

Commanded Love and Moral Autonomy

The Kierkegaard-Habermas Debate

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One way to read Kierkegaard's *Works of Love* is as an all out assault on the Enlightenment ideal of moral autonomy from a religious point of view. Kant is the *locus classicus* of this ideal, just as Descartes and Locke are, respectively, for the correlative ideals of epistemic and political autonomy. Since these three components belong to the central core of what we have come to think of as the modern understanding of the subject, Kierkegaard's critique has a distinctively postmodern flavour. But, as we shall see, it is postmodern precisely by the way it is biblically premodern.

The first thing Kant says about the relation of religion to morality in his 'Fourth Critique' is that "morality does not need religion at all." Because morality presupposes "man as a free agent who, just because he is free, binds himself through his reason to unconditioned laws, it stands in need neither of the idea of another Being over him, for him to apprehend his duty, nor of an incentive other than the law itself, for him to do his duty."¹

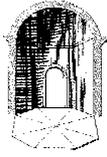
Kant has a more positive way of relating morality and religion. "Religion is (subjectively regarded) the recognition of all duties as divine commands."² But this moral role of religion is qualified in three important ways. First, it presupposes only faith and not theoretical knowledge of God. Second, as we have already seen, the God relation cannot play any essential role either in determining the content of my duty or in motivating me to do it. The autonomy of the moral agent precludes both possibilities. Third, it involves no "special duties" to God "over and above the ethico-civil duties of humanity (of man to man)..."³

Kierkegaard will agree to the first proviso (in terms of his own account of the relation of faith

to speculative knowledge). But his ethics is theonomous, and thus heteronomous, and he will vigorously reject the second and third constraints on the ethics of divine command he develops in *Works of Love*.

The second constraint involves an elitism he is eager to repudiate. Kant recognizes that one might need "the idea of another Being over him" in order to recognize one's duty or be motivated to do it, but "it is man's own fault if he is subject to such a need ..."⁴ The idea seems to be this. If we are sufficiently enlightened or intellectually mature, we will have a morality that "does not need religion at all," but if we are intellectually inferior or immature, we will need to get our morality by way of religion and the notion of divine commands. Just as Climacus repudiates an essentially Hegelian notion of the speculatively elite in *Postscript*, according to which religion is the (deficient) form in which the truth is accessible to those incapable of grasping it in its pure, philosophical form,⁵ so Kierkegaard in *Works of Love* rejects the moral elitism of the enlightened implicit in Kant's formulation. He exempts no one from the divine command as such. For the most fundamental fact about the human condition is that each of us has "another Being over him." It would be "man's own fault" not to recognize and acknowledge this dependence.

The third constraint is, if anything, even more problematic. Kant boldly corrects Jesus' summary of the law in terms of two commands, to love God and to love one's neighbour (Mark 12:28-34). For philosophical reason there is really only one duty, the duty to our fellow humans. Under such circumstances Kierkegaard sees earnestness about the moral law and rigour in its interpretation as diversionary tactics to hide the fact that



we are showing God the door. So far is he from being willing to make this move, so eager is he to reaffirm the integrity of the first commandment that at times it seems as if he will never get to the second. The God relation takes place in secret and in works like *Fear and Trembling, Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, and 'Purity of Heart,'⁶ the knight of faith is so deeply the knight of hidden inwardness that it seems faith will never emerge into the light of day as works of love.

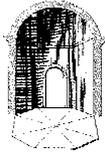
But slowly and surely it does. Already in *Two Ages* and in 'The Gospel of Sufferings'⁷ this emergence of faith from hidden inwardness begins.⁸ As he was about to publish the larger work that includes both 'Purity of Heart' and 'The Gospel of Sufferings,' Kierkegaard wrote the following:

Despite everything people ought to have learned about my maieutic carefulness, by proceeding slowly and continually letting it seem as if I knew nothing more, not the next thing — now on the occasion of my new upbuilding discourses they will probably bawl out that I do not know what comes next, that I know nothing about sociality. The fools! Yet on the other hand I owe it to myself to confess before God that in a certain sense there is some truth in it, only not as people understand it — namely, that continually when I have first presented one aspect clearly and sharply, then the other affirms itself even more strongly. Now I have my theme of the next book. It will be called: Works of Love⁹

Works of Love is indeed about sociality, about intersubjectivity in terms of the human Other. Now that the piety of hidden inwardness has been presented 'clearly and sharply,' the outward turn to the neighbour "affirms itself even more strongly." But for the Christian ethics Kierkegaard wants to articulate, God is always the middle term between me and my neighbour, and it is only in the Second Series that we get to specific works of love. The first chapter of the First Se-

ries affirms the linkage between hidden inwardness and the works of love under the rubric, "Love's Hidden Life and Its Recognizability by Its Fruits." Kierkegaard had already called his reflections "*Christian deliberations*, therefore not about *love* but about *works of love*" (3/7). But at this point Kierkegaard seems to remember the prayer of the Preface: "How could one speak properly about love if you were forgotten, you God of love, source of all love in heaven and on earth; you who spared nothing but in love gave everything; you who are love, so that one who loves is what he is only by being in you!"(3/8)¹⁰ So instead of hurrying on to describe the works of love as its visible fruit, he concludes the First Series with seven essays on the (would be) lover's God relation, in particular on the fact that the starting point of love is the command of God. Otherwise love is really only disguised self-love. In the First Series the works of love appear only formaliter as what is required by the divine law or what fulfills it. "Love is a passion of the emotions, but in this emotion a person even before he relates to the object of love, should first relate to God and thereby learn the requirement, that love is the fulfilling of the Law ... Each one individually, before he relates in love to the beloved, the friend, the loved ones, the contemporaries, must first relate to God and to God's requirement" (112/109). This passage, incidentally, makes clear that erotic love and friendship are not to be abolished by commanded, neighbour love, but rather dethroned and transformed. See 44-47/47-50, 50/53, 58/60, 112/109).¹¹

Perhaps the most memorable motif from the First Series is the contrast between commanded love and celebrated love. The former is neighbour love — "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" — an imperative that reverberates through the Christian New Testament but has its origin in the Jewish covenant with Yahweh (Lev. 19:18). Celebrated love is an ellipse with two foci, erotic love and friendship. Kierkegaard also calls these forms of love preferential and spontaneous in the



process of trying to show that they are really disguised self-love.

