

A Look at Kantian Theodicy:

Rational Faith and the Idea of History

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In the *Preface* to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant famously announces that he had to “deny knowledge in order to make room for faith.”¹ Yet this declaration is as ambivalent as it is striking. What does Kant mean by knowledge, by faith, what is the content of either and what mental processes underlie each? In this paper I hope to shed some light on these questions by exploring the notion of rational faith in the historical progress of the species through the question of theodicy. To anticipate, what is termed rational faith is rational in two senses: it is a justified orientation to certain ideas, in the sense of being logically coherent and grounded on universal premises, as well as being a response to an essential need or interest of reason.

It is helpful to bear in mind Kant’s statement that three questions guide critical philosophy: (i) “What can I know?” (ii) “What ought I to do?” (iii) “What may I hope for?”² These questions, Kant underscores, must be thought together in their reciprocal determination, and the implication of the Copernican turn—namely that objects conform to our faculties rather than our faculties

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1998), Bxxx. Citations will refer to the standard Prussian Academy Edition of Kant’s collected works by giving volume and page number, except for references to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which cite page numbers from the first (A) and second (B) editions. When a text is first introduced, the information of the editions consulted will be given.

² *Ibid.*, A804-5/B832-3.

conforming to the world—must be seen to affect each of them. That is, human subjectivity is at the center of critical philosophy; reason is the source of both the questions and the answers, and the core of subjectivity for Kant is freedom, which in his words “constitutes the keystone of the whole structure of a system of pure reason.”³

In response to “What can I know?” Kant answers: the phenomenal world of experience, which is governed by universal, mathematical laws. This rules out the possibility of knowing the traditional objects of metaphysics—God, freedom and immortality—since these cannot be objects of spatial or temporal intuition. Thus, for theoretical reason, they can never be more than regulative or heuristic ideas. Nevertheless, we still long for some access to these ideas, and here the question “what ought I to do?” opens up a new path. For in response to this question, Kant uncovers the categorical imperative—namely that one “act only in accordance with that maxim through which one can at the same time will that it become a universal law.”⁴ This moral law reveals to us that freedom, as the necessary condition for morality, must be real.⁵ Our access to a realm distinct from the strictly deterministic phenomenal world of experience provides grounds for reflecting on God and immortality. In other words, our immediate access to the unconditioned imperative of the moral law, which Kant calls a brute “fact of reason,” reveals freedom to be the one idea of speculative reason we can “know *a priori*.”⁶ Through our knowledge of freedom, the

³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason in Practical Philosophy*, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, trans. and ed. Mary G. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 5:3-4.

⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, in *Practical Philosophy*, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, trans. and ed. Mary G. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 4:421; compare 4:402.

⁵ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:4.

⁶ *Ibid.*

concepts of God and immortality attain stability, and their objective reality is proved to be *possible*—but, it must be emphasized, only possible. Thus they remain objects of hope, postulations that assure us that the interests of morality will be satisfied and that the world is amenable to our moral aspirations.

The following is divided into five parts. In Part 1, I delineate two types of theodicy found in Kant's writings. In Part 2, I consider the possibility that Kant's idea of history provides a theodicy. Parts 3 and 4 then focus on the problem of radical evil and its role in *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. Finally, I conclude with some speculative remarks regarding the implications of radical evil for Kant's understanding of man.

I. The Problem of Theodicy

Traditionally, and as the etymology implies, a theodicy is the justification of God and his ways or a vindication of God before some tribunal or standard of justice. At first, it may seem a distinctively religious problem, one aspect of a tradition with the revelation of a personal God at its foundation. Turning to this tradition, we have an exemplary case of ostensibly unjustified suffering and what might be called the first reflection on the problem of theodicy in the story of Job. What does Job want? He wants an advocate in heaven that will plead the justice of his cause. What do his friends insist on? That he must be guilty for there could be no irrational suffering. Without diving into a detailed interpretation, it seems plausible that we find the story compelling because it articulates a common human experience, namely, the desire for a reason for suffering. In the face of suffering, we ask ourselves: "why?" But no merely mechanical causal account answers this why, for we are really asking "to what

end?” “What purpose does this evil serve?” “What is the meaning of suffering?”

Thus, the motivation underlying the desire for a theodicy seems to be more universal than the Judeo-Christian tradition. That it may, in fact, always be a permanent feature of reason, a possible posture for self-conscious beings, seems implied in Kant’s description of the reflective person:

The reflective person feels a grief that the unreflective do not know, a grief that can well lead to moral ruination: this is a discontentedness with the providence that governs the entire course of the world; and he feels it when he thinks about the evil that so greatly oppresses the human race, leaving it without (apparent) hope for something better.⁷

The grief is born of the manifest discrepancy between the real and the ideal. A rational being confronts the world with a standard or ideal in mind and finds that the world fails to live up to this ideal and so pronounces it to be defective.

The specifically Kantian form of this is the discrepancy between the standing of virtue in the world and the idea of the highest good.⁸ Reason has a natural interest in the convergence of morality and happiness, and while such a convergence may be, in principle, an end to be hoped for, the manifest discrepancy found in the present seems to undermine such hope. In the tension between morality and happiness or freedom and nature, nature strikes us as

⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Speculative Beginning of Human History*, in *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983), 8:120-121.

⁸ The highest good for Kant consists in the comprehensive convergence for all rational beings of the “worthiness to be happy” and happiness (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A813/B841). That is, perhaps somewhat paradoxically, the highest good of a finite rational being is universal justice. While the idea of the highest good will be further developed throughout this essay, it is important to bear in mind the metaphysical implications. The realization of the highest good would entail the overcoming of the phenomenal-noumenal division, that is, the very duality that assured the possibility of morality by locating its ground in a supersensible realm independent of the mechanistic causality that governs the phenomenal world.

not only indifferent or inhospitable but unjust and therefore in some sense irrational, out of sync with the demands of the rational animal.⁹ Confronted with this problem—the ostensible absurdity of our situation, namely, that there is an incongruity between the world and the sort of beings that we are—a theodicy seeks to close or narrow the gap between our expectations and reality, between what we hope for and the world as we experience it. This it can achieve by either modifying what we hope for or demonstrating how the world, contrary to first impressions, is amenable to human aspirations. Stated most generally, a theodicy must show that man isn't actually homeless or adrift in this world.

