

Title: Kant's concept of radical evil

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Introduction

The concept of radical evil is important in Kant's theory of human nature. In the theory, a person is evil if he performs the kind of evil actions which make people know that the evil maxims are in him. It is radical if it corrupts the ground of all maxims. The corruption is due to the propensity to evil which the origin is the freedom of the power of choice. Since it is due to the freedom of the power of choice of human being, they must be imputable for their actions. Also, human being cannot remove the radical evil completely by themselves because good maxims are not possible if the propensity to evil is innate (Kant 1998, P.59). The concept is complicated and difficult to be proved. For example, if the propensity to evil is natural, it must be universal. If human being is liable to their evil acts, the decision to act must be a free choice which is contingent. Since it is impossible to be both universal and contingent at the same time, the concept is contradictory. Furthermore, if good maxims are not possible in human being, why are there moral laws and moral standards in the human society? If we accept that there are moral laws or moral standards in the human society, good maxims must exist and human being will not be evil innately. This paper attempts to explain Kant's theory of human nature and argues that Kant's assumptions on the theory are subject to consideration.

Kant's theory of human nature

The concept of radical evil is found in Kant's book "Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason". In part one of the book, Kant, firstly, explains his concept from the view of rigorists. Then he introduces the concepts of the three predispositions of human being and the propensity to evil. Finally, he attempts to prove that the radical evil is natural and the origin of the evil is the freedom of the power of choice of human being.

The rigorist's view

Kant thinks that human being will conduct themselves according to the maxims that they adopt. If both good maxims and evil maxims are adopted, human being will be in a position that they cannot determine how to act because evil is the negative form of moral good. A person can only select one of them as his maxim. Otherwise, he cannot take an action because the two kinds of maxim are contradictory.

Kant is a rigorist who believes that human being cannot adopt the good maxim in part and the evil maxim in other part. They must select one of them and the selected one will be universal. Kant explains that an incentive can determine the freedom of the power of choice to an action if a person has incorporated the incentive into his maxim. In such case, the incentive coexists with the freedom of the power of choice. The relationships of the incentive, the freedom of the power of choice and the action can be expressed as:

Incentive (maxim) -> the freedom of the power of choice -> the action

In the judgment of reason, the moral law is an incentive. When a person makes the moral law his maxim, he is morally good. The relationships are:

The moral law (maxim) -> the freedom of the power of choice -> act morally

If the moral law cannot determine the freedom of the power of choice relating to the action which is in relation to the moral law, in rigorist's view, it must be due to the derivation of the moral law (i.e. the incentive) incorporating into the maxim. So, it is not possible to have a different disposition in relation to the moral law. In other words, a disposition must be either morally good or evil.

In addition, Kant (1998, P49) puts a note on the idea that when we are talking about the idea what human being ought to be, we should not assume that human being can adopt both the good maxim and the evil maxim. If we are talking about the standards to judge human actions, we can find both moral good and evil in human being. The note implies that we can infer both the moral good and evil maxims from our actions practically, but it is not a good idea to put both of them in the assumption of the theory of human nature because it will make the theory meaningless. When we say that human being is natural moral good and natural evil, it amounts to say nothing because evil is the negative form of moral good in Kant's sense.

The three predispositions

Predispositions are elements which determine the human nature. According to Kant (1998, P.50-52), the three predispositions are the predisposition to the animality, the predisposition to the humanity and the predisposition to the personality. The predisposition to the animality and the predisposition to the humanity are brought under the general title of self-love. The former requires no reason and refers to physical or primary needs which are the essential characters of living beings. The

latter is based on practical reason and involves the feeling of comparison with others. It relates to the rational being that we differentiate human being from other living beings. The third element does not relate to self-love but relates to the moral law which is unconditionally incorporated in the human being. It is the capacity to respect the moral laws, so that the moral laws are adopted in the human nature. Kant calls it the predisposition to the personality. The three predispositions are the necessary elements of human nature and coexist with the human being. Since they are not contrary to the moral laws, Kant indicates that all of them are not only negative good but they are also predispositions to good.

The propensity to evil

Another important concept of Kant's theory of human nature is the propensity to evil. The meaning of evil refers to moral evil that human being allows the inference of evil maxims in them. Kant (1998, 53) indicates that propensity can be innate, acquired or brought by human being. Physical propensity is innate but the propensity to evil is brought by human being upon himself. The propensity to evil is possible only when human being freely adopts the evil maxims in him. If the propensity to evil is universal, it will be a natural propensity to evil.

