equate it – misleadingly – with the earlier notion of 'unsocial sociability'.[47] Furthermore, Yovel does not consider what could make such a remote and intangible goal as the achievement of a cosmopolitan moral community significant for the lives of contemporary human beings. After all, at the beginning of the twentieth century, in 'Science as a Vocation', Max Weber argued that the modern progressive view of history tends to hollow out the meaning of the individual's existence. Formerly, a human being could die feeling that he had experienced what life had to offer. But now he can no longer regard his own existence as anything more than a link in an endless historical chain. The result, Weber bleakly concludes, is that, 'because death is meaningless, civilized life as such is meaningless'.[48] But of course, one of the reasons why Yovel avoids considering the theory of radical evil, and its implications for the philosophy of history, is that he would have to confront the role which 'rational faith' plays in Kant's

account of morality, and the possibility of moral conversion. Like many contemporary philosophers, Yovel is attracted by Kant's philosophy of freedom, reason, and progress, but is reluctant to take the full measure of its religious dimension.

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We have already considered Kant's argument that faith in a 'moral author of the world' is implicit in an earnest moral life. In the *Critique of Practical Reason* the idea of God features as one of three 'postulates of practical reason'– 'transcendent *thoughts* in which there is nothing impossible'[49] – in whose objects we must have faith if the moral law is not to be exposed as pointless. Another of the postulates, freedom, is allotted a distinctive status by Kant. In considering ourselves as capable of acting for purely moral motives, something we *must* do in experiencing the moral law as binding on us, we necessarily postulate our own freedom. In other words, we can have insight into the fact that, without freedom, there could be no moral law in the first place, even though we cannot comprehend freedom's reality. This account of human freedom has received a new lease of life in recent decades, in the wake of the 'two-aspect' construal of Kant's transcendental idealism popularized by interpreters such as Graham Bird and Henry Allison.[50] After all, the fact that, as morally conscious beings, we generally regard ourselves and others as responsible for our actions, and so by implication as free agents, is scarcely contentious. The real argument concerns the status to be given to this consciousness. Hard-boiled naturalists must dismiss it as an illusion. But the minimal or 'deflationary' position now frequently attributed to Kant is that our practical self-understanding need not be regarded as making metaphysical claims that *compete* with the worldview of the natural sciences: all we need to assert is that it expresses a viewpoint which we necessarily take on ourselves as self-conscious agents, and which no empirical discovery could undermine. Clearly, the same could not be said of the concept of God. As Kant puts it, through the moral law we have insight into the reality of freedom, but in the case of God we cannot even have insight into his *possibility*. The existence of God is not a condition of the moral law, but only of the necessary object of a will *determined by* such a law.[51]

Kant ascribes a similar status to his third postulate: that of the immortality of the soul. Here he enquires into the conditions of meaningfulness of the struggle to act morally throughout my finite, unrepeatable, earthly existence. On Kant's account, it is only if we have faith that death does not arbitrarily cut short our moral striving, that our effort to reverse the fundamental

decision which has corrupted our power to frame moral maxims can continue indefinitely towards its goal, that the moral life can be saved from futility. More specifically, I cannot be objectively obliged to achieve something, in this case the perfection of my moral character, or what Kant terms 'holiness' (the spontaneous purity of the moral will), which is in fact unachievable. But as with the two other postulates of practical reason, there is no question, for Kant, of trying to demonstrate philosophically the immortality of the soul. His position is rather that the distinction of phenomenal and noumenal realms allows space for faith in modes of existence and agency about which we can only speak through 'symbolic anthropomorphisms', to employ Emil Fackenheim's phrase.[52] Since time is an a priori form of our empirical intuition, whatever 'immortality' means, it cannot be a matter of endless duration. Perhaps it could be minimally construed – in Allen Wood's formula – as the 'fulfilment of immanent moral strivings in a transcendent existence'.[53]

Yet given what Kant says about the intractability of the propensity to evil, it seems that, however such a transcendent existence is conceived, it would not enable human beings to effect their own moral conversion. For a being whose will is corrupted at its root cannot repair the damage solely through an act of this same will. Hence, in the *Religion*, Kant finds himself compelled to allow a role for divine 'grace', which could perhaps even be regarded, or so Allen Wood has argued, as a 'fourth postulate'.[54] But here Kant has to walk a difficult line. It would be fatal to his moral thought to admit that divine grace could substitute for a lack of human effort, and he is therefore relentlessly critical of all religious rituals and practices (including prayer) which are interpreted by their followers as a 'means of grace'. As Kant states, 'there is no other means (nor can there be any) [for a human being] . . . to become worthy of heavenly assistance, except the earnest endeavour to improve his moral nature in all possible ways, thereby making himself capable of receiving a nature fit – as is not in his power – for divine approval, since the expected divine assistance itself has only his morality for its aim'.[55] Human beings may *hope* for divine assistance, but only if they do their absolute best: 'we can admit an effect of grace as something incomprehensible but cannot incorporate it into our maxims for either theoretical or practical use'.[56]

Kant's theory of the postulates of practical reason, his account of what we are entitled to hope – indeed, on some of his formulations, *must* believe as earnest practitioners of morality – depends on his distinction between phenomenal and noumenal worlds, and therefore on the validity of transcendental idealism. But as we have just noted, the metaphysical meaning of this form of idealism, indeed the question of whether it is a metaphysical doctrine at all, or rather the antidote to metaphysics, is still a matter of hot dispute.[57]

And the various construals of the phenomenal/noumenal distinction that can be defended on the basis of Kant's texts are reflected in the notoriously unstable status of the postulates. At one extreme, Kant has been understood as proposing a philosophy of the 'as if', arguing that we must behave as though certain morally necessary fictions were truths. An intermediate interpretation presents the postulates as having truth from the practical point of view, a standpoint that is necessarily ours as finite, rational agents, but as adding nothing to our knowledge of reality (on this reading, there is no 'fact of the matter' regarding the noumenal realm). But it is difficult to defend these readings as the definitive account of Kant's intentions, since he sometimes writes as though what is postulated may or may not have objective reality. Our limitation is simply that we can never know, since 'We are dealing . . . here simply with Ideas which reason itself creates, the objects of which (if it possesses any) lie completely beyond our vision'.[58] To go by such statements, what Kant calls the 'primacy of practical reason' means simply that it is the *practical relevance* of the 'Ideas' (his term for concepts of non-experienceable, but rationally legitimate, objects) that supremely concerns us in living our lives, and that no theoretical considerations can dethrone them. It does not mean that practical reason has a general priority over theoretical reason, or is even in a position to define the validity of its counterpart's mode of access to reality. Given this chronic elusiveness of what the 'practical' standpoint is supposed to make available (which would remain even if transcendental idealism itself were less contentious), coupled with the rise in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries of a secular, naturalistic worldview, it is scarcely surprising that many attempts have been made to interpret Kant's account of the progressive transformation of the world by reason in social, political, and historical terms, dispensing with its religious dimension. Such attempts do not so much abandon the postulates, or at least not all of them, as seek to bring them down to earth.

Of course, the basis of such a programme can already be found in Kant himself. The principle of Kant's *summum bonum* (the proportionality of happiness and virtue) is a definition of justice. And Kant makes every effort he can to portray humankind as moving historically towards – at least – the political precondition of this goal: a perfect civil constitution, either in the form of a cosmopolitan state, or an association of republics bound by international law. As we have seen, he does not think this progressive movement of history can be theoretically demonstrated, but believes that we can assemble scattered evidence into a teleological conception of history, from the standpoint of our practical interest in the realization of this ideal.

From such a perspective, the evil that plagues human history arose through human beings, in their first primitive state, allowing the power of their animal impulses to continue dictating the use of their emergent reason. The detachment from instinct made possible by rational reflection opens up a vast new world of possibilities. But although these possibilities, under the domination of the natural drives, are pursued selfishly and competitively, this pursuit nonetheless stimulates the development of human culture. On this account, which Kant proposed during the 1780s, evil is not counterproductive in the long term for human society. As he puts it, 'The history of *nature*, therefore, begins with good, for it is the work of God, while the history of *freedom* begins with wickedness, for it the work of man. For the individual, who in the use of his freedom is concerned only for himself, this whole change was a loss; for nature, whose purpose with man concerns the species, it was a gain.'[59] Around the same time that Kant penned these reflections, in the context of a philosophical interpretation of the third chapter of Genesis, he also formulated his famous doctrine of 'unsocial sociability', the notion that the volatile mix of interdependence and rivalry typical of the human world is ultimately turned to good purpose in developing our capacities. As Kant writes, 'Man wishes concord; but Nature knows better what is good for the race; she wills discord. He wishes to live comfortably and pleasantly; Nature wills that he should be plunged from sloth and passive contentment into labour and trouble, in order that he may find means of extricating himself from them.'[60] Indeed, Kant even argued around this time that belligerence can play a progressive role. 'In the present state of human culture, then, war is an indispensable means to the still further development of human culture. Only in a state of perfect culture would perpetual peace be of benefit to us, and only then would it be possible.'[61] In general, his impulse was to hold on as long as he could to the idea that self-interest may bring us, in the very long term, to the point of achieving a just and peaceable world.

In recent years, a powerful reading of Kant's philosophy of history along these lines has been proposed by Allen Wood. Kant's theory of unsociable sociability, Wood suggests, explains how the human 'fall' into evil proves ultimately beneficial, by providing the motor for advance towards the full institutionalization of freedom. As he puts it, 'Kant's ethical thought is fundamentally about the human race's collective, historical struggle to develop its rational faculties and then through them to combat the radical propensity to evil that alone made their development possible. It is precisely because human beings must in this way turn against their own nature that their history is one of self-conflict, self-alienation, and consequently self-liberation.'[62] Put at its most compressed, Kant's sketch of a universal history assumes that self-

interest will eventually bring the members of some polities to regulate their conflicts through the establishment of a republican constitution (a form of government which respects individual freedoms and legislates in the interests of all). Thereafter, states with such constitutions will gradually desist from settling their disputes by armed conflict, because of their sensitivity to the opinion of a public concerned about the danger and expense involved in warfare, and in the constant preparation for it. They will seek to establish a peaceful federation of states. This federation can in turn can be expected to play the lead in ushering in a comity of free nations under international law, and hence a perpetual peace. At this stage of history, on Wood's interpretation, an epoch of freedom will replace the epoch of nature, since further development of the human race will occur under the conscious direction of human beings themselves. He summarizes: 'In this sense, human history works backwards: It makes us rational through an irrational society, leaving us the task of remaking society through reason.'[63]

A major difficulty with Wood's approach, however, is that he has to insist on a social genesis of evil. For it is only if evil is the product of specific structures of social interaction that we can envisage its overcoming through the collective transformation of those structures. Wood puts great emphasis on what Kant describes as the 'diabolical vices' of envy, ambition, and rivalry, vices that can be regarded as expressions of a competitive society, and which distort our 'disposition to humanity': our innate drive to seek social recognition. (He is far less interested in Kant's treatment of those vices, such as lust and gluttony, that distort our 'disposition to animality', our drive to satisfy our biological needs.) Of course, Kant would have to have been foolish to deny the influence of society over the morality of individuals, whether for good or for ill. And in his conception, religious communities figure essentially as a means of counteracting the negative effects of human association. But Kant also makes clear that portraying society as the cause of evil would be circular, presupposing the vulnerability to corruption it is meant to explain, unless one asserts that *any* form of human association must give rise to evil.[64]

In the *Religion* Kant takes pains to avoid this implication, arguing that the vices of culture, such as '*envy, ingratitude, joy in others' misfortunes*', are 'grafted upon' our inclination to compete with others, and are not intrinsic too it. This is why he states that 'nature itself wanted to use the idea of such competitiveness (which in itself does not exclude reciprocal love) as only an incentive to culture'.[65] In other words, our 'disposition to humanity' (to compare our condition with that of others, and to obtain recognition as of equal worth with them), *need not* have led inevitably to destructive

forms of rivalry and hostility. Wood cites this passage, but he misunderstands its purport. He takes it as a further statement of Kant's doctrine of unsociable sociability, as formulated in the 1784 'Idea for a Universal History'. But the point Kant is making in the *Religion* is that an *amiable* form of competitiveness could have stimulated cultural development *just as well* as the destructive forms which we have witnessed in human history, and could – in principle – have prevailed. Thus the root of evil must be sought at a deeper level than the dynamic of human association. This is also made clear by that fact that, on Kant's account, the 'bestial vices' of gluttony and lust are similarly 'grafted' onto our disposition to animality, without any social contribution.

The shift in Kant's position must surely be attributed to deep moral concerns about attributing a positive role to evil in historical progress. A year before the publication of the first part of *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant had published an essay 'On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials of Theodicy'. Here he assessed and rejected a series of tactics which thinkers have employed to reconcile the existence of moral evil with divine goodness. The first argument Kant considers runs as follows: 'There is no such thing as an absolute counterpurposiveness which we take the trespassing of the pure laws of our reason to be, but there are violations only against human wisdom; divine providence judges these according to totally different rules, incomprehensible to us, where, what we with right find reprehensible with reference to our practical reason and its determination might yet perhaps be in relation to the divine ends and the highest wisdom precisely the most fitting means to our particular welfare and the greatest good of the world as well.'[66] Significantly, Kant rejects this defence out of hand: 'This apology, in which the vindication is worse than the complaint, needs no refutation; surely it can be freely given over to the detestation of every human being who has the least feeling for morality.'[67] It might be countered that Kant is here objecting to the suppression of spontaneous moral condemnation in deference to a functionality of evil which *transcends* our comprehension – the implication being that, if we understood what long-term benefits evil action produced, our repugnance could be legitimately overcome. However, it is clear both from the argument in this passage, and from other sections of the essay, that Kant is opposed to the quashing of moral judgement with an eye to *any* advantage, whether known to us or not. He defines 'the morally counterpurposive' or 'evil proper (sin)' as 'the absolutely counterpurposive, or what cannot be condoned or desired either as ends or means'.[68] In other words, evil is what Nabert calls 'the unjustifiable'. This view would not make sense if human cultural and moral development *had* to occur through the

perpetration of evil acts. But as we have seen, by the time of the *Religion* Kant no longer admits this necessity.

But there is another argument against Wood's interpretation, besides the strictly moral one. Wood asserts that we human beings are 'capable of gradually reshaping our deeply corrupt social life by revolutionizing and uniting the hearts of individuals through the free power of reason'.[69] In short, that it is the 'moral law' itself which can overcome evil.[70] Yet, what *is* our 'deeply corrupt social life' if not an expression of the fact that our power of reason is not free but enslaved? The 'moral law' *tout court* cannot overcome evil, because evil is precisely our deep tendency to override the claims of the moral law. Wood seems here to overlook the fact that, on Kant's account, our selfish inclinations have such power over us only because of the fundamental self-choice that we have made. As Henry Allison has put it, for Kant 'The conflict is not between psychic forces but between principles, each of which claims to be the supreme ground for the selection of maxims . . . it is self-conceit, not inclination or even self-love, that is opposed to the moral law and . . . this is because it makes the satisfaction of inclination into a matter of unconditioned right, thereby affirming a principle that is contrary to this law'.[71]

This disagreement is not primarily a dispute over rival interpretations of Kant. The real problem for Wood's position is that, while asserting that 'the demand of reason is not merely to subordinate our inclinations to reason's principles but also to reconstitute our disordered social relationships',[72] he offers no explanation of why human beings do not conform to this demand *now* – or indeed why they have not already conformed to it long ago. After all, Wood knows as well as Allison that our inner moral conflicts are not clashes between opposing forces, let alone between a force and a principle, which would be an incoherent thought. Kant's conception of moral subjectivity differs fundamentally from the popular view of human beings as torn between their rational and their sensuous nature.[73] The point is that, while the instrumental, strategic, and communicative uses of reason have a history, recorded in the development of civilization and culture, it is not clear – on Wood's account – why *practical* reason should have a history. For one of Kant's great innovations was to insist on the universality of moral consciousness, and to deny that moral capacity has anything to do with theoretical knowledge, philosophical insight, or level of culture.

In Kant's own thinking morality has a history because human beings must struggle painfully to free themselves from the evil principle which they have inaugurally chosen, and which has corrupted the will. He emphasizes that this struggle will have no hope of success unless human beings combine for mutual moral support in the kind of association that we know as a 'church'. Of course

it could be argued that, since Kant accepts the basic choice for evil is unintelligible, he is just as bereft in the face of the historicity of practical reason as Wood. But the difference is that Kant can at least *describe* a noumenal perversion of the will, which makes sense of the need for a long-term combat with evil, even though he cannot ultimately account for it. By contrast, Wood's position acknowledges only a *diversion* under empirical pressures, but not a *perversion* of the will. 'The doctrine of radical evil', he asserts bluntly, 'is anthropological, not theological. Its basis is not religious authority but naturalistic anthropology.'[74] In consequence, he can offer no philosophical description of the recession of our consciousness of the moral law, and cannot accommodate reason's failure to take nature in hand.

Obviously, this is not to suggest that Kant's approach is devoid of deep problems. As we have seen, the tracing back of evil to a noumenal act of self-choosing leads to severe difficulties in explaining how human beings can ever achieve a moral conversion, and set themselves on the path towards the good. And it is in this context that Kant appeals to the idea of divine 'grace', while seeking ways to mitigate the difficulties posed by this explicitly religious concept. In the final part of the *Religion* Kant argues than the concept of grace need not be regarded as any more inherently problematic than the concept of freedom, 'since freedom itself, though not containing anything supernatural in its concept, remains just as incomprehensible to us according to its possibility as the supernatural [something] we might want to assume as surrogate for the independent yet deficient determination of freedom'.[75] Yet at the beginning of the book Kant himself had underscored the difference between freedom and other postulates, arguing that we know the *possibility* of freedom a priori, since this is a condition of our moral consciousness (and this is presumably what he means in asserting that there is nothing 'supernatural' about the concept of freedom); there is nothing self-contradictory about taking ourselves to be free, from a practical point of view. But just as we can have no insight even into the possibility of God or immortality, neither can we make sense of the action of grace, which is supposed to solve an apparently insoluble problem, namely how 'by a single and unalterable decision a human being reverses the supreme ground of his maxims by which he was an evil human being (and thereby puts on a "new man")'.[76] Of course, this decision is only the beginning of the story. Kant continues: 'he is to this extent, by principle and attitude of mind, a subject receptive to the good; but he is a good human being only in incessant labouring and becoming; i.e., he can hope – in view of the purity of the principle which he has adopted as the supreme maxim of his power of choice, and in view of the stability of this principle – to find himself upon the good (though narrow) path of constant

progress from bad to better. The transformation of intelligible character, then, corresponds to a slow struggle towards the good in the world of sense.'[77]

The incomprehensibility of this process is due in part to the fact that it makes no sense to think of the act of conversion as *subsequent* to the original act of self-choosing, since acts of freedom – being noumenal – can have no temporal index (indeed, even the notion of a noumenal 'act' is scarcely intelligible). As Gordon Michalson has written, Kant has

> no obvious way of making sense of the 'before and after' of the process of moral conversion. Kant's theory of moral conversion or regeneration culminates in the paradox that an act having no relation to time produces a moral agent who is materially different 'after' the act from 'before'.[78]

This problem does not similarly occur if we consider an empirical chain of actions carried out by a rational agent. For whatever the metaphysical difficulties involved in regarding such a sequence as the expression of noumenal freedom, the notion is at least not internally incoherent. But in the case of Kant's intelligible character, or moral 'disposition', we are dealing with a structure of subjectivity which is itself 'timeless'– it underlies all empirical actions. Here the very notion of change or moral revolution becomes hard to make sense of at all, even metaphorically. Furthermore, as Leslie Mulholland has argued, 'There is no reason whatsoever for the person to make a different choice on the second occasion from on the first occasion. It is as if one person at one occasion made two choices of incompatible supreme maxims . . . Only if we allow past experience to have an influence on the present decision can this be avoided.'[79] Indeed, some commentators have drawn precisely this conclusion, conceding that '[Kant's] images of revolution and conflict are, of course, no less temporal than the idea of progress. They must be taken to refer to a timeless condition of the self as it is in itself, in which both a good disposition and a morally defective disposition are present, and the good disposition is stronger.'[80] Yet it is easy to see that Kant could not accept this construal – for it would amount to a denial of radical evil in the first place.

The philosopher Emil Fackenheim once summarized Kant's conception of religion as 'justified hope'.[81] But perhaps in the end Kant's attempt, unrivalled in its dignity and profundity, to combine a steadfast confidence in human progress with a disabused sense of the intractability of human evil, leads into philosophical perplexities which the appeal to rational faith does not alleviate, but simply intensifies. It became one of the tasks of the first great post-Kantians to preserve a due sense of the depth of evil, while finding a way both of justifying hope, and of keeping hope humanly intelligible.

Kant: The Perversion of Freedom   41

Notes

1 G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol. 3: *Medieval and Modern Philosophy*, trans. E. S. Haldane and Francis H. Simson (Lincoln, NE and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 459.

2 Ibid., p. 425.

3 Ibid., p. 458.

4 See Immanuel Kant, *The Moral Law: Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. H. J. Paton (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 107–23; Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 17–30.

5 See Paul Guyer, 'The Form and Matter of the Categorical Imperative', in *Kant's System of Nature and Freedom: Selected Essays* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005).

6 Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings* trans. and ed. Allen Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 45.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., p. 56.

9 See Immanuel Kant, 'An Answer to the Question: "What is Enlightenment?"', in *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 54–60.

10 Goethe's and Schiller's comments are cited in Emil L. Fackenheim, 'Kant and Radical Evil', in *The God Within: Kant, Schelling, and Historicity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), p. 21.

11 See *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, p. 59.

12 Kant defines the Idea of happiness in terms of 'an absolute whole, a maximum of well-being in my present and every future state' (*The Moral Law*, p. 81). He affirms that it can be 'presupposed surely and *a priori* in the case of every human being because it belongs to *his essence*' (ibid., p. 79).

13 Kant makes this argument, in different forms, in all three of his *Critiques*. But the conception of God (as well as immortality) as religious 'postulates' of practical reason is most thoroughly worked out in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (see pp. 90–122, 'Dialectic of Pure Practical Reason').

14 See Karl Leonhard Reinhold, *Letters on the Kantian Philosophy*, ed. Karl Ameriks, trans. James Hebbler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), Letters 1–5 (pp. 1–75).

15 See Karl Leonhard Reinhold, 'Erörterungen des Begriffs von der Freiheit des Willens', in Rüdiger Bittner and Conrad Cramer (eds), *Materialien zu Kants Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975), pp. 310–24.

16 *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, p. 49.

17 Henry Allison defends the consistency of Kant's position throughout the critical period in *Kant's Theory of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 133–4. But this is unconvincing. In the *Groundwork* Kant affirms that

'on the presupposition that the will of an intelligence is free, there follows necessarily its *autonomy* as the formal condition under which alone it can be determined' (*The Moral Law*, p. 121). Kant subsequently has to concede that such a will can also be determined heteronomously.

18 See *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, pp. 47–50.

19 Allison, *Kant's Theory of Freedom*, p. 140.

20 The German term for 'original sin' is *Erbsünde* ('inherited sin'), which makes the target of Kant's objection more explicit.

21 *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason,* p. 62.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid., pp. 57–8.

24 For a critical assessment of some of these attempts, see Stephen R. Grimm, 'Kant's Argument for Radical Evil', *European Journal of Philosophy*, 10: 2 (August 2002).

25 *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason,* p. 56.

26 Ibid., pp. 56–7.

27 Ibid., p. 57.

28 Paul Guyer, 'Immanuel Kant', in Edward Craig (ed.), *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 192.

29 To give just an indication, the index to Barbara Hermann's *The Practice of Moral Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993) contains no entry for 'evil'; likewise Onora O'Neill's *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). Christine Korsgaard's *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* discusses the problem of evil-doing at pp. 171–6, though Korsgaard here accepts Kant's view that evil is 'unintelligible'. (By contrast, in her second book, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Korsgaard does sketch an explanation of evil (pp. 102–3, pp. 250–1), but the term is still not regarded as meriting an entry in the index.)

30 Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), p. 79.

31 *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, p. 57.

32 David Held, 'Cosmopolitan Democracy and the Global Order: A New Agenda', in James Bohman and Matthias Lutz-Bachman (eds), *Perpetual Peace: Essays on Kant's Cosmopolitan Ideal* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), pp. 235–51.

33 Ibid., p. 247.

34 Peter Gowan, 'Neoliberal Cosmopolitanism', *New Left Review*, 2nd series, 11 (September–October 2001), pp. 79–93.

35 Ibid., p. 85.

36 Ibid., p. 88.

37 Jürgen Habermas, 'Kant's Idea of Perpetual Peace, with the Benefit of Two Hundred Years' Hindsight', in Bohman and Lutz-Bachman (eds), *Perpetual Peace*, p. 130.

38   See Peter Gowan, 'A Calculus of Power', *New Left Review*, 2nd series, 16 (July–August 2002), p. 47.

39   Ibid., p. 67.

40   See Immanuel Kant, 'Perpetual Peace', in *On History*, ed. Lewis White Beck (New York: Macmillan, 1963), pp. 85–135.

41   *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, p. 57.

42   Ibid., p. 129n.

43   Ibid.

44   Immanuel Kant, 'An Old Question Raised Again: Is the Human Race Constantly Progressing?', in *On History*, p. 151.

45   Immanuel Kant, 'Perpetual Peace', p. 114.

46   See Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. and ed. Robert B. Loudon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 238.

47   See Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Kant and the Philosophy of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 149.

48   Max Weber, 'Science as a Vocation', in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (London: Routledge, 1970), p. 140.

49   *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 112.

50   The pioneering works in this regard are Graham Bird, *Kant's Theory of Knowledge: An Outline of One Central Argument in the Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Humanities Press, 1962), and Henry Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism: An Intepretation and Defense* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983).

51   See *Critique of Practical Reason*, pp. 3–4.

52   Fackenheim, 'Kant's Philosophy of Religion', in *The God Within*, p. 16.

53   Allen Wood, *Kant's Moral Religion* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1970), p. 124.

54   See ibid., pp. 232–48.

55   *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, pp. 183–4.

56   Ibid., p. 73.

57   A defence of a 'modest' metaphysical reading of Kant's transcendental idealism can be found in Karl Ameriks, *Kant and the Fate of Autonomy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). For a nuanced and deeply insightful appraisal of the metaphysically deflationary approach, focusing on Bird and Allison, see Sally Sheldon, 'The Problematic Meaning of Transcendental Idealism', PhD thesis, University of Essex, 2003.

58   Immanuel Kant, 'The End of All Things', in *On History*, p. 151.

59   Immanuel Kant, 'Conjectural Beginning of Human History', in *On History*, p. 60.

60   Immanuel Kant, 'Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View', in *On History*, p. 16.

61   Immanuel Kant, 'Conjectural Beginning of Human History', p. 67.

62   Allen Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 296.

63   Ibid., p. 295.

64   Wood cites the opening of book 3 of the *Religion* to support his case for the social origin of evil. Here Kant states of the individual, 'Envy, addiction to power, avarice, and the malignant inclinations associated with these, assail his nature, which on its own is undemanding, *as soon as he is among human beings*' (*Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, p. 105). Basing himself on this, Wood goes so far as to assert that 'Evil for Kant is therefore a product of human reason under the natural conditions of its full development, which are found in the social condition. The radical evil in human nature is an inevitable accompaniment of the development of our rational faculties in society' (Allen W. Wood, 'Religion, Ethical Community and the Struggle against Evil', *Faith and Philosophy*, 17: 4 (October 2000), p. 504). Yet Kant begins the paragraph from which the above citation is taken by reaffirming that 'The human being is nevertheless in this perilous state through his own fault'. Kant goes on to admit that the human being can 'easily convince himself' that the threats of evil 'do not come his way from his own raw nature, so far as he exists in isolation', but he does not affirm that this is the truth of the matter. For further criticism of Wood's argument for the social origin of evil in Kant, see Grimm, 'Kant's Argument for Radical Evil'.

65   *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, p. 51.

66   Immanuel Kant, 'On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy', in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, p. 20.

67   Ibid.

68   Ibid., p. 18.

69   Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought*, p. 320.

70   Ibid., p. 300.

71   Henry Allison, 'Duty, Inclination and Respect', in *Kant's Theory of Freedom*, p. 126.

72   Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought*, p. 295.

73   On this see Yirmiyahu Yovel, 'Kant's Practical Reason as Will: Interest, Recognition, Judgement, and Choice', *Review of Metaphysics*, 52: 2 (December 1998), p. 289.

74   Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought*, p. 287.

75   *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, p. 183.

76   Ibid., p. 68.

77   Ibid.

78   Gordon E. Michalson Jr, *Fallen Freedom: Kant on Radical Evil and Moral Regeneration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 85.

79   Leslie Mulholland, unpublished paper, cited in ibid., p. 87.

80   Robert Merrihew Adams, 'Introduction', in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, p. xx.

81   Fackenheim, 'Kant's Philosophy of Religion', p. 4.

Chapter 2   Fichte and Schelling: Entangled in Nature

The difficulties many recent thinkers have faced in trying to make sense of Kant's theory of evil were confronted, only a few years after the publication of the *Religion*, by Johann Gottlieb Fichte, the first great inheritor of the Kantian revolution. Fichte was born in 1762, in humble circumstances (his family were ribbon weavers in the Oberlausitz region of Saxony). But his youthful brilliance struck a local nobleman, who undertook to sponsor his education, and after a period of tutoring he was sent to the famous school in Pforta, later attended by Nietzsche. Yet, as with many gifted people from lowly backgrounds, Fichte's preferment did nothing to assuage his sense of the corruption and injustice of the world. Obliged to break off his university studies in theology and law by the withdrawal of support from his benefactor's heirs, Fichte took a common route for young intellectuals of the day, working as a household tutor in Germany and Switzerland. At the time his outlook was shaped by the providential determinism of the prevalent Leibniz–Wolffian tradition, though he struggled to reconcile this philosophical position with his sense of the turbulence of the inner life, and his keen desire to contribute to the moral improvement of humankind. He became an enthusiastic supporter of the French Revolution, which broke out when he was in his late twenties, and defended its principles in some of his earliest publications.[1]

In 1790 Fichte read the *Critique of Pure Reason* (one of his tutees was keen to be instructed in the new 'Critical Philosophy'), though without its initially making a major impact his views. But his vision of the world was overturned a few months later by his discovery of Kant's practical philosophy. In a letter to the great friend of his school and university days, Friedrich August Weisshuhn, written in August–September 1790, Fichte enthused:

> I have been living in a new world ever since reading the *Critique of Practical Reason*. Propositions which I thought could never be overturned have been overturned for me. Things have been proven to me which I thought could never be proven – for example, the concept of absolute freedom, the concept of duty, etc. – and I feel all the happier for it. It is unbelievable how much respect for mankind and how much strength this system gives us![2]

From then on, Fichte devoted himself to the task completing the Kantian revolution, if necessary defending the spirit of Kant's philosophy against what he regarded as its frequently inconsistent letter. His aim was to work out a comprehensive 'system of freedom' – to clarify the awkward, unresolved relation between the theoretical and practical standpoints in Kant, and thereby to develop an overall conception of the world, and of the place of self-conscious agents within it, compatible with the great Kantian discovery that our destiny is rational autonomy. Within a few years the ensuing publications had earned Fichte a chair at the University of Jena.

The revelation Fichte received from reading Kant's second *Critique* was that, as finite agents certain of our *duty* to fulfil the moral law, a duty which is unconditional, independent of any specific purpose or incentive, we have a confidence in our freedom which no ratiocination could ever challenge. The moral standpoint trumps any philosophical theory that would portray human beings as simply part of the natural order, however understood. But it is typical of Fichte's thinking that he quickly came to regard many of Kant's basic philosophical assumptions as threatening the very 'primacy of practical reason' he had discovered. Most obviously, Kant argues that all human activity, including all psychological processes, must be regarded as governed by causal laws. Metaphysically speaking, spontaneity – exemption from causal determination – belongs only to the noumenal subject, to which – by definition – we can have no experiential access. But as far as Fichte is concerned, Kant's description of free agency as a form of noumenal causality fails to counter the threat of determinism. The defeat of 'mechanism' and 'fatalism', to use Fichte's own terms, cannot be achieved

> simply by shifting the ground of our moral decisions into the intelligible world. In that case, the ground for determining our will is supposed to lie in something that is not sensible, though something that nevertheless determines us just like a physical power, the effect of which is a decision of our will. But how is something of this sort any different from the sensible world?[3]

In other words, for Fichte freedom becomes actual only if experienced in empirical agency. But for this to be possible there can be no unbridgeable gap

between the subject of knowledge and the subject of action. My agency, my striving to achieve the goals I set for myself, is a response to the condition of the world – including the inner world – as I experience it. But on Fichte's account the way I experience the world is in turn a reflection of my practical projects. As he writes, 'I am the ground of this alteration, means: that the same one, and no other, who *knows* of the alteration, is also the one who is active; the subject of consciousness and the principle of effectivity are one and the same.'[4] Indeed for Fichte, our self-consciousness, which Kant took as his starting point in explaining the necessary structure of any objective world, is possible only because we are aware of ourselves as agents engaged with a recalcitrant reality:

> all consciousness is conditioned by consciousness of myself, which in turn is conditioned by the perception of my activity, which is itself conditioned by the positing of some resistance as such . . . The representation of some stuff that simply cannot be changed by my efficacy, something we earlier found to be contained in the perception of our own efficacy, is thus derived from the laws of consciousness.[5]

As this argument indicates, Fichte – unlike Kant – does not consider it necessary to regard the subject of consciousness as passively affected by a 'thing-in-itself', in order to account for the reality of a world independent of our thoughts and intentions. The 'I', the subject of consciousness and action, is pure 'agility', as Fichte puts it, and experiences itself as limited by an external world in which – and against which – it must act, only because this is a necessary condition of self-awareness. We can become conscious of any item – including the self we all are – only contrastively, by means of a distinction between the item and what it is not. Regarded ideally, I am absolute activity, absolute independence; but from my finite, empirical point of view I necessarily experience myself as limited by, confronted by an obdurate objective world. But since what philosophers often refer to as the 'external world' (perplexingly – for external to what?) has now been explained as a necessary condition of self-consciousness, Fichte is able to carry out a transcendental excision of the 'thing-in-itself'. This he regards as an important step in securing freedom against the deterministic threat.

All the same, a sceptical reader of Fichte might still enquire: how is a *phenomenology* of freedom (Fichte's account of our immediate experience of ourselves as not determined, but as *willing* to pursue a specific goal, rather than any available alternative) supposed to guarantee the *reality* of freedom? Might it not be the case, after all, that – as Kant argued – in the empirical

world, and despite our subjective convictions, there are no rents in the fabric of causality? It is at this point that we need to consider the reconfigured role that Fichte allots to the categorical imperative.

In the *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant had argued that our awareness of being unconditionally bound by the moral law is the sole 'fact of reason'. This non-empirical fact is the *ratio cognoscendi* of our freedom, the basis on which we know *of* it, without actually knowing it. But for Fichte, to regard the categorical imperative as interposed between ourselves and our freedom in this way entails not autonomy, but its opposite. He argues that consciousness of an infrangible moral law is only the *purely intelligible* form in which the gap between the absolute activity which I am, primordially and ideally, and my finite empirical self appears to me. The moral 'ought' is the reverse, objectified side of my fundamental striving for absolute independence.[6] Hence Fichte can assert that the 'moral law is by no means the sort of thing that could ever be present within us without any assistance from us, but is instead something that we ourselves first make'.[7] While it is true that many human beings may not be explicitly aware of this making, all take a normative perspective on the behaviour of their fellows, even if they have failed to grasp its relevance in their own case.[8] And this universality of the categorical imperative can be treated as confirming the reality of the spontaneity or self-activity experienced in empirical willing, since it discloses every action as subject to the moral 'ought'.

Following through on this anti-dualistic impulse, Fichte declares that even my embodiment, as a condition of my agency, can be transcendentally decoded as a condition of possibility of self-consciousness. Since only something material can act on other material things, 'viewed as a principle of an efficacy in the world of bodies, I am an articulated body; and the representation of my body is itself nothing but the representation of myself as a cause in the world'.[9] So for Fichte, as opposed to Kant, we are not forced ultimately to resign – so opening the door to scepticism – from the struggle to understand human beings as the perplexing combination of an empirical existence governed by natural causality and a core of transcendental freedom.

As we have seen, for Fichte the categorical imperative is the objective manifestation of reason, which is pure activity. Subjectively, the same activity can be described as a 'pure drive', or a drive (*Trieb*) whose aim is self-activity as such. In the same way, empirical activity appears in objective form as the movement of my body, while subjectively it is experienced as the expression of one of the drives that contribute to my well-being and self-preservation. However, even my natural drives, since they seek to extinguish a feeling of need (and hence dependency) can be seen as versions – at a more primitive,

less reflective level – of the drive for absolute independence which defines the self. Without a drive of some kind, there can be no consciousness at all, since it is the drive which expresses my simultaneous limitation by, and need to overcome, the constraints of the natural world. Furthermore, drives cannot be understood as links in a chain of cause and effect, since though they tend towards a goal, their activity is not exhausted in reaching it. They are plastic, for they can be guided and restrained by the will. The concept of drive, then, is an important tool for breaking down Kant's implausibly deterministic picture of our inner life. Fichte does not work with an opposition between practical reason, on the one hand, and what Kant calls the 'pathological' impulses of our nature (often misleadingly described by modern Kantians as 'contingent'), on the other. Though, as limited beings, we cannot become *immediately* aware of the 'pure drive', we can engage in a progressive process of self-reflection which reveals it to underlie everything which we think and do. As Fichte writes,

> according to the moral law, an empirical temporal being is supposed to become an exact copy of the original I. This temporal being is the conscious subject; something is in this subject only insofar as it is posited by means of a free act of the subject's own self-activity. Moreover, one can comprehend that this positing, these acts of reflection on what originally constituted us [as rational beings], have to fall into a successive temporal series, since they are all limited; and thus it will take some time until everything that is originally in us and for us is raised to the level of clear consciousness. To describe this temporal course of the I's reflections is to provide the history of an empirical rational being.[10]

It is this developmental conception that sets the stage for the explanation of evil which Fichte presents in §16 of his 1798 *System of Ethics*.

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Fichte begins with the idea of being which is free but, as yet, almost entirely lacking in self-awareness. The most obvious example of such a being is a human infant. According to Fichte the small child is 'formally' free – we cannot say, even at the very early stages of life, that all responses to the environment are purely causally determined. The child's spontaneity, and not just its natural constitution, is expressed in the way it responds to things and persons around it. As Fichte puts it, the non-self-aware being, 'is free for an intellect outside himself, but for himself – if only he could be something for

himself – he is only an animal'.[11] When a first level of reflection, of more explicit self-awareness, is achieved, a being formerly sunk in this uncoordinated, impulsive condition becomes conscious of the possibility of choice between different aims. But, on Fichte's account, such choices will still be oriented towards the achievement of 'happiness' (*Glückseligkeit*) through the satisfaction of one's inborn drives. Indeed, for Fichte, many human beings remain stuck at this level, never advancing to a higher stage of reflection, where they grasp that they are subject to a moral law that constrains the ways in which happiness may be pursued. Fichte points out that such an ethical stance may even be formalized and promoted as a philosophical position: he reproaches the materialist thinkers of the French Enlightenment, such as Helvétius, for espousing precisely this debased conception of morality. However, he does not deny that human history and the observation of society supply plenty of evidence to confirm the materialist view of human beings as essentially satisfaction-seeking animals. It is scarcely surprising, then, that many less reflective people will simply conform to the social mores prevailing around them and act on this model. As Fichte remarks, it is *natural* for the human being, without an act of spontaneous reflection, 'to borrow his maxims from the general practice or at least from the practice that seems to him to be the most common and to judge what *ought* to happen on the basis of what *actually happens*'.[12]

If we were guided by the Kantian paradigm, we might expect the next stage of reflection to bring about a shift from domination by natural desires to the freedom of the morally acting self. However, Fichte does not advance directly from the individual dominated by the quest for happiness to the individual fully aware of moral duty. Rather, he suggests, the drive for *Selbständigkeit* (radical self-sufficiency) will first appear 'as something contingent, as something that is present within us simply by chance and for no higher reason'.[13] For this reason, the next advance in reflection gives rise to a distinctive character type who is driven not by the search for happiness, understood as the satisfaction of natural desires, but rather by the need for untrammelled self-assertion. The maxim followed by such an individual is one of 'unlimited and lawless domination over everything outside us'.[14] It is notable that here the object of striving is determined not by the drives, but by the will as such, just as in the case of genuinely moral thinking.[15] Indeed, Fichte admits that, in a certain respect, such an attitude is admirable, and superior to the mere quest for sensuous pleasure – it is typified by those figures whom he terms the 'heroes of our history'. But it is also more dangerous than the motivation of the simple sensualist. In order for the stage of genuine morality to be achieved, the impulse to dominate, which has not yet been reflected upon

(and which, because of this, can still imagine itself to be benevolent), must become accessible to consciousness, transformed into a drive for genuine freedom, rather than remaining an inchoate urge.

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Fichte's theory of moral consciousness has certain advantages over that of Kant. Most obviously, it is *developmental* theory, presenting a picture which appears far closer to empirical moral psychology. With his discussion of the 'heroic' attitude to the world, for example, Fichte introduces a form of consciousness which is lacking in his predecessor's account, and which highlights a recurrent defect of the Kantian approach. Kant tends to assume that what leads us to deviate from the moral law can only be the desire for some kind of natural satisfaction. He has no space for the notion of a self that is driven not by natural desires, nor even by the urge for social superiority and esteem, but rather by a quest for radical self-assertion. Such autarchy may be sought in the form of the dominion of the individual over other individuals, and external circumstances in general, but it is often achieved only at the expense of personal happiness, as normally understood. Hence, in Fichte's characterization, this drive stands simultaneously close to, and remote from, morality. On the one hand, it can be exemplified by the ruthless behaviour of tyrants. But on the other, to become moral, 'a human being has only to raise to clear consciousness this drive to absolute self-sufficiency – which, when it operates as a blind drive, produces a very immoral character – and then . . . simply by means of this very act of reflection, this same drive will transform itself within him into an absolutely commanding law'.[16]

The developmental dimension of Fichte's theory also points up another crucial difference from Kant. In the *Religion* Kant argues that

> The human being (even the worst) does not repudiate the moral law, whatever his maxims, in rebellious attitude (by revoking obedience to it). The law rather imposes itself on him irresistibly, because of his moral predisposition; and if no other incentive were at work against it, he would also incorporate it into his supreme maxim as sufficient determination of his power of choice, i.e. he would be morally good.[17]

In other words, while a human being can decide to prioritize the 'incentives of his sensuous nature' over the moral law, he cannot choose to act against the moral law simply for the sake of the violation itself. For to do so would mean treating the 'incentives which can spring from freedom'[18] (our interest,

as rational beings, in acting autonomously) simultaneously as *counter-*incentives. And, for Kant, this is simply incoherent. He insists that even the most hardened villain must wish, in his heart of hearts, to become the good man he has failed to become.[19] In other words, Kant's denial of the human possibility of a diabolic will (a will which would be unambiguously directed towards evil) is part of his conception of moral experience as a permanent tug-of-war, a conflict between an awareness of the demands of morality, and the pull of our finite, embodied natures.

But in Fichte this inner struggle appears to be absent. He fails to distinguish clearly, for example, between acting against the moral law as a result of succumbing to the allure of an empirical incentive, and acting against the moral law simply *for the sake of* wickedness. In *The System of Ethics* Fichte endorses Kant's view that human beings cannot have a 'diabolical' will. But he then brings forward a perfunctory argument to show, not just that human beings cannot contravene their moral duty merely *because* it is their duty, but that they cannot act against their awareness of duty at all:

> to say that a human being is clearly aware of his duty means that he, as an intellect, absolutely demands of himself that he do something; to say that he decides to act in good consciousness contrary to his duty means that, at the same undivided moment, he demands of himself that he not do the very same thing. At one and the same moment, therefore, these contradictory demands would be placed upon him by one and the same power – a presupposition that annuls itself and involves the clearest and most patent contradiction.[20]

In other words, we can ignore what duty commands us to do only when we fail to recognize it *as* duty.

Fichte's image of the moral life diverges dramatically from that of Kant on this crucial point. Kant regards our moral experience as characterized by incessant struggle between the good and bad principles within us. As long as we remain human, we remain subject to the clash between an awareness of the moral law – however residual – and our desire to pursue our empirically self-centred interests, even at the cost of transgression. It is this ingrained conflict that provides the introspective evidence for 'radical evil'. In Fichte's thought, by contrast, we advance towards a full awareness of the claims of morality through a series of levels of consciousness. A rational being may simply not yet have attained the level of moral reflection – she may still be acting on impulse, on a maxim of self-interest, or pursuing independence in the form of autarchy and domination. Nonetheless, on Fichte's view this conception can actually help to clarify the Kantian claim that 'radical evil

is innate in human beings, and yet has its ground in freedom'.[21] This is because

> it can be predicted and comprehended that a human being will remain at the lower points of reflection for a long time, perhaps even for his entire life, since there is absolutely nothing which drives him higher; and experience confirms that the former is at least the general case. To this extent evil is inborn in human beings. It is nevertheless not necessary that a human being remain on this lower point, since there is also nothing that *keeps* him there.[22]

Evil, then, consists in a failure to apprehend the demands of morality, which itself results from a 'non-use of freedom' (*Nichtgebrauch seiner Freiheit*).[23] This account is marvellously lucid, as far as it goes. But it leaves one major question open: how can a rational being can be held *responsible* for its failure to advance to a higher level of self-consciousness? For without responsibility we have no theory of evil. In §16 of the *Sittenlehre* Fichte grapples repeatedly with this problem.

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Fichte never tires of stressing that the advance from one stage of reflection to the next can only be an act of freedom, an expression of the subject's spontaneous activity: moral insight cannot be compelled. But if the advance in reflection is an act of freedom, its non-occurrence appears to be our responsibility. Nothing constrains a human being to remain on a lower level of reflection, acting on the basis of an inadequate style of maxim, for

> he absolutely *ought to have* raised himself to a higher level of reflection, and he also *could have done* this. He is to blame for not doing this, and hence . . . for the unworthy [*untaugliche*] maxim that flows from his failure to raise himself to a higher level of reflection . . . Hence one is quite correct to judge as follows: in this situation, i.e. with this way of thinking and with this character, this human being simply could not have acted any differently from how he did act. Yet one would be wrong . . . to want to claim that the person in question could not have had a different character than the one he has now. If a human being's present character is unworthy, then he is absolutely supposed to form for himself another character; and he is able to do this, for it depends purely on his own freedom.[24]

But although Fichte's argument may establish that evil is a consequence of our freedom, it is not obvious that it also establishes our *responsibility* for evil, as a comparison with Kant soon makes clear. In the case of the senior thinker,

human moral responsibility results from a combination of two factors. The first is the timeless act of self-choosing, which fixes the basic human moral disposition – a disposition which primes empirical selves to raise their particular interests, at least on some occasions, above the moral law. But the second factor, no less essential, is our awareness of the unconditional claim of the moral law, which makes us feel our inadequacy, even 'humiliates' us, as Kant sometimes says. Without this second factor, it would be hard to see how we, as finite self-conscious beings, could be regarded as responsible for the choice of our fundamental *Gesinnung* – since this is a noumenal event to which we have no access in experience. We become aware of this 'event' only negatively, as it were – through our consciousness of the gulf between our behaviour and what the moral law demands. No matter how deeply embedded the character traits that result in our behaving wrongly may be, we cannot shake off the sense that we *ought* to have done otherwise, that our character should be different, and that we are ultimately responsible not just for what we do, but for who we are.

Now it is striking that there can be no equivalent form of consciousness in Fichte, since the categorical imperative is just the supreme expression of the subject's pure activity, apprehended by the empirical subject as an objective demand. As he states, 'the moral law is by no means the sort of thing that could ever be present in us without our assistance . . . but is instead something that we ourselves first make'.[25] In other words, in Fichte's case, the familiar problems associated with cognitive theories of morality (how can we be held accountable for our ignorance?) are further exacerbated. They become more acute because self-reflection does not raise us to a level at which we are able to grasp some *previously unobserved* moral reality. Rather, this imperative is brought into being only by the act of reflection that grasps it: 'Only through an act of absolute spontaneity does that consciousness arise, and it only remains through the continuation of that act of freedom; if one ceases to reflect, then it disappears.'[26] Thus although, as Fichte stresses, from an external viewpoint I may be regarded as culpable for failing to reflect, and although – having achieved a new level of moral reflection – I can see that I *ought* to have achieved it earlier, the notion of responsibility starts to become elusive. For, as Fichte himself admits, prior to carrying out the act of reflection, there can be no awareness of obligation.[27] Yet how can I be blamed for not doing something, when I can have no notion that I *ought* to do it, until I have actually done it?

But if Fichte has problems in ascribing responsibility to those who have not yet reached the stage of full moral awareness, is he any more successful in accounting for the surrender to evil of those who have already attained this

stage? One major consequence of Fichte's approach, which we have not yet considered, is that the focus of moral awareness is displaced from the categorical imperative to the experience of conscience. On Fichte's view, the categorical imperative is a heuristic device, a means of checking whether what we take conscience as requiring us to do is in fact in conformity with reason. We consider whether we can also will any other person to do the same thing in the same circumstances. But, as Fichte points out, it is still *we* who have to decide whether our maxim can indeed be willed as a universal law; it is *our* moral insight that is decisive. Hence, on his account, 'the formal law of morals [*Sitten*] is as follows: act purely and simply in accordance with your conviction concerning your duty'.[28] The voice of conscience is supreme, since conscientious conviction expresses the 'complete harmony of our empirical I with the pure I',[29] and if everyone's action realized the pure I (which ultimately can be no more yours than mine) then practical harmony would reign.

