

What is Missing? Jürgen Habermas's Turn to a 'Post-secular Society' and the Limits of Postmetaphysical Modernity

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines Jürgen Habermas’s recent turn to a “post-secular society” and evaluates this move in light of the wider background of his philosophical and political thought. While taking stock of Habermas’s arguments that a postsecular turn in liberal politics is necessary in order to regenerate and thus strengthen and stabilize the normative content of the Enlightenment project, my analysis in this thesis shows that the concept of “post-secular society” raises significant normative tensions for the “postmetaphysical” character of Habermas’s philosophical and theoretical thinking. In the first part of the thesis I examine Habermas’s re-construction of the normative project of modernity (as found in the works of Kant, Hegel and Marx) independent from the metaphysical premises of “the philosophy of the subject”. My discussion brings to the fore the central role played by the “dialectic of Enlightenment” in Habermas’s thought: modernity must generate normative substance out of its own resources and thus “communicative reason” continues the Enlightenment project of finding a rational replacement for metaphysics/religion. I also underscore the role played in this project by the thesis of the “linguistification of the sacred”.

In the second part of the thesis I examine Habermas's recent writings (post 9/11/2001) and the concept of a "post-secular society" introduced in them. Conceding that something is missing in the "postmetaphysical" view of modernity as previously articulated, Habermas turns to religion as an important source of normative and moral insight. A "post-secular society" relies on a project of translation: the cognitive (or truth-) content of religious traditions must be "salvaged" from the religious dogmatic shell that encapsulates them and transferred into the "universally accessible" language of reason. I examine this project and discuss some important normative tensions that it generates first, for the project of grounding modernity out of its own normative resources and, second, for the universal dimension of "communicative reason". Finally I suggest some directions that could be explored in order to cash in on the aspirations animating Habermas's project of "salvaging" translation and make this project more feasible and plausible.

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To the memory of my mother Nicolina Atanasescu (1946-2014)
Bending the bow, you made it all possible

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List of Habermas's works cited. The square brackets contain the year of the German edition.

AWM	<i>An Awareness of What is Missing</i> (2010 [2008])
BFN	<i>Between Facts and Norms</i> (1998 [1992])
BNR	<i>Between Naturalism and Religion</i> (2008 [2005])
CES	<i>Communication and the Evolution of Society</i> (1979 [1976])
DS	<i>Dialectics of Secularization</i> (2006 [2005])
FK	Essay on "Faith and Knowledge" in <i>The Future of Human Nature</i> (2003)
IO	<i>The Inclusion of the Other</i> (1998 [1996])
JA	<i>Justification and Application. Remarks on Discourse Ethics</i> (1993 [1991])
KHI	<i>Knowledge and Human Interests</i> (1971[1968])
LC	<i>Legitimation Crisis</i> (1975 [1973])
LPS	<i>The Liberating Power of Symbols</i> (2001 [1997])
MCCA	<i>Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action</i> (1990)
OPC	<i>On the Pragmatics of Communication</i> (1998)
PDM	<i>The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity</i> (1990 [1985])
PF	<i>The Past as Future</i> (1994 [1993])
PPP	<i>Philosophical-Political Profiles</i> (1983 [1981])
PT	<i>Postmetaphysical Thinking</i> (1992 [1998])
RR	<i>Religion and Rationality</i> (2002)
STPS	<i>The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere</i> (1989 [1962])
TCA1	<i>The Theory of Communicative Action, vol. 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society</i> (1984 [1981])
TAC2	<i>The Theory of Communicative Action, vol. 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason</i> (1987 [1981])
TJ	<i>Truth and Justification</i> (2005)
TP	<i>Theory and Practice</i> (1973 [1971])

“From ourselves we moderns have nothing at all”

Nietzsche, *On the Advantages and Disadvantages of History for Life*,
Cambridge, 1980, 24.

Chapter 1

Introduction and chapter outline

Jürgen Habermas's recent writings have caught many commentators by surprise. Beginning with the 2001 public address "Faith and Reason" delivered on the occasion of receiving the *Friedenspreis* of the German BookTrade fair in the city of Frankfurt's main cathedral,¹ Habermas's theoretical reflections revolve around the problem of religion, in ways that many consider to signal an unexpected turn in his thought.

"Something is missing", Habermas now contends, in the normative project of modernity, as he calls for a "reflexive overcoming of a modern self-understanding that has become hardened and exclusive in its secularism" (BNR, 145). Secular sons and daughters of modernity, he writes, should learn to respect the "power of articulation" still present in religious language and be open "toward the possible rational content of religious contributions" (BNR, 11). We would be wise, Habermas (almost prophetically) warns us, to recover the "regenerative power" of religious language and use it to counteract the "dwindling normative consciousness" of late modernity (BNR, 250).

This new stance and his remarks on the need to overcome an "exclusive" secularism and on the "regenerative power" of religion are deeply puzzling for a variety of reasons. Over his long career as a critical theorist and public intellectual Habermas has been a resolute defender of the Enlightenment project, famously claiming that this project is still "unfinished" today. He emphatically declared his allegiance to the "normative content of modernity" (ideals like self-reflection, self-determination - moral autonomy, and self-expression - authenticity) as this found expression in the work of Kant, Hegel and Marx. And if these great modern philosophers failed to provide a universal grounding for normative modernity, Habermas has presented himself not only as someone willing to pick up once again the great task of grounding normativity out of

¹ Habermas's speech, delivered just a month after the terrorist attacks on 9/11/2001, became an instant sensation in Germany; see Hans Joas, "Post-Secular Religion? On Jürgen Habermas", in *Do We Need Religion*, Boulder, Paradigm Publisher, 2008, 105. In English Habermas's address was published as "Faith and Knowledge", in *The Future of Human Nature*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2003.

modernity's own resources (i.e. independent from metaphysical or religious first principles) but also as someone who can succeed where everyone else has failed.

What is truly remarkable about this narrative is that among important contemporary figures Habermas is quite isolated in thinking that this task can still be carried out. Of course, there are other important thinkers, like John Rawls or Richard Rorty for instance, who defend the liberal project and modernity, but their defence relies on pragmatic and contextual premises and they are not really interested in defending grand claims about the universality of modern reason, about grounding modernity's normative content, or about providing foundations for a critique of society.

Habermas however never wavered in his allegiance to a universal view of reason, to the progressive ideals of modernity, to a critique of ideology and injustice and to the project of rational self-organization of society. These commitments set his work in a clear contrast to some powerful tides of philosophical discontent with the rationalist and universalist underpinnings of the philosophical project of modernity as manifested in a wide range of philosophical positions. In continental philosophy these include the critical theory of Adorno and Horkheimer, the post-humanism of Heideggerian ontology, various existentialist currents, phenomenology, philosophical hermeneutics, Foucault's "poststructuralism" and Derrida's "deconstructionism"; whereas in Anglo-American philosophy this discontent is expressed in the "neo-Aristotelian" current represented by thinkers as diverse as Hannah Arendt, Ronald Beiner, Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor, and Michael Walzer (if I am permitted to group these diverse and complex thinkers under one rubric).

Against all these powerful currents of thought, Habermas argues that philosophy must commit itself to the role of *guardian of reason*, as a retreat from this position² would invite troubling philosophical and political implications. Philosophy must fight off the pervasive, deeply corrosive and thus highly debilitating critique of reason put forward by all the various

² The picture of philosophy as "guardian of reason", I want to suggest, should be viewed in contrasts with the view of man as "shepherd of being" from Heidegger's late thought.

approaches, but in particular by the so-called “postmodern” philosophy, and by French “poststructuralism”, in particular.

In a very interesting turn of thought, Habermas claims that his recent openness to the power of articulation from religious traditions does not alter this basic commitment to the guardian role of modern reason. Quite the contrary, he introduces the concept of a “post-secular society” in an effort to strengthen philosophical reason (and not weaken it as one would expect). He writes: “my motive for addressing the issue of faith and knowledge is to mobilize reason against the defeatism lurking within it. Postmetaphysical thinking cannot cope on its own with the defeatism concerning reason which we encounter today both in the postmodern radicalization of the ‘dialectic of the Enlightenment’ and in the naturalism founded on a naïve faith in science” (AWM, 18).

It is this intriguing and unexpected alliance between “postmetaphysical” and “postsecular” that in my view makes the attempt to seriously analyze Habermas’s recent turn to religion very interesting.

I argue in this thesis that Habermas’s postsecular turn should be seen as a major theoretical move, whose significance and magnitude are at least as important as his departure from the “philosophy of the subject” worked out in the late 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s.

It is very interesting to observe a hidden symmetry in Habermas’s defence of the philosophical project of modernity: faced with a radical critique of modernity (primarily in the work of Nietzsche and Heidegger and their “postmodern” disciples) Habermas defended modernity by separating its philosophical project from the metaphysical assumptions of “the philosophy of the subject” (in Kant, Hegel and Marx). Thus, in order to remain philosophically plausible, modernity must become “postmetaphysical”. In a strikingly similar manner, when confronted with a radical reaction to modernity in the form of a global religious revival (roughly over the past 3 decades or so) and fundamentalist rejections of its project (most visible after 9/11/2001), Habermas makes a symmetrical move. Once again he defends the “unfinished” project of

modernity, but this time by disentangling modernity from its secular underpinnings.³ Thus, modernity must become postsecular.⁴

The two philosophical moves, from metaphysical to “postmetaphysical” modernity and from secular to postsecular modernity, are symmetrical and both are meant to rescue and strengthen the philosophical project of modernity with its universal and progressive claims. However, despite their symmetry and shared purpose, are these two moves really compatible? Is the concept of “post-secular society” actually compatible with “postmetaphysical thinking”? In this dissertation I argue that the two concepts are not fully compatible. In particular I suggest that the secularist narrative was more central to the postmetaphysical turn than Habermas has been willing to admit. Therefore it is not possible to seamlessly move to a postsecular view without weakening the very concept of postmetaphysical.

Philosophically speaking, the first transition (to “postmetaphysical thinking”) has proved to be extraordinarily fertile, having many far-reaching implications. It has rescued critical theory from what many thinkers consider to be the “dead end” in which Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* seemed to have definitively placed it. It has broadly corresponded to the transition from the first to the second generation of the Frankfurt School and it has prompted Habermas to articulate an alternative concept of reason, that of “communicative reason”, which has become the cornerstone of a very influential strand of democratic theory today, “deliberative democracy”. It has opened a path to developing a distinct moral theory (“discourse ethics”) and allowed Habermas to engage with important issues in legal philosophy, in liberal theory of rights

³ I read this flexibility less as a sign of an eclectic spirit and more as the mark of a profound intellectual honesty. After all, like all great philosophers, Habermas is a “dialectical thinker”, as Richard J. Bernstein once remarked: “Habermas’s self-criticism is the mark of a genuine dialectical thinker. When difficulties have been pointed out by his critics, or when he has come to appreciate deficiencies of his analyses, he has confronted them directly. He does this in a spirit of *rejecting* what is no longer defensible, *preserving* what he still deems valid, and *moving beyond* earlier formulations to new frontiers. This is why one can detect continuities and discontinuities throughout his intellectual journey”. See Richard Bernstein, *Habermas and Modernity*, MIT Press, 1985, 15.

⁴ As we shall see, a “post-secular society” for Habermas does not mean leaving modernity behind (would this even be possible?) as in trying to turn back the clock of history. It does mean however an alteration of Habermas’s philosophical project with a view of obtaining a more dialogical relationship with religion, which now acquires a legitimate place in modernity.

and popular sovereignty, in theories of nationalism, in ways that now decisively shape the contemporary debates in all these fields.

I would like to suggest that the transition to a “post-secular society” promises to be no less important in its substance as well as in its implications, which due to the recent origin of this transition remain yet to be fully worked out. Given Habermas’s significant contribution to political theory over the past few decades, his recent call to overcome “secularism” seems to suggest that an important strand of liberal normative political theory (that of a Kantian inspiration) finds itself at an important critical juncture today. My doctoral research aims to identify and critically examine the normative implications of this recent turn in political theory.

The literature on Habermas’s thought is vast. His own writings comprise a large body of work spanning more than five decades of writing and each of his major works has generated extensive debates and discussions. Over the years he has engaged in debates with major thinkers, from Gadamer to Rawls and Rorty, and from Derrida and Foucault to Brandom and Putnam, and his ideas influenced fields as diverse as social and political theory, epistemology, philosophy of language, communication studies, legal and political thought, rhetoric, developmental psychology and aesthetics. The sheer magnitude of Habermas’s contribution to and engagement with contemporary thought, as well as the fact that his philosophy has evolved over time, make any attempt to pass general judgements on his work a daunting task. The more recent (postsecular) phase of his thought has also generated wide interest and the literature on Habermas’s concept of “post-secular society” has grown exponentially in the past few years. It seems that many political theorists, sociologists, philosophers of religion and theologians have sensed the fecundity of Habermas’s attempt to rethink the link between “secularism” and modernity, and began to critically evaluate its merits in earnest.

In this introductory chapter I will briefly specify the main positions in the literature on Habermas’s recent turn to a “post-secular society”, I will delineate the major topics under discussion and I will indicate how my research situates itself in the context of this literature. Finally I will specify how I want to proceed and what I propose to do in each chapter of my dissertation.

In political theory Habermas’s concept of “post-secular society” has been discussed in the context of a wider debate on the role of religion in the public sphere. Habermas’s view has been

mainly analyzed against the background formed by the Kantian conception of the “public use of reason” and the issue of “reasonable pluralism” in liberal democracy as treated by John Rawls’s “political liberalism” (Rawls, 1993). This is hardly surprising, for Habermas wrote the important essay “Religion in the Public Sphere: Cognitive Presuppositions for the ‘Public Use of Reason’ by Religious and Secular Citizens” (2008) as a direct intervention in the debate between Rawls and Rawlsians like Robert Audi (1997, 2000), on the one side, and critics like Kent Greenwalt (1988), Paul Weithman (2000) and Nicholas Wolterstorff (1997), on the other. Significant contributions to a better understanding of postsecularism in relation to such concepts as “public reason”, “public sphere”, “reasonable pluralism” have been made by political theorists like Simone Chambers (2007, 2010), Maeve Cooke (2006, 2007), Christina Lafont (2007), Melissa Yates (2007). Other interventions have been made by Barbato and Kratochwil (2009), Andrea Baumeister (2011), Phil Enns (2010), Alessandro Ferrara (2010), Rainer Forst, Austin Harrington (2007a, 2007b), Herta Nagl-Docekal (2009), Thomas M. Schmidt (2009), Andrew March (2013) Lucas Swaine (2008). The recent debate between Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, Judith Butler and Cornel West, published as *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (2011), is also an important point of reference. In fact, Charles Taylor’s monumental work *A Secular Age* (2007) offers an interesting contrast to Habermas’s view of “post-secular society”, and the debate between these two prominent contemporary thinkers is highly relevant for my research.

Before I delineate the main topics discussed in the literature on Habermas’s concept of “post-secular society”, I would like to briefly mention the larger context within which this literature must be placed, as well as the impact this concept has had in fields closely connected to political theory.

The growing body of research on the concept of “postsecular” must be situated in the larger context of a constitutive concern of liberal theory with religion and the proper relation between religion and politics, a concern that in recent years has seen a revival. For an impressive discussion of how this problem has been approached in Western political philosophy see Ronald Beiner *Civil Religion. A Dialogue in the History of Political Philosophy* (2010). Other interesting works in this context are Jeffrey Stout’s *Democracy and Tradition* (2005) and William Connolly’s *Why I am Not a Secularist* (2000).

In theology, as one may expect, Habermas's idea of a "post-secular society" has received great attention. Theological engagement with Habermas's later work has profited a great deal from two high-profile public meetings. The first took place in 2004 at the Catholic Academy in München and opposed in a most cordial dialogue Habermas and Cardinal Ratzinger (the soon to-be Pope Benedict XVII)⁵. The second meeting took place in February 2007, again in München, in which Habermas together with representatives of the Jesuit School for Philosophy (Norbert Brieskorn, Michael Reder, Friedo Ricken, Joseph S. J. Schmidt) debated the relation between faith and reason⁶. Against this backdrop of high public visibility, Habermas's postsecular turn has been discussed in a flurry of recent articles which appeared in theological journals and in a couple of books. The most systematic (perhaps also the most significant) recent treatment seems to be offered by Nicholas Adams (2006) and Maureen Junker-Kenny (2011). See also Nigel Biggar and Linda Hogan (2009). The prominent Anglican theologian John Milbank has also engaged recently with Habermas's recent work (2013).

However theological engagement with Habermas's work goes back some time, at least to the second half of the 1970s, when Helmut Peukert (1976) inaugurated what may be called "communicative political theology" and in the last section of my thesis I will have the opportunity to discuss in some detail Johann Baptist Metz's and Helmut Peukert's dialogue with Habermas. Although Habermas has been rather scarce in his treatment of religion prior to the recent postsecular turn,⁷ the theory of communicative action influenced theological reflection to some degree. A good bibliography for the theological reception of Habermas's work on communication is compiled by Edmund Arens (1989). Habermas responds to some theological

⁵ Their exchange appeared in English as *The Dialectics of Secularization. On Reason and Religion*, Ignatius Press, 2005.

⁶ The dialogue was published by Polity Press in 2010 under the title *An Awareness of What is Missing. Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age*.

⁷ Indeed, prior to 2001, Habermas's discussion of religion encompassed mainly the discussion of the "linguistification of the sacred in vol.II of *The Theory of Communicative Action*" and his criticism of messianism and mysticism from the lecture on Derrida in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Lecture VII, pp. 183-184). This relatively weak engagement with theological themes in Habermas did not prevent (Christian) theologians from taking a keen interest in his work on rationality and communication. What they found attractive in Habermas's thought was his critique of positivism, scientism, system theory and of a Nietzschean understanding of reality in terms of power, all intellectual currents that many in practical theology found incompatible with the Christian view of human person, community and history (see Junker-Kenny 2011, 18).

objections to his view of rationality in the essay “Transcendence from within, transcendence in this world” (1992). Other important applications of Habermas’s work to theology can be found in Paul Lakeland (1990) and Jens-Glebe-Moller (1987).

Beyond the literature in political theory and theology that engages directly with Habermas’s concept of “postsecular”, the past decade or so witnessed a significant resurgence of scholarly interest in religion within fields as diverse as sociology, anthropology and philosophy which, although only tangentially preoccupied with Habermas, does constitute nonetheless a wider background against which his views can be critically discussed in instructive ways.

Thus, in sociology and sociology of religion the “secularization thesis” espoused by classic founders like Auguste Comte, Emil Durkheim and Max Weber (who all thought that secularization, alongside bureaucratization, urbanization and rationalization of society would eventually lead to the demise of religion in the modern world) had enjoyed a virtually unchallenged domination up to the 1990s. Since then this thesis has come under intense criticism: see for instance Robert Bellah et al. (1985), Peter L. Berger (ed.) (1999), Martin David (2005), Andrew M. Greeley (2003). What today seems untenable in the theory of secularization is mainly the unilinear and deterministic way in which all societies were seen to progress along a single path of development from tradition to secularized modernity. Different communities or societies experience change in diverse forms, not all following the pattern of Western Europe. This led the sociologist Samuel Eisenstadt to introduce the concept of “multiple modernities” (2002); see also Jose Casanova (1994). From this perspective, secularized modernity in Western Europe seems to be the exception rather than the norm to be followed by other societies.

In anthropology authors like Talal Asad (2003), and Saba Mahmood (2005) interrogate the meaning of the “secular” and “postsecular” in interesting ways, mainly in relation to Islam and Islamic traditions, which are nonetheless pertinent to Habermas’s discussion of these terms. Finally, religion has acquired a growing importance in the work of many contemporary philosophers, some associated with postmodernity like Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (1998), others with Marxism like Alain Badiou (2003) or post-Marxism like Slavoj Žižek (see Davis et al. 2005 and Milbank et al. 2010). The growing interest in religion in the work of many continental thinkers from Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-François Lyotard, and

Jean-Luc Nancy, to Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Marion is well traced by Hent de Vries (1999). These wider discussions are not always directly relevant to Habermas's take on "postsecularism". However they offer an opportunity to place Habermas's work in the context of current philosophical debates over the meaning of secularism and religion.

Going back to the main literature on the concept of "postsecular" in Habermas in political theory one can identify in it a couple of recurrent topics: first of all, the meanings of the terms "secular" and "postsecular" are intensely scrutinized; then the scope of the turn to postsecularism is discussed and the important question here is what sort of requirements do the "post-secular society" impose on religious citizens, on the one hand, and on non-religious citizens, on the other? What "cognitive conditions" are necessary for a "post-secular society"? Strictly related with this later question, also extensively analyzed is an issue of fairness: whether or not the "cognitive burden" exacted by "post-secular society" is symmetrically distributed for the secular and for the religious citizens?

A distinct site of intense debate in this literature is constituted by the institutional import of postsecularism: what role should religion play in the formal public sphere (parliaments, courts etc.), on the one side, and in the larger civil society, on the other? How exactly should the liberal state draw the line between the secular language of the state, on the one side, and religious doctrines and various secular (non-religious) doctrines about what constitutes the good life, on the other, so that the "neutrality" of the state be maintained?

Finally, Habermas ties the concept of "post-secular society" to learning processes in which secular and religious citizens are equally engaged; thus religion must modernize and the secular consciousness must become more self-reflexive. In relation to this aspect, a fundamental question occupies central stage: what do these postsecular learning processes involve in more concrete terms? For instance, what does "modernized religion" mean more precisely for various religious communities present in our plural societies? Moreover, are these learning processes running on parallel tracks or are they interconnected? As Habermas contends, these learning processes are necessary pre-conditions for a project of translation, which is a central feature of a "post-secular society": religious utterances carry cognitive substance (which contains moral insights and intuitions fundamental for our human condition) and this content can be "salvaged"

and made generally available if reason translates them into the “equally accessible language” of rational discourse.

Although my doctoral research will engage with all these issues prominent in the literature on Habermas’s recent turn to a “post-secular society”, I propose to move the conversation in a direction which is less explored. I want to examine the concept of postsecularism in the context of Habermas’s wider philosophical thought and in a direct relation to what Habermas has called “postmetaphysical thinking”.

The main argument of my Thesis is that Habermas’s turn to a “post-secular society” represents a shift with consequences that are more radical than he seems to realize or is willing to admit. Habermas’s declared intention in coining the concept of “post-secular society” is to articulate a more complex and more flexible, in short, a better version of what he previously defended as “postmetaphysical thinking”. As mentioned, he argues that modern secular reason (“communicative reason”) would be strengthened (and not weakened) by the turn to a “post-secular society”.

It seems to me that many commentators have accepted this argument too quickly. Some go as far as to interpret the recent turn in Habermas’s thought as the manifestation of a tendency which has always been present in his work, a kind of muted (or latent) appreciation of religion which only recently has found a clear voice. Eduardo Mendieta for instance, has recently defended the view that religion has always been central to Habermas’s philosophical project.⁸ This project, Mendieta claims, has been constantly nurtured by, and displayed a constant appreciation of, the Judeo-Christian tradition. Although this intellectual inheritance has only recently become the object of Habermas’s theoretical reflections, it has always been present in the background of his thought. Clearly, in the interpretation of authors like Mendieta the turn to “postsecular” represents the salutary surfacing of a tendency that had run deep in Habermas’s previous work.

⁸ See Mendieta’s introductory study in Habermas *Religion and Rationality*, The MIT Press, 2002. Ronald Kuipers also underlines Habermas’s appreciation for “the ethical impulse he finds beating within differing manifestations of the Judeo-Christian religious tradition”. See Ron Kuipers, “Reconciling a Shattered Modernity: Habermas on the Enduring Relevance of the Judeo-Christian Ethical Tradition” in Lieven Boeve et al. eds. *Faith in the Enlightenment? The Critique of Enlightenment Revisited*, Editions Rodopi, 2006, 123-142.

A different tack is taken by authors like Charles Taylor, Fred Dallmayr, Stanley Fish or William Connolly, who contend that Habermas's turn to a "post-secular society" does not represent a serious break with his previous thought. Habermas continues to treat religion in a functional way and, like in all his mature works, he fails to take its claims seriously. Like Mendieta, these thinkers also see a continuity between Habermas pre- and post-secular turn, only now this continuity acquires the opposite sense: religion as such played no significant role in Habermas's major works and it does not play an important role in the postsecular phase of his thought either.

My argument departs from both these common ways of reading Habermas. I claim that upon close examination the turn to "post-secular society" in Habermas's thought proves to be a seismic shift which threatens to destabilize his commitment to a "postmetaphysical" grounding of modernity. Thus, in distinction from Mendieta, I argue that religion played only a *residual* role in Habermas's pre- post-secular mature thought, and that Charles Taylor and the other thinkers mentioned are in fact right to argue that in his main works Habermas had espoused a strictly functional approach to religion. However, against these thinkers, I put forth the argument that the recent postsecular turn represents a new approach. Although a lingering functionalism is still present, especially in relation to his arguments regarding "the priority" of reason over faith, Habermas goes well beyond treating religion as merely performing a stabilizing function for the state/politics.

However, it is exactly in relation to this point that problems begin to arise for Habermas's arguments. On my view, it is precisely the fact that Habermas is now ready to take religious claims seriously that generates significant normative tensions for his previous defence of "postmetaphysical thinking". It is exactly because Habermas aims to overcome functionalism with the introduction of "postsecular" - signalling a significant shift from his previous views - that this concept introduces serious normative tensions for his prior strategy of a "postmetaphysical" grounding of modernity.

This argument is borne out via a detailed analysis of Habermas's recent writings and an extensive discussion of the project of "salvaging" translation that underscores the limits of this project.

I interpret Jürgen Habermas's recent writings as representing a shift from a narrative of *sublation*⁹ of the sacred to a more restrained narrative that affirms the *priority* of reason over the sacred. The first narrative dominated all Habermas's mature works, from *The Theory of Communicative Action* (vol.1 1981/ vol. 2 1987), to *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1990), *Postmetaphysical Thinking* (1992) and *Between Facts and Norms* (1998), and espoused an evolutionary view of society. In this narrative, a "communicative" view of reason was presented as being able to supersede religion through a "linguistification of the sacred".¹⁰ This supersessionist view has also been framed by Habermas in terms of a transition from metaphysics to "postmetaphysical thinking".

In Habermas's recent essays, however, the sacred plays a more ambiguous role and, as I argue, these essays can be viewed as espousing a narrative of "containment" of the sacred. Habermas no longer portrays religion as a stage of social evolution that has successfully been overcome with the transition to modernity. Rather than a precursor of "communicative reason", religion is viewed in these essays as a sovereign domain of meaning, an "intellectual formation" independent from "communicative reason" and separated from it by strict borders. The divide between faith and reason cannot be bridged, Habermas now argues, as faith has a core which remains opaque to secular reason. However, the two domains share a common genealogy and in light of this common heritage, Habermas proposes a mutually enriching dialogue between faith and reason in a "post-secular society". This dialogue is defined by the *priority* of reason vis-à-vis religion and by a project of "non-destructive" *translation* of religious truth-contents into rational discourse.

⁹ I use the terms "sublation" and "supersession" interchangeably to translate the German *Aufhebung*. I will sometime use the term "replacement", although this term does not entirely capture the sense of simultaneous cancelation and preservation that *Aufhebung* denotes. However I think that the word "replacement" can also be legitimately used in light of Habermas's claim in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* that his project continues what he calls "the dialectic of Enlightenment" set in motion by Kant, Hegel and Marx, who all aimed to find a *rational equivalent* to religion. See PDM, 1995, 84.

¹⁰ The following passages are representative: the "spellbinding power of the holy, is sublimated into the binding/bonding force of criticizable validity claims and at the same time turned into an everyday occurrence". J. Habermas, TCA2, 1987, 77. See also: "'God' becomes the name of a communicative structure that forces men, on pain of a loss of their humanity, to go beyond their accidental empirical nature and to encounter one another indirectly, across an objective something that they themselves are not". LC, 1975, 121.

The bulk of my discussion in this thesis is a close examination of these two main features of the dialogue between reason and faith in a “post-secular society”: the thesis of priority of reason over religion and the project of salvaging translation.

In relation to the first aspect, I put forth the argument that the transition from rational sublation of religion through “linguistification of the sacred” to priority of reason over religion weakens some important Habermasian theses and generates significant tensions for “postmetaphysical thinking”. I briefly indicate these tensions in what follows.

The idea of reason’s priority comes to the fore most clearly in Habermas’s discussion of those cognitive pre-conditions that are necessary for a fruitful dialogue between secular and religious citizens in a “post-secular society”. On the one side, as Habermas writes, secular citizens should engage in a “self-critical assessment of the limits of secular reason” (RPS, 139-140) and develop a self-reflective attitude which overcomes a “rigid and exclusive secularist self-understanding of modernity”. For my discussion of this thesis it is important to note that this attitude, according to Habermas, should go beyond “a respectful sensibility for the possible *existential* significance of religion for some other person” (RPS, 138). Secular citizens must in fact “take religious contributions to contentious political issues seriously” and “not exclude the possibility that these contributions may have *cognitive substance*” (RPS, 139, my emphasis), i.e. that they may carry truth-content.

On the other side, a “post-secular society” requires religious citizens to accept the following three conditions: they must accept the principle of freedom of religion, the priority of science and the priority of communicative reason. As he writes, religious consciousness must first “come to terms with the cognitive dissonance of encountering other denominations and religions. It must, second, adapt to the authority of the sciences which hold the societal monopoly of secular knowledge” (FK, 104). Finally, “religious citizens must develop an epistemic stance toward the *priority* that secular reasons also enjoy in the political arena. This can succeed only to the extent

that they embed the egalitarian individualism of modern natural law and universalistic morality in a convincing way in the context of their comprehensive doctrines” (RPS, 137, my emphasis).¹¹

According to Habermas, developing these cognitive preconditions on both sides of the divide between faith and reason would facilitate a project of “salvaging” translation: moral insights/intuitions which lay buried deeply within religious traditions can be extracted from their “dogmatic shell” and translated into the universally accessible language of reason. These kind of translations could counteract the poverty of meaning that plagues late modernity, restore reason’s confidence in its ability to provide normative grounding for modernity, and remind everyone of the importance of human dignity and solidarity. In a word, translation would help practical reason “regenerate itself”, especially when confronted with the threats raised by the radical postmodern critique of modern rationalism and the naive determinism of a scientific worldview.

I do not want to contest the point that an ampler contribution of religion to democratic politics would produce benefits that secular liberal societies would be wise to attend to. Quite the contrary, I am sympathetic and supportive of Habermas’s recent openness to religious traditions. However I think that this new picture of the relationship between faith and reason generates normative tensions that are too significant to be ignored.

The suggestion that reason depends on the external support of religion to regenerate itself throws in doubt some of the arguments Habermas put forward in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* to the effect that modernity could ground its normative standards out of its own resources. The thesis that modernity “has to create its normativity out of itself” (PDM, 7) is quite clearly undermined by Habermas’s admission that reason should look at religion for normative regeneration. In what sense can “communicative reason” still be seen as continuing the “dialectics of Enlightenment” - the attempt to heal the pathologies of reason using resources internal to reason - if Habermas now admits that reason must team up with religion in order to counteract modernity’s pathologies? The whole idea of modernity being able to rationally

¹¹ See also the following passage: religious consciousness must “relate itself to competing religions in a reasonable way; leaves decisions concerning mundane knowledge to the institutionalized sciences, and makes the egalitarian premises of the morality of human rights compatible with its own articles of faith”. Habermas in *The Power of Religion...*, 26-27.

bootstrap itself, so central to Habermas's "postmetaphysical thinking", seems now to come under threat.

Other important lines of tension are generated by Habermas's claim that religious discourse has "cognitive substance" or truth-content. Indeed the project of "salvaging" translation is premised on the contention that religious language has "cognitive substance" and thus it is not simply ideological, irrational or fictional discourse. It is this truth-content that reason must identify, remove from the "dogmatic shell" in which it is encapsulated and make it generally accessible.

In my view the argument that religious discourse has "cognitive content" (and it thus cannot be seen as fictional or irrational discourse) is quite intriguing and signals the fact that the postsecular turn is a drastic departure from Habermas's earlier views. If religion has "cognitive substance", then it cannot be unambiguously placed within the third cultural sphere of modernity, the ethical sphere, which contains conceptions of exemplary or good life that shape my identity or my community's identity. And indeed, Habermas now argues that religion must be seen as "special case" of ethical diversity: religion cannot be assimilated to other ethical conceptions of the good existing in modern society as there is a difference *in kind* between religion and ethnic, cultural or philosophical differences. This clearly suggests that there is more to religion than its existential or ethical role.

However, this suggestion invites some vexing questions for "postmetaphysical thinking". First, how are we to interpret the possibility that religious utterances may contain truth? How does the truth potentially contained by religious speech fit into the scheme of the three validity claims and their corresponding value spheres? And second, what *is* then the proper place of religion in the differentiated architectonic of modernity if it cannot be (unambiguously) placed in the ethical sphere? Where and how exactly should we place religion vis-à-vis modern reason in a "post-secular" society?

Tackling these questions leads me to the central argument of my interpretation of Habermas's recent turn. Abandoning the supersessionist narrative that played an important role in *The Theory of Communicative Action* and *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Habermas now adopts a more modest philosophical position that affirms the *priority* of communicative reason over religion; and he seems to suggest that the idea of "priority" of reason can do the same work for the "postmetaphysical" framework of modernity as the idea of replacement (*Aufhebung*) did,

namely to sustain a universal moral theory, but with added bonuses: more room for a legitimate presence of religion in modernity and a less defeatist reason in the face of postmodern withering attacks and of a “scientific” type of determinism.

I argue instead that the thesis of “priority” of reason over religion, unlike the thesis of “supersession” of religion by reason, is no longer strong enough to sustain reason’s universality. Habermas’s shift from *Aufhebung* of religion to priority over religion comes with a price: the price is weakening the claim to universality of communicative reason. For how universal can “communicative reason” (and the “ethics of discourse”) be said to be if religion is accepted as an “intellectual formation” *complementary* to communicative reason and separated by strict borders from the latter? If reason cannot determine anymore what is true and what is false in religion it means that reason has reached some limits. Outside these limits there remains a domain (the religious domain) that is not simply irrational or devoid of meaning. Although religion becomes extraterritorial to reason, there are moral intuitions buried in its domain that await to be “salvaged” and put into the accessible language of reason.

Once the thesis of “linguistification of the sacred” is replaced by the narrative of “priority” of communicative reason over religion, the claim to universality of reason depends now on the success of translation. Thus, the project of translation becomes the linchpin that holds together the old project of “postmetaphysical” modernity and the new project of “post-secular society”.

Translation of religious meaning into the language of reason, if successful, would indeed bridge the fault lines generated by the transition from “postmetaphysical” to “postsecular” modernity, which shows that salvaging translation does the heavy lifting for the new alliance between “postmetaphysical” and “postsecular”. Successful translation becomes the *pièce de résistance* for safeguarding a universal view of communicative reason and, in fact, the claim to universality of reason stands or falls with the success of translation: if translation is successful, that is to say, if those moral intuitions buried in religious tradition/language can be successfully extracted from the religious shell and transferred without loss in the language of reason then, indeed, communicative reason’s claim to universality can be upheld even in the absence of an *Aufhebung* of religion.

It becomes therefore very important for the arguments I put forth in this dissertation to carefully analyze Habermas’s project of salvaging translation and in the second part of my discussion I

closely investigate what would make translation of religion a successful project. In my discussion, I distinguish between two meanings of translation in Habermas's recent writings, one taking the form of an "institutional translation proviso" while the other being tied to "non-destructive" secularization. I argue that both these versions of translation are plagued by significant difficulties. The institutional translation proviso seems unnecessary and suffers from overreach and, in my view, it represents a lingering Rawlsian influence that Habermas can dispense with without harm. In addition, the project of "non-destructive" philosophical translation raises problems of its own.

These problems come into view more clearly when I interrogate what would make philosophical translation successful? The following questions guide my analysis: what is decisive for the success of translation? How do we know that religious contents have been successfully transferred into rational discourse? Moreover, how can we possibly determine if along with the cognitive content some part of the "dogmatic shell" was not also taken over by (or smuggled in) the translation? Or, conversely, could the cognitive substance of religion be fully extracted? How can we possibly know that some of this substance is not left behind? Does translation have an end point? Or it must be seen as an open-ended process? In addition, would it be possible to identify a criterion to help us discriminate between a bad and a good translation?

It is at this important point in Habermas's narrative that his willingness to take religion seriously and thus go beyond the functionalist approach adopted by his earlier writings begins to create problems for his arguments. Habermas distinguishes his own project of translation of religion as "non-destructive secularization" from similar attempts in the history of philosophy by Kant or Hegel or Marx by the fact that these attempts were animated by a "hostile take-over intention", while Habermas's own project of translation is premised on the idea of respect for religion. Habermas insists that any engagement with religion must preserve intact the borders between reason and religion: religion is a sovereign domain of meaning with its own dignity and its own territory, and reason must renounce the rationalist presumption that it can decide what is true and false in religion. This cuts both ways: reason must not attempt to subsume religion (like in Kant, Hegel or Marx) but neither should it surrender its ground to religion (like in late Heidegger, or some playful postmodern attempts at appropriation of theological themes).

In its strongest form the argument that faith is a sovereign domain of meaning holds that faith has a core that is discursively impenetrable. Thus, Habermas writes: “at best, philosophy circumscribes the opaque core of religious experience when it reflects on the specific character of religious language and on the intrinsic meaning of faith. This core remains profoundly alien to discursive thought as the hermetic core of aesthetic experience, which likewise can be at best circumscribed, but not penetrated, by philosophical reflection” (BNR, 143).¹²

This argument however quite clearly suggests that there are limits to what reason can transfer from religion in its own idiom. The presence of these limits, in turn, undermines the idea of a “successful” translation. Thus, I argue that the idea of non-destructive translation is quite paradoxical in that translation succeeds in being a “non-destructive” engagement with religion to the extent that reason treats religion with respect and is ready to learn from it; however, it is precisely to the extent that this requirement applies (i.e. reason treats religion as a sovereign domain of meaning), that religion becomes “extra-territorial” to reason and thus there are limits to what reason can extract from religion in translation.

In the last part of my discussion, my analysis focuses on these limits of salvaging translation, which I want to place in the context of Habermas’s lament that “something is missing” in the postmetaphysical framework of modernity. Indeed, Habermas concedes that something is missing in translation: “... the lost hope for resurrection is keenly felt as a void”. “When sin was converted to culpability, and the breaking of divine commands to an offence against human laws, something was lost” (FK, 333).

The question I raise in this part of my discussion is whether the limits of translation are generated by the “special case” of religion, as Habermas suggests, or, quite the opposite, they must be seen as stemming from “postmetaphysical thinking”? While Habermas defends the first alternative, arguing that religious experience has an opaque core which cannot be successfully redeemed in publicly testable terms, I want to defend the second alternative. I link the limits of

¹² See also the following passage: “religiously rooted existential convictions, by dint of their if necessary rationally justified reference to the dogmatic authority of an inviolable core of infallible revealed truths, evade that kind of unreserved discursive examination to which other ethical orientations and world views i.e. secular ‘conceptions of the good’ are exposed” (BNR, 129).

rational translation (what is missing in translation) to the post-Kantian nature of Habermas's "postmetaphysical thinking". Thus, on my interpretation, the limits of translation have less to do with a questionable phenomenology of religion (the distinction between an opaque core and a more accessible periphery - if reason must renounce the presumption that it can decide what is true and what false in religion, how can this distinction even be drawn?) and more to do with some self-imposed limitations of reason in the process of its "detranscendentalization", that is in the transition from "metaphysical" reason to "communicative" reason.

To make my case, I investigate one important moral problem that seems to reveal a failure on the part of secular philosophy to match the power of articulation found in religious language. That is the problem of undeserved suffering and hope.

I think that few topics are more relevant for the current social and political conditions than the topic of hope. In a world that is rife with conflict, violence, meaningless suffering, greed and mindless consumerism, economic crises, fundamentalist movements, terrorism and the recurrent threat of nuclear war, the importance of hope cannot be overestimated. It is therefore with respect with this important moral problem that a project of translation would be highly relevant and acutely needed. However, I argue that Habermas's "postmetaphysical thinking" runs into limits when the question of hope is raised. Internally, this thinking possesses very limited normative resources to address this moral problem. And externally, the project of "salvaging" translation cannot deliver what is sorely needed in our societies today.

In closing my analysis in this dissertation, I ask whether the limits of "postmetaphysical thinking" are fixed and beyond repair, or whether they could be enlarged or even transcended? Could one use Habermas to go beyond Habermas and cash in on the aspirations and intentions that animate the postsecular turn of his recent writings? A brief investigation of some important thinkers that engaged with the problem of suffering and hope, such as Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin and Johann Baptist Metz, allows me to suggest some directions in which Habermas's theory of communicative action should be modified, if the project of "salvaging" translation from his recent writings were to become a more plausible project.

Chapter Outline.

Chapter 2 is entitled “The normative project of modernity between metaphysics and the radical critique of reason” and introduces the reader to Habermas’s view of “postmetaphysical thinking”. The central issues examined in the chapter are Habermas’s engagement with the problem of the normative foundations of modernity and his attempt at renewing the “dialectic of Enlightenment” from the works of Kant, Hegel and Marx. In the wake of Kant’s critique of traditional metaphysics and the anthropological turn to (transcendental) subjectivity that Kant effected in philosophy, modernity is confronted with the philosophical task of grounding its “normative content” out of its own resources, i.e. independent from traditional metaphysics. Following Hegel, Habermas takes the “normative content of modernity” to encompass values and principles clustered around concepts like “self-reflection”, moral autonomy (or “self-determination”) and authenticity (or “self-expression”). The “dialectic of Enlightenment”, in the sense in which Habermas uses this expression, denotes the philosophical process that would rationally ground this content without appeal to metaphysical “first principles”, and that would hence be able to offer a *rational equivalent* for the integrative power of metaphysics/religion in the medium of reason alone.

Investigating Habermas’s position relative to the issue of modernity’s normative foundations is germane to my investigation in this dissertation because the solution Habermas envisages to this problem determines to a large extent the range of philosophical means that his thought has available when the dialogue between reason and faith is proposed in his more recent writings on a “post-secular society”.

As the guiding thread of my discussion in this chapter I choose Habermas’s claim that our situation today is no different at a philosophical level from that of the first generation of Hegel’s disciples. According to Habermas, after Hegel there has been no credible alternative to a “postmetaphysical thinking”. By tracing the rationale behind this claim, my analysis in this chapter places Habermas’s philosophical project in the context of contemporary debates about the “fall” of metaphysics, the proper role and relation of philosophy to empirical sciences, the normative project of modernity, and the pathologies of modern rationalism. The chapter’s main aim is to draw the philosophical contours of Habermas’s thought and thus provide an intellectual

roadmap for a correct understanding of many of the arguments that I will raise and discuss in the remaining part of the thesis.

However the chapter goes beyond an attempt at contextualization and engages with some important Habermasian theses; perhaps the most important such thesis, the one whose weight pulls all the others around it, as if with gravitational force, is Habermas's argument that abandoning a metaphysical type of foundationalism does not entail a descent into relativism, contextualism or into what is ultimately an irrational reliance on the "Other" of reason, reconstructed either in an aesthetic mode or in (Nietzschean) terms of power. In short, for Habermas, "postmetaphysical" does not mean "postmodern".

Around this point, and in reference to it, all the other claims raised by Habermas can be organized. Postmodern thinkers aim to exit from the "dialectic of Enlightenment" entirely, as they take modernity's attempt at self-grounding to be an impossible, unnecessary and ultimately oppressive project. By postulating an unconditional foundation for the totality of existence, either in the form of transcendental consciousness (Kant), or an absolute subject that achieves self-consciousness in history (Hegel), or that of the labouring activity of a species that develops in history (Marx), modern rationalism remains entangled with homogenizing and repressive social and political aspirations because it replicates the reductionist tendencies of pre-critical metaphysics. Thus, the "dialectic of Enlightenment" is unmasked by postmodern thinkers as hopelessly self-destructive and nihilistic.

A large part of my analysis in this chapter is dedicated to Habermas's engagement with postmodern thought. According to Habermas, completely jettisoning the attempt to solve the foundational problem of modernity leads, in fact, to a philosophical dead-end. He defends this conclusion on two counts: the postmodern critique falls prey to the same foundationalist mode of thought that it rejects both in pre-critical metaphysics and in modern rationalism (he interprets Heidegger and Derrida as espousing an "inverted foundationalism"); moreover, due to its totalizing character, the radical critique of reason simply cannot give an account of the validity of its claims.

Hence, according to Habermas, the only philosophical alternative still valid for us today is the attempt to continue the dialectical project of finding a rational equivalent for the integrative power of religion from the work of Kant, Hegel and Marx but on non- (or post-) foundationalist

premises. Habermas's "postmetaphysical thinking" must be viewed as a project of grounding the normative content of modernity in the absence of metaphysical foundations.

Chapter 3 examines the main features of this project. Entitled "The normative project of modernity as 'linguistification of the sacred'", the chapter proposes a detailed analysis of the difficult philosophical predicament of Habermas's "postmetaphysical thinking". By analogy with the antinomies discussed by Kant in *Critique of Pure Reason*, I suggest that Habermas is faced with what I would like to describe as the "antinomy of postmetaphysical thinking", and the overall philosophical profile of his thought is decisively shaped by his response to this antinomy.

In the wake of postmodern rejection of Enlightenment, two philosophical demands which are equally important but nonetheless mutually incompatible confront Habermas's thought. On the one side, modernity's project of self-grounding must be continued and Habermas is very explicit about the need to provide a grounding for the normative content of modernity. Indeed, without a justificatory narrative or a grounding strategy, concepts like objective knowledge, reflexivity, moral autonomy and authenticity, as well as the legal and juridical framework of human rights that these concepts underpin, can be easily de-legitimized as representing nothing more than different facets of a will to power, or as mere manifestations of a Western understanding of normativity which could claim local validity at best. Upholding the distinctions between truth and power, between validity and merely *de facto* acceptance, between emancipation and domination, becomes simply impossible unless some grounding is offered for these distinctions.

And yet, on the other side, the grounding of modernity's normative content cannot go all the way down to some ultimate (unconditional, immutable and infallible) foundation in the manner of metaphysics. Any such attempt would instantly make "postmetaphysical thinking" vulnerable to the charge of projecting a unifying reductionism on a recalcitrant reality and ultimately of being a dogmatic and repressive project.

Habermas's thought is thus caught between the necessity of claiming a *moment of unconditionality* for the normative content of modernity, absent which modernity can no longer claim universal and emancipatory character, and the equally imperative necessity of avoiding ultimate and unconditional foundations for this normative content. This is the main quandary of Habermas's "postmetaphysical thinking" and in my view the entire project stands or falls with its ability to settle this matter convincingly.

My discussion in this chapter concentrates on Habermas's attempt at finding a solution to this difficult antinomy through a change of paradigm. He contends that the philosophical paradigm with which Kant, Hegel and Marx all worked (what Habermas calls "the philosophy of the subject") must be abandoned. As Nietzsche, and in his footsteps many post-Nietzschean thinkers, have convincingly shown, this paradigm is plagued by insoluble problems and is therefore no longer philosophically fertile. Thus, only a radical change of perspective would release the philosophical means necessary to find an adequate resolution to the antinomy of "postmetaphysical thinking".

This change of perspective concentrates on the need to detranscendentalize (or desublimize) reason. Habermas argues for a transition from pure to impure reason that in the end would lead to a contextualized view of reason which does not however entirely renounce its claims to unconditional validity. According to Habermas, a reason released from its ties to the structures of (transcendental) subjectivity and situated in history, culture and nature, would shake off the oppressive and violent character that the "postmodernist" critique of modernity incessantly imputes to it. The analytic philosophy of language as well as pragmatism are two philosophical directions that help Habermas achieve this task.

In this chapter I discuss Habermas's program of "formal pragmatics" and I concentrate on the "validity claims" to truth, normative rightness and truthfulness that speakers unavoidable make when they communicate in order to reach understanding about something in the world (in what Habermas calls "communicative action"), on the "unconditional" character of these validity claims, as well as on the rational reconstruction of those formal procedures that make possible the argumentative process of rational redemption of the validity claims advanced in communication (what Habermas calls "rational discourse").

In my discussion I also look at the kind of philosophical justification Habermas provides for the program of "formal pragmatics" and the concept of "communicative reason" derived from it. As a transcendental deduction à la Kant is no longer an option, Habermas argues that this program must be seen as a fallible hypothesis that stands in need of empirical corroboration. An indirect validation of the concept of communicate reason is offered by Habermas himself in his discussion of Max Weber: insofar as "communicative reason" allows one to correct the grim

diagnosis that Weber's theory of modernization has put on modernity, this remedial story can be taken as an indirect proof of the validity of the concept of communicative reason.

Chapter 4, entitled "A Project of *Aufhebung* or Containment of the Sacred?" shifts the focus of my analysis to Habermas's recent writings. Declaring that something is missing in the "postmetaphysical" project of modernity as he had so far articulated it, Habermas turns to religion as an important source of normative insight. The postmetaphysical view of modernity, he now argues, must take a postsecular direction.

The chapter takes a close look at this new conceptual alliance between "postmetaphysical thinking" and "post-secular society" in Habermas's thought. While Habermas takes the turn to a "post-secular society" to be not only fully consistent with the postmetaphysical framework of modernity but also a salutary improvement of this framework, I argue that the postsecular turn to religion has consequences which threaten to destabilize the whole philosophical project of postmetaphysical thinking.

In order to make my case I look closely at the thesis of "linguistification of the sacred" from *TCA* and I discuss it in the context of the dialectic of Enlightenment. I show that Habermas embraced a supersessionist narrative according to which communicative reason successfully sublated religion. This falls in line with his reading of Max Weber's theory of modernization and his contention that the concept of "communicative reason" can be used to correct Weber's grim diagnosis of modernity as lacking meaning and freedom. Modernity *does not* succumb to nihilism and to the bureaucratic nightmare of an "iron cage" rationalization precisely because communicative reason is able to successfully replace and take over from religion the functions of generating meaning and solidarity.

I find it important for my line of argumentation in this thesis to underscore the following point. The universality of communicative reason is premised and depends on this supersessionist narrative. "Communicative reason" develops its full potential only when the three aspects of validity (truth, rightness and truthfulness) are splintered in distinct "validity claims", removed from their pre-modern anchoring in a transcendent God, and gradually institutionalized in three distinct cultural spheres of science, moral-legal discourse and ethical as well as aesthetic discourse.

In this narrative religion preserves only a residual presence: the structures of modernity preserve from religion a “cognitive perspective”: the God’s eye viewpoint is transferred to the impartial moral point of view embodied by the universalization (U) principle.¹³ In virtue of their *existential* value (helping us cope with shattering events in our life), religious traditions may also preserve some *temporary* relevance in the rationalized lifeworld of modernity; they may also retain some *limited* relevance in the ethical sphere of modernity, due to insights about what constitutes a good or exemplary way of life for this or that community (but not universally).

My discussion in this chapter shows that a few years after the publication of *TCA*, and in response to some theological objections to his functionalist reading of religion, Habermas began to waver in his confidence that modern reason is able to successfully supersede religion. I interpret this period as an intermediate phase in Habermas’s thought dominated by what is an ambivalent idea: faith and reason, Habermas argued, may be obliged to enter into a relation of “abstemious coexistence”.

With the 2001 essay “Faith and Knowledge” the supersessionist narrative from *TCA*, as well as the philosophically ambiguous position of abstemious coexistence, are abandoned. In this essay, as well as in all his subsequent writings, Habermas clarifies the relation between faith and reason as one between two sovereign domains of meaning separated by clear borders that have nonetheless a common genealogy and find themselves in a relation of mutual dialogue. This new picture undermines the thesis of the “linguistification of the sacred”. The weakening of this thesis however raises difficult questions for the entire “postmetaphysical” view of modernity as articulated and defended by Habermas in his mature works. These questions are further examined in the next chapter.

Chapter 5 is entitled “The Salvaging Work of Translation” and concentrates on the project of “salvaging” translation. I argue in this chapter that once Habermas abandons the supersessionist narrative from his earlier work, according to which “communicative reason” sublates religion,

¹³ The universalization (U) principle, which is the communicative-pragmatic analogue of Kant’s categorical imperative, holds that a norm is valid if “all affected can accept the consequences and the side effects its *general* observance can be anticipated to have for the satisfaction of *everyone’s* interests (and these consequences are preferred to those of known alternative possibilities for regulation)” (MCCA 65).

two interrelated sets of normative challenges emerge to “postmetaphysical thinking”. The first must be located at the level of Habermas’s theory of “discursive” democracy, while the other must be placed at the level of Habermas’s theory of modernity.

In the postsecular picture from Habermas’s recent writings, religion’s significance goes beyond the field of the existential or the ethical. Backing off from a functionalist view of language (and from the Marxist view he previously embraced that religion is ideology) Habermas now contends that religious speech has “cognitive substance” (or truth-content). This raises the important question of how is this cognitive substance to be accounted for in the deliberative model of democracy defended by Habermas in *Between Facts and Norms*? The main concern here is how should the liberal state deal with religious interventions in the public sphere of a postsecular liberal society?

Stressing that a “post-secular society” does not mean a postsecular state, Habermas introduces an “institutional translation proviso”: religious reasons are to be granted unrestricted access in the wider public sphere of liberal society, but they must be translated into a “generally accessible language” before they can gain entrance into the stronger public sphere of parliamentary debates. I discuss some important difficulties with this proviso.

