

# Infinitely Demanding

Ethics of Commitment,  
Politics of Resistance

**Simon Critchley**

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*Guardian*

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*Ethics of commitment, politics of resistance*

SIMON CRITCHLEY



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# Contents

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Introduction: The possibility of commitment	1
a. Nihilism – active and passive	3
b. Motivational deficit	6
c. The argument	8
<b>I Demanding approval – a theory of ethical experience</b>	<b>14</b>
a. Ethical experience	14
b. Ethical subjectivity	19
c. Justifying reasons and exciting reasons	23
d. Kant, for example – the fact of reason	26
e. The auto-authentication of the moral law – some contemporary Kantians	27
f. The autonomy orthodoxy and the question of facticity	32
<b>2 Individualism – how to build an ethical subject</b>	<b>38</b>
a. Alain Badiou – situated universality	42
b. Knud Ejler Løgstrup – the unfulfillable demand	49
c. Emmanuel Levinas – the split subject	56
d. Jacques Lacan – the Thingly secrecy of the neighbour	63
<b>3 The problem of sublimation</b>	<b>69</b>
a. Happiness?	70
b. The tragic-heroic paradigm	73

c. Humour	77
d. We still have a great deal to learn about the nature of the super-ego	82
e. Having a conscience	85
4 Anarchic metapolitics – political subjectivity and political action after Marx	88
a. Marx’s truth	94
b. Capitalism capitalizes	97
c. Dislocation	99
d. The names are lacking – the problem of political subjectivity	103
e. One needs to search for the struggle	105
f. Politics as interstitial distance within the state	111
g. True democracy	114
h. Ethics as anarchic meta-politics	119
i. A new language of civil disobedience	123
j. Dissensus and anger	128
k. Conclusion	131
Appendix: Crypto-Schmittianism – the Logic of the Political in Bush’s America	133
Explanatory note	149
Notes	151
Index	165

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# Introduction

## The possibility of commitment

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Philosophy does not begin in an experience of wonder, as ancient tradition contends, but rather, I think, with the indeterminate but palpable sense that something desired has not been fulfilled, that a fantastic effort has failed. Philosophy begins in disappointment. Although there might well be precursors, I see this as a specifically modern conception of philosophy. To give it a name and a date, one could say that it is a conception of philosophy that follows from Kant's Copernican turn at the end of the eighteenth century. The great metaphysical dream of the soul moving frictionless towards knowledge of itself, things-in-themselves and God is just that, a dream. Absolute knowledge or a direct ontology of things as they are is decisively beyond the ken of fallible, finite creatures like us. Human beings are exceedingly limited creatures, a mere vapour or virus can destroy us. The Kantian revolution in philosophy is a lesson in limitation. As Pascal said, we are the weakest reed in nature and this fact requires an acknowledgement that is very reluctantly given. Our culture is endlessly beset with Promethean myths of the overcoming of the human condition, whether through the fantasy of artificial intelligence, contemporary delusions about robotics, cloning and genetic manipulation or simply through cryogenics and cosmetic surgery. We seem to have enormous difficulty in accepting our limitedness, our finiteness, and this failure is a cause of much tragedy.



One could give an entire taxonomy of disappointment, but the two forms that concern me most urgently are religious and political. These forms of disappointment are not entirely separable and continually leak into one another. Indeed, we will see how ethical and religious categories are rightly difficult to distinguish at times, and in my discussions of ethics I will often have recourse to religious traditions. In religious disappointment, that which is desired but lacking is an experience of faith. That is, faith in some transcendent god, god-equivalent or, indeed, gods. Philosophy in the experience of religious disappointment is godless, but it is an uneasy godlessness with a religious memory and within a religious archive.

