INTERIORITY AND EPIPHANY:
A READING IN NEW TESTAMENT
ETHICS

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Common to a good deal of contemporary philosophical reflection on human identity is the conviction that we are systematically misled, even corrupted, by a picture of the human agent as divided into an outside and an inside—a ‘true self’, hidden, buried, to be excavated by one or another kind of therapy, ranging from the intellectual therapy of the post-Cartesian tradition (the modern ‘philosophy of mind’, the epistemological struggle) to the psychological therapy of another ‘analytic’ tradition, the tradition inaugurated by Freud and still flourishing in various serious and more popular forms. Modern ethics and theology alike have been haunted by a presence usually called the authentic self: an agent whose motivation is transparent, devoid of self-deception and of socially conditioned role playing. As a therapeutic fiction, this is a construct of great power and usefulness. I suspect, though, that it is also a fiction that is intellectually shaky and, in the last analysis, morally problematic. It plays with the idea that my deepest, most significant or serious ‘interest’ is something given and something unique; it brackets the difficult issue of how we are to think through our human situation as embodying a common task, in which the sacredness of the authentic self’s account of its own interest is not the beginning and the end of moral discourse.

‘No depth exists in subject until it is created. No a priori identity awaits us … Inwardness is a process of becoming, a work, the labour of the negative. The self is not a substance one unearths by peeling away layers until one gets to the core, but an integrity one struggles to bring into existence.’¹ This sharp

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formulation by a contemporary American philosopher who attempts to bring Hegel, Heidegger, Marx and Freud into fruitful conversation concentrates our thinking very effectively. For if there is no pre-existent ‘inwardness’, where is the ‘real’ self to be found or made but in the world of exchange—language and interaction. More particularly, this statement of the question makes it clear that the self as self-conscious is the product of time. We tend to conceive interiority in terms of space—outer and inner, husk and kernel; what if our ‘inner life’ were better spoken of in terms of extension in time? The time it takes to understand? My sense of the ‘hiddenness’ of another self is something I develop in the ordinary difficulty of conversation and negotiation. I don’t follow; I don’t know how to respond in such a way that what I want can be made clear and achieved. Conversation and negotiation are of their nature unpredictable, ‘unscripted’; their outcome is not determined. Thus I develop the sense of the other speaker/agent as obscure to me: their motivation or reasoning is not transparent, not open to my full knowledge, but always waiting to be drawn out and clarified. In this process I develop correspondingly the sense of myself as obscure: I must explain myself if I am to attain what I want, and as I try to bring to speech what is of significance to me in such a way as to make it accessible to another, I discover that I am far from sure what it is that I can say. I become difficult to myself, aware of the gap between presentation and whatever else it is that is active in my acting. It is not surprising that I embody these things in the picture of one hidden self confronting another, both hampered by the inadequacy of language or shared conventions—with the result that we can then fall into the trap of supposing that there could be a self-presence without difficulty, a real or truthful apprehension of myself and another agent or agents, freed from the distorting effects of our imperfect linguistic or social tools.

In other words, we assimilate the difficulty of mutual understanding between two agents to the difficulty of two people speaking a different language; somewhere there are better tools, a speech in which we are more properly or honestly at home. But in fact the difficulty is not that experienced by two speakers, one or both of whom are working in an unfamiliar or problematic medium. The exchanges of conversation and negotiation are the essence of what is going on, not unsatisfactory translations of a more fundamental script. The difficulty is inherent in what is being done, and could not be removed by a more adaptable or familiar medium. Difficulty and what goes with it, the awareness of possible error (in how I hear and how I am heard) form the stuff of my awareness of what we commonly call the ‘interior’ life, mine and the other’s. It thus becomes abundantly clear that my interiority is a construct that emerges through the labour of exchange—which is not to say that it is a reducible, secondary, epiphenomenal matter. Quite the contrary: what is lost in this analysis is not the ideal of a truthful self-perception but the myth of a truthful perception that can be uncovered by the redescription of the self’s linguistic and social performance as the
swaddling-clothes of a hidden and given reality—which, of course, divorced from the reality of performance, becomes formal to the point of emptiness.

The ‘for-myself’ and the ‘for-another’ of awareness and speech are thus not separable. Even when I try to formulate or picture my ‘real’ self, what I am in effect doing is imagining an ideal other, an ideal interlocutor and observer, a listener to whom I am making perfect sense. The danger, of course, is that this imagined other, the perfect listener, blocks out the actual, less perfect, less sympathetic hearers with whom I am actually and temporally doing business, so that my self-perception remains firmly under my own control. The proper logic of this recognition that my self-knowledge emerges from converse and exchange enjoins a consistent scepticism about claims to have arrived at a final transparency to myself. If it is converse that gives me a self to know, the continuance of converse means that I have never done with knowing. I do not cease to be vulnerable to other accounts of myself, to the pressure to revise what I say of myself at those points where I have to recognise a breakdown in the movement of exchange, the delay and obscurity that drives me back to ask, ‘What did I mean?’ The point at which I cease to ask or even understand such a challenge is, arguably, the beginning of mental sickness, the index of a pathology. And this vulnerability must also extend to my account of my own interest or ‘good’: I cannot assume that my good or my destiny is specified by the mysterious interior reality that is imagined to underlie the surface activities of language and negotiation. I shall discover what is good for me, I shall discover how to construe and articulate my interest, just as I construe everything else about my self-perception—in the processes of encounter and exchange, not in the excavation of a buried inner agenda.

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This is the point at which substantive conflict seems to arise. Say that we are indeed in the process of constructing the inner life and the integrity that is believed to go with it in the processes of conversation or negotiation: this cannot deliver a vision of anything like a common good in itself. To discover what is good for me in the process of converse may well in the first instance mean discovering the need for resistance, the need to deny that my interest is specified for me by some other in a unilateral way. That there is an adversarial moment in the construction of the self and its knowledge of itself is, of course, the insight that fuels Hegel’s entire discussion of the Lord and the Bondsman, and in the complex political situation of our century, it sometimes appears to be the dominant motif in the discovery or appropriation of selfhood: I discover who or what I am by the discovery of myself as victim, stripped of my ‘true’ identity by some other. My interest must be articulated by denial and revolt, by a distancing from the other’s definition of the linguistic field. Hence what we might call the ‘separatist moment’ in
all twentieth century liberationist movements, racial, gender-based and so on. I/we am/are not what you have taught us to be and to believe; to be what we truly are, we must reject your account of reality and overturn what it privileges (European rationality, pale pigmentation, masculine bias in language, heterosexual coupling). Current debate about ‘political correctness’ in the United States and elsewhere is often clouded by a twofold misunderstanding (curable, perhaps, by the digestion of more Hegel): on the one hand, the separatist moment is absolutised in an insistence that self-definition, definition ‘from within’, is the most fundamental moral need in a situation of manifest and continuing inequity; on the other hand, objectors fail to see the significance of the recognition entailed here that language and negotiation are about power, and that the bestowal of power on the powerless requires the most unspiring interrogation of the processes by which groups, persons and interests are in fact, historically and socially, defined. The former ends up in the crudest kind of mythology about self-realisation on the basis of some mysterious inner essence, unpolluted by converse; the latter remains at a resolutely pre-reflective (and so essentially pre-political) stage of awareness. Both sides of the debate, insofar as they fall into one or other of these attitudes, explicitly or implicitly, assume there is no difficulty, to use the word yet again, about the discovery of interest, and no continuing agenda to lead us into questioning about common interest. They remain at the level of adversarial definition: interest is secured at the expense of another.

