

The ethics of conviction

Marxism, ontology and religion

John Roberts

If the ‘turn to ethics’ has shaped much recent continental philosophy, the ‘turn to religion’ has not been far behind. The reappearance of various religious categories and concepts in recent political philosophy and philosophical ethics is unmistakable. Moreover, given that much of this writing emerges from the vicinity of Marx, if not directly from Marxism itself, this turn is certainly not to be mistaken for a simply reactionary move. Indeed, the opposite might be argued: the reinscription of various religious categories out of a philosophical ethics is part of a wider cultural commitment to renew, reinvolve, repossess Marxism as a revolutionary moral tradition, a tradition in which conscience and judgement play defining roles.

This moral repossession of Marxism, however, is not as one might presume solely Hegelian in spirit. On the contrary, the ethics of the ‘other’ in its current post-modernized forms is judged to be the very dissolution of the ethical, which is the basis on which moral law is rendered weak and submissive to social-democratic norms. On this view, ethics can only be made livable by breaking with the assimilative, communal act of identification.

It is no surprise, therefore, that it is in Kant, and in particular a version of Adorno’s Kant, that the new politicized ethics has found its critical resources. In this corpus of writing (Alain Badiou, Roy Bhaskar, Antonio Negri, Slavoj Žižek) the turn to ethics as a turn to religious categories is broadly a *renunciative* move. That is, if we follow Adorno’s loose distinction between a Kantian ethics of conviction of self-responsibility (*Geisnnungsethik*) and a Hegelian (tolerant) ethics of social responsibility (*Verantwortungsethik*), in which empirical conditions of the ethical act are taken into account, this writing closes down the ethical pathway to the ‘other’ on the neo-Kantian basis of the primacy of the subject’s moral commitments.¹ Moral duty is not to be separated from the demands of self-abnegation and self-violation. Bhaskar’s views

are somewhat different to Badiou’s, Negri’s and Žižek’s on the politics of this position – which I will discuss later – but suffice it to say that all writers invoke or borrow from a secularized, Kantian, (early) Christianized tradition of the conscionable self whose judgments and will, in Kant’s sense, exist in conflict with and contradistinction to empirical experience.

To link this secularized Christian tradition to Marxism, or to a reclaimed ‘existential’ Marxism, is of course, in turn, to link this tradition directly to the foundations of Enlightenment thinking itself. The secularized Christian themes of Badiou, Negri and Žižek, in particular, resituate philosophical ethics within the secularized Christianity of German idealism. Indeed, Kant’s secularization of the paradox of Christian moral duty – one performs one’s moral duty through the abandonment of one’s duty – is the very foundation of modern European philosophy’s transfiguration of the ethical self within the Judeo-Christian tradition. In Kant there is no separation between the moral law as duty and the operations of reason. Moral law is to be found in the principle of the will separate from the ends which can be brought about by such an action. Only an act which does not serve sensuous inclination and self-interest can be an act of the will: ‘The moral worth of an action does not depend on the result expected from it.’²

Deconstruction has recently also drawn deeply from this Kantian well of the renunciative subject, allowing us to talk about deconstruction’s own ethico-religious turn, even if Derrida rejects the metaphysics of the Christian legacy of Western philosophy: that being is able to exceed its representation in signification. Derrida, Badiou, Negri, Žižek and Bhaskar may share a concern with the conscionable, responsible subject, but Derrida’s interest in the immanent risk of responsibility opening up the subject to the wager of the ‘to-come’ is narrowly focused. In fact, we might place Derrida’s ‘religion beyond religion’ within a

weak Messianic tradition; Badiou's and Žižek's 'ethics of passion' within a strong Messianic tradition, and Bhaskar's and Negri's 'respiritualized' Marxism – with their somewhat different ethical commitments – within a tradition of ecumenical libertarianism.

The recent turn to ethics as a turn to 'religious categories' of responsibility, fidelity and passion, then, follows a discernible path (the recovery of the Enlightenment link between religious categories and philosophical reflection) which diverges into two main tendencies: a deconstructive commitment to wresting philosophy's occluded religious concepts from the hubris of a secularized Western philosophy in order to stage the continuity between philosophy and non-philosophy; and the reinvigoration of the revolutionary and diremptive passion of the religious subject. In some sense these two positions overlap and invade each other's territories. But what is at stake metaphysically in the latter certainly means that the two positions should not be confused. This distinction is made clear in two writers who fit neatly into this bifurcated secularized Christianized tradition: the Derridean Hent de Vries, and the Žižekian, Kierkegaardian Timothy Bewes. Their recent interventions into the field of a politicized ethics sum up what has come to be at stake in these two secularized religious positions. For De Vries – following Claude Lefort and Carl Schmitt – the theological-political is the always permanent horizon of philosophy that post-philosophy and philosophy as an underlabourer for science consistently forget, and therefore remains a residual, if non-metaphysical, presence. As he argues in *Religion and Violence* (2002), 'Philosophy ... never really emancipated itself from the systematic limits – semantic and figural; rhetorical and imaginative – imposed upon it by religion.'³ For Bewes, in contrast, following Lucien Goldmann and Georg Lukács, the utopian spirit of historical materialism survives in the tropes of transcendentalism: 'It is precisely in its "transcendental" or "Messianic" aspects, the affirmation of an other to what exists – in the name of which what exists or what has already existed, may be "saved" – that Marxism retains its revolutionary and progressive potential.'⁴

Essentially, the return to religious categories out of the return to the ethics of conviction is a 'return to religion beyond religion' as the realm of the passionate act as the ground of responsibility. Ethics becomes a site of the passionate political judgement and decision. Consequently, for these writers on either side of the metaphysical divide, before ethics enters the conventionalized, social-democratic site where 'human rights' and 'difference' are given their pluralist char-

acter, it is the archive and space of a less 'forgiving', less accommodating set of moral proscriptions and precepts: the Christian demands of sacrifice, unconditional love, faith, grace, fidelity, the miraculous, and the (non-pious) vows of poverty. In this respect the turn to religious categories as an underused political heritage is not based on any reinvocation of the religions of the Book, or the elaboration of the 'good life', but on a refiguring of the universal drama of human responsibility. The new writing proposes neither an unreflecting faith nor a new version of onto-theology. What the post-Platonic, post-pagan tradition of the interiorized, reflective, responsible self is seen to provide is the repoliticization of ethics under the religious imperative of the transcendental (Christianized) subject.