The experience of religious disappointment provokes the following, potentially abyssal question: if the legitimating theological structures and religious belief systems in which people like us believed are no longer believable, if, to coin a phrase, God is dead, then what becomes of the question of the meaning of life? It is this question that provokes the visit of what Nietzsche refers to as the uncanniest of guests: *nihilism*. Nihilism is the breakdown of the order of meaning, where all that we previously imagined as a divine, transcendent basis for moral valuation has become meaningless. Nihilism is this declaration of meaninglessness, a sense of indifference, directionlessness or, at its worst, despair that can flood into all areas of life. For some, this is the defining experience of youth – witness the deaths of numerous young romantics, whether Keats, Shelley, Sid Vicious or Kurt Cobain, and their numbers continue to multiply – for others it lasts a whole lifetime. The philosophical task set by Nietzsche and followed by many others in the Continental tradition is how to respond to nihilism, or better, how to *resist* nihilism. Philosophical activity, by which I mean the free movement of thought and critical reflection, is defined by militant resistance to nihilism. That is, philosophy is defined by the thinking through of the fact that the basis of meaning has become meaningless. Our devalued values require what Nietzsche calls

reevaluation or trans-valuation. All the difficulty here consists in thinking through the question of meaning without bewitching ourselves with new and exotic forms of meaning, with imported brands of existential balm, the sort of thing that Nietzsche called 'European Buddhism' – although there is a lot 'American Buddhism' around too.

However, this book will be concerned with the other major form of disappointment, political disappointment. In the latter, the sense of something lacking or failing arises from the realization that we inhabit a violently *unjust* world, a world defined by the horror of war, a world where, as Dostoevsky says, blood is being spilt in the merriest way, as if it were champagne. Such an experience of disappointment is acutely tangible at the present time, with the corrosion of established political structures and an unending war on terror where the moods of Western populations are controlled through a politics of fear managed by the constant threat of external attack. As I try to show in the Appendix to this book, this situation is far from novel and might be said to be definitional of politics from antiquity to early and considerably later modernity. My point is that if the present time is defined by a state of war, then this experience of political disappointment provokes the question of justice: what might justice be in a violently unjust world? It is this question that provokes the need for an ethics or what others might call normative principles that might enable us to face and face down the present political situation. The main task of this book is responding to that need by offering a theory of ethical experience and subjectivity that will lead to an infinitely demanding ethics of commitment and politics of resistance (See Figure 1).

### **Nihilism – active and passive**

Yet, the latter is not the only option offered up by the present situation. This is why I mentioned religious disappointment and

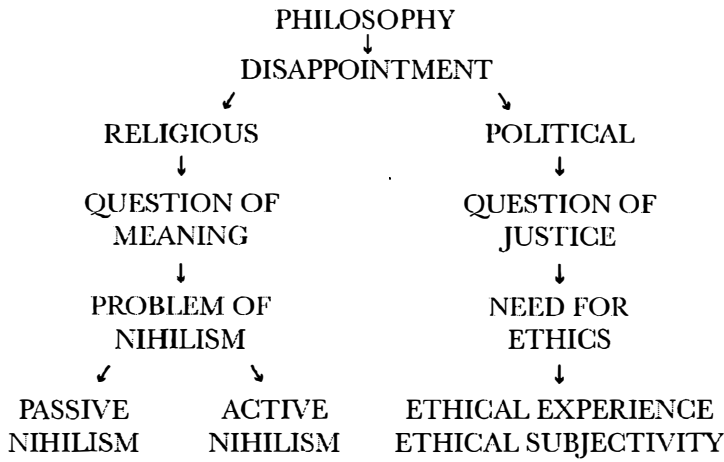


Figure 1

the problem of nihilism. Keeping that problem in mind, the present situation can provoke coherent, but in my view misguided, responses that we might describe as 'passive nihilism' and 'active nihilism'. The passive nihilist looks at the world from a certain distance, and finds it meaningless. He is scornful of the pretensions of liberal humanism with its metaphysical faith in progress, improvement and the perfectibility of humankind, beliefs that he claims are held with the same dogmatic assurance that Christianity was held in Europe until the late eighteenth century. The passive nihilist concludes that we are simply animals, and rather nasty aggressive primates at that, what we might call *homo rapiens*, *rapacious animals*. Rather than acting in the world and trying to transform it, the passive nihilist simply focuses on himself and his particular pleasures and projects for perfecting himself, whether through discovering the inner child, manipulating pyramids, writing pessimistic-sounding literary essays, taking up yoga, bird-watching or botany, as was the case with the aged Rousseau. In the face of the increasing brutality of reality, the passive nihilist

tries to achieve a mystical stillness, calm contemplation: 'European Buddhism'. In a world that is all too rapidly blowing itself to pieces, the passive nihilist closes his eyes and makes himself into an island.<sup>1</sup>