As we have seen, Fichte flatly denies that we can be fully aware of what conscience commands, and yet choose not to obey it, for this would be both to assert and to deny its validity simultaneously. Hence, on his theory, evil can occur only through the use of strategies that becloud or dilute our awareness of what conscience requires. The *Sittenlehre* lists three principal devices that human beings employ to evade the call of conscience. Firstly, we can distract our minds from the specific action that would be the fulfilment of duty, by imagining that our duty is something else. Secondly, we can acknowledge a moral demand in general but delay, prevaricate, postpone its requirements, fail to admit its relevance to the present case. Finally, we can weaken the notion of duty into something less categorical, such as a recommendation or advice, which no longer has unqualified priority over the other demands of our nature.[30]

If we now ask what makes possible these various obfuscations and evasions of the call of conscience, then Fichte's basic answer is – torpor. As natural entities we tend, like everything natural, to persist in our current state of being. But when this persistence comes into conflict with the drive towards absolute self-activity, it manifests itself as a 'force of inertia' which holds us back from rational exertion. In more explicitly moral terms, this is laziness and cowardice, the human being's 'reluctance to leave his state, a tendency to remain on the habitual track'.[31] We must be committed to a constant moral effort, Fichte insists, in order to prevent such backsliding:

> This is the force of inertia in our own nature. Even the regularity and order of most human beings is nothing other than this propensity toward repose and

toward what is habitual. It always requires some effort to tear oneself loose . . . and if the jolt we receive continues to reverberate, the human being still falls back soon enough into his habitual inertia, just as soon as he stops watching over himself.[32]

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In §16 of *The System of Ethics* Fichte explicitly states his aim of repairing the deficiencies in Kant's theory of evil. He identifies succinctly the difficulty with Kant's appeal to empirical evidence for the innateness of evil, an appeal which has worried philosophers ever since, and clearly states the problem to be solved: 'mere experience, however, would not entitle us to make such a universal presupposition. There must therefore be some rational ground for this claim, though one that does not yield necessity, since that would destroy freedom, but only explains this universal experience.'[33] Yet for Kant the inner struggle of human beings occurs between two possibilities of freedom: we can choose to prioritize the particular or the universal, and in both cases we exercise *Willkür*, though only in second case in conformity with *Wille*. In Fichte, the inner struggle is rather between 'freedom' and the 'non-use of freedom': there is no internal division of the will. Of course, formally speaking, we are still free in not using our freedom. But since we lack awareness of being free at this stage, our condition is equivalent to leading a purely natural existence. Significantly, where Kant talks about the 'radical evil' (*das radikal Böse*) in human nature, Fichte, when propounding his own conception of positive evil, employs the German word '*Übel*'. Although the historic overlaps in meaning are intricate, in modern German '*Übel*' tends to refer less specifically to moral trangression, and more broadly to whatever is amiss, troublesome, disagreeable, nasty, or even sickening. Kant himself attempts a semantic segregation along these lines, connecting '*das Übel*' with '*das Wohl*', and contrasting them as ill-being and well-being, while allotting only to '*das Böse*' a moral meaning, as the opposite of the good (*das Gute*).[34] Fichte, however, overrides this distinction, asserting that it is 'inertia with respect to reflection, and to what follows therefrom: namely, acting in accordance with such a reflection', which would be a 'true, positive, radical ill [*ein wahres, positives, radikales Übel*]'.[35]

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Given the strength of the countervailing forces, we cannot help but ask: why would anyone undertake the arduous effort, and constant self-monitoring, on which Fichte lays so much stress? In Kant our moral striving is bolstered by

the postulates of God and immortality. Unless we have faith in the transcendent reality of these Ideas, we cannot think of the *summum bonum* as a genuine possibility; and if the highest good is not achievable, it makes no sense to think of ourselves morally beholden to strive for it. But as we have seen, this does not mean that, for Kant, the imperative force of the moral law is itself conditional on possessing such a faith. He is convinced of the difficulty of cleaving to morality, in the absence of existentially sustaining faith. But he does not go so far as to claim that it is impossible. As he stresses, his explanation of the role of postulates

> does not imply that it is as necessary to assume the existence of God as it is to recognize the validity of the moral law, and that, consequently, one who is unable to convince himself of the former may deem himself absolved from the obligations imposed by the latter. No! All that must be abandoned in that case is the *aiming at* of the final end in the world to be effectuated by pursuit of the moral law.[36]

At the same time, towards the end of the *Critique of Judgement*, Kant paints a distressing picture of the fate of the noble materialist and atheist, such as Spinoza:

> Deceit, violence and envy will always surround him, although he himself be honest, peaceable, and kindly; and the righteous men with whom he meets will, notwithstanding all their worthiness of happiness, be yet subjected by nature, which regards not this, to all the evils of want, disease and untimely death, just like the beasts of the earth. So it will be until one wide grave engulfs them together (honest or not, it makes no difference) and throws them back – who were able to believe themselves the final purpose of creation – into the abyss of the purposeless chaos of matter from which they were drawn.[37]

After this powerful evocation of futility, Kant concludes his discussion with the claim that respect for the moral law will inevitably be weakened by lack of faith in God.[38]

Kant can hold rational faith and morality apart in this way because he does not regard our conviction of the categorical force of moral imperatives as sufficient to secure obedience to them. Describing this Kantian view from another perspective, we could say that the specifically religious postulates build a bridge between the quest of self-conscious, embodied existence for happiness and the claim of practical reason, which pull in different directions. But in Fichte's thought the moral law does not bear down upon the empirical self. Rather the moral law is the objectified form of our awareness of the activity of the absolute

'I'; and this activity, of which our natural drives are limited, proleptic expressions, is its own end – it finds complete fulfilment within itself. Hence no question mark hangs over whether what Kant terms the '*summum bonum*' is possible, for in behaving morally we are already making it actual. Or, to put this in another way, action aimed at bringing about a future state of affairs already expresses the consciousness that such a state of affairs can be achieved, subject only to the limitation of time. As Fichte writes in his 1799 essay 'On the Basis of our Belief in a Divine Governance of the World':

> To the extent that I seize upon that purpose which is posited by my own essential being, and transform it into the purpose of my action, I simultaneously posit its carrying out as possible through real action. Both propositions are identical: for setting something before myself as a purpose means: I posit it as real in some future time; but if reality is posited, possibility is necessarily posited with it.[39]

Fichte takes it, then, that unshakeable confidence in what he calls a 'moral world order', guaranteeing the achievability of morality's ultimate purpose, is expressed in our practical commitment to morality: it is not a supplementary item of faith to which we may or may not adhere. Furthermore, he asserts without ambiguity: 'That living and working moral order is itself God'.[40] To the objection that we can point to examples of moral atheists, Fichte has a striking response:

> The faith described is a practical faith, and it is entirely possible that it does not enter the consciousness of he who possesses it. The true believer affirms: I believe in the possibility of the realization of the moral law. He always assumes this progressive improvement of the human race in acting, and consequently also an ongoing, constant cause of the unimpeded advance in the furthering of the purpose of reason.[41]

In short, since freedom, pure self-activity, is the transcendental condition of all practical consciousness, the conviction of its reality can be deduced as implicit in all such consciousness. Faith or belief (*Glaube*) does not consist – for Fichte – in a commitment to propositions that have less than full evidential support. Rather it is prior to and foundational for all knowledge; it lies deeper than the epistemic contrast of the true and the false: 'That I ought, and what I ought, is the first, the most immediate. This needs no further explanation, justification, authorization; it is known by itself and true by itself. It is grounded and determined through no other truth; but all other truth is determined rather through this.'[42]

It not difficult to see, given the climate of the times, why the issue of the journal co-edited by Fichte containing 'On the Basis of our Belief in a Divine Governance of the World' was ordered to be confiscated by the political authorities, provoking a furore which eventually resulted in his sacking from the University of Jena for atheism. Fichte has done away with the idea of a personal God, even in the etiolated sense in which Kant acknowledges it. God is neither a 'particular substance' nor a transcendent entity, nor even a postulated one; he has no consciousness or personality, since these are attributable only to finite beings. Rather he is the moral *ordo ordinans*, the 'higher law' which is always already at work in my good actions.[43] We can understand why Fichte moves in this direction. For to imagine God as a noumenal agent, who – as the author of both nature and morality – is able to engineer the convergence of their laws, would fatally compromise human freedom. Yet it is also difficult not to regard Fichte's development of Kant's line of thought, despite its immanent logic, as a trivialization of the problem of evil. Fichte expresses his supreme moral confidence in a conventional formula: 'Thou shalt not lie, even if the world should collapse in ruins as a result'.[44] But he then hastens to add that this is merely a 'figure of speech': 'if you were seriously to believe it would fall apart, then your being would be contradictory and self-annihilating'.[45] But can we actually rule out this possibility? Might not a lie one day prevent an all-out nuclear war? Can the moral life really be so straightforward?

If Kant's conception of a moral author of the world falls under suspicion of offering false consolation, if his notion of a postulate sways uneasily between quasi-knowledge of a transcendent reality and beneficent fiction, then Fichte's claim that the empirical world 'has not the least influence on the moral and the immoral' surely downplays the intractability of the human situation. We can have confidence, Fichte asserts, that 'every truly good action succeeds, every evil one certainly fails'.[46] But, as Peter Rohs has pointed out, since Fichte's final purpose of the world is not the proportionality of happiness and virtue, but the entire absorption of nature into self-conscious activity, it is difficult to see what the distinction between successful and unsuccessful action consists in. After all, it is not as though nature can fundamentally thwart human purposes; for, as Fichte declares, 'The world is nothing other than the view of our own inner activity, as pure intelligence, rendered sensible according to comprehensible laws of reason, within incomprehensible limits.'[47] Furthermore, even if a triumphant 'moral image of the world' were to flow automatically from obedience to conscience, Fichte still has the problem of explaining how human beings are to achieve this level of moral commitment in the first place. For despite his rejection of the Kantian noumenal 'power of choice', he is not able to resolve the paradox of a self-imprisoning freedom – the problem which led

Kant to appeal to the notion of 'grace'. Sometimes Fichte suggests that the drive to self-activity will assert itself in each individual in the long run, if there are no countervailing forces such as social habit. Yet his theory of evil gives reason to doubt this. For, as he states, in the *System of Ethics*, a human being held back by laziness and habit 'always ought to tear himself loose from this state [of inertia]; and if one considers him to be absolutely free then he is also *able* to do this. Before he can freely tear himself loose, however, he must first be free. But it is precisely this freedom that is fettered; the very force through which he is supposed to help himself is allied against him.'[48]

How is this vicious circle to be broken open? Ironically, Fichte finds himself appealing to 'a true miracle' (*ein wahres Wunder*) – exemplified by 'those human beings in whom the moral sense . . . has developed from inside' – in order to resolve the paradox.[49] So although he rejects any appeal to the super-natural machinery of 'grace', of the kind to which Kant has resort, there is room to doubt whether he makes the possibility of moral transformation any more comprehensible. Fichte admits that exceptional individuals who somehow achieve this miracle, such as the founders of religions, will tend to attribute their achievement to 'a spiritual, and intelligible being outside of themselves'.[50] From the point of view of the moral inspiration that their example provides to the religion's followers, this attribution is a matter of no concern. But Fichte asserts that it makes *theoretical* (as opposed to religious) sense only if, in referring to 'themselves', such moral pioneers intend merely the 'empirical I'. The implication, then, is that it is the 'absolute I' which achieves the moral transformation – but by the end of his discussion of evil, Fichte has still not really told us how.

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It is noteworthy that Kant, who did not in theory rise to a transcendental act determining all human existence, was led in later investigations by sheer faithful observation of the phenomena of moral judgement to the recognition of a subjective basis of human conduct (as he expressed it) which preceded every act within the range of the senses, but which, in turn, had itself to be an act of freedom. On the other hand Fichte, who had speculatively grasped the concept of such an act, reverted in his theory of morals to the current philanthropism and was content to find this evil (which precedes all empirical action) only in the inertia of human nature.[51]

This assessment comes in the course of the most celebrated treatment of evil in the canon of German Idealism, Schelling's treatise 'On the Essence of Human Freedom', first published in 1809. During the early, meteoric phase

of his career (he was appointed to a chair in Jena in 1798, before he was out of his twenties), Schelling had regarded himself as a follower of Fichte; he did not cease to acknowledge the importance of Fichte's advances, even in lectures on the history of modern philosophy which he gave much later in life.[52] As a young thinker, Schelling accepted Fichte's central claim that the Kantian revolution remained unfinished, and that the way to complete the breakthrough was by uniting theoretical and practical reason in the concept of the absolute or 'self-positing' I. Nonetheless, by the mid-1790s, Schelling was becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the one-sided character of Fichte's presentation of this advance. He fully accepted the systematic ideal to which the post-Kantians aspired (a comprehensive account of how the divergent, seemingly incommensurable dimensions of the world disclosed in human experience ultimately cohere). And he also accepted that such integration could be achieved only if the system could be derived from a single principle. But Schelling was convinced that, by definition, such a principle could not be allied with one facet of the reality to be made perspicuous. In his view, Fichte's transcendental idealism could not give adequate weight to the independent being and dynamic inner structure of the natural world; the concept of the self-positing I, in which Fichte believed he had discovered 'the absolute identity of the subject and the object',[53] the point of intersection of thought and reality, was marred by a residual subjectivism. These considerations led Schelling to probe beyond the limits of Fichte's method, which focused on the transcendental deduction of those features of experience functionally indispensable for self-consciousness. He did so by posing the question of the natural preconditions (though not, of course, the causation) of the self-awareness which a pure transcendental philosophy must assume as its point of departure. The answer, he believed, required working out a philosophy of nature, intended to run parallel with the transcendental theory of experience. But by the early 1800s Schelling had abandoned this awkward, twin-track approach in favour of what he called 'identity philosophy' (*Identitätsphilosophie*). He now realized that all metaphysical polarities (subjectivity/objectivity, ideality/reality, mind/nature, and so on) must be treated as derivative, as subsidiary to the absolute or the unconditioned.

For a brief historical moment the notion of absolute identity appeared to have resolved the fundamental problems of metaphysics.[54] These utopian flashes occur in the history of thought from time to time. But in fact, as Schelling soon discovered, his new monism generated its own severe difficulties. To see this, one only has to consider that the opposition of freedom and necessity is also abolished in the absolute. It soon became apparent to Schelling that the collapse of *this* dualism posed a threat to freedom – the very freedom

whose formulation as autonomy had driven the Kantian revolution in the first place. For a process that is 'free' in the sense of not being externally determined, but unfolding in accordance with its own immanent law, is nonetheless not free in the morally significant sense – capable of spontaneous willing, without causal antecedents. From this point onwards, Schelling's thought moves back towards the notion of the 'subject' as the basis of the system. For, as he came to realize, if freedom is to be preserved, the world cannot flow with necessity from its ultimate ground. Rather, the process of coming-into-being must itself *be* the manifestation of freedom, of pure willing. As Schelling famously states in the treatise on human freedom (*Freiheitsschrift*): 'Will is primordial being, and all predicates of such being apply to it alone – groundlessness, eternity, independence of time, self-affirmation.'[55] Reality is the activity of a subject, but this subject is no longer to be blended confusingly, as in Fichte's thought, with the finite subject of action and reflection. Rather, we are dealing with the 'absolute subject', or he who – traditionally – has been known as 'God'. As Schelling declared in his 'Stuttgart Private Lectures', delivered a year after the publication of the treatise on freedom, 'the entire process of the creation of the world – which still lives on in the life process of nature and history – is in effect nothing but the process of the complete coming-to-consciousness, the complete personalization of God'.[56]

Schelling's new struggle to preserve both the moral significance of freedom and the metaphysical scope of the identity philosophy is evident in his unfavourable comparison of Fichte with Kant. By 1809 he had reached the realization that human freedom, taken seriously, must be a capacity to choose between good *and* evil – and that evil, as Kant had argued, involves an inversion of the predominance of universal over particular, undermining the regulation of impulses and desires within the moral personality. However, in line with his extension of the concept of will, Schelling perceives the adumbration of this disruption also within the natural world, as counterposed, yet interdependent, ontological tendencies become twisted into logically inconsistent relations to each other. By reducing evil to mere inertia, a resistance to the self-assertion of freedom, Fichte fails to take this possibility of inversion, and hence of cosmic and moral disorder, seriously.

Schelling, in other words, moves back towards the Kantian concept of a complex – potentially conflictual – relation between *Wille* and *Willkür*, between the universality of practical reason and the spontaneity of the individual self. But now the difficulties posed by this dual theory of the will are multiplied. For Kant regarded the systematic coherence of our conception of the world only as a regulative idea – a demand of reason towards which we can continually advance, but which we can never entirely achieve. For Schelling

however, as for the other great Idealists, system must be *actual*: the world exists, and in order to exist, it must – at least in its fundamental features – cohere. He begins the 'Stuttgart Private Seminars' with the question: 'To what extent is a system ever possible? I would answer that long before man decided to create a system there already existed one, the system of the world.'[57] The Kantian dichotomy of *Wille* and *Willkür* must therefore be re-thought, so that the ground and origin of this division of the will, and thereby the possibility of its eventual overcoming, become perspicuous. Otherwise we will find ourselves inhabiting a world whose moral darkness is redoubled by its unintelligibility.

The problem confronting Schelling can also be put in another way. For Fichte the self is unitary activity. Human beings cannot be cobbled together out of an empirical psychology governed by natural causality and a core of transcendental freedom. Even our material bodies and their movements are the expression, in the objective world, of the process which is experienced subjectively as willing.[58] And even the most basic corporeal drives are unself-conscious expressions of the thrust of the empirical 'I' towards freedom, towards becoming the pure self-determining activity that, from the transcendental standpoint, it always already is. The self is essentially 'pure drive', practical reason, striving to realize itself in ever more adequate ways. Hence, for Fichte, to accept that there could be a fundamental diremption in willing – that our volition could pull us in incompatible directions – would be equivalent to a denial of the unity of the self. As he states, 'It cannot be too strongly stressed that a rational being is not something arbitrarily composed from heterogeneous pieces but is a whole; if one removes one of its necessary components, then one removes them all.'[59] This is why he insists that the commands of conscience cannot be both recognized and ignored, and that, above conscience, there can be no further court of appeal. By contrast Schelling expresses sympathy for the Kantian view that an inaugural act of freedom can establish – and in the case of human beings, *has* established – a subjective basis for action contrary to the ethical, in other words contrary to reason itself. The human will pulls in two directions at once: towards the realization of positive freedom, but also towards its rejection. But why should we ever shun the adequate realization of our freedom, and with it the Kantian 'kingdom of ends', the prospect of harmonious coexistence with our fellow human beings? What is the attraction of evil?

Schelling realizes – along with Fichte – that Kant gives no adequate answer to this question. Hence, in the *Freiheitsschrift*, he has to fulfil a twofold task. He must endeavour to explain how the will can become divided against itself, inclined to thwart its own push towards integral freedom, while acknowledg-

ing Fichte's insight that the self must be, in the last analysis, a unitary phe-
nomenon. And at the same time he must offer an account of why this
self-division is almost inevitably bound to occur; he must explain its univer-
sality without asserting its necessity. The *Hang zum Bösen* must be an expres-
sion of freedom, not of the 'non-use of freedom', as Fichte had suggested: the
notions of inertia or laziness can never be adequate to explain the virulence
of evil. But evil cannot, as Kant suggested, be simply the result of a groundless
individual act of self-choice, about which there is nothing further to be said.
For then its pervasiveness remains a mystery.

To put this central issue from one final angle, the problems encountered
by Kant's theory of evil stem from the way he distinguishes between *Wille*
('will') and *Willkür* ('power of choice'). For, as he puts it in the Introduction
to *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 'the will, which is directed to nothing beyond
the law itself, cannot be called either free or unfree'.[60] Only choice, Kant goes
on to say, can be described as free. And yet, on his account, choice can be free
only when it subjects itself to the moral law, since it is only through our
experience of ourselves as moral agents that freedom evinces its reality at all:
there are no grounds for regarding oneself as free when driven by natural
desire. Yet at the same time, unless there is a genuine, non-predetermined
choice between alternatives, between right and wrong, placing oneself under
the moral law cannot itself be an act of freedom. From the theoretical stand-
point, therefore, we cannot understand how morality can be the realization
of freedom, while from the practical standpoint we cannot understand how
free choice can result in moral transgression. As Kant puts it:

> although experience shows us that man as a *sensible being* has the capacity to
> choose *in opposition to* as well as *in conformity with* the law, his freedom as an
> *intelligible being* cannot be *defined* by this, since appearances cannot make any
> supersensible object (such as free choice) understandable. We can also see that
> freedom can never be located in a rational subject's being able to make a choice
> in opposition to his (lawgiving) reason, even though experience proves often
> enough that happens (though we still cannot conceive how this is possible).[61]

Schelling's response to this aporia is to assert that 'the real and vital con-
ception of freedom is that it is a possibility of good and evil'.[62] But he also
realizes that, in order to make good on this definition we must cease to think
dualistically, consigning freedom to noumenal exile from a world structured
by mechanistic causality. We must understand nature 'in itself' as teleologi-
cally structured, for only in purposiveness can causality and freedom be
metaphysically reconciled. Yet at the same time, to account for the conflict of

what Schelling calls the 'universal will' and the 'particular will' (the philo-
sophical descendants of Kant's *Wille* and *Willkür*), we also need to think of
this purposiveness as pulling in two opposed, even contradictory, directions.
We must come to see why the world is agitated by a fundamental rift.

Schelling's key to addressing these problems is the ingenious twist which
he gives to the traditional notion of God as *causa sui* ('cause of himself').
Schelling takes this formula to mean that God contains his own cause, but is
not *identical* with this cause. Even God must suffer from an inner duality
because 'everything can become manifest only through its opposite, i.e. iden-
tity through non-identity, difference and distinguishable principles',[63] and – as
we have seen – for Schelling the world as a whole is the process of God mani-
festing himself. But although it is not too difficult to appreciate the force of
this argument for a contrastive condition of disclosure in the case of finite
things, God's infinity produces a problematic pattern of *internal* exclusion,
since he must *encompass* the contrast on which he depends. As Schelling
writes, 'God contains himself in an inner basis of his existence, which, to this
extent, precedes him as to his existence, but similarly God is prior to the basis
as this basis, as such, could not be if God did not exist in actuality.'[64]

This formulation makes clear that Schelling's innovation does not solve the
problem of circularity raised by the notion of being who is *causa sui*. Rather,
it identifies a necessary fracture *within* this circularity. For Schelling, as abso-
lute idealist, the problematic status of God cannot merely reflect the limits of
finite thinking, but must internally mark him. In conventional monotheism
he is regarded as 'a particular, isolated, unique and entirely self-contained
essence, thereby separating Him from all creation'; pantheism, by contrast,
'dissolves Him into a universal substance that is merely the vehicle of all
things'.[65] An adequate conception of God, however, must understand him in
both of these ways. We can accommodate these conflicting views only if we
think that for God to *exist* as the essence of all things, as opposed to being
merely a lifeless universal, an abstraction from them, he must be 'grounded
in, as it were supported by, God as an *individual essence*; *the individual in God
is thus the basis or foundation of the universal*'.[66]

Schelling then develops an account of this relation of ground and existence
as an interplay between two wills – the universal will and the particular will,
or the 'will of love' and the 'will of the basis'. The second of these is manifest
in the contractive, involuted, singularizing movement, which underpins all
existence by making it determinate, while the first is revealed in that outflow-
ing, communicative thrust, the striving to escape the prison of selfhood
through merger, which is existence itself. Part of what Schelling is seeking here
is a more fluid, more dialectical version of the time-honoured but problematic

distinction between universals and particulars. Reality is now characterized by a particularizing and a universalizing directionality or striving (implied in the metaphor of 'will'), rather than by a stark metaphysical dichotomy. Nonetheless, this split cannot be overcome entirely if we continue to assume – even from an absolute standpoint – two discrete wills tending in contrary directions. Hence we must presuppose what Schelling terms a 'doubling [*Doublirung*] of the essence'.[67] While the 'will of the basis' is fundamentally an inward-turning spiral, it also strives to disclose itself as this involution (for a nakedly particular subject of predication, without any predicate, would be *as* nothing). Correlatively, the will of love strives for disclosure, for communication, yet can reveal itself only *through* the particular (a predicate, a universal, never instantiated in some determinate thing, remains merely an abstraction). At the same time, each form of the will is threatened by absorption into its opposite, and therefore seeks to overcome it, giving rise to a contradictory, oscillating movement:

> If love wished to break the will of the depths, it would be in conflict with itself, it would be in disunion with itself and would no longer be love . . . Neither, to be sure, can the will of the basis destroy love, nor does it desire this, though it often seems so . . . The basis is only a will to revelation, but just in order that the latter may come to pass the former must call forth distinctiveness and contrast.[68]

For Schelling, it is this antagonism that lies at the heart of the dynamic process of nature. The dialectic of attraction and repulsion sways back and forth in ever-widening arcs. The more distinct love and the basis become, the more they long for each other, giving rise to the progressively more complex forms of mineral, plant, and animal existence. This development culminates in the emergence of the human being – in whom the distinction of ground and existence has become fully explicit and self-conscious. Human beings, in other words, are uniquely aware of the gap between their status as particular embodied beings, and their capacity for freely chosen existence. We exist in an edgy, unstable relationship to ourselves, which we struggle to bring into equilibrium – and it is this self-relatedness that Schelling calls 'spirit' (*Geist*).

The high tension across the gap between basis and existence is not itself evil; it merely sets the stage for its emergence. Certainly, Schelling sees the unquenchable conflict of will and basis expressed in the imperfection, melancholy, and latent chaos of nature. Particular things struggle – and always fail – adequately to instantiate the universal. He even goes so far as to state that

'evil is, of course, nothing other than the primal basis of existence insofar as it strives towards actualisation in created beings, and thus it is in fact only the higher potency of the basis operating in nature'.[69] But Schelling also stresses that although this '*universal* evil' strives towards realization in nature, it can never achieve it.[70] Natural organisms cannot subordinate the universal to the particular aspect of their being since – in their teleologically structured life-process – these two dimensions are inextricably intertwined: each individual part both serves the purpose of the whole and is sustained by it. Only in the case of human beings are things otherwise. Typically, in human beings, the particular will seeks to dominate the process to which it should surrender, to turn the universal will into the basis of the basis. Yet why should this occur? Why should the singularity of the 'I' strive to constrain its own expansive movement of self-communication?

Schelling's answer is: out of fear of the groundlessness of freedom, anxiety at losing oneself in an outflowing of love.

> It is God's will to universalise everything, to lift it to unity with light or to preserve it therein; but the will of the deep is to particularize everything or to make it creature-like. It wishes differentiation only so that identity may become evident to itself and to the will of the deep. Therefore it necessarily reacts against freedom as against what is above the creature, and awakens in it the desire for what is creature – just as he who is seized by dizziness on a high and precipitous summit seems to hear a mysterious voice calling to him to plunge down.[71]

This reaction is almost inevitable, Schelling suggests, because of what he calls the 'anguish of life' (*die Angst des Lebens*): existence, in its pure freedom, threatens me with loss of identity. But we could also put the anxiety the other way around. The only way to deal with our troubling facticity, with the opaque contingency of our natural basis, is to treat it as if it were itself the whole of existence, to subordinate our freedom to it. Evil arises through this inversion.

As we have noted, with these audacious speculations, Schelling is struggling to rework the distinction between *Wille* and *Willkür* that lay at the heart of Kant's theory of evil. The unanswered question bequeathed by Kant was: why should the noumenal self, beginning from a point of indifference, choose to prioritize the pursuit of its own desires over obedience to the moral law, given that – according to Kant – freedom in the positive sense, freedom as rational autonomy, can be realized only through moral obedience. Try as he might, Kant is unable to explain the 'pull' of our finite embodied nature, given that no incentive can have an impact on the will,

can inflect our volition, except as incorporated into a maxim. This is the price he pays, we could say, for his realization that the idea of a conflict between nature and freedom is incoherent.[72] But, from Schelling's point of view, Kant's difficulties arise from an inadequate conception of nature. Indeed, we can see now why Schelling makes the claim that 'Only after recognising evil in its universal character is it possible to comprehend good and evil in man too'.[73] At first glance, this may seem like a philosophical regression, a distraction from Kant's sober focus on moral evil, and a return to the pre-critical notion of a *malum metaphysicum*. But Schelling's point is rather the opposite: that the drama of human selfhood is played out proleptically in the natural world, in the ontological tussle between the particularity of each thing's being, and 'universal will' (*Universalwille*) which sustains all; or, to put this in another way, that the human achievement of fully reflective self-consciousness cannot cancel the fact that 'existence', as he asserts, 'is ownness, is separation' (*Existenz ist Eigenheit, ist Absonderung*).[74] Kant finds resistance to the moral law only in the demands of our sensuous nature (endorsed within a maxim), and finds nothing strange in identifying human personality with respect for the categorical imperative, despite its complete *im*personality. For Schelling, however, as Michelle Kosch has put it, 'being a self is *itself* a temptation, and a nearly overwhelming one'.[75] In this perspective, what is most compelling about our desires is not that, when fulfilled, they bring us certain kinds of satisfaction, but rather that they individuate us, make us who we are. Some of our desires, it is true, may not square with our core sense of self; we may feel we would be better off without them, and even make efforts to shed them. But we cannot make sense of who we are independently of *any* repertoire of desires: we cannot regard them *all* as equally 'contingent' accoutrements of the rational self, as latter-day Kantians often invite us to do.[76]

For Schelling, however, the tug of particular desires does not pose an inherent threat to a core value called 'autonomy', since he does not locate moral goodness in a will structured by the moral law. Schelling's 'universal will' does not take legal form; it is rather comparable to the teleological principle which patterns the life of an organism, and therefore cannot be abstracted from the configuration of particulars in which it finds embodiment. Similarly, the particular will is not simply the drive towards separateness and introversion; it is also the longing of selfhood to *be*, though escaping its own opacity, opening itself up, revealing itself. This view contrasts sharply with Kant's conception, in which *Willkür* is merely the motor for actions which, as one condition of being good, must exemplify the rational legislation of *Wille*. Schelling states:

> If evil consists in strife between the two principles, then the good can only consist in their complete accord . . . The relation of the two is not to be conceived as arbitrary morality or one derived from self-determination. The latter concept presupposed that they were not, in themselves, one; but how can they become one if they are not? . . . The relation of the two principles is that the dark principle (selfhood) is bound to the light.[77]

Ethical goodness, then, does not require us to act in a detachedly rational manner, for 'He is not conscientious who, in a given case, must first hold the command of duty before himself in order to decide to do right because of his respect for it.'[78] Rather, it involves putting the energy of our selfhood at the service of the universal life, 'just as the quiet will in the calm depths of nature is also universal will precisely because it stays in the depths'.[79] In this process 'the dark principle of selfhood and self-will is completely penetrated by light and is one with it'[80] – though it is not dissolved or abolished. Yet all the same, from the standpoint of selfhood, this submerging and fusion is dreaded as if it spelled extinction. Hence the pervasive human urge to be nothing but creature, the pull towards autistic self-enclosure.

But we now need to face the recurrent question: if this urge is so pervasive, so ineluctable, how we can be held answerable for it at all? Kant preserved our responsibility for evil by admitting that its universality was philosophically inscrutable; Schelling, in seeking to disclose the metaphysical basis of evil, may appear to risk relieving us of this responsibility. Yet in fact Schelling insists, no less than Kant, that 'evil remains man's own choice; the basis cannot cause evil as such, and every creature falls through its own guilt'.[81] In opposition to Fichte's theory of evil as the result of natural inertia, he takes up the Kantian conception of a timeless choice of intelligible character, manifested in our empirical decisions.[82] Only this notion of noumenal self-choosing, Schelling contends, can explain the curious intermingling of freedom and necessity that we experience in our moral evaluation of ourselves. Our choices flow from who we are; they are not simply haphazard or arbitrary. Yet at the same time we cannot help but regard ourselves as responsible for them. We must conclude, then, that 'The act which determines man's life in time does not itself belong in time but in eternity. Moreover it does not precede life in time but occurs throughout time (untouched by it) as an act external by its own nature.'[83] Schelling realizes that the possibility of moral conversion poses grave problems for this view (problems in which Kant became entangled). But his response is to cut the Gordian knot by asserting that conversion, if it occurs, must itself be a consequence of the inaugural self-choice:

However if it happens that human or divine aid – for some aid man always needs – determines him to change his conduct to the good, the fact that man accepts this influence of the good, and does not positively shut it out from him – this fact is also to be found in that initial act because of which he is this individual and not another.[84]

Since, for Schelling, noumenal freedom manifests itself precisely through the individual's life in time, he is not faced with the difficulty of relating intelligible character (which, according to Kant, can *only* be good or evil) to empirical character, of correlating the temporality of moral struggle with a punctual, para-temporal conversion from bad to good. Noumenal freedom is abyssal: it is the ground of all determination, and so cannot be determined even by radical acts of self-choosing. Hence for Schelling even the 'letting-act-in-him of the good or evil principle' is the 'consequence' of the human being's intelligible deed, but is not identical with it.[85]

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The clash between Fichte and Schelling over the philosophy of evil embodies options that are still very much alive today. Fichte's confidence in the power of reason is continued in the contemporary conviction that, if we apply sufficient knowledge and political determination, we can – in principle – organize the collective life of humankind on the basis of peace and justice. The failure to grasp what the 'ethical drive', the core of our subjectivity, demands can be put down to laziness, complacency, lack of reflection: obstacles that can be overcome, since there is no fundamental conflict between human beings' rational perception of their interests and the interests of reason. Since Fichte's approach seeks to overcome the Kantian dualism of causality and freedom, he is not forced to take recourse to quasi-theological notions of 'Providence' or the tacit purposes of Nature, in order to bridge the gap between moral intentions and the mechanisms of human history. His outlook seems to converge with the hopes of modern, secular progressivism, and to express the moral commitment required to help bring about humankind's improvement. By contrast, Schelling's figurative, anthropomorphic discourse sinks a shaft into the unsoundable depths of being. His insistence on the tendency of the particular will to pervert the universal will, and on the ground of existence as an 'irreducible remainder which cannot be resolved into reason'[86] suggests the need for religious hope – faith in an ultimate triumph of the good, which cannot be achieved by the power of reason (embodied in the world's 'system') alone.

But these initial appearances may be deceptive. For although Fichte denies that the course of nature has a ground that is independent of the absolute I, of self-consciousness in general, he is only too aware that – from our individual, finite perspectives – there is no obvious correlation between moral purposes and the way in which the world unfolds. As he asks in *The Vocation of Man*:

> But is my intention always fulfilled? Does it take no more than to will the best in order to make it happen? Oh, most good resolutions are completely lost for this world, and others seem to work even against the purpose one had in mind for them. On the other hand, people's most despicable passions, their vices, and their misdeeds very often bring about the better more surely than the efforts of the righteous person who never wants to do evil so that good may result from it.[87]

In this text, published in 1800, the year after his forced resignation from the University of Jena and his move to Berlin, Fichte abandons his attempt to deduce the moral law as the intelligibly objective form of the self's pure activity, and returns to something analogous to the Kantian 'fact of reason'. However, this fact now takes the form of a consciousness of moral obligation inherent in my worldly encounter with other subjects:

> I am aware of appearances in space to which I transfer the concept of myself; I think of them as beings like myself. Speculative philosophy, taken to its conclusion, has taught me or will teach me that these supposed rational beings outside of me are nothing but products of my own mind, that I just happen to be compelled, according to demonstrable laws of my thought, to present the concept of myself outside of myself . . . But the voice of conscience calls to me: whatever these beings may be in and for themselves, you ought to treat them as self-subsistent, free, autonomous beings completely independent of you.[88]

Conscience now trumps philosophical speculation, indeed 'Truth has its origin in conscience alone'.[89]

From this starting point, Fichte sketches an astonishing prospective philosophy of history. He begins by acknowledging that, from the standpoint of experience, efforts aimed at the moral improvement of society seem futile:

> It is still nowhere possible to propose any improvement without stirring up a host of the most varied self-seeking purposes and inciting them to war . . . Evil entices each individual with the promise which is the most tempting for him, and the perverted, though they constantly quarrel with each other, declare a

truce as soon as the good comes into view and move against it with the combined strength of their perdition.[90]

Furthermore, even those of good will often fail to agree on the best policy and fall into rivalry, accusing each other of betrayal. Yet experience, Fichte insists, cannot have the last word: 'Will [it] go on forever? Never – unless the whole of human existence is a purposeless and meaningless game.'[91] From the practical standpoint, the standpoint of faith, we can be confident that the 'ruling classes' will eventually provoke their own overthrow, and that a polity of free and equal citizens, determined never to return to the past, will be established. In the interests of its own security, this state will be compelled to spread its example to others, so that 'once only a few truly free states have come to be, the domain of culture and freedom, and with it universal peace, will gradually encompass the whole earth.'[92] Furthermore, within the civil constitution demanded by reason 'evil shows no advantages but rather the surest disadvantages, and the outbreak of self-love into unjust acts will be suppressed by self-love itself. Because of the unerring administration in such a state, every privilege and suppression of others . . . will even turn against its author who will inevitably suffer the evil he had intended for another.'[93] The potential for evil, then, will finally be extinguished by political and legal means.

Fichte's vision of the future presupposes faith in a 'universal will' which is expressed through the conscientious actions of individuals, but it does not depend on belief in the agency of a personal God. All the same, it would be hard not to describe it as religious, given his conviction that – despite all appearances – there can be no irreducible obstacle to humankind's advance towards the realization of its rational destiny. And it therefore raises the question: do contemporary political and moral perspectives which implicitly rely on the same confidence not also have something religious about them? Do they not silently share Fichte's conviction that, unless we are making progress, and unless progress can never come to a stop, 'it would not be worth the trouble of having lived, of having played this ever-recurring game that goes nowhere and means nothing'?[94] And does not this conviction imply a *transcendent* hope in the ultimate convergence of empirical reality and the highest good? In Fichte's ideal republic 'unerring administration' will render evil simply unprofitable, counterproductive. Will the members of this administration, then, never experience moral temptation themselves?

In contrast to Fichte, from his earliest publications Schelling resisted the idea of the primacy of practical reason, and hence the theory of postulates

which follows from it. In the *Freiheitsschrift* he argues that Fichte, in proposing the notion of a moral world order, 'immediately fell into contradictions and untenable assertions'.[95] But it could be said that Schelling's strategy, in the *Freiheitsschrift*, is not simply to overcome these contradictions. Rather, he displaces them to the interior of the divine life, arguing that there is 'a tendency working against the will to revelation'[96] within God himself. God also suffers from the elemental division between 'being insofar as it is basis, and being insofar as it exists'.[97] Yet at the end of his treatise, Schelling inevitably confronts the question: what is the relation between these two modes of being? If we deny that they have any common ground, then the result is an 'absolute dualism'.[98] But, as he remarks, dualism is a 'system of self-destruction and the absolute despair of reason',[99] since it begins from a division that resists any further explanation. Yet if we regard basis and existence as having a common source, we seem obliged to assume an ultimate identity not just of basic logical and metaphysical categories such as the universal and the particular, the ideal and the real, but also of contraries such as freedom and necessity, good and evil. Such an identity is not only morally intolerable, but also suffers, as Schelling puts it, from 'all the inconsistent consequences which must befall any intellectualistic system'.[100]

Schelling's response to this dilemma is to suggest that the duality of basis and existence does indeed have a precondition, but one which should not be viewed as a 'common ground', since this suggests that oppositions are overcome within it. Rather this precondition must be described as the 'un-ground' (*Un-grund*), since it is logically prior to all grounding, and all existence. We must not imagine, Schelling insists, that the un-ground *contains* the principles of ground and existence, though as yet undistinguished. For it is a mistake to continue predicating distinctions of an indifference which is defined by their cancellation. Indifference, he argues, 'is not a product of antitheses, nor are they implicitly contained in it, but it is a unique being, apart from all antitheses, in which all distinctions break up'.[101] Ground and existence can both be predicated of the 'un-ground', since 'its relation towards both is a relation of total indifference', but only as 'non-antitheses, that is, in disjunction and each *for itself*'.[102] The un-ground, we might say, provides the common logical space within which ground and existence must be placed in order to be contrasted at all. As Schelling writes, '*without* indifference, that is *without* the un-ground, there would be no twofoldness of the principles'.[103] But he also insists that this does not mean that the contrast itself is a merely conceptual one. Rather, the un-ground divides into 'two equally eternal beginnings, not that it is both *at the same time* but that it is both *in the same way*, as the whole in each, or a unique essence'.[104] One striking consequence of this construction is that God

himself is demoted to a secondary, dependent position. The un-ground, Schelling suggests, 'divides itself only that there may be life and love and personal existence',[105] and God now becomes the encompassing manifestation of these possibilities.

The contemporary pertinence of Schelling's train of thought is underlined by the similar disempowerment of the divine proposed by the Jewish philosopher Hans Jonas in his celebrated essay 'The Concept of God after Auschwitz'. For Jonas, after the evil of the Holocaust, we can no longer hold together God's supreme power, his benevolence, and his intelligibility. Since to deny God's goodness would contradict his very concept, and since Jewish tradition insists that God's purposes are knowable, at least in part, it is the attribute of omnipotence that must be abandoned. In Jonas's narrative, powerfully reminiscent of Schelling's:

> In the beginning, for unknowable reasons, the ground of being, or the Divine, chose to give itself over to the chance and risk and endless variety of becoming . . . And wholly so: entering into the adventure of space and time, the deity held back nothing of itself: no uncommitted or unimpaired part remained to direct, correct, and ultimately guarantee the devious working-out of its destiny in creation.[106]

But the result of this renunciation of divine power is that, though God may make himself felt through the 'mutely insistent appeal of his unfulfilled goal',[107] his destiny is now up to us, dependent upon our moral choices. As Jonas puts it elsewhere, 'We literally hold in our faltering hands the future of the divine adventure and must not fail Him, even if we would fail ourselves.'[108] But we cannot help asking: what role is the concept of God now playing for Jonas? No longer the focus of a faith that good will triumph in the end, the invocation of God seems to do no more than underscore the existential seriousness of the moral demand.

Unlike Jonas, Schelling makes a serious attempt to answer this question, as one way of addressing his central organizing theme: the relation between freedom and system. To attain a comprehensive, rational understanding of the world, we must regard it as a closed structure of elements bound together by necessity. Yet, how can we consider the world in this way if take the full measure of freedom? This is not simply a matter of the indeterminacy and unpredictability implied by a genuine power of choice between different courses of action. For freedom, Schelling asserts, is the capacity to choose either good *or* evil, and evil takes the form of a perversion in which the universal is particularized, while the particular masquerades as the universal. Evil,

in other words, is not simply a lack or deficiency, as many previous thinkers in the Western tradition had argued. It consists in a disruption of the logical structure of reality, though this disruption attains its full destructiveness only in the human world. Yet at the same time, Schelling asserts, the world *must* constitute a system: 'since all the same individual freedom coheres in some way with the world-whole, there must be some system, at least in the divine understanding, with which freedom is consistent.'[109]

By the end of his treatise, Schelling has developed an answer to this problem: the perversion of evil is inherently contradictory, and hence ultimately self-defeating. In recoiling from its fusion with the universal will, the particular will can be seen as asserting the primacy of non-identity (resistance to classification) over identity. Yet, in doing so, it tends to undermine its own foothold in being. Pure particularity, pure non-identity, in striving to separate itself from all identity, would dissolve, become non-identical with itself. It would deprive itself of the minimal consistency it requires in order to be. The predominance of the involution of the ground is self-defeating, since in order to be, the ground must open itself up to its other, be disclosed. Evil has no independent being, therefore: it *is* the good, but the good regarded in its non-identity.[110] Schelling is careful not to conclude from this argument that the contraction of the basis, which gives rise to evil, can ever be entirely annulled. But at the end point of creation, when all has been taken up into 'absolute identity',[111] evil remains only as 'desire, as the eternal hunger and thirst for reality, but is unable to go beyond potentiality'.[112]

A deep philosophical difficulty lies in knowing what status to give to this anticipatory narrative. It is not, like Fichte's history of the future, postulated from the standpoint of practical reason. But neither can it be understood as a metaphysically guaranteed prediction. In Schelling's view, God cannot express himself deterministically – like Spinoza's one substance – in accordance with his own immanent law. Rather, he is the free relation between ground and existence: it is the independence of the ground within him which allows him to manifest himself *as* life and becoming, and consequently allows human beings to be free in finitely embodying God's relation to himself, rather than – *per impossibile* – by standing outside him. But on Schelling's own account, once human freedom is in play, the possibility of the choice for evil is always open, the future indeterminate. Hence to stare into the unground is not just to stare into the abyss of an indifference or 'predicatelessness' which *precedes* God himself. It may also be to witness the idea of God being undermined by the very attempt to understand him as life rather than system – and hence as vulnerable to, indeed as imperilled by, the conflict of good and evil, whose ferocity depends on his existence.

Notes

1   In the spring of 1793 Fichte published 'A Discourse on the Reclamation of the Freedom of Thought from the Princes of Europe, who have Hitherto Suppressed It', and the first instalment of 'A Contibution toward Correcting the Public's Judgement of the French Revolution'. The second instalment of his defence of the principles, though not every feature of the practice, of the French Revolution appeared in February of the following year. See 'Züruck-forderung der Denkfreiheit von den Fürsten Europens, die sie bisher unter-drückten. Eine Rede' and 'Beitrag zur Berichtigung der Urtheile des Publikums über die Französische Revolution (Erster Theil zur Beurtheilung Ihrer Rechtsmässigkeit)', in Reinhard Lauth and Hans Jacob (eds), *Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, section I (Werke), vol. 1 (Stuttgart–Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1962), pp. 167–92 and 203–404, respectively.

2   'Fragment of a Letter to Weisshuhn, August–September 1790', in *Early Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 357.

3   J. G. Fichte, *The System of Ethics*, trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale and Günter Zöller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 153.

4   Ibid., p. 9.

5   Ibid., p. 13.

6   Ibid., p. 9.

7   Ibid., p. 183.

8   Ibid., pp. 62–3.

9   Ibid., p. 16.

10   Ibid., p. 169.

11   Ibid.

12   Ibid., p. 174.

13   Ibid., p. 176.

14   Ibid., p. 177.

15   Ibid.

16   Ibid., p. 181.

17   *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, p. 58.

18   Ibid., p. 30.

19   See *The Moral Law*, pp. 114–15.

20   *The System of Ethics*, p. 182.

21   Ibid., p. 173.

22   Ibid.

23   Ibid.

24   Ibid., p. 172.

25   Ibid., p. 183.

26   Ibid., p. 182.

27 Ibid., p. 173.

28 Ibid., p. 155.

29 Ibid., p. 161.

30 See ibid., pp. 185–8.

31 Ibid., p. 190.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., p. 189.

34 See Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 52.

35 *The System of Ethics*, p. 189. For helpful discussion of this issue and the Kant–Fichte contrast in general, to which I am indebted, see Claude Piché, 'Le mal radical chez Fichte', in Jean-Christophe Goddard (ed.), *Fichte: Le moi et la liberté* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2000).

36 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Haffner, 1974), p. 302.

37 Ibid., p. 303.

38 Ibid., pp. 303–4.

39 J. G. Fichte, 'Über den Grund unseres Glaubens an eine göttliche Weltregierung', in Werner Röhr (ed.), *Appellation an das Publikum: Dokumente zum Atheismusstreit Jena 1798/99* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1991), p. 16.

40 Ibid., p. 19.

41 J. G. Fichte, 'Ideen über Gott und Unsterblichkeit', in Reinhard Lauth and Hans Jacob (eds), *Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* (Stuttgart–Bad Canstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1962–), section IV (Kollegnachschriften), vol. 1, p. 162.

42 'Über den Grund unseres Glaubens', p. 17.

43 For these formulations, see J. G. Fichte, 'Aus einem Privatschreiben', in Rohr (ed.), *Appellation an das Publikum*, p. 469, and 'Über den Grund unseres Glaubens', p. 17.

44 'Über den Grund unseres Glaubens', p. 19.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid., p. 17.

47 Ibid., p. 18. See Peter Rohs, *Johann Gottlieb Fichte* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1991), p. 115.

48 *The System of Ethics*, pp. 190–1.

49 Ibid., p. 195.

50 Ibid.

51 F. W. J. von Schelling, *Philosophical Inquiries into the Nature of Human Freedom*, trans. James Gutman (La Salle, IL: Open Court Classics, 1992), p. 67.

52 See F. W. J. Schelling, *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, trans. Andrew Bowie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 94–113.

53 *The System of Ethics*, p. 7.

54 On the brief historic perception of the *Identitätsphilosophie* as the ultimate philosophy, and its aftermath, see Jean-François Marquet, *Liberté et Existence:*

Étude sur la formation de la philosophie de Schelling (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), pp. 367–413.

55 *Of Human Freedom*, p. 24.

56 F. W. J. von Schelling, *Stuttgart Seminars*, in *Idealism and the Endgame of Theory: Three Essays by Schelling*, trans. and ed. Thomas Pfau (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994), p. 206.

57 Ibid., p. 197.

58 *The System of Ethics*, pp. 68–9.

59 Ibid., p. 169.

60 Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 52.

61 Ibid.

62 *Of Human Freedom*, p. 26.

63 *Stuttgart Seminars*, p. 200.

64 *Of Human Freedom*, p. 33.

65 *Stuttgart Seminars*, p. 210.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid., p. 200.

68 *Of Human Freedom*, p. 52.

69 Ibid., p. 55.

70 Ibid., p. 58.

71 Ibid., pp. 58–9.

72 As Yirmiyahu Yovel has put it, 'on Kant's model of the will, there is no pulling and pushing of two forces engaged in a mechanical clash, but something more analogous to an election (of which *Willkür* is the arbiter)' (Yovel, 'Kant's Practical Reason as Will', p. 289).

73 *Of Human Freedom*, p. 58.

74 F. W. J. von Schelling, 'Die Weltalter. Erstes Buch. Die Vergangenheit. Druck I (1811)', in *Ausgewählte Schriften*, ed. Manfred Frank (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985), vol. 4, pp. 229–30.

75 Michelle Kosch, *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling and Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 100.

76 For example, Onora O'Neill remarks: 'Desires come and go, are contingent, varied, and naturally caused. Only while a desire (or other alien cause) lasts does it affect deliberations' ('Reason and Autonomy in *Grundlegung III*', in *Constructions of Reason*, p. 64). But to speak of a desire such as my wish for intimacy with my partner as 'alien' and 'naturally caused' is surely a violation of language. There is no need to go to such dualistic extremes to make the point that even such desires may change or vanish, whereas 'Reason, by contrast, depends on nothing separable from an agent' (ibid.).

77 *Of Human Freedom*, pp. 70–1.

78 Ibid., p. 71.

79 Ibid., p. 40.

80   Ibid., p. 68.
81   Ibid., p. 59.
82   Ibid., p. 65.
83   Ibid., pp. 63–4.
84   Ibid., p. 67.
85   Ibid., p. 68.
86   Ibid., p. 34.
87   J. G. Fichte, *The Vocation of Man*, trans. Peter Preuss (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), p. 92.
88   Ibid., p. 76.
89   Ibid., p. 72.
90   Ibid., p. 84.
91   Ibid., p. 85.
92   Ibid., p. 86.
93   Ibid., p. 89.
94   Ibid., p. 81.
95   Ibid., p. 9.
96   Ibid., p. 76.
97   Ibid., p. 86.
98   Ibid., p. 87.
99   Ibid., p. 28.
100 Ibid., p. 87.
101 Ibid.
102 Ibid., p. 88.
103 Ibid.
104 Ibid., p. 89.
105 Ibid.
106 Hans Jonas, 'The Concept of God after Auschwitz', in *Mortality and Morality: A Search for the Good after Auschwitz*, ed. Lawrence Vogel (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996), p. 134.
107 Ibid., p. 141.
108 Ibid., p. 130.
109 *Of Human Freedom*, p. 8.
110 Ibid., p. 80.
111 Ibid., p. 90.
112 Ibid., p. 85.

Chapter 3   Hegel:
          A Wry Theodicy

The internal breakdown of the Idealist conception of system in Schelling's treatise on freedom, and in his subsequent thinking, proved to be the seed of many developments in nineteenth- and twentieth-century European philosophy. Contrasted with Schelling's proto-existentialist and even materialist impulses, the philosophy of his classmate, friend, and later rival, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, might seem in some respects to be a throwback to an earlier era. After all, Hegel presents his own theory of history – quite explicitly – as a philosophical vindication of God's justice. 'The aim of human cognition', he declares,

> is to understand that the intentions of eternal wisdom are accomplished not only in the natural world, but also in the realm of the [spirit] which is actively present in the world. From this point of view, our investigation can be seen as a theodicy, a justification of the ways of God (such as Leibniz attempted in his own metaphysical manner, but using categories which were as yet abstract and indeterminate).[1]

If we enquire *why* this must be the aim of human cognition, then Hegel's answer is that human beings have an 'absolute need' to feel at home in the world, in its natural, social, and cultural dimensions – a need for what, in more technical language, he terms 'reconciliation'.[2] In his lectures on the philosophy of religion, Hegel makes clear that his concern with 'reconciliation' is a successor to the concern that Kant and Fichte address through the postulates of practical reason. Participation in the ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) of a community must be sustained by confidence in its meaningfulness, its ultimate value, its convergence with the 'final purpose' (*Endzweck*) of the world.

But the achievement of this purpose cannot remain merely a postulate, albeit a morally necessary one. For in this case the dichotomy between the limited scope of individual action and the inscrutability of the divine supplement would leave our consciousness intolerably torn. On Hegel's account, the notion of a 'moral world order' already represents an attempt to go beyond this impasse:

> Kant and Fichte maintain that we can sow, do good, only on the presupposition of a moral world order. We do not know whether what we do will prosper and succeed, and we can act only on the assumption that the good bears fruit in and of itself, that this is not something posited but is an objective fact in virtue of the very nature of the good. This presupposition therefore constitutes an essential condition [of human action].[3]

Ultimately, Hegel argues, the content of this presupposition must be 'the unity of subjectivity and objectivity – this divine unity', for we cannot think of divine action as occurring *alongside* human action; rather it is that which envelops and sustains it: 'The one-sidedness that appears as the activity and so forth of the subject is merely a moment that simply subsists; it is nothing on its own account but exists only by virtue of this presupposition.'[4] Furthermore, it would be inconsistent for this absolute content (the unity of subjectivity and objectivity) to remain *simply* a presupposition. Human beings need to *experience* the unity of divine and human action, and it is the satisfaction of this need, on Hegel's account, towards which religious consciousness strives. Yet Hegel also contends that the representational form in which religious consciousness is articulated ('*Vorstellung*' – representation – is Hegel's general term for the symbolic, mythic, and narrative medium of religious consciousness) is ultimately inadequate to its content; it objectifies the ground of all existence which subjectivity seeks to apprehend, and so maintains the barrier between human consciousness and the divine. His own philosophical system culminates in the attempt to articulate religious truth in conceptual terms, beyond reliance on faith or revelation, and therefore in a form commensurate with the rational expectations of modern, self-determining human beings.

One apparent problem with this philosophical project is that it seems to continue precisely the conception of the relation between religious and philosophical consciousness to which Schelling had reacted from the *Freiheitsschift* onwards. If the structures of nature, and the pattern of human history, are to be rendered conceptually perspicuous, then they must unfold with rational necessity; but such necessity is incompatible with the contingency entailed by

genuine moral freedom (the freedom to choose between good and evil). Or, to put the problem the other way around: if evil is regarded as a necessary aspect of the development of the human historical world, then it ceases to be evil in any morally significant sense – it ceases to be what Nabert terms 'the injustifiable'. In the Introduction to his lectures on the philosophy of history, Hegel famously proposes that 'the only thought which philosophy brings with it is the simple idea of reason – the idea that reason governs the world, and that world history is therefore a rational process'.[5] And, in many other passages of same lecture course, he translates this conviction into explicitly theological terms. 'History', he asserts, 'is the unfolding of God's nature in a particular, determinate element.'[6] But with such declarations Hegel surely risks falling into the trap of all theodicies: denaturing, mollifying – even apologizing for – evil.

Such an accusation has certainly been a staple of responses to Hegel throughout the twentieth century. In his book on *Radical Evil*, for example, Richard J. Bernstein, asserts that, whether we take the religious language Hegel uses to describe the historical process 'straight', or seek to decode it in anthropological terms, 'Evil is understood and justified as a necessary dialectical moment in the progressive development of humanity'.[7] In a similar vein, William Desmond has identified an 'existentialist' and a 'logicist' strand in Hegel's account of evil. This critic concedes that Hegel starkly portrays the torment of evil, but then goes on to claim that, ultimately, Hegel treats evil as a necessary moment in the unfolding of the divine 'Idea'. As Desmond puts it, 'The evil which is necessary is simply an ontological structure inherent in the being of the human self, namely that a sense of internal difference or rupture necessarily defines that being.'[8] In the last analysis, he contends, Hegel expresses the thought of evil 'in terms of the same rhythm of *dialectical self-mediation* that pulses throughout the system as a whole'.[9]

Such criticisms have been lent more poignancy by the effort of many twentieth-century European thinkers to confront the philosophical implications of the Nazi 'final solution', and other atrocities of almost incomprehensible scale. Thus Hans Jonas – in his essay 'Matter, Mind and Creation: Cosmological Evidence and Cosmogonic Speculation'[10] – rebels against what he portrays as Hegel's intolerable optimism. 'The disgrace of Auschwitz' – Jonas asserts – 'is not to be charged to some all-powerful providence or to some dialectically wise necessity, as if it were an antithesis demanding a synthesis or a step on the road to salvation.'[11] Similarly, Theodor Adorno interprets Auschwitz as the conclusive demonstration that the dominant thread of human history is not the advance towards emancipation (Hegel's 'progress of the consciousness of freedom'), but the development of increasingly total forms of domination,

which now shape even the psychology of individuals. Hegel, he suggests, can regard this history as progressive only by 'blithely dismiss[ing] the individual experience of the prevailing universal as an unreconciled evil'.[12] For Adorno, then, Hegel does not simply justify wrongdoing as a step on the path of spirit's advance. The supposedly beneficent primacy of objective spirit over the individual subject amounts to a transfiguration of bad into good.