In the first instance this stems from their origin (as celebrated by the poet and not yet transformed by the divine command), not in the God relationship, but in the drives and inclinations of the lover (44-56/47-58). The beloved or friend is chosen, preferred above the other others, because she is attractive to the drives and inclinations of the one whose love the poet will celebrate. She satisfies some need or desire of the lover, whose love can be called spontaneous because this need or desire is natural and not the product of moral discipline and transformation. As a means of self-gratification, the lover's love is self-love.

Of course sex is not the issue here. This should be clear from two facts: 1) the same analysis is given to non-sexual friendship as to erotic love, and 2), as already noted, sexual love is not to be abolished but only dethroned by neighbour love. But Kierkegaard finds it necessary to be fully explicit. He does not wish his critique of drive based love to perpetuate a certain misunderstanding of Christianity. On this view Christianity showed, through its opposition of flesh to spirit, that it "hated erotic love as the sensuous." By contrast, Kierkegaard insists that Christianity has quite different fish to fry "and it has been no more scandalized by a drive human beings have indeed not given to themselves than it has wanted to forbid people to eat and drink. By the sensuous, the flesh, Christianity understands selfishness ... Christianity has misgivings about erotic love and friendship simply because preferential love in passion or passionate preference is actually another form of self-love" (52-53/54-55).¹²

There is an important agreement with Kant here. The inclinations and interests that make up our 'pathological' nature are forms of self-love and must be subordinated to a duty that cannot be derived from them.¹³ Practical reason is presented as the opponent not of the sensuous as such but of self-love. Yet in a Kierkegaardian perspective, Kantian ethics itself, by virtue of its commit-

ment to autonomy, is a disguised form of self-love. For it remains the case that I am the ground of my relation to the Other. In the case of celebrated love, I am the ground qua drives and inclinations. In the case of commanded love, construed in the light of the Kantian imperative which is categorical just by virtue of its victory over the pathological, I am the ground qua reason.

Kierkegaard's analysis brings to light an ambiguity in Kant's argument against allowing my drives and inclinations to be the basis of my relation to the Other. On the one hand, to do so is to elevate self-love to a first principle, since whom I relate to will be determined by what I find attractive, and how I relate will be governed by what I find gratifying.¹⁴ On the other hand, to let my drives drive my relation to the other is to fail to protect my sovereignty as an agent. For Kant finds heteronomy in allowing the will to be determined by anything but pure practical reason. In saying this he reinscribes the Platonic / Cartesian dualism according to which

I am my soul but
I am not my body
in a very familiar form
I am my reason but
I am not my passions, my drives
and inclinations.

Now things begin to look different. Previously, the attempt to put the pathological in its place came across as a noble resistance to self-love. Now it turns out to be but the flip-side of a dual attempt to keep the self unconditionally in charge. For heteronomy is to be found not only in allowing the will to be determined by anything beneath it, the pathological, but also by anything above it, including God. This is why, as we saw at the outset, "morality does not need religion at all" and the mature moral agent can dispense with "the idea of another Being over him."¹⁵

Strictly speaking, no Other has a claim on me, and this for two reasons. Returning to the text just cited, we find that if I have obligations it is only because I am "man as a free agent who, just



because he is free, *binds himself* through his reason to unconditioned laws” (emphasis added). In the first place, I am not bound to either God or my neighbour but to laws of which I am the ground or author. Secondly, I am bound only because I bind myself. My freedom to gratify my desires has been compromised. But my freedom to be the sole ground of my relation to Others without having anyone over me has been maintained. I am the middle term of my relation to the Other. That relation may be benevolent, but it is a benevolent despotism. For in relation to the Other I maintain full sovereignty.

Three times in *Works of Love* Kierkegaard refers to “the saying of the venerable fathers: ‘that the virtues of paganism are glittering vices’” (53/56, 196/186, 269/256).¹⁶ Though Kant is never the immediate target, this would clearly have to be the verdict of *Works of Love* on Kantian virtues. As the heroic subordination of inclination to duty, of the passionate preferences of erotic love and friendship to the categorical imperative that renders even those I have no reason to prefer as ends in themselves, these virtues are splendid indeed. But as the self-assertion of the absolute autonomy of the self left totally in charge of its relations to all Others — its passions beneath it, its neighbour beside it, and its God (no longer in any essential way) above it — these virtues are seen as vices. From the standpoint of the ‘royal’ law, You shall love your neighbour as yourself,¹⁷ they look like forms of self-love (I am my reason and my reason is the absolute to which all else is relative).

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Perhaps the most powerful contemporary attempt to preserve Kant’s Enlightenment vision of the moral life, including its autonomy, is that of Jürgen Habermas.¹⁸ And perhaps its power derives largely from the point at which it parts company with Kant most decisively. In place of a monological conception of reason present to itself in the inwardness of consciousness,¹⁹ Habermas

opts for a dialogical conception of reason as the public conversation that seeks consensus about disputed validity claims by means of argument (as distinct from propaganda, the manipulative technologies of hidden persuaders).

