

## 5 Between Care and Claim: Comments on Michael Carper's *Can the Religious Person Say Anything?*

Laurence Rohrer

Michael Carper's paper, *Can the Religious Person Say Anything?* very beautifully accomplishes what it sets out to do, namely it delineates the very real tension between public moral discourse and religious discourse that is commonly misunderstood. Michael's contrast of Kierkegaard and Habermas is largely effective but I think imperfect in one respect. I am largely in agreement with the manner that Michael delineates the tension between faith and reason in *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling*. However, I think that the delineation of the tension of care and claim that Michael develops in the closing arguments of his paper does not work equally well in Habermas's communicative theory of ethics, because I do not think that Habermas understands the categories of the ethical and the religious as similarly to Kierkegaard, as Michael sometimes suggests.

Michael has convinced me that in various parts of their discourses, Kierkegaard and Habermas seem to be making similar claims about the both the religious and the ethical, but I think that he underestimates the force of the very real differences between both writers, that he himself addresses in his discussion of the ethical as Kierkegaard understood it, and the demands of public moral consensus demanded by Habermas.

Michael discusses the fact that Kant profoundly influences Kierkegaard understanding of the ethical. I would also add that Hegel's famous explication of *Antigone* which contrasts the divine law of the family i.e. tribe, with the law of the state, is very much at play in Kierkegaard's dialectic as well. Like Hegel, Kierkegaard argues that the two laws must at times clash.<sup>i</sup> But unlike Hegel, Kierkegaard does not trivialize the divine law of the family as the beliefs of the

primitive ethical community which must eventually dissolve into the higher synthesis of the law of the state. I bring this point about Hegel into my response, simply because I believe that this Hegelian understanding of the law of the family, “stemming from the underworld of the unconscious” is precisely the kind of attitude held by Habermas regarding religion in general, in that its focus is self-transcendence, involving sectarian claims. Just as there is no way that Antigone can excuse herself before the law, there is no way for the sectarian to justify herself before the public without meeting the ethical expectations of the laws of the state (qua the Ethical), which at times differ from the law of the family. The Hegelian view is not the position that Kierkegaard took however. The ethical and the religious must both remain valid, and the higher synthesis, if any is possible for both care and claim must retain the entire former properties of both the ethical and the religious. The Knight of Faith must remain suspended like the dancer as Kierkegaard so poetically put it. Thus, I agree with Michael that if we accept Kierkegaard’s presuppositions about the categories of the ethical and the religious that something akin to Michael’s own remarks about suffering and love perhaps pose the only partial solution.

In contrast, the reasons that Habermas holds, to explain why the religious cannot speak to the public implies strikingly different things. For Habermas, the religious when speaking in religious terms, is operating under a form of practical rationality (to borrow an expression from MacIntyre) that is not acceptable to the liberal expectations of ethical discourse, which as Michael points out, aims at some sort of reflective equilibrium that emerges from public discourse. The difference between the attitudes of Kierkegaard and Habermas towards the religious is clear. For Kierkegaard the genuinely faithful must hold onto the antinomy of the two valid categories, precisely because both are valid, but for Habermas the religious can contribute nothing qua religious *because* he believes their form of practical rationality is *invalid*.

Unlike Hegel who believed that the higher synthesis of the state represented the fruition of the Weltgeist in which some of the prior categories would be retained – there is no higher category other than the public ethical discourse itself for Habermas. Thus, the religious person is forced into bad faith at every juncture they wish to enter public discourse. He must entertain and negotiate with the positions of those that hold views that may clearly contradict his own. In short, the religious must cease to be religious and act as a secular liberal in order to say anything at all. Thus, while it may seem that Abraham's position in *Fear and Trembling*, appears to be analogous to the religious sectarian that concerns Habermas, as Michael suggests in his discussion of Finlayson's interpretation, he is not. Abraham must remain in the tension between God and the Ethical in order to remain in the Truth, as the Knight of Faith. The sectarian on the other hand, as Habermas believes, fails to understand the ethical at all, precisely because he remains religious.