If this means a return to an engagement with Kantian moral law, it also means, more pertinently, a return to Kant's insistence on the indivisibility of religious faith, reason, freedom and modernity. As Kant insisted in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, modernity does not render obsolete all religious categories (forms of ethical obligation); on the contrary, under the critical and self-critical imperatives of reason such categories are renewed and extended.⁵ Under the demands of reason, the ecclesiastical, sect-divided realm of religion is divested of its supernatural residues and of the dogmas of revealed experience. But if ecclesiastical belief is transformable, its institutional forms are inevitable for Kant. Hence the compromise formation of his moral law: enlightenment is the continuous purging of ecclesiastical form and dogma and the expansion of the domain of rational religion (*Vernunftreligion*). In other words, although religion is unable to provide a stable and authoritative system of beliefs, it is, nevertheless, in a position to provide intellectual and metaphorical resources for politics and ethics.

To say that this Kantian legacy of the ethics of conviction is wholly representative of the recent turn to religion without religion would be to over-egg the Christian legacy. But without Kant's 'secularization' of Christianized categories, it is hard to get a clear sense of why the critique of the ethics of responsibility (in its Levinasian forms) is such an overwhelming presence in the anti-postmodern ethics of the moment, even in Derrida's largely Levinasian writing. For if Derrida and Hent de Vries deflate transcendental judgement, nevertheless their writing – like the materialists and realists Badiou, Negri, Žižek and Bhaskar – is indebted to Kant's Christianized paradox of obligation (an ethics against ethics) and to Kant's notion of radical

evil: that the human propensity to sin is inherent to all (well-intended) action. As such, what unites this writing across political commitments is a defence of the paradox of responsibility as *a defence of the risk of freedom*. Consequently, the turn to an ethics of conviction is united around two competing views of renunciation and the radical subject: the subject who is responsible to the difficulty or impossibility of responsibility to the ‘other’ (the Derridean position), and the subject who is responsible to the subject’s infinitude (Negri’s productive void, the void that pulls the multitude into the revolutionary ‘to come’; Badiou’s fidelity to the revolutionary ‘to come’). The latter concept of the renunciative subject, then, is distinguishable via a simple question: How is a revolutionary subject or subjectivity possible in a world without presently discernible revolutionary forces? Where will its critical resources emerge? Contra Derrida and De Vries, the reinvigoration of religious categories in Negri, Žižek and Badiou (Bhaskar is a somewhat different matter, as we shall see), sees in early Christian thinking a source for the renewal and deepening of revolutionary agency and commitments.



In matters of ethics, if not of Kantian renunciation, we have been here before: the would-be melding, or even marriage, of Christian faith and Marxism has been a feature not only of ecumenical versions of both Christianity and Marxism since the early 1900s and the Second International, but, more significantly, of the critique of Marxism as a scientific positivism in the anti-Stalinist, Hegelian Marxism of the 1960s. I am thinking in particular of Alasdair MacIntyre’s *Marxism and Christianity* (1971) and Roger Garaudy’s *The Alternative Future: A Vision of Christian Marxism* (1972), two texts which use a Christianized notion of the creative radical subject in Hegel to reinsert Hegel into the main body of Marx’s writing.⁶ Also published during this period was the Protestant theologian Colin Morris’s extraordinary *Unyoung, Uncoloured, Unpoor* (1969), a Christian defence of revolutionary violence and of the historical Jesus as seditious and political and an ally of the Jewish Zealots.⁷

MacIntyre wrote from a position that is critical of both Marxism (or, more correctly, a Stalinized, historicist Marxism) and the official Christian Churches, yet is close to the classical – if undertheorized – Marxist principle that Judeo-Christian categories are able to provide a set of resources and commitments that function to distance men and women from the existing structures of exploitation and exchange.⁸ ‘It is in the contrast between what society tells a man he is and what religion tells him he is that he is able to find grounds both for criticizing the status quo and for believing that it is possible for him to act with others in changing it.’⁹ In this respect MacIntyre recognizes that the intellectual resources out of which Marx transformed the ‘philosophy of man’ into the critique of political economy – Kant, Hegel and Feuerbach – were based on a secular reworking of Christian themes, which, to the end, remained a residual force in his writing.

For Hegel the content of religion is the thoroughgoing *de-estrangement* of human beings. However, the institutional locations and mythic forms of religion prevent this process from taking hold on a universal basis; it is only philosophy – theoretical reason – that is able to achieve this. If Marx insisted famously that neither religion

nor theoretical reason, together or singularly, were enough to render this possible, nonetheless his writing remained linked to those aspects of Hegel that embody the critical content of Christianity: namely, the rescuing of humans from the ignominy of finitude. As in Christ's rejection of Graeco-Roman and Judaic law, humans for Marx are able to fashion an identity that transcends or refuses to pay homage to the existing social order. This understanding of religious commitment as a refusal to pay fealty to 'false gods' connects Marx to the Christianity of his 'master', Hegel. This is the central preoccupation of Garaudy's *The Alternative Future*. As in the case of MacIntyre, Garaudy sees a Stalinized Marxism as having accepted a mechanical materialism and a utilitarian ethics. Marxism cannot be the authentic breaker of chains unless it includes the divine creativity of humans – human subjectivity as the continuous outpouring of transcendence. In this, Stalinism and its recent postmodern cognates have successfully disconnected Marx's writing from its transcendental heritage by drawing a utilitarian line under its ethics. As such, MacIntyre's and Garaudy's work in the 1960s was a Hegelianized attempt to bring the Christianized vision of de-alienation down to earth: revolutionary consciousness does not merely reflect on a situation, it *protests* against it.

