

Dreams of a Spirit-Seer and Kant's Critical Method: Comments on Stephen R. Palmquist's *Kant and Mysticism*

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Abstract

In his new book, *Kant and Mysticism*, Stephen Palmquist argues that Kant had already formulated his critical method by the mid-1760s and that it emerged from his reflections on Swedenborg's mystical visions. In order to evaluate these claims, I consider Kant's correspondence with Charlotte von Knobloch and Moses Mendelssohn before and after the publication of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*; the context in which Kant published *Dreams*; and the method he employs when he discusses Swedenborg's visions in that work. I conclude that Kant's critical method was not well-formed during the 1760s and did not emerge from Kant's reflections on Swedenborg.

Keywords: Immanuel Kant, Emanuel Swedenborg, *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, method

I approach Stephen Palmquist's new book, *Kant and Mysticism* (Palmquist 2019, hereafter *KM*) as a Kant scholar and historian of philosophy, not as an expert in the philosophy of religion and certainly not as an authority on mysticism. I do not feel qualified to address the parts of *KM* that deal with these issues, so my comments will focus on Part I, which updates and restates chapter 2 of Palmquist (2000), where he argues that 'Kant's serious consideration of Emanuel Swedenborg's mystical thought was the primary impetus that led to Kant's Copernican Revolution' (pp. 2–3). Palmquist further defends this view in part I of *KM*, where he says that 'Kant is intentionally using Swedenborg's visions as a *test case* for the application of his well-formed Critical method, before launching into its application to all of metaphysics' (p. 19) and

even claims that ‘Kant already has a clear conception of the Critical *method*, and is nurturing the seed that was to grow into his complete philosophical system’ in *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* (Kant 1992, hereafter *DSS*) (p. 26). These statements indicate that Palmquist thinks Kant had already formulated his critical method in the mid-1760s and that it emerged from his reflections on Swedenborg’s mystical visions. If he is right, then Kant scholars will have to revise standard accounts of Kant’s intellectual development and reconsider the origins of his Critical philosophy.

There are many suggestive quotations and readings in part I of *KM* that support Palmquist’s claims about Swedenborg’s influence on Kant, its philosophical significance and its implications for the development of Kant’s critical method. But I am not sure they are sufficient to prove that Palmquist is correct about Swedenborg’s influence on Kant. Take, for instance, his interpretation of Kant’s correspondence with Charlotte von Knobloch before and Moses Mendelssohn immediately after the publication of *DSS*. Palmquist treats this correspondence as evidence that Kant’s ‘private’ view of Swedenborg and his visions is at odds with the ridicule he directs at them in *DSS* (p. 25). While his correspondence with von Knobloch shows that Kant was aware of stories about Swedenborg’s visions, one could also see his letter as evidence that Kant was trying to be consistent about his enlightenment rationalism. He tells von Knobloch he has always regarded tales of the mystical and the marvellous with scepticism, but refuses to dismiss them out of prejudice or reject the testimony of credible witnesses (*Correspondence*, Kant 1999, hereafter *C*, 10: 43–4). He also indicates that he withholds judgement until he has conducted further inquiries and subjects everything to ‘the test of sound reason’. Later, when Kant tells Mendelssohn he is ‘charmed’ by spirit reports and ‘cannot rid myself of the suspicion that there is some truth to their validity, regardless of the absurdities in these stories and the fancies and unintelligible notions that infect their rational foundations and undermine their value’ (10: 70), it is not obvious that he takes a positive view of Swedenborg’s visions that he has to hide, lest he be mocked or scorned. On the contrary, he could be agreeing with Mendelssohn that any philosophical truth about the nature of spirit that might be contained in Swedenborg’s visions is hopelessly obscured by absurdity and nonsense. Kant could also be expressing a reasonable fear that readers might attribute these absurdities to him, which would explain his decision to employ a mocking and satirical tone in *DSS*. These alternate readings are, I think, at least as plausible as the ones Palmquist proposes, but they

do not suggest that Kant had 'a strong desire to explore the implications of his lifelong belief in the spirit world' (p. 17) that was realized in *DSS*.

