

Chapter 9
Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel
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Chapter Summary

Hegel's approach to evil is examined in the context of his stance towards the ethical, metaphysical and theological dimensions of the treatment of evil in the earlier philosophy of Kant, as well as that of the transformations within post-Kantian German culture attendant on the rise of the historical and philological sciences. While understood in one way, these sciences together with the "linguistic turn" in post-Kantian philosophy put thought about morality on a trajectory that was to issue in Nietzsche's later historicist debunking of the notion of evil in *The Genealogy of Morality*. Hegel, however, attempted to integrate the historical and linguistic peculiarities of the notion of moral evil, *das Böse*, into a systematic philosophy that was affirmative of both the western Christian tradition and the philosophical tradition inherited from the Greeks.

In the late nineteenth century, in works such as *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Friedrich Nietzsche was to popularize a distinctly *debunking* historicist approach to morality, and in particular, to the conception of *moral evil* "*das Böse*". This concept had, since the time of Kant, been commonly contrasted to the more general sense of the *ill-being* or *badness*—"das Übel"—all too often encountered in life. Thus, in *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant notes:

For that which the Latins denominate with a single word, *bonum*, [the German language] has two very different concepts and equally different expressions as well: For *bonum*, it has *das Gute* [the good] and *das Wohl*

[well-being]; for *malum*, *das Böse* [evil] and *das Übel* [ill-being] (or *Weh* [woe]) ... *Well-being* or *ill-being* always signifies only a reference to our state of *agreeableness* or *disagreeableness*, of gratification or pain, and if we desire or avoid an object on this account we do so only insofar as it is referred to our sensibility and to the feeling of pleasure or displeasure it causes. But *good* or *evil* always signifies a reference to the *will* insofar as it is determined by the law of reason to make something its object.

(*Critique of Practical Reason*, 52)ⁱ

In Nietzsche's philologically based "genealogy" of evil, no equivalent of the notion "böse" had been present in the life of an ancient slave-holding society, a society which was clearly meant to be understood as that of the classical Greek polis. The most powerful central members of that society considered themselves and their way of life as good, and referred to the lives of those that they had subjugated with the *privatively* conceived concept "bad" or "base" [*schlecht*] (*On the Genealogy of Morality*, First essay). That is, the bad were those conceived simply as naturally lacking the capacities and virtues constituting goodness, and who had thus found themselves as the slaves of those who possessed these qualities—life's natural masters. The life of the polis, however, ended, and came to be replaced with a very different form of life—effectively one that started as the christianized Roman empire. The rise of Christianity, in Nietzsche's view, was to be understood as resulting from a type of revolution in which the former slaves rose to social dominance, and in so-doing transformed the old moral code which had worked to legitimize the earlier society, in the process restructuring its conceptual architecture.

The basic transformation was a simple one, but it was one that had complex consequences. The old concept "good" in the non-moral sense (which Kant had characterized as "*wohl*") had applied to a *distinct* actual way of life,

the life lived and valued by the former masters, but the former slaves now re-described and condemned such lives with the new concept “evil” [*böse*]. In turn they prided themselves as “good” in the new sense of “*gut*” for having *refrained* from such evil lives, living up to a moral code which condemned their constitutive acts. Thus while in the classical system, the evaluatively negative term “bad” had been the privative one—the slaves simply lacking the virtues of their masters and so unable to live like them—in the new post-classical system the analogous term “evil”, took the *content* of the former concept “good”, simply reversing its evaluative polarity. The *evaluatively* negative term had thus become, in terms of *content*, the positive one. Correspondingly, the new evaluative term “good” was reserved for those who *refrained* from the form of life with the definite content. This meant that what had formerly been a simple privation in the older system had now become, as Kant had stressed, *voluntarized*: in contrast to the old “bad” life, the new “good” one had become regarded as made up of negative willed actions—“actions” of denial and restraint. In this sense, the new good life could be seen as a life consistent with the action of *subjecting oneself* to a set of prescribed laws according to which one lived, laws *prohibiting* certain actions, such as those found in the Old Testament’s Decalogue, for example. But clearly Nietzsche had also intended here to capture lives subjected to secularized versions of such divine imperatives, like that found in Kant’s conception of the Categorical Imperative conceived as a device for testing and ruling out impermissible actions.

