

2002

# Review of Sharon Anderson-Gold, Unnecessary Evil: History and Moral Progress in the Philosophy of Immanuel Kant (2001)

Harry van der Linden

Butler University, hvanderl@butler.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch\\_papers](http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers)



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

## Recommended Citation

van der Linden, Harry, "Review of Sharon Anderson-Gold, Unnecessary Evil: History and Moral Progress in the Philosophy of Immanuel Kant (2001)" *Kantian Review* / (2002): 136-139.

Available at [http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch\\_papers/24](http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers/24)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarship and Professional Work - LAS by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact [fgaede@butler.edu](mailto:fgaede@butler.edu).

Permission to post this publication in our archive was granted by the copyright holder, *Kantian Review* ([http://www.uwp.co.uk/book\\_desc/kant.html](http://www.uwp.co.uk/book_desc/kant.html)). This copy should be used for educational and research purposes only.

The original publication appeared at:  
van der Linden, Harry. Review of Sharon Anderson-Gold, *Unnecessary Evil: History and Moral Progress in the Philosophy of Immanuel Kant* (2001), *Kantian Review* 6 (2002): 136-39.

DOI: not available

Rousseau and Kant) that have informed liberal politics, and the other, if not greater, darkness, in the form of religiously inspired violence, against which liberalism has also historically struggled. In slighting that nobler, if partly mistaken, motive, Tuck's otherwise incisive study fails to do liberalism full justice.

SUSAN M. SHELL  
Boston College

*Unnecessary Evil: History and Moral Progress in the Philosophy of Immanuel Kant.* By Sharon Anderson-Gold. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001. Pp. xiii, 138. ISBN 0-7914-4819-3 (hbk) \$50.50; 0-7914-4820-7 (pbk) \$17.95.

This slim volume offers a very valuable contribution to the ongoing explication and reconstruction of Kant's ethics as a social ethics. Anderson-Gold shares the increasingly common Kant reading that his notion of the highest good as the universal union of virtue and happiness is to be understood as a social ideal that sets 'collective moral goals'. This reading sees Kant's writings on history as integral to his moral theory in that one must assess how much, and in what way, progress has been made toward realizing the ideal in order to articulate specific social duties. Anderson-Gold discusses in several chapters Kant's view of historical progress and the reflective judgement that enables us to articulate and assess such progress. She pays special attention to his idea that the enthusiasm that the French Revolution engendered among its spectators shows that a moral cause, or a genuine concern with universal welfare, is operative in humanity. Her analysis of this public of spectators leads to an interesting discussion of emerging pluralistic 'cosmopolitan publics' in our own time as a precondition for future peace, justice and local and global democracy. In the final chapter of her book, Anderson-Gold further articulates contemporary Kantian social duties, supplementing her political-legal and cosmopolitan public proposals with Kantian arguments for sustainable economic development. The core of her work, however, is to argue that Kant's much neglected doctrine of radical evil is crucial to his social ethics, both as a matter of textual accuracy and in terms of its contemporary reconstruction. This argument will be the focus of the remainder of this review.

Anderson-Gold maintains that, even though an increasing number of contemporary Kant scholars, such as Yirmiahu Yovel and more recently Pauline Kleingeld, have correctly interpreted the highest good as a social and historical ideal, 'none have provided an adequate explanation of how such a goal is related to the moral life of individuals' (p. 6). Notably, they have not offered an account of 'how it is that individuals have a personal stake in the promotion of this ideal' (p. 7). The doctrine of radical evil provides such an account once it is recognized that the propensity to evil that Kant ascribed to humanity emerges only in a social context. Anderson-Gold cites Kant's claim in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (tr. T. M. Greene and H. H. Hudson, p. 85) that

envy, the lust for power, greed, and the malignant inclinations bound up with these, besiege [the individual's] nature, contented within itself, *as soon as he is among men*, and it is not even necessary to assume that these are men sunk in evil and examples to lead him astray. (Ak. 6: 93-4)

She clarifies: 'The propensity to evil is not something that is simply 'within me' and 'within you', but something that operates within our very mode of association' (p. 46). This means that 'Kant implies that our hope to effect a revolution "within" [the overcoming of evil and the striving for moral perfection] rests upon the transformation of the social condition of our existence'. Anderson-Gold adds that striving for virtue viewed as a private enterprise is 'futile' (p. 46), citing with approval Kant's view that we must leave the 'ethical state of nature' and unite in ethical communities for the sake of collectively combating evil, for without such communities individuals, no matter how much they 'may have done to throw off the sovereignty of evil', are 'incessantly in danger of falling back under its dominion' (*Religion*, p. 86). The highest good as social ideal and the moral life of the individual, then, are intrinsically connected. Individual moral progress requires collective moral improvement, and the individual striving for moral perfection requires that one joins and actively participates in voluntary associations of virtue that aim at the highest good.