Note that in the above passage Kant speaks of providence but not of God, sin, redemption, eternal reward or punishment. While there is an appropriation of religious language in his statement of the reflective man's experience, the ground of the dilemma is man and the relation of human reason to the contingent commotion of the world. But if the question can be separated from revelation, what is being justified? Even in the absence of any presumption about the existence of a personal God, one might still ask: "why do the good suffer and the wicked prosper?"¹⁰ Here the question is no longer directed to a transmundane agent; instead, one seems to be asking about the nature of the world we find ourselves thrown into.

⁹ Kant's "doctrine of the highest good would be the ultimate expression of Kant's implicit trust in the inherent rationality of the universe. In a rational universe, moral endeavor may suffer momentary frustrations, but on the whole, it would continually increase, however slowly. Gradually, this process builds to the point where the phenomenal world shows clear signs of man's moral endeavor."—G. E. Michalson, *The Historical Dimensions of a Rational Faith: The Role of History in Kant's Religious Thought* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1977), 13.

¹⁰ Kant underscores that the success of the wicked is in fact the greater source of frustration; see Immanuel Kant, *On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy*, in *Religion and Rational Theology*, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, trans. and ed. Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 8:261.

Thus Kant seems to have two theodicies in mind, which share the goal of narrowing the distance between the real and the ideal but differ as to *what* is being vindicated. On the one hand, there is the traditional sense of an account that would justify God in the face of the ostensible evils afflicting man in the world, which responds to the question: “why would a benevolent, just and omnipotent God create such a world?” On the other, there is an account that would justify nature. The focus is not on a divine creator God but on man’s nature and his place in the cosmos. This second account ultimately responds to the question: “Is life in *this* world worth living?”

Kant, however, seems to collapse the two, arguing that “all theodicy should truly be an *interpretation* of nature” since it is through nature that “God announces his will.”¹¹ But this should strike us as odd; couldn’t God be justified on a supernatural level? And isn’t the traditional appeal to an afterlife and ultimate judgment just such an attempt to justify the discrepancy between virtue and happiness in this world?¹² Yet this sort of rhetorical move is quite common in Kant’s historical and political writings. For example, in *Perpetual Peace*, when interpreting world history, Kant advises that “in accordance with the limits of human reason one ought to speak of nature’s purposes rather than *providence*.”¹³ This apparent modesty, this accepting of reason’s limits, has the peculiar affect of removing God from the picture. Thus even while taking up a traditionally religious problem and appropriating religious language,

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 8:264.

¹² The Kantian formula for what is traditionally expected in heaven is captured in the notion of the highest good, namely, the complete convergence of virtue, or the being worthy of happiness, and happiness.

¹³ Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace*, in *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*. trans. and ed. Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983), 8:362.

Kant is focused on a response available to reason here and now, independent of a supernatural resolution to the problem.¹⁴

Before elaborating on what such a worldly theodicy needs to respond to, it is helpful to quickly sketch out three different theologies Kant has in mind while developing his response to the problem of theodicy: (1) that of positive, historical religion and what is gleaned from a revealed text; (2) that of rational religion, defined as the interpretation of our moral duties as divine commandments and entailing belief in God, individual immortality and some other world, in which the highest good is realized in the kingdom of ends;¹⁵ and (3) a theology whereby the ends of rational religion are secularized: nature's purposes take the place of God's providence and the notions of the species' progression towards a perfectly moral world replaces individual concerns with salvation and an afterlife.

¹⁴ The focus on a mundane theodicy can also be understood to address the question: "What if human reason is self-undermining?" The possibility that reason is self-undermining is central to the whole enterprise of critical philosophy and constitutes the central element of Kant's debt to Rousseau. Human reason is in need of a critique for the purpose of self-regulation in order that it not, Icarus-like, attempt to reach beyond itself and in so doing undermine itself, thwarting its own original intentions. Compare the treatment of the dangers of enthusiasm in Immanuel Kant, *What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?*, in *Religion and Rational Theology*, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, trans. and ed. Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 8:133-146. For Kant's debt to Rousseau see Richard Velkley, "Transcending Nature, Unifying Reason: On Kant's Debt to Rousseau," in *Kant on Moral Autonomy*, ed. Oliver Sensen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 89-106.

¹⁵ See, for example, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:129: "Religion is the recognition of all duties as divine commands, not as sanctions, i.e. arbitrary and contingent ordinances of a foreign will, but as essential laws of any free will as such. Even as such, they must be regarded as commands of the supreme being because we can hope for the highest good (to strive for which is our duty under the moral law) only from a morally perfect (holy and beneficent) and omnipotent will." Compare *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, in *Religion and Rational Theology*, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, trans. and ed. Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 5:154 and following.

This third theology is in some ways not a theology, as it is less a *logos* about God than a *logos* about man and his place in the world. Nevertheless it deserves the appellation for two reasons: (i) it responds to the concerns and questions that underlie the first two, most centrally it is concerned with hope, and (ii) it echoes aspects of the other two theologies. It takes over elements of positive religion insofar as it is concerned with a temporal progression and a changing relationship, both theoretically and practically, that man has with the highest good and yet the beliefs that constitute the doctrine of this theology are ostensibly universally available to unaided reason.¹⁶ While this third theology, which one might term a historical theology or a theology of historical progress, is the focus of this essay and the locus of Kant's political philosophy,¹⁷ he has his eye on the other two, and one dimension of his writings on history and religion seems to be the pedagogic goal of leading his readers from the first to the second and finally to the third, thereby reorienting practical reason to the project of reforming political and cultural life.¹⁸

To see how Kant's approach to history offers the possibility of a mundane theodicy, it is essential to bear in mind that Kant explicitly denies the possibility of giving a traditional *theoretical*

¹⁶ The "ostensible" qualification of the availability of these truths is required as it is not entirely clear whether or not "the history of pure reason" (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A852-5/B880-883) is a necessary prerequisite for Kant's formulation of these problems and to what extent socio-political conditions, notwithstanding the transcendental ground of human autonomy, determine the content of one's thought (see, for example, *What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?*, 8:144-146).

¹⁷ This is intended in both senses, that is, both as inquiry into and reflection on political life and as a form of philosophic writing that is cognizant of its public dimension and its potential influence on political life.