Nietzsche’s parable has seemed to many to address the conditions that humans have found themselves in the broadly secular, post-enlightenment culture of the modern world, and might be thought of as having brought together different strands of modern thought in a compelling way. First, it can be seen as speaking to the distinctly scientific and anti-metaphysical cast of much modern thought and philosophy in which the *actual* world becomes

identified with the *natural* world and becomes considered a “moral-free zone”.ⁱⁱ Thus Nietzsche doesn’t seem to tell a story or give a theory about the actual *nature* of evil; rather, he gives an account, from a broadly naturalistic perspective, primarily of human practices in which certain activities are conceptualized and *evaluated* in terms of concepts such as “good” or “evil”, “good” or “bad”, and so on, and in doing this, brings out the historical variability of such practices and the systems of thought with which they are articulated, a variability that is generally in line with the sorts of empirical studies of human existence found in the modern human sciences. But more specifically, it sheds light on the peculiarity of the modern western way of thinking by drawing attention to the peculiarities of the moral system characterizing modernity in a way that has parallels with theorists who distinguish modern “guilt cultures” from traditional “shame cultures”, for example (Benedict 1946; Dodds 1951).

Nietzsche’s account also speaks to those naturalistic and determinist critics of the concept of the human “will” by describing how the *idea* of a free will could have caught on in western culture. From Nietzsche’s perspective, the old morality had no need of the notion of will, but once the “inversion” of this morality had occurred, a certain conception of “the will” became needed, since the conception of an essentially *negatively defined* “good life” required the idea of the *willful* avoidance of actions deemed evil. Besides relating to those critical of the idea of the human faculty of “the will” as a source of action standing *outside* the causal fabric of the natural world, Nietzsche’s broad account has found support from those who have pointed to peculiarly *post-classical* concept of “the will”, regarding it as a concept born from the thought of early church thinkers, especially Augustine, and noting its general absence in ancient Greek thought about action (Dilhe 1982). And along with this, others have noted the

general absence of the idea of the law as divine decree in ancient Greek religious and philosophical thought (Brague 2007).

All these aspects of Nietzsche's thought might be understood as having been contributed from earlier aspects of German culture on which he had drawn, both earlier forms of philosophy as well as the newer historical and philological sciences. Philosophically, as noted above, the distinction between ~~to~~ two opposing antonyms to “good” upon which Nietzsche’s story relies had been discussed by Kant. However, while Kant had alluded to the *historical* specificity of this distinction when noting that Latin relied on the single term “malum”, this observation did not seem to have for him the type of consequence that it would have for those who came after the so-called German “linguistic turn” (Lafont 1999). Here Kant’s assumption that the conceptual structure of both theoretical and practical thought was universal and independent of the structure of the language in which one *expressed those thoughts* had been challenged by his near contemporary Königsburgian, J. G. Hamann who, in his “Metacritique” of Kant’s philosophy of 1784, referred to language as “the first, last, and only organon and criterion of reason” (*Metacritique of the Critique of the Purism of Reason*, 58). This idea seemed to lead to the potentially relativist belief that if a culture did not, say, have the *concept* of moral evil then individuals or acts within such a culture could not *be* evil. But if we see Nietzsche’s development of such an approach as part of a pervasive *rejection* of the philosophical and religious inheritance of the west, we might also point to G. W. F. Hegel as a thinker who adopted many of these same ideas in the service of a systematic *affirmation* of this heritage. In this chapter, I frame Hegel’s conception of evil within a similar set of considerations to those found in Nietzsche—considerations that are at the same time historical and ethical, religious and logico-linguistic—but do so in order to show how Hegel had

attempted to integrate such considerations into a systematic affirmation of the philosophical and religious content of the western tradition.

