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9

Evil and passions¹

Affects and passions

If we disregard, for the moment, the difference in how they are related to objects, we find that both affects and passions are considered illnesses of the mind, because both affect and passion hinder the sovereignty of reason. However, the former is less harmful than the latter. This can be demonstrated if one compares anger (affect) with hate (passion). Anger intensifies quickly and subsides in an equally instantaneous manner. Hatred, because it is a passion, does not allow for such control.

Since the passions can be coupled with the calmest reflection, one can easily see that they must neither be rash like the emotions, nor stormy and transitory; instead, they must take roots gradually and even be able to coexist with reason. (Ant, 7: 265)

Passions are more closely related to the will; nevertheless, this does not imply that they can be brought under greater control by reason. The inverse is suggested, namely, that they “take root” in reason and coexist with rational decision. Curiously the irrational aspects of affects make them preferable to passions. And Kant uses many medical metaphors to stress just this distinction: an affect is an intoxicant that causes a headache while a passion is a poison that causes a permanent illness (Ant, 7: 252), affect is a delirium (7:

266) or a “stroke of apoplexy” (7: 252), while passion “works like consumption or atrophy” (7: 252) or an illness that abhors all medication (7: 266), passions are “cancerous sores for pure practical reason” (7: 266) to which the physician of the soul could only prescribe palliative cures (7: 252). The metaphorical bundle of infirmity of emotions speaks to their degree of evil. Affect, the least dangerous of the “illnesses of mind,” is related to weakness which can still coexist with a good will:

Affects belong to *feeling* insofar as, preceding reflection; it makes this impossible or more difficult. Hence an affect is called *precipitate* or *rash* (*animus praeceps*), and reason says, through the concept of virtue, that one should *get hold* of oneself. Yet this weakness is the use of one’s understanding coupled with the strength of one’s affects is only a *lack of virtue* and, as it were, something childish and weak, which can indeed coexist with the best will. (TL, 6: 408)

Affects make the work of understanding more difficult. If one has a weak understanding united with a strong affect, one momentarily loses control. But such a lack of control is not, properly speaking, a vice, but, as already discussed, a lack of virtue. In the *Religion*, this loss of control is called the frailty (*fragilitas*) of human nature, and consists in taking the moral law as the objective ground of action. However, it lacks sufficient subjective force when compared to inclinations (Rel, 6: 30). Passions, on the other hand, are beyond the weak adjectives of “childish,” because they are not just signs of weakness, but of true evil:

A *passion* is a sensible *desire* that has become a lasting inclination (e.g., *hatred*, as opposed to anger). The calm with which one gives oneself up to it permits reflection and allows the mind to form principles upon it and so, if inclination lights upon something contrary to the law, to brood upon it, to get it rooted deeply, and so take up what is evil (as something premeditated) into its maxim. And the evil is then properly evil, that is, true vice. (TL, 6: 408)

Unlike affects which are temporary emotions, passions are characterized as lasting inclinations. Evil is connected to reflection and to the will's formulation of maxims based on emotions. While an affect constitutes a subjective incentive that opposes a maxim, a passion may form principles for action. If one is overtaken by anger, he may be unable to act on maxims which he reflectively acknowledges to be the right ones. But if the passion of hatred is present, the agent may choose maxims against the moral law, a choice that is classified as a third degree of evil—that is, perversity of the human heart, in the *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (Rel, 6: 30). The passion of hatred, for instance, can lead someone to premeditate a murder. One could also murder someone based on a momentary uncontrolled affect. Even if the wrong action is the same, the latter is based on a discrepancy between the force of emotion and the will; the former is based on a will that has chosen to act according to a nonmoral maxim. That is why Kant says passions are more harmful to freedom than affects:

One can also easily see that passions do the greatest harm to freedom; and if affect is a delirium, then passion is an illness which abhors all medication. Therefore, passion is by far worse than all the transitory affects which stir themselves at least to the good intention of improvement; instead, passion is an enchantment which also rejects improvement. (Ant, 7: 265)

The evil character of passions comes from two features. First, a passion presupposes a maxim of the subject and is associated with the purposes of reason. It implies that maxims are a kind of distortion and perversion of reason. Second, passions are never completely satisfied, thus they are labeled by the word “mania” (*Sucht*), meaning that they become an obsession about their never totally conquered object. That is why Kant supports that no physical love can count as a passion. Only the refusal of the object of the love can turn the affect of love into a passion of love.

