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A Christian Context for Conscience? Reading Kierkegaard's Works of Love Beyond Hegel's Critique of Conscience

Philip G. Ziegler
University of Aberdeen

SUMMARY

In several late works, Kierkegaard propounds what he calls his "second ethic," one which "presupposes Christian dogmatics." This ethic confounds typical characterizations of Kierkegaard's project as but a variation of the Kantian assertion of the radical moral autonomy of the individual. In fact, in *Works of Love* Kierkegaard reworks one of the hallmark categories of Kantian ethics – conscience – in explicitly theological terms precisely in order to *resist* the collapse of moral reflection into merely subjective caprice and formal vacuity. In doing so, he draws surprisingly near to his arch nemesis, Hegel, and provides an account of conscience highly illustrative for contemporary Christian reflection.

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

In mehreren späten Werken legt Kierkegaard das vor, was er „zweite Ethik" nennt, eine Ethik, die „christliche Dogmatik voraussetzt". Diese Ethik irritiert typische Charakterisierungen des Kierkegaardschen Projektes als eine bloße Variation der kantischen Behauptung der radikalen moralischen Autonomie des Individuums. Tatsächlich arbeitet Kierkegaard in seinem Buch Werke der Liebe eines der bezeichnenden Kategorien der kantischen Ethik – das Gewissen – in explizit theologischen Begriffen mit dem Zweck um, dem Zusammenbruch moralischer Reflektion in eine bloße subjektive Laune und in eine formale Leere *zu widerstehen*. Indem er dies tut, kommt er seinem Erzfeind Hegel überraschend nahe und bietet eine Darstellung des Gewissens, die für die heutige christliche Reflektion sehr erhellend ist.

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RÉSUMÉ

Dans diverses œuvres de la fin de sa vie, Kierkegaard propose ce qu'il nomme sa « seconde éthique » et qui « présuppose la dogmatique chrétienne ». Cette éthique mêle les caractérisations typiques du projet kierkegaardien avec ce qui n'est autre qu'une variation de l'affirmation kantienne de l'autonomie morale radicale de l'individu. En fait, dans ses « œuvres de l'amour », Kierkegaard refond l'une des catégories principales de l'éthique kantienne, celle de la conscience, en termes explicitement théologiques, justement pour éviter que la réflexion morale se réduise à un simple caprice subjectif et qu'elle sombre dans une vacuité purement formelle. En faisant ainsi, il se rapproche étonnamment de Hegel et apporte une manière de considérer la conscience qui est très éclairante pour la réflexion chrétienne contemporaine.

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Introduction

In our time, the concept of conscience is closely, perhaps inseparably, associated with the modern notion of freedom as the self-determination of the enlightened subject. Whether in the religious or more broadly ethical sphere, appeal to conscience often sets individual moral autonomy over against the claims of external authority of one sort or other. This conceptual inheritance has its origins in the Enlightenment liberalisms of Locke, Bentham and Rousseau. However it finds it most remarkable formulation in Kant's practical philosophy. Kant's account of the formal, absolute, universal and subjective character of conscience as the seat

of rational human moral reflection and legislation is a watershed from which contemporary common sense notions of human freedom as the exercise of the unrestricted self-legislating will are all downstream.

It is precisely this Kantian view of the self with its absolute claim to moral self-determination which comes under Hegel's critical scrutiny, and prompts him to develop an ethic which avoids the problems he sees besetting any such radically subjective account of morals. For Hegel, the perils of the radically subjective conscience of Kant's *Moralität* are surmounted by recasting conscience within an account of what he calls *Sittlichkeit*, or actual socio-ethical life. This ethical life overcomes the apparent opposition of the freedom of subjective Spirit (which is the heart of *Moralität*) and the claims of objective Spirit (which constitute the structures of abstract Right), and shows up the essential coherence of individual moral freedom and objective social structures and obligations.

As in all such dialectical ascents in Hegel's thought, subjective moral freedom is surpassed, but only so as to be essentially preserved. Of course, on the other side of this ascent the very idea of ethical freedom is transformed: if, from the perspective of *Moralität* freedom is construed as freedom *from* external, heteronomous ethical constraint, from the perspective of *Sittlichkeit* this opposition of internal and external, autonomy and heteronomy is abolished, so that freedom can now be said to be freedom *freely* to assume and exercise one's role in social and political life. Individual conscience and external moral claims are no longer at odds with one another in Hegel's vision of a human moral freedom "grounded in the *acceptance* of our defining situation... [and] powered by an affirmation of this defining situation as *ours*."

Now, readers of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* will no doubt recall the Dane's allergy to Hegel's *Sittlichkeit*, a dis-ease made manifest under the evocative figure of the story of Abraham and Isaac (Gn22:1-18), and focussed in the concept of the teleological suspension of the ethical. In that text, Johannes *De Silentio* struggles to extract the individual out from under the totalizing claim of the ethical sphere of custom, role and law (the constituents of *Sittlichkeit*) by positing a religious sphere of individual obligation beyond that of ethics: Abraham's freedom to respond to God's concrete command to sacrifice Isaac *must not* be constrained by any external complex of social obligations, including – alarmingly – that of father and son. *De Silentio* contends that such constraints are impotent in relation to the radical personal freedom of the 'Knight of faith'. Indeed, this work is commonly taken to be an assertion, *contra Hegel*, of the autonomy of human conscience in the teeth of the claims of ethical community.

