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Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling and Kierkegaard

By Michelle Kosch

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Learned, even sophisticated is Michelle Kosch's study on freedom and reason in Kant, Schelling and Kierkegaard. She endeavours to examine 'the early history of the idea that moral agency is self-legislating through the lens of one of its central difficulties, that of accounting for the possibility of moral evil. Its primary aim is to shed light on the history of philosophy in the German-language realm between Kant (who first articulated the idea) and Kierkegaard (who best articulated the difficulty). I argue that this was one of the main issues shaping the contours of debate during that period, shaping (if one may put it this way) the rise and fall of German idealism.' (2)

And indeed, Kosch manages to reconstruct the ambivalent story of moral agency from Kant to Kierkegaard by providing new insights about Schelling as central position in-between. Kosch acknowledges that Schelling's role has already been of interest to German literature but she considers it widely unknown to English literature (cf. 124ff.). Yet things look even worse given that hardly any popular philosophical introduction or biography interlinks Schelling and Kierkegaard. To mention just a few examples, Christoph Helferich (*Geschichte der Philosophie*, 2005) offers rather helpful portraits of both Schelling and Kierkegaard but neglects any connection between them; instead he highlights the Hegelian influence on Kierkegaard who generally is presented as 'lone wolf', just like Schopenhauer or Nietzsche. Patrick Gardiner (*Kierkegaard*, Oxford UP) describes Kierkegaard's philosophical background by pointing to Kant, Hume and Hegel, mentioning only Kierkegaard's departure to Berlin after the break with Regine Olsen and how his first enthusiasm about Schelling's philosophy soon and forever changed into the opposite sentiment. Exactly the same story is related by Peter Tudvad (*Kierkegaards København*, 2005) who at least points out some possible reference to Schelling in Kierkegaard's *Begrebet Angest*. Xavier Tilliette, in his biography of Schelling (*Schelling. Biographie*, 1999), also mentions Kierkegaard in several instances but again only in his early enthusiasm for the young counterpart of Hegel. And even Franz Josef Wetz (*Friedrich W. J. Schelling zur Einführung*, 1996), who explicitly strengthens Schelling's exceptional role in German philosophy (compared to Fichte and Hegel) and in his influence on existential philosophy and 'Lebensphilosophie', refers to Kierkegaard by referring to his disappointment

and renunciation about Schelling's philosophy.

Kosch is able to present her ideas in short form and clear words, which allows her to deal with such a huge topic in no more than 219 pages of text. Though she examines the positions of Kant, Schelling and Kierkegaard thoroughly, providing the reader with textual evidence wherever needed, she is courageous enough to 'condense' big theories to a few sentences capturing the basic idea, e.g. in outlining Kant's view of freedom: '(1) We have freedom construed roughly as libertarians construe it: our actions are causally dependent on us rather than on preceding events, and could at least sometimes be different from what they in fact are.' (16f.) This she further explains in a footnote: 'There are two distinct claims here; Kant holds both and thinks the first entails the second. His view is a species of agent-causal account, though of course it differs from standard agent-causal accounts because of the transcendental idealist story I discuss under (4)' (17, fn.2). Then Kosch continues: '(2) The natural world, of which we are a part, is a mechanistically deterministic system – that is, one in which all events are causally dependent on preceding events and could not be different from what they in fact are. (3) These two claims would be incompatible were transcendental realism true (that is: were the natural world of (2) the world as it is in itself). (4) Since transcendental idealism is true, however, (1) and (2) are compatible after all (as free causality and mechanistic causality belong to different conceptual realms.' (17). Breaking Kant down to such short form, however, demands high skills by both author as well as reader concerning philosophical knowledge and terminological virtuosity. Kosch writes in a surprisingly 'German style', learned but not 'belles lettres', examining the systematic arguments in a rather text-immanent way. Thus the book is definitely addressed to a very specific readership, namely the specialists in the field of modern (European) philosophy.

In systematic respects her line of argument is the following: It is no surprise that 'Kant's approach to the traditional problem of freedom and determinism has been criticized on a number of counts' (37), especially as his theory of agency proposed a double self—or at least a double perspective on the self (cf. 38), namely the 'absolutely spontaneous noumenal entity' as well as a 'mechanistically determined object of experience' (37). Kant himself, she argues, already offered two possible solutions: 'The first is the second *Critique's* suggestion that the theoretical standpoint should be taken to be subordinate to the practical' (38), the 'second is the path taken by Schelling and, after him, Hegel. It builds on a suggestion in first *Critique* [...] that is developed quite substantially in the *Critique of Judgement*. The suggestion is that even theoretical reason might have need of a fundamentally practical notion – the notion of purpose – to make sense of the unity and systematicity theoretical inquiry expects to find in the natural world.' (39) Kosch then recalls the Kantian line of thought in the third *Critique* concerning the regulative idea of an understanding or intellect capable of both universal and particular agency which would be 'something like the *cause* of the whole [...] so that the whole of nature | could be viewed as the end of this higher understanding.' (40f.) Consequently Kosch correctly points to the fact that this idea 'cannot do without the idea of a higher intellect that intuits the whole as whole and for which each

particular as well as the totality of particulars is *necessary*.' (42) But by this, Kosch holds, Kant would only allow freedom in the sense of 'rational self-determination' instead of the 'transcendental freedom in the sense defined in the first two critiques, a sense of freedom that was bound up with the contingency of individual choice' (42) and thus able of imputable evil agency.