Anderson-Gold rightly holds that Kant's thesis of the innate propensity to evil as it relates to the highest good has received inadequate attention and her work admirably fills the gap. Still, this leaves the question open whether a further development of Kant's

social ethics (as is Anderson-Gold's aim) should proceed along these lines. One problem is that Kant only mentions churches as imperfect examples of ethical communities and that he emphasized that full moral emancipation requires that religious institutions are eventually cast aside and replaced by a 'church invisible' or 'inner' unification of good wills. Thus the struggle for moral perfection falls back from a collective undertaking to an individual one. Anderson-Gold needs to address systematically why Kant took this step. Another difficulty is that the focus on innate evil may not be compatible with the view of the highest good as a *universal* task. Anderson-Gold maintains that moral commitment to the ethical community and its aims requires moral faith, a faith in 'God as Absolute Person, through whose continuous presence the moral law abides while our commitments waver' (p. 51). I am not sure what to make of this statement and doubt that it fits with Kant's overall view. Does Anderson-Gold want to say that those who do not believe in such a Being are doomed to fail in their endeavour to live a socially committed and righteous life? At any rate, Anderson-Gold's claim seems incompatible with her attempt to show the contemporary relevance of Kant's social ethics by arguing that 'voluntary associations formed [in our time] to promote the basic interests and rights of world citizens are social instantiations of ethical communities', and that 'ethical communities need not be limited to communities of religious faith, although they often do in fact arise from such communities' (p. 108). Her commitment to a clearly Christian conception of evil is in tension with her defence of pluralism. A final problem is that Kant held that good legal conditions are necessary for the emergence of the highest good as social ideal, but that legal institutions themselves are not a locus of moral emancipation. The view of moral development as the overcoming of evil seems to strengthen this institutional bias that is antithetical to directly grounding social duties.

The upshot is that a convincing Kantian social ethics may need to break more fundamentally with Kant than Anderson-Gold envisions. More importantly, it may be that for the purpose of bringing Kant's ethics to a higher social plane it would be better to develop further his notions of autonomy and heteronomy as individual and social concepts than to do the same for his ideas of innate evil and striving for moral perfection.

The title of Anderson-Gold's work indicates that her vision of moral progress and the human predicament is far from optimistic. No

doubt, we are the beneficiaries of the toil of previous generations, but our gain comes with a definite price. Anderson-Gold perceptively notes:

The moral life of later generations is in some respects more challenging than the moral life of earlier generations. As the scope and complexity of institutional life grows, the need for an educated and enlightened public increases. When social-cultural opportunities for such enlightenment are present, the individual has a stronger duty to participate and maintain these conditions for future generations. (p. 102)

She concludes her book in the same vein: 'Moral life will become increasingly challenging' (p. 110). Anderson-Gold's study offers a worthy avenue for helping us to meet this challenge.

HARRYVAN DER LINDEN

*Butler University*

*Kants Ethik: Die Grundlehre.* By Peter Baummann. Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2000. Pp. 120. ISBN 3-8260-1931-8, DM 28.

Beginners in philosophy very often find Kant's works hard to read. They appear difficult to them not only because his philosophy is as complex and difficult as it is, but also because Kant does not present his theories in a reader-friendly way. He uses long, complex sentences, misleading examples, yet he is enigmatic and brief where he should be clear and detailed (and vice versa), dry and practically without jokes (though his tone is sometimes ironical and mocking). It is hard stuff, and not only for beginners.

It is all the more important that a commentator should make Kant's texts and his arguments readable and understandable. Naturally, this is particularly true for all those who write introductions and overviews and who address beginners. Peter Baummann's small book on *Kants Ethik* is meant to be such a book for beginners. It goes back to a course given at the University of Hagen (where students work at home, not in real classes), but since then it has been entirely revised. Baummann intends a '*Heranführung*' (p. 7), an '*Orientierung*' (S.7) which presents the '*Grundlehre*' (the book's subtitle) of Kant's ethics.