The abandoning of the supersessionist narrative from TCA creates another important problem. Religion can no longer be conceived of as a superseded stage of historical development and it must be seen as an independent domain of meaning that shares a common genealogy with modern reason. This raises the question of how does this new configuration of the relationship between faith and reason affect the theory of social evolution on which Habermas’s “postmetaphysical thinking” relies?

Habermas introduces the idea of translation as “non-destructive” secularization and takes pains to distance his philosophical project from the approach to religion one finds in the works of Kant, Hegel and Marx, which were animated by an “hostile take-over” intention, as Habermas now writes. Habermas’s project of translation is premised on the idea of respect for religion: the perspectives of faith and reason cannot be bridged and religion is now portrayed as a sovereign domain of meaning with its own dignity and its own territory. Religion becomes thus extraterritorial to reason: its core, Habermas now argues, remains opaque to secular reason being tied to cultic practices and participation in communal forms of worship.

My discussion in this chapter examines the opacity argument from Habermas's recent work, exposes some of its problems and draws the main implication of this argument: there are limits to what reason can transfer from religion in its own idiom. This implication however raises questions for the idea of *successful* translation.

The last chapter of my dissertation, **Chapter 6**, is entitled "Postmetaphysical Hope?" and investigates further the idea of limits to translation. The main argument of this chapter is that these limits are in fact internal to Habermas's view of "communicative reason". Religious language is able to preserve intact its power to disclose the world in a way that cannot be matched by secular reason *not* (necessarily) because it relies on an opaque core tied to worship and cultic practices but because reason, in the postmetaphysical form it takes in Habermas's thought, is simply not equipped philosophically to absorb important contents available in religion.

I argue that the limits of translation stem from the post-Kantian nature of Habermas's "postmetaphysical thinking". To illustrate this argument I focus on one important moral issue, the problem of innocent suffering and hope. Thus, in my discussion I want to raise again one of the important Kantian questions: what may I hope for? and direct this question to Habermas's "postmetaphysical thinking".

I discuss Habermas's critique of Kant and I show that Habermas uncovers a serious tension in Kant's moral philosophy: the deontological framework of this philosophy sits in strong tension with Kant's doctrine of "the highest good" and the postulates of reason.

Re-positioning reason on "postmetaphysical" premises, Habermas solves the Kantian tension between deontology and teleology in favour of deontology, thus abandoning the Kantian doctrine of the "highest good" (happiness). Habermas's moral theory gains in coherence, but there is a price to be paid. Dropping Kant's conception of the highest good and his doctrine of the postulates of reason, Habermas's "postmetaphysical" thought is left with very few normative resources to account for the problem of undeserved suffering and hope in history.

In the final part of my discussion I ask if the internal limits of "postmetaphysical thinking" (when it comes to hope) can be enlarged, transcended or repaired? How should Habermas's

philosophical project be modified, so that the project of “salvaging” translation from his recent work become a more plausible (and successful) project?

I suggest an answer to this question by looking at some important thinkers that placed the problem of hope and redemption of innocent suffering at the centre of their thought: Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Johann Baptist Metz and Helmut Peukert.

Chapter 2

The Normative Project of Modernity between Metaphysics and the Radical Critique of Reason

2.1 Introduction

This chapter looks at the problem of normative foundations of modernity in Habermas's thought. I choose as the leading thread of my discussion a claim that Habermas makes quite often. At a philosophical level, Habermas argues, we are today still in the situation of the first generation of Hegel's disciples (PDM, 53; PT, 29); since Hegel, there is no alternative to "postmetaphysical thinking".

Analyzing what Habermas means by the concept "postmetaphysical" as well as his rationale for this intriguing and, at first glance at least, quite implausible claim regarding the lack of alternative to "postmetaphysical" thought, will provide me with the opportunity to place Habermas's thought within the contemporary horizon formed by philosophical debates about the legacy of metaphysics in modernity, about the proper relation of philosophy to empirical sciences, about what constitutes the "normative content" of modernity, about the kind of pathologies engendered by modern rationalism. It is important to clarify where Habermas stands with respect to all these important issues because, as we shall see later, the philosophical position he defends in these debates (position for which he applies the generic term "postmetaphysical thinking") determines the profile of his mature thought, against which the recent turn to a "post-secular society" can be set in contrast, analyzed, and shown to be, as I will argue in the second part of my dissertation, a rather seismic shift.

The following important Habermasian theses will be discussed at length in this chapter: first, that the classical ontological paradigm (what it is called *prima philosophia*) has lost plausibility in modernity; second, that modern society faces some very important foundational questions in the wake of traditional metaphysics's collapse: in the absence of a metaphysical foundation, modernity must show how it can ground its "normative content" out of its own resources. Third,

that important modern philosophers, from Kant to Hegel and Marx, aimed to solve this foundational problem through a change of paradigm, from ontology to subjectivity, which was supposed to offer a rational equivalent for the integrative power of metaphysics (and religion); however they all have failed in this endeavor. Fourth, that this failure to solve the problem of modernity's self-grounding has led to a radical critique of modern rationalism which sought to unmask modernity as inherently pathological and self-destructive and the problem of modernity's foundation as a false problem, that should be definitively dropped. Fifth, that the proposal to completely jettison the attempt to solve this foundational problem leads in fact to a philosophical dead-end; hence, sixth, that the only alternative laying open in front of us today is to confront once again this foundational problem and try to solve it through a new change of paradigm.

My analysis in this chapter is structured in the following sections: in section 2.2. I will dwell on what Habermas takes to be the defining aspects of metaphysics and I will highlight some important factors that have eroded the plausibility of "metaphysical thinking". In section 2.3. I will present Habermas's argument that the "fall" of metaphysics compels philosophical thought to engage in a soul searching process out of which a couple of philosophical movements have emerged under the rubric "postmetaphysical". Subtle elective affinities tie these currents of thought to Habermas's own version of "postmetaphysical thinking" and I hope that my discussion will throw some light on the most important such connections. In section 2.4. I will discuss what Habermas takes, following Hegel, to be "the normative content" of modernity (revolving around concepts like self-reflection, autonomy or self-determination and self-expression) and I will show how this content has been grounded in a "philosophy of the subject" that depends on untenable metaphysical presuppositions. In the last section of the chapter, section 2.5., I will look at Nietzsche's critique of the normative content of modernity which has been continued and radicalized by his "postmodern" followers, and I will examine Habermas's arguments as to why the radical rejection of the normative substance of modernity cannot constitute a viable philosophical alternative.

The main task of this chapter is to provide the reader with an intellectual roadmap for the many complex and sometimes controversial claims that I will put forth in the rest of the dissertation. Thus the chapter aims to draw the main contours of Habermas' thought and to make clear why

Habermas felt compelled to adopt the “postmetaphysical” position that he defended in his mature works.

2.2 Metaphysics and its problems

According to Habermas, metaphysical thought can be defined by three main aspects: a) **identity thinking** (or “totalizing” thinking); b) **idealism** (or the “equation of being with thought”); and c) **logocentrism** (or a “strong”, redemptive, concept of theory which assumes a “privileged access to truth” (PT, 8)).¹⁴

My discussion of these aspects in what follows cannot aim for comprehensiveness. I do not propose here a fully developed exegetic effort, as my reflections are guided by a more modest interest: what I want to do, following Habermas, is to bring into sharper focus just those inner features of metaphysics which have come under intense criticism in late modernity. The question that interests me in this discussion is the following: what is the matter with metaphysics in the eyes of late modernity? What aspects generate the hostility toward metaphysical mode of thought of so many modern and postmodern thinkers? As we shall see in a moment, the chief complain is that metaphysics harbours a reductionist tendency (identity is privileged over difference, ideas over matter and theory over praxis) which entangles the metaphysical mode of thinking in numerous difficulties, difficulties that ultimately cannot find adequate solutions within the metaphysical framework. In this framework, what is uniquely irreplaceable and different, cannot find due expression; this inability is at the origin of the claim that metaphysical thought is repressive, a charge put forth most forcefully by the “postmodern” disciples of Nietzsche. It is therefore this reductionist tendency of metaphysics that my discussion will try to put in relief.

¹⁴ Habermas admits that his view of metaphysics is rather a “rough simplification” which “neglects the Aristotelian line” of thought. Moreover Habermas takes “ancient materialism and skepticism, late-medieval nominalism and modern empiricism” as being “antimetaphysical countermovements” which nonetheless “remain within the horizon of possible thought set by metaphysics itself” (PT, 29). It seems to me that to excise Aristotle from the history of metaphysics is quite a momentous decision which may actually skew the critique of this history; what Habermas criticizes is rather versions of Platonism and not necessarily metaphysics as such. Be this as it may, in my discussion I follow Habermas’ viewpoint as I cannot here deal with the question of Aristotle’s place in metaphysical thought and how this question would impact Habermas’ reading of metaphysics.

a) “Identity thinking”¹⁵

As Habermas points out, the beginnings of “metaphysical thinking” can be found in an operation of abstraction. In ancient Greece, for the first time, mytho-poetical narratives explaining the origin of the cosmos were subjected to a radical interruption. The origins of the world were no longer represented in space and time, as what was first in the world. Greek philosophical thought removed these origins from time and space and elevated them into something infinite (or unconditioned) which “stands over and against the world of the finite and forms its basis” (PT, 30). “The unconditioned” (or “the universal”, “the absolute”) was conceived of as either a world-transcendent creator-god, or as a principle, or as the essential ground of nature, or as being as such. Vis-à-vis “the absolute”, finite things were regarded as particular entities, as particular instantiations of the universal principle. Thus the existing innerworldly things were interpreted as parts of a single whole, of a totality. The binary relationship between “the unconditioned” universal, on the one side, and what is finite, particular and transitory, on the other side, becomes the “fundamental relation” (PT, 30)¹⁶ of the entire metaphysical tradition. The fundamental relationship between an all-encompassing totality (the One), and what is particular, finite, which come in many different shapes, forms and sizes (the Many) can also be taken to represent the relationship between Identity and Difference.

Important to note here is that the way in which metaphysics conceives of the relation between identity and difference bears both logical and ontological connotations. As Habermas writes: “the one is both axiom and essential ground, principle and origin. From it the many is derived – in the sense both of grounding and of originating. And, thanks to this origin, the many is reproduced as an ordered multiplicity” (PT, 30). It is this view of “ordered multiplicity” that

¹⁵ In Habermas’s discussion of metaphysics this aspect also appears as the “unitary thinking”, or the “totality”, or the “foundationalism” of metaphysics. It is important to note that “identity thinking” figures prominently in Adorno’s critique of metaphysics and modernity and it seems that in his discussion of this aspect Habermas draws on Adorno.

¹⁶ See also: “‘The one and the Many’, unity and plurality, designates the theme that has governed metaphysics from its inception. Metaphysics believes it can trace everything back to one” (PT, 116). The relentless drive to all-encompassing unity is a key feature of metaphysics. This totalizing force is what ensures the ultimate triumph of the universal over what is particular.

reveals an important fact about metaphysics: difference is mainly conceived as numerical difference.¹⁷ Hence, because they are conceived on the model of numbers in a series that can be infinitely generated according to a principle, the Many becomes logically and ontologically subsumed to the One. It is this logico-ontological dualism of the identity thinking of metaphysics that ultimately reduces difference to identity, what is particular to the universal. To sum up, one can reasonably affirm that traditional metaphysics accords a clear precedence to identity over difference.

The modern turn to subjectivity, best represented by Kant's Copernican revolution, radically alters the ontological paradigm of traditional metaphysics. Despite this significant anthropological shift, modernity preserves nonetheless the asymmetry between the One and the Many. The modern philosophy of consciousness (what Habermas calls "philosophy of the subject" whose main representative thinkers are Kant and Hegel) continues to privilege identity over difference. Later in this chapter I will have the opportunity to discuss in more details the modern turn to subjectivity in Kant and Hegel; here I just want to keep the present discussion flowing and briefly indicate how the "philosophy of consciousness" continues the metaphysical tendency of subsuming difference under identity.

This tendency lives on in what Kant calls the "synthetic unity of apperception" which, as he argues, accompanies every operation of our thought and unifies the manifold material of sensation into a coherent whole. This unifying force, this power of synthesis, is also responsible for the world-constituting spontaneity of our thought. Insofar as we know things, objects etc. (the many) these are subsumed to the forms of intuition and the categories of intellect, as the material which is given form and unity by our mind. The same unifying drive is detectable in the syntheses operated by reason (as distinct from the intellect). For instance, the cosmological idea

¹⁷ Qualitative differences are set aside. There is an abstraction from what qualitatively differentiates things and makes them unique (irreplaceable). This operation of abstraction lives on in modern philosophy, an aspect that is captured very well by Adorno and Horkheimer. As they write in their *Dialectics of Enlightenment*: in modernity "formal logic was the high school of unification. It offered Enlightenment thinkers a schema for making the world calculable. The mythologizing equation of Forms with numbers in Plato's last writings expresses the longing of all demythologizing: number becomes the enlightenment's canon. The same equation govern bourgeois justice and commodity exchange", p.4. See also: "Bourgeois society is ruled by equivalence. It makes dissimilar things comparable by reducing them to abstract quantities. For the Enlightenment, anything which cannot be resolved into numbers, and ultimately into one, is illusion; modern positivism consigns it to poetry. Unity remains the watchword from Parmenides to Russell. All gods and qualities must be destroyed", pp.4-5.

of the world unifies into a totality the whole of possible experience, all appearances, all conditions in general.¹⁸

As Habermas points out, and as we shall see better in the next section, Hegel's critique of Kant does not escape the reductionist tendency of identity thinking. Hegel introduces a more processual understanding of the Absolute, as "the mediating process of a self-reference that produces itself unconditionally" (PT, 129). History becomes the medium of the mediation between the universal and the particular (between One and the Many) and Hegel conceives of the One of metaphysics as Absolute Subject. Thus, unlike traditional (pre-modern) metaphysics, Hegel's Absolute Subject does not stand over and against the world, its does not precede the historical world process. For Hegel, the Absolute exists only in the mediating relation of the finite and the infinite to each other as this unfolds in history and becomes aware of itself in reflection.¹⁹ But despite these differences, as Habermas remarks, in raising the relation between One and the Many at the level of Absolute Spirit, that becomes aware of itself in the historical process of self-development, Hegel covertly endorses a pre-eminence of unity relative to difference. The unbalance in Hegel's philosophical thought is succinctly captured by Habermas as follows: "A history with an established past, a predecided future, and a condemned present is no longer *history*" (PT, 130). In Hegel, identity triumphs once again over difference and plurality.

¹⁸ Of course, according to Kant, no object of experience could correspond to this totality and that is why this idea of reason is only a regulative principle, which is to say that it plays only a heuristic role: it compels human intellectual endeavours to become systematic, as unitary and as complete as possible.

¹⁹ As Habermas writes, reflection is "the self-reference of a spirit that works its way up out of its substantiality to self-consciousness and which bears within itself the unity as well as the difference of the finite and the infinite" (PT, 129).

b) The “idealism” of metaphysics²⁰

The second aspect which, according to Habermas, is central to “metaphysical thinking” is its “idealism”. The term denotes the internal relation between being and abstract thinking, a relation already established by Parmenides. “Metaphysical thinking” takes essences to have a conceptual nature. Put differently, metaphysics posits a perfect match between the *genera* and *species*, as conceptual categories, and the order of things themselves. In Plato, for instance, the universal unity of the multiplicity of particular things is assured by the Idea of the Good which comprises in itself all other Ideas.

In short, as Habermas points out, the ideal has a conceptual nature and it is from this conceptual nature of the ideal essence that “being derives the further attributes of universality, necessity, and supratemporality” (PT, 31). Geometry provides a privileged model for the understanding of beings and the explanation offered for the genesis of beings follows the deductive model of geometry. Moreover, beings are devalued in their physical, material constitution as mere copies of eternal essences (as in Plato). Insofar as the role of matter is merely privative, metaphysics gives a clear precedence of ideas over matter. This figure of thought also frames the ethical problem of sufferance and evil: if the unity of the ideal is assured by the Idea of the Good, evil is explained as privation, as a lack, similar to the way in which darkness could be thought of as being caused by the absence of light.

Modern “philosophy of consciousness”, although critical of traditional metaphysics, preserves the primacy of ideas over matter. The idealism of Kant and Hegel continues to affirm this priority in various ways. As Habermas writes, in Kant “the ideal essences are transformed into the categorical determinations of a productive reason” (PT, 32). And in Hegelian dialectic, the idealist prevalence of ideas over matter is confirmed in the self-referential nature of the process of reflection through which the absolute spirit recovers itself in a procession through nature and history.

²⁰ This aspect of metaphysics is also discussed by Habermas as “the equation of being with thought” (PT, 29).

c) The “logocentrism” of metaphysics²¹

The third defining feature of metaphysics is its logocentrism. From its very beginnings metaphysics has claimed a redemptive dimension. Knowledge of truth was directly tied to salvation of the soul. In Greek philosophy, the contemplative type of life (*bios theoretikos*) was recommended as the highest form of life, an ranked higher than the active life of the statesman, for instance. Theory²² itself was an exemplary form of life that assured a privileged access to truth and led to individual salvation. Interpreted in the light of this aspect, philosophy was a path to salvation, similar to the religious paths of the prophet, the monk, or the eremite. What distinguished philosophical salvation from the religious path was the elitist character of the former: whereas religions consider their redemptive paths to be universal, opened in principle to everyone, philosophy reserves *bios theoretikos* for an elite, the educated few.²³

This soteriological dimension of metaphysics had a direct bearing on how the relation between theory and practice was conceived of. In the classical metaphysical framework, theoretical life requires renouncing the natural attitude toward the world by putting the everyday network of experiences and interests at a distance, in the attempt to reach contact with the extra-ordinary. As Habermas notes, traditional metaphysical thinking is characterized by a clear primacy of theory over practice.

Modern philosophy, with the rise of “the philosophy of consciousness” and the critique of traditional metaphysics, has fractured the established link of theory with sacred history. Despite this break, however, modernity preserves the distance from the ordinary in the methodical attitude of the inquirer. The method is what assures access to truth.²⁴ The methodical attitude of the scholar assures the immunity of theory from cultural or historical prejudices and preserves

²¹ As synonym for “logocentrism”, Habermas also uses the formulation “a strong concept of theory”, because he ties “logocentrism” with the redemptive meanings associated with contemplative life.

²² “Theoros”, for instance, was the representative sent by the Greek cities to the public religious festivals.

²³ See for instance Habermas, “Are There Postmetaphysical Answers to the Question: What is the ‘Good Life’?” in *The Future of Human Nature*, Polity Press, 2003, p. 2.

²⁴ This idea has been debunked by Hans Georg Gadamer in *Truth and Method* (1960).

the classical theoretical aspiration to privileged access to truth. As Habermas writes: “The modern philosophy of consciousness sublimates the independence of the theoretical mode of life into a theory that is absolute and self-justifying” (PT, 33).

d) Deligitimizing metaphysics: internal and external factors

Having laid out the three defining aspects of metaphysics, I can now discuss some important factors that eroded the plausibility of metaphysical thought. There are internal and external factors.

From a perspective internal to philosophical thought, the three aspects briefly discussed above (the primacy of identity over difference, of ideas over matter and that of theory over practice), have entangled metaphysics in serious difficulties. According to Habermas, at least three problems remain unsolved within the metaphysical framework: the problem of mediation between universal and particular (the problem of identity and difference), the problem of how philosophical thought should account for what is “irreplaceable individual”, and the discontent with the “merely privative determinations of matter and evil” (PT, 117).²⁵

The inability to tackle these issues successfully within the metaphysical mode of thought becomes the main source of a radical critique of metaphysical rationalism which shatters the legitimacy of the entire metaphysical mode of philosophical reflection. This critique has devastating effects because it reveals the essence of metaphysics as power, as domination: metaphysics is based on the homogenization and forced integration of what is different, particular, diverse, or plural (in short: that what is non-identical) into an illusory unity, universality, totality and identity. What is important to stress for my purpose in this dissertation is that this oppressive character of metaphysics is transferred to the philosophical project of

²⁵ As Habermas also puts it: three topics “have sparked the critique of metaphysics within the very framework of metaphysics: the relationship of identity and difference, the problem of what is ineffably individual, and the discontent with affirmative thinking” (PT, 117). According to Habermas, these problems could begin to find adequate solution only if we radically change the paradigm, from subjectivity to language. My next chapter deals extensively with this argument.

modernity (to normative concepts like self-consciousness, moral autonomy and authenticity) insofar as this project relies on metaphysical foundations.

Section 2.5. of this chapter will be dedicated to a comprehensive analysis of this critique in Nietzsche and his “poststructuralist” and “postmodern” disciples. For the remainder of this section, however, I want to briefly put aside the problems internal to metaphysical thought and shift the focus of my discussion to some “external” factors. According to Habermas, powerful social and historical trends have debilitated “metaphysical thinking” from outside, as it were, and a full picture of the process of de-legitimation of metaphysics must include them as well. These “historical developments”, as Habermas writes, are “socially conditioned” and therefore they can be regarded as external to metaphysical thought (PT, 33); they have nonetheless a direct impact on the self-understanding of philosophy.

Four such developments can be distinguished.

First, Habermas notes the emergence of the empirical methods of natural sciences (since the 17th century) and the rise of “formalism in moral and legal theory as well as in the institutions of the constitutional state” (since the 18th century). According to him, these two developments have made possible a new kind of rationality, “procedural rationality” (PT, 33). In a procedural framework, the idea of truth is released from its traditional link to a strong concept of theory, which aimed at rendering intelligible the inner structures of reality, and becomes tied instead to “the procedural rationality of the scientific process that would decide whether or not a sentence has truth-value in the first place” (PT, 6).²⁶

Moreover, the totalizing thinking of metaphysics is rendered “dubious” (PT, 33) by the fallibilism of scientific theories, whose working hypotheses are justified “through empirical

²⁶ This is “an antimetaphysical affect” that, as Habermas writes, is “not restricted to the logical empiricists in the Vienna Circle” who tried in vain to determine a criterion of meaning which would demarcate science from metaphysics “once and for all”. Habermas includes here the early Husserl, the young Horkheimer, structuralist thinkers as well. They all “made philosophical thinking bow to the sciences’ claim to exemplary status”. The shift is described as follows by Habermas: “the order of things that is found in the world itself, or that has been projected by the subject, or has grown out of the self-formative process of spirit, no longer counts as rational; instead, what counts as rational is solving problems successfully through procedurally suitable dealings with reality”. Empirical problems are entrusted to scientific communities of inquirers and moral-practical problems to communities of citizens and to the system of law (PT, 35).

confirmation or through their coherence with other statements that are already accepted” (PT, 36). As Habermas points out, the close finality of metaphysical systems of thought collides and becomes incompatible with “the unprejudiced openness” which characterizes “the cognitive process of science”.

The second trend highlighted by Habermas is the growing complexity of modern society. This ever-expanding complexity makes possible “new experiences of time and contingency” which since the 19th century has been reflected by the “intrusion of historical consciousness” in the humanities. This drew attention to “the dimension of finiteness” and pushed for attempts to “situate” reason (by detranscendentalizing it) (PT, 33-34).²⁷ Pragmatism and hermeneutics are the two currents of thought at the centre of the movement to “situate” reason.²⁸

Third, the increasingly differentiated and complex modern society engendered a functionalization of forms of life, which gave rise to a critique of reification, of domination, ideology, and alienation. This critique went in two directions: a critique of the foundationalism of the “philosophy of the subject” which forces everything in the form of subject-object relations, on the one side, and that of a critique of the “objectivistic self-understanding of science and technology”, on the other. This critical movement (directed against ideology and reification) helps to spread a strong anti-foundationalist mood during the 19th century and thus paved the way for the transition from “the philosophy of consciousness” to the philosophy of language (PT,

²⁷ Thus history, language, action and the body become as many “media of embodiments” of the transcendental consciousness. “Wittgenstein’s language-game grammar, Gadamer’s contexts of tradition in effective history, Levi-Strauss’s deep structures, and the Hegelian Marxists’ historical totalities” represent attempts to contextualize “an abstractly exalted reason” and “to situate it in its proper domains of operation” (PT, 7).

²⁸ Arguments which “situate” reason in history and society have been developed “from Humboldt through Frege to Wittgenstein and through Dilthey to Gadamer, from Pierce through Gehlen, and, finally, from Feuerbach through Plessner to Merleau-Ponty” (PT, 19).

33-34).²⁹ Analytic philosophy and structuralism are the two main movements of thought that animate the turn to language (PT, 7).³⁰

Finally, a growing awareness of the fact that theory and practice stand in a relationship of mutual dependency makes itself present in the 20th century: theoretical accomplishments are now seen to be “embedded” in “the practical context of their genesis and employment”. Thus “everyday contexts of actions and communication” become relevant for theoretical understanding and they achieve “philosophical status” in concepts like that of “lifeworld background” (PT, 33-34), or those of “language game”, “form of life”, “practice”, “linguistically mediated interaction”, “convention”, “cultural background”, “tradition”, “effective history”. (MCCA, 9)³¹ The emphasis on the “web of everyday life and communication surrounding ‘our’ cognitive achievements” aims to convey the general idea that cognition is inescapably “mediated by language and linked to action” (MCCA, 9).

²⁹ The linguistic turn replaces the relation between subject and object with “the relation of language to the world or of a proposition to a state of affairs”. Moreover, as Habermas writes, “world-constitutive accomplishments are transferred from transcendental subjectivity to grammatical structures” (PT, 7) which are publicly accessible and cannot be reduced to what is merely subjective.

³⁰ However, methodological “bridges” are built to formal semantics from Husserl’s theory of meaning, and even Western Marxism will embrace this turn through critical theory (especially in Habermas’s own variant).

³¹ The reversal of the relationship between theory and practice (the “overcoming of logocentrism” (PT, 8)) is basically a Marxist achievement- the world has to be changed and not merely interpreted; however pragmatism from Pierce to Mead, Piaget’s developmental psychology, Scheller’s sociology of knowledge or Husserl’s analysis of the “lifeworld” provided additional evidence “for the rootedness of our cognitive accomplishments in prescientific practice and in our intercourse with things and persons” (PT, 7).

2.3 After metaphysics: philosophy's quest for a new identity

Under the weight of these powerful external pressures and faced with the nagging internal problems already mentioned, “metaphysical thinking” succumbs to a process of devaluation and delegitimization. The “fall” of metaphysics is an event with radical implications for the self-understanding of philosophy as an intellectual endeavour. The collapse of the unitary thinking, of the idealism and the logocentrism of metaphysics has raised difficult questions regarding the proper role of philosophy, its proper method, its scope and object of inquiry.

Two such sets of questions seem to be really important.

First, if the metaphysical type of foundationalism is definitively compromised, what kind of grounding could philosophy still claim for its investigations? Should philosophy succumb to a form of cultural contextualism? Should it renounce systematic claims to validity and objectivity and transform itself into literature? Should it try to untie its venerable links with reason and rational totality and thus drift into irrationality? Or should it join with resignation the triumphant march of natural sciences in the ancillary role of “philosophy of science”?

An equally important and difficult set of questions raised by the collapse of metaphysics targets what Habermas calls the “normative content of modernity” (more on this in the next section):³² if the metaphysical foundations of modernity (as in Kant and Hegel) are no longer defensible, should we also do away with the “normative content of modernity”? Should “postmetaphysical” mean “postmodern” as in bidding farewell to modernity?

In my view these two sets of important concerns converge in the following central question: if the synthesis between metaphysics and modernity forged in the past 300 years (with German idealism as its pinnacle) has been broken what options still lay open to us?

Strictly from a logical point of view, four alternatives seem possible.

³² I will be able to draw a more complex picture of what Habermas means by “the normative content of modernity” in the following section, where I will place Habermas’s rendition of this content in relation to Kant, Hegel and Marx.

- **Option 1.** A defence of metaphysics in spite of all its internal problems and external pressures for change identified by my discussion above, paralleled by a defence of a metaphysical foundation for modernity. The work of someone like Dieter Henrich in Germany, for instance, can be cited here.³³ Within this rubric I think one could also place the Catholic intellectual tradition after the *Aggiornamento* of the Vatican II Council, which continues to uphold the synthesis between Greek metaphysics and the Christian faith realized by Thomas Aquinas (what has been called the *Hellenization* of Christianity), while affirming a more cordial relation with modernity (or at least with some basic aspects of modernity). The *Regensburg Address* (2006) of Pope Benedict XVI, for instance, is notable in that it still offers arguments in defence of this synthesis.

- **Option 2.** A defence of metaphysics followed by a rejection of the normative project of modernity, regarded as the main source of innumerable disasters. Here belongs “the great alliance against the ideas of the 1789”, to borrow Habermas’s phrase, represented by Leo Strauss, Martin Heidegger and Arnold Gehlen. This alternative assimilates the powerful critique of modernity which begins with Nietzsche (more on this in my next section), and places hope in the regenerative force of a return to metaphysics before Kant, even before Socrates in the case of Heidegger.³⁴

³³ See for instance Dieter Henrich “What is Metaphysics - What is Modernity? Twelve Theses against Habermas”, in Peter Dews ed. *Habermas. A Critical Reader*, Malden: MA, Blackwell, 1999, pp. 291-319. Habermas responds in “Metaphysics after Kant” in PT, pp. 10-27.

³⁴ Under this category it would probably be safest to place the neo-Aristotelian current which originates in the work of Joachim Ritter and Hans-Georg Gadamer in Germany and the writings of Hannah Arendt in the US; as Habermas writes: “The ethos and politics of Aristotle are unthinkable without the connection to physics and metaphysics in which the basic concepts of form, substance, act, potency, final cause and so forth developed... Today it is no longer easy to render the approach of this metaphysical mode of thought plausible...” (*CES*, 202). To simplify a lot, Habermas links neo-Aristotelianism to an attempt to resurrect some “old truths” of metaphysics, and thus to a kind of conservatism. However, evaluating the relationship of neo-Aristotelianism with modernity may be a complicated task, as not all those who could be associated with this label are uncompromisingly hostile to modernity. The Aristotelian stress on the common good, participatory politics, fraternity and friendship, and rule of law is also present in modern democratic conceptions of common will, popular sovereignty and participatory democracy. Therefore it would probably be fitter to place the work of some neo-Aristotelians in the previous category, that which upholds the link between metaphysics and modernity. In any case, the picture we get from Habermas with respect to what can be loosely called “neo-Aristotelianism” (one could perhaps include here important communitarian thinkers such as Alasdair McIntyre, Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor and Michael Walzer) is that this current of thought remains plugged to metaphysics in a way which today is just no longer plausible. See however Ronald Beiner’s argument that Arendt cannot be interpreted as a “neo-Aristotelian” and that Habermas is wrong to place her in this category. Ronald Beiner “Hannah Arendt: The Performativity of Politics” in *Political Philosophy. What It Is and Why It Matters?*, Cambridge University Press, 2014, pp. 1-24, especially p.5ff. See also the excellent

- **Option 3.** An overcoming and rejection of metaphysics, which also rejects the normative project of modernity. French “poststructuralism” (Foucault, Derrida), and in general thinkers associated with “postmodernism” (Lyotard, Deleuze) belong to this category. Again, the critique of modern reason launched by Nietzsche becomes the stepping stone for a radicalized and totalizing critique of the “unitary thinking”, “idealism” and “logocentrism” of metaphysics. In this radical discourse, the very thought of universality disintegrates along with the idea of unconditional foundations. They must be replaced by a celebration of multiplicity and diversity, by an empowering and liberating relativism of different “forms of life”.

- **Option 4.** Finally, the last logical option would concede that metaphysical foundations are no longer available, but it would aim nevertheless to defend and preserve the normative achievements of modernity. Obviously this alternative, if possible at all, must rethink the philosophical grounding of the “normative content of modernity” and find some non (or post-) metaphysical type of justification for this content. Habermas resolutely situates his own philosophical project within this “postmetaphysical” alternative.³⁵ Moreover, he distinctively claims that this last option is the only one still philosophically viable today: as he repeatedly insists, there is no alternative to “postmetaphysical thinking”.

discussion of MacIntyre and communitarian political philosophy in the same book (on pp. 168-196). I share Beiner's observation that that when it locates its critical impulse in multiculturalism and identity politics communitarianism in fact exhausts itself and becomes co-opted by liberalism (p.193). This is in line, I would suggest, with my point above that not everyone in this camp is hostile to modernity. Interesting for me to read, in light of my dominant concerns in this dissertation, was Beiner's engagement with MacIntyre on religion, modernity and politics on pp. 183-188.

³⁵ Habermas's “postmetaphysical thinking” must be placed in the context formed by four main philosophical movements: analytic philosophy, phenomenology, Western Marxism and structuralism. All these movements emerged in the XXth century in the wake of the fall of metaphysics and all of them make the transition to scientific proceduralism, they are engaged in the linguistic turn, they all attempt to situate reason in history and culture and also aim to overcome the logocentrism of metaphysics. What is however more important for our discussion is that all these movements preserve the positive link with the “normative content of modernity”. It is in a constant dialogue with these four philosophical currents that Habermas's thought develops. It comes as no surprise therefore that Habermas rejects the more recent shift in “the horizon of modernity” which becomes discernable towards the end of the XXth century: all these 4 currents seem to exhaust themselves in “post-” movements, whether we talk about the “post-analytical philosophy” of Rorty and Lyotard, about Kuhn's “post-empiricist” theory of science, about the “poststructuralism” of Foucault and Derrida or about various “post-Marxist” schools. These “post-” movements either openly embrace radical contextualism, like Rorty and Lyotard or reject entirely the philosophical project of modernity, like Foucault and Derrida. In terms of my discussion in this section all these “post-” movements should be included in the third alternative above, the one that rejects both metaphysics and modernity.

This is quite a grand claim and for the remaining part of this chapter I will concentrate on Habermas's position. There are a couple of distinct but interrelated aspects that must be clarified here. It is important first to look more closely at the reasons backing this claim regarding the lack of alternative to "postmetaphysical thinking", and to evaluate their cogency. I have briefly highlighted above some of the problems plaguing metaphysical thought, but now this issue has to be considered in earnest. Also, it is important to obtain a clearer picture of what exactly must be preserved after the fall of metaphysics: what constitutes the "normative content" of modernity more precisely, a content that, as Habermas argues, must find some philosophical justification that nevertheless avoids metaphysical foundationalism? A distinct problem, which I will be able to tackle fully only in the next chapter, is how exactly is this to be done? What kind of grounding can be offered for normative modernity in a postmetaphysical manner?

If we look at the reasons supporting Habermas's position, it is clear that he places an important stress on the external factors mentioned above that have delegitimized metaphysics to a large extent. His pragmatist leanings explain this preference: as a good pragmatist, Habermas holds that philosophy must respond to social and economic trends that objectively confronts it from outside, as it were. Philosophy must help solve problems the emergence of which are outside of its control. Let me quote Habermas at some length here:

"Do not these and similar signs indicate that intellectuals articulate shifts in mood, which they in no way invent, but which have instead palpable social and often economic causes? As a good pragmatist, I hold the view that a philosopher's capacity to create problems through intentionally inciting doubt is quite limited. I share Pierce's doubt about any type of Cartesian doubt. Problems emerge in situations over which we are not in control; they are something which objectively happens to us".³⁶

Habermas's allegiance to pragmatism therefore places a heavy emphasis on powerful social and economic trends which are hostile to metaphysical thought, as mentioned above. In his view, neither of the first two alternatives above (options 1 and 2) that still rely on a metaphysical mode

³⁶ Habermas, "Questions and Counterquestions" in Richard J. Bernstein *Habermas and Modernity*, MIT Press, 1985, 198.

of reflection, irrespective of their acceptance or rejection of the normative core of modernity, can retain much viability today. The open, fallible and procedural view of reason introduced by modern empirical sciences, as well as the increasing complexity and functionalization of society and economy, seriously undermine any attempt to defend all-encompassing and closed metaphysical systems. Neither clinging to the metaphysical premises of the modern “philosophy of consciousness”, nor returning to traditional (pre-Kantian) metaphysics within the ontological paradigm of *prima philosophia*, is possible any longer. The calls for “situating” reason in history and for the overcoming of *logocentrism* must be seriously reckoned with and not simply ignored.

Habermas’s pragmatism however accounts for only half of the picture. The other half is constituted by his critical engagement with “postmodern” thought. Habermas’s critique of “postmodern” thinkers plays a pivotal role in his defence of the claim regarding the lack of alternatives to his position. After all, it is not at all clear why the disintegration of modernity’s metaphysical foundations should not be followed by a collapse of modernity’s normative framework. If metaphysics is *kaput*, as Habermas claims, it is not immediately apparent how the normative claims which define modernity can survive its demise. This is precisely the “postmodern” challenge (option 3 above): in their attack on modern rationalism and its foundations in modern philosophy of consciousness, “postmodern” thinkers also want to tear to pieces the normative framework erected on this foundation.

In light of this problem, Habermas’s critical engagement with “postmodern” thought becomes very important for my purpose in this thesis. A lot hangs on this, in fact. If the “postmodernist” option, the two-fold rejection of metaphysics and the “normative content of modernity”, can be shown to be a false alternative, and if moreover we assume (as Habermas does) that metaphysical foundationalism is obsolete and implausible, then indeed Habermas’s claim about the lack of an alternative to his position becomes much more plausible.

Dismissing postmodernism, however, is no easy task. Postmodernist claims are very much attuned to the experiences of pluralism, differentiation, decentration and diversity that a complex society and a sophisticated, ever expanding, technology make possible, and thus, in his rejection of these claims, Habermas must rely on something more than the pragmatist need to respond to some “objective” social and economic trends. Like Habermas, postmodern thinkers argue for an

overcoming of the logocentrism of Western metaphysics and are sworn enemies of metaphysical foundationalism.

Therefore the justification for Habermas's resistance to the "postmodern" alternative must be located inside the territory of philosophical thought.³⁷ Indeed, if metaphysics is no longer viable and it must be overcome, why not fully embrace perspectivism, pluralism, diversity, contextualism and, eventually, the relativism of all values? Why not accept that what Habermas calls "the normative content" of modernity is just one possible social and political project among many other projects, one "form of life" (or "language game" or "intellectual formation") among a plurality of other such "forms of life", all of equal worth and standing?

In order to better understand Habermas's response to this difficult predicament, we must return to the problems internal to metaphysical thought, briefly sketched above. That is, we must return to philosophical argument: in order to lend credence to the claim that "postmetaphysical thinking" has no alternative today, Habermas must put forth a convincing argument that the alternative path of "postmodernism" is truly a philosophical dead end, an intellectual *cul de sac*.³⁸ He does put forward such an argument and in the remaining sections of this chapter I want to evaluate its cogency.

³⁷ This justification has a lot to do with the problems internal to metaphysics mentioned at the beginning of this section (the reductionist mediation between the universal and the particular, and consequently the inability to account for what is "irreplaceable individual"; and the dissatisfaction with "logocentrism"). As already intimated in my discussion of these aspects, the postmodernist rejection of metaphysics and modernity is fueled by a deep intellectual distrust regarding metaphysics' ability to adequately solve these problems. As we shall see in the next section Habermas thinks that postmodernist thinkers may be a little bit too hasty in their wholesale rejection of modernity: they do not consider the possibility that the three metaphysical problems mentioned could actually find adequate solution if one was able to frame them in a different (that is non-metaphysical) paradigm. Thus one of Habermas' important claims is that a change of paradigm (from consciousness to language) would offer a new philosophical framework able to release the philosophical means necessary to adequately deal with what is problematic in the metaphysical heritage. A modernity centered on a non-reductionist mediation between universal and particular (i.e. an adequate concept of intersubjectivity), on an adequate and plausible rendition of agency (what is "irreplaceable individual"), both understood in a materialist (non-logocentrist) framework would then be able to withstand the charge of self-destructive totalitarianism. I will discuss all this at large in the next chapter.

³⁸ Habermas has devoted a lot of energy to this aim, especially in the lectures held at the College de France in Paris (1983) and Cornell University (1984) and later published in the volume *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (MIT Press, 1987). My discussion in the next section relies heavily on this volume.

2.4. The “normative content” of modernity

Section 2.3 above left us with the task of probing further Habermas’s claim that there is no alternative to “postmetaphysical thinking”. To remind the reader, Habermas means by “postmetaphysical thinking” a defense of the normative content of modernity in the absence of metaphysical foundations. To show that such a philosophical project is our only alternative today Habermas must credibly debunk the “postmodern” philosophical position. This position holds that in the absence of a metaphysical foundation, no universal and progressive normative claims can be safeguarded.

In the remaining part of this chapter I will concentrate on Habermas’s argument that the “poststructuralist” critique of metaphysical reason is a false alternative due to the following two reasons: first, this critique does not escape the foundationalist mode of thinking of the very metaphysics which it denounces and rejects; and second, this radical critique, due to its totalizing character, is unable to give an account of the validity of its own claims.

In order to be able to correctly assess these Habermasian arguments, however, I need to make a short detour. It is imperative that I first give an account of what Habermas calls “the normative content” of modernity before being able to analyze the pertinence of the “postmodern” attacks against this content. So far in this preliminary chapter I discussed the main aspects defining metaphysics and I indicated why and how the whole metaphysical tradition (up to Hegel) succumbs to a process of de-legitimation. Now I need to be more precise about the place of normative modernity in the contested history of metaphysics.

In this section (2.4.) therefore I aim to foreground and discuss the link between modernity and metaphysics. As the “normative content of modernity” has been given expression in the philosophical works of Kant, Hegel and Marx, my discussion will concentrate on these thinkers, seeking to determine more precisely the main lines connecting them to Habermas. The influence of these three thinkers on Habermas’s thought is complex and multi-layered and, in fact, Habermas’s philosophy may be succinctly characterized as a synthesis between the Hegelian-Marxist philosophical framework and a linguistic type of Kantianism. Throughout my dissertation I will have the occasion to repeatedly engage with various aspects of this synthesis,

in this section however I focus on just one such aspect, and that is the problem that concerns me most in this chapter, the problem of modernity's "self-grounding". The question that I am interested in is the following: is modernity able to ground its normative standard out of its own resources?

My discussion has two parts: first, I identify the origin of this foundational problem in Kant's anthropological turn in modern philosophy and then, second, I look at how Hegel and Marx reckoned with the Kantian legacy and evaluate their proposed solutions to this crucial problem.

2.4.1 The divided house of modernity: Kant's anthropological turn

As is known, Kant's critique of traditional metaphysics initiates an important anthropological turn in philosophy. The "Copernican revolution" effected by Kant introduced a significant modulation in metaphysical thought, which has become paradigmatic for how modernity understands itself. Indeed, as Hegel correctly argued, "the essence of the modern world gathered into its focal point in Kantian philosophy" (PDM, 19).

The importance of Kant for my topic in this dissertation resides in that he raised to the level of philosophical reflection a novel problem: with his critique of traditional metaphysics, followed by an uncompromising reflexive self-restraint in matters of knowledge, he was forced to confront the question of the rational self-grounding of modernity. Let's see more precisely why this question becomes an acute problem for Kant.

In its essence, I argue, Kantian philosophy is an attempt to draw the proper boundaries of reason. Kant limits the domain of certain knowledge to knowledge of things given in (possible) experience and this reorientation of cognition to what can be given in experience casts serious doubt on the type of knowledge that had been central to the whole metaphysical tradition, a knowledge derived from unmediated (i.e. independent of sensuous experience) intellectual

access to objects. Such a direct access must now be seen in a dubious light and, in fact, Kant explicitly equates it with an illicit transgression of the boundaries of valid knowledge.³⁹

The main upshot of the radical restriction introduced by Kant is a major transformation of the concept of reason: reason does not belong to the order of things, it can no longer be thought of as embodied in the objective structure of the cosmos to which human mind also belongs (as it was the case for the whole metaphysical tradition which posited the equation of being and thought - see my discussion of “the idealism of metaphysics” in the previous section); reason is demoted to a subjective faculty. This scaled-back view of reason inaugurates the principle of “subjectivity” as the normative principle of modernity. To put all this in Kantian vocabulary, “transcendental consciousness” becomes the foundation of certain knowledge, the *a priori* basis of all possible knowledge; in addition, the only way to get access to this foundational layer is through radical self-reflection.

However, not only is reason subjectivized in Kant, it is also splintered. The universal subjective faculty of reason is split into three moments, a cognitive, a practical and an aesthetic moment. The unity of these moments remains strictly formal, in keeping with the Kantian distinction between form and content of knowledge.⁴⁰ Metaphysical concepts like “God”, “soul” and “the world” are not entirely dispensed with. They are however emptied of any ontological substance and now represent mere “interests” of reason. To be more precise, in Kant they become regulative ideas of reason.⁴¹

³⁹ Such transgressions generate mere illusions which cannot yield any cognitive gain; in fact, they cannot be qualified as “knowledge” at all.

⁴⁰ Concepts, the building blocks of knowledge, are mere forms of thought and remain empty and blind if they are not given particular content. The latter always comes from intuitions, ultimately from sensible experience. One important consequence of this distinction between the form of knowledge (coming from our mind) and the content of knowledge (coming from sensorial data) is that we cannot know how things really are, that is how they are independent from our conscious, “in-themselves”, as it were. We can only know how things appear to us. This is the famous Kantian distinction between *phenomenon* (appearance) and *noumenon* (the thing-in-itself).

⁴¹ For instance, the concept of the “world”, as the totality of existing conditions, cannot possibly correspond to something in our experience. As human beings, it is impossible to have the experience of this totality. At the same time however, reason has a strong interest in positing the idea of “world”-totality in order to orient our striving for knowledge toward as much completion and as much unity as possible. This idea becomes necessary, according to Kant, as a focal point of our epistemological endeavors in that it directs our cognitive efforts toward coherence and completion. In Kant’s specific terminology the idea of the “world” plays a “regulative” role. I will discuss (in some

Thus at the core of the anthropological turn brought about by Kant's "Copernican revolution" we find a series of fragmentations and divisions which definitively shatters the metaphysical unity of the cosmos. Let's recapitulate them very briefly: first we have the subject-object split. The world (as we know it) is spontaneously constituted by the subject's reason which generates its unity, necessity and universality. The autonomous rational subject (the seat of this world-constituting reason) is an entity at once self-transparent, self-mastering and self-assertive. This autonomous subject however stands over and against what lies beyond the borders of certain knowledge that he draws. This is the *noumenal* domain of "things-in-themselves" (of which he can have no real knowledge), a domain that becomes the necessary counterpart of the world-constituting rational subject. Put differently, pure reason stands over against nature, history and language.

Second, within the sovereign subject itself, three distinct aspects of reason are differentiated by Kant: the cognitive, moral and aesthetic rational faculties.

And third, the rational capacity of the autonomous subject to act out of respect for the moral law stands in sharp contrast with the appetites, desires, feelings and self-interests of the same subject, all sources of heteronomous actions.

As already mentioned, these differentiations characteristic to modernity seriously undermine the thought of a rational totality (of a meaningful and rational cosmos to which human beings themselves belong) and thus force the modern subject in a condition of metaphysical homelessness, as it were.⁴² However the loss of the metaphysical home is compensated for by a very important promise, and it is this promise that lends tremendous force to the normative understanding of modernity. Habermas reads normative modernity as centered on three clusters of meaning formed around the concepts of "self-reflexion" (the epistemological focus of Kant's first critique), "self-determination" (or "moral autonomy" discussed by Kant in *Critique of*

detail) the other two "ideas of reason", the immortality of the soul and the existence of God, in the last chapter of this dissertation, the chapter on "Postmetaphysical Hope".

⁴² It is important to remember that in Kant's own view the restriction of what can constitute certain knowledge is also meant to make room for faith. By disentangling Christian faith from ontological arguments for the existence of God, and in general from the scholastic synthesis between Greek metaphysics and Catholic theology, it liberates Christianity from the vexing burden of demonstrating scientifically the existence of God, and it thus protects it from the erosion generated by the progress of natural sciences. I will discuss in more detail Kant's idea of a "rational faith" in the last chapter of this dissertation.

Practical Reason) and “self-actualization” (the aesthetic moment of reason from Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgement*).⁴³ Thus modernity promises rational emancipation from age-old dependencies, shedding off man’s “self-imposed immaturity” (Kant). Modernity promises freedom, self-empowerment and, in the political domain, it also promises setting political authority on a rational basis. In Habermas’s view, the rise of “subjective freedom” as the foundational principle of modernity for the first time in history makes possible the prospect of a “rational practice” - a truly rational society.

It is important to make here two remarks, very briefly, as they will facilitate my discussion in the next chapters: the first is that Habermas preserves a keen interest in the social and political consequences of the Kantian turn in philosophy. He contends (borrowing from Max Weber, as I will show in due course) that latent in Kant’s tripartite distinction of formal reason one can find a theory of modernity. To put it differently, the Kantian trisection of reason can be seen as a “philosophical crystallization”⁴⁴ of independent (objective, material) social, cultural and historical developments. In fact, the Kantian fragmentation of reason reflects processes of “differentiation” and “decentration” set in motion by the process of modernization, as the three Kantian rational faculties correspond to the cultural differentiation of three “value spheres”⁴⁵ (or “structures of rationality”): the cognitive-instrumental one (here belongs modern science), the moral-practical one (here belongs “positive law and posttraditional ethics”) and the aesthetic-expressive one (here belongs “autonomous art and institutionalized art criticism”).

⁴³ In describing modernity as revolving around these three aspects Habermas follows Hegel (see for instance Habermas *BNR*, 238). Using a different formulation, which this time combines Kantian and Marxist insights, Habermas describes the normative content of modernity as follows: modernity holds “the prospect of a self-conscious practice in which the solidary self-determination of all was to be joined with the self-realization of each” (*PDM*, 337-338). According to Habermas, this project has lost nothing of its actuality and importance. It remains actual precisely because its normative promise is “unredeemed” as yet. Modernity is still an “unfinished” business, an unfinished “project”, as Habermas often puts it. I will treat Habermas’s view of modern society in more detail in the second half of my next chapter.

⁴⁴ I borrow the term from Jay M. Bernstein, “The Causality of Faith” in Maurizio Passerin d’Entrèves and Seyla Benhabib eds. *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity. Critical Essays on the Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1996, 257.

⁴⁵ Habermas follows here Max Weber and Emil Lask, see *MCCA*, 17.

The second thing that is important to keep in mind, is that modern “differentiation” and “decentration” acquire in Habermas the status of a pre-condition for any possible view of free and rational society. Modern differentiations embody a tendency toward actualization of freedom⁴⁶ and they are tied to a process of “rationalization” of society which allows “the unfolding of the rational potential of social practice” (PDM, 345-346). In other words, differentiation for Habermas plays the role of a *critical threshold*: it is the criterion that distinguishes modernity from any other historical epoch. To give this insight an even stronger form, differentiation is a non-negotiable, *sine qua non* aspect of the anthropological turn on which modernity is built. A free and rational society *depends on* differentiation. Therefore any attempt to bridge the differentiated spheres of modernity, to reconcile the fragments of modernity or to repair its fractures must not fall back beyond this threshold. Any attempt to restore a rational unity for modernity’s fragments must *preserve* these fragments (if one does not want to revoke the advances in freedom and knowledge made possible by modernity). Hegel and Marx are fully aware of this imperative and Habermas follows on their footsteps.

⁴⁶ Thus freedom can be realized in society only through these modern differentiations. As Habermas writes, in modern society “subjective freedom” is realized as “the space secured by civil law for the rational pursuit of one’s own interest; in the state as the in principle equal rights to participation in the formation of the political will, in the private sphere as ethical autonomy and self-realization; finally in the public sphere related to this private realm, as the formative process that takes place by means of the appropriation of a culture that has become reflective” (PDM, 83).

2.4.2 The “paradox of modernity”: the Kantian legacy in Hegel and Marx

The promise of rational and political maturity made possible by the modern turn to subjectivity, a promise insistently defended by Habermas as still being in need of fulfilment, cannot however suppress an uneasy feeling of estrangement or alienation. As Habermas himself acknowledges, the divisions introduced by Kant (as well as the corresponding “differentiation” and “decentration” of modern society) have been experienced “at the same time as abstraction, as alienation from the totality of an ethical context of life”. In pre-modern societies, metaphysical (and religious) worldviews played a very important integrative role. As he writes: “once religion was the unbreakable seal upon this totality [of ethical life]; it is not by chance that this seal has been broken” (PDM, 83).

Indeed, religion once represented a powerful force of integration for traditional society, a force which has been seriously weakened by the process of enlightenment and by the process of transition to modernity, more generally. Moreover this process, as Habermas argues, is irreversible (PDM, 84).⁴⁷ Enlightenment can only correct its deficiencies by “radicalized enlightenment”. More and not less enlightenment is the solution to whatever divisions, fractures, or pathologies might have been created by the process of enlightenment.

It is not very difficult to see that there is something paradoxical about this narrative and that modernity’s attempt at self-grounding has an aporetic core: the more the enlightenment process progresses, the more fractured and self-independent the “spheres of values” grow. So the greater

⁴⁷ As Habermas writes: “one feature of this enlightenment is the irreversibility of learning processes, which is based on the fact that insights cannot be forgotten at will; they can only be repressed or corrected by better insights. Hence enlightenment can only make good its deficits by radicalized enlightenment” (PDM, 84). In my view passages like this one strongly imply that Habermas endorses, at least in this phase of his thinking, a linear view of progress: the process of modernization can go in just one direction, from a religiously integrated society to a more and more enlightened society in which rational insights are corrected by better rational insights until the rational learning process completely replaces religion as the main source of meaning and social solidarity. In my view this linear narrative of progress adopted by Habermas in the *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* is also explicitly defended in *The Theory of Communicative Action*. It is only with his turn to a “post-secular” society (after 2001), that this view of progress suffers significant modifications and acquires a more cautious interpretation. I will return to this topic in the next chapter in the section dedicated to Habermas’s thesis of “linguistification of the sacred”.

will become the need for integration of society and culture. At the same time reason is barred from reaching back to some metaphysical worldview in order to meet this need: the learning processes once set in motion by the enlightenment cannot be rolled back. Which is to say that the fight against the increasing trend toward social anomie and social disintegration must rely strictly on modern reason's own resources. However it was precisely modern reason that has set off the processes of differentiation and disintegration in the first place.