Evil from an Ethical and Historical Perspective

To approach Hegel's conception of the nature of evil we might usefully start with a paragraph from "Part 2, Morality [Die Moralität]" of his major work in practical philosophy, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Here we find evil in the sense of "*das Böse*" located within an explanatory framework that is typically "Hegelian":

Where all previously valid determinations have vanished and the will is in a state of pure inwardness, the self-consciousness is capable of making into its principles either *the universal in and for itself*, or the arbitrariness of its *own particularity*, given the latter precedence over the universal and realizing it through its actions—i.e., it is capable of being *evil* [*böse zu sein*]. (§139)

This characterization may be couched in the less than lucid idiosyncrasies of Hegel's vocabulary, nevertheless certain things are clear enough. First, aspects of Hegel's account recall the approach of Kant: it is clear that it is here "moral" evil (*das Böse*) and its relation to the will that is at issue, and next, we can recognize in the idea of a self-consciousness "capable of making into its principles ... *the universal in and for itself*" something akin to Kant's conception of morality as grounded in the idea of an individual's willing in accordance with a moral law conceived in terms of its universality. Indeed, Hegel had commented on the "merit and exalted viewpoint of Kant's moral philosophy" just a few paragraphs before (§133 add).

Next, in linking the capacity for evil in this way *to* a capacity for moral goodness, Hegel seems to further signal his approximation to Kant who, in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, had insisted that the ground of evil “cannot be placed, as is commonly done, in the sensuous nature of the human being, and in the natural inclinations originating from it” (81). For Kant, the issue as to “whether the human being is good or evil, must not lie in the difference between the incentives that he incorporates into his maxim (not in the material of the maxim) but in their *subordination* (in the form of the maxim): *which of the two he makes the condition of the other*. It follows that the human being (even the best) is evil only because he reverses the moral order of his incentives in incorporating them into his maxims” (83). Thus Hegel seems to be clearly alluding to Kant’s approach when he notes of the “determinations of the natural will” that:

it is said of these desires, drives, etc. that they *may* be either good *or* evil. But when the will lets its content be determined by these desires etc. in the determination of *contingency* which they have as natural [forces], and hence also by the form which it [i.e. the will] has at this point, the form of particularity, it thereby becomes opposed to *universality* as inner objectivity ... In this case, the inwardness of the will is evil. (*Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, §139 remark)

And yet, this discussion occurs in a part of Hegel’s text in which he is *criticizing* Kant’s practical philosophy in terms of what he calls its *formality*—a critique that has something in common with Nietzsche’s critique noted above. We might then expect this to have consequences for Hegel’s own conception of evil, and it does.

For Hegel, a crucial defect of Kant's system of morality is that it cannot generate a determinate content from within itself and relies on a content being given from the non-moral sphere—nature. This, Hegel thinks, poses a dilemma for Kant's conception of *duty*.ⁱⁱⁱ “Since action for itself requires a particular content and a determinate end, whereas duty in the abstract contains nothing of the kind, the question arises: *what is duty?*” (*Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, §134) One might be told to promote one's own welfare and the welfare of others but “these determinations . . . are not contained in the determination of duty itself” leaving duty without a properly *moral* content and hence *indeterminate* (§135).^{iv} As in Nietzsche's later critique, Hegel is thus critical of Kant for his entirely “negative” account of “the good life”: the *categorical imperative* cannot generate from itself a positive willed content; it can only, in virtue of posing the question of the universalizability of a content, pass judgment on which externally *given* contents are permissible but ruling out those which are *not*. And again like Nietzsche, Hegel was to contrast this distinctly *post-classical* approach to moral life with the very differently conceived “good life” that had been espoused in the pre-Christian classical polis.

Hegel points to the historical specificity of the type of moral system that relies on the “inner” voice of conscience understood as articulating the moral law. Something like these subjective approaches *had* appeared in antiquity as had been the case with Socrates and the Stoics, but “the tendency to look *inwards* into the self and to know and determine from within the self what is right and good appears in epochs when what is recognized as right and good in actuality and custom is unable to satisfy the better will” (*Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, §138 remark). That is, like Nietzsche Hegel sees the classical polis as having providing a form of moral life in which individuals found the values—the exemplifications of what they took to be good and bad—in that objective life form itself, its “ethical life [*Sittlichkeit*]”. The retreat into

inwardness, “*Innerlichkeit*”, had been unnecessary when the polis was healthy, hence “Socrates made his appearance at the time when Athenian democracy had fallen into ruin. He evaporated the existing world and retreated into himself in search of the right and the good” (§138 addition).^v