¹⁸ One might venture to say, in coarse terms, that there is a hierarchical ordering determined by the degree to which each conforms to the demands of reason, that is, the degree to which each succeeds in responding to the desire for justice, hopes for a better world and the realization of morality's inherent teleology.

theodicy, that is, an account of the whole that would justify God as good, holy and just.¹⁹ In his essay *On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy*, which is contemporary with his work on rational religion, Kant argues for precisely this.

At this point one might ask: “Why go on about theodicy when Kant explicitly rules out its possibility?” This is, in fact, precisely the tension Kant’s essay points to. For though we want a theodicy, not only do the limits of reason preclude a theoretical theodicy but these limits turn out to be a guarantor of our freedom as moral beings. If the realization of the highest good were proved to be impossible, this would crush our hopes; practical reason could not bear the weight of such despair. On the other hand, if one could definitively prove the wisdom and beneficence of a creator God or the ultimate harmony of nature with man’s moral striving, then autonomy would be undermined, since we would then have reasons for acting morally other than the moral law itself. In either case the questions “what ought I to do?” and “what may I hope for?” would be obviated, having collapsed into “what I can know.” In sum, Kant’s essay on traditional forms of theodicy consists in the reassertion of the thesis that in drawing limits to knowledge, he makes room for faith. In a certain sense, faith is the corollary to knowledge of ignorance.

To reiterate, the demand for justice is the source of the desire for a theodicy. That is, practical reason’s interest in the realization of the highest good generates a theoretical problem but one that theoretical reason cannot answer. Thus, if there is to be a response to the world-weariness or despair that the reflective feel when thinking upon the course of the world, it must take the form of a rational faith, for the course of the world or nature as a whole simply cannot be an object of experience and therefore cannot be an object

¹⁹ Such as what Leibniz apparently offers in his *Theodicy* and which, in an overly simplified form, is satirized in Voltaire’s *Candide*.

of theoretical knowledge. But, and this must be underscored, this type of faith is not born of passion. It is a necessary aspect of our being *finite* rational beings.

II. *The Idea of History*

A secular theodicy, one that seeks to justify man's natural condition by means of an appeal to history, is given a clear formulation in Kant's response to the lament of Moses Mendelssohn that humanity does not make any progress towards the highest good, but "vacillates between fixed limits," exhibiting the same degree of virtue and vice, happiness and misery in all times and place.²⁰ According to Mendelssohn, history is a pathetic spectacle, mere commotion, from which one could never hypothesize about the intention of providence or the purposes of nature.

Kant agrees that if there is no "education of the human race," no possibility of man perfecting himself, then man's situation would be Sisyphean.²¹ If history is nothing more than the "human race from period to period taking steps upward toward virtue and soon after falling back just as deeply into vice and misery," the sight would indeed be intolerable.²² Comparing such a view of history to a drama, Kant declares that

To watch this tragedy for a while might be moving and instructive, but the curtain must eventually fall. For in the long run it turns into farce; and even if the actors do not tire of it, because they are fools, the spectator

²⁰ Immanuel Kant, *On the Common Saying: That may be Correct in Theory, but it is of No Use in Practice*, in *Practical Philosophy*, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, trans. and ed. Mary G. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) and *On the Proverb: That may be True in Theory, but is of No Practical Use*, in *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983) 8:307.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 308.

does, when one or another act gives him sufficient grounds for gathering that the never-ending piece is forever the same.²³

History as farce has a twofold effect. It undermines any hope for a better future, which is the necessary condition of the “desire to do something that benefits the general good,” and leads one to a kind of misanthropy.²⁴ If history is a mere concatenation of contingencies without moral progress, one would be forced to conclude that the human race is not worthy of love, and, however one may try to love humanity, “one cannot avoid hating what is and remains evil.”²⁵

To reiterate, evil confronts reason, challenging a reflective individual, such as Mendelshsohn, to ask himself: Why do anything at all? Why is a purposeful effort to achieve some end better than a listless, solitary quietism? If it all goes to ruin or my efforts make no difference, why engage in any political, pedagogic or cultural activities at all?

This potentially enervating conclusion can only be staved off if history is shown to be something more than mere farce. We must ask ourselves whether there are “in human nature predispositions from which one can gather that the race will always progress toward what is better and that the evil of present and past times will disappear in the good of future times”?²⁶ If so, then philanthropy is not absurd, for in its progress toward the good, humanity is deserving of love. It is precisely such predispositions Kant sets about uncovering in his reflections on history.

In the essay *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent* Kant delineates what history would have to be,

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 309.

²⁵ Ibid., 307. Thus a successful theodicy also avoids the temptation of misanthropy. By means of this connection, one can see that a theodicy turns on whether man is worthy of love. In other words, a defense of nature’s beneficence or God’s providence is ultimately an apology for the human species.

²⁶ Ibid.

what kind of logic there would have to be governing all the particulars for it to be plausible to hope that there is an overarching trajectory or course for the human species. Though the localized “play of the freedom of the human will [das Spiel der Freiheit des menschlichen Willens]” is unpredictable, human history as a totality may exhibit an order that tends to the full development and flourishing of the species’ capacities.²⁷ Thus, individual men may pursue their own self-interested ends, but they may also, in fact, be proceeding “toward an unknown natural end [Naturabsicht], as if following a guiding thread [Leitfaden].”²⁸

However, Kant does recognize a possible objection to such a conception of history. Since man acts neither by natural instinct alone, like other animals, nor according to a fixed plan, dictated by reason, it seems no “*systematic [planmäßig]* history of man is possible.”²⁹ Absent a single governing principle, human history lacks the requisite univocity to conform to any one plan. Yet it is precisely this peculiar doubleness that lies at the heart of the need for reflection on the *course* of human history, which is so chaotic not because man is simply lawless, but rather, because he is subject to two masters, he is wholly ruled by neither. This peculiar doubleness is the reason for man’s indeterminacy and consequently the possibility of the progressive perfectibility of his capacities. In other words, man’s ontological indeterminacy is the ground for the possibility of historical teleology.

²⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent*, in *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983) and *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim*, in *Anthropology, History, and Education*, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, ed. Günter Zöllner and Robert B. Loudon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 8:17.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 8:18.