But is this view of things correct? Is *De Silentio's* task in effect, to put the Hegelian genie 'back in the Kantian bottle' with the help of religion? Is Kierkegaard's own understanding of individual autonomous conscience basically an *irrationalized* version of Kantian moral subjectivism, perhaps even its apotheosis? This is precisely the view famously proposed by Alasdair MacIntyre:

> The fundamental doctrine of Søren Kierkegaard is that not only are there no genuine objective tests in morality; but that doctrines which assert that there are function as devices to disguise the fact that our moral standards are, and can only be, chosen. The individual utters his moral precepts to himself in a far stronger sense than the Kantian individual did: for their only sanction and authority is that he has chosen to utter them.

MacIntyre takes Kant's moral philosophy to be the "immediate ancestor" of Kierkegaard's work, and sees the latter's book *Either/Or* to be "at once the outcome and epitaph of the Enlightenment's systematic attempt to discover a rational justification for morality" whose essential contribution is to make plain the "arbitrariness of our moral culture".

Such a reading of Kierkegaard's understanding of morals in general, and of conscience in particular, is inadequate in the extreme. Not only does it fail to locate *Either/Or* and *Fear and Trembling* in the movement of the authorship, it also neglects to take seriously the teaching developed in the later and explicitly theological writings which form the *telos* of Kierkegaard's life work as a whole. Whereas the ethic put forward in *Fear and Trembling* is chiefly polemical and tactical in nature, that articulated in *Works of Love* (1847) represents the mature expression of the "new" or "second" ethic to which Kierkegaard had gestured in the early paragraphs of *The Concept of Anxiety* – an ethic that "belongs to a different order of things" because it "presupposed dogmatics". Bruce Kirmmse regards this text as one of the most important of Kierkeagaard's works, and certainly his major ethical work. It is in *Works of Love* that the concept of conscience is treated at length within an account of love as it

to be "Christianly understood" and moved beyond whatever constructive ethical proposals one might glean from readings of *Fear and Trembling, Either/Or* or other works of the authorship on their own terms.

My thesis is this: Kierkegaard's exposition of conscience in *Works of Love* in fact shows him to be in active revolt *against* the Enlightenment view of conscience as the consummation of human moral autonomy. Amy Laura Hall, has persuasively argued that *Works of Love* is first and foremost an attack on self-confident moral reasoning, representing

> Kierkegaard's sustained attempt to reinsert the indicting use of the law into a conversation overconfident in human effort and blithely reliant upon God's corporate dispensation of grace.. to precipitate the awareness of sin indispensable for our repentance and to evoke the confession necessary for our reception of grace.

While I concur with this judgment, it seems to me integral to Kierkegaard's pursuit of this aim, that he must spell out what Charles Taylor has called "a situation for human freedom" wherein moral subjectivity is set within a range of determinate relations which form for it the contours of "moral space". Though differing radically in so many other ways, here for a moment, Hegel and Kierkegaard find a point of positive relation. They together reject a view of moral autonomy that violently abstracts human agents from the fundamental ethical reality in which their agency is exercised, and indeed is possible at all. The concept of conscience Kierkegaard develops moves in the same direction of Hegel's critique of the Kantian ethics of subjectivity; it reasserts, within the very notion of conscience itself, an objective situation by which moral agency is substantiated and to which it is trued.

Of course, the nature of this moral field is markedly different for Kierkegaard than for Hegel. It is the strictly *theological* tenor of Kierkegaard's account of nature and context of conscience that is perhaps most striking here. As David Gouwens aptly describes, *Works of Love* offers "an extensive grammar that examines and tests the quality of human love in light of divine love". For Kierkegaard, the ethical reality in which conscience arises is constituted first and foremost by the God-relationship, and then subsequently also by the relationship with the neighbour God establishes. Crucial is the way Kierkegaard sees these two relations with God and neighbour as relations which *mediate* the willing and doing of the individual moral agent. Such mediation – as Hall's work shows – is no trifling matter either. For conscience is where the determinative reality of these two fundamental mediating relations is brought to bear upon personal moral reflection and finds humble and fragile expression. In the movements of conscience, the moral agent is confronted with the "Christian objection to the self-willfulness of drives and inclinations" and their all-too-human moral schemes are exposed to a "chilling inversion". In conscience then, reality itself as Christianly understood presses in to bring to "make foolish the wisdom of the wise" as it reorients all ethical reflection to that one "whom God made our wisdom" (1 Cor 1: 10, 30).

To grasp Kierkegaard's "second ethic" adequately we must pay close attention to the way it confounds typical characterization of his ethics as a close cousin of the Kantian project of asserting the radical moral autonomy of the individual. And few things show how far off the mark such characterizations are than the account of conscience provided in *Works of Love*. For here Kierkegaard reworks one of the hallmark categories of Kantian ethics in explicitly theological terms precisely in order to resist the collapse of moral reflection into merely subjective caprice and formal vacuity. In doing so, he draws surprisingly near to his arch nemesis, Hegel, in ways that are both telling and important.

