

ISSN 1751-8229

Volume Three, Number Three

## **Of Diabolical Evil, and Related Matters: On Slavoj Žižek 's Reading of Kant's Practical Philosophy**

Matthew Sharpe – Deakin University, Melbourne School  
of Continental Philosophy

*“... ( marks) all betokening*

*What an exhausting effort it takes*

*To be evil ...”*

Bertolt Brecht, commenting on the lines marking the physiognomy of a Japanese  
God, rendered in a decorative mask.

*“If I have done one good deed in all my life,*

*I do repent it from my very soul”*

Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* (act 5, 189-90)

Since the mid-1980s, Slavoj Žižek has propounded a series of striking readings not only of Karl Marx—as might be expected from a thinker who grew up in the Eastern bloc—but also of Marx’s primary philosophical influences: Immanuel Kant, Schelling and Hegel. In this essay, we will be examining Žižek and his students’ radical reading of Kant, in order to bring ourselves to the position where we might intelligently pose questions to and about it. The animating sense of this task is that Žižek’s radical reading of Kant is an original and independently intriguing contribution to Kant studies, as well as being at the philosophical heart of his own, wider endeavours.

The central principle of what could be called the ‘new Slovenian reading of Kant’ is expressed boldly in Slavoj Žižek’s great 1993 work *Tarrying With the Negative*. The second chapter of that work begins as follows:

It may seem paradoxical to evoke a ‘crack in the universal’ apropos of Kant: was Kant not obsessed by the Universal, was not his fundamental aim to establish the universal form (constitutive) of knowledge, does his ethics not propose the universal form of the rule which regulates our activity as the sole criterion of morality, etc.? Yet as soon as the Thing-in-Itself is posited as unattainable (after Kant), *every universal is potentially suspended*. Every universal implies a point of exception at which its validity, its hold, is cancelled ... On account of this singularity, each of Kant’s three critiques ‘stumbles’ against universalisation. In ‘pure reason’, antinomies emerge when, in the use of categories, we reach beyond finite experience and endeavor to apply them to the *totality* of the universe: (or) if we endeavor to conceive of the universe as a *whole*, it appears simultaneously (to us) as finite and infinite, as an all-embracing causal nexus and containing free beings. In ‘practical reason’, the ‘crack’ is introduced with the possibility of ‘diabolical evil’ (sic.), of an evil which, as to its form, *coincides with the good*. In the ‘capacity of judging’ qua ‘synthesis’ of pure and practical reason, the split occurs twice. First, we have the opposition of aesthetics and teleology, ... two poles which, together, do *not* form a harmonious whole ... (and second, we have) the sublime (which) is to be conceived precisely as the index of the failed ‘synthesis’ of beauty (purposiveness without purpose) and (teleology: purpose without purposefulness) ... (Žižek, 1993, 45-6) <sup>1</sup>

The reader can see immediately the difference between Žižek’s claims concerning Kant and the overwhelmingly pervasive reception of Kant as the philosopher of universalisation *par excellence*. How can Žižek maintain, despite the weight of evidence, reception, and scholarship, that Kant was not such a philosopher

of universality, but of a crack in the same? In Žižek's most extended rumination on Kant's practical philosophy—which will be the specific object of our focus in this essay—Žižek specifies his position further. Kant's orthodox readers are not wholly misguided, in their collective passing over of the 'crack in the universal' which the new Slovenian reading thinks to isolate in Kant's thinking. But for Žižek, the key point is that Kant's texts are not monological, whatever Kant's own official and programmatic intentions. They are internally divided constructions. So here, the influence of Derrida's way of approaching philosophical texts upon Žižek can be clearly seen.

In each of his three *Critiques*, Žižek contends, Kant washed his philosophical hands of concepts to which his own position logically committed him, which indexed this 'crack' in the universal and thus threatened Kant's philosophical intentions. To quote "The Unconscious Law":

... (a)fter indicating the contours of this concept, Kant quickly withdraws and offers another, supplementary concept in exchange, a concept which already 'pacifies' the unbearable dimension of the first one: the Sublime (is offered) (instead of the Monstrous) (in the *Critique of Judgement*); radical evil (is offered) (instead of 'diabolical evil') (in the texts on practical reason)..." (Žižek, 1997, 227)<sup>ii</sup>

Žižek is not averse to reading this repeated motif in Kant as a reflection of an obsessional existential comportment: one characterised by a fear of Truth, an encounter with the Real or Thing-in-Itself, hidden behind the characteristic "critical" rhetoric of avoiding error at all cost.. (Žižek, 1989, 190) The reader can also wonder as to its politics, in multiple ways.

A full assessment of what is being claimed here concerning the three *Critiques* is too large a project for this paper. This essay takes only the argument concerning morals or Kant's 'practical reason'<sup>iii</sup>. Particularly, Žižek's position concerning what Kant calls 'diabolical evil' will be my concern, and how Žižek thinks Kant at once thinks such a notion, before withdrawing from it into the more congenial, if still grim, teaching concerning radical evil.. This focus responds to three reasons, beyond considerations of economy:

1. The first reason is that the methodology employed by Žižek as he considers Kant's practical philosophy exemplifies the way that he reads Kant in general. Despite Žižek's frequently-expressed criticisms of Derrida, this reading of Kant is a meaningfully quasi- or para-deconstructive reading. As we have indicated, the claim is that at several points the truth of Kant's position is indicated in 'symptomatic' moments: moments 'in Kant more than Kant himself', as Žižek might put it. In these moments, the 'crack in the universal' peeks through the textual fabric of the official Kantian philosophical project, before being closed over by the concepts that undergird Kant's 'standard academic image'.