The dialogical conception of reason has two basic presuppositions, the linguistic turn and the sociological turn.²⁰ In the first place, a conversational conception of reason presupposes a philosophy of language as communication, and a normative one, at that. Habermas distinguishes three kinds of speech act: indicative/assertoric acts whose task it is to state facts, imperative/appellative acts whose task is to express norms or issue commands, and expressive acts whose task is to express feelings or personal evaluations. All three are subject to norms in that all can fail to be rational; they are subject to critique in terms, respectively, of the truth of their factual claims, the legitimacy of their normative claims, and the sincerity of their emotional expressions (TCA II 6, 26, 61, 72, 75).²¹

Imperative/appellative discourse is like expressive discourse in that it is evaluative; but it is like indicative/assertoric discourse in that normative rightness is as objective as propositional truth. Its validity is universal (TCA II 72, 91-92). That, at any rate is the task and the goal of imperative/appellative discourse. It can be called normative discourse in a special sense, for while both its sisters occur subject to norms derived from their respective tasks, its task, unlike theirs, is to establish norms (both legal and moral in the modern world) by which behaviour is to be governed. It is this middle mode of speech, which Habermas takes to be uniquely human (TCA II 61, 71), that is central to his account of the relation of religion to morality.

In the second place, since Habermas agrees with Wittgenstein that language games are forms of life, his dialogical conception of reason presupposes a theory of society and its evolution. It is in the context of such an account, developed in conversation with Mead and Durkheim, that we



find Habermas' version of the claim that "morality does not need religion at all." Not surprisingly it appears under the rubric "the linguistification of the sacred." It will involve both the linguistic and the sociological components of his dialogical conception of reason.

At the outset we must notice that the Habermasian self is first and foremost the performer of speech acts. As such, this self is not in the first instance present to itself in the private inner sanctum of consciousness but present to others in the public square of conversation. It is a decentred, secondary self that finds itself unable to arrive on the scene prior to society and its norms. The dawn of consciousness is the realization of being already obligated. (TCA II 43, 48). Unlike the Kantian self, it does not bind itself to principles grounded in its own insight; like the Kierkegaardian (and Levinasian)²² self, it finds itself already bound through the presence of an Other that does not await its consent.

In spite of this agreement with Kierkegaard, Habermas ends up agreeing with Kant, as already noted, that "morality does not need religion at all." This means simply that the linguistification of the sacred signifies a very different account of the Other to and by whom we find ourselves already obligated from Kierkegaard's account. Most immediately the norms will always be those into which we are socialized, the positive, empirically observable norms prevailing in the community or communities to which we belong. But, except in the fantasies of legal positivists, these norms never rest their validity on their happening to be in force; they always make at least implicit reference to some transcendent or transcendental source of their validity. And it is precisely on the difference between the transcendent and the (quasi)transcendental as sources of legitimation that the difference between Habermas and Kierkegaard will come to light.

Habermas' account of the evolution of society is a theory of secularization both like and unlike such theories in Comte, Nietzsche, and Weber.

The secularization process is a rationalization process. In other words, Habermas is an Enlightenment thinker who interprets social evolution as progress, defined in terms of increasing rationality.²³ (He may not frequently use the term 'progress', but his theory loses most of its interest if 'rationalization' means only movement to something different but not superior to what is pre-modern.)

The *terminus a quo* is 'archaic' society whose norms are derived from the sacred. The language in which the social lifeworld is constructed and maintained is that of religious symbols, or, as he likes to call them, 'paleosymbols', the language of myth (TCA II 52-53, 61, 72). The reproduction of this normative order takes place in ritual (TCA II 60). In a society that fully corresponds to the ideal type 'archaic', all action is a form of ritual. "The religious ... is evidently the archaic core of norm consciousness" and prior to the linguistification of the sacred, provides "the sacred roots of the moral authority of social norms" (TCA II 46-47).²⁴

In such a society all crime or wrongdoing is sacrilege, and punishment takes on a correspondingly ritual significance of purification and/or expiation (TCA II 50, 78, 87). But the correlation of crime and punishment must not be understood as if the validity of the norms derived from the sanctions by which they are enforced. "The violation of a sacred norm counts as a crime not because sanctions are placed upon it; rather, it brings sanctions because norms are at first an apparatus for protecting sacred objects or regions" (TCA II 78; cf 48). The importance of this point is Habermas' desire to link religion to practical reason rather than to instrumental-technical reason.²⁵ As with Kant, right and wrong cannot be reduced to questions of utility. If normative validity were derived from sanctions rather than the other way around, both society and the individual would be reduced to calculative, instrumental thinking. Society would promulgate and enforce its norms, not because they express the



right and the good but because they are the means for avoiding (or mitigating) the war of all against all. The criteria by which they would be judged would be efficiency in maintaining order rather than, say, justice. As a Kantian and a Marxist, Habermas sides with Durkheim, whom he quotes as saying, “The term ‘moral authority’ is opposed to material authority or physical supremacy” (TCA II 48).

Were this not so, the moral life of the individual would also be but a matter of expediency. Its form would be the hypothetical imperative, If you don’t want to be punished, don’t do X. Of course, this has as its correlate, If you’re sure you can get away with it, there’s no reason not to do it.