The active nihilist also finds everything meaningless, but instead of sitting back and contemplating, he tries to destroy this world and bring another into being. The history of active nihilism is fascinating and a consideration of it would take us back into various utopian, radical political and even terrorist groups. We might begin this history with Charles Fourier's utopian *phalansteries* of free love and leisure, before moving on to late nineteenth-century anarchism in Russia and elsewhere, through to the Promethean activism of Lenin's Bolshevism, Marinetti's Futurism, Maoism, Debord's Situationism, the Red Army Fraction in Germany, the Red Brigades in Italy, the Angry Brigade in England, the Weather Underground in the USA, without forgetting the sweet naivety of the Symbionese Liberation Army.

At the present time, however, the quintessence of active nihilism is al-Qaeda, this covert and utterly postmodern, rhizomatic quasi-corporation outside of any state control. Al-Qaeda uses the technological resources of capitalist globalization – elaborate and coded forms of communication, the speed and fluidity of financial transactions, and obviously transportation – against that globalization. The explicit aim of the destruction of the World Trade Center was the initiation of a new series of religious wars. The sad truth is that this aim has been hugely successful. The legitimating logic of al-Qaeda is that the modern world, the world of capitalism, liberal democracy and secular humanism, is meaningless and that the only way to remake meaning is through acts of spectacular destruction, acts which it is no exaggeration to say have redefined the contemporary political situation and made the pre-9/11 world seem remote and oddly quaint. We are living through a chronic re-theologization of politics.

In my view, one should approach al-Qaeda with the words and actions of bin Laden resonating against those of Lenin, Blanqui,

Mao, Baader-Meinhof, and Durruti. The more one learns about figures like Sayyid Qutb, who was murdered by the Nasser government in Egypt in 1966 after a period of imprisonment when he wrote many texts that would influence intellectuals like al-Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden's mentor, the more one sees the connection between Jihadist revolutionary Islam and more classical forms of extreme revolutionary vanguardism.<sup>2</sup> Although bin Laden's language is always couched in terms of opposing the 'Zionist-Crusader chain of evil' and 'global unbelief', the political logic of Jihadism is an active nihilist revolutionary vanguardism which is far more deeply committed to martyrdom and the rewards of the hereafter than the establishment of any positive social programme. In the savage intensity of his piety, Osama bin Laden is a quasi-kissing cousin of Turgenev's Bazarov.<sup>3</sup>

### **Motivational deficit**

Although they are opposed, both active and passive nihilism are Siamese twins of sorts, as they both agree on the meaninglessness of reality, or rather its essential unreality, which inspires either passive withdrawal or violent destruction. I will be following a different path. It seems to me that that we have to think through and think out of the situation in which we find ourselves. We have to resist and reject the temptation of nihilism and face up to the hard reality of the world. What does that reality teach us? It shows violent injustice here and around the world; it shows growing social and economic inequalities here and around the world; it shows that the difference between what goes on here and around the world is increasingly fatuous. It shows the populations of the well-fed West governed by fear of outsiders, whose current names are 'terrorist', 'immigrant', 'refugee' or 'asylum seeker'. It shows populations turning inward towards some reactionary and xenophobic conception of their purported identity, something which is happening

in a particularly frightening manner all across Europe at present. It shows that because of an excessive diet of sleaze, deception, complacency and corruption liberal democracy is not in the best of health. It shows, in my parlance, massive political disappointment.

