

Spanners and Symbols: God's Action as Communicative Action

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Within the framework of the "empiricist" philosophy widely assumed in English theology, there is a serious problem about how to represent God's action in the world. This applies equally to God's action in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and to God's action today through the Holy Spirit. Here I will argue that the problem can be eased by a change of philosophical framework. I will do so in dialogue with Maurice Wiles' *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine*¹ which reveals with outstanding honesty and clarity the difficulties that the empiricist framework throws up.

I

By the "empiricist" framework I mean a general set of philosophical presuppositions that are deeply entrenched within our culture in general, and widespread within our university departments of science, philosophy and theology in particular. Of these (often only implicit) presuppositions I am interested in just two: firstly, that the chief function of language is to represent or "picture" reality; secondly, that "action" must take place via some causal mechanism, the model for which is given by the causal mechanisms of the natural sciences. Thus the only relation that language can have to action is to "picture" it.

This pair of assumptions is peculiarly deadly for theology, because it pushes back our possibilities for conceptualizing God's action to only two. Either we think of God's action as the communication of knowledge about a state of affairs—a picture of reality—or else we must see it as an intervention in the causal nexus so as to rearrange the course of events in the physical world. Each then presents insuperable problems of interpretation, and does not really do justice to what we (or the tradition) would like to say about the action of God.

Consider, for example, the activity of the Holy Spirit in the world today. Wiles first rejects 'the idea of some special relation of God to particular events' as difficult to justify:

The experience of divine guidance or divine providence is so frequent and so fundamental a Christian experience that if it were to be understood as always implying special divine *causation* ... the occurrences of such special divine activity

would have to be so numerous as to make nonsense of our normal understanding of the relative independence of *causation* within the world. (pp. 37f, my stress)

Wiles, as his terminology of 'causation ... causation' indicates, conceptualizes a 'special relation of God to particular events' as God intervening as one cause among others in the causal nexus. God's action is assimilated to the dominant world-view of the natural sciences, and then rejected.

Thus Wiles is forced back to the only alternative available within his framework, the communication of information. First he rejects a "mentalistic" adaptation of the first model. 'God working by the way of love through the inner promptings of the Holy Spirit' (p. 96) cannot involve an extra, isolable, 'causal factor' (p. 97). Rather, revelation occurs when 'particular events by virtue of their intrinsic character or the results to which they give rise give (like the beauty of the lillies) particular expression to some aspect of God's creative purpose for the world as a whole' (p. 38). God's activity is thus to be understood as a way of speaking about those events in the world through which we glimpse God's overall sustaining and creative purpose for the whole cosmos. That is, it is to do with the communication of information. But is that all that we—or the tradition—would want to say about the action of God?

Consider, secondly, God's action in the crucifixion. Once again the dichotomy operates: either the crucifixion must effect an intervention in some "cosmic mechanism" modelled on the mechanisms of the natural sciences, or else it just conveys information.

Wiles clearly rejects the first option, and with it the ancient 'belief that in the death and resurrection of Christ God worked effectively in history to transform once for all man's status ... in relation to God' (p. 62f.). The cross does not represent 'an objective act of God ... in the history of this world, in virtue of which things are not as they were' (p. 64). Instead, he holds that 'Christ's passion is in some way a demonstration of what is true of God's eternal nature' (p. 79). Thus once again God's action becomes the communication of knowledge about a state of affairs.

Yet this is not quite fair, because Wiles also salvages from ancient theories of the atonement the recognition that 'the passion of Christ has been remarkably *effective* as a historical phenomenon in the transformation of human lives' (p. 80, my stress). This, I feel, points the way forward, because it threatens to burst open the model of the "communication of information". So the question must be asked: Is it possible to conceptualize God as *acting* to transform human lives, without conceptualizing him as (to parody a little, but not, I think, enormously) a "celestial mechanic" with the Holy Spirit as his "spanner"?

II

In my opinion, this can only be achieved as the result of a change in
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philosophical framework; a change which rejects the two presuppositions of empiricism explored above. Such a paradigm change is provided in the work of the German philosopher/sociologist Jürgen Habermas, and his concept of “communicative action”. In what follows, I will try to show that Habermas’ “communicative action” affords a less inadequate way of conceptualizing the action of God than the two ways provided by empiricism. To effect the paradigm change will be a two-step process, because our notions of action and of language are both in need of reformulation.

