

Faith in Honesty

The Essential Nature of Theology

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	ix
Introduction: Some Preliminary Definitions	1
Honesty/Frankness/Sincerity	1
The Essential Vocation of Theology	2
Theology versus Sacred Ideology	4
Against Agnosticism	6
The Proper Self-limitation of Metaphysics	7
A Threefold Struggle	10
Prospectus	12
PART I PHILOSOPHICAL PREAMBLE: CONTRIBUTION TO THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF HONESTY	
1 The Intrinsic Three-in-Oneness of Radical Honesty, (a): Response to Nietzsche's Critique of Christianity as Being, By Nature, Dishonest	17
The Significance of Epicurus	18
Nietzsche in Agreement with Epicurus: the Criterion of Free-spiritedness	18
Nietzsche contra Epicurus: the Criterion of Creative Intensity	22
The Third Criterion	25
2 The Intrinsic Three-in-Oneness of Radical Honesty, (b): Building on Hannah Arendt's Analysis of Totalitarianism	29
The Forgetting of Isonomy	31
The Vanishing of <i>Auctoritas</i>	37
Critique	40
PART II TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY	
3 Origins of the Dogma	45
The New Testament and Beyond	45
'Religion'	50
Easter in the Earthly City	52

	Bishops versus Gurus	54
	God in Three 'Persons'	55
4	Historical Evolution of Trinitarian Thought	57
	God of the Philosophers/God for the Common People	57
	Augustine: a Brilliant Detour	60
	The Joachimist Eruption	63
	Schleiermacher and Tholuck	66
	The Hegelian Eruption	68
	The Barthian Eruption	75
	Barth contra Hegel	78
5	The Context for First-Person Theology Today: 'Primal Shakenness' Directly Apprehended	81
	'Religion', not 'Religions'	82
	Solidarity of the Shaken/Solidarity among Philosophers	84
	The Heideggerian Challenge	86
	Levinas's Critique of Heidegger	89
	Heidegger's Grand Narrative	90
	The Levinasian Alternative	95
	Beyond both Heidegger and Levinas	100
	Christ in Anonymity	104
6	The Context for Second-Person Theology Today: Clean Evangelism	107
	Christians and Epicureans	109
	' <i>Marana tha!</i> '	111
	The Inspiration of Bereavement	115
	Disciplinary Eschatology: the Old Platonist Error	117
	The True Meaning of 'Original Sin'	121
	Two Forms of Corporate Conceit	125
	Honesty as Fire	132
7	The Context for Third-Person Theology Today: Liturgical Proposals	135
	Three Levels of Liturgy	136
	A Way Forward	138
	Objections	143
	The <i>Kairos</i> Now	146
	Moltmann/Hauerwas	149
	Healing, at Last	153
	A 'Second-order' Contrast-church?	156
8	Conclusion: An Empty Tomb	159
	<i>Notes</i>	167

Contents

vii

<i>Appendix I</i>	<i>Who's Who</i>	181
<i>Appendix II</i>	<i>A Brief Note on the Question of Gender</i>	187
<i>Appendix III</i>	<i>Texts for a Christian Day of Atonement</i>	191
<i>Appendix IV</i>	<i>A Sermon for Trinity Sunday</i>	197
<i>Index</i>		203

Introduction

Some Preliminary Definitions

Once, the most momentous theological divisions within Christendom were the conflicts between the various church denominations: Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant. But now, perhaps, no longer. More and more, the most elementary division is one which cuts across the old denominational boundaries, namely the split between theological ‘liberals’ and the more conservatively ‘orthodox’.

Which of these two tendencies stands closest to the truth? I think that both are right. And, equally, that both are wrong.

Both are right to have suspicions of the other; both are wrong, in so far as those suspicions harden into conversation-inhibiting prejudices.

Beyond all more particular issues of biblical interpretation or ethical discernment, at the deepest level what we have here is a confrontation between two opposing principles of suspicion. Thus ‘liberals’ suspect their more conservatively ‘orthodox’ opponents, perhaps first and foremost, of tending, in practice, to mis-identify the saving element in true faith with the mere devout appropriation of a proper creed as such. This amounts to a certain form of confessional correctness. At the same time the conservative ‘orthodox’, most significantly, suspect the ‘liberals’ – with their tendencies towards ‘non-realist’ metaphysics and a ‘postmodern’ understanding of history – of, in effect, doing away with any real basis for religious authority, abandoning it just for the sake of modish liberal ‘political correctness’.

Both, I would argue, are right. The ‘liberals’ are right, inasmuch as it is true that the saving element of true faith does not consist in any mere appropriation of propositional correctness as such, but much rather in the religious appropriation of *the most radical honesty*. And the ‘orthodox’ are right, inasmuch as the demands of deep honesty do indeed need to be accorded the most decisively absolute authority.

However, let’s be clear about the meaning of this term ‘honesty’.

Honesty/Frankness/Sincerity

Very often, in common parlance, the word ‘honesty’ is used as a straightforward synonym for frankness, or for sincerity.

However, what I mean here is, precisely, *radical* honesty, which is something far more.

The difference is quite simple: to be frank is nothing more than truly to say what you think; and to be sincere is nothing more than truly to mean what you say. But what I would call ‘radical’ honesty means being truly *open to what other people may have to say*.

It means being truly open even to people with very different viewpoints from your own, shaped by very different cultural traditions and contexts, and very different personal experiences of life – people with, as a result, often quite opposite opinions to your own. It means not lying to them – and not lying to yourself, either, in order to evade their critical judgement of you and of what you represent; in that sense, actually being quite suspicious of yourself.

‘I hear what you are saying’, people sometimes say, when what they really mean is ‘Please, like me!’ And, again, ‘I will hide nothing from you’ sometimes just means ‘Please, look at me!’ But radical honesty is neither of these. It is very simple: to be radically honest is to love the prospect of the moral lessons to be learnt from your encounter with other people more even than you love the prospect of receiving their love and attention.

The Essential Vocation of Theology

Radical honesty: in what follows I shall simply call it ‘Honesty’ with a capital ‘H’.

Authentic theology, I would argue, is the science of faith, rightly understood as the theistic appropriation of the demands of Honesty, so defined.

That is, it is, properly, the theistic branch of the science of the sacralization of perfect truth-as-Honesty, as Buddhology is, properly, the Buddhist branch of the same; and so forth.

But it has always been liable to two basic corruptions, which are ‘basic’ in the sense of representing elementary distortions of the very *will* to truth, in this regard: on the one hand, corruption into what I would call ‘sacred ideology’; and, on the other hand, corruption by ‘intellectual conceit’.

By ‘sacred ideology’, first, I mean very simply everything that springs from a fundamental impatience with the pursuit of truth. That great hero of the German Enlightenment, G.E. Lessing, captures the issue here, I think very precisely, in a little parable:

As regards truth [Lessing writes], it is not the supposed or actual having of it that confers merit; but the honest pains one takes to get on its track. For it is the exercise of seeking out the truth, not the possessing of it, which develops those strengths on which one’s ongoing self-fulfilment basically depends. Possession makes one placid, idle and complacent. . . .