It is here that we have to recognize the force of al-Qaeda's position and their diagnosis of the present. In a word, the institutions of secular liberal democracy simply do not sufficiently motivate their citizenry. On the contrary, at this point in time, the political institutions of the Western democracies appear strangely demotivating. There is increasing talk of a democratic deficit, a feeling of the irrelevance of traditional electoral politics to the lives of citizens, and an uncoupling of civil society from the state, at the same time as the state seeks to extend ever-increasing powers of surveillance and control into all areas of civil society. I think it might be claimed that there is a motivational deficit at the heart of liberal democratic life, where citizens experience the governmental norms that rule contemporary society as externally binding but not internally compelling.<sup>4</sup> They are simply not part of our mindset, the dispositions of our subjectivity. If secular liberal democracy doesn't motivate subjects sufficiently, then – returning to active and passive nihilism – what seems to motivate subjects are frameworks of belief that call that secular project into question. Whatever one may think about it, one has to recognize that there is something powerfully motivating about the Islamist or Jihadist worldview, or indeed its Christian fundamentalist obverse. Yet, the source of that motivation is metaphysical or theological. What is most depressing about the many depressing features of the current US administration is the sort of metaphysical or theological symmetry between George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden. This is what I mean when I say that we have entered a period of new religious war.

The hypothesis here is that there is a motivational deficit at the heart of secular liberal democracy and that what unites active and

passive nihilists is a metaphysical or theological critique of secular democracy, whether in terms of a Jihadist or Christian fundamentalist activism or a Buddhistic passivity. Now, crucially, this motivational deficit is also a *moral* deficit, a lack at the heart of democratic life that is intimately bound up with the felt inadequacy of official secular conceptions of morality. Indeed, following Jay Bernstein here, one might go further and argue that modernity itself has had the effect of generating a motivational deficit in morality that undermines the possibility of ethical secularism.<sup>5</sup> I am not so sure I want to nail my colours to the mast of a defence of secularism, but it brings me to the premise behind the opening chapters of this book. What is required, in my view, is a conception of ethics that begins by accepting the motivational deficit in the institutions of liberal democracy, but without embracing either passive or active nihilism, although each of these positions represents a potent temptation: the sense that the world is irreparably flawed in a way that behoves either passive withdrawal or active destruction. What is lacking at the present time of massive political disappointment is a motivating, empowering conception of ethics that can face and face down the drift of the present, an ethics that is able to respond to and resist the political situation in which we find ourselves. This brings me to my initial question: if we are going to stand a chance of constructing an ethics that empowers subjects to political action, a motivating ethics, we require some sort of answer to what I see as the basic question of morality. It is to this that I would now like to turn.

### **The argument**

How does a self bind itself to whatever it determines as its good? In my view, this is the fundamental question of ethics. To answer it we require a description and explanation of the subjective commitment to ethical action. My claim will be that all questions of

normative justification, whether with reference to theories of justice, rights, duties, obligations or whatever, should be referred to what I call 'ethical experience'. Ethical experience elicits the core structure of moral selfhood, what we might think of as the existential matrix of ethics. As such, and this is what really interests me, ethical experience furnishes an account of the motivational force to act morally, of that by virtue of which a self decides to pledge itself to some conception of the good. My polemical contention is that without a plausible account of motivational force, that is, without a conception of the ethical subject, moral reflection is reduced to the empty manipulation of the standard justificatory frameworks: deontology, utilitarianism and virtue ethics.

The initial task of Chapter 1 is twofold: first, to outline a theory of ethical experience based on the concepts of approval and demand; and second, to show how this theory presupposes a model of ethical subjectivity. I then go on to explore this notion of ethical experience with particular attention to Kant's notion of practical reason and how that notion is picked up and adapted in an influential way by contemporary Kantians, such as Rawls, Korsgaard and Habermas. The central focus of the discussion of Kant will be the peculiar doctrine of the 'fact of reason' which attempts to unify the justification of moral norms on the basis of universality with the motivation to act on those norms.

My overall argument can be broken down into meta-ethical and normative parts. I understand meta-ethics to be inquiry into the nature of ethics and what makes ethics the thing that it is, i.e. what makes ethics ethical; I understand normative ethics to be the recommendation of a specific conception of morality. On the basis of my meta-ethical argument about ethical experience in Chapter 1 and illustrated with the example of Kant, I will go in on in Chapters 2 and 3 to construct a normative model of ethical subjectivity. I will recommend this model most warmly, although I don't think it is the business of moral argument to be able to



provide watertight proofs for its propositions. Ethical argument is neither like logic, which is deductively true, nor science, which is inductively true. There is a point at which the rationality of moral argumentation gives way to moral recommendation, even exhortation, an appeal to the individual reader from an individual writer.

