Kantian Review, **26**, 1, 105–111 © The Author(s), 2020. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Kantian Review
doi:10.1017/S1369415420000473

Mysticism without the *Mustikos*? Some Reflections on Stephen Palmquist's Mystical Kant

SWAMI MEDHANANDA (AYON MAHARAJ)
Program in Philosophy, Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda Educational and Research Institute, West Bengal, India
sw.medhananda@gmail.com

Abstract
This article critically examines some of the main arguments of Stephen Palmquist's *Kant and Mysticism*. While I agree with Palmquist that Kant admits the possibility of certain indirect forms of mystical experience, I argue that Palmquist makes Kant out to be more of a mystic than he actually was. In particular, I contend that Palmquist fails to provide convincing justification of two of his main claims: (1) that Kant was a mystic or at least had strong mystical tendencies and (2) that some of the experiences that are central to Kant's philosophy are best understood as mystical experiences.

Keywords: Kant, Stephen Palmquist, Emanuel Swedenborg, mysticism, mystical experience, conscience

Stephen Palmquist's interesting and provocative study, *Kant and Mysticism* (Palmquist 2019, hereafter *KM*), is a valuable contribution to the growing scholarly literature on Kant's views on mysticism. Palmquist makes a persuasive case for rejecting the simplistic view – still held by many Kant scholars – that Kant was outright hostile to all forms of mysticism. He joins several recent scholars in arguing that Kant's views on mysticism are more nuanced and complex than previously assumed.[1]

Kant refers to 'mystics' and 'mysticism' in various places.[2] According to Kant, mystics claim to have direct experience of supersensible entities such as God through a special faculty of non-sensible intuition called

'intellectual intuition' or 'mystical understanding'.[3] By emphatically ruling out the possibility of intellectual intuition, Kant's epistemology seems to deny the very possibility of mystical experience. However, Palmquist rightly points out that Kant's dismissal of mysticism stems from his unduly narrow understanding of mysticism as the direct experience of supersensible entities (p. 3). What Kant actually rejected was not mysticism as such but the particular form of mysticism he called *Schwärmerei*, which Palmquist defines as the 'delusion of claiming *secret knowledge* based on alleged mystical experiences of God or of a hidden spiritual realm' (p. 5). Although most translators have rendered *Schwärmerei* as 'fanaticism' or 'enthusiasm', Palmquist translates it (somewhat misleadingly) as 'delirium' (p. 3).[4] *KM*'s central argument is that, while Kant rules out the possibility of delirious mysticism, he admits the possibility of – and sometimes even encourages – certain *non*-delirious forms of mystical experience (pp. 5–6). Palmquist makes a sustained case that what he calls 'Critical mysticism' is central to Kant's philosophy.

While I agree that Kant admits the possibility of certain non-enthusiastic forms of mystical experience, I will argue that Palmquist overreaches in some respects by portraying Kant as more of a mystic, and more sympathetic to mysticism, than he actually was. I will critically examine four of Palmquist's most significant claims in *KM*:

(1) While Kant denies the possibility of direct experience of supersensible entities, he admits the possibility of 'indirect' or 'symbolic' mystical experiences.
(2) Some of Emanuel Swedenborg's mystical ideas may have influenced the development of Kant's own Critical philosophy.
(3) Kant himself was a mystic or at least had strong mystical tendencies.
(4) Some of the experiences that are central to Kant's philosophy are best understood as mystical experiences.

I will argue that Palmquist's justification of claims (1) and (2) is fairly convincing, but his justification of claims (3) and (4) is much weaker.

Claim (1). Palmquist argues that Kant denies the possibility of mystical experiences based on non-sensible intuition, but admits the possibility of other types of mystical experience (p. 146). As Palmquist puts it, 'a mystic might experience some sensible object(s) but take it or them as a symbolic representation of a noumenal reality to which it points only indirectly' (p. 137). Palmquist makes a convincing case that Kant's

philosophy accommodates the possibility of indirect or symbolic mystical experiences – experiences of something sensible that the mystic takes to be caused by a supersensible entity such as God.[5] Since mystical experiences are at best indirect, they do not have any epistemic value: they can never amount to knowledge or certainty of any supersensible entity (p. 146). Moreover, Kant consistently subordinates mystical experiences to practical reason. Only those mystical experiences should be accepted as genuine which 'serve as motivations for the person to live a morally better life' (p. 146). On these grounds, for instance, Kant faults the biblical Abraham for obeying the unethical command of a voice he took to be God's. According to Kant (*Conflict of the Faculties*, 7: 63; hereafter *CF*), since the voice commanded Abraham to kill his own son Isaac, Abraham's certainty of the moral law – which prohibits killing – should have led him to ignore the voice. Palmquist's defence of claim (1) makes a significant contribution to Kant scholarship, since many Kant scholars continue to overlook the fact that Kant admits the possibility of indirect mystical experience.