In order to explain the propensity to evil is universal, Kant indicates that it is rooted in one of the three predispositions of human being. Both the predisposition to animality and the predisposition to personality are not applicable because the former is for physical needs which cannot be controlled by human being and the latter is not possible to be both moral good and evil at the same time. The only choice for Kant is to root the propensity to evil in the predisposition to humanity. Since the predisposition to humanity is innate, if the propensity to evil is rooted in it, the propensity to evil can be universal.

The evil by nature

Kant (1998, P55-56) explains the meaning of "the human being is evil by nature" that being evil is applicable to the human species, not individuals. It does not imply that being evil is given in the human species. If it is given, being evil is necessary for human being. Since the evil, in Kant's theory, refers to morally evil, it must not be a predisposition of human being. So, it cannot be given. However, through

experience, being morally evil can be presupposed as subjectively necessary in human being. It is necessary if and only if morally evil is universal.

Kant (1998, P57-60) indicates that moral evil originates from neither sensuous nature nor an evil reason. It should originate from the freedom of the power of choice of human being. Kant thinks that the three predispositions are incorporated into the supreme maxim of human being. The predisposition to animality and the predisposition to humanity can be bought under the title of self-love (the law of self-love). If they are sufficient for the determination of the power of choice, human being will be morally evil. If the predisposition to personality alone (the moral laws) is sufficient for the determination of the power of choice, human being will be morally good. Kant points out that whether a person is good or evil is not determined by the difference of the incentives (the moral law and the law of self-love). It is determined by the moral order of the incentives incorporated in the maxim of human being. If human being makes the incentives of self-love as the condition of compliance with the moral law, human being is morally evil. The propensity to evil is the propensity which makes self-love superior to the moral laws. Since it is, in Kant's theory, universal, the radical evil is natural. Kant also indicates that the radical evil cannot be removed by human being themselves because it is rooted in the predisposition to humanity.

The origin of evil in human nature

After explaining the evil by nature, Kant (1998, P61-64) points out that origin, in general, can be found according to reason or time. However, the origin of evil can only be sought from reason because evil actions are determined by the freedom of the power of choice which, in turn, is not determined by other preceding cause. We cannot find it by temporal term because, if we are doing so, the ultimate cause will be a propensity to evil, i.e. innate. Then, human being will not be accountable for his actions.

Since the origin of evil is the freedom of the power of choice which is imputable, all other subordinate choices, whether they are free or not, are not matter. Human being must be accountable for what he chooses initially. The freedom of the power of choice in the very beginning is the most important choice. For example, when a man chooses to be a human being, assuming that we can have the freedom of the

power to make the choice, he must be accountable for all his acts as a human being, including the involuntary acts. In Kant's theory, the choice of adopting maxims which is not in compliance with the moral laws is a free initial choice of human being. It is the origin of evil and human being is imputable for the choice. Even though all other subsequent choices are not free, human being is still imputable for the initial choice.

In the remark session of the part one of the book "Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason", Kant indicates that the relationship between the freedom of the power of choice and the effect of an action is bounded. Kant does not claim that it is a cause and effect relationship because they cannot be inferred. For example, if a person decides to do an action and the action leads to an effect, we cannot infer that the other person making the same decision will lead to the same effect of the action. In the cause and effect relationship, the same cause will always have the same effect in the same environment. In this sense, the freedom of the power of choice is the origin of evil but not the cause of evil.

Discussions on Kant's theory of human nature

Kant's theory of human nature is accompanied by some assumptions which are arguable. Four of them will be discussed in this section. They are the possibility of both moral good and evil, the necessity of the predispositions to good, the problem of the freedom of the power of choice and the problem of universality. Since Kant does not provide sufficient proofs for his arguments, all the four assumptions are supposed subject to further consideration.

The possibility of both moral good and evil

Kant thinks that it is impossible to have a disposition either moral good or evil because the incentive (the moral law or self-love) is incorporated in the maxim which human being will conduct ourselves accordingly. It seems superficially that human being have two choices, moral good or evil. However, Kant indicates that human being has the propensity to evil which is rooted in the predispositions to humanity. When human being makes a choice, they universally have the propensity to evil. So, Kant concludes that human being is evil although it is not innate. It implies that human being do not have choice to adopt the moral good in their maxim because the

propensity to evil is rooted in the predisposition to humanity that they cannot remove it. The foremost assumption of Kant's theory is that human being cannot have a maxim that is both moral good and evil at the same time.

