

# Christina Drogalis on Stephen Palmquist's "Comprehensive Commentary on Kant's «Religion»"

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Critique

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STEPHEN PALMQUIST | *Comprehensive Commentary on Kant's Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason* | Wiley-Blackwell 2015

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By Christina Drogalis

Before I begin my comments, I would like to acknowledge the great work that Stephen Palmquist has accomplished with this book. I was impressed not only by the care which he took in the translation of Kant's writings but also by the significant contributions that he made to our understanding of how the *Religion* fits with Kant's other works and projects. He argues, I think rightly, that we should understand the *Religion* as part of the judicial wing of Kant's writings, rather than the practical wing. In understanding that the *Religion* focuses on the question of "What may I hope?" rather than "What ought I to do?", we as readers begin to take a new perspective on Kant's intentions for this work.

I was additionally impressed by Palmquist's treatments of some of the more misunderstood or controversial claims that Kant presents in this work, such as his claim that all humans are necessarily evil, though this evil must be freely chosen by individuals (p. 100). Palmquist argues that radical evil is necessary for humans in the sense that having an evil propensity is a necessary requirement for the possibility of making a free choice.

The following comments will primarily focus upon Palmquist's claims regarding the necessity of divine aid in the transformation of one's moral character. While I largely agree with his reading of Kant's intentions regarding the place of religion in morality, I shall raise some questions regarding Palmquist's reading of the role of divine assistance, or grace. More specifically, I question whether Kant's statements entail that divine aid and, further, our belief in the existence of divine aid are necessary conditions for overcoming the effects of the propensity to evil. In other words, I shall focus on whether the 'may' of "What may I hope?" is properly understood as a 'may' or as a 'must' in this case.

While Palmquist highlights more than one way in which divine aid and the belief in divine aid play a role in our moral improvement in the *Religion*, I am primarily interested in his claim that we must believe in the existence of divine assistance insofar as it explains how it is possible to overcome the effects of our choice to have a propensity to evil. This process takes place when a person overcomes the effects of his choice to prioritise incentives of self-love over the incentive to respect the moral law, which is our natural predisposition to good (p. 122). In short, Palmquist argues that humans are incapable of restoring the power of this predisposition to good within us on our own, and, consequently, we must believe in the existence of supernatural assistance. Namely, we must believe that there is a God who can view our intelligible characters and judge, when we have completed all the work that is within our power to do, that our work is sufficient for actual goodness.

In his interpretation of the First Piece, Palmquist argues that humans must believe that God plays the role of a judge in the transformation of our intelligible characters from bad to good. According to this reading, humans are incapable of becoming holy—what Palmquist describes as needing “no incentive other than awareness of the duty to obey the moral law” (p. 130)—but rather can only become “virtuous”, or enter onto “the path of ‘progress’ from an imperfect *attempt* to be good to the ideal goal of restored holiness” (p. 128). As Palmquist explains:

Choosing to make the moral law the sole incentive for all of one’s maxims does not automatically constitute holiness because this “firm resolve” on its own is not an empirical act; it is only one’s rational **conviction** to act [...]. A person with a virtuous “empirical character” will normally perform actions that conform to the law, as an expression of the choice to restore the supreme and sole priority of the good predisposition, even though he or she may not yet be able to realize this goal in **all** situations. (p. 128)

However,

[t]he goodness that genuine religion demands and offers is, by contrast, **noumenal**; a person can become not just empirically or ‘legally’ good but ‘morally’ good only through a radical transformation of the heart. (p. 129)

Because we are unable to attain such holiness on our own, by believing in divine assistance, we can understand how our inadequate efforts can be made adequate. This understanding comes in the following form. In order to explain how the change in our intelligible moral characters can take place, Kant introduces the idea that there are two perspectives to virtue, or to our moral progress. On the one hand, from our empirical perspective, our moral progress is

simply that—progress towards holiness. However, from the perspective of a divine judge, who can view our intelligible characters, “our imperfect progress can be taken as *equivalent* to the required change of heart” (p. 132).

Palmquist summarises Kant’s conclusions as follows:

First, if viewed from the standpoint of a moral God who sees into the depth of our heartfelt inward conviction, a person’s conversion from the normal situation of being infected with an evil propensity to a revolutionary new life based on the purity of the good predisposition is sufficient for that person to be declared good; and second, a faith in this hypothetical possibility can empower the converted persons to experience genuine moral reformation by enhancing “the strength of their maxims”. (p. 132)

As Palmquist further explains,

[w]e must be able to access divine grace in some form in order to have a reasonable hope of being sanctified, assured of an eternal destiny with God, and justified in spite of our past evil. (p. 207)

Having “practical faith” that God will grace the divine gift of judging our moral efforts as though we have already achieved perfection allows us to actually morally improve (p. 166).