Such an appeal of the cohesion and wholeness of the life of the classical polis in contrast to the developing social atomism of the post-classical world—an atomism that reappeared in early modernity and that had come to be felt strongly at the end of the eighteenth century within the German-speaking states—is clearly present in Hegel’s early writings in the 1790s at a time at which he shared this orientation with the friends acquired during his time at the Tübingen Seminary, Friedrich Hölderlin and Friedrich Schelling. But with time Hegel moved away from any simple helenophilism to become both more *Christian* and more focused on the positive sides of the “inwardness” that marked the distinctly *modern* forms of European culture and distinctly protestant forms of Christianity. The development of the free individual grasping itself as such could only be understood in the ancient world as “ethical corruption” because “the principle of the self-sufficient and inherently infinite personality of the singular individual [*des Einzelnen*]” was “historically later than the Greek world” (*Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, §185 remark). This principle had to await certain historical developments such as the Christian religion and the system of Roman law which would provide it with the conceptual resources for its internal and external articulation respectively, but importantly it had to await the development of the modern economically based realm of “civil society” within which the (necessarily male) family representative functioned as a point-like bearer of “rights” (Hegel 1991, Part 3, section 2). Nevertheless, as we have seen above, Hegel retained elements of the “romantic” diagnosis of the ills of modernity with its atomistic fragmentation of substantive ethical life,^{vi} ills that could be recognized as implicit in Kant’s

“formal” conception of morality and its consequences. The differences between their respective treatments of evil come out in both *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* and the earlier *Phenomenology of Spirit* in Hegel’s treatment of the topic of “conscience”, *Gewissen*. The modern conscientious agent manifests the most developed form of moral will but is at the same time the locus for the development of moral evil.

We might treat J. G. Fichte’s treatment of the “conscientious” agent in his development of Kant’s moral philosophy as exemplifying this morally ambiguous status of conscience. In *The System of Ethics* of 1798, Fichte had discussed conscience as a higher “power” or “faculty” of feeling [*Gefühlsmögen*] via which one may reproach oneself, or alternatively feel at peace with oneself, when one reflects on the nature of our own empirical will (*The System of Ethics*, 139–40). Self-censure may range from annoyance at oneself to self-contempt, while in its positive form, the feeling of self-respect can provide courage and strength for the project of rational self-determination (139). With the notion of conscience Fichte takes up the theme of his earlier “Doctrine of Science”, or *Wissenschaftslehre*, such that the “call” of conscience can be understood as a type of summons to autonomous self-determination (137–8). In the experience of conscience I find myself in immediate intuitive contact with my higher, essential, self because conscience leads me away from the pull of natural drives which are alien to my higher self (139). But inner conviction can become a sense of one’s own infallibility, as is found in Fichte’s account of the voice of conscience which “never errs and cannot err ... has final jurisdiction and is subject to no appeal” (165). It is this “self-certainty” expressed in conscience and implicit in the formally moral attitude itself,^{vii} and not simply the *subordination* of rational form to the material contents of reason, that is for Hegel the source of genuine evil.

The remarks and additions to §§ 139 and 140 of *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* present the intricate connections between this sort of Fichtean certainty in “formal” conscience and the capacity for evil. “Conscience, as formal subjectivity” says Hegel, “consists simply in the possibility of turning at any moment to *evil*; for both morality and evil have their common root in that self-certainty which has being for itself and knows and resolves for itself” (*Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, §139 remark). Evil effectively occurs when “*subjectivity declares itself absolute*”. Hegel refers the reader to the section “The Conscience” of the earlier *Phenomenology of Spirit* in which conscience is presented as a development of the clearly Kantian “moral worldview” in which “‘pure’ duty as determined by the moral law” is taken by the moral subject as “their absolute essence, the expression of their absolute freedom” (*Phenomenology of Spirit*, §599). The bearer of the moral outlook or worldview is the post-classical moral subject, who finds him or herself in a world which, unlike that of the ancient polis, is deemed “indifferent” to the moral law that defines that subject’s own “absolute essence”. Hegel is interested in the range of possible responses of such a subject to the inevitable clashes between their espoused morality and the indifferent empirical reality. As duty cannot be understood as coming from the ethical life of the community that has been replaced by the indifferent natural world, it becomes grasped as the object of another, *divine*, consciousness. Christianity with its transcendent unitary God now comes to replace the gods of the household and polis.

