

THE AUTONOMOUS SELF AND THE COMMANDING COMMUNITY

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THE PROBLEM of authority in our Western religious institutions arises essentially from our widespread acceptance of the notion of personal autonomy. This doctrine so fundamentally characterizes liberals like me that our religious bodies must be substantially structured in terms of it and our relationship with God is fundamentally correlated with it. In my opinion, its influence has also been widely felt even in those religious communities that affirm that their corporate forms derive in significant detail from God's revelation. How we transform that originally secular notion so that it may find a proper place in our service of God affects not only our understanding of faith but (what directly concerns us here) our conception of the legitimate authority of our religious institutions. I therefore propose to approach the issue of social discipline by first clarifying how I think we ought to frame our concept of personal religious autonomy. I shall do so by examining certain representative thinkers who have materially influenced me with regard to this issue. Then, having established what I take to be the right contemporary challenge to traditional religious notions of corporate authority, I shall seek to mediate between religiously autonomous persons and their communities.¹

I

Any thoughtful discussion of autonomy must focus on the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Were there space, I would begin with more than a nod to Peter Abelard,² Thomas Aquinas,³ and Martin Luther, who in their own ways pointed us toward modern individualism. I shall, however,

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¹ Readers eager to know the central methodological considerations on which this study rests will find them briefly stated in Section III.

² "For Abelard sin lay solely in the intention. A man could not be called a sinner because he did what was objectively wrong, nor because he felt a sinful desire; sin, purely and simply, lay in consent to sinful desire" (C. Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual 1050–1200* [New York: Harper & Row, 1972] 75).

³ "The general principle he advocated was that 'every man must act in consonance with reason' . . . a principle which persuasively demonstrates the advance in individual ethics and a principle which begins to assert the autonomy of the individual in the moral sphere" (W. Ullmann, *The Individual and Society* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1966] 127).

allow myself a few sentences on René Descartes and Jean Jacques Rousseau to serve as an introduction to the great Koenigsberg thinker.

With Descartes a decisive negative principle became basic to the nascent Enlightenment and the related enfranchisement of the individual: we ought to doubt every idea until it is a clear and distinct truth to us. As Descartes's procedure of thinking from methodical doubt became a categorical imperative for the modern mind, sovereignty in the realm of value began to shift to the individual from the community.⁴ Single selves now began to sit confidently in judgment over all proposals for their assent or action, and demanded warrants of their personal acceptability.

In Rousseau this assertion of the authority of the self took social, specifically political, form. The negative principle now manifested itself as the indignant criticism of institutions. This leads Rousseau to the positive idea that persons ought to rule themselves and thus that governments ought to be democratic. Our personal experience of democracy—the most humane, if flawed, system of government we know—has provided the social basis for our concern with autonomy. And so to Kant.⁵

In Kant's ethics all other considerations are subordinated to the individual's manifestation of good will. Kant clearly distinguishes between will and impulse. The latter is little more than an animalistic urge and thus hardly an appropriate basis for human action. In human will our drive to action is organized in somewhat rational form.⁶ Our will becomes truly good when it fulfils its rational potential. That means one which does not operate in terms of whim or caprice but only in terms of rational necessity.⁷ A truly ethical will ought not function by a merely contingent principle, for it would have slight rational status and thus infringe on the individual's dignity.⁸ It will therefore also not frame exceptional privilege or apply only to a favored group but will be universal. The best term for such an ethical principle is "law," and a good will is thus one which follows this sort of moral law.⁹

⁴ On Descartes's fundamental individualism, see B. Williams, *The Project of Pure Inquiry* (New York: Penguin, 1978) 69–71.

⁵ The direct link between Rousseau and Kant is concisely indicated by L. W. Beck, *Early German Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1969) 489–90.

⁶ *Ibid.* 490. H. J. Paton, *The Categorical Imperative* (London: Hutchinson, 1965) 80, 82–83. For a more detailed analysis, see the chapter "Kant's Two Concepts of the Will in Their Political Context," in L. W. Beck, *Studies in the Philosophy of Kant* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), particularly the conclusions reached, 221 and 223.

⁷ Paton, *Categorical Imperative* 211–12; E. Cassirer, *Kant's Life and Thought* (New Haven: Yale University, 1981) 244–45.

⁸ *Ibid.* 233.

⁹ On the analogy to the quest for pure reason, *ibid.* 239; Beck, *Early German Philosophy* 491; Beck, *Studies* 224; Paton, *Categorical Imperative* 81 and 207.

Immanuel Kant, then, is the champion of literal autonomy. He teaches an ethics of *nomos*, of law, for reason operates in terms of universal, binding certainties. What constitutes such law, whether in general or in any given situation, one ought to clarify for oneself, since one has the reason to do so.¹⁰ When we abjectly accept moral direction from another, we betray our most essential human capacity. The truly ethical person relies on the self, the *autos*, but does so in terms of ethical law, *nomos*.¹¹ The good will is, in this sense, self-legislating, autonomous.

The unsophisticated modern ear no longer hears the Kantian overtones of the word "autonomy." Instead, it often implies the legitimacy of a privatistic permissiveness, as in the authoritative dictum of popular culture that no one can really tell you what you ought to do. What, we must ask, kept the Kantian individual from this contemporary wilfulness?

For Kant, reason ought to control the will lest it become mere impulse. Anarchy, which so often seems to threaten us, is simply unthinkable in Kantian ethics. The rational mind is characterized by lawfulness, not its absence. And what is an ethical law for me personally must, if it is rational, equally be true for all humankind. Kantian self-legislation cannot yield the moral isolation we often see about us.

But why, asks the child of twentieth-century freedom, is Kantian rationality so constraining? What gives it such domineering authority? With such troubling questions, we start our hard way to our contemporary disillusionment.

As a devoted Enlightener, Kant has no doubt that our rationality, above all else, makes us human.¹² In his letter on Enlightenment, he writes that, to come of age, to be mature, means to throw off the tutelage of others and to think for oneself.¹³ Not to progress in fighting the accumulated errors of humankind and to grow more free thinking for ourselves would be "a crime against human nature."¹⁴ He has little doubt that society can only benefit from the growth of self-determination. "Men work themselves gradually out of barbarity if only intentional artifices are not made to hold them in it."¹⁵

In fact, for Kant the identification of our humanity with our rationality is utterly self-evident. For that reason he does not usually bother to

¹⁰ Richard Kroner does not hesitate to call this emphasis on the self "subjectivity" (R. Kroner, *Kant's Weltanschauung* [Chicago: University of Chicago, 1956] 68).