2. The second reason is the priority accorded by Kant himself to practical reason. As readers will recall, it is in the sphere of practical reason that Kant believes the import of the Ideas of Reason can still be borne out, even though these Ideas have been denied their traditional, "constitutive" functioning in 'the Transcendental Dialectic' of the first *Critique* (so, freedom has a practical import and reality, despite our inability to establish its existence theoretically; the data of our practical moral experience gives us reason to 'postulate' the immortality of the soul (see anon), etc.).

3. The third reason is that Žižek himself is Kantian enough to reassert this priority of practical reason in his texts, albeit in a different manner, bringing together his psychoanalytic and Marxian influences. By reading Žižek's rereading of Kant's later 'practical' writings on good and evil, we are hence better placed to weigh both the force and the limitations of Žižek's own project as a post-Kantian critical theorist or political philosopher.

The paper has three parts. **Part I** is exegetical. It stages the argument that Žižek (and after him, notably, Alenka Zupancic) make concerning the place of 'radical' (*versus* 'diabolical') evil in Kant's writings. **Part II** then looks at Žižek's reading of 'diabolical evil' in Kant's texts, and outside of them. This is evil, to quote Žižek, conceived "as a pure spiritual attitude, far more 'suprasensible' than good": evil, that is, not performed for the sake of any anticipated selfish (or in Kant's terms 'pathological' gain), but performed for its own sake. **Part III** completes the exposition. It expounds Žižek's supplementation of Kant on the place and force of

diabolical evil. The **Conclusion** of the paper then stages some critical questions concerning Žižek's reading of Kant's practical philosophy.

### ***Part I: Radical Evil, or 'The Fall, Conceived Within the Bounds of Mere Reason'***

Žižek's reading of Kant's practical philosophy draws from two principle sources. These are the *Critique of Practical Reason* and the first book of Kant's lesser known, 1793 work, *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*.<sup>iv</sup> It is around the problematics raised by this latter text that Žižek weaves his reading of *The Critique of Practical Reason*, as well as of Kant's anthropological and political writings.

Kant begins *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* by citing John, 5:19. "That 'the world lieth in evil'", Kant says, "is a complaint as old as history". (Kant, 1996, 69) Kant's aim in Book 1 is to philosophically account for the manifold evidences which have animated this timeless human complaint.

Kant begins in this purpose by attesting that: "We call a human being evil ... not because he performs actions that are evil (contrary to law), but because these are so constituted that they allow the inference of evil maxims in him." (Kant, 70) At issue here is Kant's central, liberal distinction between questions of mere legality (whether an act externally conforms to law) and those concerning morality (whether or not the agent's action was done solely out of the subject's reverence for the moral law). (Kant, 1996, 76; Kant, 1952, 321, 325) Evil is not mere illegality, though it often coincides with it. Evil is immorality, acting for the sake of ends posed in maxims other than those dictated by a sense of duty and respect for the dignity of the moral law.

Kant then isolates three types of evil *qua* acting out of irreverence or indifference for the moral law:

1. The first form of evil is undoubtedly the most common. Kant calls it evil from the 'frailty' or weakness (*fragilitas*) of human nature. In such malign *fragilitas*, one knows what is morally and/or legally right, and yet acts against the dictates of law in the expectation of pleasure or gain, or in order to avoid the sacrifices associated with acting well. The politician who spends public funds on sex toys is a case in point; as is the poor man whose poverty forces him to

theft; as is the liar whose lie acquits him before the law, and so on. (Kant, 1996, 77) Philosophers since Plato and Aristotle have wondered at the possibility and nature of human's propensity to act badly, despite knowing the good (the Greek *akrasia*). Žižek's telling philosophical theorisation of *fragilitas*'s inauthenticity is the following:

I have no right to assume the position of metalanguage; of an objective observer of myself, in order to ascertain what my nature allows ...By saying: 'what could I do: I'm only human' to excuse myself, I would disavow precisely what is most germane to me as a moral being: namely the capacity to choose freely which of my inclinations I let determine my conduct. (Žižek, 1993, 99).

2. The second type of evil Kant isolates in *Religion Within the Bounds of Mere Reason* is 'impurity' (*impuritas*) of the human heart. Here, Kant intends actions which are in accordance with moral law (*viz.* they are 'legally' sound), but which haven't been adopted in respect (*achtung*) for the moral law. This is the type of evil which involves what we call 'ulterior motives'. Examples of impurity are someone who 'plays by the rules' so she can climb the professional ladder; or the archetypal school teacher who takes an obvious satisfaction from the prosecution of discipline upon his pupils. As Žižek argues in *The Indivisible Remainder*, his predictable excuse: 'I was only doing my *duty*', is not good enough for Kant. The reason concerns what is the effective flipside to Kant's famous, pietistic anxiety that any finite being could ever perform a wholly good act (due to our thoroughgoing embeddedness in the 'pathological' order of the senses and 'radical evil', as we'll see). Žižek puts this 'flipside' to Kantian rigorism neatly when he says that even (externally) doing one's duty is no excuse for (internally) getting pleasure from this performance. (Žižek, 1997, 170; 1993, 100; 1999b, 298<sup>v</sup>) For Kant, too, in the words of the poet: '(t)here can be no higher treason/than doing the right thing, for the wrong reason' (T.S. Eliot). (Kant, 1996, 77)
3. The third type of evil Kant lists is evil from the 'perversity' or 'depravity' (*perversitas*) of human nature. This, importantly for us, is what Kant calls

‘radical evil’:

(Radical Evil) reverses the ethical order (of priority) among the incentives of a free will ... the cast of mind is thereby corrupted at its root ... and the man is hence designated as evil. (Kant, 1996, 78)

We note then that the ‘radicality’ in question when Kant speaks of ‘radical evil’ absolutely does *not* concern a quantitative increase in the number or intensity of evil acts an individual or corporation might perform. As shocking as this may sound, neither Timothy McVeigh, Osama Bin Laden, George W. Bush or Dick Cheney, nor Adolf Hitler is particularly ‘radically evil’ in the Kantian sense. This is not to say that they weren’t really bad people, even great criminals. It is to make a category error. The ‘radicality’ or, if you like, the *priority* at stake for Kant, when he invokes ‘radical evil’ is a logical one. In Alenka Zupancic’s formulations:

The ‘radical’ character of radical evil does not refer to its ‘quantity’, since it is not a concept designed to explain the ‘radicality’ of evil as it effects the real world ...