The problem to be faced and overcome, then, is one about how we move beyond rivalry; how we are to arrive at ethics properly so called, instead of a battleground between competing interests (I take it that ethics is nothing if not a discipline for evaluating and judging local or individual claims to know the good in the light of accounts of the good that are not purely local or individual). This leads us back to reflection on the processes of self-discovery already sketched in this essay. We learn how to ‘speak’ ourselves, how to ‘utter’ ourselves, in conversation, in the presence of an interlocutor. To imagine an ideal interlocutor, what I earlier called the perfect listener, the presence to which I am wholly transparent or to whom I make sense, is to imagine a presence with which I do not in the ordinary sense ‘negotiate’; the capacity of the other for attention, an attention complete enough to assure me of unconditioned space or time to develop and discover what I am to be, is in such an ideal case not shadowed at all by the other’s own particular agenda, by another set of interests comparable to mine. Yet to spell it out in these terms is to display the character of this ideal interlocutor as a fantasy. On the one hand, my language and self-presentation only acquire identity in the contentions of exchange with another, in a set of particular and historical encounters with those elements in the world of personal transactions that deny my illusions of control, my passion for ‘scripting’ the language used around me; I become a self only in the self-dispossession of discovering that there are things I cannot acquire, goals I cannot attain. On the other
hand, to absolutise contention is to remain trapped in a stage of consciousness where the other is always liable to be apprehended as a threat or a rival. Thus I do not emerge into selfhood without concrete otherness; I do not discover my humanity in the absence of frustration, the resistance of the world to my will (if I can even be said to have a ‘will’ in the absence of the linguistic specificity that is developed in negotiation). But I do not recognize the convergence of my interest and the other’s without a move beyond opposition and negotiation. In the crude terms of recent social debates, it is in a measure true that we do not grow without competition; but competition without mutual recognition and mutual need is barbarous and self-destructive.

The other who is concrete yet not a partner in negotiation, not engaged in a process of mutual ‘adjustment’, seems, then, to be what we look for and perhaps presuppose in the search for a way into ethical discourse. The concreteness of the other cannot be sacrificed; the ideal listener will not do, since this figure has no ‘resistance’, and is, ultimately, only at the service of my development; and an other purely instrumental to my specification finally collapses back into the chaos of my undifferentiated existence, into pre-consciousness rather than a conscious self-appropriation. A concrete other of this kind would have to be apprehended as other equally to my own project and interest and to any specific other subject in the field of negotiation; neither competing with me for moral space, nor endorsing or protecting my moral space over against other subjects. In this sense, we can say that it must be articulated as that to which I and others are commonly answerable; it is what makes sense of me as a moral subject (i.e., as a subject not determined by my private calculation of my interest or good), and therefore what I appeal to in making sense of my positions or policies. But, precisely because it is what makes sense of me in this way, questioning and reshaping my would-be private or partisan account of what is good for me, it is more than a static principle of legitimation for what I happen to decide. If I appeal to it in the struggle of negotiation, I do so in the acknowledgement that I as well as the other will be exposed to its challenge, and liable to be changed by it. Further, I can accept this situation as something other than simply the triumph of another will over mine in the battle for moral space, since this non-competitive other remains other as well to the specific ‘rival’ subject that confronts me at any given moment. The appeal either of myself or of a specific historical other to this presence with which neither of us can negotiate provides a ground for discourse about our human negotiation that is not immediately trapped in rivalry: a common discourse before a common other, to which I and the other are alike vulnerable or responsible.

If we can and do presuppose something like this in trying to formulate a moral discourse at all, that is, a discourse not determined by the tribalism of competing accounts of the good, a discourse of shared self-criticism, what exactly is it that we are talking about? We could say, as a good many would,
that this is a necessary fiction if we are to find a Kantian ‘tribunal’ for the settling of moral dispute. But as soon as the appeal to common answerability is defined as an instrumental construction, we are in danger of returning to our starting point: really human interests are conflictual, but it is more convenient to pretend otherwise, since social harmony is desirable. However, on such an account, it is desirable, presumably, because it is in my interest. I don’t like being disturbed. And I assume that others have a similar distaste for being disturbed, and will to that extent co-operate in realising my desire. This passive and minimal version of the foundations of law remains vastly popular in the liberal North-Atlantic milieu, and—before it is too readily criticised—it must be said that there are worse accounts. The trouble with it is that it is inadequate to adjudicate anything, or to assist in the negotiation of conscientious matters rooted in a coherent moral worldview: hence the chaos of ‘liberal’ responses to the presence of Islam in the West; hence the violent bitterness that characterises the debate over abortion and the law, especially in the USA. The classical theological principle that what is just for me is bound up with what is just for my neighbour, and that my desire, if it is to be genuinely for a good beyond the private and local, must be a desire for the good of my neighbour is not necessarily capable of being stated in the terms of mutual non-disturbance. A fictive or abstract account of shared answerability takes it for granted that what we first learn as human subjects is private desire, and that this remains a fundamental: the social ideal is to discover a means of securing maximal realisation of private desires, under a ‘contractual’ arrangement whereby certain of them are sacrificed so as not to interfere too severely with the private policies and goals of other individuals. We are, in fact, back with the priority of the private, of the inner life. This account of the situation is as problematic philosophically as it is practically.

If we are not, then, talking about a notional or contractual tribunal, must we be talking about the apprehension of an ‘absolute’ presence, a transcendent interlocutor? The temptation is to give a rapid ‘yes’ to this question, without noticing that this would still leave us with the problem of how the moral world is concretely learned. It is, notoriously, not enough to appeal to universal moral intuitions, an innate code; the supposed deliverances of anything like this are at best trivial, and fail to offer any method other than a majority vote for settling moral conflict. If we are serious about the material and temporal character of learning selfhood, we have to ask about the material and temporal processes whereby a sense and a practice of common answerability might be intelligibly generated. How might I or we historically be educated in a relation with something I cannot negotiate with?