¹¹ Paton, *Categorical Imperative* 180 ff.

¹² Kant demonstrates a certain teleological interest in this regard: *ibid.* 44–45; Beck, *Early German Philosophy* 491.

¹³ I. Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959) 85.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 89.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 91.

discuss it.¹⁶ As the Marburg neo-Kantian Ernst Cassirer puts it,

Critical ethics affords us no answer as to why order takes precedence over chaos, free subordination to the universality of a self-given law over arbitrariness of individual desires. In the critique of reason, theoretical as well as practical, the idea of reason, the idea of a final and supreme union of knowledge and will is taken for granted. Whoever fails to acknowledge this idea thus excludes himself from the orbit of its manner of posing problems, and from its conceptions of "true" and "false," "good" and "evil," which it alone can substantiate, empowered by its method.¹⁷

Written before World War I, that final sentence already testifies to the melancholy fate of a sovereign reason in the century and more since Kant. And the succeeding decades have only further diminished its imperial sway.¹⁸ What was self-evident to Kant had become, even to a leading neo-Kantian, only another possible way of posing and answering questions. Today, the *nomos* Kant empowered with reason's authority has little binding force and a drastically altered sense of the *autos* pervades our discussions of moral duty. Kant may no longer define the term for us, but he more than anyone taught us the dignity of self-determination and did so with such truthfulness that, though we feel we must transform the concept, we cannot surrender it.

The most effective practical challenges to Kantian individualism have come from Marxism and nationalism. Particularly because of our concern with social structures, we must give some attention to their critique of making the single self the foundation of our thought.

Karl Marx often refers positively to the individual, but almost always as part of his apologetic strategy. He is resolutely determined to shift the center of authority from the individual to society or even to humankind.¹⁹ He attacks the notion of autonomy most perceptively by demonstrating that the alleged freedom of individuals in bourgeois democracy comes only with more fundamental alienation from their true humanity. By exposing the deleterious role things play in modern life, the cruel use people make of one another, the harsh power we economically face, he awakens us from our dogmatic dream of our pure inner freedom.²⁰ Our

¹⁶ Again and again for Kant our rational nature requires us to come to certain conclusions: Cassirer, *Kant's Life* 225; Paton, *Categorical Imperative* 240. It also determines his understanding of a rational faith: Beck, *Early German Philosophy* 487; Cassirer, *Kant's Life* 263. Kroner, *Weltanschauung* 35–37, detects some ambiguity with regard to God.

¹⁷ Cassirer, *Kant's Life* 246.

¹⁸ A similarly doleful plaint about the fate of reason from after World War II is made by another Kantian in Paton, *Categorical Imperative* 260.

¹⁹ K. Marx, *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society* (New York: Doubleday, 1967) 457.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 267, 272–73, 458.

ideas as individuals, and the forms in which we think, he rudely insists, will testify far more to the conditions of production under which we exist than to the purity of human reason.²¹

To be sure, Marx is speaking politically rather than philosophically. That is exactly his point, that the only truly significant philosophy will be done in terms of socioeconomic power realities, not speculatively à la Hegel. He summarizes his rejection of individualism at the conclusion of his essay "On the Jewish Question." Marx here is not concerned with the specific situation of Jews.²² Rather he wishes to discuss the abstract issue of emancipation, specifically by denying that gaining individual rights is meaningful freedom. He argues:

Political emancipation is a reduction of man to a member of civil society, to an *egoistic independent* individual on the one hand and to a *citizen*, a moral person, on the other. Only when the actual, individual man has taken back into himself the abstract citizen and in his everyday life, his individual work, and his individual relationships become a *species-being*, only when he has recognized and organized his own powers as *social* powers so that social force is no longer separated from him as *political* power, only then is human emancipation complete.²³

To some extent Marx has persuaded us all. We find it difficult to deny that our individuality is substantially social. For us, therefore, self-determination must mean creating a social order which enables us all to be more fully human. Even when our agenda becomes substantially economic, I do not see this view inherently contradicting Kantianism, for Kant surely knew the importance of fulfilling ethical responsibility in social relationships. The break with Kant comes when Marx says, or is understood to say, that the person is essentially social. Then one effectively nullifies individualism by universalizing it, for now society knows better than its members what their individuality ought to be and totalitarianism replaces autonomy.

The other example of a widely-accepted social understanding of human existence is nationalism, which I shall consider through the thought of one of its most noble exponents, the Zionist essayist Asher Ginzberg. He wrote under the pseudonym Ahad Haam, "one of the people," itself a fine epitome of his position. He deserves our attention because he demanded that all nationalism be ethical. The Jewish national ideal, he further argued, historically goes beyond that to a commitment to moral

²¹ Negatively, *ibid.* 458; positively, 281, 467.

²² When Marx does turn to the specific question of emancipating the Jews, he identifies the Jewish people with everything he despises in contemporary society; the result is scurrilously anti-Semitic (*ibid.* 241 ff.)

²³ *Ibid.* 241.

excellence.²⁴ Thus, in principle, his social theory allows for the clash of wills we are studying. In practice, his understanding of Jewish ethics as well as of nationalism prevents his being of much direct help to us.

Ahad Haam's clearest statement about Jewish ethics comes in his disdainful critique of Claude Montefiore's now, as then, unparalleled commentary entitled *The Synoptic Gospels*.²⁵ Montefiore concluded his 1909 work by suggesting that Judaism had to come to terms with the Gospels to remain a great teaching. Ahad Haam repudiated this notion as inconsistent with the ethics of Judaism. Not surprisingly, he presents his version of the usual modern Jewish polemic against the practicality of Christian love, as exemplified in the Sermon on the Mount. If that might be done on the personal and local level, it would still be utterly ineffectual internationally.²⁶ But the bulk of his argument develops from an acceptance of the old Christian polemic distinction between the two faiths. He argues that justice is superior to love as the standard for human relations. The Jewish national ethic, he opines, is distinctively dedicated to the life of justice. This he takes to be an uncompromising abstract principle, one which gives only a highly limited place to human individuality.²⁷ Typically, he sounds more like a Kantian than a classic Jewish ethicist when he dreams of a day when

Justice will become an instinct with good men, so that in any given situation they will be able to apply the standard of absolute justice without any long process of reflexion. . . . Personal and social consideration will not affect them in the slightest degree; their instinct will judge every action with absolute impartiality ignoring all human relations, and making no difference between X and Y, between the self and the other, between rich and poor.²⁸

As against the injustice and partiality that regularly mar social relationships, such principled justice would be a welcome human advance. But to say that ethically we ought to ignore all "personal and social considerations," "all human relations," seems not only harsh but inflexible and possibly even cruel. One wonders what Ahad Haam thought of the Jewish notion of *rahamim*, of mercy, which in Jewish teaching traditionally accompanies the enunciation of the lofty standards of God's

²⁴ Perhaps the fullest statement is given in the essay "The Transvaluation of Values," in A. Haam, *Selected Essays* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1936) 217 ff. Thus he can say: "It is almost universally admitted that the Jews have a genius for morality, and in this respect are superior to all other nations" (228).