In this sense, MacIntyre and Garaudy represent the recovery of a Christianized Kantian–Hegelian infinitude within Marxism and notionally, as such, provide a precursor for the new ethics of passion, fidelity and abnegation. Hegel, Marx and Feuerbach humanized certain Christian beliefs in 'such a way as to present a secularized version of the Christian judgement upon, rather than the Christian adaptation to, the secular present'.¹⁰ This is why the notion of religion as a radical critique of the secular present is diminished by the demythologizers of religion whose goal is to assimilate Christian categories to the secular present. In a reified world, it is the universalizable claims of religion, rather than the rationalist critique of religion-as-ideology, which are able to provide an outpouring of transcendence, and therefore provide a solution to the problems of human finitude, . Thus, what the rationalist demythologizers of religion fail to recognize is that metaphysical desire persists despite the delegitimation of religious belief.

Is this new ethics of conviction a call, then, to the vast constellation of Christian churches and sects to make alliance with revolutionary politics, to recall the Christian ministry to its own revolutionary, political origins? Hardly. Contemporary Christianity, even in its radical evangelical forms, is so wedded to the

malignity of social democracy and the market as to make this a desperate joke. Thus, the last thing that these writers appear to be interested in is a reconciliation of Marxism with the ecclesiastical practices and institutions of the Christian Church, a marriage Marx and Engels themselves once dismissed as 'feudal socialism'. The possible link lies, rather, in the act of passionate transcendence itself: the utopian leap of faith. Or, as Bewes puts it, the identity of Marxism and religious thought lies in 'the mobilization of ... energies towards a mode of engagement in which conceptual forms of the present are regarded in the light of an unimaginable and yet imminent future.'¹¹

Radical subjectivity

The turn to religious categories as a realm of the authentic decision unlocks a constellation of categories of agency and commitment. Indeed, it is remarkable that in a period of the crisis of politics, of the terrifying management of consensus, of the dissolution of traditional working-class identities, there should be such an extensive turn to notions of radical subjectivity and the infinitude of the subject. For in Kant the problem of moral philosophy is exactly freedom of the will, the status of a form of behaviour that is not ruled by the causality of nature, in a world in which humans increasingly appear to be ruled by heteronomous forces.

For Kant freedom is *sui generis*. That is, we have the ability to set a series of causally linked events in motion through an action which possesses an independent character. In this way the action initiates a new causal series. In these terms Kant speaks of the absolute spontaneity of the cause: the product of thought does not resemble the premises from which it emerges. Spontaneity is the faculty concerned with the free production of concepts. Hence self-reflection is implicit in Kant's ethics: we are part of nature, yet because we are liberated from the blind pursuit of natural ends, we are capable of alternative actions. But because Kant treats reason *qua* freedom as absolute, this self-reflection is not able to expand and fuse with praxis. This is why self-reflection only plays a nominal rather than a constitutive role in his ethics. It is this failure to develop the category of self-reflection that accounts for the conventional descriptions of Kant's ethics as a form of bourgeois asceticism. But, as Adorno insists, this reduction of Kant to the stereotype of the bourgeois ascetic is a narrowing of the critical implications of Kant's moral philosophy.¹² What is implicated in Kant's ethics of conviction is a resistance to, and exclusion from, those interests and impulses by

which normative experience is defined. It is this active renunciative content of Kant's moral law that is opened out and developed in the new ethics of conviction. The moral repossession of politics can only be made on the basis of recognizing that the embodied moral agent is someone who is always implicated in risking the worst (for self and other) in the name of the best. Indeed, this is a moral imperative given the subject's entanglement in heteronomy. Hence the importance for Derrida and Bhaskar, Badiou, Negri and Žižek alike of the Christianized notion of responsibility as an invitation to irresponsibility: of shooting oneself in the foot, so to speak. Indeed, in a highly circumscribed late capitalist world, this invitation to irresponsibility, of being faithful to what is inconvenient and unfaithful to what is convenient, becomes heightened, heavily freighted with all kinds of exacting political demands.

The Kantian risk of the worst in the pursuit of the best is explored in various registers in Derrida's *The Gift of Death* (1992), Badiou's *Ethics* (1998), Žižek's *The Fragile Absolute* (2000),¹³ and now Negri's *Time For Revolution* (1997/2000) and Bhaskar's *From Science to Emancipation* (2002) and *Meta-Reality* (2002).^{*} In this regard what unites this thinking across political positions is a recovery of the 'revolutionary' cultural memory of early Christianity's break with Graeco-Roman thought: an understanding of the good in terms of that which is forgetful of itself. Responsible life is a kind of forgetting-of-self, a kind of gift of, and from, the self.