Again employing the image of watching “men’s actions placed on the great stage of the world,” Kant asks whether one might still “try to discover whether there is some *natural objective* [*Naturabsicht*]” in the seemingly absurd (*Widersinnigen*) “course of human affairs.”³⁰ Such a natural objective would provide the requisite “guiding thread” that would enable one to write “a history of creatures who proceed without a plan of their own but in conformity with some definite plan of nature’s [*Plane der Natur*].”³¹ Such a “guiding thread” would constitute an idea of human history, enabling one to rationally hope for the progress of the species. But as an idea it is a regulative or heuristic principle that, though illuminating, does not amount to a verifiable theoretical proposition.³²

In sum, Kant’s response to Mendelssohn’s melancholic reflections is to see how human history proceeds according to nature’s plan and how nature works to promote free, rational beings. Paradoxically, nature achieves through history its highest end, which is the actualization of a being that can transcend his own merely given nature.³³ That is, though nature intends for all creatures to

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² “An idea, according to the first Critique, is a spontaneous projection of pure reason, a projection to which nothing in experience—nothing that is empirically knowable—can be adequate, and yet which is for all that no mere chimera or fantasy; . . . it is a goal to be systematically and progressively approached. . . . An idea is essentially practical and grounded in freedom.”—Susan Meld Shell, *The Embodiment of Reason: Kant on Spirit, Generation, and Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 163.

³³ This peculiar overcoming of nature is, therefore, not only man’s perfection but the perfection of nature itself, insofar as nature births a moral being that can provide an account of why he ought to exist and in the act of justifying himself, justify nature. Compare §§83-84 of the *Critique of Judgment*, especially Kant’s statement that since “only in the human being, although in him only as a subject of morality, is unconditional legislation with regard to ends to be found,” he alone is “capable of being a final end, to which the whole of nature is teleologically subordinated” [Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, The Cambridge Edition of

develop their natural capacities completely and in conformity with their given end (*Zweckmäßig*), man is unique in possessing rationality, which “seeks to extend the rules and aims [Regeln und Absichten] of the use of all its powers far beyond natural instinct.”³⁴ Thus if nature intends the full actualization of man’s rational capacity, reason must become autonomous. Rather than be guided by instinct, man’s nature entails a negation of his origins in the attainment of his self-perfection. Man’s natural teleology is the overcoming of nature. How then does nature bring about this paradoxical end?

The central idea of Kant’s essay on universal history is, to borrow a Benardete formulation, the “teleology-of-evil”; that is, something flowers or grows from an incoherent ground that reason itself, if given full mastery of nature, would have precluded.³⁵ In this case, the two *prima facie* evils that ultimately serve nature’s purpose are (1) nature’s step-motherly miserliness and (2) the “unsocial sociability” of men.³⁶ In being parsimonious in its provisioning of man, nature compels man to develop his rational capacity to meet even the most basic needs of food, clothing, shelter and physical defense. Man only survives by contrivance. At first the harsh requirements imposed by physical necessity seem a source of misery, but Kant sees in these obstacles to our happiness the whet stone whereby man sharpens his rational faculties. Nature in providing such obstacles indicates that it “has willed that man” rise above “the mechanical organization of his animal existence.”³⁷ The

the Works of Immanuel Kant, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 5:435-6].

³⁴ Kant, *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent*, 8:19.

³⁵ Seth Benardete, *Encounters and Reflection*, ed. Ronna Burger (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 196.

³⁶ Kant, *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent*, 8:23.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 8:19.

delay in satisfaction promotes the development of those capacities that make man worthy of well-being.³⁸

While nature's parsimony compels man to actualize his native capacities, this alone would lead only to technical achievement and the transformation of his relationship to his physical environment. Complementing nature's parsimony in external conditions is the internal characteristic of man's "unsocial sociability." Man's unsociable "characteristic of wanting everything according to his own desires" leads to a refined form of "antagonism in society," on account of which he is "driven by his desire for honor, power, or property, to secure status among his fellows."³⁹ The potentially destructive antagonistic impulse is sublimated in society, where men impose upon themselves a collective and reciprocal disciplining of the desire for preeminence.

Thus, Kant claims, from man's antagonistic instinct, which is directed toward salutary ends in society, emerge "all the culture and art that adorn mankind."⁴⁰ Self-regarding vanity promotes the cultivation of a diversity of talents, but most importantly man's unsocial sociability works to "establish a way of thinking that can in time transform the crude natural capacity for moral discrimination into definite practical principles and thus transform a *pathologically* enforced agreement into a society and finally a *moral* whole."⁴¹ In light of this process, Kant quite reasonably declares: "Thanks be to nature for . . . competitive vanity, for the insatiable desire to possess and also to rule. [Since] Without them, all of humanity's excellent natural capacities [Naturanlagen] would have lain eternally dormant."⁴²

³⁸ Ibid., 8:20.

³⁹ Ibid., 8:21-23.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 8:22.

⁴¹ Ibid., 8:21.

⁴² Ibid.

The remainder of Kant's essay is taken up with illustrating how these principles foster political progress, the goal of which is an international federation of states, each with a republican constitution that combines the "highest possible degree of *freedom*" with a "perfectly *just civil constitution*."⁴³ Such a cosmopolitan condition is described as nature's highest purpose, for it serves as "the womb [Schooß] in which all original dispositions [Anlagen] of the human species will become developed."⁴⁴ Such a political order provides the necessary conditions for the gestation of what Kant calls the "seed of enlightenment,"⁴⁵ which he defines as the emergence of man from his "*self-imposed immaturity*" and the courage to use one's own understanding free from all tutelage.⁴⁶ The Enlightenment is man's coming of age.

At this point in the history of the species, the convergence of nature's and reason's purposes would be reciprocal. Not only does nature, by means of a hidden plan further the cultural, political and moral conditions that lead to man's flourishing, man as rational can articulate this intention and through "a philosophic attempt to work out a universal history of the world according to a plan of nature" further this intention of nature.⁴⁷ Nature, in a sense, becomes in man self-conscious of its own intentions. Thus the convergence of aims constitutes more than a harmony. The reciprocal relation between nature and man entails a twofold justification of the human predicament, for nature is no-longer seen as counter-purposive to man's efforts (that is, man is supported by nature in his moral

⁴³ Ibid., 8:22.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 8:28.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 8:30.