There are also other feelings that can either be an affect or become a passion. Besides love, Kant gives the example of ambition. An ambitious person, besides his own ends, usually wants to be loved by others; however, if he is passionately ambitious, he can be hated by others and even run the risk of becoming poor, because his passion makes him blind. If ambition, however, remains as an inclination, it will be compared to other inclinations and will not ruin the ambitious man. That is why Kant declares that “inclination, which hinders the use of reason to compare, at a particular moment of choice, a specific inclination against the sum of all inclinations, is passion” (Ant, 7: 265).

Passions do not operate like affects, making the subject momentarily incapable of acting according to what he has decided to do. An agent taken by an uncontrollable affect may act against the maxim she has decided to follow, which may lead to irrational actions, going beyond what one call rational agency. On the contrary, passions may form maxims of action, which highlights their evil disposition. Actions from passions belong to the realm of rational agency; however, they do not follow prudential reasons. This is the case of the ambitious man. If ambition is only an inclination, one can ground maxims of action in ambition, which will lead to the conquest of what the ambitious man desires. When ambition as passion ground maxims of action, since passion is a mania (*Sucht*), it can lead to the opposite of what is desired. A blind ambition, such as Lady Macbeth’s lust for power, can lead to the opposite of what is desired. She desperately wanted her husband to be king, but she ended up causing his death.

Natural and social passions

Kant divides passions into natural and social ones: natural passions are called “burning passions,” for example, the inclinations for freedom and sex; and the social passions are called “cold passions” and are ambition (*Ehrsucht*), lust for power (*Herrschaftsucht*), and greed (*Habsucht*) (Ant, 7: 272–75). The passion of

freedom should not be understood as a rational desire to determine the will in an autonomous way; rather it is a desire not to depend on other people: "Whoever is able to be happy only at the option of another person, feels that he is unhappy" (Ant, 7: 268). It is a natural desire, a desire to keep others far away, and to live "as a wanderer in the wilderness." It is a natural desire, not a rational one and comes from the desire not to depend on anyone, which belongs to the natural man before "public law protects him"—that is, in the state of nature.

The most dangerous passions, however, are not the innate, but the acquired ones, which arise from culture. In the *Religion*, Kant states that the evil principle of human nature resides in passions, "which wreak such great devastation in [human being's] originally good disposition" (Rel, 6: 93), referring mostly to the social passions of envy, addiction to power, and avarice. Their danger consists in their having characteristics of reason: "Passion appears to imitate the idea of a faculty which is closely linked with freedom, by which alone those purposes can be attained" (Ant, 7: 270). Passions imitate rationality in the sense that they can calculate means to desired ends. We can observe this in the analysis of greed. Kant explains this passion as the desire to have all that is good: "Money is a password, and all doors, which are closed to the man of lesser means, fly open to those whom Plutus favors" (Ant, 7: 274). Although avarice is a passion and is not related to the moral self-determination of an agent, it is related to a calculus of the means to have everything materially worthy and to open all doors forbidden to the poor.

After all these negative features imputed to passions, we should ask: Can virtue be a cure to passions? That the evil of passions is worse than the evil of affects can be attested by many passages in the *Religion*. Kant also cites the Bible in his own words: "We have to wrestle not against flesh and blood (the natural inclinations) but against principalities and powers, against evil spirits" (Rel, 6: 59) in order to assert that evil does not reside in sensible incentives.

In the *Religion*, Kant maintains that inclinations are good and that evil should be sought for in a rational principle. This position seems to contradict

the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, where both affects and passions are considered illnesses of mind. We should try to solve the apparent contradiction between the *Religion* and the *Anthropology*. If we correctly distinguish the purpose of the texts, we see that while in the *Religion* Kant is concerned with the source of evil, which cannot be placed in the natural realm; in the *Anthropology* he is merely trying to *explain* emotions. In the latter, it is correctly shown that both affects and passions may impede the will, either as stormy feelings that hinder the accomplishment of the action based on a moral maxim, or by grounding the choice of the maxim. However, in both the *Religion* and *Anthropology* the worst evil resides in a rational principle, not in a natural one, thus, even in the *Anthropology*, passions are thought to be more dangerous than affects. Affects can be the cause of weakness, but passions are the cause of true evil.