It does not refer to any empirical act, but to the root of all pathological, non-ethical conduct. It is the precondition of the adoption of maxims other than those that come from the moral law ... (Zupancic, 2000, 87 / 89)

This is why Kant himself calls radical evil “a common ground, itself a maxim, of all particular morally evil maxims”. (Kant, 1996, 70, 79) Elsewhere, he describes it as a “propensity” that is “innate” within us all. (Kant, 85) Radical evil inheres, Kant claims, in “... the human being, even the best”. The reason is that “it is woven into human nature”. (Kant, 1996, 78)

Philosophically, three questions are raised by these claims.

1. What is the nature of Kant’s claim that human beings have an ‘innate’ or radical propensity to evil, and how can he redeem its validity, using ‘mere reason’?
2. What philosophical work does Kant want this postulation to *do* for him in *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, in terms of his attempt to

give an account of the human condition?

3. How does the Kantian postulation of radical evil sit with the rest of his philosophical system, and what might it commit him to, given the terms of this conceptual structure?

In the remainder of this **Part I**, we will deal with questions 1 and 2. The third question, which is the one that Žižek thinks opens Kant's texts out onto the topic and possibility of diabolical evil *malgre lui*, will be dealt with separately in **Part II**.

1. The question of how Kant redeems his claim that man has a positive tendency to evil "alongside" his tendency to good has two answers.

First, in a succession of near-Voltairean passages, Kant suggests in *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* that, "in view of the multitude of woeful examples that the experience of human deeds parades before us", there seems to be little choice but to postulate an innate evil propensity in human beings. (Kant, 1996, 80-81) The twentieth century here is reminded, for reasons that might ultimately not be contingent, of the observations in *Civilization and Its Discontents* which led him to postulate the death drive.

However the reader of Kant can see how this inferential argument will not be sufficient for the type of case Kant characteristically wants to make. Kant's claim to the radical evil in human nature stems ultimately from a second, strictly transcendental argument from the nature of subjects' immanent experiences.



## Figure 1: The Form of a (Kantian) Transcendental Argument

1.     **X is**  
      (where X is an observable phenomenon, for example moral judgments of others)
2.     **Y is the necessary (or at least the only possible)**  
**condition/presupposition of x**  
      (for example, free will is the presupposition for moral judgments making sense)
- ergo** 3. **Y is**  
      (people have free will)

The transcendental argument to radical evil begins from the experience which Kant calls ‘humiliation’ in *The Critique of Practical Reason*. Subjects always experience doing their moral duty as minimally arduous or humiliating, Kant argues. Yet the moral law is in itself an incentive motivating action. It follows, contra Socrates or Spinoza, that what opposes moral motivation cannot be ignorance alone concerning the true nature of the Good. An active counterforce (Kant, 1996, 72, n.) is the necessary presupposition of this experience, underlying our amoral “self-conceit” (Kant, 1952, 322). As Žižek explains Kant here:

... the proof of the existence of this counterforce lies in the fact that I experience the moral Law in myself as a traumatic agency which exerts an unbearable pressure on the very kernel of my self-identity and thus utterly humiliates my self-esteem- so *there must be* in the very nature of the ‘I’ something which resists moral law: the conceit which .../ (would) perceive morality as a simple set of external rules, of obstacles that society has put in place in order to restrain the pursuit of egotistical ‘pathological’ interests. (Žižek, 1997, 99/ 100 (my italics), Kant, 1996, 79; Žižek, 1989, 166-8)<sup>vi</sup>

## Figure Two: The Deduction of Radical Evil

1. Humiliation occurs in the presence of moral duty
  2. Radical evil, an ineluctable propensity to disobey the moral law, is the only possible explanation for this humiliation
- ergo* 3. human beings are radically evil

2. what work then does Kant think presupposing “evil as subjectively necessary in every human being” (Kant, 1996, 80) can do? The widest problematic at issue here is the traditional problem of evil and of theodicy, justifying the existence of evil (and hence God’s ways) to man.

In several fascinating passages in *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant hence confronts the biblical ‘fall’ narrative. This account is the Bible’s way of accounting for the origin, and intractability, of human evil. Kant’s fascinating assertion about it is, however, begins from the claim that its narrational coherence conceals a logical *impasse*. This impasse is that posed by the question: given that, as we are told, humanity was innocent before the fall, how could we *ever* possibly have fallen?

If we give the standard response to this dilemma: *viz.* that our first representatives were ‘lured’ by a ‘third agent’ (*viz.* the serpent), so that the responsibility in no way belonged primarily to them, a first problem arises. This is the problem of why it is that God has punished human beings *with* the fall for a fate whose ‘prime mover’ was not human?

However, if we therefore postulate that in fact Adam chose for evil in Eden, a second problem arises. This is the problem that if Adam were truly innocent before the fall, how could he ever have exercised his prelapsarian freedom to choose evil? Surely, a wholly good or innocent being— by definition— would have had no truck with the serpent’s wiles?