If God held all truth shut up in his right hand, but in his left hand held the unalloyed, ever restless drive to truth, only with the proviso that I would be for ever going wrong, and if he then said, ‘Choose!’ I would in all humility fall upon his left, and answer, ‘Father! give me this! The pure truth is for you alone’.¹

In the terms of this parable, ‘sacred ideology’ may well be defined as whatever expresses the option Lessing refuses, that is, the outworking of a desire for the gift in God’s right hand; or any belief-system, in so far as it is shaped by such desire, for a ‘truth’ which finally puts an end to the need for real, open-minded thought; a lazy, or dogmatic, holding fast to the opinions of a certain tradition, understood as at least a partial satisfaction of such ambition.

This, however – since it is the false option, and not really desirable at all – is a gift God never gives. And sacred ideology is *ideo-logy* as opposed to *true theo-logy*, in that it puts an idea (called ‘God’) in the place of God.

But now let us also go a little further than Lessing does. In God’s left hand there are in fact, again, *two* gifts, both of them highly desirable – but one supremely so. The supremely desirable gift is the grace of perfect truth-as-Honesty, whereas the other is the grace of an infinite appetite for truth-as-correctness. And here we begin to approach the second of the two corruptions identified above, the problem of intellectual conceit.

Truth-as-correctness is a quality of abstract doctrine. That is, it is something that may belong to a doctrine considered simply in itself, as a theme of testimony, or pedagogy, abstracted from any specific conversational context. Objectively, it inheres in well-informed and well-shaped propositions, or theories; subjectively, it inheres in the accuracy and sincerity with which one appropriates what is objectively correct, so as to present it to others.

Yet the point is: this is still not truth-as-Honesty. For I repeat: truth-as-Honesty is a quality of sheer conversational *receptivity*.

Truth-as-Honesty may be a quality of conversation between individuals, or of whole politically organized conversation processes, or, indeed, of the interior conversation processes constituting the self-knowledge of each individual soul. It is a sheer love of openness towards other points of view, by which our own predominant point of view is challenged – a commitment to radical openness, in that sense – with regard both to ourselves and the world about us – completely unmixing by any other motive. It is truth as a hollowing out of our selves, by divine grace, a cultivation of perfect attentiveness, to fresh insight – the infinitely purgative truth of that quality of will.

Theology, in my view, is ideally to be understood as the theistic branch of the science of the sacralization of perfect truth-as-Honesty. But now let us distinguish theology in that sense, as decisively as possible, from the very different enterprise of metaphysics.

The distinction I want to make here corresponds directly to the distinction between truth-as-Honesty and truth-as-correctness. For by ‘metaphysics’ I mean, precisely, the most comprehensive celebration of the pursuit of truth-as-correctness, a systematic meditation on the nature of that pursuit, in general, as it relates to ethical and religious tradition. Sacred ideology claims already to possess truth-as-correctness. Good metaphysics, essentially, serves to dissolve this claim. And its proper role, I would argue, in the Christian context is thereby to help clear the way for authentic theology.

But let us nevertheless be very clear about the radical difference between theology and metaphysics. They are centrally concerned with two quite different species of truth, requiring two quite different modes of cultivation. Truth-as-correctness is, in general, what we pursue through academic education; the more education, the closer we come to it. And the pursuit of such truth is, therefore, pre-eminently the business of an educated elite. But, considered purely and simply in itself, truth-as-Honesty is, on the contrary, equally open to all, quite regardless of educational attainment. Thus one cultivates it not through schooling, but, in a broad sense, through prayer. Theology differs from metaphysics in that it is a form of thinking which, whilst of course it operates within the domain of truth-as-correctness, nevertheless essentially celebrates what transcends that domain. It is a quest for public strategies to promote true prayerfulness.

Only, the trouble is that intellectual conceit then intervenes, that is, the conceit of theologians as intellectuals, concerned to uphold their own special prestige deriving from educational privilege. And this results in a tacit, yet systematic, blurring of the distinction. Theology gets mixed with metaphysics. (Both, after all, talk about God.) It fails adequately to assert its true radical otherness, and existential primacy.

Theology versus Sacred Ideology

Far worse than the mixing of theology with metaphysics, however, is its entanglement with sacred ideology, which, let us frankly admit, goes very deep within church tradition, more or less everywhere.

Ideology is an impatient claim already to be in actual possession of correct opinion. Of course, Christian theologians have always recognized that the truth of true faith is something far more than just the holding of correct opinion, as conveyed by abstracted propositions, considered purely in themselves. ‘You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe – and shudder’: this is already said in the New Testament (James 2:19). And Thomas Aquinas, for instance, distinguishes between ‘formed’ and ‘unformed’ faith. What the demons are said to have – a not yet saving, because exclusively theoretical, correctness of understanding about God – is ‘unformed’ faith. In order that ‘unformed’ faith should become true and saving, for Aquinas, it has first got to be ‘formed’ – by love.

Very well. Only then the question is: *how?*

What does love need with which to inform correct opinion, in order that true faith may result? All too often, it seems to me, where the question is not explicitly posed, the implicit answer is just a frank sincerity. Nor does Aquinas himself, by any means, rule this interpretation out.

Right opinion about God, informed by love in the guise of a frank sincerity: that, if you like, is the essential formula for ideologized faith. No very radical affirmation of Honesty here. But instead: a claim to propositional correctness,

correctly appropriated, according to the rules of some particular party line. The party line may be conservatively ‘orthodox’, or it may be ‘liberal’. It makes no odds; the basic corruption is the same in either case.

The difference between authentic theology and its corruption into sacred ideology, I would argue, directly mirrors the way in which Honesty transcends simple frankness and sincerity. Sacred ideology is just a polemical strategy, which works best when its adherents really believe in it. But authentic theology, by contrast, is always a quest for ideal conversational give-and-take.

Or one might perhaps put it like this: there are, here, two diametrically opposed attitudes to propaganda, by which, to be precise, I mean any strategy of persuasion aiming, straight away, to shift the behaviour of whole social masses as such. It is not, therefore, designed to stir people into deeper thoughtfulness (which with masses is impossible), but, rather, to stimulate and redirect already existent instincts, through flattery and menace. Ideologized theology tends to function as legitimative back-up to the propaganda of its own host community, whether confessional or secular. But post-ideological theology – on the contrary – seeks to cultivate forms of spirituality which are a therapy against propaganda *of all kinds*.

Sometimes, of course, propaganda may serve a good cause. The early church, for instance, survived under persecution and grew, very largely thanks to its highly effective use of something like propaganda: celebrating the heroic memory of its martyrs, demonizing its enemies, invoking post-mortem threats and promises in quasi-propaganda fashion. Without such practices, the gospel would in all probability never have been successfully handed down to us. None the less, it still seems clear to me that the best Christian theology is that which most explicitly insists upon the absolute otherness of the actual gospel, in itself, in relation to any sort of propaganda vehicle.

The God of ideological theology is, in effect, a God who accepts unthinking propaganda-led obedience. Thoughtful obedience is of course preferred but, if need be, unthinking obedience will do. (And the more ideological one’s attitude, the quicker one will be to allow such necessity.) By contrast, the God of post-ideological theology *cannot* accept unthinking obedience. It is inconceivable, since to obey this God, the true God, is nothing other than to be thoughtful. Not necessarily with any great articulacy: by thoughtfulness here I do not mean articulate cleverness – which may well, indeed, just be a mask for thoughtlessness. But I mean a sober awareness, at least, of how we tend to fool ourselves; an intense concern; a genuine prayerful openness, in short, to new insight.