Hegel's Critique of Conscience

To draw out the correspondence between Hegel and Kierkegaard at this point, it is necessary to recount all-too briefly Hegel's treatment of conscience in the *Philosophy of Right* and the *Phenomenonology of Spirit*. In both works, conscience marks a penultimate stage in the unfolding history of *Geist*. In Hegel's study of Right, conscience emerges as the most intense expression of *Moralität*, the final moment before the dialectical transition to *Sittlichkeit*. In the *Phenomenology*, conscience is discussed within the "third world of Spirit," that of *moral* Spirit, just prior to the dialectical transition to religion. Although engaging slightly different aspects of Kant's understanding of conscience, in both cases consideration of conscience sets up the essential *problematique* which Hegel's own account of ethical life (and similarly Kierkegaard's own recasting of conscience, as will be shown) attempts to resolve.

It is the nature of the merely moral standpoint,

Hegel says, to focus one-sidedly upon the individual subject and his moral will. Pursued to its end, this unbalanced stress upon subjective moral will results in the good being characterized "as the universal abstract essentiality of the will, i.e, as duty" (*PR* § 133). Whatever is to be done is to be done simply and solely for duty's sake. The good is thus identified with that which duty unconditionally enjoins from within upon the subjective will. But, Hegel asserts, no content is specified for such duty, because,

> duty itself in the moral self-consciousness is the essence of the universality of that consciousness... all that is left to it, therefore, is abstract universality, and for its determinate character it has identity without content, or that abstract positive, the indeterminate. (*PR* § 135)

Left with this abstraction, the moral subject labours under the formal injunction of duty's *ought* without being able to specify or give content to this *ought* for itself. It is at this point that Hegel says conscience arises. It is in conscience that moral self-consciousness "first has its *self-certainty; a content* for the previously empty duty" (*PS* § 633). Playing on the linguistic affinities of certainty (*Gewißheit*) and conscience (*Gewissen*), Hegel defines the latter as "that which establishes the particular and is the determining and decisive element" within subjective moral consciousness whose "universality, reflected into itself, is the subject's absolute inward certainty of himself" (*PR* § 637).

Conscience makes concrete the abstract will. This is to say that conscience is a "simple action in accordance with duty, which fulfills not this or that duty, but knows and does what is concretely right" in any given situation (*PS* § 635). From within the standpoint of *Moralität*, conscience claims absolute moral authority for the subjective insight of the individual. Indeed, conscience is exactly "the expression of the absolute title of subjective self-consciousness to know itself, and from within itself, what is right and obligatory;" it is "the unity of subjective knowing with what is absolute" (*PR* § 137). In conscience, then, the moral subject claims for himself *immediate certainty* of the content of his duty in the form of his own *inner conviction* (*PS* § 637).

So conscience represents the radicalization of whole moral standpoint with its one-sided emphasis on the subjective will. The moral knowing that is conscience is the knowing of,

> the self-assured Spirit which has its truth within *itself*, in *its* knowledge, and therein as knowledge of duty.... In the strength of its own self-assurance it possesses the majesty of absolute *autarky*.... The *self-determination* is therefore, without further ado, absolutely in conformity with duty. (*PR* § 646)

Moral conscience on such a view finally rests upon the individual's "moral genius, which knows the inner voice of its immediate knowledge to be a divine voice" (*PS* § 655).

In the claims thus made for conscience, Hegel sees starkly manifest the heart of the problem with Kantian morals as a whole. In its singular stress upon the principle of individual subjective willing as the essence of the moral life, *Moralität* is driven first to an entirely formal (and so empty) notion of duty, the content of which, if it is to be made specific at all, can only be specified by the self-legislation of the individual moral will. As a result, appeal to conscience represents an essentially *arbitrary* resolution to the ethical problem. In conscience, the subject's "intention, through being *its own* intention, is what is right; all that is required is that it should know *this* and should state its conviction that its knowing and willing are right" (*PS* § 654). Having no reference to an objective content for its moral knowledge nor external motive for its moral will, conscience lapses into capriciousness: the moral subject, on Kant's terms, "in the majesty of its elevation above every specific law and every content of duty, puts whatever content it pleases into its knowing and willing" (*PS* § 655).

As arbitrary, the claim of conscience is also always also deeply ambiguous. Hegel concludes the matter:

> The ambiguity in connection with conscience lies therefore in this: it is presupposed to mean the *identity* of subjective knowing and willing with the true good, and so is claimed and recognized to be something sacrosanct; and yet, at the same time, as the mere subjective reflection of self-consciousness into itself, it still claims for itself the title due, solely on the strength of its absolutely valid rational *content*, to that identity alone. (*PR* § 137)

In its unflinching concentration on formal subjectivity, Kantian morals never grasps this "absolutely valid rational content" objectively, and yet under the rubric of conscience it nonetheless pretends to knowledge of it all the same. Hegel sees in this simply its *reductio* into arbitrariness and pervasive ambiguity. Kant's moral position, finally, must

abandon the determination of the good to the voluntary choice of particular subjects, and thus blurs the distinction between moral and amoral, good and evil. This is what lies behind Hegel's famous charge that "if conscience is only formal subjectivity, to have a conscience is simply to be on the verge of slipping into evil in independent self-certainty" (*PR* § 139).

