Nature, Corruption, and Freedom: Stoic Ethics in Kant’s *Religion*

Kant’s account of “the radical evil in human nature” in the 1793 *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone* is typically interpreted as a reworking of the Augustinian doctrine of original sin. But Kant doesn’t talk about Augustine at all there, and if he is rehabilitating the doctrine of original sin, the result is not obviously Augustinian. Instead Kant talks about Stoic ethics in a pair of passages on either end of his account of radical evil, and leaves other clues that his argument is a reworking of an old Stoic problem. “Radical evil” refers to the idea that our moral condition is — by default and yet by our own deed — bad or corrupt; and that this corruption is the root (*radix*) of human badness in all its variety, ubiquity, and sheer ordinariness. Kant takes as his premise a version of the Stoic idea that nature gives us “uncorrupted starting points” (Diogenes Laertius 7.89). What sense can be made of the origin of human badness, given such a premise? Kant’s account of radical evil is an answer to this old Stoic problem, which requires a conception of freedom that is not available in his Stoic sources.

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