Ideological theology is preoccupied with the intellectual border conflicts between distinct confessional (religious or anti-religious) traditions and sub-traditions. Whether it accentuates such conflicts, or seeks to do away with them, either way they are its whole concern.

But post-ideological theology, on the contrary, is not – in the first instance – interested in that sort of conflict at all. Instead, it is preoccupied by the conflict between Honesty and dishonesty: a conflict by which every

confessional tradition, every confessional sub-tradition, every subtlest sub-division of a confessional sub-tradition, is, in different ways and at different levels, internally riven. Its whole aim is to draw that conflict to the surface.

Of most theology one would have to say that it is a more or less ambiguous mixture of the ideological and the trans-ideological. But it seems to me that, in the end, *everything* depends on making clear the absolute difference between the two.

Against Agnosticism

‘The fool has said in his heart, there is no God’ (Psalm 14:1). As in the days of the psalmist, so also today. But why is the ‘folly’ of this not universally obvious, as it should be? I would suggest: essentially because of our continuing trappedness, both ‘believers’ and ‘unbelievers’ alike, within the limitations of a still all too ideologized theology.

Yet, in the Christian context, it is only true theology which properly overcomes sacred ideology. Such ideology may indeed be countered by a rival, irreligious form of ideology, which, however, is no real answer. Or it may be countered by a resort to systematic agnosticism – as Kant, for instance, advocated – or, still more aggressively, the Positivist tradition.

But agnosticism is, essentially, just a withdrawal from conversation. It is the closing down of certain sorts of quite seriously offered conversation, with nothing more than a dismissive shrug of the shoulders; an impatient, dogmatically repeated ‘We cannot know’, without any serious attempt to enter into the alien world-view for which such conversation makes sense. And how can a withdrawal from conversation advance the cause of that altogether conversational phenomenon, pure truth-as-Honesty? The trouble with agnosticism is that it still leaves bigotry in possession of religious tradition. It fails to confront sacred ideology where sacred ideology is in fact at its most vulnerable, that is, on its own chosen terrain, where its intrinsic thoughtlessness overlays traditions with often quite profoundly thoughtful origins.

‘This world is God’s creation.’ So faith affirms. For ideologized theology that affirmation is the supreme self-assertion of a particular culture. In effect, it amounts to the cultural-imperialistic claim that what *we*, in our tradition, correctly worship is also the ultimate source of all truth and goodness, everywhere and always.

But for post-ideological theology, by contrast, it says something quite different. Here, the same proposition becomes a definitive recognition of the sometimes tormenting, sometimes inspirational impulse to Honesty as, in fact, the ultimate source of all real meaning in life.

This impulse is divine. In other words, it is an impulse of infinite authority; one which therefore requires maximum imaginative reinforcement in its struggles, through narrative and illustration; and, beyond empty lip-service, the most skilful possible political promotion. Can *that* legitimately be doubted?

There can never be any honest certainty in ideologized faith. However passionately frank the sincerity with which it is held, it is still only an opinion.

True faith, on the other hand, is not an opinion. It is the registering of a challenge: a commitment to better conversation, at every level of both public and private life. In itself, it is at any rate one version, the theistic version, of a truth which – if and when it is at last unwrapped from its ideological coverings – no thoughtful person can honestly doubt. For who can honestly doubt that the demands of Honesty are, in principle, of infinite authority? Who would deny that they therefore require maximum imaginative reinforcement? Or who can fail to see the need for effective campaigning communities, dedicated to their political application?

And how then is one more specifically (for example) to assess the particular truth or falsehood of *Christian* faith? First and foremost, surely, it has to be assessed, in quite pragmatic terms, as a (God-given?) set of strategies for the confessional articulation, and working through, of this trans-confessional challenge. In which case, the real question is not so much whether one can sincerely assent to the various propositions of the church's creed as a formulation of correct opinion, but, rather, whether, or to what extent, and how, one can in all Honesty be part of the church as it actually is: so rich in potential resources for amplifying the demands of Honesty; and yet so often, in the event, corrupted by ideology?

The Proper Self-limitation of Metaphysics

The true answer to the corruption of theology into sacred ideology does not, I think, therefore lie in Kantian, or Positivist, agnosticism, which merely forecloses this sort of issue. Instead, I would argue, it lies in what Hegel called 'speculative' thinking.

Granted, the old Hegelian terminology sounds odd to us today. And yet it seems to me that Hegel is a key pioneer here, in two basic regards: both by virtue of his *Logic* and by virtue of his *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

In the first place, what constitutes good metaphysics? The core vocation of metaphysics, I have suggested, is to help dissolve sacred ideology. But I would argue that, in order to do so, it ought not to interfere, in any way, with what properly belongs to theology.

Metaphysics may, from this point of view, 'interfere' with theology just as much in friendly, as in unfriendly, ways. Obvious examples of unfriendly interference are: deistic or atheistic metaphysical doctrines; Spinozist 'pantheism'; or, again, Kantian agnosticism. But by 'friendly' interference, on the other hand, I mean the importing especially of pre-Christian, Platonist or Aristotelian, metaphysics into theology for apologetic purposes, on the supposed grounds that these doctrines to some extent anticipate, and moreover help clarify, the ultimate truth-as-correctness of divine revelation as such.

The trouble is, such a procedure makes it seem as though the whole truth of the gospel might in fact quite accurately be summed up in Nietzsche's phrase as 'Platonism for the masses',² or as though the gospel is truer than Platonism only inasmuch as it is able to take the essential truth-as-correctness of Platonist metaphysics, and popularize it, with unique effectiveness. There have indeed always been vigorous objections to such a view, along the lines of Tertullian's famous cry: 'What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?' And there is, I think, often a sound theological instinct at work here. Yet such protest so easily then just merges into a crude fideism. That is, it becomes confused with a mere defiant refusal of rational argument – as though faith, rather than being an opening up to honest rationality, were on the contrary somehow 'beyond' reason. Again, this is a fundamental closing down of conversation, which is, to that extent, essentially dishonest.

Let us be quite clear: the true difference between metaphysics and theology is *not* the difference suggested by fideism, between a thinking faithful to reason and a thinking which purports to be somehow 'beyond' reason. No, it is a difference which only becomes clear, for the first time, when, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, a Christian philosopher appears who sets out systematically to develop a brand new form of metaphysics, characterized, as a matter of principle, by the very utmost theological reticence.

Thus there could not be a less fideistic defender of the faith than Hegel. He is a quite uncompromising rationalist, who sees philosophy and religion, in the very fullest possible sense, as partners, two complementary 'forms' for one and the same ultimate 'content'. And yet, the point is that this shared 'content' is by no means, as he sees it, a metaphysical theory. On the contrary, what he means by his formula of two 'forms' for one 'content' is precisely the complementarity of two modes of (what I would call) true theology, *both* of them decisively transcendent of metaphysics.