Kant’s interpretation and resolution of this impasse is philosophically ingenious. It also steals Levi-Strauss’ mythical thunder, over one hundred and fifty years prior to the latter’s famous structural analyses of mythologies. Kant suggests

that the biblical narrative is explicable as the result of a misrepresentation of a *logical antecedence*—that human beings have always already opted for evil—as a narratable *historical origin*. For Kant, that is, the Biblical fall narrative tries to ‘historicise the logical’, and this is why it is unable to avoid *aporia*. As we have seen, Kant agrees with the Judaeo-Christian heritage that we need to *presuppose* some deep propensity to evil. But this necessity in no way, for him, commits us to a story about temporal origins. (Kant, 1996, 87-89) Zupancic puts it this way:

... for Kant, evil can be said to be ‘innate’ only in a logical sense, that is, posited as the ground antecedent to every use of freedom in experience, and thus conceived of as present in humanity at birth- *though birth need not be the cause of it.*’ (Zupancic, 2000, 88)

## **Part Two: From Radical Evil to Diabolical Evil, or: Why Žižek Thinks Don Juan is the Truth of Kant**

Our third question from Part I—concerning how Kant’s postulation of a transcendental propensity to evil sits with the rest of Kant’s philosophy—is decisive for Žižek’s critical rereading of the practical philosophy. To anticipate, Žižek’s suggestion will be that when we read *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, mindful of the terms of Kant’s wider critical philosophy, we can see that Kant’s acceptance of the possibility of radical evil commits him to accepting a much more uncanny or disturbing prospect: namely, the possibility of diabolical evil, evil chosen without any pathological (from fragility or impurity) grounds, but as it were for its own sake.

Let us now put (somewhat formally) Žižek’s reasoning:

i. Kant’s official position is that it is *solely* our autonomous capacity to legislate for ourselves in line with the moral law that is capable of ‘lifting’ us out of the causal-phenomenal nexus. Consider for instance this crucial passage from *The Critique of Practical Reason*, describing respect (*achtung*) for duty as in some way a trans-phenomenal drive (*triebfeder*) within human beings. Moral conduct for the sake of the Law or categorical imperative, Kant remarkably says, requires:

... a respect for something entirely different from life, in comparison to which life and its enjoyment have absolutely no worth. (A man) lives only because it is his duty, not because he has the least taste for living. / *Such* is the nature of the genuine drive of pure practical reason. (Kant, 152, 328 (my italics))

However;

ii. A choice or tendency which is *transcendental* (like, Kant *dixit*, that of 'radical evil' (cf. **Part I**)) can't be 'pathologically' motivated, in Kant's system. The reason is that:

iii. when Kant speaks of our desires as 'pathological', what he is asserting is that our motivations to act, *except* when we act morally (i.), are conditioned by representations of 'empirical' things in the world (this pretty girl, that cup of coffee). These passively affect us, or drive us to act in their pursuit. (Zupancic, 2000, 7) By contrast, to take the most famous Kantian candidate of what is transcendental, the categories of the first *Critique of Pure Reason* are *themselves* absolutely *not* empirical 'representations'. On the contrary, they are the purely formal frame given whose schematisation by the imagination, such representations can *emerge* in the first place.

Hence, if:

(i.) the moral good (dutiful action) is Kant's model for what allows us to transcend the 'pathological', and:

(ii.) (ii.) radical evil, as transcendental (Part 1), cannot be pathologically conditioned (iii.), it follows unavoidably that:

iv. the 'act' of the transcendental adoption of 'radical evil' as a maxim which originally subordinates universal Law to one's particular ends can itself only have a purely formal, free and non-pathological act.<sup>vii</sup> As such, this opting for evil will have been indistinguishable from a purely good moral act (as per i.).

The full force of describing, Žižek's reading of Kant as quasi- or para-deconstructive then should be clear. The claim is that, on Kant's own terms, that the originary Act

wherein human beings allegedly opt for evil as the subordination of moral Law to their pathological self-conceit—an Act that Kant's teaching concerning radical evil posits as underlying all subsequent pathologically motivated acts of evil—can only have been an act of evil for the sake of evil. In other words, it will have been an Act untainted by the lure of any pathological gain to self. The uncanny thing is that this means that this Act would seem philosophically indistinguishable from the morally good Act as Kant defines it.

Yet Žižek goes further. On top of this persuasive deconstructive reading of the logic of Kant's competing commitments, Žižek also argues that we can actually witness several moments in Kant's *oeuvre* wherein he openly confronts the possibility of diabolical evil. What then are these, supplementary moments, from whose abyssal confrontation with an evil which would be transcendently grounded Kant understandably, but inauthentically, withdrew? There are, discernibly, two such central points wherein Kant's practical inquiries led him to explicitly approach the possibility of what he called "the incorporation of evil *qua* evil into one's maxim". (Kant, 1996, 84 (sic.)).

