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Evil and the Empowering Conception of Rational Agency

13.10.2025, 9.45, room 116



Kant’s theory of radical evil, paradoxically, ultimately dignifies the powers of rational agency. First, I show the paradoxical structure of radical evil. Second, I argue that radical evil gives rise to a normative form of unintelligibility: it manifests as a deficit of self-knowledge and a kind of self-alienation in which agents fail to make fully intelligible the principles that govern their maxims. Crucially, this moral opacity does not entail ignorance of the moral law nor does it preclude self- and co-legislation; agents can remain aware of the moral law and still exercise moral agency despite the opacity of particular maxims. Third, I contend that Kant develops an empowering conception of human agency that highlights the social cultivation of rational capacities and practical attitudes. For Kant, rational hope and faith function as distinct modes by which agents resist and reconfigure evil: they organize and orient human agency toward cooperative correction. The most effective response to radical evil is therefore collective — the deliberate organization of shared agency through ethical communities and political institutions that foster mutual self-understanding and disciplined, co-legislative moral practice.

Carla Bagnoli is a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia. In addition to numerous essays on Kantian ethics, moral epistemology, action theory, and moral psychology, she is the author of Ethical Constructivism (Cambridge, 2022) and five Italian-language monographs on practical reasoning, moral authority, responsibility, and reasons. Her edited volumes include Time in Action (Routledge, 2022); Constructivism in Ethics (Cambridge, 2013); Morality and the Emotions (Oxford, 2011); Reason, Agency, and Ethics (Oxford, forthcoming); The Sovereignty of Good at 55 (Cambridge, forthcoming); and Religious Authorities and Practices of Conflict Resolution (Routledge, forthcoming). She is currently working on moral disorientation and the social authority of reason.