How to heal passions

The extirpation of affects is not Kant's central goal and he even claims that the extirpation of inclinations would "not only be futile but harmful and blameworthy as well" (Rel, 6: 58). However, it is his invariable position that we should extirpate passions, since they are not natural feelings or inclinations.

In his analysis of emotions and evil in Kant, Michael Rolf correctly argues that, for Kant, "all passions are evil, and that all passions are social in content," but Kant "does not claim, and in fact he explicitly denies, that affects are evil, at least in the sense that passions are evil."² He considers that "affects, in contrast with passions, are not evil in the way passions are because they lack what makes passions evil, namely, a maxim opposed to the moral law."³

In order to win the battle against this principle of evil, one should find its cause. If men search the circumstances that lead them to evil principles, they will find out that they are not related to their raw nature, but to the corruption

of the will that one man produces over others. If a man considers himself to be poor, he does so “only to the extent that he is anxious that the other human beings will consider him poor and will despise him for it” (Rel, 6: 94).

In their works about evil, both Allen Wood⁴ and Sharon Anderson-Gold⁵ call attention to the fact that evil in Kant has its source in our social condition. Since evil originates from social relations, fighting against the evil of passions implies an effort to build a new society that could counteract passions.

In the chapter “Radical Evil” of the book *Political Emotions*, Martha Nussbaum also stresses the social feature of human evil in Kant. She says, “The fact that we are animals is not the primary source of our moral difficulty” and Kant’s “key contention is plausible: the tempter, the invisible enemy inside, is something peculiarly human, a propensity to competitive self-love, which manifests itself whenever human beings are in a group.”⁶

The raw nature of men, although able to produce strong inclinations that are difficult to master, does not lead to the corruption of the human heart. Kant is unequivocal in asserting that only association of men is able to produce pure evil:

Envy, addiction to power, avarice, and the malignant inclinations associated with these, assail his nature, which on its own is undemanding, *as soon as he is among human beings*. Nor it is necessary to assume that these are sunk into evil and are examples that lead him astray: it suffices that they are there, that they surround him, and that they will mutually corrupt each other’s moral disposition and make one another evil. (Rel, 6: 94)

This claim is unambiguous: the inclinations are not by themselves the source of evil, nor are our affects. The passions of envy, addiction to power and avarice are awakened by interaction with other human beings, even if there is no bad behavior from others. Human beings are not evil because they are corrupted by already wicked persons. Ordinary social interaction makes human beings evil, because this interaction awakes comparison between people. Kant also claims

that comparison is the source of this social evil: men feel that they are poor because they compare themselves to others, and the fear of being despised or dominated produces the evil passions of ambition and greed.

Nussbaum agrees with this very pessimistic Kantian viewpoint: “Even when people are well fed and housed, and even when they are reasonably secure with respect to other prerequisites of well-being, they still behave badly to one another and violate one’s other rights” (Nussbaum 2013, p. 167). Nor is evil a matter of social teaching: “Kant is surely right when he suggests that people require no special social teaching in order to behave badly, and indeed regularly do so despite the best social teaching” (Nussbaum 2013, p. 167).

Is virtue enough to heal evil?

Could virtue also be considered a cure for evil? If evil comes from the weakness of the will, virtue can help to strengthen the weak will. Weakness is the first degree of the propensity to evil: it refers to the case in which one has a weak will and is influenced by a strong affect, and quickly loses control. However, such lack of control is not, properly speaking, a vice, but a lack of virtue.

Virtue, as strength, could work as a cure for affects, because these are temporary outbursts of feelings. As Kristi Sweet highlights, “There are numerous ways in which Kant defines virtue, and virtue itself is manifold in its constitution, perhaps first in Kant’s understanding of it is that it is strength.”⁷ Like strength, it can work against inclinations and affects that make it difficult to maintain our resolve. Virtue implies abiding with the principle of moral law, but it also requires fortitude in keeping our decision to follow the moral law.