In the following comments, I shall raise potential issues with two aspects of Palmquist’s interpretation of the need for divine aid in this case. Specifically, I argue that (1) because I take the overcoming of radical evil to require only the commitment to improve our actions in the future and not actual perfection in our actions, virtue, by Palmquist’s definition, appears to be adequate for this overcoming and, consequently, (2) it is not obvious that faith in divine assistance is a necessary requirement for moral improvement at this stage, but merely a permissible belief.

To summarise, the problem of moral improvement in the case of radical evil is framed by Palmquist as follows: Even once a person has made the choice to change her conviction from bad to good, her commitment to acting on incentives of self-love to instead acting on the incentive of respect for the moral law, her empirical moral improvement will only be a gradual one. That is, she will gradually perform an increasing number of morally good actions, rather than merely legally good ones. But this moral progress does not fulfil what Palmquist interprets as what the moral law commands, which is actual moral goodness, both in one’s conviction and in one’s actions. Therefore, we require the idea of a

divine judge who can view our intelligible conviction and judge that conviction and our empirical progress to take the place of actual moral goodness in our actions. Further, Palmquist notes, believing in such a divine judge will strengthen our ability to continue on in our moral progress because we can understand how the commands of the moral law can be fulfilled, despite empirical evidence seemingly to the contrary (p. 132).

First, it is unclear why the moral law would command this kind of moral goodness in this case. Certainly, it is a plausible reading that the moral law commands goodness in one's particular actions and not simply in one's conviction. And it is certainly true that merely legally good actions would not suffice for this kind of improvement. However, by my reading, the issue at hand in this particular stage of moral improvement (that is, the overcoming of radical evil) is not one's ability to become morally good in one's actions but merely to restore the predisposition to good, or to change one's intelligible character from bad to good. This is a change in one's intelligible, not empirical character, as Kant notes when he writes at AA 6:48 that, even after a person has changed his conviction to good, he still must work on becoming morally good in the full sense of acting on good maxims in particular cases. This passage indicates that Kant takes these changes to be two separate instances of moral improvement: first the momentary change in one's conviction, which constitutes overcoming radical evil, and then a gradual change in one's actions.

Consequently, if this is the sort of moral improvement that is required, divine assistance appears to be unnecessary at this stage. That is, if, as Kant says in the *Religion*, a person is judged to be good or evil by her fundamental prioritisation of incentives, or her conviction, it seems that the overcoming of radical evil would not require both a good intelligible and empirical character but merely the former. Palmquist's argument for the need for divine assistance, on the other hand, focuses on our inability to perform solely good actions in the future. While this certainly may be an issue for something like the achievement of the highest good, it is not clear, based on how Kant describes the overcoming of radical evil, why that would be relevant, at this stage.

Admittedly, even if it is possible for humans to achieve this transformation without actual divine assistance, it may still be necessary for us to *believe* in the existence of such assistance because of our lack of understanding. As Palmquist explains,

[t]he problem is that reason is incapable of understanding the very thing that **must** be understood if the transcendental limitation established in the First Piece (i.e., the rootedness of evil in human nature through our own free choice) is to be overcome. (p. 123)

He also states in the Introduction that he means this in a robust way: not as a “*mere* idea, which we fool ourselves into postulating for the sake of morality” but as a “mental conviction (or belief) that a real God must exist, to empower the believer to do good” (p. 17). He goes on to explain that we must not postulate a “possible God” but an “actual God” because the former is too weak to have a real impact on our moral striving, as weak, embodied creatures (p. 18).

Indeed, Kant states many times that it is impossible for us to understand how such a change could occur and raises the concern about what impact this lack of understanding could have on one’s hope and, therefore, on one’s ability to pursue moral improvement. However, I have two concerns about the type of belief that Palmquist claims we would need in this case. First, it is unclear to me how this robust sort of belief is possible to acquire, if the need for it arises due to moral commands. This seems contrary to the way in which sincere religious belief typically arises.

Second, it is not obvious to me that a human being is unable to morally improve from a state of radical evil without a robust belief in an actual God—and perhaps even without a weaker belief in a merely possible God. In fact, there may be good reasons to believe that reasonable hope can be achieved by a moral agent without either kind of belief. Specifically, it seems that the command of the moral law alone could be sufficient for such hope. While Kant is obviously worried about the problems that a lack of understanding regarding our ability to improve presents, it is not clear why we cannot read moral improvement as nonetheless possible, though perhaps more difficult, without filling in the gaps of understanding that reason faces. As Kant states on several occasions (e.g. RGV, AA 6:45), the commands of the moral law must be possible for us to achieve. Short of having evidence that this kind of improvement is actually *impossible*, it seems plausible that a person could pursue moral goodness even without the (admittedly helpful and certainly permissible) belief in the existence of divine assistance.

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