Hegel presses the logic of the Kantian conscience to its extreme, and so into a fundamental *aporia*, for the sake of resolving it. In the *Phenomenology*, this resolution is found in religion; in the *Philosophy of Right*, in *Sittlichkeit*, where the objective one-sidedness of abstract Right and the subjective one-sidedness of abstract moral subjectivity are each overreached in a *concrete* substantiation of the ethical Idea. But for our purposes, what is most significant in all this is the basic *shape* of Hegel's protest against the Kantian ethics of subjective conscience as the background for Kierkegaard's own reworking of the concept of conscience. Hegel's critique of conscience strikes at its *Situationslosigkeit*, its abstraction from all ethical objectivity, and hence its inescapably arbitrary and ambiguous nature. His own discussion of *Sittlichkeit* re-asserts an external and objective situation for conscience, a situation no longer thought to be at odds with subjective moral freedom, but rather the very condition of possibility for the existence of genuine subjective moral freedom at all. Hegel's solution to the adjudged inadequacies of the Kantian conscience is to provide for it a determinative context in an account of ethical life – under the rubrics of family, civil society and the state – that affords a material (and not merely formal) frame of reference within which conscience can stand as a viable category for ethics. To be rehabilitated, conscience must recover its "ethical substance."

Conscience and Love – Kierkegaard's Recasting of Conscience

We know that Kierkegaard was aware of Hegel's critical treatment of conscience, and that he saw his own account of conscience as adequate to avoid the problems Hegel attacks. In a journal entry from 1849, Kierkegaard writes,

> ... conscience in its immediate state... contains elements which are the very opposite of conscience. Herein lies the truth of what Hegel says about conscience being a form of evil. But in another sense Hegel says this without justification. He ought rather to have said: What many, indeed most, people call conscience is not conscience at all, but moods, stomach reflexes, vagrant impulses, etc. – the conscience of a bailiff.

Kierkegaard distinguishes between conscience "in its immediate state" and conscience shot through with "ethical substance," freely granting the force of Hegel's critique of the former. Is it possible that, in the matter of conscience at least, Kierkegaard and Hegel might prove to be closer than might be expected given Kierkegaard's generally antagonistic posture towards the German philosopher?

Adequately exploring this possibility and rightly interpreting Kierkegaard's concept of conscience are both inhibited by approaches that have exclusive reference to existentialism as an interpretive framework and that neglect, as a matter of course, the later and explicitly theological works which Kierkegaard penned. Readings of this type are legion, and they typically cast conscience as one of a cluster of concepts with which Kierkegaard describes the subjective moral machinations of individual consciousness. On such views conscience amounts to a mode of subjectivity in which "one recognizes the obligation that one has to oneself to become a self" and so is understood solely as an aspect of individual self-consciousness whose origin, function and goal is the self: conscience exhausts its reality completely within the internal dynamics of the moral subject. Indeed, any suggestion the pseudonymous works might give that Kierkegaard conceives of conscience having external reference to "either universal laws, or an absolute *telos* or God" is vigorously resisted in defense of this strictly existentialist interpretation. The result is to ascribe to Kierkegaard a view of conscience as a legislative and juridical faculty wholly internal to the self, which is "immanently present in the being of rational, self-reflective, self-conscious human beings."

If such readings were correct, Kierkegaard's idea of conscience would be squarely in the sights of Hegel's critique of conscience. That such readings are in fact untenable becomes clear in the light of the account of conscience Kierkegaard gives in *Works of Love*. Here we find an explicitly theological doctrine of conscience, one that articulates the concept of conscience *proper* to which Kierkegaard alludes in the journal entry cited above. Here we find that Kierkegaard has carefully attended to Hegel's critique of the morality of the immediate

subjective conscience, and that he develops a view of conscience on the other side of that critique, as it were. Conscience proper, for Kierkegaard, is invested with a pervasive external, objective aspect as Kierkegaard situates the subjective activity of the moral agent within an ethical field of reference in a manner formally similar (despite significant material differences) to the way Hegel moves to place subjective moral freedom with the context of *Sittlichkeit*. Indeed, Kierkegaard looks, rather counter-intuitively, to this account of conscience to do precisely this work.

In *Works of Love*, conscience appears as a supporting theme within the first division of the text, whose overarching theme is the definition of love itself. Throughout, Kierkegaard presses a sharp distinction between erotic love and friendship on the one hand, and on the other what he calls "genuine love" or love "Christianly understood," a love that corresponds to the New Testament use of the word *agape*. The defining mark of this latter sort of love is that it is enjoined upon the individual as a duty, i.e., as something to which one is subject as a command or a law. Christian love, says Kierkegaard, stands under and responds to the eternal divine declaration: "You *shall* love" which is "the *royal* law" (*WL*, p. 24). Ingredient in this divine imperative are the specific objects proper to this love, namely God himself and the neighbour. To love God Christianly is to do so "*in obedience*" and "*in adoration*" while to love the "very unpoetic neighbour" whom "thinkers call ‚the other'" Christianly demands genuine selflessness (*WL*, p.19, 21). The neighbour, as the concrete occasion to enact what the law of love requires, is "nearer to you than anyone else" and takes precedence over erotic love's preferred objects, whether friend or beloved (*WL*, 21).

For Kierkegaard there is a profound qualitative distinction between love as is generally conceived – whose origins lies in "the play of the powers of immediacy" – and the love that is marked by the "earnestness of eternity, the earnestness of the commandment in spirit and truth, in honesty and self-denial" (*WL*, 25). The application of the "word of the *royal law*" to human love subjects it to "the change of the eternal" and wins for it "enduring continuance" (*WL*, p. 32).