The position of “conscience” emerges out of this matrix. The post-classical moral subject had first located the moral law, *qua* law with material content, in a transcendent God, but this God can be equally grasped as *nothing other* than a product of its own thought, causing the moral worldview to relocate the source of this authority back within itself. In “conscience”, the inner voice of conscience has come to be understood *as* the internalized voice of God,

allowing the conscious subject to believe that *it itself* is “in its contingency completely valid in its own sight, and knows its immediate singularity [*Einzelheit*] to be pure knowing and doing, to be the true reality and harmony” (*Phenomenology of Spirit*, §632). It is *this* self-certain version of the moral subject that becomes capable of true evil.

In contrast to both Kant and Fichte, for Hegel, subjective certainty about anything, including one’s own intentions, is just that: the merely *subjective* feeling of certainty rather than objective *truth*. Here Hegel focuses not simply on the actions of the conscientious subject but importantly on the subject’s expression of their conviction to others—expressions that thereby open those subjective convictions to the interpretations and evaluations of others. The conscientious subject is certain that his or her act is right, but “in that this right thing which conscience does is at the same time a *being-for-another*, it seems that a disparity attaches to conscience” (*Phenomenology of Spirit*, §648). Once an intention has been acted upon, it has been translated into a reality consisting of a plurality of interlocking circumstances with which the agent *cannot possibly* have a full acquaintance, a plurality which “breaks up and spreads out endlessly in all directions, backwards into their conditions, sideways into their connections, forwards in their consequences” (§642). Thus when the supposed universal intention becomes a “*specific action*”, it becomes something that is no longer “identical with the element of everyone’s self-consciousness, and therefore not necessarily acknowledged” (§642). The solipsism of the conscientious agent’s self-certainty means that others “do not know whether this conscience is morally good or evil [*moralische gut oder ... böse*]”. Hegel’s next words, however, may strike us as puzzling: “or rather they not only cannot know, but they must also take it to be evil” (§649).

To understand why the stance of the conscientious subject *must* be taken to be evil requires that we go beyond the narrowly Kantian individualistic standpoint typical of modernity. For Hegel, why “conscience” marks an advance over the immediate “dumb” form of Kantian moral self-consciousness is that the agent has learned to express its “inner” states within the properly *spiritual* medium of language – the discursive space of reasons and justifications – rather than in the “natural” space of mere *deeds*. In a certain sense Hegel thinks of feelings and their expression as natural, but it is the propensity for their expressions to be put into words and so raised to the level of conceptuality that makes them the most immediate form of something “spiritual”. Language is spiritual because it is the medium whereby the expressions of individual certainty come to be differently understood from the viewpoints of others who are able to appreciate features of the action’s context invisible to the agent. But the formally conscientious agent *insists* on the veracity of their inner conscience, refusing to acknowledge challenges from the contrary interpretations of others. It is in this sense that they “resist” the universal, because it is only by taking account of the interpretations of others that individuals have access to “the universal”.

In Hegel’s account in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the treatment of the evil implicit in the moral worldview will lead through the dialectic of the so-called “beautiful soul” into discussions of the religious community, and it is into the topic of religion that we must follow Hegel.

Evil from a Religious Perspective

The existence of “evil” in the world has traditionally been seen as posing a problem for religions which, like Christianity, start from the idea of a perfect—omniscient, omnipotent, omni-benevolent—God. Classically, this has led to the project of “theodicy”, the attempt to justify God to man in the face of the

existence of evil. The *problem* of “evil” therefore starts from the awareness of “*das Übel*” in the world—evil in the sense of seemingly pointless suffering—but the questions it raises seem to bear on the “moral” status of a God who could knowingly and willfully *create* such a world.

While it was Leibniz who gave theodicy its name, the project in fact goes back to the origins of Christianity. One theodicial response to evil had been to appeal to the idea that the evils humans complain of are evil only from their own limited point of view, and not *genuinely* evil—not evil from any non-limited *objective* point of view. We have seen something of this idea in Kant’s account of well-being and ill-being in *Critique of Practical Reason*, but an early version of this can be seen in the views of St. Augustine, who, reacting against his own earlier Manichean ideas, discounted the existence of genuine evil in the created world by regarding God’s creation as consistently *good*. Such good, however, consistent with the ideas of Plotinus, could exist to different *degrees*. In the words of John Hick, there was for Augustine “no level of being, however, humble, which is, as such, evil”, although the relative *lack* of goodness opened up a realm of corruption and malfunction, such that evil became possible as “the malfunctioning of something that in itself is good”(Hick 2010, 44). Once again, we can hear echoes of this in Kant. Humans are epistemically limited in relation to the idea of the functioning of a Godly mind, reducing reason in humans to the discursive application of concepts to the givens of bodily affections. This fallen state of human cognition is not *itself* evil, but it creates the *possibility* of evil, as when humans elevate the interests of their senses over the interests of reason itself.