For Habermas modernization means rationalization, which in turn, means secularization. For him as for Descartes and Locke, reason defines itself in large part through its refusal to allow tradition to be self-validating. But this is primarily the case in relation to the religious traditions of archaic society in which “the authority of the sacred” constitutes a “rationally impenetrable” given (TCA II 145). The task of modernity is to replace the sacred with dialogical reason as the ground of society’s norms. “Norm guided interaction changes its structure to the degree that functions of cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization pass from the domain of the sacred over to that of everyday communicative practice” (TCA II 91). This means that politics will be the ritual of the modern world (TCA II 82), but to see just what this means we need to see just what Habermas means by the linguistification of the sacred.

First, in keeping with the dialogical conception of the self as present to others in speech rather than present to itself in consciousness, Habermas has a linguistic conception of rationality. It is to be explained “in terms of the conditions for a communicatively achieved, reasonable consensus ... The rationality potential in action oriented to mutual understanding can be released and translated into the rationalization of the life-

worlds of social groups to the extent that language fulfills functions of reaching understanding, coordinating actions, and socializing individuals” (TCA II 86).

Two objections immediately arise. First, not just any old use of language to reach understanding, coordinate actions, and socialize individuals will count. After all, in the archaic world the language of ‘paleosymbols’ played precisely this role. Second, it seems circular to define rationality in terms of a ‘reasonable consensus.’

In reply to the first objection, Habermas writes, “Linguistic communication that aims at mutual understanding — and not merely at reciprocal influence — satisfies the *presuppositions* for rational utterances or for the rationality of speaking and acting subjects” (TCA II 86). In other words, the conversation must understand itself not simply as the site of bargaining in terms of previously established norms, but as the site where the norms are established. In reply to the second objection, Habermas tells us that by a rational consensus he means one reached by an “ideal communication community.”

In judging a morally relevant conflict of action, we have to consider what general interest all those involved would agree upon if they were to adopt the moral standpoint of impartiality taking into account all the interests affected ... What was intended by the categorical imperative can be made good by projecting a will-formation under the idealized conditions of universal discourse. Subjects capable of moral judgment cannot test each for himself alone whether an established or recommended norm is in the general interest and ought to have social force; this can only be done in common with everyone else involved. (TCA II 94-95).²⁶

It is now possible to define the linguistification of the sacred in terms of the new form and content moral authority assumes in the modern world. The form is conversation, or, as Habermas prefers, communicative action. The linguistification



of the sacred occurs when “the socially integrative and expressive functions that were at first fulfilled by ritual practice pass over to communicative action” (TCA II 77). This is a full fledged *Aufhebung* of the sacred by secular conversation. The “authority of the holy is gradually *replaced* [my emphasis] by the authority of [a rationally] achieved consensus.” This involves the “disenchantment and disempowering of the domain of the sacred” in which the “aura of rapture and terror that emanates from the sacred, the *spell-binding* power of the holy, is sublimated into the *binding/bonding* force of criticizable validity claims and at the same time turned into an everyday occurrence” (TCA II 77). In the discourse ethics that replaces the authority of the sacred, “we find *dissolved* [my emphasis] the archaic core of the normative, we see developed the rational meaning of normative validity” (TCA II 92). Insofar as sacred authorization does not altogether disappear, it becomes entirely dependent (as in Kant) on rational authorization (TCA II 89). The linguistification of the sacred means morality within the limits of reason alone, when reason is defined as a certain kind of conversation.

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If conversation replaces revelation as the new form of moral authority,²⁷ the general will replaces the divine will as its content (TCA II 81-82, 94). We can see why Kierkegaard is eager to return to the fray, but we must look closely to see just where he chooses to do battle.

First, in emphasizing that archaic sanctions are not the ground of archaic validity but derive therefrom, Habermas, as we have seen, stresses the non-instrumental, non-hypothetical character of sacred norms. It is utterly crucial to him that this feature of archaic society not be lost, that the dialogical reason that dissolves and replaces the authority of the sacred not be instrumental, calculative reason. It must be a reason that obligates and obligates categorically. Here, as before, legitimacy cannot be a function of the power to en-

force. Nor can it derive from contract, for contractual agreements are binding only to the degree that some pre-contractual norm is operative, and, in any case, contractual agreements are expressions of instrumental rather than practical reason. The linguistification of the sacred claims for dialogical reason the same power Kant claimed for monological reason, the power to generate unconditional obligation (TCA II 79-82).

Although discourse ethics is a kind of proceduralism, it does not have the problems of Kantian formalism regarding content. For its principle is not the absence of self-contradiction but the presence of (rationally achieved) agreement. Since the agreement will be about some previously or potentially disputed issue in human life, it will always have content. So Hegel’s critique of Kant is neutralized.²⁸

But Kierkegaard might argue that discourse ethics lacks the form rather than the content of the ethical. There are places where Kierkegaard seems to suggest that only the divine command has the force of law, that categorical obligation requires divine authority (96-97/94-96, 112/111). But this is in a context where the alternatives to divinely commanded love are humanly celebrated erotic love and friendship. Habermas might reply that he is trying to develop a secular theory of something like commanded love.²⁹ And against that project, available to Kierkegaard in its Kantian form, we find no argument in *Works of Love*.

A second issue arises if we concede this power at the theoretical level, at least for the sake of argument, and ask a practical, empirical question. Does this secularized reason have “the power to hold together a secularized society” (TCA II 92), to sustain a moral order in the real world by generating and sustaining a lifeworld whose worldviews, institutions, and socialization practices are able to bridge the gap between validity and efficacy.

Habermas acknowledges the “pressing question as to the limits of the integrative capacity of action oriented to reaching understanding, the



limits of the empirical efficacy of rational motives” (TCA II 111). His answer is optimistic. “The more communicative action takes over from religion the burdens of social integration, the more the ideal of an unlimited and undistorted communication community gains empirical influence in the real communication community” (TCA II 96). In other words, the more completely the process of secularization is carried out, the greater the efficacy of the linguistified replacement of the sacred.