As is already apparent by the introduction of these few concepts, Kierkegaard is here at work unfolding his "second" or "new" ethic which presupposes an explicitly Christian point of view. In this ethic, theological concepts taken over from Scripture offer a description of the reality within which the idea of conscience finds its proper place. This is an exercise of "moral reflection" as Oliver O'Donovan describes it, that "necessary taking-stock of the world" which "asks about our placement in the world, our relation to other realities." For Kierkegaard the primary realities that position us ethically are those of God, the neighbour, and the divine imperative to love *Christianly*. These are more decisive than everyday existence, Kierkegaard contends, for "human existence is indeed at hand a second time, but not fancifully; the second time of its existence is its existence in God, or more correctly, this is its first existence, whereby each individual learns from God what the Law's requirement is... (*WL*, p. 117). It is with reference to one's "existence in God" – and ethically this means concretely, one's existence under the claim of the law of love – that an individual finds "substance and purpose and truth and actuality in existence" (*WL*, p. 117). It is of immense importance that this should be the starting point of the "second ethic" and hence also the basis on which conscience is to be treated. Kierkegaard does not take up the matter of conscience as part of a general phenomenological investigation of the moral subject, but only in the course of unfolding a theological account of the world within which the moral subject is set. And this is a world pervaded by the command, ‚You shall love.'

But what of conscience itself? Kierkegaard makes a crucially important remark at the outset:

> If one were to state and describe in a single sentence the victory Christianity has won over the world or, ever more correctly, the victory by which it has more than overcome the world, (since Christianity has never wanted to conquer in a worldly way), infinity's change that Christianity has as its aim, by which everything indeed remains as it was (since Christianity has never been a friend of the trumpery of novelty) and yet in the sense of infinity has become completely new – I know of nothing shorter but also nothing more decisive than this: it has made every human relationship between person and person a relationship of conscience.... just as the blood pulsates in every nerve, so does Christianity want to permeate everything with the relationship of conscience (*WL*, p. 135).

If in secular terms, only the monarch is thought of as having no other duty than the duty of conscience, from the perspective of Christianity this

regal power must not be denied to even the lowliest of persons. In the midst of the performance of everyday tasks, Kierkegaard indicates that everyone may and indeed must say to himself, "I am doing this work for wages, but that I do it as carefully as I am doing, I do – for the sake of conscience" (*WL*, p. 136). By referring one's work to conscience, what is achieved? Not the casting off of worldly labour and obligations – these, Kierkegaard says, remain in place. What occurs he argues is the *infinite inward* transformation of the nature of such labour and obligations; conscience is a register into which the business of life is translated by the force of the royal law of love. The effect is renovate the ethical substance and significance of the circumstances in which the moral life if live while leaving their forms largely intact.

But what does it mean, exactly, to assert that "*love* is a matter of conscience"? It first means that upon entering any human relationship each individual "must first be asked whether he has consulted with God and with his conscience" (*WL*, p. 140). This rather obvious, since what matters to conscience is precisely what is referred to it in moral reflection. Yet something important is indicated by this redundancy – namely, that *each and every* relationship is to be referred to conscience. The scope of conscience, says Kierkegaard, is unrestricted. In fact, he argues that its ubiquitous reach is in some sense analogous to God's omnipresence (*WL*, p. 140).

Its scope clarified, Kierkegaard must still specify the content of conscience itself; he must explain what takes place when human relationships are referred to it. On this score, Kierkegaard explains that the workings of conscience serve the faithful discharge of the royal law of love by first calling to mind what love itself is, and then comparing actual relationships with the true nature of love thus recalled. Conscience therefore takes the individual to that place where the nature of love itself is truly made manifest, where "a doctrine about love that is the essentially Christian doctrine" can be learned, and for Kierkegaard's second ethic this means we "must start from God and must find God in love to the neighbour." In this movement, Kierkegaard contends, Christian faith "takes possession of every expression of love and is jealous for itself"(*WL*, p. 140). Yet, even more concretely, Kierkegaard sees the law of love to be fulfilled in and laid upon us by Christ. Of this he writes,

> Christ was the fulfilling of the Law. How this thought is to be understood we are to learn from him, because he was *the explanation*, and only when the explanation is what it explains, when the explainer is what is explained, when the explanation [*Forklaring*] is the transfiguration [*Forklarelse*], only then is the relation the right one. (*WL*, p. 101)

The life of Christ is the *very definition* of what love is, being the concrete enactment of "love, in the divine sense" (*WL*, p. 110). Kierkegaard, here as elsewhere in his religious writing,sets forth Christ as the love's "crushing" exemplar, and so as the ever indicting rule to which conscience refers itself. In this context it is sufficient to note that the figure of Christ provides the specific material definition of the law of love which besets and directs moral conscience.

Conscience is thus a reflective act wherein an individual sets a specific love-relationship alongside the rule of love exemplified in the life of Christ for scrutiny and judgment. The act of conscience is that act in which the substantive claim of the law of love is called to mind – "learned again" as Kierkegaard says – as the critical and formative gauge of all acts of human love. As such it is always first and foremost a reflexive and juridical act which aims to check "the self-willfulness of drives and inclinations" (*WL*, p. 140) in the exercise of love.