Hegel develops his doctrine of metaphysics in his *Logic*. But this metaphysics is quite extraordinarily modest in its relationship to religious faith. As with any metaphysics, Hegel's *Logic* is a systematic study of the pursuit of truth-as-correctness, considered in the most general terms. Now, of course, the God of Christian faith is the God of all truth, both truth-as-Honesty and truth-as-correctness; and therefore, from the point of view of Christian faith, any metaphysical doctrine is necessarily also a doctrine about God. Yet Hegel draws a sharp distinction: his doctrine in the *Logic* is, as he puts it, 'the exposition of God as he is in his eternal essence before the creation of nature and a finite mind'.³ In other words, it simply does not impinge on theology, since theology is the study of God as revealed in and through the actual phenomena of creation. And in actual fact the central doctrine of the *Logic* does not directly address any of the primary themes of theology at all. But, on the contrary, it would, in itself, be equally compatible with all sorts of different religious, or irreligious, belief-systems. It would be quite compatible even with a non-theistic religious belief-system, such as that of Buddhism, or

even with the most irreligious sort of atheism. In so far as ‘metaphysics’ is understood as a body of argument for or against religious faith, then Hegel’s is, in short, just the very purest sort of anti-‘metaphysical’ metaphysics!

The *Logic* does not prescribe any particular onto-theological belief-system, either orthodox or heterodox. In this respect, Hegel systematically refuses to accommodate himself to the demands of sacred ideology. The devotees of sacred ideology want metaphysics to serve their purposes. This produces what Hegel calls ‘reflective’ thought. He, however, is not a ‘reflective’ philosopher; but, in his terms, a ‘speculative’ one instead. ‘Reflective’ metaphysics aims at clear-cut onto-theological results: purporting to demonstrate the *exclusive* truth-as-correctness of a particular brand of theism, or a particular brand of atheism. And so forth. ‘Speculative’ metaphysics, however, does not. Hegel is a thoroughly Christian philosopher, but he is not one who seeks to vindicate his faith in ‘reflective’ metaphysical terms; his Christianity is not metaphysical but theological.⁴ The metaphysics he develops in his *Logic* is simply a comprehensive celebratory survey of the pursuit of truth-as-correctness, in general. And nothing more.

Thus what is it, Hegel in effect enquires, to pursue truth-as-correctness in general? This, if you like, is the properly fundamental question of metaphysics. One might say that to pursue truth-as-correctness is to comprehend:

- the interplay of Being and Nothingness;
- the truth of Becoming;
- the determinacy of determinate moments of Becoming;
- their finitude and infinitude;
- their oneness and diversity; and
- their measurability.

Or that it is to grasp:

- the Essence (of truth-as-correctness);
- the interplay of Identity and Difference;
- the thingness of things;
- their phenomenality; and
- their relationships of content and form, whole and part, force and expression, inwardness and outwardness, necessity and contingency, substance and accident, cause and effect, action and reaction.

Or that it is to grasp:

- the Concept (of truth-as-correctness);
- its development through the interplay of universality, particularity and individuality;
- the nature of logical judgement, in its various forms;
- the nature of syllogistic reasoning, in its various forms; and

- the nature of the natural sciences, and of philosophic theory, in the broadest sense, as such.

Hegel moves through each of these answers in turn. He sets out, so far as he can, to link them into a coherent sequence of ever-growing complexity. And, in the end, he gathers them all together, in the concept of the 'Absolute Idea'.

Here we have his name for the fullness of metaphysical truth. Yet the 'Absolute Idea' is still not the sort of onto-theological *result* for which 'reflective' thinking craves. It is not a result, but a celebration. To be precise: it is nothing other than a retrospective celebration of the whole process which the preceding argument as a whole has surveyed, the whole dynamic of it. The argument, in other words, culminates in a celebration of the sheer *appetite* for truth-as-correctness, an appetite which it has not so much sought to satisfy, with onto-theological results, as to awaken, by example. This is absolutely what I think metaphysics ought to be – above all, in its restraint.

But then, on the other hand, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel also provides us with a way into *trans*-metaphysical philosophic theology. That is, he systematically begins to open up the question of what it means to promote the very purest truth-as-Honesty, in philosophic terms. For what else is 'Spirit', or '*Geist*', in the Hegelian sense, if not an emergent will to Honesty? The way he sees it, there are three basic philosophic disciplines: 'logic' – that is, primordial metaphysics; 'philosophy of nature', which is an extension of metaphysics in relation to natural science; and 'philosophy of Spirit'. And by 'Spirit' he, in effect, quite simply means everything that transcends metaphysics, the way that the pursuit of truth-as-Honesty transcends the pursuit of truth-as-correctness.

The discussion of religion in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is of course a purely philosophic form of theology, inasmuch as it is, in the first instance, trans-confessionally framed, arriving at a consideration of gospel truth out of an initial consideration of purely universal human experience, as such. And yet, this is philosophic *theology*: it is entirely free from metaphysics. Hegel preserves the boundaries between the two with, it seems to me, the most admirable clarity.

A Threefold Struggle

In what follows, however, I want to add something else – something Hegel does not say. I intend to argue that there is an essential threefoldness to the most radical Honesty, a threefoldness directly corresponding to the Christian self-revelation of God as Trinity.

Hegel, indeed, is also a pioneer reviver of trinitarian theology, as we shall see. But, for reasons I shall indicate, I think that his doctrine in this regard is actually quite one-sided. And I therefore want to go well beyond it, along these lines.

The threefoldness I have in mind is the articulation of a threefold struggle, in which Honesty is pitted against three basic forms of dishonesty. Thus:

- 1 There is the dishonesty that remains, as it were, trapped in the present moment: swept along by routine, going with the flow of things; the sheer low-key unreflectiveness, or spiritual indolence, of those who are content just to belong, and merge inconspicuously into their cultural background, without any commitment to thinking independently, or perhaps without the necessary confidence to do so. This is the dishonesty of the human herd, or, intellectually, the dishonesty of the academic functionary who is no more than a functionary. Let us call it: dishonesty-as-banalilty.
- 2 There is the far more future-oriented dishonesty of a ruthless plotting and scheming: a matter of seduction, this, by flattery and threats; a corrupted pathos, informing a corrupted form of impassioned solidarity, that is, the typical dishonesty of a gang, which, in an intellectual context, becomes the dishonesty of the ideological party, or clique. Here we have dishonesty-as-manipulation, entangling both the manipulator and the manipulated in its cunning.
- 3 There is the dishonesty involved in a wilfully energetic evasion of responsibility for the past – at its most brutal, the dishonesty of the destructive mob; in a more polite form, the dishonesty of the merely boastful community, which cannot see, or rather does not want to see, its own shadow side. Or else – by way of excessive reaction to that – the dishonesty of the nihilistic individualist, who likewise yearns to be free from all that may be burdensome in the corporate history of which he or she is part. I call this dishonesty-as-disowning.

True Honesty, as I would conceive it, is a thoughtful openness towards the otherness of other people, involving a struggle, equally, against all three of these general types of phenomenon.

Thus dishonesty-as-banalilty occludes the otherness of other people, inasmuch as it is a simple, life-impoverishing failure to be at all interested in that otherness, or in the lessons potentially to be learnt from it. Dishonesty-as-manipulation, by contrast, *is* interested in the otherness of other people, but only because it is preoccupied with the question of how to predict the responses of the other, for aggressive purposes of control. And dishonesty-as-disowning is also interested, but only in a purely self-defensive mode: it is all about constructing systematic defences against reproach – whether reproach framed in terms of the prophetic heritage of one’s own tradition, or the reproach of aggrieved outsiders.

Banalilty, manipulation and disowning: it seems to me that, between them, these three basic categories encompass it all.