Could virtue be a cure for the third degree of evil, or malignity? Recently some authors have pointed out that virtue can be the cure for all evil. Michael Rohlf states that “in general, virtue is the strength to comply with moral maxims in the face of our propensity to evil, understood as our tendency to prefer

the satisfaction of inclinations,” and the education for virtue “will promote not only a good heart and the adoption of fundamental moral maxims, which together constitute the intelligible character of virtue, but also the strength of will to comply with those maxims in the face of our propensity to evil.”⁸

However, since the evil of passions is connected to society, this education for virtue can only fully occur in a society based on the idea of virtue. Only a social remedy can overcome these cancers of pure practical reason.

If evil is social, the only way to overcome the evil of passions is through a community based on the ideal of the moral good. Virtue in the sense of individual strength is insufficient to accomplish this task without setting up a society, which will rule over passions.

The social solution to evil is clearly stated in the following quote:

Inasmuch as we can see, therefore, the dominion of the good principle is not otherwise attainable, so far as human beings can work toward it, than through the setting up and the diffusion of a society which reason makes it a task and a duty of the entire human race to establish in full scope. For only in this way we can hope for a victory of the good principle over the evil one. (Rel, 6: 94)

This society is not juridical-civil society, but an ethico-civil society which can coexist with the former. While a juridical-civil, or political society, is the relation of human beings to one another under public juridical laws, an ethical-civil society is one in which they are united under the laws of virtue alone, without being coerced. They can coexist and be composed of the same members.

An association of human beings merely under the laws of virtue, ruled by this idea, can be called an *ethical* and, so far as these laws are public, an ethico-civil (in contrast to a *juridico-civil* society), or an ethical community. It can exist in the midst of a political community and even be made up of all the members of the latter (indeed, without the foundation of a political

community, it could never be brought into existence by human beings).
(Rel, 6: 94)

Kant points to an ethical community, which is the embodiment of virtue and of moral principle. This is not a political society, since even a perfect civil society could not overcome passions and therefore defeat true evil by itself. In addition, this ethical community is a community of virtue, although not individual virtue, but of a shared one. It is—as Kant stresses in the above quotation—“an association under the laws of virtue.” This association under the laws of virtue may help fight social passions, while individual virtue could only control affects.

Kant makes an analogy of this ethical community with a juridical-civil society. In addition, just as we can oppose the idea of a state of nature to the civil society, we can oppose an idea of an ethical state of nature to an ethical community.

In a political community, political citizens are still in the ethical state of nature. The citizens cannot be coerced to enter an ethical state, but they can do it. This decision rests on the person's will, since the citizen of the political community remains free:

The citizen of the political community therefore remains, so far as the latter's lawgiving authority is concerned, totally free: he may wish to enter with his fellow citizens into an ethical union over and above the political one, or rather remain in a natural state of this sort. (Rel, 6: 96)

The ineffectiveness of political institutions

Kant claims in the *Religion* that human beings cannot ground the overcoming of evil only in the development of political institutions. In order to attain their moral destination, they need to build an ethical community. He seems to have

changed his mind about possible progression in history based on improving political institutions. In the *Idea for an Universal History*, he claims that “the greatest problem for the human species, to which nature compels him, is the achievement of a civil society universally administering right” (Idee, 8: 22). In the *Idea*, the just civil institutions are considered sufficient to develop the aim of human nature and to accomplish our moral end.

Paul Guyer remarks that there is already a shift from the text *Idea for a Universal History* (1784) to the appendix of *Perpetual Peace* (1795). He argues that in the first, moral change happens through a natural process, while in the second Kant claims that only the exercise of human freedom can lead to the moral destination of man.⁹

Mutchnik claims that in order to understand Kant’s conceptual shift one must turn to the *Religion* (1793), “where the problem of radical evil receives its fullest expression.”¹⁰ He criticizes among others, Allen Wood, who has based his interpretation of evil in Kant only on the *Idea*: “Interpreters like Allen Wood have found in *Idea for a Universal History* the key to understanding the social dynamics of the propensity of evil, tracing the roots of Kant’s view to his thesis about unsocial sociability.”¹¹

The idea of unsociable sociability plays an important role in the *Idea*, as an explanation of how immoral inclinations or passions can engender a moral outcome. This unsociable propensity, Kant affirms, “is this resistance that awakens all the powers of human being, brings him to overcome his propensity to indolence, and, driven by ambition, tyranny, and greed, to obtain for himself a rank among his fellows, whom he cannot stand, but also cannot leave alone” (Idee, 8: 20).