We may think of the views of Augustine and Kant here as consistent with standard ways of thinking about the mythology of “the fall of man”, the Garden of Eden representing an either good or morally neutral natural world with the

appearance of evil attendant upon a willful disobedient act—Adam’s and Eve’s eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. On this view, evil has “anthropogenic” origins, but Hegel interprets the biblical account of the fall in ways that stress *pre-anthropological* factors in the origins of evil, even to the extent of rendering evil “theogenic” (O’Regan 1994).

As we have seen from his treatment of *conscience*, Hegel associates evil with one’s capacity to withdraw into oneself, and to one-sidedly regard one’s *own states* as sources of certainty, thus cutting one off from the viewpoints of others needed for the unearthing of subjective sources of error. In the section on “Revealed Religion” in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel also treats evil in relation to this type of self-centredness, but ties it to the self-centredness of the figure of Lucifer from the Book of Isaiah:

Since this withdrawal into itself or self-centredness of the existent consciousness immediately makes it self-discordant, Evil [*das Böse*] appears as the primary existence of the inwardly-turned consciousness; and because the thoughts of Good and Evil are utterly opposed and this antithesis is not yet resolved, this consciousness is essentially only evil [*wesentlich nur das Böse*]. ... [Thus] the becoming of Evil can be shifted further back out of the existent world even into the primary realm of thought. It can therefore be said that it is the very first-born Son of Light [Lucifer] himself who fell because he withdrew into himself or became self-centered. (*Phenomenology of Spirit*, §776)

Lucifer is an existing consciousness born from the Godhead and who is *simply* evil, but for “evil” to be determinate, it needs an opposite, so “at the same time ... there is also present the *good* consciousness opposing it”, and in the myth after the fall of Lucifer “in his place another was at once created”

(§776)—the “second person” of the Holy Trinity to be identified with Jesus. We know from Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* that, following Jakob Böhme Hegel interpreted Lucifer as symbolizing *the material world itself*, and God’s *second* son, Jesus, as *spirit’s* worldly incarnation, the task of spirit being to *redeem* the fallenness of material existence (*Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, vol. III, 293*).^{viii} Humans, of course, combine determinations of these two realms, nature and spirit: they belong equally to the primarily evil fallen realm, and to the redeeming spiritual realm—in particular, the religious community left in the wake of the life and death of Jesus, the community that contains the germs of the philosophical realm of reason and freedom. But while these are clearly related to the contrasting rational and material dimensions of human existence found in Kant, Hegel’s allusions to a pre-anthropological origin of evil suggest that these are not combined in the way that is found in the Kantian picture.

Other biblical resonances of Kant’s position of evil support this difference in outlook. Kant points out that while evil cannot be so grounded in any animal nature of humans, neither can human evil can be considered to be “diabolical”—a type of evil that would result when “resistance to the law” were itself “elevated to an incentive” (*Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason, 82*). Here we are presumably to imagine the evil capable of a *non-finite* being, an angel, such as Lucifer. By their nature angels do not need, and so do not possess the type of *discursive* reason found in humans in which concepts have to be applied to bodily given intuitive inputs. The Kantian explanation of human evil could thus not apply in this sphere, and so Lucifer’s evil would need another source—it must originate in a will that is turned directly *against* the will of God, an “incentive” that is directed *against the law itself*. But, as we have seen, this is just the type of evil of which humans are capable in “formal conscience” in Hegel’s account. Humans *are* capable of “diabolical” evil, in a

way that they are *not* for Kant, but conversely, they are also capable of participation in the *divine* redemption from that fallen status.^{ix}

All this overtly religious form of imagistic expression, however, belongs to what Hegel describes as “*Vorstellung*” [“representation”], often translated in this context as “picture-thinking”—a form of thinking not proper to “the concept” (*Phenomenology of Spirit*, §776). To understand what these religious differences mean *philosophically*, we must turn to Hegel’s logical considerations.

