

Reply to Pablo Muchnik

ROBERT B. LOUDEN

University of South Maine

Email: louden@mail.edu

I am very grateful to Pablo Muchnik for his reflections and critical remarks on my recent book, *Kant's Human Being: Essays on his Theory of Human Nature (KHB)*, in part because they have forced me to reassess my own approach to Kant. Pablo and I both begin from the conviction that neither the light dove nor Kant's practical philosophy can fly in airless space, and that Kant himself was well aware of this, despite generations of Kant commentary to the contrary. Anthropological pressure is needed to get practical philosophy off the ground and to keep it moving. My main concern over the years has been to draw attention to the underexplored second part of Kant's morals, a part that is largely impure and empirical, and which one sees on display not only in Kant's numerous lectures on anthropology but also in a host of other Kantian texts, early as well as late. Pablo, on the other hand, drawing from Kant's *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793), advocates what he calls a 'hybrid method' or 'quasi-transcendental approach', one that 'is neither fully empirical nor fully a priori, but contains elements of both' (Muchnik 2009: 129; see also pp. xxiv, 162). Pablo thus openly embraces 'syncretism' (Muchnik 2009: 129),¹ whereas I advocate a more fastidious approach, trying to heed Kant's warning that a philosophy 'which mixes ... pure principles with empirical ones does not even deserve the name of philosophy ... much less ... moral philosophy' (G 4: 390). In other words, while Pablo and I share a concern to overcome the obsession with 'keeping philosophy pure' (Rorty 1982: 19–36), we pursue this concern along somewhat different paths. I will return to this issue of our different paths after making a few very brief comments on Pablo's opening remarks concerning (1) what motivates my overall project and (2) some specific contentions I make in *Kant's Human Being*.

1

Pablo is certainly correct in stressing that on my view Kant's ethics 'remains incomplete and risks becoming ineffectual if it is not

accompanied by a second, usually ignored part'. Defending the integrity of, and uncovering the multiple textual sources for, this second under-examined part of Kant's ethics has become one of my own obsessions over the years. However, while I agree that this second part is 'not a mere accretion' of Kant's ethical theory, I do deny that it is 'implicitly contained within the first part of ethics from the start'. Again, I take Kant's basic distinction between pure and impure principles seriously, as well as his opposition to the indiscriminate mixing of nonempirical and empirical components. While I would agree that Kant himself does not always succeed in keeping the two parts as separate from each other as he thinks he does, I do not think the impure part is implicitly contained in the pure part from the start. The ultimate importance of pure ethics may be less than Kant believed, but it is possible to separate the pure from the impure.

2

Pablo's reflections on *Kant's Human Being* focus on Parts One ('Human Virtues') and Two ('Anthropology and Ethics') of my book. The four essays in Part One, he notes, are 'variations on a single theme, namely, that anthropology plays a decisive role in shaping Kant's theory of virtue'. This is certainly true. However, he then infers that 'this entails that there is an implicit anthropology even in the first part of ethics', and on this point we disagree. On my view, Kant's theory of virtue is based on empirical assumptions regarding human needs, tendencies and drives. And because Kant's theory of virtue does not set forth 'its teaching simply from a priori principles', it therefore cannot 'be called *pure* philosophy' (*G* 4: 388). Pablo also notes that on my view 'what distinguishes Kant's brand of virtue ethics is the realization that human beings are evil by nature', and on this point we certainly agree. Kant defends a darker view of human nature than one typically finds in Enlightenment literature.

3

Pablo raises some critical remarks about my project, and in closing I would like to respond briefly to them. I am wary of replacing what Pablo rightly calls my empirical and naturalistic approach to Kant's impure ethics with the allegedly syncretic, quasi-transcendental method that Pablo claims to find on display in Kant's *Religion*, for the following reasons.

1. As noted earlier, Kant explicitly speaks against mixing the pure and impure parts of ethics in the Preface to the *Groundwork* as well as

elsewhere (see e.g. *MS 6: 216–17*, *Moral Mrongovius II 29: 599*). The pure part must come first; the impure, second. My interpretation better fits Kant's own explicit intentions than does Pablo's.

2. Pablo claims that my 'appeal to experience-based reflection short-changes the noumenal aspect of Kant's thought, for it fails to capture its *a priori*, moral component'. But nowhere do I claim that the experience-based reflection that forms the core of Kant's impure ethics constitutes the whole of his ethical theory. Kant's impure ethics is merely 'the second part of morals' (see *KHB 49–64*). It is by no means meant to replace the first *a priori* part of morals, though it is meant to join it as a necessary partner.
3. Pablo himself admits that Kant 'never made' his alleged syncretic, quasi-transcendental doctrine 'fully explicit' – 'Unfortunately, Kant was not fully explicit about his novel methodology' – and so in order to rectify matters Pablo proposes to 'determine what Kant must have *thought*' (Muchnik 2009: 129). But is it prudent to cast texts aside and speculate about what an author must have thought? Kant himself never uses the term 'quasi-transcendental', and as I showed earlier (see n. 1) he is no friend of syncretism. How then can we be confident that Kant in fact employs a quasi-transcendental method in *Religion*? Pablo argues that 'the system of propensities to evil ... in *Religion I* ... must itself be interpreted in quasi-transcendental terms, i.e., as providing conditions for the possibility of the patterns which human actions display throughout history' (Muchnik 2009: p. xxiv). But in my own discussion of 'Anthropology and the Universality of Evil' in *Kant's Human Being* (115–20; see also Loudon 2010: 93–115), I argue that we need to 'take seriously Kant's frequent appeals to experience and anthropology in his discussion of radical evil' (117). In *Religion I*, Kant himself states that 'the existence of this propensity to evil in human nature can be established through experimental proofs (*Erfahrungsbeweise*) of the actual resistance in time of human choice against the law' (6: 35; see also 19, 20, 32–3). Indeed, as others have noted, 'the claim that evil is given empirically (and only empirically) is reiterated throughout *Religion*' (Kosch 2003: 63). In other words, there is in fact ample warrant to read Kant's account of radical evil as itself empirical rather than quasi-transcendental, and I myself defend just such an interpretation in *Kant's Human Being*.
4. But even if one sides in the end with Pablo in deciding that Kant's account of radical evil in *Religion* is somehow both empirical and *a priori* (and I readily admit that my own empirical interpretation of Kantian radical evil is not problem-free), there still remains the issue