Such accusations directed at Hegel are not new. They have been repeatedly levelled against him down the years. During his lifetime, similar criticisms were voiced by contemporary religious thinkers, often in the form of the accusation of 'pantheism'. The early nineteenth-century theologian Friedrich Tholuck, for example, a leading figure of the conservative-revivalist *Erweckungsbewegung* ('movement of awakening') within Lutheranism, could see no essential difference between Hegel, Fichte, and Spinoza. He portrayed them all as exponents of a 'conceptual pantheism' comparable, in its consequences for ethics, to the 'pantheism of feeling' typical of Islamic mysticism, to which – as an accomplished orientalist – he had devoted a scholarly study. Idealist philosophies of absolute identity, Tholuck claimed, which cancel all oppositions between the conditioned and the unconditioned within an 'indifferent primal being',[13] lead to ethically intolerably results: 'These consequences are, namely, that even the moral criterion of human beings is no absolutely true criterion, but that *actually* good and evil are the same and only differ in appearance.'[14] Within the 'total absoluteness' of the German Idealists, Tholuck argued, 'the self-conscious God, individuality, freedom and ethics are cancelled'.[15] Hegel, who vigorously resisted the suggestion that his philosophical views were pantheistic, had little difficulty in showing the shortcomings of Tholuck's critique. The problem with pantheism, Hegel argued, lies not in its inability to draw a meaningful distinction between good and evil – a thinker such as Spinoza has no difficulty in doing this, since for him evil consists in the human being's insistence on separateness from God. Rather the problem is an abstract conception of God as the universal substance or essence, which – far from absurdly identifying him with the totality of finite particulars – tends to abolish the finite world in the infinite. 'But to speak of identity-philosophy', Hegel argues, 'is to stick with abstract identity or unity in general, and to neglect the point on which alone everything hinges, namely, the inherent determination of this unity, whether it is defined as substance or as spirit.'[16]

But is the definition of the ultimate principle of reality as subject-like, as what Hegel calls 'spirit', sufficient to defuse the accusation that evil becomes a dialectically necessary moment of the world's development? A more sophisticated criticism, which avoided the loose attribution of an 'identity-

philosophy' to Hegel, was voiced by the theologian Julius Mueller in his book *Die Christliche Lehre von der Sünde* ('The Christian Doctrine of Sin'). According to Mueller, Hegel's conception of evil was plagued by a fundamental contradiction. From the ethical standpoint Hegel regards evil as forbidden; yet, from the viewpoint of metaphysical necessity, he regards it as inevitable. The logical-speculative cast of Hegel's thought, Mueller contended, has the result that evil must be regarded as a 'necessary moment in the absolute process', which 'the iron-clad advance of the same through history cannot in any way constrain, but only strengthen'.[17] And if this is the case, Mueller concludes, 'we must even admire the grandiose reason and audacious cunning of the Hegelian world spirit most of all in the form of evil'.[18] Attacks of a similar kind, though of an even greater philosophical acuteness, were also a staple of the writings of Søren Kierkegaard, of course. In the Introduction to *The Concept of Dread* Kierkegaard targets what he portrays as the inflated role of the Hegelian negative. It is not just moral experience which is thereby denatured: the equation of negativity and evil disrupts the integrity of both ethical *and* logical enquiry: 'One sees how illogical movements must be in logic since the negative is the evil, and how unethical they must be in ethics since the evil is the negative. In logic this is too much, in ethics too little; it fits nowhere if it has to fit both places.'[19] But are such criticisms, even made by a genius, adequate to the complexity of Hegel's theory of evil?

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

As a first stage in Hegel's defence it could be pointed out that – far more than most thinkers in the Western canon – Hegel emphasizes antagonism, conflict, and suffering as fundamental features of reality. In the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, he declares that 'The life of God and divine knowing can . . . be expressed as love playing with itself; but this idea sinks to the level of mere edification and even insipidity, if the seriousness, the pain, the patience and the labour of the negative is missing from it'.[20] The same thought can be found throughout Hegel's mature philosophy of religion, where he emphasizes the abstract, lifeless character of a God who does not enter fully into the finitude and agony of the world. As a young man Hegel, like many of his contemporaries, had admired the harmony which he perceived in (an idealized image of) the ethical life of the ancient Greeks. But in his maturity he unfavourably contrasts pagan religion, 'with its cheerful state of reconciliation from the outset', with the outlook of Christianity. It is precisely the grandeur of Christianity, Hegel suggests, that it 'tears apart the natural unity of spirit, the unity of human beings with nature, destroys natural peace; like original sin, evil

from the very beginning; so the human being is something negative within himself'.[21] Christianity, Hegel declares, begins with 'pain' (*Schmerz*) – the ultimate pain of the self-conscious experience of finitude, from which not even God is exempt. Christianity is the 'consummate' or 'completed' (*vollendete*) religion, since here 'The highest divestment of the divine idea – as divestment of itself, i.e., [the idea that] is in addition this divestment – is expressed as follows: "God has died, God himself is dead". [This] is a monstrous, fearful picture [*Vorstellung*], which brings before the imagination the deepest abyss of cleavage.'[22]

Yet despite all this, determined critics could no doubt respond that Hegel's insistence on the centrality of the story of God's humiliation, torture, and execution – in stark contrast to Kant's translation of Christianity into what Reinhold called a 'gospel of pure reason' – confirms their case. For the death of Christ is followed by his resurrection. And this event Hegel interprets – in philosophical terms – as the 'negation of the negation': in other words, the return of absolute subjectivity to itself, out of the extreme of its own self-annihilation.[23] The ultimate Hegelian truth, then, is that God is 'infinitely self-relating negativity'.[24] But in this case it seems that the undergoing of gratuitous suffering and death, submission to moral evil, are merely the prelude to the restoration of a higher, more complex unity, a necessary moment in the dialectical process, a stage in the divine activity of self-loss and self-return.

To assess this dispute, to get a grip on the relation between evil and metaphysical necessity in Hegel, we must first examine how he treats the biblical myth of the Fall. It is a narrative to which he returns on many occasions, and it must be admitted that Hegel stresses a particular aspect of the third chapter of Genesis in a way that at first appears to lend support to his critics. For Hegel interprets the myth as an account of the effects of man's 'lapse from natural unity',[25] thereby seeming to suggest that evil is inherent in the self-consciousness of finite, self-reflective beings such as ourselves. Furthermore, Hegel's obvious interest in, and emphasis on, the fact that man's initial transgression consists in eating the fruit of the forbidden tree, reinforces this impression. For if acquiring *knowledge*, and in particular knowledge of the moral distinction between good and evil, is in itself something evil, then evil appears to be inherent in self-awareness. Hegel, in fact, interprets and endorses the Christian doctrine of original sin in precisely this way:

> We all know the theological dogma that man's nature is evil, tainted by what we call Original Sin. Now while we accept the dogma, we must give up the setting of incident which represents original sin as consequent upon an acci-

dental act of the first man. For the very notion of spirit is enough to show that man is evil by nature, and it is an error to imagine that he could ever be otherwise.[26]

Yet before we make any definitive assessment, we must consider the full complexity of Hegel's account.

Undoubtedly, Hegel is deeply critical of the Enlightenment notion that 'natural humanity' is good. In this respect he stands in the tradition of Kant and Schelling. As he states in the 1821 manuscript for his lectures on religion, 'the natural being is not liberated within itself vis-à-vis itself and external nature. It is the human being of desire, of savagery and self-seeking, of dependence and fear. To the extent that such nature is milder or more savage, this is purely a matter of whether the climatic and natural condition are propitious or not.'[27] In the second cycle of lectures, from 1824, Hegel reinforces the point by arguing that ideas of the natural goodness of humanity involve a tacit backward projection of the condition of human beings who have already benefited from civilization:

> We are told, people aren't so bad after all, just look around you. But these are people with ethical and moral training, already reconstructed, and put into a certain pattern of reconciliation . . . If educated and cultured human beings are to be considered, then the transformation, reconstruction, the discipline through which they have passed, the transition from natural volition to true volition, must be visible in them, and their immediate natural will must be seen to be sublated in all that. The first definition [of humanity], therefore, is that human beings in their immediacy are not what they ought to be.[28]

We have just noted that Hegel, with his philosophical reading of 'original sin', stands in the tradition of Kant and Schelling. All share a rejection of the notion of spontaneous human goodness, inherited from the Christian tradition. But as the preceding remarks indicate, Hegel also entertains a developmental perspective on human ethical capacities which, in some respects, is closer to the viewpoint of Fichte. Hence when Hegel considers the claim that human beings are 'by nature good', which – he says – is the 'more or less predominant notion of our time', he does not disagree outright. Rather, he takes the expression 'by nature' to mean 'in itself' (*an sich*).[29] In Hegel's vocabulary, the term '*an sich*' has distinctive connotations: it suggests a one-sided, undeveloped – because not yet fully self-consciousness – mode of being. So if we put this claim together with the account of the role of discipline and education, it seems that Hegel envisages a process of ethical development, both in the individual and in the species, that is essentially a

process of acculturation, and in which our natural impulses are shaped and guided towards integrated, social forms of expression. In contrast to Kant's view, then, practical reason for Hegel does not hold our 'pathological' desires in check. Rather, he envisages a process of transmutation; as he states in the Introduction to the *Philosophy of Right*: 'the impulses should become the rational system of the will's volitions'.[30] But if this is indeed Hegel's account of ethical development, is he not guilty of precisely that conflation of socio-cultural and moral progress against which had Kant warned in the *Religion*? Despite his emphasis on original sin, Hegel would be proposing just the kind of intolerably optimistic philosophy of history that modern critics, pointing to the record of the twentieth century, have often imputed to him.

In fact, Hegel can be seen as seeking to combine the benefits of both the Kantian–Schellingian *and* the Fichtean approaches to evil. Though he does not deny the existence of spontaneous feelings of sympathy and sociality in human beings, he rejects the notion that such fluctuating responses could form the basis of ethical conduct. He agrees with Fichte that the overcoming of evil is a process in which human beings raise themselves out of their slavery to natural impulse, and recognize the claim upon them of rational, universal principles. But whereas Fichte in the 1790s describes this process in onto-genetic terms, as a sequence of subjective acts of reflection, which gradually raise the individual to full awareness of the demands of moral conscience, Hegel describes a historical process of education, of *Bildung*: the level of ethical consciousness attainable by the individual is almost entirely circum-scribed by the level of insight attained by her culture.[31] Hegel differs drastically from Fichte, however, in his insistence on the anguished experience of inner moral diremption, which he values as a central feature of the Christian tradi-tion. Whereas Fichte rejects the doctrine of original sin, asserting that human beings are originally neither good nor evil, and denies that we can simultane-ously recognize and flout the moral law, Hegel asserts unambiguously that 'The Christian doctrine that man is by nature evil is loftier than the other which takes him to be by nature good'.[32] This is so because our sense of our own freedom (and here Hegel agrees with Kant) is bound up with a conscious-ness that our natural impulses do not spontaneously accord with the other-centred activities which our membership of a human community demands of us, combined with an awareness that, in principle, we have the power to overcome this discrepancy.[33] Hegel asserts: 'in this alone, that [evil] is a matter of human responsibility, is human *freedom* recognised – its being posited by humanity itself; humanity has dignity only through the acceptance of guilt'.[34] Hegel does not deny the reality of historical advances in moral consciousness. (Slavery, for example, is no longer morally acceptable, and – for Hegel – this

development expresses an acquired insight into the essential freedom of human beings.) But he does not conclude that individuals, or human groups, become *less capable* of choosing to exercise their freedom in unethical ways. Indeed, as we shall shortly find, the temptation to extreme forms of evil may even be stronger under modern conditions. And, despite his emphasis on the social context, Hegel can at times insist on the imputability of evil in tones as adamant as those of Kant: 'That the human being is a natural [being] is a matter of its will, its doing. No excuse to the effect that human being is as it is by nature, education, / or circumstances [can] justify, excuse, or take away guilt.'[35]

One major difference between Kant and Hegel, however, is that the Kantian moral life admits no experience of the resolution of the inner struggle. Significantly, in the 1824 cycle of lectures on religion, Hegel's discussion of the moral theories of Kant and Fichte (which we have already touched on) forms part of his evocation of the 'infinite anguish' preceding the appearance of God as a sensible presence, the human embodiment – in Christ – of the idea of reconciliation. It seems, then, that for Hegel the torn consciousness of evil is a prelude to the resolution of the basic conflicts of human existence. In the same course of lectures Hegel explicitly states:

> Humans must have their antithesis as their objective – what for them is the good, the universal, their vocation. Spirit is free; freedom has the essential moment of this separation within itself. In this separation being-for-self is posited and evil has its seat; here is the source of all wrong, but also the point where reconciliation has its ultimate source. It is what produces the disease and is at the same time the source of health.[36]

Here again, it looks as though Hegel is playing into the hands of his critics, suggesting that evil is an essential moment, the 'negativity' that drives the dialectical process forward. But although Hegel describes the inherent rending of human self-consciousness as 'evil', the crucial point is that this splitting is evil *only* if it becomes rigid and reified – if the human subject dwells within it *as* diremption, rather than passing through it, treating it as a purely *transitional* moment. The thought is put with particular clarity in a passage from the 1827 version of the lectures:

> there is posited here the cleavage that is freedom, the abstraction of freedom. Insofar as human beings exist for themselves (i.e., they are free), good and evil exist for them and they have the choice between the two. This standpoint of formal freedom in which human beings are face-to-face with good and evil and stand above both, are lords of both, is a standpoint that ought not to be –

though not, of course, in the sense that it should not be at all or should not arise. On the contrary, it is necessary for the sake of freedom, else humanity is not free, and is not spirit; rather it is a standpoint that must be sublated, that must come to an end with reconciliation, in the union with the good.[37]

Evil arises when the subject turns inward, isolates herself, exalts her own power of choice, failing to acknowledge the prior claim of the shared human world in which her very existence is grounded: 'Abstractly, being evil means singularizing myself in a way that cuts me off from the universal (which is the rational, the laws, the determinations of spirit)'.[38]

Perhaps the most vivid exemplification of this idea of evil in Hegel's work is the dialectic of acting and judging consciousness, in the 'Morality' chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The acting consciousness proclaims its action to be motivated by duty, while all the time being aware – even if only dimly – of the particular interests that it is pursuing. The judging consciousness holds aloof from entanglement in the impurity of action, and devotes itself to uncovering the 'selfish' motivations underlying the purportedly dutiful actions of others. In fact, its judgements are just as subjective and particular as the impulse behind the actions it condemns. Hegel's point is that the very split between particularity and universality in the realm of action is a product of the breakdown of relations between the two forms of consciousness, of an antagonism that persists so long as each fails to open itself up, to acknowledge its own culpable one-sidedness. It is 'uncommunicative being-for-self', as Hegel puts it, which must be 'thrown away' in order for evil to be overcome.[39] And this requires finite, self-conscious subjects to acknowledge one another fully as both finite *and* self-conscious, as the antithesis and unity of '*universal* essence' and 'exclusive *individuality*'.[40] This reciprocal recognition, Hegel affirms, is '*absolute* Spirit': the pristine intersubjective structure which is implicit all determinate forms of social life.

To approach this issue from another direction, Hegel interprets the theological concept of 'sin' as describing a condition in which a human being allows her subjectivity to remain suspended, as if it could rest at a neutral point *between* good and evil. For to treat this opposition as if it were a genuine equipolarity is already to have embraced the bad. Commenting again on the myth of the Fall, Hegel states:

> Being evil is located in the act of cognition, in consciousness. And certainly, as we said earlier, being evil resides in cognitive knowledge; cognition is the source of evil. For cognition in consciousness means in general a judging or dividing, a self-distinguishing within oneself. Animals have no consciousness, they are unable to make distinctions within themselves, they have no free being-for-self

in the face of objectivity generally. The cleavage, however, is what is evil; it is
the contradiction.[41]

It is the dynamic of finite, self-reflective existence, then, which necessarily
generates the opposition of good and evil. Yet it is only to the extent that
human beings choose to linger in this opposition that they *become* evil. For
in such fixation subjectivity takes its own form (the power of choice between
alternatives) as its decisive content, with the result that this empty, purely
self-referential form tends to collapse into the immediacy of natural desire.[42]
This danger can be overcome only when the I 'supersedes itself within its own
self', escaping from its inconsistent self-enclosure, from 'the very contradic-
tion of its pure universality, which at the same time still strives against its
identity with the other'.[43]

While it is true that there are some passages in Hegel's work that appear
to equate evil with negativity as such,[44] the weight of evidence makes clear
that these laxer formulations cannot represent his considered view. In the final
volume of the *Encyclopaedia*, for example, Hegel suggests that finite spirit
becomes evil not simply as negativity, but 'as the extreme of negativity subsist-
ing within itself' (*als das Extrem der in sich seienden Negativität*).[45] As Michael
Theunissen has pointed out, this is an unusual expression in Hegel. Intuitively
parsed, it surely suggests an aberrant isolation – a form of negativity that has
become autarchic, suppressing its own mediating role, resisting its own nega-
tion in the movement towards reconciliation. Evil, on this account, would not
lend impetus to a dialectical movement, but would rather be its point of
stand-still, crisis, or breakdown. Hegel's view, Theunissen argues, is that evil
consists not in the native independence (*Selbständigkeit*) of finite spirit vis-à-
vis God or absolute spirit, but rather in its insistence on standing entirely
alone (*Verselbständigung*).[46] In general, when interpreting Hegelian claims
such as that 'the fall of the world from God means that it has fixated itself as
finite consciousness',[47] we must not overlook the significance of the term
'fixated'.

On this evidence, the widespread assumption that Hegel's theory of spirit
as self-othering and self-retrieving precludes him from developing an ethically
serious theory of evil must be rejected. It is based on an insufficiently fine-
grained reading of Hegel's texts. To some contemporary thinkers, proponents
of an unequivocally post-religious reading of Hegel, this conclusion will come
as a disappointment. Such interpreters generally endorse Hegel's account of
the dialectic of recognition driving historical development; but they under-
stand this dialectic exclusively in social and political terms. The individual
sense of sinfulness, and need for an experience of reconciliation, play no part

in such interpretations. Yet, as we have seen, Hegel insists that the awareness of guilt is an essential dimension of our modern subjective freedom. We cannot understand ourselves as capable of shaping our lives in line with universal principles, rather than as simply pursuing the satisfaction of our private desires, without also regarding ourselves as falling short of the full freedom which such an orientation could make possible. As Joachim Ringleben has written, for Hegel, 'In the concept of sin freedom knows its own essentially imperilled status, both as actual and as deriving from its principle, and therein knows itself'.[48] Sinfulness makes us aware of our freedom in the mode of its loss, of our failure adequately to realize it. A freedom that was taken for granted, whose exercise became a matter of routine, would cease fully to be freedom.[49]

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We began this chapter by considering the possibility that Hegel's commitment to a fully rational explication of the structure of reality must debar him from giving an adequate account of evil. But by now it should be clear that Hegel is, in many ways, a direct inheritor of the reflection on freedom and evil initiated by Kant.[50] Although he argues, against Kant, that our duties cannot be determined by a formal procedure such as the categorical imperative, but are built into the ethical life in which we participate, Hegel does not doubt that – in the modern world – we must be able to carry out such duties with a conviction of their moral worthiness. The 'sublation' (*Aufhebung*) of morality in ethical life which he describes in the *Philosophy of Right* contextualizes morality's claims, denies conscience unconditional priority in all circumstances. But the independent status of the moral perspective is far from being entirely abolished.[51] Furthermore, fulfilling our socially determined duties – as a caring parent, a supportive friend, a trustworthy colleague, a responsible citizen – provides plenty of material for ethical striving and ethical failure (though Hegel, admittedly, sometimes writes as though ethical life were just a matter of performing allotted roles). At the same time Hegel is – of course – deeply interested in the social shaping of subjectivity. Although our sense of freedom now demands the congruence of objective duty and moral conviction, this has not been the case at all times and in all places. In Hegel's thought 'morality' (*Moralität*, as opposed to *Sittlichkeit*) becomes a semi-technical term for a distinctively modern (and, to his mind, distorted) way of construing the normative dimension of agency. Furthermore, since he rejects the distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal, Hegel does not separate transcendental freedom from the empirical consciousness of freedom,

and so rejects the Kantian view that a propensity to evil could be manifested from the beginning of human life, an expression of the individual's 'intelligible character'. 'Children', he asserts, 'are innocent; and that is because they have no will and they are not yet accountable.'[52] Here Hegel takes a common sense view of volition as an empirical phenomenon, subject to a range of natural and social factors. But how, then, can he accept the doctrine of original sin, under a suitable philosophical interpretation? How can he acknowledge a defect of the *will* that is universal in the human race, and yet for which each human being is responsible?

Hegel suggests that it is the coexistence in human beings of natural drives and inclinations and a (potentially) rational will that justifies the notion of inherent evil:

> The way humanity is implicitly, or according to its concept, is of course what we refer to abstractly as humanity 'according to nature'; but concretely the person who follows passions and instincts, and remains within the sphere of desire, the one whose law is that of natural immediacy, is the natural human being. At the same time, a human being in the natural state is one who wills, and since the content of the natural will is only instinct and inclination, this person is evil.[53]

Elsewhere in the lectures on the philosophy of religion he comments in a similar vein: 'From the formal point of view, since the natural human being has volition and will, / it is not an animal any more; but the content and purposes of its volition are still natural. It is from this standpoint – obviously the higher standpoint – that humanity is evil by nature; and it is evil just because it is a natural thing.'[54] To go by these assertions, it might appear that Hegel, in eschewing the dualism of sensible and intelligible worlds, has run up against the problem of imputability that also confronted Fichte. In the early stages (both historical and individual) of the development of ethical awareness, Hegel seems to suggest, the human will may be formally free, but its content is inevitably supplied by natural impulse. From the standpoint of a higher, more reflective stage we can see that human beings *should* not remain in this state. But is this sufficient to resolve the issue? Is it the case that such human beings *could* have so elevated themselves? As we discovered, Fichte's solution to this problem was simply to assert that, since the human capacity for self-reflection is entirely spontaneous, there is – in principle – no blockage that could *prevent* a human being from moving to a higher level of moral consciousness. But it is far from clear that the lack of impediment is sufficient to establish a positive capacity. In Hegel's case the difficulty is made

worse by his emphasis – in itself, entirely plausible – on the social, cultural, and educational factors in the growth of moral awareness. 'Strictly speaking', Hegel states, 'the naturalness of the will is the selfishness of the will; in its naturalness, the will is private, distinguished from the universality of willing and opposed to the rationality of the will that has been *cultivated* into universality.'[55] Though it may appear harsh of Fichte to hold us accountable for failing to achieve a moral perspective which we cannot even glimpse until we have made a reflexive leap, it would seem even harsher for Hegel to blame human beings for not having enjoyed the benefits of a certain kind of upbringing.

There is one crucial distinction between Hegel and Fichte in this regard, however. For Hegel's conception of imputability is itself developmental. As we have seen, Hegelian 'evil' means the rejection of reconciliation – more concretely, it means secession from the ethical life in which one's subjectivity is grounded. But of course, at different points in history, the principles of ethical life may themselves be more or less adequate, more or less universal. Hegel's response to slavery provides a good example of his sensibilities in this regard. Though some societies have regarded slavery as a legitimate institution, Hegel asserts that all justifications of slavery depend on a false view of human beings as natural entities, who can therefore be treated as possessions.[56] But at the same time Hegel also thinks it is meaningless to insist that the notion of all human beings as essentially free (the correct view) should have been embodied in social practice everywhere, and that the members of societies that have failed or fail to do so are therefore morally deficient. For the practice of slavery is a sign that human beings have not yet attained full self-awareness. Or, as Hegel puts it, 'The false, comparatively primitive, phenomenon of slavery is one which befalls spirit when spirit is only at the level of consciousness', [57] that is, has not attained self-consciousness. Hegel's view, in other words, is that we can judge societies to be unjust or 'unethical' (*unsittlich*) without regarding the individual members of such societies as *responsible* for the injustice.[58] At the same time, as long as there is an ethical life at all (as opposed to a condition of lawlessness and barbarism), there will be failures and transgressions for which individuals *are* legitimately held accountable by their contemporaries. But even then, the manner in which responsibility is construed will vary in line with the prevailing forms of ethical consciousness.

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This brings us to a fundamental aspect of Hegel's approach. For Hegel it is religion, in its quest to apprehend the ultimate ground of all reality, which

most fully reflects the manner in which human beings understand themselves and their collective life at a given point in space and time. Religion is the mode in which societies articulate their own ethical structure in an unselfconscious, objectified form, using those mythic, narrative, and symbolic elements that Hegel classifies as '*Vorstellung*'. This means, then, that we can trace changing concepts of moral right and wrong, and of moral responsibility, through studying the history of religions. And since – for Hegel – human beings are beings whose self-understanding is constitutive of who they are, moral responsibility will itself evolve as the religious comprehension of it changes.

In his developmental account of the history of religion, Hegel begins with oriental religions, which understand the divine as the universal essence of the natural world, not yet grasping God as an essentially spiritual being. It is only with Zoroastrianism, he argues, a religion of transition between East and West, that the divine comes to be understood as the good, and the polarity of good and evil is regarded as the fundamental practical polarity, though here still portrayed in quasi-natural, cosmic terms (as the struggle of light and darkness). Then, in what Hegel terms the 'religions of the transition' (Syrian and Egyptian religion) progress is made towards the realization that – as he puts it – 'the dark or negative aspect occurs within subjectivity itself, an intensification that in its subjectivity becomes evil'.[59] Finally, the awareness of subjectivity as morally self-divided reaches its agonized climax in the Roman world prior to the birth of Christ. Here, in one mode of religious-ethical consciousness, which Hegel associates with Judaism, the focus is on God as a remote spiritual being whose moral pressure torments me, since he 'does not release me in my natural existence, in my empirical willing and knowing, from the infinite demands of absolute purity';[60] in another mode, characteristic of Stoicism, individuals retreat from an ethically inhospitable world into the abstract purity of rational self-consciousness. In both of these contrary positions the possibility of the unity of the divine and the human, of the infinite and the finite, of rational self-consciousness and particular existence, has not yet been grasped. As Hegel states, 'This is the deepest depth. Human beings are inwardly conscious that in their innermost being they are a contradiction, and have therefore an infinite *anguish* concerning themselves.'[61] Part of Hegel's solution to the problem of imputability, then, is to show, through his history of religion, how the ethical perspective (which, at first, applies retrospectively and externally to human beings still dominated by the 'natural will') is itself progressively internalized – how a sense of culpability intensifies, as the object of religious devotion becomes more spiritual. As he comments, 'Evil and anguish can be infinite only when the good or God is known as *one* God, as a pure, spiritual God.'[62]

This crisis is resolved through the coming of Christ, and the historical emergence of the Christian religious community. Without immersing ourselves in the details of Hegel's Christology, we can take it that, through the event of God's unique incarnation as a human being, his life and teaching, his execution on the cross, and his resurrection, human beings witness absolute spirit going to the utmost extreme of finitude. This becoming human must be singular, for otherwise God could be regarded as merely putting on a 'mask' of finitude, as Hegel puts it (as occurs in the multiple incarnation narratives of other religious traditions). Hegel makes clear that he does not regard the doctrine of the incarnation as a metaphysical claim about the person Jesus of Nazareth, but as a description of the intersubjective relation between Christ and those who knew him: 'Because it is the appearance *of God*, it occurs essentially for the community; it must not and cannot be taken in isolation. Appearing is being for another; this other is the *community*.'[63] It was necessary for the development of spirit that, at a certain point in history, 'this content – the unity of divine and human nature – achieves certainty, obtaining the form of immediate sensible intuition and external existence for humankind, so that it appears as something that has been seen in the world, something that has been | experienced'.[64] The crucifixion, Hegel similarly insists, 'is an essential moment in the nature of spirit . . . it must not then be represented merely as the death of *this individual*, the death of this empirically existing individual. Heretics have interpreted it like that, but what it means is rather that *God* has died, that *God himself is dead*.'[65] God, as a remote, transcendent being, is no more; he has revealed his full coincidence with human finitude. After this turning point, realized in the joy of Easter, human beings can have confidence that reconciliation is neither a metaphysical abstraction, nor merely an aesthetic appearance, but a genuine existential possibility. For Hegel world history, after the turning point of Christ, is the history of the effort progressively to build reconciliation into the fabric of social, political, and personal life, to make the finite historical world the home of infinite freedom.

Yet at this point the problem of the universality of evil re-emerges. We can understand why, prior to Christ's life and death, the 'natural will' – as Hegel terms it – might tend to prevail over the universal will. But now human beings are fully aware of their freedom: the notion of the 'natural will' has revealed its oxymoronic character, we might say. Within societies shaped by Christianity, at least, there is an awareness that the conflict of freedom and finitude can be reconciled. Finitude can be transcended, without being denied, in a community of love and forgiveness. Such a form of reconciliation, Hegel emphasizes, does not require me to renounce or deny my natural drives and

inclinations. Certainly they must be purified, cultivated, even disciplined, but they need not be ascetically suppressed. Such a process, Hegel explains, is a 'liberation' – a release from the 'indeterminate subjectivity which, never reaching reality or the objective determinacy of action, remains self-enclosed and devoid of actuality'.[66] Why, then, do human beings continue freely to resist this liberation?

Kant, as we saw, has no coherent response to the question: why do human beings choose the opposite of autonomy, rational self-determination, allowing themselves to be pulled along by their non-rational desires? From the empirical standpoint, the answer may appear to be obvious. The moral law bears down on me, demanding that I set aside such desires, no matter how crucial to my sense of self their satisfaction appears to be. It is the very stringency of morality, then, that makes evil appear an unavoidable option. Of course, for Kant this cannot be the transcendental story. But Hegel responds that this account can indeed be taken as an accurate depiction, provided we grasp the *complicity* between good and evil generated by the moral view of the world itself. So, in the section on 'Good and Evil' in the Encyclopaedia *Philosophy of Spirit*, Hegel argues that the choice of evil occurs as a reaction to the 'abstraction' that characterizes the moral 'ought': 'this repeated *ought*, with its absoluteness, which yet at the same time is *not*'. For moral consciousness, the good appears as 'the *non-objective*, non-universal, the unutterable; and over which the agent is conscious that *he* in his *individuality* has the decision'.[67] Unable to tolerate this elusive abstractness of the content of its volition, the subject which, in this 'deepest descent into itself',[68] has become merely an empty form (an 'abstract reflexion of freedom into itself'),[69] 'gives itself the content of a subjective interest' in choosing evil. This collapse into particularity clearly differs from the dominance of the 'natural will', which precedes the full emergence of moral consciousness. Elsewhere Hegel acknowledges, in fact, that 'we seem at first to have a doubled evil', though he goes on to say that 'both are really the same', since even the 'natural wickedness of man' is unlike the 'natural life of animals'.[70] One mark of the duplicity may well be that developed evil – if we can put it like that – will display more virulence, precisely because of the desperation of the subject's reaction against its own indeterminacy.

It might be responded, however, that this analysis simply displaces the problem of the motivation of evil. For in Hegel's thought participation in 'ethical life' is supposed to resolve the contradictions that arise at the level of moral consciousness. In grasping its 'identity' with the universality of the will embodied in practices and institutions, the subject is no longer oppressed by the abstraction of the moral ought, but becomes the infinite form which

'actualises and develops the good' – the freedom already embodied in the social world. It thereby transcends the moral oscillation between good and evil. But now the question becomes: if *this* solution to the problem of abstraction is available, why do human beings so regularly adopt the strategy of prioritizing their particular interests, a strategy which is contradictory, since – according to Hegel – it knows itself to be against the good? Hegel, it seems, still cannot avoid the question confronting any theory which equates full freedom with moral or ethical conduct, but also holds human beings responsible for behaving wrongly: why would anyone choose freedom in its deficient form?

Here several issues need to be disentangled. Hegel believes that the answer to the unstable relation between conscience and evil, and hence the danger of choosing evil, is overcome through the transition from morality to 'ethical life'. For by participating in the world of a political community, the subject finds duty as '*his own* and as something which *is*; and in this necessity he has himself and his actual freedom'.[71] Or, to put this from another perspective, 'the ethical personality, i.e. subjectivity, which is permeated by the substantial life, is *virtue*'.[72] However, Hegel also makes clear, for example in the *Encyclopaedia*, that the transition from morality to ethical life is a transition from certainty of self to *trust*. This, he states, is the 'true, ethical disposition', because it is only through trust that individuals can accept their dependency on others while preserving a sense of autonomous agency, the two combining in the awareness of belonging to a shared ethical world. Evil, then, can be seen as the result of our difficulty in exchanging certainty for trust, in ceasing to cling to our own contingency as the essence of our identity.[73] As Hegel says, ethical personality 'in relation to substantial objectivity, to the whole of ethical reality, exists as confidence, as deliberate work for the community, and the capacity of sacrificing oneself for it'.[74]

The notion that there is difficulty in doing the right thing may seem to contradict a widespread understanding of Hegel's ethical theory, summarized in the Victorian slogan, 'my station and its duties'. After all, Hegel declares that 'To try to define duty in itself is idle speculation, and to regard morality as something difficult to attain may even indicate a desire to exempt oneself from one's duties. Every individual has his *station* in society, and he is fully aware of what constitutes a right and honourable course of action.'[75] Furthermore, one of Hegel's fundamental objections to Kantian morality is that it severs the bond between virtue and happiness, projecting their congruence into a vague, unattainable beyond, and thereby imposes unreasonable demands on the moral subject. But such views do not mean that Hegel denies *any* element of obligation in ethical life, or thinks that participation is a matter

of spontaneous self-fulfilment. Rather, the point is that the 'substance which knows itself as free' is a substance in which 'the absolute *ought* is no less an is'.[76] Freedom, so we might interpret, cannot stand still – it exists only in the process of striving for its own realization. Furthermore, this realization is not a simple, linear process. For, as Hegel emphasizes, there is always a 'second universal' at work in history (contrasted to the first universal of ethical life), which 'makes it difficult for the individual to comply with the precepts of ethics'.[77] The problem is that each ethical whole is determinate and limited, and is therefore is confronted by a 'higher universal', which generates fractures within it. Eventually, as these internal scissions intensify, ethical life will be condemned to 'debasement, fragmentation and destruction'.[78]

In principle, then, ethical life resolves the split between virtue and happiness, between the here-and-now and the beyond, which plagues Kant's conception of morality. But ethical life itself is not a static, unquestionable point of reference: no individual can – without prior commitment – understand what it means to feel at home in a social world. The situation is not like that of choosing between two pre-given objects of unequal value. For the reconciliation to be attained remains deficient as long as the individual hangs back: ethical life does not function as a pre-existing ideal to which we aspire. Just as there can be no objective indicator of the viability of a marriage, independent of the commitment of the partners to making the relationship work, the only way in which to secure and deepen the character of ethical life in general is by taking part in it. Furthermore, any existing form of ethical life will be marred by inadequacies and injustices that will place ethical demands (and dilemmas of conscience) on those whose participation sustains it. Hegel's perspective does not do away with moral effort or striving in favour of mere routine. So we can understand *why* individuals might hold back from full participation in ethical life, even choose evil. But we can also see that – as a result of their commitment – individuals can experience a realization of the good. This realization no longer taxes their endurance by being endlessly postponed. In his 1819–20 lectures on the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel opens his portrayal of ethical life with the bold declaration that 'The good is here not displaced into a beyond, into a moral world order, but is actual and present'.[79]

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But from the early phases of the reception of Hegel's philosophy right up to the present day, this notion of the good as being 'actual and present' has provoked reactions ranging from disquiet to outrage. The worry is that, without an ideal focus for our moral effort, we will slip into accommodationism,

persuading ourselves that the world is basically in order as it already is. Within an influential current of contemporary European philosophy, this focus is rendered in the form of an 'unlimited community of communication' (*unbegrenzte Kommunikationsgemeinschaft*), in which the quality of discussion – free of all internal and external impediments – would guarantee the objectivity of consensually defined moral norms. In the newer 'constructivist' versions of Kantian ethical theory, which have been developed in the wake of John Rawls's thought, the validity of a universalist morality which treats all human beings as ends in themselves is understood to follow from our apprehension of the capacity for rational reflection as transcendentally prior to all engagements, or as the core of our identity.[80] Yet these reconstructions of the Kantian position, both European and American, are often strangely silent on an issue which is absolutely central for Kant: how is commitment to the stringently impartial demands of morality to be achieved?

For Kant himself, of course, 'rational faith' is required to bridge the gap between the strictness of the moral law and the demands of our embodied nature (whose organized fulfilment defines the aspiration to happiness). But even in his earliest published writings Hegel recorded dissatisfaction with this solution. In *Faith and Knowledge* (1801), while still strongly influenced by Schelling's *Identitätsphilosophie*, Hegel was inclined to equate evil and natural necessity. Nonetheless, he also asserted that religion 'expounds an eternal redemption for this necessity, which is to say that it is a truly present and real redemption, not one that is put off into an infinite progress and hence never to be realized.'[81] By the time he published the *Phenomenology of Spirit* he had developed this critique into a powerful attack on the Kantian postulates of practical reason. Here he begins his discussion of the 'moral view of the world', by outlining the problems that result from regarding duty as the 'absolute essence' of self-consciousness (in Kantian terms: regarding awareness of the moral law as the core of human personality). Like any form of *self*-consciousness, morality must also be a form of *consciousness* (that is, be related to an object *other than* itself). But since morality is purely a matter of the universal form of the will, the object must in this case fall entirely outside the domain of duty, as a '*Nature* whose laws like its actions belong to itself as a being which is indifferent to moral self-consciousness'.[82] On this account, it is the conflict between 'the absoluteness of morality and the absoluteness of Nature',[83] generated precisely by Kant's first postulate (freedom understood as rational autonomy), that requires the second and third postulates for its solution. Hegel does not specifically mention belief in the immortality of the soul, but he points out that the infinite progression towards holiness which this postulate makes conceivable is itself simply a way of displacing the

fundamental contradiction. For moral consciousness, the core of self-consciousness according to Kant, presupposes the opposition between duty and natural impulse, along with the struggle to subordinate impulse to the rational will. Hence if holiness (their spontaneous congruence) were to be achieved self-consciousness would abolish itself. We can only envisage an endless progress towards the condition of holiness; yet at the same time, the whole point of the postulate is to render holiness reachable. As Hegel sarcastically remarks, 'Which of these really is the case can no longer clearly be determined in the dim remoteness of infinity, to which for that very reason the attainment of the goal is postponed.'[84]

Hegel's critique of the third postulate (that of a 'moral author of the world', who ensures the convergence of happiness and virtue) is subtle and rich. Its central focus is the oscillating status of a goal (the *summum bonum*), which is understood both as the possible final aim of human endeavour *and* as impossible without divine assistance: 'consciousness itself really places the object *outside* of itself as a beyond of itself. But this object with an intrinsic being of its own is equally posited as being, not free from self-consciousness, but as existing in the interest of it, and by means of it'.[85] The basic dilemma generated by Kant's postulate, then, is that the moral world order must either be brought about by God, in which case human effort is superfluous, or it is an achievable object of human moral striving – in which case God falls out of the picture. Furthermore, in this section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel highlights the 'hypocrisy' to which the split between supposedly pure rational agency and the interests of the empirical individual must give rise:

> Moral self-consciousness asserts that its purpose is pure, is independent of inclinations and impulses, which implies that it has eliminated within itself sensuous purposes. But in this alleged elimination of the element of sense it dissembles again. It acts, brings its purpose into actual existence, and the self-conscious sense-nature which is supposed to be eliminated is precisely this middle term or mediating element between pure consciousness and actual existence.[86]

Around a decade and a half later, in the chapter on 'Morality' in the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel returned to this deep complicity between subjective moral conviction and morality's negation: 'To have a conscience, if conscience is only formal subjectivity, is simply to be on the verge of slipping into evil.'[87] This is because the modern notion of morality places the onus on the subject to decide what is good and what is evil, but provides no stable criterion for distinguishing between the two. As Hegel explains, 'Once self-consciousness has reduced all otherwise valid duties to emptiness and itself to the sheer

inwardness of the will, it has become the potentiality of either making the absolutely universal its principle, or equally well of elevating above the universal the self-will of private particularity, taking that as its principle and realizing it through its actions, i.e. it has become potentially evil.'[88] According to Hegel's account, this instability of moral consciousness gives rise to an intensifying series of distortions. The first of these is hypocrisy, in which the reflective consciousness puts forward as moral what is in fact in its own private interest. This then leads to the claim that any action is 'good' as long as some reason can be given for it ('probabilism'). From here we move to the claim that it is simply good intentions that make an action as good, which in turn gives rise to the idea that it is the subject who *decides* what is good. Finally, the highest point of subjectivism is attained in romantic irony, where the subject places herself above morality as such: 'It is not the thing that is excellent, but I who am so; as the master of law and thing alike, I simply play with them as with my caprice; my consciously ironical attitude lets the highest perish and I merely hug myself at the thought.'[89] Hegel suggests that such irony, as the 'final, most abstruse form of evil, whereby evil is perverted into good and good into evil, and consciousness, in being aware of its power to effect this perversion, is also made aware of itself as absolute, is the highwater mark of subjectivity at the level of morality; it is the form into which evil has blossomed in our present epoch.'[90]

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It would be unreasonable, of course, to demand that an early nineteenth-century thinker should have anticipated the moral catastrophes of twentieth-century history. But when Hegel is accused of proposing a naively progressivist theory of history his critics usually overlook the fact that, in his persistent critique of subjectivism, he provides a searching diagnosis of the distinctively modern potential for evil. Hegel is deeply aware that, as the scope of subjective freedom grows, the potential for devastating outbreaks of evil-doing grows also. He outlines the threat with particular clarity in the 1819–20 version of his lectures of the *Philosophy of Right*. When the right to determine what is good is assigned to the individual conscience, then not only do good and evil slide into one another, since the good is merely an abstract goal, and the consequences of its attempted realization cannot be anticipated; subjective intention decides what can be violated in the pursuit of supposedly higher goals. As Hegel comments, 'Whatever has been ruined in the world has been ruined for good reason. Human beings and governments have good grounds to adduce for everything. Thus in the abstractly good there remains only the

positive, and hence every opposition of good and evil is cancelled.'[91] As he points out, the maxim that 'the end justifies the means', which has been used to defend so many modern acts of inhumanity, is either a truism (any end, if it is good, justifies the means employed to achieve it), or it means something more ominous. What those who employ this phrase intend to say is that: 'to use as a means to a good end something which in itself is simply not a means at all, to violate something in itself sacrosanct, in short to commit a crime as a means to a good end, is permissible and even one's bounden duty'.[92]

For Hegel, then, the unleashing of subjectivity in the modern world brings a new depth of freedom, but also unprecedented dangers. Seen from this perspective, his philosophy, far from suppressing or neutralizing the reality of evil, includes a profound attempt to think about the kind of social arrangements that would minimize its attraction, its subversive power. Philosophical protests against Hegel's supposed optimism rarely display this degree of responsibility. In general, it is one of the strengths of Hegel's thought that he does not propose a discrete moral or ethical theory, independent of his general account of the kinds of familial, economic, and political arrangements that would establish a social world in which modern citizens can realize their freedom without paying the price of an individuation that leaves them prey to feelings of 'loneliness', 'emptiness', and 'depression'.[93] Hegel is not moralistic about evil, we could say. He would surely have agreed with twentieth-century thinkers such as Hannah Arendt that it is the failure of the modern social world to provide a 'home' which fosters the worst outbreaks of arbitrary destructiveness. If this approach appears almost to excuse evil-doing, Hegel is surely simply reflecting the common intuition that it is in unjust, irrationally ordered, conflict-ridden societies that moral violations – and the extremest kinds of violations – are most likely to flourish.

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It would be mistaken to assume, then, that Hegel's philosophy can be reduced to a rubber-stamping of reality– a contemplative comprehension of the rationality of the world, devoid of ethical and practical implications. Admittedly, he believes that a culture's philosophical reflection upon itself, and attempt to justify its own founding assumptions, only emerges when its youthful self-confidence and energy is beginning to ebb. Yet, precisely because of this liminal position, philosophy could also be seen as prefiguring a new beginning, setting the stage for the next advance of spirit.[94] The most celebrated piece of evidence for the purely retrospective construal of Hegel's thought occurs, of course, in the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right*:

> The teaching of the concept, which is also history's inescapable lesson, is that it is only when actuality is mature that the ideal first appears over against the real and that the ideal apprehends this same real world in its substance and builds it up for itself into the shape of an intellectual realm. When philosophy paints its grey on grey, then has a shape of life grown old. By philosophy's grey on grey it cannot be rejuvenated but only understood.[95]

Yet earlier in the same preface, Hegel emphasizes that, since the aim of philosophy is to endow what is already rational in principle with the '*form of rationality*', it cannot 'remain stationary at the given', regardless of whether the status quo is upheld by 'the external positive authority of the state or the *consensus hominum*, commonsense, or by the authority of inward feeling and emotion and by the "witness of the spirit" which directly occurs within it'. Rather, 'thought which is free starts out from itself and thereupon claims to know itself as united in its innermost being with the truth'.[96] In displaying this truth, philosophy can exercise what Michael Theunissen has termed an 'indirectly practical function', since the transformation of consciousness brought about by philosophical insight can itself have concrete effects, without the philosopher needing to advocate or prescribe specific forms of practice or action. Hegel's notorious claim that 'What is rational is actual and what is actual is rational'[97] must be balanced, especially if we take its accommodationism at face value, by the many attested variations of the formula. In the transcript of the 1819–20 lectures on the philosophy of right, for example, Hegel is recorded as stating: 'What is rational *becomes* actual, and what is actual *becomes* rational.'[98]

We have already examined Hegel's critical response to the Kantian postulates of practical reason. For Hegel, rational faith in a *summum bonum* which hovers between immanence and transcendence cannot reconcile us to the demands of the moral law, and cannot contain the inner contradictions of moral consciousness. The need of human beings for reconciliation cannot be endlessly postponed. Yet, at the same time, there is no reason to assume that freedom has already been completely achieved, that reflection will not find the human world wanting in many respects. In fact, Hegel regards his task as being to show that reconciliation has objectivity, or has already been achieved *in principle*, without suggesting that there is nothing further to do. In Jean-Luc Nancy's fine formulation, the exquisite balancing act Hegel demands of thought is 'not to give way on the inscription of the absolute in the present, without conceding any treating-as-absolute of a present, whatever it may be (past, present or still to come)'.[99]

This problem takes us back into the heart of Hegel's philosophy of religion. We have already seen that, for Hegel, Christ's life and death offers human

beings the 'certainty' of the union of divine and human power, which for Kant remains merely a postulate. However, the awareness that this reconciliation has been achieved in Christ does not entail that it has already been fully actualized in human history. In order for the experience of God's humanization to become fully effective, a long and intricate learning process is required, in which – as Hegel often puts it – the reconciliation which God has already achieved must be 'appropriated' (*zu eigen gemacht*) by human beings.[100] The revelation of divine power at work in a single, finite human existence is the first step in this process. But Hegel argues that this demonstration in turn remains abstract, unless it is confirmed by the formation of a community of faith which accepts all its members as equal in their infinite worth and freedom. Human beings learn through the action of Christ that subjectivity 'is *capable* of having an infinite value, and this capacity or possibility is its absolute, defining character'; within the Christian community, 'Subjectivity has given up all external distinctions in this infinite value, distinctions of mastery, power, position, even of sex and wealth. Before God all human beings are equal . . . herein lies the possibility and the root of truly universal justice and of the actualization of freedom.'[101]

The emergence of this community, Hegel argues, is the essential meaning of Christ's resurrection: in his theology Easter blends with Pentecost. The course of human history, after the life and death of Christ, is the progressive working out and enactment of the experience of this triumph. Inevitably, as it matures, the experience sheds its counter-cultural, revolutionary, or 'polemical' character, as Hegel puts it, and takes the shape of the aspiration to a society, based on principles of justice and freedom, in which human beings can learn to feel at home. As Hegel writes in his introduction to the lectures on the philosophy of history:

> The *Germanic* nations, with the rise of Christianity, were the first to realize that man is by nature free, and that freedom of the spirit is his very essence. This consciousness first dawned in religion, in the innermost region of the spirit; but to incorporate the same principle into secular existence was a further problem, whose solution and application require long and arduous cultural exertions . . . This *application* of the principle to secular affairs, the penetration and transformation of secular life by the principle of freedom, is the long process of which history itself is [made up].[102]

Yet here we must note a crucial feature of Hegel's account. The impulse of freedom emerges from religion. But, in the last analysis, it remains trammelled by the representational form in which religion relates to its object, which is

'absolute spirit' (spirit apprehending itself *as* spirit). Within the religious sphere itself, the activity of the cult, which fosters a feeling of participation in the divine, can be seen as an attempt to overcome the one-sided, distancing character of representation. But, at the same time, the very practice of the cult maintains an unreconciled barrier between society at large and the religious community. In some respects, religious practice embodies the very paradigm of free, autotelic activity, yet at the same time this freedom is neutralized by its isolation from the environing world. Eventually, then, the barrier between the cult and ethical life must itself be broken down, as the principle of reconciliation expands outward to permeate all social relations.[103] As Hegel writes, 'it is in the ethical realm that the reconciliation of religion with worldliness and actuality comes about and is accomplished'.[104] Indeed, he declares that 'if heart and will are earnestly and thoroughly cultivated for the universal and the true', then 'ethical life is the most genuine cultus'.[105]

It should be clear by now that one aim of Hegel's philosophy of history is to overcome the dilemma between human action and divine action which plagues Kant's theory of the postulates. He states, 'The differentiation of spirit is the work of the spirit itself, and it is the sum of its own activity. Man, too, is his own product; he is the sum total of his own deeds, and has made himself what he is.'[106] Though Hegel does not comment on the relation between these two claims, the implication is unmistakable: we should neither think of spirit as the product of human activity, nor think of human activity as the product of spirit, for in either case one of the two would not be self-determining. Rather, human self-productive activity and the activity of spirit are one and the same. It is this insight, we could say, which supplants Kant's postulation of a 'moral author of the world'. In Kant's account of faith 'even this not-being-posited is itself a being-posited by me'; even 'rational faith' cannot escape the shackles of subjectivism and the inner conflicts it produces. From Hegel's perspective, however, God's agency (his 'grace') and free human agency can be experienced and known as one. There is no gap to be bridged between the empirical and the noumenal, and grace is not a supernatural gift in which I must trust even though I cannot comprehend it. For God is not a being, transcendent or otherwise: he is the progressive self-manifestation of reconciling power in the realms of human creativity, worship, thought, and action.[107]

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Inevitably, this conception of history returns us to the question of theodicy. If, in general, Hegel's thought seeks to incorporate 'the seriousness, the pain,

the patience and the labour of the negative', nowhere is this more in evidence than in his unvarnished view of human history. He displays a cold-eyed realism about the bloodiness and brutality of the record:

> When we contemplate this display of passions, and consider the historical consequences of their violence and of the irrationality which is associated with them (and even more so with good intentions and worthy aims); when we see the evil, the wickedness, and the downfall of the most flourishing empires the human spirit has created; and when we are moved to profound pity for the untold miseries of individual human beings – we can only end with a feeling of sadness at the transience of everything. And since this destruction is not the work of mere nature but of the will of man, our sadness takes on a moral quality, for the good spirit in us (if we are at all susceptible to it) eventually revolts at such a spectacle.[108]

History, as Hegel is only too aware, appears to us as the 'slaughter bench on which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of states, and the virtue of individuals have been sacrificed'.[109] Yet he also argues that 'Reason . . . rejects the category of the purely negative and assumes that this negative element, this universal activity of mankind, has produced a lasting achievement, and that our present reality is the result of the whole of human history. The finite and momentary ends are moments within a universal end; the perishable contains an imperishable element which these ends have helped to create.'[110] Indeed, Hegel goes so far as to claim that 'History is the unfolding of God's nature in a particular, determinate element'.[111] But surely, the combination of these two perspectives exposes Hegel once again to the charge of functionalizing evil, treating it as a motor of the advance of humankind towards the good. The accusation was formulated with admirable concision by Julius Mueller: Hegel treats as metaphysically necessary what is ethically forbidden.

Yet it is remarkable, in this context, how infrequently the basic counterfactual question has been posed: could spirit *in principle* have unfolded to the full consciousness of freedom *without* the occurrence of evil? The question has obvious relevance for evaluating Hegel's claim to have rendered the truth of Christianity in philosophical terms, for orthodox Christian doctrine cannot permit evil a positive function. But, more generally, it bears on criticism of the role that evil plays in Hegel's conception of the historical process. To give just one example, Richard J. Bernstein has declared, echoing many other protests, 'There is something hollow, something almost obscene, in thinking that Auschwitz can be interpreted as a necessary moment in the dialectical realization of Spirit or humanity.'[112] And this complaint, in turn, relies on the assumption that Hegel seeks to 'justify the existence of evil by showing how

evil turns out to be a necessary dialectical moment in the realisation of the true infinite that is always already implicit in human finitude'.[113] Yet, on closer inspection, it turns out not to be the notion of the necessity of evil, of its inevitability or insuperability *as such*, to which Bernstein fundamentally objects. This becomes clear when he concludes his critique with the somewhat Manichean affirmation: 'We can at once recognize the ways in which evil bursts forth in ever-new ways, and at the same time struggle to fight these evils and overcome them.'[114] What really gives offence, it seems, is Hegel's presumed view that the development of humanity has been *necessarily dependent* on evil.