One of the earliest attempts to give some moral substance to a notion of common human interest appears in Stoicism and Cynicism. The precise social background out of which these philosophical movements developed

is difficult to analyse, but one can at least say that they both have something
to do with disillusion about the possibilities of the conventional classical
ethics of public life. In a period of endemic warfare between Greek states,
there was much to be said for developing a foundation for ethics independ-
ent of the traditional civic context. Cynicism has its alleged origins in the
fourth century BCE, and Stoicism enters its first major period of evolution in
the century following, when the rise and disintegration of Alexander’s
empire had still further weakened the old civic patterns of virtue and raised
the awkward questions of cosmopolitanism. The idea of the human being
(or at least the free human being) as a ‘citizen of the universe’ initiates
a tradition of reflection on the unity of kinship of human agents, and
consequently a kind of egalitarianism (a kind of egalitarianism, since the
theoretical allowance of equality is not in practice or, often, in theory,
extended to slaves). The fundamental unifying factor is wisdom or the
capacity to be taught it, and this wisdom is defined as living according to
‘nature’. The difficulties of this were already being extensively discussed in
antiquity: philosophers had noticed that appeal to ‘nature’ was an unhelp-
ful move when it came to specifics, and the critics of Stoicism in particular
were unhappy with a double list of possible actions, those performed
according to nature and those wholly indifferent, for which there could be
no fully reasonable grounds. Both Stoics and Cynics also seemed to go no
further with their universalism and egalitarianism than a strong com-
mandation of attitudes to be shared by the non-civic community of the wise;
they remained figures deliberately marginal to the public sphere.

Such a summary is, of course, a simplification of complex history, social
and intellectual; but it is worth pondering in the light of the comparisons
frequently drawn in recent New Testament scholarship between the recorded
preaching of Jesus and the Cynic tradition. It is easy, perhaps, to assimilate
too glibly the universalism of Stoic or Cynic to the universalism of the
Christian Church, without considering the difference between an ethic of
shared attitudes among a fraternity of the wise and a specific social structure
existing alongside the ordinary civic systems of the Roman Empire, in a
perennially uncomfortable relation with them for several centuries. My point
is that the earlier question of how a non-tribal ethic might be historically
learned can be answered at one level by adducing the radical universalism
of Stoic or Cynic; these ideas enter the moral vocabulary partly in reaction
to a situation of moral scepticism in the context of a reshaping of social
boundaries. But the ideas themselves have no clear embodying structures.
To the extent that the Christian Church is an embodying structure for an
ethic of shared accountability and common interest, it needs closer examina-
tion in this connection. In the next part of this essay, I shall be suggesting
that the narrative (not simply the recorded teaching) of Jesus functions
in such a way that it mediates historically the meaning of a non-negotiable
and therefore non-competitive presence ‘before’ which ethical discourse is
conducted; and that, when conducted systematically in that light, the character of ethical discourse itself is significantly affected.

There are two aspects of the narrative of Jesus that immediately establish the centrality of a ‘non-competitive other’ in the construction of an ethic capable of dealing with common interest or common good. The first and most evident is what the gospels present as Jesus’ offer of access to God for all, including—and perhaps especially—those who could have no claim of moral or spiritual privilege. The God of Jesus is the God who sends rain on the just and the unjust; and this entails a community of God’s people not defined by their prior satisfactory behaviour. It is what J. D. Crossan, in his important, if controversial, study of *The Historical Jesus* refers to as an ‘unbrokered’ society—that is, one that does not rely for its workings upon control by some privileged class of the means of access to power or acceptability. In proclaiming, in action as well as words, that the welcome of God is like an invitation to a meal with no social rationale, no ritual for ranking guests and marking their various levels of wealth or importance, Jesus ‘makes … no appropriate distinctions and discriminations. He has no honor. He has no shame.’

In consequence, the God of the Gospels ceases to function as guarantor of a particular set of conditions for access to the holy and the transformative. This is a God who resists being used ideologically, or used as a criterion for the exclusion of the unsatisfactory and alien. To turn to a rather different intellectual milieu from that of recent New Testament scholarship, we may recall René Girard’s observation: ‘The Gospels deprive God of his most essential role in primitive religions—that of polarizing everything mankind does not succeed in mastering, particularly in relationships between individuals.’ Girard goes on to offer a reading of the parable of the talents in terms that make this ‘deprivation’ clear:

The servant who is content to bury the talent that was entrusted to him, instead of making it bear interest, also has the most frightening picture of his master. He sees in him a demanding overseer who “reaps where he has not sown.” What happens to this servant is, in the last analysis, in exact conformity with his expectations, with the image he has constructed of his master. It does not derive from the fact that the master is really like the servant’s conception of him (here the text of Luke is the most suggestive), but from the fact that men make their own destinies and become less capable of breaking away from the mimetic obstacle the more they allow themselves to be fascinated by it.

In their different idioms, both Crossan and Girard are, I believe, saying that the proclamation of Jesus makes concrete the presence of a non-competitive other: God is not to be approached through skilled intermediaries who will
see to it that God’s ‘interest’ is safeguarded in a transaction that, by giving privilege to us, may compromise the divine position. And, if God is conceived as needing to be conciliated so that violent reaction may be averted, as in the mind of the unprofitable servant in the parable, God is still within the competitive framework; God has a ‘good’, an interest, that is vulnerable. Whereas, if God’s reaction can never be determined by a supposed threat to the divine interest, God’s action and mine do not and cannot occupy the same moral and practical space, and are never in rivalry.

God’s action is never, in this picture, *reactive*: it is always, we could say, *prior* to human activity, and as such ‘gracious’—that is, undetermined by what we do. This in turn changes how I am to see my activity: what it can never be is any kind of bartering for a favourable or advantageous position vis-à-vis the universe and its maker. That God is never threatened by finite action entails that there is a level at which my own being is not capable of being threatened. It is simply established by God’s determination as creator—that is, by God’s will for what is authentically other to the divine being to exist. My behaviour does not have to be a defensive strategy in the face of what is radically and irreducible other, because the radicality of that otherness is precisely what establishes my freedom from the necessity to negotiate with it. There is no question here of saving the interest of diverse parties to a transaction. The traditional theological commitments to the timelessness of God, or at least God’s non-participation in the same scheme of temporality as ours, and to the doctrine of creation from nothing are very far from being abstract and speculative matters for the believer, examples of the philosophical ‘corruption’ of theological reflection. They are ways of safeguarding the fundamental point of the proclamation of Jesus, that God’s acts are undetermined by ours, and that therefore we can never and need never succeed in establishing our position in the universe.

If this is how we are to understand the nature and activity of the Christian God, and if, consequently, no failure or defeat within the human world can ultimately determine our standing before God, one further consequence is a change in how we understand our being-in-time. God’s difference from our temporality leaves us with a time that can be seen as *given*, as an opportunity for growth or healing, since no disaster is finally and decisively destructive. The theological assurance about the future that is proclaimed in Christian discourse has to be read in this light. It is not a conviction that there is or must be a happy ending to any particular human story; this would be to make trivial (and often almost blasphemous) the doctrine of divine providence. Rather it is an assurance that time is always there for restoration; that we are never rendered incapable of action and passion, creating and being created, by any event. To be the object of God’s non-historical regard is to be assured not only of a *status*, but also of an *involvement*: we are always ‘addressed’. That is to say, our time can be apprehended as us as a question, or a challenge, as something to be filled. To sense my future as being a
question to me is to sense that what I can receive, digest and react to is
not yet settled or finished. What God’s regard, as pronounced by Jesus,
establishes is my presence as an agent, experiencing and ‘processing’
experience. I continue to be a self in process of being made, being formed in
relation and transaction.