I wonder if Habermas is living in the same world we live in. I should think it would be easier to defend the opposite thesis: the more completely secularized society becomes, the more normative discourse (in the strong sense of the term) is crowded out by indicative/assertoric and expressive discourse and, correspondingly, the more reason is reduced to the instrumental, strategic tasks appropriate to a world increasingly reduced to facts and desires.³⁰

If we turned to *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, we might construe Climacus’ claim that the System has no ethics as the claim that whatever power secular modern reason has to hold society together is void of moral content. For he treats the System as at once modernity’s theory of reason and the ideological legitimation of its practices. The claim that the speculative is a branch of the aesthetic is analogous to Frankfurt school anxieties about the dominance of instrumental reason in the modern world. But in *Works of Love* we find no such general argument. It is merely erotic love and friendship, as celebrated by the (romantic) poet, that are presented as self-love unpurified by obligation.

For the sake of argument, at least, the Kierkegaard of *Works of Love* might concede to Habermas that dialogical reason has the power both to generate valid, categorical obligations and to motivate their efficacy in an increasingly secular world.³¹ The point of such a concession would be to locate more precisely his primary objection. In Habermas’ theory the relation be-

tween rational conversation (form) and the general will (content) is not contingent. Just as for Peirce the true and the real are defined in terms of the ultimate consensus of investigators, so for Habermas the right as the general will simply is the consensus that results from rational conversation.³² It is this equation by definition that excludes the sacred from playing any essential role.

In other words, Habermas reaffirms the ideal of moral autonomy in the form of a conversation with only human participants. Sounding very much like Kant, he notes that moral action arises not from acquiescence to superior force but from respect for an authority that “while it surpasses us, is within us,” which means that “moral constraint has the character of a self-overcoming” (TCA II 48).³³ The move from the monadic, atomic self to the conversational, dialogical self preserves this immanence, while giving it new expression. Thus Habermas appropriates for his own project the following statement from Mead: “I think all of us feel that one must be ready to recognize the interests of others even when they run counter to our own, but that the person who does that does not really sacrifice himself, but becomes a larger self” (TCA II 94). We can express the same point by saying,

I am the general will more deeply than
I am my particular will.

Consequently, when I subordinate the latter to the former I preserve the moral autonomy to be found in the Kantian subordination of inclination to duty. Qua rational, which now means qua member of the conversational We, I am the source of the moral authority to which I submit. Just as the theory of the general will removes the authority of the King at the political level, so it removes the authority of God at the moral level.

God at the guillotine. That is how Kierkegaard sees it, and he might almost have had Habermas in mind when he says that secular modernity “explains that all this about a God-relation is actually a delusion, a retardation ... Just as nowa-



days attempts are made in so many ways to emancipate people from all bonds, also beneficial ones, so also attempts are made to emancipate the emotional relationships between people from the bond that binds one to God and binds one in everything, in every expression of life ... there is the desire to teach people the freedom that is 'without God in the world.'³⁴ The abominable era of bond service is past, and so there is the aim of going further — by means of the abomination of abolishing the person's bond service in relation to God, to whom every human being, not by birth but by creation from nothing, belongs as a bond servant ... this bond service is found to be a burdensome encumbrance and therefore there is a more or less open intent to depose God in order to install human beings — in the rights of humanity? No, that is not needed; God has already done that — in the rights of God". (114-15/111-12).

One of the rights of God is the right to be worshipped. Kierkegaard portrays modernity as a kind of jealousy in this regard. In erotic love, the beloved wants to be the highest for the lover, wants to be worshipped (122/118, 125/120-21). The Habermasian correlate to this is the desire of the We to be the highest for each I that belongs to it, so that, as Hegel puts it, religion becomes philosophy when it discovers that consciousness of God is really the (collective) self-consciousness of the believing soul, now named Spirit.

A closely related way in which modernity "wants to teach one to forget God" (127/123) concerns not the right to be worshipped but the right to be the author of the moral law. "God and the world [including both Kant and Habermas] agree in this, that love is the fulfilling of the Law; the difference is that the world understands the Law as something it thinks up by itself" (128/123).³⁵

When dialogical reason becomes the linguistification of the sacred it becomes "the alliance that excludes God" and just for this reason is "an alliance in self-love" (119/115-16), the self-love that usurps for the human conversation the pre-

rogatives of divine speech. As the demand for autonomy, modernity is "a mutiny against God ... because then it ultimately is people who determine the Law's requirement instead of God. Therefore the one who forgets this not only becomes personally guilty of rebellion against God but also contributes his share to the mutiny's gaining the upper hand". (117/113-14). In other words, any virtues that show up at this scene will be glittering vices.

Kierkegaard proceeds in something of the satirical spirit of Climacus. "Or should the determination of what is the Law's requirement perhaps be an agreement among ... all people, to which the individual then has to submit? Splendid — that is, if it is possible to find a place and fix a date for this assembling ... and if it is possible, something that is equally impossible, for all of them to agree on one thing!" (115/112). Echoing Climacus' gleeful question about when the System will be finished, Kierkegaard suggests that while awaiting the ideal consensus (that Habermas himself treats as counterfactual so as to avoid the Hegelian temptation of identifying any given *Sittlichkeit* with moral truth)³⁶ "the Law's requirement is a false alarm" (116/112-13).