At first sight, it appears that Hegel must hold such a view. After all, as we have just observed, Hegel repeatedly stresses the injustice, desecration, and ensuing suffering that have occurred throughout history. And he also makes no bones about the fact that such violations may occur as part of a process that, in general, is driving history forward. Yet we must also bear in mind that, for Hegel, not all examples of conflict, violence, or even injustice are manifestations of evil. For in his thought evil means the 'conscious separation of the reflective will from the universality of spirit', as Ludwig Siep has expressed it.[115] Evil, of course, *generates* strife and suffering. But we cannot automatically equate the destructiveness that Hegel regards as intrinsic to spirit's development with evil.

Perhaps the most obvious example of this distinction is tragic conflict. From the *Phenomenology of Spirit* onwards, Hegel understood the conflicts portrayed in ancient tragedy not as the result of a wilful violation of the ethical order, but as the eruption of the latent inconsistency between the 'ethical powers' composing the world of the polis. His favoured example is the clash between Antigone and Creon over the burial of the former's brother Polyneices. Such individuals, lacking the modern capacity for reflective self-distance, identify absolutely with *one* of the ethical powers (Creon with the claims of the state, Antigone with those of the family), a one-sidedness which leads to their downfall. Hegel emphasizes that, in the case of tragic conflict, 'since each calls forth this opposition, and its not knowing is, through the deed, its own affair, each is responsible for the guilt which destroys it'.[116] But this shared guilt merely emphasizes the fact that we not confronted with a conflict of right and wrong: 'Only in the downfall of both sides alike is absolute right accomplished, and the ethical substance as the negative power which engulfs both sides, that is, omnipotent and righteous Destiny, steps on the scene.'[117] For Hegel, the potential for such tragic conflicts can be finally defused only by the emergence of a form of political association, the modern state, in which contradictory ethical imperatives are subject to conscious negotiation and

reconciliation. And this in turn can happen only when the locus of rationality shifts from the 'unalloyed unity' of ethical life to the 'unity of the subject'.[118] The destructive clash between Antigone and Creon, explored in the *Phenomenology*'s chapter on 'True Spirit. Ethical Life', is replaced with the unreserved mutual acknowledgement of the acting and the judging consciousness, which concludes the 'Spirit' section of the *Phenomenology* as whole.

Tragic conflicts are essential to the unfolding of spirit, on Hegel's account. Yet they do not involve evil – wilful self-alienation from ethical life. They are rather symptoms of the decay of ethical life in its immediacy. However, a more difficult case to answer may be raised by Hegel account of 'world-historical individuals', who push the development of spirit forward through their overriding, dimly conscious passion to bring into being the next universal principle. As Hegel concedes, 'such world-historical individuals, in furthering their own momentous interests, did indeed treat other intrinsically admirable interests and sacred rights in a carefree, cursory, hasty and heedless manner, thereby exposing themselves to moral censure'.[119] Yet even in such cases, the individuals concerned cannot be said to have arbitrarily separated themselves from the 'universality of spirit' embodied in a particular ethical world. For Hegel's point is that such individuals arise only when an ethical world is already in decay. It is in the context of the 'debasement, fragmentation, and destruction of the preceding mode of reality' that world-historical individuals, driven by their apprehension of the emerging universal, seek to deliver the *coup de grace*, as Caesar did in crossing the Rubicon.[120] 'For this spirit', Hegel affirms, 'the present world is but a shell which contains the wrong kind of kernel.'[121] In general, then, the transition from one shape of spirit to a higher, more comprehensive shape of spirit is inevitably accompanied by conflict, and by what appears, from within the still extant but now exhausted shape of spirit, to be injustice and evil. But, the suffering caused by such conflict, is not the *result* of evil as Hegel understands it. World-historical individuals are driven by an instinctive awareness of the demands of a more comprehensive phase of reason, and are far from being self-seeking in the sense in which this term is usually understood. Their lives are arduous, and they tend to die young. So although spirit could not have developed without conflict, violence, and humanly produced suffering, a case can be made that the specifically *evil* choices which human beings have made have not played a *necessary* role in this development.

At this point, however, we may begin to wonder what Hegel's proclaimed theodicy actually achieves, when measured against the traditional goals of the genre. After all, Hegel does not try to suggest that what appears to us as purely destructive moral evil may in fact be purposive from the viewpoint of God;

nor does he attempt a quasi-aesthetic vindication of the divine plan, in which the experience of evil is portrayed as an aspect of the world's *chiaroscuro*, as necessary for us fully to appreciate, by contrast, the nature of the good. Furthermore, Hegel does not even suggest that evil people who prosper materially will find their pleasures soured by bad conscience, that the trials of the righteous are an apposite way of testing and steeling their virtue, or that innocent victims of injustice will receive their reward in a future life. In fact, Hegel adopts none of the defences of God's goodness whose feebleness Kant had sought to expose in his essay 'On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Attempts at a Theodicy'.[122]

Hegel insists that reconciliation is distinct from consolation.[123] The reconciliation to be achieved through a philosophical understanding of world history does not require us to believe that moral evil contributes to the good, albeit in ways that transcend our understanding. He also abandons any suggestion of a link between moral and physical evil, traces of which remain in Kant, and even more so in Schelling.[124] Rather, he declares that reconciliation is achieved through 'knowledge of the affirmative side of history, in which the negative is reduced to a subordinate position and transcended altogether. In other words, we must first of all know what the ultimate design of the world really is, and secondly, we must see that this design has been realized, and that evil has not been able to maintain a position of equality beside it'.[125] The sole assurance philosophy can give us, then, is that the good is ultimately more *powerful* than evil. But this does not transform evil into good, or into a precondition of the good.

Yet, even if this defence of Hegel's account of the status of evil is accepted, objections might still be raised to his confidence that the good will triumph in the long term. For example, in the lectures on the philosophy of world history, Hegel declares that 'the history of the world is a rational process, the rational and necessary evolution of the world spirit'.[126] He even goes so far as to risk a prospective claim: 'Sure in the knowledge that reason governs history, philosophy is convinced that the events will match the concept.'[127] It must be remembered, of course, that the 'necessity' which Hegel has in mind is not causal, or even purely logical: it is the necessity with which freedom strives to work out its own self-realization. As he writes, 'The absolute goal, or, if you like, the absolute impulse, of free mind . . . is to make freedom its object, i.e. to make freedom objective as much in the sense that freedom shall be the rational system of mind, as in the sense that this system shall be the world of immediate actuality.'[128] Furthermore, Hegel is aware of what he calls the 'paradox' of claiming it to be 'possible for the universal or the rational to determine anything whatsoever in history', since history is composed of the

actions of individuals, and 'the will of the individual is free if he can determine his volitions absolutely, abstractly, and in and for himself'.[129] In *The Vocation of Man*, Fichte anticipates the establishment of a political and social system which, by the ingenuity of its arrangements, would render evil actions simply counterproductive for the individual. But Fichte can entertain this thought only because he understands evil as lazy collusion with natural impulse, which a more powerful natural deterrent would be sufficient to overcome. Hegel, on the other hand, roots evil in the intrinsic tendency of subjective freedom towards autarchy, which means that no social mechanism can eliminate back-sliding, or even the possibility of moral catastrophe. Perhaps the most he could plausibly claim is that such events cannot completely reverse the level of *consciousness* of freedom that has been attained – indeed, it is precisely this level of awareness that shows up moral disasters for what they are.[130]

But by this point, with not even the victory of the good guaranteed, confidence in which he takes to be central to religion, we may begin to wonder whether Hegel achieves any of the goals of a theodicy at all. The minimum aim of a theodicy must surely be to show us that our moral disappointment with the world need not be the last word. But Hegel is quite explicit that we must *abstract* from the moral standpoint when considering history philosophically: 'Reason cannot stop to consider the injuries sustained by single individuals, for particular ends are submerged in the universal end.'[131] World history is above the point of view from which such things as 'justice and virtue, wrongdoing, power and vice, talents and their achievements, passions strong and weak . . . etc.' matter.[132] For Hegel, there is a higher 'right' of history which overrides the rights of individuals, despite all the respect that is due to individual conscience.[133] In one sense, it is easy to understand why Hegel advocates this detachment. From a rational, secular point of view, there is nothing we can do about the evil deeds of the past. What we *can* do is commit ourselves to ensuring that the pressure towards evil is minimized by our social and political arrangements. We can draw ethical courage from history if we keep our eye on the logic of the advance in the consciousness of freedom. But to do so we must not allow our distress at the spectacle of past injustice and suffering to overwhelm our sense of what human beings have achieved. The tragic conflicts of the past, like the conflicts of good and evil, cannot be reconciled. But we *can* be reconciled to their existence. For freedom can *come to be* only through the constant overcoming of conflict and resistance.

In many respects this is an admirably sober and realistic conception, an attempt to retrieve the maximum of the ethical and political content of the Christian religious tradition while honouring the post-Enlightenment claims of rational insight. Yet what is lost in Hegel's substitution of politically

realized freedom for the Kantian *summum bonum* should not be forgotten. For the coincidence of happiness and virtue engineered by Kant's moral author of the world is eternal – God is beyond time and space. From our finite, temporal position we must imagine the realization of the supreme good as still to come, since it is an object of our future-directed moral striving. But we could just as well think of it as always already achieved, or as realized in this very moment, and in every moment. More importantly, since the *summum bonum* has no temporal restriction, it includes *all* human beings – indeed, all rational beings – whenever they lived or died. Religious hope embraces justice for the dead, as well as for the living and those who will live, though this is not a dimension of rational faith that Kant emphasizes. For good or ill, this is an aspect of the believer's response to evil for which Hegel's philosophical comprehension of faith offers no equivalent. His concept of reconciliation does not include the thought that the pain and suffering entwined with evil, once past, can be undone. Though he affirms, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, that 'The wounds of the Spirit heal, and leave no scars behind',[134] this statement makes sense only if applied to the power of confession and forgiveness to undo present wrongs – it does not mean that we can abolish the unjust past. Similarly, Hegel does not attempt to conceal his rejection of the literal truth of the Christian doctrine of the immortality of the soul: in this respect, too, there is no transcendent dimension that would allow us to hope that senseless suffering need not be the last word for so many who have lived and died. For Hegel, as we have seen, the 'moral world order', the place where happiness and virtue coincide, if they do so at all, is simply a functioning form of ethical life. But this means that 'the so-called prosperity or misfortune of some particular individuals or other cannot and should not be regarded as an essential moment within the rational order of the universe'.[135] It is scarcely surprising then that, despite Hegel's monumental effort to reconcile secular and religious consciousness, the sense of distress and dismay at past evil, and its irremediability, persistently breaks through in post-Hegelian thought.

Notes

1   G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 42. (Hereafter *LPHI*.)
2   For a discussion of the nature of this 'absolute need', see Raymond Geuss, 'Art and Theodicy', in *Morality, Culture and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 78–115.

3 G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. III: *The Consummate Religion*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, trans. R. F. Brown, P. C. Hodgson, and J. M. Stewart (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 212–13. (Hereafter *LPR III*.)

4 Ibid., pp. 212, 213.

5 *LPHI*, p. 27.

6 *LPHI*, p. 42.

7 Richard J. Bernstein, *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p. 63.

8 William Desmond, 'Evil and Dialectic', in David Kolb (ed.), *New Perspectives on Hegel's Philosophy of Religion* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992), p. 164.

9 Ibid., p. 162.

10 Hans Jonas, 'Matter, Mind and Creation: Cosmological Evidence and Cosmogonic Speculation', in *Mortality and Morality*, pp. 165–97.

11 Ibid., p. 188.

12 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 307.

13 F.A.G. Tholuck, *Blüthensammlung aus der morgenländischen Mystik, nebst einer Einleitung über die Mystik und die Morgenländische insbesondere* (Berlin, 1825), p. 14.

14 Ibid., p. 13.

15 F. A. G. Tholuck, *Die Lehre von der Sünde und vom Versöhner, oder die wahre Weihe des Verzweiflers* (Hamburg, 1823), p. 229.

16 G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. I: *Introduction* and *The Concept of Religion*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, trans. R. F. Brown, P. C. Hodgson, and J. M. Stewart (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1998), p. 379. (Hereafter *LPR I*.)

17 Julius Müller, *Die christliche Lehre von der Sünde* (Breslau, 1849), vol. 1, p. 555.

18 Ibid.

19 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 13.

20 G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 10.

21 *LPR I*, p. 105.

22 *LPR III*., p. 125.

23 *LPR III*, p. 22.

24 *LPR III*, p. 83.

25 G. W. F. Hegel, *The Logic of Hegel: Being Part Three of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (1830), trans. William Wallace (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 42 (§24, *Zusatz*).

26 Ibid., p. 44 (§24, *Zusatz*).

27 *LPR III*, pp. 93–4.

28 *LPR III*, pp. 204–5.

29   *LPR III*, p. 296.

30   G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (London and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 19. (Hereafter *PhR*.)

31   To be fair, Fichte does emphasize the social influence on moral consciousness in §16 of the *System of Ethics*, though it is not clear how he can account for it philosophically. And by 1806 he had developed his own philosophy of history, centred on the development of humankind's moral consciousness, in his public lectures on 'The Characteristics of the Present Age'. See *Die Grundzüge des gegenwärtigen Zeitalters* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1978).

32   *PhR*, p. 231 (§18, *Zusatz*).

33   *PhR*, p. 231 (§18, *Zusatz*).

34   *LPR III*, p. 102.

35   *LPR III*, p. 102.

36   *LPR III*, p. 206.

37   G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. II: *Determinate Religion*, ed. Peter Hodgson, trans. R. F. Brown, P. C. Hodgson, and J. M. Stewart (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1987), p. 528–9. (Hereafter *LPR II*.)

38   *LPR III*, p. 206.

39   *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 406.

40   Ibid., pp. 406–8.

41   *LPR III*, p. 301.

42   Ringleben, *Hegels Theorie der Sünde*, pp. 152–3.

43   *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 409.

44   For example, in the 'Introduction' to his lectures on world history, Hegel states: 'In order to justify the course of history, we must try to understand the role of evil in the light of the absolute sovereignty of reason. We are here dealing with the category of the negative, as already mentioned, and we cannot fail to notice how all that is finest and noblest in the history of the world is immolated upon its altar' (*LPHI*, p. 43).

45   G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind: Being Part Three of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, trans. William Wallace (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 300 (§568).

46   See the characteristically illuminating and subtle discussion of these issues in Michael Theunissen, *Hegels Lehre vom absoluten Geist als theologisch-politischer Traktat* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1970), pp. 266–74.

47   *LPR III*, p. 65.

48   Ringleben, *Hegels Theorie der Sünde*, p. 284.

49   See Hegel's remark in the 'Introduction' to the lectures on world history: '[Spirit's] freedom does not consist in static being, but in a constant negation of all that threatens to destroy freedom' (*LPHI*, p. 48).

50   Here I differ from the interpretation of the post-Kantian trajectory proposed by Michelle Kosch in her excellent book *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling*

and Kierkegaard. Kosch rightly argues that the problem posed by evil for Kant's ethics of autonomy is an important key to the philosophical dynamic of the period. But she reads Hegel out of this story, on the assumption that he takes 'the idea of autonomy to be itself unproblematic in ethical terms' (p. 5). But for Hegel evil is the *Doppelgänger* of (Kantian, autonomous) morality.

51 For a recent discussion of the relation between moral subjectivity and ethical life in Hegel, which – to my mind – talks up the status of the former, see Frederick Neuhouser, *Foundations of Hegel's Social Theory: Actualizing Freedom* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2000), ch. 7. For a more balanced view, see Ludwig Siep's outstanding article, 'Was heißt "Aufhebung der Moralität in Sittlichkeit" in Hegels Rechtsphilosophie?', in *Praktische Philosophie im Deutschen Idealismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992), pp. 217–39.

52 *LPR III*, p. 202.

53 *LPR III*, p. 298.

54 Ibid.

55 *LPR III*, p. 299 (my emphasis).

56 *PhR*, p. 48 (§57).

57 Ibid.

58 For a well-documented discussion of this issue, see Vittorio Hösle, 'Eine unsittliche Sittlichkeit: Hegels Kritik an der indischen Kultur', in Wolfgang Kuhlman (ed.), *Moralität und Sittlichkeit: Das Problem Hegels und die Diskursethik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), pp. 136–82.

59 *LPR II*, p. 622.

60 *LPR III*, p. 308.

61 Ibid.

62 *LPR III*, p. 301.

63 *LPR III*, p. 215.

64 *LPR III*, p. 313.

65 *LPR III*, p. 219.

66 *PhR*, p. 107 (§149).

67 *Philosophy of Mind*, p. 252 (§511).

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid., pp. 252, 253 (§509, §511).

70 *The Logic of Hegel*, p. 44 (§24, *Zusatz*).

71 *Philosophy of Mind*, p. 254 (§514).

72 Ibid. (§516).

73 Recall that in the *Phenomenology* Hegel suggests that 'uncommunicative being-for-self' must be 'thrown away'. Such throwing away cannot be purely the result of an act of rational self-reflection.

74 *Philosophy of Mind*, p. 255 (§516).

75 *LPHI*, p. 80.

76 *Philosophy of Mind*, p. 120 (§514).

77   *LPHI*, p. 81.

78   *LPHI*, p. 82.

79   *LPHI*, p. 122.

80   See, notably, Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, and Onora O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason*, especially Part I.

81   G. W. F. Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, trans. Walter Cerf and H. S. Harris (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1977), p. 180.

82   *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 365.

83   Ibid.

84   Ibid., p. 369.

85   Ibid., p. 374.

86   Ibid., p. 377.

87   *PhR*, p. 92 (§139, *Zusatz*).

88   Ibid.

89   Ibid., p. 102 (§140).

90   Ibid., p. 94 (§139, *Zusatz*).

91   G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophie des Rechts: Die Vorlesung von 1819/20 in einer Nachschrift*, ed. Dieter Henrich (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983), p. 109.

92   *PhR*, pp. 97–8 (§140, *Zusatz*).

93   These characterizations of moral consciousness, from §136 (*Zusatz*), §141, and §149 of the *Philosophy of Right*, are cited by Axel Honneth, in *Leiden an Unbestimmtheit: Eine Reaktualisierung der Hegelschen* Rechtsphilosophie (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2001), p. 43. Honneth's book is a fascinating attempt to interpret Hegel's philosophy of right as a therapeutic enterprise, intended to heighten our awareness of the pathologies of modern legal, moral, and social consciousness.

94   For an informative discussion of Hegel's conception of the cultural and historical role of philosophy, see Vittorio Hösle, *Hegels System*, vol. *2: Philosophie der Natur und des Geistes* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1988), pp. 424–35.

95   *PhR*, p. 13 (Preface).

96   *PhR*, p. 3.

97   *PhR*, p. 10.

98   G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophie des Rechts. Die Vorlesung von 1819/20*, p. 51 (my emphasis).

99   Jean-Luc Nancy, *Hegel: L'inquiétude du négatif* (Paris: Hachette, 1997), p. 42.

100 *LPR I*, p. 359n.

101 *LPR III*, p. 138.

102 *LPHI*, p. 54.

103 For an excellent discussion of the character and inner logic of religious worship in Hegel, see Theunissen, *Hegels Lehre vom absoluten Geist als theologisch-politisches Traktat*, pp. 397–419.

104 *LPR III*, p. 342.

105   *LPR I*, p. 335n.
106   *LPHI*, p. 96.
107   *LPR III*, pp. 230–1.
108   *LPHI*, p. 68.
109   *LPHI*, p. 69.
110   *LPHI*, p. 212.
111   *LPHI*, p. 42.
112   Bernstein, *Radical Evil*, p. 73.
113   Ibid., p. 74.
114   Ibid., p. 75.
115   Siep, 'Was heißt "Aufhebung der Moralität in Sittlichkeit" in Hegels Rechtsphilosophie?', p. 226.
116   *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 285.
117   Ibid.
118   See *LPR II*, p. 643. For an outstanding treatment of Hegel's philosophy of tragedy, to which my account is indebted, see Christoph Menke, *Tragödie im Sittlichen: Gerechtigkeit und Freiheit nach Hegel* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996).
119   *LPHI*, p. 89.
120   See *LPHI*, pp. 82–9.
121   *LPHI*, p. 83.
122   Kant, 'On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy', in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*.
123   See *LPHI*, p. 67.
124   See Kant, 'Conjectural Beginning of Human History', p. 60, and Schelling, *Of Human Freedom*, p. 59.
125   *LPHI*, p. 43.
126   *LPHI*, p. 29.
127   *LPHI*, p. 30.
128   *PhR*, p. 32 (§27).
129   *LPHI*, p. 71.
130   Such caution may be part of the reason why Hegel famously defines world history as 'the progress of the consciousness of freedom', rather than simply as the progress of freedom (*LPHI*, p. 54).
131   *LPHI*, p. 43.
132   *PhR*, p. 217 (§345).
133   See *LPHI*, pp. 90–2.
134   *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 407.
135   *LPHI*, p. 91.

Chapter 4   Schopenhauer and Nietzsche: Suffering from Meaninglessness

From the secular, naturalistic perspective prevalent amongst citizens in many Western societies it is tempting to regard the question of theodicy – and more generally, the philosophical problem of evil – as the product of an antiquated conception of the world. It is only if we assume the existence of a benevolent and omnipotent creator, it seems, that we encounter acute difficulties in explaining the existence of suffering and moral evil. But belief in the existence of such a creator, let alone the conviction that his existence can be philosophically proven, has been in steady decline over the last two hundred years, as an image of the world largely shaped by science has come to occupy centre stage. Yet the course of post-Kantian idealism, as we have traced it so far, suggests that to think of evil and suffering as posing a problem for a *pre-existing* belief in God may not be the most illuminating way of viewing the matter. Rather, we could say, the fundamental issue is how to sustain a sense of human existence, and especially of the moral life that lies at its core, as a meaningful enterprise, in the face of a recalcitrant social reality and the perversity of human behaviour. We can be easily led to despair by the morally inhospitable character of the world.

In Kant and Fichte this problem is addressed in terms of the faith required to render our experience of ourselves as rational agents, who are bound to seek the realization of the highest good, coherent. In the Schelling of the *Freiheitschrift* it is addressed through the project of a system that will express the logic of the world's movement towards reconciliation, without suppressing the freedom (the equilibrium of existence with its basis) that enables any disclosure of a world at all. Finally, in Hegel the problem is reformulated as the task of demonstrating that modern society and culture, though they are the outcome of a history disfigured by cruelty and violence, are congenial to

the realization of freedom. Despite everything, the world is a place where human beings can feel at home.

This Kantian and post-Kantian enterprise required drawing on the resources of the Christian religion, with its history of Fall and redemption, its eschatological hope for the overcoming of evil. But these resources now had to be appropriated in a post-Enlightenment context, where any appeal to authority, tradition, or revelation was required to face the tribunal of reason. In Kant's case philosophy is required to explain the indispensable role of rational faith; in the case of Hegel, it must function as a reconciling form of consciousness in its own right (though whether this means that, for Hegel, religion itself is obsolescent remains a vexed issue). Inevitably, this drawing on religious sources involves a more or less radical reworking of theological concepts and motifs. In Fichte, for example, the notion of God as a transcendent personal being is rejected as an anthropomorphism incompatible with God's infinity. In Schelling, God becomes the process of the self-revelation of being. And finally, in Hegel, we reach the notion of God as absolute spirit. In this conception, religion is no longer merely the human community's consciousness of the divine, but the evolving form taken by God's self-consciousness, and in this sense the realization of God himself. There ceases to be a world-creator whose existence can be abstracted from the modes in which he comes to be comprehended and worshipped.

What makes Arthur Schopenhauer *our* contemporary, as well as being a contemporary of the great German Idealists, is that he vehemently rejects this entire philosophical development. Born into an affluent merchant family in Danzig in 1788, and educated at the Universities of Göttingen and Berlin, Schopenhauer matured in an intellectual atmosphere fundamentally shaped by the great post-Kantians. As his manuscript notebooks reveal, he studied many of the major works of Fichte and Schelling intensively, and indeed transcribed and commented on lectures by Fichte, which he attended as a student at the University of Berlin. His masterpiece, *The World as Will and Representation*, was published in 1818, the year in which Hegel's move from Heidelberg to Berlin triggered the emergence of Hegelianism as the predominant philosophical force in Germany. Two years later Schopenhauer delivered a great cycle of lectures at the University of Berlin, which can be regarded as the second major statement of his system. Hegel himself was in the audience for the presentation which the aspiring philosopher had to deliver as part of his application to become a *Privatdozent*, with the entitlement to teach in the Berlin philosophy department.[1]

Yet despite his historical proximity to – and close intellectual contact with – the German Idealists, Schopenhauer came to regard this whole philosophical

movement as theoretically flawed, politically craven, and wilfully obscurantist, if not downright meretricious. Idealism was fatally compromised by its intellectual dependence on a Judaeo-Christian inheritance whose vitality as a tradition of religious belief and practice – Schopenhauer sensed – was irretrievably on the wane. As far as he was concerned, far from providing a perspicuous reformulation of the truths expressed in inadequate form by religious doctrine, the Idealists sought simply to veil religious convictions in philosophical drapery, with disastrous consequences for the integrity and coherence of their thought. The metaphysics of German Idealism, with its portentous claims about the 'Absolute', was simply a disingenuous substitute for overt talk about God. In the notebooks written when he was still in his twenties, and working out his own system, Schopenhauer wrote: 'Schelling does with his absolute what all devout and illuminated theists did with their God – they expressed logical impossibilities about him which were only a figurative expression for the abstract statement, namely that the understanding is only a faculty conditioned by the sensuous world and valid only for this.'[2] From very early on he vehemently resisted the thought that the world could be regarded as a creation or manifestation of the divine. And prime amongst the reasons for his resistance was the conviction that evil and suffering cannot be regarded as a mere lack or deficiency in a world that is essentially good.[3]

Schopenhauer, throughout his life, attacked an understanding of philosophy as continuous with speculative theology. At the core of his objections lay the argument that Idealism could not simply change the content of the religious concept of God by semantic *diktat*. In effect, he agrees with his Idealist contemporaries that the notion of a personal creator God is incoherent: 'Personality is in fact a phenomenon which is only known to us from our animal nature, and is therefore no longer thinkable in a lucid way when separated from this: now to make such a thing the origin and principle of the world is a proposition which will not immediately spring into everyone's head.'[4] But, at the same time, Schopenhauer believes the upshot of this argument to be that the notion of God must simply be dropped, along with any more abstract substitute for it: 'An impersonal God, by contrast, is mere philosophy professor's twaddle, a contradictio in adiecto, an empty word, to satisfy the thoughtless, or to pacify those who are on their toes.'[5] Philosophy, he argues, must begin from dispassionate, unprejudiced observation of the world, and reflection on the subject who experiences this world. In his eyes, the approach of the Idealists is so far from this conception that he can only explain their mode of philosophizing by recourse to ulterior motives. His later writings are packed with caustic, ad hominem denunciations. The 'sophisms, insinuations, distortions, false assertions' (*Sophismen, Erschleichungen,*

Verdrehungen, falsche Assertionen)[6] of the idealists were motivated by a need to placate the political authorities, to provide a philosophy supportive of established religion, and – thereby – to ensure their proponents a continued living as university professors. By contrast, Schopenhauer, who failed as a lecturer in Berlin, but could live comfortably from his private income, regarded his own thought as faithful to the radicality of Kant's achievement. For it was Kant who had ended the dominance of 'Jewish theism' in philosophy, by demolishing all pretentions to prove the existence of God.

Viewed from an unsympathetic perspective, Schopenhauer's intemperate attacks may appear to be based on a sorry misreading of the basic strategies of German Idealism. He consistently interprets the term 'the Absolute', for example, as if it referred to the notion of a 'first cause'. Time and again he employs Kant's argument against the viability of the cosmological proof of God's existence in order to debunk this notion:

> We must think of everything according to the laws of the understanding in the eternal chain of causes and effects; only then do we establish it as existing. But the absolute is supposed as such to be simply *detached* from this chain, existing without cause. And so it happens that, by our having it, it vanishes; thus the understanding lays down all the conditions, but then removes an exceedingly necessary one. The absolute therefore collapses like a building deprived of its foundations.[7]

Or, as he puts it rather more pithily in another context, 'The law of causality is therefore not so obliging as to allow itself to be used like a cab which we dismiss after we reach our destination.'[8] Clearly, this attack betrays a serious misconception. For we can understand Idealist talk of the absolute as an expression of the permanent pressure on knowing to detach or 'absolve' itself from its opaque relation to the object, thus generating a new form of knowing, until it becomes manifest that truth does not lie beyond self-consciousness, but is implicit all along in knowing as it occurs in our experience, and needs only to be comprehended as such.[9]

Yet even if the notion of the absolute is reformulated in this way, Schopenhauer might still have a response. For it is basic to German Idealism that not even the dichotomy of subject and object can stand as an unquestioned presupposition of cognition. As long as the knowing subject remains related to an object (which, since it cannot be understood unequivocally as either internal *or* external to consciousness, gives rise to the oscillation of idealism and realism), cognitive awareness is unstable, and not yet rationally transparent to itself. It is a fundamental assumption of Schopenhauer's thinking,

however, that all knowledge requires the relation of a subject to an object. Like the other post-Kantians, he argues that we must presuppose a knowing subject that cannot be an item within the empirical world, since everything that exists can exist only *for* such a subject. But he takes it to be a lesson of Kant's philosophy that, as the precondition of all knowledge, the subject itself can never be known: 'I (that is to say the synthetic unity of apperception according to Kant) am indeed on this side of all representation and as its condition, are [*sic*] separated from it. (What lies behind the concave mirror is not reflected back by it); I can therefore, as Kant says, never perceive and know myself.'[10] For Schopenhauer, we have no access to an 'absolute I' or 'absolute subject'. Idealist invocations of 'intellectual intuition' (the immediate awareness of a non-empirical entity, such as the self) are dismissed by him as a baseless fraud: 'That the subject should ever become object for itself is the most monstrous contradiction ever thought of: for subject and object can only be thought one in relation to the other . . . if the subject is to become an object, it presupposes as object another subject – where is this to come from?'[11]

Seen from this angle, Schopenhauer's declaration, 'I argue against your absolute precisely as I do against the God of the deists', may not be as gauche as it appears at first sight. For it is undeniable that the thought of the absolute 'I', as this emerged in the context of early post-Kantian idealism, takes over many of the features of the notion of the divine being; it is understood as infinite, self-positing activity. But from Schopenhauer's perspective, the notion of the 'I' as self-grounding simply stems from the illusion that we can know anything at all except as an object conditioned by time, space, and the principle of sufficient reason (which he argues is the only a priori principle required for objective experience).[12] Hence, as Schopenhauer remarks in his notebooks, 'From Schelling's false premise that the I is thought there then follows his absurd sentence that "it produces itself through absolute causality".'[13] In other words, what binds monotheism and the Idealist notion of the absolute together is the concept of God as *causa sui* which lies at the heart of the ontological argument. Like Kant, Schopenhauer insists that this argument is invalid. He accepts the Kantian view that the concept God, the perfect being, cannot entail his existence as one of his perfections, because existence is not a 'real predicate' (it does not add anything to the characterization of the entity which we are thinking). In his doctoral dissertation, 'On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason', Schopenhauer makes the same point by criticizing what he regards as a longstanding confusion of reasons and causes. Conceiving of God as the necessarily existing being entails that the concept of God contains the *reason* for his existence, simply because this is the way we have set the concept up. But we cannot jump from here to the conclusion

that God's concept contains the *cause* of his existence, and therefore that he necessarily exists in reality. All we can say is that God, if thought of at all, must be *thought of* as necessarily existing.[14] Schopenhauer denies, of course, that this is a coherent thought, since he regards necessity as always conditional, never absolute.

Since one central line of post-Kantian thought was concerned to overcome the dualism of subject and object, of thought and being, it was far from aberrant of Schopenhauer to suggest that the project of German Idealism revolved around the ontological argument. In his 'Fragments on the History of Philosophy' Schopenhauer traces the vicissitudes of this argument, from Descartes up to his own day. It is clear, he asserts, that Spinoza's pantheism is actually only the continuation of Descartes's ontological proof.[15] In fact, Spinoza simply assumes the validity of the ontological argument in the first 'Definition', which opens his *Ethics*: 'By cause of itself I understand that whose essence involves existence, or that whose nature cannot be conceived unless existing.'[16] On Schopenhauer's account, Spinoza's example became vital for the Idealists, who sought – vainly – to supersede the constraints imposed by Kant on the development of a systematic, rational understanding of the world. Time and again he attacks Hegel, his favourite target, for seeking to deduce the actual existence of the world from what is conceptual, and hence abstracted from it. Hegel's system is nothing more than a 'monstrous amplification of the ontological proof', which falsely treats the 'logically necessary' as if it were the 'actually necessary'.[17] Schopenhauer, in fact, prefigures the criticism of Hegel's supposed 'panlogicism' which has been constantly repeated from Feuerbach and the young Karl Marx, right up to the present day. The famous Marxist accusation that Hegel turns the world upside down, deriving reality from the Idea, occurs in numerous forms throughout his work.[18]

But Schopenhauer objects not only on epistemological and metaphysical grounds to the assertion of the ultimate identity of the ideal and the real. The animus of his attacks on the post-Kantian Idealists would remain incomprehensible if one overlooked the moral fervour that drives them. Ultimately, what he cannot tolerate is the implication that, if we dig deep enough metaphysically, we will uncover a world that is purposive or rational. He registers what can only be called an existential protest against any such view. Spinoza may not have been wrong, Schopenhauer concedes, to begin from a monistic ground of the world: but he was utterly mistaken to regard this ground as divine.[19] In fact, the modern pantheism stemming from Spinoza is essentially a 'decent way of doing away with God', it is a 'disguised negation' of theism.[20] Viewed in terms of its intelligibility, however, it is a jump from the frying pan

into the fire. The thought of a single, personal being as creator of the world is not an easy one. But at least the belief in an all-powerful, all-wise, and benevolent God, who yet creates a 'tortured world',[21] can be saved from complete absurdity by appeal to the unfathomability of the divine decrees. 'But, on the assumptions of pantheism the creating God himself is the one who is endlessly tortured and, on this little earth alone, is dying every second, and this voluntarily: that is absurd.'[22] Idealist system-builders fail to confront the reality of human existence with the requisite seriousness. They produce merely 'joke philosophy' (*Spaß-Philosophie*)[23] As Schopenhauer remarked in conversation towards the end of his life: 'Mistrust every saccharine metaphysics! A philosophy in which one does not hear, between the pages, tears, howling and chattering of teeth, and the frightful din of general, reciprocal murder, is no philosophy.'[24]

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

It should be plain by now that Schopenhauer's philosophy spells out many of the basic features of modern, post-religious consciousness. For example, his Idealist contemporaries tend to assign the natural sciences a relatively humble position in the hierarchy of knowledge. By contrast, Schopenhauer's thought reflects the new age of technology and industry: 'In this century no *philosophical system* can attain a lasting dominance, if it does not attach itself to the natural sciences, and stand in a constant interchange with them.'[25] But it is not simply that Schopenhauer, like many more recent thinkers, was inclined to compare humanistic disciplines such as history unfavourably with the progress of the natural sciences. He also argued that philosophy is not a matter of deduction from first principles, but must begin from 'experiential knowing' (*anschauende Erkenntnis*). Like other sciences, philosophy operates by means of abstraction and generalization. Its aim is to produce an explanatory theory, though one which deals with the most universal features of the world and of human existence. 'Philosophy', Schopenhauer asserts, 'is nothing but the correct and universal understanding of experience itself, the true interpretation of its meaning and content.'[26] Furthermore, Schopenhauer's mature thought inclines increasingly towards a conception of human beings as organisms whose behaviour is determined by their biological needs and drives. Human consciousness, awareness of an external world, is the product of brain processes, and our knowledge of the world is developed in the interests of survival. The a priori status of the principle of sufficient reason (*Nihil est sine ratione* – 'nothing exists without a reason'), which structures our cognitive access to reality, already betrays an overriding practical concern with conse-

quences, and above all with relations of cause and effect. In line with this outlook, Schopenhauer believes that – even in the civilized state – motives derived from our biology are preponderant in most human beings, for most of the time.

Correspondingly, Schopenhauer takes a very dim view of the value of historical knowledge. He rejects the idea that any developmental logic can be discerned in human history (in this respect, the pessimistic downswing signalled by the popularity of his thought in the decades after his death in 1860 parallels the disillusioned, postmodernist announcement of the end of 'grand narratives', which was a key feature of the intellectual mood of the West in the late twentieth century). There is no evidence, Schopenhauer contends, that history displays any advance in human morality, in the rationality of social arrangements, or in the alleviation of suffering. He is not just an atheist; he also rejects Idealism's surrogates for God, such as a world-structuring and history-guiding reason. Humankind is not advancing towards a freer, happier condition.

Yet despite the many ways in which Schopenhauer seems close to a modern, secular, disenchanted outlook, there are others in which he is far removed. Despite his respect for – and extensive knowledge of – the natural sciences, he argues that naturalism, as a philosophical standpoint, begs all the important questions. The point is put with great force in the second volume of *The World as Will and Representation*. Naturalism cannot answer any of our ultimate questions about the origin of things, or even explain why the basic constituents of the world are such as they are. All it presents us with are 'Beginningless and endless causal series, inscrutable fundamental forces, endless space, beginningless time, infinite divisibility of matter'.[27] In short, 'naturalism, or the purely physical way of considering things, will never be sufficient; it is like a sum in arithmetic that never comes out'.[28] But it not just that naturalism cannot satisfy what Schopenhauer calls our 'metaphysical need' (our need for an ultimate explanation of *why* the world is as it is). He also argues that if – *per impossibile* – there could be an 'absolute system of physics', then this system would destroy the moral standpoint. Although it is wrong, in Schopenhauer's view, to claim that morality is dependent on theism, it is not wrong to claim that it is dependent on some *metaphysical* conception of the world. This is because metaphysical thought does not simply extend and complete our physical theories, but rather opens up a different dimension of existence. It registers the fact that the world has an 'inner', scientifically inaccessible side which Schopenhauer seeks to indicate by means of the Kantian contrast between phenomenal and noumenal reality. He never tires of praising this distinction as Kant's immortal contribution to philosophy,

endorsing his predecessor's view that, without it, there could be no moral judgements of good and bad, right and wrong. If the world has no transcendent depth, then ethical perspectives have no purchase on it: 'We can therefore set this up as the necessary *credo* of all righteous and good men: "I believe in a system of metaphysics." '[29]

Schopenhauer is convinced, in fact, that the world is meaningful only when viewed in the light of the moral ought. As he states, 'the supreme point at which the meaning of existence generally arrives is undoubtedly ethical'.[30] It is this conviction that explains the basic strategy of his philosophy – but only when it is combined with his deep hostility to German Idealism. For although there is a profusion of ways in which one might understand the mainstream development of post-Kantian thought, one of the most obvious is to regard it as responding to the many unresolved problems generated by Kant's dualistic bent, and more specifically to his contrast between causal necessity and freedom. In a note written around May 1797 Kant remarks:

> The reality of the concept of freedom unavoidably implies the doctrine of the *ideality* of things qua objects of perception in space and time. Unless these perceptions were nothing but subjective forms of sensibility, rather than things in themselves, their practical use, i.e. actions, would be wholly dependent on the mechanism of nature, and freedom, together with morality (its consequences) would be annihilated.[31]

But although the later Idealists concurred with Kant's view that human freedom is incompatible with a conception of finite, empirical objects as ultimately real, they were far from satisfied with Kant's attempts to secure freedom. Kant insists that, regarded phenomenally, human actions are physical events within the causal order of nature. Yet, on his account, the ground of the determinate causal order which we experience is – in some indefinable sense – the 'thing-in-itself'. The problem is evident in the reflection from Kant's notebooks we have just considered. For even the doctrine of the transcendental ideality of the objects given in experience is insufficient to secure the reality of freedom, if the specific causal configuration of these events (which includes, of course, movements of our own body) is regarded as grounded in the thing-in-itself. Kant does not insist, of course, that individual human actions can be seen as the expression of distinct noumenal choices; rather, our intelligible character is disclosed in the whole sequence of our actions over a lifetime, which can thus be seen as the temporally extended manifestation of a unique 'timeless' act of self-choosing. But even this does not go far enough. For Kant still regards the agency of each human being as

noumenally individuated, and he is therefore faced with the problem of how a human biography, as a manifestation of freedom, can mesh causally with natural events which are understood as having a different noumenal ground.

The young Fichte's way of highlighting this problem was to assert that Kantian transcendental philosophy and the doctrine of the thing-in-itself are sheerly incompatible. We have to choose between 'dogmatism' (a term Fichte applies to all realist and materialist positions) and 'criticism', and should choose the latter for the sake of freedom. For Fichte, 'There is no consciousness without REAL activity, without absolute freedom . . . thus freedom is the ground of all philosophizing, all being. Stand upon yourself, stand upon freedom, and you will stand firm.'[32] But, in order to reconcile the results of my free agency with the equally free actions of others, as they interlace within the world of the senses, we must move towards the notion of a universal process of the self-realization of freedom, manifest in both the natural and the human worlds and ultimately one, despite its myriad, self-consciously individuated facets. Eventually this thought will lead away from subject-centred idealism. But nonetheless self-positing freedom remains the central concept of post-Kantian philosophy. Even the manner in which Hegel describes 'spirit' is essentially as self-realizing freedom.

In his essay *On the Basis of Morality*, Schopenhauer shows a keen awareness of the dynamic of these philosophical developments, even if his evaluation of them is deeply hostile. The fatal initial move, as far as he is concerned, is Kant's claim that pure reason can be practical, and that we become aware of the unconditional obligation under which this capacity puts us as the 'fact of reason'. As Schopenhauer writes:

> As, in the life of the individual, one false step in youth often ruins the whole career, so, when Kant made that one false assumption of a practical reason [*Vernunft*] that is furnished with wholly transcendent credentials and, like the highest courts of appeal, gives decisions 'without grounds', the result was that from the austere prosiness of critical philosophy sprang teachings utterly heterogenous to it. Thus there are doctrines of a reason [*Vernunft*] at first only faintly '*surmising*', then clearly '*becoming aware of*', and finally perceiving quite vividly with an '*intellectual intuition*', the '*supersensuous*'. Every dreamer could now promulgate his musings as the 'absolute', that is, officially issued, utterances and revelations of this reason [*Vernunft*].[33]

But this deprecation of the shift in post-Kantian thought towards a 'system of freedom', which Schopenhauer takes to be no more than licence for old-style speculative extravagance, raises acute questions about his own position.

For, as we have seen, Schopenhauer also believes that naturalism, regarded as an exhaustive account of reality, is deeply question-begging; it offers no purchase for an ethical perspective, and – more broadly – for the concern with value, with what truly matters in our lives. Against naturalism, he argues – following Kant – that the nexus of cause and effect structures only the phenomenal world, and cannot satisfy our desire for an ultimate explanation. *The World as Will and Representation* offers a striking analogy:

> the philosophical investigator must always feel in regard to the complete etiology of the whole of nature like a man who, without knowing how, is brought into a company quite unknown to him, each member of which in turn presents him to another as his friend and cousin, and thus makes them sufficiently acquainted. The man himself, however, while assuring each person introduced of his pleasure at meeting him, always has on his lips the question: 'But how the deuce do I stand to the whole company?'[34]

For Schopenhauer, of course, there is an answer to this question, since we can regard the world and our place within it from a non-naturalistic perspective. But this other viewpoint cannot be that of the Kantian consciousness of duty, for – as we have seen – Schopenhauer repudiates the claim that reason can be practical. The key to Schopenhauer's attempt to reconcile these conflicting pressures is his theory of the will.

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Schopenhauer argues that, in one unique case, we experience events not as part of the causal nexus of nature, but as expressions of purposeful agency. These events are the voluntary movements of our own bodies. In this instance, what appears from the outside – and in our perception of our own movements, if they are observable – as a physical process, is also experienced 'from the inside', as a manifestation of our will. In Schopenhauer's view, there are not two discrete interrelated processes here – an inward act of volition, followed by bodily movement. Rather, these are the same event seen from two opposite sides, like the recto and verso of a sheet of paper. Schopenhauer then goes on to argue that this experience of our own agency gives us the vital clue to the character of the inner, noumenal side of nature as a whole. All events and processes in the physical world can be regarded as expressions of a noumenal will. Furthermore, since Schopenhauer agrees with Kant that time, space, and causality are forms which we impose on the raw material of experience, it makes no sense to think of the noumenal will as either singular or

plural. All we can say is that 'will' is the inner reality of the world. However, the awareness of the core of our selves as will in Schopenhauer's sense is far removed from the Kantian experience of 'practical reason' as generating moral laws to which we strive to conform. It is much closer to the experience of being impelled to act by our drives for various kinds of satisfaction, drives that can be only temporarily quelled before they renew their ineluctable, tormenting pressure.

It should be already clear that, although Schopenhauer endorses Kant's distinction between empirical and intelligible character, he must construe it in a manner very different from that of his predecessor. Far from highlighting the compatibility between the theoretical view of ourselves as determined and the practical view of ourselves as free, he stresses the extent to which Kant is committed to a deterministic account of empirical action. The popular conviction of the freedom of the will, Schopenhauer suggests, is a false inference from the common assertion that 'I can do what I will'. Certainly, one can do what one wills if all this means is that, once a course of action is decided upon, one can put it into effect. But the real issue is what determines this decision in the first place. And, on Schopenhauer's account, this determination occurs through the impact of motives (which he defines as 'causality that passes through *cognition*') on our inborn character.[35] There may be a struggle or conflict between different motives, which endures for a while. But this does not mean that the eventual outcome is *indeterminate* until it occurs.

At the same time, of course, Schopenhauer must be able to account for our feeling of responsibility for our actions, whose validity he has no wish to deny. He therefore argues that our empirical character, as it is revealed over time, is the consequence of what he terms 'intelligible character'– by which he understands the fundamental orientation of our will. Since this character is noumenal, it is free. As Schopenhauer writes, we have to 'look for the work of our *freedom* no longer in our individual actions, as the common view does, but in the whole being and essence [*existentia et essentia*] of the human being himself, which must be conceived as his free act manifesting itself merely for the faculty of cognition (tied as the latter is to time, space and causality) in a plurality and diversity of actions'.[36] However, we must proceed cautiously here. For Schopenhauer the 'intelligible character' is free *only* in the sense of lacking causal antecedents (because noumenal), but not in the sense of being *self-chosen*. He tends, in fact, to use the term 'intelligible character' to describe the individual's basic moral personality, which may gradually unfold different facets, but which cannot be essentially changed. As he puts it in his Berlin lectures on the metaphysics of morals, 'the *intelligible character* is to be

regarded as an *extra-temporal*, therefore indivisible and unalterable act of the will; the *empirical character* however is its appearance, developed and *extended* in space, time, and all the forms of the principle of sufficient reason'.[37] Even though this 'act of the will' is not determined, it could not have been otherwise. It is simply an expression of the one universal will that underlies both the subjective and objective dimensions of the world, and is therefore – by definition – beyond the opposition of necessity and freedom. As Schopenhauer states, 'The concept of freedom is therefore really a negative one, since its content is merely the denial of necessity, in other words the denial of the relation of consequent to its ground according to the principle of sufficient reason.'[38] Overall, he has a strong tendency to employ the concept of 'intelligible character' to place beyond alteration the core features of the *empirical* psychology of the individual. The contrast with Kant, who allows only two moral qualities of the intelligible character (good or evil), but sees these as the expression of an alterable choice, is striking. Even more striking is Schopenhauer's conviction of his fidelity to Kant on this point of doctrine, given such claims as that '*Repentance* never results from the fact that the will has changed – this is impossible – but from a change of knowledge. I must still continue to will the essential and real element of what I have always willed; for I am myself this will, that lies outside time and change.'[39] Inconsistent with his predecessor's views as this account may be, and – what is more important – dubious as moral psychology, one can see its logic as a response to the problem of timeless change which Kant bequeathed.

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As the philosopher and sociologist Georg Simmel pointed out long ago, in his classic study of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, the metaphysics of the will, understood as a 'blind, unstoppable drive',[40] overturns the mainstream Western tradition of theology and philosophy. Human beings can no longer be regarded as having lapsed from an original state of harmony and innocence, or as having failed to realize their capacity for moral perfection.[41] Even Kant's interpretation of this doctrine – the susceptibility of rational beings to a categorical imperative, that is the signature of their capacity for autonomy – is rejected as crypto-theological.[42] Hence Schopenhauer does not need to confront the problem – so taxing for all the other thinkers considered so far – of explaining why human beings prefer an inadequate, self-destructive freedom to genuine freedom. Rather, he begins the other way round: 'Virtue is a stranger in this world. Boundless egoism, cunning, malice are actually always the order of the day. It is wrong to deceive young people about this.

This simply means that, later, they will realize that their teacher was the first deceiver they encountered.'[43]

If we ask why Schopenhauer's theory of the will results in the primacy of egoism, the answer appears to be that the will, apprehended through the drives of the individual, is what is most immediately given to her, whereas other human beings appear only as 'representations'. We are each cemented at the centre of our own universe. As Schopenhauer remarks, 'in consequence of the subjectivity essential to every consciousness, everyone is himself the whole world, for everything objective exists only indirectly, as mere representation of the subject, so that everything is always closely associated with self-consciousness'.[44] He notes that

> There is no greater contrast than that between the profound and exclusive interest everyone takes in his own self and the indifference with which all others as a rule regard it, similar to the indifference with which he regards them. There is even comic side to seeing innumerable individuals of whom each regards himself alone as *real*, at any rate from a practical point of view, and all others to a certain extent as mere phantoms.[45]

From Schopenhauer's perspective, the fundamental issue in ethics is not how to explain human immorality, but rather the capacity of some human beings, on some occasions, to act morally. Egoism, he claims, 'lies like a broad trench between one man and another. If anyone actually jumps over to help another, it is like a miracle that excites astonishment and wins approval.'[46]

On Schopenhauer's account, the overcoming of egoism occurs when human beings glimpse their underlying metaphysical unity, apprehend that they are each no more than fleetingly individuated expressions of the will. The moral person then sees through the veil of Maya, as Schopenhauer often (misleadingly) calls the Kantian phenomenal world, grasping her oneness with all other human beings, indeed all sentient and conscious – and therefore suffering – beings. The psychological expression of this metaphysical insight is what Schopenhauer calls 'compassion' (*Mitleid*). It would be wrong, however, to infer from this term that Schopenhauer's ethics is based on emotion or feeling. He is not concerned with the results of different mental responses to a shared reality. On the contrary, moral goodness and badness are the correlates of different fundamental ways of experiencing – and this means, for an idealist such as Schopenhauer, that they correspond to different worlds. As he writes, 'The egoist feels himself surrounded by strange and hostile phenomena, and all his hope rests on his own well-being. The good person lives in a world of friendly phenomena; the well-being of any of these

is his own well-being.'[47] If Schopenhauer holds, like Kant, that moral actions are disinterested, this is not because they display the efficacy of pure practical reason, but because they reflect the insight (however inchoate) that 'every living thing is just as much our own inner being-in-itself as is our own person'.[48]

At this point we cannot help being struck again by how closely, in some respects, Schopenhauer's intuitions anticipate what might be regarded as the common sense of post-religious consciousness. Part of this convergence can doubtless be explained by the fact that we live in an increasingly atomized society, and that Schopenhauer's insistence on primary egoism paints a distressingly perceptive picture of human relations under modern capitalism (a point regularly made by his more sympathetic Marxist interpreters).[49] But it is far from uncommon, in the liberal tradition, to regard human beings as egoistically motivated, and to assume that this selfishness – as Schopenhauer also claims – is held in check largely by law, custom, and the rules of politeness. Sigmund Freud, who did not seek to conceal the influence of Schopenhauer, holds some such conception of human beings, while adding the refinement that the ruthless egoism banned from free expression in everyday intercourse is manifested, in more or less disguised forms, in our phantasies and our dreams.

Along with this normalization of egoism, as we might call it, has come a shift in the implications of the concept of evil. Since self-interested behaviour is now expected, and therefore calls for no special explanation, the notion of evil tends to be reserved for acts of cruelty and destruction that *lack* any obvious selfish motive, and seem to be of no benefit to the perpetrator, whether the gain be construed materially, symbolically, or in terms of psychopathology. The most extreme example, of course, is the Holocaust, which – as is often pointed out – was counterproductive for the German war effort, and therefore the survival of the German people. The philosopher Paul Ricoeur, who thought a great deal about these issues, was led to the conclusion that, in reflecting on evil, we feel the pressure of two contrary responsibilities: to maximize our understanding of what occurred, but at the same time to acknowledge the unfathomability of evil acts: 'I always come up against the same difficulty: how to preserve intact the dimension of the *tremendum horrendum*, but also intact the gradualism of explanation?'[50] In *To Mend the World*, Emil Fackenheim makes a similar, though less balanced point:

> To explain an action or event is to show how they were possible. In the case of the Holocaust, however, the mind can accept the *possibility* of both how and why it was done, in the final analysis, solely because it *was* done, so that

the more the psychologist, historian or 'psychohistorian' succeeds in explaining the event or action, the more nakedly he comes to confront its ultimate inexplicability.[51]

Schopenhauer also reflects (or rather anticipates) this semantic shift. In his moral theory actions are classified into three categories: good, bad, and evil. The character of good actions we have just examined. Bad actions are the kinds of self-centred actions with which we are all familiar from everyday life. But for Schopenhauer, specifically evil actions are not 'selfish' in the sense of pursuing private desires at the expense of others. They are motivated rather by the need to obtain relief from the tormenting pressure of one's own will, by inflicting pain on others. It is a sign of his contemporaneity, perhaps, that Schopenhauer includes the dimension of meaninglessness, or nihilism, in his account of evil. He argues that, in 'a person filled with an extremely intense pressure of will', one satisfaction after another proves inadequate, so that 'when at last all wishes are exhausted, the pressure of will itself remains, even without any recognised motive, and makes itself known with terrible pain as a feeling of the most frightful desolation and emptiness'.[52] This person, Schopenhauer suggests, 'then seeks indirectly the alleviation of which he is incapable directly, in other words he tries to mitigate his own suffering by the sight of another's, and at the same time recognises this as an expression of his power'.[53] The anticipations of psychoanalytic literature in this theory of evil are unmistakable. Psychoanalysts, even from widely differing traditions, have concurred that evil is best understood as the attempt to inflict one's own experience of the evacuation of meaning on others. In his study of the psychology of serial killers, for example, Christopher Bollas has suggested that such individuals seek to induce in others their own early experience of a total, traumatic breakdown of trust in the benignity of the adult world.[54] And, generalizing a similar insight, André Green has written: 'Evil is without why because its *raison d'être* is to proclaim that everything which exists has no meaning, obeys no order, pursues no aim, depends only on the power it can exercise to impose its will on the objects of its appetites.'[55]

Schopenhauer's thought also registers the increasing salience of suffering as an ethical issue in modern sensibility. He is not inclined, for example, to think of suffering as justified for the sake of 'higher purposes' – for he acknowledges no religious or political purpose that could override the demand to alleviate suffering. Furthermore, he extends the ethical domain beyond human beings to include all sentient beings, in a manner that anticipates the increasing moral heed paid to the suffering of animals in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Since human beings are driven by will, and their reason

functions only as an instrument in the service of this will, they lose the privilege of sovereign rationality which was long regarded as setting them above the rest of creation.

