

# Ronald Green 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

By Ronald M. Green

Stephen Palmquist's *Comprehensive Commentary on Kant's Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason* is a rich and erudite work of scholarship. Above all, it displays intellectual generosity in its effort to try to understand what Kant was trying to say in this his culminating work of his moral and religious philosophy. If I sometimes disagree with Palmquist or criticise his interpretation in what follows, this should not obscure the fact that I have learned a vast amount from Palmquist's remarkable book. My focus will be on Kant's treatment of radical evil in the First Piece or First Part of the *Religion*. I would like to suggest that while Palmquist offers a way of elucidating and validating Kant's argument for the human universality of radical evil, his argument is not as incisive as it might be and may even be erroneous.

On my reading, Palmquist's relevant claim is that Kant's argument must be understood as developing a property of the human genus or species. For example, Palmquist states:

In other words, if just one of us is guilty of an evil action, then the evil propensity is imputed to the human nature shared by us all. (p. 112)

I think that is right. We both agree with Pablo Muchnik's statement "Kant is operating with a dual conception of agency, the single individual and the whole species" (Muchnik 2009:138). But I think that Palmquist gets it backwards. It is not because "just one of us is guilty of an evil action" that "the evil propensity is imputed to the human nature shared by us all" but rather because "the evil propensity is imputed to the human nature shared by us all" that each "one of us is guilty of an evil action". In other words, on my view Kant goes from the universal reality of sinning to its unavoidability for each individual. The argument is from the universal to the singular, not from the singular to the universal.

Palmquist bolsters his own understanding with the briefly stated suggestion of a transcendental proof, a proof he admits that Kant himself never offers.

Palmquist states this proof as follows:

Although he does not explicitly say so, the only way Kant's position can be maintained is if having an evil propensity is a necessary requirement for the possibility of making a free choice. For reasons I shall explain at the end of this section, I believe that Kant's argument here amounts to exactly this bold claim. That is, at this point in his exposition, he is arguing that the evil propensity is a necessary condition for free choice, inasmuch as free choice arises only in it and through it. (p. 100)

So radical evil, Palmquist seems to argue, is implicit in the fact of human freedom. But such a position raises many questions. For one thing, it appears to make sinning necessary, which runs directly counter to Kant's view. It also appears to confuse the presence of a propensity to evil and the possibility of sinning, as correlates of freedom, with the actual exercise of that propensity, which alone counts as the sinning needed for a judgement of radical evil.

In my view, Kant's argument aims at the reasonable imputation of evil to each and every human being based not on an a priori argument, but on an assessment of the empirical reality of human experience measured against the stern logic of the moral requirement.

Let me outline what I take to be Kant's argument. I believe it proceeds in four steps. Step one is the assertion that

(1) moral virtue requires exceptionless obedience to the priority of duty over inclination.

This is Kant's famous 'rigorism', which is based, I think, on his understanding of the singularity of any maxim governing our moral choices. Step two is the observation that

(2) even a single act of moral defection precludes an individual from ever deeming himself as morally worthy. (This second observation follows from the first assertion.)

The third step is the observation that

(3) no human being (with one possible exception) has ever exhibited a life of exceptionless adherence to moral duty.

Fourth and finally is the conclusion that

(4) each of us must therefore reasonably deem ourself to be radically evil, evil at the root.

Steps (1) and (2), as Palmquist observes, are transcendental. They are based on an understanding of duty. The second—that even one instance of moral defection precludes an individual from a positive moral self-assessment—derives from the insight that there can be only a single highest maxim directing an individual's willing. There cannot be a plurality of such maxims, or we would face the question of which maxim decides among this plurality. Nor is there a way to avoid the need for a determining maxim since choice by a rational individual must always be based on a maxim.

It follows that if in any instance of choice an individual chooses self-love, then, because this choice must be seen as free and unnecessitated, this maxim must be seen as possibly omnipresent behind all the individual's choices. Such a choice, once made, is also possibly ever-recurring because it reveals what is perhaps the individual's supreme maxim. Kant states in the *Religion* that a person's

action is yet free and not determined from any of these causes, hence the action can and must always be judged as an original exercise of his power of choice. (RGV, AA 6:41)

In other words, one bad choice made in freedom is possibly a foundational and enduring choice for the individual's lifespan. Palmquist recognises this point in dubbing Kant's argument here as transcendental but it seems to me that he doesn't quite develop the logic of Kant's position, which rests on freedom and the insight that any determining maxim must be seen as possibly one's highest maxim.