²⁵ The critical portion may be found in A. Haam, *Essays, Letters, Memoirs* (Oxford: East and West, 1946) 127 ff.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 137.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 135.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 132.

and humankind's justice. Unfortunately, Ahad Haam never produced his promised work on Jewish ethics and we have only the comments in his essays by which to fathom his meaning. We can, however, say that where Marx sublimated the self into society, Ahad Haam universalized it to an ethical ideal.

By turning to his theory of the nation, we can ask what he would counsel a loyal Jew whose individual conscience clashes with what Jewish leaders proclaim as each Jew's national ethical duty. Ahad Haam regularly polemicizes against the modern privatization of Jewish lives and stresses the primacy of national considerations in Jewish existence. In his essay "Flesh and Spirit" he argues that individualism denies reality and that the self should be understood properly as a "limb of the national body."²⁹

Yet in the one case where he directly confronts the possibility of such a clash, he backs off from subordinating our individual ethics to those of the nation. Much in his essay "The National Ethic" denies Kantian autonomy, for he declares that one who wishes to be "a whole person in one's role as Jew" should acquire a Jewish national feeling to the point where "it directs one's life and restrains one's will in all one's acts."³⁰ But on the specific issue of marrying a Gentile, Ahad Haam hedges. He acknowledges that from a personal ethical standpoint, a loyal Jew might feel that intermarriage was permissible.³¹ He rejects this—but with what seems a sudden loss of confidence. He makes a radical shift from principle to contingency, and reasons in terms of an emergency at that. Not even making a declaration, he only inquires whether, in the present perilous situation of the Jewish people, it is "not an ethical duty of the nationalistic Jew to defend the folk and to sacrifice one's personal happiness for this."³²

Ahad Haam surely taught much of modern Jewry that ethnicity is the authentic social form of Jewish identity, even religiously. But for all his ethical sensitivity, he did not retain sufficient respect for the individual conscience to be able to help us with the conflicts his social view of Jewishness has engendered, now so greatly magnified by the difficulties faced by the State of Israel.

Marxism and, if not nationalism, then sociology have strongly affected our sense of the self. Most commentators point to the increased privatization of American life as the major result of the flower-child rebellion of the 1960's. For me, an equally important outcome has been the continuing effort to create person-oriented communities and institutions.

²⁹ Untranslated: A. Haam, *All the Writings of Ahad Haam* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1949) 350.

³⁰ Untranslated: *ibid.* 163.

³² *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

Most of the early communes have died. But we continue to see the creation of small groups for sharing significant aspects of one's life or to offset the intensified loneliness which has accompanied growing individuality, in the Jewish community, *havurot*. For us, any consideration of the self must, I think, pay as much attention to its social as to its rational nature. And it is this recognition of our ineradicable sociality which makes conflicts between our institutions and ourselves so difficult to resolve.

Retrospectively, the ethical problem of the self as a social reality may be said to haunt and ultimately render unsatisfactory the life work of Jean Paul Sartre. In its initial stage Sartre emerged as the great philosophic exponent of the utterly free and unlimited individual. The difference between his phenomenological analysis and that of Descartes is instructive.³³ For Sartre, almost all the certainties of substantive rationalism have had to be surrendered. Rather, the world is technically understood to be absurd. Now, literally, there is nothing on which the authentic self may rely and still be truly for-itself. The self has only its freedom given to it. Indeed, in seeking external support to authenticate one's use of one's freedom, one already commits the primal Sartrean sin. As Dominick La Capra phrases it, "This pure and total freedom is an empty spontaneity that approximates blind will and allows only for a 'leap' into commitment."³⁴ Sartre can use the term "autonomy," but with rationality providing no guidance, with the *autos* defined as pure freedom, *nomos* means that it must radically be a law unto itself. The result is a thoroughgoing relativism. As Sartre says in the concluding ethical pages of *Being and Nothingness*, "... all human values are equivalent ... all are on principle doomed to failure. Thus it amounts to the same thing whether one gets drunk alone or is a leader of nations."³⁵ Here Sartre has given refined philosophic expression to the unanticipated outcome of Enlightenment individualism, an agnosticism so universal and profound it has led to moral solipsism.

This Sartrean individualism does admit of one social moral consideration. Sartre acknowledges that the other who stands over against me must be granted the same sort of freedom-consciousness that I possess.³⁶ Sartre has no good reason for this declaration, since one could hardly know any other free self as one knows one's self. Yet this moral deviation from his accustomed rigor testifies eloquently to his ethical seriousness.

Sartre had promised a work on ethics to fulfil the ontological analysis

³³ For the continuities with Descartes, see M. Grene, *Sartre* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1973) 39, 44.

³⁴ D. La Capra, *A Preface to Sartre* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1978) 127.

³⁵ J. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Washington Square, 1966) 767.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 358 ff., 641.

of *Being and Nothingness*. Instead, he turned to the Marxist notion of the sociality of the self in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Though Sartre now situated the self in its socioeconomic situation, nothing in this new analysis resolved his ethical problem of what an utterly free self should do.³⁷ In the *Critique* he did try to frame a way in which groups may properly be said to have a we-subject. But this does not go very far. Though he now acknowledges the many social determinants of our individuality, he does not at all shift the locus of legitimate authority from the self to the group.³⁸ What has happened is aptly summarized by Steven S. Schwarzschild: "*Critique of Dialectical Reason* does not differ very much from *Being and Nothingness* except for the fact that the hole of human autonomy is no longer to be found primarily in the being of some metaphysic but rather within the interstices of Marxist history."³⁹ Again, Sartre promised a successor ethical volume which never appeared, though a posthumous work with the promising title *Power and Liberty* has been announced.