Derrida explores this legacy in *The Gift of Death* through the reflexive notion that responsibility is always insufficient. 'One is never responsible enough.'¹⁴ In order to be responsible it is necessary to address what being responsible means, and this response will inevitably involve questioning the name by which responsibility is to be upheld or given. The responsible decision always exists in a place of reflection upon what is already judged to be responsible. In other words, responsibility implies a gift or sacrifice that 'functions beyond both debt and duty', beyond *what is expected*. Hence there is no responsibility 'without a dissident and inventive rupture with respect to authority, orthodoxy, rule, or doctrine'.¹⁵ This is why the biblical story of Abraham and his son Isaac has become so central to the recovery of the Christian

paradox of responsibility (following Kant and Kierkegaard, Derrida, De Vries, Žižek and Bewes all discuss it). In the story of Abraham and Isaac, Abraham is willing to sacrifice what he loves in the name of an absolute duty to his faith. For Derrida this sacrifice is the very condition and definition of the ethical. Directly echoing Kant's notion of performing one's moral duty through abandoning one's moral duty, Derrida argues: 'If you love only those who love you and to the extent that they love you, if you hold so strictly to this symmetry, mutuality, and reciprocity, then you give nothing, no love.'¹⁶ To love, therefore, one must come to hate what one loves in order to save love from the diktats of authority and heteronomy. One must violate ethics in order to 'save' ethics. One must invite violation, a certain death, in order to preserve ethics from death. Responsibility and irresponsibility are mutually defining. But for Derrida this mutuality of responsibility and irresponsibility is never symmetrical. The ethical point of the sacrifice of ethics in the Abraham story is that Isaac was saved. In order for the sacrificial act to occur and interrupt the ethical, the ethical must stay in place: without the 'intervention' of God, Abraham would become simply a murderer, rather than someone who remains responsible, absolutely, to his faith. Abraham's action, then, reveals a secret of fidelity: the passion that knows no self-calculation. This is why Kierkegaard was so compelled by Abraham's story and re-Christianized it as a radical principle: there is no freely given responsibility without the sacrifice of returns.

Žižek, likewise, takes the story of Abraham as of singular importance in recognizing the Christian break with the pagan economy of returns and reciprocity. Indeed, both writers use the same quotation from Luke 14:26 to emphasize the Christian imperative of the putting to death of one's own: 'If any one comes to me and does not hate his own brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple'.¹⁷ But in Žižek this break with the ethical in the name of the ethical becomes an insistence on the universalizing content of the renunciative break with the pagan economy of returns and reciprocity. For Žižek, Christ's invocation to hate those who we are closest to and hit out at ourselves enjoins us to dissociate ourselves from the community in which

^{*} Antonio Negri, *Time for Revolution*, trans. Matteo Mandarini, Continuum, New York and London 2003. £16.99 hb., 0 8264 5931 5; Roy Bhaskar, *From Science to Emancipation: Alienation and the Actuality of Enlightenment*, Sage, New Delhi/Thousand Oaks/London, 2002. 376 pp., £39.00 hb., £14.99 pb., 0 7619 9716 4 hb., 0 7619 9717 2 pb. Roy Bhaskar, *Meta-Reality: The Philosophy of Meta-Reality*, Volume 1, *Creativity, Love and Freedom*, Sage, New Delhi/Thousand Oaks/London, 2002. 436 pp., £39.00 hb., £14.99 pb., 0 7619 9714 8 hb., 0 7619 9715 6 pb.

we live by espousing *a universal love*. Universal love insists on the non-identity between truth and appearances in the name of an emergent totalizing truth. As such, early Christianity adheres to what paganism denies: separation, the insistence on distinguishing boundaries as a moral choice. In this Christ disrupts the pagan/Roman circular logic of revenge and punishment and the balance of the All. For instance, the act of showing one's other cheek after being hit is not an indication of masochism, but the means whereby 'the circular logic of reestablishing balance' can also be interrupted. In the story of Abraham this takes the form of the severance of family obligations in order to gain a space of 'free action'. Žižek asks: 'Is not such a radical gesture of "striking at oneself" constitutive of subjectivity itself?'¹⁸ I must hate, put to death, in order that I love beyond what I already know and love. In this way, Žižek shares with Derrida a Christianized, Kantian sense that it is the suspension of the ethical that makes ethics possible. But Žižek's reading of this call to commitment is more than simply a commitment to the responsibility of responsibility; it is rather a commitment to the infinitude of the moment of risk. That is, the doubling of the decision does not just lead to the suspension of the ethical in the name of the other; it also opens the decision onto a transcendental objective. It is this 'passionate call' to the transcendental objective (the emancipatory 'to-come') that we also find in Badiou, Negri and Bhaskar.

Reflective renunciation

Although Badiou follows Derrida in judging the ethical act a risk, an opening to the future, this act is always potentially a means of putting an end to consensus and re-establishing the universal, outside the claims of the 'other'. (Žižek borrows his 'passionate call' to the transcendental objective and the diremptive power of the Christian paradox of responsibility from this very argument.) This is because for Badiou truth is the only thing that is for all, and therefore can only be achieved in the face of dominant opinion. In this way Badiou's ethics counterpoise the authenticity of commitment and not giving up one's conviction to the 'mere belonging of the "ordinary" situation'. Crucial to this is his Paulian idea of the subject as the bearer of fidelity to a founding, originary event which puts in place a process of truth. The subject becomes the event, perseveres with the truth of the event that first seized, broke and challenged the subject. The subject, then, does not pre-exist this process of fidelity; the process of truth 'induces a subject', produces the conditions for the subject's perseverance in truth. Fundamental

to this notion of perseverance is the idea of pursuing an excess of knowledge beyond myself, the linking of the known to the not-known. 'How will I, as someone, *continue* to exceed my own being?' Truth is the product of an encounter, of many encounters, rather than a process of discursive affability or sociability, because truth can only be seized on.¹⁹

Badiou's ethics stand very much within Kant's productive account of moral law: I produce the law from within myself (or, rather, in Badiou's case, out of fidelity to the transformative event). As such its renunciative content contains an explicit Kantian asociality. The internalization of fidelity poses a continual splitting or severance between knowledge and truth. Like Kant, Badiou distinguishes between the 'good' and the good done in the name of (disguised) self-interest. But if Badiou's ethics inflate, in Kantian fashion, the value of subjective self-control, this is not a radicalized version of Kantian moral law. For Badiou makes an Adornian move within and against the ethics of conviction. Fidelity to the horizon of truth is brought back into self-reflective engagement with empirical experience, into conflict with what Badiou calls the encyclopedia of knowledge from which everyday opinions and forms of sociability and communication are drawn. And it is precisely out of this conflict between the fidelity to the possibility of the 'to-come' and the conformities of knowledge of the 'ordinary' situation that an emancipatory politics emerges. 'Emancipatory politics always consists in making seem possible precisely that which, from within the situation, is declared to be impossible.'²⁰