Evil from a Logico-Linguistic Perspective

In his *Evil and the God of Love*, John Hick has presented Augustine’s account of evil as an attempt to resolve a contradiction in the views of Plotinus, by whom he was influenced. Plotinus had treated evil as “non-being”, which, claims Hick, equivocates between “the absolute sense of sheer nothingness” and the “relative sense of the not yet realized potentiality of some specific thing” (Hick 2010, 42). Plotinus had thus treated evil as both forms of non-being: evil being “negative and passive” when treating the universe as an emanation of the One who is perfectly good, but as “positive and active” when describing the “felt potency of evil in human experience”. Augustine, he claims, had resolved this ambiguity to a certain degree by giving evil an anthropogenic origin in the malfunctioning of a good, but limited, human capacity for reason.

Reflections on the structures of “negation” relevant to the ambiguity of Plotinus’s treatment of evil can be found in one of Kant’s pre-critical essays on the concept of “negative magnitudes” where he differentiates between two ways of considering “negative” concepts which addresses at a formal level the ambiguity of the notion of “negative” being in Plotinus (*Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes into Philosophy*, section 2). Kant there

effectively distinguishes *contrary* concepts, such as beautiful and ugly (A and *non-A*), from *contradictory* ones, such as beautiful and *not* beautiful (A and *not A*) (221). We might think of the second of these negative concepts, but not the first, as derived from the denial of judgment *affirming* the positive concept. Such logical considerations, he says, are relevant to moral philosophy, as we should not understand evil in the sense of “*das Übel*” as the mere *lack* of goodness or virtue but as something *opposing* goodness. Suffering is not simply a lack of pleasure but an amount of “negative” pleasure, and concomitantly, *das Übel* is not the *logical* negation, or the contradictory of goodness, but its “real negation”—it is a type of *is-a-negative version* of well-being (its contrary), not the mere lack of it. But from the perspective of his later transcendental idealism, Kant did not consider judgments that are relative to the pleasantness or painfulness of the experience of the object involved as genuinely cognitive judgments. The sense of good as *das Wohl* or of evil as *das Übel* there become philosophically and morally irrelevant. Measured simply in terms of the contingent pleasures and frustrations experienced by finite beings, these concepts lack objectivity.

The same general logical considerations reappear in a transformed way after Kant’s transcendental turn, however, in *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. Some “not-good [*nichtgute*]” contradicting some good may be “the consequence either of the mere lack of the ground of a good ... or of a positive ground antagonistic to the good ... in this latter case, the not-good can also be called the positive evil [*das positive Böse*]” (72 note). The later case is now a *true* case of moral evil and not just a subjective “*Übel*” because in relation to the “good” we are no longer talking of the ground of any subjectively pleasant or unpleasant quality but the *moral law* as the ground of the moral goodness of an action. Kant’s point is that in such a case, the opposing “not-good” will be something *counteracting*—that counteracts the moral law like a

counterposing force; ~~it~~ evil will not result simply ~~consist in~~ from the *absence* of a moral motivation. ~~That~~ This diagnosis is, of course, consistent with Kant's transcendental moral philosophy: we are being presented with a case in which the interests of some bodily inclination ~~providing a particular content of moral reasoning are~~ is being elevated over the interests of the universal moral law itself, ~~in a way to~~ such that it actively *prevents* the expression of the law. [1]

As we have seen, Hegel's account of evil, while close to that of Kant, is shaped by his general critique of the "formalism" of Kant's account of moral reasoning. I suggest that we consider Hegel as starting from something like Kant's later abandoned "pre-critical" account of good and evil as "*das Wohl*" and "*das Übel*".^x These may be good and evil from the limited perspective of a finite agent, but this does not eliminate them for being cognitively or morally relevant. Unlike Kant's morally neutral account of material nature, Hegel's *starts* from the assumption that there is "evil" in the material world as there is "good"—the picture signaled mythologically by the identification of the material world with Lucifer. Thus Hegel starts from the assumption that humans are to be considered part of the natural world, such that their inclinations provide the grounds from which aspects of the world are judged to be "*wohl*" and "*übel*". But humans are also, of course, "spiritual" entities, symbolized by the "second" son who replaces the first after the first's fall into materiality and determinacy, but this "spiritual" status should not be identified with their capacity for abstract reasoning as with Kant. Rather, it is bound up with their capacity to "negate" their own immediate and limited evaluations and judgments, a capacity which presupposes particular types of relations to others. The partitioning of the world into by subjective first-order conceptions of *das Wohl* and *das Übel* is bound up with an activity of "negating" situations or states of affairs, but humans can extend this evaluation to their own immediately given "first-order desires" themselves, when the question of their