Each, then (I want to argue) becomes the core issue of a particular species of theology. And moreover these three species of theology directly correspond

to the three divine ‘Persons’ of the Holy Trinity: ‘First-Person theology’, essentially concerned with the critique of banality; ‘Second-Person theology’, essentially concerned with solidarity-building in resistance to manipulation; ‘Third-Person theology’, essentially concerned with strategies for the proper owning of tradition. That, in short, is my core thesis here.

Prospectus

Overall, my thesis will be an argument in two parts. Part I is simply a filling out of the suggestion that there is, by nature, an intrinsic threefoldness to the most radical Honesty, in this sense. And then in Part II I go on to try to integrate this into the actual history of Christian trinitarianism.

Part I consists of two chapters. In the first I discuss the nature of Honesty with particular critical reference to the thought of Nietzsche. If, after all, one is to try to interpret Christian theological tradition in the sort of terms I propose, then there clearly is quite a major challenge in Nietzsche’s attack on it, inasmuch as Nietzsche charges Christianity precisely with being, by its very nature, ineradicably dishonest. And so – why is Nietzsche wrong? It is not so much, I think, that he is mistaken about the facts, but, rather, I want to argue that Nietzsche’s own notion of ‘honesty’ is crucially defective.

After this, in Chapter 2 I go on to discuss Hannah Arendt’s diagnosis of twentieth-century totalitarianism. For what more dramatic type of example could there be of a public culture entirely founded on dishonesty? And Arendt surely remains its finest philosophic analyst.

This first part is purely philosophic. It is an attempt to find at any rate some intimations of trinitarian truth already present in the *pre*-theological aspect of things. But I also want to argue that the Christian dogma of the Trinity implicitly originates, at the deepest level, as a form of testimony to the intrinsic threefoldness of Honesty, and that the history of the doctrine represents a gradual evolution towards explicitly clarifying that origin.

Part II develops this case. First therefore, in Chapter 3, I consider the early beginnings of trinitarian theology, from that point of view. Then, in Chapter 4, I follow the history through, up to the two great revivals in trinitarian theology, by Hegel in philosophic form, and by Karl Barth in dogmatic–theological form. And after that there are three further chapters: on the contexts for First-Person theology today, Second-Person theology today and Third-Person theology today. These are, so to speak, samples of the sort of work I think most of all now needs doing, in each of these domains.

Of course, these three domains of theology constantly overlap in their concerns. All three are approaches to the whole of theology; and each therefore provides its own distinctive context for a consideration of trinitarian truth as a whole. Yet I hope nevertheless to help make clear the sense in which each does indeed have its own quite distinct integrity, the sense in which they are,

all three of them, equally necessary, and the sense in which these really are *the* three faces of the most radical Honesty – a genuinely unsurpassable confessional manifestation, in other words, of the very profoundest trans-confessional religious truth.

Chapter 1

The Intrinsic Three-in-Oneness of Radical Honesty, (a): Response to Nietzsche's Critique of Christianity as Being, By Nature, Dishonest

Let us begin with Nietzsche. 'By their fruits you shall know them': amongst the, in dialectical terms, most significant fruits of any religious tradition are its dedicated opponents. And none is more deeply dedicated to the critique of Christianity than Nietzsche.¹

Thus he is, I think, a quite peculiarly formidable critic of Christianity just by virtue of the way his argument transcends metaphysics, to get right at the very roots of Christian faith.² Given that faith as such is not rooted in metaphysics, metaphysical arguments cannot in themselves threaten to uproot it; at most they can only compel its reformulation. But Nietzsche's critique goes altogether deeper. His counter-faith to that of Christianity is explicitly a faith in intellectual honesty – (I shall write the word with a small 'h' when referring to his concept). Christian faith, he argues, is by its very nature dishonest.

And, as he himself insists, the Christian can by no means escape such a critique by rejecting its presuppositions. For, he argues, it is precisely Christian faith itself which has taught us moderns, in principle, to value the ideal against which it offends.

This, Nietzsche thinks, is indeed Christianity's great historic achievement. That the Christian God is now 'dead' is, deep down, because Christian faith has been destroyed from within by its own 'will to truth': its monotheistic identification of divinity with the infinite demands of Truth, explicitly recognized as being infinite; and its pressing back, therefore, beyond questions of right action as such, to an ideal of absolute purity of motive – an innermost disciplining of *the will*.³ His Zarathustra is, above all, the prophet of true honesty – again, a quality of infinite 'will to truth'. Prophets are needed to establish new virtues, and true honesty is 'the youngest virtue'.⁴ But, thanks to centuries of Christianity (he argues), this youngest of virtues – young though it is – already has an irresistible authority.

Nietzsche, in short, criticizes Christian faith essentially by seeking to outbid it. *And, in the end, the only way he can be answered with any conviction is by our seeking once again to up the stakes.*

Let us, therefore, take a closer look at the distinctive Nietzschean notion of ‘honesty’ – with a view to formulating a proper theological response.

The Significance of Epicurus

It seems to me that Nietzsche’s conception of intellectual honesty has two basic aspects – and that these two aspects are, in turn, quite neatly correlatable to the two sides of his ambivalent relationship to Epicurus.⁵

Of all classical philosophers Epicurus has on the whole been the one most fiercely rejected by Christian theology; even though – or perhaps partly because – Epicureanism was the one and only Greek precursor movement to Christianity as a missionary enterprise.⁶ And he became an important symbolic figure for Nietzsche – as ‘the inventor of an idyllic–heroic mode of philosophizing’.⁷ On the one hand, Nietzsche admires Epicurus as ‘one of the greatest of men’, a critic of the ‘pre-existing Christianity’ of his time.⁸ But, on the other hand, he also criticizes Epicurus as ‘a typical *décadent*: first recognized as such by me’.⁹

These two opposing aspects of Nietzsche’s relationship to Epicurus may I think be said to result from his application of two quite distinct general criteria for intellectual honesty, one of which he shares with Epicurus, whereas the other is very un-Epicurean.

Nietzsche’s two criteria directly correspond to the first two of the three that I think need applying. And, as will appear, it is my view that his thinking is ultimately vitiated by his complete ignoring of the third. Yet the additional validity of that third criterion by no means invalidates either of the other two which he does apply.

Nietzsche in Agreement with Epicurus: the Criterion of Free-spiritedness

Thus intellectual honesty, in the rigorous sense intended here, is far more than just a matter of not consciously and deliberately lying. But, rather, it designates the overcoming of any sort of *wilful thoughtlessness*.

The thinking thereby set loose is not just the thinking involved in solving problems, devising strategies, gaining practical skills, winning arguments. It is, instead, the thinking which already in itself confronts the recalcitrant, corrupted will: thinking in the sense of the warning, ‘stop and think!’ – not merely going with the flow, but genuinely allowing experience to disturb and overthrow prejudice. Its concern, in other words, is not so much with the refining of the technical means required for the attainment of given moral ends as with the prior questioning of those ends themselves – in Nietzschean terms, a continual ‘revaluation of all values’.

Clearly, though, not all of those who seek to promote a ‘revaluation of all values’ do so for pure Honesty’s sake. For there are also the *manipulators*.

And herein, surely, lies the special symbolic importance of Epicurus. For, of all the leading philosophers of antiquity, it was I think Epicurus who most directly, and most boldly, addressed the problematics of dishonesty-as-manipulation.