The first step is to break free from the conceptual tyranny of the natural sciences. This is a tyranny that assimilates human action—and God’s action—to intervention in the causal nexus presupposed by science and technology. This is the point of the “mechanic and spanner” parody above. Habermas, classically in the book *Knowledge and Human Interests*², denies that the natural sciences tell us how the world “really is”—i.e. give us a “picture of reality”—for the semi-pragmatist position that they tell us how we may manipulate the world effectively. Scientific knowledge is thus knowledge about how we can *use* the world: it is knowledge related to the human interest in being able to predict and control the behaviour of the natural world effectively. On this model, scientific knowledge is still real knowledge, but knowledge with a limited scope. It is not the only “real” sort of knowledge, such that all other forms of knowledge must be ultimately reducible to it, or be exposed as nonsense. Rather, it must be kept in its place. And specifically, in this context, its concepts of cause, effect and mechanism must not be allowed to escape from their legitimate field to dictate what God (or man) “acting” must mean.

The second step is to reformulate our ideas about language. Following the later Wittgenstein, Habermas rejects the concept of language as primarily representatory, for language as primarily active in the constitution of, and transformation of, our socio-cultural “lifeworlds”. The ordinary use of language then becomes a form of action that does things in the individual and social realms. An obvious example, which Habermas quotes from Austin, is “I do” said in the context of the marriage service. Here the words do not describe a marriage but actually enact it. The words change something in the social world. Habermas maintains that this phenomenon is characteristic (although not always so obviously) of all ordinary use of language. Thus, for the ordinary use of language, he coins the term “communicative action”³.

Seeing communicative action as *action* is only possible, of course, because of the flexibility introduced into the concept of “action” above. This flexibility enables Habermas to split the concept of action into two: into “communicative action” and “instrumental action”⁴. The latter is intervention in the causal nexus of the physical world, operating by way of empirical restraints in order to achieve unilaterally conceived ends:

“action” much as in empiricism. But it is the new category, communicative action, that is interesting in this context. As noted above, it is a form of action because it “does” things; it is not merely a matter of description. But it is very different from instrumental action for two reasons. First, its medium is symbols instead of forces. And secondly, following from this, it is a form of action that can only be achieved by two (or more) persons: symbols must be understood and accepted for communicative action to succeed. Thus communicative action is conceived of as intervention in the social or “subjective” worlds, in order to achieve a bilaterally conceived agreement, consensus or understanding.

III

I want to suggest that our conceptions of God’s action might be rather less inadequate to their subject matter if we were to abandon the two empiricist alternatives of instrumental action and the communication of information for Habermas’ communicative action. I will suggest four ways in which this new paradigm makes better sense of what the tradition says about the action of God.

First, it makes some sense of the biblical ideas of God’s creative or active word—and of Jesus as the word made flesh—if this word is seen as communicative *action* rather than mere description or sheer command. This is particularly so because language (in Habermas’ model) is integrally involved with the *formation* of the individual and of society.

Secondly, it makes some sense of the idea that God’s action can be *resisted*. If God’s action is implicitly conceptualized as intervention in the causal nexus as one extremely potent “force” among others, then it is hard to see how it could be resisted if seriously applied. But if God’s action is *communicative* action, and its medium is symbols instead of forces, then this does not apply. Communicative actions couched in symbols can be misunderstood, or rejected, irrespective of the status of their author, because their success depends upon an *unforced agreement*.

Thirdly, the paradigm of God’s action—the crucifixion—no longer need be either simply the communication of information about God’s nature, or causal intervention in some “cosmic mechanism”; it can be a real intervention by God in man’s socio-cultural lifeworld, but a communicative one. As such it can be a truly creative or transformative *action*, leading (once understood and accepted) to a transformation of the individual and society. Yet as *communicative* action it becomes effective only when understood and accepted—otherwise it remains an instance of “failed communication”. Thus what in Wiles’ treatment is split up into two quite separate events—the event of the cross and the modern transformation of a human life—can be reunited into one communicative action. The communicative action of the cross is only complete—only

succeeds—when it transforms the life of a believer who understands and accepts it.