### *'Evil within the Bounds of Kant's Reasoning Alone'*

In Book 1 of *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant in fact explicitly broaches the possibility of 'diabolical evil' on the terms we have established. Yet while in this way performatively admitting it as logically conceivable, he indeed immediately suggests that it is 'absolutely impossible' or even "a contradiction", on grounds of an identification of freedom and moral duty (which at this point is merely presupposed). Kant says:

The ground of (human) evil can ... not be placed ... in a *corruption* of the morally legislative reason, as if reason could extirpate within itself the dignity of the law itself, for this is absolutely impossible. To think of oneself as a freely acting being, yet as exempted from the one law commensurate to such a being (the moral law), would amount to the thought of a cause operating without any law at all ..., and this is a contradiction. *Sensuous nature* therefore contains too little to provide a ground of moral evil in the human being, for, to the extent that it eliminates the incentives originating in freedom, it makes of the human a purely *animal* being; (however) *a reason exonerated from the moral law, an*

*evil reason as it were (an absolutely evil will), would on the contrary contain too much (to provide a ground for human evil), because resistance to the law would itself be thereby elevated to an incentive ... (Hence) the subject would be made a diabolical being.- Neither of these two is however applicable to the human being. (Kant, 1996, 82 (my italics))*

### *The Diabolical Metaphysics of Killing the Monarch(y)*

Žižek's own account focuses on a further moment in Kant's *oeuvre*, in *The Metaphysics of Morals*. Significantly, given Žižek's own revolutionary politics, this is the point within *The Metaphysics of Morals* where Kant discusses the possibility of "the formal execution of the monarch". However sublime a spectacle Kant held the French Revolution to have been, viewed from a philosophical distance, this passage shows that Kant was however horrified at the Jacobins' Act of actually trying and then executing Louis XVI in 1793. Such a gesture, Kant recognised, involved not simply an evil performed in and against the background of an established legal form, in the pursuit of some pathological gain denied to subjects within the present conditions of this socio-political organisation. The 'evil' here involved the Jacobins' disavowing the existing *form* of legal organization, in order to institute an entirely new legal form. Here, then, Žižek contends that Kant faced up to an act which was not motivated, on Kant's terms, by peoples' 'sensuous nature'. Yet, the Jacobins' actions at the same time contravened both the existing social law and the 'one law (supposedly) commensurate to our natures' as moral selves—namely, the categorical imperative. However, as Žižek stresses, even in spite of the very historical fact of the regicide of 1793, Kant still insisted on arguing in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, that: 'So far as can be seen, it is impossible for men to commit a crime of such formal and completely futile malice, although no system of morality should omit to consider it, if only as an idea representing ultimate evil. (Kant, 1998, 146)

To stress: Žižek's suggestion, given these Kantian texts, is that when we affirm in full the possibility of 'diabolical evil', we are not setting ourselves abstractly against Kant. Kant's works themselves, both logically and in these two symptomatic moments,

*commit us* to admitting its possibility and lasting philosophical interest. With and against Kant, however, Žižek for his part also proffers what he takes to be several literary and historical exemplifications of this diabolical evil.

Žižek's primary example of how such 'diabolical evil' is eminently more than an abstract or 'philosophical' possibility, is the figure of Don Juan as dramatised by Moliere and Mozart. The key scene in Mozart's *Don Juan*, for Žižek, is the last scene. Here, the great lover, condemned to death, is confronted with the statue of his arch-enemy, the *commendatore*. The statue reminds him of the punishments that await him in the afterlife, should he choose not to repent his sinful career. As Žižek and Zupancic (who are following Lacan here (Lacan, 1986, 108-109)) comment, this scene uncannily resembles the 'parable of the gallows' which Kant erects in *The Critique of Practical Reason*. (1952, 302) Through this 'parable of the gallows', Kant had wanted to show us that, while someone might conceivably refuse to *lie* (*viz.* break the moral Law), though he were faced by death, "we do not have to guess very long" about whether a man would give up his life for the sake of pleasures of the flesh. (1952, 30) The problem for Kant is that, despite Kant's supposedly 'knock-down' argument, Don Juan *does* refuse to repent. He accepts death and perdition not for the sake of the moral law, but only out of a fidelity to his debauchery. In Moliere's *Don Juan*, not even a series of messengers from heaven, "reminding him of where he is heading" are able to change his resolve. (Zupancic, 2000, 127) As Žižek says:

Don Giovanni persists in his libertine attitude at the very moment when he knows very well that what awaits him is *only* the gallows ... That is to say, from the standpoint of pathological pleasures, the thing to do would be to accomplish the formal act of penitence: Don Giovanni knows that death is close, so that by atoning for his deeds he stands to lose nothing, only to gain (ie: to save himself from posthumous torments), ... yet 'on principle' he chooses to persist in his defiant stance of the libertine. How can one avoid experiencing Don Giovanni's unyielding 'no!' to the statue ... as the model of an intransigent *ethical* attitude, notwithstanding its 'evil' content? (Žižek, 1993, 96)

### Part III: The ‘Speculative Identity’ of Evil and the Good?

Žižek’s point in drawing Kant out on the question of diabolical evil, and adducing Don Juan as an *unheimliche* double that Kant cannot avow, is not simply exegetical or scholarly. On top of what is thus uncovered, Žižek mounts a stronger philosophical position. Žižek’s argument is that, if we accept the philosophical and historical possibility of diabolical evil, Kant’s understanding of the relation between good and evil as a “real opposition” of “two opposed contrary forces” become untenable. (Žižek, 1993, 99, 96) In Žižek’s words in *Tarrying With the Negative*, instead we will need to broach “Hegel’s logic of negative self-relating”. in order to conceive properly of this relation. (Žižek, 1993, 101)

To see why this is so we need to look at how Žižek reads yet two further passages from Kant’s practical writings.