Kierkegaard further specifies the act of conscience by speaking of God and the neighbour as the "middle" or "mediating" terms of all our human relationships. "*Christianity teaches*," he writes, "*that love is a relationship between: a person – God – a person, that God is the middle term*" (*WL*, p. 107). Or again: "it is God who by himself and by means of the middle term ‚neighbour' checks" and adjudges our loving so that only then can it be said that "love is a matter of conscience" (*WL*, p. 142). The primary middle term, God, and the secondary middle term, neighbour, both interpose themselves between the parties of any and all human love, for it is "self-denial's middle term that steps in between self-love's *I* and *I*, but also between erotic love's and friendship's *I* and *other I*" (*WL*, p. 54). With its demand to mediate the act of love through such middle terms, conscience interrupts the moral self with its insistent and cutting question: "is it actually love, in the divine sense, to show a devotion such as the object of love demanded?" (*WL*, p. 18).

For this reason, conscience refuses to leave the subjective moral self alone with its will to love and

the private works of love, but rather demands that this will and these works be mediated – in effect, be externalized and made public – by reference to God and neighbour. Though it is the moral subject herself who undertakes this reflection, the mediating terms come to her from outside and so reflection is drawn outwards, and the self thereby entangled in a set of particular external relations. By introducing God and neighbour as middle terms in the act of conscience, a fundamental sociality or relationality is interjected into the constitution of the moral subject once again, providing an element of heterogeneity within the concept of conscience itself. In this way Kierkegaard makes clear that, Christianly understood, it will not do for the criteria of conscience to be left to the subject's self-determination or personal discernment.

There is a third and final description of conscience offered by Kierkegaard in *Works of Love*: namely that "to relate to God is precisely to have a conscience" such that "the relationship between the individual and God, the God-relationship, is the conscience"(*WL*, p. 143). Keeping in view that God, for Kierkegaard, is never simply a predicate (transcendental or otherwise) of the human subject but is always the One who is separated from the human by an infinite qualitative difference, such a definition of conscience is striking indeed. Although conscience is always an inward movement of subjectivity, it has as an essential and defining element, a relation to another – God – who can never be absorbed or collapsed into human subjectivity. Said differently, moral conscience is never properly in possession of its middle terms – they remain something given to it only in an existing external relation. The self does not have a grasp upon its own criteria for assessing what shape love ought to take in the world, but must at every point redirect this matter beyond itself by referring it to the *object* of the individual's God-relationship, i.e., God himself.

Recall at this point that the God-relationship is not left as a formal concept in Kierkegaard's account, but as noted above, is materially defined in the person of Christ who is for conscience the both the prototype of *the* God-relationship (*vere homo*) and the manifestation of divine love (*vere deo*). Oriented to Jesus Christ as the concretion of divine and human love, conscience is preserved from lapsing back into that subjective caprice and arbitrariness of which Hegel accused the Kantian moral conscience. Kierkegaard acknowledges that preservation from such self-deception is precisely the issue when he writes,

> God wants each individual, for the sake of certainty and of equality and of responsibility, to learn for himself the Law's requirement. When this is the case, there is durability in existence, because God has a firm hold on it. There is no vortex, because each individual begins, not with ‚the other' and therefore not with evasions and excuses, but begins with the God-relationship and therefore stands firm and thereby also stops, as far as he reaches, the dizziness that is the beginning of mutiny (*WL*, p. 118).

Finally then, for Kierkegaard, conscience is the means by which it is ensured that it is not the moral subject *per se*, but ultimately only God become concrete in Christ, "who in every case will determine what love is" (*WL*, p.126).

Where this is *not* the case, Kierkegaard agrees that Hegel's worst fears about moral conscience are fulfilled, and true conscience is lost, being replaced with the arbitrary because autonomous will. He writes, "as soon as one leaves out the God-relationship, the participants' merely human definition of what they want to understand by loving, what they want to require of each other, and their mutual judgment by virtue of that, become the highest judgment" (*WL*, p. 112). In his treatment of conscience, Kierkegaard is working to ensure that the definition, the scrutiny and the judgment of how love ought to take shape in the world are all ultimately ascribed to God. For the moral self only escapes self-deception and illusion as it heeds God's own explanation of love, which is identical (as already noted) with Christ's person and work. No less than Hegel, but for explicitly Christian reasons, Kierkegaard is committed to resisting the capricious conscience of the ethics of subjective conviction. What he says about Christian faith as a whole can rightly be applied to his understanding of the content of the true conscience as well, namely that essential to it is acknowledgment that "it did not originate in any human heart" (*WL*, p. 27). Conscience is not so much the seal of human moral autonomy as it is the subjective reflection upon and inward appropriation of that radical heteronomy that Kierkegaard understands to constitute the reality of the ethical sphere.

At least two aspects of this view of conscience call for further clarification and invite specific criticism. The first is the deep separation Kierkegaard opens up between the inward transformation of love-relationships (and also labour) at the hands

of conscience on the one hand, and the untroubled maintenance of the external *status quo* on the other. The work of conscience is restricted to the achievement, on the part of the individual, of a different *perspective* or way of seeing one's life and relationships that is inwardly liberating but which outwardly changes nothing. If conscience were to give voice to its vocation, Kierkegaard claims, it would say,

> Do not busy yourself with changing the shape of the world or your situation.... No, make Christianity your own, and it will show you a point outside the world, and by means of this you will move heaven and earth; yes, you will do something even more wonderful, you will move heaven and earth so quietly, so lightly, that no one will notice (*WL*, p. 136).