Clearly, before one can be honest in relation to others one must first escape any merely manipulated subservience to them. And Nietzsche is entirely at one with Epicurus in focusing his critique not so much on the more obvious dishonesty of the manipulator towards the manipulated, but, far more, on the altogether deeper-rooted dishonesty of the manipulated, in denying their manipulatedness.

Thus it was the chief aim of Epicurean discipline to render its adepts acutely self-critical with regard to that danger. Manipulation operates through more or less veiled threats and promises. What renders us vulnerable are our addictions, our craving for things which the manipulator may promise to supply or threaten to remove; it may be an addiction to drugs, to luxuries of every sort, to wealth and power, to fame, or to love. When Epicurus identifies wisdom with 'ataraxy' he basically means a general freedom from addiction, in the most comprehensive sense. The 'Garden' he established at Athens was, in the broadest possible sense, a detoxification centre: a place of tough talking and friendly mutual support in the battle for ataraxy, so defined.

As a campaigner against ideological manipulateness, on the other hand, his enemy number one was Plato. As Nietzsche remarks:

How malicious philosophers can be! I know of nothing more venomous than the joke Epicurus allowed himself to make against Plato and the Platonists: he called them *Dionysiolakes*. The literal, surface meaning of this word is 'flatterers of Dionysius'. Or: tyrants' lickspittles and toadies [after the tyrant Dionysius II of Syracuse, whom Plato sought to train as a philosopher ruler]. At the same time, though, it also amounts to saying, 'they are all *actors*, there is nothing genuine about them' (for *Dionysiolax* was a colloquial term for an actor). And that is how he shows his real malice towards Plato.¹⁰

So Epicurus taught his followers to see through the pretences of a philosophical high-mindedness which was, he thought, nothing more than a veiled bid for domination. And the Nietzschean doctrine of 'the will to power' in a sense simply generalizes this embryonic hermeneutics of suspicion, already present in Epicureanism, converting it into a general precautionary principle for the questioning of all cultural phenomena, without exception.

Nietzsche speaks here of Epicurus' 'malice' (*Bosheit*). For him, 'malice' tends to be a thoroughly affirmative term, a key ingredient of honesty. Also of himself he writes, 'I am no good when I am not malicious.'¹¹ The negative flavour of the word in common parlance brings out, for him, the natural resistance of manipulative dishonesty to being unveiled. And the 'will to power' is then what 'malice', in this Nietzschean sense, is always and everywhere alert to. 'This world', he famously declares, 'is will to power – and nothing

besides!’¹² Here we have Nietzsche’s ‘malicious’ inversion of the Christian doctrine of divine creation, as a universal invitation to thoughtfulness in general. Thus the doctrine of ‘will to power’ is precisely intended as a systematic exaltation of ‘malice’ over faith, inasmuch as faith is ‘maliciously’ to be understood as a mere vulnerability to manipulation. Here is clear-eyed, cheerful ‘malice’, understood as the first principle of true honesty.

Epicurean ‘malice’ is also deliberately coarse and philistine. Thus: ‘I spit on beauty’, Epicurus declares, ‘and upon those who, pointlessly, respect it when it offers no pleasure.’¹³ High-minded manipulativeness, of the Platonist type, celebrates the ‘beauty’ of certain sorts of self-sacrifice, for one’s country or one’s creed, in accordance with the Idea of Justice, thereby evoking a tremendous sense of duty, and associated guilt-feelings. The ‘beauty’ Epicurus spits on is surely, above all, the beauty that Platonist philosophy exalts.

Plato identifies the political cause of Truth with the self-assertion of a particular educational elite. So he seeks to develop the study of metaphysics into a solidarity-building principle: bonding together the philosopher class, as such, and thereby equipping them to be the proper bearers of supreme authority in the state. The utopian ideal of direct philosopher-rule, somewhat playfully advanced in the *Republic*, is no doubt impracticable, since authentic philosophers will scarcely have either the time or the inclination to rule as well as study, and it is hard to see how the non-philosophical, and therefore politically unenlightened, masses could be brought to acquiesce in such an arrangement. But in the second-best ideal of the *Laws*, even though philosophers as such do not rule directly, the whole system is nevertheless still designed to maximize their influence. One of the prime purposes of the proposed constitution in the *Laws* is to restrict the rival influence of commercial, or clan, interests. And the dominant religious cult will be a worship of the star-gods: a practice quite alien to Greek tradition, imported from the Middle East, but precisely intended to enhance the prestige of the philosopher class, inasmuch as they are also expert in astronomy. In the background, here, is the doctrine of the ‘splendid fiction’ in the *Republic*, where Socrates is represented as openly advocating a strategic use of religion in order to promote public order, the philosopher class deliberately manipulating the non-philosophers by religious means – and doing so moreover, in all sincerity, with a perfectly clear conscience.¹⁴

Epicurus, for his part, completely rejects Platonist religion. Indeed, he rejects the whole Platonist advocacy of philosopher class-interest, because he rejects all forms of class-politics. Any commitment to the politics of class-interest immediately tends to entangle one in forms of strategic manipulation. And, given the actual dominance of class-interest in all existing forms of politics, he actually repudiates any active engagement in politics of any sort. The Garden was very much a place of retreat from the world. As Diogenes Laertius puts it, ‘The reason Epicurus kept out of public life was his exceptional concern for equality.’¹⁵ The only membership requirement for the community of the Garden was a basic literacy, and people of all social classes were equally

welcome – including, very strikingly in that world, quite a good number of women as well as men.

‘I spit on beauty, and upon those who, pointlessly, respect it when it offers no pleasure.’ What everyone knows about Epicurus is, of course, that he was a hedonist. But he was a hedonist, basically, because his primary concern was with the undoing of manipulation, even in its philosophically most sophisticated forms.

Thus the key feature of ‘pleasure’, in the context of Classical debate, is that it does not designate a *qualification* for anything. Classical anti-hedonist thinkers reject the idea that virtue aims essentially at pleasure, above all because they are preoccupied with virtue as a set of membership qualifications. Plato is concerned with what qualifies one to be a good member of the ideal cultural-revolutionary ruling elite. Aristotle focuses on the qualifications for good citizenship in a more general, conservative sense. And similarly for Christian theology, later on: what counts are the qualities of life associated with good, loyal church membership. But in any such notion of virtue Epicurus senses the danger of corporate manipulateness. ‘For my part’, he says, ‘it is to continuous pleasures that I invite you and not to virtues that are empty and vain and offer only disturbing expectations of reward.’¹⁶ ‘Virtue’, if it is not to be a term for what is ‘empty and vain’, needs to be redefined. In Epicurean usage it is no longer an end in itself, but instead a designation for the necessary means to the highest forms of pleasure, which are the highest not because of any supposed association with the life-style of a particular privileged class, but solely in the sense of being the most continuous, immediate and tranquil. Moral manipulators appeal straight to the demands of ‘virtue’, about which they claim to know better than I. But no one, obviously, can know better than I do what gives me such pleasure. That is the underlying rationale of Epicurus’ hedonism.