Finally, Schopenhauer's contemporaneity is revealed in the fundamental question he poses on behalf of human beings who feel they have outgrown religion: how can we bear to live in a world torn apart by so much misery and evil? For if we can no longer sustain a conviction of the world's overall purposiveness, or even of its receptivity to human purposes, what could serve to mitigate its torment? We can no longer even conceive of a *summum bonum*, since the will has no final aim or object, and 'that there is no ultimate aim of striving means that there is no measure or end of suffering'.[56] Ultimately, Schopenhauer argues, the answer lies in turning away from the world altogether; we must cease willing, end our complicity with suffering. A momentary glimpse of this state is afforded by aesthetic contemplation, when we regard things purely as distillations of their own essential nature, rather than as objects causally related to us and therefore affecting our interests. The experience of beauty, whether in art or nature, offers us a temporary suspension of willing. However, Schopenhauer explains, true release can come only from ceasing to will altogether, which means at the point when the will turns against and cancels itself. He describes this as the only moment when an act of freedom can manifest itself in the phenomenon.[57] But since the subject/object structure of experience depends on the application of the category of causality, which in turn is tied to our existence as practical subjects of willing, in the ascetic denial of the will the very distinction of subject and object fades away. Such a condition can be evoked, Schopenhauer suggests, only by such terms as 'ecstasy, rapture, union with God, and so on'.[58] Ironically, then, after all his criticism of the Idealists for seeking a philosophical point of departure beyond the subject/object distinction, Schopenhauer's philosophy concludes with the evocation of such a state as the only definitive response to the suffering of the world.

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Schopenhauer's philosophy remains disturbing, because it converges with – yet offers a deep challenge to – many aspects of modern consciousness. In Sebastian Gardner's excellent formulation, Schopenhauer's thought

> stands at the junction of two originally united strands of the Enlightenment at the point of their final separation: rationalist humanism and scientific naturalism. In addition, it communicates the one to the other and provides each with an

inverted image of itself. The spirit of rationalist humanism which received expression in Kant's philosophy, and which the transcendental tradition took radical measures to attempt to preserve, is confronted by Schopenhauer with the naturalistic image of the world but expressed in its own language, the language of metaphysics . . . On the other side, scientific naturalism beholds itself in Schopenhauer recast in the metaphysical terms it repudiates, as if in caricature.[59]

Many naturalistically inclined contemporary thinkers might find Schopenhauer's rejection of Kantian 'practical reason', and his even his disillusioned account of human motivation congenial. They might well also sympathize with his view that moral evil is an upshot of pervasive inner suffering as well as an intensification of it. Yet at the same time, they would no doubt reject his conclusion that the only ultimate response to the world's pain is to negate the will that fuels suffering, by adopting a self-denying ascetic life, if not positively courting extinction. Yet is there, for the determined but morally sensitive naturalist, any alternative to this conclusion?

Schopenhauer rejects all theodicies – and their secular descendants – which suggest that the world is fundamentally good, or that suffering and evil can in some way be redeemed. Indeed, he sometimes argues that, in a godless universe, *any* instance of suffering is sufficient to condemn the world as a whole: 'For that thousands had lived in happiness would never do away with the anguish and death agony of one individual; and just as little does my present well-being do away with my previous sufferings.' A calculus of misery and happiness would be invidious, and so we can only conclude that 'we have not to be pleased but rather sorry about the existence of the world'.[60] Most of us – even those drawn to utilitarian views – would no doubt also reject the idea of such a trade-off. Nonetheless, we are inclined to believe that the prospect of the gradual diminution of suffering and evil is sufficient to prevent the world as a whole from being condemned. Yet why should the fact that justice and happiness are *increasing* provide a more persuasive counter-balance than the mere fact of their sporadic existence? Furthermore, from Schopenhauer's perspective, even if future amelioration could be accepted in principle as compensating for the past, there is no reason to believe that human beings have the capacity to improve their common lot. In this context, he often invokes the doctrine of 'original sin', describing it as what is most profound and important in Christianity. Of course, in his version, original sin is not the result of a fall from a primeval state of innocence. It does not refer to a corruption of the will, but to the mere affirmation of the will as such.[61] Hence it cannot be shed by a process of moral rebirth. No change of social arrangements could make any difference to our inner condition. And

the only moral revolution Schopenhauer believes possible is not a conversion to the good, but the negation of the will in its entirety.

Yet it is striking that, in the final analysis, even the arch-pessimist is unable to confront the prospect of the endless suffering and evil of the world (for him the two are not clearly distinct, since evil arises involuntarily from suffering) without some form of moral consolation. Indeed, in his early notebook comments on Schelling's *Freiheitsschrift*, he defends the idea of a 'moral world order' against Schelling's criticism, and the notion recurs even in his most mature work, where he portrays it as *the* enduring preoccupation of philosophy.[62] Schopenhauer's version of such an order is 'eternal justice'. His thought seems to be that, because the world is an accurate picture of the will, there *cannot* be an imbalance between moral intention and physical process in the world as a whole: 'The will is free; it is almighty. The will appears in everything, precisely as it determines itself in itself and outside time. The world is only the mirror of this willing; and all finiteness, all suffering, all miseries that it contains, belong to the expression of what the will wills, are as they are because the will so wills.'[63] It is the one universal will that both inflicts and undergoes suffering.

But, as Georg Simmel has argued, such a conception of cosmic balance ignores the fact that it is the fate of *individuals*, and the correlation of guilt and pain with respect to each human personality, that is central to our notions of justice.[64] Schopenhauer may reassure us that – from a purely transcendental standpoint – 'tormentor and tormented are one'; but it is the relation *between* the noumenal and the phenomenal (in Kantian terms, between intelligible character and happiness) that we care about. 'Eternal justice', then, cannot function as Schopenhauer's equivalent for the 'moral world order' of Kant and Fichte. For it does not express a faith that the world as a whole is good or justified, and Schopenhauer does not even try to suggest that it might. It is only his insistence on the ultimately illusory character of individuation, in its dependence on the subjective forms of space, time, and causality, that enables him to think of the overall equilibrium of cruelty inflicted and suffering undergone as a form of justice at all. The main significance of the doctrine, then, is to highlight the acute existential difficulty – even for the arch-pessimist of European philosophy – in confronting, unadorned, a world of pervasive torment and evil.

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Schopenhauer's thought does not prescribe. At the opening of his great ethical treatise, the fourth book of *The World as Will and Representation*, he writes:

all philosophy is always theoretical, since it is essential to it always to maintain a purely contemplative attitude, whatever be the immediate object of investigation; to enquire, not to prescribe. But to become practical, to guide conduct, to transform character, are old claims which with mature insight it ought finally to abandon. For here, where it is a question of the worth or worthlessness of existence, of salvation or damnation, not the dead concepts of philosophy decide the matter, but the innermost nature of man himself.[65]

From a prevalent contemporary standpoint, which regards ethics not merely as an enquiry into the normative, but as a form of normative enquiry, it might appear that such a view destroys the point of a philosophical treatment of the subject matter. But for Schopenhauer this is not the case. Philosophy still needs to give an account of the possibility and nature of morally good conduct (assuming that such conduct does indeed occur), and to explain the basis of ethical evaluation (assuming that the ethical perspective is not simply illusory).

Not all recent philosophical treatments of ethics have been prescriptive, of course. In the middle of the twentieth century, many philosophers – at least in the English-speaking world – devoted themselves to analysing moral language and the ontological status of the objects of ethical discourse, on the assumption that moral values were not susceptible to rational justification. Very often such investigations reached the conclusion that the ethical standpoint has no objectivity validity, that moral value is not woven into the fabric of reality. Schopenhauer is not of this view. As we have seen, he believes that his metaphysics of the will can make sense of the ethical viewpoint, and indeed explain why the supreme importance this viewpoint has for us is far from being an illusion. In other words, he rejects the idea that we can continue to sustain our ethical discourse, even after the decline of religion, without devising some post-religious but still metaphysical grounding for it. Indeed, Schopenhauer sometimes anticipates that his own metaphysics will come to play this role in a post-Christian society.[66]

One of the turning points in Friedrich Nietzsche's early development as a philosopher was his rejection of Schopenhauer's metaphysics, after a relatively brief initial period of enthusiasm. However, Nietzsche did *not* reject Schopenhauer's claim that his own – or some comparable – metaphysics was required to explain and sustain the validity of moral judgements. Rather, he drew the conclusion that moral evaluation, grounded in the Judaeo-Christian tradition to which even Schopenhauer affiliates, must be an illusion. We cannot carry on using moral language as if – historically and culturally speaking – nothing serious has occurred. Furthermore, if 'There are no moral

phenomena at all, only a moral interpretation of phenomena', [67] as Nietzsche later proclaimed, a prime task of the philosopher must be to evaluate moral evaluation itself. Thinkers must pose the question: is this a perspective we should *want* to adopt, is it propitious for human vitality and well-being?

It is in the opening sections of *Human, All Too Human* that Nietzsche records his first public settling of accounts with Schopenhauer. He argues that his predecessor arrives at the 'fantastic concept of so-called intelligible freedom' through seeking to render our sense of responsibility for our actions (expressed, for example, in feelings of remorse) compatible with the determinism he also defends. But there is no need for such implausible expedients, Nietzsche claims:

> Here the erroneous conclusion is drawn that from the fact of a feeling of displeasure there can be inferred the justification, the rational *admissibility* of this feeling of displeasure . . . But a feeling of displeasure after a deed is absolutely not obliged to be rational; on the contrary, it cannot be, since it rests precisely on the erroneous presupposition that the deed need *not* have taken place of necessity.[68]

The logical outcome of the historical internalization of the moral principle, Nietzsche suggests, which 'successively makes men accountable for the effects they produce, then for their actions, then for their motives, and finally for their nature',[69] should be the realization that human beings are not morally responsible at all – since they cannot be held accountable for who they are. Our moral nature is something 'assembled from the elements and influence of things past and present'.[70]

At one point in *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer declares that 'to be just, noble and benevolent is nothing but to translate my metaphysics into actions'.[71] What fired the early Nietzsche's enthusiasm for this metaphysics was its author's rectitude, his relentless exposure of the complicities between Idealist philosophy and theology, his suspicion of conceptual web-spinning, and his rejection of naively optimistic and meliorist visions of human history. Nietzsche was convinced by Schopenhauer's claim that history tells us nothing essential about humanity, and, at worst, is used as a means to evade disquieting truths about the human condition. As he wrote in the second of his *Untimely Meditations*, 'Schopenhauer as Educator':

> He who regards his life as no more than a point in the evolution of a race or of a state or of a science, and thus regards himself as belonging wholly to the

history of becoming, has not learned the lesson set him by existence and will have to learn it over again . . . In becoming, everything is hollow, deceptive, shallow and worthy of our contempt; the enigma which man is to resolve he can resolve only in being, in being thus and not otherwise, in the imperishable.[72]

Yet even before he had published his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, a work that has long been regarded as relying on a version of Schopenhauerian metaphysics,[73] Nietzsche had jotted down devastating criticisms of Schopenhauer's thought. These centred on the illicit move made in identifying the supposedly 'unknowable' thing-in-itself as 'will', and – perhaps even more fundamentally – on the incoherence between Schopenhauer's materialist theory of mind and his idealist epistemology.[74] By the time of the publication of the first volume of *Human, All Too Human* in 1878, Nietzsche was beginning to treat this predecessor symptomatically. He no longer regarded Schopenhauer's thought as a remorseless exposé of the collusion between philosophy and religion, but rather as its final, post-theistic expression.

In *Human, All Too Human* Nietzsche does not claim that the distinction, inherited by Schopenhauer from Kant, between the world 'in-itself' and the world of appearances is meaningless. But he denies that we can know anything of the world in-itself, or that such a world could be of any relevance for the understanding and evaluation of the religious and moral life. Even if we allow the validity of the contrast, the world of appearances as a whole cannot be taken as a guide to the character of the thing-in-itself; rather it is the habits of thought and practical reactions that human beings have acquired over the ages which have given this world its distinctive shape.[75] It has been the typical mistake of philosophers to believe that moral, religious, and aesthetic phenomena open a window on to an ultimate reality that is otherwise inaccessible. Nietzsche asserts that, on the contrary, 'it is probable that the objects of the religious, moral and aesthetic sensations belong only to the surface of things', and that 'the reason [man] deludes himself is that these things produce in him such profound happiness and unhappiness'.[76] The correct approach to such phenomena, therefore, is not to search for their supposed metaphysical foundations, but rather to engage in what Nietzsche calls 'historical philosophizing', based on the realization that 'everything has become: there are *no eternal facts*, just as there are no absolute truths'.[77]

But if there are no absolute truths, then it must also be a mistake is to seek for some metaphysically valid kernel of religious doctrines. In this respect, Nietzsche argues, Schopenhauer remained too close to his Idealist contemporaries, to whom he was otherwise implacably opposed:

Certainly one can gain very much towards an understanding of Christianity and other religions from Schopenhauer's religio-moral interpretation of men and the world; but it is just as certain that he blundered over the *value of religion with respect to knowledge* . . . born into our own time he could not possibly have spoken of the *sensus allegoricus* of religion; he would, rather, have done honour to truth after his usual fashion with the words: *a religion has never yet, either directly or indirectly, either as dogma or as parable, contained a truth*.[78]

Schopenhauer, as we have noted, explicitly regarded his task as the provision of a metaphysics that could substitute for the collapse of religion.[79] But Nietzsche felt himself to be living in an era when not just Christianity, but also metaphysics, was on the decline: 'Perhaps the *scientific demonstration* of the existence of any kind of metaphysical world is already so *difficult* that mankind will never again be free of mistrust of it.'[80] Morality cannot be saved by a philosophical shoring-up of its crumbling religious foundations. Indeed, Nietzsche comes to the conclusion that Schopenhauer's global pessimism is merely an inversion of theological optimism, of the justification of the world as the creation of a benevolent deity. Pessimism may be useful as a provocation of the 'theologizing philosophers',[81] but the idea that we inhabit a world of suffering, whose character can be explained by its status as the manifestation of a blind metaphysical will, is just as much an 'artifice' as the religious views it opposes. There can be no evaluation of the world as a whole as either good *or* evil, Nietzsche asserts, outside of a theological perspective.[82]

The tendency of Schopenhauer's philosophy, we could say, is to 'naturalize' evil. In doing so, he reflects a widespread development within modern consciousness. Ever since the beginnings of the modern era, prominent intellectual currents have regarded human action in general as the expression of an inherent, inevitable egoism. More recently, seemingly pointless cruelty and destructiveness have come to be seen as an attempt to escape from extreme internal pressures. Evil, then, is in some sense 'de-moralized'; it is simply the most intense, exasperated expression of a drive that shapes not only the human world, but the activity of nature in general. But this process of naturalization is undercut by Schopenhauer's predilection for describing the human condition (that of a being who is self-conscious, yet driven by a will which lies beyond the influence of self-reflection) in theological terms. Like his Idealist predecessors, Schelling and Hegel, Schopenhauer finds a deep truth in the Christian doctrine of original sin. Yet it is not at all clear that he is entitled do so. For, unlike other interpreters of the doctrine, from Kant to Nabert, he does not wrestle philosophically with the obscure intertwining of fatality and freedom. The suffering of the world, and even the human

contribution to this suffering, is wholly determined by the world's inner character. But since Schopenhauer insists on applying ethico-religious concepts to the world (all willing, which generates suffering, is in some sense sinful), the *summum bonum*, if it can be spoken of at all, becomes an escape from the world altogether into the condition of will-lessness.[83] By contrast, Nietzsche's own philosophical programme involves the deconstruction of any moral perspective on the world. This dismantling is supported by a genealogical analysis of how we came to take moral concepts, and most crucially those of good and evil, as the fundamental categories of agency and action in the first place.

Nietzsche's most detailed account of the origin of the concepts of good and evil is to be found in *On the Genealogy of Morals*. In the preface to this work, he recalls that, even in his teenage years, he was haunted by the philosophical question of the 'origin of evil'. But as he matured he realized that this origin should not be sought 'beyond the world'. Rather, the theological or metaphysical approach to the problem of evil should be replaced by the question: 'under what conditions did man invent for himself those value judgements good and evil, and *what value do they themselves have*?'[84] Nietzsche's answer is that the contrast of good and evil is the perversion of an anterior rank ordering, in which noble human beings, whose existence he describes in terms of exuberance, spontaneity, and unrestrained physical vitality, described themselves as 'good', while labelling the commoners, who were most likely members of a conquered race – almost as an afterthought – as 'bad'. This evaluation was dislocated and reversed by the 'slaves', who – out of debility, fearfulness, and resentment – labelled the boisterous aggression of the masters 'evil', and their own innate passivity and feebleness 'good'. In Nietzsche's account, this 'radical revaluation of [noble] values'[85] met with astonishing success. Astonishing, because it required the energy of life to turn inward against itself, and to cripple itself. Furthermore, Nietzsche tells us, the triumph of *ressentiment*, of the envious and malicious feelings of the weaker against the stronger, coalesced with the social process of inculcating a sense of guilt through training and punishment, forcing the spontaneously outward-directed drives to turn inward. This was a historically momentous development, opening the vast inner spaces of the human soul, and forcing human beings to shape themselves in accord with the ideal of a transcendent, non-natural good. Even philosophical – and modern scientific – notions of a disinterested pursuit of truth, Nietzsche claims, are offshoots of this 'ascetic ideal'.[86]

Yet as Stephen Mulhall has argued, there are striking parallels between Nietzsche's account of the origins of morality and the ascetic ideal, and the

Christian doctrine of the Fall.[87] In both cases an originally 'good' nature becomes perverted, turns its energies against itself, and begins to pursue a conception of freedom that in fact destroys the possibility of authentic human fulfilment. In Nietzsche, as Mulhall points out, it is the event of human beings beginning to *understand* themselves in terms of 'original sin', as guiltily responsible for their innate, spontaneous impulses, that now becomes the original sin. The human being becomes a 'sick' animal, internally riven, in conflict with its own nature, and committed to a notion of redemption through self-denial that simply makes matters worse. Parallel to the Christian idea of God-given freedom turning against and shackling itself, runs Nietzsche's idea of the 'will-to-power' (the constant drive towards self-enhancement through the overcoming of obstacles) becoming introverted and crippling itself, in a triumph of reactive forces. For Nietzsche, this situation can be overcome only by rejecting the understanding of ourselves as sinful. We must come to see this self-interpretation as a historical product, though one that has become deeply ingrained because of its long duration.

As Mulhall also points out, Nietzsche finds it no easier than his theological predecessors to account for the inaugural perversion. He tries to come to grips with the issue by presupposing a primordial division of the human race, between the noble and the base, between masters and slaves. The fall or 'corruption' of human nature then occurs when the slaves contrive to persuade the masters to accept their revaluation, which means – amongst other things – accepting the existence of a fictional 'subject' of action, metaphysically prior to the action itself, who can be held morally responsible. But this narrative raises the question of why the masters should prove at all vulnerable to the blandishments of the slaves, unless they already suffer from some hidden weakness which makes them susceptible to the attack. That they do indeed have such a flaw is revealed, Mulhall suggests, by Nietzsche's internal division of the master caste between nobles and priests. For the priests, far from living a life of unselfconscious, outwardly turned exuberance, already possess capacities for reflective awareness, and are therefore able to harness the slave revolt in the interests of their own power.[88]

Continuing this argument, Mulhall claims that the form of existence that Nietzsche attributes to the nobles makes no sense as a form of *human* life:

> Nietzsche's rhapsodies about the wholly spontaneous, instinctual life of the nobles have an inveterate tendency to suggest that for them there is no hiatus between impulse and expression – between conceiving a desire and acting to satisfy it; the distinction between an event in their interior lives and one in their exterior lives barely gets a grip. In other words, the very features of their mode

of existence that most encourage Nietzsche's inclination to think of it as para-
disal are just what give us grounds for doubting that it counts as a human form
of life.[89]

But Mulhall is wrong, I think, to imply that, for Nietzsche, the unreflective
consciousness of the nobles represents a prelapsarian state to which we should
strive to return – or that it needs to function for Nietzsche as 'a genuine,
historically realisable alternative to Christian asceticism'.[90] The nobles may
represent a kind of 'pre-human' existence. But in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*,
which was published in the years immediately prior to *On the Genealogy of
Morals*, Nietzsche's eponymous prophet advocates no regress, but anticipates
the 'overman', a figure who stands for the overcoming, through synthesis,
of the fundamental diremptions that plague human life.

Nietzsche's thinking, in other words, is more dialectical in this regard than
Mulhall gives him credit for. His conception of human self-transcendence,
for which the *Übermensch* stands as a cipher, does not reverse the immense
gains in richness of experience and understanding which human beings
achieved through their powers of reflection and deliberation, but rather
incorporates this complexity into a non-dualistic self-understanding, which
no longer pits mind against body, reason against impulse, the ideal against
the natural.[91] It is true that Nietzsche faces deep difficulties in explaining how
nature can turn against and pervert itself. But he is convinced that we have
no option but to try to explain this, since Christianity is in irreversible histori-
cal decline. Even Christian theologians, he argues, no longer really accept the
doctrines of their religion in anything other than a symbolic sense. As he
writes in *The Anti-Christ*:

> Even with the most modest claim to integrity one *must* know today that a
> theologian, a priest, a pope does not merely err in every sentence he speaks, he
> *lies* – that he is no longer free to lie 'innocently', out of 'ignorance'. The priest
> knows as well as anyone that there is no longer any 'God', any 'sinner', any
> 'redeemer' – that 'free will', 'moral world order' are lies – intellectual serious-
> ness, the profound self-overcoming of the intellect, no longer *permits* anyone
> *not* to know about this things.[92]

It would be hard to contest that, in general, Nietzsche has an acute sense
for the intellectual dynamic of post-Enlightenment theology. In the course of
his interpretation, Mulhall conducts an analysis of the speech of the madman
who, at the beginning of *Zarathustra*, arrives in the marketplace, lantern in
hand in broad daylight, to announce that he is 'looking for God'. The by-
standers whom the madman addresses poke fun at him, treating God as if he

were a thing or person one could lose or misplace: 'But the madman', Mulhall writes, 'finds this conception of God as an (illusory) entity to be far more childish than the religious faith it claims to have outgrown . . . [He] compares the death of God to the wiping away of our horizon, to the swallowing up of an ocean, to a loss of spatial orientation; such comparisons assume that God is not so much an entity as a medium or a system of coordinates'.[93] But Mulhall's suggestion that Nietzsche's proxy attack is directed primarily against 'the marketplace atheists' superstitious concept of God' ignores Nietzsche's view that to reduce God merely to a 'framework within which to locate and track ourselves'[94] is already to have conceded the essential point. Nietzsche, as we shall explore more fully in a moment, was far too urgently concerned with the question of redemption to be palmed off with the reduction of the Divinity to a semantic horizon. Religion may *also* have performed such an existentially orienting function, of course. But it is only the authentic creator and redeemer God of traditional Christianity, the one who died for our sins and who rose from the dead, who could help us in our plight – albeit a plight that Christianity's implacable demands brought about in the first place. It is loss of *this* God that has traumatized post-Enlightenment culture – and seeking to resuscitate him as a flimsy framework of meaning will fool no one in the long run. After all, Nietzsche, like Schopenhauer, was all too familiar with the reinterpretations of Christian doctrine which began with Kant and the post-Kantian idealists, and explicitly rejected them. The very idea of appealing to a framework of meaning that is not humanly generated, or an *ordo ordinans* of the kind postulated by Fichte, even the idea of the priority of practical over theoretical reason, a crucial component of Kant's legacy to modern philosophy and theology, are regarded by Nietzsche as dishonesty. In *The Anti-Christ*, Nietzsche sarcastically outlines what he takes to be the consequence of Kantian agnosticism: 'There are questions whose truth or untruth *cannot* be decided by man; all the supreme questions, all the supreme problems of value are beyond human reason . . . To grasp the limits of reason – only *this* is true philosophy.'[95]

For Nietzsche, then, normative language, the language of ethics, is dependent on theistic assumptions which can no longer be openly avowed. But most modern thinkers, in his view, are simply unable to face up to this fact. As a result, they find themselves caught between a reluctance to challenge the worldview of modern scientific naturalism, which has attained such social prestige, and an inability to abandon their commitment to a morality essential shaped by the Judaeo-Christian inheritance. Modern human beings are living on borrowed time, refusing to contemplate the erosion of the spiritual and intellectual foundations on which their culture was built, and therefore unable

to confront the task of constructing a new one. As Nietzsche states at the beginning of *The Anti-Christ*: 'It was from *this* modernity that we were ill – from lazy peace, from cowardly compromise, from the whole virtuous uncleanliness of modern Yes and No.'[96] The diagnosis remains powerful. Nietzsche insists that a religious self-understanding is simply incompatible with the probity of science, the sober disentangling of patterns of causal necessity.[97] And the same applies to post-religious moral self-understandings, which continue to draw surreptitiously on religious sources.

<center>*</center>

In this sense Nietzsche can be seen as 'two jumps ahead' of our modern situation. He fully accepts the collapse of inherited moral values. The foundations of the basic distinction between good and evil lie in religious convictions which themselves promoted the rigorous intellectual integrity that now compels us to abandon them. On Nietzsche's account, our modern ideals of freedom and equality are inseparable from the Christian concept of the soul, and the belief that human beings are created by – and therefore equal before – God.[98] He concludes that once the ideas of the soul or of its successor, rational personality, are abandoned, as any consistent naturalist must abandon them, then the value of human beings will depend on their capacities and achievements. He finds it simply incredible to suggest that any dolt or minion could have the same essential value as a Goethe or a Michelangelo.[99] The mass of mankind exists only to support the peaks, and different kinds of human beings, with different abilities, must be assigned to appropriate social roles. Similarly, there can be no one moral code enabling everyone to flourish alike. Those who are described in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* as the 'last men' resist these conclusions, clinging to values that have lost their religious and metaphysical support, have become hollowed out, and are incompatible with honesty towards oneself. Nietzsche's concern is to work his way through to a new form of evaluation, leaving behind the old morality that has condemned itself to death, even though the sentence has not yet been carried out.

The basis of Nietzsche's new evaluation is the conviction that increase in the richness and intensity of life is itself the fundamental goal of life. Such heightening is, for Nietzsche, experienced most acutely in conquering resistance, in overcoming obstacles – and most profoundly – in surpassing the obstacle that is ourselves. It is in this sense that he describes the principle of life as 'will-to-power', and even claims that 'The criterion of truth resides in the enhancement of the feeling of power'.[100] In many respects Nietzsche is closer to Hegel than Schopenhauer in his feeling for the historical ebb and

flow of human vitality, and for the way in which ossified expressions of life are splintered and dissolved by the forces incubating within them. Indeed, Nietzsche pays tribute to Hegel for his effort to demonstrate the divinity of being, despite all the error and evil the world contains.[101] Where Nietzsche emphatically disagrees with his predecessor, however, is on the issue of the goal or purpose of world history. Hegel understands human history as the development of spirit's consciousness of its own freedom, whereas Nietzsche perceives himself as standing at a turning point, the point at which all notions of an inherent meaning or purpose of the world must be given up. In so far as we can still recount a global narrative of history, it will be the narrative of the gradual disclosure of an error, as the will-to-power begins to break out of the age-old structure ('two thousand years of anti-nature'[102]) which was its own perversely constraining creation.

But here Nietzsche encounters a deep difficulty. For the striving after a transcendent goal, and the consequent repudiation of the here-and-now, are central to what he deprecates in Christian morality. For one thing, focusing on a specific purpose, which is taken to be imperative, is inherently a form of self-limitation. As Nietzsche writes, 'The philosopher smells a boundary, a nook, a prison, a stupidity in every goal.'[103] Indeed, merely preferring the not-yet-existent future to the present is a form of nihilism, since 'the nihilist is the human being who judges that the world as it exists should not be, and judges that the world as it should be does not exist'.[104] Much of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* dramatizes an engagement with this dilemma, through the sequence of experiences of the book's central figure. Throughout the first half of the text, Zarathustra struggles, at first unconsciously, with the problem that to preach the 'overman' as the future transcendence of humanity, is implicitly to condemn the present and the past, and therefore to engage in precisely the kind of dualistic thinking that the thought of the overman is meant to overcome. To reject what has already occurred in the world, however repugnant it may be, is still to fall prey to *ressentiment* in the very effort to overcome it. The problem becomes acute in the chapter of *Zarathustra* called 'Of Redemption'. For here Zarathustra declares that what tortures the will is its inability to change the past: 'The will cannot will backwards; that it cannot break time and time's desire – that is the will's most lonely affliction.'[105] In its desperation to alleviate the pain and misery of the past, the will therefore devises notions of guilt and punishment, of Schopenhauerian 'eternal justice'. But behind such notions Nietzsche finds the 'spirit of revenge'. The will

> is sullenly wrathful that time does not run back; 'That which was' – that is what the stone which it cannot roll away is called.

> And so, out of wrath and ill-temper, the will rolls stones about and takes revenge upon him who does not, like it, feel wrath and ill temper.
>
> Thus the will, the liberator, becomes a malefactor: and upon all that can suffer it takes revenge for its inability to go backwards.
>
> This, yes, this alone is revenge itself: the will's antipathy towards time and time's 'It was'.[106]

Given this evocation of the problem, it seems that to strive to turn the historical page, to assert the power of the will to begin again, would be simply another way of rejecting what has already occurred, and so leaving the open wound of the past to fester. Hence Zarathustra announces that the creativity of the will consists not primarily in bringing the new into being, but in endorsing what has already been: 'All "It was" is a fragment, a riddle, a dreadful chance – until the creative will says to it: "But I willed it thus!"' Yet, at the point of announcing to his disciples the need of the will to 'will backwards', 'Zarathustra suddenly broke off and looked exactly like a man seized by the extremest terror.'[107]

The willing of the 'It was', the affirmation of what Nietzsche calls the 'eternal return of the same' (*die ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen*), and the dread aroused by the thought of this very affirmation, are the key to the drama of *Zarathustra*. The prophet is forced to confront and overcome his horror that everything petty, sick, ugly and suffering returns, to learn to affirm a world process that repeats itself in ever-renewed cycles. The will-to-power must, at its highest point, unite with the thought of the eternal return, so that the final dualism of past and future can be overcome, and so that the finitude of the will directed towards a goal can be united with the unendingness of repetition. As Eugen Fink has commented, 'The thought of return cancels the opposition of past and future, or rather, it gives to the past the sense of open possibility of the future, and to the future the solidity of the past.'[108] In some respects, then, we could regard the thought of the eternal return as Nietzsche's successor to both Christian faith and its Schopenhauerian substitute. In the chapter 'Of Redemption', for example, Zarathustra announces the notion of 'willing backwards' immediately after the evocation of notions of a moral world order and of Schopenhauerian 'eternal justice'. Even more clearly, at one point in his notebooks Nietzsche writes: 'In place of metaphysics and religion the doctrine of the eternal return (this as a means of training and selection)'.[109] As the parenthesis indicates, the eternal return does not function, like its precursors, to ground or disclose a new conception of the moral or the ethical. Rather, Nietzsche envisions the thought of return as a test, a generator of crisis, which only those strong enough could withstand. Many might experience it 'as a

curse', and respond with destructive rage at the meaninglessness of a world without direction or purpose.[110] But it would bring to the fore 'Human beings who *are conscious of their power*, and who represent the achieved force of man with conscious pride'.[111]

It is not too difficult to see how such speculations could give rise to the idea that Nietzsche regards the confrontation with the thought of the eternal return as a selective process, at least in the sense of setting a crucial test of self-conviction and fortitude (could you will to live your life over and over again?), which only certain individuals will be able to withstand. But, of course, we could always ask: what is the point of such selection if everything ultimately returns anyway, sick as well as healthy, weak as well as strong? Such considerations have led many commentators to conclude that there is simply a deep inconsistency between Nietzsche's doctrines of the will to power and of the eternal return.[112]

In his highly influential interpretation of Nietzsche, however, Gilles Deleuze sought to reconcile these doctrines in a novel way, by arguing that the thought of the eternal return is not just a kind of moral test, but that the eternal return itself actually functions as a selective process. Nietzschean affirmation, Deleuze argues, is not simply a matter of saying 'Yes' to the world, of actively endorsing whatever is given. Affirmation is not simply opposed to negation, as the exuberance of the nobles might be opposed to the *ressentiment* of the slaves. Rather, affirmation can take negation into its service once the alliance of negation with the reactive, resentful forces has been broken. Furthermore, once this break has been made, affirmation can gather together and itself negate all reactive values.[113] On this reading, it is the process of 'becoming-active', of becoming affirmative, which is then reflexively affirmed as that which eternally returns. Or as Deleuze puts it in *Différence et Répétition*, 'The Negative does not return. The Identical does not return. The Same and the Similar, the Analogous and the Opposed do not return. Only affirmation returns, that is to say the Different, the Dissimilar. So much anguish prior to extracting the joy of such a selective affirmation: nothing returns of that which denies the eternal return.'[114] The 'same' that recurs in Nietzsche's formula, then, is the sameness of perpetual difference, which emerges at the second, reflexive level of affirmation. As Deleuze states, 'Far from *presupposing* the One and the Same, the eternal return constitutes the only unity of the multiple as such, the only identity of what differs: coming back is the only "being" of becoming.'[115]

But the irony of Deleuze's interpretation is that it tends to restore precisely the distinction between the metaphysically real and the apparent world which Nietzsche's teaching was aimed at overcoming. 'That only joy returns: such

is the practical teaching of Nietzsche', Deleuze declares. But all too clearly, much more than joy – and experiences very different from joy – return in the empirical world we inhabit. It seems, then, that Deleuze's construal of the return must refer us to an intelligible world – indeed to something like a 'moral world order', which ensures that only what is capable of pure affirmation can win eternal life. Deleuze more or less admits the validity of the parallel himself in the final chapter of *Nietzsche and Philosophy*: 'We "think" the will-to-power under a form distinct from that under which we know it (thus the *thought* of the eternal return surpasses all the laws of our *knowledge*). Distant remnant of the themes of Kant and Schopenhauer: what we know of the will-to-power is also pain and torture, but the will-to-power is also unknown joy, unknown happiness, the unknown god.'[116]

The fame of Deleuze's *Nietzsche and Philosophy* stems largely from its role in launching the anti-Hegelian, anti-dialectical trend of French philosophy in the 1960s and 1970s. Although Deleuze recognizes that Hegel pioneered the thought of the 'death of God', he argues that – in Hegel's case – the reconciliation of infinite and finite, of God and man, simply perpetuates the dominance of the reactive forces embodied in the ideas of both. But one could easily reply that, in Deleuze's version, the eternal return is itself a transcendent idea, and therefore a product of *ressentiment*.[117] Indeed, Deleuze explicitly argues that Zarathustra's convalescence, his recovery from the second confrontation with the thought of eternal return, which strikes him down, occurs when he realizes that everything petty and repulsive about humanity *need not* occur again and again: 'If Zarathustra feels better, it's because he understands that the eternal return is not that at all. He finally understands the unequal and the selection in the eternal return.'[118] But surely this suggests the very opposite of what Nietzsche intends: a flight from the unchangeable realities of life, and especially of the past, into the thought that, next time round, things will be different, things will be better?

Deleuze asserts, in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, that Hegelianism fails to grasp the full import of the death of God, since it portrays this demise as the *dialectical* outcome of Christian theology and morality, and therefore remains contaminated by them. But a case can be made that it is Nietzsche, rather than Hegel, who is the more religious thinker. Nietzsche consistently criticizes Hegel for to attributing a divine purpose to the world, and in so doing ruining the 'innocence of becoming'.[119] Yet as we discovered, Hegel's philosophy offers no consolation for the senseless suffering and evil of the past, and holds out no eschatological hope that such evil can be annulled. Whatever Hegel may understand by reconciliation, whatever it may take to make us feel 'at home' in the world, such a condition is not tantamount to redemption.

Nietzsche, by contrast, is obsessed with the question of redemption. Yet, since he also rejects the idea of a divine making good of whatever remains beyond human power, he has no choice but to transform the past into something willed and affirmed. This does not mean that he advocates the willing of past suffering and injustice for *its own sake*. Rather his thought is that the world forms an essentially interlocked whole, and that to will one thing, to endorse unequivocally even one moment of one's life, entails willing the whole cyclical complex of world-events which that moment pulls in its train. As Zarathustra sings,

> Did you ever say Yes to one joy? O my friends, then you said Yes to *all* Woe as well. All things are chained and entwined together, all things are in love;
>   if you ever wanted one moment twice, if ever you said: 'You please me, happiness, instant, moment!' then you wanted *everything* to return![120]

All the agony and ugliness that necessarily return, along with the instant of ecstasy, are – we might say – just 'collateral damage'. In effect, Nietzsche has inverted Schopenhauer's judgement that one episode of anguish is enough to condemn the world.

Alexander Nehamas reads the eternal return along these lines. Nietzsche thinks, according to Nehamas, that

> taking the occurrence of the events of our past as given, we should try on their basis to achieve something that makes us willing to accept our whole self . . . But in this way the past is changed. The narrative that relates it to the present is altered, and even the events in our past can be turned into actions for which we are willing to accept responsibility ('Thus I willed it') and which we are therefore willing to repeat.[121]

Nehamas acknowledges, of course, that for Nietzsche not just the events of my life, but *all* events in the universe are necessarily interwoven (this is why Nietzsche can declare that 'A reprehensible action means: a reprehended world'[122]). But Nehamas continually slides between talk of willing the totality of one's own life (thought of, figuratively, as willing its return), and willing the cyclical character of the world – and hence of human history – as a whole. There may well be moral qualms behind this imprecision. For Nehamas writes that a person capable of Nietzsche's highest formula of affirmation would want 'the eternal repetition of everything else in the world, past and present, accidental and intentional, good and evil'.[123] But can he really be serious about this? Can he mean that I could will the return of the Rwandan genocide, of

Hiroshima, of Auschwitz, for the sake of experiencing what he calls 'the justification of a life'? What right do I have, in general, to will the repetition of others' suffering on *their* behalf – and more especially when it is for the sake of *my* redemption? Would not such willing make a mockery of the very notion of justification?

Such questions have been put to Nietzsche himself by the Anglican philosopher Giles Fraser:

> A *dramatis personae* of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* would contain a range of different people – the fool, the ignorant, the cripple, the disappointed, the gullible, the easily led, even the ugly – but where is the presence of brutality, where the horrific, where violence, where the portrayal of shit? . . . Of course there are a number of passages where Nietzsche seeks to portray the horror of the nihil. But since then we have looked into the pit and instead of seeing emptiness we are faced with piles of bodies. Compared to that Nietzsche's own version of the nihil looks pale and self-obsessed.[124]

There is something both perceptive and facile about this critique. It is true that when, in the chapter called 'The Convalescent', Zarathustra explains the impact of his 'most abymal thought', the horror that had struck him down and left him for dead, he focuses on what he calls 'the little man', on the wretchedness and pettiness of human achievement:

> The human earth became to me a cave, its chest caved in, everything living became to me human decay and bones and mouldering past . . .
>   The greatest all too small! – that was my disgust at man! And eternal recurrence even for the smallest! That was my disgust at all existence![125]

Zarathustra's horrified reaction to the past, it seems, is not a response to the pain of irremediable injustice. Its basis seems to be almost more aesthetic than moral ('disgust' can apply in either sphere). But is Fraser right to argue that, at the crucial points, Nietzsche simply lapses into 'kitsch'– that willing the eternal return is ultimately no more than a Biedermeier parlour game? Is there not something self-congratulatory about his idea (currently a very widespread one) that – post-Auschwitz – we have learned to look into the heart of human evil in a way no generation has ever done before? After all, Nietzsche learned to philosophize at the feet of Schopenhauer, whose evocations of the wickedness and misery of human existence it would be hard to surpass:

> If we were to conduct the most hardened and callous optimist through hospitals, infirmaries, operating theatres, through prisons, torture-chambers, and

slave-hovels, over battlefields and to places of execution; if we were to open to him all the dark abodes of misery, where it shuns the gaze of cold curiosity, and finally were to allow him to glance into the dungeon of Ugolino where prisoners starved to death, he too would certainly see in the end what kind of world is his *meilleur des mondes possibles*.[126]

In the chapter of *Zarathustra* called 'The Vision and the Riddle', directly after the prophet announces the thought of the eternal return for the first time, an episode of the utmost poignancy occurs. The howling of a dog reminds him of an animal he heard one night back in the depths of his child-hood, just as the full moon was poised to go down over a neighbouring house: 'then I heard a dog howling in that way. And I saw it, too, bristling, its head raised, trembling in the stillest midnight, when even dogs believe in ghosts.'[127] Twice the animal's cry arouses pity in Zarathustra, the second time through its terrified response to the disappearing moon. There could scarcely be a more disturbing image of the dread and desolation of existence, all the more moving for being centred on a speechless creature. It is not easy to dismiss the pity of the child Zarathustra as a less potent protest against world-affirmation than the wretchedness we feel in contemplating the record of political cruelty and murder over the last century.

Nietzsche devised the eternal return because he believed that transcendence had been exposed as a lie, yet he could not give up on the idea of redemption. He bequeaths to us the question: can we accept the end of transcendence *and* redemption? Are our fragile narratives of political and social progress enough to keep us afloat? The question of whether Nietzsche – or anyone – could confront, morally and existentially, the consequences of the salvation that he proposed, is almost impossible to decide. But when Deleuze suggests that it was because of his descent into insanity that Nietzsche never achieved a definitive account of the eternal return,[128] we might be tempted to put the matter the other way round: it was Nietzsche's struggle to face down, without any alleviation, the inflexible necessity of the world's pain and evil, to absorb them into the moment of exaltation, that contributed to driving him mad.

Notes

1 For details (possibly apocryphal) of the Hegel–Schopenhauer encounter, see Alfred Schmidt, *Idee und Weltwille: Schopenhauer als Kritiker Hegels* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1988), pp. 12–14.

2 Arthur Schopenhauer, *Manuscript Remains*, vol. 2: *Critical Debates (1809–1818)*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (Oxford: Berg, 1988), p. 373.

3 See Schopenhauer's critique of Fichte's *Die Anweisung zum seligen Leben*, in *Manuscript Remains*, vol. 2, pp. 397–9.

4 Arthur Schopenhauer, 'Über die Universitäts-Philosophie', in *Parega und Paralipomena: Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 4, ed. Wolfgang Frhr. von Löhneysen (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), p. 232.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 *Manuscript Remains*, vol. 2, p. 371.

8 Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1974), p. 58.

9 For interpretation of Hegel's conception of the absolute along these lies, see Martin Heidegger, 'Hegel's Concept of Experience', in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

10 *Manuscript Remains*, vol. 2, p. 349.

11 Ibid., p. 318. For helpful discussion of Schopenhauer's critique of the Idealists in this regard, see Christopher Janaway, *Self and World in Schopenhauer's Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), chs 4–5.

12 See *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason*, ch. IV.

13 *Manuscript Remains*, vol. 2, p. 343.

14 For a helpful analysis of Schopenhauer's argument, see F. C. White, *On Schopenhauer's Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992), pp. 20–4.

15 See Arthur Schopenhauer, 'Fragmente zur Geschichte der Philosophie', in *Parega und Paralipomena: Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 4, ed. Wolfgang Frhr. von Löhneysen (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), pp. 90–5.

16 See Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, ed. James Gutman, trans. W. H. White and A. H. Stirling (New York: Hafner, 1949), p. 41.

17 Cited in Schmidt, *Idee und Weltwille*, p. 34.

18 For a full-scale treatment of Schopenhauer's critique of Hegel, which brings out the parallels with Marx and other contemporaries, see Schmidt, *Idee und Weltwille*, ch. 6.

19 See Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1966), vol. II, ch. 50. (Hereafter *WW II*; vol. I will be referred to as *WW I*.)

20 'Fragmente zur Geschichte der Philosophie', pp. 69–70.

21 Ibid., p. 70.

22 Ibid.

23 'Über die Universitäts-Philosophie', p. 193.

24 *Idee und Weltwille*, p. 34.

25 Ibid., p. 21.

26 *WW II*, p. 183.

27 *WW II*, p. 177.

28 Ibid.

29 *WW II*, p. 175.

30 Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, p. 20.

31 Immanuel Kant, *Gesammelte Schiften*, ed. Royal Prussian (later German) Academy of Sciences (Berlin: Georg Reimer (later Walter de Gruyter), 1900–), vol. 18, *Reflexion*, no. 6343.

32 Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* (Kollegnachschrift von K. Chr. Fr. Krause, 1798/99) (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1982), p. 49.

33 *On the Basis of Morality*, p. 80.

34 *WW I*, p. 98.

35 See Arthur Schopenhauer, *Prize Essay on the Freedom of the Will*, ed. Günther Zöller, trans. E. F. J. Payne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 27–32.

36 Ibid., p. 87.

37 Arthur Schopenhauer, *Metaphysik der Sitten: Philosophische Vorlesungen Teil IV* (Munich: Piper Verlag, 1985), p. 81.

38 *WW I*, p. 287.

39 *WW I*, p. 296.

40 Schopenhauer, *Metaphysik der Sitten*, p. 60.

41 See Georg Simmel, *Schopenhauer und Nietsche* (Hamburg: Junius Verlag, 1990), pp. 61–87.

42 See *On the Basis of Morality*, p. 130.

43 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The Art of Controversy and other Posthumous Papers*, trans. T. B. Saunders (London: Sonnenschein & Co., 1896), p. 94.

44 Ibid., p. 132.

45 Ibid., p. 132.

46 Ibid., p. 133.

47 *WW I*, p. 374.

48 *WW I*, p. 373.

49 See, for example, Max Horkheimer, 'Die Aktualität Schopenhauers', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1985).

50 Paul Ricoeur, *La critique et la conviction: Entretien avec François Azouvi et Marc de Launay* (Paris: Calman-Lévy, 1995), p. 171.

51 Fackenheim, *To Mend the World*, p. 233.

52 *WW I*, p. 364.

53 Ibid.

54 See Christopher Bollas, 'The Structure of Evil', in *Cracking Up* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 180–220.

55 André Green, 'Pourquoi le mal?', in J.-B. Pontalis (ed.), *Le mal* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 437.

56 *WW I*, p. 309.

57 *WW I*, p. 398.

58 *WW I*, p. 410.

59 Sebastian Gardner, 'Schopenhauer, Will and the Unconscious', in Christopher Janaway (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Schopenhauer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 404.

60 *WW II*, p. 576.

61 See *WW II*, p. 405.

62 See *WW II*, p. 590.

63 *WW II*, p. 351.

64 See Simmel, *Schopenhauer und Nietzsche*, p. 147.

65 *WW I*, p. 271.

66 See 'Fragmente zur Geschichte der Philosophie', p. 165.

67 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a New Philosophy of the Future*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1972), p. 78 (§108).

68 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. R. J. Hollindgdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 35 (§39).

69 Ibid., p. 34 (§39).

70 Ibid.

71 *WW II*, p. 600.

72 Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Schopenhauer as Educator', in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 155.

73 For the argument that the metaphysics of *The Birth of Tragedy* are less Schopenhauerian than has been assumed, see Béatrice Han-Pile, 'Nietzsche's Metaphysics in *The Birth of Tragedy*', *European Journal of Philosophy*, 14: 3 (December 2006), pp. 373–403.

74 See Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On Schopenhauer (1868)', in Christopher Janaway (ed.), *Willing and Nothingness: Schopenhauer as Nietzsche's Educator* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 258–65.

75 See *Human, All Too Human*, p. 16(§10).

76 Ibid., p. 14 (§4).

77 Ibid., p. 13 (§2).

78 Ibid., p. 62 (§110).

79 'The moral results of Christianity, right up to the highest ascesis, are rationally grounded by me in the order of things; whereas in Christianity they are only grounded through mere fables. The belief in these disappears more every day; for this reason people will have to turn to my philosophy' ('Fragmente zur Geschichte der Philosophie', p. 165).

80 *Human, All Too Human*, p. 23 (§21).

81 Ibid., p. 27 (§28).

82 Ibid., p. 27 (§28).

83 In *The World as Will and Idea*, Schopenhauer argues that there can be no *summum bonum* in the literal sense, since there can be no 'final satisfaction of

the will, after which no fresh willing would occur'. But he allows the expression 'an honorary, or so to speak emeritus, position', as a metaphorical description 'the complete self-effacement and denial of the will' (*WW I*, p. 362).

84 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansell Pearson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 5.

85 Ibid., pp. 18–19.

86 For a lucid analysis of the components and structure of Nietzsche's argument, see Raymond Geuss, 'Nietzsche and Genealogy', in *Morality, Culture and History*, pp. 1–28.

87 See Stephen Mulhall, *Philosophical Myths of the Fall* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 32–45, esp. p. 38.

88 See, ibid., pp. 42–3.

89 Ibid., p. 42.

90 Ibid., p. 41.

91 For an interpretation of the 'Übermensch' along these lines, see Günther Figal, *Nietzsche: Eine philosophische Einführung* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1998), section IV, ch. 2.

92 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, in *The Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 150 (§38).

93 Mulhall, *Philosophical Myths of the Fall*, p. 22.

94 Ibid., p. 28.

95 *The Anti-Christ*, p. 174 (§55).

96 Ibid., p. 115 (§1).

97 See, for example, *Human, All Too Human*, p. 12 (§1).

98 Ibid., p. 186 (§62).

99 On this aspect of Nietzsche's thought, see Simmel, *Schopenhauer und Nietzsche*, pp. 261–302.

100 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufman, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), p. 290 (§534).

101 See Karl Löwith, *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1995), p. 197.

102 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992).

103 *The Will to Power*, p. 481 (§909).

104 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. XII, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Munich: Deutsche Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999), p. 366. (Hereafter *KSA XII*.)

105 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 161.

106 Ibid., p. 162.

107 Ibid., p. 163.

108 Eugen Fink, *Nietzsches Philosophie* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2002), p. 89.

109 *KSA XII*, pp. 342–3.

110 *KSA XII*, pp. 216–17.

111 *KSA XII*, p. 217.

112 See, for example, Karl Löwith, 'Critical Yardstick for Nietzsche's Experiment', in *Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Eternal Recurrence of the Same* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 174–93.

113 Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche et la philosophie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1962), p. 205.

114 Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et répétition* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968), p. 382.

115 Gilles Deleuze, 'On the Will to Power and the Eternal Return', in *Desert Islands and Other Texts 1953–1974*, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Michael Taormina (Los Angeles and New York: Semiotext(e), 2004), p. 124.

116 Deleuze, *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, p. 199.

117 For a critique of Deleuze's 'selective' interpretation of the eternal return, which even suggests parallels with an Augustinian narrative of fall and redemption, see Henry Staten, *Nietzsche's Voice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 69–76. I am indebted to Staten's insightful statement of the case against the selective reading.

118 Deleuze, 'On the Will to Power and the Eternal Return', p. 124.

119 *KSA XII*, p. 386.

120 'The Intoxicated Song', in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, pp. 331–2.

121 Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 161.

122 Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 165 (§293).

123 Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, p. 162.

124 Giles Fraser, *Redeeming Nietzsche: On the Piety of Unbelief* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 138.

125 *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, p. 236 ('The Convalescent').

126 *WW I*, p. 325.

127 *WW I*, p. 179 (§46, 'The Vision and the Riddle').

128 See Deleuze, 'On the Will to Power and the Eternal Return', p. 117.

Chapter 5   Levinas:
Ethics *à l'Outrance*

It is evident, right from the first page of Emmanuel Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*, that the author is locked in a confrontation with Nietzsche. For Levinas opens the Preface to his first major work with a statement designed to resonate throughout his enquiry: 'Everyone will agree that it is of the highest importance to know whether we are not duped by morality.'[1]

Levinas was born into the Jewish community in Kovno, Lithuania, in 1906. Though he spent most of his life in France, and survived the war in German captivity because of his status as a French army officer, many of his family were murdered in the Nazi camps. Hence the urgency of his need to establish whether Nietzsche was right to claim that 'There are no moral phenomena at all, only a moral interpretation of phenomena'.[2] Is it self-deception, as Nietzsche insisted, to believe that purely moral considerations can play a role in the outcome of human affairs? Is what many take to be the unconditional binding force of morality merely an ingrained illusion? From the standpoint of a sober, dispassionate characterization of the human world, Nietzsche may appear to have a strong case. For, as Levinas immediately goes on to enquire: 'Does not lucidity, the mind's openness upon the true, consist in catching sight of the permanent possibility of war?'[3] We do not need obscure fragments of Heraclitus, Levinas asserts, to prove that 'being reveals itself as war to philosophic thought, that war does not only affect it as the most patent fact, but as the very patency, or the truth, of the real'.[4] Levinas is doing more here than suggesting that the great pre-Socratic thinker, and – by implication – his admirer Nietzsche, correctly glimpsed the belligerent character of being. He argues that the consequences of the concept of totality, with which philosophy seeks to encompass being, find their most vivid exemplification in war. For within the totality 'individuals are reduced to being bearers of forces that

command them unbeknownst to themselves'; 'the ultimate meaning alone counts; the last act alone changes beings into themselves'.[5] Here Levinas seems intent on fusing the visions of Hegel and Nietzsche, the ostensible contraries. Philosophy is the thinking of the totality, and because of this it alienates the individual subjects of experience and action, 'making them play roles in which they no longer recognize themselves, making them betray not only their own commitments but their own substance, making them carry out actions that will destroy every possibility for action'.[6] In other words, there can be no 'system of freedom' of the kind the German Idealists sought to construct, since any whole must *reduce* its elements to their subordinate functions.