These taunts have considerably less force against Habermas, who doesn't claim completion and finality for our moral knowings and practices, than against Hegel, who does. But regardless of their force, it would be a mistake to stage the debate between Kierkegaard and Habermas at this site; for even if he is willing to have a little fun raising these questions, it is clear that the fundamental issue is the claim that autonomy, whether it can solve these problems or not, is a form of self-love that deserves to be called mutiny and rebellion.

This account of modernity's desire for moral autonomy in its Habermasian form is clearly an argument in the Rortian sense of a redescription to make something look bad.³⁷ Is it a critique in any stronger sense?

In one important sense it is not because it



does not want to be. In *Works of Love*, as in other writings of Kierkegaard, both pseudonymous and nonpseudonymous, there is a continuous, explicit contrast between two points of view or two ways of understanding. One is described as human, worldly, pagan, the other as Christian or divine. For at least two reasons, both of which can easily be illustrated from *Works of Love*, this is not the claim to sectarian superiority that it might appear to be. First, Socrates is frequently invoked as belonging to the second point of view. Second, the point of the contrast is very often to show that Christendom is one of the dominant forms of paganism in the modern world.

In connection with the second point, the motto of *Philosophical Fragments*, “Better well hanged than ill wed”, is a necessary guide. The point is not to prove the superiority of the second point of view over the first from some allegedly neutral (non)perspective. It is rather to insist on the non-negotiable difference between the two, to portray authentic Christianity and certain dominant features of modernity in an either/or relation, and to call Christendom to repentance from its compromises with paganism.³⁸

Still, there are several arguments against Habermas at least implicit in *Works of Love*. The first recapitulates the argument of the first chapters of *Philosophical Fragments*. It goes like this. Discourse ethics and the theory of communicative action in which it is embedded show how different secularized modernity is from archaic society. But they do not show that it is better, only that they are different. Over against the myths of the archaic world, Habermas places the Enlightenment myth of progress; over against premodern faith in God, he places faith in Reason. But calling one’s own standpoint Reason is, in the Enlightenment context, more a form of self-congratulation than an argument. And we have learned from sources very different from Kierkegaard that Reason, or what calls itself by that name, can consist in forms of domination and exclusion derived from a will to power that is not always

beautiful.³⁹ Even if Habermas can show that there is something global and not just Western about the secularization/rationalization process we call modernity, and even if he can show that his dialogical reconstruction of it is superior to its earlier, monological modes, there remains the question whether it is not mutiny and rebellion against legitimate authority.

Two further arguments concern the adequacy of Habermas’ identification of the religious with the archaic. Both involve the difference between the archaic, Durkheimian world of myth and ritual that seems to be the only form of religion with which Habermas is familiar, and the pre-modern but not archaic biblical traditions to which Kierkegaard appeals. Like his Frankfurt predecessors, Habermas is deeply concerned to keep critique alive in a world where its possibility has been greatly reduced by the triumph of instrumental reason. While he rightly recognizes the absence of critique in the archaic world, he fails to notice the role of prophetic critique in the biblical traditions, the appeal to the sacred traditions not to legitimize but to challenge current understandings and practices. Prophetic critique is not so much a theme of Kierkegaard’s writings as their inner spirit. It is something he performs more than he discusses. Whether the pathologies of modernity are better cured by the linguistification of the sacred than by a return to biblical faith is a topic worthy of discussion. But the superiority of ‘modern’, ‘rational’ critique to ‘premodern’, ‘prophetic’ critique can hardly be established by a discourse that doesn’t even recognize the existence of the latter.

Another difference between archaic and biblical religion⁴⁰ also involves the nature of the sacred. The God of the Bible is essentially personal in a way most relevant to Habermasian theory. “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son” (Hebrews 1:1-2). The biblical God is a performer of speech acts. The covenantal God makes prom-



ises and issues commands, such as the one that especially concerns Kierkegaard in *Works of Love*, You shall love your neighbour as yourself. But it would be very undemocratic to exclude a speaking God from the ideal speech community that defines the right and the good. On the other hand, God cannot be just another member of the speech community. The moment God enters the scene, moral democracy is replaced by moral monarchy. (Of course, it does not follow that any human being should be a king rather than a president or prime minister.)

To acknowledge God's reality would require a radical revision of Habermas' theory, but he has no inclination to argue for God's unreality. So he solves this problem by not raising it. Of course, he has the same right to presuppose the nonexistence of God that Kierkegaard has to presuppose God's pressing reality. As the debate with Gadamer made clear, the point of the conversational account of reason is not to deny the hermeneutical, perspectival point of departure for human understanding but to look for a path beyond the war of all (ideas) against all toward consensus. Still, Kierkegaard's description of Habermas' project as mutinous rebellion is a reminder that Habermas, too, belongs to a community or tradition of faith, or, if you prefer, of unbelief. As Habermas and Gadamer agree, the communities of faith and of unbelief should seek consensus through conversation. It is hardly necessary to emphasize the difficulty of that task. What needs to be noticed here is that if Habermas should try to build his unbelief into his theory of conversation, as he seems to do with the linguistification of the sacred, that would be an a priori and unilateral declaration of victory. It would say to the believing soul, in effect, Yes, we can talk. But first you must check your faith at the door by agreeing that we, and not God, are the highest criterion of the 'True and the Right'. Such a gesture would tend to confirm postmodern suspicions about 'Reason' as exclusionary power.

These objections do not demolish Habermas.

But they do indicate how much work lies ahead if he is to offer Kierkegaard anything like a compelling case to abandon his pre-and-postmodern suspicions of modernity's aspirations for moral autonomy.