The central philosophical task in my approach to ethics is developing a theory of ethical subjectivity. A subject is the name for the way in which a self binds itself to some conception of the good and shapes its subjectivity in relation to that good. To be clear, I am not making the questionable claim that it is the job of philosophers to manufacture moral selves. They exist already as the living, breathing products of education and socialization. What I am seeking to offer is a model of ethical subjectivity with some normative force that might both describe and deepen the activity of those living, breathing moral selves. I construct a model of ethical subjectivity by borrowing three concepts from three thinkers. From Alain Badiou, I borrow the idea of *fidelity* to the event as the central ethical experience, which I link to the neglected and much-maligned concept of commitment. From the little-known Danish theologian Knud Ejler Løgstrup, I take the idea of the ethical demand, which is a one-sided, radical and – crucially, for me – *unfulfillable* demand. From Emmanuel Levinas, I take the idea that the unfulfillability of the ethical demand, what he sometimes calls ‘the curvature of intersubjective space’, is internal to subjectivity. The thought here is that the Levinasian ethical subject is a subject defined by the experience of an internalized demand that it can never meet, a demand that exceeds it, what he calls infinite responsibility. For Levinas, the experience of the demand is affective and the affect that constitutes the ethical subject is trauma. Following this clue, I seek to reconstruct the basic operation of Levinas’s work in psychoanalytic terms, borrowing the notion of trauma in the later Freud. This means that the ethical subject is, in my parlance, *hetero-affectively* constituted. It is a *split*

*subject* divided between itself and a demand that it cannot meet, a demand that makes it the subject that it is, but which it cannot entirely fulfill. The sovereignty of my autonomy is always usurped by the heteronomous experience of the other's demand. The ethical subject is a *dividual*.

In Chapter 3, I show how this conception of the ethical subject runs the risk of chronically overloading – indeed masochistically persecuting – the self with responsibility in a way that calls for an experience of what psychoanalysts call sublimation. Drawing heavily from Lacan, the problem of sublimation will take us into psychoanalytic discussions of art and, more specifically, tragedy. I argue that the psychoanalytic discourse on sublimation is hostage to a 'tragic-heroic paradigm' that extends back through Heidegger to German Idealism. Against this paradigm, I will show how *humour* can be conceived as a practice of minimal sublimation that both maintains and alleviates the division of the ethical subject.

So, on my view, the ethical subject is defined by commitment or fidelity to an unfulfillable demand, a demand that is internalized subjectively and which divides subjectivity. Now, such a divided subjectivity is, I would argue, the experience of *conscience*, which is a concept that I want to place back at the heart of ethics. Despite Nietzschean claims about conscience culminating in self-hatred or Freudian claims about the cruelty of the super-ego, I am proposing an ethics of discomfort, a hyperbolic ethics based on the internalization of an unfulfillable ethical demand. Such a conscience is not, as Luther puts it, the work of God in the heart of man, but rather the work of ourselves upon ourselves. Such formulations bring Foucault's late work to mind. But I do not understand this work of the self upon itself in Foucault's sense, which always seems to be orientated around practices of self-mastery, what he calls 'care for the self as a practice of freedom'.<sup>6</sup> On the contrary, for me, the experience of conscience is that of an essentially divided self, an originally inauthentic humorous self that can never attain the autarchy of self-mastery.