In order to sort this out Kosch now turns to Kant's late *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, where Kant postulates the idea of radical evil. The latter, however, is hardly present in Kosch's interpretation. Instead she makes it quite clear that Kant, right from the start in around 1760, always sought to avoid the idea that human beings were able to choose evil in free agency. Evil might happen because of ignorance, neglectfulness, compulsiveness or passivity of will, but not in a deliberate, rational manner. In *Religion* Kant would name frailty, impurity of motive and the perversity of the will (cf. 58f.) as those features of human character which might lead to evil acts but he would avoid any idea that made humans fully capable of and responsible for evil deeds in the same way as they had 'a capacity for good' (46). Evil itself, thus, had to remain inexplicable to Kant who could only accept it as an empirical fact (cf. 61–63). The idea of 'radical evil' [CR], however, is considered but shortly (in a footnote) by Kosch: 'Interestingly, Kant, at the same time as he sets down the position that evil is unintelligible (even if empirically given), also takes that position that, according to Kierkegaard, goes hand in hand with it: (1) Evil is a *universal* human propensity, so deeply rooted in the will that "we must say that it is found in the human being by nature"' (63, fn. 40.). Thus she leaves Kant's readers suspended between 'the notion of autonomy and that of moral responsibility', of which 'Kant's successors would have to decide which of the two to preserve.' (65)

It is interesting to see that Petruschka Schaafsma (*Reconsidering Evil. Confronting Reflections with Confessions*, 2006) also proposes that the idea of radical evil remained 'a foreign element in Kant's ethical thinking' (142). Unlike Kosch, however, she takes the notion of radical evil rather serious and thus presents a completely different reading of Kant by pointing to 'the fact that in Kant's view evil should always be regarded as a matter of free, responsible acting' (143): 'Though it may in general be difficult for reflection to do justice to the ambiguity of evil, the difficulties in Kant's text largely seem to be caused by the domination of the ethical view. This ethical view aims at a specific clarity and univocality as regards evil: it views evil as a free, responsible act.' (144; cf. 137, 141) I believe that the different conclusions the authors arrive at, despite similar positions in the beginning, are due to the varying degree of interest in the background of the idea of radical evil: Kosch on the one hand remains rooted in philosophy throughout her interpretation which can also be seen in her treatment of the *Critique of Judgement*, where she points to the idea of a higher intellect but does not discuss the notion of Creation which would have opened quite another perspective. Schaafsma on the other hand takes into consideration the corresponding religious, theological and dogmatic ideas. She points to Kant's unusual vocabulary in *Religion within the Boundaries*, calling 'the propensity to evil an "innate guilt (*reatus*) which is detectable as early as the first manifestation of the exercise of freedom in the human

being''' (132). According to Schaafsma this marked the turn 'to a more explicitly religious vocabulary' and, most importantly, it evoked 'a different atmosphere from the ethical one' (133), similar to the passages where Kant spoke of "'effects of grace'" (137) and especially when he spoke of 'the restoration to the good in spite of evil' (138). Kant presupposed that human beings are evil by nature, and the problem was 'the duty and the possibility of becoming good in spite of evil' (143), which was not only a philosophical but also a religious question—in all its ambiguity. Some further work will have to be done on Kant in order to sort out these various perspectives and 'atmospheres' in Kant's writings (cf. C. Richter, *Fragility of Reason. Kant's Transcendental Philosophy beyond its Cliché*, forthcoming 2009). But it will certainly provide us with a better understanding of the relation between Kant's early and his later works.

Kosch, however, moves on to Schelling, who first had sought to closely follow Kant in the idea 'that the tension between theoretical and moral standpoints might be resolvable through the regulative idea of an overall teleology of nature' (66) and consequently progressing to the re-construction of nature and history according to a basic rational principle. The problem of imputative moral responsibility was much the same as in Kant but, different to Reinhold and Schmid, whom Kosch also brings into play, Schelling did not see this as a problem. Again Kosch thoroughly analyses the line of argumentation, carefully yet determinedly guiding the reader towards the major change in Schelling's works, namely the turn from assuming a prevalent rational principle to an understanding of the world as 'chaotic and irrational' (87) as well as the wish to overcome the Kantian distinction between the individual and the universal keeping God in the distance of a regulative idea (cf. 119) which makes Schelling the central figure and his a core position on the path from Kant to Kierkegaard. Just like in the discussion of Kant, however, Kosch again stresses the question of moral evil as the main focus of thought: 'By 1809, Schelling had come to the conclusion that the investigation into the conditions of possibility of rational self-determination could shed no further light on the question of the conditions of possibility of moral agency in a more general sense, because it could shed no light at all on the possibility of moral evil. He gave the sketch of a new theory of moral agency in the *Freiheitsschrift* [. . .]' and, as Kosch goes on, 'Schelling spent the rest of his career working out, in one way or another, the consequences of the shift in view that began with the *Freiheitsschrift*.' (88) An argument often overlooked but still crucial in this respect was the idea of revelation replacing 'reason as the source of moral norms' (89), as Kosch correctly states, which then consequently might lead to the notion of contemplation and even contemplative science (cf. 120). Schelling, however, remained critical concerning 'pure' or mystic contemplation, yet still kept philosophical religion in the game.