Is there any solution to this paradox? In other words, the fundamental question that must be answered is this: *is it possible to find a concept of reason which is flexible (and comprehensive) enough to preserve the differentiations introduced by modernity and yet robust enough to be able to restore the unifying power of religion in the medium of reason alone?* What kind of rational "equivalent" for the integrative force of religion can be offered?

This is the paradoxical question of modernity's self-grounding (or the "dialectic of Enlightenment", as Habermas following Hegel also calls it⁴⁸), with which Hegel and his left and right disciples wrestled. All post-Kantian philosophers, in fact, were forced to grapple with this *aporia*. And all of them tried to work out concepts of reason which would be able to repair the fragmentation, make the world whole again, and thus succeed in finding, as Habermas puts it, "an equivalent for the unifying power of religion",⁴⁹ while simultaneously preserving the differentiations introduced by Kant's philosophical anthropology. Among these attempts the works of Hegel and Marx stand out, and Habermas's philosophical project ("postmetaphysical

⁴⁸ The "dialectic of enlightenment" in the context of this discussion represents the need to reconcile the divisions brought about by modern reason using reason itself. Compare this meaning with the one consecrated by Horkheimer and Adorno in their book *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*: for these two authors the expression "dialectic of Enlightenment" denotes something slightly different as it captures a peculiar self-defeating and self-damaging dynamic nested in the very promise to self-determination brought about by philosophical Enlightenment; the enhanced powers to master nature and objects through analytical knowledge turns against the sovereign subject, and enslave him in a nightmarish society subject to almost total bureaucratic and economic control.

⁴⁹ This was the philosophical "program" they were all committed to (PDM, 84). In the pursuit of this program they all failed however. The "dialectic of enlightenment" miscarried again and again in Hegel, Schelling, Fichte, Marx (and this, it must be said, with disastrous political consequences). Faced with these repeated failures, two options present themselves to us: either we discard the whole dialectical attempt at self-grounding or we try to renew its movement one more time. Habermas argues for the second option. That is why Habermas thinks that, at a philosophical level, we are in fact still contemporary with the first generation of Hegel's disciples. Like in their case, the task confronting us is to once more renew modernity's attempt at self-grounding. This time however this renewal has to be done with new philosophical means and being mindful of the mistakes Hegel's disciples (on the left as well as on the right) fell prey to.

thinking”) is significantly shaped by them. Let’s see very briefly what kind of reconciliation is sought by Hegel and Marx and whether or not their attempt to rationally ground modernity out of its own resources is successful.

According to Habermas, Hegel is the first thinker to recognize modernity’s pressing need for reconciliation; against Kant, Hegel points out that reason is not only a source of divisions and differentiation but also a force of reconciliation. The word Hegel uses for the divisions introduced by Kant’s anthropological turn is *Entzweiungen* (diremptions), gesturing thus towards the imperative to overcome them.

Hegel’s basic aim is to re-establish the shattered unity of metaphysics, without abandoning however the normative insights made possible by the Kantian turn to subjectivity. What is supposed to encapsulate the synthetic, reconciliatory power of reason in Hegel is the concept of “ethical totality”, a concept which captures, as Habermas writes, “the picture of an undamaged intersubjectivity” (PDM, 337).

As Habermas points out, Hegel raises a very important challenge to Kant’s transcendental idealism, a challenge that all critics of modernity have subsequently adopted and amplified. Hegel is the first thinker after Kant to “unmask the [Kantian] principle of subjectivity as one of domination” (PDM, 27)⁵⁰ (this ties back to my discussion of the reductionist tendency of pre-critical metaphysics which, as I already intimated in section 1.2. of this chapter, is taken over and preserved by modern metaphysics).

It is very important therefore to look at this charge more carefully.

As Habermas writes, according to Hegel, the “repressive character of reason is universally grounded in the structure of self-relationship, that is, in the relationship of a subject that makes itself an object” (PDM, 27). Indeed Kantian philosophy seems to be damaged by the following

⁵⁰ This is a charge common to all critics of modernity, as Habermas remarks. It runs like a thread from “Hegel and Marx down to Nietzsche and Heidegger, from Bataille and Lacan to Foucault and Derrida” (PDM, 55-56). In my discussion in this section, however, I show that there is an important difference between these philosophers: Hegel and Marx still aim to find a concept of reason which eliminates the oppressive (reifying) character of the anthropological turn effected by Kant, whereas the others thinkers mentioned will completely give up this attempt. Habermas sides with Hegel and Marx and rejects the attempt to abandon this anthropological turn.

inescapable difficulty. The rational subject finds itself in an intolerable dual position: there is a big gap yawning between the transcendental (extramundane) position of the “I” as noumenal agency and the intramundane, empirical position of the same “I”. On the one hand the knowing subject stands as an entity over and against the world as the totality of objects of experience. On the other hand, however, the subject is one entity amongst many other entities in the world (PT, 41). In the relation-to-self of the Kantian transcendental philosophy *the self meets itself as an object*. The direct implication of this situation is that the very structure of rational self-reflection is followed like a shadow by self-objectification (or self-reification).⁵¹ In other words, self-reification becomes an inescapable feature of the anthropological turn initiated by Kant, an ineradicable feature of modernity’s attempt to ground itself independently from metaphysics, and therefore of its whole normative project.

This explains why Hegel argues that the promise of freedom and self-empowerment heralded by the modern turn to subjectivity (a promise on which the tremendous force of the Enlightenment to win hearts and minds has resided) is disfigured by a process of self-objectification, which transforms emancipation into unfreedom. Hegel points out that the Kantian principle of subjectivity posits as absolute something which is merely conditioned (PDM, 33) or, to put Hegel’s argument in Kantian vocabulary, *Verstand* (Understanding) usurps the place of *Vernunft* (Reason).⁵² The turn to subjectivity in Kant raises “self-consciousness”, which is the principle that gives objective coherence to the manifold of subject’s sensations, to the status of an absolute

⁵¹ As Habermas points out, the principle of subjectivity (of self-consciousness) is treated as authoritarian by all thinkers critical of modernity, especially those writing under the philosophical banner of Nietzsche, because it “purchases self-consciousness only at the price of objectifying internal and external nature. Because the subject has to relate itself constantly to objects both internally and externally in its knowing and acting, it renders itself at once opaque and dependent in the very acts that are supposed to secure self-knowledge and autonomy” (PDM, 55). Correspondingly, subject-centred reason, reason grounded in the principle of subjectivity, is also authoritarian: “this reason denounces and undermines all unconcealed forms of suppression and exploitation, of degradation and alienation, only to set up in their place the unassailable domination of rationality. Because this regime of a subjectivity puffed up into a false absolute transforms the means of a consciousness-raising and emancipation in just so many instruments of objectification and control, it fashions for itself an uncanny immunity in the form of a thoroughly concealed domination. The opacity of the iron cage of a reason that has become positive disappears as if in the glittering brightness of a completely transparent crystal palace”. All those who attack modern reason from Nietzsche and Heidegger to Foucault and Derrida agree that “these glassy facades” have to be shattered. They differ only in the manner in which they want to demolish them (PDM, 56). I will fully engage with the post-Nietzschean critique of modernity in the next section.

⁵² “It had falsely put understanding [*Verstand*] or reflection in place of reason [*Vernunft*] and thus elevated something finite to the status of absolute” (Habermas, PDM, 24).

principle. And thus the synthesis realized by the transcendental consciousness in knowledge is a forged unity. The unification is a violent one.⁵³

This is why, according to Habermas, Hegel understands his own philosophical project as responding to the “objective need” to overcome Kantian subjectivity towards an “unforced identity”, towards an “unification other than the ... one fixed in relations of force”.⁵⁴ Hegel contrasts the “authoritarian”⁵⁵ subject-object split from Kant’s philosophy with “the unifying power of an intersubjectivity that appears under the title of `love` and `life`” (PDM, 30).⁵⁶

It is at this point that Habermas presses an interesting argument: according to Habermas, Hegel’s early writings (from the Jena period) are in fact very close to framing the concept of intersubjectivity in *communicative* terms (based on the unforced force of the better argument).⁵⁷ In his later writings, however, Hegel abandons this possibility and proceeds to develop a notion

⁵³ The “unshackling power of reflection” released by modernity has become “autonomous and now achieved unification only through the violence of a subjugating subjectivity” (PDM, 33). I have already touched upon this violent or oppressive aspect of modernity in the previous section, where I discussed the “identity thinking” of traditional metaphysics and its continuous presence in modernity.

⁵⁴ This intention is one of the most important element of Hegelian legacy that lives on in Habermas’s “postmetaphysical thinking”.

⁵⁵ The difference between the `wild Moguls` subject to blind authority and the modern citizens who only obey their duty resides not in the difference between freedom and slavery but only in the fact “that the former has his lord outside himself, while the latter carried his lord inside himself, yet at the same time is his own slave: For the particular – impulses, inclinations, pathological love, sensuous experience, or whatever else it is called – the universal is necessarily and always something alien and objective” Hegel “The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate” in *On Christianity. Early Theological Writings by Hegel*, (New York, 1984) p.207, quoted by Habermas in PDM, 28.

⁵⁶ As Habermas points out, the young Hegel initially conceives of this unifying intersubjectivity on the model of the primitive Christianity and the ancient *polis*. However, his study of political economy made him realize that modern capitalist economy represents a “completely novel reality”. The divisions wrought by the relentless competition of antagonistic economic interests (in modern “civil society”), and the diremptions of modernity more generally, cannot be reconciled through “the ethical quality of the polis and primitive Christianity”. Hegel is thus forced to take a different route, a route which will lead him toward the concept of the Absolute or Spirit (*Geist*).

⁵⁷ Habermas first made this point in an early article “Labor and Interaction: Remarks on Hegel’s Jena *Philosophy of Mind*” in *Theory and Practice*, Beacon Press, 1973, 142-169. In this text he argues that the concept of “ethical totality”, could have been developed by Hegel as a form of linguistic intersubjectivity. Habermas claims that the germs of a notion of “communicative reason” (which presses towards unification and identity through the unforced force of the better argument) are discernable in early Hegel. As Habermas writes, Hegel in the Jena period wants to replace “the reflective relationship between subject and object” with the “*communicative mediation* of subjects. The living spirit is the medium that founds a communality of the sort that one subject can know itself to be one with another subject while still remaining itself” (PDM, 30, my emphasis).

of reason based on the philosophy of the subject, reason is framed in terms of the relation of the subject to itself (PDM, 32).⁵⁸ Thus Hegel introduces the concept of the Absolute, which must be understood in relational terms; the Absolute should not be conceived of as preceding “the world process either as being or as intellectual intuition” (Hegel distances himself here from Hölderlin and Schelling); rather, as Habermas explains, the Absolute “constitutes itself only in the process of the relating of finite and infinite to one another and, hence, in the consuming activity of coming-to-itself. The absolute comes to be neither as substance nor as subject; it is apprehended only as the mediating process of a relation-to-self that produces itself free from conditions” (PDM, 33-34).

With the help of this concept, Hegel appears to have overcome the Kantian principle of subjectivity and its false oppositions “without having recourse to anything other than the principle of subjectivity” itself, as Habermas writes (PDM, 34). Hence Hegel can claim to have solved the paradox of modernity, showing how modernity can ground itself out of its own resources.

Habermas argues, however, that the elegant solution to the problem of modernity’s self-grounding that Hegel offers with the concept of the Absolute as “the infinite processing of the relation-to-self” (PDM, 36) pays an exorbitant price. According to Habermas, Hegel’s concept of the Absolute reconciles the fragments of modernity only at the price of blunting modernity’s critical “impulse”. Indeed, Hegel declares in the preface to the *Philosophy of Right*, that the real is rational. As Habermas remarks, with this assertion “a space is open for a *predecided, prejudged present*” (PDM, 41). In Habermas’s words: “philosophy cannot instruct the world

⁵⁸ Thus he follows in the footsteps of Kant, Fichte and Schelling and remains trapped in what Habermas calls “the philosophy of the subject”. As Habermas writes: reason is “thought of as the relation-to-itself of a subject, but now as a reflection that does not merely impose itself upon another as the absolute power of subjectivity; rather it finds its existence and movement in nothing else but resisting all absolutizing, that is, in doing away again with every positive element that it brings forth”. Hegel stresses “the absolute self-reflection of a subject that attains self-consciousness from its own substance and has unity within itself as the difference between the finite and the infinite”. For a more recent discussion of Hegel where Habermas makes similar points see Habermas “From Kant to Hegel and Back Again” in *TJ*, 175-211.

about how it ought to be... It is no longer aimed critically against reality, but against obscure abstractions shoved between subjective consciousness and an objective reason” (PDM, 43).⁵⁹

It is thus apparent, as Habermas correctly claims, that Hegel does not in fact settle the problem of “modernity self-reassurance” (PDM, 43) (or modernity’s self-grounding). A reason realized in the reality of the monarchical state deprives philosophy “of the calling to self-critical renewal” (PDM, 42). That is to say that reconciliation has already been realized in the political status-quo of the day.⁶⁰

After Hegel it was primarily Karl Marx who confronted this resignation with the critical challenge that the state is by no means a higher embodiment of the concept of ethical totality, an embodiment that heals the divisions and antagonisms of a capitalist economy (the “civil society” in Hegel). For Marx, as Habermas writes, “the state merely fulfills the functional imperatives of this [civil] society and is itself an expression of its ruptured ethical dimension” (PDM, 62).

For the purpose of my discussion in this chapter it is important to note that Marx (and “praxis philosophy” in general) does not give up the basic intention of “the dialectic of enlightenment” set in motion by Kant and Hegel. For praxis philosophy, the theme of reconciliation remains important and, therefore, praxis philosophy still tries to realize in practice the Hegelian idea of “ethical totality”, even in the context of complex modern social systems (PDM, 62). In other words, praxis philosophy⁶¹ still aims to find a solution to the paradox of modernity.

⁵⁹ “This *blunting of critique* corresponds to a *devaluation of actuality*” (PDM, 42). By contrast Hegel’s disciples, “the Young Hegelians ... make a plea for the *importance of existence*: Feuerbach insists on the *sensuous existence* of internal and external nature...; Kierkegaard adheres tenaciously to the *historical existence* of the individual... finally, Marx insists on the *material being* of the economic foundation of our common life”. They all “protest against the false mediations, carried out in the realm of mere thought, between subjective and objective nature, between subjective and objective spirit, between objective spirit and absolute knowledge” (PDM, 54).

⁶⁰ Hegel cannot really deliver what he sets out to do: he cannot reconcile the fragments of modernity because he ends up injecting a too strong meaning into the concept of “ethical totality”: this becomes the rational totality of the Absolute Spirit. Thus, as Habermas writes, the concept “of rational reality ... is raised above the facticity, contingency, and actuality of sudden events and oncoming developments” (PDM, 54). See also what he says on page 51 of *PDM*: exactly that “element which had to matter most to the modern consciousness – the transitory aspect of the moment pregnant with meaning, in which the problems of an onrushing future are tangled in knots” is “shoved aside”.

⁶¹ Habermas includes within “praxis philosophy” not only the various strands of Western Marxism, such as the critical theory and the Budapest school, the existentialism of Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Castoriadis, the phenomenology of Enzo Pacis and the Yugoslavian *Praxis* philosophers, but also the “radical democratic kinds of

A privileged role in this attempt is reserved to the concept of “labour”. The Hegelian concept of “ethical totality” now takes the form of “emancipatory praxis”, at the center of which one finds the concept of “labour”. Marx draws attention to the fact that human beings are not only knowing individuals but also producing subjects. While preserving the framework provided by the Hegelian figure of thought of a self-formative process of the spirit that becomes conscious of itself in reflection, Marx shifts the accent within this framework such that he now accords a privileged position to “the relationship between acting subjects and manipulable worldly objects”. He “conceives the self-formative process of the species (on the model of self-externalization⁶²) as a process of self-creation” (PDM, 63-64). This has a direct implication on how rationality is conceived: reason is now located not in “the reflection of the knowing subject” but “in the purposive rationality of the acting subject” (PDM, 65).

As Habermas notes, however, the problems that plague the “philosophy of the subject” (or philosophy of self-reflection) in Kant and Hegel undermines Marx’s “emancipatory praxis” as well. In fact these problems become even “more acute” for this type of praxis (PDM, 68): self-externalization, which in Marx replaces self-reflection, cannot avoid the problem (signaled already by Hegel) of self-objectification. The dominant tendency now is that labouring individuals, to the degree that they acquire their identity in the process of instrumental domination of external nature, achieve this identity only at the cost of repressing their own inner nature. The instrumental reason specific to purposive activity is falsely inflated into a social totality.⁶³ In the next chapter of this dissertation I will take up again the topic of instrumental

American Pragmatism” (G. H. Mead and Dewey) and of analytic philosophy (Charles Taylor). See note 15, PDM, 394.

⁶² The actualization of man’s essential powers.

⁶³ This is a problem that acquires significant weight in post-Marxist philosophers like Adorno and Horkheimer, who take it up mediated by the works of Max Weber, György Lukács and Sigmund Freud. In Habermas’ view, Adorno and Horkheimer do not intend to solve this problem anymore and instead leap out entirely of the “dialectic of enlightenment” to which Marx still adhered to. In this they come close to contemporary post-Nietzscheans. Adorno and Horkheimer no longer think it possible to find a concept of reason flexible enough to reconcile the fragments of modernity and replace the synthetic force of religion. Adorno remains content with a critique of instrumental reason and does not seek to solve the *aporia* of modernity’s self-grounding. As Habermas puts it, with the concept of “negative dialectics”, Adorno traces “the history of the rise of instrumental reason back to the point of the primordial usurpation and of the split of a monadically hardening reason from *mimesis*, and then circles round this point, even if only in aporetic fashion” (PDM, 241). Here I am forced to let this thread of my analysis loose, but I will pick it up again in the last chapter of the dissertation, the chapter on “Postmetaphysical Hope”, where I will discuss in some details Adorno’s negative dialectics.

reason in Marxist and post-Marxist philosophy (drawing on Lukács, Adorno and Horkheimer), and I discuss the implications of this view of reason for Habermas' theory of modernity. This is why I will not pursue this line of argument any further here.

2.5 Nietzsche's long shadow: the radical critique of modern reason

In the previous section I discussed the “normative content of modernity” as successively articulated in the works of Kant, Hegel and Marx and I explained why Kant's anthropological turn to subjectivity generates a foundational problem. Hegel, and then all his left and right wing disciples, grappled with the problem of modernity's self-grounding, seeking a solution to modernity's paradoxical attempt to ground its normative content out of its own resources. As solution to this paradox they all sought to find a concept of reason that was flexible enough to preserve the differentiations introduced by Kant's turn to subjectivity and yet robust enough to be able to restore the unifying power of metaphysical and religious worldview.

A radical break with this narrative occurs only with Nietzsche, and the importance of this moment for Habermas's defense of modernity cannot be overstated. Nietzsche represents for Habermas a turning point in the philosophical discourse of modernity because he is the first modern thinker to declare the paradox of modernity's self-grounding irresolvable. Nietzsche abandons the philosophical imperative of reconciling the differentiations introduced by modernity and he emphatically rejects the possibility of finding a philosophical solution to modernity's *aporetic* attempt at self-grounding. In this great refusal he is followed by a long line of influential thinkers, from Heidegger, to Derrida, Foucault and a score of others, all of them indicting the normative content of modernity as hopelessly reifying, oppressive and self-destructive.

Habermas's engagement with the post-Nietzschean critique of modernity is complex. The literature on this debate is quite large and it customarily casts Habermas as an implacable opponent of post-Nietzschean thinkers. It seems to me that this view is not entirely correct as it does not do full justice to Habermas's engagement with this line of thought. In fact Habermas

agrees with much of the substance of the postmodern arguments. For instance, Habermas agrees that grounding modernity on the metaphysical premises of a rational sovereign “subject” replicates the reductionist tendency of traditional metaphysics. This is not at all a small point⁶⁴ and my discussion in the first section shows how similar is Habermas’s critique of metaphysics to what post-Nietzschean thinkers find objectionable in metaphysical modes of thought. What Habermas wants to resist, however, is the totalizing character of the postmodern critique of modernity.

This stance is a very important moment in the justificatory strategy deployed by Habermas in favour of his own project. Debunking the radical critique of modernity in a convincing way becomes crucial for Habermas’s project, and it is very important for my purpose in this dissertation to carefully examine Habermas’s arguments against the Nietzschean line of thought and evaluate their plausibility. A lot hangs on this because if, on the one side, it can be convincingly shown that the post-Nietzschean path out of the “dialectic of Enlightenment” leads nowhere but that, on the other side, relying on a metaphysical mode of thought is an unpalatable option because this mode of thought engenders dogmatism and oppression, then indeed the only alternative still open to us is the imperative to engage anew with the vexing problem of modernity’s self-grounding. In other words, if the postmodern critique of metaphysical foundationalism is correct but if this critique can offer us no alternative then indeed we are compelled to take up again the task that Kant, Hegel and Marx have all been forced to confront: the task is to replace the reconciliatory power of metaphysics/religion with a rational equivalent. Now however, Habermas is saddled with an additional requirement: he is compelled to show that he can succeed where all modern thinkers, from Kant to Hegel and Marx, have failed. In the next chapter of my dissertation, I will show how a positive solution can be found and why such a solution requires a change of paradigm.

⁶⁴ It is in fact a contentious point. For instance, with respect to pre-Kantian metaphysics, Habermas takes Kant’s critique of this tradition in *Critique of Pure Reason* as well as Heidegger’s attempt at “destruction of metaphysics” to be correct and valid. For a critique of this position and a defense of metaphysics see Alasdair MacIntyre *After Virtue* (198) where the author defends an Aristotelian teleological worldview. Good engagements with this topic can also be found in John Milbank’s work *Theology and Social Theory. Beyond Secular Reason* (1990) and in the Patristic scholar David Bentley Hart’s impressive work *The Beauty of the Infinite. An Aesthetic of the Christian Truth* (2003). For a very interesting critique of Heidegger’s deconstruction of metaphysics see Christos Yannaras *On The Absence and Unknowability of God. Heidegger and the Areopagite* (1967); the author draws on the work of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite to debunk some of Heidegger’s claims regarding metaphysics.

2.5.1 Nietzsche and the “Other” of reason

Nietzsche doubts that modernity is able to ground itself out of its own resources. For, as he declares, “from ourselves we moderns have nothing at all”.⁶⁵ This is a direct blow to the Kantian view of normativity as based on a sovereign (self-mastery) subject. For Nietzsche (unlike for Habermas) modernity is not that critical threshold, that unique juncture in history, which releases for the first time a “rational potential” and thus opens up the possibility of a free and rational society. Modernity is only the latest segment of a long process of rationalization which started with Socrates and Christ. Moreover, in Nietzsche’s reading, this “rationalization” is a form of decline rather than progress, a process of decline “initiated by the dissolution of the archaic life and the collapse of myth” (PDM, 87).⁶⁶

The modern “subject” must be overcome, according to Nietzsche, which is to say, that the wheels of the dialectics of Enlightenment set in motion by Kant, Hegel and Marx must be broken. However, the exit from this dialectic cannot be accomplished by reaching back to traditional metaphysics or to any of the religious-metaphysical premodern traditions. For Nietzsche these traditions are already infested with the germs of a domineering reason.⁶⁷ Thus, only the future may hold the hope for salvation from the devastations wrought by modernity. Here Nietzsche introduces a utopian figure of thought that will prove very influential for subsequent thinkers: “the god who is coming”, the mad god Dionysus, represents the hope for overcoming “the true neediness and inner poverty of man”.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Nietzsche *On the Advantages and Disadvantages of History for Life*, Cambridge, 1980, 24, quoted by Habermas in *PDM*, 86.

⁶⁶ Horkheimer and Adorno, like Heidegger for that matter, will later adopt the same view.

⁶⁷ “They are *too rational*... to be able to provide opposition to the radicalized enlightenment of modernity” (Habermas *PDM*, 86).

⁶⁸ Nietzsche *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* (Cambridge, 1980), p. 32, 64, quoted by Habermas, *PDM*, 87. As Habermas points out, the idea of a new mythology as a counterbalancing force to Enlightenment and modernity is of Romantic origin (*PDM*, 90). However Nietzsche will later depart from

It is Habermas's contention that, with Nietzsche, the critique of modern reason dispenses for the first time with *any* emancipatory claims. Nietzsche confronts subject-centered reason at the centre of modernity with its "absolute other": the Dionysian appeals to experiences of ecstatic de-centration of subjectivity, to states liberated from "imperatives of utility and morality", from "all constraints of cognition and purposive activity". Only when all "conventions of perceiving and acting", all "categories of intelligent doing and thinking" are unsettled, when the polymorphous is validated against "the unity of the transcendent God", when "the curse of identity" is dismantled, when the "*principium individuationis*" collapse, only then "the world of the unforeseen and the absolutely astonishing opens up". Only then "the realm of aesthetic illusion, which neither hides nor reveals, is neither appearance nor essence, but nothing other than surface" reveals itself (PDM, 93-94).

Therefore, as Habermas suggests, for Nietzsche the "escape route from modernity"⁶⁹ (PDM, 94) can be open only by a total rejection of the principle of subjectivity, a total "break-up of the principle of individuation". With this, the Nietzschean critique of reason "sets itself outside the horizon of reason" (PDM, 96).

However, as Habermas points out, this total rejection of subject-centered reason comes at a price and forces Nietzsche into an irresolvable dilemma. Criticizing subjective reason, Nietzsche appeals to criteria borrowed from aesthetic modernity. However he cannot offer a justification for these criteria because his critique situates itself outside the horizon of reason. As Habermas

Romantic messianism because Romantics overlap the figure of Dionysus with that of Christ (this equation is taken up by Hölderlin, Novalis, Schelling, Creuzer). As Habermas writes, Nietzsche sees that Romanticism aims at a "*rejuvenation* of, but not a departure from, the West". The romantics pledge their hopes on a future fulfillment of the modern age and not in opposition to it (PDM, 92). In contrast to this romantic union of the Dionysian with the Christian, Nietzsche's new mythology wants to totally turn away from the "nihilistic void of modernity".

⁶⁹ Habermas claims that in order to outline this route Nietzsche appeals (at least implicitly) to "the basic experiences of aesthetic modernity". He "enthrones taste, 'the Yes and the No of the palate' as the organ of a knowledge beyond true and false, beyond good and evil" (PDM, 96). "The world", for Nietzsche, "can be justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon" (PDM, 94). In Habermas's interpretation, Nietzsche tries to reduce everything "that is and should be to the aesthetic dimension" (PDM, 95). Thus Nietzsche aims to demonstrate that morality can be traced back to the *preferences* for what serves life. He explains the way in which "the illusory identities of knowing and morally acting subjects" are constituted; the way in which "the fictions of a world comprised of entities and goods arise"; "how metaphysics, sciences and the ascetic ideal achieved predominance" in modernity; and "how subject-centered reason owes this entire inventory to the occurrence of an unsalutary, masochistic inversion of the very of the will to power". The domination of subjectivity in modernity "is conceived as the result and expression of a perversion of the will to power" (PDM, 95). Indeed, the theory of a will to power provides the framework within which Nietzsche carries on his totalizing critique of subject-centered reason.

writes: Nietzsche cannot “legitimate the criteria of aesthetic judgement that he holds on to”.⁷⁰ In other words Nietzsche’s radical critique of reason attacks its own foundations, and thus it remains trapped into “the dilemma of a self-enclosed critique of reason that has become total” (PDM, 96).

Nietzsche, according to Habermas, sensed this difficulty and in the attempt to face it he “oscillates between two strategies”: that of an “initiate” philosopher and that of a “skeptical scholar”. Both these strategies, Habermas argues, are beset by intractable difficulties. The initiatic philosophy revolves around a critique of metaphysics which “pursues the rise of the philosophy of the subject back to its pre-Socratic beginnings”. The difficulty with the initiatic way is that the critique must presuppose for itself a privileged access to truth, a “unique kind of knowledge”, as Habermas puts it, which is highly problematic. The second strategy uses “scholarly tools” but “in an antimetaphysical, antiromantic, pessimistic and skeptical attitude” in order to write a genealogy of the belief in truth and of the ascetic ideal. The difficulty here is that the validity of this genealogy has to be simply presupposed because it cannot be rationally justified (PDM, 96-97).⁷¹

Heidegger and Derrida adopt the first strategy. The second is followed by Bataille, Lacan, and Foucault.⁷² In the remaining part of this section I will assess whether Heidegger, Derrida and

⁷⁰ Part of the problem, according to Habermas, is that Nietzsche does not recognize that aesthetic discourse remains inextricably tied to modern reason; he “does not recognize as a moment of reason the critical capacity for assessing value that was sharpened through dealing with modern art”, a moment which, as Habermas argues, “is still at least procedurally connected with objectifying knowledge and moral insight in the process of providing argumentative grounds” (PDM, 96).

⁷¹ For critical views on Habermas’s interpretation of Nietzsche a good resource is Babette E. Babich ed. *Habermas, Nietzsche, and Critical Theory*, Humanity Books, 2004. A good critical discussion can be found in Fred Dallmayr “The Discourse of Modernity: Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Habermas”. In *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity*, ed. by Maurizio Passerin d’Entrève and Seyla Benhabib, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1997, 59-96.

⁷² Surprisingly enough, in the *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* Habermas does not engage with Lyotard, although after all Lyotard is the main thinker associated with “postmodernism”. For a good comparative discussion of Habermas and Lyotard see David Ingram “The Subject of Justice in Postmodern Discourse: Aesthetic Judgement and Political Rationality” in Maurizio Passerin d’Entrèves and Seyla Benhabib eds. *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity*, MIT Press, 1997, pp. 269-301. See also Richard Rorty’s essay: “Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity” in *Habermas and Modernity* ed. by Richard Bernstein, Cambridge, 1985. Rorty however misreads Habermas’s grounding strategy as being foundationalist.

Foucault indeed manage to escape the dilemma of a critique of reason which becomes total and thus attacks its own foundations.

2.5.2 The initiatic rejection of the Enlightenment: Heidegger and Derrida

Heidegger joins Hegel and Nietzsche in their critique of modern subjectivism. In his view modernity is characterized by the fact that man becomes the measure of all being, the center of all things. This absolutization of modern subject's purposive rationality reveals the totalitarian essence of modernity (this is a point already made by Hegel, as we saw above). Humanity has entered an age of catastrophe brought about by the boundless expansion of humankind's manipulative powers which relentlessly objectify nature and society. The rise of subjectivity in modernity has engendered a ruthless global competition for domination and exploitation of the earth.

Such a radical situation requires a radical solution. Our only chance of survival lies in the attempt to overcome and depart from the whole history of Western metaphysical rationalism (of which modernity's turn to subjectivity is only the last segment). According to Heidegger, western metaphysics displays a crucial flaw: it has forgotten something essential, namely the question of Being of beings (which was still vital for the pre-Socratic thinkers for instance).

In order to overcome metaphysics (its modern transformation included) Heidegger engages in three moves, towards ontology, hermeneutics and existentialism. First he gives an ontological turn to his critique of subject-centered reason (PDM, 133). In *Sein und Zeit* the analysis of *Dasein* is offered as the way of overcoming the Western forgetfulness of Being. According to Habermas, Heidegger's originality in this work consists in that he ontologizes the premises of Kantian transcendental philosophy: the transcendental conditions of the objectivity of experience are replaced by the structures of being-in-the-world of the *Dasein* (what Heidegger calls "existentials"). Thus, knowing and acting, which are the basic features of the rational subject in Kant, become in Heidegger merely derivative modes of "standing within a *lifeworld*, within a world intuitively understood as context and background" (PDM, 147). The name Heidegger uses

for the analysis of “existentials” is “fundamental ontology”. Moreover, Heidegger gives a hermeneutic meaning to this analysis: the model for access to Being is the interpretation of a text. It is “the hermeneutical understanding of complex-meaning contexts that discloses Being” (PDM, 144). Finally Heidegger also injects an existentialist dimension into the analysis of the human *Dasein*’s modes of existence in the world. Thus he introduces the theme of authenticity as care for one’s own existence. It is the concept of “care” which allows Heidegger to emphasize “the temporal constitution of human existence” (PDM, 145).

The three Heideggerian moves (towards ontology, hermeneutics and existentialism) aim to leave behind the paradigm of subjectivity and self-reflection characteristic of the philosophical discourse of modernity. With this he also wants to leave behind the normative content of modernity (based on self-knowledge, moral autonomy and self-expression) with its self-destructive implications. Indeed, in Heidegger knowing and acting are not conceived of on the basis of the subject-object relationship anymore. “World is always prior to the subject that relates itself to objects in knowing and acting”. World is defined by Heidegger as “a network of involvement”, a *lifeworld* which is always already “intuitively understood as context and background” (PDM, 147-148).⁷³

However, according to Habermas, Heidegger is unable to offer a viable concept of intersubjectivity. As Habermas argues, “the priority of the lifeworld’s intersubjectivity over the mineness of *Dasein*” cannot be really defended in the conceptual framework of Heidegger’s early philosophy because this framework remains “tinged with the solipsism of Husserlian phenomenology” (PDM, 149). On this monological basis a viable concept of intersubjectivity cannot be adequately construed.⁷⁴

⁷³ Habermas claims that at this point Heidegger could have taken the further step of analysing the “lifeworld” in terms of linguistic intersubjectivity and in terms of a process of reaching mutual understanding, as Habermas himself will try to do (see next section). He does not take this step because he downgrades (wrongly, according to Habermas) “the background structures of the lifeworld that reach beyond the isolated *Dasein* as structures of an average everyday existence, that is, of unauthentic *Dasein*” (PDM, 149). Missing this opportunity, Heidegger’s analytic of *Dasein* leads back into “the blind alley of the philosophy of the subject” (PDM, 151).

⁷⁴ The problem of intersubjectivity can be solved only if the focus of analysis shifts for the structures of the subject (understood either in transcendental mode, like in Kant, or in ontological mode, like in Heidegger) to the structures of linguistic intersubjectivity, to what is going on in the linguistic medium in which subjects capable of speech and action come to a mutual understanding about something in the world. See my discussion in the next section.

In short, as Habermas contends, Heidegger does not escape the problems of the “philosophy of the subject” and its foundationalism. “The question concerning the “who” of *Dasein*” leads Heidegger back to “a subject that constitutes the world of being-in-the-world by the authentic project of his possibilities for existing” (PDM, 149).⁷⁵ According to Habermas, *Dasein* “tacitly assumes” in Heidegger “the place of transcendental subjectivity” (*Dasein* grounds itself out of itself, almost in a Fichtean manner). Far from overcoming metaphysics, Heidegger allows himself to get entangled with “the classic demand of *Ursprungsphilosophie* [philosophy of origins, or *prima philosophia*] for self-grounding and ultimate grounding” (PDM, 151).

In Habermas’s reading, Heidegger is quite aware of this entanglement and therefore in his late philosophy he shifts the accent from the analytic of *Dasein* and its authentic project of meaning disclosing to a fatalist and quasi-religious view of Being.

Heidegger’s late philosophy, after the so-called *Kehre*, reactivates the Dionysian messianism of Nietzsche. The God to come, the absent God from Nietzsche takes the form of Being which abandons beings, self-occludes itself to beings, even to that unique being (human person) who has the ability to inquire into the meaning of Being. As Habermas writes, in later Heidegger “the activism and decisionism of self-assertive *Dasein*” “lose their meaning disclosing function”, which is now transferred to an impersonal event in the history of Being, to a fateful dispensation of Being. The self-affirmation of *Dasein* in an authentic life-project is replaced by “letting be [*Gelassenheit*] and readiness to listening” (PDM, 160).

In order to validate its claims, however, Heidegger’s critique of metaphysics cannot however appeal to the tools of reason made available by the modern subject-centered reason. Discursive thinking, argumentation and scientific analysis cannot help him because he treats them as

⁷⁵ In Heidegger “the existential efforts” of *Dasein* “generates” “the lifeworld in which human existence is embedded” (PDM, 149). The who of *Dasein* is identified with human existence “radically isolated in the face of death” (this is the Kierkegaardian influence on Heidegger) (PDM, 150). Hence the analysis of “being-with” as an existential of *Dasein* offered by Heidegger in *Sein und Zeit* cannot be really “made fruitful” for the question of how the world itself is constituted and maintained” (PDM, 150). “The authentic capacity to be whole” on *Dasein*’s part (PDM, 150-151) is endowed with disclosive function. The world is disclosed through the creation of meaning generated by *Dasein*’s authentic existential project. Thus the Kantian subject “that constitutes objective realms by way of the transcendental conditions of knowledge” is replaced in Heidegger by “the creation of meaning that discloses the world” (PDM, 152). With this, as Habermas remarks, Heidegger remains caught in “the enchanted circle of the philosophy of the subject” (PDM, 152).

symptoms of the modern sickness, of the forgetfulness of Being. Heidegger's critique of metaphysics is also a critique of modern sciences and methodical research. Therefore the challenge Habermas raised to Nietzsche is directed now to Heidegger: what kind of validity can Heidegger claim for his critique of metaphysics? Basically the claim involved is that of an initiate. The "essential thinking" that Heidegger expounds claims a privileged access to truth and does not thrive on argumentation or discursive thinking.⁷⁶

As Habermas contends, in a final analysis Heidegger's philosophy cannot "actually lead us out of the discourse of modernity" (PDM, 141). Insofar as *Dasein* is "delivered over" to a "contingent occurrence of Being" (PDM, 152),⁷⁷ the *Kehre* "propagates a mere inversion of the thought pattern of the philosophy of the subject" (PDM, 153) and thus amounts to "inverted foundationalism".⁷⁸ With his "history of Being", as Habermas writes, Heidegger in fact "temporalizes the origins, which in the shape of an unfathomable destiny, certainly retain the sovereignty of a first principle". Thus "the first principle of *Ursprungsphilosophie* is temporalized" (PDM, 153) and not dispensed with.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ What Heidegger does, in Habermas's view, is to revive the logocentrism of the metaphysical tradition. Heidegger breathes new life into the strong, contemplative, concept of theory, which relies on the claim that philosopher has a privileged access to truth. Indeed, says Habermas, "essential thinking" of late Heidegger "renounces all empirical and normative questions that can be treated by social-scientific or historical means, or can be at all handled in argumentative form" (PDM, 139). The ban on discursive thinking however has unsettling consequences, as Habermas does not cease to remind us: "the destinings of Being remain undiscoverable"; this indeterminacy demand an attitude of "resignation to fate". Thus the political implications of Heidegger's late philosophy consist of a "diffuse readiness to obey in relation to an auratic but indeterminate authority" (PDM, 140).

⁷⁷ Now "Dasein is no longer considered the author of world-projects in light of which entities are at once manifested and withdrawn; instead the *productivity* of the creation of meaning that is disclosive of world passes over to Being itself. Dasein bows to the authority of an unmanipulable meaning of Being and rids itself of any will to self-affirmation that is suspect of subjectivity" (PDM, 152-153).

⁷⁸ It is interesting to note Habermas's strategy here: he takes the objection raised by Heidegger against Nietzsche and turns it against Heidegger himself. Heidegger claimed that Nietzsche's "demolition [of metaphysics] remains dogmatic and like all reversals, a captive of that metaphysical edifice which it professes to overthrow" (PDM, 166). This is exactly Habermas's charge against Heidegger. It is also his charge against Derrida as well, as we shall see below.

⁷⁹ "This is revealed", writes Habermas, "in the undialectical nature of Being: The holy – as which Being supposedly comes to language in poetry – is considered to be the absolutely unmediated, just as it had been for metaphysics". For a critique of Habermas's reading of Heidegger see Nicholas Kompridis "Heidegger's Challenge and the Future of Critical Theory" in Peter Dews ed. *Habermas. A Critical Reader*, Blackwell, 1999, pp.118-152.

The initiatic way inaugurated by Nietzsche and followed by Heidegger is continued in a different key by Jacques Derrida. Derrida continues “the movement of Heidegger’s thought” (PDM, 180) in the sense that he carries on the Heideggerian project of a critique of Western metaphysics. However Derrida is unhappy with the “metaphysics of presence” that still makes itself felt in Heidegger’s association of “the proximity of Being” with values like “neighbouring, shelter, house service, guard, voice, listening” (PDM, 162) and therefore he wants “to go beyond Heidegger” (PDM, 83). Can Derrida lead us out of the discourse of modernity?

The starting point for Derrida’s attempt to overcome western metaphysics is language.⁸⁰ In a highly original move, Derrida ties this “metaphysics of presence” to phonetic writing. Rationality as *Logos* dwells in the spoken word.⁸¹ Western metaphysical rationalism (Western “logocentrism”) becomes what Derrida calls “phonocentrism”. The overcoming (or “deconstruction”) of “logocentrism” can be achieved by getting back beyond the roots of phonetic writing.⁸² The form taken by the Derridian intention is “grammatology”, a study of writing that goes beyond “the phonetic as a sheer fixation of sound patterns” (PDM, 164). What is essential of language, contends Derrida, is not speech but writing.⁸³ As Habermas points out, what interests Derrida, in fact, is the “testamentary essence” of the written sign (PDM, 166, also 177). The sign lasts, the substrate of the written sign survives catastrophes. The written form detaches what is said from the presence of audience, from the intentions of the author, from the range of objects under discussion. The text acquires autonomy from all “living contexts”, it

⁸⁰ Although in Heidegger’s late philosophy language is described as “the house of Being” Heidegger does not offer any systematic or substantial analysis of language. (PDM, 163).

⁸¹ Derrida’s point is that until Husserl and even Heidegger “metaphysics thought of Being as presence – Being is the production and recollection of beings in presence, in knowledge and mastery” (PDM, 177).

⁸² The phonetic writing (writing that copies the sounds of words) is “the medium of the great metaphysical, scientific, technical, and economic adventure of the West”; Derrida argues that this medium, which is “coextensive” and “equiprimordial” with metaphysical thought, is actually “limited in space and time”. Derrida *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore, 1974), p. 10, quoted by Habermas PDM, 163.

⁸³ In this, Habermas suggests, Derrida is influenced, *via* Levinas, by “the Jewish understanding of tradition, which is more removed than the Christian from the idea of the book and precisely for this reason remains more rigorously bound to erudition in scripture”. However, as a disciple of Heidegger, Derrida rejects any ontotheological interpretation of his work. He claims that he is not after a theology, not even a negative one (PDM, 165).

transcends the world. And thus the text guarantees “absolute readability” (PDM, 166)⁸⁴ for its semantic content even when the whole world turns into a pile of wreckage.

Hence writing can count as an “event without any subject” (PDM, 178). This “enlarged and radicalized” (PDM, 164) concept of writing becomes what Derrida calls *archewriting* (*archi-écriture, Urschrift*) (PDM, 178). This *archewriting* is endowed with the role of generating subjectless structures; it takes on a world-disclosing function, without however making itself present. It withholds itself and resists *parousia*. Only traces of it are left behind in the structures of the produced texts (PDM, 180).

As Habermas argues, we meet here once more the motif of a god whose presence is announced by his absence.⁸⁵ In fact what Derrida does in his writing on “difference” and “deconstruction” is to offer a variant of Heideggerian philosophy. Derrida follows “the movement of Heidegger’s thought” in that he preserves the “inverted foundationalism” of this thought while pushing the foundation one level deeper (PDM, 181); “... the originative transcendental power of creative subjectivity passes over into the anonymous, history-making productivity of writing” (PDM, 178). Only that this time *Urschrift* becomes a “still profounder... basis”⁸⁶, prior to the Heideggerian distinction between ontic and ontological, between beings and Being of beings. “What is first and last is not the history of Being, but a picture-puzzle: The labyrinthine mirror-effects of old texts, each of which points to another, yet older text without fostering any hope of ever attaining the archewriting” (PDM, 179).

⁸⁴ “Even in the absence of all possible audience, after the death of all beings with an intelligent nature, the writing holds open in heroic abstraction the possibility of a repeatable readability that transcends everything in this world. Because writing mortifies the living connections proper to the spoken world, it promises salvation for its semantic content even beyond the day on which all who can speak and listen have fallen prey to the holocaust” (Habermas PDM, 166).

⁸⁵ It is worth noting that Derrida does not get this motif from the Dionysian messianism present in Nietzsche and Heidegger. Influenced by Levinas, Derrida is rather “inspired by the Jewish understanding of tradition” (PDM, 165, see also note 46 on page 406).

⁸⁶ This “basis” is, in Habermas’s words, “vacillating or oscillating”, in the sense that at the core of archewriting is a moment of absence - this core is empty; its generative power is assumed by the “difference” (proper to writing) which is prior to any identity of meaning. Only against this prior element of difference, identity can be constituted.

In Habermas's interpretation, Derrida's view of *archewriting* is nourished by religious sources, in particular by Jewish mysticism, "all denials notwithstanding" (PDM, 182).⁸⁷ As Habermas writes: "Derrida's grammatically circumscribed concept of an archewriting whose traces call forth all the more interpretations the more unfamiliar they become renews the mystical concept of tradition as an ever *delayed* event of revelation" (PDM, 183).⁸⁸

Thus, in Habermas's view, Derrida avoids the Heideggerian relapse into the bad taste of a kind of a new paganism that wants to go back before the beginning of monotheism.⁸⁹ "The work of deconstruction", writes Habermas, "fosters an unacknowledged renewal of a discourse with God that has been broken off under *modern* conditions of an ontotheology that is no longer binding" (PDM, 407). Basically Derrida's critique of metaphysics is, as Habermas writes, a "program of scriptural scholarship" (PDM, 165).

For the purpose of my discussion in this chapter is important to note that, according to Habermas, Derrida does not escape the main problem plaguing Heidegger's thought. The same "inverted foundationalism" present in Heidegger can be found in Derrida's thought as well. Derrida, like Heidegger, does not succeed in extricating himself from the premises of the

⁸⁷ Derrida modifies the metaphor of the book of nature, or the book of the world, which attests to the "hard-to-read, painstakingly to be deciphered handwriting of God", the original text of which has been long lost. In Derrida's hands this metaphor is modified by removing "any optimistic note from this picture" in the sense that "this book written in God's handwriting never existed, but only traces of it, and even they have been obliterated" (PDM, 164). This finds parallels in the Jewish (Cabbalistic) tradition of interpretation of the absent, hidden God, tradition which has been renewed by the contemporary question of how to reckon with the horror of Holocaust (in Levinas, for instance). See also Habermas's note 46 on page 406, PDM.

⁸⁸ In note 46 on page 406 of PDM, Habermas accepts the interpretation put forth by Susan Handelman in her "Jacques Derrida and the Heretic Hermeneutic" in M. Krapnik, ed., *Displacement, Derrida and After* (Bloomington, 1983), pp.98ff. As Habermas explains approvingly, Handelman situates Derrida's opposition to Western logocentrism "in the religious-historical context of the repeated defence of the letter against the spirit... Pauline Christianity had discredited the interpretation history of the oral Torah as the 'dead letter' in contrast to the 'living spirit' (2, Corinthians 3, 6) of the immediate presence of Christ" (PDM, 406). As Handelman writes: "Derrida's choice of writing to oppose the Western logocentrism is a re-emergence of a Rabbinic hermeneutics in a displaced way. Derrida will undo Graeco-Christian theology and move us back from ontology to grammarology, from Being to Text, from Logos to *Écriture* - Scripture". Quoted by Habermas on note 46, p. 406 in PDM.

⁸⁹ "The remembrance of the messianism of Jewish mysticism and of the abandoned but well-circumscribed place once assumed by the God of the Old Testament preserves Derrida, so to speak, from the political-moral insensitivity and the aesthetic tastelessness of a New Paganism spiced up with Hölderlin" (PDM 167). Indeed, the political implications of Derrida's work would be closer to an anarchist orientation, rather than any surrender to the authoritarian, quasi-sacral, "admonition to bend before destiny" from Heidegger (PDM 182).

“philosophy of subject” that he aims to deconstruct. As Habermas writes, Derrida does not “escape the aporetic structure of a truth-occurrence eviscerated of all truth-as-validity” (*PDM*, 166-167). With his conception of “archewriting” and “general text”, Derrida privileges the poetic (“world-disclosing”) function of language, at the expenses of its cognitive function, rhetoric at the expenses of logic and “world-disclosure” over problem-solving.⁹⁰

As we shall see in the next chapter, Habermas aims to construe the relation between the work of language as “world-disclosing” and “problem-solving” (through argumentation) in an inverse order of priority. Without denying the “world-disclosing” “function” of language he wants to subordinate it to the argumentative use of language geared toward “solving problems”.⁹¹

⁹⁰ Derrida remains “idealistically fixated upon the history of metaphysics as a transcendent happening that determines everything intramundane” (*PDM* 206). For a critique of Habermas’s interpretation of Derrida see David Couzens Hoy “Splitting the Difference: Habermas’s Critique of Derrida” and Christopher Norris “Deconstruction, Postmodernism and Philosophy: Habermas on Derrida” in Maurizio Passerin d’Entrèves and Seyla Benhabib eds. *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity*, MIT Press, 1997.

⁹¹ In all his works prior to the turn to religion, Habermas strikes an optimistic note regarding this priority of cognitive over the poetic use of language. In his more recent writings however he comes to admit that perhaps this relation of priority has taken a too strong form in his work, and this created a congenital vulnerability for “postmetaphysical thinking”. However, he seeks remedial resources not in the modern art, but in religious traditions (Judaism and Christianity) through a project of “salvaging” translation. I will come back to the complex relationship between the cognitive use of language and the “world-disclosing” power of religious language in the third chapter of this dissertation.

2.5.3 The genealogic rejection of the Enlightenment: Michel Foucault

In distinction from Heidegger and Derrida, Foucault follows the other path envisaged by Nietzsche in order to deal with the paradox of a critique of reason which attacks its own foundations: the genealogical path. Does Foucault manage to offer a viable escape from the “philosophy of the subject”? This is what I will briefly discuss in the following.

The modern form of knowledge inaugurated by the anthropocentric thinking of Kant is the main focus of Foucault’s writings. Specific to this form of knowledge (what he calls the modern *episteme*) is that reason stands in intimate relationship with the scientific study of human beings (human sciences). Therefore a historiography of human sciences will permit a lucid glimpse into the real nature of modern reason.⁹²

In early works like *Madness and Civilization* (1961) and *The Order of Things* (1966), Foucault conceives the historiography of human sciences as an “archaeology” of knowledge. The main aim of the “archaeological” exercise is to analyze the discourses regarding madness from the early history of psychiatry in order to trace back “the original point of the initial branching off of madness from reason”.⁹³ Such an investigation of how the initial border between reason and unreason is drawn aims to reveal the fact that reason is constituted only through knowledge of what is heterogeneous to reason, excluded from reason, the “other” of reason (defined as madness). The scientific study of madness goes hand in hand with the attempt to master it by placing it under clinical supervision.⁹⁴

⁹² As Habermas contends, Foucault’s effort of unmasking of reason takes the form of a historiography that can be seen as covering two phases: in his initial writings Foucault is engaged in an “archaeology” of knowledge, which he will later expand into a “genealogy” of human sciences. See *PDM*, 247.

⁹³ As Habermas points out, such an analysis is meant to uncover the moment of constituting madness “as a reflex image of the constituting of reason” (*PDM*, 240) by identifying those practices of exclusion, proscription and outlawing whereby the boundaries between reason and what lies “outside” it are drawn.

⁹⁴ Foucault aims to throw light on the “constitutive connection between the human sciences and the practices of supervisory isolation” (*PDM*, 244). The model of closed institution, inaugurated by the establishment of psychiatric institutions at the beginning of modernity, is replicated in factory, the prison, the school, the military academy, all over the modern society. Modernity itself becomes a huge disciplinary project. As Habermas writes, Foucault sees in all these institutionalized disciplinary practices “the monuments to victory of a regulatory reason that no longer

The general point that follows from all this is that *truth always depends on mechanisms of exclusion*. As Habermas writes, it is the purpose of the “archaeology of knowledge” to reveal the “truth-constitutive rules of exclusion” in any discourse (PDM, 248).⁹⁵

In his early writings Foucault situates the “archaeology” of knowledge in the context of the history of metaphysics as he traces those discourse mechanisms of exclusion constitutive of human sciences that he uncovers back to a “will to knowledge”.⁹⁶ So here Foucault still operates with the distinction between what appears as truth and what underlies this claim, between epiphenomena and their deeper meaning.

subjugates only madness, but also the needs and desires of the individual organism as well as the social body of entire population” (PDM, 245). Human sciences, clinical psychology, pedagogy, sociology, political science, cultural anthropology, offer ever new therapies and social techniques of power, and thus they “form the most effective medium of the new, disciplinary violence that dominates modernity” (PDM, 245). It is on this basis that Foucault is able to posit “an internal kinship between humanism and terror” (PDM, 246).