Here, then, is one way in which the gospel announced by Jesus, in
separating out our action from the business of establishing a position in the
universe, might be said to liberate ethics. What we are to say in evaluation
of our behaviour is not to be determined, or even shadowed, by considera-
tions of how this or that action succeeds in securing the place and interest
of a particular subject or group vis-à-vis its environment. This vision of a
convergent human good thus appears almost as a kind of by-product of the
proclamation of indiscriminate divine welcome. If there is no anxiety of
rivalry in our ethical reflection, no anxiety about the possible ultimate ex-
tinction of our interest in the presence of God, it follows that every perceived
conflict of human interest represents a challenge to work, to negotiate. This
can sound as though all conflicts are simply matters of error, and require
better explication in order to be resolved; but such a utopian piece of ethical
intellectualism would overlook the way in which (as outlined earlier) ‘real’
or ‘true’ interest is itself only formed in the process of engagement, inter-
action. It is true that consciousness repeatedly mistakes itself, its nature and
its good; but this is an error corrigible only within action and interaction that
modifies the consciousness and changes its position.\(^\text{15}\) But, as suggested in
the first part of this essay, a commitment to what might be called, in a rather
Hegelian phrase, the labour of ethics can emerge only as the social world is
freed from the assumption of basic and non-negotiable collisions of human
interest. To put it another way, the self is free to grow ethically (that is,
to assimilate what is strange, to be formed into intelligibility) only when it
is not under obligation to defend itself above all else—or to create itself, to
carve out its place in a potentially hostile environment.

Theology has formalised the teaching of Jesus on the ‘non-competitive
difference’ of God and God’s indiscriminate welcome in terms of justifying
grace; we are reckoned to have a right to be, by God’s free determination.
My basic argument has been that ethics is only going to be ethics if it assumes
something like justification. However, if all we can say is that Jesus intro-
duces into our discourse about the good a fruitful new idea, we are in danger
of returning the whole discussion to abstractness. I turn finally then to the
second aspect of the narrative of Jesus, to what lies beyond not only his
recorded teaching but also his practice of hospitality and absolution. The
practice of Jesus in his ministry is bound up with the formation of a com-
community in which the acceptance and welcome of God is not negotiated into
being, not ‘brokered’ by an intermediary or a system of administered condi-
tions. As such, it might be simply an historical experiment, leaving an inspir-
ing example. That it has not been understood in such terms is significant.
From the beginnings of Christian discourse, the community around Jesus in his ministry—the community of disciples and of others, including those who have received from him healing or absolution—was held to be continuously present, so that to join the community was to become ‘contemporary’ with Jesus (this is what is taken for granted in numerous sayings, especially in the Matthaean tradition, such as Mt 18.20 and 28.20). How is it that the ‘unbrokered kingdom’ becomes more than an historical project dependent on the physical presence of Jesus, or the direct ‘personal’ inspiration of Jesus?

The narrative elucidates this by recording that the historical failure of the mission of Jesus, conceived as a call for the renewal of Israel in certain radical ways, is overridden. Jesus proclaims the indefeasible and indiscriminate and indestructible regard of God for all, regardless of merit and achievement; yet he falls foul of the religious and political authorities and is executed. But to proclaim that he has been raised from death is to say that both the proclamation and the practice of Jesus cannot be brought to an end by an authority, even one that has the power of life and death. What Jesus does is, in theological language, owned and vindicated by God as God’s proclamation and practice; as such, it is not ultimately vulnerable to history, in the sense that its continuance is never at the mercy of human will or the institutions of the world. Put another way, Jesus’ action becomes recognizable as divine action when it is shown to be something that endures beyond the strongest rejection. Jesus remains as the focus of the new community, not as a memory but as a living presence. While this last formulation needs a great deal more elucidation, it expresses the sense in the first Christian documents of belonging to a community of interactive fellowship with Jesus, rather than a community founded by a figure in the past. The precise form of his ministry continues, in healing and absolution, in the introduction into new forms of prayer and intimacy with God, in the activity of extending the limits of God’s people beyond the limits of the legally satisfactory. Gradually but inexorably, the practice of Jesus’ continuing ministry in the community extends also beyond the boundaries of the ethnically and historically acceptable members of God’s people—to the non-Jewish world. As I have argued elsewhere, this extension to the non-Jewish world is a major factor in the development of classical Christology, in that it carries the assumption that Jesus is ‘free’ to be heard and received throughout the human world, and to redefine the perceived will of God in respect of God’s people by universalising the scope of God’s call.

The resurrection of Jesus can thus be read as the way in which God’s indefeasible commitment to welcoming the human creation and constructing communion among diverse human beings appears as an historical phenomenon, as the temporal persistence of the action and the gospel of Jesus. That Jesus cannot be described, in Christian terms, as a past figure only means that what he is and does endures—through his own literal and material presence and so through all the ways in which who and what he is
is obscured, betrayed or apparently historically defeated in the life of the Christian community as in the life of the entire human world. The theological idea of the indestructible regard of God, with all its implications for the possibility of reconciled community, is capable of being perceived and learned as an historical matter through the perdurance of Jesus’ life in the life of the community and as the continuing source of judgement to which the community looks. We are not talking about an identity of Jesus and community; if we were, the distinctiveness of the claim that Jesus remains active in the community would be lost; his action would simply be initiating the activity of the community. The doctrine of the resurrection is, among other things, an attempt to distinguish between the emergence of the new community as an historical fact and the continuance of Jesus’ activity in calling and forming the community. This latter is, of course, not available for historical inspection in the same way; but the early Church, in associating the resurrection with the empty tomb, insisted that the perdurance of the practice and proclamation of Jesus was not reducible to ‘internal’ shifts in the collective consciousness of the Church. This matter remains, I believe, problematic wherever the theology of Jesus’ resurrection fails to separate out the changes in the Church’s mind from the action of God in respect to the person of Jesus. The question of the empty tomb is not theologically indifferent.

What I have been attempting so far is not a natural theology, a digging-out of a conceptual space into which theological claims can be inserted. It simply seeks to identify a practical as well as conceptual problem in our world, a problem about the foundations of a non-tribal, non-competitive ethic, in such a way as to suggest that the Christian theology of justification, grounded in the narrative of Jesus’ ministry, passion and resurrection, provides a structure and vocabulary for discussing this problem. Is it then an essay in apologetics? In a sense, yes. The claims made by classical Christian theology for the universal pertinence of the proclamation of Jesus, the claims to a decisive authority in shaping the human world, can only be given flesh by trying to see if, in fact, the narrative of Jesus can offer resources for an ethic and an anthropology with some ability to liberate us from the manifestly self-destructive spirals of human interaction. It is only in the unceasing and manifold generation of such attempts at seeing the world in the light of the gospel narrative that Christian theology can make concrete sense of its own convictions—not by winning a succession of arguments that ‘prove’ the inadequacy of secularism, but in displaying at least the confidence that our theological discourse has the ability to promise human transformation.