In this respect Badiou's and Žižek's ethics of conviction constitute a form of *reflective renunciation*. If in Kant renunciation is established independently of experience, in Badiou and Žižek the ethics of renunciation is a daily practice of intransigence. Indeed, in clear opposition to the postmodern particularization of ethics and the Derridean doubling of responsibility, Badiou talks of the revolutionary subject as a rival to capital, as someone who, in the logic of Christianity's dissolution of particularism, is part of the struggle of one universalism against another universalism.²¹ This conflict of subjectivities, this conception of emancipatory politics as a walking away from doxa and the conformities of knowledge, as a space of rivalry to capital, also drives the asociality of Negri's theory of the subject. Negri talks about politics as a means of taking 'leave of domination'.²² But for Negri the responsible subject, the revolutionary subject, paradoxically, is not a conscionable subject, produced in truth, in the Badiouian/Kantian sense. Rather, for

Negri the risk of responsibility is immanent to all creative being, and thus responsibility to the 'to-come' does not need to be based on the fidelity to an earlier revelatory and constitutive (abstract) moment of truth. Negri rejects subjectivity as a space of transcendental mediation.

Transcendence for Negri is not a matter of waiting, of the mediation of the particular through an impending universal, of the call 'to-come', but of the opening up to the universal through the seizing of the moment 'to-come'. He calls this the eternity of finitude. In this defence of an anti-teleological space of emancipation, there is therefore no space for individual fidelity to the perseverance of truth. No space of correspondence between self, a founding event and the 'to-come', because the practices of truth (emancipatory practices) are already doing their work from below. Because the multitude is a free multiplicity on the edge of time (that is, continuously emergent being) it is the common telos which produces value and meaning. The risk of the 'to-come' is based on the collective *free appropriation* and transformation of the present: revolution does not need the internal representation of a revolutionary event for revolution to be thinkable or possible (a libertarian position defended, incidentally, by the Christian revolutionary Colin Morris). The 'to-come' lies in the unfolding act of living labour itself, rather than through an ethical commitment to its possibility. The subject, therefore, is not something which exists before or after the immeasurability of the struggles of living labour; it is produced in the struggles of labour, by labour – it is the space of common being. Truth is not behind or in the depths; 'it is in front, in the risk of vacillation'. Negri names this force *kairos*: a constant outpouring of transcendence through the collective.²³

This outpouring of non-teleological transcendence provides a very different ethics of conviction than Derrida, Badiou and Žižek. Because Negri has no interest in the mediation of politics from below, 'ethics is the responsibility of the present in as much it is innovation of being'.²⁴ Class consciousness, resistance, the politics of reflective renunciation are things which emerge immanently and spontaneously from within the relations of production and the conflicts of the 'to-come'. Nevertheless, if Negri, on this basis, rejects the classical Marxist/Christianized model of the figure/



party as a mediation between the transcendent and the human, his workerist ethics are clearly indebted to Christianized categories of faith and passion. The two categories which figure most prominently in his theory of *kairos*, and which place his ethics, like Badiou's and Žižek's, in the space of a secularized Christianized mediation of Marxism, are 'love' and 'poverty'.

For Negri love and poverty are the basis on which the immeasurability of the 'to-come' is produced: that which compels and grounds the time of revolution. That is, love and poverty represent the place where the power of the 'to-come' is made possible. For Negri love is indivisibly a *social category*. 'Love constructs tools, languages and politics of being with the common; and in generating, it creates being, i.e. it renews the eternal.' Love, then, is the force that sustains the resistance of the 'multitude', of the common enterprise of being on the edge of time. This is why love and poverty are tightly linked for Negri. It 'is the poor person who renders love real', given that, for Negri, it is the poor person who is able to act freely, to seize the opening on the edge of time as innovation and therefore express resistance and define singularity.²⁵ The power of the poor lies in the way the poor are able to open themselves up to the immeasurableness of the 'to-come' through the refusal

of work and received understanding. In this Negri seeks to reverse the ecclesiastical place of the poor in the Christian Church and social democracy. The poor person is not the object of love but the immeasurable *subject* of love. For Negri the revolutionary message of Christ's theology lies in his rejection of pity for the poor: in Christ's teaching 'in each poor person one discovers the figure of Christ'.²⁶ Love makes the common into a vital force that brings together the power of the multitude. Indeed, it is love which sustains the common construction of being; love is inseparable from cooperation, or the co-production of singularities. Love and poverty are the common names of the 'to-come', the forces through which the 'to-come' are generated.

Through the categories of love and poverty Negri seeks to break with the dualism of a conventional Kantian ethics of conviction. Renunciation is embedded in the productive labour of the multitude ('Rebellion is endemic and it traverses every consciousness and renders it proud');²⁷ it is not a transmittable virtue, a set of moral commitments that are freely interiorizable in the manner of Badiou. This is why Negri rejects the notion that the renunciative self is ever truly free of the space of the common that inscribes it. As such Negri refuses a certain self-image of the activist/intellectual which usually follows from an ethics of conviction: the self who is detached in his or her renunciation. Negri's categories of productive inclusion rightly question who is capable of following an ethics of conviction, who is to benefit from a reflective renunciative ethics, and what the benefits of such renunciation might actually be. But this leaves Negri's understanding of the politics of renunciation – of taking one's leave of heteronomy – subject to the essential weakness of anti-teleological politics: the disconnection between the 'to-come' and the *qualitatively new*, the new that doesn't simply embody the past but breaks with it. To take leave of heteronomy without taking leave of the social forms in which the subject is embodied by capital is to arrive at a very familiar place. Indeed, it is not to leave at all. Renunciation is a theory of the 'to-come' as the new, or it is nothing. In striking at oneself renunciation embodies the 'to-come' as qualitatively other.