“grounds” arise—questions typically posed by *others* confronted with the expression of those desires. This gives rise to evaluations of a different conceptual structure, in this case evaluations structured by conceptual pairs like “*gut*” and “*böse*”.

This distinction is captured by Hegel’s abstract discussion of “the will” in the Introduction to *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. The will, he notes, contains “the element of *pure indeterminacy* or of the ‘I’s pure reflection into itself, in which every limitation, every content, whether present immediately through nature, through needs, desires, and drives, or given and determined in some other way, is dissolved” (§5). This is the element of the will that is given expression in the *evil* of formal conscience. It is a “moment” of the will, but only a moment. It is implicit in the will’s activity but becomes potentially evil only when it is hypostatized and held onto as the *truth* of the will against the will’s second moment which is “the *positing* of a determinacy as a content and object”, a content that “may further be given by nature, or generated by the concept of spirit” (§6). The will is the necessary “unity of both these moments” (§7), and Hegel describes the *third* moment of the will as the I’s being “with itself in its limitation, in this other” (§7 addition).

To help us understand freedom as this relation, Hegel appeals to the model of friendship and love: “Here, we are not one-sidedly within ourselves, but willingly limit ourselves with reference to an other, even while knowing ourselves in this limitations as ourselves” (*Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, §7 addition). Hegel then goes on to describe the “will of the stubborn person who considers himself unfree unless he has *this* will”. But this is clearly the type of will possessed by the formally conscientious agent insisting on *this* inner certainty.

We can see, then, that in contrast to Nietzsche's "genealogy" of morality and the concept of evil, Hegel's account locates it within what he takes to be the framework of a religion of a "God of love". It is ultimately the *refusal* of the community of friendship and love that lies at the basis of evil in Hegel's account. But he simultaneously sees his account as also squarely within the *philosophical* tradition of the west, as evil is a refusal of the necessarily communal structures of *rationality* and *freedom* in an equivalent way. For Hegel, then, the *historicity* of good and evil does not undermine the objectivity of these notions themselves. Good and evil are real existences within an account of human history that is a history of redemption and enlightenment.

ⁱ For an account of the evolution of these terms in German philosophy, see the entries on "*Bosheit*" and "*das Übel*" in Ritter et. al. 1971–, vols 1 and 11.

ⁱⁱ This is not to say that Nietzsche himself took these considerations in a consistently "naturalistic" ~~in this~~ way.

ⁱⁱⁱ There is a massive secondary literature on this, but for a clear and compelling presentation of Hegel's criticisms see Sedgwick 2012.

^{iv} Hegel explains: "From this point of view, no immanent theory of duties is possible. One may indeed bring in material *from outside* and thereby arrive at *particular* duties, but it is impossible to make the transition to the determination of particular duties from the above determinations of duty as *absence of contradiction*, as *formal correspondence with itself*, which is no different from the specification of *abstract indeterminacy*." (Hegel 1991, § 135 remark)

^v Hegel adds: "Even in our times it happens that reverence for the existing order is in varying degrees absent, and people seek to equate accepted values with their own will, with what they have recognized".

^{vi} See, for example, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, §§ 185, 241, 243.

vii Hegel's critical analysis of the Fichtean stance of "self-certainty" is found in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, chapter 4.

viii On the importance of Böhme's theology for Hegel's conception of evil see O'Regan 1994, Part 2, chapter 3.

ix On the activist "Pelagian" dimensions of the form of Christianity in which Hegel was raised, see Dickey 1987.

x From the perspective of Hegel's *logic*, contrary conceptual pairs like these belong to the "logic of being" (*Science of Logic*, Book One: The Doctrine of Being).

Further Reading

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