⁴⁶ Immanuel Kant, *What is Enlightenment?*, in *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983), 8:35.

⁴⁷ Kant, *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent*, 8:29.

efforts) and nature is recognized to have a purpose and fulfillment in man.

While Kant is not uniformly sanguine,⁴⁸ his essay affirms that one can nevertheless observe in the history of the human race traces of evidence of “the fulfillment of a hidden plan of nature.”⁴⁹ Though what we observe may be faint, since “human nature” cannot be “indifferent” to the future of the species, such traces taken in conjunction with the awareness of our own capacity for contributing to and accelerating this progress suggest an aim or *telos* for the species which, more than a mere chiliastic illusion, is a defining aspect of the human condition.⁵⁰

What Kant here describes as a congenital “inability to be indifferent” to the future is another expression of the interest of reason that underlies the question: “What may I hope for?” Stepping back, we can see that an interest in the future of the species, hope for the realization of the highest good and philanthropy are all aspects of man’s orientation to an uncertain future and the need for an overarching end to guide his local endeavors.

⁴⁸ Kant indicates that the political arrangement necessary for nature to “achieve its remaining purposes for our species,” poses the “supreme problem” as it requires the improbable coincidence of three factors—“correct concepts of the nature of a possible constitution, great experience practiced through many courses of life and beyond this a good will that is prepared to accept it.” Taken in conjunction with the paradox of mastery developed in the *Sixth Thesis*, Kant concludes that a just political order, if it ever comes into being, “will be only very late, after many fruitless attempts” (*Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent*, 8:22-24). For a discussion of the problems raised in theses five through seven and the character of Kant’s response in the remainder of the essay, see Shell, *The Embodiment of Reason*, 168-74.

⁴⁹ Kant, *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent*, 8:27.

⁵⁰ Thus such an account of history serves “to open up a consoling prospect into the future (that we, without presupposing a plan of nature, cannot hope for), a prospect in which we are shown from afar how finally the human species works its way up to a condition in which all the germs that nature has placed in it can fully develop and its destiny be here on earth fulfilled” (*Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent*, 8:30).

In sum, nature brings about a desirable end through the very woes that we so often lament. Precisely what causes us to doubt whether the course of the world has any meaning is seen as the necessary means for achieving a world we could morally affirm. Not only do private vices issue in public benefits, but local self-interest promotes world-historical, species-wide progress, in the course of which the very ills that promote the development of man's capacities will also be overcome. In this sense, historical progress reveals evil to be self-undermining.⁵¹ Kant's Idea of History serves as a theodicy by demonstrating how the emergence of two indispensable elements of the human good—man's rationality and a sound political order—are paradoxically "the result of forces which do not themselves tend towards the good order or the rational."⁵²

III. The Problem of Radical Evil

We saw in our brief consideration of *Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent* how man's competitive unsocial instincts contributed to the formation of a law bound political community. But if this progress is the result of and perhaps even depends on self-interested passions, then the progress is not really moral. Intended as a response to pessimistic doubts, does the assurance that nature works through immorality really bolster a moral man's hopes? Moreover, might such progress only ameliorate man's condition without actually transforming it? Might there be an improvement of

⁵¹ Compare Kant, *Perpetual Peace*, 8:379: "What is morally evil has the property, inseparable from its nature, of being at odds with itself in its aims and destructive of them (especially in relation to others similarly disposed), so that it clears the way for the (moral) principle of the good, even if progress is slow."

⁵² Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1975), 315.

man's lot—his external circumstances, including the formation of a just constitution—without any moral improvement?

To underscore this possibility it is helpful to recall Kant's remark that a republican constitution, though the "most difficult to establish and [even] harder to maintain" is so far from requiring the self-restraint of angels as to be possible even "for a people comprised of devils" because nature comes to our aid in the form of those self-interested "inclinations, and it is merely by organizing a nation well," that "one inclination is able to check or cancel the destructive tendencies of the others. . . . And so man, even though he is not morally good, is forced to be a good citizen."⁵³ That is, not morality but prudential calculation suffices to secure the "only [constitution] wholly compatible with the rights of men."⁵⁴

Furthermore, we might ask whether the problems that beset the human condition reside not in nature, but in the distinguishing feature of man, namely, his freedom. What if the evil to be remedied is not that of the external world or even something that is born of our social interactions, but is rather an essential part of us? What if the vanity that is an engine for technological and cultural progress is actually an indication of some more deeply rooted problem?

It is these objections that Kant tackles directly in *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, which is also Kant's most explicit engagement with the claims of revelation. But rather than a typical Enlightenment rebuttal, Kant seems with his doctrine of radical evil to be appropriating the central tenet of religious thought. But is this a mere rhetorical concession? Goethe, for one, read Kant in this manner, declaring Kant to have "criminally smeared his philosopher's cloak with the shameful stain of radical evil, after it has taken him a long human life to cleanse it from many a dirty

⁵³ Kant, *Perpetual Peace*, 8:366.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

prejudice [just] so that Christians too might be enticed to kiss its hem.”⁵⁵

But perhaps Goethe too quickly sees in Kant’s use of Pauline language of sin a concession to traditional Christianity, for if we probe the meaning of radical evil, we uncover a metaphysical doctrine in keeping with the central Kantian thought that man is rational but finite, and that his peculiarity is a consequence of the relation between these two facts.

Kant begins by observing two opposed camps of thought. Some condemn the world for being the debauched locus of evil; man has fallen away from some Golden Age or Lost Paradise and is in a state of deepening moral decline, awaiting a final judgment to restore a just and righteous order. Others, however, have championed the opposite view; man is essentially good and rather than falling away from some idyllic state is continually progressing toward the realization of a moral order in this world.⁵⁶ Opposed to these two extremes, Kant wonders “whether a middle ground” may be possible, namely whether “as a species, the human being [is] . . . partly good, partly evil.”⁵⁷

But this moderate judgment entails more than recognizing that man periodically commits evil deeds. Since all action is preceded by a determination of the will in accordance with a maxim, any evil deed is the result of the subordination of duty to our natural desire for happiness. In subordinating the universal moral law to the claims of “self-love” we act immorally or heteronomously, since we permit ourselves to be determined by something other than the

⁵⁵ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, “Letter to Herder, June 7th 1773,” quoted in Karl Barth, *Protestant Thought: From Rousseau to Ritschl*, trans. Brian Cozens (New York:: Harper & Brothers, 1953), 178.