⁹⁵ Hence the gaze of the archaeologist aims to get “at the buried foundations of meaning, at the infrastructures to be painstakingly excavated, which indeed first establish what is going to be considered true and false *inside* any discourse”(PDM 247-248). The structures excavated by the archaeologist within a specific discourse are themselves impossible to characterize in terms of truth or false, as they determine the meaning of these terms in the first place. By unearthing a “discursive practice down to its very roots”, in other words by going back to that origin when what is heterogeneous is excluded and the limits of discourse are drawn, what looks from inside the discourse as valid and without alternative is exposed, under the gaze of the archaeologist, as “something particular that could be otherwise” (PDM, 252).

⁹⁶ In Habermas’s interpretation, this will to knowing self-mastery acquires for Foucault the transcendental role of constituting the discourses of human sciences. However the archaeology of human sciences runs into problems, as Habermas points out. First Foucault must have realized that archaeology remains too close to structuralism and Heidegger’s history of Being. Second archaeology is too close to a “depth” hermeneutics or an “hermeneutics of unveiling” (Habermas PDM 241), in that it still attaches an emancipatory claim to its erudite historiographical effort. Thus according to Habermas, in his study of madness, Foucault wants to get to what lies beyond the scientific discourse on madness and the practices of supervision engendered by this discourse, to the “mute contact of body with eyes” (PDM 241). He wants to lend a voice “to the whispers of the world”, to “what is unspoken in what is said” (PDM, 240). But surely such a normative dimension which lies deeper under the disciplinary study of madness would be very hard to justify because it resembles too much the emancipatory thrust of the very human sciences Foucault wants to unmask as disciplinary manifestations of a will to truth. The third problem is that in Foucault’s early writings the relation between discourses and practices of power is not very clear. Examples of practices of power are “therapies, expert opinions, social technologies, curricula, tests, research reports, data banks, proposal for reforms, etc”. Scientific discourses, the “scientifically prepared knowledge of man... congeal directly into disciplinary violence in the form of” these power techniques (PDM 269). At a superficial reading it appears that discourse engenders disciplinary practices of power; however, in fact it is the other way around, in that Foucault wants to “demonstrate the provenance of modern anthropocentric thought in modern technologies of domination” (PDM 271). Later, in his writing on genealogy, Foucault clarifies this relation in exactly this sense, by subordinating discourses to practices of power.

From 1970 onward, however, Foucault makes the transition to a theory of power. As Habermas claims, archaeology is now subordinated to a “genealogy” of discourses.⁹⁷ Genealogy takes the historiographical exercise of archaeology out of the context of a critique of metaphysics and thus the critique of modern reason is now replaced by a theory of power. What happens with this transition is that genealogy stubbornly refuses from now on to attach *any* emancipatory claim to its historiographical exercise. Genealogy leaves behind hermeneutics, it does not want to uncover a deeper meaning, and it moves toward a “felicitous positivism”: it simply aims to empirically describe the work of technologies of power without any other further ado. As Habermas writes, under the gaze of the genealogist history becomes “a meaningless kaleidoscopic changes of shape in discourse totalities that have nothing in common apart from the single characteristic of being protuberances of power in general” (PDM, 277).⁹⁸

With this concept of power it seems that Foucault succeeded in overcoming the anthropological turn of Kant’s idealism and in extricating genealogy from the “philosophy of the subject” and its scientific study. But the question is whether he really found a way out from the principle of subjectivity? Habermas’s argument is that Foucault remains caught within the paradigm of the subject.⁹⁹ There are in fact three charges that Habermas raises against Foucault: 1) presentism, 2)

⁹⁷ In this point Habermas follows Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, the editors of Foucault’s works in English. It is apparent that with the move from archaeology to genealogy Foucault clarifies the relation between discourses and practices of power by subordinating the first to the latter. He extends now the will constitutive of truth that he identifies in modern human sciences to “a will constitutive of truth for *all* times and *all* societies” (this is what Habermas calls “a spatiotemporal generalization”); Foucault also “undertakes a substantive neutralization” in that “he de-differentiates the will to knowledge into a will to power that is supposed to be inherent in all discourses, not just those that specialize in truth” (PDM, 270). As Habermas remarks, in focusing on power, genealogy adds a further dimension to the historical research into constitutive conditions of knowledge which he named “archaeology”. To the “transcendental role of an analysis of technologies of power that are meant to explain how scientific discourse about man is possible at all” Foucault now adds the empirical role of “functionalist social science”⁹⁷. Genealogy “retreats into the reflectionless objectivity of a nonparticipatory, ascetic description of kaleidoscopically changing practices of power” (PDM, 275-276). Thus the concept of power in Foucault appears, as Habermas writes, in an “irritating double role”(PDM, 273): power “is supposed to be a power of transcendental generativity *and* of empirical self-assertion simultaneously” (PDM, 256).

⁹⁹ His genealogy does not actually manage to extricate itself from the normative claims of the sciences of man. As Habermas puts it, the “radically historicist extinction of the subject” espoused by genealogy “ends up in an unholy subjectivism (PDM, 276).

relativism and 3) cryptonormativism. All of them aim to show that genealogy does not leave the orbit of modern subjectivism.

By “presentism” Habermas means that Foucault’s historiography cannot avoid its hermeneutic point of departure in the present. When Foucault compares different practices of domination and techniques of power, he “inevitably connects the viewpoints under which the comparison is proposed with his own hermeneutic point of departure” (PDM, 277).¹⁰⁰ The relativism of Foucault’s genealogy is generated by the reduction of truth claims within a discourse to relations of power. What appear as valid and unavoidable within a particular form of knowledge (*episteme*) becomes under the objective gaze of the genealogist a function of power techniques. If this is so, however, then this perspective affects the validity of Foucault’s own historiography. The latter is self-referential and self-defeating.

Finally, Habermas argues that a certain “cryptonormativism” is still discernable in Foucault’s historiographical analysis. Foucault wants to distinguish himself from a critic of ideology in the manner of Marx or Freud, who both, as he argues, use “obsolete contradictions between legitimate and illegitimate power, conscious and unconscious motives” and who both side with those who fight against exploitation and suppression (PDM, 283). The genealogist abstains himself from taking sides and does not want to discriminate between legitimate and illegitimate power. However, as Habermas argues, a certain dissidence is involved in Foucault’s own historiography as well:¹⁰¹ “Foucault understands himself”, we read, “as a dissident who offers resistance to modern thought and humanistically disguised disciplinary power”. Genealogy is marked by “engagement” with the power techniques and a “critical tenor” “dominates the self-definition of the entire work” (PDM, 282). Genealogy is also a tactic and a tool, a weapon “for waging battle against a normatively unassailable formation of power” (PDM, 283). If this is so, Foucault implicitly lays claims to some normative standards of critique (PDM, 285). Otherwise,

¹⁰⁰ For instance Foucault divides “historical epochs through implicit reference to the present”. Moreover, his analysis of power is also a “diagnostic of its [own] time” (PDM, 278).

¹⁰¹ In a letter to Bernard-Henry Levy, Foucault writes: “If that were all, there wouldn’t be any resistance. Because resistance has to be like power: just as inventive, just as mobile, just as productive as it is; like it, it has to come from below and be strategically shared” (“Non au sexe roi” in *Le Nouvel Observatoire* 12 March 1977, quoted by Habermas, PDM, 283.)

asks Habermas, why fight at all? Why should we mobilize and resist the all pervasive, capillary-like form of power of modernity? As Habermas writes: “Only with the introduction of normative notions of some kind could Foucault begin to answer this question” (PDM, 284).¹⁰²

2.6 Conclusion

We have reached the final point of a lengthy analysis. In this chapter I examined Habermas’s response to the problem of the normative foundation of modernity. The position he defends is presented under the rubric “postmetaphysical thinking” and Habermas distinctively claims that since Hegel there is no alternative to this approach.

Focusing on this important claim, my discussion placed Habermas’s thought in the context of contemporary debates regarding the fate of metaphysics, the “normative content of modernity”, the relation between modernity and metaphysics, and the radical critique of modern rationalism.

After a short introduction (section 2.1), I explained why, according to Habermas, metaphysics can no longer be a valid mode of thinking (section 2.2). The source of metaphysics’ problems can be located in its foundationalism: the holistic mode of thought of metaphysics reduces the totality of existence to a foundational principle. This reductionist tendency has a three-fold manifestation: it renders metaphysics unable to find an adequate mediation between universal and particular; it makes metaphysical thought unable to represent in a satisfactory way what is unique and irreplaceable. Finally, metaphysical foundationalism manifests itself in an

¹⁰² In Habermas’s view Foucault’s concept of power has empirical content, *but also* aesthetic content (PDM, 285). With this, according to Habermas, Foucault implicitly makes appeal to the normative standards involved in the aesthetic modernity. In other words, he does not leave the orbit of modernity. For a critique of Habermas’s interpretation of Foucault see James Schmidt “Habermas and Foucault” in Maurizio Passerin d’Entrèves and Seyla Benhabib eds. *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity*, MIT Press, 1997, and the essays assembled in Michael Kelly ed. *Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate*, MIT Press, 1994, and in Samantha Ashenden and David Owen eds. *Foucault Contra Habermas. Recasting the Dialogue between Genealogy and Critical Theory*, Sage, 1999. A good discussion can be found in Amy Allen “Discourse, Power, and Subjectivation: The Foucault/Habermas Debate Reconsidered”. *Philosophical Forum*, 40, no.1 (2009): 1-28.

“affirmative” mode of thinking which devalues the material conditions of life (and matter in general) and leads to a clear primacy of theory over praxis.¹⁰³

Section 1.3 looked more closely at the link between metaphysics and modernity. I focused on what Habermas calls “the normative content of modernity” and I pointed out that although the philosophical project of modernity, as worked out successively by Kant, Hegel and Marx, makes sustained efforts to distance itself from traditional (pre-critical or pre-modern) metaphysics, this project incorporates nonetheless some of the problematic tendencies of metaphysics. Kant plays a pivotal role in the narrative Habermas wants to tell about modernity. The importance of Kant is that he raised the the problem of self-grounding to the level of philosophical reflection: modernity must prove itself capable of generating normativity out of its own resources. Numerous modern thinkers, in an attempt to solve this problem, have proposed various rational equivalents to the foundational principles of pre-modern metaphysics. Kant’s “transcendental subjectivity”, Hegel’s “absolute subject”, the labour activity of the human species unfolding itself in history in Marx, all represent concepts that offer a rational replacements for the “first principles” of metaphysics. On the basis of such rational equivalent principles sound foundations can be provided for the normative content of modernity, which Habermas (following Hegel) locates in the intellectual constellation formed by the clusters of meaning surrounding the concepts of “self-reflection”, “self-determination” or moral autonomy and authenticity or “self-expression”.

In Habermas’s rendition of this narrative about the rational self-grounding of modernity, Friedrich Nietzsche represents a radical caesura, an important turning point. Nietzsche, and following him Heidegger, Derrida, Foucault (and a score of other thinkers that can be loosely grouped under the rubric of “postmodernism”) launched a radical critique of this modern narrative; if this critique is valid then this would have devastating consequences for the normative content of modernity as this critique umasks the essence of modern rationalism as power, as domination. In section 2.4 I subjected Habermas’s engagement with this critique to a detailed analysis as debunking this critique is vital to Habermas’s purpose. Habermas argues that the exit out of the dialectics of enlightenment proposed by Nietzsche and post-Nietzschean

¹⁰³ This is what postmodern thinkers criticize as the “metaphysics of presence” (or the “onto-theological” problem).

thinkers is a false alternative and it leads us nowhere. I devoted a large space to the debate between Habermas and important post-Nietzschean thinkers in this chapter because these thinkers raise a very serious challenge to the “dialectic of Enlightenment”. They represent, I want to suggest, the true interlocutor of Habermas in much of his defence of the Enlightenment as being still unfinished. It is impossible, in my view, to correctly understand the philosophical nature of Habermas’s strategy of grounding of modernity’s normative content and thus the difficulties he runs into when in his recent writings he proposes a project of translation of religion, unless we understand very well the challenge posed by “postmodernism” to the Enlightenment project, a challenge that Habermas feels compelled to respond to.

Postmodern thinkers aim to leave the “dialectic of Enlightenment” entirely behind, as they take modernity’s attempt at self-grounding to be misguided to begin with. By postulating an ultimate, unconditional foundation for the totality of existence, modern rationalism replicates the reductionist tendency of traditional metaphysics, remaining thus entangled with homogenizing and repressive social and political aspirations. Postmodern thinkers unmask the dialectic of Enlightenment as hopelessly self-destructive and nihilistic. Rejecting the thought of a “first principle” of traditional metaphysics, and reshaping the grounding of the Enlightenment’s claims to freedom and emancipation on the basis of a subject-based reason, modern rationalism overburdens itself with tasks that it cannot possibly bear. For instance, “pure reason” in Kant is supposed to spontaneously generate the world (as we know it). But this task cannot possibly be achieved within the turn to subjectivity that dominates Kant’s philosophy, and thus Kant is forced into an intolerable dualist position, acknowledging the existence of something like the “thing-in-itself” about which reason cannot say much. Moreover, insofar as modern philosophy works with the idea of an unconditional foundation, either in the form of transcendental consciousness (Kant), or the World-Spirit as an absolute subject that achieves self-consciousness in history (Hegel), or that of the labouring activity of a species that develops in history (Marx), it falls prey to the same reductionist tendency which dominates pre-critical metaphysics.

The only way out of this predicament, postmodern thinkers argue, is to fully abandon modernity’s attempt at self-grounding and reach outside the horizon of subjective reason. Aesthetically inflected experiences and concepts, as well as unsettling, decentering and dis-ordering experiences of a quasi-mystical type (on the model of Dionysian messianism - the god

that is to come) are offered as the generic “Other” of reason, pointing to a way out of the nihilistic vortex of modernity.

Habermas subjects this radical critique of modern rationalism to a thorough analysis. He shows that this critique falls prey to the same foundationalist mode of thought that it rejects both in pre-critical metaphysics and in modern rationalism. It is quite significant, for instance, that Habermas reads Heidegger and Derrida as foundationalist thinkers, a charge that they would most likely resolutely reject. Both these philosophers, according to Habermas, operate with an “inverted foundationalism”; this type of foundationalism differs from the foundationalism of *prima philosophia*, or the modern foundationalist thought which revolves on the sovereign modern rational subject, which both posit a *rational* foundation, only in that the unconditional foundation is this time set completely outside the grasp of reason, in a Being beyond beings or in an archewriting. In addition, very important, the radical critique of reason, due to its total character, simply cannot give an account of the validity of its results.

If the radical rejection of modernity is a philosophical dead end, as Habermas suggests, and if moreover relying on a metaphysical type of foundationalism leads to oppressive social and political projects, then indeed the only philosophical alternative still open in front of us is to set the “dialectic of Enlightenment” in motion again, this time on non (or post-) foundational premises. This is to say, in fact, that Habermas must prove that he can succeed where Kant, Hegel and Marx have failed. In the next chapter I discuss how exactly is this to be done.

Chapter 3

The Normative Project of Modernity as “Linguistification of the Sacred”

3.1 Introduction: the antinomy of “postmetaphysical thinking”

My analysis in the previous chapter has drawn the broad philosophical contours of Habermas’s philosophical project. In the present chapter I want to shift the focus of my discussion from how Habermas delineates his project vis-à-vis important modern and postmodern thinkers, to a detailed discussion of some of the central features of this project.

My discussion so far has suggested that in order to offer a successful and viable philosophical alternative, Habermas’s “postmetaphysical thinking” must resolve at least three difficult sets of problems. Let me very briefly underline these problems here as an introduction to my analysis in this chapter.

First, Habermas must show how the problems left unsolved by the whole metaphysical tradition (up to Hegel) can be successfully answered by “postmetaphysical thinking”. This is to say that Habermas must show how the problem of difference (the mediation between universal and particular) can be solved in a way that no longer forces the integration and assimilation of the particular to the universal; Habermas must also show how his approach can adequately account for irreplaceable individuality and, finally, he must show how the relation between theory and practice is to be re-calibrated so that the logocentrism of the metaphysical tradition can be avoided.

The second major set of problems that must be faced by Habermas’s project is related to the dialectics of Enlightenment. Insofar as Habermas’s philosophical alternative aims to renew the dialectics of Enlightenment set in motion by the thought of Kant, Hegel and Marx, he must show how this can be done without getting mired into the problems identified by the “postmodern” critique of modern rationalism. How exactly is the normative content of modernity to be grounded out of modernity’s own resources? Habermas is confronted here with the (quite ambitious) task of showing that he can succeed where all modern thinkers from Kant to Marx

have failed: he must articulate a plausible concept of reason that can be proved flexible enough to preserve the differentiations introduced by Kant's modern turn to subjectivity and yet robust enough to be able to replace the synthetic and integrative force of pre-modern metaphysical (and religious) worldviews.

The third task is closely related with this problem of modernity's normative self-grounding. Habermas must be more precise on the status of this "grounding". This is of crucial importance for the topic of my dissertation because the way in which Habermas settles this matter determines to a large extent his view of transcendence, and his view of the place and role of the sacred in modern society.

These three tasks raise interesting and complex philosophical issues that I simply cannot discuss at length in this dissertation. For the purpose of my discussion in this thesis it will suffice to narrow down the focus of my analysis on the last two tasks mentioned, and in particular on the problem of self-grounding of modernity. But before I delve into details I would like to briefly layout, in general terms, Habermas's strategy in solving the three sets of problems.

Habermas approaches these three distinct sets of problems in a systematic and unitary manner through a refinement of the concept of rationality. Thus, the problem of the universal vs. the particular is approached in a way that tones down much of the dramatism involved in most metaphysical narratives about this binary relation. Habermas no longer thinks it necessary to engage with any of the grand cosmological claims involving concepts like "genera" and "species", noetic access to the One, or the mystical union of the individual with the transcendent etc., that constituted the distinctive marks of (pre-critical) metaphysical thought. Nor does he think it is possible to rescue Hegel's notion of the subject as the unity of the universal and the particular. Habermas scales back and reframes the relationship between universal and particular primarily as a problem of intersubjectivity: in a correctly conceived relation of intersubjectivity the terms of this relation will preserve their integrity and are no longer reducible to one another.¹⁰⁴ In addition, the problem of irreplaceable individuality is tackled through a new

¹⁰⁴ No doubt that Habermas's solution involves a highly reductionist move: Adorno, the direct predecessor of Habermas in the tradition of critical theory, still envisaged a comprehensive concept of reconciliation (on the basis of the concept of *mimesis*), that included the natural world for instance. Knowledge of nature, for Habermas, can no

conception of agency and autonomous self; Habermas claims that the self is socialized from the get go: “subjects are individuated and socialized in the same stroke” (PDM 149).¹⁰⁵ Finally, with respect to the issue of logocentrism (the relation between theory and practice), Habermas defends a materialist and evolutionary framework - a marriage of Kant and Darwin as he sometimes describes it - in which philosophy is reshaped into a “reconstructive science” and the relationship between sciences and philosophy is drawn in a new way (I will say more on this relation in the next section of this chapter).

The second and the third sets of problems (pertaining to the dialectic of Enlightenment and the strategy of grounding of modernity) are closer to my purpose in this dissertation, and in this chapter I will concentrate on Habermas’s response to these problems. Using an analogy with the antinomies discussed by Kant in *Critique of Pure Reason*, I argue that Habermas is faced here with what I would like to call “antinomy of postmetaphysical thinking”. Let me briefly explain.

As we have seen, the thought of an ultimate and unconditional first ground (in the manner of metaphysical thought) is no longer plausible. Foundationalism breeds reductionism, dogmatism and therefore transmits an oppressive character to any social and political project erected on metaphysical foundations. This diagnosis applies to *prima philosophia* (pre-Kantian philosophy) as well as to modern philosophy: insofar as the modern turn to subject-centered reason postulates an unconditional foundation (either in the form of “transcendental consciousness” in

longer be covered by reconciliation. This knowledge is the proper domain of the natural sciences, which take an empirical, analytical and manipulative approach (driven by an instrumental view of reason) to nature. In reframing the problem of difference (the relation between universal and particular) as a problem of intersubjectivity Habermas hopes to fend off much of the critique launched by postmodern thinkers against the way in which modern philosophy (in Kant, Hegel and Marx) conceived of this relation. But the price he pays for this is a narrowing of the scope of the concept of reconciliation to the social world.

¹⁰⁵ Habermas defends this thesis in the essay entitled “Individuation through socialization: on George Herbert Mead’s Theory of Subjectivity” in *PT*, pp.149-204. I will not have the chance to discuss in this dissertation Habermas’ view of autonomy and whether or not this view manages to successfully tackle the metaphysical problem of irreplaceable individuality. Doubts have been raised whether the postmetaphysical view of agency constitutes a better approach to this problem than let’s say St. Augustin’s or Aquinas’ metaphysical views of the self, or the ones put forth by communitarians like Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre or Michael Sandel for that matter. From a distinct direction, one that uses psychoanalytical and Lacanian insights, Habermas’s conception of agency is also subject to a pertinent critique. However I cannot cover these very interesting discussions in the pages of this dissertation. For good discussions of autonomous agency in Habermas see: Maeve Cooke, Habermas, “Autonomy and the Identity of the Self”, *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol. 18, no. 3-4, 1993, pp. 269-291, and Joel Anderson, “Autonomy, agency and the self” in Barbara Fultner ed. *Jurgen Habermas. Key Concepts*, Durham, Acumen, 2011, pp. 91-112.

Kant, the Absolute Spirit in Hegel, or in the form of a labouring macro-subject that develops itself in history in Marx), it cannot avoid dogmatism. And yet jettisoning entirely the project of offering a normative grounding for modernity, which is the core aspiration of the post-Nietzschean line of thought, cannot be a plausible alternative either. This line of thought works with an “inverted” foundationalism, which could potentially lead to far more oppressive projects than that of a modernity founded on a rational “subject”.

Habermas is faced here with two equally pressing demands that are mutually incompatible. He sets out to show how this antinomy can be resolved. On the one side Habermas is explicit about the need to provide a grounding for the normative content of modernity. Indeed, without a justificatory narrative or a grounding strategy, concepts like objective knowledge, moral autonomy (or “self-determination”) and authenticity (or “self-expression”), all central elements of modernity’s normative content as this was articulated in Kant, Hegel and Marx, can be easily de-legitimized as representing nothing more than different facets of a will to power or as mere manifestations of a Western understanding of normativity which could claim only local validity at best. Upholding the distinctions between truth and power, between validity and merely *de facto* acceptance, between emancipation and domination, becomes simply impossible unless some grounding is offered for these distinctions.

And yet, on the other side, the “grounding” of modernity’s normative content cannot go all the way down to some ultimate (unconditional, immutable and infallible) foundation in the manner of metaphysics. Any such attempt would instantly make “postmetaphysical thinking” vulnerable to the charge of projecting a unifying reductionism on a recalcitrant reality and ultimately of being a dogmatic and repressive project.

Habermas is thus caught between the necessity of claiming a *moment of unconditionality* for the normative content of modernity, absent which modernity can no longer claim universal and emancipatory character, and the equally imperative necessity of avoiding ultimate and unconditional foundations for this normative content. This is the main quandary of Habermas’ “postmetaphysical” project and in my view the entire project stands or falls with its ability to settle this matter convincingly.

In what follows I will discuss Habermas’s solution to this difficult predicament. According to Habermas, this antinomy can find a resolution only if the philosophical paradigm within which

Kant, Hegel and Marx worked, what Habermas calls “the philosophy of the subject” is abandoned.¹⁰⁶ As Nietzsche and many post-Nietzschean thinkers have convincingly showed, this paradigm is exhausted and only a radical change of perspective would release the philosophical means necessary to adequately deal with all the problems mentioned.

Habermas’s exit from the paradigm of the “philosophy of the subject” is guided by two re-orientation moves, the first towards pragmatism, the other towards the analytic philosophy of language. These two moves should allow for a process of “detranscendentalization” (or “desublimation”) of reason. According to Habermas, reason must be released from its ties to the structures of (transcendental) subjectivity and situated in history, culture and nature. He contends that a contextualized reason of this kind shakes off the oppressive and violent character that the “postmodernist” critique of modernity incessantly imputes to it.

My discussion in this chapter begins with an analysis of the philosophical status of Habermas’s “postmetaphysical thinking” (section 3.2). In the wake of the collapse of metaphysics, it becomes imperative that philosophy redefine its relationship with empirical sciences. Obtaining a clear picture of how Habermas draws this relationship will help us better understand his solution to the problem of foundation of modernity.¹⁰⁷ This section is entitled “Philosophy as Stand-In and Interpreter” and as I will show in this section Habermas thinks that philosophy has no choice but to adopt the rational proceduralism and fallibilism of natural sciences, without however giving up its specific concerns with concepts like “universality” and “totality”.

In the next section of the chapter (3.3) I will direct my attention to the communicative conception of reason at the core of Habermas’s philosophical project. “Communicative reason” is a “detranscendentalized” or “situated” reason in the sense that it always comes into play within

¹⁰⁶ In this paradigm reification and objectification follow like a shadow any attempt on the part of the rational subject to know and understand the world of objects. Reification also affects rational subjects’ attempt to act together with other human beings. As a consequence, this paradigm cannot produce an adequate concept of “intersubjectivity”.

¹⁰⁷ It is also important to discuss this relation because in his recent writings on “postsecular society” Habermas revisits it; if before his concern was to draw “postmetaphysical thinking” closer to empirical sciences and to underline the distance that separates it from metaphysics (under the force of the postmodern critique of metaphysics), in his recent writings on “postsecular society”, Habermas seems more concerned to bring “postmetaphysical thinking” closer to metaphysics and away from “scientism”.

a particular cultural and historical context. I analyze Habermas's attempt to contextualize reason by a turn to everyday communication within *Lebenswelt* (or *life-world*, a concept he borrows from Husserl) and I discuss some of the ties that link the concept of "communicative reason" to the two philosophical movements that in the 20th century have placed language at the centre of their investigations: hermeneutics and analytic philosophy.

However, Habermas's use of some important hermeneutic insights takes a specific twist. It is very important for Habermas's project of grounding the normative content of modernity to insist that "communicative reason", although situated within *lifeworld*, always points beyond this local context. It is of vital importance for Habermas's differentiation of "postmetaphysical thinking" from "postmodern" thought to show that the communicative view of reason preserves a *moment of unconditionality* and it thus cannot be reduced to historical and cultural context, to power relations, or to various "language games" (to use here Wittgenstein's term). In spite of its situatedness within language, history and nature, reason is able to retain a moment of *unconditionality* which brings into play a "transcendence-from-within" our *lifeworld*. It is on the basis of this view of transcendence that Habermas grounds the normative project of modernity in a way that resolves the antinomy of the postmetaphysical thinking.

Section 3.4. further pursues the distinction between the "transcendence-from-within" and transcendence from without our lifeworld by examining Habermas's claim that the consensual use of language raises some counterfactual "idealizations" (in what he terms "validity claims"); these idealizations have a normative content and it is possible to "rationally reconstruct" the normative substance of the validity basis of language. The "theoretical reconstruction" of these idealizations is no longer put forth by Habermas as an ultimate foundation for modernity. This reconstruction should be seen more like a fallible hypothesis whose validity depends on it being corroborated or tested in a dialogue with empirical sciences. The testing can be done in a number of ways, however Habermas's main interest goes in the direction of social theory: the concept of "communicative reason" allows us to correct some of the errors committed by important social theorists from Durkheim to Weber; to the extent that Habermas's view of reason allows us to articulate a more comprehensive and more congenial theory of modernity, this view of reason proves to be valid.

Section 3.5 picks up one important feature of Habermas's theory of modernity, the thesis that communicative reason can be seen as a "linguistification of the sacred", and seeks to shed light on the view of religion latent in his postmetaphysical defense of modernity. This section closes the present chapter and prepares the ground for a full engagement with Habermas's "postsecular" turn in the next three chapters.

3.2 "Postmetaphysical" philosophy as "stand-in" and "interpreter"

As already noted, "postmetaphysical thinking" abandons the idea that it is possible to find some infallible, ultimate or unconditional foundation for the rational project of modernity. As long as philosophy still clings to the idea of some ultimate foundation, it cannot avoid a reductionist and authoritarian character. Habermas's "postmetaphysical thinking" therefore claims to be, first and foremost, a non-foundationalist approach. This claim translates into the need to "detranscendentalize" reason: reason cannot remain "pure", tied to the transcendental structures of a sovereign subject which stands opposed to history, culture and nature (like in Kant); nor can it be made an epiphenomenon of a prior and more fundamental entity (the Other of reason, either in the form of Being, or Archewriting, or Power) as post-Nietzschean thinkers would have it.

The question that I want to pursue in this section is the following: what are the implications of the movement to detranscendentalize reason for the relation between philosophy and science? Answering this question becomes important for a correct understanding Habermas's strategy of grounding the normative content of modernity on non-metaphysical (i.e. fallible) premises.

As noted already, the progress of natural sciences has had a highly corrosive influence on metaphysical thought and it did not leave philosophy's self-understanding unaffected. In making the transition to "postmetaphysical" (from a pure to an impure reason) philosophy must rethink its relationship with empirical sciences.

Habermas has found a special way to formulate this insight: philosophy must exchange its role of "Usher" (or Judge) (*Platzanweiser*) for the dual role of "Placeholder" (*Platzhalter*) and

“Interpreter”. This dual role redraws the relationship between philosophy and empirical sciences in a much more sober manner: philosophy can no longer play the role of showing sciences their proper place, as it did in the foundationalist paradigm of metaphysics (the role of “judge” that philosophy played in Kant, for instance, by drawing the borders of what constitutes certain knowledge).

In the absence of a foundationalist stance, philosophy can no longer claim to trace the limits of certain knowledge and must adopt a more modest posture. Philosophy has no choice today but to let herself be drawn into the sphere of gravity of modern positive sciences with their emphasis on fallible knowledge and progress as “learning process”.

This being said however, philosophy should resist total assimilation to scientific endeavour. Thus, according to Habermas, “posmetaphysical” philosophy should rather be seen as a hybrid research program that represents a “blend of philosophy and science” (MCCA, 14). This program straddles the established boundaries between natural sciences and speculative thought¹⁰⁸ because it assimilates the emphasis on fallible knowledge and procedural rationality of the empirical sciences¹⁰⁹ without thereby abandoning philosophy’s traditional concerns with concepts like “totality” and “universality”. This sort of hybridity, claims Habermas, is the most fertile approach and he places it in the traditions opened by Marx and Freud. As he notes, in the social sciences and psychology this kind of mixed research is not at all atypical.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Habermas also calls this sort of relation “a nonexclusive division of labour” (PT, 38).

¹⁰⁹ Philosophy may no longer “lay claim to a privileged access to truth, or to a method, an object realm, or even just a style of intuition that is specifically its own” (PT, 38).

¹¹⁰ Freud, Durkheim, Mead, Weber, Piaget and Chomsky have all engaged in this kind of mixed research: “each inserted a genuinely philosophical idea like a detonator into a particular context of research. Symptom formation through repression, the creation of solidarity through the sacred, the identity-forming function of role thinking, modernization as rationalization of society, decentration as an outgrowth of reflective abstraction from action, language acquisition as an activity of hypothesis testing – these key phrases stand for so many paradigms in which a philosophical idea is present in embryo while at the same time empirical, yet universal, questions are being posed” (MCCA, 15). The hybrid character of Habermas’s “post-metaphysical thinking” is reflected in the peculiar combination one finds throughout his work of the “perspective of the observer” (used in empirical sciences) and the “perspective of the participant” (the hermeneutic view), which Habermas takes to be equally valid, although they seem to yield different, even opposing, results.

In negotiating this new relationship with empirical sciences, however, philosophical inquiry must give up any cognitive privilege and accept a status similar to that of the other scientific disciplines that constitute the ensemble of natural, social and human sciences.¹¹¹ The role of “usher” must be exchanged for the role of “stand-in” (or “place holder”).

What does (postmetaphysical) philosophy stand-in for? It stands for “empirical theories with strong universalist claims” (MCCA, 15). As “place-holder”, philosophical thought advances “rational reconstructions” which no longer claim the role of “ultimate justifications”. These “reconstructions” have merely a hypothetical status and their validity depends on corroboration from empirical scientific inquiry.¹¹² As Habermas puts it, philosophy “does not direct its own pieces” anymore, by which he means that philosophy does not possess its own distinctive criteria of validity.

By placing philosophy on an equal footing with other scientific disciplines *within* the system of sciences, Habermas explicitly rejects three possible alternatives. The first is the complete assimilation of philosophy to science (in system-theory, for example, or in “the philosophy of science”). The problem with this alternative is that it threatens to completely flatten out any kind of normativity. The same assimilationist move can be detected in the attempt to model “human sciences” (*Geisteswissenschaften*) after natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*) (PT, 37). The second alternative rejected is that of a neat, clear-cut, mutually exclusive division of labour between philosophy and sciences, which “might guarantee to philosophy its *own* object realm with its *own* method...” (PT, 37). Phenomenology (with eidetic abstraction) and analytic philosophy (with analysis of language) have adopted this alternative. However, disciplines like anthropology, psychology, and sociology have frequently “overstepped the demarcation lines”, which cannot be constructed very rigidly anyway. Finally the third alternative that Habermas rejects is the complete expulsion of science from the territory of philosophy (what Habermas

¹¹¹ Naturally, some of these sciences will be closer to philosophy than others. Of particular interest for Habermas are what he calls “reconstructive sciences”, see the note below.

¹¹² Reconstructive sciences are “those sciences that systematically reconstruct the intuitive knowledge of competent subjects” (*OPC*, 28). These “rational reconstructions” can be subjected to “indirect verification by using them as inputs in empirical theories” (*MCCA*, 32). For a good discussion of Habermas’s own project as “reconstructive science” see Alford, Fred C. “Is Jürgen Habermas’s reconstructive science really science?” *Theory and Society*, 14, no.3, 1985, pp. 321-340.

sometimes calls “the turn to the irrational”, see for instance PT, 37). This rejection comes in many forms, in the name of “existential illumination and philosophical faith” (Jaspers), “mythology that complements science” (Kolakowski), “mystical thinking of Being” (Heidegger), “therapy” (Wittgenstein), “deconstructive activity” (Derrida), “negative dialectics” (Adorno). In Habermas’s view it is just not possible anymore to identify a sphere proper to philosophy “where thought can be illuminating or awakening” as opposed to the objectifying thought at work in scientific approaches. Philosophy should not try to secure a separate identity (as non-science) with the price of renouncing fallible, criticizable, in a word “contestable knowledge” (PT, 37).

In the second role, that of “interpreter”, postmetaphysical philosophy must attempt to bridge the three cultural spheres of expert knowledge created by modernity (science, morality and art) with the common knowledge of everyday life. Everyday life needs guidance from the highly specialized knowledge generated in these value spheres. As this knowledge grows more and more distant from the common sense, philosophy must assume the vital role of making accessible to the average person theoretical findings generated in the fields of arts, science and morality. This philosophical mediation becomes increasingly necessary, as these spheres expand independently from one another and grow progressively remote from the common sense.

It is interesting to note here that in his recent writings Habermas alters the direction of this mediation, and I will return to philosophy’s role of “interpreter” in my next chapter on “post-secular” modernity. It seems to me that in recent work Habermas changes the direction of mediation and guidance that philosophy is supposed to offer. With the idea of “salvaging” translation, he reverses the mediation between everyday life and sciences: now sciences, and in particular what he calls *scient-ism* (a synthetic, comprehensive worldview that tries to reduce everything to hard naturalism and biologism), are said to be in need of guidance from insights still preserved by religious traditions which, as unexpectedly as this may seem, continue to survive in modern *life-world* (they seem to stubbornly resist the onslaught of scientific progress and the process of modernization).

3.3 The paradigm change: from “philosophy of the subject” to “formal pragmatics” and “communicative reason”

Section 3.2 above discussed the kind of reconfiguration of the relationship between philosophy and empirical sciences that Habermas envisages in the wake of the disintegration of metaphysics. In this section (3.3) I analyze the communicative conception of reason at the core of Habermas’s conception of “postmetaphysical” philosophy.

As noted already, Habermas contends that the philosophical paradigm of the “philosophy of the subject” must be abandoned. His exit from this paradigm relies on the following basic idea: the focus of theoretical analysis must shift away from a subject that knows objects towards what is going between two subjects who want to reach understanding in language about something in the world. The intention guiding this paradigm shift is, as Habermas writes, to abandon the “paradigm of the philosophy of consciousness – namely, a subject that represents objects and toils with them – in favour of the paradigm of linguistic philosophy – namely, that of intersubjective understanding or communication” (TCAI, 390).¹¹³

The central contention here is that this change of paradigm makes it possible to identify some pragmatic conditions of possibility of intersubjective understanding which, as Habermas argues, are *unavoidable* (*nichtintergebar*) for any use of language with “communicative intent” (that is the use of language between a speaker and a hearer who communicates in order to reach understanding about something in the world).

It is not difficult to see that this is a Kant inspired type of enterprise: Habermas seeks to reconstruct the universal “presuppositions” (or conditions of possibility) of intersubjective

¹¹³ Habermas aligns himself here with what in the parlance of the XXth century philosophy has been called “the linguistic turn” in philosophy. This turn has come in two main variants: hermeneutics and the analytic philosophy of language, and most people take these two variants to be competing rather than complementary lines of thought. Interestingly enough, Habermas relies both on the hermeneutical tradition as developed from Dilthey and Droysen to Heidegger and Gadamer and on the analytic philosophy from Wittgenstein and Frege to Quine and Davidson and he uses insights from both traditions in complex and fruitful ways. What makes Habermas’s appropriation of the linguistic turn really interesting is that in his thought the two lines become complementary rather than opposed sources of insights. See for instance Habermas “Hermeneutic and Analytic Philosophy: Two Complementary Versions of the Linguistic Turn” in *TJ*, 51-81.

understanding in language similar to Kant's attempt to identify the conditions of possibility of subject's cognition.¹¹⁴ Because these conditions are presupposed by our quotidian linguistic interaction,¹¹⁵ what we need to make them transparent is an analysis of everyday communication. Hence, the primary focus of Habermas's analysis is on what happens when two (acting and speaking) subjects try to coordinate their actions through language in an everyday situation.

As a side but important note, Habermas also touches here on one of the basic issues in sociology, namely how is social action possible? The explanatory models of action that predominate in social theory are centered on an analysis of ends and means. Consequently, the rationality of an action is explained by the selection of the most appropriate means for the attainment of a given end.¹¹⁶ In this explanatory model, reason is instrumental and calculatory. It is also noteworthy that classic social theory lacks an analysis of language in social relationships. The turn to language and linguistic interaction that Habermas proposes radically alters this situation.

Taking into account the use of language in the coordination of actions, Habermas introduces the distinction between two types of social action. They are: "strategic action" and "communicative

¹¹⁴ Kant located the conditions of possible knowledge in the transcendental ego. Habermas's "reconstructive" project focuses on the pre-theoretical, implicit knowledge and competencies of speaking subjects. It is at this level that some "unavoidable" presuppositions of reaching understanding in language are said to reside. In view of this obvious parallel between Kant and Habermas, the reconstructive project proposed by Habermas can be qualified as "quasi-transcendental". Other examples of "reconstructive" sciences, according to Habermas, are Chomsky's generative grammar, Piaget's theory of cognitive development and Kohlberg's theory of moral development. What they all have in common is the attempt to rationally reconstruct generative rules and cognitive schemata which are implicit in the pre-theoretical every-day life.

¹¹⁵ Habermas's "reconstructive" program is at once pragmatic (in the sense that it focuses on the use of language in quotidian communication), quasi-transcendental (in the sense that it articulates the pre-theoretical, taken-for-granted knowledge of competent users of language as a condition of possibility of linguistic understanding), formal (in the sense that it lays bare the structures of communication in language), and scientific (in the sense that it is put forward as a fallible hypothesis that must be empirically verified and tested. I will say more about the testing of this program in the next section).

¹¹⁶ In his discussion of types of rationality, Max Weber famously distinguished *Zweckrationalität* ("rationality toward an end") from *Wertrationalität* ("rationality toward a value"). The two types have the same underlying pattern however: the actor selects the best means for the successful attainment of an end or for the realization of a value. Common to all attempts to conceive of rationality in the means-end paradigm (Weber's own included) is the following unsettling characteristic: reason does not have much to say about the ends that actors deem worthy of achievement. With the fall of metaphysics and the consequent deligitimation of any concept of "substantial" reason (what Weber calls the "disenchantment" of the world), the pluralism of values and ends that ensues is rationality-free. Habermas accepts the disenchantment thesis but rejects the understanding of modern pluralism as reason-free. I will discuss Weber's thesis, its Marxist reception and Habermas's take on this thesis in the next section.

action”. By “strategic action” Habermas means a linguistically structured action in which subjects use language manipulatively to attain ends involving other subjects.¹¹⁷ Basically, a speaker uses language deceptively to obtain what she wants from another agent. Again a parallel with Kant might be useful here. This is the kind of action that Kant’s categorical imperative excludes from the domain of morality: the use of other subjects merely as means to one’s own purposes. The strategic action is oriented towards success. It is a form of instrumental action insofar as the agent instrumentalizes the other participants in this linguistic interaction in order to successfully achieve her ends.¹¹⁸ The mechanism of action coordination specific to “strategic action” is influence (*Einflußnahme*).

By contrast, actors involved in “communicative action” are not oriented toward success but toward “reaching understanding about something in the world”. Here the mechanism of action coordination is consensus (*Einverständnis*). In relation with this distinction Habermas advances the crucial thesis that the strategic use of language is parasitic on the consensual use of language, which is the original mode of language use (TCAI, 288).¹¹⁹ In a more teleological vein (that

¹¹⁷ “Strategic action” is a form of instrumental action involving the direct use of language. There are forms of instrumental actions that do not imply such a direct involvement of language. A worker using a hammer to mend something is carrying on a series of instrumental actions without the need to linguistically interact with someone else. Of course, insofar as his thoughts are linguistically structured, language is present in this process. After the linguistic turn, the presupposition of a direct access to objects, facts and sense data must be dropped. However this is an example of an instrumental action where there is no direct use of language.

¹¹⁸ The strategic (as a form of instrumental) action plays an important role not only in sociology but also in political theory. For instance it is fundamental for the “social contract” tradition of liberal thought. Habermas’s basic critical point against the “social contract” tradition is that the binding character of a valid norm cannot be derived from the mutual competition for success of self-interested agents (Hobbes’ problem).

¹¹⁹ Other parasitic uses of language include the symbolic, the figurative. The thesis of the priority of consensual use of language is very important to Habermas’s overall projects because on it he will ground his two-track theory of modern society (composed of “system” and “lifeworld”). Societies reproduce themselves on a functional dimension (which presupposes a coordination of consequences of actors’ actions, above their head, as it were; the state and the market are the primary institutions for this type of reproduction) and on a consensual dimension of reaching understanding in the *lifeworld*. I will discuss this two-track theory of modernity in the next section. But it is worth noting that the reproduction of *lifeworld* is taken to be primarily consensual because of the primacy Habermas presupposes for communicative action over strategic action. However there is a gap here: even if one were to concede the cognitive priority of the consensual use of language over the strategic one this does not necessarily imply a functional primacy of communicative action over strategic action in the reproduction of *lifeworld*. See the discussion of this aspect in Maeve Cooke *Language and Reason. A Study of Habermas’s Pragmatics* (1997). On this note, it should also be mentioned that thinkers like Derrida rejects entirely the possibility to discriminate between a cognitive, consensual use of language and a strategic use of it, parasitic on the first. Derrida thinks impossible to draw a distinction between “normal” (that is cognitive) language and the rhetorical, metaphorical, deceiving etc. use

Habermas however has come to reject more recently) he suggested that “reaching understanding” was the very *telos* of language.¹²⁰

3.3.1 The formal features of “communicative action”

In his analysis of “communicative action” Habermas aims to demonstrate that this action presents some formal features. In order to identify the formal structures of the consensual use of language (the conditions of possibility of this action) Habermas appeals to a fundamental intuition that has acquired philosophical purchase in the later work of Ludwig Wittgenstein and then in the work of J. L. Austin and John Searle. When we speak we also do something with the words we utter: we make a promise, we bear witness, we demand or request something, we accuse, we excuse, we recommend etc. Therefore Habermas takes as the main unit of his analysis of consensual linguistic interaction the “speech act”, which he treats as being formed by two parts: the illocutionary part and the propositional content.¹²¹

of language. See Habermas’ discussion in *PDM* pp.185-210, and Derrida’s reply in *Limited Inc.* (1988). I have already signalled Habermas’ position on this important distinction in Chapter 1 (section 1.3).

¹²⁰ In his first major work he puts this point this way: “What raises us out of nature is the only thing whose nature we can know: language. Through its structure, autonomy and responsibility are posited for us. *Our first sentence expresses unequivocally the intention of universal and unconstrained consensus*” *KHI*, 314, my emphasis. It is important to note, however, that Habermas’s view on consensus as the *telos* of linguistic communication has shifted over time; if in earlier writings unconstrained consensus is taken indeed to be the *telos* of language - which implies that such a consensus is in principle achievable, in his later writings Habermas takes this consensus to be a regulative idea - and therefore more of a projection, a *focus imaginarius* (to use Kant’s terms, from whom the idea of regulative ideal is borrowed), something that we can asymptotically approximate but never actually achieve. See my discussion of the “ideal speech situation” in the last chapter of this dissertation (“Postmetaphysical Hope”) where I put forward the argument that the shift away from teleology thins out the resources for hope in “postmetaphysical thinking”.

¹²¹ In view of this structure any speech act can be formalized on the follow model: P(x), where P is the illocutionary part and x the propositional content. Any utterance can be brought into this form. When I say “this ball is red” my formalized utterance is “I assert that the ball is red”. If I say “the ball is red” as part of a conversation with my kid about what kind of present he would like for his birthday, then the correct formalization of my utterance is: “I promise that the ball [that I will buy for you] is red”. It is possible that an utterance is an assertion and a promise at the same time. However according to context, just one such aspect is predominantly thematized. The validity basis of consensual language (the three validity claims) is present in the illocutionary part of the speech act.

Thus Habermas defines “communicative action” as a form of linguistic interaction in which two agents coordinate their plans of action through reaching understanding in language about something in the world. According to Habermas, the following process best exemplifies this type of interaction: the ego initiates a speech act and thus makes an offer to an alter by raising “validity claims” (these validity claims are embodied in the illocutionary part of the speech act); the alter may respond to this offer with a “Yes” or a “No”; this sequence is oriented toward reaching a common understanding about something in the world; if the answer is “Yes” the two actors reached a common negotiation of their situation; if the answer is “No”, the ego can offer reasons for his initial validity claim, and then both ego and alter enter a phase of renegotiation of the situation; through the process of offering and accepting (rejecting) reasons they reach a common understanding about something in the world. In this process a communicative type of reason comes into play.

It is important to remark that the concept of “reaching understanding” (*Verständigung*) places Habermas in the proximity of philosophical hermeneutics. It is in the tradition running from Dilthey to Heidegger and Gadamer that “meaning understanding” (*Sinnverstehen*) has been given a central place. One of the most important aspects of this tradition that informs Habermas’s theory is the situatedness of our position as finite agents communicating with one another. “Communicative action” (the process of reaching understanding in language) takes place in an always already given “lifeworld”. The concept of “lifeworld” plays a vital role in Habermas. Indeed communication cannot possibly be conceived in the absence of shared convictions and beliefs, of principles and values taken-for-granted. The communicative action always takes place against a background of a substantive network of intersubjectively shared norms that are taken to be valid.

However even though the concept of *lifeworld* plays an essential role in Habermas’s analysis of communication as the indispensable repository of taken-for-granted conviction and values against which everyday communication unfolds, the actual theory of meaning on which Habermas relies in his analysis of the formal aspects of the process of “reaching understanding” does not draw on the hermeneutical tradition, but rather on the analytical philosophy of language. Particularly useful in this context for Habermas is the so-called “truth-conditional semantics” developed from Frege to Dummett. The important point I shall take from this theory for the purpose of my present discussion is that, according to Habermas, *one understands the meaning*

of an utterance when one knows what makes it acceptable (or valid). Thus Habermas expounds the thesis that meaning is inextricably linked with validity.¹²² In other words “understanding meaning” is conceptually tied to a process of argumentation whereby validity claims are tested. Reasons are offered for a particular claim, they are accepted or rejected with other reasons, and the whole process moves under the gentle (uncoercing) force of the better reason in the direction of a rational consensus. This tendency towards rational consensus in argumentation explains why Habermas rejects the idea that we are actually trapped inside our *lifeworld*. While he adopts this hermeneutical concept, Habermas nonetheless wants to avoid some of the consequences that follow from this hermeneutical import: he denies that all understanding is historical (confined to the lifeworld context where this understanding takes place) and sees the relationship between rational argumentation and the *lifeworld* as tied into a feedback loop. Although “communicative action” and rational argumentation have their roots in the *lifeworld*, they have an impact on those taken-for-granted elements of the lifeworld that make it possible, in that it gradually replace this unreflective elements with rational agreements.

It is also important to note that in Habermas’s analysis the argumentative process presupposed by the (rather strong) thesis that meaning is tied to validity works only on the basis of a couple of important presuppositions. Because these presuppositions have an “ideal” content, Habermas also calls them “idealizations” and he keenly stresses their “unavoidable” character: “in performing speech acts, speakers trying to reach an understanding with one another must ‘unavoidably’ undertake certain idealizations” (TJ, 7).¹²³

These presuppositions are the following: the shared presupposition of a system of worlds (the objective world of independently existing objects, the social world of interpersonal legitimate expectations and the subjective world of inner experiences), the reciprocal presupposition of

¹²² For a discussion of this thesis see Albrecht Wellmer “What is a Pragmatic Theory of Meaning? Variations on the Proposition ‘We Understand a Speech Act When We Know what Makes it Acceptable’” in Axel Honneth et al. eds. *Philosophical Interventions in the Unfinished Project of Enlightenment*, MIT Press, 1992, pp. 171-219.

¹²³ The attempt to provide a “conceptual history of the genesis of the basic concepts and assumptions of formal pragmatics” is carried on by Habermas in the light of the Kantian doctrine of ideas in the essay “From Kant’s Ideas of Pure Reason to the ‘Idealizing’ Presuppositions of Communicative Action: Reflections on the Detranscendentalized ‘Use of Reason’” in *TJ*, pp.83-130. Habermas discusses here the main differences and similarities between the Kantian ideas of reason and the “idealizations” of communication.

rationality (or `accountability`), the unconditionality of context-transcending validity claims (such as truth, moral rightness and truthfulness) and the presuppositions of argumentation (such as publicity and inclusiveness; equal rights to engage in communication; exclusion of deception and illusion; absence of coercion) (TJ, 86 and 106-107).

In what follows I will discuss these unavoidable presuppositions of communicative practice and then I will comment first on their justification and then on what Habermas takes to be their “counterfactual”, but nonetheless effective status. This becomes very important for correctly understanding the concept of “transcendence-from-within” in Habermas.

3.3.2 The presuppositions of communication

a) the shared presupposition of a world

If they want to achieve understanding “about something”, language users (speaking and acting subjects) must be able to “refer” to something in the world. However, subjects can refer to something only if they start with a pragmatic presupposition, namely they presuppose “the world” “as the totality of independently existing objects that can be judged or dealt with”. The world is understood to be “objective” in the sense that “it is given to us as the same for everyone” (TJ, 89, see also 254).

Habermas analyses the concept of “the world” under three distinct dimensions (three distinct systems of reference): the “objective world” of independently existing objects, “the social world” as “the totality of possible legitimately regulated interpersonal relationships” (TJ, 103) and the “inner world”¹²⁴ of private subjective experiences. Habermas`s thesis is that the architectonic of

¹²⁴ The inner world of private experiences is somehow different from (or not entirely analogous to) the other two (objective and social) worlds. This private world is constituted rather “negatively as the totality of that which neither occurs in the objective world nor is taken to be valid or intersubjectively recognized in the social world”. As such, this concept seems to play a complementary role vis-a-vis the other two worlds, which are “publicly accessible” whereas the subjective world is not. Habermas introduces this distinction as a result of Wittgenstein`s private language argument and Sellars`s critique of mentalism. See TJ, 104. Now, it is clear that insofar the third “cultural sphere” of art and art criticism (to which Habermas later adds ethical-existential discourses on collective identity) is

the three worlds is made possible by the *structure of (our propositionally differentiated) language*: the objective world of facts is “grammatically coupled” (TJ, 103) with constative language use and thus with the role of the third-person pronoun; the social world with regulative language use and with the grammatical role of the second-person personal pronoun; the inner world with the “first-person perceptual and experiential reports” (TJ, 104).¹²⁵

These three world-concepts are *formal*¹²⁶ in the sense that they “constitute the grammatical system of reference for everything that speaker and hearer can ever encounter in the world. These frameworks lack any content beyond the conditions necessary for reference either to possible objects or to possible interpersonal relations and norms” (TJ, 77).

tioned to the “inner world” of private experiences, Habermas eliminates art’s capacity to express truth or to provide cognitive insights. I will come back to this important point in the last chapter of my thesis.

¹²⁵ If we (as a species) used a different language, one not differentiated in propositions, a non-propositional language, then we could not have had these concepts of the world.