This ethical vacuum in Sartre's thinking has now been filled, at least temporarily, by the publication of three interviews with Sartre by his last intimate associate, Benny Levy. At the end of the third interview Sartre is reported to have said that the Jewish people, by its life, constitutes a metaphysical reality. He renders this extraordinary judgment because the Jewish people has freely dedicated itself to achieving a this-worldly messianism by continually transforming and thereby transcending social reality. Such a statement would be tantamount to a retraction of Sartre's philosophy in prior years, and Simone de Beauvoir has denied that the interviews indicate Sartre's final position. However, Schwarzschild has now massively argued⁴⁰ that Sartre had to arrive at some such conclusion in order to complete his notion of ethical commitment as absolutely freely chosen by a mind rational enough to have such a project. By the time Schwarzschild's deliciously audacious reinterpretation of the Sartrean quest is over, Sartre can be called "a Jew *honoris causa*."⁴¹ By that Schwarzschild means one who espouses Hermann Cohen's Marburg neo-Kantian explication of Judaism's regulative idea.⁴² Thus Schwarzschild

³⁷ Grene, *Sartre* 258 ff.

³⁸ "... there is in Sartre a scepticism regarding the possible primacy of any kind of group life, any life that resists collapse into a constellation of individual consciousnesses in which it exists as an object. ..." (A. Danto, *Jean-Paul Sartre* [New York: Viking, 1975] 135). See La Capra, *Preface* 136.

³⁹ S. Schwarzschild, "J.-P. Sartre as Jew," *Modern Judaism* 3 (1983) 50.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 39-73.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 59.

⁴² For insight into the rival, Heidelberg neo-Kantianism with a more substantive approach to God and thus to classic religiosity (Protestant), see R. Kroner, *Weltanschauung* 40 ff.

can triumphantly identify Sartre's atheism as saying only "what for two hundred years Kant and H. Cohen's neo-Kantianism had said all along. . . ."⁴³ And it is in terms of Cohen's unique notion of messianism as an always beckoning but never attainable ethical goal that Schwarzschild interprets Sartrean ethics. It is regrettable that this fascinating study was published in a Jewish intellectual journal where scholars are unlikely to be able to benefit from and respond to its radical thesis.

Jürgen Habermas may well be said to be presenting the most interesting contemporary secular effort to situate free individuals in a thoroughly social context.⁴⁴ Habermas has tried to face up to the dire moral consequences of our ethical agnosticism in a time of increasingly powerful social structures.⁴⁵ Once again institutional evils impel the thinker to take the self seriously, even though much can no longer be said simply from within one's private individuality. Habermas has sought a ground of ethical value in our lived human social situation. In this way we may finally resolve the perennial post-Enlightenment problem of having to validate a robust social responsibility from a rigorously individualistic source of authority.⁴⁶

Habermas points to communication as unique to human beings and universal in humankind.⁴⁷ Applying a transcendental analytic, he then inquires as to its necessary presuppositions.⁴⁸ Among the most important are the effort to be understood and, therefore, to gain assent to the act of communication (not its content). From this arises the fundamental concern of ethics, to seek the other's agreement or, conversely, the right not to be coerced but to come to one's own understanding.⁴⁹

Rationality quickly claims its place in this process, for Habermas acknowledges the validity of one form of coercion, what he calls the peculiar force of the better argument.⁵⁰ We can then state a new criterion

⁴³ Schwarzschild, "Sartre as Jew" 59.

⁴⁴ To place Habermas' highly Germanic thought in relation to the concerns of Anglo-American philosophy, see the lucid introductory essay by Charles Taylor and Alan Montefiore in G. Kortian, *Metacritique* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1980) 1-21.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 56; D. Held, *Introduction to Critical Theory* (Berkeley: University of California, 1980) 67-69, 134-35, 349.

⁴⁶ For Habermas, humans have an interest in reason which drives them toward emancipation and autonomy; moral freedom is thus the *telos* of philosophy (ibid. 254). See Kortian, *Metacritique* 70, 109.

⁴⁷ His "universal pragmatics" is analyzed ibid. 118 ff., as well as by Held, *Introduction* 332 ff.

⁴⁸ ". . . sometime in the mid 1960s, he seems to have been frightened by the specter of relativism, and retreated into a kind of transcendentalism" (R. Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory* [Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1981] 64). See Kortian, *Metacritique* 121.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 119; Geuss, *Idea* 69; Held, *Introduction* 256, 333.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 344.

of truth, one which we may not be able to exemplify but which we can always endeavor to reach: that is, what would be accepted by everyone under the conditions of perfect communication.⁵¹ In the service of this ideal we must unmask all the present distortions of communication, largely deriving from our social arrangements, and by transcending our false consciousness begin our march toward the ideal.⁵²

Autonomy has now become the individual's right to resist any societal value or structure which remains unconvincingly explained. Without postulating any of the Kantian claims for practical reason, Habermas has made the individual's rationality the hope for ethical judgments and, therefore, social arrangements. By Kantian standards this is a minimalist ethic, but compared to the usual Marxist analysis of the place of the individual in contemporary society, it remains powerfully individualistic. To that extent at least, Habermas is making a significant contribution to resolving the tension between the autonomous self and its social obligations.

Yet the compelling power of this philosophy remains limited by its pragmatic evasion of the metaethical issue of the dignity of the self. In this secularism as in others, it is not clear why one should take the self so seriously and grant it such authority. What we realistically know about most people's lives, most emphatically beginning with our own, surely will not allow us to claim that they merit ultimate worth. If we are to be accorded the dignity of autonomy, it must surely be despite what we regularly show ourselves to be. That, in fact, we Westerners continue to attach such significance to individuality may only be, as Oriental critics suggest, a sign of our faulty sense of reality. Advaita Hinduism advises people to give up this illusion, which arises from a dualism that betrays the oneness of ultimate reality. Less metaphysically, much of Buddhism directs us, as the first step to enlightenment, to acknowledge the truth of *annata*, that there is no such thing as a self. Why, then, do we take it so for granted? It is hardly persuasive to respond that even the enunciation of such doctrines presupposes communication and therefore its implicit values. Perhaps at certain gross levels of understanding interpersonal communication remains necessary, but with a growth in insight speech becomes increasingly inadequate, as the record of the odd forms of religious "communication" indicates.⁵³

Moreover, my Jewish sense of content-laden responsibility makes me impatient with learning only the proper form of an ethical imperative.

⁵¹ Ibid. 343–44; Geuss, *Idea*, 65–66.

⁵² Ibid. 70 ff.