The concepts of moral good and evil are created by human being. They are meaningful only when we are living in a society or dealing with others. If human being is living in isolation, they have no one to compare with and what they do will be for themselves only. The predisposition to humanity is not so significant in an isolated world than in a society where human being lives together. Since the predisposition to humanity involves comparison, if there are no others to compare, they will be inactive. So in an isolated world where no social contact is found between individuals, human being will not be evil. When an isolated person joins a group or a society, the predisposition to humanity is active and the person becomes evil immediately. Similarly, a baby, who is born in a society, will change from moral good to evil when he contacts the outside world at the time of birth. The dramatic change is so amazing that no one will be aware of it because the time interval is so short that human being is still lacking the capability to measure it. If we accept human being cannot be both moral good and evil at the same time, we must also accept the dramatic change, otherwise it is contradictory. If we consider the change is not so dramatic and it can take some time to complete it, we should accept that a person can be both moral good and evil in the interval period. During the period, the person will follow the moral maxim in some time and the evil maxim in the other time. The rigorist's view is so rigid that moral good and evil are absolutely contradictory, the intermediate cases, which may exist practically, are ignored.

The necessity of the predispositions to good

The second assumption is the predisposition to good. Kant thinks that the three predispositions of human nature are negative good because they are not contrary to the moral laws. However, he does not explain it in detail. A possible explanation is that the concept of moral law is created by human being. Maybe we can assume that the first two men of the world are the creators of the moral laws. Since the three predispositions exist in them when they were born, it is impossible to assume that the three predispositions of the two men were against the moral laws which had not yet been created. Another explanation is that the assumption of the predisposition to

good is essential because Kant believes that good maxims are not possible if human being is innate evil. In case of assuming the three predispositions evil, moral maxims will never be adopted in human being. Human being does not have the freedom of the power of choice to adopt moral good in their maxims. Then, they are not accountable for their evil acts because being evil is not their free choice. That is possibly why Kant cannot assume the three predispositions evil. In addition, Kant (1998, P.49) indicates that human being cannot adopt both good maxim and evil maxim at the same time because the maxims being adopted are universal. If human being can adopt good maxim in some parts and evil maxim in others, it will be a contradiction. So Kant can only assume the three predispositions good.

In fact, the assumption is necessary practically because it is the basic belief of human being. The basic belief directly affects human judgment. If the predispositions are regarded as evil, the human society will be changed to the one without moral feeling. Without moral feeling, the moral laws become meaningless. To understand the impact of losing moral feeling, let us look at the Peng Yu incident in China in 2006.

On Nov 20, 2006, an old woman fell to the ground and broke her leg after jostling at a bus stop in Nanjing, an eastern China city. A young man, Peng Yu, helped her up and escorted her to hospital. Later the woman and her family dragged the man to court, which ruled that the young man should pay 40 percent of the medical costs. The court said the decision was reached by reasoning. The verdict said that "according to common sense", it was highly possible that the defendant had bumped into the old woman, given that he was the first person to get off the bus when the old woman was pushed down in front of the bus door and, "according to what one would normally do in this case", Peng would have left soon after sending the woman to the hospital instead of staying there for the surgical check. "His behavior obviously went against common sense."

This "reasoning" horrified, and angered, the whole nation. From then on, the number of pedestrians helping old people in need has dramatically decreased. Using search engines online, one can get dozens of stories of old people left lying on the ground without any passers-by giving a helping hand. Netizens have even coined a new phrase for it - "sequel of the Peng Yu case". (China Daily, 2011-01-05)

The reasoning behind the judgment made in the case is that people getting off a bus will push down the people near the bus stop and a stranger will not take care others in

need. The reasoning obviously does not involve the consideration of the moral characters of human being. In other words, it is based on the assumption that human being is evil. If moral feeling was included in the judgment, the reasoning might not be in this way. So, innate moral good in the human nature is necessary both practically and theoretically.

In a society without moral feeling, will it really be no moral law? According to Kant, good maxim is not possible if human being chooses evil maxim as their supreme maxim. The same logic used by Kant in the human nature theory can also be applied in a society where human beings choose the evil maxim as their supreme maxim. When human beings conduct themselves according to the immoral laws which are the counterpart of the moral laws in Kant's theory, they may also be affected by the propensity to moral good which is rooted in the predisposition to animality and the predisposition to humanity. For example, safety and live are the primary needs of living beings. In order to have the feeling of safety or to live, human being will have the desire to be protected, especially for the weaker ones. At the same time, human being will have the desire to protect the others because they will obtain the feeling of superior to others, especially for the stronger ones. When the weaker ones and the stronger ones live together, moral acts, which are not against Kant's moral laws, are also possible because human being has the freedom of the power of choice. They may not act according to the immoral laws which are in their supreme maxims because whatever reasons. In fact, it is not necessary to find out the reasons because the freedom of the power of choice is contingent. It is the origin of the propensity to good in the society which is without moral feeling. In this case, it is not necessary to have the predispositions to good in the physical world. However, since it is one of the important assumptions in Kant's theory, it is necessary in the theory.