¹²⁶ These “worlds” as formal presuppositions of communication must be distinguished from the *lifeworld*. The “objective”, the “social” and the “inner” worlds are formal presuppositions generated by the grammatical role of the pronouns system present in our language, and they are merely “formal projections” (*Entworfen*) (see TJ, 98) tied to the use of personal pronouns, projections that speakers and hearers unavoidably make when communication is initiated. Very much distinct from these formal projections, the *lifeworld* is constituted by the substantive web of intersubjectively shared beliefs, convictions, customs, values, interpersonal relationships, norms, rules that are present in a particular community, society etc. This network is the implicit and taken-for-granted knowledge of competent users of language, of individuals who grew up in a culture, have been socialized in a tradition etc., in short as people inescapably belonging to a “form of life” (to use the Wittgensteinian term). Due to its substantive nature, *lifeworld* always exists in the plural, as *lifeworlds*. As participants in our *lifeworld*, we cannot actually reach its boundaries, we cannot really bring its totality in the light of reflection, and we cannot step out of it at will. Therefore, any validity claim raised in communication is always raised “here” and “now”. However, Habermas makes a peculiar use of this hermeneutical insight, in that although he accepts the hermeneutical situatedness of any claim to validity, he rejects nonetheless the fall into the relativism of “language games” and the corresponding thesis of incommensurability of forms of life. By changing the perspective from that of a participant in *lifeworld* to that of an observer it makes sense to try to reach a theoretically informed point of view about the *lifeworld*, which allows us to make general statements about *lifeworld* as such. One cannot step out of her *lifeworld* and yet one can ask questions like how *lifeworld* reproduces itself from one generation to another, or how rational is a particular *lifeworld*. Thus, adopting the perspective of the observer Habermas is able to talk about the universal structures of the *lifeworld* (culture, society and personality) and analyze their “rationalization” in modernity, as I shall discuss in the next section. It is this methodological duality of perspectives (by no means devoid of tension) that gives the specific flavor of Habermas’s overall philosophical project. For a critique of this (uneasy) alliance between hermeneutics and functionalism in Habermas see Hans Joas “The Unhappy Marriage of Hermeneutics and Functionalism” in A. Honneth and H. Joas eds. *Communicative Action: Essays on Jurgen Habermas’s Theory of Communicative Action*, MIT Press, 1991, pp.97-118.

b) the reciprocal presupposition of rationality (or accountability)

Speaking and acting agents engaged in communication also unavoidably make the supposition of rationality. Agents must mutually assume that they are rational, which Habermas translates as seeing themselves as capable of being motivated (moved) by reasons. An agent would not engage in communication with somebody unless he implicitly presupposes that he has in front of him a rational person. This presupposition of rationality corresponds (rather loosely) to the Kantian view of autonomy of rational subject (i.e. her capacity of acting “out of respect for the law”).¹²⁷ Unlike Kant however who stresses moral reasons¹²⁸ as basis for the “special kind of causality” represented by freedom, Habermas takes “accountability” (or rationality) to depend on all kinds of reasons: “reasons for the truth of statements, ethical orientations and modes of action as indicators for the authenticity of life choices or the sincerity of confessions and... aesthetic experiences, narrative declarations, cultural standards of value, legal claims, conventions and so on” (TJ, 95). Thus for Habermas “accountability consists ... in an agent’s *general* ability to orient her action by validity claims” (TJ, 95).

¹²⁷ For a comparative discussion of the communicative presupposition of rationality and the Kantian view of autonomy see *TJ*, 93-99.

¹²⁸ In fact there are two distinct sets of reasons addressed by Kant, which correspond to the distinction he makes between “freedom of choice” (*Willkürfreiheit*) and “freedom of will” (*freie Wille*). This is in line with Kant’s definition of freedom in general as “an agent’s capacity to subordinate her will to maxims, that is, to orient her actions by rules whose concept she have mastered”. Accordingly, if they follow “rules of prudence or skill” which depend on inclinations and subjective ends, they exercise their “freedom of choice”. If they follow universalizable maxims imposed by the practical reason then they exercise their “free will”. Thus Kant has in view basically two types of reasons as determinative of will: technical-practical reasons and moral-practical reasons. See Habermas’ discussion of Kant in *TJ*, 95. In distinction from Kant, however, Habermas extends the range of reasons that count as “good reasons” for communicative action beyond the reasons of purposive rationality and moral reasons. Hence, as Habermas writes, “ethical orientations” could count as good reason in communicative action. This point has important bearings, I would argue, on the current debates regarding the cultural application of human rights, for instance. When one appeals to, say, “Asian values” in order to account for her interpretation of human rights, she cannot be seen as putting forward a faulty reason. Another example of good reason that Habermas explicitly offers is an “aesthetic experience”. So it seems that Habermas is pretty “liberal” with respect to what may count as good reason in communicative action. However, when it comes to religious reasons, Habermas adopts a rather restrictive position. As we shall see in the next chapter, he argues that there is an opaque core at the heart of religious experience that cannot be translated into good reasons. It follows from this, I would say, that a mystical experience, unlike an aesthetic experience, cannot count as good reason, unless translated. Although Habermas numbers “sincerity of a confession” among the reasons allowed, apparently he does not have in mind a confession of faith or of any religious experience but merely confessions of mundane every-day private experiences.

Like the Kantian idea of freedom, the communicative presupposition of accountability is *counterfactual*, as it is evident that people in everyday practice orient their actions by other things than good reasons and validity claims. However, because he dropped the premises of the “philosophy of the subject” (transcendental consciousness), Habermas, unlike Kant, cannot assume an *a priori* knowledge of this idea. Thus for Habermas “the supposition of rationality is a *defeasible* assumption and not *a priori* knowledge. It functions as multiple corroborated pragmatic presupposition that is constitutive of communicative action. But in any given instance, it can be falsified” (TJ, 97).

Here lies an important difference between the communicative-pragmatic presupposition of accountability and the presupposition of formal worlds discussed above. Whereas the formal projection of a totality of identifiable objects in general (the objective world) cannot be falsified or contradicted by the kinds of experiences that it makes possible, the presupposition of rationality can be falsified in the very practice that it makes possible. Basically we are dealing here with two different meanings of the (quasi) transcendental: “`unavoidable` presuppositions are apparently `constitutive` for *practices* in a different sense than they are for *object domains*” (TJ, 98).

c) The unconditionality of validity claims

When a speaker initiates a speech act she implicitly raises “validity claims”. Validity is analyzed by Habermas under three distinct aspects which connect with the formal system of the three worlds discussed above: when the speech act is initiated, if the ego and alter aim to reach understanding about something in the world of objective facts, *truth* is the main aspect of validity involved in their negotiation of the situation; if they aim to reach understanding about something in the symbolically structured world of social relations (made up of norms and values, basically) the main aspect of validity involved is that of “*normative rightness*”; and finally if they aim to reach understanding about something in the inner world of their subjective experiences, then “*truthfulness*” (authenticity) is the aspect of validity activated by their communicative interaction.

Habermas's enlarged notion of validity which extends beyond the epistemological concept of truth and incorporates social normativity and subjective expressiveness deserves a couple of further remarks.

First, this notion of validity is meant to back up Habermas's cognitivist view of morality. The validity of a moral norm, its "normative rightness", has a status that is *analogous* to the epistemic status of truth. This thesis is important for Habermas's rebuttal of all those who embrace the positivist claim that postmetaphysical reason (a reason which dropped any foundationalist pretence) can have no bearing on the assessment of norms and values. Habermas contends that moral norms are capable in principle of rational adjudication. This contention will become very important for Habermas's correction of Max Weber's diagnosis of modernity (as we shall see below).¹²⁹

Second, "truthfulness" is a validity claim distinct from that of "rightness" in that it is raised for the subjective experiences belonging to the inner world of the speaker. Unlike rightness, truthfulness bears no analogy to truth: the inner world cannot be "public" in the same way in which the world of objective facts and the world of legitimately regulated interpersonal relations can. Therefore the claim to "truthfulness" cannot be worthy of universal recognition (as the other two validity claims can). This aspect is important for the way in which Habermas treats the world-disclosing power of language, and artistic expression in general. It is also important for the distinction between morality and ethics that Habermas wants to maintain. He includes ethical conceptions of the good life alongside personal claims to authentic expression into the third cultural sphere of modernity, guided by the validity claim of "truthfulness". Whereas morality is concerned with those norms that capture a generalizable interest (what is equally good for everyone), ethics is concerned with what is good for me or for us (as a community with a shared set of substantive values and virtues, a shared *ethos*).¹³⁰

¹²⁹ For a discussion of Habermas's position see Hermann Lübbe "Are Norms Methodically Justifiable? A Reconstruction of Max Weber's Reply" in S. Benhabib and Fred Dallmayr eds. *The Communicative Ethics Controversy*, MIT Press, 1990, pp. 256-269.

¹³⁰ For a good discussion of Habermas's distinction between morality and ethics see T. McCarthy "Legitimacy and Diversity: Dialectical Reflections on Analytical Distinctions" in Michel Rosenfeld and Andrew Arato eds. *Habermas on Law and Democracy. Critical Exchanges*, University of California Press, 1998, pp.115-153.

d) The presuppositions of argumentation

In communicative action, which always takes place against the background of an intersubjectively shared *lifeworld*, validity claims are raised rather “naively” (TJ, 77), meaning that they are more or less taken for granted. The intersubjective nature of the *lifeworld* in which speakers always already find themselves exerts a powerful pressure to consensus. The shared network of convictions, beliefs and established practices that form the taken-for-granted background of our every-day communication assures that communicative interaction has a consensual outcome most of the time.

However, in the course of every-day communication a validity claim may become problematic in the sense that the offer made by the speaker (in the illocutionary part of her speech act) is met by a “No” and thus rejected by the hearer. In this case, when a validity claim becomes the object of problematization, interlocutors switch from communicative action to a different form of communication, namely “rational discourse”.

Now rational discourse, as Habermas conceives it, is a type of communication that escapes (to a certain degree) the contextual nature of the hermeneutical position in which speakers always find themselves. In rational discourse validity claims are tested under conditions which aim to assure independence from the “here” and “now” of our usual communication. Although the background knowledge embodied by the *lifeworld* can never be made into the subject of rational discourse as a whole, only segments of it can be tested, the possibility of rational testing of validity claims assures that one is never actually trapped inside her *lifeworld*.¹³¹ Thus Habermas claims that a

Habermas’s distinction between the just and the good has been critiqued by a number of important political philosophers from Charles Taylor to Alasdair MacIntyre.

¹³¹ Although Habermas adheres to the basic hermeneutic thesis of “meaning holism”, he denies the determinism of meaning that is implicit in this thesis. This point is important for Habermas’s rejection of Heidegger’s view of language for instance, and of all those who attach great importance to the world-disclosing power of language. A good discussion of Habermas’s take on “meaning holism” and the “world-disclosing” power of language is found in Cristina Lafont, *The Linguistic Turn in Hermeneutic Philosophy*, MIT Press, 1999. The “world-disclosing” power of language is also at stake in the debate between Habermas and Derrida - see my discussion of Habermas’s critique of

certain capacity for “self-transcendence” is built into the structures of rational discourse and rational discourse thus conceived allows him to deny the universality of hermeneutics as defended by Hans-Georg Gadamer.¹³²

According to Habermas, at the level of rational argumentation, where validity claims are rationally tested, a distinct set of presuppositions are unavoidably made by the actors engaged in this form of communication. The process of giving and asking of reasons relies on the following formal-pragmatic presuppositions: a) no one who could bring a relevant point into the conversation regarding a controversial validity claim should be excluded (publicity and inclusiveness); b) everyone must have equal rights in communication, for instance everyone must have the same opportunity to speak (equal rights to voice opinions); c) participants must mean what they say (lack of deception and illusion); d) communication must be free of restrictions (lack of restrictions).

As Habermas makes clear, a), b) and d) are the rules of *egalitarian universalism*.

Derrida in the first chapter. The basic point is that Habermas affirms a different order of priority than Heidegger or Derrida: the cognitive use of language geared towards solving problems takes precedence in Habermas over the world-disclosing (the poetic) use of language. I will go back to the issue in my discussion of Habermas’s recent project of “salvaging translation” from his recent writings.

¹³² The debate between Habermas and Gadamer focuses on this aspect of the universality of hermeneutics, Gadamer insisting on the historical situated character of all rational reflection. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem”, *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 1–20. Habermas “A Review of Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*” in F. Dallmayr and T. McCarthy (eds.) *Understanding and Social Inquiry*, (Notre Dame, 1977), pp.335-63. See also the section “The Problem of Understanding Meaning in the Social Sciences” in *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. I, pp.102-141. The secondary literature on the debate between Habermas and Gadamer is quite large. Interesting discussions can be found in Thomas McCarthy, “Rationality and Relativism. Habermas’s ‘Overcoming’ of Hermeneutics” in Thompson, John B. and David Held eds. *Habermas. Critical Debates*, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1982, 57-78; Fred Dallmayr “Life-World and Critique”, *Between Freiburg and Frankfurt*, Amherst MA, University of Massachusetts Press, 1991, pp. 13–24; Dieter Misgeld, “Discourse and Conversation: The theory of communicative competence and hermeneutics in the light of the debate between Habermas and Gadamer”, *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 4(4), 1977, pp. 321-344 and Misgeld, “Critical Theory and Hermeneutics: The Debate Between Gadamer and Habermas”, in J. O’Neil ed. *On Critical Theory* NY: Seabury Press, 1976, pp.164-184; Anthony Giddens, “Habermas’s Critique of Hermeneutics” in *Studies in Social and Political Theory*, London, 1997; Austin Harrington, *Hermeneutic Dialogue and Social Science: A critique of Gadamer and Habermas*, Routledge, 2001; Robert Piercy, “Ricouer’s account of Tradition and the Gadamer-Habermas Dialogue” *Human Studies*, 2004, 27(3), pp. 259-280; David Ingram, “The Possibility of a communication ethic reconsidered: Habermas, Gadamer and Bourdieu on discourse”, *Man and World*, 1982, 15(2), pp. 149-161; Richard J. Bernstein, “What is the difference that makes a difference? Gadamer, Habermas, and Rorty” *PSA: Proceedings of the Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association*, 1982, pp. 331-359; Georgia Warnke, “The Hermeneutic Circle versus Dialogue”, *Review of Metaphysics*, 65(1), 2011, 91-112.

In the case of argumentation about the validity of moral norms (the moral-practical discourse) these rules of egalitarian universalism generates the following principle of universalization (U):¹³³ “All affected can accept the consequences and the side effects its *general* observance can be anticipated to have for the satisfaction of *everyone’s* interests (and these consequences are preferred to those of known alternative possibilities for regulation)”.¹³⁴

The principle of universalization (U) governs Habermas’s moral theory, what he calls the “discourse ethics”. I will have the chance to say more about the “ethics of discourse” in my next chapters. Now however I would like to turn my attention to the justification that Habermas puts forth for the program of “formal pragmatics” (and for the communicative view of reason at the centre of it) because this will help me shift my analysis in the direction of the important thesis that I want to consider in the remaining part of the chapter, namely that “communicative reason” represents a “linguistification” of the sacred.

¹³³ MCCA, 65. The principle of universalization U is the formal-pragmatic analogue of the Kantian categorical imperative. On the basis of the same rules of reason Habermas also introduces the principle of discourse D: “Only those norms can claim to be valid that meet (or could meet) with the approval of all affected in their capacity *as participants in a practical discourse*” (MCCA, 66). The exact nature of the relationship between D and U has been source of contention. I follow Habermas’s own lead in *BFN* and take D as the principle that regulates rational discourse in general, whereas U refers specifically to moral discourse. This interpretation also finds explicit support in a text from 2005: see Habermas “The Architectonic of Discursive Differentiation” in *BNR*. However, like Seyla Benhabib and Maeve Cooke, I think that U introduces an unnecessary consequentialist dimension in Habermas’s (predominantly) neo-Kantian deontological theory of morality and that, in fact, the principle D does all the work necessary for a good defense of discourse ethics. See S. Benhabib “Afterword” to *The Communicative Ethics Controversy* ed. Benhabib and Dallmayr, MIT Press, 1990 and Maeve Cooke “Habermas, Feminism and the Question of Autonomy” in *Habermas. A Critical Reader*, ed. Peter Dews, Blackwell, 1999, note 55 on page 208.

¹³⁴ Habermas did not put much effort in the derivation of U from the presuppositions of argumentation, which is rather weak. After all it is not clear why a moral principle constructed on the basis of argumentation should also hold and be applicable outside a situation of this kind, i.e. when participants leave the situation of argumentation. William Rehg in his study *Insight and Solidarity. A Study in the Discourse Ethics of Jürgen Habermas* (1994) addresses this weakness and tries to offer arguments in favor of the derivation of U from the presuppositions of argumentation. See also William Rehg “Discourse Ethics” in Barbara Fultner ed. *Jürgen Habermas. Key Concepts*, Acumen, 2011, pp. 115-139. A good discussion in David M. Rasmussen *Reading Habermas*, Blackwell, 1990, chapter 4: “Discourse Ethics”, pp.56-74. For discussions of “discourse ethics” in relation to civil society and democracy see Simone Chambers “Discourse and Democratic Practices” in Stephen K. White ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Habermas*, Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 233-262 and Jean Cohen “Discourse Ethics and Civil Society” in David Rasmussen ed. *Universalism versus Communitarianism*, MIT Press, 1990, pp.83-108.

3.4 “Communicative reason” and “postmetaphysical” modernity

We have now the full picture of Habermas’s “formal pragmatics”. Before I go further, I would like to make a few (very brief) remarks on the relevance of “formal pragmatics” for the “dialectic of Enlightenment”, the topic I discussed in the previous chapter, and underscore the role played by “formal pragmatics” in modernity’s *aporetic* attempt at normative self-grounding.

The program of “formal pragmatics” reveals a very important aspect of Habermas’s view of “communicative reason”. Reason preserves a *procedural unity* across different value spheres. The formal features of the process of intersubjectively (argumentative) redeeming of a validity claim as reconstructed by Habermas are equally operative in all three types of rational discourses (scientific, legal-moral and aesthetic). If we want to tie this discussion to the cluster of problems discussed in the previous chapter, then we should point out that this is Habermas’s response to the problem of reconciliation of modernity’s differentiations that Hegel raised against Kant. Habermas’s concept of “communicative reason” would closely correspond to Hegel’s concept of “ethical life”; however for a full picture of this formal-pragmatic re-working of Hegel’s “ethical life” in Habermas’s theory, the formal features embodied by the Ideal Speech Situation must be supplemented by Habermas’s view of “rationalized lifeworld”¹³⁵ - I will discuss this view in my next chapter.

Moreover, according to Habermas, the unity realized by the intersubjective redeeming of validity claims is no longer vulnerable to post-Nietzschean critical challenge that modern rationalism is based on a forceful unification of the universal and particular and it is therefore oppressive. The only “force” that is present in this universal view of communicative reason is the “unforced” force of the better reason/argument. Reconciliation in Habermas does not rely anymore on “the philosophy of the subject” and it is based on procedural unity of the process of exchanging

¹³⁵ For a good analysis of this concept in Habermas see Simone Chambers *Reasonable Democracy: Jürgen Habermas and the Politics of Discourse*. Cornell University Press, 1996.

reasons and on the *un-coercing* force of the better argument; Habermas can thus claim that this reconciliatory view can no longer be viewed as oppressive, but emancipatory and liberating.¹³⁶

Moreover, the “formal pragmatics”, although it is meant to offer a sound foundation for critique and social theory, is no longer a foundationalist program. The moment of “unconditionality” retained by the discursive redemption of the validity claims allows us to distinguish between *de facto* agreement and rational consensus and thus it allows us to uphold the distinction between facts and norms and ultimately to criticize distorted communication and reification. But this moment of “unconditionality” is held on fallible premises. There is no *Letztbegründung* in Habermas.

This claim however invites the important question: what kind of justification for the program of formal-pragmatics can Habermas offer? In this section I would like to answer this question and move my analysis in the direction of Habermas’s social theory. I will discuss Habermas’s engagement with social theory and religion, which will give me the chance to discuss the important role “communicative reason” plays in Habermas’s thesis of “linguistification of the sacred”.

So what kind of philosophical justification can Habermas provide for the program of “formal pragmatics”? It is clear that Habermas’s justificatory strategy cannot rely on a transcendental deduction, the Kantian way.¹³⁷ Under postmetaphysical conditions a transcendental foundation is not an option anymore. Hence the properties of “necessity” and “universality”, which Kantian transcendental consciousness guaranteed for its categories, are weakened by Habermas. Unlike the Kantian conditions of possibility of knowledge in general, the formal-pragmatic

¹³⁶ For a critique of this point see Amy Allen’s essay “The Unforced Force of the Better Argument: Reason and Power in Habermas’ Political Theory”. *Constellations*, 19, no.3 (2012): 353-368.

¹³⁷ As we have seen, Habermas’s “formal pragmatics” bears a certain structural similarity with Kant’s critical philosophy in that “formal pragmatics” identifies the unavoidable conditions of possibility of understanding in language in a manner reminiscent of Kant’s attempt at identifying the universal and necessary conditions of possibility of cognition. Nevertheless “formal pragmatics” has to give up the figure of thought on which the whole Kantian philosophy depends: namely the structure of subjective consciousness. In fact it has to abandon all foundational tropes which rely on the metaphysical support of the “philosophy of the subject” and its “usher” view of the role of philosophy (in which philosophy assumes the task of demarcating the domains of knowledge and thus showing sciences their proper place). Such view belongs to the (metaphysical) part of the heritage of the Western philosophical thought which the transition to a “postmetaphysical” age has render untenable.

presuppositions of communication cannot claim “necessity”. As Habermas contends, they can assume merely an “unavoidable” character, that is: “we cannot imagine it being otherwise” (see for instance *TJ*, 220). By virtue of this unavoidability (their “quasi-transcendental” status) they retain however universality.

If transcendental foundational strategies are not an option anymore, that should not be taken to imply that the presuppositions of communication lack justification completely. A weaker form of justification is offered by Habermas in the form of what he calls a “performative contradiction”: every time an opponent tries to reject these presuppositions she must offer some kind of reasons for this rejection and thus she unavoidably relies on the very presuppositions of communication she wants to reject.¹³⁸ In other words, part of Habermas’s strategy is to show that the shoe is really on the other foot: it is less a matter of the Kantian pragmatist (Habermas) trying to provide an irrefutable justification for these presupposition and more a matter of the opponent being challenged to refute them, which she cannot actually do without contradicting herself.

But we do not need to put too much stress on the “performative contradiction” argument. The formal-pragmatic program can be justified and rendered plausible not only *via negativa* (based on the difficulty of its refutation) but also in a positive way, on the basis of empirical confirmation. As I have already mentioned in the previous section, “formal pragmatics” needs empirical corroboration because under “postmetaphysical” conditions *any* foundational program may claim only hypothetical status. Any such program has to be understood as *fallible* and therefore its plausibility depends on being put to test.¹³⁹

¹³⁸ “Performative contradiction” is a concept discussed by Jikko Hintikka and used by Karl-Otto Appel in his defence of the transcendental program of formal pragmatic. Habermas appeals to Appel’s use of this concept and directs it against postmodern critics. A good discussion of this problem can be found in Martin Jay “The Debate over Performative Contradiction: Habermas versus the Poststructuralists” in Axel Honneth and all, *Philosophical Interventions in the Unfinished Project of Enlightenment*, MIT Press, 1992, pp. 261-279.

¹³⁹ The same applies, of course, to “formal pragmatics” which Habermas takes to provide sound foundation for social theory, as we shall see shortly. It must be noted here however the objections to Habermas’s use of fallibilism in his strategy of grounding raised by Karl-Otto Apel, a lifelong collaborator and friend of Habermas. The two have developed together the program of detranscendentalization of Kantian philosophy through a turn to language, but they part ways exactly on the issue of the foundational status of the “formal pragmatics”. Apel’s point is that sound foundations for social theory, and by extension for the normative content of modernity, cannot be offered on fallible premises. Thus “formal pragmatics”, in order to accomplish what it set out to do, must assume a fully foundational role, similar to the foundational role the Kantian conditions of possibility played in epistemology. See for instance Karl-Otto Apel “Normatively Grounding ‘Critical Theory’ through recourse to the *Lifeworld?* A Transcendental-

According to Habermas, there are a couple of ways to test the plausibility of “formal pragmatics”, as well as that of the concept of “communicative reason” which emerges out of it. First, as he writes, the presuppositions of understanding reconstructed by the “formal pragmatics” in a hypothetical way “must... be capable of being checked against speakers’ intuitions, scattered across as broad a sociocultural spectrum as possible” (TCA1, 138). Second, the plausibility of “formal pragmatics” depends on assessing its “empirical usefulness”.¹⁴⁰

However, there is a third way of rendering the hypothetical reconstruction of the “formal pragmatics” plausible. This alternative is attractive to Habermas because it is more congenial to a political and social theorist. Habermas looks at “the sociological approaches to a theory of societal rationalization”, and argues that “the more freely” a social theory informed by the concept of communicative reason “can take up, explain, criticize and carry on the intentions of earlier theory traditions, the more impervious it is to the danger that particular interests are being brought to bear unnoticed in its own theoretical perspective”. Hence, as Habermas writes, for any social theory “linking up with the history of theory is also a kind of test” (TCA1, 140).

Pragmatic Attempt to Think with Habermas against Habermas”. In *Philosophical Interventions in the Unfinished Project of Enlightenment*, ed. by Axel Honneth and all, trans. by William Rehg. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992, 125-170. For a good discussion of Habermas in relation to Apel see Uwe Steinhof, *The Philosophy of Jürgen Habermas. A Critical Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2009. Habermas however remains reluctant to go Kantian all the way and embrace Apel’s foundational position. See for instance what he says in response to Apel in “Discourse Ethics: Notes on Philosophical Justification” in *Communicative Ethics Controversy*, edited by Seyla Benhabib and Fred Dallmayr, MIT, 1990, 93-95. He also takes issue with Apel in “Remarks on Discourse Ethics” in *Justification and Applications*, MIT Press, 1994, 19-111, especially pp. 76ff. I hope my discussion in the previous chapter made abundantly clear why Habermas refuses to present “formal pragmatics” as ultimate justification (*Letztbegründung*). He agrees with the postmodern argument that philosophical foundationalism generates oppressive social and political projects.

¹⁴⁰ According to Habermas, three areas of empirical research seems to be relevant here: a) the investigations regarding the patterns of systematically distorted communication (based on material “gathered primarily in pathogenic families from a clinical point of view”); b) the field of anthropogenesis; and c) the investigations in the field of developmental psychology with regard to “the acquisition of communicative and interactive capabilities” (TCA1, 139). It should be noted here that Habermas, appealing to empirical corroboration, may have placed himself in a difficult situation: how could empirical findings possibly validate (or corroborate) what is in essence a counterfactual program? This is a legitimate question and I thank here Ronald Beiner for pressing me on this. There is an additional problem with this argument: any process of corroboration, validation on the basis of empirical research has to take place through an exchange of reasons, through dialogue and rational discourse. Which means, in fact, that the counterfactual idealizations are present in the very process whereby they are supposed to be validated. Habermas’s argument seems to be thoroughly circular. In order to further defend this argument one should probably appeal to a distinction between good circles vs bad (or vicious) circles.

In view of these considerations, Habermas's strategy to increase the plausibility of "communicative reason" consists in taking up "conceptual strategies, assumptions and lines of arguments from Weber to Parsons with the systematic aim of laying out the problems that can be solved by means of a theory of rationalization developed in terms of the basic concept of communicative action" (TCA1, 139-140).

In this section 3.4 I will focus only on this Habermasian strategy of testing the concept of "communicative reason". After a brief discussion of Max Weber's account of modernization (3.4.1), which remains a basic point of reference for Habermas's theory of modernity, I will show how the concept of "communicative reason" can be used as a corrective to Weber's theory (3.4.2). This allows me to introduce Habermas's own interpretation of the process of modernization based on the distinction between "system" and "lifeworld". This distinction plays a central role in Habermas's response to Western Marxism's critique of modernization as reification and thus in his attempt to reconfigure the whole tradition of historical materialism.¹⁴¹ In the last section of this chapter (3.5) I will discuss Habermas's thesis that modernization takes the meaning of a "linguistification of the sacred".

¹⁴¹ This reconfiguration of historical materialism is Habermas's response to the third problem of the legacy bequeathed by metaphysics discussed by me in the previous chapter: the relation between theory and praxis. On the one side, materialism cannot play the subordinate role assigned to it by traditional metaphysics and Habermas adheres to Marxist aspiration that the world has to be changed and not only interpreted (which is to say that the material conditions of life must be changed and not only reconciled in thought); on the other side, the Marxist type of materialism runs into the objectification (or reification) problem and thus it cannot realize its emancipatory potential. Habermas reconfigures historical materialism in the direction of a marriage between Kantianism and Darwinism. He calls this philosophical project "soft naturalism". I will say more about this in my next chapter.

3.4.1 Max Weber's theory of modernization

Weber's theory of modernization "still holds out", Habermas writes, "the best prospect of explaining the social pathologies that appeared in the wake of capitalist modernization" (TCA2, 303).¹⁴² It is with respect to these specifically modern "pathologies" that the concept of communicative reason is highly relevant. I would like to briefly explore here what Weber meant by "modernization".

Weber understands the emergence of modern society as the last segment of a larger, "world-historical" process of "rationalization"¹⁴³ of religion. This process has two stages.

The first stage is that of "cultural rationalization" which is characterized by the emergence of three independent "value spheres" (science, morality and art), on the one side, and of new attitudes toward the world (or new "structures of consciousness"), on the other side. The process of "cultural rationalization" is coextensive with a growing "disenchantment" of the world (beginning with disenchantment of mythical thought).

The second stage is the stage of "societal rationalization" (or modernization proper), where the new "structures of consciousness" made possible by the "cultural rationalization" of religious

¹⁴² "Neither of the principal components of Weber's diagnosis of the times [lack of meaning and lack of freedom] has become any less relevant in the six or seven decades since he formulated them" (TCA2, 301).

¹⁴³ Weber places the emergence of modern society (the modern bureaucratic state and capitalist economy) in the context of a much larger process, a "universal-historic process of rationalization" of religious worldviews, as he puts it. The comparative study of religion undertaken by Weber led him to believe that this process unfolds in all world religions in the same direction. It results however in the emergence of the modern state and capitalism *only* in the Western world, due to a combination of "internal" and "external" conditions. Although Weber himself has been reluctant to embrace a universalist position (which holds that Western rationalism and secularization are universal and not merely the product of local, Western conditions), Habermas argues that the way Weber reconstructs the process of rationalization – also as a *logico-developmental* process and not merely the product of external, empirical and sociological factors – weds him to universalism. See TCA1 pp.178-185. I will discuss to some extent the logico-developmental dimension of Habermas's theory of progress in my next chapter.

worldviews are “institutionalized” in the two rational¹⁴⁴ “orders of life” of the bureaucratic state and capitalist economy.

Let me lay out in more detail what these two stages entail so that I can introduce Weber’s diagnosis of modernity, and then discuss the corrective role “communicative reason” is supposed to play, according to Habermas; finally I will discuss some of the consequences that follow from the Habermasian appropriation of Weber’s theory of modernization.

The first stage of “cultural rationalization” brings changes at the level of culture and at the level of personality¹⁴⁵ (this is what is meant by new “structures of consciousness”), whereas the stage of “societal rationalization” reflects changes at the level of society.

With respect to the structural aspects of “cultural rationalization” Habermas notes the break with magical thought introduced by the great religious worldviews. In all great religions that Weber studied, rationalization begins with the theme of undeserved suffering. Raising the suffering of the just as a problem, all great religions introduced the distinction between “is” and “ought”, between “appearance” and “essence” or, in Habermas’s words, between “the empirically ‘given’” and “the normatively ‘valid’” (TCA1, 175). The is/ought distinction departs from mythical thought because breaks away with “the fixation on the surface of concrete phenomena that is anchored in myth” (TCA1, 213); this distinction makes possible the conceptual category of “the world” as the totality of appearances or empirical phenomena, a totality that is distinct from what underlies these phenomena, that is their essence, or their grounding principle.

This (metaphysical-religious) concept of the “world”, as Habermas notes, is not (yet) the decentered and formal world-concept that modernity operates with (TCA1, 206) because the religious-metaphysical concept of the “world” still blends together cognitive, normative and aesthetic aspects. We deal here with the concept of a “concrete world order” that “relates the

¹⁴⁴ Weber applies the term “rational” here because, as he makes clear, the modern state is geared towards rational administration. Likewise the capitalist enterprise is geared towards rational economic action. Modern “formal law” regulates the interactions between these two “action-systems”, which mutually reinforce and stabilize one another.

¹⁴⁵ In his discussion of Weber, Habermas uses a distinction which has gained wide currency in social theory since Talcott Parsons, that between “culture”, “society” and “personality”. For instance, when Weber talks about the emergence of modern “structures of consciousness”, Habermas takes that to refer to changes at the level of “culture” and “personality”.

multiplicity of appearances... to a point of unity”, the divine, where “is” and “ought” are united. Nonetheless, in distinction from mythical thinking, in the religious-metaphysical framework “the world” is devalued and put at a certain distance from its ground.¹⁴⁶ Seen from a structural point of view, all great world religions *objectivate* the “world” in that they place it at a certain distance from what grounds it, and therefore this concept represents a great step forward in the transition to modernity.

Weber has a name for this objectivation of the world, he calls it “disenchantment”. The more rationalized a worldview is, the more disenchanted this view of the world becomes. In its final stage (reached in the modern Western world), “cultural rationalization” brings about a totally disenchanted concept of the world in which the three aspects of validity: the cognitive, the moral and the aesthetic, are differentiated out from one another and cut adrift from the transcendental anchoring in a divine reality.¹⁴⁷

Thus for Weber the defining aspect of “cultural rationalization” is the emergence and subsequent stabilization of what he calls (in good neo-Kantian fashion) three “value spheres”: the spheres of science, morality and law, and art, each organized around one of the three validity aspects just mentioned and each with its own “autonomous logic”.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ This ground is conceived either as “historically fleeting earthly realm in relation to a transcendent Lord of Creation” or as a “merely phenomenal foreground in relation to the essential ground of all things”, as Habermas puts it (TCA1, 203).

¹⁴⁷ The potential for cultural rationalization is higher in some religions than in others, although all religions, insofar as they try to explain the suffering of the just person (insofar as they propose a theodicy), follow the path of cultural rationalization. For instance the combination between a transcendent Lord of creation and a negative view of the world is the most conducive to cultural rationalization or “disenchantment” of the world. And it is exactly this combination that one finds in the Western world. It is important to note however that Weber’s discussion distinguishes between internal and external factors of the process of rationalization; the *internal* factors represent the rational possibilities that arise with a particular understanding of divinity and its relation with the world. These internal factors determine the range of what is possible as direction of rationalization (Habermas refers to the emergence of the spectrum of possibilities as the “logical-developmental” factor). However the actual path of rationalization a particular religion takes depends also on *external* factors such as the specific interests of the “carrier strata”, how homogenous is a population, the conflict (or absence thereof) between church and state, etc. (Habermas refers to this as the “historical-contingent” factor).

¹⁴⁸ Weber takes the “inner logics” of these value spheres to mean that they are amenable to independent rational and cumulative progress. Progress in the sphere of science can take place independent from progress in the moral and legal sphere, for instance.

As Habermas points out, Max Weber is particularly interested in the emergence of the *moral* value sphere, what he calls “ethical rationalization” (*Ethisierung*), because here he sees the key factor that explains modernization of the Western society at the societal level. “Societal rationalization” is the second stage of the historical process of progressive rationalization that Weber takes to be developing in all great world religions and it encompasses the rise of the modern bureaucratic state and modern capitalist economy. These two central developments of the modern world (bureaucracy and capitalism) would not have been possible without the prior rationalization of culture and in particular the moral sphere. Moral rationalization (or disenchantment) for Weber is the key factor contributing to the rise of state bureaucracy and capitalism. Why is this so?

In general terms, the narrative Weber offers is that changes at the level of culture and personality effected by the process of cultural rationalization are transferred (institutionalized) at the level of society. In a more precise sense, Weber articulates a quite complex view of how ideas and material interests interpenetrate¹⁴⁹ and how ideas (values) are “realized” in the “life orders” (social systems) of society, thus making them legitimate. I cannot here even begin to do justice to this view and therefore I will limit myself to a couple of remarks that I find absolutely necessary for understanding Habermas’s own interpretation of the modern state and capitalist economy.

First, Weber emphasizes the importance of motivational aspects in the process of transferring modern cultural changes into societal changes. Second, he underscores the conflict among the three “value spheres” engendered by cultural rationalization. Third, he draws attention to the “paradox” of modernity: rationalization of society leads to a generalized “lack of meaning” and “lack of freedom”. This theme will surface again in the Western Marxist appropriation of Weber under the category of “reification”, as we shall see below. In all these three areas Habermas wants to think with Weber in order to take us beyond Weber.

¹⁴⁹ In explaining innovation and social change Weber takes ideas and interests to be equiprimordial. In the famous passage from the introduction to “The Economic Ethics of World Religions” Weber implicitly rejects Marx’s interpretation of ideas as mere reflections of economic interests. “Not ideas, but material and ideal interests directly govern men’s conduct. Yet very frequently the “world images” created by “ideas” have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest”. *From Max Weber* ed. by Gerth and Mills, p. 208; this passage is also quoted by Habermas in TCA1, 193.

By focusing on the rationalization of the moral “value sphere”, Weber thought that he was able to retrieve the motivational basis for the emergence of capitalism and modern bureaucratic state (the main institutional expressions of the process of societal rationalization). Disenchantment of the world in the moral sphere manifests itself in a departure from the ethics of “universal brotherhood” (specific to traditional Christianity) and the emergence of an “ethics of conviction” - distinguished by the fact that it is based on principles and it is universalistic (TCA1, 162)). The new “ethics of conviction” then penetrates from the level of culture to the level of individuals’ value orientations and behavioral dispositions (the level of personality) (TCA1, 164). Thus the “ethics of conviction” is mirrored in that “methodical conduct of life” which Max Weber famously illustrated in connection with the ideas of Calvinists, Pietists, Methodists and the Anabaptist sects.

It is important to understand that, in Weber’s rendition of this process, both the rational “ethics of conviction” and the “methodical conduct of life” are anchored in the religious quest for salvation of the soul.¹⁵⁰ It is this religious foundation that explains the tremendous force with which the methodical conduct of life was able to penetrate all aspects of life. The rigorous, principled, rationally controlled conduct of life, the relentless isolation of the individual believer who toils in his vocation, the innerworldly asceticism of his continuous labour, all these features of the devout life are interpreted as signs the faithful need in order to assure themselves of salvation.

For my present discussion, however, it is important to note that regardless of the initial soteriological motivations, the most important (unintended) result of the innerworldly asceticism characteristic of many Protestant groups according to Weber is that it gradually led to the

¹⁵⁰ Weber discusses what he calls the Protestant doctrine of calling: by rejecting sacraments and other outward signs of the elect, the faithful must continuously test his ethical conviction, must continuously prove himself before God. The ethical discipline of a methodical and rational conduct of life is the way of proving himself before God. Weber shows how the removal of the Catholic practice of confession of sins resulted in a “tremendous internal pressure under which the sect member in his conduct was constantly held”. This pressure explains the inner-worldly form of asceticism of which “the Puritan sects are the most specific bearers”. As Weber notes: “it is not the ethical *doctrine* of a religion, but that form of ethical conduct upon which *premiums* are placed that matters. Such premiums operate through the form and the condition of the respective goods of salvation.... For Puritanism, that conduct was a certain methodical, rational way of life which – given certain conditions – paved the way for the “spirit” of modern capitalism”. Max Weber “The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism” in *From Max Weber*, Gerth and Mills eds, p.321.

organization of *all* social relations along rational and functional lines. Innerworldly asceticism thus assured the spread of purposive-rational action orientations in *all* areas of life and this had significant consequences for the economic and administrative areas of life. According to Weber, the quest for salvation of the soul and the inner-worldly asceticism that this quest engendered within Protestantism provided a strong motivational basis for the rise of the modern capitalist economy and the bureaucratic state. The transfer from the cultural level “rationalization” (disenchantment/objectification of the world) to the societal level “rationalization” (the rise of bureaucracy and capitalism) cannot be fully understood in the Weberian narrative without understanding the role this motivational basis plays.

However, the story Max Weber wants to tell does not end here, as he also draws attention to what he calls the “paradox” of modernization.¹⁵¹ And it is in relation to this aspect that the discussion becomes highly relevant for my purpose in this chapter. According to Weber, the religious motivational basis that he identified in the Protestant “ethic of conviction” was necessary only for the *emergence* of capitalism and state administration, in that it provided the initial conditions for the rationalization of society. The *stabilization* of societal rationalization, however, does not need the religious foundation anymore. Actually, in the long run, capitalism and state administration *turn against* the religiously inspired “ethic of conviction” which made them possible. To put this in Weber’s own terms, although the Protestant ethic of calling made possible the spread of purposive-rational action in all compartments of life in a value-rational way, over time “value-rationality” recedes while the “purpose-rationality” becomes ubiquitous and justifies itself purely in utilitarian terms.

¹⁵¹ I have used the formula “the paradox of modernity” in the previous chapter where I discussed Hegel’s and Marx’s attempts to reconcile the differentiations introduced by Kant. In that discussion “the paradox of modernity” referred to the philosophical attempt at grounding modernity out of its own resources. The meaning of this expression in Weber is however slightly different. He wants to point out that reason’s differentiation in value spheres leads to necessary conflicts between these spheres and thus modern reason, insofar as it depends on this differentiation, is self-destructive. It is this meaning that is further elaborated and worked upon by Adorno and Horkheimer in their brilliant *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in my view one of the best books written in the 20th century. It is interesting that Habermas puts forward the concept of “communicative reason” in order to correct the Weberian view of modernity and to counteract the dark pessimism of Adorno. However, as I will try to make clear in my next chapter I interpret Habermas’s recent turn to religion (in a “post-secular society”) as a tacit admission that “communicative reason” is too weak for this task. It needs the support of much stronger resources of meaning - like the ones preserved in religion. An interesting question is why Habermas does not go in the direction of artistic creation, like Adorno did, to find relevant resources of meaning and why he chooses instead to return to the metaphysical world of religious tradition.

So where exactly does the paradox of “modernity” that Weber talks about lie? The paradox consists in the fact that the very differentiation of the value spheres that elevated modern reason out of the metaphysical-religious worldviews carries the seeds of reason’s own destruction, or at least reason’s claim to universality. *For Weber the gradual differentiation of the three value spheres (science, morality and art) is necessarily accompanied by a growing conflict between their “inner logics”*. Hence ethical rationalization comes in direct collision with the rationalization of the other two cultural spheres: progress in the scientific sphere as well as the emergence of hedonist lifestyles, directly undermines the religious ethics of conviction. To put this in a nutshell, secularization of society will gradually replace religion with scientism and hedonism.

In view of the inherent conflict built into the very differentiation of cultural modernity, Weber advances a diagnosis of modernity dominated by a deeply disheartening pessimism: the rationalization of society, insofar as it is coextensive with secularization (the disintegration of the religious foundations of ethics under the twin pressures of instrumental reason and hedonistic lifestyle), will lead to a generalized “lack of meaning”. Loss of meaning (or modernity’s nihilism) is correlated with modernity’s polytheism of ultimate values which stems from reason’s fragmentation; as Habermas puts this Weberian point: “reason splits itself up into a plurality of value spheres and destroy its universality” (TCA1, 247).

Rationalization of society will also gradually lead to a generalized instrumentalization of individuals, to a push towards total administrative domination, and therefore to a generalized “lack of freedom”.¹⁵²

¹⁵² Weber talks about the “shell of bondage which men will perhaps be forced to inhabit someday, as powerless as the fellahs of an ancient Egypt. This could happen if a technically superior administration were to be the ultimate and sole value in the ordering of their affairs, and that means: a rational bureaucratic administration with the corresponding welfare benefits” (Weber *Economy and Society* ed. G. Roth and C Wittich, 1968, p. 1402, quoted by Habermas, TCA2, 428). In one of today’s news headlines I stumbled upon a frightful illustration of Weber’s premonition: a Belgian IT firm wants to implant its employees with microchips, so that their working efficiency can be better tracked; <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-4203148/Company-offers-RFID-microchip-implants-replace-ID-cards.html>, accessed February 10, 2017.

3.4.2 Habermas's correction of Weber

Habermas adopts the Weberian genetic structure of the process of modernization as cultural disenchantment followed by societal rationalization. Thus, he basically accepts Weber's analysis of modernity in terms of differentiation of three value spheres, the emergence of decentered (or post-traditional) structures of consciousness and the dominance of bureaucracy and capitalist economy in modern society. Habermas however disagrees with Weber's diagnosis of modernization as leading to a generalized "lack of meaning" and "lack of freedom". It is exactly here that the concept of "communicative reason" proves its analytical usefulness. Habermas uses the concept of "communicative reason" to correct the grim Weberian diagnosis of modernity and this remedial narrative serves, according to Habermas, as an (indirect) verification of this concept of reason and the program of formal pragmatics.

Habermas has another compelling reason to counteract Weber's view of modernity, and that is the fact that this view has decisively influenced Western Marxist thinkers like Horkheimer and Adorno and thus the tradition of "critical theory" to which Habermas himself belongs. So we have here a strange alliance: both from an "idealist" intellectual lineage (Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida) and from a "materialist" one (Lukács, Adorno, Horkheimer), the same dismal view of modernity emerges. Insofar as Habermas has put a lot of effort into rejecting the "idealist" critique of modernity, he must also give an answer to the same critique this time, however, as it is articulated within the neo-Marxist tradition.

Adorno and Horkheimer read Weber through the lens of György Lukács's theory of "reification of consciousness".¹⁵³ Lukács tied "reification of consciousness" to class differentiation and class

¹⁵³ Lukács connects Marx's political economy with Weber's theory of modernization. The subsumption of "living labour" under "dead labour", and the commodification of all labour relations, as depicted by Marx, are used by Lukács to derive a "form of objectivity" (an objectivistic deformation of subjectivity generally which can also be understood as "reification of consciousness") which determines all subjective relations of the bourgeois society, those among capitalist strata no less than those among working class. On this new view, the proletariat remains privileged only in the sense of still having "the possibility of recognizing the cause of alienation, namely, the subsumption of life-relations under the commodity form" (TCA2, 332). Lukács traced this general reification of all aspects of life to the emergence of the class struggle between capitalists and proletarians at the beginning of modernization. The direct implication of this view is that, for him, the removal of class struggle – in socialism – holds the prospect of liberation from reification. After the horrors of Stalinism, understandably, Adorno,

exploitation. However, Horkheimer and Adorno no longer anchor reification in class dynamics.¹⁵⁴ They follow Weber in that they link reification with the modern expansion of “purposive-rationality” in all spheres of life, an expansion specific to modernity as such and not only to one aspect of it – class differentiation. Hence they also accept Weber’s prediction that a socialist revolution (which abolishes class differences) will not be able to reverse modernization’s trend towards an “iron cage” society. Adorno’s critique of “instrumental reason” presents modern rational (capitalist or socialist) society as a reified, dystopic, totally administered society.¹⁵⁵

But this diagnosis cannot be accepted by Habermas, mainly because it blunts and ultimately denies the emancipatory impulse of critical theory, and his reflections on the “pathologies” of modernity must be regarded as a critical reaction to Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s view of modernity. However, it is clear that any genuine response to Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s view of modernization as reification must reckon with Weber’s diagnosis of modernity on which this view is based. In order to make sense of the “pathologies” of modernity, Habermas argues, we have to go back to Max Weber.

While Habermas preserves the overall framework of Weber’s view of modernization *qua* rationalization as having two stages, the argument he wants to press is that Weber’s rendition of the transition from stage 1 (cultural rationalization) to stage 2 (societal rationalization) is too narrow. In other words, Habermas argues that the structural possibilities opened up by stage 1 are only *selectively* realized in stage 2. Modern capitalist economy and modern state bureaucracy

Horkheimer and the other Frankfurters are no longer attracted by this view. This explains why they return to Max Weber: it is not really socialism or capitalism which are responsible for reification, the cause is much deeper and must be located in the the genetic code of modernity as it were, i.e. in the rationalization process of modernization.

¹⁵⁴ For a very good discussion of this problem see Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science. An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno*, Verso, 2014, especially chapter 3: “The Lament over Reification”, pp. 35-66.

¹⁵⁵ As Karl Löwith notes, for Weber hope for moments of spontaneity against such a nightmarish, totally controlled society, once we drop the prospect of deliverance by way of socialist revolution, relies on the existence of some exceptional men who can create meaning in a higher degree (Löwith, *Max Weber and Karl Marx*, Routledge, 1964). This is Nietzschean influence on Weber. For Adorno hope is rooted in what he calls the “mimetic” power of art and love. For other early Frankfurt School thinkers, like Benjamin for instance, hope may come in the form of “remembrance” which he explicitly traced to the importance of memory in the Jewish religious tradition. In general these thinkers were not insensitive to the power of religious images of fulfilled life. I will pick up again this topic in my chapter on hope (chapter 5). It is characteristic of Habermas that he sees all this as slip into irrationalism: Adorno’s concept of “mimesis” appeals to “irrational powers” (TCA2, 333).

are only selective institutional actualizations of the process of cultural rationalization and do not exhaust the full range of the process of rationalization.

Habermas's thesis is that Weber's analysis of the emergence of capitalism and bureaucracy does not exhaust the systematic thrust of his theory of modernization. It is very difficult however to rescue the systematic scope of Weber's view from a selective interpretation unless one uses improved conceptual tools. According to Habermas, the Weberian analysis of modernity is encumbered by some methodological shortcomings and these limitations explain why Weber was unable to conceive of bureaucracy and capitalism as only partial institutionalizations of cultural modernity.

Habermas concentrates on two basic methodological shortcomings. The first is discernible in relation to Weber's concept of "rationality" while the second can be seen in his use of the concepts of "meaning" and "meaning understanding".

The first methodological shortcoming, Habermas argues, can be fixed with the help of "systems theory" as developed by the American sociologist Talcott Parsons. From Parsons Habermas borrows the concept of a "self-regulating" (autonomous) social system that possess its own "steering capacity" and can be distinguished by functional criteria.¹⁵⁶ Habermas thus insists on discriminating between rationality of action and rationality of system. The latter has a larger and more impersonal ambit: the imperatives of the system "override the consciousness of the members integrated into them" (TCA2, 333). Thus systemic integration takes place behind the back of the acting social agents, as it were, in a coordination of action consequences realized through the "steering media" of each system ("money" in the case of capitalist economy, and "power" in the case of the state administrative system).¹⁵⁷

Because Adorno and Horkheimer did not have access to this distinction, they suggest that modernity expands the "rationality of knowing and acting subjects" "into a purposive-rationality

¹⁵⁶ The economy is an example of a self-regulating functional system: the function of the economic system is to provide the material conditions of life.

¹⁵⁷ For a good discussion of the relation between action theory and system theory see James Bohman *New Philosophy of Social Sciences*, MIT Press, 1991.

of a higher order” (TCA2, 333) which thus becomes total. In fact we are dealing here with two distinct (and irreducible) types of rationality, one of actions, the other functional.

Not only must Weber’s understanding of action rationality be expanded by adding a functionalist (systemic) dimension of rationality to it, but his view of rationality must also be refined and improved. For this purpose Habermas thinks that hermeneutics can provide useful resources.

Take, for example, the way Weber uses the categories of “meaning” and “understanding meaning”. Weber, as a good neo-Kantian, wants to keep questions of validity distinct from questions of fact (this parallels Kant’s distinction between a realm of freedom and a realm of necessity), and hence he is equally interested in constellations of validity as he is in constellations of causality.¹⁵⁸ Insofar as Weber is concerned with questions of validity, he aims to retrieve the perspective of the participants in the process of modernization: he wants to get to the meaning that actions have for actors/participants themselves (the discussion of the motivational power of the Protestant ethic of calling has exactly this purpose: to recover the meaning of the inner-worldly asceticism that gradually led to the rise of capitalism for the individuals involved - why they take some actions to be valid and others not).

However, as Habermas points out, rightly I would think, the category of “meaning” must remain “inaccessible to a neo-Kantian reared in the tradition of the philosophy of consciousness” (TCA1, 339). Indeed, a more hermeneutical and intersubjective approach holds the promise of a better theory of meaning understanding (*Sinnverstehen*). Thus Habermas turns to hermeneutics and the philosophy of language in order to expand Weber’s methodological framework (based as this is on the concepts of “purposive-rational” and “value-rational” action).

An hermeneutically inflected concept of meaning, Habermas claims, will help us make better sense of the entire breadth of the process of modernization. Accordingly, he replaces the

¹⁵⁸ Habermas operates with this distinction too, a distinction which can be ultimately traced backed to Kant’s distinction between the spontaneous causality of the will and the natural causality of empirical phenomena. Thus, Habermas also separates validity from causality, norms from facts, and therefore operates with a methodological dualism: a hermeneutical retrieving of meaning from the “perspective of the participant” and an empirical or sociological “perspective of the observer”. Ultimately, these two distinct perspectives can be traced back to the use of the system of pronouns in our propositionally-differentiated language. Speakers of a non-propositional language would not have access to these two perspectives.

Weberian distinction (“purposive-rational” versus “value-rational”) with the distinction between “strategic action” (“action oriented to success”) and “communicative action” (“action oriented toward reaching understanding”). I discussed this distinction in the previous section (1.3.) and I indicated there what Habermas takes to be the formal (and therefore universal) features of “action oriented toward mutual understanding”. Here I just want to stress that the concept of “communicative reason” which underlies this type of action cannot be reduce to the teleological structure (actors’ orientation for action) of “purposive rationality” and “value rationality” from Weber, because communicative action always necessarily involves a common, intersubjective negotiation of actors’ action plans through a process of argumentation (exchanging reasons).