Love, ontology and non-duality

It is a distinctive feature of Roy Bhaskar's turn to religious categories that, like Negri, he adopts the productive category of love in order to establish an ethics of conviction within a reflective renunciative framework. But unlike all the above writers, his com-

mitment to the moral repossession of Marxism (or a transcendental politics) is framed by an unprecedented opening up to actual religious traditions, in particular Eastern religious traditions (Sufism, Kabbala, Yogism, Buddhism, Taoism). His work therefore is opposed to the post-religious appropriation of religious categories in deconstruction and the Kantian/Hegelian-Marxisms of Badiou and Žižek. What preoccupies Bhaskar, and what makes his libertarianism closer to Negri's, is a convergence between the truths of religious traditions and the emancipatory sciences, on the basis of the idea that all authentic emancipatory practices are involved in the 'shedding or disemergence of unwanted and unnecessary determination'.²⁸ Religion is not the basis for philosophical speculation, but part of an ontology shared with science. However, Bhaskar is not proposing a theo-ontology; rather what concerns him are the conditions of possibility of right-action, in which right-action is inseparable from a commitment to emancipation *all the way down* to the ultimatum and the beginning of the universe.

Bhaskar's early critical realism was important as a form of philosophical underlabouring for Marxism, particularly during a period when post-Althusserianism was cheerfully dismantling Marxism's realist ontological commitments. What critical realism lacked in its earlier versions, however, was a theory of dialectic and an explicit thematization of being. Bhaskar addressed this in *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom* (1993), which embraced a neo-Hegelian framework of absence, totality and negation.²⁹ In *From Science to Emancipation* and *Meta-Reality* he has now moved on to a self-proclaimed new stage of development: transcendental dialectical critical realism (TDCR) or 'meta-reality'. In this he sets out not only to rectify what he sees as the antinomies and aporias of dialectical critical realism, but to rethink and reground the trajectory of the emancipatory traditions of Western philosophy. In this the thematization of being is given a central place in his system. The emancipatory claims of philosophy, religion and the social sciences are all submitted to a cosmological account of natural causation, regrounding the categories of materialism and realism in a deeper and expanded set of ontological claims. As he puts it: transcendental dialectical critical realism involves a 'deepening of greater totalization leading to greater reflexivity, ultimately that is the unity of theory and practice'. In this respect, Bhaskar's new work is the most direct attempt to bring secularized Christian and other religious categories to bear on the transcendental objective of the emancipatory traditions of philosophy and the social sciences: the

supersession of capital. In this, his recent works have a distinctly inflationary character. Bhaskar's writing no longer sees itself as underlabourer for the sciences, but as a philosophical system in itself. This is reflected, paradoxically, in the anti-philosophical tone of the writing, the fact that both *From Science to Emancipation* and *Meta-Reality* are written as 'guides to' emancipation. In crossing over to the East, Bhaskar has borrowed some of the rhetoric of the swami. TDCR is 'pro-active'.³⁰

In *From Science to Emancipation* and *Meta-Reality*, Bhaskar develops a fourfold account of the embedded subject: 'anything I do coming from me will be (or involve) an affect at the level of the stratification of my personality, but will also involve material exchanges with nature, social interactions with other human beings and impact in some way on the social structure'.³¹ Bhaskar's meta-reality represents the most systematic attempt in recent post-Cartesian philosophy of the subject to produce a non-dualistic account of self, agency and subjectivity. As a result, it risks a dissolution of the subject back into a flattened neo-pagan economy of ethical relations. In contradistinction to the whole panoply of conventionalist cultural accounts of the self as a heteronomous site of power and desire, Bhaskar argues that human autonomy is non-divisible, but occluded by social structures. He thus returns – in a kind of heavy clear-out of postmodernist culturalism – to a Rousseauesque notion of the self as essentially free but suppressed. The autonomy of human beings is overlain by 'structures of oppression, master–slave relationships, duality, alienation, split and the mystified world of ideology'. Hence what is required, he argues, is for people to recognize this, and 'shed, let go' of the heteronomous forces of determination.³²

This is the basis for Bhaskar's understanding of right-action. Without this simple invocation to 'walk away', take leave of heteronomy, the forces of autonomy are unable to start. Like Negri, Bhaskar sees transformational activity as embedded in an ontological account of human powers. This leads him to argue in Kantian terms that every genuine transformative act emerges *ex nihilo* from within a free realm of action. Or, more precisely, that free human agency emerges from a well-resourced immanent ground, prepared by previous kinds of transformative work. Human agency rests, for Bhaskar, on the non-dual actuality of our own essential freedom. This in turn is given a deeper ontological content by Bhaskar: because freedom is immanent to being, god or the ultimatum must also be immanent to this experience of freedom. If we are to talk about the ultimatum, god, Bhaskar insists, then we

should talk about 'the ontological immanence of god in man'.³³ The essence of man, if it is god-like, will be part of a totality that is greater in depth than man himself. As such, he argues, this is neither a covert resort to anthropocentricity nor an ontological proof of god's existence. Rather, it is an argument for the ontological embedding of spontaneous being in the *ex nihilo* creation of the universe.