⁵⁶ Kant, *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, 6:19-20.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 6:20.

law of practical reason.⁵⁸ From evil deeds we infer “an underlying evil maxim, and from this, [we can infer] the presence in the subject of a common ground . . . of all particular morally evil maxims.”⁵⁹

That is, in the very “nature of a human being” there lies a propensity to evil.⁶⁰ “The ground of evil cannot lie in any object *determining* the power of choice through inclination, not in any natural impulses, but only in a rule that the power of choice itself produces for the exercise of its freedom.”⁶¹ Thus the ground of evil lies in man’s capacity to give himself rules, in man’s capacity for self-legislation, for forming maxims that respond to the question “what ought I to do?” To say that a human being is by nature good and evil means that “he holds within himself a first ground” for the adoption of good (lawful) or evil (unlawful) maxims, “and that he holds this ground *qua* human.”⁶²

An immoral maxim subordinates the objective unconditional imperative of reason to the subjective incentive for happiness. One, thereby, makes an exception for oneself, arguing in effect that one is not really a member of the class of beings to whom the moral law applies. But what is the ground of our tendency to make an exception for ourselves? At first it seems that the natural, sensuous inclination to happiness provides a sufficient account of our motivation for doing so, but in his critique of the Stoics Kant rules out this possibility, arguing that the Stoics “mistook their enemy, who is not to be sought in the natural inclinations, which merely lack discipline, . . . but is rather . . . an invisible enemy, one who hides behind reason and hence [is] all the more dangerous.”⁶³ The real

⁵⁸ Ibid., 6:36.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 6:20.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 6:21.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 6:57.

enemy of virtue is “the malice (of the human heart) which secretly undermines the disposition with soul-corrupting principles.”⁶⁴ It is not mere sensual receptivity or the promptings of natural instinct that interfere with the adoption of genuine moral principles. There must be, in addition, some active resistance on our part to the adoption of moral maxims. “Genuine evil consists in our *will* not to resist the inclinations when they invite transgression.”⁶⁵ Since, the universal command of the moral law is always present to us, we must be willfully turning away from it in all evil deeds. Thus while man may have immediate access to something unconditioned in his awareness of the moral law, he is nevertheless beset by a propensity toward evil, a perversion in the very capacity for self-determination that is the ground of mankind’s freedom, moral action and dignity.

Not only, however, is this propensity to evil rooted in our freedom but Kant somewhat surprisingly stresses that we are responsible for the presence of this innate tendency toward evil. In what makes the doctrine of radical evil most resemble the Christian doctrine of original sin, Kant claims that we are somehow guilty for “the indwelling of the evil principle.”⁶⁶ We are its “author;” we who harbor it have earned it outside of time through what Kant calls an “intelligible deed” or “deed of freedom.”⁶⁷ But such culpability is the obverse of the responsibility we must assume for there to be morality at all. In the same inscrutable freedom of reason that underlies the determination of the will in accordance with the moral

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 6:58.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 6:18.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 6:25, 31, 21. See also 6:41: “We cannot inquire into the origin in time of this deed but must inquire only into its origin in reason, in order thereby to determine and, where possible, to explain the propensity [to it], if there is one, i.e., the subjective universal ground of the adoption of a transgression into our maxim.”

law lies the basis of our propensity to moral evil. The will is the locus of two countervailing propensities.

While Kant's language of guilt, perversion, wickedness, and even of our *peccatum originarium* seems to support Goethe's chastisement, there is a metaphysical interpretation of radical evil as the individuation of reason that does not merely modify Christian teaching but ultimately subverts its central tenets. That we can be swayed by subjective incentives at all is not merely a product of our sensuality, for such motivation does not yet issue into action. A determination of the will, an act of reason, is still required, but rationality, hitherto, has been equated with universality. How then can reason form a maxim for the determination of the will that is evil and therefore irrational?

Reason as such is entirely general; not tied to a particular place or time, it is without perspective. But the "I think" of the transcendental ego is necessarily localized. The first-person pronoun, which accompanies all our rational activity, is an indexical term that is intelligible only in relation to something it is not. The reason, then, of a located "I" is subject to all the irrational contingencies of facticity—its being here and now (*hic et nunc*). Whereas reason as such is universal, each individual man is geographically and chronologically determined. This specificity and our awareness of it make us, in contrast to divine reason, peculiarly historical as well as rational beings. The familiar epistemological problems facing the cognizing of historical particulars are a consequence of man's doubleness as universally rational but also having a local perspective, with access to both atemporal truths of reason and temporal truths of fact.

That is, if the good principle is nothing other than the structure of reason or the form of rationality, the evil principle must oppose it, and if the form of rationality is universality or pure

lawfulness, then it would be individuation or the contingency of particularity that is opposed to morality, that is the basis of our propensity to evil and, what amounts to the same thing, our propensity to irrationality.

Radical evil is not the result of sensual temptation or the appeal of earthly delights but our susceptibility to the temptation to make an exception for oneself in the face of the moral law—to prefer one's own subjective happiness to the objective command of duty, on account of a rational argument. That is, man's facticity, his individuation is precisely what allows such arguments to be persuasive to reason. It is in some sense reasonable to prefer one's own happiness to the strictures of the universal command of reason.

IV. The Teleology of Human Limitation

In light of Kant's doctrine of radical evil, the prospect for a successful theodicy seems rather bleak. Radical evil not only "corrupts the ground of all maxims; it is, moreover, as a natural propensity, *inextirpable* by human powers."⁶⁸ All men at all times will be subject to its sway. If evil is a permanent element of human consciousness, how can moral progress ever be possible? If each new generation of the species is born with such a propensity to evil, what good is any political-cultural progress? How in the face of radical evil can one even ask "what may I hope for?"

The interpretation of radical evil as individuation offers a way of understanding Kant's middle path between abject resignation in the face of evil's presence within the human and shallow self-assurance that it need not present a permanent problem. It does so in two ways. First, it allows us to understand why radical evil is

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 6:37.

related to what Kant calls “a limitation in our reason,” namely the need to posit ends and have those ends represented to us in some sensible manner. Second, it provides a motor or dynamic principle for specifically moral historical change. Precisely because man’s reason is divided against itself, man can claim to be the author of his own history. Together these two corollaries provide the metaphysical basis for an argument that reaffirms the autonomy of the human species and places man’s rationality rather than God’s grace at the center of any eschatological (or soteriological) story.