As for Kierkegaard, he is less optimistic. He thinks that one who acknowledges "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" as a divine command is called to a double dose of 'self-denial', 'self-control', and 'self-sacrifice' — first in relation to the neighbour, whose claim on me is unaccompanied by anything to gratify my drives and inclinations, and second in relation to all the third parties among whom my neighbour and I find ourselves. I will find myself "forsaken by language and people's understanding" (131/126). It is as if Kierkegaard has read Habermas and recognized the linguistification of the sacred as the temptation to which every Established Order has already succumbed, as the self-love by which every society treats its own conversation, however democratic or undemocratic, as the final word on the True and the Right. In the tradition of the Hebrew prophets, he senses that the divine command gets through to us, if ever it does, only by breaking through the defences with which society has sought to protect itself and its members from its awesome and infinite demand. The mutiny has always already occurred.

That, I take it, is the point of the teleological suspension of the ethical in *Fear and Trembling*. It is because Abraham is "forsaken by language and people's understanding" that he cannot explain to Sarah and to Isaac what he is doing. No doubt the command to love one's neighbour is easier to swallow than the command to sacrifice one's son. But the logic is the same. In one case a father loves a son; in the other a lover loves a beloved. But in both cases the lover has a higher allegiance. Either the mere fact that this is the case, or the action called for in particular circumstances, can make the lover's love look like hate to the beloved. This is why Silentio finds it necessary to quote one of Jesus' hardest sayings as a



key to the Abraham story. “If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.”⁴¹ And it is why Kierkegaard introduces the idea of the true lover being “forsaken by

language and people’s understanding” by saying, “But the inwardness of Christian love is to be willing, as reward for its love, to be hated by the beloved ... This shows that this inwardness is an unalloyed God-relationship” (131/126).

No wonder autonomy looks so attractive!⁴²

Notes

1. KANT, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), p. 3. Is the gendered language here innocent?
2. *Religion*, p. 142.
3. These first two qualifications are found in *Religion*, p. 142n.
4. *Religion*, p. 3.
5. I have emphasized this motif in *Becoming a Self: A Reading of Kierkegaard’s Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. West Lafayette, Purdue University Press, 1996. See, for example, p. 107 and p. 112 n. 23.
6. This is the familiar title of Part One of *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* (henceforth UDVS), trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993. Its actual title is ‘An Occasional Discourse.’
7. This essay is Part Three of UDVS.
8. For the first, see my *Kierkegaard’s Critique of Reason and Society*. University Park, Penn State University Press, 1991, pp. 47-48. For the second, see *Becoming a Self*, p. 197.
9. Quoted in the Supplement to *Works of Love*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1995, p. 409. Also found in *Soren Kierkegaard’s Papirer*, I-XIII, ed. P. A. Heiberg, *et al.* (2nd. ed., Copenhagen, Gyldendal, 1909-70, VIII A 4, and in *Soren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers*, I-VII, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, assisted by Gregor Malantschuk. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1967-78, V 5972.
10. References to *Works of Love* will be given in the text, first to the Hong translation and then to volume IX of *Soren Kierkegaard’s samlede Vaerker*, I-XIV, ed. A. B. Drachmann, *et al.* (1st ed., Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1901-1906). Similar references to other works are also to the first Danish edition.
11. This gesture, which echoes the Hegelian *Aufhebung*, goes back to *Either/Or*. See *Becoming a Self*, pp. 25-28. Compare the formula “each one individually . . . must first relate” with *Two Ages*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1978, 62-63/V 59.
12. Here Kierkegaard restages a conversation from *Either/Or*. The aesthete presents Christianity as excluding the sensuous (the erotic) in the name of spirit, while Judge William insists that the flesh which opposes the spirit is “not the sensuous-it is the selfish.” See *Either/Or*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1987, I 61/I 44 and II 49/II 46. Cf. II 21, 60-61, 91/II 20, 55-56, 83-84.
13. See, for instance, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis White Beck. Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1959, pp. 13, 16, 39-40, and 50; *Akademieausgabe*, IV, 397, 399, 422, 432.
14. It is important to let these terms have their sexual meaning, since erotic love is at issue, and at the same time, since friendship is also at issue, to recognize the sexual meanings as metaphors for non-sexual relations.
15. Starting from the human face rather than the command of God, Levinas develops an ethics as fundamentally opposed to Kantian autonomy as Kierkegaard’s. Not surprisingly, he uses the theological language of transcendence and revelation in describing the Other’s claim on me. But even if the Other is the widow, the orphan, or the stranger, whose nakedness signifies the absence of anything to appeal to my drives and inclinations, the Other claims me from on high. “To recognize the Other is to give. But it is to give to the master, to the lord, to him whom one approaches as ‘You’ in a dimension of height.” *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1969, p. 75. The translator distinguishes this ‘you’ of majesty from the ‘thou’ of



intimacy.

16. The fathers are Lactantius and Augustine. See *Works of Love*, p. 502. n.73. The saying is a favorite of Kierkegaard's. See *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1985, 53/IV 219; *Two Ages*, 86/VIII 80; and *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1980, 46/XI 158 and 82/XI 193. It can be read as a commentary on his Shakespearean motto for *Fragments*, "Better well hanged than ill wed."

17. Kierkegaard's repeated designation of the commandment as the royal law may be taken, in the political turmoil of post-revolutionary modernity, for a claim something like this — Whether Christianity is wed to monarchy as the proper form of government can be debated; but the Christian God, in relation to every individual and every social order, is an absolute monarch. That cannot be debated. See *Practice in Christianity*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991, 88/XII 84.