For the purpose of my discussion in this chapter I want to underscore the major innovation that Habermas introduces (which brings him into an interesting - fruitful but tensed - dialogue with the tradition of hermeneutics) to the Weberian methodological framework: Habermas takes on board the hermeneutical concept of the *lifeworld* (discussed by Husserl, Heidegger and Gadamer, and applied to sociology by A. Schütz and T. Luckmann) as the necessary counterpart to the concept of “communicative reason”. The *lifeworld* is the holistic background of taken-for-granted assumptions, values and patterns of interpretations against which reaching understanding in language between two actors takes place; we always already find ourselves thrown or situated within a *lifeworld* and any meaningful exchange of reasons and arguments takes place only against this background.¹⁵⁹

As a result of this methodological innovation, Habermas conceives of society as being made up of both *lifeworld* and “system”.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹ And yet, as I noted already, we are not trapped inside our lifeworld. This oscillation between the situatedness of our process of communication and the orientation towards validity claims which point beyond our lifeworld, an orientation built in this process despite its local character, is the heartbeat of Habermas’ “post metaphysical thinking”.

¹⁶⁰ “System”, as discussed above, is Parsons’s term that Habermas applies to what Weber took to be “society” proper – composed of different “life-orders”: those institutions where ideas and material interests interpenetrate and which regulate the allocation of goods - basically, the capitalist economy and the bureaucratic state. For a good discussion of the distinction between system and lifeworld in Habermas’s work see Joseph Heath “System and Lifeworld” in Barbara Fultner ed. *Jürgen Habermas. Key Concepts*. Durham: Acumen, 2011, pp. 74-90. Heath identifies at least four distinct ways in which Habermas draws this distinction in his work, and discusses some of the ambiguities related to this distinction.

Therefore, argues Habermas, what Weber meant by modernization (rationalization of society) must in fact be tracked onto two independent dimensions simultaneously: rationalization of the *lifeworld* (equivalent to the structural differentiation of its main components: culture, society and personality), which takes place primarily through “communicative action”, and rationalizations of the “system” (equivalent to an increasing level of complexity for the systems of action centred on the non-linguistic media of “money” and “power”).

Let me go back now to the pathologies of modernity identified by Weber (lack of meaning and lack of freedom) and ask how does Habermas view them in the light of the methodological innovations that he introduced? Well, these pathologies now appear in decisively more irenic light: the subsystems centered on money (Weber’s capitalist economy) and power (Weber’s state bureaucracy) can now be depicted as overstepping their proper borders in an expansionist move that illegitimately encroaches upon and colonizes the *lifeworld*. In other words, lack of meaning and lack freedom are not inescapable modern pathologies, they are not, as Weber thought, inscribed in the very genetic code of modernity, as it were; in Habermas’s interpretation they become just the pathological results of an unbalanced rationalization of society.

The main implication of this new view is that a process of decolonization is possible: modernity can be put back on tracks if only the boundaries Habermas draws on the basis of the concept of “communicative reason” are respected. Habermas pursues this implication further in his major work *Between Facts and Norms* (1999 [1992]) where he presents a model of “discursive” democracy in which an open and vibrant public sphere, as well as emergent social movements, play the positive role of pushing back against the illegitimate expansion of the state and the market in the direction of a correct re-balancing of the structures of modern society.

Because in my next chapter I will turn again to Habermas’s deliberative model of democracy and discuss the postsecular direction this model takes in his recent writings I will no longer pursue this topic here. What I want to do for the remainder of this chapter, is to address one central aspect of Habermas’s theory of modernity that I could not touch upon so far. According to Habermas, “communicative reason” can also be seen as a “linguistification of the sacred”. Looking at this claim more closely will allow me to link my analysis in this chapter to the whole cluster of problems that I addressed in the previous chapter and move my analysis in the direction that will be the topic of my next chapter.

3.5 “Communicative reason” as “linguistification of the sacred”

The previous sections of this chapter give a clearer picture of Habermas’s view of “postmetaphysical thinking”. In this section I would like to localize more precisely the place of religion in Habermas’s project of a “postmetaphysical” modernity. My purpose is to retrieve and make explicit Habermas’s view on secularization latent in this project.

3.5.1 “Communicative reason” replaces religion

Modernization is a process of rationalization that is coextensive with a progressive disenchantment of the world. Both Weber and Habermas affirm this picture of modernization. However, while for Weber (under Nietzsche’s influence) disenchantment has ultimately negative and nihilistic implications, Habermas espouses a decidedly more positive view of this process. According to Weber, disenchantment creates a differentiation of three “value spheres” (science, morality and art) and is followed by a progressive crumbling of the moral sphere under the hostile pressures of the other two spheres. The erosion of the religious foundations of morality leads eventually to a pulverization of moral values and introduces irrational, decisionistic and voluntaristic elements into ethics. On the cultural level, the modern predicament involves a “polytheism” of ultimate values: a neo-pagan resurrection of the perpetual struggle between various “gods” and “demons”, with no way to decide among them. On societal level, rationalization as disenchantment leads to a general spreading of rational forms of domination (especially in the rational administration of people – the modern bureaucratic state; and in the rational exploitation of labour for profit – the modern capitalist economy). In light of these cultural and societal outcomes of disenchantment, Weber contends that secularization entangles modernity in a damaging and self-defeating “paradox” insofar as the progressive secularization of modern society is correlated with an “iron cage” view of society (lack of freedom) and with

generalized anomie (lack of meaning). One must face this predicament with lucidity and must resist secular attempts at re-enchanting our world. *Ersatz* forms of religiosity adapted to modernity's scientism or hedonism are not only ridiculous in their shallowness but also quite dangerous.¹⁶¹

As I already mentioned, Habermas argues that the concept of "communicative reason" proves its analytical usefulness in that it can repair this view of secularization. I want to analyze in some detail how this repair is supposed to work, and I hope that this analysis will allow me to unravel Habermas's own view on secularization - never presented in an open and systematic form. Once Habermas's view of secularization is retrieved, I can use it as a yardstick for my evaluation of his postsecular turn in the next two chapters.

Habermas rejects Weber's diagnosis of modernity on three accounts. He points out first, that Weber neglects the results of cultural rationalization on the cognitive axis (the domain of empirical sciences) and the aesthetic axis (the field of modern arts). Unlike the sphere of morality, sciences and arts play no role in Weber's explanation of modernization. Weber remained fixed on the process of rationalization as it played out on the moral axis because he thought that powerful psychological/cultural motivating factors for the emergence of capitalism can be identified in certain moral ideas. However, the systematic intent of his theory, as Habermas puts it, requires that rationalization of modernity should be discussed on all three cultural axes. And once all three complexes of rationality (cognitive-instrumental, moral-

¹⁶¹ We could remember here Weber's stern warning in "Science as Vocation" that the opposition between the religiously "musical" man and the modern world dominated by the claims of science and hedonism is in fact irreconcilable and that one should face this fact with lucidity and resignation. A lucid understanding of "the inescapable condition of our historical situation" characterized by the disenchantment of the world should make one resist, this is what Weber hoped, the need for false prophets. He has the following words to tell to those youth craving for new prophets of our time: "Mind you, the devil is old; grow old to understand him.... [this] means that if one wishes to settle with this devil, one must not take to flight before him as so many like to do nowadays. First of all, one has to see the devil's ways to the end in order to realize his power and his limitations" (in *From Max Weber*, p.152). In retrospect, it is hard to deny that these words (written in 1918) had prophetic meaning, if we think of the wreckage wrought by some very charismatic secular leaders in European politics, from Lenin, to Mussolini. The lesson of all this, I argue, is that the religious man should absolutely reject this kind of self-appointed ideological prophets of modern times and resist attempts at secularization of religious message in the purpose of modern politics. It is an interesting question what would Weber have thought of Habermas's project of salvaging translation of religion, as this project can also be viewed as such an attempt at (non-destructive, this time) secularization of religion.

practical and aesthetic-expressive) are taken into account, Habermas argues, we can draw a picture of modernization that is less antagonistic (or divided against itself).

Habermas's central contention is that we should keep separate the *formal aspects* of the process of cultural rationalization (the emergence of the abstract "validity claims" of truth, rightness and truthfulness) from the more *substantive aspects* of this process (how these validity claims are actualized – for instance in modern culture the claim of rightness has been embodied in the Protestant ethic of conviction). If this separation between what is formal and what is substantive in modernization is maintained, then, according to Habermas, at the formal level *there is no inherent conflict between the three validity claims of truth, rightness and truthfulness*. On the contrary, at this formal and procedural level, the unity of reason can in fact be preserved, and thus Weber was wrong to think that fragmentation of reason was the inescapable outcome of modernization. Conflicts or contradictions, Habermas concedes, may occur between the substantive manifestations of the three validity claims: as Weber showed, the religious ethic of conviction came into conflict in the long run with the actual results of scientific progress and also with the hedonistic lifestyle that aesthetic self-expression takes in late modernity. Thus, as a first point against Weber, Habermas presses the thesis of the unity of modern (communicative) reason in its abstract differentiation of validity claims, a unity assured by the procedural process of argumentation (discussed in the previous section) which plays itself out, he claims, with equal force in all three modern "value spheres" of science, morality and law and art¹⁶².

Second, moving from the formal to the substantive level, Habermas flatly rejects Weber's view that a modern ethics of conviction (based on principles and universalist in orientation) cannot outlive the erosion of its religious foundations. Weber seems to overlook, argues Habermas, the successful stabilization in modern societies of a cognitivist type of ethics influenced by Kant. The examples Habermas offers are the theoretical approaches of Kurt Baier, Marcus Singer, John Rawls, Paul Lorenzen, Ernst Tugendhat, and Karl-Otto Apel, all of whom "share the intention of analyzing the conditions for making impartial judgements of practical questions, judgements

¹⁶² The thesis of a procedural unity of reason in all its diverse manifestations is only programmatically stated in TCA. For a more substantial defence of this thesis, central to Habermas's view of modernity, see his essay "The Unity of Reason in the Diversity of its Voices" in *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, pp. 115-148.

based solely on reasons”.¹⁶³ Habermas includes on this list his own moral theory, “discourse ethics”; his discussion makes clear that Habermas thinks that “discourse ethics” can successfully stabilize itself even in the absence of a religious or metaphysical support (although, as he declared in an interview, he would not object if someone interpreted discourse ethics as the direct heir of the Judaic emphasis on justice and of Christian love - more on this in my next section).¹⁶⁴

At this point we reach the core of the issue. Against Weber, Habermas argues that secularization of society *does not* push modernity in the direction of paradoxical self-destruction. At this stage of his thought Habermas is adamant about this point. He constantly defends it throughout the two voluminous volumes of *The Theory of Communicative Action*. And this defence goes beyond a critique of Weber’s view of secularization. It also makes use of the social theories of Emil Durkheim and George Herbert Mead in order to support the idea that “communicative reason” supersedes religion. This, of course, ties back to my discussion in the first chapter, where I underlined Habermas’s commitment to the “dialectic of Enlightenment” (from Kant, Hegel and Marx): the attempt to find a rational replacement of religion. In what follows I offer a sketch in broad strokes of this supersessionist narrative before I turn to a more detailed analysis in the next chapter, where I shift the focus of my discussion on the alterations to this narrative introduced in Habermas’s recent writings.

Habermas claims that the rationalization of the *lifeworld* (as distinct from, and complementary to, the rationalization of the system) can be interpreted as “linguistification of the sacred”. What does this mean? Broadly speaking, it means that the transition to modern society takes place as a transition from “normatively ascribed agreement” to “communicatively achieved” agreement.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³ See Habermas, “Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Philosophical Justification”, in Seyla Benhabib and Fred Dallmayr, *The Communicative Ethics Controversy*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990, pp. 60-110, p. 60.

¹⁶⁴ The idea of an inherent conflict of the value spheres “retains a certain plausibility only so long as Weber does not take into account, with respect to the moral-practical complex of rationality, a form of the religious ethic of brotherliness secularized at the same level as modern science and autonomous art, a communicative ethic detached from its foundation in salvation religion; that is, so long as he remains generally fixated instead on the relations of tension between religion and the world” (Habermas, TCA1, 242). This passage is important because it clearly shows Habermas’s “discourse ethics” as being the secularized form of the religious ethics of brotherliness.

¹⁶⁵ An interesting discussion of Habermas’s thesis can be found in Johannes Berger “The Linguistification of the Sacred and the Delinguistification of the Economy” in Axel Honneth and Hans Joas eds. *Communicative Action: Essays on Jurgen Habermas’s The Theory of Communicative Action*, MIT Press, 1991, pp. 165-180.

Habermas adopts Durkheim's thesis that morality has a sacred basis and grafts onto it Mead's idea of social communication as "linguistification of the sacred". Durkheim understands the transition from pre-modern to modern society as a change from social integration through faith to social integration through cooperation and agreement. Habermas interprets this trend, building on Mead, as "an unfettering of the rationality potential of action oriented to mutual understanding" (TCA2, 288).

All this leads to a picture of modernization quite different from the one we got in Weber: modernization ("societal rationalization" in Weber) does not mean a direct institutionalization of the decentered structures of consciousness expressed in the three "value spheres". The methodological shift towards "symbolically structured lifeworld", "communicative reason", and "action oriented to understanding" prevents such a direct or unmediated transfer. What we have at the threshold of modernity, in Habermas's view, is an "uncoupling" of the "system" from the "lifeworld". The differentiation of the three complexes of instrumental-cognitive, moral-practical and aesthetic-expressive rationality (rationalization of the "lifeworld") makes possible in a first step the increasing differentiation of the systems of economy and the modern state (the systems centered on the steering media of money and power). These systems, which reproduce themselves through the delinguistified media of money and power, in a second step gradually uncouple themselves from the *lifeworld* (the linguistically structured background whose rationalization made them possible) and begin to encroach upon the structures of the *lifeworld*.

However, Habermas points out that the differentiation of the "system" and its gradual swelling at the expense of the repository of meaning which is stored in the *lifeworld*, on the one side, and the gradual rationalization of the lifeworld which made possible the uncoupling of the system to begin with, on the other side, correspond to the reproduction of society on two *irreducible* principles of reproduction (on the basis of "strategic action" as distinct from "communicative action"). Therefore, the invasion and colonization of the *lifeworld* by the system can never be complete. There will always be resistance coming from the *lifeworld*¹⁶⁶ and therefore total colonization is impossible. It is impossible insofar as the human condition (to borrow from

¹⁶⁶ According to Habermas, a contemporary expression of this resistance to colonization of the *lifeworld* is to be found in the new social movements centered on ecology and anti-nuclear protest. See his discussion of these movements in *Between Facts and Norms*.

Hannah Arendt) is irreducibly tied to linguistic communication.¹⁶⁷ In this Habermas departs from Adorno's nightmare of a totally administered society, such view is just that, a nightmare, a truly dystopic view, and not a real possibility. However, Habermas also departs from Marx, however, in that now the capitalist economy can claim a legitimate place in modern society, capitalism being a valid institutional embodiment of modern rationalization for as long as it remains within its proper boundaries.

What is important to note for my purpose in this section, is that Habermas's theory of social evolution subtly turns the Weberian discourse about the "paradox" of modernity into one about the "pathology" of modernity. From an *aporetic* view of modernity, a modernity found in relentless and irreconcilable opposition with itself (a house divided, as I put it in my first chapter), Habermas shifts the terms of the discourse to a *clinical* view of modernity, to a discourse about sickness, "symptoms", deformations, and therefore, very importantly, to a discourse about *health* and possible cure.¹⁶⁸

Thus he writes: "the deformations that interested Marx, Durkheim and Weber – each in his own way – ought not be attributed either to the rationalization of the lifeworld as such or to increasing system complexity as such. Neither the secularization of worldviews nor the structural differentiation of society has unavoidable pathological side effects per se" (TCA2, 330). As he will go on to say, it is just the unbalanced rationalization that generates the pathology of modernity.

¹⁶⁷ We could imagine a future society where we stop talking to one another, a society which is integrated purely on the basis of monetary rewards and the use of force. But in what sense could we claim that this society is still a human society?

¹⁶⁸ Engaging with Habermas's clinical view of modernity, David Ingram argues that a formal view of the unity of reason across three validity claims cannot deliver judgements about what would constitute a healthy calibration of these validity claims. A claim to *health* is not one of the three validity claims that Habermas discusses. It is not clear how Habermas can support a critique of the colonization of the lifeworld and a critique of modernity as an unbalanced institutionalization of the three validity claims on the basis of a *formal* view of the unity of reason. As a potential solution to this problem, Ingram looks at what he calls "aesthetic rationality", traces of which can be found in Habermas's discussion of the lifeworld (communication in lifeworld blends all three validity claims together). See D. Ingram *Habermas and the Dialectic of Reason*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987, especially chapter 11: "The Theory-Practice Problem Revisited", 172-188, and D. Ingram, "The Subject of Justice in Postmodern Discourse: Aesthetic Judgement and Political Rationality", in *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity*, ed. by Maurizio Passerin d'Entrevies and Seyla Benhabib, MIT Press, 1997, 269-302.

I would like to give Habermas's position vis-à-vis the relation between modernization and secularization (or disenchantment) an even stronger form. The erosion of the religious foundations in the process of disenchantment does not really pose a problem for modernity, it is not the root-cause of its pathology and it does not have to lead to the fragmentation of reason and a "polytheism" of ultimate values, as Weber thought. According to Habermas, the differentiation of science from morality and art brings about an undeniable *increase* in rationality. It represents an "unfettering" of communicative rationality, a type of rationality that is now able to freely develop itself in the three spheres independent from (crippling) metaphysical assumptions. And as reason's unity across all these different spheres is assured by the procedural conditions of argumentation, differentiation for Habermas does not entail fragmentation and it does not bog modernity down in a polytheistic quagmire. So secularization as differentiation is not at all a loss to be bewailed. Quite the contrary, it is a gain to be celebrated. Moreover, this differentiation cannot be undone, according to Habermas: insights cannot be forgotten at will, as he also puts it. The following passage is telling: "... chances are fading that we can bring together again, in a post-traditional everyday practice, those moments that, in traditional forms of life, once composed a unity – a diffuse one surely, and one whose religious and metaphysical interpretations were certainly illusory" (TCA2, 330).¹⁶⁹

We have here in front of our eyes the most important reason why differentiation cannot be regarded by Habermas as involving loss: religion offers an ideological view of the world. Religion unites and forges together (not only procedurally as Habermas would have it, but also substantively) the three distinct cognitive, moral and aesthetic moments of reason and anchors this unity into a transcendent divinity. But this substantive unity is "illusory", according to Habermas. Therefore the sublation of religion into a communicative rationality (linguistification of the sacred) brings no significant loss: nothing is really missing in the transition from religion to "postmetaphysical" (communicative) reason.¹⁷⁰ Paraphrasing Marx here, in the rational

¹⁶⁹ The awareness of the impossibility of a return to religious-metaphysical unity, is what Habermas calls "an instinct of reason", an instinct that reason develops with the increasingly pathological effects of its embodiment in modern society. See TCA2, 229-230.

¹⁷⁰ This is how another important distinction that Habermas draws in relation to Marx (to whose view of religion *qua* ideology Habermas subscribes) must be explained: the destruction of traditional ways of life (good in principle – because nothing is lost, on the contrary, a potential for reason is released) has to be differentiated from the

process of linguistification of the sacred, we lose nothing but our fetters and win a whole new world.

In drawing this section to a close I want to make one last remark about just how risky (or fragile if we want) is “communicative reason” as a secular replacement for the capacity of religion to generate meaning and social integration.

3.5.2 The risks involved in the replacement narrative

By engaging in a linguistic turn and creatively adapting the theories of social evolution of Durkheim and Mead, Habermas has managed to transform the discourse about “the paradox” of modernity (Weber) into a discourse regarding the “pathology” of modernity. However, in “setting the religious consensus communicatively aflow” communicative reason is left with the imperative need of creating new forms of consensus. These new forms cannot be derived from a re-valuation of values (Habermas is not Nietzsche), or from new metaphysical principles or concepts, because any such substantive consensus would mean falling back to a pre-critical (metaphysical) level. The new consensus cannot be other than a “rational agreement” obtained under formal conditions: it is the consensus reached in the process of exchanging reasons. This reconciliation of modernity’s differentiations, according to Habermas, is no longer vulnerable to the post-Nietzschean critical challenge that modernity imposes a violent and self-destructive project on the whole world. Reconciliation in Habermas no longer relies on “the philosophy of the subject” and it is based on procedural unity of exchanging reasons in argumentation and on the “unforced” force of the better argument; this reconciliatory view can no longer be viewed as oppressive, but emancipatory and liberating.

However it is worth noting the peculiar predicament that the Habermasian agreement bound form of rationality lands itself in. Under postmetaphysical conditions, unlike the case of

destruction of post-traditional ways of life (bad because it involves a colonization and desiccation of the rational potential unfettered by the first type of destruction). Marx is not attentive enough to this distinction.

traditional societies, nothing can remain immune to criticism.¹⁷¹ This is to say that communicative reason knows no barriers, no special preserves and no areas that can be protected from the critical lights of reason. This also means that *any* rational agreement must remain open to further challenges, new rational arguments, possibly new voices, new concerns, new interests or to new scientific evidence. Thus, no matter how well the formal conditions under which this consensus is reached approximate the procedural conditions spelled out in the “ideal speech situation”, any “rational agreement” must remain open to the *destabilizing* power of new reasons and new arguments.¹⁷²

In fact, I would argue that our best interests lay with the attempt to rationally shake any established agreement, so that new points of view, new interests can be accounted for and incorporated into an ever-expanding rational agreement. And certainly this is Habermas’s position when he rejects the charge that his view of rationality is inimical to disagreement, struggle, political agonism, diversity and difference.¹⁷³ Against this charge, Habermas stresses the open-ended character of the process of argumentation, and holds that any agreement should

¹⁷¹ As Habermas writes: “In a rationalized *lifeworld* the need for achieving understanding is met less and less by a reservoir of traditionally certified interpretations immune from criticism; at the level of a completely decentered understanding of the world, the need for consensus must be met more and more frequently by risky, because rationally motivated agreement – be it directly, through the interpretative accomplishments of participants, or through a professionalized expert knowledge that has become customary in a secondary sense. In this way communicative action *becomes loaded with expectations of consensus and risks of disagreement that make great demands on reaching understanding as the mechanism for coordinating action*” (TCA1, 340-341, my emphasis). See also the following passage: “Unfettering normative contexts and releasing communicative actions from traditionally based institutions – that is from obligations of consensus – *loads (and overloads) the mechanism of reaching understanding with a growing need for coordination*” (TCA1, 341, my emphasis).

¹⁷² This inherent openness of rational agreement stems from the “regulative” nature of the ideal speech situation. There can never be a closure to the process of argumentation because the ideal speech situation cannot be taken to mean a stage in the future which modern society must reach. It is not a utopian projection that must be realized in practice. Habermas has distanced himself from some of his earlier formulation that implied the possibility of realizing the utopian potential of communication (like the frequently cited idea that reaching agreement is the inherent *telos* of language). In other words, Habermas moved away from teleology towards a regulative view of reason. I will have more to say on this in my last chapter on “Hope under Postmetaphysical Condition”.

¹⁷³ Habermas’s model of “discursive democracy”, which he defends as an intermediate position that can be reduced neither to the liberal nor to the republican models of democracy, has generated a great deal of debates and criticism. The basic suspicion is that Habermas’s emphasis on “rational agreement” or “consensus” leads to a theory of democracy which is inhospitable to difference, to political struggle and (rational) disagreement. In particular, theorists who defend an “agonistic” model of democracy have pressed this point against Habermas. See for instance Chantal Mouffe “Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism”, in *Social Research* 66(3), 1999, pp 745-758, and “For an Agonistic Model of Democracy”, *Political Theory in Transition* ed. Noel O’Sullivan, New York: Routledge, 2000.

be seen as provisional - the idea of rational consensus functions more as regulative ideal which is only counterfactually present in current argumentation.

To put all this in a nutshell, once “communicative reason” replaces tradition, this form of reason must bear increasingly greater demands for social integration and generation of meaning; it tries to meet this need by constantly engendering rational agreements; it is clear however that no such agreement can be final and hence none can be solid (or safe) enough to fulfil the tasks required from it.

This is indeed, as Habermas himself acknowledges, a “risky” mechanism for coordinating social action. One could interpret this as expressing a lingering anxiety and for good reasons: communicative reason is a risky mechanism of integration because it is overburdened with a “growing need” of generating rational consensus while any such consensus must be seen as provisional and therefore as inherently unstable. On the one hand “communicative reason” proceeds to progressively dissolve all forms of traditional consensus,¹⁷⁴ replacing them with communicative agreements and thereby seriously weakening the resources for normative integration and meaning that society has available. On the other hand communicative reason must turn against any of the communicative agreements that replace these traditional resources out of an inescapable internal need to constantly re-examine any agreement whatsoever. And let us remember, all this must to be done while reason holds on and pushes back against the growing pressure of the twin systems of money and power that incessantly encroach upon the process of reaching agreement.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴ “All that is solid melts into thin air”, that is how Marx and Engels once referred to the effects of capitalism on the values of the pre-modern forms of life (The Communist Manifesto). It is actually striking how similar is Habermas’s own choice of words: he talks about “thawing” traditions, about setting the sacred aflow. The basic idea is the same: modernity forces the transition from a solid, stable, frozen worldview to something which is more flexible, malleable, plastic, i.e. to a worldview of a liquid nature. He argues this point so convincingly, that it becomes difficult to see how there can be anything that could resist sinking into the flow.

¹⁷⁵ This situation is quite dramatic, and if one is to take seriously what Habermas says about the colonizing and expansionist nature of money and power, it looks rather hopeless. In *Between Facts and Norms* (1992) Habermas turns to law as the possible solution for mitigating the risks involved by positing communicative action as the main mechanism of social integration in modernity. In this work a theory of law which emphasizes the communicative formation of democratic popular will is presented as a solution to this problem. In the limited space I have in this dissertation I cannot engage with Habermas’s theory of law.

To conclude, once the metaphysical and religious foundations of society are set aflow, liquefied and superseded, “communicative reason” finds itself in a peculiar and difficult predicament: this form of reason must resist the relentless colonizing pressure which stem from the toxic dynamic of the two ever-growing and ever-expanding colossuses of “money” and “power”, but it must do battle against them with unstable and precarious means. Because what are these means? Against the pressure of money and power to comprehensively determine our life, communicative reason must continuously engender “rational agreements” which are however contestable, revisable and therefore provisional. The un-coerced force of the better reason can never lead to definitive rational agreement. Indeed, any such rational agreement has only a precarious (because changeable) status: we reach rational agreement in the light of the best evidence, the best arguments etc. that we *have here and now*. But it is impossible to eliminate in principle the possibility that future arguments and/or evidence (provided by new scientific findings, for instance, or by new technological developments, discoveries, etc.) will significantly alter the content of whatever constitutes our current rational agreement.¹⁷⁶

Does this predicament of “communicative reason” support the positive view of secularization that Habermas affirms against Weber? In the next chapter I hope to show that Habermas’s answer shifts from a confident “yes”, to a more cautious “probably so” and finally to “not really”.

¹⁷⁶ If Habermas does not want to be forced to entertain some kind of “end of history” thesis, he must admit to the provisional status of any rational agreement no matter how well the process of argumentation approximates the ideal speech situation.

3.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I discussed Habermas's defence of a "postmetaphysical" view of modernity. At the core of this view lies a concept of "communicative reason" which, as Habermas argues, is operative in every-day linguistic communication. Habermas reconstructs this concept through a pragmatic analysis of the "unavoidable" conditions of reaching an understanding in language. According to Habermas, these conditions have an "ideal" content insofar as they express certain (counterfactual) "idealizations" that speakers must unavoidable make when they want to understand one another.

This appeal to "idealizations" and to an "ideal speech situation" indicates that Habermas' "postmetaphysical thinking" still relies on a residue of metaphysics. Metaphysical heritage is not completely abandoned. "Communicative reason" thus stakes out an intermediary and quite ambivalent position between "metaphysics" (from Plato to Hegel) and the radical critique of metaphysical rationalism (with its dual origins, stemming from an "idealist" line of thought in Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault and Derrida, and from a "materialist" one in Lukács, Horkheimer and Adorno).

My analysis in this chapter aimed to determine more exactly the nature of this position. I showed that Habermas rejects the idea of ultimate foundations and holds that, unlike the whole metaphysical tradition (including the modern "philosophy of the subject" in Kant, Hegel and Marx), "postmetaphysical thinking" thrives on fallible knowledge, on procedural processes of inquiry and on cooperation between philosophical insights and processes of empirical verification. As a result of this new predicament, philosophy must reconsider its relationship with empirical sciences. In this sense, philosophy must abandon the position of "judge" of scientific endeavors (as in the Kantian attempt at drawing the borders of what counts as certain knowledge) and adopt the more modest (dual) position of "stand-in" and "interpreter".

The hybrid character of philosophy as "stand-in" is also meant to clearly signal the need to give up metaphysical foundationalism. Habermas accepts the argument (raised by Nietzsche, Heidegger and many "postmodern" critics of modernity) that by positing an ultimate foundation philosophy ends up with a domineering and violent project. More directly, this means that

philosophy must abandon the metaphysical premises of the “philosophy of the subject”. Reason is not to be understood as the subjective faculty of a metaphysical subject, or as the dialectical process of coming to self-awareness of an absolute subject. Reason is now situated in culture, history and nature and it must be therefore viewed as embodied in the argumentative process of exchanging reasons and its formal presuppositions.

But reason however, although always operative within culture, history and nature, cannot be reduced to cultural or historical context. There is a moment of unconditionality that the pragmatic presupposition of argumentation retain, insofar as these presuppositions are “unavoidable” and therefore universal. The validity claims (of truth, rightness and truthfulness) implicit in any speech act are raised here and now, but they contain a moment of “unconditionality” which allows them to “burst open” any local boundaries. The validity claims implicitly raised in argumentation point beyond cultural and historical contexts towards “an ideal speech situation”, where the rational redemption of these claims would be complete and universal agreement would be achieved.

Although the “ideal speech situation” should not be seen as realizable in a future society, as it functions more like a regulative ideal, it is clear that postmetaphysical thinking “still retains portions of the idealist heritage” (BFN, 9) of metaphysics, as Habermas puts it. Only by preserving this metaphysical residue (in the “idealizations” of communication), as Habermas argues, can reason do battle with the contextualism of “language games” or with the recourse to “the Other” of reason, the two blind alleys into which the “postmodern” radical critique of reason forces philosophical thinking. In addition, only by holding on to this residue of metaphysics can modernity do battle against the absolutist project of (pre-critical, traditional) metaphysics. As Habermas puts it, “the ideal speech situation” and “communicative reason” are the last trace of the *“Nihil contra Deum nisi Deus ipse”* (PT, 144).¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁷ Latin for “Only a God can fight God”. The secularist core of Habermas’s project comes here to light in its full splendor. On the same page Habermas offers one of the most beautiful metaphors that can be found in his writings: “Communicative reason is of course a rocking hull - but it does not go under in the sea of contingencies even if shuddering in high seas is the only mode in which it ‘copes’ with these contingencies”. Taken together, the Latin motto and this metaphor, capture quite well the predicament of Habermas’s “postmetaphysical thinking”: This thinking must avoid absolute principles and transcendent foundations by situating reason within culture, history and nature; however, in doing so, it must avoid a contextualist or a relativist view of reason; reason should not sink under the “sea of contingencies”. These twin dangers can be avoided only if a residue of metaphysics is actually

This “non defeatist” concept of “communicative reason” (as Habermas likes to call it) and the program of “formal pragmatics” are then put forward as suitable grounding for the normative project of modernity. “Communicative reason” thus takes a place in a very prestigious intellectual lineage, in that it explicitly continues Hegel’s and Marx’s attempts to find a solution to the “paradox of modernity” (modernity’s attempt at grounding itself out of its own resources).

The rational grounding of modernity in Habermas does not assume the role of ultimate foundation and therefore its plausibility depends on empirical corroboration and verification. In *The Theory of Communicative Action* Habermas provides what he calls an “indirect” verification showing how this concept can take up and carry on the intentions of earlier theoretical traditions (from Durkheim, Mead, Weber, Lukács, Adorno, Horkheimer and Parsons).

This discussion allowed me to engage with his view of modernization as the uncoupling of the economic (capitalist) system and state bureaucracy from the *lifeworld* and the pathologies caused by the colonization of the latter by the first. One aspect of Habermas’ theory of social evolution is of particular interest for my purpose in this dissertation and that is his view of secularization. This view is articulated in direct opposition to the narrative of “disenchantment” espoused by Weber. As I tried to show Habermas painted a much more positive picture of secularization of modern society than Weber did.

In the next chapter I delve into Habermas’s turn to “a post-secular society” from his writings after the terrorist attacks of 9-11-2001.

preserved. This residually metaphysical element (the Ideal Speech Situation) however expresses a “transcendence-from-within” which in fact is opposed to (does battle with) the “transcendence-from-without” of metaphysics, while fulfilling the same function, that of upholding the universality of reason.

Chapter 4

From Postmetaphysical to Postsecular Modernity: Aufhebung or Containment of the Sacred?

4.1 Introduction

Thus far in this dissertation my primary aim has been to identify and discuss the main features of Habermas's philosophical project. As the purpose of these two chapters was to lay bare the central aspects of Habermas's "postmetaphysical thinking", the tenor of my discussion so far has been exegetic rather than critical.

Now that the main features of Habermas's project have been introduced, I want to turn to a more exigent analysis. Therefore in the following two chapters I discuss, in a decisively more critical manner, some limitations of Habermas's "postmetaphysical thinking". My task is made somewhat easier by the fact that Habermas himself has recently showed some dissatisfaction with the way he had previously articulated the project of overcoming metaphysics. In a recent essay Habermas writes: "... Practical reason fails to fulfill its own vocation when it no longer has sufficient strength to awaken, and to keep awake, in the minds of secular subjects, an awareness of the violations of solidarity throughout the world, an awareness of what is missing, of what cries out to heaven" (AWM, 19). And, in fact, a careful reader can discern an acute sense of loss, a poignant feeling that something important is missing, pervading all Habermas' more recent essays.

What exactly is missing? What has the normative project of modernity lost in making the transition from metaphysics to "postmetaphysical" thought? And is the loss remediable? Furthermore, what kind of remedy can be offered without being drawn back into the orbit of metaphysics?

Answering these questions is a complex undertaking. However, one point emerges with some clarity from Habermas's recent essays, namely that whatever it is that modern reason misses, it

has something to do with modernity's "secularism". Hence the postmetaphysical view of modernity discussed so far now takes a postsecular direction.

In the following two chapters (chapters 4 and 5) I take a close look at this new conceptual alliance between "postmetaphysical thinking" and "post-secular society". The argument I put forward in these chapters is the following: while Habermas seems to think that the turn to a post-secular society is not only fully consistent with the postmetaphysical framework of modernity he had previously defended in all his major works, but also a salutary improvement of this framework, I argue that when closely examined this turn has radical consequences which threaten to destabilize the whole philosophical project of "postmetaphysical thinking".

In this chapter (chapter 4) I aim to show that Habermas now abandons the narrative of *sublation*¹⁷⁸ (*Aufhebung*) of the sacred (that I briefly analyzed in the last section of my previous chapter) in favor of a narrative of *containment* of the sacred. In Habermas's recent work religion is no longer portrayed as a precursor of communicative reason, a stage of social evolution that has successfully been overcome by modernity. Religion acquires now the status of an "intellectual formation" in its own right, an independent/sovereign domain of meaning that is separated from communicative reason by strict borders. Despite this divide that, as Habermas now argues, cannot be bridged, religion and communicative reason share a common genealogy. And it is this common heritage that should facilitate a mutually enriching dialogue between these two intellectual domains, a dialogue which is defined however by the *priority* of reason vis-à-vis religion and by "non-destructive" *translation* of religious semantic contents into rational discourse. As I will show, this shift from replacement to containment of the sacred is by no means a seamless transition. It generates very difficult normative tensions for the whole project of "postmetaphysical" modernity as this has been previously defended by Habermas.

The chapter is organized as follows: section 4.2, entitled "Religion within the boundaries of mere rationalized *lifeworld*", goes back at the thesis that reason sublates religion through a

¹⁷⁸ I use the terms "sublation" and "supersession" interchangeably to translate the German *Aufhebung*. I sometime also use "replacement" although this term does not capture the sense of simultaneous cancelation and preservation that *Aufhebung* denotes. I think however that "replacement" can be legitimately used in my discussion in light of Habermas's claim in PDM that his project offers a "rational equivalent" to religion.

“linguistification of the sacred” because it is this thesis that comes under severe strain in Habermas’s recent work.¹⁷⁹ The term “sublation” (*Aufhebung*) is, of course, Hegelian, and it has the specific meaning of cancelation and preservation. So when Habermas says that “communicative reason” sublates (or supersedes) religion in modernity, what exactly is preserved and what is cancelled from religion? This is the question I want to answer in this section.

Section 4.3 shifts the discussion in a direction closer to Habermas’s current view of religion. I want to show in this section that already towards the end of the 1980s Habermas has begun to waver in his confidence that modern reason is able to supersede religion. Dominant in this period is the ambivalent idea of an “abstemious coexistence” between faith and reason.

It is only with the 2001 essay “Faith and Knowledge” that Habermas is ready to abandon this philosophically ambiguous position. In this essay, as well as in all his subsequent writings, Habermas clarifies the relation between faith and reason as one between two sovereign domains of meaning that find themselves in a relation of mutual dialogue and translation, even though separated by clear borders. This new picture is the focus of my analysis in section 4.4. My main argument in this section is that this new picture seriously undermines the linguistification of the sacred thesis according to which reason is able to sublimate the sacred. The weakening of this thesis, however, raises difficult questions for the entire “postmetaphysical” view of modernity as previously articulated and defended by Habermas. These questions are further examined in the next chapter (chapter 5).

¹⁷⁹ I have already introduced the idea of *Die Versprachlichung des Sakralen* towards the end of the previous chapter, but I could not devote too much attention to it, as the focus of that chapter laid elsewhere: to determine more precisely the justification Habermas offered for the concept of “communicative reason”.

4.2 Religion within the boundaries of mere rationalized *lifeworld*

In the following discussion my primary aim is to provide a clear account of the role religion has played in “postmetaphysical thinking”. In the first part of the chapter (sections 4.2 and 4.3) I distance myself from the view espoused by some commentators that religion has always played a central role in this project, while in the second part of the chapter (4.4. and 4.5) I aim to show that Habermas’s postsecular turn goes beyond a functionalist reading of religion.

My argument is that religion had only a *residual* legitimacy for Habermas’s postmetaphysical project of modernity and it cannot be regarded as a central feature of this project. To support this argument I adopt a two-pronged strategy. In a first step (section 4.2) I look again at the thesis of “linguistification of the sacred” in order to tease out to the fullest extent possible the implications of the supersessionist narrative defended by Habermas throughout all his works prior to the recent turn to “post-secular society”. The question I am interested in this section is the following: what is the place and role of religion (if there is any) once the sacred has been successfully “linguistified”? Or, to rephrase this question in a more Kantian vein, what is the role of religion within the bounds of a fully rationalized *lifeworld*? Finding a clear answer to this question will help me evaluate the extent to which the recent postsecular turn is merely the more explicit unfolding of a latent but central tendency of Habermas’ thought or rather a radical rupture that generates significant tensions for “postmetaphysical thinking”.

The second part of my strategy (next section 4.3.) is to analyze the texts and passages that are brought to support the idea that religion has always been central to Habermas’s work and to show that they do not support this idea and that, in fact, they can all be brought in line with the supersessionist narrative without undue violence.

In this section (4.2) I discuss the concept of “rationalized lifeworld” and with it the “linguistification of the sacred” in modernity. Although my discussion concentrates on those “vanishing points” that, according to Habermas, define and orient a fully “rationalized lifeworld”, first I need to introduce a brief discussion of the important distinction that Habermas draws in *The Theory of Communicative Action* between “logico-developmental” and “empirical”

factors of social evolution. Having a clear understanding of this distinction becomes indispensable to any attempt to evaluate Habermas' position on religion in a fully rationalized society, or at least this is what I argue.

With the occasion of receiving the Frankfurt Book Fair's Peace Prize, shortly after the terrorist attacks of 9-11-2001, Habermas delivered a public address that astonished his audience. Speaking in *Paulskirche* cathedral in Frankfurt, the German philosopher called for the abandonment of the overconfident project of modernizing secularization and put forward the generous offer to renew the dialogue with religious traditions. Translated into English as "Faith and Knowledge" (FK, 2003), this speech was almost unanimously considered sensational in Germany. Many analysts declared it "epoch-making" and the audience's reaction in Frankfurt's cathedral or watching on television resembled a religious awakening.¹⁸⁰

The first two chapters of my dissertation, detailing Habermas's embrace (against Weber) of a positive view of secularization, are sufficient to explain the German public's reaction of bewilderment. After all, the exhortation to overcome "secularism" and to open the door to religion came from someone who had placed a stubborn defense of a strong rationalist *cum* secularist view of modernity at the very center of his philosophical thought. The "postmetaphysical" framework of Habermas's philosophical project was supposed to transcend and replace the metaphysical (as well as religious) mode of thinking, centered on the thought of some ultimate foundation. The replacement is unavoidable (there is no alternative to "postmetaphysical thinking") as it represents the final expression of a universal trend of societal

¹⁸⁰ See Hans Joas, "Post-Secular Religion? On Jürgen Habermas", in *Do We Need Religion. On the Experience of Self-Transcendence?* Boulder, Paradigm Publishers, 2008, 105-111, p.105. It is clear however that Habermas's speech does not reflect an existential reorientation on the part of its author. One cannot find in this text the slightest hint to a personal religious experience and there are no indications whatsoever of a conversion to a religious point of view. In fact Habermas is quite clear that he remains "tone-deaf" and "unmusical" to religion, as he puts it, echoing Weber. "Ich bin Alt aber nicht Fromm geworden", Habermas reassures us. In fact Habermas calls for the abandonment of a narrowly conceived "secularism" and for a dialogue with religious traditions in order to strengthen and not weaken the "postmetaphysical" understanding of modernity, as I already mentioned. In my view this makes Habermas's recent project much more interesting philosophically than any facile attempt to oppose modernity or to radically reject its normative project.

rationalization.¹⁸¹ And it is worth noting that if Max Weber was quite ambivalent about the universal direction of the process of modernization *qua* rationalization, Habermas harbors no such ambivalence: he makes it clear that the Weberian framework is compatible only with a universalist reading of this process.¹⁸²

I argue in this section that Habermas's clear support for a universalist interpretation of Weber's view of the process of modernization as rationalization has the following direct implication: insofar as religious traditions and communities still exist in modernity, this *empirical* fact can have no theoretical bearing on philosophical and sociological reflections and it can have no bearing on the political and normative *structure* of modern society. Those religious traditions that are still with us today must be seen as remnants of a stage of social evolution that has already been superseded (structurally) with the transition from metaphysics to post-metaphysics. As there is no alternative to this transition, the still existing religious traditions can have only a transitory status, destined as they are to a universal process of "linguistification of the sacred", whereby whatever cognitive content religious worldviews may hold is taken over by the "discourse ethics" - for the moral sphere of modern life - and by the reproduction of the *lifeworld* through "communicative reason", more generally (I will clarify these ideas more in due course).

I briefly turn to the distinction Habermas draws (following Weber) between "logico-developmental" and "empirical" factors of social change/evolution because this distinction will help clarify my interpretation of Habermas's position. Let's recall Habermas's main argument

¹⁸¹ For a good discussion of Weber's theory of rationalization that throw some doubts on the connection between the process of rationalization and a "postmetaphysical" stage, see Ronald Beiner "Second Prologue: Freud, Weber and Political Philosophy", *Political Philosophy. What It Is and Why It Matters*, Cambridge University Press, 2014, pp. xliii-lv.

¹⁸² Indeed, Weber is ambiguous on the universality of the process of rationalization as disenchantment and objectification of the world. This process looks like a universal process, as he says, from *our point of view*: "A child of modern European civilization who studies problems of universal history shall inevitably and justifiably raise the question: what combination of circumstances have led to the fact that in the West, and here only, cultural phenomena have appeared which — at least as *we* like to think — came to have *universal* significance and validity." Max Weber, "Author's Introduction" to the *Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*. By contrast, Habermas stresses in TCA that only a universalist understanding of this process is compatible with the Weberian framework of analysis. What this implies quite directly in my view is the fact that all societies, sooner or later, will enter this process of disenchantment and rationalization. Habermas's interpretation also implies that all societies can be placed on a continuum from a mythological view of the world to a post-traditional type of society, some closer to a fully rationalized *lifeworld* while some other still behind but slowly and inexorably moving forward in this process of rationalization.

against Weber (and against the appropriation of Weber by early critical theory): capitalism and bureaucracy represent just a *selective* realization of the rational potential made possible by the process of modernization. In other words, the spectrum of logical alternatives opened up by cultural rationalization (disenchantment/secularization) is *wider* than what has gained empirical (*de facto*) ascendancy with the advent of a modern capitalist economy and the modern state.

The key here is to correctly understand the difference between evolution at the level of logical possibilities (“logico-developmental” factors) and evolution at the level of empirical events/phenomena, and the exact nature of the relationship between these two planes at the threshold of modernity, according to Habermas. While Weber and Marx see a direct link between premodern (traditional) and modern forms of life, Habermas introduces a more complex picture. Indeed, Weber saw a direct connection between the religious the Protestant ethics and capitalism.¹⁸³ In a similar way Marx saw a direct transition from the destruction of traditional forms of life to the emergence of the new (capitalist) form of economic exchange.¹⁸⁴ In Marx, the development of “the means of production” made possible by the industrial revolution become incompatible with the feudal relations of property, which thus became “fetters” that “had to be burst asunder”. Of course, for Marx the same dialectical movement will take place in the transition from a modern (bourgeois) society to a future communist society: the gigantic means

¹⁸³ This ethics makes the emergence of capitalism possible after which this new form of rational organization of economic exchange stabilizes itself and destroys the religious ground that generated it.

¹⁸⁴ With the development of the means of production and of exchange (in early modern Western societies with the advent of the so-called “industrial revolution” in England) the feudal relations of property became no longer compatible with this already developed productive forces. They became thus so many “fetters” that “had to be burst asunder” and “they were burst asunder” (*The Communist Manifesto*). As Marx (and Engels) succinctly put it: “In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions it [the bourgeoisie] has substitute naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation” (*The Communist Manifesto*). The kind of economic exploitation present in pre-modern (medieval) society has been replaced in modernity by a new form of exploitation which is much more reckless and brutal because it turns all human relationships into relationships based on nothing else but naked interest and monetary transactions. For exploited classes this is pretty much like the difference between getting a beating with and without being the influence of opiate substances, or like the difference between being subject to a surgery that will extirpate their humanity with and without anesthetic. As they also famously say: “all that is solid melts into thin air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind” which is “naked interest” and “callous cash payment”. This idea that in modernity human relations are turned into relations of exchange, into relations of equivalence basically, is best developed in Marx’ theory of value from *Das Kapital*. However, this idea has acquired a second life in many postmodern critics of modernity, but perhaps most importantly in Adorno’s reflections on the “logic of identity”. Cf. the passages from the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* where he and Horkheimer criticize the “identity thinking” of modernity.

of production created by capitalism, this immense amount of wealth and development is no longer compatible with the bourgeois relations of property, which thus become fetters in their turn and must be destroyed.¹⁸⁵ For my discussion in this chapter however it is important to remain focused on the line of separation between pre-modernity and modernity, and thus I shall put aside the question of what happens at the line between the modern form of life and whatever it is that will replace it in the future. In other words, I am not interested at this point in the messianic dimension in Marx and what happens with this dimension in Habermas (although I will have a few things to say about this in my chapter on “Postmetaphysical Hope” - chapter 6).

With respect to the threshold between pre-modern and modern society, Habermas introduces a more complex picture. Leaning more toward Weber than Marx, Habermas adopts the idea that the spectrum of logical possibilities opened up at the beginning of modernity is larger than what gained empirical ascendancy with the historical development of capitalism and the bureaucratic state.

And here comes the first important point of my discussion in this section. Habermas takes this spectrum to encompass *three* logical possibilities, which he interprets as representing the *formal aspects* of the three “cultural spheres” identified by Weber (loosely corresponding to Kant’s three critiques). Weber narrowed the focus of his analysis to just one such “cultural sphere” (the religious ethics) and thus he neglected the other two logical (formal) possibilities opened up at the threshold of modernity.¹⁸⁶ For instance: the emergence of modern science played no role in his analysis of modernity. In other words, Weber focused on *just one* of the three “validity claims” of truth, rightness and authenticity whose differentiation was made possible (on a formal-logical plane) by the modern “rationalization” (secularization) of culture. However the “systematic thrust” of Weber’s theory of modernization as rationalization can be rescued, argues Habermas, if *all three* formal aspects of the “value spheres” (all three “validity claims”)

¹⁸⁵ The bourgeoisie, this destructive “sorcerer”, has conjured up with his spells the “powers of the nether world” that he is now no longer able to control. The proletarian class (also created with this increasing development of production) will overturn an obsolete bourgeois social order and establish, for the first time in the history of humankind, a truly emancipated, free society.

¹⁸⁶ Thus the “systematic thrust” of Weber’s theory of modernization, as Habermas also puts it, is not exhausted by his analysis of the link between the emergence of the more modern, more rationalized, religious ethics (in Protestantism) and capitalism and bureaucracy.

differentiated by the secularization of modern culture are taken into account (I explained in detail in the previous chapter how Habermas proposes to correct Weber's theory).

And here comes the second important point for my discussion in this section: all these three possibilities have gradually acquired institutional substance and expression in Western modern societies. Modernity has led to *institutionalization* of all these three possibilities. From mere logical possibilities they have all become *structures* of modernity. Thus Habermas points out for instance that the scientific "sphere" acquired institutional form in modern universities, in communities of inquirers, in institutes of research, in scientific journals etc. Likewise, and more important for my discussion here, the moral-legal "cultural sphere" has acquired institutional expression in what Habermas calls the "public sphere". The importance of the "public sphere" in Habermas' work cannot be underestimated. Let me remind the reader here that the main purpose of one of Habermas's first book, the *Structural Transformation of Public Sphere* (1989[1962]), was to trace the emergence of the bourgeois "public sphere" and to draw attention to its gradual institutionalization in West European politics. In a similar manner, although in this respect Habermas' reflections are less systematic, the third "validity claim", that of authenticity, gained independent institutional expression in the sphere of artistic creation and ethical conceptions of life.¹⁸⁷

Habermas's argument is that only after these logical possibilities (or formal aspects) made possible by the secularization of culture (the three distinct "validity claims") have been embodied into the *structural components* of cultural modernity (i.e. they were institutionalized in their differential expressions), that the two "systems" of capitalist economy and bureaucratic state decouple themselves from the *lifeworld*, increasingly expand themselves and eventually colonize the *lifeworld* thereby threatening the borders between these different modern structures.¹⁸⁸ Thus the attempt to decolonize the modern *lifeworld* in a future society (the

¹⁸⁷ Just to give a quick example, the critique of work of art today (the rational discourse that evaluate the aesthetic value of a work of art), does not proceed anymore on the premise that the concept of "beauty" has also moral implications. Modern art is post-auratic art (to borrow Walter Benjamin's term).

¹⁸⁸ Thus, in late modernity, market imperatives tend to determine and constrain artistic expression (for instance in the city I live there is almost no arts festival today where a big bank is not also the main sponsor; artistic creation become an accessory to the relentless drive for increased visibility and ultimately profit), while the same imperatives increasingly encroach upon the public sphere. The public process of rational formation of the will in the "public

Habermasian equivalent of Marx's utopian communist society) cannot annul these structures; on the contrary, decolonization means their correct rebalancing, resetting these structures in their right place.

To summarize, one can say that, according to Habermas, the question regarding the normative legitimacy of modernity is already settled *from a structural or philosophical point of view* (there is no viable philosophical alternative today to "postmetaphysical thinking" - see my discussion of this Habermasian claim in the first chapter). In light of the present discussion I interpret this claim to mean that the *structures* of cultural modernity have no alternative today: any attempt to de-differentiate them will force us to fall back before the critical threshold established by Kant.¹⁸⁹

However, *from an empirical (or historical) point of view*, things may be a little bit different, because many existing institutions and the identity of many communities in our modern societies continue to be shaped by religious or metaphysical claims. This persistence can be explained by various *empirical* factors, and one can point out here for instance the historical contribution of religious institutions to the process of nation-state building in various countries, the social inertia of historical settlements (concordats) between the State and the Church (Italy may be the paradigmatic case here), and the various economic interests of "carrier strata" (to invoke one of the main empirical factor in Weber's analysis). Another empirical factor is the *existential* role of faith, and its capacity to help us cope with shattering events in our life (events like death, loss, sickness and radical vulnerability).

What all this shows is that from an empirical point of view, unlike from the logico-developmental point of view, the question regarding religion's persistence in modernity might not be closed, at least for the time being.

sphere" is seriously undermined by the logic of the market - this has been the warning contained in the conclusion of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. As modernity progresses, monetary and financial interests gradually undermine the public process of exchanging reasons. As mass media becomes increasingly dominated by the logic of the market, media outlets are run as any other corporate business. Similar points can be made about public universities and pretty much all institutions of late capitalist societies.