Thus a Christian theological statement has to be—at least—an invitation into a world of possible readings of the world in terms of the gospel, and possible responses to the given narrative of Jesus; not a provider of occult information,
but, to borrow a famous phrase from Eliot on the metaphysical poets, a modification of sensibility. This in turn implies that the criteria for theological coherence and adequacy are going to be quite complex: general considerations of how hypotheses may be given plausibility by argument are not going to be obviously the best tools, nor will arguments about the explanatory force of doctrinal formulae (as making sense of odd phenomena) best address the significant issues. We must ask about how we test a theology’s force or comprehensiveness in consolidating a distinctive and resourceful perspective on the diverse narratives of human agents; we must consider whether a particular theological idiom or construct strengthens the sense of an integral fullness of perception and discernment in respect of human agency, whether it shrinks or extends the fundamental conviction about the transforming pertinence of Jesus’ narrative and identity to all human situations. In the rest of this essay, I propose to look at aspects of the theological style of two elements in Christian scripture which are often supposed to be problematically diverse: the primary Pauline literature along with the disputedly Pauline letter to the Ephesians; and the gospel of Matthew. My aim will be to underline how Pauline and Matthaean theology alike approach what we might call ethics and spirituality by a twofold strategy, drawing out how Christian behaviour is to be interpreted in terms of the *manifestation* of God through Jesus Christ, and at the same time making it plain that this manifestation is not restricted to *successful performance*: the comprehensiveness of the structuring vision emerges in the way in which failure, recognised and accepted as such, entails a ‘dispossession’ that itself mirrors the divine gift as narrated in the history of Jesus. Only (I suggest) when we can trace this dual, ironic strategy can we properly assess the theological import of Paul (and deuto-Paul?) and Matthew, in relation to what we have already traced in the Jesus tradition at its most basic level.

Paul first: for him, being co-opted into the divinely chosen community, being in Christ, is inseparable from co-option into the divine action; and this action is not only God’s active pursuit of reconciliation with the world, but also God’s self-revelation. The Christian life is, from one perspective, the repetition or recapitulation of the act and the narrative of God, primarily but not exclusively in the incarnate Christ: this we could draw out of, for example, the meditation in II Cor about the ministry of reconciliation (II Cor 5.11 ff.). We find many other passages in the Pauline corpus where the imitation of God in Christ is a central theme. We are not to consider our own interests above those of others, for Christ did not so consider himself (Rom 15.2–3); rather, we are to welcome or accept each other as Christ has accepted us (15.7). We are to give generously to each other—Christ became poor for our sake, and made others rich by that voluntary poverty (II Cor 8.9). We are to offer our lives as a sacrifice to the Father, as Christ did (Eph 5.1), and to follow the pattern of self-emptying or non-grasping embodied in Christ, pre-incarnate and incarnate (Phil 2.1–11). And so on: but
the argument does not stop simply with an appeal to what Jesus has done. It is significant that such passages repeatedly move towards a further level of ‘grounding’ the appeal when they go on to speak of ‘glory’ as the goal or product of certain sorts of action. This is particularly clear in Rom 15: the mutual forebearance of believers, their acceptance of each other, issues in God being glorified—not simply through the voice of the community’s praise, though that is a significant part of the meaning of Rom 15.6, but also surely through the manifestation of the character of God that is involved. If we accept each other ‘for the glory of God’ (15.7), this is part of a display of God’s self-consistency (15.8), which issues finally in the joy and gratitude of the non-Jewish world. That is to say, the Gentiles don’t rejoice only because they are granted a spectacular privilege, but also because the glory of God is made plain to them. Indeed, the gift is inseparable from the delight: here as elsewhere, ‘the glory of God’ functions as a rationale for certain styles of action (e.g. I Cor 10.31, II Cor 4.15, 8.19). Generosity, mercy and welcome are imperatives for the Christian because they are a participation in the divine activity; but they are also imperative because they show God’s glory and invite or attract human beings to ‘give glory’ to God—that is, to reflect back to God what God is. Giving glory is practically identical with rejoicing—rejoicing ‘in’ God, being glad that God is God, not merely that God is well-disposed towards us.

Thus, the imperative changes its character: we are to act in such a way that the nature of God becomes visible, in the way it was visible in the life and death of Jesus. The further rationale for acting so as to manifest the nature of God is ultimately that the nature of God is that which provokes joy, delectatio. The point of the whole history of divine action which our acts imperfectly recapitulate is that there should be cause for rejoicing. This, I believe, is the sense in which Paul’s ethic carries the dimension of ‘contemplative fruition’: our final purpose is to enjoy seeing something of what God eternally is. II Cor 9 puts this very plainly in recommending financial generosity so that there may be an overflow of thanksgiving to God (9.11–14): the beneficiaries of the Church’s generosity do not rejoice simply because their needs are met, but because it makes plain the divine and fundamental character of gift itself; because God has become manifest. Or, to put it in more tendentious terms, the Pauline ethic has a powerfully aesthetic foundation: delight in the beauty of God is the goal of our action, what we minister to each other and to the human world at large. In some passages, like Rom 15 and II Cor 9, Paul even seems less interested in the receiving of God’s mercy by the Gentiles than in the fact that the bestowal of this mercy calls forth praise—presumably not exclusively from believers.

If this is correct, then the writer to the Ephesians is closer to a central Pauline theme than he is sometimes assumed to be. Ephesians makes much of the manifestation of God’s long hidden purposes, God’s longing to exhibit the full range and depth of the divine liberty to give and recreate (1.5 ff., 12,
2.7, 3.10–12, 16–21). God does what God does so that the divine glory may be known, praised and enjoyed—and I take the three words to be necessarily interlinked. I should want to add that the believer’s knowing is ‘intellectual’, in the scholastic sense in which intellect is itself a participation in the reality understood, so that the mind’s reception of what God is believed to have done becomes another channel for the divine reality to manifest itself. The Christian’s thinking is a vehicle of ‘glory’, an occasion for praise and thanksgiving.

Ephesians uses very freely the language of ‘mystery’ to describe what is shown in Christ, in the preaching of Christ and in the living of the believing life; the word is more frequent in this epistle than anywhere else in the Christian scriptures. It is, as I have indicated, connected with the idea of God revealing hidden purposes. But it is actually in the undoubtedly Pauline literature that one finds a use of the word that links it more clearly to the themes we have just been considering. Paul, in I Cor 4.1, famously refers to himself as a ‘steward’ of God’s mystery, the person who handles or administers or conserves the narrative of the divine purpose. This usage, however, follows immediately upon a sharp polemical discussion of the divisive issue in Corinth concerning the authority and status of the various missionaries: Paul’s conclusion is that the preacher of the gospel is bound to point away from himself or herself, to divert attention from any simply individual skill, power or fluency. The preacher is not there to impose a personal philosophy, but to introduce people to the fullness of God’s work in Jesus; this is accomplished when preachers put themselves at the disposal of the hearers. ‘All things are yours,’ says Paul: through the preacher’s self-deliverance into the hands of the hearers, the hearers are ‘delivered’ into the possession of Christ and thus into divine ownership (or, better perhaps, divine ‘owning’, divine acknowledgement of responsibility for us). This is what leads on immediately to the image of the apostle as oikonomos of the divine mystery. The apostle’s stewarding role becomes manifest, it seems, when the apostle is dispossessed of individual power or expertise, the kind of power that comes from the successful deployment of rhetoric. The divine purpose, as Paul is constantly repeating in these early chapters of I Cor, is realised in the vulnerability and awkwardness of the human voice proclaiming it.