⁵³ Habermas recognizes that there are more forms of communication than discourse and he hopes ultimately to consider them all; see Held, *Introduction* 332.

People luxuriating in freedom but unable to determine what to do with it need more substantive guidance. From what source can they gain the values and even the maxims by which they should live? And what might engender in them not merely a possible ethical construction of reality but an imperative of such quality that its appropriate response was one's utmost, lifelong devotion? I do not see contemporary secular reason capable of quieting our insatiable Cartesian doubt about rationalistic assertions concerning the ultimate grounds of our ethics.⁵⁴ This critique of critical reason, set against the background of such certainties as I can affirm, provides the intellectual ground for my now turning to religious thought.⁵⁵

For me, the diverse strands of this post-Enlightenment quest come together least inadequately in the system of Martin Buber.⁵⁶ He knows no utterly discrete Cartesian ego but only a self which is always engaged with an other. So much the phenomenologists might have told us. But Buber also asserts that the self can directly know other selves, and these I-thou meetings are qualitatively more significant than our more precise customary engagement with others as objects. Indeed, Buber contends, the full self truly emerges only in the interpersonal encounter. Through its I-thou relationships it has access to a standard by which to live and an imperative to do so. The ultimate ground of all such I-thou encounters, and not uncommonly the immediate other in them, is God, the Eternal Thou. Because, directly or indirectly, God relates to us precisely as the singular, individual thou we are, we know ourselves, in our specific personhood, to be endowed with ultimate worth.

The notion of autonomy functions here but in transformed fashion. The self, Buber stresses, must retain its individuality in a genuine I-thou encounter. Obviously, if you will not let me stand my ground, then "I" am no longer present to you. In contrast, my individuality only emerges in its fulness in relation to you and because of what we mean to one another. Thereafter I can no longer base my moral judgments on purely private considerations. The *autos* which now seeks the worthy act must always do so as an encounter partner.

⁵⁴ Critiques of Habermas' thought on related if more directly philosophic issues may be found *ibid.* 395 ff. (on making communication normative and using discourse as its model) and Geuss, *Idea* 66-67 (on the absurdity of the ideal speech situation), 81 ff. (on the theoretical problems of Frankfurt School thinking as a whole).

⁵⁵ Max Horkheimer, one of the leaders of the Frankfurt School, seems to have reached somewhat similar conclusions: "By the mid 1960s he felt he could not defend any philosophy or critical stance that lacked a theological moment; that is, an awareness of the transcendent, or the infinite, or the 'Wholly other'" (Held, *Introduction* 198).

⁵⁶ For my understanding of Buber's thought as a whole, see E. Borowitz, *Choices in Modern Jewish Thought* (New York: Behrman, 1983) 141 ff.

No Kantian *nomos* can necessarily indicate the obligation that now devolves upon me.⁵⁷ Law seeks to specify the common case. It may, perhaps, speak to my-our present situation. But as I participated in and emerged from our meeting in fresh individuality, a universal law may also not know my-our need. It therefore cannot be granted its old coercive priority. For Buber, *nomos* is our acknowledgment of the commanding power of our relationships. They do not leave us content merely to bask in their significance but send us forth to live in terms of what we have just come to know. In this old-new sense, Buber's dialogical self has autonomy.

The personal effects of the notion of the I-thou relationship are so impressive that its equally social consequences are often overlooked. When we apply the distinction between I-it and I-thou relating socially, we see that our institutions disturb us so because they regularly treat us more as objects than as persons. Instead, we now consciously aspire to a social existence in which people reach out to one another in dialogic concern. Buber terms such a group a community and he, more than anyone I can think of, is responsible for the revolutionary thesis that our highest human duty is to transmute society into community.⁵⁸

Usually this takes place only slowly, by individuals meeting and changing their social relations. On occasion groups as such directly have an I-thou encounter.⁵⁹ Then, as we may have experienced small-scale in work, prayer, or study, we are all momentarily bound up in a unity which did not negate our individuality while fulfilling it in a relation with many others. So the community forged by that experience now becomes valued in itself—and with each renewal of the experience the group becomes more important to our personal existence.

In great historic moments this happens to a folk and establishes its national character. The Hebrews shared such an experience in the events we call Exodus and Sinai—but did so with the unparalleled recognition that they were entering a covenant with God as well as with their newly-born nation.⁶⁰

All such corporate encounters, great or small, generate specific duties, thus specifying the mission on which the group now embarks. These laws retain their legitimacy as long as they continue to express the encounter that gave rise to them.⁶¹ Social forms have a further validity to Buber.

⁵⁷ Buber's most direct statement on this point comes in his response to his ethical critics in R. Schlipp and M. Friedman, *The Philosophy of Martin Buber* (Open Court: La Salle, Ill., 1967) 717 ff.

⁵⁸ M. Buber, *Israel and the World* (New York: Schocken, 1948) 186, 193, 210.

⁵⁹ M. Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Scribners, 1958) 54.

⁶⁰ M. Buber, *Moses* (Oxford: East and West, 1947) 110 ff.

⁶¹ Buber, *I and Thou* 118.

People cannot remain in the I-thou state but must spend most of their lives in the I-it mode. Until the next encounter, the individual should seek to transform the I-it by what is still remembered of the I-thou.⁶²

Secondarily, law provides for the continuity of I-thou reality in our I-it existence, a thesis with major social implications. Here is Buber's explication of the Torah's condemnation of Korah for rebelling against Moses (Num 16):

Naturally God rules through men who have been gripped and filled with His spirit, and who on occasion carry out His will not merely by means of instantaneous decisions but also through lasting justice and law . . . for without law, that is, without any clear-cut and transmissible line of demarcation between that which is pleasing to God and that which is displeasing to Him, there can be no historical continuity of divine rule upon earth.⁶³

Korah was wrong because he argued "that the law as such displaces the spirit and the freedom and . . . that it ought to be replaced by them."⁶⁴ He forgot our I-it historicity, dissolving it in the timelessness of the I-thou experience. Yet to some extent he was correct, for "in the world of the law what has been inspired always becomes emptied of the spirit, but . . . in this state it continues to maintain its claim of full inspiration . . . the law must again and again immerse itself in the consuming and purifying fire of the spirit, in order to renew itself and anew refine the genuine substance out of the dross of what has become false."⁶⁵ Thus Buberian I-thou autonomy holds sway over the Buberian affirmation of law.⁶⁶

This dialogical understanding was the basis of Buber's famous exchange of letters from 1922-25 with Franz Rosenzweig concerning the authority of Jewish law.⁶⁷ Rosenzweig had suggested that Buber accept traditional Jewish law, at least in principle, as a perennial potential course of action. Buber rejected the idea. As he wrote in various letters, "I cannot admit the law transformed by man into the realm of my will, if I am to hold myself ready as well for the unmediated word of God directed to a specific hour of my life."⁶⁸ "I must ask myself again and again: Is this particular law addressed to me and rightly so? So that at one time I may include myself in this Israel which is addressed, but at times, many times, I cannot."⁶⁹ And more abstractly, "for me, though

⁶² Ibid. 48-49, 112-15. Politically, too, M. Buber, *Between Man and Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1948) 64.