Considering additional evidence from the context in which *DSS* was written and published can also help to evaluate Palmquist's claim that Kant was 'intentionally using Swedenborg's visions as a *test case* for the application of his well-formed Critical method' (p. 19). It is apparent from the publications that preceded *DSS* that the mid-1760s was a very productive time for Kant – he published technical philosophical works like *The Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God* (1763) and popular works like *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764). One of the works Kant published during this period, *Inquiry concerning the Distinctness of the Principles of Natural Theology and Morality* (1764), even won second prize in the Prussian Royal Academy's prize-essay competition. We can see from his correspondence with Johann Heinrich Lambert in 1765 that Kant planned to capitalize on the success of his *Inquiry* in a work called *The Proper Method of Metaphysics*. The same correspondence (mentioned in *KM* at pp. 40–1, n. 4, and 99, n. 13) also documents the difficulties Kant faced as he attempted to formulate this new method. He complains that there are too many erroneous judgements and mistaken procedures in contemporary metaphysics and that, as a result, he lacks examples that would show 'in *concreto* what the proper procedure should be' (C, 10: 56). Kant tells Lambert that he plans to write essays on the metaphysical foundations of natural and practical philosophy to supply himself with these examples, but at no point does he mention Swedenborg or suggest that his reflections on the 'proper' method of metaphysics were occasioned by his reflections on mystical experience. Perhaps that is because Kant was too embarrassed to admit his fascination with Swedenborg to a respected mathematician and philosopher like Lambert. But it could also be that the views Kant intended to present in a work he called 'the culmination of my whole project' (C, 10: 56) were developed through reflections on the method of metaphysics that we find in Kant's *Inquiry* and *Only Possible Argument*, and even in earlier works like *A New Elucidation of the First Principles of Metaphysical Cognition* (1755). The correspondence with Lambert might also suggest that Kant was in no position to publish anything 'well-formed' when he published *DSS*, much less the critical method he would employ in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Because Palmquist does not seriously consider the possibility that *DSS* developed from Kant's reflections on the method of metaphysics during the 1760s, and may not articulate a 'well-formed' view on the subject, it is difficult to accept his claims about Kant's intentions.

When we look more closely at the text of *DSS*, it becomes even more difficult to find evidence of a ‘well-formed’ method, much less the critical method Kant would employ in *CPR*. In the first part of *DSS*, Kant begins his investigation of the concept of ‘spirit’ by admitting his ignorance and examining the use of the word in ordinary language (chapter 1). He then proceeds to draw out the implications of the way these terms are used in ordinary language and extends them into a philosophical system (chapter 2). In chapter 3, however, he admits that there is no reason to think this procedure is methodologically sound, because it is based on ‘surreptitious concepts’ that have no basis in experience and ‘obscure inferences’ that are tied together in ‘a tangled metaphysical knot, which can either be untied or cut as one pleases’ (*DSS*, 2: 322). Kant appears to have been inclined to cut the knot, but he recognized that some methodological insights can be derived from the genealogy of the concept of ‘spirit’ that he has provided. So, in chapter 4 of the first part of *DSS*, immediately before he launches into the chapters mocking Swedenborg, Kant encourages philosophers to weigh their judgements carefully, purge themselves of prejudices and blind attachments that may have worked their way into their souls ‘in a surreptitious manner’, and try to see things from the perspective of others (*DSS*, 2: 349). I would certainly agree that this is good advice that philosophers ought to follow; yet I doubt it has much to do with the critical method Kant employs in the first *Critique*. Because Kant does not call for ‘a critique of the faculty of reason in general, in respect of all the cognitions after which reason might strive independently of all experience’ (Axii) at any point in *DSS*, and does not make similar claims in any other published or unpublished works from the pre-Critical period, I think it is unlikely that his critical method was ‘well-formed’ during the 1760s.

By this point, it should be clear that I do not think that Palmquist has demonstrated his claims about Swedenborg’s influence on Kant in *KM*. I also do not think he has proven that Kant’s critical method developed out of his reflections on Swedenborg’s visions, nor that this method was well-formed during the mid-1760s. More historical-critical work would have to be done to substantiate the claims Palmquist makes in *KM*, but that does not mean the concept of ‘Critical mysticism’ that he is developing throughout the work is without merit. I suspect Palmquist is right when he argues, in part II, that Kant did not (and Kantians should not) always dismiss mystical experience as a form of ‘delirium’ (Palmquist’s unusual translation of *Schwärmerei*), particularly given the definition of the mystic as ‘a human being looking upon the division between earthly and super-earthly, temporal and eternal,

as transcended, and feeling himself, while still externally amid the earthly and temporal, to belong to the super-earthly and eternal' that Palmquist adopts from Albert Schweitzer (p. 50). There are, indeed, many similarities between this conception of mysticism and Kant's philosophy, particularly his moral philosophy. We must be careful and critical about the way we treat these similarities, but doing so would be a continuation of the work Palmquist has begun in *KM*. He is to be applauded for his willingness to challenge conventional accounts of the development of Kant's Critical philosophy and broaden the scope of Kant interpretation in this and other works.

References

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