And, in the same spirit, when it comes to metaphysics it seems that, following through his hermeneutics of suspicion, he proceeds according to a twofold logic: first discarding, as illusion, whatever may be thought to derive from the inventiveness of would-be manipulators, and then affirming whatever other elements of traditional Greek piety still remain. He therefore completely rejects the notion of post-mortem rewards and punishments. Platonist propaganda, of course, makes great play with this notion as a device for persuading non-philosophers to comply with the moral dictates of their betters, even though they cannot comprehend the true philosophic rationale for those dictates. Nothing could be more manipulative! Threats and promises in place of reasoning: here indeed we have the very essence of manipulation. But Epicurus has a gospel to proclaim, a gospel of release from all manipulation, and at the heart of that gospel is the cheerful assurance that death means extinction. He denounces the concept of Fate as a merely manipulative device to make the oppressed acquiesce in their oppression. In general, the whole idea of divine intervention in human affairs appears to him to be manipulative superstition – we should not let ourselves be overawed. To be sure, there are gods. (Do they

not appear to us in dreams?) But they could not care less about us. Their divinity simply consists in their being sublime celestial models of ataraxy – the least manipulatable, and the least manipulative, beings imaginable.¹⁷

From the Nietzschean point of view, Epicurus is perhaps the prime example of a classic ‘free spirit’. True, Nietzsche himself does not entirely repudiate politics in the way Epicurus does. He is altogether more indulgent towards *realpolitik*, acknowledging the inevitability of at any rate some quite manipulative strategies on the part of government in the building up of the necessary broad consensus for social coherence. But, none the less, his critique of Christianity very largely builds on Epicurus’ critique of Platonism. Christianity, he argues, is essentially manipulative; no other form of religion is more lethally manipulative than manipulative Christianity. And Epicurus is in this sense, as he puts it, a great critic of ‘pre-existing Christianity’.

Epicurus, on the other hand, had only ever known manipulative ideology in the most aristocratic of forms. He had never seen what happens when it is infused with the *ressentiment* of the oppressed, in the form of ‘slave morality’. Whereas now, Nietzsche remarks:

Supposing one had it in one to look down upon the curiously painful, coarse and yet at the same time subtle comedy of European Christianity with the mocking indifference of an Epicurean god, I doubt if there would be any end to one’s laughter and amazement: for does it not appear that *one* will has dominated Europe these eighteen centuries, namely the will to make of humanity a *sublime abortion*?¹⁸

Nietzsche contra Epicurus: the Criterion of Creative Intensity

Well, yes. An Epicurean god, in Nietzsche’s view, would respond to the prevailing ‘will’ made manifest in Christian and post-Christian history with ‘laughter and amazement’.

But then, he immediately also goes on,

one who, with an opposite ambition, no longer Epicurean but as it were wielding a divine hammer, came up against this almost deliberate corruption and stunting of humanity productive of the European Christian (I think of Pascal for instance), would he not be driven to cry out in rage, in pity, in horror: ‘O you fools, you presumptuous, pitying fools, what have you done? Was this a work for your hands? How you have bungled and botched my beautiful stone! What a thing for *you* to take upon yourselves!’

Here, juxtaposed with the light-hearted laughter of the Epicurean god, is a very different response. This is the anguish of the Dionysian spirit. And, in the end, Nietzsche is really a devotee not of the Epicurean gods, but of Dionysus.

His basic understanding of the demands of radical honesty may, indeed, be quite precisely defined in these terms: his first move is to affirm the Epicurean

critique of dishonesty-as-manipulation, so far as that goes; his second move, however, carries him decisively beyond Epicurus, into what he himself sees as essentially new territory.

Thus, as he puts it:

I have presented such terrible images to knowledge that any 'Epicurean delight' is out of the question. Only Dionysian joy is sufficient: *I have been the first to discover the tragic*.¹⁹

He claims to be the first to have grasped the true philosophical significance of 'the tragic', essentially in the sense that 'the tragic' is the dark side of 'Dionysian joy'. And this is none other than the authentic quality of pathos poetically attendant upon the most radical honesty, in its struggle against, not only dishonesty-as-manipulation, but also what I have called 'dishonesty-as-banality'.

The basic weakness of Epicureanism, for Nietzsche, is that it represents a free-spiritedness which, after all, turns its face away from 'the tragic' and therefore from 'Dionysian joy'.

Whereas the dishonesty of manipulateness, one might say, is a wilful misuse of emotional intelligence, the dishonesty of banality is just an absence of any will to develop such intelligence at all. The manipulator observes other people's feelings closely in order to exploit them; the one who is banal is content with relationships of sheer emotional superficiality. And 'Dionysian joy' is, simply, Nietzsche's name for the very utmost opposite to that superficiality. It is an absolute jubilant stripping away of all our defences against the moral shaking power of intense experience.

But the trouble with Epicurus, from this point of view, is that he is exclusively concerned with the problematics of release from manipulation, and completely blind to the no less serious problematics of overcoming banality. No real thinker, as such, can ever actually *defend* banality; but it is all too easy to be distracted by other concerns. And Epicureanism is critical of banality only in so far as the banal individual is *at the same time* subject to manipulation.

In fact, Epicureanism is as blind in this regard as mainstream popular conformist Christianity is.²⁰ And necessarily so because of the missionary impulse which both movements share, and their consequent inclination always to try to appeal, as far as possible, to the lowest common denominator of human desire. What Nietzsche is objecting to here is thus the intrinsic dishonesty of any attempt at the mass-marketing of wisdom, as the path to some easily recognizable form of happiness. So he rejects hedonism in the Epicurean sense, inasmuch as Epicurus, in his role as a mass-marketer of 'wisdom', defines true pleasure merely as an end to suffering. The whole Epicurean marketing strategy is to promise inner liberation, here and now, from the things that make us suffer. And then – dishonestly, in Nietzsche's terms – to present just *that* as the highest form of human fulfilment. But for Nietzsche the highest form of human fulfilment is, on the contrary, whatever

involves the most thorough, all-inclusive *self-questioning*, so that, whereas therefore Epicureanism calls into question only our addictions, and the morality which plays upon them, the Nietzschean ideal also fundamentally calls into question the very instinct for self-preservation from suffering, to which Epicureanism for its part appeals.

The Epicurean Garden was a spiritually therapeutic community; but it was by no means a community of open-minded debate. On the contrary, the therapy was framed by quite a simple set of dogmas laid down by the founder. And these were never seriously questioned within the community. Nietzsche's 'Dionysian joy', however, transcends the Epicurean outlook in just this respect. For it is, not least, a sheer joy in questioning.

By contrast to 'Epicurean delight', the attainment of which would put an end to the need for thinking, this 'joy' is for ever opening up new challenges, new vistas for thought. That is why it is necessary for the ultimate fullness of honesty, as Nietzsche understands it.

It is the very utmost opposite to the banality of the human herd, in that it has nothing whatsoever to do with mere self-preservation from suffering; it is, on the contrary, a great overflow of superabundant life into *infinite* desire. Of course, the more ambitiously intense one's desires, the greater one's vulnerability to the suffering that comes from their probable frustration. But never mind. This is what it means, in Nietzschean terms, to embrace the 'tragic' nature of true wisdom. Banality is a wilful turning away from 'the tragic', in this sense, because it responds to misfortune, or the risk of misfortune, basically by deciding to care less about life in general. But what Nietzsche calls 'Dionysian joy' is the true magnanimity that is able to rise decisively above that all-too-human response. And so it expresses a fundamental readiness, always, to care more about life in general.