Could we then go a step further, admittedly beyond the explicit words of Paul, to suggest that the mystery that is the purpose of God is in some way rooted in a perception of God as naturally self-dispossessing or self-giving? There is a kind of convergence between the idea of a practice of generosity as sharing in and making visible the character of the generous or welcoming God, and the experience of an ‘anti-rhetoric’ of human inarticulacy and unskilledness in verbalising the nature and purposes of God. The practice of the ethical life by believers is a communicative strategy, a discourse of some sort; and equally the speech of believers is an ethical matter, morally and spiritually suspect when it is too fluent, too evidently grounded in the
supposedly superior quality of the speaker. A form of religious persuasion that insists upon its right to possess or control its own outcome, whether by appeal to status or privilege (in Paul’s terms, especially the status of ethnic and/or legal ‘purity’) or by insistence upon its own excellent performance fails to communicate its intended matter, which is the action and nature of God. If the substance of the gospel has to do with God’s giving up possession or control—in Paul’s language, the Father giving up or giving over the Son to the cross, or Christ giving up his ‘wealth’, security, life for the sake of human beings—then the speech appropriate to this must renounce certain kinds of claims and strategies. This is why (a point we must face candidly) Paul’s correspondence is characterized by a sense of moral danger: Paul himself is walking the tightrope of Christian persuasion with something less than total success as far as the renunciation of possession and control are concerned. He can be bullying and manipulative, even in the very passages where he most plainly articulates his own ethic of preaching. Perhaps this is why generations of Paul’s readers, including those who framed the liturgical offices for the feast of his conversion, have found the agonized contradictions of II Cor 11–12 very close to the heart of his theology and ethics; as if here he is recognizing that his very failure to observe his own prescriptions for the rhetoric of the gospel is turned to persuasion by its recognition of its own failure and folly. ‘When I am weak, then I am strong’: not only the ‘weakness’ of stumbling language or confused argument, but the scandal of the self-acknowledged moral crassness of Paul’s appeal to authority and experience.

What follows or might follow from this is the problematic agenda of Christian theology for some centuries after Paul. In the first place, the idea of a self-dispossessing witness being transparent to a self-dispossessing God, the idea (to borrow a significant insight from the Contra Arianos of Athanasius) of a God whose essential life is the generation of difference that is still conceivable as communion or continuity, is built into the slowly evolving model of God as Trinity. To say that Paul, or any writer in the corpus of Christian scripture, simply enunciates a ‘trinitarian ethic’ is, of course, anachronistic and over-simple. But it is always worth asking what it is that the language of Christian scripture prompts, makes thinkable, gestures towards. At this level, it is not nonsense to suggest, I believe, that a trinitarian structure for discourse about the eternal life of God offers the fullest explication of Paul’s moral rhetoric. But secondly, there is a particularly sharp (perhaps rather distinctively Protestant?) paradox implied if this is pursued in reading Paul. The self-forgetting of God, God’s putting the divine life ‘at the disposal’ of what is not God, becomes manifest precisely in the acknowledged inadequacy, the fractured and failed character, of all Christian rhetoric, whether in word or in deed. What in the created order mirrors the giving-away of God is not simply the practice of concrete generosity—which remains of focal importance, of course—but the practice
of penitent irony about the misapprehensions of the life and speech of faith. If I may here pick up a notion I have very briefly touched on elsewhere, we understand the truth of the Christian God in the very apprehension of our own misapprehensions;¹⁹ our spiritual conformation to the life of the trinitarian God involves, among a good many other things, a scepticism, both relentless and unanxious, about all claims to successful performance in our life and our discourse.

Matthew and Paul have regularly been represented as—at best—tensive, if not contradictory poles in Christian ethical discourse:²⁰ Matthew is interested in Jesus as a second Moses, Paul is interested in a new creation to which the law, even in intensified or interiorised form, is marginal. But the Matthaean ethic is in fact as concerned as the Pauline to avoid an ideal of the self-construction of the righteous agent by successful performance. There are appropriate kinds of performance, but what is constitutive of fundamental identities is a relation with God that is shaped not by the pursuit of consistent moral policies but by that puzzling mix of disposition and circumstance sketched in the Beatitudes. The commendatory rhetoric converges surprisingly closely at certain points: ethics is about manifestation. The Sermon, when it appeals to the correlation between human and divine forgiveness (Mt 6.14–15), when it exhorts the believer to a perfection consisting in indiscriminate love (5.43–48), when it implicitly grounds the constants of human generosity or responsiveness in divine willingness to give, faintly imaged in human dispositions (7.7–11), nudges us in precisely the same direction as Paul: Christian virtue is there to display a reality that will cause thanksgiving and delight, that will cause people to give glory to the Father (5.16).

What is more, the external situations in which ‘perfection’ is to be realized are almost all circumstances of discomfort or disadvantage. Christian ‘excellence’ is in significant part a matter of how we are to deal with our powerlessness or dispossession, just as the conditions listed in the Beatitudes are conditions of vulnerability or conditions metaphorized as vulnerability (‘hunger and thirst’ in the cause of justice).²¹ We’d better notice carefully what this does and doesn’t say. There is no commendation of passivity as such, no simple advice to the systemically powerless that they accept their lot: the counsels are being given to people who have expectations of exercising power but are placed in circumstances where they lose it or have it undermined. When I am injured, I have the means of possible redress; I have power to restore the balance that has been upset (I can retaliate, I can go to court or whatever). But I also have, as a believer, the freedom to alter the terms of the relation: I can decline to see it as a challenge to equalize the score, and opt to display positively the sovereign liberty of God not to retaliate or defend an interest. In other words, I can either attempt to close off my vulnerability or I can so work with it as to show the character of God. If we come to the Sermon looking either for an ethic of passive obedience to external authority or an ethic of resistance and liberation as
conceived in our own age, we shall be disappointed. Matthew’s Jesus is a more teasing character than either model would suggest; and the Sermon ought to be read with great patience and nuance before we try to derive a political ethic of the right or the left from it. But more of this later.