This chain of implication is central to Bhaskar's conception of the emancipatory character of his project. We possess a basic embodied ground state that enables non-dual action to emerge. This ground state includes energy and intelligence, creativity, the capacity for love and right action and the fulfilment of intentionality. The groundedness of non-dual action is crucial therefore to the political content of his emancipatory project: the conditions and resources for emancipation are already in place in everyday capitalist relations. Emancipation, however, is fought for at the level of the embodied, dualistic personality and not at the level of the transcendental real self. Bhaskar describes the dualistic level as demi-reality, that which dominates the world of relative reality, the everyday terrain on which the struggle against dualism is fought. Emancipation is conceived as a process of oppositional dualistic activity in which the pursuit of non-duality lies in a struggle for self-consistency with one's transcendental ground state. Self-realization is becoming one with one's transcendently real self, a process of disidentification. Non-duality, however, is not just hard-won through 'meditation' or concentration – it is not unusual or exotic to everyday experience. On the contrary, humans possess a spontaneous capacity for non-dual transcendental identification.

For instance, non-dual attentiveness and right action are to be found in listening to someone speak (we cannot listen and think abstractly at the same time), in sex, creating an artwork, playing football – those activities where absorption allows some dissolution of judgemental attention, where thinking is subordinate to the activity in process. These moments of non-duality reveal that the struggle for non-duality is embodied in an already given network of non-dual powers; identity and the unity of being are ontologically and logically prior to concepts of non-identity and split. As such Bhaskar makes the broader claim that non-duality is the *necessary condition* for all human interaction and agency. He gives the example of factory workers: the factory is kept going not just as a result of the coercive effects of the wage-labour relation, but through the spontaneous, co-operative non-dual action of workers. Workers give of themselves freely *within* the wage-

labour relation. This is Bhaskar's key argument. The non-dual resources for struggle against the heteronomy of division and split have an immanent position within this struggle for non-duality. People already live and struggle within the realm of non-duality. This claim is very similar to Negri's theory of love as the ground of co-operative labour. And, indeed, it is the category of love that underwrites Bhaskar's theory of the ground state, and operates as the fundamental category of his transcendental project.

As with Negri, Bhaskar sees love as explicitly a social category: the constitutive praxis of the common. But, in contrast to Negri, Bhaskar expands the boundaries and efficacy of love to ontological proportions. For Bhaskar love is the binding, unconditional force which unites the universe. It unites energy, intelligence, creativity, right action. Indeed, the world of duality and split is inconceivable without the pre-existing, transformative presence of a 'deeper essential, creative loving self'.³⁴ This is expressed in the way love inevitably returns the absence of love to love. The more those aspects of an entity or enemy that are opposed to love are overwhelmed by love, the more those aspects will disappear. Thus Bhaskar, like Derrida and Žižek, invokes the (Christian) tactic that in offering love to an enemy the hierarchical force that drives the economy of revenge and duality is weakened. But, for Bhaskar, there is no ambiguity about the universality of this love: love *does* heal, unite and de-alienate. This is why love above all else 'embodies a drive to totality'. Once we love something we must 'be set on a dialectic in which [we] must unconditionally love the totality of all beings, albeit in ways which are specific to the concrete singularity of the relationship with them'.³⁵ The drive to totality or holistic causality is for Bhaskar based ultimately on the drive to love the divine ingredient or immanent god, the ultimatum, in the beloved thing. I recognize that my being is enfolded in all other beings *all the way down*. He calls this the cosmic envelope: the human power of transcendental identification (the love at the ground state) that connects humans with humans, and humans with other beings, across time and space. However, the transcendental content of this love does not imply an undifferentiated identification or fusion with the other. Love is not an abstract force for inclusive dealienation and unity, but a highly contextualized universal *motive* for action. Thus if the 'best way of loving people may be to transform structures ... this does not mean that you never kill. The best way of transforming a structure may be to shoot someone, though I'm not saying it is.... So love

does not imply any particular action. It is consistent with a lot of different behaviours.'³⁶

This returns us to the theme of renunciative reflection and the paradox of responsibility. As a contextual motive for de-alienating action, love will find itself in the position of the violation of self and the other. Infact it is compelled to, because love, as the ground of the struggle for non-duality, is tied to the derealization of the ego and the other: the more I am willing to surrender my ego, the more capable I am of walking away from heteronomy. Bhaskar's transcendental dialectical critical realist system operates a theory of the dialectical embedding and disembedding of the subject, in which transformational activity is grounded in an expanded account of negation and emancipation. Walking away from heteronomy, 'giving up' on split, clearing out, action-as-inaction, form a kind of renunciative inventory for the re-embedding of the non-dual self. In this respect, the reified self here is subject to the embedding of the subject in natural and social causation in two directions simultaneously: internally (towards its co-presence in the other) and externally (towards its co-presence in cosmological time, the ultimatum, god). However, this kind of systematization of an ethics of conviction invariably produces an inflation of self-emancipation, the very thing that an ethics of conviction was designed to prevent. That is, the ontological ambitions of emancipation outweigh its feasible political forms, resulting in a loss of clarity at the level of social categories and social agency.

Thus, for Bhaskar, we are all victims of master-slave relations; there is no privileged agent of change, people will come together as human beings to transcend capital, yet 'I do give a primacy to class.' But free development as a condition of the free development of all is not absolute; it is determined by our limitations and obligations as a species. Freedom is only possible as freedom *within* heteronomy. As such, at this stage of social development, human freedom will be overwhelmingly determined by how humans overcome the primary social split of class. Hence the expansion of our non-dual ground state will contribute to that possibility, but it will be subject to collective forces beyond its immediate control. In Bhaskar's model, however, desire, non-duality, flows in the opposite direction to fill the heteronomous void. The relations between non-duality and duality, between non-duality and the critique of heteronomy, non-duality and experience, need refining and re-embedding in an understanding of the historical dynamics of actual collective struggles.³⁷

Christian paradox and dialectical paradox stem from the same source: the coercive, limited, instrumental thinking of the world of dualism. In the corpus of writing discussed here, this conjunction has come into focus as the basis for the moral repossession of the subject, of politics from below, of emancipatory non-dual thought and action. The convergence of themes around (teleological and non-teleological) transcendence and sacrifice presupposes an attempt to renegotiate the language of negation and empathy, to dissolve and remix their orders. I have argued that this is grounded in the rethinking and repoliticization of a neo-Kantian (Adornian) ethics of conviction. The result – certainly in Bhaskar and Negri – is a greater emphasis on the forces of non-duality in the struggle for non-dualism, and a weakening of the place of Marx in the renunciative mix. But crucially what unites this writing is the overcoming of heteronomy through a new language of (Christianized, Marxian) paradox, in which the renunciation of life and its transformation exist simultaneously. ‘To live *in* the present does not mean to live for the present moment.’³⁸ Thus struggle as love, love in struggle, renunciation within struggle, struggle as renunciation, renunciation as an act of universal love, are held to repoliticize negation and empathy in a culture that narrows and demeans their powers.