Apart from Schelling's basic notion of being, it was the notion of despair that fascinated Kierkegaard (cf. 121). Again Kosch concentrates her reconstruction on the idea of agency, now closely following Kierkegaard's (aesthetic) writings in *Either/Or* (where Kierkegaard cites Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism*), *Two Ages* and *The Sickness unto Death* and again, she is able to condense the core

points into short form: 'The relevant idea in these, as in all the instances of despair described in *The Sickness unto Death*, is that the person in despair has the wrong conception of himself as an agent.' (154) The crucial point here as well as, according to Kosch, in all further writings, is that despair is not to be understood as psychological mood but as an act the subject bestows on him/herself, namely the inability of being a self as well as the inability of not-being a self. This she holds also true for the later ethical works *Fear and Trembling*, *The Concept of Anxiety* or the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. All of them had their focus on 'the ethics of autonomy', and 'the criticism of the ethical standpoint presented in these works [would be] continuous with that of the aesthetic standpoint: it involves a misrepresentation of the nature of agency in the form of a denial of freedom – not of choice in general but of choice – of good and evil in particular.' (155f.) It is then especially Kierkegaard's *Begrebet Angest* which comes close to Schelling in pursuing the idea of being 'tempted by one's finitude' (212), when 'freedom looks down into its own possibility, laying hold of finiteness to support itself' (212, citing BA). One of the differences towards Schelling Kosch sees (with Kierkegaard) in his effort to *explain* phenomena (like anxiety or sin) which in fact can only be made *plausible* (cf. 213f.). Instead, Kosch says, to Kierkegaard 'selfishness can describe sin, but not in its function as a *natural force*, since that is a theoretical notion' whereas 'Schelling in fact succumbed to the temptation to turn an ethical point into a cosmological one' (214). In her concluding remarks on Kierkegaard Kosch points to one last objection which is based on Kant's idea 'that some specifiable moral law must be the *ratio cognoscendi* of freedom' (215): 'Is one actually entitled to use a conception of human freedom as freedom for good and evil [. . .] in the absence of an ethical criterion that would specify the content of those notions?' (214f.) Kierkegaard rejected this objection by saying that moral action is not based on specific moral or religious contents and injunctions, but on the question 'What am I supposed to do?', arising from 'the situation of existing subjectivity' (215). But in fact – and this is what Kosch intends to show – his view is based on similar foundations as that of Kant: Any moral inquiry presupposes a) that moral questions *do* arise and might be answered rightly or wrongly because we do not know the answers in advance and b) that human beings *are* responsible beings which presupposes at least a certain 'amount' [CR] of freedom. In this sense it is true that 'we already have the answer to the fundamental normative questions that face us' by understanding 'that the moral law is the *ratio cognoscendi* of freedom' (216).

It is impressive to see how Kosch conclusively traces the lines from Kierkegaard back to Kant, presenting a systematic line of thought in an exceptionally elegant, agile way. Even if some readers might miss a final systematic summary of this line, her hope that 'this study will contribute to the understanding of the history of the nineteenth century by making the decline and replacement of the idealist project nearly as comprehensible as its rise and brief hegemony has been made by the excellent recent work in this field' (219) can only be confirmed to have been successful. On the other hand there is something slightly inconsistent about the historical line Kosch presents: It is not, as she herself remarks at the

end, that she did not take into account such 'important figures' as Hegel or Fichte (217) or 'the state of the debate on this set of issues as it has arisen in contemporary ethics' (219) as this would blast the boundaries of this study. But despite the decided historical approach she takes, arguing that in order to understand the problem of good or evil-doing moral agency we have to start with Kant and then continue on to Schelling and Kierkegaard, the strength of this historical line ceases for the positions themselves: They are reconstructed by the systematic arguments without any reference to the surrounding historical and cultural changes between 1780 and 1850 which of course massively influenced their ways of thinking. For Kierkegaard this would not necessarily afford to discuss the 'specifically Danish intellectual context' (218), naming Sibbern or Martensen. But it would have needed to discuss the wider intellectual horizon in historical and cultural perspectives as well as in theological respectively religious concerns. Without the political, social, economical and thus also intellectual changes in the events usually called 'cultural crisis' the turn from the 'absolutely spontaneous noumenal entity' versus 'mechanistic determination' to the fragility of 'existing subjectivity' will not be fully understood—mainly because their effect on the systematic arguments becomes visible first in the underlying change of 'atmosphere'.