The infinite transformation which Christian faith effects by making everything a matter of conscience – i.e., by mediating absolutely everything human through the God-relation – is limited, it would seem, strictly to the sphere of subjective inwardness. Thus, Kierkegaard contends the manual labourer remains a manual-labourer externally, even as inwardly, despite discovering in conscience his essential equality with the Regent in eternity; and woman remains subordinate to man within the lived actuality of marriage, though inwardly knowing herself the equal of the man before God (*WL*, p. 139).

There are troubling prospects in all of this. To delimit the ‚infinite transformation' of life achieved by conscience to the inward sphere makes the predicate ‚infinite' suspect. Infinite, here, cannot mean ‚total' since a significant portion of the totality of human existence – its external, social aspect – remains in place despite the transformation. ‚Infinite transformation' may well then simply mean that from the standpoint of the infinite (or the eternal) the specifics of one's external situation are so lost from sight and so fully relativized by the loftiness of this view, as to be rendered irrelevant. But such a reading would open Kierkegaard up to the very charge he was intent on pressing home against Hegel: namely, that despite achieving the lofty, indeed infinite, perspective in thought one must nonetheless still live, east, work (i.e., *exist*) in the actual finite world.

It would be a serious irony indeed if the cost of maintaining a doctrine of conscience able to resist collapse into pure subjectivity (as in Kant) by re-asserting the determinative role of external relations (with God and neighbour) were the loss for theological ethics of the significance of the *actual* world, that external "secondary existence" of which Kierkegaard speaks. It seems very odd that the work of conscience as Kierkegaard describes it would *not* issue in a thorough-going renovation of actual human relationships and ways of life and *be seen* to do so. For instance, it should make all the difference in the world of my *actual* day to day life with others that the relationships I have with others are entirely transformed at the hands of conscience by the interposition of the concept ‚neighbour' before any and all other categorical understandings of them, e.g., as spouse, enemy, boss, friend. Loss of the ethical significance of the conditions of actual existence and the hope of their transformation seems too high a price to pay even for correcting the hypertrophy of moral subjectivity. How does Kierkegaard's notion of the infinite inward transformation of one's life in conscience escape this obvious charge of encouraging flight from the actual and into the purely abstract.?

Yet, we have not yet done sufficient justice to Kierkegaard's carefully worded claims here: as "inwardly everything is changed" by conscience so "outwardly the old more or less remains" (*WL* p. 138). Note well – *more or less*. Or again, as previously cited, when you subject love to the scrutiny of conscience, Kierkegaard contends, "you will do something even more wonderful, you will move heaven and earth so quietly, so lightly, that no one will notice (*WL*, p. 136). Conscience affects not only the quality of moral reflection, it also affects the quality of moral *action*. Moral action is not eliminated – after all, something wonderful is *done*, the world around is *moved*. What concerns Kierkegaard much more than this *per se* is the *character* of such action. It is crucially important that the movement of the world by conscience does not occur in a *worldly* way, and that the actions to which conscience leads are enacted *Christianly*. If, unsatisfied with this stricture of Christian conscience, the moral subject grasps rather at immediate secular effectiveness, then "for what she loses she gains only a mediocre compensation in the fragment of externality she can in a worldly way obtain by defiance." (*WL*, p. 139). In short, the promise that attends conscientious action rests upon its comporting with the reality which gives it form. And this sees to it that such action – ever chastened by the claim of the royal law of love and so solidly in need of grace and patient upon God – is in the world but not of it: "What Christ said about his

kingdom, that it is not of this world, holds true of everything Christian. As a higher order of things, it wants to be present everywhere but not to be seized" (*WL*, p. 138). And while this may remain profoundly dissatisfying to the realist and pragmatic mind, in Kierkegaard's view, such is the inescapable and joyful burden of Christian moral life with a faith that "has never wanted to conquer in a worldly way" (*WL*, p. 135).

Second, this account of conscience provokes an important question about agency. Is it God, the human person, or both who act in conscience? Clearly conscience is an human act, since Kierkegaard says that an individual *relates himself* to God so as to "go with God, hold only to him, and understand under God everything you understand" (*WL*, p. 78). But Kierkegaard hints that we can also properly speak of God's agency in relation to conscience when he writes that in conscience it is "*God who by himself* and by means of the middle term ‚neighbour' checks on whether the love for wife and friend is conscientious" (*WL*, p. 142). These two agencies need not be mutually exclusive, though they are frequently taken to be so. At stake in sorting this out is the question of just how liable Kierkegaard's conscience is to collapse back into Kantian subjectivism. This would be a genuine threat if God were invoked solely as an inactive and mute template with which subjective moral consciousness equipped itself. But certain remarks, like the one just cited, militate against such a view of God. And this is borne out in other texts as well. For example, Kierkegaard's understanding of authority as a necessary and perpetual structure of ethical-religious life – as set forth in *The Difference Between A Genius and an Apostle*, published the same year as *Works of Love* – indicates that God's *active* involvement as the addressing *Other* is essential to any understanding of conscience. This view of authority, along with the crucial theme of Christ's *contemporaneity* with every age, speaks strongly in support of Kierkegaard envisaging, perhaps more strongly that *Works of Love* itself makes clear, that divine agency is an essential aspect of the reality of human conscience.