Broadly, then, renunciation testifies to the anti-postmodern politics of this writing, and the shared sense of the importance of sacrifice to the critique of heteronomy. Severing oneself from one’s family in order to denounce the particular, striking at one’s self in order to reground the ethical, taking one’s leave of the common in order to reinstate the common, resisting the ordinary in the name of the fidelity to truth, embracing the place of poverty as the place of emancipation and of truth, stripping oneself of one’s ego, walking away from heteronomy, are not things that would appear to be conducive to the sentimentalized ethical landscape of the liberal politics of the moment. Indeed, for many they would appear to be the grievous and pathological detritus of politics. But in Derrida, Žižek, Negri, Badiou and Bhaskar – across different registers and political traditions – these actions share a common, combative and resistive identity: how is the ethical political category of sacrifice to be interpreted in a political culture where sacrifice has largely been evacuated from the post-communist language of the Left and of the Christian Church?

Today when we hear the word ‘sacrifice’ it is invariably in connection with the politics of radical Islam, in as much as it is Islam, and Islam alone, that now appears to embrace sacrifice as a political

category (suicide bombers being the supreme agents of renunciation). In this light, sacrifice is judged to be a premodern residue, an ugly hangover from the pieties and doggerel of an older religious world and socialist struggle, something that the West’s technology, secularization and multiculturalism have long abandoned as a manipulative contrivance. The reconceptualization of the Christian paradox of responsibility in the new ethical writing, then, is not innocent of the continuing political significance of sacrifice, and of the necessity of reclaiming its criticality in a period where its has been deflated and archaicized. In this respect, the distinction between Derrida and Žižek, Badiou, Negri and Bhaskar over what kind of sacrificial economy is possible or obtainable or worthy for contemporary politics should not obscure the common commitment to the centrality of the sacrificial for a new model of politics. Without the risk of irresponsibility, of the violation of the other and self, the ethical could never come into being. In Derrida, though, sacrifice is always sacrificed to the impossibility of the transcendental objective, leaving the doubling of the authentic act marooned in a permanent kind of Third Wayism. The asociality of emancipatory thought, the responsibility to irresponsibility, is too easily dissolved. However, the asociality of emancipatory thought and struggle is what social democracy fears and reviles. For the renunciative act, the walking away from heteronomy, are allegories and prefigurations of a greater withdrawal: the collective withdrawal of labour.

Notes

This essay is written in the memory of Dorothy Annie Roberts, 1932–2002.

1. Theodor W. Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, trans. Rodney Livingstone. ed. Thomas Schröder, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2000.
2. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. and analysed by H.J. Paton, Harper & Row, New York, 1964, p. 69.
3. Hent De Vries, *Religion and Violence: Philosophical Perspectives from Kant to Derrida*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, p. 211; reviewed in *Radical Philosophy* 116, November/December 2002, pp. 43–6.
4. Timothy Bewes, *Reification; or The Anxiety of Late Capitalism*, Verso, London, 2002, p. 49; reviewed below.
5. Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, trans. George di Giovanni, ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996.
6. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Marxism and Christianity*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1971; Roger Garaudy, *The Alternative Future: A Vision of Christian Marxism*, trans. Leonard Mayhew, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1976.
7. Colin Morris, *Unyoung, Uncoloured, Unpoor*, Epworth Press, London, 1969.

8. See Karl Marx, 'Introduction. Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law', Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, Volume 3, pp. 175–87.
9. MacIntyre, *Marxism and Christianity*, p. 11.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 107.
11. Bewes, *Reification*, p. 266.
12. Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*.
13. Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1995; Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward, Verso, London and New York, 2002; Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute – or Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?*, Verso, London and New York, 2000.
14. Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 51.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 63, 27.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 106.
17. Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute*, p. 120; Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 64.
18. Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute*, pp. 125, 150.
19. Badiou, *Ethics*, pp. 48, 43, 50.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 121.
21. As Simon Critchley notes, however, there is a kind of grandstanding to Badiou's theory of fidelity. Badiou's understanding of the founding event is conspicuously the Great Political Event (for Badiou May '68), leavening his renunciation with the ardour of the heroic. See Simon Critchley, 'Demanding Approval: On the Ethics of Alain Badiou', *Radical Philosophy* 100, March/April 2000, pp. 16–27.
22. Negri, *Time for Revolution*, p. 259.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 153.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 183.
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 211, 209.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 209.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 200–201.
28. Bhaskar, *From Science to Emancipation*, p. 29.
29. Roy Bhaskar, *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom*, Verso, London and New York, 1993.
30. Bhaskar, *From Science to Emancipation*, pp. 25, 54.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
32. *Ibid.*, pp. 128–9.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 132.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
35. Bhaskar, *Meta-Reality*, p. 92.
36. Bhaskar, *From Science to Emancipation*, p. 254.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 198. For a discussion of Bhaskar's inflation of philosophy, see Sean Creaven, 'The Pulse of Freedom? Bhaskar's Dialectic and Marxism', *Historical Materialism*, vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 77–141.
38. Bhaskar, *Meta-Reality*, p. 257.





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