Since 'the state of war suspends morality',[7] and being has revealed itself as war, then morality – it seems – must be an illusion. Politics, though it may pay homage to morality, is in fact the continuation of war by other means: 'it is opposed to morality, as philosophy to naiveté.'[8] Peace can never be more than a ceasefire, liable to be broken at any moment, as soon as self-interest dictates, just as Nietzsche argues that no pact or truce can be anything other than the expression of a pre-existing equilibrium of forces. And yet, Levinas argues, we can understand peace in a radically different way. For human beings are also oriented towards an 'eschatology of peace' which 'institutes a relation with being *beyond the totality* or beyond history, and not with being beyond the past and present'.[9] This eschatology is incommensurable with the language of philosophy, of cognition in general. But this does not mean that it is powerless. 'We oppose to the objectivism of war,' Levinas asserts, 'a subjectivity born from the eschatological vision . . . The harsh law of war breaks up not against an impotent subjectivism cut off from being, but against the infinite, more objective than objectivity.'[10] Yet this claim is not meant to imply that peace triumphs over war *within* the totality either. Rather the eschatological dimension induces a profound rift in our culture. Levinas's description is worth repeating in full:

> To tell the truth, ever since eschatology has opposed peace to war, the evidence of war has been maintained in an essentially hypocritical civilization, that is, attached both to the True and the Good, henceforth antagonistic. It is perhaps time to see in hypocrisy not only a base contingent defect of man, but the underlying rending of a world attached to both the philosophers and the prophets.[11]

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Even from this brief account it should be clear how *Totality and Infinity* returns to some of the central concerns of Kant's ethics, in a post-

Nietzschean context – two thirds of the way through the century of 'total war'. But we can also see that Levinas has drastically reworked the Kantian perspective. Firstly, he does not offer a philosophical transcription of the concept of 'original sin'. The conflict lies not between the willed prioritization of 'self-love', as Kant calls it, and obedience to the moral law. Rather it is a clash between the world viewed theoretically, which Levinas more or less equates with its being viewed philosophically, and what he terms the 'optic' of ethics. No culpability, it seems, attaches to the exclusivism of the theoretical perspective – it is just that we are inevitably torn between our attempts to make the world systematically intelligible, and an encounter with that which lies beyond the world as a totality, with what Levinas refers to as 'transcendence' or 'infinity'.

But soon after his outlining of this diremption, a significant shift occurs in Levinas's account. After first counterposing being-as-war and eschatological peace, as if they were two incommensurable alternatives between which there could only be a kind of *Gestalt* switch, he now announces that he will 'distinguish between the idea of totality and the idea of infinity, and affirm the *philosophical primacy* of the idea of infinity'.[12] Infinity, or the 'gleam of exteriority', as he puts it, can be glimpsed in 'a situation where totality breaks up, a situation that conditions the totality itself'.[13] This basic thought is condensed in Levinas's oft-repeated contention that 'ethics precedes ontology', or that 'ethics is first philosophy'.[14] These are slogans that cannot fail to recall Kant's claim for the primacy of practical reason.

Just as Kant seeks to show that pure reason can be practical, through his analysis of the irreducible experience of moral obligation, much of Levinas's philosophical effort is devoted to revealing that an ethical encounter with the infinite does indeed occur: that we are not duped by morality. As we shall explore more fully in a moment, for Levinas this encounter takes the form of the face-to-face relation with the human other. But as we know, Kant's task is not completed simply by establishing the objective validity of the categorical imperative. For we would still have to conclude that morality was an illusion if what the moral law enjoined us to achieve, the *summum bonum*, could never in fact be attained. Like Kant, Levinas also argues that we stand under unconditional ethical obligations. We are obliged, in the first instance, not to kill, and to offer unreserved succour to the human other who appears – in his or her most essential guise – as the 'widow, the hungry, the orphan'.[15] More ambitiously, we are obliged to strive for the realization of peace and justice among human beings.[16] But as we have just seen, Levinas also regards history, the domain of the totality, as the empire of war. How, then, can ethical obligation make sense when the realization of justice seems incompatible with the

permanence of war; when – as Levinas puts it – we are torn between our consciousness of the True and our consciousness of the Good?

It is scarcely surprising that, in struggling with the problem of this structural antagonism, Levinas is sometimes drawn to a Kantian style of solution, for example during the discussion of Kant in his lecture course *La mort et le temps*. Here Levinas begins by drawing a contrast with Heidegger, whose earlier thought focuses on the finitude of human existence, disclosed in 'being-towards-death'. On his reading, the entirety of human experience is interpreted by Heidegger in ontological terms, and all meaning is understood as an event of Being.[17] But what if there were a signification that went 'beyond' being, or could not be reduced to being? This is the possibility that Levinas discovers in Kant, and which he finds so powerful. One of Kant's great achievements, he asserts, is to have shown that 'meaning can signify without reference to being, without recourse to being, without the comprehension of being which is given'.[18] In the case of postulates of practical reason, Levinas suggests, 'There is a total independence of the practical in relation to cognitive access to being.'[19] More specifically, Kant has shown that, even though the God of 'onto-theology' may be dead, there are other ways in which the word 'God' can continue to signify, just as the 'rational faith' in immortality can be seen as something other than the self-interested desire for a prolongation of personal existence after death.

Levinas's reference to the 'death of God' suggests why he emphasizes the 'otherness' (*altérité*) of the objects of Kantian rational faith, the absolute gulf which separates them from all being. For he does not wish to fall foul of the Nietzschean attack on metaphysics, on the positing of a 'true' world, let alone a just and merciful deity, behind the world of appearances. As he writes, '[The] noumenon is to be distinguished from the concept of God possessed by the believers of positive religions . . . faith purged of myths, the monotheist faith, implies metaphysical atheism.'[20] Yet by divorcing transcendent ethical meaning so radically from being, Levinas risks distorting Kant's intentions. For in Kant's thought, it is precisely the need to secure the *possibility* of the highest good which leads to the postulates of God and immortality. God is understood as the 'moral author of the world', and this is why Kant's religious thought must connect up with a philosophy of history which interprets historical action as displaying a purposive pattern, from the standpoint of our moral interest in the realization of a cosmopolitan ethical community. Indeed, Kant – by the time of the *Religion* – leaves a certainty ambiguity as to whether the ultimate goal is to be understood in this-worldly or other-worldly terms. By contrast, Levinas emphasizes the thought that the object of rational hope is not an object that could ever be attained. Kant

understands 'Hope as relation with something more than being that will never be able to be affirmed as existing or be signified as that which is the correlative of knowledge. On this basis a subjectivity would be thought which can be in relation with that which cannot be realised – not, however, with the romantically unrealisable: with an order above or beyond being.'[21] But in contrast to this definition, Kant never portrays the distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal as a distinction between that which has 'being' and that which lies 'beyond being'. On the contrary, it could be argued that he understands practical reason, and the postulates which its dialectic generates, as giving us access to what ultimately *is* (the moral world order, as opposed to the morally indifferent world of appearances). Indeed, on occasion he can suggest that the practical postulates 'have as their object *not an acting* but rather a *being*'.[22]

   Not surprisingly, then, Levinas elsewhere registers this philosophical difference from Kant, and in fact turns critical of his predecessor. In his essay 'Transcendence et mal' he underlines how Kant discovers a use of practical reason which is independent of all that exists: 'A good will, which is in a certain sense utopian, deaf to information, indifferent to the confirmations which could come to it from being . . . stems from a freedom situated beyond being, and prior to knowledge and ignorance.'[23] But, following in the wake of this radical breakthrough, the postulates represent, in Levinas's eyes, a failure of nerve, a bridge thrown back anxiously towards being. As he writes: 'And yet, after a moment of separation, the relation with ontology is re-established in the "postulates of practical reason", as if it were awaited amidst all these acts of daring: the ideas join up in their own way with being, in the existence of God guaranteeing . . . the harmony of virtue and happiness.'[24] In general, Levinas is hostile to any cushioning of the ethical demand, its linkage even with a *hope* to be worthy of happiness. Throughout his work, he emphasizes the starkness and illimitability of moral responsibility. But by detaching the ethical demand so completely from any empirical human interest, or from any development discernable within history, he surely risks producing the opposite effect to the one he intends. Far from protecting ethics from its absorption by a warlike ontology, an eschatological peace that bears no relation to the achievement of worldly peace risks being dismissed as a futile illusion.

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Yet there is another major strand of Levinas's thinking which seems to point in precisely the opposite direction to the line of thought we have followed so

far. In contrast to Kant's conception of the categorical imperative, which focuses on my capacity rationally to endorse my own maxims, Levinas seeks to anchor ethical obligation in the everyday realities of interpersonal relationships. As he states, 'The banal fact of conversation, in one sense, quits the order of violence. This banal fact is the marvel of marvels.'[25] It is in the face-to-face relation with the human other, Levinas contends, in the other acknowledged through the speech I address to him or her, that I glimpse that which cannot be known or objectified, or even regarded as existing – that I approach the 'Infinite'.

One way to interpret Levinas's claim is by reference to the expectation of frankness, regarded as a condition of communication between human beings. The thought is that the exchange of speech would lose its purpose if we did not presuppose the sincerity of our interlocutors. Levinas tries to demonstrate this by pointing out that if we doubt systematically the sincerity of a speaker, and therefore undertake – say – a psychoanalytical or sociological investigation, in order to explain why she is saying such false, misleading, or self-deluding things, we would still have to trust the sincerity of *other* interlocutors in carrying out our investigation. For we cannot experience an objective world at all, without a grip on the meanings conveyed by language, and we can gain this purchase only through the practice of – primarily – truthful communication. For an isolated, putatively pre-linguistic knowing subject, any proto-object would be inseparable from changing perspectives on it, and on its relation to other equally unstable objects, in an endlessly shifting phantasmagoria: 'The objectivity of the object and its signification come from language.'[26] For Levinas, as for Wittgenstein, there can be no private language. An objective world is a shared world, disclosed from within a relatively stable framework of meaning. And only beings who understand themselves as participants in a realm of speech – speech which is fundamentally sincere – possess such a framework. Sincerity, in this context, can be regarded as the coincidence of *what* is said and the *act in which* it is said. As Levinas puts it, 'Language is exceptional in that it attends its own manifestation. Speech consists in explaining oneself with respect to speech.'[27]

Does this mean that, in any empirical instance, we can be sure that the words which are uttered by the human other are not meant to deceive? Levinas denies this possibility, if we take into account purely the content of what is said. There is a sense, however, in which any utterance is 'sincere' – the sense in which even the choice to be sincere or insincere reveals to us something of *who* the other is. It is in this respect, Levinas suggests, that there is a 'frankness' in all speech, since, whatever is said, we encounter the other – as the 'signifier', the one who intends a meaning – not 'behind' speech, but

present or manifest in it. It is this argument which gives rise to the complex relation between the concept of speech and the key notion of the 'face', in Levinas's thought. For it is a familiar experience that, in looking into the countenance of another person, we find the least disguised expression of who that person is – hence the tendency to look into the face to discern the truth or untruth of what the speaker says. In effect, Levinas appeals to this tendency in order to transform the notion of the face into a metaphor for that fundamental sincerity which lies at the basis of speech, in so far as it reveals the speaker. As he writes in *Totality and Infinity*, 'Deceit and veracity already presuppose the absolute authenticity of the face – the privileged case of a presentation of being foreign to the alternative of truth and non-truth.'[28] And elsewhere in this work he refers to the 'absolute frankness of the face to face proffered at the bottom of all speech.'[29] It is this 'absolute frankness' which allows us a glimpse of the infinite.

The face, then, is not an object, but the condition of all objecthood. But if this conclusion is right, how is it possible to apprehend the face at all? Levinas answers that we cannot cognize the face, but can encounter it only through our response to it, which is inherently ethical, since it takes the form of a restraint of what he describes as our initially wanton, heedless, even violent freedom. It is important to understand what this means. We do not first 'identify' an entity as a (human) other, and then –subsequently – adopt a certain practical attitude towards this entity, based on our ethical evaluation of it. Rather, the restraint of our freedom is itself the very process of encounter. To address the Other, acknowledging that a human being is like no other object, is already to have abandoned violence. This is why, from another perspective, Levinas can say that the face is the prohibition of murder, issuing the primordial commandment: 'Thou shalt not kill.' As he writes, 'It is the welcoming of the Other, the commencement of moral conscience, which calls into question my freedom. Thus this way of measuring against the perfection of infinity is not a theoretical consideration. It is accomplished in shame where freedom discovers itself murderous in its very exercise.'[30]

It will be evident from the discussion so far that, in its broad outlines, Levinas's thought belongs to the tradition of intersubjectivist thinking descending from post-Kantian idealism. In this tradition, the 'summons' issuing from, or the 'recognition' of the other is a precondition of my own self-consciousness, and therefore of the experience of an objective world. Furthermore, it is a common feature of this tradition that my relation to the other is not primarily cognitive – that my acknowledgement, like that of the other, is fundamentally practical and ethical. Surprisingly, perhaps, in

view of his repeated critique of Hegelianism, one can find many passages in Levinas's work which sound extremely close to Hegel in this regard. For example, he writes in the opening piece in *Difficult Freedom*, his fine collection of essays on Judaism: 'Reason and language are external to violence. They *are* the spiritual order. If morality must truly exclude violence, a profound link must connect reason, language, and morality.'[31] Furthermore, Levinas's explanation of this claim seems to draw directly on the Hegelian insight into the tension between inequalities of status and role, and the fundamental reciprocity implied by addressing the other in speech: 'Even when one speaks to a slave, one speaks to an equal. What one says, the communicated content, is only possible only thanks to the face-to-face relation where the Other counts as an interlocutor prior even to being known.'[32]

Throughout *Difficult Freedom* Levinas defends a strictly ethical conception of religion which has strong Kantian echoes, not least in its severing of religion from what he regards as the dangerous irrationality of the sacred. Yet, in terms of its content, his view of religion comes closer to Hegel's suggestion that 'ethical life' can be the most genuine form of cult. His assertion that 'The coincidence of the political and the spiritual marks the maturity of man'[33] provides just one striking example. 'Does not religious inspiration', Levinas enquires, 'aim in the last analysis at the very possibility of society, the possibility for a man to see the face of another man?'[34] It is not that belief in God *incites* to justice, he insists. Rather, such belief *is* the institution of justice.[35] Here, it seems, religion does not refer us to an eschatological future beyond being, but rather to the political fulfilment of the potential already contained in homely acts of human acknowledgement and association. Can these two strands of Levinas's thinking be reconciled?

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In seeking an answer to this question, we should note that there is one respect in which Levinas diverges from the mainstream of intersubjectivist thinking. Generally, within this tradition, the process of interaction is taken as central in the genesis of self-conscious subjectivity. We first become self-aware through internalizing the attitude of the other towards us in interaction – an idea that has been fleshed out empirically in the twentieth century, in psychoanalytic theory and psychoanalytically guided forms of infant observation. Levinas, however, does not endeavour to explain the genesis of the sense of self through such an interactive process. On the contrary, he has a quite distinctive account of the emergence of the conscious self, which he lays out in some of his early works.

Levinas begins with a blank, anonymous process of existing (*l'exister* – a nominalized infinitive), which he terms the '*il y a*' (the 'there is'). The *il y a* is featureless, devoid of affirmation or negation, without any distinction of subject or object. For Levinas it is a source of horror, a blankness to which we come closest in the experience of insomnia or during an involuntary vigil, when we feel the pointless, interminable weight of existence. He then goes on to suggest that the emergence of the subject can be interpreted as a retreat from this oppressive limitlessness of being. No explanation can be given for why this emergence occurs; as Levinas puts it, 'There is no physics in metaphysics.'[36] But we can describe it as the process whereby – in a strong echo of Schelling – naked existing is appropriated as a basis by that which withdraws from mere existing. As Levinas writes, 'The appearance of "something which is" constitutes a veritable inversion at the heart of anonymous being. It carries existing as an attribute, it is master of this existing, as the subject is master of the attribute.'[37] Yet this escape from the *il y a*, the creation of a breathing space in its boundless claustrophobia, is bought at a heavy price. For in relating to *its* basis, the emergent subject must also relate to itself, and therefore singularize itself: 'In order for there to be an existent in this anonymous existing, a departure and return to self must become possible, that is to say the very work of identity. By virtue of its identification, the existent is already closed in on itself; it is monad and solitude.'[38]

Here we encounter one of Levinas's most basic philosophical preoccupations. For although the subject has acquired a certain freedom through its folding in on itself, its withdrawal from the 'il y a', it still remains enchained to its own being, to the existence that is now its basis. In his early work, Levinas offers a series of powerful phenomenological evocations of experiences such as malaise, nausea, fatigue, in which one feels the weight, the drag, of one's own being. In such experiences we become aware of the 'dislocation of the *me* in relation to the self'.[39] In his account, the world of economic activity and the satisfaction of needs is not so much a response to biological necessity and material compulsion as it is a positive attempt to escape from this burden of being. In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas devotes a major section of the book ('Interiority and Economy') to this active relation between the self and the environing world. His central insight is that we do not labour and engage with the world merely in order to satisfy needs, and thereby secure our happiness. Rather, our activity is an expression of happiness, in the sense that it is simultaneously the *enjoyment* of activity, of our sensuous interaction with what surrounds us, the elements which we cannot objectify as things in being, but rather in which we 'bathe'. As Levinas writes, 'The reality of life is already on the level of happiness, and in this sense beyond ontology.'[40]

It is not easy to evaluate the status of this account of subjectivity and enjoyment (*jouissance*), especially since it appears to go so directly against the intuition, deeply embedded in the post-Hegelian philosophical tradition, that self-conscious subjectivity can emerge only within an intersubjective context. Levinas stresses repeatedly the solipsistic character of the world of enjoyment – and perhaps he is trying to do justice to the sense of solitary inwardness which haunts us all, no matter how immersed we may be in collective life. Yet it is clear that this interiority is not simply the inbuilt character of subjectivity, but rather involves a closing off from the other, an obliviousness to which subjectivity is essentially liable. In Kantian terminology, we might even call it a 'propensity', except for Levinas's stress upon its innocence. As he writes, 'In enjoyment I am absolutely for myself. Egoist without reference to the Other, I am alone without solitude, innocently egoist and alone. Not against the Others, not "as for me . . ." – but entirely deaf to the Other, outside all communication and all refusal to communicate – without ears, like a hungry stomach.'[41] But to complicate the picture even more, a few pages later Levinas hastens to add that his description of enjoyment 'does not render the concrete man. In reality man has already the idea of infinity, that is, lives in society and represents things to himself.'[42]

It is not hard to discern the problem Levinas is confronting here. If the encounter with the infinite, the glimpse of the divine that occurs in our everyday response to the other, were acted upon, then social life would already be an ethical life. Yet such is clearly not the case. There must, then, be a deep-rooted dynamic of subjectivity which closes us off to the ethical demand, so that the face of the other is experienced as an irruption, an intrusion. Levinas, in fact, proposes a general conception of history in which the experience of otherness has been covered over by the dynamic of knowing, of a reifying subjectivity which has already detached itself from immersion in the world of enjoyment, yet has somehow failed to register the face of the other. This is how he adapts and reworks the basic thought of Heidegger's 'history of Being' (*Seinsgeschichte*). Whereas Heidegger argues that it is the 'question of Being' which has been progressively consigned to oblivion during the history of the West, Levinas claims that what has been occluded is the transcendence of the Other, in an insistent reduction of the 'Other' to the 'Same'. The result has been the forms of thinking and acting canonized by Western metaphysics, which are centred on a representing subject who incorporates all objects and events into the train of his own experience. As Levinas writes,

Philosophy is produced as a form in which the refusal of engagement with
the other, the waiting preferred to action, indifference with regard to others,

the universal allergy of the early infancy of philosophers is manifest. The itinerary of philosophy remains that of Ulysses, whose adventure in the world was only a return to his native island – a complacency in the Same, an unrecognition of the Other.[43]

Like Heidegger, Levinas employs a version of phenomenological method to recover this repressed level of experience. But his claim is that Heidegger did not go far enough in breaking with the ontological and epistemological prejudices of Western thought. Though Heidegger attempts to step beyond metaphysics with his thinking of the ontological difference, he remains oriented towards the 'experience of Being'. Heidegger pushes phenomenology to its limit, seeking to disclose not the unmediated presence of things, but the 'clearing' within which they first come to presence. But for Levinas the face marks the limit where phenomenological vision breaks down, since it bedazzles the would-be discloser. The face, as we might put it, is the clearing in the clearing.[44]

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According to Levinas, the 'presentiment and memory of the Nazi horror' cast its shadow across his life and thinking.[45] His second major work, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, is dedicated 'to the memory of those who were nearest among the six million murdered by the national socialists, besides the millions and millions of human beings of every religion and every nation, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-semitism'. But how precisely is Levinas's thought to be understood as a philosophical response to the Holocaust? And more particularly, how does it attempt to rethink the meaning of ethics, in response to the unprecedented evil, the 'Evil . . . certain of its excellence',[46] which Levinas perceives in the Final Solution?

It is clear, first of all, that Levinas regards the history of the twentieth century as marking a profound failure of civilization. The last century witnessed the rise of a political rationality freed from all ethical constraint:

> This is the century that has known two world wars in thirty years, the totalitarianisms of right and left, Hitlerism and Stalinism, Hiroshima, the Gulag, and the genocides of Auschwitz and Cambodia. This is the century that is drawing to a close in the obsessive fear of the return of everything these barbaric names stood for: suffering and evil inflicted deliberately, but in a manner no reason set limits to, in the exasperation of a reason become political and detached from all ethics.[47]

It is important to recall that, for Levinas, this severing of politics from ethics is a possibility and danger from the very moment that ethical obligations become institutionalized. As he writes, 'The interhuman perspective can subsist, but can also be lost, in the political order of the City where the Law established mutual obligations between citizens.'[48] Even the just and egalitarian state is a fundamentally ambiguous creation: is it a means of holding on the leash the latent war of all against all, or does it emerge from the 'irreducible responsibility of one for another'?[49] Levinas's basic strategy, in response to this threatening ambivalence, is to bring us back to the raw phenomenology of our (intrinsically ethical) response to the human other, prior to any social or political overlay. He is quite insistent that 'the norms of morality are not embarked in history and culture'.[50] In this respect, as already suggested, Levinas's approach bears comparison with those of other philosophers who do not seek to extend our knowledge, but rather to disclose to us what we already – unreflectively – know. And the immediate model for Levinas's enterprise is, of course, Heidegger's effort to retrieve and unfold the 'preunderstanding' of the meaning of Being which is implicit in *Dasein*'s concern for its own Being.

But at this point a significant disanalogy emerges. In Heidegger's thinking the fall of Western metaphysics into the 'forgetfulness of Being' is no accident: there is a kind of fatality about the overlooking of the ontological difference between Being and entities, since this difference is inherently resistant to thought, is approachable only obliquely. By contrast, Levinas cannot avoid addressing the problem of whether the solipsism of subjectivity is fateful, inevitable – or whether it is a closing off for which the subject can be held responsible. For only in the latter case can we apply notions of culpability, as Levinas does in suggesting that my spontaneous, oblivious freedom is guilty.

Levinas's dilemma, in this regard, becomes apparent in the chapter of *Totality and Infinity* entitled 'I and Dependence'. For, on the one hand, he asserts that 'egoism is necessary for infinity': infinity can only be encountered as an irruption into the closed sphere of the I of enjoyment.[51] Yet, on the other hand, unless there were some chink or fracture within this sphere, the infinity of the Other could never intrude at all. Thus Levinas writes:

> Neither the separated being nor the infinite being is produced as an antithetical term. The interiority that ensures separation (but not as an abstract rejoinder to the notion of relation) must produce a being absolutely closed over on itself, not deriving its isolation dialectically from its opposition to the Other. And this closedness must not prevent egress from interiority, so that exteriority could

speak to it, reveal itself to it, in an unforeseeable movement which the isolation of the separated being could not provoke by simple contrast. In the separated being the door to the outside must hence be at the same time *open and closed*.[52]

Seen from another angle, Levinas's difficulty is that he does not wish the opening towards the Other to satisfy a *need* – since in this case the Other would once more be reduced to the Same. He always emphasizes the spontaneity of what he calls 'metaphysical desire', which carries the self beyond itself towards the Other. By why should such desire ever arise at all within the self-enclosed I of enjoyment? And, if such desire does not arise, if the I remains locked up in its solipsism, in what sense is this something for which it can be held to account?

This basic dilemma or ambiguity occurs in multiple aspects of Levinas's thought. For example, his account of 'Enjoyment and Representation', like Hegel's analyses of the various 'shapes of consciousness' in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, explores a permanent possibility in the repertoire of human attitudes to the world, but is also laced with unmistakable historical references. We find ourselves in a pagan universe, prior to the appearance of monotheism, to the dawning of infinite transcendence. Gradually, enjoyment reveals itself as prey to insecurity, to the unpredictability of the elements in which it is immersed and from which it lives. As Levinas writes, 'The nocturnal prolongation of the element is the reign of mythical gods. Enjoyment is without security.'[53] Thus the underlying instability of enjoyment seems to point this world towards what lies beyond itself, in a kind of dialectical movement: 'The separated being must run the risk of the paganism which evinces its separation and in which this separation is accomplished, until the moment that the death of these gods will lead it back to atheism and to the true transcendence.'[54] Yet, elsewhere in his earlier work, Levinas insists that revelation can have no preconditions, that there is no thread connecting the sacred to the God of monotheism, or that – as he puts it – 'there is no natural religion'. In *De l'existence à l'existant*, he writes: 'The impersonality of the sacred in primitive religions, which for Durkheim is the "still" impersonal God from which will emerge one day the God of developed religions, describes, on the contrary, a world where nothing prepares the appearance of a God.'[55]

It is equally symptomatic that, towards the end of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas offers a new interpretation of war, strikingly different from the account with which he so dramatically opens the book. As we saw, Levinas begins by claiming that war is simply the most condensed expression of a totalizing ontology. But now he argues that 'War presupposes the transcen-

dence of the antagonist . . . it aims at a presence that always comes from else-where, a being that appears in a face'.[56] He even asserts bluntly that 'Violence can aim only at a face'.[57] In other words, war is not simply a manifestation of Nietzschean 'will-to-power', or of the blind *conatus* of individuated beings. It violates a *pre-existing* ethical relation: 'War presupposes peace, the antecedent and non-allergic presence of the Other; it does not represent the first event of the encounter.'[58] The face-to-face, it appears, is not synonymous with the ethical relation, since the face of the Other can provoke rejection, even anni-hilating hatred. Or, as Levinas puts it, the face is not just 'infinite resistance to murder', for 'the epiphany of the face brings forth the possibility of gauging the infinity of the temptation to murder'.[59]

Why does the face disclose this temptation, call forth violence? This is really a way of posing the question of the nature of evil – and very often Levinas appears to have scant interest in the question. In the course of one philosophical discussion, Philippe Nemo objects to his characterization of the face-to-face relation: 'One is tempted to say to you: yes, in certain cases. But in other cases, to the contrary, the encounter with the Other occurs in the mode of violence, hate and disdain.' To this Levinas replies, somewhat insou-ciantly: 'To be sure. But I think that whatever the motivation which explains this inversion, the analysis of the face such as I have just made, with the mastery of the Other and his poverty, with my submission and my wealth, is primary.'[60] In general, Levinas sets all the emphasis on the positive ethical character of the human-to-human relation. Correspondingly, he connects what he terms – in one of his most sombre meditations on the twentieth century – the 'deficiency' of human beings, their incapacity to fulfil what is morally demanded of them, with the Western tradition's focus on 'ontology as freedom, as will-to-power, as an assumption in its totality and its finitude of the *essance* of being'.[61] Moral failure then, and even moral catastrophe, becomes a matter of the obtuse persistence in being of the subject (Levinas refers to the 'fiasco of the human which seems to us to burst forth in the prolongation of a certain exaltation of the Same, of the Identical, of Activity, and of Being'[62]). In general, there is no primordial perversion of the will for Levinas (in theological terms, no 'original sin'), since this would imply an essential – though lost – human freedom. And it is precisely the insistence on the primacy of the human being's 'free and rational decision' which, in his eyes, has culminated in the fiasco. Freedom is equated here with 'this essential energy of the human, this courage of being' which 'is concretely revealed in the maintenance of his identity against everything which would come to alter its sufficiency or its *pour soi*';[63] it is what Levinas – borrowing from Spinoza – describes elsewhere as the *conatus* of the subject, which must

be broken by the ethical encounter. Yet this construal simply returns us to the question: how can violence *aim at* the face?

It is not easy to find a clear response to this question in Levinas's work. But from the oblique reflections contained in a later section of *Totality and Infinity* ('The Ethical Relation and Time'), one of the rare places where he writes about 'hatred' and the 'passion for murder', it is possible to assemble the beginnings of an answer. In opposition to Heidegger's account of 'being-towards-death', Levinas insists that death can never be heroically acknowledged as mine. On the one hand, 'My death comes from an instant upon which I can in no way exercise my power. I do not run up against an obstacle which at least I touch in that collision, which in surmounting or enduring, I integrate into my life, suspending its alterity. Death is a menace which approaches me as a mystery.'[64] Death is felt as external to me, alien, untimely: 'In death I am exposed to absolute violence, to murder in the night.'[65] Yet, on the other hand, my mortality is also what is most intimate to me: it is 'the concrete and primary phenomenon', since it exposes the delusion of thinking of myself as pure, intangible subjectivity. Mortality 'forbids the positing of a for-itself that would not be already delivered over to the Other, and consequently be a *thing*'.[66] This ambiguous status of death, Levinas argues, is made manifest as suffering; it is suffering, rather than death, that is 'the supreme ordeal of freedom'. Yet we may try to escape this ordeal through hatred, by attempting to inflict the passivity of our own suffering on the Other, who must yet remain a human other so as to bear witness to the pain: 'In suffering the subject must know his reification, but in order to do so he must precisely remain a subject. Hatred wills both things.'[67] In this context, Levinas suggests that the death of the other is merely the infliction of 'a supreme suffering'. But he also hints, in a related passage, that murder can be seen as an attempt to prove that death is merely nothingness, simply 'annihilation'; to deny the elusive ambiguity of death – imminent and yet always postponed, arbitrary and yet inevitable.

In so far as Levinas offers any philosophical aetiology of hatred and violence, then, he sees them as attempts to suppress the barely endurable ambivalence of self-conscious, mortal existence. As he writes, 'In suffering the free being ceases to be free, but while non-free, is yet free.'[68] Significantly, at the very beginning of his career, in his 1934 essay 'Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism', Levinas sought to understand the dynamic of what he later described as an 'essential possibility of elemental Evil'.[69] And he did so in terms of a similar tension constitutive of modern subjectivity. Here the *malaise* arises from the notion of an 'infinite freedom in relation to all attachments' which, Levinas argues, has been central to the Western religious and philosophical tradition. Such a radical conception of freedom, which, through

remorse and repentance, or through eucharistic reconcilation, can lift even the weight of the unchangeable past, leaves us with a sense of *enchainment* to particularity. Our alienation from own corporeality offers perhaps the most tormenting example: 'It is the feeling of the eternal strangeness of the body in relation to us,' Levinas states, 'that has nurtured Christianity as much as modern liberalism.' The adhesion of the body to the self constitutes 'a union of which nothing can alter the tragic taste of finality'.[70] Almost inevitably, Levinas suggests, a reaction occurs to this alienation, taking the form of an impulse to collapse the distinction between subjectivity and the body. In place of the vapid, uncommitted freedom into which post-Christian liberalism has degenerated, the body – understood in terms of biology and heredity – offers a promise of enracination and authenticity. But now, in consequence of its identification with the particular, freedom's aspiration to the universal can only take the form of imperialism, of violent, domineering expansion. The echoes between this explanation of evil, and the theory proposed by Schelling in the *Freiheitsschrift*, are startling. Just as in Schelling's account, Levinas suggests that freedom is seized with anguish at its own groundlessness, which it escapes by identifying with an opaque ground. There are unmistakable parallels, too, with Hegel's conception of evil as the surrender to contingency of a subjectivity frozen in the moment of formal freedom. But the irony is that, from a critical standpoint, Levinas's response to the threat of evil could be seen as invoking precisely the kind of indeterminate moral imperative which Hegel regarded as part of the problem – not part of the solution.

In many respects 'Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism' sets the agenda for Levinas's subsequent thought, because of its critique of the liberal notion of freedom: 'Thought becomes a game. Man revels in his freedom, and does not definitively compromise himself with any truth.'[71] To overcome the possibility of the irruption of that 'elemental Evil' which the essay seeks to define would require understanding human freedom in a different way – not as play, but as surrender to the severity of the ethical demand. In the long phase of his work leading up to *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas seeks to develop such an account. But as we have seen, the lesson of that book is fundamentally ambiguous. Can subjectivity persist in its self-affirmation, oblivious to the ethical claim? And if it cannot, what determines the appearance of the face as the prohibition, rather than as an incitement to murder? Or are these two possibilities inextricable? In which case, despite a general reluctance (after his early foray) to address the question of evil, Levinas comes close to admitting that history is necessarily – permanently – the history of war and violence. If it is true that 'of peace there can only be an eschatology',[72] then there can be no hope of advance towards peace on *our* earth.

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Levinas returns to the definition of evil, however, in his late 1960s essay 'Humanisme et anarchie'. Here he begins with the claim that the French anti-humanism of the decade has revealed the vulnerability of the concept of the autonomous subject – how readily it can flip over into a subjectless determinism. This oscillation, Levinas argues, suggests that we must acknowledge a subject prior to reflective self-consciousness, prior to any act of freedom – defined by a fundamental passivity, the 'pre-originary susceptibility'[73] of its responsibility for the other. This shift towards an emphasis on the status of the subject as ethical 'hostage' is typical of the later development of Levinas's work. But here he poses a relatively unusual question: why would the subject employ its freedom, which is subsequent to its immemorial responsibility, in order to *evade* this responsibility? Levinas's answer consists in contrasting the 'responsibility for others, alien to eros, as to enthusiasm', with the 'erotic attraction of irresponsibility', through which we glimpse the 'Evil of the absolute freedom of play'. Glimpse, but perhaps fail to recognize. Levinas knows that the prospect of absolute freedom cannot help but entice us: 'Whence, from the heart of submission to the Good, the seduction of irresponsibility, the probability of egoism in the subject responsible for its responsibility, that is to say the birth of the Ego within the obedient will.'[74]

The theory of evil which Levinas sketches all too briefly here makes for a fascinating comparison with Kant, whom he regards as his sole forerunner in seeking to define an ethics 'beyond being'. Kant portrays human beings as having made an inaugural choice to prioritize their desires over the moral law, and so as having rendered themselves incapable of fulfilling the moral demand, despite their irrepressible awareness of it. For Levinas, by contrast, the 'seduction of irresponsibility' occurs from with the 'heart of submission to the Good'. Hence, even though egoism is 'probable', as Levinas admits, it is not primordial – it represents a deviation from our original orientation. Consequently however, as in Kant, the turn towards evil does not extinguish our sense of moral obligation. For as Levinas argues evil is not simply the result of the irresistible pressure of our desiring nature, but is revealed as 'sin, that is to say, responsibility, despite oneself, for the refusal of responsibilities'.[75] The distinction between Kant and Levinas, then, seems to consist only in the fact that, for the latter, there is no paradox, no opaque process of moral 'rebirth', involved in the subject's return to the good – we are simply required to become what – deep down – we already are.

But at this point a further complication enters. For Levinas goes on to suggest that, without the false equipolarity of evil and good, which results

from our seduction by evil, the claim of the good could not make itself felt. It is only in relation to the 'ego', which – deluded – regards itself as its own origin, that the 'an-archic' claim of the good can explicitly assert itself. Hence, although Levinas generally repudiates the idea of 'original sin' – and of any philosophically reformulated successor to it – he now seems to make evil the precondition of the good. Yet at the same time he realizes that this is cannot be the last word. For the idea of an endless contest between good and evil would amount to an endorsement of precisely that equipolarity which he denounces as a 'luciferian lie'. Without evil, without the egoism of the self, the 'anarchic submission to the Good would no longer be an-archic, and would amount to a demonstration of God, as if God belonged to the order of being or perception'.[76] And yet, the argument continues, if such a demonstration lies beyond the scope of philosophy, it nonetheless lies within the scope of 'an optimism which theology can teach, which religion may hope for'.[77] Levinas, it seems, despite his critique of Kant's supposed climb-down, his concessions to being, cannot permanently avoid the problematic of the postulates of practical reason. For if evil is inferior to the good – despite the appearance it tries to generate – then the good cannot remain merely an intermittent, 'anarchic' interruption of egoism, of the totality, but must triumph in the end. To deny this would be precisely to adopt the perspective of evil: that of an unsurpassable duality.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

Levinas is renowned as the thinker of the unconditional ethical demand. In the course of a conversation with Philippe Nemo he asserts: 'I am responsible for the other, without waiting for reciprocity, even if it should cost me my life. Reciprocation – that is his business. It is precisely to the extent that the relation between the other and me is not reciprocal that I am in subjection to the other; and I am "subject" essentially in this sense. It is I who support everything.'[78] In this context, Levinas repeatedly criticizes Christian notions of redemption, which he takes to imply a 'reward' for morality, or even to assert 'the primacy of supernatural salvation with respect to earthly justice'.[79] Yet, as we have seen, Levinas cannot avoid the question of the *point* of ethical commitment, given what we know about humanity and about the character of the world. To assert that 'To be good is deficit, and wasting away and stupidity in being; to be good is excellence and height beyond being'[80] simply ignores the almost intolerable tensions set up by the contrast. Approaching this issue from another angle, many critics, from Paul Ricoeur to Jean-Louis Chrétien, have argued that Levinas's insistence on the pure asymmetry of the

ethical relation, which is meant to exclude the ethical relevance of any consideration of the behaviour of others, is at least as much a problem as it is a solution.[81] Michel Haar, for example, has protested: 'If I am forced to be responsible for the other or reply to the other through his own absolute proximity, if I am threatened, taken hostage, overwhelmed, crushed . . . then I am only confronted with my "bad conscience" . . . reduced to a perpetual fear of the other, but above all of myself, as a usurper and a potential criminal.' Without a rule, a common measure, Haar concludes, 'the Other would be in his turn more terroristic and more totalitarian, more imperialist than any totality instituted by the Same'.[82] Those who blithely defend Levinas against such charges, affirming that here – at last – is an ethics without false compensations, without theodicy,[83] overlook the fact that Levinas is far too subtle and sensitive a thinker not to have pondered intensely over these issues.

Totality and Infinity ends with a lengthy section entitled 'Beyond the Face'. The reader who has followed Levinas so far might well be taken aback by this. After all, how could anything transcend transcendence? What sense can we make of a 'beyond' of that which is already 'beyond being'? It soon becomes apparent, however, that Levinas, no less than Kant, is concerned that moral endeavour cannot be sustained if it is felt to be ultimately futile. He does not share Kant's concern with the divergence between moral intentions and the unpredictable results brought about by natural causality – no doubt because his ethics is not an ethics of the good will, but of concrete acts of charity and justice. Furthermore, innate wickedness does not pose a problem for his thought, at least not on the surface, since he rejects the Christian notion of original sin, and its post-Christian correlates. Levinas is deeply conscious, however, that human finitude threatens the meaningfulness of morality, as does the prospect of an unending battle between good and evil, however this prospect is understood. He insists, throughout *Totality and Infinity*, that ethical judgement, or what he calls the 'judgement of God', is not to be equated with the judgement of history. But he also realizes that, were this judgement to remain purely interior, clandestine, without trace, were it to die with the mortal individual, then this would be *tantamount* to the final triumph of history. He concedes: 'Yet this inner life cannot forgo all visibility. The judgement of consciousness must refer to a reality beyond the sentence pronounced by history, which is also a cessation and an end. Hence truth requires for its ultimate condition an infinite time, the condition for both goodness and the transcendence of the face.'[84]

Totality and Infinity does not frame the compatibility of finitude and infinite time through a postulate of immortality, as does Kant. Rather, it does so through the experience of erotic love, fecundity, and paternity. In the erotic

encounter the severity of the ethical is attenuated; 'Eros goes beyond the face'[85] because 'the being that presents itself as identical in its face loses its signification by reference to the secret profaned and plays in equivocation'.[86] In Eros, we could say, corporeality is not primarily the possibility of exposure to – and service to – the Other but is voluptuousness, a 'conjuncture of identification',[87] in which I strive to unite with the Other despite her transcendence. By definition, this aspiration cannot be fulfilled – the experience of Eros always terminates with an *arrière-goût* of disappointment. But it leads to a surpassing of the lovers through procreation, and to what Levinas terms 'paternity'. In fatherhood I continue to live beyond myself – for the child both is and is not me. Indeed, for Levinas, who understands time discontinuously, stressing the 'resurrection' implied by each discrete instant, fecundity and birth are the essence of temporality as such. As he writes, 'this recommencement of the instant, this triumph of the time of fecundity over the becoming of the mortal and aging being, is a pardon, the very work of time.'[88] Though the Other in his unilateral severity cannot forgive me, it seems that time can.

Levinas's guiding idea appears to be that ethical striving can be renewed with each generation – there can be no conclusive triumph of the totality, even though individuals may die. But, of course, the impossibility of a final defeat of our aspirations is not equivalent to the triumph of the good. Aware of this, in the conclusion to *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas hints that the infinity of time *alone* is insufficient to sustain moral fortitude. He writes: 'Peace must be my peace, in a relation that starts from an I and goes to the other, in desire and goodness, where the I both maintains itself and exists without egoism. It is conceived starting from an I assured of the convergence of morality and reality, that is, of an infinite time which through fecundity is its time.'[89] It is fascinating that Levinas here admits the subject's need for an assurance of the ultimate 'convergence' of the practical and theoretical viewpoints, to employ Kant's terms. For this concession challenges the widely popular view of Levinas's ethics as having – unproblematically – jettisoned the impedimenta of theodicy. But even so, the invocation of fecundity alone cannot provide the assurance required. For if each generation, if parents through their progeny, can begin anew, there is no reason to think that the children – or the children's children – will do any *better* than their forebears. Levinas, like Kant, is conscious that for finite beings such as ourselves morality can only consist in endless progress. But he also appreciates that, in the final analysis, a postulate of endlessness must be conjoined with the anticipation of definitive achievement. Hence the section entitled 'Beyond the Face' in *Totality and Infinity* concludes: 'Truth requires both an infinite time and a time it will be able to seal, a completed time. The completion of time is not death, but messianic time, where the

perpetual is converted into the eternal. Messianic time is the pure triumph; it is secured against the revenge of evil whose return infinite time does not prohibit.'[90] The concept of messianic time, then, is Levinas's way of opening up the concerns that led Kant to rational faith in a 'moral author of the world'.

These concerns cannot be dismissed as marginal to Levinas's thought. In his magnificent commentary, 'Textes messianiques', Levinas interprets a series of debates concerning the Messiah and the messianic time recorded in the Talmudic treatise 'Sanhedrin'. The crucial exchange, for our purposes, bears on whether the messianic time is to be brought about by human moral action alone, or whether it requires the intervention of God. Against Rabbi Eliezer, who insists that deliverance must be merited, Rabbi Joshua takes the view that deliverance *will* occur – come what may. Levinas, whose aim is to retrieve the strictly philosophic content of these debates, states the dilemma clearly: 'The demand for absolute morality is a demand for absolute freedom. And consequently the possibility of immorality. What will actually happen if men to not return to God? This will happen: the Messiah will never come, the world will be delivered to the wicked and the thesis of the atheists – of those who consider that the world is delivered to arbitrariness and evil – will triumph.'[91] He goes on to comment: 'God is here the very principle of the triumph of the good. If you do not believe that, *in any case*, the Messiah will come, you no longer believe in God.'[92]

The definition of God as 'the very principle of the triumph of the good' strikingly recalls not just the Kantian description of God as 'moral author of the world', but – perhaps even more closely – the definitions of God given by Hegel in the introduction to his lectures on the philosophy of history. 'Goodness', Hegel declares, 'not just as a general idea but also as an effective force, is what we call God.'[93] Levinas veers close to this, in admitting that morality must be sustained by an implicit confidence in the ultimate benevolence of the world. Yet he also draws back. Like Kant, he is deeply disturbed by the thought that confidence in God's power might encourage the shirking of moral responsibility. Consequently, in the section of 'Textes messianiques' devoted to the question, 'Who is the Messiah?', Levinas proposes that it is for each person to play this role. For each person

> can only say 'I' to the extent that he has already taken upon himself [the] suffering [of all]. Messianism is nothing but this apogee in being that is the centralisation, the concentration or torsion onto itself – of the I . . . Messianism is therefore not the certainty of the coming of a man who will bring history to a stop. It is my power to bear the suffering of all. It is the instant when I recognise this power and my universal responsibility.[94]

'Textes messianiques' was delivered in two parts to the conference of the French section of the World Jewish Congress, in 1960 and 1961, and so is contemporaneous with the publication of *Totality and Infinity*. Yet, in its notion of the 'torsion onto itself – of the I', Levinas's Talmudic commentary already anticipates his second major work, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, which first appeared in 1974 and which marks a dramatic departure from his earlier positions in many ways. However, 'Textes messianiques' does not point only in the direction of Levinas's second, demented masterpiece; it remains in suspension, declining to make a choice between the different versions of the messianic which it entertains. So we are faced with the question: why did Levinas ultimately gravitate towards a view in which the 'I' takes on the messianic role, is supposed to have 'power to bear the suffering of all'?

We might guess that much of the philosophical pressure stemmed from the deep rift which Levinas had diagnosed in *Totality and Infinity*, the split between knowledge and morality, between philosophy and prophecy. In the aftermath of Kant, this divide had also been central to the concerns of the German Idealists. They felt that the postulates swayed uneasily between subjective certainty, a purely moral necessitation, and an objective – but non-cognizable – status. The trust in the world required for life and action could not be left dependent on such elusive preconditions. Hence the need to reunify the practical and the theoretical, in the form of a purposive conception of human history, towards which the later Kant has already pointed the way. Yet Levinas does not take this route. Rather than reaching the conclusion that the eschatological dimension needs to be integrated into history, that being and the ethical must be reconciled, he moves in entirely the opposite direction. Perhaps he had not thought the ethical demand radically enough, had not distinguished it resolutely enough from the domain of being. Levinas seems to pursue the idea that, if expressed with sufficient intensity, through a kind of torture of language, the ethical relation will no longer leave a gap between demand and delivery, of the kind which had to be bridged by the Kantian postulates (or some equivalent for them). Such linguistic innovations would also respond to the objections raised by Jacques Derrida, in his classic assessment of Levinas's thought up to *Totality and Infinity*. Derrida argued that Levinas had more or less naively assumed he could tell the truth about the Other – that he had sought to hold apart infinity and totality by the very philosophical means which could not help but reduce the former to the later.[95]

In *Otherwise than Being* the separation, the distance between self and Other implied by the concept of the face-to-face is collapsed. Levinas had already argued, in *Totality and Infinity*, that I am ensnared by ethical responsibility prior to any conscious reflection, decision, or commitment. But, as we saw, he still had to take account of the fact that the face could disclose the 'temptation to murder' as well as the ethical impossibility of murder. Even though I cannot choose responsibility, I can still choose – he somewhat reluctantly concedes – to derogate that responsibility. In fact, though Levinas persistently suggests that we are claimed by ethical obligation *prior* to freedom, or that our freedom is 'promoted' by ethical obligation, he cannot suppress the danger which freedom poses for the supremacy of ethics. In this respect, the problem which evil (the urge to do violence to the face) poses for Levinas's thought parallels the difficulty it raises for a Kantian ethics of autonomy. The rational faith in the good, Levinas's 'optimism, which religion may hope for', starts to look vulnerable to the contingencies of human decision. But in *Otherwise than Being*, it is almost as though Levinas is trying to close down the possibility of moral evil, making suffering, sacrifice, expiation, the very definition of subjectivity. Or rather, in this work and in some of his later essays, there is an upsurge of interest in the nature of evil. But evil is now primarily construed as suffering inflicted gratuitously on the subject, rendering theodicy – or any of its secular substitutes – unthinkable.[96]

More specifically, Levinas argues that what defines my uniqueness, makes me the irreplaceable subject that I am, is my obligation to substitute myself, to put myself in the place of the other, an obligation which is irrefusable and untransferable.[97] The Other no longer towers above me in his ethical height, but is rather 'under my skin', obsessing me, traumatizing me, even persecuting me – and I am responsible, Levinas asserts, even for this persecution. Since purely asymmetrical, this responsibility is illimitable. As Levinas writes, 'Below the zero of inertia and nothingness, deficient in being-in-itself and not in being, precisely without a place to lay its head, in the non-place and thus without condition, the self will reveal itself to be the bearer of the world.'[98] Levinas seeks to parry the accusation of endorsing the endless *Sollen* of the subject's responsibility, by claiming that 'the debt increases to the extent that it is paid off'.[99] There is no question of taking even one step towards an infinitely remote goal, and hence no tantalizing illusion of progress. But this does not make finite subjectivity any less tormented. On the contrary, Levinas stresses that embodiment, the capacity to sense and to feel, is – inherently – 'vulnerability, exposure to outrage, to wounding'.[100] Furthermore, Levinas no longer describes this exposure, this laceration, as expressing a metaphysical *desire* which strives beyond being. Rather, it is testimony – in itself – to the

'glory of the Infinite'. Goodness is no longer a goal, an aspiration: 'Goodness is in the subject, an-archy itself.'[101] Subjectivity, which is now understood as 'otherwise than being', and therefore beyond the 'bad infinity of the *Sollen*', becomes 'life without death, life of the Infinite or its glory; but life outside of essence and nothingness'.[102]

But we should not overlook the price of this equation of the good with the 'trauma', the 'persecutory hatred', even the 'maliciousness' of the ethical. Firstly, there is the shift of emphasis from action – inspired by a vision of justice – towards suffering. Suffering – now described as expiation – appears to become an end in itself. Indeed, the human subject is now called upon to play an unreservedly messianic – even Christological – role. As Levinas writes, 'The non-interchangeable par excellence, the I, the unique one, substitutes itself for others.'[103] Yet, as critics of Levinas have repeatedly argued, this attribution of limitless responsibility is both implausible and intolerable. Philippe Nemo has protested that, on Levinas's account, one would have to say that 'the Jew is to blame for the Shoah'. Nemo continues: 'I believe that this implication is unacceptable, and I regard this unacceptability as a criterion. Like the unjustified suffering of Job, the Shoah is an evil in excess – in excess even of the moral force which Levinas claims is infinite.'[104] Similarly, Jean-Louis Chrétien has argued that Levinas gives the game away when he remarks: 'to support the universe – a crushing burden, but a divine discomfort'.[105] Rejecting any notion grace or forgiveness, any 'theo-logical thesis',[106] Levinas has no option but to attribute godlike capacities to the human.[107]

But, perhaps just as disastrously, Levinas's new position in *Otherwise than Being* also tends to dissolve the distinction between moral and physical evil, a tendency encouraged by the elasticity of the French term *le mal*. Right from the beginning of his philosophical career, he had been inclined to characterize 'being' as an ill, or as evil. Being burdens us, oppresses us, stifles us in its very monotony. As Levinas wrote in *De l'existence à l'existant*, 'being is essentially alien and strikes against us, it is the sickness of being' (*c'est le mal d'être*). But, in these early writings, and right up until *Totality and Infinity*, frankness, discourse, hospitality, generosity opened a window onto transcendence. In *Otherwise than Being* all the escape routes are closed: 'As if persecution by the Other were at the basis of solidarity with the Other.'[108] In an erasure of the distinction between the moral and physical, suffering becomes – indifferently – 'the malady or the malignity of evil' (*la maladie ou la malignité du mal*).[109] Far from being a matter of the perversion of the ethical response, evil now comes primarily from the Other. Consistent with this development, Levinas makes no attempt to explain the 'origin' of evil. He argues that even the notion of 'original sin' implies that the moral 'debt' is

the outcome of an act once freely committed, whereas in fact it is inherent in my existence as a subject.[110] Yet, of course, by portraying the debt as without beginning (and without end), he transforms it into something for which there can be no fault – underscoring again his collapse of the distinction between freedom and unfreedom.