18. The short version of Habermasian ethics, its *Grundlegung*, so to speak, is found in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen. Cambridge, MIT Press, 1990. For discussion see *The Communicative Ethics Controversy*, ed. Seyla Benhabib and Fred Dallmayr. Cambridge, MIT Press, 1990.

19. This is a very different inwardness from that of the Kierkegaard texts, in which the self finds itself *coram deo*.

20. The best expression of Habermasian ethics in the context of the philosophies of language and of society it presupposes is *The Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. Thomas Mc Carthy. Boston, Beacon Press, 1984 (vol. I) and 1987 (vol. II). Henceforth TCA.

21. These three dimensions of discourse correspond, respectively, to culture, society, and person or, put a bit differently, to the dimensions of the lifeworld that involve, respectively, reaching understanding through shared worldviews, coordinating actions through legal and moral institutions, and socializing the individual so that she becomes an individual. Habermas sees socialization and individuation as two sides of the same coin. See TCA II 86-88, 107.

22. See note 15 above.

23. Going back to his inaugural lecture in Frankfurt in 1965, Habermas emphasized that reason is not just instrumental reason, but practical and emancipatory reason as well, that is, reason concerned with the establishment and critique of practical norms and social institutions with a moral and not merely technical purpose. As a second generation member of the Frankfurt school (and thus a certain kind of Marxist), his conception of increasing rationality is not primarily oriented toward science and technology but "toward a rational society." This latter phrase is the title of an English translation of six essays from the late sixties, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro. Boston, Beacon Press, 1970. For the inaugural address see the appendix to the work in which he first worked out its program, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro. Boston, Beacon Press, 1971.

24. These phrases, "the archaic core of norm consciousness" and "the sacred roots of ... moral authority" evoke Derrida's important essay, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" (the inner quotation marks referring to Montaigne) in which he says, no doubt with Habermas in mind, "Nothing seems to me less outdated than the classical emancipatory ideal." See *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, and David Gray Carlson (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 28. Derrida distinguishes law, which is always deconstructible, from justice, which is not. This non-empirical, undeconstructible justice seems 1) to be Derrida's secular successor to "the mystical [sacred] foundation of authority" and 2), since it transcends linguistic formulation in principle, to be quite different from what Habermas has in mind. It would take a careful examination to determine whether such an appearance is misleading.

25. See note 23 above.

26. Habermas distinguishes his position from Rawls' as follows: "the projection of an ideal communication community serves as a guiding threat for *setting up* discourses that have to be carried through *in fact* and cannot be replaced by monological mock dialogue" (TCA II 95). In *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, Habermas expresses this reformulation of Kant's universalization and Rousseau's general will in principles U (universalization) and D (discourse). "(U) All affected accept the consequences and the side effects [the agreement's] observation can be anticipated to have for the satisfaction of *everyone's* interest (and these consequences are preferred to those known alternative possibilities for regulation ... (D) Only those norms can claim to be valid that meet (or could



meet) with the approval of all affected in their capacity *as participants in a practical discourse.*" (pp. 65-66).

27. It might not be as easy as most assume it is to specify just where Habermas and Rorty part company.
28. See the final chapter of *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*.
29. How important is it that it never occurs to Habermas to speak of love?
30. This is essentially the portrait of modernity painted by Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue*. Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1981.
31. By reading *Works of Love* in the light of the book on Adler (*On Authority and Revelation*), Steve Evans argues that Kierkegaard would not be at all eager to make the first concession. See C.S. EVANS, 'Authority and Transcendence in *Works of Love*' in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 1998, p. 23-40.
32. "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" in *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1960, V, 268. In both cases the result is that any present validity claims are tentative and at best penultimate. It would also seem, at least in Habermas' case, that rationality comes in degrees.
33. The first of the two quoted phrases is itself quoted from Durkheim.
34. Ephesians 2:12. The antithesis Kierkegaard sees between Christian faith and modernity's yen for autonomy is nicely focused here. What modernity sees as emancipation, Christianity sees as the condition from which people need to be rescued.
35. Kierkegaard writes, "Kant was of the opinion that man is his own law (autonomy)-that is, he binds himself under the law which he himself gives himself. Actually, in a profounder sense, this is how lawlessness or experimentation are established. This is not being rigorously earnest any more than Sancho Panza's self-administered blows to his own bottom were vigorous." *Soren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, I, 188. Steve Evans called my attention to this passage in his paper 'Authority and Transcendence in *Works of Love*'
36. On this point Habermas is closer to Derrida than to Hegel. See Derrida's sharp distinction between law and justice in the essay cited in note 24, above.
37. Richard RORTY, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. New York, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 7.
38. The Lutheran character of this challenge is clear once we realize that the target is not a certain medieval Catholicism but a certain modern Protestantism. On the structure of this strategy in certain pseudonymous texts, see my 'Johannes and Johannes: Kierkegaard and Difference' in *International Kierkegaard Commentary. Philosophical Fragments and Johannes Climacus*, ed. Robert L. Perkins. Macon, Mercer University Press, 1994.
39. Secular postmodernists like Nietzsche, Derrida, and Foucault come quickly to mind. Over against the Marxist tradition, to which Habermas belongs, and in agreement with Kierkegaard, they are deeply suspicious of any attempt to say this may be true of 'your' (bourgeois, monological) Reason, but 'mine' (proletarian, dialogical) is exempt.
40. This difference is the one I have tried to spell out by distinguishing mimetic from covenantal religion in *God, Guilt, and Death: An Existential Phenomenology of Religion*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1984.
41. Luke 12:26. Quoted in *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1983, p. 72.
42. This essay was supported by a grant from the Pew Evangelical Scholars Program, which I am pleased to acknowledge with gratitude.