¹⁸⁹ The Kantian-Weberian narrative of modernity adopted by Habermas in his major works can be challenged, of course. Charles Taylor, for instance, is one important contemporary philosopher critical of this narrative.

However, and this is the third important point I want to emphasize in this discussion, Habermas expected the gap between structural and empirical factors to progressively diminish. I think this is a crucial point for understanding the role of religion in a fully rationalized lifeworld and in order to fully grasp it we must go back to the mediating role that philosophy takes on under “postmetaphysical” conditions (as interpreted by Habermas). Recall that after the “fall” of metaphysics, philosophy can no longer draw the transcendental limits of science and must settle for a more modest (dual) position: on the one hand, as “stand-in”, philosophy provides sciences with universal hypothesis for empirical testing; on the other hand, however, philosophy becomes an “interpretative” discipline, and it is this role that interests me here. As “interpreter” philosophy mediates between the three cultural spheres, on the one side, and the everyday life, on the other side. Because the results of the three rational discourses which test and redeem validity claims in science, morality and arts can have quite an abstract and esoteric nature for everyday life (think of quantum physics), philosophy must interpret these sometimes very specialized outcomes in a way that makes them relevant for quotidian communicative interaction. Thus, in Habermas, philosophy functions as a loop whereby more and more elements that are simply taken for granted in everyday life (and we can assume that this will be the case for many aspects of religious life) are drawn into the whirlpool of rational problematization where they are tested for their validity on the three dimensions of “truth”, “truthfulness” and “sincerity”; the outcomes of these rational discourses, as interpreted by philosophy, are then released back into the *lifeworld*. This strongly implies that, in its role of interpreter, philosophy gradually pulls up the *lifeworld* in the direction taken by the progressive rational redeeming of the three validity claims (to put it very crudely, philosophy as interpreter performs the role of bootstrapping of modernity).

In terms of my present discussion, this is to say that contemporary, “postmetaphysical”, philosophy is responsible for effecting, in the long run, a process of convergence between the normative structures of cultural modernity and the empirical reality of the *lifeworld*. The better philosophy performs this mediation, the narrower the distance that exists between these structures and the empirical reality of our lifeworld will become. In other words, the better philosophy fulfills its role, the less the need for religious presence in modernity, as the empirical substance of the *lifeworld* will increasingly approximate the structures of modernity, which are secular.

If my interpretation above is correct, then what could be the attitude of “postmetaphysical” philosopher with respect to religion? It cannot be other than one of benign silence or polite indifference, because although from an empirical point of view religion may still preserve some social or existential influence, from a structural, theoretical (i.e. philosophical) point of view religion has already been superseded and therefore rendered irrelevant as source of normative or validity claims.

And indeed (*pace* Mendieta and others) silence is what one finds in Habermas’s main works up to 2001; in none of his major works, since the early *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989 [1962]) to the major *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1984/1987 [1981]), *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1990[1985]) and *Between Facts and Norms* (1998 [1992]), do religious traditions figure either as significant intellectual resources or as partners of dialogue.¹⁹⁰

This impression is reinforced by a quick comparison between two of Habermas’s texts written more than 20 years apart. This is what Habermas wrote in 1971, in an essay titled “Does Philosophy Still Have a Purpose?”:

“Postmetaphysical thought does not dispute determinate theological affirmations; instead it asserts their meaninglessness. It means to prove that in the system of basic terms in which the Judeo-Christian tradition has been dogmatized (and hence rationalized) theologically meaningful affirmations cannot be set forth at all. This critique is no longer related immanently to its object; it strikes at the roots of religion and opens the way to a historical-critical dissolution of the dogmatic contents themselves which began in the nineteenth century”.¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ The editors of a recent book on *Habermas and Religion* note that in Habermas’s work religion is (at best) of “transitional interest”. See “Editors’ Introduction” in Craig Calhoun, Eduardo Mendieta, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen eds. *Habermas and Religion*, Malden, MA, Polity Press, 2013, pp. 1-23, p.7. I find this assessment right on the mark. However, I agree that Habermas has proved himself very adept at discerning and discussing theological motifs in the works of Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin, Gershom Scholem and Theodore Adorno. See for instance “The German Idealism of the Jewish Philosophers” (1961), “Ernst Bloch: A Marxist Schelling” (1960), “Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique” (1972), “Gershom Scholem: The Torah in Disguise” (1978). But none of these theological motifs plays a major role in Habermas’s own major works.

¹⁹¹ Habermas “Does Philosophy Still Have a Purpose?” in *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, MIT Press, 1983, 12-13 (German edition 1971). This rather strong thesis of the “meaninglessness” of religious affirmations is also reflected in *The Theory of Communicative Action*, ten years later. In this work the unity of cognitive, moral and aesthetic moments of reason which religion traces back to a transcendent divinity is declared “illusory” (see TCA2, 330).

And it is quite striking that 20 years later, in the most systematic account of his theory of “discursive” democracy delivered in *Between Facts and Norms*, Habermas made virtually no reference to religion, neither as a friend, i.e. as a resource in reason’s struggle to decolonize modern society, nor as a foe, i.e. as a dark force animating the destructive force of capitalism and its colonizing pressure on the *lifeworld*. Now, if we think of the extraordinary range of Habermas’s theoretical engagement with so many different domains (from linguistics to child psychology, from ethnography and anthropology to aesthetics, from “system theory” to social theory and constitutional law theory), I would say that the silence on religion in his work is quite deafening.¹⁹²

How are we to interpret this silence as anything else but an endorsement of the view that religion has already been superseded in structural terms and, as the modern *lifeworld* progresses towards a fully rationalized *lifeworld*, it will be so in empirical terms as well? In short the implication of this silence is that religion can claim merely what I call *residual* legitimacy (a term that will become clear as we proceed).¹⁹³

I therefore find unassailable the affirmation that religion plays no significant role in the “postmetaphysical” framework of modernity Habermas articulated in his major works, other than

¹⁹²And it becomes even more so if one remembers that these interdisciplinary efforts, which rightly place Habermas amongst the most important philosophers writing today, continue the interdisciplinary program initiated by the early Frankfurt School. However Adorno, Horkheimer, Benjamin, Bloch, all incorporated religious and eschatological motifs in their work (Adorno’s “negative dialectics” could be construed without much difficulty as negative theology - on materialist premises, but theology nonetheless. And late Horkheimer reads like a truly religious thinker. When Horkheimer claimed that “it is futile to rescue an unconditional meaning without God” Habermas declared himself irritated by this remark and wrote an essay to express this irritation (*JA*, 133-146). However, I think that now, in the post secular phase of his thought, Habermas would probably see this as an overreaction on his part, as his recent writings draw him closer to Horkheimer’s position.

¹⁹³ Analyzing Habermas’s silence, it could be argued, cannot really supply a convincing argument, as one can easily fall in the trap of reading too much into it. However, what important thinkers pass in silence is sometimes more important than what they explicitly say; certainly Habermas would agree with this, as he quotes Sartre’s saying that “silence is reactionary” and directs that against Heidegger (with respect to the latter’s publication of *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, without explanation or apology). In what follows I will direct my attention to an analysis of the “rationalized *lifeworld*” and I will show that what Habermas *does say* fully concurs with my interpretation of his silence.

that of a precursor whose dogmatic contents have been historically and critically dissolved in the process of modernization.¹⁹⁴

Let me underscore here one more point very briefly. Throughout his major works Habermas shares, without always explicitly acknowledging it, Marx's view of religion as ideology and the thesis in *Critique to Hegel's Philosophy of Right* that criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism. The Habermasian variant of this thesis is more complex, to be sure, but in essence it says the same thing: "communicative reason" begins to unfold its full rational potential in society only with the break up of religious/metaphysical *worldviews* into the three distinct validity claims of truth, rightness and truthfulness. Insofar as these three claims are fused together and anchored in the transcendent reality of God (this is the case at least for the three major monotheistic religions), religion severely impairs the rational potential of communication. Only when this unification is identified/exposed as *illusory* (see TCAII, 330) and dispensed with, can the rational potential contained in the three validity claims become available, first as mere logical possibilities, but then gradually institutionalized and thus released in society. Like Marx, Habermas too sees religion as a form of ideology (or "false consciousness").

So far in this section my whole case has rested on an analysis of silence, an analysis of what Habermas did not say rather than what he explicitly says. I now turn to what Habermas explicitly says about a fully "rationalized lifeworld". I show that an analysis of those "vanishing points" which, according to Habermas, obtain for the process of rationalization of the *lifeworld* yields the same conclusion, namely that in a fully rationalized *lifeworld* religion as such has no place, or just a transitory and therefore inconsequential place in the normative framework of modernity.

¹⁹⁴ An example of what Habermas had in mind for this process of migration of critical contents is, I want to suggest, is Kant's writings on religion where Kant "critically assimilate", one can say, some of the central dogmas of Christianity. Thus, the Kingdom of Heaven is reworked (Habermas would now say "translated") by Kant into a universal republic of ends. In a similar way, Marxism critically assimilated (translated) the emancipatory impulse from the Judeo-Christian tradition into a materialist view of history. Hegel's concept of the Absolute can also be placed without difficulty among these attempts at critical assimilation of religious dogmas. Recall that Habermas himself followed in the footsteps of these great modern philosophers and claimed in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* to he can achieve what all them failed to do, namely to offer an equivalent of religion without relying on metaphysical premises. It is very interesting that now, in the post-secular phase of his thought, Habermas argues that all these attempts (including his own, I have to stress) must be seen as examples of "destructive" secularization. This can only support my main argument in this chapter that the post-secular turn in his thought is a seismic shift rather than the explicit surfacing of a latent tendency.

According to Habermas, the rationalization of *lifeworld* involves the gradual differentiation of the three components of the *lifeworld* - culture, society and personality - and results in the following “vanishing points”: “for culture, a condition of the constant revision of traditions that have been unthawed, that is, that have become reflective; for society, a condition of the dependence of legitimate orders upon formal and ultimately discursive procedures for establishing and grounding norms; for personality, a condition of the risk-filled self-direction of a highly abstract ego-identity”.¹⁹⁵

These “vanishing points” allow Habermas to re-construct the “normative content of modernity” free from the problematic assumptions of the philosophy of consciousness: “self-consciousness returns in the form of a culture become reflexive; self-determination in the form of generalized values and norms; self-realization in that of the advanced individuation of socialized subjects” (PDM, 345).

If we analyze now the three dimensions of a rationalized *lifeworld* (culture, society and personality), it is immediately apparent that religion retains normative weight in none of them. Let’s take them one by one. From a cultural point of view, as noted, modernity brings the separation of the three value spheres of science, morality/law and arts.¹⁹⁶ In regard to the sphere of science centred on cognitive claims to truth, religion must surrender its truth claims to scientific communities of inquirers. Under “postmetaphysical” conditions truth becomes a “validity claim” which is redeemed in a fallible, procedural manner on the basis of empirical evidence and rational argumentation. For Habermas, as for the whole positivist tradition, knowledge of reality (of facts or states of affairs) is public, testable and fallible. This transpires

¹⁹⁵ As I explained, these conceptual innovations have a significant advantage in that they allow Habermas to correct Weber’s grim diagnosis of the process of modernization (this remedial work serving also as an indirect verification of the program of “formal pragmatics”). While Weber thought that rationalization of society would lead to a generalized “lack of meaning” and “lack of freedom”, Habermas argues that “lack of freedom” and “lack of meaning” are merely pathological aspects of modernization and not inescapable features of this process. From a “paradoxical” view of modernity, a modernity in irreconcilable conflict with itself, Habermas shifts the accent to a “pathological” view of modernity, the direct implication of this view being that healing is possible. And indeed Habermas defends the thesis that lack of meaning and lack of freedom are the result of the “colonization” of the *lifeworld* by the system, which implies that de-colonization is possible and modernization can be put back on tracks if only the borders between *lifeworld* and system are respected.

¹⁹⁶ In passing being said, immediately noticeable here is the fact that there is no sphere dedicated to religion in modernity.

more clearly in Habermas' understanding of philosophy as "stand-in" which must enter into a productive alliance with empirical sciences, providing universal hypotheses that can be used as input for empirical research and that can thus gain validation.¹⁹⁷ Clearly, in the scientific sphere, there is no longer any room for the kind of truth claims that rely on transcendent and unconditional foundations.

If we look now at the moral sphere, the moral content of religious worldviews migrates without remainder into the "discourse ethics", a procedural process of argumentation that tests this content regarding its generalizability. "Discourse ethics" aims to test and shape moral norms in the direction of what is "equally good for all". The universal moral point of view (specified by the U principle - see my discussion in the previous chapter) replaces the appeal to transcendent moral principles.¹⁹⁸

As much of the confusion regarding the role of religion in Habermas's work stems from misrepresenting the nature of the relation between U and metaphysics/religion, I would like to examine Habermas's argument in more detail. I can explain at this point what I meant by the claim that religion has only a "residual legitimacy" in "postmetaphysical thinking" and I can clarify the nature of the religious residue.

So how exactly should one understand the relation between the U principle and the transcendent principles of traditional metaphysics and in particular the religious traditions of Judaism and Christianity? In an interview with E. Mendieta, Habermas says: "I would not object to the claim

¹⁹⁷ See my discussion of Habermas's view of the relation between philosophy and empirical sciences in Chapter 3.

¹⁹⁸ The thought of transcendence (from without) is replaced by the transcendence-from-within (our linguistically constituted *lifeworld*) of the process of moral argumentation regulated by U. The unconditionality attached to transcendent principles is transferred over in modernity to the unconditionality of validity claims. According to Habermas, although these claims are always raised here and now (in a particular cultural/historical context) they nonetheless retain a moment of unconditionality. They always point beyond a particular context. Indeed it is a pragmatic feature of how we use language (speech) that when we claim something to be true we do not claim it to be true only for us (for our context, cultural, linguistic context). We claim it to be true across all contexts. But of course further arguments, exchange of reasons, or scientific results, may very well prove our initial claim to be false. Thus all these three claims are held in a fallible manner. According to Habermas, the fallible manner in which we hold these claims *does not* undermine their unconditional character. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, whether the coupling of unconditionality and fallibilism is really a viable (or even coherent) project remains, in my view, one of the most important challenges to Habermas's theory of validity claims and to his thesis of "linguistification of the sacred".

that my conception of language and communicative action oriented toward mutual understanding *nourishes itself* from the legacy of Christianity” (RR, 160, my emphasis), and he refers specifically to the Christian concept of logos as “embodied in the communicative practice of the religious congregation” (RR, 160).¹⁹⁹ In the same interview Habermas also says that “universalistic egalitarianism, from which sprang the ideals of freedom and a collective life in solidarity, the autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, the individual morality of conscience, human rights and democracy, is the *direct legacy* of the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love” (RR, 149, my emphasis).

It is this kind of declarations that led some commentators to claim that religion (the Judeo-Christian tradition to be more exact) had always played an important, even central, role in Habermas’s “postmetaphysical thinking”. However, I do not find much in these passages to support the claim regarding the “centrality” of religion for modernity as in my view they all fall in line and are fully consistent with the Weberian narrative that Habermas espouses. Let me explain and clarify here the nature of this “direct legacy” of the Judeo-Christian tradition for Habermas’s moral theory.

What postmetaphysical thinking does preserve from religion (and metaphysics for that matter) is a certain *cognitive perspective*. What Habermas values is the impartial perspective, the God’s eye perspective, that becomes available for the first time with the emergence of Greek metaphysics and the most important religious traditions (following Karl Jaspers, Habermas identifies the so-called *Axial Age* - between 800 BC and 200 AD - to be the historical epoch when this cognitive advance took place). This perspective remains indispensable even for “postmetaphysical thinking”. Let me remind the reader once again of the distinction between the logico-developmental and empirical dimensions of social change. The contribution of the Axial Age must be understood at the logical-developmental level. It is at this level that the Axial Age has introduced a new distinction (inexistent in the mythological view of the world): that between essence and appearance, between an unconditioned principle/God and the world of phenomena that is generated by the unconditioned. This distinction makes a rational explanation of the world

¹⁹⁹ Already in *Knowledge and Human Interests* Habermas says that the “communicative-theoretical version of the concept of emancipation” can be seen as the “secularizing translation of the divine promise of salvation” (RR, 160)

possible. For the first time an explanation for the existence of evil and for the suffering of the just can be offered. In other words, *theodicy* and ethics now become possible (for instance, in the book of Job, the suffering of the just is explained as a wager between God and the accuser-Satan).

Habermas reads this distinction as an important learning process (a cognitive step forward): by positing an unconditional first principle detached from the fray of everyday facts and events, this cognitive advance enables one to separate, as Habermas nicely puts it, “validity from genesis, truth from health or soundness, guilt from causality, law from violence, and so forth” (RR, 158). Without an impartial cognitive perspective of this kind, it would be impossible to distinguish validity from facticity (or norms from facts).

However, according to Habermas, at the threshold of modernity the learning process set off by the Axial Age at the logico-developmental level takes yet another step forward. The transcendent perspective from metaphysics and religion is splintered into three distinct impartial cognitive perspectives centered on three “validity claims”. One could say without erring too much that for Habermas modernity makes available three God’s eye (impartial) perspectives, differentiated by the three rational discourses centered each on “truth”, “rightness” and “authenticity”, but unified by a procedural view of “communicative” reason. The moment of unconditionality introduced by the transition from mythology to the religious-metaphysical paradigm is preserved and transferred into the three validity claims. Thus in modernity the rational redeeming - always in a fallible manner - of these three normative claims in a process of argumentation generates normativity *from within our world* and no longer needs the support of an ontological principle or the divine.²⁰⁰ All this clarifies, I hope, the nature of the “legacy” of the Judeo-Christian tradition in Habermas’s “postmetaphysical thinking”: the latter preserves the cognitive perspective of the tradition while replacing it with a tripartite regulative ideal (the ideal speech situation).

²⁰⁰ If we want to put this point in a simplified form, Habermas preserves the shift effected by Kant’s moral philosophy which reduces God to a postulate (principle) of reason, but then detranscendentalizes this principle and gives it a tripartite form. The transcendence from-without-our-world is transformed, via Kant’s concept of “regulative idea”, into the transcendence from-within-our-world of the three “validity claims” generated from our language here and now (and not from the timeless structures of a rational subject). What this implies for the moral issue of evil and redemption of unjust suffering (hope) will be discussed at length in the sixth chapter of this dissertation.

Now the very important point I would like to take from this discussion is that *the universality of the U/D principle is premised on and depends on this replacement*. The universality of communicative reason (in its procedural unity across the spectrum of three validity claims) cannot be upheld unless the learning process just mentioned is presupposed. One cannot claim universality for the “discourse ethics” if one does not also claim that religion has been replaced/superseded by “communicative reason”. No universality of reason without *Aufhebung* of religion.

Habermas’s attitude to religion and metaphysics can be seen as “positive” only if one compares the status of the Judeo-Christian tradition to that of mythology (the pre-Axial Age religion). Indeed, this tradition is closer to “postmetaphysical thinking” than the pre-Axial religion (mythology), no doubt about that. This proximity must be placed within the logico-evolutionary perspective in that both “postmetaphysical thinking” and religion/metaphysics work with the distinction between facts and validity and it is this proximity that explains all his positive remarks about the religious inheritance of modernity.²⁰¹ Moreover Habermas clearly equates any attempt to abandon the concept of the unconditioned, any attack on the distinction between facticity and validity, with a “regressive tendency” (RR, 159). And he explicitly ties this intellectual tendency to the neo-paganism of the Young Conservatives in Germany, precursors of fascism, who drew direct inspiration from Nietzsche’s attack on Platonism and monotheism (RR, 159). I must say at this point that I totally share Habermas’s assessment of modern neo-

²⁰¹ My discussion above answers, I hope, the question what is preserved and what is canceled from religion in the Hegelian language of *Aufhebung* that Habermas uses, which was the question with which I opened this section. “Communicative” reason sublates religion in the sense that modern reason preserves the *cognitive perspective* made possible by religion but cancels everything else, i.e. all the dogmatic contents that make a religious believer recognizable as such. Borrowing a Kantian distinction, I would say that Habermas’s (like Kant’s) interest in religion has never been in *Kirchenglauben*, but only in *Vernunftreligion*, and the latter was meant to cancel, replace and to annul the first. To put this in terms of a yet another famous distinction, Habermas’s “god” has always been the god of philosophers and not the living God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This God, the living God, plays no role whatsoever in Habermas’ postmetaphysical thinking. In fact “communicative reason” began to develop its potential in modernity *only* once religion is proved illusory and this should give pause to all those who argue that Judeo-Christian tradition has always been central to Habermas’s work. What Habermas does, in fact, is to remain faithful to the Weberian framework of analysis and in this framework religion cannot have but a *residual* legitimacy, as I put it, tied to the preservation of a particular cognitive perspective. As I will show in the last section of this chapter, it is the cancellation part of the replacement narrative that Habermas now disavows. In a “post-secular society” the kind of cancellation of the *Kirchenglauben* that he previously endorsed is seen now as “destructive” secularization and it must be rejected.

paganism²⁰² and his anxiety regarding Nietzsche's perspectivism. Fascism, in my view, can be read as a "revolution of nihilism" and, in Europe at least, it has clear intellectual connections with the resurrection of a neo-pagan view of the world.

I now return to my discussion of the vanishing points of the fully rationalized lifeworld and look at the sphere of ethics because in relation to this sphere I can distill another important aspect of Habermas's view of religion at the borders of a fully rationalized lifeworld.

It is fair to say that, unlike the other two modern spheres of science and morality, the sphere of arts (a sphere that includes ethical doctrines of the good) does display some openness to religion. Indeed, the only space in cultural modernity that remains relatively open to religious influence is the cultural sphere that encompasses artistic expressions, collective values and conceptions of what constitutes an exemplary life (the good life). Insofar as religious traditions have historically shaped discourses of identity of various communities (think of the relation of Judaism to the historical persistence of various diaspora communities over so many centuries), these traditions may find some acceptance in modernity but only in so far as they undergo serious transformations. This sphere, like the other two spheres, is defined by the same process of reason giving governed by "communicative reason" and claims advanced within this sphere are exposed to the same "uncoerced" force of better reasons that guides the other two spheres of science and morality.

Therefore in a fully rationalized lifeworld religious traditions become ethical conceptions of the good life on a par with other ethical views existing in modern culture (e.g. utilitarianism). Moreover insofar as they want to retain public relevance in modernity, they must bow to the argumentative force of "communicative reason" centered on the claim to authenticity (truthfulness), which means, among other things, that religious images of the good life must

²⁰² One could probably make a difference here between the meaning of "neo-paganism" in American and European context. It seems to me that neo-paganism in North-America has a rather benign and innocuous meaning being tied to history of colonialism and to claims of reparation of historical injustices or some restoration of Aboriginal ways of life. Nothing like this can be said about "neo-paganism" in Europe, where it has a much more ominous meaning, either tied to the Nazi resurrection of Germanic pre-Christian mythology or to Mussolini's fascist dream about a new Roman Empire. His attack on and attempt at conquest of Albania, Greece and Ethiopia, for instance, were clearly part of this dream. And I do not find it at all surprising that the "Golden Dawn" party in Greece today appeals to ancient (pre-Christian) Greek values.

forfeit their *universal* significance. For Habermas, they must be understood as being tied to identity politics, to what is good for this or that community, what is good for “us”.²⁰³ Indeed religion must renounce any claim to universality insofar as universality is now transferred to communicative reason. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that in a fully rationalized lifeworld only the *ethical* part of religious traditions can still deserve (limited or local) public recognition.²⁰⁴

Let me switch the focus of my analysis to the second component of a rationalized *lifeworld* that is to the level of society (distinct from culture). Noticeable here is that modernizations brings about a double separation: the modern bureaucratic state develops separately from the *lifeworld* and likewise the capitalist economy grows apart from the *lifeworld*. These separations, however, could not have taken place without the prior retreat of religion into the private sphere - manifested in the separation of the Church from the State and the elimination of religious

²⁰³ I will have to come back to this topic because it is not clear to me what this actually implies for the theological discourse at the center of religious traditions. Surely, the self-understanding of this type of discourse does not fit Habermas’s view (at least in the case of Christianity), because placing religion in the sphere of what is good for “us” effectively denies the claim to universality that many religious traditions put forward. Indeed, one can see here once again the force of the evolutionary perspective defended by Habermas in all his important works: the universality of U can only be upheld if religion lessens its claims to universality. Religion must thus be relegated to a past cognitive stage and its claims to universality denied. All that remains from religion once societies transitioned into modernity is a universal cognitive perspective as preserved by communicative reason, as well as some ethical and identity claims or conceptions of happiness which must be placed at the same level as any secular ethical conception of life (like utilitarianism or Kantianism).

²⁰⁴ Moreover, in relation to this third cultural sphere, we meet here a claim that Habermas also advances in relation to Nietzsche and those post-Nietzschean authors (like Foucault for instance) who find sources of resistance to the homogenizing tendencies of modern reason in the work of art or in concepts with aesthetic content (cf. Habermas’s claim in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* that Foucault’s concept of “power” has aesthetic content). Adorno, of course, should also be included here. Against all these thinkers, Habermas claims that the aesthetic criteria of validity in modernity are not outside the purview of modern (communicative) reason. The architectonic needs of Habermas’s theory of modernity (the need to affirm a unity of reason across all three value spheres of modernity) compels him to claim that the aesthetic sphere of cultural modernity displays the same progressive structure (based on a learning process) as the sphere of science and the sphere of morality and the law. All these Habermasian claims are very contestable and, to my mind, very problematic, to say the least. For instance, if I read Habermas correctly, to say that the sphere of arts displays a “learning process” in manner similar to science is to implicitly affirm that, for instance, Kazimir Malevitch’s pictures are (somehow) *better* than, let’s say, the splendid icons painted by Andrei Rublev; or that Eduard Munch’s “Scream” is better than Giotto’s frescoes. I have serious doubts that this implication of Habermas’s view of the formal unity of cultural spheres of modernity can be defended. Let alone the fact that Habermas has never seriously engaged with those philosophers of science, like Thomas S. Kuhn in the USA or Bruno Latour in France, who argue - with very strong evidence, that scientific discovery *does not* follow a cumulative, progressive process. And if the idea of progress is challenged in the sphere of science and seems to be implausible in the sphere of artistic expression, why would not it be equally implausible in the moral sphere?

constraints on economic transactions.²⁰⁵ Therefore, in this view of modernity, religion belongs to the private sphere. Indeed this is the only possible place for religion in “postmetaphysical” modernity (for as long as religion still exists).

The interpretation I offer in this section, namely that a fully rationalized lifeworld relegates religion to the private sphere (temporarily, awaiting its complete demise), while its ethical part/doctrine is secularized and made parochial as part of the third cultural sphere of modernity, is also supported by the following interesting parallel.

Let’s remember how Habermas defines “communicative action”: communicative action, in everyday common interactions, activates all three validity claims of truth, rightness and sincerity simultaneously. Interestingly this corresponds to the way religious *worldviews* also unite the three validity claims. So in Habermas’s model, the entanglement or interlocking of the three validity claims is associated with the *unreflective* level of everyday communication. The *reflective* level of communication, the more complex form of rational discourse, is triggered only when one of the rules of actions (or norms, or values) that are usually taken for granted in everyday communication becomes the object of disagreement. Once communication switches to the higher level of reflexivity of discourse, the three claims are set apart from one another and thematized explicitly one at a time. It is therefore fair to say that in Habermas’s model God-talk belongs only to the unreflective level of communication.

To summarize the results of my (rather lengthy) analysis in this section, I argue that in a fully rationalized *lifeworld* communicative actions of a religious type have their proper place in the private sphere of everyday unreflective communication. When and if religious communities aim to communicate “reflectively” and get access to the public sphere, they must accept the differentiation of the three validity claims (truth, rightness and authenticity) and their separate thematization in specialized discourses. When this happens however, that is when religious

²⁰⁵ Once again we can see just how much Habermas’s analysis is indebted to Weber. It should be noted however that Weber’s famous connection between early Protestantism and capitalism is by no means immune to criticism. To cite just one example here, one should contrast this Weberian-Habermasian narrative with Leo Strauss’s arguments in *Natural Right and History* (1953). Strauss argues that the emergence of capitalism must be lied at the door of the new philosophy which begins with Machiavelli and not at the door of European Reformation. It is the new, “scientific” study of man and society in Machiavelli, Hobbes and a score of other early modern philosophers that has gradually led to the restructuring of all social relationship in terms of formal and instrumental interaction.

claims are held in a “reflexive” manner, these claims become in fact ethical claims. As ethical claims they can have only parochial or limited validity as they are tied to collective identity, to what is good for a particular group and not necessarily for everybody.

Finally, if we look at the level of individual personality, modernization involves decentered forms of consciousness, which implies that we, the sons and daughters of modernity, are able to distinguish between an objective domain of facts, an intersubjective domain of normatively regulated relations and finally a subjective domain of inner experiences,²⁰⁶ and adopt different basic attitudes (*Grundeinstellungen*) towards each domain. Insofar as amongst the sons and daughters of modernity there are still individuals who have not acquired this capability, this means that these individuals have not yet made the step to a modern form of consciousness. Although they live in a modern society they do not benefit from the increase in maturity that the differentiation of distinct attitudes brings about. However the structural constraints of “postmetaphysical” modernity will sooner or later force them to take this step. It is impossible to live in a modern society and ignore the structural constraints of “communicative reason”. Sometimes Habermas describes this situation in strong words: someone can ignore the demands of communicative reason only at pain of suicide or schizophrenia. I take this to fall in line with my interpretation above that the gap between normative structures of modernity and empirical or everyday lived experience must progressively close up (even though they can never fully overlap but only asymptotically approach one another).²⁰⁷

What this implies for a religious citizen is that s/he is compelled to learn to differentiate between the laws of God (that s/he can still abide by in her/his private life) and the more mature normative structure of the liberal society that captures what is “equally good for all” - what is

²⁰⁶ This is in fact to say that modern individuals are able to distinguish between questions of truth, questions of what is right and questions of what is good and they have learned to switch between these three distinct kinds of discourses without serious mental and cognitive dissonances.

²⁰⁷ I am not claiming here that Habermas thought or argued that this gap will completely disappear one day. After all, Habermas has more recently warned against an “essentialist misunderstanding” (BFN, 323) of the “ideal speech situation” and the pragmatic idealizations of argumentation - which form the normative core of Habermas’s philosophical project, which cannot be taken as representing an achievable social ideal. However, he does argue that this ideal is nonetheless *effective*, (counterfactual but nonetheless effective, that’s how he puts it) which means that, in the long run, and with the help of the mediation realized by philosophy, as mentioned above, the gap will progressively narrow.

“just”. Moreover the right (or the just) takes priority over the good in modern society and therefore the religious citizen, when s/he wants to participate in the public sphere, must learn to put the laws of the city above God’s commands. It is worth emphasizing here that this does not lead to cognitive conflicts in most cases (at least for Judeo-Christian societies). A conception of human rights (which is more or less what Habermas seems to mean by “what is equally good for all”) does not contradict, and in fact is consistent with many tenets of Christianity. It does however lead to conflict when human rights are interpreted in direct opposition to these tenets; the usual cases here are legislation regulating abortion and the redefining of marriage to accommodate same-sex unions - although, interestingly enough, not polygamy (even if this can be also consensual for all involved).²⁰⁸

²⁰⁸ These two cases have consumed a lot of the energy of activists in the Western world, however less attention is given to other interesting cases which have occurred in recent years; in particular the emergence of a “genetic market”, as well as eugenic tendencies in liberal countries - attempts at self-improvement of the species - all framed in terms of human rights. Although I cannot discuss it in this dissertation, I think that one of the most interesting topic of research in moral theory today is the interaction between the possibility of scientific manipulation of human genetic code and the forces of the market. For instance, it is clear that insurance companies have a direct interest in knowing the genetic code of potential insurers. To the extent that this information becomes available, the logic of the market dictates that differential premiums should be established for those more prone of developing genetic disease in life. This obviously increases the financial burdens for those with a faulty genetic make-up and this in turn will put increasing pressure on parents to screen pregnancies, to opt for the alternative of conceiving in vitro and to try to manipulate the genetic make-up of their offspring in order to improve their genetic structure.

4.3 Faith and reason in a relationship of “abstemious coexistence”?

The postsecular turn in Habermas’s thought, as we shall see in the remaining part of this chapter, brings significant alterations in all these areas of rationalized *lifeworld* and this can only attest to the radical nature of this turn.

However, at this point in my discussion, I want to note that the turn to a “post-secular society” which began in 2001 was preceded by what I would call a “preparatory” phase, a phase in which Habermas gradually lost confidence in the take-over narrative (with its “vanishing points” discussed above) and grappled with the problem of how to understand the relation between “communicative reason” and religion in a more nuanced way. Perhaps one of the most important aspects of this period is that Habermas backed off (to a certain extent) from the view that religion is ideology. In this section I argue that, despite these doubts, Habermas is not ready in this phase of his thought to abandon the thesis that modern reason sublates religion. All those passages where Habermas seems to infer that religion still preserves in modernity an unexhausted power of creating meaning can be brought in line with the supersessionist narrative from TCA without much undue violence. So let me trace the evolution of Habermas’ thought on this subject, before I fully engage with the concept of postsecular modernity.

The publication of *The Theory of Communicative Action* in 1981 has generated many debates and critical exchanges in political theory and social theory. But it also had a larger impact on all those interested in the battle over the soul of modernity and it thus provoked interesting ripples in theology as well. In the last chapter of this thesis I discuss in some detail the dialogue between Habermas and Johann Baptist Metz and Helmut Peukert (two important theologians who engaged systematically with Habermas’s theory of “communicative reason”). Here I just want to mention the fact that, under the impact of some of the critical challenges raised by theologians, Habermas partially retreats from the view that religion is ideology (an illusory view of the world). Most relevant in this sense is a text he delivered at the symposium “Critical Theory: Its Promise and Limitations for a Theology of the Public Realm” organized by the Divinity School of the University of Chicago on October 7-9, 1988, and published in English as “Transcendence from within, transcendence in this world” in 1992.

In this text Habermas concedes that in *The Theory of Communicative Action* he gave religion a “one-sided, functionalist description”. He also concedes in this text that in traditional societies world-religions “do *not* function *exclusively* as a legitimation of governmental authority”. At their core they are often protest movements that “attempt to ground other ways for human beings to relate to one another and to reality as a whole”.²⁰⁹ To put this more sharply, Habermas came to accept that world-religions are not simply ideology. They are not created simply to provide a moral (transcendent) justification for the political powers of the day and thus to prevent the exploited classes from changing the material conditions of their life (the “opium of the people” argument).

In the essay “Transcendence from within...”, Habermas also accepts that in *TCA* he suggested too quickly an affirmative answer to the question as to “whether then from religious truths, after the religious world views have collapsed, nothing more and nothing other than the secular principles of a universalistic ethics of responsibility can be salvaged, and this means: can be accepted for good reasons, on the basis of insight”.²¹⁰ This question, Habermas now says, must remain open.

Of course, the interesting question for my discussion in this chapter is whether for Habermas this question must remain open philosophically (in structural or “logico-developmental” terms) - in which case the supersessionist narrative is seriously undermined - or only empirically - in which case he can still preserve intact the supersessionist narrative. My view is that at this stage of his thought, Habermas endorsed the latter rather than the first option and I will try to show why this is the case.

The concessions just mentioned are preceded by the following remarkable passage (which gives us a taste of what will follow later, after the postsecular turn):

²⁰⁹ Habermas quotes David Tracy here. See “Transcendence from within...” in *Religion and Rationality. Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity*, Polity Press, 2002, 79.

²¹⁰ In “Transcendence from within, Transcendence in this World” originally published in *Texte und Kontexte*, 1988, pp. 127-56, translated in English and published in Don S. Browning and Francis Schussler Fiorenza eds. *Habermas, Modernity and Public Theology*, Crossroad, 1992, pp. 226-50, republished in *Religion and Rationality. Essays on Reason, God, ad Modernity* edited and with an introduction by Eduardo Mendieta, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2002, pp. 67-95, p. 79. All my references are to this edition.

“Even viewed from outside, it could turn out that monotheistic traditions have at their disposal a language whose semantic potential is not yet exhausted (*unabgegoltene*), that shows itself to be superior in its power to disclose the world and to form identity, in its capability for renewal, its differentiation, and its range.”²¹¹

In my view, the admission that the “semantic potential”²¹² of religious tradition “is not yet exhausted” shows some hesitation regarding the supersessionist narrative of modernity discussed in my previous chapters. It could actually turn out, Habermas seems to say here, that the attempt to replace religion (as a source of meaning and solidarity) has been less successful than he previously thought. However, these doubts are not strong enough to force Habermas into a massive reconsideration of the structural framework of “postmetaphysical” modernity. He leaves open the possibility that this inability may reflect just a temporary situation, inserting the word “yet” just before “exhausted”. If I read him correctly, what Habermas is saying here is something like this: perhaps I declared a little bit too hastily the demise of religious traditions (in modernity) and the complete assimilation of their cognitive contents in “discourse ethics”. This process seems to be something of a *longue durée*, but I don’t think that my theoretical view of “postmetaphysical” modernity is fundamentally mistaken. We cannot exclude the possibility that one day this assimilation will be complete.²¹³

However, the doubts regarding the supersessionist narrative resurface in the essays collected in the volume *Postmetaphysical Thinking* (1992[1988]), this time growing in intensity. Here one finds additional attempts on the part of Habermas to clarify the status of the take-over narrative. This shows that in this period (7 years after the publication of TCA and 3 years after that of PDM) Habermas begins to entertain serious doubts about the thesis of the “linguistification of the sacred” and struggles to define the relationship between faith and reason in a more complex and subtle way.

²¹¹ “Transcendence from within...”, 71.

²¹² This is a rather vague choice of words - does Habermas here have in mind one of the three validity claims? Which one? “The superior power to disclose the world” refers to a contrast with the scientific discourse? Or with the moral one (discourse ethics)?

²¹³ Simone Chambers (2007) nicely lays out the tension that exists at this stage of Habermas’s thought in terms of a Platonic and an Aristotelian reading of his position.

Consider the following passage from PT:

“Communicative reason does not make its appearance in an aestheticized theory as the colorless negative of a religion that provides consolation. It neither announces the absence of consolation in a world forsaken by God, nor does it take it upon itself to provide any consolation. It does without exclusivity as well. As long as no better words for what religion can say are found in the medium of rational discourse, it will even coexist abstemiously with the former, neither supporting it nor combating it”.²¹⁴

The position announced here for the problems that interest me in this chapter is one of “abstemious coexistence”. In other words, religion may have to coexist in parallel with “postmetaphysical” thinking, the latter neither trying to do what Adorno and then (some) postmodern thinkers try to do, that is to offer a negative theology on the basis of aesthetic experience, nor to offer existential consolation for losses in our lives provoked by death and sickness. Observe, however, that this position of “abstemious” coexistence does not imply a serious reconsideration of the “postmetaphysical” view of modernity, because, once again, it may express just a temporary inability: just “as long as” no better words can be found for what religion has to say is the latter accepted in this non-combat relation. It may very well happen that the right words will be found one day.

The following passage conveys the same image:

“In the wake of metaphysics, philosophy surrenders its extraordinary status. Explosive experiences of the extraordinary have migrated into an art that has become autonomous. Of course, even after this deflation, ordinary life, now fully profane, by no means becomes immune to the shattering and subversive intrusion of extraordinary events. Viewed from without, religion, which has largely been deprived of its worldview functions, is still indispensable in ordinary life for normalizing intercourse with the extraordinary – and not merely in the sense of the contemporaneity of the noncontemporaneous. This ongoing coexistence even throws light on a curious dependence of a philosophy that has forfeited its contact with the extraordinary. Philosophy, even in its postmetaphysical form, will be able neither to replace nor to repress religion as long as religious language is the bearer of a semantic content that is inspiring and even indispensable, for this content eludes (for the time being?) the explanatory force of philosophical language and continues to resist translation into reasoning discourses” (PT, 51).

²¹⁴ “The Unity of Reason in the Diversity of its Voices” in *PT*, 145.

Religion is still indispensable in the “ordinary life” of postmetaphysical modernity, which is now “fully profane” (observe the plain contradiction here), in so far as it helps us cope with “explosive experiences of the extraordinary”, with events like death, loss and sickness. In my view what Habermas acknowledges here is the *existential* value of religion, its capacity to normalize “intercourse with extraordinary”, and not its cognitive claims or its “worldview functions” (explaining the nature of reality, moral claims).

Thus, I argue that in saying that “communicative reason” will have to coexist with religion, being neither able to “replace” nor “repress” it, Habermas does distance himself to some extent from the supersessionist position he had earlier defended (in *TCA* and *PDM*). But one would be wrong to interpret this distance as giving credence to the thesis that religion has always retained a central role in Habermas. In fact, this distance is not very significant, because the next sentence in the quoted passage affirms that the “curious dependence” of communicative reason on faith (when faced with the “shattering and subversive intrusion of extraordinary events”) will last only “as long as” the religious language “eludes” the explanatory force of rational discourse. In other words, the inability of communicative reason to translate (note that the word “translation” appears already in this text from 1988 - and this can only contribute to confusion) the “semantic content” of religious language is not generated by *a structural inability*; it reflects only a temporary failure. “For the time being” we are faced with this “curious dependence”, but this does not imply that Habermas is ready to discard the replacement narrative:²¹⁵ “communicative reason” may very well find (one day) the necessary semantic means to replace religion and thus complete the “historical-critical dissolution” of the religious “dogmatic contents” begun by the Enlightenment (as he put it in the passage I quoted above from *Wozu noch Philosophie?*).

²¹⁵ The question mark after the words “for the time being” in this passage betrays a heightened doubt regarding this narrative than in the other passages I quoted here from “Transcendence from within...” and from PT.

4.4 The postsecular turn: from sublation (*Aufhebung*) to containment of religion

I have shown that Habermas's thought evolved from a confident defense of communicative reason as the rightful successor to religion, to a more cautious recognition of the still unexhausted semantic power of religious language which, Habermas has come to accept, might not be absorbed without remainder by the communicative process of exchanging reasons. In this phase of his thought Habermas leaves open the question of whether or not "communicative reason" will be able to fully appropriate the semantic content of religion in some distant future. He only concedes that reason and faith will have to "abstemiously" co-exist "for the time being".

Habermas's later writings, after the 2001 "Faith and Knowledge" speech with which I began this chapter, remove the ambiguity involved in the idea of "abstemious" co-existence between faith and reason. Habermas now argues that the limits between these two cannot be overcome and that there are strict borders between faith and reason each of which must be seen as two independent domains of meaning. Despite the presence of these borders, Habermas now argues, the two have a "common genealogy" and therefore must be seen as complementary and not opposed "intellectual formations". The relationship between these two formations must be one of dialogue and reciprocal learning in a "post-secular society", a learning process which is guided by a clear primacy of "communicative reason" vis-à-vis religion, on the one side, and a more important public role for religion, on the other side.

The direct implication of this new view, I want to suggest, is that "communicative reason" *will never be able* to replace religion.²¹⁶ Reason's inability to discursively retrieve the semantic content of religious worldviews is no longer interpreted by Habermas as the effect of a transitory situation. This inability reflects now a *structural* incapacity: there are clear and strict borders

²¹⁶ In terms of Simone Chambers' discussion, the Platonic reading is abandoned in favor of the Aristotelian one.

between “postmetaphysical” reason and faith. The philosophical perspectives centered on faith and reason cannot be bridged.

My argument is that this new configuration raises serious normative challenges to “postmetaphysical thinking” and the main aim of my discussion in the remaining part of this chapter is to bring these normative tensions fully into light. In my view these tensions emphasize just how drastic the shift to “post-secular society” really is when compared with Habermas’s previous position.

I want to begin my discussion by clarifying the normative contours and implications of the concept of “post-secular society”. What Habermas means by a “post-secular society” has at least three interconnected dimensions. One is political/strategic, another is empirical (or empirically driven), while the third is normative. These distinct meanings map quite well onto the reasons that led Habermas to engage in this surprising alteration of his philosophical project, and it is important to keep in mind these reasons because, as we shall see later, there are many critics who interpret Habermas’s reflections on a “post-secular society” as an unwarranted departure from a secular view of modernity. In short, these critics accuse Habermas of taking a wrong turn in advocating for a “post-secular society” and it is therefore important to understand his reasons for doing so before attempting to assess the merits of this critical challenge.

From a political point of view, it is not without significance that the postsecular shift in Habermas’s thought began after the terrorist attacks in 9/11/2001. Global terrorism and the religious fundamentalism that feeds it is a large concern informing Habermas’s discussion of this concept. Fundamentalism, in his view, does not represent a latent feature of some religious traditions (in this case Islam): “In spite of its religious language, fundamentalism is an exclusively modern phenomenon, and therefore, not only a problem of others” (FK 102). Fundamentalism is in fact a reaction to modernizing pressure, argues Habermas. In the current context of economic globalization this pressure can have very destructive effects, which can no longer be compensated or mitigated by the establishment of a comprehensive welfare state, on the model familiar to us from post-World War II Europe, for instance. Moreover, when the modernizing assault on traditional ways of life is also tied to feelings of humiliation and evaluated against the historical context of Western colonialism, a wholesale rejection of the modern project may emerge which can (and does) take violent expression.

Strictly from a political perspective, the important question becomes: what is the appropriate response to this violence? What kind of strategy should the West adopt when confronted with the violent rejection of its social and political project? Of course retaliation and the use of its military might is one option (“the war on terror”). In the long run however this cannot be a viable solution because it leads us down the destructive path of an all-out clash of civilizations.

And here Habermas offers one of the remarks that baffled his audience when he delivered the speech in Frankfurt: the West needs to reflect again on its own relation with the process of secularization. “Only if we realize what secularization means in our own postsecular societies can we be far sighted in our response to the risks involved in a secularization miscarrying in other parts of the world” (FK 103). The initial surprise provoked by this claim is amplified when Habermas declares that the process of secularization in our Western societies is not yet completed: “if we want to avoid a clash of civilizations we must keep in mind that the dialectic of our own occidental process of civilization has as yet not come to a close” (FK 102-103).

Thus, the violent rejection of secular modernity manifested in global terrorism becomes for Habermas the occasion for an attempt at normative self-clarification (which shows by the way that the normative dimension of the concept “postsecular” is the crucial one). One of the important strategic/political benefits of this normative self-clarification is that a new picture of the West may be presented to the rest of the world. What this new picture should convey is that modernity is not necessarily wedded to a “destructive” secularist view that instrumentalizes religion, consigns it only to a private role, and hopes for its future disappearance under the radiant sun of positive science, capitalism and (communicative) reason.²¹⁷ “We do not want to be perceived as crusaders of a competing religion or as salespeople of instrumental reason and destructive secularization”, Habermas now writes (FK 103). In light of the serious global threats and challenges to modernity, it becomes very important to show that there is room in modern society for a more ample contribution of religion in the public sphere of liberal societies and hence for a more congenial (mutually enriching) relationship between faith and reason.

²¹⁷ Which is, by the way, exactly what Habermas had previously endorsed in his theory of modernity, as I made clear already in the first section of this chapter. In direct contrast with this view he now affirms that the “dialectic of secularization” does not necessarily lead to the privatization, followed by the decline and eventually disappearance, of religious values.

I think that Habermas is basically correct in this insight. Liberal democracy has a better chance of genuine development in non-Western contexts if it is unhinged from a secularist worldview.

I now turn to the empirical aspect of the postsecular turn in Habermas. According to Habermas, the term “post-secular society” is meant to apply only to wealthy Western societies, like those in Western Europe, Australia or Canada. In these countries a secular view of modernity has gained wide acceptance and has become an entrenched feature of political and social reality (since the 19th century - think here of the separation between church and state). Only for them, therefore, does it make sense to argue for a transition to a “post-secular society”.

Thus, at first sight, Habermas’ term “post-secular society” seems to imply that religion had been close to extinction (in secular societies), but was making a dramatic come-back (hence a “post-secular society”). However the situation on the ground has always been more complex than that.²¹⁸ In Western Europe, for instance, although the principle of separation of Church and State is widely accepted, the Anglican Church continues to be the established Church of England since Henry VIII, and the same can be said for the Lutheran Church in Northern Europe (this has recently changed though). And in countries like Austria, Spain, Italy or Greece the Catholic and Orthodox Churches have always retained much institutional weight and continue to be important partners of the secular state in many policy areas. Moreover in the USA, with their constitutional “wall of separation”, religious communities have consistently maintained a marked presence, so much so that the US has always been seen by sociologists as rather the exception to the secularization thesis.²¹⁹

I think that Habermas is now ready to interpret this complex empirical reality in a different key. He seems to agree that the progressive secularization of Western societies did not lead, as many

²¹⁸ This view probably applies only to Eastern Europe and Russia up until 1989 - and that only under duress, to put it mildly.

²¹⁹ The American religiousness has not got into decline since Tocqueville noticed in 1840 the difference between Europe and the US (see Finke and Stark 1992). However, neither the European case seems to unambiguously support the secularization thesis: “There has been no demonstrable long-term decline in European religious participation!... “; “religious participation was very low in northern and western Europe many centuries before the onset of modernization” (Rodney Stark, 1999, 254). Levels of religiosity remains high in Europe although the participation in institutionalized religion has decreased. Grace Davie interprets this as a shift from belonging to believing (believing without belonging).

sociologists and social theorists believed (and as he himself has argued in TCA), to a gradual diminishing of the importance of religion in people's lives or to a decrease of its relevance for society. Not only does organized religion show no signs of imminent disappearance but at the beginning of the 21st century many religious communities are expanding on a global scale and display a quite unexpected vitality.²²⁰

It is important for my discussion in this chapter to note that Habermas does not seem willing anymore to interpret the empirical persistence of religion through the lens of his distinction between structural and empirical factors of social evolution (as I explained at the beginning of this chapter). Clearly, he is now unwilling to write off the presence of religion as just a temporary situation which will one day (conveniently) disappear under the pressure of the structural differentiation of modernity. A "post-secular society" must adapt "to the fact that religious communities continue to exist in a context of ongoing secularization" (FK 104).

Thus in light of this empirical reality a theoretical self-correction becomes necessary. The "postmetaphysical" framework of modernity must be disassociated from the secularization theory he had once been committed to.²²¹ Habermas now abandons the thesis that "communicative reason" is able to supersede religion (both on a functional dimension of social

²²⁰ Many examples come to mind: the role of Catholicism in the Polish trade-union movement *Solidarnost* at the beginning of the 1980s, the rise of militant Islam with the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the rise of the religious Right in the USA since the 1970s, the significant advances of Evangelical Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa and in Latin America, the rise of charismatic movements even among Catholics, the recent growth of Christianity in China, the power of Jewish ultra-orthodox settlers and Hindu nationalism are only the most notable examples. The rise of the Orthodox Church after decades of severe persecution in Russia and some East European countries, nothing less than a massive re-enchantment of the East, must also be added here.

²²¹ The turn to "postsecular" in Habermas falls in line with a growing awareness among social theorists and sociologist that the so-called "secularization thesis" is rather implausible. We have to remember that in the sociological literature on the emergence of modern society this thesis had once enjoyed undisputed, truly hegemonic, status: the process of modernization was supposed to lead to, in a first step, privatization followed by gradual disappearance of religion in a future society which will become fully secular. All founders of sociology, from Durkheim to Weber and Marx, have shared this assumption regarding the increasing irrelevance of religion in modernity. The rising tides of industrialization, mass education, bureaucratization and welfare state provisions were supposed to lead to a radical diminishing of the political, institutional, social and cultural role of religion. The implicit (and not so implicit) projection was that a fully modern society would first privatize and then dispense with religion completely. Today, most sociologists reject this thesis. Compare David Martin *A General Theory of Secularization* 1978, Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* 1967, with more recent works: Grace Davies, *Religion in Britain since 1945. Believing without Belonging* 1994, Jose Casanova *Public Religion in the Modern World* 1994, Rodney Stark "Secularization R.I.P." 1999, Warner *Secularization and its Discontents*, 2010. What today seems to be particularly implausible in the secularization theory is the linear and irreversible trends that it postulates.

integration - solidarity, and on the non-functional dimension of generating meaning) and replaces it in his most recent work with the idea of a common genealogy between reason and faith and with a project of “salvaging” translation.

Can “postmetaphysical” thought remain intact once the secularization thesis is discarded?²²² In my view the coupling of “postmetaphysical” and “postsecular” is fraught with serious philosophical tensions and I want now to explore these tensions in all their complexity.

4.5 Normative Tensions: postmetaphysical or postsecular modernity?

Although political and empirical events contributed to the turn to “post-secular society” in Habermas, it is the normative dimension of this concept that interests me in this chapter and in what follows I direct my attention to this dimension.

Once the focus of discussion shifts to the normative level what becomes immediately noticeable is a return of Habermas’ deep anxiety over the post-Nietzschean critique of modernity: “My motif for addressing the issue of faith and knowledge is to mobilize modern reason against the defeatism that lurks within it” (AWM, 18). And he explicitly ties reason’s defeatism to “postmodern” thinkers: “postmetaphysical thinking cannot cope on its own with the defeatism concerning reason which we encounter today both in the postmodern radicalization of the ‘dialectic of the Enlightenment’ and in the naturalism founded on a naïve faith in science” (AWM, 18).