⁶³ Buber, *Moses* 188.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ So already in Buber, *I and Thou* 118-19.

⁶⁷ F. Rosenzweig, *On Jewish Learning* (New York: Schocken, 1955) 109-18.

⁶⁸ Ibid. 111.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 114.

man is a law-receiver, God is not a law-giver, and therefore the Law has no universal validity, for me, but only a personal one."⁷⁰

For Buber, concern for the presence of God should be our unqualified primary interest. By that standard, Jewish law seemed more to be serving its own institutional ends, not its Giver. To bring God back to the center of Jewish life, Buber felt he must resolutely resist any prior claims to his devotion.⁷¹

In his earlier years, at the turn of the century, Buber had stressed the group rather than the individual, but from the early 1920's on he felt that nothing was more important than the struggle against the collective.⁷² Today, more than half a century later, we must still oppose our collectives for regularly seeking to nullify or neutralize our autonomy. But, in addition to this struggle, the paramount one of Buber's life, we must carry on another of at least equal significance. We must re-emphasize the sociality of the self, even as we envisage the self fundamentally grounded in covenant with God; for in our time, autonomy has largely shrunk into the notion of the self as a law unto itself. What began as a movement to liberate individuals has now become, through the loss of the old guiding certainties, a means for their degradation. If only to retain the validity of autonomy so as to oppose our overbearing institutions, we need to oppose unrestrained individualism and specify the sources of authority which should limit it. Redirecting autonomy has become as important a task as opposing any collective seeking to deny it. To me, then, autonomy is more God-oriented than our secular teachers admit and more social than the older Buber was willing to concede.⁷³ On that understanding, I now turn to the problem of living in commanding communities.

II

The first premise can be quickly stated. The self gains its worth not from itself but from its relationship with God. Much has been written on that score. More impressive is the way Americans have outgrown the alleged death of God. Adolescents think that to come of age one must spurn one's parents. But after our Oedipal acting-out we can appreciate that intimate relationships, even with persons deserving of deference,

⁷⁰ Ibid. 115.

⁷¹ This, then, is a strategic decision, based upon Buber's estimate of his situation and that of Judaism; it is not a matter of eternal principle. Cf. M. Friedman, *Martin Buber's Life and Work: The Middle Years 1923-1945* (New York: Dutton, 1983) 230, and note his statement about himself as a *hasid* (323).

⁷² Buber, *Man and Man* 80.

⁷³ Cf. E. Borowitz, *Choices* 243-72. For an earlier approach to the issue, see E. Borowitz, "Autonomy versus Tradition," *Central Conference of American Rabbis Journal* 15 (1968) 32-43.

confer rather than impede maturity. So for some years now the quest for personal spirituality has been the outstanding phenomenon of American religious life.

If we can accept God in any significant sense of the term, we cannot employ our autonomy selfishly, that is, without intimate reference to the One who is sovereign and also the source of our freedom. God, in whatever way we relate to God, both bestows and delimits our independence.

We cannot as easily indicate today how human collectives validly ought to exercise significant sway over us. Let us begin by acknowledging that our group has some legitimate authority. We are not usually shaken by simple issues of social order or group discipline. Let us also confess, with some trepidation, that conscience can make ultimate claims upon us. Hence we can understand that in extreme cases we might—may God spare us—have to dissociate ourselves radically from our community. The tangled texture of our problem is most easily seen when a community behest rankles badly and we are suddenly caught between its authority and our autonomy.

The dialectical nature of our present struggle with group authority now manifests itself. As a troubled religious liberal, I feel I must begin from the side of the autonomous self, now bestriding our culture with great self-assurance. And I want to say a strong word about its essential sociality.

The Cartesian discrete self is a methodological fiction, useful for intellectual purposes and perhaps even necessary in our present understanding of our existence, but a fiction nonetheless. But what began as a heuristic device has become a metaphysical given. In truth, we are all very much more the children of our time, place, and community than of our pure thought or free choice. The very project of thinking as a pure mind, for all that it is the work of individual genius, arises within the history of Western thought, itself an elitist enterprise carried out by an uncommonly bookish group of white, middle- or upper-class males addicted to abstraction—of which I am one. The tribal and guild aspects of philosophy and theology are readily apparent to any perceptive observer at one of their conferences. Even creativity and individuality quickly become cult activities, and one identifies with them by adopting their garb, hair styles, buzz words, diets, and approved causes. Contemporary individualists did not themselves create the notion of autonomy. They received it as a social inheritance. They now assert their independence of others on the basis of a doctrine they learned from them. Kant would be appalled at autonomy as the ideology of enlightened selfishness; he took persons as ends far too seriously for that.

If we establish our autonomy on the basis of the freedom God has given us, we can hardly escape the consequent sociality of our selfhood.

However we interpret the metaphor, God's voice commands not only the most intense, direct, personal love but also the love of our neighbor. Only by converting a specific directive into a vague sentiment can we arrive at a Judeo-Christian libertarianism.

The exercise of autonomy cannot, then, begin with a Cartesian initial negation of all institutions, lest we thereby deny our very selves. And in this part of the twentieth century I do not see how it can be reinstated on the basis of a Rousseauistic trust in our natural human goodness which would reproduce Eden if uncorrupted by society. The proper use of autonomy, then, begins by repudiating the self as a monad. I am individual and unique but likewise inseparably a part of all mankind. More, by my finitude I am necessarily more intimately linked to some of its vast number than to others. I am therefore morally obligated to live my life in community with them and exercise my personal autonomy in terms of them. To that extent the social critics of individualism, like Marx and Ahad Haam, were correct.