The question then becomes, and this is the theme of the final

chapter: what is the link between conscience and political action? I pursue this through a reading of Marx, particularly the early Marx and more particularly still the figure of what he calls ‘true democracy’ in his early critique of Hegel. I see this figure as a clue for a thinking of the political in Marx’s work against the tendency towards economistic reductionism that was emphasized by Engels and became an article of faith for the Marxism of the Second International. My use of Marx is not scholarly or philological, but diagnostic. I am interested in his work because some of his analyses and concepts tell us a good deal about who we are, where we are, and how we might change who and where we are. This chapter turns around, to coin a phrase, what is living and what is dead in Marx’s work. On the one hand, I defend Marx’s diagnosis of capitalism and argue that his socio-economic insights have become more plausible in the face of what we all too glibly call globalization. Yet, on the other hand, I criticize the belief that the development of capitalism leads ineluctably to the simplification of the class structure into the opposed poles of bourgeoisie and proletariat, where the latter becomes the political subject of revolutionary communist praxis. Yet, if the proletariat is no longer the revolutionary subject, then this raises a deep question as to the nature of political subjectivity. After a discussion of the formation of political subjectivity that draws on Gramsci’s concept of hegemony and Ernesto Laclau’s recovery and elaboration of that concept, I go on to consider the possibility of political organization at the present time. In particular, I consider the meaning that can be given to figures like association and coalition in the face of the radical dislocations of global capitalism. I discuss the politics of indigenous identity as a powerful example of the invention of a new political subject, before moving on to the spectacular tactical politics of contemporary anarchism, which I think has forged a new language of civil disobedience.

Circling back to the main argument of the book, I conclude by arguing that at the heart of a radical politics there has to be what I

call a *meta-political* ethical moment that provides the motivational force or propulsion into political action. If ethics without politics is empty, then politics without ethics is blind. Taking my cue from a heterodox reading of Levinas, I claim that this meta-political moment is *anarchic*, where ethics is the disturbance of the political status quo. Ethics is anarchic meta-politics, it is the continual questioning from below of any attempt to impose order from above. On this view, politics is the creation of *interstitial distance* within the state, the invention of new political subjectivities. Politics, I argue, cannot be confined to the activity of government that maintains order, pacification and security while constantly aiming at consensus. On the contrary, politics is the manifestation of dissensus, the cultivation of an anarchic multiplicity that calls into question the authority and legitimacy of the state. It is in relation to such a multiplicity that we may begin to restore some dignity to the dreadfully devalued discourse of democracy.

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# Demanding approval – a theory of ethical experience

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## Ethical Experience

What do I mean by ethical experience? I would like to begin by trying to pick out the formal structure of ethical experience, or what, with Dieter Henrich, we can call the grammar of the concept of moral insight.<sup>1</sup> Firstly, with the word ‘experience’ in the ethical domain I do not mean a passive display of externally received images in the theatre of consciousness. Experience is not sheer passivity. Rather, ethical experience is an *activity* whereby new objects emerge for a subject involved in the process of their creation. This distinction between passive and active experience broadly follows that between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* in Hegel, where the latter suggests the ongoing, processual character of experience. Ethical experience is activity, the activity of the subject, even when that activity is the receptivity to the other’s claim upon me – it is an active receptivity.

In my view, ethical experience begins with the experience of a demand to which I give my approval. There are two key components to ethical experience: *approval* and *demand* (See Figure 2). Let me begin by unpacking the notion of approval. I claim that there can be no sense of the good – however that is filled out at the level of content, and I understand it for the moment in an entirely formal and empty manner – without an act of approval, affirmation or

## THE STRUCTURE OF ETHICAL EXPERIENCE

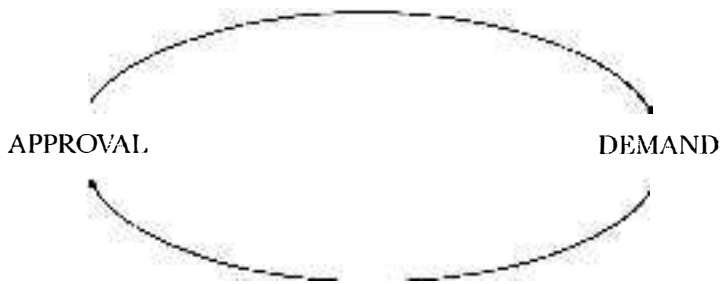


Figure 2

approbation. That is, the ethical statement 'love thy neighbour as thyself' differs from the epistemic claim that 'I am now seated in a chair'. Why? Because my ethical statement implies an *approval* of the activity of loving one's neighbour, whereas I can be quite indifferent to the chair I am sitting on. If I say, to use a less common moral example, that 'it would be good for parrots to receive the right to vote in elections', then my saying this implies that I approve of this development.