Claim (2). Hans Vaihinger (1892: 513) was one of the first scholars to argue that some key aspects of Kant's Critical philosophy may have been influenced by Swedenborg's mystical ideas. Taking Vaihinger's lead, recent scholars (e.g. Johnson 1999, 2001; Thorpe 2010) have explored in greater detail some of the deep philosophical affinities between the ideas of Swedenborg and Kant. The second and third chapters of *KM* make a valuable contribution to this promising scholarly endeavour. Militating against the widespread assumption that Kant's reading of Hume was the sole or primary factor that awakened him from his 'dogmatic slumber', Palmquist contends that Swedenborg 'very likely' influenced Kant's formulation of the Copernican hypothesis (p. 35). While claims of influence are notoriously difficult to prove, Palmquist's subtle argument for Swedenborg's possible influence on Kant – along with the complementary arguments of Johnson and Thorpe – deserves to be taken very seriously by Kant scholars.

Claim (3). In chapter 8, Palmquist argues that certain features of Kant's personality, daily habits and his autobiographical and philosophical writings strongly suggest that he had 'inherently mystical tendencies' (p. 80). Unfortunately, the evidence Palmquist provides is not very convincing. Kant's 'meditative attitude toward the moral law' (p. 77) is supposedly revealed in the following autobiographical passage: 'when composing my writings, I have always pictured this judge as standing at my side to keep me not only from error that corrupts the soul, but even

from any careless expression that might give offense' (*CF* 7: 9; cited at p. 75, n. 2). This passage indicates Kant's reverence for the moral law, but I see no justification for taking this reverence to be mystical. Palmquist also claims that Kant's upbringing fostered in him a 'meditative attitude toward nature'. He cites as evidence Kant's remark that his mother 'opened' his 'heart to the impressions of nature' (p. 78). Once again, why does being open to the 'impressions of nature' necessarily indicate a 'meditative' attitude? Moreover, even if Palmquist *is* able to prove that Kant had a meditative attitude, there is still a world of difference between a meditative attitude and a properly mystical bent of mind. While meditative states often precede mystical experiences, there is no reason to believe that Kant had any such mystical experiences.

Another example of Palmquist's strained reading of Kant is his attempt to find evidence of Kant's mystical bent in his practice of 'disciplined breathing' during his daily walks (p. 79). As Palmquist puts it, 'Such an interest in disciplined breathing, practiced during periods of silence and solitude, is likely to give rise to a religious experience of some sort, even if one is not consciously fostering a mystical bent, as these are all typical examples of the type of discipline practiced by mystics' (p. 79). This bold empirical claim seems both implausible and unjustified, since there is no reason to believe that the very act of disciplined breathing is 'likely' to result in mystical experiences. Moreover, Palmquist provides no evidence that Kant's practice of disciplined breathing actually did give rise to any mystical experiences, so his argument amounts to little more than speculation. Overall, then, I believe Palmquist's attempt to justify claim (3) is unsuccessful.

Claim (4). The brunt of *KM* is devoted to defending this claim, so I will consider it in some detail. According to Palmquist, three experiences frequently discussed by Kant are best understood as mystical: the experiences of conscience as God's voice, of nature as God's handiwork, and of the 'I' as a unity of apperception. I will focus here on Palmquist's mystical interpretation of the Kantian experience of conscience.

Palmquist rightly points out that Kant, especially in his later writings, claims that the '"voice of God" speaks to human beings through their common participation in practical reason' (p. 64). If I understand Palmquist correctly, he suggests that such statements indicate that the 'immediate experience' of the moral law within us is actually an indirect mystical experience of the 'voice of God' (p. 64). As Palmquist puts it, 'To let our activity be guided by this mysterious, inwardly impelling force

or spirit (i.e., by practical reason) *is* to let ourselves be guided by God.' Palmquist is correct that certain people may enjoy the indirect mystical experience of their own conscience as the voice of God. Indeed, as Palmquist points out, Kant, in *The Conflict of the Faculties*, quotes a long letter from Wilmans (*CF,* 7: 74; cited on p. 60) which describes a group of 'separatist' mystics who 'consider the inner [moral] law … an inward revelation and so regard God as definitely its author'. Palmquist plausibly claims that Kant's Critical philosophy admits the possibility of such an indirect mystical experience of the voice of God in conscience.

However, I think Palmquist makes the mistake of generalizing from the experience of a small group of separatist mystics. That is, Palmquist at least sometimes claims that the experience of conscience as such is a mystical experience. He overlooks the fact that Kant himself considers the mystical experience of conscience enjoyed by a handful of separatist mystics to be an anomaly. In my opinion, Palmquist conflates two importantly different ways of experiencing conscience as the voice of God: one is mystical, the other is not. A small minority of people – like the separatist mystics – can have an indirect mystical experience of God as author of the moral law within them. The vast majority of us, however, can only *interpret* our non-mystical experience of conscience as an experience of God's voice.