The problem of the freedom of the power of choice

The third assumption is the freedom of the power of choice. Kant thinks that there is no predisposition to evil in human being. However, it is possible that human being has the propensity to evil which is applicable to moral being who have the freedom to adopt moral good or evil as their maxims. The freedom of the power of choice is contingent because moral being can adopt either moral good or others as

their maxims. Of this point, Kant's theory of the natural propensity to evil is questionable. If the propensity to evil is natural, it must be universal. If it is universal, it will not be contingent. Freedom of the power of choice and universality is contradictory. It is difficult to ensure the universality of adopting evil in human being's maxim if human being has the freedom of the power of choice.

To deal with the contradiction, Kant (1998, P.55) indicates that the propensity to evil refers to human's acts which are determined by the freedom of the power of choice. The freedom of the power of choice is always earlier than the acts and itself is not an act. If it is regarded as an intelligent act, not physical act, then the propensity to evil can be applied to the freedom of the power of choice. In this sense, the freedom of the power of choice is no longer a real freedom because it is affected by the propensity to evil. The choice is constrained. A constrained choice cannot be a real free choice. If so, it may not be contingent.

The freedom of the power of choice is an important concept in Kant's radical evil theory. It is important because Kant believes that a person is accountable for his actions which are determined by his free choice. If it is not free, human beings need not be responsible for their actions. Kant (1998, P.46) points out that the freedom of the power of choice is possible only if there are no conditions or constraints and no cause-effect relationship. He emphasizes the freedom of the adoption of maxims because he thinks that adopting maxims in human being is no restriction. Only in this sense, human being is imputed to one's actions. In Kant's point of view, human being will act according to their maxims which are adopted freely. A person can adopt any maxims, morally good, evil or both, without restriction. When adopting both moral maxims and non-moral (humanity) maxims, on the principle of self-love, the person will act according to non-moral maxims because moral maxims are not self-love. If it is correct, the propensity to evil is caused by the principle of self-love which is innate, not the freedom of the adoption of maxims. Freedom of the adoption of maxims is not a matter if a person always follows the moral maxims. It is the matter of adopting the principle of self-love. In Kant's term, it is the propensity to evil putting moral acts subordinate to non-moral acts.

Furthermore, Kant does not consider the case of doing a moral act or not doing a moral act. Not doing a moral act is not amount to doing a non-moral act because there is no action involved. Since the propensity to evil is applied to actions, it is not

appropriate to declare a person who does nothing is evil. When a person decides to do or not to do a moral act, if the incentives of doing and not doing are the same, the person cannot make the decision if incentives are regarded as the determinant. Kant (1998, P.59) thinks it is a situation of contradiction because a person cannot be morally good and evil at the same time. From this point of view, we can infer that Kant considers there are only two choices: either doing the moral act because the person is morally good or not doing the act because the person is evil. Kant does not consider the third option that the person does not do the act because of ignorance. When making a rational decision, a person needs to know the incentives of the two choices. If the information is not available or unknown, the person may not be able to make a decision immediately and waits for more information. During the indecisive moment, we cannot call the person evil because of not doing the moral act.

Another other problem about the freedom of the power of choice is whether there is a real free choice or not. The definition of free choice, in Kant's sense, is no restriction, i.e. a person can make a choice without any influence. However, the freedom of the power of choice of human being is restricted by their experiences. Since the capacity of thinking of human being is not unlimited, human being can only think about what they have being experienced. For those things or concepts outside their experiences, they can only imagine them based on what they have already known. This limitation makes human being not really free to think. The real freedom is that human being can choose to overcome the restriction or not. They choose to overcome it does not mean that they really can overcome it. It only means they have an incentive to do so. However, if the aim is to overcome restrictions, the aim itself again limits the freedom of the power of choice. A choice based on any aim will not be a free choice because it is limited by the previous decision. Only aimless choice is really free. So when we are talking about the freedom of the adoption of maxims, we must distinguish two types of choices, before experience and after experience. The former implies real freedom because we are not restricted by previous experience while the latter means restricted freedom. Basically, all rational choices are not free. Only those choices not based on rational thinking can have the possibility to be free.