However, this is not to say that approval is absent from epistemic claims or factual statements. One might legitimately object that if I say 'there is a large portion of baltic herring on the table', then my saying this implies a tacit approval of that fact, for I am particularly partial to the aforementioned herring. Alternatively, if I say 'there is a dead rat in my fridge', or, with Peter Sellars's Inspector Clouseau that, 'there is a bomb in my room', then my factual statements imply strong disapproval, a disapproval, moreover, bordering on the moral assertion that it is not good for me to have a rat in my fridge or a bomb in my room. On this view, the

difference between factual and moral statements with respect to approval is a difference of degree and not a difference of kind. My point is simply that there *is* a difference of degree and that moral statements imply strong approval or disapproval of the states of affairs under discussion, e.g. ‘war is always wrong!’ or ‘evil must not be appeased but attacked!’; ‘abortion is murder!’ or ‘every woman should have the right to choose!’; ‘Famine relief is essential!’ or ‘charity begins at home!’ Both factual and moral statements imply an experience of approval and the difference between them might be said to consist in the *strength* of that approval, ranging from a more or less indifferent assent or neutral acquiescence to an existential affirmation or commitment that leads to action.

However, although the good only comes into view through approval, it is not good *by virtue* of approval. That approval is an approval *of* something, namely a demand that demands approval. In my example, the approval of parrots receiving the right to vote is related to the fact that – at least in my singular moral imagination – parrots make a certain demand, namely the demand for political representation. Ethical experience is, first and foremost, the approval of a demand, a demand that demands approval. As is suggested by Figure 2, ethical experience has to be circular, although hopefully only virtuously so. As Heidegger famously shows against the accusation of the circularity of Cartesian reasoning, not all circles are vicious.

Leaving parrots to one side, and turning to the history of philosophy and religion, we can think about how this formal concept of demand can be filled out with various contents. Here is a list of demands for approval that can be inserted on the right side of Figure 2: Mosaic Law in the Bible, the Good beyond Being in Plato, the resurrected Christ in Paul and Augustine, the Good as the goal of desire for Aquinas, the practical ideal of generosity for Descartes, the experience of benevolence for Hutcheson, and of sympathy for Adam Smith and Hume, the greatest happiness of the greatest number for Bentham and Mill, the moral law in Kant,

practical faith as the goal of subjective striving in Fichte, the abyssal intuition of freedom in Schelling, the creature's feeling of absolute dependency on a creator in Schleiermacher, pity for the suffering of one's fellow human beings in Rousseau or for all creatures in Schopenhauer, the thought of eternal return in Nietzsche, the ethico-teleological idea in the Kantian sense for Husserl, the call of conscience in Heidegger, the relation to the Thou in Buber, the claim of the non-identical in Adorno, etc., etc. This list might be extended.

The point is that each of these positions is the expression of a demand to which the self gives its approval, and that this structure of demand and approval gives the shape of ethical experience. The essential feature of ethical experience is that the subject of the demand – the moral self – affirms that demand, assents to finding it good, binds itself to that good and shapes its subjectivity in relation to that good. We will extend this very short history of ethics with the example of Kant and some contemporary Kantians and post-Kantians, but note that my little list has some big gaps, some of which will be discussed presently.

What I called above the virtuous circularity of ethical experience raises the following question: which comes first, demand or approval? *Prima facie*, one is perhaps inclined to say that the demand comes first; that is, without some sort of demand there is nothing to approve. This would appear to be true experientially. Let me take two examples: (i) Bob Geldof, London-based Irish rockstar turned activist and philanthropist, and (ii) the resurrection of Christ. In late autumn 1984, Bob Geldof experienced the demand of Ethiopian famine victims during an enormously distressing BBC newscast. Approving of this demand, he became subjectively committed to doing something to alleviate their plight, and thus the Band-Aid and Live-Aid projects were born. Much money was raised, much good was done, and Bob eventually became Sir Bob. Indeed, an even more dreadful version of the Band-Aid single was released late in 2004 and



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