#### *The Uncanny Undesirability of the Inaccessible Highest Good*

The first is the closing passage of Part I of *The Critique of Practical Reason*. Here Kant argues that not only is it *impossible* for a human to fully know the good—which is a fundamental tenet of his critical turn in moral philosophy. If we *were* to attain it, Kant now additionally argues, this would be profoundly dehumanising, robbing us of our moral agency:

God and eternity in their awful majesty would stand unceasingly before our eyes ... Transgression of the law would indeed be shunned, and the commanded would be performed. But because the ... spur to (moral) action would in this case be always present and external, reason would have no need to gather its strength to resist the inclinations ... Thus most actions conforming to the law would be done from fear, few would be done from hope, (and) none from duty ... The conduct of man ... would be changed into a mere mechanism, where, as in a puppet show, everything would gesticulate well, but no life would be found in the figures ... (Kant, 1952, 355)

Kant here states clearly the paradoxical conclusion that an over-proximity to the Good—surely what we might suppose to be the goal of living and acting well— would in fact be disastrous. It would be disastrous because it would lead to the loss of moral autonomy, instead making of us mere slaves not needing to overcome any contrary inclinations in order to do the good.<sup>viii</sup>



How though does Žižek read this uncanny passage? For Žižek, what Kant is confronting in these terms, despite himself, is the *Unheimliche* possibility that the highest Good is ‘*speculatively identical*’ with ‘monstrous evil, or that:

... (as) for the concept(s) ‘in themselves’, ... (good and evil) are indistinguishable: the difference is purely formal, and concerns only the point of view of the perceiving subject. (Žižek, 1997, 228-9)

This is why Žižek stresses that diabolical evil does not involve the Byronic-Miltonic spectacle of characters in love with evilness for the sake of the diabolical power which it confers. Despite its imposing title, Žižek claims that Kant’s ‘diabolical evil’ names nothing other than the *content* of the moral law *qua* pure form. (Žižek, 1997, 227, 229) To give up all pathological motives and to nominate something— even a ‘good’ content like not lying— as one’s sole ‘end in itself’, is on Žižek’s terms necessarily to approach this dimension of diabolical evil. At the least, we can agree, it is to appear as inhumane, inexplicable, and incomprehensibly intransigent to one’s contemporaries.

Žižek’s controversial claim in *The Plague of Fantasies* is indeed that *this* speculative identity of the Good on his terms and diabolical Evil is the unbearable Truth which Kant was seeking to disavow by repeatedly denying that a wholly good act is possible for mortals (and accordingly ‘postulating’ that the soul must be immortal in its striving for this impossibility). (Kant, 1952, 344; Zupancic, 79-82)

How though does Žižek propose that we can precisely think this ‘speculative identity’ between diabolical evil and the good? To answer this question, Žižek focuses upon (and we must turn to) a further ‘symptomatic’ moment within Kant, from *The Metaphysics of Morals*.

### *Impossible Yet Prohibited: The Double-Coded Origins of Moral Order*

In *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Žižek observes, when Kant discusses the question of the *origins* of any legal order, he resorts to an obviously *flawed*, logic. This logic or illogic, notably, is of the same type as that in play in the famous last line of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* (‘whereof one cannot speak, one must remain silent ...’),

Derrida's defence of a 'wholly Other', and conservative arguments about genetic research. In a word, Kant *prohibits the impossible*. Kant first 'establishes' that researches concerning the origin of a legal order can only come up empty-handed. Having done this, though, Kant nevertheless feels obliged to add that such researches are "a menace" which subjects "ought not to indulge in", and which need to be proscribed by the state. (Kant 1998, 143) Why the need to proscribe these researches, if they can only unearth nothing? Why this anxiety then about such necessarily fruitless inquiries?

Žižek's contention is that Kant's anxiety here, like anxiety per se, indicates the proximity of the Truth of the Real. It is an intimation—for those who know how to read—that the *crimen inexplabile* pertaining to regicide is not the aberrant *exception* that we saw in Part 2 that Kant wants soberly to argue that it is. (Žižek, 1998, 142-163) Indeed, in a position which aligns him notably with Derrida, Agamben and others, Žižek suggests that such events as the beheading of Louis XVI in 1793 give violent figure to the necessary condition of the founding of *any* legal order. (In truth, this is the most important consequence that Žižek takes from his reading of Kant on practical reason, as I shall expand in the **Conclusion**). Diabolical evil *qua* unpathological contravention of Law, Žižek claims, is actually: "... Good itself 'in the mode of becoming'". (Žižek, 1993, 97) Accordingly, it is not simply in terms of the opposition form-versus-content that its 'speculative identity' with the Good must be thought (as above). This dialectical evil, as the Good 'in its becoming', should actually be afforded a further, transcendental priority *over* the Good. In this sense, it can justly be said that Žižek is a teacher of (diabolical) evil.

Žižek's own claim is that the main philosophical source for his position here is Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*. In these lectures, Hegel is concerned with Hegel's undertaking of a reflection on the Fall as that act whereby human-being *became* human-being, passing over from its animalic prehistory. Žižek's characteristic argument is that Hegel here goes further than Kant, or unearths what Kant is committed to but cannot avow. For, as Žižek reads the *Lectures*, Hegel can be seen to pass beyond the notion that the choice of *radical* evil is only 'on a par' with the Good. Instead, Hegel poses that:

... the choice between good and evil is ... in a sense not the true, original choice: the truly first choice is the choice between (what will later be perceived as) yielding to one's pathological leanings and choosing radical evil: i.e. an act of suicidal egoism which 'makes place' for the Good, ... which overcomes the domination of (animalic) natural impulses, by way of a purely negative gesture of suspending the life-circuit. (Žižek, 1993, 96-7)

In this light, Žižek's final suggestion on diabolical evil is that we need to radicalise a further standard *doxa* to which Kant still subscribes: namely, that subjectivity as such is always merely *able* to choose evil—since we are free also to follow the Law, etc. For Žižek, the deeper truth is furthermore that "... the status of the subject as such is evil, i.e. insofar as we are 'human', in a sense we have *always already* chosen evil". (Žižek, 1993, 98 (my italics)) According to this teaching, Good itself, in anything like the standard sense of a communally binding ethical substance, can only ever represent a gentrification of its *own* origins. These origins, for their part—the Good 'in its becoming'—involve an excessive gesture of 'diabolical evil' which the positive order which it founded could not now tolerate.