I believe it is in this latter sense of non-mystical interpretation that we should understand Adickes' statement – cited by Palmquist at p. 103 – that for the later Kant 'the categorical imperative … leads directly to God, yes, serves as a pledge of His reality'.[6] Even for the later Kant, our direct awareness of the categorical imperative is not a mystical experience of God but a faith-based interpretation of the categorical imperative as originating in God. For instance, a religious person might consider her intense suffering to be a trial sent from God. Obviously, such a person does not thereby experience God but, rather, *interprets* her suffering as an experience caused and sustained by God. Kant clearly distinguishes between a mystical experience of God and a faith-based interpretation of a non-mystical experience in this passage from his *Lectures on Ethics* (Collins, 27: 337–8; cited on p. 67): 'We know God, not by intuition, but through faith. … To be sure, faith is just as strong as intuition.' Strangely, however, Palmquist takes this passage as support for his mystical interpretation of Kant. Contrary to Palmquist, I think Kant had good reasons for *not* taking such faith-based interpretations of everyday experiences to be mystical.

Palmquist's implausible mystical interpretation of the Kantian experience of conscience points to a more fundamental hermeneutic problem that casts a shadow over *KM* as a whole: he does not sufficiently reflect on, or justify, his unusual interpretative procedure of reading Kant against Kant by claiming, against Kant's explicit intentions, that certain experiences central to Kant's philosophy are, in fact, mystical. Why did Kant refrain from calling the experience of conscience 'mystical'? Palmquist's answer strikes me as overly simplistic: Kant supposedly had an unduly narrow understanding of mysticism, which prevented him from acknowledging the mystical nature of the experience of conscience (p. 3). For Palmquist, then, there is nothing fundamentally un-Kantian about expanding the notion of mysticism to encompass such experiences as that of conscience. I would argue, to the contrary, that taking the universal experience of conscience to be mystical *is* a profoundly un-Kantian gesture. Kant was well aware that the term 'mysticism' derives from the Greek word *mustikos*, which means 'hidden'. Accordingly, Kant rightly understood that a mystical experience, by its very nature, is both private and rare and hence cannot be the common property of all. For this reason, Kant refers in one text (*CF*, 7: 65; cited on p. 58) to 'mysticism, with its lamp of private revelations'. For Kant, the experience of conscience cannot be mystical, precisely because it must be a universally shared experience grounded in practical reason. Calling the experience of conscience 'mystical' amounts to depriving the experience of its universality, which would be fatal to Kant's Critical philosophy.

According to Kant, everyone should feel admiration and reverence for the moral law, which is precisely why Kant never cashes out this admiration and reverence in mystical terms. Palmquist, by interpreting Kantian reverence for the moral law as 'mystical reverence' (p. 72), is in danger of landing in a double bind. If Palmquist takes reverence for the moral law to be mystical in the full-blooded sense, he deprives the experience of the moral law of its universality, thereby undermining the very basis of Kant's practical philosophy. On the other hand, if he takes reverence for the moral law to be mystical in the deflationary sense which he himself seems to favour, then he waters down the concept of mysticism to the point where it becomes virtually meaningless. At one point, for instance, Palmquist claims that God 'speaks to each of us in our universal encounter with nature and conscience' (p. 84), thereby conflating mystical experience with the aesthetic experience of natural beauty and the experience of conscience. One might well wonder whether the kind of universal mysticism Palmquist attributes to Kant is a mysticism worthy of its name.[7]

Notes

1 E.g. Maharaj 2017; Johnson 2001; Laywine 1993.
2 E.g. A854/B882, 28: 241 (*Metaphyik* L_1 [Pölitz]), 29: 761 (*Metaphysik* Mrongovius).
3 E.g. 28: 207, 241 (*Metaphysik* L_1).
4 I agree with Palmquist that the words 'enthusiasm' and 'fanaticism' have various misleading connotations, but his alternative translation is arguably even more misleading, since 'delirium' has the connotation of false knowledge, not implied by *Schwärmerei*.
5 *KM*, pp. 45–6, summarizes and endorses my position in Maharaj (2017) that Kant's Critical philosophy accommodates the possibility of indirect mystical experience.
6 It should be noted that Palmquist introduces Adickes' statement with the remark, 'Kant goes so far as to depict the moral imperative as the voice of God in the human soul' (p. 103) – thereby misleadingly suggesting that the statement was Kant's own, rather than Adickes'.
7 I thank Helmut Wautischer for helpful feedback on an earlier draft.

References

Johnson, Gregory (1999) 'Kant's Early Metaphysics and the Origins of the Critical Philosophy'. *Studia Swedenborgiana*, 11 (http://www.baysidechurch.org/studia/default.asp?ArticleID=174&VolumeID=42&AuthorID=24&detail=1).

—— (2001) 'A Commentary on Kant's *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*'. Ph.D. dissertation, Catholic University of America.

Laywine, Alison (1993) *Kant's Early Metaphysics and the Origins of the Critical Philosophy*. Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview.

Maharaj, Ayon (2017) 'Kant on the Epistemology of Indirect Mystical Experience'. *Sophia*, 56, 311–36.

Palmquist, Stephen (2019) *Kant and Mysticism: Critique as the Experience of Baring All in Reason's Light*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Thorpe, Lucas (2010) 'The Realm of Ends as a Community of Spirits: Kant and Swedenborg on the Kingdom of Heaven and the Cleansing of the Doors of Perception'. *Heythrop Journal*, 52, 52–75.

Vaihinger, Hans (1892) *Commentar zu Kants Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, vol. 2. Stuttgart: Union Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft.