

Critical Mysticism or Critical Ethos? Intercultural Reflections on Stephen Palmquist's *Kant and Mysticism*

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Abstract

This contribution offers a sympathetic historical and intercultural reflection on Stephen Palmquist's work *Kant and Mysticism*. It examines (1) the appropriateness of this portrayal of Kant and mysticism in relation to its historical context (which encompasses figures such as Malebranche, Spinoza and Swedenborg), suggesting that Kant is committed to an account of rationality, ethical personhood and a 'critical ethos' in tension with mysticism; and (2) the inadequacy of Kant's understanding of mysticism in the context of South and East Asian philosophical and religious discourses, indicating the need for an intercultural turn in the philosophy of religion.

Keywords: intercultural philosophy, mysticism, perspectivism, rationality

1. Introduction

After briefly outlining a few key elements of Stephen Palmquist's insightful and nuanced account of the significance of mysticism in the development of Kant's philosophy from the pre-Critical writings to the *Opus Postumum* in his *Kant and Mysticism* (Palmquist 2019; hereafter *KM*), I delineate questions concerning the adequacy of Kant's portrayal of mysticism in interpreting religious experience as well as the appropriateness of its application to non-Western forms of religious experience.¹ I also consider Kant's interpretations of Buddhism and Daoism as forms of pantheistic mysticism that neglect a particular conception of rationality and ethical individuality and personhood.

Palmquist's way of interpreting Kant – to modify the hermeneutical maxim of understanding the author better than the author did – may well open up a dialogue between Kantian and East Asian thought more than Kant himself could.²

2. Holism, Perspectivism and Mysticism

A noteworthy dimension of Palmquist's works on Kant over the previous four decades, again evident in *KM*, is the holistic emphasis on the perspectival vision at work in Kant's Critical philosophy.³ This feature is fairly unique, in contrast with standard interpretations, and indicates a provocative and productive way to engage and rethink Kant's arguments and their implications. This Kantian vision of the whole is elucidated through the concept of 'Critical mysticism'. Mysticism is often portrayed as a unity with the whole to the point of the individual's submergence into the immanence of nature or transcendence of God, a point we will return to below. Critical mysticism, in sum, is the experience of the cosmos as a whole (i.e. as totality) that is primarily understood as having a moral character. This vision of an ethical whole, a community and republic of spirits or moral beings, orientates Kant's Critical project and its differentiation of various forms of judgement. Palmquist astutely elucidates Kant's strategy as multi-perspectival, offering a system of perspectives. His interpretation offers a notable alternative to the idea that Kant only articulated an analytically differentiated account of forms of reason and judgement, whereby the sense of the whole is lost and the question of how to bridge these diverse 'worlds' (realms of inquiry) becomes unanswerable.

Kant's articulation of a sense of the whole that is exhibited through the shifting perspectives between theoretical, practical and aesthetic judgement and reflection also intimates points of conversation with East Asian thinking (especially Daoism, Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism) that Kant himself – given his historical circumstances – could not recognize. These diverse traditions concern forms of experience that are sometimes classified under the Western category of mysticism, giving rise to questions of how the whole is reflected through particulars, such as the image of the dewdrop that discloses the infinity of the world; or questions of the diversity and possible hierarchy between different perspectives.

The early Daoist *Zhuangzi* text deploys narratives, images and logical paradoxes to reverse and transverse perspectives, thus exhibiting a perspective that has a sense of the whole and the perspectivity of beings. In Chinese Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism, one sees a more

systematizing concern for establishing a hierarchy between different perspectives and for teachings that elucidate the whole and humanity's role within it. Such concerns might sound foreign to Kant, yet they have become part of the reception of Kant in East Asia, particularly through the works of Mou Zongsan (1909–95). Mou translated Kant's major works into Chinese and systematically explored Kant's thought. He relates Critical philosophy to long-standing debates over a 'perfect teaching' (*yuanjiao*). This teaching could appropriately exhibit the sense of the whole and the roles of other perspectives and teachings within it.

3. *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer as a Critique of Metaphysics*

Dreams of a Spirit-Seer Elucidated by Dreams of Metaphysics (1766; Kant 2003, hereafter *Dreams*), frequently taken to be Kant's most eccentric work, is often not given the close attention it deserves. *KM* places this work at the centre of Kant's Critical concerns. I agree with this assessment but wonder if this significance, in greater agreement with traditional interpretations, might be due to Kant's concern with the problem of mysticism or rather the problem of metaphysics.

One question worth pondering is: does Swedenborg's mysticism deserve a prominent role in the development of Kant's Critical philosophy given Kant's dismissive hostility towards Swedenborg? Swedenborg's mysticism might serve more as an example, a test case, for a different concern – a concern not necessarily with mysticism as such, but with metaphysics. Swedenborg then serves as a parody and illustration of the absurdity of speculative reason and experience. As I read *Dreams*, Kant is primarily unfolding a preliminary version of his critique of metaphysics, and the concise and dismissive commentary on Swedenborg occurs in the later sections of the text as a satirical parody of the more central concern with philosophical metaphysicians.

Dreams is a pivotal text for interpreting the development of Kant's critique of metaphysics in general, in which mysticism is either crucially important or operates as a borderline case of the excesses of human hallucinations about what lies beyond experience and the visible. *Dreams* links Kant's arguments against Swedenborg's otherworldly speculations with Kant's rejection of metaphysical systems, which are the preoccupation of most of the book and its central argument about overstepping boundaries. Kant and Swedenborg shared common philosophical inspirations, which Swedenborg used in an unsystematic and dogmatic manner. They had overlapping concerns that appear to have alternatively fascinated and repelled Kant, helping to place his own early

metaphysical aspirations into doubt (cf. *Correspondence*, 10: 43–8; Kant 1999: 70–6). The primary targets of *Dreams* are the speculative *a priori* systems of Leibniz and Wolff, and Crusius' *a posteriori* metaphysics. The absurdity of the mystic might then be interpreted as a parody that embarrasses speculative metaphysical thinkers and deeply questions the possibility of speculative metaphysics.

An argument for this case might be sketched as follows. The primary sections of *Dreams* address the possibility of metaphysics and the illusions involved, so this does prefigure the Critical philosophy. Yet the sustained commentary on Swedenborg comes late, almost as an addition, such that it might be interpreted as a secondary concern or an example that illustrates the prior concern with the possibility of a genuine metaphysics, and the absurdity of transgressing the genuine boundaries of reason and experience.

One might disagree with the claim that Swedenborg's mysticism was a principal stimulus leading to Kant's Copernican revolution while agreeing with the claim that Kant's typically negative remarks concerning mysticism indicate a different, Critical form of mysticism. One might further wonder if the holistic, multi-perspectival dimension of Kant's works is best described as a form of mysticism, even a Critical one, given Kant's and our own contemporary negative associations with this controversial category; arguably it might be better expressed as a Critical *ethos* in reverent awe of nature (the starry sky above) and the heart-mind (the moral law within) than as any – even a Critical – form of mysticism.

4. Kant and Chinese Philosophy as 'Spinozism'

The problematic of using the word 'mysticism' is not merely verbal. It is interconnected with the Western (including Kant's) misinterpretation of Asian philosophies and religions. *KM* invites further exploration of Kant's Critical mysticism and Chinese thought through its discussions of Kant's *dao*. We might accordingly note that in Kant's discussions of Eastern philosophies and religions, he takes them as expressions of pantheistic mysticism and Spinozism. He sees in these forms of mysticism the problem not only of transgressing the boundaries of reason, but also of reducing the person to pantheistic and panentheistic systems of nature and God – an ongoing concern for Kant that orientates his rejection of all systems of totality and the whole. Kant's rejection of mystical experiences is interconnected with his ethical reinterpretation of the religious. The true sense of the community of spirits is, he repeatedly states in

Dreams, the republic of rational moral beings, which prefigures his mature practical philosophy, as Palmquist describes.

Kant repeatedly returned to the issue of the loss of ethical personhood in nature that he perceives in Eastern teachings. Unlike Leibniz and Wolff's earlier positive reception of China, and more closely aligned with Malebranche's condemnation of Chinese thought as pantheistic and 'Spinozist', Kant's mid-1780s lectures on religion identify Asian thought with the mystical experience of nature, assimilating it to Spinoza (Lectures on Theology Pöhlitz, 28: 1052; Kant 2001: 390):

To expect this [e.g. divine participation] in the present life is the business of mystics and theosophists. Thus arises the mystical self-annihilation of China, Tibet and India, in which one deludes oneself that one is finally dissolved into the Godhead. Fundamentally one might just as well call Spinozism a great enthusiasm as a form of atheism.

Kant thinks such atheistic mysticism or enthusiastic naturalism is incoherent, since it breaches the transcendental separation between immanence and transcendence, the sensible and its conditions and the supersensible whereof nothing cognitively meaningful can be stated.

Kant's targets include Buddhism and Daoism, given his identification of Laozi with the monstrous in 'The End of All Things' (8: 335; Kant 2001: 228):

From this [improper dabbling in the transcendent] comes the monstrous system of Lao-kiun [i.e. Laozi] concerning the *highest good*, that it consists in *nothing*, i.e. in the consciousness of *feeling* oneself swallowed up in the abyss of the Godhead by flowing together with it, and hence by the annihilation of one's personality; in order to have a presentiment of this state Chinese philosophers, sitting in dark rooms with their eyes closed, exert themselves to think and sense their own nothingness. Hence the *pantheism* (of the Tibetans and other oriental peoples); and in consequence from its philosophical sublimation Spinozism is begotten . . .

Kant interprets nothingness as primarily negative and pantheism as its celebration rather than as the affirmation of things and life in their immanent significance. We might consider not only whether this account of

Asian philosophy is accurate, and there are many good reasons to think it is not,⁴ but also its implications for the problematic of mysticism, religion and ethics. Is there room for genuine mystical experience in Kant or only its interpretation in light of mere rationality and the priority of the ethical?⁵

5. Kant between Malebranche and Spinoza

An additional issue is Kant's complex relationship with Spinoza, which Palmquist thoughtfully addresses elsewhere (e.g. Palmquist 2008). Adding Malebranche to the picture makes it more complex. A question remains insofar as Kant understood Chinese thought as Spinozist and denying ethical personality. As noted in *KM*, Kant repeatedly takes up the phrase: we perceive or intuit all things in God. He links this phrase more positively with Malebranche in 1770 and more negatively with Spinoza in later works. Kant's own understanding is arguably closer to Malebranche's use than to Spinoza's pantheism, which Kant considered overly idealistic. Malebranche stated that 'we see all things in God' (*nous voyons toutes choses en Dieu*) (2006: 3.2.6). This signifies that the human mind can intuit intelligible archetypal ideas. Kant would famously deny the possibility of intellectual intuition. But he himself identified his kinship with Malebranche's idea in his 1770 Inaugural Dissertation (2: 410; Kant 1929: 73–4):

But it seems more cautious to hug the shore of the cognitions granted to us by the mediocrity of our intellect than to be carried out upon the high seas of such mystic investigations, like Malebranche, whose opinion that we see all things in God is pretty nearly what has here been expounded.

'Seeing all things in God' is not equivalent to seeing God's divine essence, nor can it be a pantheistic submergence in God for Malebranche. It is rather linked with the soul's individuation, perceiving in the light of the intelligible in accordance with both natural reason and Christian piety. This strategy led Malebranche to polemicize against Spinozism in general and the perceived 'Spinozism' of the Chinese philosophers in his 1708 work (Malebranche 1980).

In kinship with Malebranche, Kant's vision of the whole is a more theistic one of an ethos of individuals than either pantheistic or panentheistic, even arguably when Kant endeavoured to accommodate the Spinoza reception and pantheism of early German romanticism and idealism (especially Lichtenberg and perhaps the early Schelling) in his *Opus*

Postumum. Kant linked ‘seeing all things in God’ to Spinoza in the *Opus Postumum*, although this formulation derives from Malebranche.⁶ The status of the *Opus Postumum* is a contested issue in Kant scholarship given his perceived departures from the spirit of the Critical philosophy. But, nonetheless, the idea of a universal society of spirits, inspired in part by Leibniz and reformulated by Kant from the pre-Critical through the Critical writings, is primarily understood as a moral republic of ethical persons orientated towards the moral law rather than a mystical form of the communion of spirits that he rejected in his critique of Swedenborg.

6. Kant, Mou Zongsan and the Question of Intuition

Another way of approaching these issues, which is opened up in *KM*, is to consider Mou Zongsan’s critique of Kant’s account of ‘intellectual intuition’ of ‘the thing in itself’ that for Kant is only possible for God, who is unrestricted by space and time (see e.g. Mou 1971). In addition to being a notable scholar in Kant studies, particularly his philosophy of religion, Palmquist has also written on the architectonic and perspectival character of the shifting models of the *Yijing* (Book of Changes), which was a significant source of inspiration for Mou.⁷ We might accordingly consider the following questions. What would it require for there to be a human form of holistic or intellectual intuition of the cosmos as a concrete whole? Could it be articulated from the Chinese Buddhist and Neo-Confucian traditions, as Mou argued in pointing out the limitations of Kant’s Critical philosophy? Would it require a notion of immanence and immanent graspability of the whole in the particular that is unavailable in Kant’s Critical philosophy, insofar as it is defined as Critical in Kant’s sense?

Given Palmquist’s perceptive articulation of wholeness and perspectival-ity in his lucid portrait of Kant’s Critical mysticism, Kant and Mou are not as distant as might be thought, once their incompatible understandings of the idea of intellectual intuition are appropriately interpreted. Mou did not of course propose that humans have God-like intellectual intuition of the whole in its concreteness, but the capacity for grasping the whole and the particular in their relationality, as exhibited (for example) in grasping the moment through reflection on the *Yijing*. Such ‘intuition’ is not mystical, according to Mou’s understanding of the Chinese philosophical tradition; rather, it belongs to everyone (and not only the Chinese, even as Mou insisted that Chinese traditions expressly illuminated it) in their everyday mundane experiences. The experience of the whole in the particular that illuminates the whole is

disclosed not in the fantastic but in ordinary encounters with others, things and environments.

7. Conclusion

Kant and Mysticism lucidly unfolds a significant alternative to the standard interpretations of *Dreams* and, more generally, mysticism in Kant's philosophy. It is an eloquent and nuanced reading of the conceptual development of Kant's Critical philosophy in its historical context and Kant's thinking of problems of experience, intuition and the religious that will become an essential reference for future scholarship.

Notes

- 1 This contribution uses the following English language translations of Kant's works: Kant 1929, Kant 1998, Kant 2001, and Kant 2003.
- 2 An essential resource for interpreting the encounter and dialogue between Kantian and Asian philosophy is Palmquist 2010. Kant did not distinguish between pantheism and panentheism. His accounts of nature and ethical personalism conflict with the former and latter.
- 3 For his systematic exposition of perspectives in Kant, see Palmquist 1987 and 1993.
- 4 See the discussion of Kant's negative portrayal of Chinese philosophy as mystical and Spinozist in Nelson 2009: 510–13; Nelson 2017: 111–12.
- 5 On the latter topic, see Palmquist 1992.
- 6 Some scholars have concluded that Kant confused Spinoza and Malebranche. See e.g. Förster's endnote 123 in Kant 1998: 279.
- 7 On Kant's philosophy of religion, see especially Palmquist 2016. On architectonic and perspectival reflection in relation to the *Yijing*, see e.g. Palmquist 2011 and 2015.

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