Kant introduces the notion of an essential “limitation of our reason” as a correction of an idealized picture of human autonomy. Describing morality as entirely self-sufficient, needing no incentive other than the moral law itself, Kant declares that “when duty is the issue,” morality not only “can perfectly well abstract from ends altogether,” but it “ought so to do.”⁶⁹ But this picture of morality is quickly qualified. Morality is indeed logically self-sufficient when one abstracts from man’s localized condition, but such a merely formal conception of autonomy entails a purity of will that deserves to be described as “holy.”⁷⁰ Such angelic purity is not native to man. His condition is rather different, “for in the absence of all reference to an end no determination of the will can take place in human beings at all, since no such determination can occur without an effect, and its representation.”⁷¹ Our awareness of the moral law may provide a “*how*,” but without a “*wither*” or wherefore we cannot act.⁷² Kant describes this need for ends as one of “the inescapable limitations of human beings and of their practical faculty of reason.”⁷³ In “every action,” says Kant, man seeks “something in it

⁶⁹ Ibid., 6:3-4.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 6:4.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., 6:7.

that might serve [him] as an end,” which, though it comes “last in practice,” is “first in representation and intention.”⁷⁴ For the human, pure lawfulness turns out to be an ideal; man necessarily asks himself: “*What is then the result of this right conduct of ours?*”⁷⁵

But we are not merely concerned with the ends of particular actions. Rather, in being oriented to ends, we are also oriented to a more encompassing project, one that would provide unity to our endeavors, making those more immediate ends constitute an ordered whole. Reason must “fashion for itself the concept of a final end of all things” and thereby provide for itself “a special point of reference for the unification of all ends.”⁷⁶ This highest end (*Endzweck*) not only orients all of reason’s endeavors but is also our response to the ostensible incongruity of the “purposiveness deriving from freedom with the purposiveness of nature” [*Zweckmäßigkeit aus Freiheit mit der Zweckmäßigkeit der Natur*].⁷⁷ That is, man’s reason requires that the end of morality harmonize with the end of our natural desire for happiness. The possible unity of the two can only be thought through the idea of the highest good.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 6:5.

⁷⁶ Ibid. Compare Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, “On the ideal of the highest good, as a determining ground of the ultimate end of pure reason” (A803/B831-A819/B847) and “The architectonic of reason” (A832/B860-A851/B879). The teleology of the idea of the highest good that is postulated in response to a moral need in *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* and its progressive, historical dimension should be understood in light of the centrality of teleology to Kant’s critical philosophy and, in particular, in light of Kant’s striking statement that “philosophy is the science of the relation of all cognition to the essential ends of human reason (*teleologia rationis humanae*) and the philosopher is not an artist of reason but the legislator of human reason” (A839/B867). On the centrality of teleology to Kant’s philosophic enterprise see Richard L. Velkley, “Metaphysics, Freedom and History: Kant and the End of Reason,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (2001): 153-170.

⁷⁷ Kant, *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, 6:5.

Thus, due to a limitation of our practical reason, we fashion an idea, which unites the two realms we inhabit—the noumenal and the phenomenal—and which thereby serves as the ultimate purpose of all our striving. Our concern with the coincidence of morality and happiness is an expression of our desire for overcoming this fundamental duality and attaining wholeness. Such wholeness is our deepest aspiration. Therefore, according to Kant, “morality leads to religion” as a consequence of the need to reflect on the possibility of realizing this deepest hope.⁷⁸

But to have some motive force in the determination of our will, both the local ends of our particular actions and the guiding ideas of reason must be given representational form, which requires that “morally oriented reason call (through the imagination) sensibility into play,” thereby connecting man to locally available sensible material.⁷⁹ This need for representation is also described by Kant as an inexorable limitation of human reason, which demands “for even the highest concepts and grounds of reason something that the *senses can hold on to*.”⁸⁰

This need for a representation of an end to precede all our actions means that we are receptive to the conditions which surround us—to the political, cultural and social circumstances within which we exercise our freedom. Such receptivity makes political life possible, but it also means that we exercise our freedom in response to the community’s representation of moral ideas such as the holy, the just and the good and metaphysical ideas of God, freedom and immortality. The inescapable limitation of human

⁷⁸ Ibid., 6:6. It should be underscored that both the idea of the highest good and the idea of “a highest . . . being who alone can unite the two elements of this good” are born of “our natural need” to think for all our actions “taken as a whole some sort of final end which reason can justify” (6:5).

⁷⁹ Ibid., 6:23n.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 6:109. Compare 6:65n, 80. Compare also Michalson’s account of schematization (*The Historical Dimensions of a Rational Faith*, 78-114).

reason or radical evil might, therefore, be seen as the condition of human communion, in both its religious and political guises, each of which is centrally concerned with ideas that cannot be objects of knowledge but always remain objects of hope. The question “what may I hope for” seems to lie at the ground of both political and religious life.

In his examination of religion, Kant focuses primarily on the representation of two governing ideas. On the individual level, practical reason is concerned with the pursuit of a pure or holy will, which is given a personified representation in the story of Christ.⁸¹ On the species-wide level, the central idea is the ethical community, which constitutes the perfectly just social order, where the perfect coincidence of virtue and happiness reigns. Moral progress consists in progress toward the realization or instantiation in this world of these two ideals.⁸² Kant reads the past history of religious development, in particular the transition from the statute-governed juridical community of the Jewish nation to the universal religion of Christianity with its emphasis on a good will, as signs that the species has already made some movement toward the ethical community’s universal, cosmopolitan and moral form of religious life.

These two ideas are intimately interwoven. If the ethical community were to be achieved, all its members would need to

⁸¹ See Kant’s discussion in the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* that for “a holy will” or a “perfectly good will” there are no imperatives, that is, “the ‘ought’ is out of place here, because volition is of itself necessarily in accord with the law” (4:414). Compare also the *Groundwork* on the good will as the only thing that is “good without limitation,” not “because of what it effects or accomplishes, . . . but only because of its volition” and on its attainment as constituting “the true vocation of reason” (4:393, 294, 396).