Step (3) in Kant's argument is the observation that no human being can attest to an exceptionless adherence to moral duty. Here, I believe, is where Kant's discussion in section three of the First Piece, entitled 'The Human Being is Evil by Nature', fits in. This section does not merely offer illustrations of Kant's point, but is an essential component of his argument. The brief overview of human iniquity demonstrates the truth in Horace's claim "Nobody is born without vice" (RGV, AA 6:32). In other words, in view of this record, no one can *reasonably* attest that he or she has not ever, and therefore will not ever invert the priority of morality over self-love. This is an individually orientated and empirical argument. The genus, as Palmquist observes, is implicated in it, but the argument doesn't claim that I am corrupt because I am a member of a genus with some necessary

fault. It says: "Look at the record of this species and tell me whether *you* can reasonably believe that *you* are exempt from its consistent pattern of choices." Kant's reply to this question is that no one can reasonably offer such an assurance. As Kant puts it,

| according to the cognition we have of the human being through experience  
| he cannot be judged otherwise [than as] evil **by nature**. (RGV, AA 6:32)

It follows from the empirical nature of this argument that it is not impossible that someone belonging to the human species might be free of sin. Sinning is never necessary. Nor does it follow from the fact of freedom (as Palmquist appears to suggest). Indeed, I think that the possibility of a human being's not sinning is essential to Kant's Christology. At least one individual avoided all temptations, even the most powerful ones imaginable, and always chose rightly. But no one who looks at their own or others' life records can reasonably make a similar claim.

There is a genus- or species-based argument here: we are all creatures of sensible inclination and we are free. So it is understandable (but not of course necessary) that we will sometimes favour self over morality. But this does not (and cannot) imply the necessity attaching to an a priori argument, as Palmquist appears to suggest. It is Kant's empirical review of human wrongdoing that is meant to anchor the conclusion that no one can reasonably declare himself or herself free from the reality of choosing wrongly, and hence from the conclusion that each of us is evil at the root.

Let me conclude here, with some thoughts occasioned by my own research on Kierkegaard's relationship to Kant. I have reported this research in two volumes (Green 1992, 2011). In both volumes, I argue that Kierkegaard was deeply informed by Kant's position on radical evil in the *Religion*. From Kierkegaard's Christian point of view what was striking was that Kant, a rigorous moral philosopher and a leading figure of the Enlightenment, was defending the rationally offensive Christian doctrine of original sin.

But Kierkegaard differed with Kant on one key question: Is belief in the historical reality of salvation offered in Jesus Christ a necessary component of religious-moral salvation? This difference is most notable in Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments* where the epigraph for the volume asks, "Can an eternal happiness be built on historical knowledge?" (Kierkegaard 1985:1), and the book as a whole answers by arguing that religious-moral salvation *must* be based on faith in a historical event.

I believe that Palmquist recognises the importance of this issue but, at the same time, I think that he lets Kant off the hook too easily. Throughout his *Commentary*, Stephen repeatedly argues that Kant understood the importance of the historical paradigm represented by Jesus Christ as the 'archetype' of a sinless humanity. This defence of Kant's Christological seriousness is an important contribution of Palmquist's *Commentary*. But Palmquist does not develop the fact that Kant explicitly denies that this archetype requires a sensible presence—schematisation—in time and space. Thus, in a long footnote in the *Religion*, Kant dismisses such schematisation of a moral concept as representing impermissible anthropomorphism (RGV, AA 6:65n; Palmquist, p. 107). However, I do not think it is extreme to say that Kierkegaard's entire authorship is based on a rejection of Kant's position in this footnote. According to Kierkegaard, if we are to believe that it is possible for a human being to achieve sinless existence, we must believe that this has at least happened once. Ironically, Kierkegaard's position is itself based on Kant's famous epistemological insight in the *First Critique* that there is great difference between ideal concepts ("a hundred possible [dollars]") and their empirical reality ("in my financial condition there is more with a hundred actual dollars") (A599/B627). So Kierkegaard draws on both Kant's ethics and epistemology to reject Kant's neglect of the importance of the historical reality of God's intervention in history.

This returns us to my deeper but nuanced point of disagreement with Palmquist: the role and importance of empirical experience in Kant's whole approach to sin and its overcoming. I welcome his response to and/or his correction of my criticisms.

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*Ronald Green is Professor Emeritus of Religion and the Eunice and Julian Cohen Professor Emeritus for the Study of Ethics and Human Values at Dartmouth College, USA. His most recent books are **Kant and Kierkegaard on Time and Eternity** (Mercer UP, 2011) and **Suffering and Bioethics** (co-edited with Nathan Palpant, Oxford UP, 2014).*

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