So the substance of the Sermon seems to direct us, as does Paul, towards the focal point of a renunciation of certain kinds of defence or safety as itself an imaging of the divine character suitable for provoking gratitude or glorification directed towards God. This may be reinforced if we look, secondly, at the rhetoric of ‘inwardness’ that appears as a unifying theme in much of the Sermon. Our contemporary intellectual climate, as we noted at the beginning of this essay, has taught us to be wary of interiority—the privileging of motive, the search for authority or integrity or authenticity in an ‘inner’ identity unsullied by the body or history, the essentialism in various doctrines of human nature that arises from a preoccupation with the hidden and true ‘centre of the self’. Nietzsche’s denunciations of Christian moral discourse frequently return to this point, to the poisoning of the wells of human life by encouraging scepticism about appearances. The Sermon has, it seems, a lot to answer for, if this is its progeny.

Well, yes, it does; we have to grant the ways in which a rhetoric of interiority which Christianity has consistently fostered has had philosophical and moral and cultural consequences that have been corrupting. But if we jump to hasty conclusions here, we shall have missed something of the Matthaean ethic; it is not developed with the conscious and extravagant irony of Paul, but it suggests its own ironies. Matthew does indeed take it for granted that integrity belongs in an inner realm and that it is not to be constructed or construed in terms of patterns of action alone. But if he privileges truth in the inward parts, it is not, as in most of the more modern varieties of discussing interiority, so as to allow the inner to be deployed. If the interior is the place of truth, it can never be deployed; you cannot use it to win arguments, to ground anything about your or anyone’s identity, to establish sincerity or good intentions. The inner life, in this context, cannot be spoken; it silences moral defence and debate. If you do what you do to be seen by human eyes, you have your reward; your moral ‘audience’ is the Father en tō kruptō, the one whose habitat is secret places. Because of the Father’s secrecy, the divine judgement, the only one actually of any truthfulness or final import, remains beyond anyone’s power of utterance. It is not an esoteric truth—which is what the appeal to interiority has so regularly become—but an inaccessible truth. In short, the appeal to the inner world is another strategy of disempowerment for the Christian moral agent.

Hence, of course, the injunctions about not judging. There is no secure access to the inner life of another, and if you judge by external standards, you may expect to be open yourself to equally shallow and unmerciful judgement. When Matthew’s Jesus uses the word ‘hypocrite’, as he so freely does in the Sermon, we must not think immediately of a disjunction between
inner and outer, of a problem about sincerity, but of the moral or spiritual weakness of someone who expects to be judged on external performance: in ch. 6, ‘hypocrites’ are not necessarily people who don’t mean what they do, or who are trying to conceal inner unfaithfulness; they are simply (as the Greek word implies) ‘actors’, agents who consciously construct themselves in the process of performance. The word’s negative resonance of deceit or simulation arises from the fact that, if selves cannot really be so constructed, the self that is evolved in patterns of behaviour is in some way false. The ‘hypocrite’ has not learned that the self is not a sort of possessed object, to be refined or matured by conscious practice; the ‘hypocrite’ has to recognize the uncomfortable truth that the self’s standing, the self’s adequacy or excellence or attunement to God (‘blessedness’), is out of the agent’s control. Matthew foreshadows here the later Christian paradoxes explored in Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine, paradoxes concerning the systematically unknowable character of the self. But he has given this theme a more clearly defined moral edge by linking it with the proscription of judgement or, more exactly, of offering oneself for judgement by humanly perceptible criteria.

Of course Matthew’s general rhetoric in the gospel is liberally strewn with judgement and with hostility towards the outsider, the non-believer, the unconverted Jew; this is a still darker aspect of the legacy of the first gospel. This should not, however, lead us to a simple rejection of the ethic of the Sermon, or even an accusation of ‘hypocrisy’ in the modern sense. Matthew, like Paul, is exploring an area of moral danger, and the riskiness of the discourse is exhibited, as with Paul, though less self-consciously, in the failures of consistency. The challenge is still audible: can the moral agent relinquish the centrality of an image of herself or himself as moral agent? So long as we are, so to speak, polishing the image of the agent, what our actions show is a successful will; the meaning of the actions terminates in the will’s success. If we let go of that image, the meaning of what is done is grounded in God, the act shows more than the life of the agent: it shows the character of the creator. But to get to that point, the discipline that the agent has to undergo is attention not to performance but to an interiority that is not to be possessed. It is visible and judgeable only by God. So that, finally, for Matthew, Christian excellence is what it is for Paul: the manifestation of the divine reality in such a way as to provoke thanksgiving and delight. Externally focused morality is unacceptable not because it encourages insincerity, but because it is in grave danger of always terminating in itself, in the successful will, not in the life of the creator. And successful wills do not provoke contemplative joy, on the whole.

In the last part of this reflection, I want to look rather sketchily at the sorts of moral practice and moral critique that might emerge from these considerations.
Scepticism, penitence, irony about performance, the dissolution of the solid moral self built up by good actions—all of this could issue in a morality that is profoundly individualized, incapable of thematizing ethical questions or of providing a critical edge to the believer’s engagement with the wider culture. A sophisticated Protestantism in particular lends itself to some such style, and its literary heritage would be interesting to explore, across a spectrum ranging from John Updike to Antonia Byatt or Iris Murdoch. There are times, too, when this kind of moral scepticism (i.e. scepticism about the attainability, but not the reality, of virtue) is a welcome relief from the deafening new rhetoric of common virtue secured by the balancing of rights and the reparation made for offence. This is a proper concern in reflecting on the conditions of justice, but a poor substitute for the discourse of virtue. Whatever the attractions of this sceptical and reticent ethic, it is not finally a fruitful basis for ethical talk, to the extent that it concentrates upon the realm in which no negotiation takes place, no public risk, no common policies; and it certainly represents only a sliver of the moral world of the writers we have been looking at. I want to propose three elements of the ethic outlined here that might have bearing on the contemporary language of public or common moral practice and speech.

(i) The sceptical or reticent principle, in the context of Christian scripture as a whole, is the negative side of a positive insight. The controlling question of much, if not most, of our New Testament is about who belongs among the community of the friends of God, formerly identified exclusively with the people of Israel. Paul and the evangelists build on the clearly remembered practice of Jesus, for whom the friends of God are those who are content to accept the assurance of Jesus that their willingness to trust God’s word through him is the sole basis of belonging with God’s people. To hear and accept that word is not to perform a task (there is no satisfactory answer to the rich man’s question as Matthew records it, ‘What good deed must I do to have eternal life?’), but to enter into the sharing of Jesus’ company, foreswearing any other kind of claim to God’s favour than the assurance given by God of an unearned and prior favour freely offered. Virtue in this new community of the friends of God thus comes to be bound up with the steady critique of all practices that reinstate or try to reinstate claims on the love of God grounded in achievement. Positively, this casts light on the way in which Paul, especially in Rom and I Cor treats ethics, questions of specific behaviour, as governed by the principle of ‘edification’: good acts are those that build up the Body of Christ. Virtue thus rests upon the fundamental process of curing the delusion that I have an interest or good that I alone can understand, specify and realize. It is essentially to do with the definition of an interest that is both mine and the other’s, since what we most basically share is the assurance of being equally valued or welcomed by God. What I think I possess is there to be given for the sake of that newly envisioned common interest. When Paul deplores ‘boasting’, and he so frequently does,
it is to undermine the nonsense of any language about claims within the Christian community.

