Joël Madore persuasively argues that Kant’s moral theory cannot be deeply understood without a careful examination of his account of “radical evil,” developed in the late work *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*. In that work, Kant argues – to the surprise of many readers – that every human being is evil by nature. And he didn’t mean by this that we are all contaminated by embodiment. Rather, the infamous doctrine of radical evil maintains that we each freely acquire an evil character. That is: there is no sin in the flesh, and we are all sinners.

Madore rightly resists the temptation to dismiss radical evil as an aberration in the Kantian corpus. That reason’s great Enlightenment champion also held reason responsible for the universal guilt of our species is just too interesting to ignore. For Madore, evil constitutes a deep philosophical problem for Kant as the philosopher of autonomy, and Kant’s engagement with this problem both enriches and complicates his theory. He argues that the Kantian distinction between ‘ought’ and ‘is’ amounts to a “moral gap” – Madore’s term for the space made by the free will between the good and the actual (p. 25). The “problem of evil”, for Madore, is that we fall short of what we have ourselves legislated for ourselves as binding. This “falling short” emerges in our weakness in resisting temptation, in our failure to justify morality in the face of challenges, and in our inability to motivate virtue without marshaling an obscure rhetoric of sublimity and divinity. In fact, Madore goes onto argue that all three of these “problems” lead Kant to turn, through his theory of radical evil, beyond human reason, toward the supernatural. It is then no coincidence that the lengthy account of evil appears in Kant’s *Religion*.

Madore’s picture is of a thinker who brought forward a groundbreaking thought (autonomy), saw its underlying theoretical difficulties (its “gaps”), charged bravely ahead to address them (radical evil), although his intriguing attempts were ultimately – in Madore’s judgment – not successful. Madore clearly finds much to admire in this picture of the Königsberg philosopher: courageous, honest, interesting, though wrong. But this picture is of limited value in illuminating Kant’s own thinking. For although Madore’s “gaps” make up a respectable list of qualms a reader unpersuaded by the deduction of the categorical imperative, the theory of respect as the moral incentive, and Kant’s treatment of autonomy as a “fact of reason” would have about Kantianism, it is unlikely that Kant saw them as lingering difficulties to be addressed by the account of evil. Such an interpretation would presuppose that the core
teachings of the practical philosophy were incoherent. Moreover, Madore approaches human nature with a fundamentally counter-Kantian conception—perhaps one inaugurated by Hegel—of finitude as “deficit” (Chapter 2).

For Kant, the finitude of human reason means that human beings do not necessarily carry out the dictates of morality. This is equivalent to saying that morality is an imperative for them; that is, an “ought.” The key point here is that this finitude is in no way a moral shortcoming. “Imperfect,” in the sense relevant here, means only that pure reason is not the only motivational source for us—but this is not at all a judgment of moral worth. Indeed, Madore himself points out many times that according to Kant, the sensible inclinations of the body are entirely without blame, and indeed are not themselves causes of action at all. But these positions are quite incompatible with Madore’s frequent characterization of freedom as the ability to “abstract” from sensibility (pp. 18, 47, 68, etc.). Part of the difficulty here is Madore’s reliance on the *Groundwork* for the notion of “holiness.” In that text, Kant contrasts the imperfect (in the sense of ‘finite’) will with a “holy will”, which, as “infinite,” never faces the possibility of immorality (*Groundwork*, 4:439). In fact, Kant is running together two distinctions. While every infinite will (e.g., God’s) is holy, *not every finite will need be unholy*. This latter possibility is worked out in Book II of the *Religion*, and is mentioned in a crucial connection in the *Metaphysics of Morals* (6:383). A holy *finite* will is one for whom the moral law is an imperative, but one who wills in accordance with the law at the deepest level. Kant thought Christ was a well-drawn picture of such a being: like us, but without sin.

It is therefore false for Madore to write that “to speak of evil is to speak of a moral gap,” if that gap means the given gap of finitude. The evil that men do is not given, but free. Moreover, they have no moral basis for regretting their *given* limitations. Perhaps Kant is most at pains in the *Religion* to establish that human finitude in itself is no obstacle to moral perfection. This aspect of Kant’s thinking runs counter to the agendas of subsequent German idealists, but for Kant there is no merit to transcending human limits, were such transcendence even possible; thus there simply is no duty to become a different sort of *being* than we already are. For Kant, it is quite possible for us to carry out the command “Be ye holy” without ceasing to be finite creatures hemmed in by gulsfs on every side.

Radical evil, therefore, is not in tension with autonomy. Rather, the two teachings are of a piece. One telling move of Madore’s is to contrast freedom or autonomy with evil (e.g., 57–58). But to be precise, these two are not at all opposed. Kant sheds much light on this when he points out that the good and the evil man are the same, as far as the content of their maxims go. They both are autonomous, both free, they both intend to pursue virtue, and they both