### **A Critical Conclusion**

To summarise the argument in full now:

1. Žižek draws our attention to Book 1 of *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, wherein Kant insists that we must "... presuppose evil as subjectively necessary in every human being"". (Kant, 80) Kant elevates such radical evil to a transcendental status, wherein it acts as a negative counterforce to our moral capacity. This is the truth which for Kant is indexed 'pathologically' or 'empirically' by the *humiliation* our conceit must suffer when we act rightfully: the fact that it invariably seems like hard work, rather than a pleasure, to do Good. (Part 1)
2. **Part 2** recounted Žižek's illustrations of how Kant's admission of 'radical evil' to the status of being a transcendental subjective choice, unwittingly commits himself to admitting the possibility that human beings can choose evil for the sake of evil (for 'the sheer hell of it', as it were), not through any weakness or

impurity of the will.

3. **Part 3** then presented Žižek's 'Hegelian' reading of diabolical Evil as;
  - a. the *content* of a perfectly good act, which Kant of course repeatedly denied as beyond our scope as embodied creatures.
  - b. more radically, the 'vanishing mediator' between culture and nature that needs to be gentrified by the former, or Good itself 'in its becoming'. According to Žižek, human beings' choosing of evil for the sake of evil is what first opened the field within which evil and good can now appear as a 'real opposition' (Kant),. In Žižek's post-1996 work, this subjective or subject-forming choice of diabolical Evil is indeed associated with the subject in its most radical or basic dimension: as not simply the finite, empty subject of apperception, but the bearer of the infinite death drive which separates out this empty subjectivity from the fullness of pre-anthropomorphic nature.

In conclusion, let us pose two types of criticism of this new Slovenian reading of Kant's practical philosophy, for all its exegetical elan. These criticisms, taken together, question how 'Kantian' this reading of Kant finally is, and secondly, they raise more lasting questions concerning Žižek's wider positions.

The first inquiry or criticism of Žižek's reading of Kant asks concerning how Žižek's position stands vis-à-vis Kant's famous moral universalism, highlighted in what Žižek recognises as 'the standard academic reception' of his works. (Žižek, 1993, 45) This universalism is inscribed in the very heart of Kant's exoteric moral position. In the first formulation of the categorical imperative in the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, it is figured in Kant's directive to act in such a way that your maxim could become a *universal* law. The second formulation of the categorical imperative, which Kant thinks is consonant with this first formulation, stipulates that one should never treat *any* other rational being (*viz.* universally) as solely a means to one's ends, but also always as an end in themselves. (Kant, 1952, 268, 271)<sup>ix</sup> To use Lacanian terms, it is as if, in this second formulation, Kant is aiming to spell out the implications of this moral universalism at the level of the subject(s) of enunciation. The first formulation by contrast remains at the level of

the enunciated contents (concerning the content of individuals' maxims, qua maxims, and their testing). While the relation between the first and second formulations of the categorical imperative have been questioned since at least Hegel, Kant's thought sees arguably to be that, in order to perform the universalizing test, one must consider *oneself* as 'just anyone at all'—that is, an empty subject as rational end in oneself, devoid of any specifying, 'pathological' markers. This is why it would follow that one cannot, without performative contradiction, treat another as a mere means to one's ends. For, *ex hypothesi*, in doing so, one would be opening up oneself to such treatment, in this way denying the very ('performative') *capacity* which has enabled one to undertake the practical deliberation.

Žižek for his part clearly believes that sceptical commentators on Kant, since Hegel, have been right to suggest that Kant's attempts to illustrate how his first formulation of the categorical imperative might yield any concrete imperatives all fail. In *The Metastases of Enjoyment*, Žižek hence argues that, in order to give any concrete examples of how this categorical imperative might have force in the world, Kant tacitly introduces 'pathological' and/or consequentialist considerations that contravene his deontological position. Indeed, Žižek asks us rhetorically: "... does not the restraint imposed by 'what if everyone were to do the same as me' ... silently introduce the pathological consideration of the *consequences* of our act in reality?" (Žižek, 1994, 69)

While Žižek (like Alain Badiou) often invokes the language of Universality in his works, studying this reading of Kant, highlights that the species of Universality in play here is always a Universality 'in becoming'. *What Žižek effectively wants, we are thus tempted to schematise, is all the formality stipulated in the first formulation of the categorical imperative, with none of the Universalisability that Kant held this formality to directly imply, cashed out in the omitted second formulation.* However, it is an open question \ whether Kantians and others might not protest this omission, either on grounds that it misrepresents Kant, or—more consequentially— that it leads to a decisionistic formalism (what Hegel called an ethic of conscience) that justifies everything or nothing. The reader can recall the Frankfurt School's critique of Kantian formalism, which they applied to Kant's universalism because of its formalist foundations. In Terry Eagleton's gloss, this is the concern that while Kant's

philosophy:

... safeguards moral dignity from the market place, it does so only by removing it to a place so remote as to be effectively out of sight. Freedom is so deeply the essence of everything, that it is nowhere to be empirically found ... It is not so much a practice in the world as ... a way of describing one's condition which at once makes all the difference and seems to leave everything exactly as it was.<sup>x</sup>

If it is disputable whether one can justly make such a critique of Kant's Universalism, it seems difficult to deny that this criticism applies in spades if this Universalism is removed from Kant's moral philosophy in the way that Žižek wants when he identifies Good 'in its becoming' with 'diabolical Evil'.