To his credit, Levinas realizes the risk he is running. Determined to erase any trace of purposiveness, of theodicy, he suggests, in *Otherwise than Being*, that 'all the weight of an otherness supported by a subjectivity that does not found it', that the subject's '*supporting* without compensation', discloses the incessant, nauseating tumult of the *il y a*.[111] The correlative of this suggestion is a shift, in Levinas's later work, in the use of the word 'God'. For God now becomes the 'He in the depths of the Thou', characterized in terms of what Levinas calls '*illéité*'.[112] In his infinite, unattainable desirability, God *refers to* the 'undesirability' of the human other, disclosing our inescapable responsibility, but he is no longer disclosed *through* our encounter with the Other: the face ceases to be an 'epiphany'. Yet if God is now 'other than the Other, other otherwise, other with an otherness prior to the otherness of the Other', then he is threatened with the impersonality that was central to Levinas's original evocation of the boundless horror of being. And Levinas does not shrink from drawing the appropriate conclusion: God is 'different from every neighbour, transcendent to the point of absence, to the point of his possible confusion with the commotion of the *il y a*.'[113]

Since suffering, the blank oppression of the *il y a*, is – in Levinas's definition – 'the swamping of meaning by meaninglessness',[114] he has no choice but to acknowledge that the ethical stands on the brink of bleak futility, unsustained by any faith or hope in the future. But disturbing and contestable as Levinas's conclusion may be, it surely tells us something of importance about our present moral-political situation. At the end of one his most elliptical and moving meditations on the Holocaust, Levinas refers to Nazi anti-semitism as 'An exterminating word, causing the Good, which gloried in Being, to return to unreality and huddle in the depths of a subjectivity, an idea chilled to the bone and trembling'.[115] Even more tellingly, he suggests that a kind of rebirth occurred through this denuding experience: 'but that condition, in which human morality returns after many centuries as to its womb, attests, with a very old testament, its origin on the hither side of civilizations'.[116] A philosophical enterprise intended as a profound rethinking of ethics after unspeakable horror shifts an immense burden onto inwardness. It refuses to allow itself, in the shadow of Auschwitz, even a glimmer of confidence in the goodness of the world. In so doing, it threatens to drain of all meaning the very ethical demand whose unconditional pressure it seeks to disclose.

Notes

1   Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague and London: Nijhoff, 1969), p. 21.

2   Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 78 (§108).

3   *Totality and Infinity*, p. 21.

4   Ibid.

5   Ibid., pp. 21, 22.

6   Ibid., p. 21.

7   Ibid.

8   Ibid.

9   Ibid., p. 22.

10   Ibid., pp. 25–6.

11   Ibid., p. 24.

12   Ibid., p. 26 (my emphasis).

13   Ibid., p. 24.

14   See Emmanuel Levinas, 'Transcendence and Height', in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Robert Bernasconi, Simon Critchley, and Adriaan Peperzak (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 11–32.

15   *Totality and Infinity*, p. 77. Compare Jeremiah 22: 3.

16   See Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, pp. 19–21.

17   Emmanuel Levinas, *La mort et le temps* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1992), p. 64.

18   Ibid., p. 66.

19   Ibid., p. 67.

20   *Totality and Infinity*, p. 77.

21   *La mort et le temps*, p. 73.

22   Immanuel Kant, *The Jäschke Logic*, in *Lectures on Logic*, trans. and ed. J. Michael Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 86–7.

23   Emmanuel Levinas, 'Transcendence and Evil', in *Of God who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 123.

24   Ibid.

25   *Difficult Freedom*, p. 7.

26   *Totality and Infinity*, p. 96.

27   Ibid., p. 98.

28   Ibid., p. 202.

29   Ibid., p. 182.

30   Ibid., p. 84.

31   *Difficult Freedom*, p. 7.

32   Ibid., p. 8.

33   Ibid., p. 216.

34   Ibid.

35   Ibid., p. 218.

36 Emmanuel Levinas, *Le temps et l'autre*, collection Quadrige (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1979), p. 31.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid, pp. 31–2.

39 Emmanuel Levinas, *De l'existence à l'existant* (Paris: Vrin, 1990), p. 50.

40 *Totality and Infinity*, p. 113.

41 Ibid., p. 134.

42 Ibid., p. 139.

43 Levinas, 'Meaning and Sense', in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, p. 48.

44 Levinas calls it a 'breach in the horizon'. See 'Is Ontology Fundamental?' in ibid., p. 10.

45 *Difficult Freedom*, p. 291.

46 Emmanuel Levinas, 'Nameless', in *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 119.

47 Emmanuel Levinas, 'Useless Suffering', in *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 83.

48 Ibid., p. 86.

49 See Emmanuel Levinas, 'Paix et Proximité', in *Altérité et transcendance* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1995), pp. 147–8.

50 'Meaning and Sense', p. 59.

51 See *Totality and Infinity*, p. 148.

52 Ibid. (my emphasis).

53 Ibid., p. 142.

54 Ibid.

55 *De l'existence à l'existant*, p. 99.

56 *Totality and Infinity*, p. 222.

57 Ibid., p. 225.

58 Ibid., p. 199.

59 Ibid.

60 Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), pp. 88–9.

61 Emmanuel Levinas, 'De la défience sans souci au sens nouveau', in *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée* (Paris: Vrin, 1992), p. 83. Levinas's French neologism '*essance*' is intended to capture the non-reified, processual character of Heidegger's 'Being'.

62 Ibid., p. 86.

63 See ibid., pp. 77–80.

64 *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 324–5.

65 Ibid., p. 233.

66 Ibid., p. 235.

67 Ibid., p. 239.

68 Ibid., p. 238.

69 Emmanuel Levinas, 'Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism', trans. Seán Hand, *Critical Inquiry*, 17 (Autumn 1990), p. 63. The phrase 'essential possibility of elemental Evil' occurs in the 1990 'Prefatory Note' written for the English translation which appeared in *Critical Inquiry*.

70 Ibid., p. 67.

71 Ibid., p. 69.

72 *Totality and Infinity*, p. 24.

73 Emmanuel Levinas, 'Humanisme et an-archie', in *Humanisme de l'autre homme* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1990), p. 83.

74 Ibid., p. 89.

75 Ibid.

76 Ibid.

77 Ibid.

78 *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, pp. 94–5.

79 *Difficult Freedom*, p. 161.

80 Emmanuel Levinas, 'God and Philosophy', in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, p. 141.

81 See Jean Louis Chrétien, 'La dette et l'élection', in Catherine Chalier and Miguel Abensour (eds), *Cahier de l'Herne: Emmanuel Lévinas* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1993); Paul Ricoeur, *Autrement. Lecture d'autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence d'Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997).

82 Michel Haar, 'L'obsession de l'autre', in *Cahier de l'Herne: Emmanuel Levinas*, pp. 536–7.

83 See, for example, Richard J. Bernstein, 'Evil and the Temptation to Theodicy', in Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 252–67.

84 *Totality and Infinity*, p. 247.

85 Ibid., p. 264.

86 Ibid.

87 Ibid., p. 266.

88 Ibid., p. 282.

89 Ibid., p. 306.

90 Ibid., pp. 284–5.

91 *Difficult Freedom*, p. 77.

92 Ibid.

93 *LPHI*, p. 67.

94 *Difficult Freedom*, p. 90.

95 See Jacques Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics', in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 79–153.

96 See, for example, 'Useless Suffering', in *Entre Nous*.

97 Levinas, 'Substitution', in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, p. 94.

98 Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), p. 195n.

99   Ibid., p. 12.
100 Ibid., p. 15.
101 Ibid., p. 138.
102 Ibid., p. 142.
103 Ibid., p. 117.
104 Philippe Nemo, *Job and the Excess of Evil*, trans. Michael Kigel (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), p. 196.
105 *Otherwise than Being*, p. 122.
106 Ibid., p. 196n.
107 This criticism is also cogently made by Philippe Nemo, in his reply to Levinas's review of *Job and the Excess of Evil* ('Transcendence and Evil'). See 'To Pursue the Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas', published as an appendix to Nemo's book, pp. 183–203.
108 *Otherwise than Being*, p. 102.
109 Ibid., p. 51.
110 See ibid., p. 113.
111 See ibid., p. 164.
112 See 'God and Philosophy', pp. 140–1.
113 Ibid., p. 141.
114 *Otherwise than Being*, p. 164.
115 Levinas, *Proper Names*, p. 123.
116 Ibid.

Chapter 6   Adorno: Radical Evil as a Category of the Social

The thought of Theodor Adorno, like that of Emmanuel Levinas, stands in the shadow of the Holocaust. Even those with little knowledge of his philosophical work have heard the statement which encapsulates Adorno's sense of irreparable damage done to culture by this defining event of the twentieth century: 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.'[1] What is more, the philosophies of Levinas and Adorno share a similar structure, to the extent that both take the dominant feature of Western thought to be a drive towards the absorption of otherness – or what Adorno terms the 'non-identical'. Levinas argues that the epistemological and ontological concerns predominant in European thought have suppressed the primary ethical relation to the human other; the implicit or explicit *telos* of Western philosophy has always been the autonomous subject, gathering the wealth of experience into itself. Likewise, for Adorno, Western culture has been shaped by the dynamic of 'identity thinking'. Such thinking eliminates pragmatically irrelevant, qualitative distinctions in a conceptual regimentation of the given. It expresses the drive of the subject to control everything that is external to it, and perceived as threatening simply *because of* this externality. In Adorno's view, the industrialized extermination camps revealed the historical terminus of this process. Auschwitz demonstrated that 'the philosopheme of pure identity is death'.[2]

Yet of course, beyond this bare structural similarity, there are striking differences between what Levinas construes as 'alterity', and what Adorno refers to as the 'non-identical'. For Levinas, it is the possibility of trancendence, disclosed in the face of the human other, which has been screened off, repressed by objectifying knowledge. He therefore seeks to develop a phenomenology that pushes against its own limit, opening our eyes to the ethical relation

which cannot be an object of consciousness, in which we are always already caught up. To apprehend this relation is to understand ourselves as responsible, as culpable. It is to discover ourselves first of all as 'accused', called on to suffer for the suffering other, and to realize that this accusation constitutes our selfhood. As we found, Levinas feels driven to describe the ethical relation in increasingly exorbitant terms: ultimately, I am responsible even for the fact that the other persecutes me, and this very responsibility can itself be described as 'persecution'.[3]

Levinas's ethics can be described as Kantian, to the extent that it understands moral consciousness as the awareness of an unconditional imperative which requires us to act without consideration for personal interest or happiness. But Levinas's ethics makes fewer concessions to embodiment even than Kant, who recognizes the legitimate aspiration to happiness of finite, rational beings, through the postulates which promise a moral world order. Adorno, too, is highly critical of Kant's handling of the relation between morality and happiness – but not because he shares Levinas's belief that morality can be detached from the concern for happiness entirely. Rather, Adorno upbraids Kant for not allotting happiness the centrality it deserves. The satisfaction of human needs, the fulfilment of the drive for somatic contentment (and its more complex derivatives), is not to be displaced into an indeterminate, transcendent future. Because it postpones sensuous contentment for the sake of the law, which is consequently experienced as a stricture on the subject's empirical existence, Kantian morality is repressive, in Adorno's view. Indeed, in his lecture course on *Problems of Moral Philosophy* he goes so far as to suggest that 'Kantian morality is at root nothing other than domination'.[4]

Ultimately, the reason for this striking divergence in Levinas's and Adorno's responses to Kant is to be found in the Critical Theorist's naturalistic account of the formation of subjectivity. According to Adorno, the subject emerges from nature as a self-conscious and rationally calculating control centre, which is able to delay, inhibit, and redirect its impulses in the interests of the survival of the organism. Human beings progressively acquire the capacity to detach themselves reflectively from their own natural existence, in the interests of 'self-preservation' (or 'self-assertion' – *Selbstbehauptung*). Reflective subjectivity enables relatively weak and vulnerable creatures to survive in the face of the threatening forces of nature. The modern exponential increase in the power and range of natural science and technology is simply the most dramatic expression of the drive for control over the material world which has shaped the human self ever since prehistory. In this sense, then, the 'subject' cannot be dismissed simply as an illusion, as other philoso-

phers who propose a naturalistic genesis of self-consciousness – such as Nietzsche – are prone to suggest. For Adorno, the self-understanding of the subject only falls prey to illusion when subjectivity comes to regard itself as something entirely distinct from the natural: as immaterial substance, metaphysical monad, self-positing 'I', or pure pole of transcendental constitution. The subject's tendency to absolutize itself is – in one sense – built into the process of conscious reflection, since there is an almost irresistible temptation for the reflective subject to regard the experienced world as dependent upon its acts of cognition. Correlatively, the conceptual tools that the subject employs in cognizing reality are taken as capturing the essence of what is known, whereas concepts in effect simply shear away all the qualities which are irrelevant for self-preservation. It is this process, culminating in an unconscious repression of any difference between the qualitative 'diffuseness' of nature and the realm of conceptualized objects, which Adorno refers to as 'identity thinking'.

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But although the naturalism of Nietzsche – and perhaps even more of Freud – plays a major role in Adorno's response to Kant, an equally crucial influence stems from Hegel. It is Hegel, after all, who diagnoses the contradictions that arise from the identification of an interiorized moral consciousness with the ethical as such, arguing that these contradictions betray latent conflicts between the individual and society. As Adorno writes:

> Hegel's statement that there is nothing morally real is not a mere moment in the transition to his notion of concrete ethical life [*Sittlichkeit*]. In the recognition that the moral can by no means be taken for granted, that conscience does not guarantee right action, and that pure immersion of the self in the question of what to do and what not to do entangles one in contradiction and futility, Hegel takes an impulse of the radical Enlightenment farther.[5]

In short, Hegel realized that questions of morality could not be severed from questions of social organization. 'Because freedom would be the freedom of real particular individuals, Hegel disdains the illusion of freedom, the individual who, in the midst of universal unfreedom, behaves as though he were already free and universal.'[6] The refusal to treat moments of the social totality in isolation, the understanding of individual facets of society as mediated by the whole, and the emphasis on the profound historicity of supposed metaphysical constants such as freedom – all these Adorno owes to Hegel. As

he writes, Hegel 'does not oppose the good to empirical life as an abstract principle, a self-sufficient idea, but instead links it through its own content to the production of a true totality – to precisely what appears under the name of humanity.'[7]

Yet, of course, Adorno is not – in any straightforward sense – an Hegelian. He is an inheritor of the materialist critique of Hegel stemming from Marx and from Marx's immediate philosophical predecessors, notably Feuerbach. Fundamentally, this critique does not involve commitment to a materialist metaphysics, but rather asserts the dependency of what Hegel calls 'spirit' on nature, denying that spirit can be understood as the process its own absolute self-positing. The emergence of mind or spirit (the German word '*Geist*' hovers between these semantic possibilities) has natural preconditions, and spirit exists only in its dependence on nature, its other, even though it tends to obliterate this dependency, insisting on the identity of thought and being. Hence Adorno criticizes Hegel for beginning his *Logic* with the concept of 'being', rather than the concept of 'something', since this enables Hegel to overlook the resistance of the entity, in its particularity, to complete assimilation by thinking.[8] In a comparable way – and here Adorno repeats the famous criticisms of the young Marx – Hegel reduces the concept of labour to intellectual labour. He does this, Adorno suggests, in order to deny the dependence of labour on an object external to it, which it cannot entirely absorb. In both these cases, what is at stake is the 'non-identical': that which cannot be equated with our appropriation of it, the heterogeneity which mind or spirit finds difficult to tolerate.

But it is not simply the assertion of the dependence of the mind on nature that Adorno takes over from Marx. He also seizes on and develops the idea that human history must be construed as 'natural history', or as what Marx describes as '*naturgeschichtlicher Prozess*'. Marx employs this term to evoke the compulsion exerted by the economic relations of society over individual human beings, a compulsion which lies beyond their will and consciousness. But as Adorno emphasizes in his discussion of this aspect of Marx's thought, such an approach should not be confused with the proposal of scientific 'laws of motion' of human society. On the contrary, the concept of natural history is a critical concept: the realm of freedom would begin only if the compulsion of these laws could be abolished. It is one of the limitations of Hegel's thinking that he fails to see this critical aspect of the concept of nature when applied to human social action. Hegel, after all, employs the term 'second nature', in the *Philosophy of Right*, to refer to the sedimentation of human action in social practices and institutions.[9] Yet he fails to realize, Adorno argues, that 'Spirit as second nature is the negation of spirit . . . and that the more thoroughly,

the blinder its self-consciousness is to its natural growth . . . [Hegel's] world spirit is the ideology of natural history. He calls it world spirit because of its power.'[10]

Nonetheless, Adorno does not entirely endorse the Marxist critique of Hegel either: it is both a strength and – arguably – a weakness of his thought that its relentless dialectic will not allow him any repose. He is unconvinced by Marx's tracking down of the source of social compulsion to the structure economic relations. The fact that domination did not fade after the abolition of capitalism in the Soviet bloc is but one indication, Adorno suggests, that Marx's aetiology does not dig deep enough. Engels and Marx were right to think that a mere change of political forms was not sufficient to achieve freedom – that the very structure of the life process of society required transformation. Their insistence on this was fuelled by a fear that a superficial revolution would be crushed. But the emergence of political economy, as Adorno points out, is a modern intellectual development, tied to the rise of the principle of commodity exchange to social predominance. In seeking to understand the dynamics of domination in terms of the economic laws underlying social life, Marx and Engels overlooked its deeper roots.[11]

As a result, Hegel's philosophy could be said to have acquired a new pertinence – but only if it is read against the grain. It is a central assumption of Adorno's thinking that modern society is moving towards systematic integration. As domination advances from control of the body to control of behaviour, and then to the moulding of subjectivity itself, through media manipulation, advertising and the 'culture industry', even the limited scope for autonomy available during the era of liberal capitalism is progressively extinguished. This 'administered word', governed by universal functionality, is foreshadowed by the totalizing ambitions of Hegel's philosophy. Hegel's philosophy has a social 'truth content', because – even in its internal inconsistencies – it discloses the false, antagonistic character of the totally integrated society. Yet unlike Levinas and many other recent European thinkers, Adorno does not regard Hegel's thought as simply the negation of non-identity by a system based on the principle of absolute identity. The systematic projects of Hegel and the other great German Idealists express a desire for the overcoming of contradiction, of antagonism (presupposing the tacit acknowledgement of non-identity), even if they do so in a compulsive form. As Adorno writes: 'what resonates in Hegel along with the need for a progressive integration is the need for a reconciliation – a reconciliation the totality has prevented ever since it achieved the reality Hegel enthusiastically anticipated for it in the concept'.[12]

What then, is the fundamental driving force of history, which culminates tendentially in the 'administered world' (*die verwaltete Welt*), if it is neither all-inclusive spirit, as Hegel proposed, nor the economic life process of society, as suggested by Marx in his materialist inversion of Hegel? The germ of Adorno's philosophy of history can be found in his early essay 'The Idea of Natural History', and is fully developed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which he co-wrote with his friend and colleague Max Horkheimer, during the Second World War.[13] As we have seen, in the interests of self-preservation human beings were driven to separate themselves reflectively from nature, to establish increasing control over it. The only alternative was for dawning consciousness to remain prey to dread, entangled in the obscure world of natural powers, which it represented to itself in the form of myth. Yet the employment of reason in order to escape the power of nature ended by eliminating the spontaneous life of the subject for whom that escape was made in the first place. As Adorno and Horkheimer write: 'As soon as man discards his awareness that he is himself nature, all the aims for which he keeps himself alive – social progress, the intensification of all his material and spiritual powers, even consciousness itself – are nullified . . . Man's domination over himself, which grounds his selfhood, is almost always the destruction of the subject in whose service it is undertaken.'[14] *Dialectic of Enlightenment* also describes this process in terms of the relation between empathetically imitative and instrumentally rational behaviour. The more human beings separate from the environing world, the more they must abandon 'mimesis' – styles of activity, such as magic, which express a sense of affinity with the object – in favour of the abstract identity of the self: the rigid mirroring of a nature which is itself now frozen over as an object of domination.[15]

One way of understanding this 'primal history of subjectivity' is as a return back behind Marx, a revival of philosophical tropes that fed into the Marxian notion of *Naturgeschichte*. In an early essay that has achieved classic status, Jürgen Habermas explores the adumbration of Marx's theory of history in the thought of Schelling.[16] He does so in part through a sustained comparison between Schelling's conception of dialectic and its Hegelian version. Central to the contrast, Habermas maintains, is the notion of 'false unity'. Schelling is committed to this notion – one might think of the fusion of 'basis' and 'existence', in which the basis *dominates* existence – because he is seeking to respond philosophically to a dislocated and perverted world. He needs to conceive of this world situation as having a beginning, and therefore a possible end: 'false unity' can, in principle, make way for a true one. Habermas

repeatedly contrasts this view with Hegel's thought, in which – so he claims – the priority of universal over particular, of 'existence' over 'basis', is metaphysically guaranteed, and in which nature is unreservedly subordinated to human history, in the progressive self-realization of spirit. Hegel's philosophy, on this account, cannot embody a genuine history of fall and redemption, despite its ambition to absorb the truth content of Christian theology. Rather, Habermas asserts, Hegel offers us an endless cycle, in which 'Eternal life is actual only as redemption from eternity through (immortal) death',[17] and in which there can therefore be no genuine progress towards deliverance from evil. According to Hegel, we could say, the good has preponderated over evil in world history, even as it has unfolded up until now. There is nothing fundamentally perverse about the motor that has driven humanity forward. If history is the progress of the consciousness of freedom, then there can be no systematic discrepancy between our moral condition and the general advance of society and culture.

Marx, so Habermas claims, takes over central features Schelling's rather than Hegel's structure.[18] Marx's materialism, as we have seen, is not a metaphysical theory, but rather consists in the claim that the blind force of natural compulsion has predominated in human history up until now. To be more precise, Marx adopts the idea of a dialectic of self-alienation and self-recuperation through labour from Hegel. But he inserts this Hegelian dialectic within what Habermas terms a 'framing dialectic of materialist reversal' inherited from Schelling.[19] This means that Marx highlights the *ambivalence* of the process of self-transformation through labour, to which Hegel shows scant sensitivity. Hegel typically downplays the significance of subjective purposes, displaying few qualms about a historical development of the productive forces which occurs at the expense of individual human subjects (he affirms, for example, that 'the *plough* is more honourable than are immediately the enjoyments procured by it and which are ends. The *tool* lasts while the immediate enjoyments pass away and are forgotten'[20]). But for Marx, the natural, undirected character of this process must be broken, so that it can be brought under conscious human control.

We can now perhaps perceive more clearly the affinities between Adorno and the tradition running back behind Marx to Schelling. Marx's 'false unity' is that of a social existence in which the satisfaction of material needs through socially determined forms of economic activity exerts constraint over the free development of human powers and capacities. For Adorno, however, it is the formation of a subjectivity opposed to nature *as such* that poses the problem. In his account, the self that is forged through instrumental rationality imagines that it can entirely detach itself from, and thereby dominate,

the nature upon which it depends. It understands itself autarchically – and it is this very understanding of itself as pure, universal subjectivity which reveals its fatal particularity. As Adorno writes in *Negative Dialectics*, 'Universal reason which triumphs is already restricted. It is not merely unity within the manifold but, as an attitude to reality, unity over something. But it is thus inwardly antagonistic by virtue of its pure form. Unity is splitting.'[21] This figure of thought appears strikingly close to Schelling's concept of evil, which consists in the particularizing of existence, in its struggle to suppress its difference from its own 'basis' (a basis that is in fact the compressed or 'contracted' expression of the universal). Schelling, too, is convinced that the logical primacy of the universal leaves a remainder out of account – and that freedom can be realized only when it is able to come to terms with its own contingent conditions.

But, setting these suggestive parallels aside, is there any deeper reason to stress a philosophical proximity between Adorno and Schelling? After all, Adorno employs his 'primal history of subjectivity' in order to develop searching interpretations of social, cultural, and aesthetic phenomena, showing how the dominance of identity in the form of commodity exchange, and the reification to which it gives rise, shape all aspects of modern capitalist society. The notion of a dialectic of self-preservation makes possible a diagnosis of deep tendencies in the contemporary world towards the enthronement of the means as ends, and therefore towards total functionality, the triumph of instrumental reason. To the extent that these tendencies result in a petrification of freedom, this result can be seen as following from the logic of social processes which lie entirely beyond the control of individuals. Yet Adorno uses not only a Marxist vocabulary in order to characterize the modern social world. He also repeatedly describes this world, in a morally and theologically charged phrase, as 'radically evil'. Indeed, once one starts to look more closely, it is quite startling how frequently Adorno employs the terms 'evil' – often qualified as 'radical' – in the course of his analyses. In a typical inversion of Hegel, for example, Adorno states that 'in a total society, totality becomes radical evil'.[22] Likewise, in a comment on Hannah Arendt's most celebrated phrase, he declares: 'I would not say that evil is banal, but that banality is evil – banality, that is, as the form of consciousness and mind that adapts itself to the world as it is, which obeys the principle of inertia. And this principle of inertia truly is what is radically evil.'[23] Adorno knows he is playing with fire in adopting this vocabulary. In his lecture course on history and freedom he recalls the use of the doctrine of original sin to justify domination, the forcible constraint of a corrupt human nature: 'radical evil' can legitimate evil.[24] Yet it seems no other term can do the necessary work. What is the significance of

this moral-theological lexicon in Adorno's writing – of the double affinity with both Marx and Schelling?

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Adorno has no inclination to suggest – as some more reckless recent European philosophers have done – that Auschwitz represents the terminus of secular humanism or even Western reason. But he does contend that it has revealed a devastating truth about the potentials of modern society. These potentials have not evaporated since: 'the possibility of repetition, as far as the state of consciousness and unconsciousness of human beings is concerned, continues'.[25] As he argued in his radio talk, 'Education after Auschwitz', 'Millions of innocent human beings – to give numbers or even to quibble about them is already inhuman – were murdered according to plan. That cannot be dismissed by any human being as a surface phenomenon, as a deviation from the course of history, which is insignificant when set beside the great tendency towards progress, Enlightenment, supposedly increasing humanity.'[26] He makes a similar point in his lecture course on history and freedom: 'even if we do think of it as an exception and not the expression of a trend – although this latter is not implausible given that the atom bomb and the gas chamber have certain catastrophic similarities – to do so is somehow absurd in the light of the scale of the disaster. What can it mean to say that the human race is making progress when millions are reduced to the level of objects?'[27] To explain Auschwitz in purely historical and sociological terms, for the sake of the knowledge of the past which we incontestably need, would betray a bisected consciousness, unable to integrate moral response and theoretical understanding. Of course, Adorno does not think that these two dimensions of consciousness can be soldered together at will – if there is a split between them, this is itself a powerful indicator of our socio-cultural condition. Hence his juxtaposition of a Marxian sociological vocabulary and an ethical vocabulary (which Marx himself would have rejected). To give just one example, Adorno describes contemporary society, the 'administered world', as both a *Verblendungszusammenhang* (comprehensive network of delusion) and a *Schuldzusammenhang* (comprehensive network of guilt), sometimes within the space of a single sentence.[28] This seems to be his way of keeping his audience alert to both dimensions, even at the cost of failing to achieve their integration (which, as a dialectical thinker, he must nonetheless regard as an imperative). Commenting on this duality, he writes in *Negative Dialectics*: 'The inseparable lives solely in the extremes, in a spontaneously roused impatience with argumentation, which will no longer tolerate that the horror goes

on, and in the theoretical discernment, unterrorized by commands, that shows us why the horror goes on indefinitely anyway. This contradiction alone is the scene of morality today, in the face of the real impotence of all individuals.'[29] For Adorno, it seems, as for Levinas, we are wrenched between the true and the good.

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One domain in which this torsion makes itself especially felt is Adorno's treatment of the origin and function of social domination. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* had hinted that social hierarchy tends to fuse with domination over nature because a society held together by an ascendant group will be more coordinated, more cohesive. On this account, the division of society into rulers and ruled ultimately serves the ends of self-preservation, by enhancing the collective control of nature.[30] In Adorno's later work there are many passages that express comparable thoughts, implying that the domination of one social class or group over another is the socially internalized form of natural compulsion.[31] Closely connected with this explanation of class division is the suggestion that the coercive character of social life is the negative side of the human drive to conquer material lack or need, which has been a constant factor in human history. As Adorno writes in *Negative Dialectics*, 'along with the achievements of the natural sciences, reification and reified consciousness also brought about the possibility of worldwide freedom from want'.[32] Pursuing this suggestion, he often makes the claim that we live in 'an age of both utopian and destructive possibilities'.[33] The thought he seems to have in mind is that humankind has now attained the technological capacity to abolish material need entirely, and thereby the social constraints to which it gives rise: 'given the current state of technical development, the fact that there are countless millions who suffer hunger and want must be attributed to the forms of social production, the *relations of production*, not to the intrinsic difficulty of meeting people's material needs'.[34] In his lecture course *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems* Adorno declares unambiguously that 'This culture has failed because it has clung to mere self-preservation and its various derivatives in a situation in which humanity has simply outgrown that principle'.[35]

At the same time, Adorno also reveals deep moral anxiety over the idea that social domination was *necessary* for the development of the human capacity to overcome material need. He raises the question of 'whether or not the human race could only have been perpetuated by means of conflict, whether conflict was historically an absolute necessity'.[36] Marx and Engels, he admits,

were convinced that this was the case. But in his view, any introduction of strict necessity into the contingent domain of history is philosophically suspect. The authors of the *Communist Manifesto* 'gave the problem a highly idealist turn by providing a positive answer to the question of what we can only call the metaphysical necessity, the absolute necessity of conflict'.[37] As Adorno points out, if antagonism was essential to the economic reproduction of life, then it must be regarded in a certain sense as justified, 'as historical negativity is in Hegel's metaphysical logic'.[38]

But against this conception of historical necessity, Adorno makes a startling suggestion:

> we can speak meaningfully of freedom because there are concrete possibilities of freedom, because freedom can be achieved in reality . . . in contrast to the entire dialectical tradition of Hegel and Marx, I would almost go so far as to say that actually this has always been possible . . . It is very hard to say whether, given the extremely complex and often irrational structure of history, things might not have turned out differently for once, and mankind might have been able to raise itself out of the mire.[39]

And in another passages of the same lectures, Adorno ventures what he admits is a speculative and perhaps rash further thought: 'that this possibility of making a leap forward, of doing things differently, always existed, even in periods when productivity was far less developed, an opportunity that was missed again and again'.[40] All too familiar with the Hegelian and Marxist critique of 'abstract possibility', Adorno counters with his own strictures on what he calls 'abstract impossibility'.[41] His basic claim is that the complexity of history simply does not permit categorical statements about the unripeness of social conditions, and hence the dismissal of struggles for emancipation as doomed to failure. In this way, Adorno seeks to rescue what he terms the 'anarchist' dimension of history – a dimension which Marx and Engels were intent on eradicating, albeit for reasons which may have made political sense at the time.

We can see that Adorno is wrestling here with a problem which had also posed difficulties for Kant. In some of his earlier writings on the philosophy of history, Kant had declared that the 'unsocial sociability' of human beings was the motor of social and cultural progress. He had even accepted that war could play a progressive role. But by the time of the *Religion* Kant had decided that human society need not have reproduced itself through destructive antagonism, and that human beings are therefore responsible for the violence that has occurred throughout history. The 'propensity to evil' is self-incurred:

it is not an expression of unavoidable, socio-anthropological constraints on human historical action, as some of Kant's more recent commentators have claimed.[42] In a comparable way, to entertain the idea that the realization of freedom *could have* occurred at earlier points in history, Adorno has to deny that social domination is simply the reflection of natural compulsion. The original emergence of domination is rather something disastrous and inexplicable:

> If in fact history turns out to be a permanent catastrophe, then we cannot simply reject the conjecture that something terrible must have happened to mankind right at the start, or at a time when mankind was becoming itself, and that this terrible event is like those that have been handed down to us in the myths about original sin and similar stories in which the origins of mankind and the growth of reason are associated with some disaster from the remote past.[43]

As the reference to 'original sin' makes clear, Adorno is moving here on the same terrain as Kant's philosophical commentary on the third chapter of Genesis, in his 'Conjectural Beginning of Human History' of 1786.[44] Kant, too, attempts to make sense of why conflicts between nature and culture should arise with the very emergence of human self-consciousness. The difference between the two philosophers lies in the fact that Kant regards the choice for evil as repeated by every human being, whereas, for Adorno, the primordial calamity sets history on a track which leaves human beings little choice but to act in destructive and self-destructive ways. Evil is a primarily a category of the social, and only in a secondary sense applicable to human beings and their actions. His work abounds in formulations in which the term 'evil' is applied to the oppressive totality, or to the false universal that coerces individuals, as when he states that 'socially produced evil has engendered something like a real hell'.[45] Accordingly, Adorno cannot share Kant's hard-won hope in the possibility of moral reversal, or his argument that deep-rooted conflicts between nature and culture may prove to be developmental and progressive, even if they cannot carry humanity all the way to the ultimate goal. Human history is a narrative framed by disaster: 'More in line with the catastrophe that impends is the supposition of an irrational catastrophe in the beginning.'[46]

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We can now perhaps understand more precisely why Adorno repeatedly applies the concept of 'radical evil' to the social world. For he wants to resist

the idea that he finds in both Hegel and Marx, that socially generated suffering is not sheer, pointless pain, but reflects the role of domination and antagonism in advancing the consciousness of freedom (Hegel), or in developing the forces of production to a point where labour time can be reduced to a socially necessary minimum, and material need can be abolished (Marx). Evil is not the equivalent of a historical fate (in which case it would not be evil in any morally significant sense) – it is something for which human beings are responsible, collectively, if not individually. Yet this is not, in Adorno's view, because human beings have made a positive choice for evil. As he states, 'evil, unfreedom, is not to be found where the old metaphysicians of the satanic looked for it, namely, in the idea that some people use their freedom of choice to choose evil'.[47] But even if human beings do not consciously embrace their own unfreedom, why do they not battle against it? The realization of our dependency on the social process is 'made more difficult', Adorno suggests, by the reified structure of the ego; the principle of individuation insulates us 'tendentially' (*tendenziell*) from the encompassing context, and 'promotes' a flattering trust in the autarchy of the subject.[48] But Adorno cannot go any further, claiming that human beings have lost the capacity to reflect entirely, without denying them an essential feature of subjectivity (though he is sometimes tempted to do so, or does so for rhetorical effect). Rather, he cannot avoid suggesting that human beings have repeatedly *failed* to reflect, to perceive and seize the possibility of abolishing domination. *Negative Dialectics* begins with the famous declaration: 'Philosophy, which once seemed outdated, lives on because the moment of its realisation was missed.'[49]

The sentence is enigmatic. For in what sense has the 'realisation of philosophy', by which the Left Hegelians understood the empowerment of reason, the creation of a reconciled social world, been missed? Although, in his lectures on freedom and history, Adorno makes a case against 'abstract impossibility', he can scarcely deny the force of the Hegelian view, inherited by the Marxist tradition, that history unfolds in accordance with a progressive logic of antagonism. As he states,

> I believe that you can only understand the violence inherent in this view of history as a self-realizing totality if you understand that its truth, its almost irresistible truth, lies in the fact that life and with it the possibility of happiness, and indeed even the possibility of a differently constituted world, would be inconceivable without all the things that can be urged by way of objection to it – its failings towards the individual, and all its senseless suffering and cruelty.[50]

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Adorno is unable to deny the force of dialectical constructions of history, the pre-eminent example being Hegel's 'theodicy of conflict',[51] even though he wants to contest the necessity which they claim. His difficulty is that he is desperate – but also desperately short of arguments – to resist what he portrays as Hegel's callous, offhand way with the suffering of past generations. On his account, one could speak of the 'rationality' of history 'only if it succeeds increasingly in satisfying the needs and interests of individuals, whether it be within general historical phases or at least in its general trend'.[52] Yet Hegel declares bluntly that history 'is not the soil in which happiness grows', and that 'in history times of happiness are blank pages'.[53] To oppose this complacency, Adorno must claim that the suffering caused to individuals throughout history by their non-identity with an abstract, coercive universal was senseless, because unjust. And it was unjust not in a merely formal sense – because past social arrangements fail to match up to our contemporary, supposedly universal conception of justice – but because such suffering could have been abolished, *even then*. Yet this is an extremely difficult claim to defend, as Adorno is fully aware. For it goes against the grain of his emphasis on the blind compulsion of *Naturgeschichte*. Hence, in a modification of this argument, he makes the claim that the *potential* for freedom has been ripening within a history of intensifying unfreedom. Here Adorno links up with the Marxist thought that it is material need which has sustained structures of domination, but that the development of the productive forces – albeit at great human cost – has now made possible the abolition of indigence and want. As he states, 'from what we might call a kind of perverse gratitude, the prevailing conformism confuses the grinding reproduction of life, which after all keeps us alive, with the possibility of shaping life in a way that would genuinely be achievable today, given the advanced state of the forces of production and of human rationality'.[54]

The problem with both these viewpoints, however, is that they depend on a kind of secularized eschatology. Adorno's stress on the increasingly integrated and 'total' character of domination has the implication that transformation – if it occurs – can only happen all in one go. As we have seen, in referring to past possibilities of abolishing domination, he uses the metaphor of 'bursting out'. And when characterizing the present, he describes human beings as under a 'spell', galvanizing hopes that this – elusive, immaterial – constraint might one day, as in a fairytale, be abruptly broken. As he writes in *Negative Dialectics*, 'In the spell, the reified consciousness has become total. The fact of its being false consciousness holds out a promise that it will be possible to avoid it . . . The straighter a society's course for the totality that is reproduced in the spellbound subjects, the deeper its tendency to dissociation.'[55] Hence, Adorno concludes, 'total socialization effectively hatches its

opposite, and there is no telling yet whether it will be a disaster or a liberation.'[56] But this all-or-nothing scenario is simply too polarized. When Adorno declares that 'what would be otherwise has not yet begun',[57] the extreme, implausible discontinuity is the price he pays for his tendency to interpret history in unilinear terms, as the rise of an instrumental, reifying reason. Yet his own stress on history as a 'constellation', which can only be mapped in the process of working through a specific philosophical theory, should allow for the possibility of multiple perspectives.[58]

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In Adorno's usage, as we have seen, the idea of evil – and even the metaphor of original sin – are primarily applied to the social whole. But there can be no evil without a deficient or distorted form of freedom – and Adorno is fully aware of this. His only option, then, is to stress the overwhelming pressure of society on human behaviour, without turning this emphasis into determinism. That this is not an easy balancing act is revealed by one of his most complex formulations, which occurs in the 'Freedom' chapter of *Negative Dialectics*:

> The trouble [*das Übel*] is not that free men behave in radically evil ways [*radikal böse handeln*], just as evil is being done beyond any measure Kant could have imagined, but that there is as yet no world in which – as Brecht dazzlingly shows – they would no longer need to be evil. Accordingly, evil [*das Böse*] would be their own unfreedom: it is from this that the evil which occurs stems. Society determines the individuals, even according to their immanent genesis, to be what they are; their freedom or unfreedom is not the primordial thing it appears to be under the veil of the *principium individuationis*.[59]

Here Adorno concludes with a Schopenhauerian flourish, shifted from a metaphysical into a socio-historical register. The subjectivity of human beings is determined by society. So beyond the formal opposition of unfreedom and freedom (in the sense of a capacity to choose between courses of action prompted by our desires and aversions), lies the deeper issue of why we relate to ourselves and others so instrumentally in the first place. It is presumably our inability to control the increasing predominance of means over ends, combined with the desolation of human relations it produces, that leads Adorno to claim that evil stems from our unfreedom. Yet, moving back towards the beginning of Adorno's statement, we find him suggesting that the social world *obliges* people to be evil, in the interests of survival. ('Terrible is

the temptation to do good', declares the narrator in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*.) Hence there might be a *possibility* of not doing evil, just like the peasant girl Grusha, who saves the royal baby in Brecht's play, but only at the cost of hardships and dangers which it would be unreasonable to expect anyone to incur. Finally, at the very start of his statement, Adorno – quite surprisingly – subordinates *das Böse* to *das Übel*. Evil, then, and even the unspeakable atrocities at which Adorno hints, would be traceable back not to any corruption of the will, but to the 'ill' that society allows no viable course of action that would be moral.

In fact, Adorno suggests, in *Negative Dialectics*, that we are losing the power to decide a 'right' course of action at all: 'The more mercilessly an objective-antagonistic society will comport itself in every situation, the less can any single moral decision be warranted as the right one.'[60] But worse, both action directed *against* society and the failure to take such action are equally compromised by the prevailing logic: 'Whatever an individual or a group may undertake against the totality they are part of is infected by the evil of that totality, and no less so is he who does nothing at all. Original sin has been secularised into this.'[61] It seems, then, that we cannot simply jettison the concept of original sin, that – as so many of Adorno's philosophical predecessors sensed – some secular rendition of it is required. But in so far as we continue to apply the concept to individuals, it must refer to that inherently compromised, morally untenable position in which the dynamic of history, launched by some primaeval social catastrophe, has placed each one of us.

Kant too, of course, worried deeply about the validity of moral demands in a morally inhospitable world. So it is scarcely surprising that Adorno wrestles repeatedly with Kant's ethics, with all the tenacity that stems from the frustrations of intimacy. On the one hand, he can see that Kant's insistence on a purely rational basis for morality reflects a disabused sense of the corrupt state of the world:

> Kant's rejection of empirical motives corresponds to his belief that – and this is a highly theological matter – evil rules the world, and that this world is the realm of evil. And if we can say that Kant's rigorism is more critical, that is, it is more intransigent towards existing circumstances than the seemingly more human and appealing account of ethics in Hegel's philosophy, this is precisely the point at which his radicalism appears.[62]

Yet, on the other hand, the very same rigorism, the Kantian insistence that 'ought' always implies 'can', excludes any sympathetic regard for the conditions in which moral agents find themselves. Indeed, it betrays a disciplinary

impulse. 'Social stress on freedom as existent', Adorno argues, 'coalesces with undiminished repression, and psychologically, with coercive traits.'[63] This does not mean that Adorno directly *contests* the claim that ought implies can; rather he rejects Kant's description of an unmistakable inner imperative. The sheer givenness of our consciousness of the moral demand – in the shape of the Kantian 'fact of reason' – contradicts its own claim to rationality, disclosing that there is no way to distinguish clearly between conscience and internalized social compulsion. Correspondingly, Adorno rejects Kant's suggestion that an inescapable consciousness of duty *validates* our sense of free agency. We cannot be said to experience ourselves as essentially free any more than we can see ourselves as simply part of a causal order: 'Not even the individual can find the fact of freedom within himself, and neither can the naïve sense of acting arbitrarily be simply extinguished *post festum* by the theorem of determination.'[64] Freedom, and hence morality, are for Adorno social and historical categories, their meaning and validity tied to changing conditions: 'Whole epochs, whole societies lacked not only the concept of freedom but the thing.'[65] Hence he detects circularity in Kant's efforts to demonstrate the reciprocity of freedom and the moral law from empirical examples, such as the successful but self-despising card-sharp.[66] After all, the cheat

> may be infantile and deem himself one of the chosen, above all bourgeois responsibilities; he may chuckle at the successful caper, with his narcissism sheltering him from the alleged self-disdain; or he may have acted in accordance with a moral code approved among his kind. The pathos with which he would have to brand himself a knave is based on recognition of Kant's moral law – of the law Kant wants to base upon the example.[67]

Adorno's critique goes to the core of Kant's theory of moral subjectivity, with its distinction between empirical and noumenal perspectives on the self. Timelessness, Adorno claims, is incompatible with any conception of agency of which we could make sense:

> The empirical subject that makes . . . decisions (and only an empirical one can make them; the transcendentally pure I would be incapable of impulses) is itself a moment of the spatio-temporal 'external' world. It has no ontological priority before that world . . . This is why the attempt to localize the question of free will in the empirical subject must fail. In that attempt, the line between the intelligible and the empirical realm is drawn in the midst of empiricism.[68]

Furthermore, to act purely out of respect for the universal form of an imperative, even were it conceivable, would be to act without any contribution of

natural impulse whatsoever – and for Adorno, natural spontaneity is an essential component of freedom. In ignoring this, Kant's account of practical reason colludes with the total domination of reason over nature: the goal towards which social development has been striving ever since the beginning. Furthermore, Kant himself cannot consistently remove all spontaneity from the acting subject, because, by definition, the noumenal act of self-choice, which determines the individual's intelligible character, cannot be rule-governed.[69] By contrast, in Adorno's account of moral agency, there must be an impulse, which he calls the 'addendum' (*das Hinzutretende*), for moral reflection to lead to action. He does not contest the role of cognition and rational analysis in setting the stage for our moral responses, but he denies that pure reason can be practical – can do all the work alone.[70]

At beginning of his lecture course on problems of moral philosophy, Adorno illustrates this pattern of moral action by reporting a conversation he had, on returning to Germany after the Second World War, with one of the 20 July conspirators who were involved in an attempt to assassinate Hitler. This individual knew that the bomb plot's chances of success were minimal. Adorno states:

> I believe that this act of resistance – the fact that things may be so intolerable that you feel compelled to make the attempt to change them, regardless of the consequences for yourself, and in circumstances in which you may also predict the possible consequences for other people – is the precise point at which the irrationality, or better, the irrational aspect of moral action is to be sought.[71]

Without a somatic impulse, however distilled, a response whose ultimate source is an unsuppressible bodily reaction, moral agency would not be possible. This does not mean that Adorno is simply an irrationalist: the impulse may come at the end of a process of reflection which leads to moral insight. But nonetheless, he insists that there is a 'rupture' between knowing and acting. This gap indicates the point at which we must organize the possibilities of action into a set of priorities, and then adopt one course.[72]

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In certain respects Adorno's conception of the ethical, in both its positive and its negative aspects, can be seen as an attempt to combine an account of autonomy (and its perversion) inherited from German Idealism with anti-rationalist and proto-naturalist influences stemming from Schopenhauer. But to achieve this fusion, he must historicize the metaphysics of the arch-

pessimist. As we have seen, Adorno's framing narrative recounts the rise of instrumentality, the claim that 'in the historical form in which we encounter it to this day, reason is both reason *and* unreason in one'.[73] Within this context, Schopenhauer's descriptions of the 'blind, unstoppable drive' of the will, the futile competition of egoisms in which we are caught up, regains its evocative power. And his explanation of evil as the attempt to escape deep inner torment through its infliction on others, converges with Adorno's sense of the pain concealed behind the bland psychological facades of consumer capitalism: the 'grimace of torture' discernible, to the reflective, in the 'flashlight grin' of the 'laughing placard of a toothpaste beauty'.[74] Furthermore, it is clear that Adorno's account of the 'addendum' has been deeply influenced by Schopenhauer's critique of Kant's rationalism, and his conception of compassion (*Mitleid*) as the wellspring of ethical action. The 'immediate *participation*, independent of all ulterior considerations, primarily in the *suffering* of another, and thus in the prevention or elimination of it', is for Schopenhauer the 'primary and original phenomenon of ethics'.[75] Similarly, Adorno claims that it would be an outrage to deal 'discursively' with his 'new categorical imperative': that Auschwitz should never be repeated. 'For the new imperative gives us a bodily sensation of the moral addendum – bodily because it is now the practical abhorrence of the unbearable physical agony to which individuals are exposed.'[76] Like a historicized version of *Mitleid* – Schopenhauer's 'great mystery of ethics', the compassion which somehow erodes the transcendentally entrenched illusion of our absolute separateness from each other – Adorno's *Hinzutretende* is 'a flash of light between the poles of something long past, something grown all but unrecognisable, and that which someday might come to be'.[77]

But there is a further parallel between Schopenhauer and Adorno. For just as Schopenhauer argues that compassion cannot be the definitive solution to the world's woe, since it does not remove the transcendental barrier between self and other, but merely attenuates it, so Adorno argues that there must be a mode of experience which transcends the compulsive system of instrumental reason. In his explorations of the possibility of a negation of the will, Schopenhauer reaches for comparisons with the mystical strand of religious traditions – and the same is true of Adorno's evocation of what he terms 'metaphysical experiences'. Such experiences are moments of entire fulfilment and happiness, often associated with childhood. They are so immediate, so close, that they cannot be defined or named; they vanish as soon as one reflects upon them. Yet they do not leave feelings of disappointment. They are moments, we could say, when the spell momentarily breaks. 'The possibility of metaphysical experience', Adorno writes, 'is akin to the possibility of

freedom, and it takes the unfolded subject one that has torn the bonds advertised as salutary, to be capable of freedom.'[78] Despite the contrast between Schopenhauer's asceticism and Adorno's linking of freedom and happiness, we are reminded of Schopenhauer's description of the denial of the will-to-live as the 'only act of [the individual phenomenon's] freedom to appear in the phenomenon', and as the 'transcendental change'.[79]

The concept of 'metaphysical experience', then, is an anti-Kantian provocation, a flouting of the barrier between the empirical and the intelligible. Happiness cannot be indefinitely postponed for the sake of the moral law, and freedom cannot remain merely a 'postulate' – at least not in the sense of being implied by the a priori validity of the moral demand. In *Negative Dialectics* Adorno writes: 'The subject-transcending postulates of practical reason, God, freedom, immortality, imply a critique of the categorical imperative, of pure subjective reason. Without those postulates it could not even be thought, however much Kant asserts the opposite; without hope there is nothing good.'[80]

But what is hope – and why should we hope at all? The 'Meditations on Metaphysics', which form the final part of *Negative Dialectics*, revolve obsessively around these questions, struggling to define of the ultimate status of the Kantian postulates. Very often, in the course of his meditations, Adorno criticizes Kant for banishing what is postulated to the 'intelligible world'. This move, he suggests, betrays a proto-positivist attitude of resignation, a disturbing proximity to bourgeois scepticism: 'The homeliness of Kant's doctrine is in crass conflict with his pathos of the infinite. If practical reason has primacy over theoretical reason, the latter, itself a mode of action, would have to approach the alleged capacity of its superior, if the caesura between understanding and reason is not to void reason's very concept.'[81] The objection recalls the protests of the first generation of German Idealists. In general Adorno argues, like them, that Kant's notion of experience is impoverished, excluding precisely what it presents as rational subjectivity's epistemic goal. 'The authority of the Kantian concept of truth', he comments, 'becomes terroristic with the prohibition on thinking the absolute.'[82] But while Adorno sympathizes with the Idealists' desire for a more open, more inclusive conception of experience, he finds that – in Hegel – any thought of the transcendent is abolished. The attempt to rescue a religious dimension through a process of philosophical appropriation transforms what is salvaged into its nightmarish opposite:

In the concept of the world spirit, the principle of divine omnipotence was secularised into the principle that posits unity, and the world plan was secular-

ized into the relentlessness of what happens. The world spirit is worshipped like a deity, a deity divested of its personality and all its attributes of providence and grace . . . It becomes a bondage to fate.[83]

Hence, Adorno swings back to a qualified restoration of the Kantian 'block', as he calls it: the barrier between the intelligible and the empirical world. In another echo of Schopenhauer, he suggests that 'the concept of the intelligible is the self-negation of the finite mind'.[84] It is the moment when spirit, reflecting on its own hostility to life, seeks its own ascesis, stepping beyond its drive to total autarchy. 'Such metaphysical experience', Adorno claims, 'inspires Kant's philosophy, once one breaks it out of the armour of method.'[85]

We cannot, we must not, give up on transcendence. Only by holding open a non-empirical dimension can we sustain hope that the 'permanent catastrophe' of human history, that interminable suffering, is not the last word. As Adorno writes, 'That no reforms within the world sufficed to do justice to the dead, that none of them touched upon the wrong of death – this is what moves Kantian reason to hope against reason. The secret of his philosophy is the unthinkability [*Unausdenkbarkeit*] of despair.'[86] But Adorno's predicament is that, ultimately, he cannot embrace hope in this Kantian form. To assert that despair cannot be thought through to the end, that it is *unausdenkbar*, will always appear, from a naturalistic standpoint, to be no more than the assertion of a psychological limit – just as the postulates seemed to some of Kant's contemporaries to be little more than emotional props. Adorno knows this to be a misreading of Kant, and that is why he writes of *reason* hoping against reason: the postulates are the only way to stabilize practical reason's dialectic. But in Kant this dialectic is generated only because the pressure of reason, the claim of the highest good, is *unconditional*. Rejecting such unconditionality as incompatible with our finite, embodied condition, Adorno must also give up on *Vernunftglaube*, the almost oxymoronic expression of Kantian hope. Towards the end of the 'Meditations' Adorno suggests that 'if thought is not decapitated it will flow into transcendence, down to the idea of a world that would not only abolish extant suffering but revoke the suffering that is irrevocably past'.[87] But thought alone cannot achieve so much, cannot fill out transcendence in any way, and deep down Adorno is aware of this. Besides, even if it could, the thought of the transcendent accomplishment of justice does a further injustice to those who have suffered and died, who enjoyed no reprieve, in the here-and-now. Hope itself is hopelessly antinomical: 'Whoever believes in God, cannot believe in God.'[88] As Adorno writes in *Minima Moralia*, in his mournful meditation on the fairytale of 'Snow White', 'Truth is inseparable from the illusory belief

that from the figures of the unreal one day, in spite of all, real deliverance will come.'[89]

For Adorno the thought of transcendence can no longer be preserved in the manner in which metaphysics sought to preserve it, even as its rational procedures also put transcendence under threat. 'Our metaphysical faculty is paralyzed because actual events have shattered the basis on which speculative metaphysical thought could be reconciled with experience.'[90] Metaphysics can offer no transfigurative, fortifying, or consoling content – and, as Nietzsche so remorselessly argued, the Kantian retreat into the practical perspective is in truth an admission that the game is up. The idea of the metaphysical, if it has further use at all, marks only the point at which dialectical thinking runs up against its own limit. Because it must mobilize logical compulsion, dialectics is, for Adorno, the 'ontology of the wrong state of things',[91] it still reflects – even in its negative form – the predominance of identity-thinking: 'Although dialectics allows us to think the absolute, the absolute as mediated by dialectics remains in bondage to conditioned thinking.'[92] But by turning against itself, through a final act of self-cancellation, dialectics can disclose the point where metaphysics – its speculative grandeur reduced to ruins by the evil of history – migrates into 'micrology', as Adorno terms it. Micrology is the picking over of the rubble, a reflective immersion in inconspicuous, crushed, neglected things. If there is to be any prospect of ethical-political transformation, Adorno implies, it must come from a sense that what is truly other lies neither within things nor beyond them. For what was once thought of as transcendent can now be apprehended only as 'a legible constellation of things in being'. And it may well be Adorno's deepest intuition that, if we cannot learn 'love towards things', then we will never learn to love one another.