Honesty requires that we care – the more intensely, the better. Hence death cannot be rightly presented as a simply consolatory, soothing prospect, as it is by Epicurus. For Epicurus, to meditate on death is just to ponder the futility of mortal cares, to practise a discipline of care-freeness. But Nietzsche wants the opposite. 'Dionysian joy' derives from a recognition that every moment of time is filled with eternal significance. It allows life to be 'eternal', in the sense that points to an infinite intensification of care – only without manipulation, and so without any notion of post-mortem rewards and punishments. To give maximum offence to banality, but minimum scope for manipulation: this, very simply, is what Nietzsche *wills* when he speaks of the 'eternal return of the same', that is, eternal life without rewards and punishments; and of the 'overman', as the ideal being who alone can truly affirm such a tragic prospect. This is the sense in which, as he sees it, only the 'overman' ultimately grasps the true moral reality of things.

The 'overman' is Nietzsche's symbol for infinite desire. Somewhere more or less half-way between Epicurus and Nietzsche there stands, for example, Spinoza. Equally sensitive to the problematics of manipulation, Spinoza is also a quite un-Epicurean advocate of infinite desire at any rate in the form of

an infinite *thirst for explanation*. Hence his determinism: an absolute refusal to rest content with anything short of the very fullest explanation of moral phenomena. Yet Spinoza cannot see beyond self-preservation.²¹ And, besides, it is not only an infinite thirst for explanation which Nietzsche advocates. It is, at the same time, an infinite commitment to creative *self-expression*, both artistically and politically.

This indeed is why he has such mixed feelings, after all, about Plato. For is not Plato also committed to the same? Surely this is just what Plato too is saying, when he speaks of the infinite erotic pull of the 'Idea of the Good'!

Granted, Plato completely fails to distinguish between truth-as-Honesty and truth-as-correctness, and to recognize the proper moral priority of the former. As a result, he lamentably overvalues prosaic thought, aiming at exact truth-as-correctness over poetic thought, seeking to evoke the demands of truth-as-Honesty. Nietzsche is, I think, quite rightly critical of this. And his claim to be 'the first to discover the tragic' is, it seems to me, to this extent also quite valid: he really is a pioneering philosophic poet, or poetic philosopher, exploring new strategies of struggle against banality, premised on an absolute transcendence of metaphysics.

Yet the fact that Plato himself never explicitly distinguishes truth-as-Honesty from truth-as-correctness does not mean that he, for his part, is only concerned with the latter. On the contrary: Platonism may, as Epicurus complained, be deplorably manipulative, but at the same time it cannot be denied that Plato is also a singularly radical critic of the banal. And certainly, as we shall see, Christian thinkers turning back to Plato have almost always been drawn, first and foremost, by the authority of that critique.

The Third Criterion

Nietzsche for his part attacks Christianity as being, essentially, a sacralization of 'slave morality', an expression of moralized *ressentiment*, that is, quite precisely, a militant combination of manipulativeness and banality – fundamentally dishonest, in that sense.

Of course, Nietzsche is an outrageous caricaturist. And an apologist for Christianity may well begin by protesting against the many very sweeping exaggerations in his account of what he is attacking.

But – yes, he would no doubt respond, 'Perhaps I am a buffoon.'²² Only, who cares? The point is: to belong to a church must inevitably mean rubbing along with – and at least to that extent compromising with – all sorts of stuff that is both manipulative and banal. And – *why compromise?* His commitment to caricature and 'buffoonery' basically expresses his absolute repudiation of any compromise whatsoever with manipulatedness or banality.

In short, the Nietzschean notion of intellectual honesty consists of a twofold commitment to the very utmost free-spiritedness and creative intensity, *plus* the negative principle that one should never ever engage in this kind of

compromise. A second-level Christian apologetics in relation to Nietzsche would first and foremost have to tackle that negative principle. There need be no quarrel here about historical facts. The only real question, I think, is whether Nietzsche is right about the proper nature of intellectual honesty. In other words: the apologist needs to justify community-integrative compromise, not as a qualified retreat from the most demanding form of Honesty, but, on the contrary, as being somehow positively required by it.

In my view, however, it surely is!

Thus, why compromise? Against Nietzsche, finally, I would answer: it is necessary because intellectual Honesty – understood in the strong sense as a will to the most searching possible moral thoughtfulness – does not only stand opposed to manipulation and banality. To be sure, it is quite incompatible with any form of either. But, at the same time, it also stands equally opposed to what I have called dishonesty-as-disowning.

Epicurus represents a vivid testimony to just one of the necessary three criteria for true Honesty. And Nietzsche represents a vivid testimony to just two. But, in the end, we need to go beyond Nietzsche, and try to do proper justice to all three. For, in the light of the third criterion, it seems to me that Nietzsche himself is dishonest.

What I would see as his own ultimate dishonesty lies in his quite undisguised craving for a sort of *historic innocence*. The sheer virulence with which he repudiates his ancestral Lutheranism is just one example. An even clearer case (because uncomplicated by any issue of metaphysics) is his attitude to being German. ‘It is part of my ambition’, he remarks, ‘to be considered a despiser of Germans *par excellence*.’²³ In pursuit of this he even, on somewhat flimsy grounds, pretends to be Polish. English- and French-speaking commentators have often rather liked this anti-German aspect of his thinking – not least because of the way it so obviously helps undermine his sister’s crass attempt, after his breakdown, to establish him as one of the prophets of what was later to become Nazism. But I am not so sure.

Nietzsche, it appears, knows no difference between criticizing a religious or cultural tradition and disowning it altogether. I am inclined to call this ‘dishonesty’ essentially because of the way it helps to simplify ethical life. Submitting to manipulation simplifies ethical life; so does confining one’s thinking to the banality necessary in order that one’s ideas may be mass-marketable. On the other hand, the sheer repudiation of traditional loyalties does the same – I am thinking in particular here of the way in which such loyalties can cut across divisions of social class or educational refinement, compelling one sympathetically to consider, and respond to, the experience and views of others from quite different backgrounds, as fellow community-members. Nietzsche opts out of all that – I would say, dishonestly – preferring the altogether easier business of monologue, in Zarathustran solitude.

Radical Honesty, in the sense intended here, is something more than simple sincerity or frankness inasmuch as it involves an ideal openness to the critical perceptions of other people. But for Nietzsche, it seems, the only other people

who really count in this regard are other solitary thoughtful geniuses. His honesty is an honesty only towards such people.

Nietzsche does not want to be compromised, in any way, by keeping bad company, by being associated with the merely banal, or with the crassly manipulative and the manipulated. But his extravagant anti-Christian individualism thus expresses a craving for historic innocence which, unfortunately, only mirrors the corporate craving for historic innocence which disfigures so much Christianity, where the church relates to its past solely as a set of official reasons for boasting.

Of course, what Honesty respects in other people is not their banality, or their manipulativeness and manipulatedness. Only, in its ideal form it surely also includes an infinite patience, for the sifting out of what properly demands respect from what does not. And, sadly, Nietzsche lacks any real appreciation for that sort of patience. He sees humanity as being made up of one vast dark mass of manipulative or manipulated herd-animals, plus a few bright free spirits, with very little intermediate shading.

It is this elementary *chiaroscuro* which gives his work its tremendous poetic intensity. Yet it is also, I would argue, what decisively corrupts it.