I understand that to mean that my community may reasonably demand of me that I discipline my will so that the community can function and persevere. Moreover, because I am substantially its creation, it can also legitimately expect some sacrifice of my conscience when its promptings conflict with central affirmations of my group. However, these institutional obligations are more than the dues we pay for participation or our simple duty as a result of the sociality of our being. They also derive from our recent, hard-won humility in selfhood. People are not as rational, as selfless, as morally competent as we thought them to be. Our communities and traditions often bear a wisdom far more profound and embracing, and certainly more enduring, than anything we could create on our own. In conflict with it, we must often bow to what, against our private judgment but in due humility, we accept as its superior understanding.

I have not meant by this heavy argument for the sociality of the *autos* and thus of its *nomos* to also make a case for the Grand Inquisitor. I only seek to right a balance—better, to restore a proper tension. I remain committed to the Enlightenment notion that full human dignity requires thinking and deciding for oneself. Today, as two centuries ago, that not infrequently can mean, when pressed, opposing radically what is otherwise most dear to us. As a liberal, I am regularly exasperated by a community wallowing in freedom, whose members love autonomy because it sanctions their casual nonobservance. I have therefore often tried to clarify what God rightfully demands of us.⁷⁴ Here I have tried to

⁷⁴ E. Borowitz, "The Old Woman as Meta-Question," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 44 (1976) 503–15; "Beyond Immanence," *Religious Education* 75 (1980) 387–408; "Liberal Judaism's Effort To Invalidate Relativism without Mandating Orthodoxy," in *Go*

do something of the same for the community.⁷⁵ But when an institution begins to suggest that, on the whole, I will be better off relying on its judgment than my own, then my unrepentant liberalism makes itself rebelliously felt. I acknowledge that in any controversy my community may legitimately ask for my social *bona fides* and inquire what sacrifices I have in fact made as a more than selfish self. But, in turn, I will unabashedly ask for its *bona fides*. What sacrifices has it made of its power, its ambition, its drive to serve itself, for me and those like me who are not merely its beneficiaries but independent centers of worth and wisdom, and not infrequently the source of its authority?

Most social structures still function without essential regard for individual autonomy and its consequences for desirable human relations. Their leaders quickly revert to paternalism, punishment, or tyranny. If autonomous individuals are rightly asked to acknowledge and live by their sociality, then the dialectical demand on institutions must be that they organize and activate themselves out of respect for the fundamental dignity of their participants. Messianically, we yearn for the day when the common course will be directly determined by the common will. Practically, all we can and must ask is that our organizations manifest a major, activist commitment to achieving true community and make regular progress toward it.

I cannot go beyond this clarification of our mutual responsibilities to provide a rule by which these two sources of valid authority can settle serious confrontations. I cannot even specify very far the critical signs by which we may know when we have gone beyond individual sacrifice or institutional patience. But I can provide an old-new term for living in this kind of open, unsettled, but mutually dignifying relationship. It is "covenant," now less a structure spelled out from on high than a more equal effort to live in common need and respect. As is the case with egalitarian marriages, we cannot yet tell what forms and processes are appropriate to most people in such arrangements. We can, however, accept covenantal relationship as a central ethical challenge of our time and pragmatically see how we can sanctify our lives by employing it. For some such reason, I take it, God has put us in an open history.

In my view, the foregoing analysis applies to secular as to religious institutions but it takes somewhat altered form when applied to the corporate life of biblical religions.

and Study, ed. R. Jospe and S. Fishman (Washington: B'nai Brith, 1980) 149-60; "Affirming Transcendence: Beyond the Old Liberalism and the New Orthodoxies," *Reconstructionist* 46 (1980) 7-17.

⁷⁵ Though written in 1981, my paper "The Autonomous Jewish Self" may be seen as a companion piece to this study; it is scheduled for publication in *Modern Judaism* 4 (1984) no. 1.

I begin again with the sociality of the religious self. For all our contemporary spiritual search, there are few if any people whose resulting faith is not substantially another variation of a long historical tradition of the East or the West. And if we confess that our selfhood and autonomy are grounded in God, then we are commanded to live as part of a religious community.

In classic Judaism the social takes heavy precedence over the individual. The Covenant (the capitalization indicates reference to the Sinaitic Covenant) was not made with individuals but with a folk, the people of Israel. The individual Jew participates in our intense, personalistic relationship with God—no priests, no sacraments, no hierarchy—as part of the folk's religio-ethnic intimacy with God. Our modern non-Orthodox Judaisms have extended the power of the individual in that relationship. They use the concept of individual autonomy somewhat differently but they all assert their Jewish authenticity by their continuation of the people of Israel's historic Covenant.

I believe that we modern Jews properly exercise our autonomy only when we do so in terms of our relationship with God as part of the people of Israel and as the latest expression of its long Covenant tradition. Two intensifications of our general human sociality arise from this situation. As in all religions, the most utterly fundamental human bond is at stake here, namely, that with God. Hence our religious communities and responsibilities should properly be invested with profound devotion and commitment. Moreover, because of the ethnic base of its Covenant, Judaism emphasizes the social means by which this relationship is lived. The Jewish people world-wide, its local communities, its families, its progeny are the immediate means of the sacralization of Jewish existence. Though private devotion is esteemed and even demanded, though a fierce intellectual individualism has been one great source of our folk pride, living the Covenant has always meant linking oneself intimately to other Jews and their practices.

Most Jews who modernized had such great confidence in Western culture or disdain for the ghetto that they exercised their autonomy with little regard for the Jewish people, less for Jewish tradition, and little if any for God. Despite a resurgence of Jewish ethnicity, that still remains largely true. But a significant minority among us, very much more humble about the spiritual strength of our civilization, has learned a new respect for Judaism's wisdom, and even that of its God. Where this has become an affirmation that the people of Israel's Covenant is qualitatively unique, group loyalty and discipline have been even further intensified.

For their part, our religious leaders, we must admit, bear impossible burdens. How do we suggest they turn institutions into communities?

Not every change they have initiated has proved entirely beneficial. Others, which have been resisted, have shown their mixed value when implemented elsewhere. Besides, tradition has often held up well against modernity in recent years. Surely the accumulated wisdom of centuries should not easily be surrendered for what may announce itself as ethics but may soon be seen as one decade's passion.

Moreover, our leaders must make their decisions in terms of what God wants God's community to be doing, an agenda they must largely define and effectuate. Even as they know they are not God, they must not shirk the special dignity of their roles which invests their decisions with a special measure of God's own authority.