Notes

1 Theodor Adorno, 'Cultural Criticism and Society', in *The Adorno Reader*, ed. Brian O'Connor (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 210.
2 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1973), p. 362.
3 See Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, pp. 101–2.
4 Theodor Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, ed. Thomas Schröder, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p. 105.
5 Theodor Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), pp. 47–8.
6 Ibid., p. 46.
7 Ibid., p. 48.

8   See *Negative Dialectics*, p. 135.

9   See Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, pp. 108–9 (§151).

10 *Negative Dialectics*, p. 356.

11 See ibid., pp. 322–3.

12 *Hegel: Three Studies*, p. 62.

13 See Theodor Adorno, 'The Idea of Natural History', *Telos*, 60 (Summer 1984), p. 111–24; Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 1972).

14 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 54.

15 See ibid., p. 57.

16 Jürgen Habermas, 'Dialektischer Idealismus im Übergang zum Materialismus – Geschichtsphilosophische Folgerungen aus Schellings Idee einer Contraction Gottes', in *Theorie und Praxis: Sozialphilosophische Studien* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1978), pp. 172–228.

17 Ibid., p. 180.

18 For a further classic discussion of Schelling's influence on Marx, see Manfred Frank, *Der unendlicher Mangel an Sein: Schellings Hegelkritik und die Anfänge der Marxschen Dialektik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975).

19 Habermas, 'Dialektischer Materialismus im Übergang zum Materialismus', p. 217.

20 G. W. F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1990), p. 747.

21 *Negative Dialectics*, p. 317.

22 *Hegel: Three Studies*, p. 62.

23 Theodor W. Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), p. 115.

24 Theodor W. Adorno, *History and Freedom (Lectures 1964–1965)*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), p. 159.

25 Theodor Adorno, 'Erziehung nach Auschwitz', in *Stichworte: Kritische Modelle 2* (Frankfurt am Main: Surhkamp,1969), p. 85.

26 Ibid., p. 86.

27 *History and Freedom*, p. 8.

28 See Theodor Adorno, *Zur Lehre von der Geschichte und von der Freiheit*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001), p. 165 (See *History and Freedom*, p. 113).

29 *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 285–6.

30 See *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 21–2.

31 See, for example, *History and Freedom*, p. 183.

32 *Negative Dialectics*, p. 193.

33 *History and Freedom*, p. 141.

34 Ibid., p. 144.

35 *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*, p. 129.

36 *History and Freedom*, p. 52.

37   Ibid.
38   Ibid., p. 53.
39   Ibid., p. 181.
40   Ibid., p. 67.
41   Ibid., p. 181.
42   See, for example, Sharon Anderson-Gold, *Unnecessary Evil: History and Moral Progress in the Philosophy of Immanuel Kant* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001).
43   *History and Freedom*, p. 55.
44   See Kant, 'Conjectural Beginning of Human History', pp. 53–68.
45   *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, p. 105.
46   *Negative Dialectics*, p. 323.
47   *History and Freedom*, p. 206.
48   *Negative Dialectics*, p. 219.
49   Ibid., p. 3.
50   *History and Freedom*, p. 48.
51   Ibid., p. 52.
52   Ibid., p. 41.
53   *LPHI*, p. 79, cited in *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 352–3.
54   *History and Freedom*, p. 57.
55   *Negative Dialectics*, p. 346.
56   Ibid.
57   Ibid., p. 145.
58   *History and Freedom*, p. 87.
59   Ibid., pp. 155–6.
60   *Negative Dialectics*, p. 243.
61   Ibid.
62   *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, p. 149.
63   *Negative Dialectics*, p. 232.
64   Ibid., p. 213.
65   Ibid., 218.
66   See *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 34.
67   *Negative Dialectics*., p. 225.
68   Ibid., p. 213.
69   For a cogent and illuminating reconstruction and defence of Adorno's critique of Kant's moral philosophy, see Fabian Freyenhagen, 'Adorno's Negativistic Ethics', PhD thesis, University of Sheffield, 2005, ch. 5, pp. 168–241.
70   For further helpful discussion of the role of *das Hinzutretende* in Adorno's theory of moral action see Jay Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 253–6, and Christoph Menke, 'Tugend und Reflexion. Die "Antinomien der Moralphilosophie"', in Axel Honneth (ed.), *Dialektik der Freiheit: Frankfurter Adorno-Konferenz 2003* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2005), pp. 142–62.
71   *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, p. 8.

72 See ibid., pp. 95–8.
73 *History and Freedom*, p. 45.
74 Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (London: Verso, 1974), p. 141.
75 Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, p. 144.
76 *Negative Dialectics*, p. 365.
77 Ibid., p. 229.
78 Ibid., p. 397.
79 See *WW I*, p. 398.
80 *Negative Dialectics*, p. 276.
81 Ibid., p. 384.
82 Ibid., p. 384; cf. *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, pp. 65–6.
83 *Negative Dialectics*, p. 305.
84 Ibid., p. 392.
85 Ibid.
86 Ibid., p. 385.
87 Ibid., p. 403.
88 Ibid., p. 401.
89 *Minima Moralia*, p. 121.
90 *Negative Dialectics*, p. 362.
91 Ibid., p. 11.
92 Ibid., p. 405.

Conclusion

Towards the end of the sketch of the history of Western philosophy that prefaces *The Sources of Normativity*, Christine Korsgaard declares:

> We no longer think that we are what's wrong with the world. We are no longer at all puzzled about why the world, being good, is yet not good. Because for us, the world is no longer first and foremost form. It is *matter*. This is what I mean when I say that there has been a revolution, and that the world has been turned inside out. The real is no longer the good. For us, reality is something *hard*, something which resists reason and value, something which is recalcitrant to form.[1]

If there is a lesson to be drawn for the foregoing enquiry, it is that nearly every assertion Korsgaard makes in this manifesto of a secularist humanism is wrong. In referring to 'reality' Korsgaard does not distinguish between natural and social reality, and this is partly what lends plausibility to her case. We might be willing to concede that nature is devoid of reason and value (although even this supposition has recently come under renewed pressure in Anglophone philosophy, in the discussion around John McDowell's *Mind and World*[2]), but such a claim makes no sense with reference to human history and society. Human institutions are essentially form – structures or patterns which are sustained through human activity – although what is form at one level may become matter when it becomes the object of a higher level of activity. Furthermore, the opportunity to develop a 'sure sense of self-worth, based on the whole-hearted endorsement of our practical identities', which, on Korsgaard's account, 'is enough in most circumstances to make life worth living',[3] depends on the availability of a repertoire of institutionalized or at least socially recognized roles, into which we can meaningfully enter, in which

we can feel ourselves at home. When such a repertoire is unavailable, when the environing society appears to us as alienating and unjust, even if materially opulent, then we cannot conjure up a good life simply by existential effort. To what or whom are we to attribute this deficient state of affairs? Unless we believe that social processes operate entirely above the heads or behind the backs of human agents, are we not bound to conclude that it is – at least in part – *we* who must accept the blame? Where else are we supposed to put responsibility? Is there no sense in which we are 'what's wrong with the world' – even though we are so frequently at odds with ourselves, struggling to act in conformity with what Korsgaard argues is the *core* of who we are: our 'humanity', our 'moral identity'?

But these are not the only difficulties. If reality is indeed 'recalcitrant', 'resistant to reason and value', why don't we just give up? Why do we carry on trying to reshape the world, to bring it into line with reason and value, when we have so little prospect of success, when the world offers no assistance? Why wouldn't we be daunted, overwhelmed by the task? It is worth recalling that, for an earlier generation of neo-Kantians, the pertinence and urgency of these questions was obvious, undeniable. Heinrich Rickert, for example, thought it obvious – and indeed one of Kant's crucial insights – that a necessity arises from the discrepancy between the unconditionality of the moral law and the morally inhospitable character of the world, 'a compelling necessity which points beyond us to the supersensible'.[4] This does not mean, Rickert emphasizes, that we should regard the supersensible as a realm of 'being', or are philosophically licensed to speculate about its contents. 'To brood over this supersensible and to fit it out with predicates which can only be taken from the world of the senses' is fruitless.[5] But it does mean that our commitment to morality would be pointless without a faith in the realizability of the ultimate moral goal which goes beyond anything our experience of the world could warrant.

Rickert is just as resistant as many contemporary Kantians to the notion that Kant's philosophy necessarily bequeathes a 'split in being' (*Seinsspaltung*) between the phenomenal and the noumenal, the immanent and the transcendent. Indeed, he characterizes Fichte's thought, which he he treats as the consistent working through of Kant's discoveries in this regard, as 'anti-metaphysical', and even 'positivistic'.[6] But at the same time, he would have dismissed the view that Kantianism could be reconciled with naturalism as incoherent. And, on closer inspection of Korsgaard's arguments, this indeed turns out to be the case. Korsgaard does not regard even a metaphysically deflated form of transcendental idealism as required in order to assert compatibility between what she refers to as the 'Scientific World View' and

our inner experience of ourselves as free agents.[7] In discussing whether determinism is a threat to responsibility, she comments:

> Freedom is the capacity to do otherwise, not the capacity to have done otherwise. No one has *that* capacity, because you cannot change the past. That sounds like a joke, but I mean it. The freedom discovered in reflection is not a theoretical property which can also be seen by scientists considering the agent's deliberations third-personally and from the outside. It is from within the deliberative perspective that we see our desires as providing suggestions which we make take or leave.[8]

Korgaard goes so far as to suggest that her account of freedom and moral obligation is not just consistent with, but can actually be integrated into, would-be naturalistic accounts of the genesis of reflective consciousness. 'Nietzsche and Freud', she states,

> have provided us with a powerful account of how the distinctive features of human conscience and consciousness could have evolved in a natural world of animals. You can see them as trying to explain how obligation ever emerged, a source of normativity in a different, genealogical, sense. The account I have given of what obligation is and where it comes from is harmonious with theirs. And I take this to be a point in its favour.[9]

But her case for such a fully naturalistic Kantianism is weak, and her uneasy quip about the impossibility of changing the past betrays the point of vulnerability. Korsgaard puts all the emphasis on the practical viewpoint of the agent engaged in making a decision, to whom the future appears to be genuinely open. She suggests that this viewpoint is indefeasible, whatever the science of human behaviour may say. In moral contexts, however, the construal of freedom as the capacity 'to have done otherwise' does not – of course – mean the capacity to go back in time and *reverse* a decision which has *already* been taken. It means that, at the relevant time in the past, the agent had the capacity to do something other than what she actually did. It is this capacity which is potentially in conflict with scientific naturalism, since – if real – it entails that, from the same preceding state, the flow of events in the world *could* have followed two different courses. Furthermore, as Allen Wood has shown in a classic article, if we want to hold on to human freedom without such a violation of empirical causal closure, we are going to need more noumenal machinery, not less – and Kant himself is entirely willing to take this on board.[10]

Historically, it is Korsgaard's conviction that we can have both deontology and the 'Scientific World View' (transformed by her orthography into a harm-

less bogey), normativity without *any* reference to the supersensible, which is the anomaly. Even the atheist Schopenhauer, who regards 'incurable suffering and endless misery as essential to the phenomenon of the will, to the world',[11] argues that the need to demonstrate 'a *moral* world order as the basis of the *physical*' has been a principal, and legitimate, concern of Western philosophy from Socrates onwards.[12] Schopenhauer adjudges the pain of the world to warrant the conclusion that it would have been preferable for it not to exist. But he cannot permit himself the thought that, given its existence, the world is devoid of moral equilibrium. Whatever one's conception of encompassing justice (and, as we have seen, Schopenhauer's is deeply unsatisfactory), there are powerful moral-existential barriers to concluding that the world is irreducibly inimical to its realization. Indeed, were we to conclude that a conception of justice could never be enacted, at least approximately, we would have to regard it as mistaken. Of course, this is not just a matter of considering the facts of how reality is constituted, for we interpret the world in the light of our conception of justice, just as we must match our notion of justice to the genuine potentials of the world. It is then a matter of debate and judgement where and how the balance is to be struck: what measure of hope we regard as viable, or how much we must give way on our ideals in the face of awkward, recalcitrant truths.

Arguably, even members of largely secularized societies must entertain a faith of some kind, whether explicit or implicit, whether religious or post-religious, that the world, contrary to appearances, will ultimately foster the deepest moral-political aspirations of human beings. Modern consciousness is inhabited by what Susan Neiman has termed the 'unshakable demand that the world come to meet the claims that reason advances, permitting the hope that sustains all our efforts to make this so'.[13] The most prominent philosophical attempt to abandon this hope is, of course, that of Nietzsche. But this does not mean that Nietzsche is ready to tolerate a flat contradiction between what is and what ought to be. On the contrary, he seeks rather to unmask the 'ought' as an expression of the denial of life. And those tempted by the Nietzschean escape route must ask themselves whether they can seriously endorse the alternative which he proposes. They must consider whether they are willing to accept Nietzsche's insistence on the need for hierarchy, the inevitability of violence and exploitation, and his characteristic claims such as that 'a good and healthy aristocracy . . . accepts with a good conscience the sacrifice of untold human beings who, *for its sake*, must be reduced and lowered to incomplete human beings, to slaves, to instruments'.[14] Nietzsche's conception of justice must surely repel anyone with an intact sense of human belonging, but in opposing nothing stronger than hope or

faith to a reality hardened – like Korsgaard's – against teleology, we are likely to feel on weak ground.

It is not surprising, then, that many thinkers have searched for a means of reducing the disparity between our deep moral ideals, and what history, and common knowledge of human beings, suggests we are able to achieve. In his fine book, *The Moral Gap*, John E. Hare has analysed a basic repertoire of strategies for lessening this gulf between expectation and achievement.[15] One he terms 'reducing the demand'; another 'puffing up the capacity'; the third is the elaboration of some substitute for what would be characterized – in religious terms – as God's assistance. This taxonomy offers an illuminating way of orienting ourselves among the broader intellectual currents of recent decades.

It is pretty clear, for example, that the 'postmodern' shift of cultural sensibility, in the closing decades of the twentieth century, represented an attempt to reduce the moral demand. Postmodernism is suspicious of reason and tends to withdraw into one kind of particularism or another, affecting a rejection of the Enlightenment and of universalist values as inherently oppressive. Yet it is also marked by a deep ambiguity; it cannot cease mourning for the universalism it has abandoned, and this is merely one of several ways in which it deviates from its Nietzschean inspiration. Nietzsche was convinced that moral laws crippled life. But the postmodern stance, when probed a little, turns out to be quite different: current forms of universalism are exclusionary because they are *not yet sufficiently* pluralistic; reason becomes a power of domination because it is *not yet adequately* flexible or context-sensitive. As Axel Honneth has argued, in a critique of Jean-François Lyotard, 'Without moral universalism . . . one cannot at all understand what having to defend the particularity of the suppressed language game against the dominant agreement is supposed to mean.'[16] In fact, there was always something contrived, even desperate, about postmodernist celebration of the parochial, the liminal, and the impulsive, stemming as it did from a profound disappointment. Emmanuel Levinas captured the mood perceptively:

> But human deficiency takes on in our time a new meaning *by virtue of the awareness which we have of this deficiency*. It is lived in ambiguity: despair and frivolity. The exaltation of the human in its courage and its heroism – in its identity as pure activity – tips over into an awareness of failure, but also of play. Play of influences and drives. Game played without players and without a stake, game without subject and no longer the rigour of the rational: Stoic, Spinozist or Hegelian. It is this reversal of the crisis of meaning into the irresponsibility of play which is perhaps, despite its ambiguity, the most perversely subtle modality of the human fiasco.[17]

The second of Hare's strategies is 'puffing up the capacity'. It is difficult not to identify, under this heading, a weakness in the neo-Kantian approaches to issues of political justice, and to the justification of morality more generally, which have emerged in the wake of John Rawls's work. Kantian constructivism holds out a big promise. It suggests that we can have all the reassurance of an account of moral normativity, while presupposing little more than our capacity for rational reflection, and all the benefits of a deontological theory that puts human freedom and dignity at its core, without having to pay any daunting metaphysical price. Since it appears to require no religious commitments, avoids appeals to mysterious powers of ethical perception, and invokes no entities such as values that do not gel with the ontology of natural science, it is scarcely surprising that Kantian constructivism has resonated so widely. It seems to let us keep all our most precious post-Enlightenment moral and political intuitions, without needing to offend – indeed perhaps even without needing to depart from – the common sense of modern secular naturalism. All that is required is that we take our sense of our own rational – and hence free – agency at face value. This, so it is argued, we cannot help doing anyway, when we adopt the standpoint of decision-takers. It then follows, goes the constructivist claim, that acting in ways which do not violate the moral law is the only way in which I can avoid doing damage to my own deepest sense of my capacity for thought and agency. But the question that arises here is whether such versions of Kantian moral theory are forced to airbrush the human propensity to evil, which caused Kant himself so much travail.

Among the exponents of Kantian constructivism, it is Christine Korsgaard who has paid the most attention to the problem of moral evil. In her essay 'Morality as Freedom' she tackles head on the problem which raised such difficulties for Kant's successors. The post-Kantians asked how we can regard acting out of respect for the moral law as the realization of our freedom, rather than – say – as the necessary consequence of our rational nature, unless we are also free *not* so to act, in which case doing our duty cannot be freedom's unique expression. Korsgaard seeks to defend Kant's claim that 'the moral law is the unique positive conception' of freedom,[18] by showing that the free will can retain its status only by making the 'Formula of Universal Law' its principle. Only by acting on a maxim whose content is determined by the form of law, and not by any specific end, can the will avoid the influence of the alien incentives of inclination, retaining its spontaneity through a self-legislative structure. But here Korsgaard encounters the familiar setback. On the one hand, this account of the preservation of spontaneity is supposed to conclude the explanation. We do not need to ask *why* freedom should adopt *this* fundamental maxim, realize itself in this form: 'to put an end to a regress

like this we need a principle about which it is impossible, unnecessary and incoherent to ask why a free person would have chosen it. Kant's argument must show that the categorical imperative has this status.'[19] But on the other hand, Korsgaard has to admit that 'Our inclinations may be alien to our purely rational wills, but they are not alien to us, and they do tempt us'.[20] Yet this should not worry us philosophically, Korsgaard suggests. Though the evil will may be 'unintelligible' from the standpoint of pure practical reason, there is no theoretical problem in explaining how imperfectly rational, temptation-beset creatures such as ourselves go wrong.

For Kant, of course, the fact that we find ourselves in this beleaguered situation does not entail that we are not 'free persons'. We cannot adopt a theoretical perspective on ourselves to excuse our immorality, for inclinations only masquerade as reasons when absorbed into a voluntary maxim. Correspondingly, the choice to enact our freedom in the form of respect for duty is not 'self-explanatory' for beings such as we are. The only kind of person with regard to whom it makes no sense to ask *why* she does not deviate from the moral law is the person who has already achieved full autonomy. But since autonomy is defined in terms of adherence to the moral law, the explanation becomes circular. Another way of highlighting Korsgaard's problem would be to point out that, from the standpoint of the finite, embodied agent, pure practical reason, as opposed to empirical practical reason (which regulates our behaviour so as to achieve a determinate goal), can appear to be just as 'alien' as impulse and inclination, if not more so.

This may be one of the considerations which moved Korgaard towards a different strategy in her second book, *The Sources of Normativity*. In this discussion she seeks to explain our interest in morality not directly in terms of the maximal realization of freedom, but in terms of sustaining our deepest practical identity. The advantage of this approach is that, whereas pure practical reason is an Idea (a concept which points beyond experience) that can appear foreign to the empirical self, what Korsgaard calls our 'moral identity' or our 'humanity' is supposed to be just the core of that worldly, reflective self. Indeed, as we have seen, Korsgaard suggests that it is perfectly plausible to propose a naturalistic account of the emergence of the structure of reflective consciousness that, on her account, grounds value, as do Freud and Nietzsche. Naturalism can, surprisingly, provide a basis for deontology; moral obligation can be construed as 'the reflective rejection of a threat to your identity'.[21]

Evidently, this strategy depends on establishing that our 'humanity' is indeed an identity whose imperilment we have no option but to defend against. In what is perhaps the most succinct of several passages where Korsgaard argues for this conclusion, she states:

What is not contingent is that you must be governed by *some* conception of your practical identity. For unless you are committed to some conception of your practical identity, you will lose your grip on yourself as having any reason to do one thing rather than another – and with it, your grip on yourself as having any reason to live and act at all. But *this* reason for conforming to your particular practical identities is not a reason that *springs from* one of those particular practical identities. It is a reason that springs from your humanity itself, from your identity simply as a *human being*, a reflective animal who needs reasons to act and live. And so it is a reason you have only if you treat your humanity as a practical, normative, form of identity, that is, if you value yourself as a human being.[22]

But the problem with this line of thought is that, although our reasons for adhering to our practical identity may stem from the existential disorientation which would ensue if we failed to do so, this does not show that we either do, or ought to, value our identity as a being who has *reasons to have* a particular practical identity more than that specific practical identity itself. Indeed, Korsgaard cannot argue that we *ought to* value our humanity, since our humanity is supposed to be the fount of obligation. Hence her position depends on the claim that we necessarily already value our moral identity, simply by virtue of being reflective beings, whether we are aware of this or not. But as William Bristow has convincingly shown, it is far from easy to establish this claim.[23] And it is the reality of moral evil which poses the acutest difficulties for it. Korsgaard herself proposes an important correction to Kant's rather crude psychology of motivation, pointing out that evil actions often result not from a surrender to the promptings of our desires, but from the determination to preserve our practical identity, even at the cost of universal values.[24] And since, as a matter of fact, all people some of the time, and some people most of the time, pursue immoral projects, it seems that we often do attach higher value to specific identities than to our humanity. So what is the force of Korgaard's claim that there is no wedge to be driven between myself, in the practically reflective stance, and my moral identity?

As Bristow argues, appealing to an *implicit* recognition of the priority of humanity, beneath the practical appearances, does not really help matters. For how is the claim to be substantiated that the agent, were she to reflect fully on the conditions of the specific values she holds, would recognize the value of humanity? The claim can only mean that adequate reflection would reveal a *reason* for valuing humanity – but this reason can only be the fact that we already do so (since otherwise humanity would not be the terminus of giving reasons), and hence fails to explicate, but rather simply reverts to the notion of *implicit* valuing. The general lesson to be drawn from this failure of

Korsgaard's strategy is surely that the more we try to naturalize a Kantian approach, the more the explication of the moral law's normativity will be vulnerable to the fact that, for much – if not most – of the time, human beings resist the moral law. As a result, deflationary Kantianism will be chronically tempted to underplay the difficulty of respecting the moral law, and overstate the actual level of commitment to it.

Hare's third way of dealing with the 'moral gap' – the devising of a substitute for Kant's 'moral author of the world' – is powerfully exemplified by Marxism. This is scarcely accidental, since Marx's philosophy of history grows directly out of Hegel's, which in turn can be seen as an attempt to master the problems Kant addressed through the postulates of practical reason. But Marx appropriates Hegel under the influence of Schelling's conception of a world in which the priority of basis over existence has perverted freedom. Hence, unlike the two previous strategies, Marxism does simply suppress or diminish the problem of evil; for this reason alone (there are quite a few others) it is unlikely, despite eclipses, to be irrevocably expunged from the modern intellectual horizon. Rather, Marxism incorporates evil into the process of history, as the violence and exploitation of class society, which will, in the long run, produce a final revolutionary shift to an emancipated world.

Marxists often argue that the selfish, ruthless, and competitive behaviour of human beings can be explained by the social and economic pressures of capitalist society, and that any class society will bring out unsavoury human characteristics. They suggest that it is illegitimate to extrapolate from historically determined tendencies, inferring a pessimistic conception of a change-resistant human nature. Norman Geras provides a classic statement of the case:

> conservative and reactionary assumptions about what is inherent in humanity's make-up are pervasive. That they are owes a lot – probably – to the historical influence of the Christian doctrine of original sin . . . Such ideas close off the avenues of thought against the prospect of liberation from manifold social oppressions. Their pervasiveness, relative to progressive conceptions of human nature, must perhaps always be the norm while class society survives. A long past and continuing present of exploitation and its associated evils will tend to yield pessimistic generalizations about the character traits and typical behaviour of human beings.[25]

Geras leaves it rather ambiguous whether class society produces undesirable or immoral behaviour, or rather produces ideologies which label human beings as intrinsically evil. But assuming the former could be shown to be the case, we would still find ourselves confronted with the central problem of

self-emancipation encountered by all post-Kantian theories of evil. How can human beings corrupted by class society summon up the integrity to over-throw such a society?

For Marx the position of the proletariat – the class 'in but not of civil society' – was supposed to solve this problem. The particular interest of the working class was also the universal human interest of humanity. Yet, the history of Marxist theory over the last hundred years has consisted in a steady retreat from this assumption, combined with efforts to explain how capitalism co-opts even the exploited, giving them a stake in a humanly destructive system. Not surprisingly, many more thoughtful Marxist theorists have, all along, recognized that social transformation cannot be simply a matter of the successful assertion of a class interest. Che Guevara could hardly be accused of lack of familiarity with the practicalities of revolution. In a speech delivered to the Afro-Asian Solidarity Conference in Algiers, in February 1965, he declared (one of many such declarations): 'Socialism cannot exist if a change does not take place, in man's consciousness, that evokes a new fraternal atti-tude toward humanity, such a change must be of an individual nature, in the society in which socialism is being built or has already been built, as well as of a worldwide nature in relation to all the peoples who suffer imperialist oppres-sion.'[26] For Che, the global politics of socialism, just as for Kant the cosmo-politan community, was unthinkable without a deep moral reorientation.

Postmodernism is unable to articulate our most profound ideals, and con-temporary deontological universalism and Marxism, in its theoretical guise, fail to consider the problem of the moral transformation required to sustain commitment to them. We are returned, then, to our original problem: the profound conflict between moral-political idealism and the intractability of evil, and the role of a religious orientation – however understood – in assuag-ing this fundamental existential tension.

It has already emerged from this study that, since Kant, the attempt to address this tension has often been felt to require the invention of a philo-sophical method for reconciling religious and secular consciousness. A faith sheerly opposed to secular knowledge can never be durably immunized against rational critique, while a naturalism which claims to exhaust reality will be repeatedly shipwrecked on the rock of normativity. Hegel's philosophy, of course, represents the classic attempt to solve this problem, to integrate secular and religious consciousness. But, inevitably, the moral atrocities of the twen-tieth century have put his affirmative conception of the historical process, and his political theology, under extreme pressure. It is against this background that I shall conclude by returning to the strategies of Emmanuel Levinas and Theodor Adorno, elaborated in the shadow of Auschwitz.

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Despite his constant criticism of Hegel, Levinas's philosophical project can be seen – from a certain perspective – as close to that of his great antagonist. For both thinkers are, in different ways, concerned to close the gap between philosophical and religious discourse: to do justice to both comprehension and transcendence. Hegel's approach depends on the claim that philosophy and religion express the same truth in different media. But Levinas eschews speculation, as he eschews theology. We could say that he tries to inscribe the Kantian postulates into the phenomenology of ethical experience, so that religion is no longer a matter of faith, if by this is meant a moral conviction of the existence of purely intelligible realities. In Levinas's definition, religion is almost equated with the relation to – the capacity to address – the Other, as opposed to the cognitive relation to things:

> The void that breaks the totality can be maintained against an inevitably totalizing and synoptic thought only if thought finds itself *faced* with an other refractory to categories. Rather than constituting a whole with this other as with an object, *thought consists in speaking*. We propose to call 'religion' the bond that is established between the same and the other without constituting a totality.[27]

As Levinas once put it, in the course of a philosophical debate:

> I do not want to define anything through God because it is the human that I know. It is God that I can define through human relations and not the inverse . . . I do not start from the existence of a very great and all-powerful being. Everything I wish to say comes from this situation of responsibility which is religious insofar as the I cannot elude it.[28]

It will be clear from the foregoing that Levinas comes close to equating our relation to God with awareness of the ineluctable character of the ethical injunction that structures our relation to the human Other. If we ask why Levinas continues to use the term 'God' at all, the best explanation may be that this word marks a terminus, the point at which ethical reason-giving comes to an end; or, as Levinas formulates it, 'God' is the only vocable whose 'said' – whose semantic content – 'does not extinguish or absorb its Saying', occlude what is disclosed in its very utterance.[29] Levinas, indeed, frequently describes 'atheism' as a precondition of religion. He makes clear that, in his conception, religion is not a matter of belief or non-belief in God's existence: the word 'God' resonates beyond this opposition. For this reason, he also

repudiates the ontological proof. But it could also be said that he relies on a kind of ethical analogue to it. Levinas does not try to explain why the encounter with the Other, why the trace of illeity, why the 'saying' as testimony to the 'glory of the Infinite', coalesces with an unconditional ethical binding: the command is contained in the phenomenology. Rather than the concept containing being, here it is what is 'otherwise than being' which contains the irrefusable 'ought', and all Levinas can do is try to open our eyes to its compulsion.

But in view of this strategy, we are bound to enquire: what happens to freedom within Levinas's perspective? For Kant there can be no morality without transcendental freedom. He regards it as the '*keystone* of the whole structure of a system of pure reason': its reality is disclosed by our consciousness of the moral law, and the Ideas of God and immortality acquire their 'stability and objective reality' through their attachment to its concept.[30] Here we seem to find a drastic divergence from Levinas, who begins from an encounter with (we cannot say an 'experience of') the Infinite – with the trace of God – which puts our freedom in question. The contrast with Kant, as it is commonly construed, is summarized by Catherine Chalier: 'In Kant the moral law refers to a legislating self – whence the autonomy constitutive of selfhood – whereas in Levinas it signifies the imperative of an exteriority – whence heteronomy.'[31] In Levinas, we could say, we are apparently 'released' from freedom into submission to the dictates of the Other.

Yet the contrast between Kant and Levinas is not as straightforward as it may seem at first sight. Levinas does indeed describe the condition of the subject notionally prior to the ethical encounter as a condition of freedom, construed as solipsistic spontaneity. And in his account this lack of determination or constraint abruptly finds itself in need of justification, with the appearance of the Other. As he writes: 'Conscience welcomes the Other. It is the revelation of a resistance to my powers that does not counter them as a greater force, but calls in question the naïve right of my powers, my glorious spontaneity as a living being. Morality begins when freedom, instead of being justified by itself, feels itself to be arbitrary and violent.'[32] But we need to ask whether spontaneity is the only conception of freedom at work in Levinas, either explicitly or implicitly. Clearly, the ethical demand which structures my encounter with the Other does not compel me in the sense that I can literally do nothing other than obey it. It forbids me to murder, it orders me to feed and shelter. But, as Levinas must acknowledge, murder is an ethical, not an empirical, impossibility. Indeed, he sometimes characterizes the face as both the prohibition of, and the temptation to, murder. But this means that, in ethical behaviour, my spontaneity is not totally constrained, but is

rather harnessed, put to work. Levinas suggests that the 'imperialism of the same is the whole essence of freedom', and in the same context he refers to the Other who 'imposes himself as an exigency that dominates this freedom, and hence as more primordial than everything that takes place in me'.[33] But, in the very same section of *Totality and Infinity*, he also refers to the 'investiture that liberates freedom from the arbitrary'.[34] Furthermore, after describing the imposition of the Other as an exigency that dominates my freedom, he later remarks that 'the being that imposes itself does not limit but promotes my freedom'.[35] These metaphors of investment and promotion suggest not a limitation or binding of freedom, but rather its advancement to the full enjoyment of its powers, precisely through a channelling towards the succour of the Other.[36]

When this ambiguity in Levinas's conception of freedom is taken into account, it ceases to look much different from Kant's. For Kant, too, all our actions are characterized by transcendental spontaneity even when we defer to the clamour of our impulses. But we are free only in the positive sense, when we determine ourselves to act in conformity with the moral law, and out of respect for this law. Our power of choice (*Willkür*) is 'promoted' to the status of freedom, we could say, through its determination by the rational will. Similarly, in Levinas, the investiture that 'liberates freedom from the arbitrary', releases us from the ultimately stifling enclosure of our own egoism, is achieved through our welcome of the Other, our capacity to respond to the ethical demand. The inward correlate of this practical devotion is what Levinas, in his earlier work, terms 'metaphysical desire', a desire which carries us towards exteriority, and which 'desires the other beyond satisfactions'.[37] Later, however, this desire, this searching movement towards the Infinite, which delights in its own exasperation, is transformed into subjectivity as such, testifying through its 'saying' to the Infinite by which it is haunted: 'The exteriority of the Infinite becomes, in a certain sense, interiority, in the sincerity of testimony.'[38] Now the subject *really is* 'forced to be free', to use Rousseau's phrase. But, almost by way of compensation, Levinas is now able to offer a sympathetic reading of the third of Kant's postulates, immortality: not as literal survival after death, of course, but as this 'otherwise than living, otherwise than being' which is subjectivity exposed to, substituted for, the Other.[39]

In much of Levinas's writing, this is – apparently – the end of the story. The deep rationale for his thinking can be captured in the thought that justice and equality, as political ideals, can be sustained only by a commitment far beyond what could be expected on the basis of a calculation of the benefits of participation. His project is to recall us to the attitude of unreserved concern which must subtend the structures of a community's life, if they are not to

wither and disintegrate. In this sense Levinas's basic intuition converges with that of Kant, who remarks:

> To a high degree we are, through art and science, *cultured*. We are *civilized* – perhaps too much for our own good – in all sorts of social grace and decorum. But to consider ourselves as having reached *morality* – for that, much is lacking ... Everything good that is not based on a morally good disposition, however, is nothing but pretense and glittering misery.[40]

In a similar mood, Levinas argues that

> Politics tends toward reciprocal recognition, that is, towards equality; it ensures happiness. And political law concludes and sanctions the struggle for recognition. Religion is Desire and not struggle for recognition. It is the surplus possible in a society of equals, that of glorious humility, responsibility, and sacrifice, which are the condition for equality itself.[41]

The question which haunts Levinas's work, however, is whether religion, in his understanding of the term, leads us towards the achievement of justice. If the Other is the 'master called to invest and justify my freedom',[42] can this freedom be durably and collectively realized? Already, in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas suggests that 'The third looks at me in the eyes of the Other – language is justice'. Indeed, the prophetic word (the urging of justice, we could say) 'by essence is aroused by the epiphany of the face inasmuch as it attests to the presence of the third party, the whole of humanity, in the eyes that look at me'.[43] The Other whom I encounter in the dimension of height is already himself the servant of another, and invites me to join him, 'commands me to command', as Levinas puts it. At this point the asymmetry of the ethical relation, Levinas's incessant theme, begins to veer towards equality, and towards fraternity. There emerges a moral-political *project*, of the kind which Levinas invokes in many of the essays contained in *Difficult Freedom*. Here he remarks, with approval, that 'The prime importance which the transformation of things and societies acquires in the eyes of men, and the attention which established religions pay to the transformation of things here below, defines our time.'[44]

But, as we have seen, Levinas also writes history off – and with it the entire arena of politics – as the domain of war and violence. As he writes,

> The virile judgement of history, the virile judgement of 'pure reason', is cruel. Inasmuch as the invisible is ordered into a totality it offends subjectivity, since, by essence, the judgement of history consists in translating every apology into visible arguments, and in drying up the inexhaustible source of the singularity from which they proceed, and against which no argument can prevail.[45]

This seems to imply that any historical realization of justice, or even progress towards this goal, would be unjust, since it would occlude singularity, unrepresentable ethical subjectivity (evoked here as 'apology'). Yet Levinas is all too aware of the fragility of his insistence on the purity of the ethical, on metaphysical desire: 'Demented pretension to the invisible, when the acute experience of the human in the twentieth century teaches that the thoughts of men are borne by needs which explain society and history, that hunger and fear can prevail over every human resistance and every freedom!'[46] Pulled in these two directions, the younger Levinas works with the concepts of eroticism, paternity, and filiality, in an attempt to reconcile worldly time and the ethical demand. But, ultimately, he decides that 'to listen to a God not contaminated by being' is the defining human possibility.[47] We must not, at any price, find ourselves travelling again down the path of a Hegelian understanding of history as the realization of a divine purposiveness. In 'the smoke from the ovens of the crematoria of the "final solution"', Levinas declares, 'theodicy abruptly appeared impossible'.[48]

The result of this decision in Levinas's later work is a retrenchment. If the juggernaut of human cruelty and 'useless suffering' cannot be allowed to lurch ever onwards, but if we are also unable to envisage any enduring ethical achievement, it appears that the only solution is to absorb cruelty and suffering into the ethical relation itself. And this is precisely what Levinas does in *Otherwise and Being*: 'The vortex – suffering of the other, my pity for his suffering, his pain over my pity, my pain over his pain, etc. – stops at me. The I is what involves one more movement in this iteration.'[49] Suffering, rather than succour, becomes the mode in which I respond to the agony of the other; I am responsible, culpable, even to the point of being blamed for the persecution of the one who persecutes me. Levinas's strategy, we might say, is to endow suffering with meaning *by virtue of its very meaninglessness*, to transfigure its uselessness into expiation. This is, in fact, Levinas's nightmarish version of *Versöhnung*, the final reconciliation of Same and Other, of those opposed dimensions whose incommensurability his thought had always implacably underlined: 'We have to speak here of expiation as *uniting* identity and alterity.'[50] Levinas supersedes theodicy, leaves behind any 'theo-logic', but only at the cost of conceding the 'somber paradox of the wickedness of God' himself.[51]

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Adorno shares with Levinas the sense that Auschwitz has rendered impossible any 'construction of immanence as endowed with a meaning radiated by a positively affirmed transcendence'.[52] 'Our metaphysical faculty', he declares,

'is paralyzed because actual events have shattered the basis on which specula-
tive metaphysical thought could be reconciled with experience.'[53] Yet he
rejects the strategy of retreat, of abandoning history to its own relentless vio-
lence, and compressing transcendence into the experience of ethical obliga-
tion. A clue to the manner in which Adorno might have reacted to Levinas's
thought can be gleaned from his response to the 'dialectical theology' of Karl
Barth and his followers, which shaped the cultural atmosphere in which he
matured as a thinker. Just as Levinas detaches the word 'God' from all ontol-
ogy and metaphysics, from all theology, indeed from all thematization, so
Barth asserts that 'When we Christians speak of "God" we may and must be
clear that this word signifies *a priori* the fundamentally Other, the fundamen-
tal deliverance from the whole world of man's seeking, conjecturing, illusion,
imagining, and speculating'.[54] It is true that, while Barth insists that 'God is
hidden from us outside His world' he also declares that he is manifest to us
in Jesus Christ,[55] and this conviction of God's incarnation might appear to
open an immense gulf between Barth's Christianity and Levinas's Judaism.
But it could be countered that, in Levinas's late work, the I itself – persecuted,
flayed, enucleated – takes on a redemptive, Christological function, its corpo-
reality becoming the exposure of exposure, its illimitable responsibility an
un-transferable substitution of oneself for the other, its suffering an expiation
prior to all fault: 'a subject bearing all – subject to everything – that is to say
suffering for all, but burdened with everything'.[56]

In his lecture course *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, Adorno pays
tribute to Barth's theology for having 'detected the fateful intertwinement of
metaphysics and culture with that against which they abstractly and impo-
tently protested'.[57] But he also argues that dialectical theology, 'as the doctrine
of the "wholly other" . . . turns God into an abyss', and that this consequence
'then irrupted, with overwhelming force, into the work of Kafka, where tra-
ditional theological categories are measured against experience in a way which
turns them into their opposite, a sinister mythology or demonology.'[58] Of
course, one might reply that the problem arises only from the attempt to hold
on to *some* residual notion of transcendence. Adorno himself contends that
'The polarity between critical rationality, on the one hand, and the pathos of
rescue, on the other, points to the essence of traditional metaphysics, or at
least has done throughout its history. Metaphysics can thus be defined as the
exertion of thought to save what at the same time it destroys.'[59] Why not let
this self-cancelling movement play itself out completely? For the result of this
would presumably be a move to the 'post-metaphysical thinking' character-
istic of the subsequent generations of the Frankfurt School. We could then
cease to apply an impossibly demanding moral measure to the process of

history, and to the agents caught up in this history, as if we were still hoping to descry the distorted traces of some divine plan. Instead, pushing further the secularization of theodicy into philosophy of history, which proceeded via Hegel and Marx, we could content ourselves with a theory of stages of moral consciousness – but one which implies no necessity in the advance from one level to another.

In one sense, Adorno's thought has deep affinities with this type of project. In *Negative Dialectics* he argues that it is no longer possible to frame a philosophy of history in the grand style, but that we cannot give up on the demand to comprehend the dynamic of history either: 'universal history must be both construed and denied'.[60] Furthermore, a central target in his critique of Kantian moral philosophy is the punitive insistence on individual responsibility, in abstraction from the social and historical conditions of agency. Indeed, Adorno suggests that the very notion of morality is obsolescent under contemporary conditions:

> it is only where our universe is limited that something like Kant's celebrated freedom can survive. In the immeasurably expanded world of experience and the infinitely numerous ramifications of the process of socialization that the world of experiences imposes on us, the possibility of freedom has sunk to such a minimal level that we must ask ourselves very seriously whether any scope is left for our moral categories.[61]

Yet, for Adorno, this does not mean that the notion of an unconditional demand, which Kant interpreted as the obligation to further the *summum bonum*, and Hegel as the 'absolute need' for reconciliation, has become antiquated, or been extinguished. Rather, according to him it has migrated into our awareness of unnecessary human suffering. The opening of the second section of the 'Meditations of Metaphysics' encapsulates Adorno's moral vision:

> The course of history forces materialism upon metaphysics, traditionally the direct antithesis of materialism. What the mind once boasted of defining or construing as its like moves in the direction of what is unlike the mind, in the direction of that which eludes the rule of the mind and yet manifests that rule as absolute evil. The somatic, unmeaningful stratum of life is the stage of suffering, of the suffering which in the camps, without any consolation, burned every soothing feature out of the mind, and out of culture, the mind's objectification.[62]

Adorno does not propose any positive image of reconciliation or redemption. Rather, he diagnoses a history whose inverted dynamic, whose elevation of

the particular to the role of universal can be articulated equally in socio-economic terms, or in terms of a post-Kantian theory of moral evil.

Seen from this perspective, the divergence between Adorno's thought and that of the subsequent generations of the Frankfurt School appears in a new light. Proponents of more recent Critical Theory often argue that his philosophy is unidimensional: its conception of history relies too heavily on the concept of an instrumental rationality whose employment in the domination of nature has led to the reification of all human relations, to a society in which means have acquired an insane primacy over ends. Against this conception, it is claimed that linguistic communication exhibits a 'quasi-transcendental' normativity, irreducible to instrumentality, and offering resistance to it. Yet while it is true that Adorno does not employ distinct categories for theorizing intersubjective relations, we should not conclude that he is oblivious to the difference between subject–object and subject–subject structures. One counter-indication, for example, is his denial that we can simply infer social domination from the domination of nature: a primordial catastrophe of some kind had to intervene, to produce the transition from the latter to the former. Indeed, it could be argued that there is a blindness built into the subject–subject model accorded primacy by later generations of the Frankfurt School, to the extent that it tends to overlook how individuals, imprisoned within themselves, resist acknowledgement of the intersubjective context in which they are grounded. It will not do to say, for example, that – in Adorno – reason is related to nature as – in Habermas – violence to communication.[63] For where does the violence done to communication originate? *Unde malum?* On Adorno's account, the freedom acquired as reason detaches subjectivity from nature becomes colonized by nature; the subject, in its particularity, tries to ride roughshod over the communicative context in which it finds itself. This is his version of Hegel's 'natural will' or Schelling's inversion of existence and basis – and Adorno was, of course, deeply aware of these precedents. His Hegelianism is a matter of record, but the notes which he jotted down for his seminar on Schelling's 'Ages of the World', in November 1960, reveal that he was also fascinated by Schelling's theory of the struggle between selfhood and communication, and by his ensuing description of 'anguish as the fundamental experience of all creatures'.[64]

Furthermore, in evoking the permanent catastrophe of history, Adorno refers in his lectures not only to the dynamic of 'identity-thinking', and not only to Auschwitz, but to the brutal third-world conflicts of the 1950s and 1960s. He invites his audience to consider the perversion of relations of recognition into a self-perpetuating cycle of intimidation and revenge: 'Consider one of the dreadful semi-colonial wars which are so characteristic of our time,

in which one party – and one can always toss a coin to decide which one it is – tortures and commits dreadful atrocities so that the other is also forced to torture, as it claims, to prevent its opponent from doing so.'[65] There is no argument, Adorno suggests, which can break such deadlock, no rational foundation for the proposition that one should not torture: 'the true basis of morality is to be found in bodily feeling, in identification with unbearable pain'.[66] Elsewhere he suggests that it is lack of that 'warmth between human beings for which everyone longs' that allows the logic of such antagonisms to perpetuate itself. In his radio talk, 'Education after Auschwitz', he declares: 'Society in its present form – and most likely for millennia – is not based, as the ideological suggestion made ever since Aristotle would have it, on attraction, but on the pursuit of one's own interest against the interest of all others.' He goes on to pay tribute to Christianity for its 'impulse, not immediately identical with dogma, to overcome the all-pervading coldness'. Yet there is no point in 'preaching love' to those whose character structure renders them unable to receive the message. The failure of Christianity consisted in leaving untouched 'the social order which produces and reproduces coldness': a remark which suggests the need for a new configuration of love and politics.[67]

The example makes clear that Adorno's conception of human history cannot be explained simply as an over-generalization from the experiences of fascism and Stalinism (combined with a restriction of his categorical framework to the subject–object relation). For Adorno, the memory of Auschwitz offers the paradigm of a far more general situation:

> Guilt reproduces itself in each of us . . . since we cannot possibly remain fully conscious of this connection at every moment of our waking lives. If we – each of us sitting here – knew at every moment what has happened and to what concatenations we owe our own existence, and how our own existence is interwoven with calamity, even if we have done nothing wrong . . . if one were fully aware of all things at every moment, one would really be unable to live. One is pushed, as it were, into forgetfulness, which is already a form of guilt.[68]

The sensibility expressed here is in some respects close to that of Levinas. Yet Adorno does not seek to exacerbate the guilt, as Levinas does, as if this in itself could bring a kind of redemption, but stresses how the situation overwhelms the moral capacities of the individual. The best we can hope for is to live our lives so as to be able to say that we have been a 'good animal'.[69]

Admittedly, there is one important respect in which the 'intersubjective turn' can correct Adorno's thinking. The concept of 'metaphysical experience' is central to Adorno's strategy for preventing the thought of transcendence

from turning defeatist, if not terroristic. 'The possibility of metaphysical experience', Adorno writes, 'is akin to that of freedom, and only the unfolded subject is capable of it, who has torn apart the bonds which are praised as salutary':[70] metaphysical experience is the point where worldly emancipation and transcendence touch. Yet there is something irreducibly private about Adorno's account of metaphysical experience. We wonder why he did not acknowledge that such moments, which somehow dissolve the opposition of disappointment and fulfilment, may also occur, perhaps preeminently occur, in love, in human community, in our committed relations to others. Such a thought could connect up with Adorno's argument that the demand of morality, unrealizable at the individual level, can be enacted only by a shift towards the political. As he writes, 'Even in Kant emphatic praxis was good will; and this in turn was equivalent to autonomous reason. However, a concept of praxis which is not narrow minded can now only be related to politics, to the social relations which largely condemn the praxis of each individual to irrelevance.'[71] Yet Adorno adds that, as Hegel's response to Kant demonstrates, 'in the political expansion of the concept of praxis, the repression of the individual by the universal is also posited.' What would be needed to resolve this antinomy, he asserts, is a 'possible higher form of praxis.' Such a mode of praxis would 'steer through the alternative between spontaneity and organisation'.[72]

What Adorno evokes here as a 'higher form of praxis' can be understood, I would suggest, as what could also be called 'prefigurative practice'. Political aims are pursued by such practice, but it also seeks to body forth the transformed world that it struggles to bring nearer, and in doing so promotes the mutual support and moral transformation of its participants. The idea has affinities with Kant's conception of religion, in which human beings leave behind the 'ethical state of nature', and form associations bound together by moral laws, with the aim of assisting each other in the struggle to improve their character, and thereby advance towards the highest good. But it also has connections with Hegel's account of religion as pushing historically against its own limits, overflowing into ethical life as the truest form of worship. Furthermore, the communicative turn in Critical Theory could also be seen as pointing towards a similarly revised conception of political practice, in which the strategic dimension, concerted action to change the world for the better, would be integrated with a dialogical dimension: discussion of, shared experimentation with, and the fragmentary enactment of a better human life.[73] Any such form of practice would, however, have to begin from a sense of fault, from 'healthy culpability',[74] from a readiness to admit derelictions of responsibility, without downplaying the dire momentum of social and

economic forces. Indeed, it would have to acknowledge – with all due weight given to the pressure of society and history – that, ultimately, 'we are what's wrong with the world'. And it would have to expose itself, without reserve, to the pain of that most desolate of questions: why the world, being good, is yet not good.

Notes

1 Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, p. 4.
2 See, for example, Michael Friedman, 'Kant, Skepticism and Idealism', *Inquiry*, 49: 1 (February 2006).
3 Ibid., p. 251.
4 Heinrich Rickert, 'Fichtes Atheismusstreit und die Kantische Philosophie', *Kantstudien*, 4 (1899), p. 161.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid., p. 156.
7 See Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, pp. 123–5.
8 Ibid., p. 96.
9 Ibid., p. 160.
10 See Allen W. Wood, 'Kant's Compatibilism', in Allen W. Wood (ed.), *Self and Nature in Kant's Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 73–101.
11 Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 1, p. 411.
12 See ibid., vol. 2, pp. 590–1.
13 Susan Neiman, *The Unity of Reason: Rereading Kant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 181.
14 Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 174 (§258).
15 See Hare, *The Moral Gap*.
16 Axel Honneth, 'The Other of Justice: Habermas and the Ethical Challenge of Postmodernism', in Stephen K. White (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Habermas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 297.
17 Levinas, 'De la déficence sans souci au sens nouveau', p. 85.
18 Christine Korsgaard, 'Morality as Freedom', in *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*, p. 162.
19 Ibid., p. 164.
20 Ibid., p. 165.
21 Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, p. 150.
22 Ibid., pp. 120–1.
23 See William F. Bristow, 'Self-Consciousness, Normativity and Abysmal Freedom', *Inquiry*, 49: 6 (December 2006), pp. 498–523.
24 See Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, pp. 249–51.

25 Norman Geras, *Marx and Human Nature: Refutation of a Legend* (London: Verso, 1983), pp. 15–16.

26 Ernesto Che Guevara, 'On our Common Aspiration – The Death of Imperialism and the Birth of a Moral World', in John Gerassi (ed.), *Venceremos! The Speeches and Writings of Che Guevara* (London: Panther, 1969), p. 526.

27 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 40.

28 Emmanuel Levinas, discussion following 'Transcendence and Height', in *Basic Philosophical Writings* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 29.

29 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 236.

30 Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 3.

31 Catherine Chalier, *Pour une moral au-delà du savoir: Kant et Levinas* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1998), p. 13.

32 *Totality and Infinity*, p. 84.

33 Ibid., p. 87.

34 Ibid., p. 86.

35 Ibid., p. 200.

36 Jean-Luc Nancy comments on this ambivalence in Levinas in *L'expérience de la liberté* (Paris: Galilée, 1988), p. 69n.

37 *Totality and Infinity*, p. 34.

38 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 147.

39 Emmanuel Levinas, *La mort et le temps* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1992), p. 72.

40 Kant, 'Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View', p. 21.

41 *Totality and Infinity*, p. 64.

42 Ibid., p. 251.

43 Ibid., p. 213.

44 Emmanuel Levinas, 'Judaism and the Present', in *Difficult Freedom,* p. 210.

45 *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 243–4.

46 Ibid., p. 35.

47 See Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 10.

48 Levinas, 'Useless Suffering', p. 85.

49 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 196n.

50 Ibid., p. 118.

51 See Emmanuel Levinas, 'Transcendence and evil', in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, p. 130.

52 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 361.

53 Ibid., p. 362.

54 Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, trans. G. T. Thomson (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), p. 36.

55 Ibid., p. 20.

56 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 232.

57 Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, p. 121.

58 Ibid.

59   Ibid., p. 20.
60   *Negative Dialectics*, p. 320.
61   *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, pp. 98–9.
62   *Negative Dialectics*, p. 365.
63   See Axel Honneth, 'Von Adorno zu Habermas. *Vom Gestaltwandel kritischer Gesellschaftstheorie*', in Wolgang Bonß and Axel Honneth (eds), *Sozialforschung als Kritik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982), p. 100.
64   'Angst als die Grundempfindung aller Geschöpfe'. See 'Zur Einleitung in die "Weltalter" (10.XI.60)', transcript of Adorno's seminar notes, Walter Benjamin Archive, Archive of the Akademie der Künste, Berlin.
65   *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, p. 116.
66   Ibid.
67   All quotations in the final part of this paragraph from Theodor Adorno, 'Erziehung nach Auschwitz', pp. 98–9.
68   *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, p. 113.
69   See *Negative Dialectics*, p. 299.
70   Ibid., pp. 396–7.
71   Theodor Adorno, 'Marginalien zur Theorie und Praxis', in *Stichworte: Kritische Modelle 2* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980), p. 174.
72   Ibid., p. 186.
73   For a striking suggestion along these lines, see Axel Honneth, 'Von Adorno zu Habermas', pp. 114–16.
74   See Paul Ricoeur, 'Le sentiment de culpabilité: sagesse ou névrose' [dialogue with Marie Solemne], in Marie Solemne (ed.), *Innocente culpabilité* (Paris: Éditions DERVY, 1998), pp. 9–29.

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Author's note: In the case of major philosophical works by my protagonists, as far as possible reference has been made, throughout this book, to an up-to-date or well-established English translation. However, I have quite often revised the translation, sometimes extensively. In some instances, where the original date of publication of a work may be of philosophical relevance, this is included in brackets after the title.

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