Christian ethics thus suggests a nuanced approach to some of those issues of justice or reparation touched on earlier. On the one hand: the Church has or should have a quite disproportionate interest in how mechanisms of exclusion work in human societies, in what sort of things are deployed to make claims that allow this person or group in and shut that one out. Christian ‘bias to the poor’ is not simply a doctrine that God likes poor people better than others, and that is all there is to it. It is, rather, a persistent critical concern about how claims to do with security and legitimation are made, both in and out of the Church. It is a ‘bias’ in the sense that the Christian begins with a non-negotiable commitment to basic egalitarianism.

On the other hand: Christian ethics can never be happy with a model of justice that is solely or even primarily reparative. The good or interest of the excluded matters not in itself but as the indispensable and unique contribution it constitutes to the good of all. The language of ‘rights’ is an important dialectical moment in ethical discourse, but becomes sterile when it is divorced from a proper conception of the human good that has to be worked on in conversation with others. In this sense, strange as it may seem to put it thus, Christian ethics is relentlessly political, because it cannot be adequately expressed in terms of atomized rights invested in individuals or groups, but looks beyond to the kind of community in which free interaction for the sake of each other is made possible. That means adjustment and listening; it means politics.

(ii) When ethics ceases to be about securing claims, it is free to rethink itself as something like the reading of a particular language; that is to say, it can concern itself with what acts mean or communicate, not what they contribute to a tally of successful performances and whatever results may accrue from that, nor how acts correspond to a scale of rightness and wrongness constructed in the abstract. The crucial question that has to be asked in the Christian moral evaluation of act or character is, does it speak of the God whose nature is self-dispossession for the sake of the life of the other? of the commitment and dependability of the divine action towards the creation? of the divine relinquishment of ‘interest’ and claim as embodied in the life and death of Jesus? These are not, I think, issues that leave us with an individualized or uncritical ethic. They are matters capable of being raised in the context of sexual ethics as much as the ethics of business or international relations. And it may be that something like this is rather badly needed as the discourses of Christian ethics polarize increasingly between legalism based on the injunctions of the text and a vacuous experientialism, appealing to precisely the wrong sort of interiority for its criteria. It might allow us to recognize that the actions of Christians are constantly called upon to manifest God so that God may be glorified, and yet are enacted in a world where circumstances oblige us to choose between more and less damaging (and
therefore, in respect of God, more and less opaque) options; where this happens, where the tragic dimension of the moral world impinges, what gives glory is—if we have been reading Paul (and even Matthew) correctly—the candid acknowledgement of powerlessness, in grief, not in complacency, because this in its way models the divine dispossession.

(iii) Finally, let me be allowed one more use of that annoying word, ‘paradox’. The kind of interiority that seems to be evoked in the Sermon on the Mount points not to an undervaluing but to a revaluing of the bodily agent in our ethical thinking: a paradox. If the interiority in question is the ‘secret place’ where God lives, then, as we have seen, it is not a higher and better sphere of performance: motive and intention cannot be elevated above practice or treated as sources of authority or legitimation. The challenge is to move entirely out of the performance-oriented world. External achievement does not secure status, but neither does intensity, sincerity, or good will. The inner sphere belongs to God’s judgement and is not available. What is available is action: judged not according to how it serves to secure a position before God and others, but according to its fidelity to the character of God, its ‘epiphanic’ depth. This allows us to pick up the sound Aristotelean point that doing worthy acts is a way of becoming a worthy person, in the sense that options may be evaluated by their possible transparency to God, not by their presumed correspondence to a hidden good (or otherwise) will: the inner may well follow the outer, as far as the actual processes of transformation go. But the basic point remains: of course, I cannot become a worthy person in any sense that would presume to make me worthy of God’s regard. But attention to the degree to which my choices might be read as open or not open to God’s glory might help to free me from the tyranny of both motivation and achievement. If this at all recalls Luther’s notion in chapter 27 of The Liberty of the Christian that the believer, like Christ, acts in charity because a given (not attained) reality is simply expressing itself in his or her life, that is no accident. If it also recalls Eliot’s transcription of the Gita on detachment from ‘action and the fruits of action’, doing what corresponds to truth and wisdom for its own sake, not because of a clear calculation of results, that is no accident either.23

NOTES

3 Phenomenology, 133–50.
4 This would be my central criticism of ‘non-realist’ accounts of theological discourse, in particular the work of Don Cupitt; see, for example, his Creation Out of Nothing, (SCM Press, 1990), What is a Story? (SCM Press 1992), etc.

6 Cf. Augustine, de trinitate VIII (esp. vi. 9) on the connection between love of the good and love of justice (since loving the good means desiring that the good be present in all subjects).

7 Diogenes, the ‘patriarch’ of Cynicism, flourished in the middle of the fourth century BCE, and was thus contemporary with Alexander; Zeno established the Stoa at the end of the same century.

8 Diogenes, as reported by Diogenes Laertius 6.63; see John M. Rist, Stoic Philosophy (Cambridge University Press 1969), p. 59, for a good discussion of the meaning of this phrase.


11 See n. 10; this book is a valuable essay in comparative anthropology, and makes a strong case for the affinities of Jesus with Cynic teaching. It is weakest in its highly speculative reconstructions of the history of the gospel tradition, especially the passion narratives.

12 Crossan, op.cit. p. 262.


14 Ibid., p. 189. The term ‘mimetic obstacle’ refers to the way in which a desired object possessed by another subject occasions frustration; the possessor has what I want, and is therefore what I want to be like, what I desire to imitate, but his/her possession of what I want is not only the occasion but the obstacle of my desire.

15 This is brought out very finely in the work of Gillian Rose on Hegel; see particularly Hegel Contra Sociology (Athlone Press, 1981); and Judaism and Modernity (Blackwells, 1993), especially the Introduction.

16 This is how Mary Magdalene is introduced in Lk 8.2, as one of a number of female followers alongside the Twelve, distinguished as those who have been healed by Jesus.


20 A significant recent exception is Dan O.Via, Jr., Self-Deception and Wholeness in Paul and Matthew (Fortress, 1990). This book converges at several points with my argument here, and I am glad to acknowledge my debt to it.

21 See Via, op.cit. pp. 112–127 on the Beatitudes as presenting the dialectical character of a present blessedness conceived in terms of present ‘emptiness’.

22 Ibid., pp. 92–98, on hypocrisy as self-deceit.

23 Sections 1 and 2 of this paper have appeared as Ethik und Rechtfertigung in Rechtfertigung und Erfahrung, ed. M. Beintker, E. Maurer, H. Stovesandt and H.G. Ulrich, Gütersloh 1995, pp. 311–327. Much of the remainder was prepared as a response to a still unpublished manuscript by Ellen Charry on ethics and spirituality entitled (provisionally) By the Renewing of Your Minds. The Salutarity of Christian Doctrine, discussed at a symposium in March 1995 at the Divinity School of Duke University on ethics and the New Testament. I must acknowledge my great indebtedness to Professor Charry for insights contributory to the present essay.