Jewish institutional leadership finds these problems exacerbated by the persistent threats to our existence. The Holocaust ended whatever sense of ultimate security the Enlightenment and secular democracy had given modern Jewry. The continuing peril of the State of Israel, our people's redemptive response to the Holocaust and therefore our unique contemporary symbol of the Covenant, keeps our leaders in a state of constant alarm. The people of Israel needs vigilant defense against its foes; how can it then easily tolerate critics and dissenters? The Jewish religion is threatened by a community which knows and practices little, and which believes even less. The modernization of Judaism has not produced a widespread non-Orthodox Jewish piety; then, shall what has been preserved of our tradition now be further vitiated?

All American religious institutions can surely find strong warrant for resisting further individualization as they reap the rewards of disillusion with our secular idols. However, it ought not lull them into expecting that we shall long be satisfied with them if they do not actively respect our autonomy. Believers not only expect our religious institutions to serve as social models of the humane values God demands of us as individuals; we expect that they do so in exemplary fashion. We know that we cannot realistically demand that our religious leaders be saints and our institutions perfect. We also cannot allow this to be their excuse for demonstrating little more corporate righteousness than the unconsecrated do; for we can find individual holiness by ourselves. What we seek from our institutions is the social elaboration of our private responsibility, and we know that only in its corporate religious exemplification can the full dimensions of the sacred enter our individual lives.

Most Americans do not currently find their religious institutions meeting their spiritual expectations. Against everything sociologists keep telling us about secularization, pollsters regularly find that the overwhelming majority of us continue to profess belief in God and a broad range of other Judeo-Christian beliefs. But these believers are dramati-

cally less involved in our institutions and their practices. I admit that this discrepancy says something about what one can learn by polling people about their beliefs and much more about the depth of faith being held. It also says to me that many Americans remain children of the Enlightenment, experts in criticizing their social institutions, particularly the religious ones, for not living up to the values they proclaim. I read their massive Lincolnesque defection from us as being in large part God's judgment upon our institutions for failing to exemplify better what God wants of us.

Here too I can adumbrate no rule for mediating between the conscientious self and the church or synagogue seeking to be true to its God-given mandate. The inspirited soul has always expressed itself in amazingly diverse fashion. Today, with individualism a primary good, with cultural lures of the most diverse kinds held out to us, we may expect people to hear God making an even broader range of demands upon them. But if they are part of the biblical witness of faith, they will, in some central way, be called to live in a community of fellow believers. The authenticity of their personal demands upon their institutions will first be ascertained by their response to their corporate obligations. What do they know of the tradition they are judging? What sacrifices have they made to its discipline? What place have they given the community in their vision of the proper service of God, and is it one by which it can legitimately hope to continue in faithful corporate service to God until the Messiah comes?

Then individuals, practicing what I have tried to explicate as a faithful biblical autonomy, will make their counterdemands upon their institutions. How have they used their power in relation to individuals and in pursuit of their corporate aims? How much dissent and pluralism have they tolerated or encouraged? How far have they sought to lead us and our society to a more humane existence rather than merely mirror or modify its present virtues and vices?

Our problems and opportunities arise from the need to refashion the covenants which have shaped the life of religious institutions. Heretofore they have derived essentially from two major centers of authority: God and God's people as a body. The rise of the notion of religiously autonomous individuals demands that a third partner now be fully acknowledged in the alliance.

I do not mean to suggest that God ought now be any less the primary figure in this expanded partnership. If my symbolism for God is less monarchical and more dialogical than has been traditional, I do not propose by stressing God's availability and gracious grant of human freedom to demean God's transcendent authority. Whether as people or

as individuals, our existence devolves from God and ought to be dedicated, beyond all else, to God.

I also hope I have made clear the continuing necessity of structured religious sociality. Even as selves, we need the church and synagogue if we are to serve God properly. We therefore accept the yoke of their discipline and the guidance of their teaching.

To these two traditional foci of religious authority we now insist on adding a third: ourselves in our autonomous individuality. We are not bereft of God's presence or ignorant of God's present, commanding word. Seeking in some individual way to fulfil what we dimly but undeniably come to know God wants of us, we ask our institutions to treat us with a new, because greater, measure of covenant loyalty. We require more help and encouragement from them in working out our personhood in their midst, even if that engenders greater dissent in ideas and divergence in practice than has been acceptable heretofore. We know that there are always many good reasons for not sharing power with others, but even our humble sense of our individual dignity will not let us now be content with demanding of them any less. It is time for us to become the persons as well as the people of God.

III

Permit me now to conclude with some paragraphs on what I think I have been doing in these pages, thus fulfilling the contemporary theologian's compulsion to discuss methodology. Most theology is done from certainty. Some colleagues are confident they know how people ought to think, or the structure of universal human nature or experience, or what ultimate questions arise from our existence. Others speak with assurance about what religion is or ought to be, of how history operates, of the details of what God has told us, or even of what God is. I am unsure about all these matters and many more having to do with my faith.

What is clear to me at some moments often becomes problematic later. And what I once knew I could not accept has, on occasion, become significant to me later. Each of my affirmations seems troubled by many questions and doubts. Often I seem to hold them so lightly that the slightest thing could make them fall away from me. I do not find myself alone in this religious hesitancy.

All things being equal, we can say that most people in other ages were reasonably secure in their faith. When spiritual problems or possibilities arose among them, or when new ways of thinking about their belief came to them, they created intellectual systems which reflected their situation. Theologies of certainty thus arose and became traditional among us. Not sharing that sort of stability, religiously or culturally, I cannot properly

carry on that enterprise. For myself and the many like me who find large measures of doubt and vacillation included in their faith, I work at what I have come to call the theology of comparative uncertainty—if it may be called theology at all.

I would not essay such a problematic effort were it not for two facts. The first has to do with the limits of my uncertainty. If the theologians and philosophers of religion I read regularly show me how little I am sure of, then the nihilists and humanists who surround us in this culture regularly make plain to me how much faith I still retain. For all I do not know and cannot make clear and distinct, I do not believe nothing. And what little I can say I do believe is utterly decisive for how I understand myself and what I must try to do with my life. Second, for all that I am baffled by how to do so properly, I want to think very hard about my belief. Indeed, just because I cannot be very precise about my faith, I seek to clarify intellectually whatever I can give reasonable articulation. I do not find very congenial modes of abstract discourse with which to pursue this work of reflection, but I know I cannot be true to the cognitive capacity God has given me if I do not employ it in God's service as best I can. And this dialectic of faith and uncertainty engenders my kind of theological studies.