The real freedom of the power of choice may also happen before the birth of a human being. Once a person is born, he will be constrained by the human body and

the environment. All the choices are not really free. If human being is imputable because of the freedom of the power of choice, human being will not be imputable after birth. Why is human being responsible for their actions only under the freedom of the power of choice? In fact, there is no free choice once a person is born. All the choices are conditioned. Human being can only make a choice under a preconditioned environment. Although human being can change the environment to some extent but what human being can do depends on the environment where they live in. Human being should be responsible for their actions because they are rational. They should be responsible for what they do if the choices have gone through a rational consideration. For irrational persons, we may not think that they should be responsible for their actions because they are irrational, not because the decisions are not free choices. It is the assumption of the freedom of the power of choice causing the inconsistency in Kant's concept of radical evil.

The problem of universal

Kant regards the propensity to evil innate because he thinks that it is universal. Kant tries to prove it by the three different grades of the propensity to evil, namely, the frailty, the impurity and the depravity and notes that the propensity to evil is interwoven in the human nature. He also indicates that the best man, who acts morally, is evil if the incentive to act does not come from the moral laws. In addition to the statement from a member of the English Parliament, the ritual murders of Tofoa, New Zealand, and the Navigator Islands and the never-ending cruelty in northwestern America, Kant wants to prove the propensity to evil with the stories in human history. However, these evidences can only indicate the widespread of the propensity to evil, but not the universality. In fact, the universality is not possible to be proved by scientific methods too. We cannot prove the universality of the propensity to evil by applying empirical methodologies because the population size is so large that we may not be able to manage it in a single survey. Owing to the difficulties, Kant's claim on universality is still waiting for a proof.

Also, if the effect of an evil man who works for moral good in his whole life is same as a moral good man who works in his whole life, from the point of view of the others, they may have no difference. However, to themselves, the evil man feels happiness because the others say he is good. For the moral good man, he is happy

because he is doing what he should do. As a bystander, we are difficult to judge moral good or evil by observing people's actions and the action's effects. How to prove the universality of the propensity to evil is still a difficulty in the philosophical theory of human nature.

If we cannot prove it, can we disprove it? It is also difficult because we cannot find a counter example, i.e. we cannot find a person who does not have any one of the three grades of evil which Kant describes in a society. An isolated world is a special case which may not exist in reality. So, we cannot use the case of isolated persons as counter examples. Nevertheless, not able to disprove it does not mean it is true. If we try to find out why we cannot disprove it, it is not difficult to find that it is because of the assumptions on Kant's concept of evil.

Conclusion

Kant's concept of radical evil is a contradictory theory. He thinks that evil is innate but, at the same time, he thinks that human being should be responsible for their actions which are determined by the freedom of the power of choice of human being. However, if human being is innate evil, they should not be responsible for what they did because it is natural and not a free choice of human being. Kant tries to explain his theory by three predispositions, the propensity to evil, the natural evil and the origin of evil. In his theory, we can be aware of some assumptions which are arguable.

The four assumptions discussed in this paper can be concluded that Kant's theory is subject to consideration. The rigorist's view does not consider the intermediate cases which may occur in physical world. The necessary of the predispositions to good is only for his theory, not universal. We can apply the same logic in other theories which advocate the predispositions to evil and propensity to good. For the freedom of the power of choice, it is constrained because the mind of human being is constrained by the knowledge acquired and the environment. Human being should not be imputed due to the freedom of the power of choice. They should be responsible for all actions that they have done both voluntarily and involuntarily. Finally, we cannot prove universality for the proof is impractical. Not able to find a counter example only implies that we cannot reject the hypothesis, but it does not mean that we successfully prove it.

A modified theory is suggested that both moral good and evil maxims exist in the supreme maxim. The freedom of the power of choice of human being is constrained by the knowledge acquired and the environmental conditions. If their knowledge and environmental conditions encourage the moral laws, human being will have the propensity to moral good. Otherwise, they will have the propensity to evil. Nevertheless, human being is still imputable to all their (voluntary or involuntary) actions. Since moral good or evil depends both on the predispositions and the experience, there is no innate evil or innate moral good. In fact, neither of them is possible to be proved.

Reference

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Kant's doctrine of radical evil - which holds that human beings, as a species, possess an innate propensity to evil - has long been viewed as a scandal to his admirers and a stumbling block to scholars trying to piece together his argument in favor of the claim. To his admirers, the scandal stems from Kant's apparent endorsement of the Christian view of original sin, with all of its allegedly misanthropic consequences.