Some commentators have found in the idea of unsocial sociability the main social evil. Kristi Sweet remarks, “Those who suggest that there is something in our unsociable nature that promotes evil are right.”¹² She goes further and associates this social evil with the unsociable sociability of human beings “evil and the principle of self-love in which it is embodied is profoundly anti-social.

This is highlighted in the way that unsociable sociability is expressed in one's desire to 'direct everything as to get his own way'" (Sweet 2013, p. 87).

In the *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim* (1784), the unsociable sociability is an antagonism that will overcome our initial unsociable nature: from a bad origin, we will obtain a good outcome:

Thus happen the first true steps from crudity toward culture, which really consists in the social worth of the human being; thus all talents come bit by bit to be developed, taste is formed, and even, through progress in enlightenment, a beginning is made toward the foundation of a mode of thought which can with time transform the rude natural predisposition to make moral distinction into determinate practical principles and hence transform a pathologically compelled agreement to form a society finally into a moral whole. (*Idee*, 8: 20)

In the *Religion*, on the other hand, Kant renounces to the idea of a possible moral outcome from immoral passions. There is no possibility that passions left by themselves will find their way to morality. In the *Religion*, Kant stresses another kind of evil, very different from the unsociable sociability. It is not this tendency to run away from society in order to be lonely that leads to evil, but the passions that are aroused through comparison with others.

The *Anthropology* (1797) presents another way of overcoming our evil inclinations through the cultivation of a cultivated society.

The summary of what pragmatic anthropology has to say about the vocation (*Bestimmung*) of the human being is that he is destined (*bestimmt*) through his reason to live in a society of human beings, and in this society, through the arts and sciences, to cultivate himself, civilize himself, and moralize himself. (*Ant*, 7: 324)

Unlike the radical optimist of the *Idea*, in the *Anthropology*, Kant acknowledges that there is evil in men, which "is an inclination to desire actively what is

unlawful, although he knows very well that it is unlawful" (Ant, 7: 324). He also recognizes that passions are cancerous sores of reason and does not attribute any good property to them. However, some hopefulness still remains, since passions, even if they are sores for pure practical reasons, can be overcome through the cultivation of arts and sciences. This sociocultural development, not of the individual, but of the species as a whole will be able to counterbalance evil and accomplish the natural destiny of the species, allowing it to attain full rationality.

However, neither the radical historical optimism of the *Idea* nor the cultural confidence of the *Anthropology* seemed to be enough to overcome evil. In the *Religion* there is a new condition for this development, the establishment of an ethical community, which is not guaranteed by the suggested cultivation of human being of the *Anthropology*, nor by the progress of history and political institutions of the *Idea*.

A social solution, the ethical community, should supplement a historical and cultural solution to evil, since a civil political society, even the most perfect, will never attain it. Wood explains correctly how a moral community differs from every political community:

Its laws cannot be statutes, derived from an arbitrary human authority, but must instead be purely moral laws, which recommend themselves to each man through his own reason. In addition to this, the very principle of a moral community of men will differ from that of a political one. The legislation of every political or juridical state "proceeds from the principle of limiting the freedom of each to those conditions under which it can be consistent with the freedom for everyone."¹³

The laws of the political community are always coercive laws and a moral community should promote moral relations between its members. Good laws can compel men to an outward legality, but not to a real internal moral improvement of their character. Without a moral community, there could be an

external conformity to the law, but we would never attain the full development of morality.

Allen Wood did not realize that a moral community is only necessary because evil in society is not unsociable sociability but pure evil, which will never be healed by the development of political and cultural history. However, he is right in explaining the necessity for a moral community to heal evil, because an outward legality is insufficient to attain the full development of morality.

Only an ethical community can overcome evil, because the roots of evil are social, and belong to passions that are stimulated through social interaction. Political institutions are necessary, but not sufficient conditions, because they can compel men to an external legality, but not to an improvement of their hearts.