of whether a syncretic, quasi-transcendental reading is to be preferred over one that keeps the pure and impure dimensions distinct. Pablo of course holds that his syncretic interpretation of Kant's moral anthropology is superior to the more empirical one that we find in Kant's *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of view* and related works – 'the search for the conditions of accountability [in *Religion I*] moves Kant's theorizing beyond the empirical boundaries of the *Anthropology*' (Muchnik 2009: 133). But Kant's *Anthropology* was published in 1798; *Religion*, in 1793. The Kant who published *Anthropology* in 1798 was well aware of what he wrote in *Religion* five years earlier, and nowhere in *Anthropology* does he tell readers that his earlier account of human nature is to be preferred over his later one. Thus even if we accept the claim that Kant makes a leap into the quasi-transcendental in *Religion*, it is not at all clear that this is his preferred method.

5. Also, assuming again for the sake of argument that the method of inquiry into human nature in Kant's *Religion* is indeed quasi-transcendental, I am nevertheless wary of placing so much interpretative weight on a single text. My work on both Kant's impure ethics and his theory of human nature is based on a wide variety of both published and unpublished works (including *Religion*) spanning all periods of Kant's extensive writing career. *Religion* is one of Kant's great works, but it is too thin a reed to carry all of the weight of Kant's moral anthropology.
6. Finally, Pablo fears that my 'empirical approach to the question "What is the human being?" is self-defeating, for observation is confined to the phenomenal manifestations of human behavior'. But it is important to underscore that the answers Kant himself gives to the question 'Was ist der Mensch?' in his anthropological writings are fundamentally empirical and pragmatic, not transcendental and metaphysical. Kant never claims that the answers he gives to 'Was ist der Mensch?' in his writings on human nature somehow provide an answer to all of philosophy's questions, which they would have to do if we were to 'reckon all of' philosophy's questions 'as anthropology' (*Jäsche Logic* 9: 25). Kant's own attempts to answer the question 'What is the human being?' in his anthropological works remain on the empirical plane. However, Pablo is certainly not alone in challenging Kant on this point. Foucault, for instance, also worries that the question, 'Was ist der Mensch?' is 'the sign of a rupture in Kant's thinking', since 'the important empirical status the first *Critique* assigned to the *Anthropology* is, therefore, challenged' (Foucault 2008: 75; see also Louden 2013).

But allow me to end on a positive note. As Pablo remarks, we are both concerned ‘to overturn the picture of Kant that has held the purists captive’. In order to defeat this significant adversary, alliances must be formed, and I am quite happy to do so. And in combating our opponent, it is not necessary (and perhaps not even desirable) that all members of the alliance agree on every single point of detail.

Note

- 1 Kant himself was no friend of syncretism, though this in itself does not refute the claim that he nevertheless employs a syncretic method in *Religion*. For instance, in the *Praktische Philosophie Herder* lecture transcription (1763–4), he states: ‘*syncretism*, here one tries to develop contradictory doctrines as if they were in agreement. It seldom catches on; is usually futile and often damaging – Basedow is syncretic’ (27: 78). For related discussion, see Louden 2012: 39–54.

References

- Foucault, Michel (2008) *Introduction to Kant's Anthropology*, ed. Roberto Nigro. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).
- Kosch, Michelle (2003) *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling, and Kierkegaard*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Louden, Robert B. (2010) ‘Evil Everywhere: The Ordinariness of Kantian Radical Evil’. In Sharon Anderson-Gold and Pablo Muchnik (eds), *Kant's Anatomy of Evil* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 93–115.
- Louden, Robert B. (2012) ‘“Not a Slow *Reform*, But a Swift *Revolution*”: Kant and Basedow on the Need to Transform Education’. In Klas Roth and Chris W. Suprenant (eds), *Kant and Education: Interpretations and Commentary* (New York: Routledge), 39–54.
- (2013) ‘El Kant de Foucault’. *Estudios Kantianos* 1, 163–82.
- Muchnik, Pablo (2009) *Kant's Theory of Evil: An Essay on the Dangers of Self-Love and the Apriority of History*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Rorty, Richard (1982) ‘Keeping Philosophy Pure: An Essay on Wittgenstein’. In Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 19–36.