My last example is a good deal more ambiguous. One key to Habermas' transformation of the concept of language is his contention that language, by virtue of its *telos*, is not a tool suitable for an individual to "use" so as to "manipulate" other people to his/her own ends⁶. Rather it is a thoroughly social phenomenon that is orientated to the production of community, consensus and understanding—or perhaps we might say in Christian terms "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace". So, fourthly, God acting communicatively in our lives would not imply God manipulating us and aiming at our subjection to his inscrutable will on the model of slave and potentate. Rather it would imply that our true status is that of "communication partners" with him, in a loving relationship that transcends autonomy and subservience in communicative consensus⁷.

Now, of course there is a huge problem here; the problem of safeguarding God's transcendence, of safeguarding the inherent asymmetry of the God-human relationship. It is no use deposing a picture of God as oriental despot to replace it by one of God as friendly neighbour! Which only goes to underline the obvious fact that no form of conceptualization can be adequate to the mystery of God and his action. However, the model of communicative action may be a little less *inadequate* than the models of empiricism in this area, because it offers a way of transcending the antithesis of autonomy and subservience. Perhaps using it we could make some sense of the Johannine paradox:

You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing. (John 15:14f)

If God's action is conceptualized not as the operation of an extremely potent force, but as the offering of communicative action that needs to be accepted by man or woman to succeed—succeed in his/her *transformation*—then perhaps obedience and friendship are not so antithetical after all.

At one point, Maurice Wiles seems to feel acutely the need for a category such as this. Discussing the action of the Holy Spirit in the believer, he rejects N.P. Williams' claim that 'the ultimate kernel of a "special providence" is a direct influence exerted by God upon the personality of a human being' via 'defly administered subconscious impulses' (p. 96). Such 'causal operation over and above the specifiable external influences' would not be 'a suasion of love' (p. 97). Wiles is surely right to reject Williams' model at this point. But what he is rejecting is the product of an empiricist model that reduces action to unconscious manipulation, and the 'suasion of love' to the turn of a mental spanner. With Habermas' model of communicative action this is not necessary.

Communicative action is concerned with rational appeal to the conscious actor, not manipulation of the unconscious behind his or her back; and its medium is the symbol, not a force.

- 1 Wiles M., *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine*, SCM (London) 1974. Especially chapters 2, 4 and 5. Quotations from this book are denoted by the use of single quotation marks.
- 2 Habermas J., *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Heinemann (London 1978). Compare Hesse M., *Revolutions and Reconstructions in the Philosophy of Science*, Harvester (Brighton) 1980, for a broadly similar stance.
- 3 Habermas' concept of communicative action is now most accessible in *The Theory of Communicative Action* vol 1, Heinemann (London) 1984 pp. 284—288 and 293—295. This massive two volume work explores the implications of the model of communicative action for modern social theory as a whole.
- 4 For the sake of simplicity I have neglected Habermas' concept of "strategic action", which denotes language used to manipulate other people for one's own ends.
- 5 Habermas' term for the realm of experience to which the individual has privileged access. It does *not* imply acceptance of what he calls the "philosophy of consciousness", i.e. Descartes *et. seq.*
- 6 To use language thus is a *misuse* of it that he calls "strategic action". See note 4.
- 7 "Consensus" is a term in Habermas' vocabulary that suggests the unforced nature of a relationship in which the interests of both sides are taken equally into account in mutual respect.

Documents and Human Hearts : formal and experiential sexual morality

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For the true Christian it is axiomatic that the fundamental form of interpretation of the Scriptures is not search for meaning or valid patterns of thought for today, but *discipleship*: in other words, the enactment of Christian life, the establishment and building up of the Christian community, the singular and corporate worship of God, the completion of Christ's Church by sharing in his afflictions (cf Col 1.24). The Christian interpretation of the Word of God occurs not in any private 'religious' place, but out where the human race speaks and suffers, endeavours and achieves. What Christian theology executes reflectively, Christian discipleship executes practically—mediating that memory and hope which we call the handing-on of the Gospel.

Where an opposite view prevails, responsibility for present interpretative mediation of the Gospel experience no longer devolves upon the community of Christian disciples, but far too much upon