Conclusions

If conscience is in fact, as the etymology hints, a kind of *co*-knowing, a knowing *long with* another, it might be said that Kierkegaard contends that the individual moral conscience co-knows with Christianity as a whole what God gives it to know, namely the command to love and the living and contemporaneous explanation of this command in the person of Jesus Christ. In the act of conscience, the moment of ethical interrogation in which "Christianity steps forward and asks about relationship to God, whether each individual is first related to God and then whether the relationship of love is related to God" (*WL*, p. 108) is reduplicated inwardly. This internal reduplication in the moral subject of what is, crucially, primarily an *external* interrogation *of* the moral subject by God is in essence what Kierkegaard takes conscience proper to be.

As I have argued, conscience denotes the God-relationship in its subjective ethical aspect. The concept speaks at once of an inward structure of subjective life, and of an objective and outward structure of existence to which it is essentially coordinated. As such, conscience is an individual's reflection upon her situatedness within an ethical reality primarily constituted by relations to God and to neighbour, the situation Kierkegaard significantly speaks of as our "first existence, whereby each individual learns from God" what the Lord requires of us. It is in the midst of the reality constituted by one's relationship to God and relationship to neighbour that the imperative command, ‚You shall love!' resounds and is heard. Kierkegaard's conscience is the event in which the self takes up this reality as its own; it is an act which grounds all personal moral reflection and activity in a prior acceptance of a defining situation, a situation most profoundly and properly described in Kierkegaard's view in explicitly theological terms. Hence, in the act of conscience *we* tell ourselves again what we have already heard about ourselves and our situation in the address of another. The disclosure or revelation that this situation is *our* situation becomes the presupposition of all moral conscience. The Kierkegaardian conscience is thus a kind of human echo of the divine command ‚You shall love!' in the chambers of human subjectivity, and the inwardly reflected claim of the neighbour as *my* neighbour. These echoes and reflections pervade all Christian moral reflection, and are made ever more concrete by being "explained" here and now by the One who *is* their living explanation, Jesus Christ. So, when Kierkegaard speaks of ethical maturity, he describes it as process in which we become more and more intimate with the law and its claim, which it to say, a process by which our subjective moral reality is conformed to the objective moral field or situation which it inhabits: this is the "eternal truth that love *forms* the heart" (*WL*,

p. 12). To become a moral subject is to undergo love's formation of the heart to the end that one's own inner voice more properly and more fully echoes the concrete command of Christ.

In order to avoid the serious shortcomings inherent in a one-sided subjective ethic of conscience (identified by Hegel), Kierkegaard reworks the concept of conscience, interjecting an objective, external and unassimilatable referent right into the heart of moral self-reflection. Working in a theological idiom, Kierkegaard strives for account of moral subjectivity that holds together its proper subjectivity and its determinative external context. This aim parallels that of Hegel's *Sittlichkeit* but, unlike Hegel, Kierkegaard's account is both Christianly specific and committed to holding open the distinctions between *is* and *ought*, law *giver* and law *receiver* that the German philosopher refuses, in the end, to accede. Here as elsewhere, Kierkegaard makes plain his dedication to maintaining the qualitative distinction between God and the human creature and their irreducibly *external* relation. Yet where the efforts of these men coincide is in a common effort to get beyond the Kantian ethics of subjectivity, precisely by insisting on the reality and ethical validity of an external context to which the moral subject is responsible. Here Kierkegaard (if only briefly!) draws alongside Hegel in common cause. Both authors are agreed that "it is law that gives freedom" such that "without law, freedom does not exist at all" (*WL*, pp. 38-9), thus together contest the Kantian opposition of moral freedom and objective moral direction or constraint.

In sum, Kierkegaard's account of conscience as moral reflection mediated and made concrete by reference to God and to neighbour describes a salutary "situation for human freedom" – moral subjectivity always finds itself within a set of fundamental determinative relations, i.e., those with the God of Jesus Christ and the human neighbour, which make up the fabric of moral reality and provide the condition of possibility of there being moral existence at all. Indeed, MacIntyre is right to observe that "it is only when writing from *within* a Christian position that Kierkegaard can find any reason for answering the question" moral question, ‚How shall I live?'. Just so. For Kierkegaard the Christian position can properly found and orient moral life. To demonstrate precisely this is the burden of that "second ethics that presupposes dogmatics" pursued throughout his later theological works. Kierkegaard in fact "possesses precisely the kind of teleological orientation that MacIntyre finds lacking in modernity" though this orientation is not an accomplishment of *reason* but is rather the fraught and searching gift of revelation.

Kierkegaard's treatment of conscience does provoke important questions concerning the relation of human and divine agency, as well as the relation of moral reflection to moral action. However such questions are eventually answered, it is certain that with his concept of conscience Kierkegaard is attempting to "step altogether outside the tradition of freedom as self-dependence" in order to assert once again the ethical necessity of acknowledging an constitutive context for human moral freedom, a freedom whose upholding and fashioning is perhaps even more dear to Christian faith than it is to modernity.