A second critique of Žižek's moral Kant concerns a certain slippage that I that Žižek is forced into when he, for his part, broaches 'concrete' historical examples of diabolical Evil. Žižek adduces in this vein two Christian martyrs: Thomas More and Christ himself. What Žižek wants to establish is that their acts were diabolically Evil. As this paper has shown, this means two things. The first is that that these mens' actions in defiance of the established powers of their day(s) can be seen to have emanated from no 'pathological' motivations at all, any more so than morally Good acts. The second is that these figures must *ex hypothesi* have been opposed to the dictates of the Kantian moral law, but adopted Evil qua Evil as a maxim and an ethical attitude, 'far more suprasensible than good'.

Even the statement of this second requirement is enough to show how difficult it is to feasibly uphold that either Thomas More or Christ was diabolically Evil. To focus on the example *par excellence* that of Christ. It is clear that Christ was not an insurgent for the sake of his insurgency, with no view to future consequences. If Christ brought the sword, that is, it was in order to institute a new ethico-religious form that would enable new forms of human flourishing and reconciliation with the God. He was prepared to put aside all personal and pathological pleasures, emblematically on the cross, but this is not to say that his Acts had no reasonable or explicable motivation. Notably, then—in an ironic parallel to the charge he lays against Kant's ethics in *Metastases of Enjoyment*—Žižek is in fact forced, in order to claim Christ or More as 'diabolical evil', that their actions were 'diabolical' not *per se*,

*but only relatively, “from a communitarian point of view”.* (Žižek, 1993, 97) They appeared diabolical, that is, to those entrenched within the prevailing social norms—the first century Jews or Romans, or Henry II’s Brits. However, as Žižek knows well and usually teaches, Kant’s universalism calls into question nothing if not the binding provenance of such particularistic, ‘pathological’ or communitarian ‘points of view’. This is the whole point of Kant’s distinction between legality and morality. If morality has no truck with individuals’ wishes, this is not because it necessarily allies itself with any collective worldly interests. Such interests are equally transcended and in principle able to be called into question by it. To invoke them therefore as the ‘point of view’ from whence to judge a certain person’s actions as diabolically Evil is certainly not Kantian, but expresses an evidently different philosophical orientation in thinking.

- i Slavoj Žižek *Tarrying With the Negative* (Durham: Duke Uni. Press, 1993).
- ii Slavoj Žižek, *Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997).
- iii For the accompanying assessment of Žižek's reading of the theoretical philosophy, see Matthew Sharpe, "Kant, or The Crack in the Universal: Slavoj Žižek's Politicising of the Transcendental Turn", *IJZS* vol. 2, no. 2 (2008).
- iv Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* trans. Giovanni, in Immanuel Kant, *On Religion and Rational Theology* ed. Alan Wood (Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 39-216. Hereafter as here: Kant 1996, in bracketed textual references.
- v Slavoj Žižek, *The Žižek Reader* ed. Wright and Wright (Blackwell: Oxford, 1999).
- vi Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object Of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989). This type of transcendental argument, Žižek thus remarks, is of exactly the same sort as that raised by Schelling in his *Treatise on Freedom*. In this work, the latter addresses the troubling datum that subjects can feel guilt not only when they 'did their best' (as in Kant), but even in the absence of *any* moral transgression. As Žižek comments, for him after and extending Kant on *perversitas*, a free choice of evil above and beyond any particular deed "... *must be* presupposed to account for this sentiment that we are guilty even for things which do not depend on our conscious design." (Žižek, 1989, 168)
- vii Note that orthodox proponents of Kant can protest about at least the first part of this Žižekian conclusion, by noting that it is hardly radical. Kant after all never denies that the adoption of 'radical evil' as a maxim can only represent an act springing from the subject's autonomous faculty of choice. From the start of *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, he insists that to speak of *any* evil is to imply an *imputability*, and that "... nothing is imputable but that which is our own deed". (KANT, 79)
- viii The reader can be reminded, in another field, of the problematic of the end of history, which is at once for Kojève the long-desired end and fulfilment of the human desire for recognition and, paradoxically, that whose achievement would mean that *homo sapiens*—having nothing left to strive for—would lose their defining humanity.
- ix Immanuel Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals* trans. Abbot, in Kant 1996, pp. 253-290.
- x Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of The Aesthetic* (London: Blackwell, 2001) p. 82.



## Bibliography:

Eagleton, Terry. *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Blackwell: Massachussetts, 1990).

Kant, Immanuel. *The Critique of Practical Reason* trans. Abbot., in *Kant* (Encyclopaedia Britannica, Chicago, 1952), pp. 291-365.

Kant, Immanuel. *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals* trans. Abbot, in *Kant*, pp. 253-290.

Kant, Immanuel. *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* trans. Giovanni, in Kant Immanuel , *On Religion and Rational Theology* ed. Alan Wood (Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 39-216.

Kant, Immanuel. *The Metaphysics of Morals* ed. by Mary Gregor et al (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

Žižek , Slavoj. *The Sublime Object Of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989).

Žižek , Slavoj. *For They Know Not What They Do* (London: Verso, 1991)

Žižek , Slavoj. *Tarrying With the Negative* (Durham: Duke Uni. Press, 1993).

Žižek , Slavoj. *Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality* (London: Verso, 1994)

Žižek , Slavoj. *Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997)

Žižek , Slavoj. *The Indivisible Remainder* (London: Verso, 1997).

Žižek , Slavoj. "Kant With (or Against) Sade", in *The Zizek Reader* ed. Wright and Wright (London: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 283-301.

Zupancic, Alenka. *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan* (London: Verso, 2000).