⁸² Compare the distinction between two senses of the concept of the highest, as (1) what is supreme—“that condition which is itself unconditioned, that is, not subordinate to any other (*originairum*)”—and (2) what is complete—“that whole which is not part of a still greater whole of the same kind (*perfectissimum*),” in Kant’s account of the highest good in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (5:110-113).

possess holy wills. That is, their actions would be determined entirely and exclusively by the moral law, without regard for any further end. Reciprocally, the ethical community consists in the necessary social conditions for the realization of such pure morality. But insofar as the realization of one idea presupposes the other, they represent goals that can only ever be approximated. Nevertheless, presently existing institutions can be reformed in accordance with the idea of the ethical community and an increasingly rational and moral culture can aid individual efforts to become moral. A great philosophic teacher such as Christ (or perhaps Kant himself) can critique presently existing institutions, leading to their reformation, such that the visible, worldly church more closely resembles or represents the pure idea of reason, that is, the ethical community.

To reiterate, as a consequence of a limitation of our reason, we are purposive beings. We set ourselves tasks to be completed, ends to be realized, future projects to be achieved. These ends are products of reason, of our freedom. When we form a maxim, because we are localized rational beings, it is in response not just to the bare “What ought I to do?” but rather to the question “What ought I to do here and now, in these very conditions” and thus the maxim invariably contains a goal. But there is within rationality itself, regardless of local circumstance, a highest end that provides an ultimate orientation for the exercise of our freedom. It is a totalizing, comprehensive goal and therefore concerns the whole species in relation to the whole order of being, namely, that whole of which the noumenal realm of freedom and the phenomenal realm of nature are but parts. This highest good—the ethical community—is posited in relation to our present circumstance. In so doing we simultaneously judge our present condition to be deficient and generate a *telos* for the history of the species.

But what assures us that there will be some movement toward this goal? If man is essentially free, how can there be a logic that governs man's development? For there to be such a logic requires that "there is something [governing] and to this extent that human actions take place in an involuntary direction."⁸³ If in the face of radical evil nature is powerless, where is a principle of historical change to be found? In what dynamic opposition of forces are we to find a principle of progress that might make it rational to hope for even an asymptotic approach to the ideals of practical reason?

The interpretation of radical evil as individuation provides a possible solution, for though radical evil can never be expunged, Kant insists that "since it is found in man, a being whose actions are free," "it must be possible to *overcome* it."⁸⁴ Overcoming localized reason would mean reasoning from a universal, cosmopolitan perspective, or if freedom is the essence of man, and this essence is realized when reason determines the will in accordance with a maxim that could be universalized, then the overcoming of evil is nothing more nor less than the actualization of our essence. But as individuated finite rational beings, we are not simply essences but existing individual *things*, particular discrete beings. To be "*what we are*" means overcoming the collateral damage of "*that we are*". It means trying to overcome all the accidental features, all the non-being qua essence, of our being chronologically and geographically localized.

Thus, given nature's impotency in the face of radical evil, there can only be a logic to the history of the species, if there is a logic to each individuated reason, which strives to realize its essence as reasoning, willing and acting from the wholly universal

⁸³ Pierre Hassner, "Immanuel Kant," in *History of Political Philosophy*, 3rd edition, ed. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 600.

⁸⁴ Kant, *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, 6:37.

perspective of pure reason. In contrast to the historical progress brought about by nature, any *moral* progress of the species must be the result of *local*, moral progress, of the self-overcoming of individuals. If there is a logic to the change of autonomous human history, it is because there is a logic to the change of the individual in his own overcoming of radical evil.

V. Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper it was noted that three questions guide Kant's philosophic endeavors: "What can I know?" "What ought I to do?" and "What may I hope for?" There is in fact a fourth, into which the three ultimately resolve—"What is man?"⁸⁵ In concluding, I'd like to propose that Kant's answer is that man is the being who continually strives to transcend himself, to transform himself in pursuit of ideals he is destined never to fully attain. This desire for self-overcoming is ultimately the product of man's being rational but finite, limited by individuation and yet forever wanting to transcend the parochial perspective of the here and now.

The fundamental diremption at the core of man, expressed in Kant's doctrine of radical evil, is not only the source of evil in the

⁸⁵ "The field of philosophy in this cosmopolitan sense can be brought down to the following questions: 1. *What can I know?* 2. *What ought I to do?* 3. *What may I hope?* 4. *What is man?* *Metaphysics* answers the first question, *morals* the second, *religion* the third, and *anthropology* the fourth. Fundamentally, however, we could reckon all of this as anthropology, because the first three questions relate to the last one. The Philosopher must thus be able to determine: 1. the sources of human knowledge, 2. the extent of the possible and profitable use of all knowledge, and finally 3. the limits of reason. The last is the most necessary but also the hardest" [Immanuel Kant, *The Jäsche Logic*, in *Lectures on Logic*, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, trans. and ed. J. Michael Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 9:25]. Compare Immanuel Kant, "Letter to C.F. Staudlin, May 4, 1793," in *Philosophical Correspondence, 1759-99*, trans. and ed. Arbulf Zweig, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 205.

world but also of the despair that comes from reflection upon the world's ills. For it is only because of this doubleness that we desire a theodicy; it is a testament to the peculiarity of our condition that we need an account for our failure to be what we think we *ought* to be. The desire for a theodicy is born not only of our suffering the ills of the world but equally from the sense that man contains something divine. The need for a theodicy is born of our being located between beasts and gods. Rather than a vindication of God, a theodicy is really a story we tell ourselves that reconciles us to our own failure to be gods, but the very fact that we do make an effort to give an account is an indication of a spark of the divine, for it is only rational beings that can ask themselves why they failed to be fully rational.

Hope and rational faith are corollaries of man's need to set himself goals. Fundamentally teleological, man is directed to a wholeness or completeness he currently lacks. Man is directed to the good and must have faith in making progress toward its realization or he falls into dark despair. His doubleness as rational yet finite makes hope an inescapable element of his condition, of what might aptly be called the "ordeal of consciousness."⁸⁶

⁸⁶ This formulation is taken from the writings of Michael Oakeshott, who employs this formulation in several places. See, for example, Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 243.