²²² I think one can discern a certain reluctance here. Habermas is in fact very uneasy about his abandonment of the secularization thesis: for instance the definition he gives for a “post-secular society” is deeply ambiguous: as I just mentioned a “post-secular society” is a society that must adapt “to the fact that religious communities continue to exist in a context of ongoing secularization”. This short definition of the “post-secular” presents the secularization of society to be “ongoing”, which seems to indicate that Habermas is not quite ready to discard the theory of social evolution from his previous works. However, although the context of the advancing secularization remains in place, Habermas abandons the expectation that religious traditions would someday vanish. He seems now to admit that such an outcome is unlikely and that world religions will “continue to exist”. As I pointed out already, this is to accept, in fact, that “communicative reason” *cannot* replace religion.

Habermas seems to believe that, despite all his sustained philosophical efforts, the post-Nietzschean critique of modernity has not been put to rest and continues to remain a formidable enemy for “postmetaphysical thinking”. Habermas has cut off the heads of the postmodern hydra, only to realize that, twenty years later, it grew more numerous and powerful heads.

I want to suggest that Habermas is now forced to acknowledge in a more open manner what Adorno and Horkheimer within the tradition of critical theory had forcefully criticized (in their *Dialectics of Enlightenment*) and what the postmodern critique of reason has always pointed out: namely that there is a very dark side to modernity.²²³ To be sure, Habermas has always accepted that modernity displays some self-destructive tendencies – the earlier discussion of “colonization” of the *lifeworld* by the system is a case in point. And he also acknowledged that, as a replacement of religion and as an antidote against these tendencies, “communicative reason” is a rather weak and “risky” mechanism for creating meaning and generating solidarity (see my discussion at the end of Chapter 2).

However, until the recent shift in his thought, Habermas had always been very careful to emphasize that there is more to modernity than its dark side, and this is not at all unimportant. Using the metaphor of a Janus-faced (ambivalent) modernity, Habermas has always insisted on the consensual, harmonious side of modernity in contrast to people like Foucault (and others) who have maintained that this face is just a mask that has to be torn off so that the true character of modernity can be exposed in all its monstrosity. Habermas rejected this kind of “hermeneutic of suspicion” (to use Paul Ricoeur’s term) and argued for a more irenic view of modernity: reason has a healing power that all these thinkers are wrong to ignore.

It seems to me that in his recent writings, however, Habermas concedes that the other face is growing far stronger than he had previously anticipated and it is about to overcome the irenic face with concrete disastrous consequences. If I read the current anxiety regarding the “defeatist”

²²³ I think that this acknowledgement on the part of Habermas is very important and it lends support to my argument in the first chapter of this thesis that the postmodern critique of modern reason has always been a central concern for Habermas. Unlike religion, this critique *did* place a central role in Habermas. I engaged in a quite detailed discussion of this critique in Chapter 2, because I think that one cannot really understand what Habermas means by “postmetaphysical thinking” (and especially the role that the concept of “communicative reason” is supposed to play in modern society) without understanding this critique. The concept of “communicative reason” is put forward by Habermas as direct response to this critique.

view of reason correctly, Habermas is aware now more than ever that “communicative reason” is actually too weak to reject the postmodern critique of modernity. It stands in need of support from the Judeo-Christian legacy of the Western world in order to fight off this critique.²²⁴

Habermas also now appears to think that modernity’s problems are far deeper and more serious than the “colonization” thesis from TCA suggested. The language Habermas uses in recent writings reflects this reassessment, as he talks now about a modernity “spinning out of control”, a “derailed modernity”, and the secularization of society gone “off the rails”:

“Pure practical reason can no longer be so confident in its ability to counteract a modernization spinning out of control armed solely with the insights of a theory of justice. The latter lacks the creativity of linguistic world-disclosure that a normative consciousness afflicted with accelerating decline requires in order to regenerate itself” (BNR, 211).²²⁵

²²⁴ I do not think it farfetched to place Habermas’ argument in the context of a growing interest in religion of a many postmodern writers: for a good overview see Hent de Vries *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1999, where the author traces theological themes in Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-François Lyotard, Jean-Luc Nancy, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Marion, among others. Clearly, from Habermas’s perspective, a possible alliance between the postmodernist and the religious critiques of modernity would seriously undermine the still “unfinished project” of Enlightenment, which he continues to defend. Thus, I want to suggest that among the aims of Habermas’s turn to a “post-secular society” one must also include an intention to thwart such a possible coalition by getting religion on the side of “postmetaphysical” reason. To accomplish such a re-alignment Habermas needs to prove that “postmetaphysical thinking” remains more sensitive to religion’s existential anchoring in the experience of faith and more respectful of religious heritage preserved by communities of faith than any postmodern engagement with religion can ever be. There are many passages in his late writings where Habermas appears to do exactly that, he wants to persuade his audience that religion would get more respect from an honest alliance with “postmetaphysical philosophy”, which keeps its borders vis-à-vis religion, than from its playful (and irresponsible) appropriation by postmodern thought.

²²⁵ I find this passage staggering, because the world-disclosure function of language was at the very core of the disagreement between Habermas and Derrida in the 1980s. My view is that although Derrida (like the whole Nietzsche-Heidegger line of thought) still remains “the other” to Habermas, in fact Habermas has moved in recent writings closer to Derrida’s position. He now accepts that “world-disclosing” has an important role to play for practical reason. Religious language, with its unmatched power to disclose the world, could help regenerate a dwindling normative consciousness. Also the argument from Habermas’s later writings that religion remains opaque to reason comes closer to some of Derrida’s arguments regarding the undecidability of any attempt at translation. I defend this interpretation in “Derrida and Habermas on the Politics of Translation”, a paper that I co-authored and co-presented with Andrea Cassatella at the Canadian Political Science Association 2015 Conference, June 2, 2015, Ottawa, Canada.

The decline of normative consciousness has, besides rational defeatism, some other causes as well; new and troubling phenomena reinforce today the self-destructive tendencies of modernity and raise complex normative challenges. Thus in addition to the old *nemesis* just mentioned (the postmodern critique of modern reason) Habermas takes issue with what he calls “scientism”. As he writes, “scientism often misleads us into blurring the boundary between natural scientific knowledge which is *relevant* for understanding ourselves and our place in nature as a whole, on the one hand, and a *synthetic* naturalistic worldview constructed on this basis, on the other”²²⁶ (RPS, 41, my emphasis).

The two normative challenges discussed above (the defeatist view of reason and scientism), in addition to the troubling political and empirical aspects already mentioned, lead Habermas to argue that the normative project of modernity needs *external support*. This support could come, Habermas suggests, from the religious heritage of the Western world²²⁷ in the form of translation: moral intuitions which still lie buried deeply within this heritage must be extracted from their dogmatic shell and translated into the universally accessible language of reason. This

²²⁶ Scientism is “bad philosophy” (an ideology, basically) and not science. There is a fundamental difference of perspective involved here: while science adopts the perspective of the observer, “the participant’s perspective of our everyday consciousness... can neither be easily integrated nor simply subordinated to the perspective of observer”. Thus the awareness of authorship implying accountability”, emphasizes Habermas, “is the core of our self-understanding, disclosed only to the perspective of a participant, but eluding revisionary scientific description”. And this is why “the scientific belief in a science which will one day not only supplement, but replace the self-understanding of actors as persons by an objectifying self-description is not science but bad philosophy” (FK, in Mendieta ed. *The Frankfurt School on Religion*, 331). Habermas explains in this text that our “intuitive awareness of authorship and responsibility which accompanies all our actions” must not be leveled under “depersonalized” “scientific descriptions”. Common sense should consent to be “instructed” but not “completely absorbed by counterintuitive scientific knowledge” (FK, 330). In the background of our everyday actions there is always “the image of persons who may call upon one another to account for themselves, who are naturally involved in normatively regulated interactions and encounter one another in a universe of public reason”(FK, 331).

²²⁷ One question here is why does not Habermas seek support for the “postmetaphysical” view of modernity in the realm of aesthetics and work of art? After all, early Frankfurt School thinkers, like Adorno, but also many postmodern thinkers, identified sources of resistance against the domineering drive of modern reason in artistic creation. Why is Habermas not willing to follow their lead? I think that he is reluctant to go in this direction because such a move would jeopardize the claim that the aesthetic sphere in modernity is governed by the same formal process of exchanging reasons that governs the other two spheres (science and morality). If this claim is undermined however, the thesis of unity of reason across the modern cultural spheres is also undermined. Thus the whole architectonic of Habermas’s view of modernity comes under threat. Therefore Habermas must go “outside” modern reason for support. It is this need for “external” support therefore that obliges Habermas to adopt the position that religion is “the other of reason”. This position is not free from problems however, as we shall see. For instance, the conciliar tradition of Christianity that still defends the deliberative process embodied by the 7 ecumenical councils culminating in the establishment of the Nicene creed (325-387 AD), do not accept this picture of religion as the “other of reason”.

kind of translation could counteract the poverty of meaning plaguing late modernity, restore reason's confidence in its ability to provide normative grounding for modernity, and remind everyone of the importance of human dignity and solidarity. In a word translation helps practical reason "regenerate itself".

As my next chapter is dedicated to an in-depth analysis of Habermas's project of "salvaging" (*bergen*) translation, for the remainder part of this chapter I want to concentrate strictly on the normative tensions generated by the concept of "post-secular society".

The suggestion that reason depends on external support raises one important normative tension for Habermas's prior defense of a "postmetaphysical" view of modernity. Indeed, this suggestion throws serious doubt on some of the arguments he put forward in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* which aimed to show that modernity can ground its normative standards out of its own resources. Modernity, Habermas wrote in that important work, "has to create its normativity out of itself" (PDM, 7) and the central thread of my discussion in the first two chapters of this thesis was to show the solution Habermas offers to this problem. However in what sense can "communicative reason" still be seen as doing that if Habermas now admits that reason should look at religion for normative resources? In what sense can "communicative reason" still be seen as continuing the "dialectics of Enlightenment" set in motion by Kant and pursued further by Hegel and Marx - the attempt to heal the pathologies of reason using no resources external to reason - (see my discussion in chapter 2, section 2.3) if Habermas now concedes that reason must team up with religion in order to resist modernity's pathologies? The whole idea of modernity being able to rationally bootstrap itself, so central to "postmetaphysical" thought, seems now to be undermined.²²⁸

Other important lines of tension are generated by Habermas's claim that religious traditions have "cognitive content". Indeed the project of translation that Habermas proposes in his recent

²²⁸ In his debate with Joseph Ratzinger, Habermas clarifies to a certain extent the nature of this dependence on religion: Habermas still defends the thesis that reason can generate normativity out of its own resources (which is the thesis expounded in PDM), however he is not sure anymore whether reason is able to *stabilize* itself without external help. But note just how paradoxical this claim is: reason needs religion's help to stabilize its project of containing religion. Besides the fact that this continues to treat religion functionally to a large extent, it raises the question why should religion accept this kind of position to its own disadvantage?

writings is premised on the contention that religious language has “cognitive substance” and thus it is not simply ideological, irrational or fictional discourse. It is this truth-content that reason must identify, remove from the dogmatic shell in which it is encapsulated and make it universally accessible.

The argument that religious discourse has “cognitive content” is quite puzzling and in my view betrays the fact that the postsecular turn is quite a drastic departure from Habermas’s earlier views.

Remember what was supposed to be the role of religion at the boundaries of a fully rationalized lifeworld: religion retains some relevance in the private sphere of modernity (in the *lifeworld*) only for the time being and only due to its existential significance (in order to “normalize intercourse with the extraordinary” as he put it). Once religion takes the step into the public sphere, as a tradition that has been “thawed” and made “reflective”, it transforms itself into an ethical discourse about exemplary life and collective identity. “Reflective” religion becomes ethics but the sphere of ethics (and arts), unlike the two spheres of science and morality, does not center on cognition and knowledge; knowledge for Habermas is public, intersubjective and fallible, depending on continuous testing and argumentation, and ethical conceptions of the good life do not fit this model.

The “post-secular society” presents a significantly altered picture. Habermas now thinks that there is *more* to religion than its existential or ethical role. Religious traditions, Habermas now writes, ought not to be seen by secular citizens as cognitively backward, as “archaic relics of premodern societies persisting into the present” (RPS, 138). Secular citizens and thinkers must develop a “self-critical assessment of the limits of secular reason” (RPS, 139-40). This then leads to a self-reflective attitude that overcomes a “rigid and exclusive secularist self-understanding of modernity” (RPS, 138).²²⁹ This requires something more than “a respectful sensibility for the

²²⁹ In passing being said, is it not a little bit ironic that the secular citizen is now said to be in need of more self-reflection? Reflexivity has always been the mark of “postmetaphysical” modernity, whereas religious traditions have been associated with an unreflective stage of social development, or with unreflective communicative action in the *lifeworld*. Now Habermas affirms that secular citizens need to become a little bit more reflexive, which implies that they have not been really so, or have been so insufficiently. But how come? How is this possible? The stage brought about by modernity implies that the sons and daughters of modernity have taken the step to a higher level of reflexivity, one in which different basic attitudes (*Grundeinstellungen*) towards distinct validity claims (and rational

possible *existential* significance of religion for some other person” (RPS, 138, my emphasis). What a “post-secular society” requires, in fact, is that secular citizens “take religious contributions to contentious political issues seriously”. Secular citizens “should not exclude the possibility that these contributions may have *cognitive substance*” (RPS, 139, my emphasis), i.e. that they may carry truth-content.

With the admission that religious contributions may have “cognitive substance”, however, religion can no longer be (unambiguously) placed within the ethical sphere of cultural modernity. And indeed Habermas now argues that religion cannot be assimilated to other ethical conceptions of the good existing in modern society and it must be seen as a “special case”. For instance in his response to Rainer Forst (RPS), and in his dialogue with Charles Taylor at Columbia University (“The Political...”), Habermas contends that religion cannot simply occupy a place within the ethical sphere containing conceptions of exemplary life, conceptions of the good, conceptions that shapes my/our identity.

However the argument that religious discourse has “truth-content” or “cognitive substance”, and should therefore be seen as a special case of ethical diversity generates important tensions for “postmetaphysical thinking”. Let me unpack this on two distinct dimensions: First, how are we to interpret the possibility that religious utterances may contain truth? How does the truth potentially contained by religious speech fit into the scheme of the three validity claims and their corresponding value spheres? And second, what *is* then the proper place of religion in the differentiated architectonic of modernity if it cannot be placed in the ethical sphere anymore? Where and how exactly should we place religion vis-a-vis modern reason in a “post-secular society”?

In closing this chapter I would like to offer here some tentative answers to these questions, before taking up these issues again in the next chapter.

discourses) are possible. Shall we take it now that this structural differentiation (the differentiation of the three components of culture, society and personality - each with its vanishing points) represents a “rigid and exclusive secularist self-understanding” of modernity? Clearly we need to probe more into the distinction Habermas now wants to make between a “secularist” (which is rigid and exclusive) view of modernity (this is how he would now qualify his own position in TCA, PDM and BFN?) -and a “post-secular” view of modernity (non-rigid and non-exclusive).

The first question asks about the proper role of religious truth within the picture of the three validity claims. Well, if religious discourse cannot be reduced to an ethical discourse about identity or the good life, then it must have some bearing on the other two spheres of cultural modernity: the scientific and the moral/political spheres. But how is this possible? Let's take the sphere of truth. This is the preserve of natural science. I do not think that Habermas entertains the slightest possibility that religious claims about the nature of reality, about God as giving and sustaining life, about creation *ex nihilo*, about life after death etc. could have any role in the process of scientific inquiry. All these metaphysical claims are contrary to the open-ended, falsifiable and experimental process of scientific discovery. The only kind of contribution of religion that I can see in the sphere of natural science is at best prophylactic: religion could join "communicative reason" in the latter's attempt to prevent the illegitimate expansion of the scientific sphere in the direction of the other two spheres. And indeed, Habermas argues that religious intuitions could help "postmetaphysical thinking" resist a scient-*istic* worldview, which has very toxic effects because it threatens to level out all sources of normativity and validity which, according to Habermas, remain indispensable for social life.²³⁰ An alliance between reason and religion can act as counterweight to some of the self-destructive tendencies generated by the hegemonic role of science in our modern world.

If the sphere of science cannot be permeated by religion, it must follow, I argue, that the real import of religion in "post-secular society" is with respect to the sphere of morality and the law. This sphere is governed by the universal principle U which is an instantiation of the more general normative principle D (the principle of normative discourse in general, including political discourse). Indeed, the significance of this new idea of religious truth can be found here. As I will discuss it in the next chapter, Habermas now argues for a new role of religion in the public sphere of liberal societies: religious reasons should be allowed unrestricted access to the public sphere as their truth-content can only be beneficial and enriching to a deliberative view of

²³⁰ We have to remember the relationship that Habermas establishes between postmetaphysical thinking and empirical sciences (see my discussion in Chapter 3, section 3.2). This relationship takes both the perspective of the observer (the perspective adopted by natural sciences) and the perspective of the participant (the hermeneutical perspective) to be co-original and mutually irreducible. Scient-*ism*, in the form of what Habermas calls "hard naturalism", threatens to reduce the second perspective to the first, and thus to annul the distinctions between facts and values (between facts and norms) that Habermas wants to maintain. Such a view has no room for normative concepts, for moral autonomy, acts of free will etc. which are ultimately reduced to physical processes in the brain.

democracy. However, the role Habermas assigns to religious truth in the public sphere of “post-secular society” raises some serious problems. As we shall see in the next chapter, Habermas argues that the language of the law must remain “universally accessible” and because religious reasons are not so they must be *translated* before they can make it past the threshold of the state. A “post-secular society” does not mean a postsecular state. I highlight and discuss some significant problems with Habermas’ “institutional translation proviso”.

The second question above asks about the proper relationship between faith and reason in Habermas’ postmetaphysical thinking. With respect to this issue we get a novel picture from Habermas, which in my view is tension-ridden all the way through.

Habermas now puts forward the concept of “non-destructive” secularization. He argues that reason and religion are two intellectual domains of meaning separated by strict borders. The perspective of religion and the perspective of reason cannot be bridged. These two domains of meaning or “intellectual formations” remain alien to one another and this separation is tied to what Habermas calls “methodological atheism” and with the idea of respect for religion.²³¹ What Habermas means by respect for religion is that reason cannot claim to determine anymore what is true and what is false in religion.

Habermas’s “methodological atheism” has two direct implications. First, reason should not give up its ground in the face of religion because nothing is gained if religious motifs are smuggled into rational philosophy under “false pretense”. Again, this is an argument directed against postmodernism, this time against Heidegger’s late philosophy - which reads indeed as quasi-religious philosophy. Reason should not “borrow the authority, and the air of a sacred that has been deprived of its core and become anonymous”. Nothing is to be gained, says Habermas,

²³¹ Habermas’s “methodological atheism”, premised on strict borders between faith and reason, “differs from Kant and Hegel in that this act of drawing the grammatical borders does not make a philosophical claim to determine what ... may be true or false in the contents of religious traditions” (DS, 42). See also: postsecular reason “has too much respect for the glowing embers, rekindled time and again by the issue of theodicy, to offend religion” (FK, 335).

from such a surrender of secular reason to religion: “there is no insight to be gained by having the day of the Last Judgement evaporate to an undetermined event in the history of being”²³².

The second implication of “methodological atheism” is that reason should not attempt to encroach upon, subordinate or destroy the religious domain.²³³ Religion becomes “extra-territorial” to reason, a parallel domain of meaning with its own dignity and sovereignty. Faith and reason are irreducible to one another and religion retains a dignity of its own given by the inexhaustible power of religious language to disclose meaning²³⁴ and by its anchoring in rituals and liturgical experiences.

In my view, all these remarks about an independent dignity of religious discourse show that Habermas goes well beyond applying a functional perspective to religion (although this is present too), and that there is a genuine readiness on his part to take religion seriously. Those who accuse Habermas of continuing to treat religion merely in a functional way, on the model of his mature works like TCA, have a rather superficial reading of Habermas’s recent writing.²³⁵ A “postsecular society” thrives on *non-destructive* secularization, which is a different way of saying that the supersessionist narrative from his major works is now abandoned.

What we have here is a new diplomacy. Habermas is telling a tale of two cities: reason and faith are like two cities facing one another, with their own borders, domains and citizens; these two cities have a common ancestry and have been at war with one another many times in their

²³² And his critique of Heidegger and his postmodern disciples continues: “if posthumanism is to be fulfilled in the return to the archaic beginnings *before* Christ and *before* Socrates, the hour of religious kitsch has come. Then the department stores of art open their door to altars from all over the world, with priests and shamans flown in from all four points of the compass for exclusive exhibitions” (FK, 335).

²³³ Habermas clearly distances himself here from Kant, Hegel and Marx and from his own position in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* where he claimed to continue the modern project of seeking a rational equivalent for religion and to succeed in this while everyone before him had failed.

²³⁴ Religious language remains unequalled in its “differentiated possibilities of expression and to sensitivities with regards to lives that have gone astray, with regard to societal pathologies, with regard to the failure of individuals’ plans for their lives, and with regard to the deformation and disfigurement of the lives that people share with one another” (DS, 43-44).

²³⁵ Although, to be totally fair to these authors, there is a lingering functionalism in Habermas’s postsecular thought. See my discussion below of Habermas’s defence of a “priority” of reason over religion.

tumultuous history. Athens and Jerusalem.²³⁶ But as we shall see in the next chapter, the dialogue between Athens and Jerusalem is not truly a dialogue for Habermas. This dialogue is a project of “salvaging” translation. *The mode of non-destructive secularization is translation*, says Habermas. So what we have here is more like one city, Athens, scouting out the other city’s territory for rational content that has to be “salvaged” and brought back where it *de facto* belongs: within the walls of the rational city. This looks more like incursions into enemy territory rather than diplomacy and dialogue from equal positions.

Because I discuss this project of translation in depth in my next chapter, I want to close this chapter with a few concluding remarks about this new picture of two independent and sovereign cities.

²³⁶ I use here the picture made famous by L. Strauss.

4.6 Conclusion

The idea of “non-destructive” secularization centred on the project of translation (both in the form of an “institutional proviso” and in the more philosophical form of “salvaging” translation) shows a clear shift in Habermas to a more modest philosophical position. Habermas has now moved past the stages where he thought that “postmetaphysical thinking” supersedes or “coexists abstemiously” with religion. He has abandoned the supersessionist narrative that was central to the arguments from TCA and PDM and adopted what I would like to call a position of “containment” of religion. From the idea that “postmetaphysical thinking” replaces religion Habermas has switched to a more restrained position that affirms the *priority* of “postmetaphysical thinking” vis-a-vis religion.

Thus, according to Habermas, religion must accept the following three conditions in a “post-secular society”: it must accept the principle of freedom of religion, the priority of science and the priority of communicative reason. As he writes, religious consciousness must first “come to terms with the cognitive dissonance of encountering other denominations and religion. It must, second, adapt to the authority of the sciences which hold the societal monopoly of secular knowledge” (FK, 104). Finally, “religious citizens must develop an epistemic stance toward the *priority* that secular reasons also enjoy in the political arena. This can succeed only to the extent that they embed the egalitarian individualism of modern natural law and universalistic morality in a convincing way in the context of their comprehensive doctrines” (RPS, 137, my emphasis).²³⁷

As it is clear from this passage, Habermas seems to think that the idea of “priority” of reason can do the same work for the “postmetaphysical” framework of modernity as the idea of replacement (*Aufhebung*) did, namely to sustain the universality of the moral theory, but with an added bonus: more room for a legitimate presence of religion in modernity.

²³⁷ See also: religious consciousness must “relate itself to competing religions in a reasonable way; leaves decisions concerning mundane knowledge to the institutionalized sciences, and makes the egalitarian premises of the morality of human rights compatible with its own articles of faith” (Habermas “The Political...”, 26-27).

I argue instead that the thesis of “priority” of reason over religion, unlike the thesis of supersession/replacement of religion by reason, is just not strong enough to uphold reason’s universality anymore. Habermas’s shift from *Aufhebung* of religion to priority over religion comes with a price: the price is weakening the claim to universality of communicative reason. How universal can “communicative reason” (and the “ethics of discourse”) be said to be if religion is accepted as an “intellectual formation” *complementary* to communicative reason and separated by strict borders from the latter? If reason cannot determine anymore what is true and what is false in religion it means that reason has reached some limits. Outside these limits there remains a domain (the religious domain) that is not simply irrational or devoid of meaning. Although religion becomes extraterritorial to reason, there are moral intuitions buried in its domain that await to be “salvaged” and put into the accessible language of reason.

My argument is that once the *Aufhebung* narrative is dropped and replaced by the narrative of “priority” of communicative reason over religion, the universality of communicative reason comes under threat. The universality of reason depends now on the success of translation. *Translation becomes the central linchpin that holds together the old project of “postmetaphysical” modernity and the new project of “post-secular society”*. The thesis that communicative reason is universal stands or falls with the project of “salvaging” translation: if translation is successful, that is if the moral intuitions buried in religious tradition/language are successfully extracted from the religious shell then, indeed, communicative reason’s claim to universality can be safeguarded even if in the absence of an *Aufhebung* of religion.

However, is the project of salvaging translation that Habermas proposes a successful philosophical project? This is I would like to find out in the next chapter.

Chapter 5 The “Salvaging of Translation”

5.1 Introduction

The preceding chapter argued that once Habermas abandoned the supersessionist narrative according to which communicative reason sublates religion, two interrelated sets of normative challenges emerged to “postmetaphysical thinking”. The first must be located at the level of Habermas’s theory of “discursive” democracy, while the other must be placed at the level of Habermas’s theory of modernity.

Indeed, insofar as Habermas now accepts that religious speech has “cognitive content”, the question arises how exactly this cognitive substance is to be accounted for in the deliberative model of democracy defended by Habermas? To put it differently, the central concern here is how should the liberal state deal with religious interventions in the public sphere of a “post-secular” liberal society?

In close relation with this problem a second important question arises: if religion must now be seen as an independent domain of meaning which shares a common genealogy with modern reason and it cannot be conceived of as a superseded stage of historical development, how does this new configuration of the relationship between faith and reason affect the theory of social evolution on which Habermas’s “postmetaphysical thinking” relies?

As I already mentioned, in relation to both these sets of normative questions Habermas puts forward a project of translation: the truth-content (*Wahrheitsgehalt*) of religious speech (traditions) must be “salvaged” from the dogmatic shell in which it is encapsulated and made universally available. The main purpose of “salvaging translation” is to bridge the philosophical fault lines that the concept of “postsecular society” generates for the “postmetaphysical” view of modernity.

Indeed, if “salvaging” (*bergen*) translation is a feasible and achievable normative project, the alliance between “postsecular” and “postmetaphysical” in Habermas proves to be a convincing

philosophical move. The main issue involved is communicative reason's claim to universality: if the salvaging work of translation is successful, the universality of reason is secure even in the novel picture of two independent domains of meaning that Habermas introduces after the postsecular turn. Reason and religion can be portrayed as two sovereign and complementary "intellectual formations" separated by strict borders and yet communicative reason can preserve intact its universality, if one condition applies: the project of "salvaging" translation is proved successful. If reason has the capacity to transgress the limits of its secular domain, locate "cognitive content" within the extraterritorial domain of religion, separate this content from what is merely dogmatic dross and then transfer it into its own rational discourse, making it thus generally/universally accessible, if reason can do all this for every cognitive/moral content that is out there in religion, then the postsecular turn in Habermas does not jeopardize reason's claim to universality.

However, how viable or even coherent is this project of "salvaging" translation? This is the fundamental question that I want to answer in this chapter.

Because the recent "post-secular" turn raises two distinct sets of challenges for Habermas's prior project of "postmetaphysical" modernity, I would like to distinguish between two meanings of translation in Habermas's recent work, one more Rawlsian and the other more Hegelian. The Rawlsian meaning of translation takes the form of an "institutional translation proviso". The Hegelian meaning, what I would call "philosophical" translation, denotes something grander or larger, a process that takes place at the scale of world history, encompassing the transition from metaphysics to "postmetaphysical" thought. Translation in this second sense is tied to a genealogical reconstruction of the context of emergence of the modern normative framework: the entire normative self-understanding of modernity, with the differentiations of validity claims and rational discourses, with the emergence of capitalist economy and modern bureaucratic state, with the establishment of higher level of reflexivity at the level of modern personality, this entire "postmetaphysical" framework as Habermas had articulated it in his mature works, can be seen in fact as the result of a philosophical (non-destructive) translation from the Judeo-Christian heritage of the Western World.

In this chapter I critically analyze the project of "salvaging" translation from Habermas's recent writings and I examine whether "salvaging" translation proves to be a feasible project capable of

sustaining a universal view of reason after the postsecular turn. Of primary interest for me in this dissertation is the Hegelian sense of translation, the one that pertains to the general framework of Habermas's "postmetaphysical" view of modernity. I would like to begin my discussion however with the more Rawlsian meaning of translation, what Habermas calls "the institutional translation proviso".

5.2 Habermas and Rawls on religion in the public sphere

If religious traditions are not just awkward remnants of the past, if they must be seen as permanent features of our modern moral universe, and most importantly of all, if religious speech contains "cognitive substance", then the following question becomes unavoidable: how is this substance (or truth-content) to be accounted for in a liberal democratic polity? How should we understand the relationship between the truth-content of religion and the universal principle of discourse D in its application to law and politics? To put it differently, what are the implications of the abandonment of the thesis of the "linguistification of the sacred" for Habermas's theory of "discursive" democracy as this was put forward in *Between Facts and Norms* and a couple of essays that followed the publication of this major book?

The problem here is also one of managing pluralism: insofar as the competing truth claims embedded in distinct religious traditions are with us to stay, how are they to be connected to the liberal ideas of impartiality, neutrality and equal concern for everyone's interests? In a larger perspective, this discussion touches on the difficult topic of the relationship between truth and democracy, a topic whose venerable history can be traced back to Plato's *Gorgias*.

In contemporary Anglo-American political theory the topic of pluralism of ultimate values has been given central importance in the work of John Rawls. Rawls's view of "political liberalism", as well as the concepts of "overlapping consensus", "burdens of reason", "background consensus" and "reflective equilibrium" has been the object of extensive debate. One important challenge that emerges out of these critical exchanges is the contention that Rawls's conceptual framework is tied to a rather restrictive position on the public role of religion. Habermas

intervenes in the debate between Rawls and his critics and, as he has done many times before with respect to other theoretical debates, attempts to find a *via media* between Rawls's position and that of his opponents. In what follows I cannot discuss John Rawls's view of "political liberalism" in any detail, however I do need to make a few important remarks about this view because Habermas draws quite extensively on Rawls in order to articulate his own position on the role of religion in a "post-secular society".

Although the philosophical traditions in which they write are quite distinct (Habermas remains rooted in Western Marxism's attempt to reconcile Marx with Weber and Freud), there are nonetheless important philosophical affinities between Rawls and Habermas. In particular they both draw inspiration from the Kantian philosophical paradigm (broadly construed) and both want to place their respective political philosophies at a certain distance from the metaphysical tradition: Rawls presents his view of liberalism as "political and not metaphysical", whereas Habermas defines his theoretical conception as "postmetaphysical thinking". Moreover both Rawls and Habermas defend the liberal principle of state neutrality vis-à-vis conceptions of what constitutes "the good life", both argue that what is just must take precedence over what is good, both defend the distinction between public and private and both intend to revive Kant's doctrine of "the public use of reason".²³⁸

Finally, and it is here that the comparison between the two thinkers becomes highly relevant to my purpose in this dissertation, both Rawls and Habermas tie democratic political legitimacy to rational acceptability: democratically reached decisions must be rationally acceptable to everyone involved in the process. But here differences begin to emerge. While Rawls insists that rational acceptability does not require appeals to truth, and quite the contrary, any such appeal to a "comprehensive" value like truth undermines political legitimacy, Habermas in contrast argues that democratic decisions must remain "sensitive to truth".

Therefore, for Habermas, political legitimacy retains a strong epistemic dimension because rational acceptability in politics is meant in a "truth-analogous" sense. This makes a lot of sense

²³⁸ Each in his own way, of course; Rawls's "original position" remains tied to the monological premises of Kant's deontological view of morality, whereas Habermas's "communicative reason" can be seen - in my view at least - as a radically more intersubjective and hermeneutic version of Kant's concept of the "public use of reason".

if we remember (see my discussion in the second chapter) that law, politics and morality are included by Habermas in a “cultural sphere” that bears structural resemblance to the sphere of science. Political legitimacy is generated through a rational discourse centred on redeeming the validity claim of “rightness” through a process of exchange of reasons. The same formal procedure applies to scientific discourse that aims to redeem the validity claim of “truth” as well as to morality and politics. Because Habermas takes moral and political validity to have a “truth analogous” structure he ends up giving a strong cognitivist bent to moral and political discourse.

This helps us understand Habermas’s affirmation that a democracy that is not concerned with truth anymore, a “post-truth democracy” as it were, would cease to be a democratic form of government.²³⁹ According to Habermas, democracy is an “epistemically demanding, ‘truth sensitive’ form of government”, and this sensitivity to truth can be preserved only by a deliberative form of politics. Public deliberation of equal citizens (guided by the universal principle of discourse D: only those norms are valid that could meet with the assent of all affected by them) improves the epistemic quality of democratic decision-making, thereby making it legitimate.

It is their different conceptualizations of the relation of truth and democracy that leads Rawls and Habermas to adopt distinct perspectives on the role of religion in the public sphere of liberal democracy. Rawls thinks that religious arguments appeal to non-shareable parts of “comprehensive conceptions” of the good and therefore they cannot form the basis of an “overlapping consensus”. Hence they cannot be allowed in the public deliberation regarding “constitutional fundamentals”.²⁴⁰ In this kind of deliberation, the reasons advanced by the parties must be “public”, meaning equally “accessible” or shareable. Any appeal to comprehensive

²³⁹ Habermas “Religion in the Public Sphere: Cognitive Presuppositions for the ‘Public Use of Reason’ by Religious and Secular Citizens” in *Between Naturalism and Religion*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008, p.143. This is in line with Habermas’s cognitive view of morality and legal validity discussed by me in Chapter 3 where I showed that the validity claim of “rightness” (specific to moral and legal cultural sphere) is understood as analogous to the “truth” claim from the sphere of natural sciences. It is worth noting that this strong cognitivist bent of Habermas’s view of political legitimacy prompted Rawls to argue that Habermas theory is a “comprehensive” view, still tied to metaphysics. I wish to thank here Melissa Williams for pointing this out. Rawls’s claim becomes relevant in the context of my discussion of Habermas’s relation to metaphysics in chapter 6 and 7 of this dissertation.

²⁴⁰ On Rawls’s view of “overlapping consensus” see *Political Liberalism*, pp. 133-173. For what he means by “constitutional essentials” and matters of basic justice see p.137f.

values (like those of faith) is limited by the “duty of civility” which reflects the liberal commitment to equality in the form of “equal respect” (or equal recognition).

A value like “equal respect” however may take many forms, one being for instance the emphasis on an equal (formal) set of rights for all citizens, including the right of free speech. However Rawls understands “equal respect” in a more (epistemically) demanding way: when liberal citizens engage in debates in the public sphere, they have to provide reasons that they believe other citizens could accept.²⁴¹ Thus, in a diverse and plural society, one in which multiple “comprehensive doctrines of the good” co-exist, citizens are required by Rawls’s model of “public reason” to abstract from their ultimate commitments and values.

The direct implication of the Rawlsian view (centered on “mutual respect” and generally acceptable reasons) is that religious citizens must use reasons that are independent of (do not appeal to) their fundamental religious convictions. An imaginative effort is required from these citizens every time they want to participate in public deliberation: they have to find, or invent secular arguments that parallel and replace the (genuine) religious arguments they would have used in the absence of this restriction. By virtue of being independent from religious commitments (i.e. secular) these arguments are equally accessible to all citizens.

²⁴¹ Rawls argues that this requirement reflects the mutual respect that citizens of a liberal democracy owe one another. Mutual respect is a requirement implied by discursive equality and this type of equality is a fundamental *sine qua non* value of liberal democracies. Moreover mutual respect (in this epistemic, strong sense) constitutes the basis of solidarity in liberal democracies. It also marks the difference between the liberal order and a simple *modus vivendi*. I find this requirement very strong and rather implausible.

The Rawlsian model has been sharply criticized by many thinkers.²⁴² This critique is complex and involves many aspects. Two issues however seem to be especially troubling, and these are the problems of “split identity” and that of “asymmetrical cognitive burden”.²⁴³

Rawls’s duty of civility forces religious citizens to split their identity: these citizens have to use two sets of reasons, one in their private life and another one in their public life. However, as Nicholas Wolterstorff points out, it may not be possible for religious citizens to achieve this kind of cognitive split (between public and private reasons) as they may consider it a duty to pursue their religious values in every aspect of their life, and even more so when it comes to important matters such as the public policy.²⁴⁴ As a matter of real life, the requirement imposed by the “duty of civility” is very hard to follow, if not impossible.

Moreover, as Paul Weithman suggests, the split-identity requirement might in fact damage the liberal project, because it alienates citizens with religious convictions (who could and often do make up a sizeable portion of the liberal state’s population) from this project.²⁴⁵

There is a second problem with Rawls’s proposal, one that is not so much tied to a practical impossibility but rather to a procedural aspect. The requirement imposes a cognitive burden on religious citizens that secular citizens do not have to carry. As an asymmetrical burden, this

²⁴² See John Rawls *Political Liberalism*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1993. Rawls has been criticized by Kent Greenwalt in his *Religious Convictions and Political Choice*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, by Paul J. Weithman *Religion and the Obligations of Citizenship* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, and Nicholas Wolterstorff “The Role of Religion in Decision and Discussion of Political Issues” in Robert Audi and Nicholas Wolterstorff eds. *Religion in the Public Square*, London: Rowman&Littlefield, 1997. Robert Audi defends a slightly modified Rawlsian model in *Religious Commitment and Secular Reason*, Cambridge University Press, 2000 and “Liberal Democracy and the Place of Religion in Politics” in Audi and Wolterstorff eds. *Religion in the Public Square*. Other voices critical of Rawls are Michael Perry (1988), Andrew Murphy (1998), Christopher Eberle (2002), Paul Weithman (2002).

²⁴³ For a good discussion of these two problems see Melissa Yates (2007).

²⁴⁴As Wolterstorff writes: “It belongs to the religious convictions of a good many religious people in our society that *they ought to base* their decisions concerning fundamental issues of justice *on* their religious convictions. They do not view it as an option whether or not to do it. It is their conviction that they ought to strive for wholeness, integrity, integration in their lives: that they ought to allow the Word of God, the teachings of the Torah, the command and the example of Jesus, or whatever, to shape their existence as a whole, including, then, their social and political existence.” Nicholas Wolterstorff “The Role of Religion in Decision and Discussion of Political Issues” in Robert Audi and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Religion in the Public Square*, London, Rowman&Littlefield, p.105, quoted also by Habermas “Religion in the Public Sphere”, p. 128.

²⁴⁵ We could think here of a country like Poland, or Greece or Italy.

makes Rawls's ethic of citizenship unfair to religious citizens. Secular citizens do not have to modify (or censor) their arguments even though a) some secular arguments may reflect a "comprehensive doctrine" of the good in exactly the same manner religious arguments do; and b) while it is relatively easy to identify a "religious" comprehensive reason it is more difficult to identify a secular reason which is also comprehensive (non-shareable).

Under the force of this critique Rawls has modified his position in "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited". Now he introduces a "proviso" arguing that religious citizens should be allowed to use religious reasons in public deliberation *provided* that in due course secular arguments of the same effect are also offered.²⁴⁶

It is at this stage of the debate that Habermas intervenes. Against Rawls he points out that the proviso neither puts to rest the problem of asymmetrical cognitive burdens nor that of split identity.²⁴⁷ However, siding with Rawls against his critics, Habermas argues that the liberal state must remain committed to neutrality and impartiality. Therefore in Habermas's model religious interventions are included in the informal public sphere without any kind of restrictions, but completely excluded from the public deliberation of the state, unless they are translated into a "universally accessible language".

Let me try to unpack Habermas's position in more detail before I discuss, first, the shortcomings of this position and, second, the question of whether Habermas's model does indeed manage to resolve the challenges raised against Rawls and thus offer an improved version of liberalism.

²⁴⁶ "Reasonable comprehensive doctrines, religious or non-religious, may be introduced in public political discussion at any time, provided that in due course proper political reasons... are presented that are sufficient to support whatever the comprehensive doctrines introduced are said to support". Rawls "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited" *University of Chicago Law Review*, 64, summer 1997, p.783. Quoted also by Habermas in "The Power of Religion", p.20.

²⁴⁷ Indeed, as Habermas points out, the proviso does not really remove the objection of an asymmetric cognitive burden. Ultimately the religious citizen is still required to find secular reasons for his religiously motivated interventions in the public sphere. Habermas's own position in this debate is constructed with the express aim of facing this objection by equalizing the cognitive burden between the secular and the religious citizen, as we shall see below. Thus both these citizens are required to engage in a common learning process whereby the truth-content of religious arguments are translated into an equally accessible, commonly shared (neutral or universal) language. The secular citizen is also required to reflect on the limits of his own secular views with the purpose of identifying and actually rejecting whatever secularist (exclusionary, anti-religious) or naturalist (scientist) tones they may contain. This becomes now his own "cognitive burden" which is symmetrical to that carried by citizens of faith. All this is explained below.

As noted, in contrast to Rawls, Habermas thinks that democratic deliberation must remain sensitive to truth. If one adds to this requirement his recent (postsecular) concession that religious speech contains truth, the logical consequence is that Habermas must be open to religious intervention in democratic deliberation. Habermas, in contrast to Rawls, must agree with unrestricted access of religious speech to the public sphere. And so he does. This is indeed the most important difference between Habermas and Rawls. Habermas points out that Rawls's enlarged view of public reason (after the introduction of the proviso) is not large enough, as in the final instance religious citizens are still required to find secular reasons that replace their religiously motivated interventions. Neither the split-identity problem nor the asymmetrical burden problem is deflected or resolved by Rawls's wider view of public reason.

These two problems can be resolved only if no (ethical) restrictions are put on religious speech in the public sphere of liberal society. Indeed, it seems important that, insofar as religious speech contains truth, this truth-content should not be lost for democratic deliberation. Thus Habermas thinks that the problems of "split identity" and "asymmetrical burden" can be avoided /dissolved only if religious citizens, exactly like any other citizen in a liberal democratic country, can freely put forward their arguments and freely participate in the debates of the public sphere.

Let me note here, that this inclusive position is fully consistent with Habermas's theory of deliberative democracy and it follows from this theory in a quite straightforward way. The core idea of deliberative democracy is that democratic legitimacy must have a cognitive content. In other words political legitimacy depends on rational acceptability. This legitimacy must be based on (rational) convictions and not on accommodation, compromise or negotiation (on a *modus vivendi*). The best argument must win, and that means that the results of deliberation must be equally convincing for everyone affected by the decisions taken. In order for this to work, however, certain conditions must apply, and these conditions are spelled out most clearly in the "ideal speech situation". For instance, two of the most important such conditions are that no intervention should be excluded and all voices should get an equal hearing.

There is a strong justification for this deliberative openness which is required by Habermas's theory of truth: if truth is not "given" (out there, as it were, or revealed to us) but always fallible (the "validity claim" to truth is again and again in need of being redeemed in argumentation, but it cannot be reduced to the actual results of any such argumentation), censoring possible truth-

claims at the outset of civic deliberation becomes detrimental to the epistemic quality of decisions reached in the course of deliberation. And to that extent, it becomes detrimental to the normative legitimacy of the liberal state.

To simplify somewhat, any kind of restriction goes against the idea of “letting the best argument win”. Moreover if citizens’ preferences are not fixed or constant but, on the contrary, they change in the course of deliberation under the sway of the better argument, then filtering out some possible interventions at the beginning of our democratic conversation would hinder the chances of changing our preferences in the direction of a “generalized” interest (or the common good).

It is clear therefore that restricting of any kind on citizens’ interventions (religiously-informed or not) directly undermines the idea that democratic legitimacy must have cognitive content (the idea that democracy must remain “truth sensitive”). Thus, in my view, by fully opening the public sphere to religious interventions Habermas not only solves the “split identity” problem but he remains also fully consistent with his analysis of deliberation from his previous work.

This open, inclusive model of the place of religion in liberal democracy also equalizes the cognitive burdens of citizens. Now secular citizens must carry a burden equivalent to the one carried by religious citizens. The secular citizen must engage in a self-conscious effort to take religious citizens’ public contributions seriously and this can only succeed if secular citizens abandon the secularist premise that religious citizens are cognitively backward individuals from whose contributions the children of Enlightenment have nothing to learn. Secular citizens must willingly and honestly enter into a process of mutual cooperation with their religious fellow citizens with the aim of translating religious speech into a “universally accessible” language. Secular citizens stand to benefit from their participation in this process because the cooperative translation rescues moral intuitions that lie buried deeply in religious traditions and makes them relevant to everyone, including secular citizens themselves, thus preventing the “depletion of meaning” plaguing late modernity.²⁴⁸

²⁴⁸ Note how striking is this talk of a “depletion of meaning” in Habermas, due to its Weberian tone: it clearly brings to mind Weber’s diagnosis of modernity as suffering from a generalized lack of meaning, a diagnosis that Habermas

Religious citizens, in turn, must accept that beyond the threshold of institutional discourse only secular reasons can be introduced.²⁴⁹ Thus Habermas argues that within the formal sphere of the state all religious reasons should be filtered out. In the public justification of the law, religion must remain completely silent: parliaments should expunge “religious positions or justifications from the official transcript” if they come up in deliberation (RPS, 131).

This is what Habermas calls the “institutional translation proviso”. We now need to explore this proviso in more detail, because as we shall see in a moment, there are significant problems with it.

fought so hard to prove wrong. Now Habermas thinks that reason alone cannot do it, and translation is necessary to fight off nihilism.

²⁴⁹ There are three conditions, in fact, that taken together make up the burden falling on the shoulders of religious citizens: religion must come to terms with religious pluralism, it must adapt to the authority of the sciences and it must accept the priority of secular reason in law and politics. See FK, 104, RPS, 137, *The Political...* 26-27.

5.3 The “institutional translation proviso”

There are two sets of arguments that Habermas puts forward in defence of the institutional translation requirement. The first pertains to the neutrality of the state, the second is premised on some core features of religion that make it “extraterritorial” to reason and not fully amenable to those rational conditions guiding deliberation. I address the second set of arguments more directly in the next few sections where I discuss at length Habermas’s view of religion as the “other” of reason; in this section I want to focus strictly on the first set of arguments.

With respect to the first argument, Habermas claims that state neutrality can be preserved only if political decisions are formulated and justified in a universally accessible terms. “The principle of neutrality of the exercise of political power” holds that:

“all coercively enforceable political decisions must be *formulated* and be *justifiable* in a language that is equally intelligible to all citizens. Majority rule mutates into repression if the majority deploys religious arguments in the process of political opinion,– and will- formation and refuses to offer publicly accessible justifications that the out-voted minority, be it secular or of a different faith can follow and evaluate in the light of shared standards” (BNR, 134).

Habermas’s argument raises the question whether Habermas’s model is open to the same kind of charges that have been levelled against Rawls. Indeed, instead of completely removing Rawls’s proviso (as required by the cognitive openness of deliberative democracy), Habermas seems to merely suspend this proviso for the weak public sphere but reintroduce it at the level of the state. While Rawls places the duty of civility on everyone’s shoulders (everyone should think of themselves as if they were responsible with formulating and justifying legislation) Habermas it would appear places this duty only on the shoulders of state actors. In their deliberations the latter should not use religious arguments unless these have been successfully translated in the pre-parliamentary domain:

“the truth contents of religious contributions can enter into the institutionalized practice of deliberation and decision-making only when the necessary translation already occurs in the pre-parliamentarian domain, i.e. in the political public sphere itself” (BNR, 131).

However if split-identity and asymmetrical burden are a problem for regular citizens engaged in deliberation within the larger public sphere, it is not very clear why this would become less of a problem for political representatives (parlamentarians, candidates, judges) deliberating in the formal arena of the state? If split-identity cannot be a compelling requirement for regular citizens how can it be imposed on their representatives?²⁵⁰

There are many other difficulties involved in the translation proviso. One is tied to political accountability: insofar as regular citizens want to hold their representatives accountable, these citizens cannot avoid thinking of themselves as responsible for formulating and justifying legislation, which is exactly what Rawls's duty of civility requires. This led some commentators to argue that, in practical terms, Habermas's proviso does not offer a meaningful alternative to Rawls's proviso.²⁵¹

Another important difficulty arises when no secular or proper "political reasons" can be found and thus only religious reasons exist for or against a policy proposal. In Rawls's model, exclusively religious reasons should not be used in deliberation; in this model monoglot citizens (the "integralist" citizens who cannot split their identity - see Wolterstorff's discussion - or citizens who cannot discern any pull from secular reasons) should abstain from voting on the basis their religious-only reasons. Habermas's model attempts to rectify this exclusionary situation for monoglot citizens. As mentioned, secular citizens should step in and help these monoglot citizens find suitable translations. Indeed, in my view, it makes a lot of sense to think that this collaborative effort increases the chances of finding publicly accessible translations, translations that are equally acceptable to everyone involved, secular or religious alike. However, even Habermas's model cannot rule out in advance the possibility that such collaborative effort

²⁵⁰ It is, of course, the case that we hold representatives accountable to standards that are more stringent than what is expected from regular citizens. But if the requirement of split identity is in reality impossible to meet for a religious citizen, pushing too much in the direction of applying stricter standards for religious representatives would in fact lead towards the uncomfortable (and at limit undemocratic because discriminatory) conclusion that devout citizens should avoid becoming political representatives in a liberal democracy - as they cannot perform their job very well.

²⁵¹ See James Boettcher, "Habermas, Religion and the Ethics of Citizenship", *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 35(1-2), 2009, 215-238.

may fail. After all it's not at all clear that universally acceptable translations can be found for each and every contentious issue that emerges in contemporary societies, marked as these are by deep pluralism.²⁵² Moreover, as I will discuss in the final part of this chapter, Habermas himself seems to suggest that there are limits to what secular language can take over in translation from religion, at least with respect to some moral issues. In the last chapter of this dissertation I look at the issues around the concept of hope, for instance, as a limit concept for translation.

When translation fails however, Habermas has no other solution but to fall back on the exclusionary position defended by Rawls. Religious arguments that cannot be adequately translated should be completely excluded from the "generally accessible" language of state deliberation. Obviously, this situation has a negative impact on the political autonomy of citizens with religious convictions: as their concerns are not taken up in the process of law formulation and enacting, they cannot see themselves as authors of the law. This may run into problems of democratic deficit if these citizens make up a large part of the population (we may want to think here of a country like Poland or Greece, for instance).

A slightly different problem occurs when one considers the following aspect: the political autonomy of religiously-inclined citizens seems to depend on the successful translation of their arguments; translation in turn depends to a large extent on the secular citizens' level of "reflexivity", on their willingness to accept that religious speech might contain truth and on their capacity to transcend a secularist mindset (that nothing of cognitive value can be found in

²⁵² Take the example of abortion; since *Roe versus Wade* in 1973 the public discourse has not moved a *iota*; one finds exactly the same opposing fronts in this cultural war today as more than 40 years ago. This may be so because what we have in this case is a clash of mutually exclusive worldviews. And in fact, as a side note, Habermas's model of deliberative democracy ignores or denies the possibility of comprehensive views which are just incompatible to one another. Jeremy Waldron discusses cases of deep pluralism, when one's way of life makes another's way of life impossible; the example he gives is that of a devout Muslim and of a committed pornographer, but one can see how this example can in fact speak to many other situations in modern plural societies. Habermas's model of democracy underplays the importance of this kind of situations because one of the fundamental premises of the deliberative model is that there are no unshakeable, fixed, or ultimate grounds that cannot be swayed by the gentle force of the best argument. People's commitments, values, interests change in the course of deliberation, under the unforced force of the better argument, in the direction of the common good. This is in line with and stems from Habermas's view of communicative reason as being able to transcend cultural and historical contexts (the best defence of this view is given in the first part of the first volume of TCA - see also my discussion in chapter 3). It is interesting to note here, however, that Habermas seems to contradict his own theory with the argument that religious worldviews are in fact of this type: their core is impenetrable to discursive reason - which means that religious citizens' convictions cannot be swayed by the force of the better argument.

religious traditions, that religion is an awkward remnant of a pre-modern past). However this lands the whole argument in a paradoxical situation, because it seems quite odd to suggest that one's autonomy should depend on someone else's level of reflexivity. The very idea of autonomy seems to be contradicted here.

Other problems arise from Habermas's attempt to equalize the cognitive burdens of citizens. As Christina Lafont argues, the attempt to make these burdens more symmetrical puts the secular citizen at disadvantage: while monoglot religious people are now allowed to bring their exclusively religious arguments in public deliberation, secular citizens who happen to think that religion presents an irrational view of the world or that religion is an opium of the people, are required to censor or to abstain from airing these views.²⁵³ As Melissa Yates remarks, Habermas seems to be able to solve the problem of asymmetrical burden only with the price of universalizing the split-identity problem: now everybody seems to be required to self-censor some of their deeply-held beliefs.²⁵⁴ The concerns expressed by Lafont and Yates are shared by many others commentators.²⁵⁵

What can be said for Habermas's model when confronted with this barrage of criticism and multitude of challenges? How feasible is the whole idea of an institutional translation proviso?

One suggestion common to many authors, especially to those holding a dismissive view of religion, is that Habermas's attempt to ease and equalize the asymmetrical burden that religious citizens must carry (in Rawls's model) is misguided to begin with. This burden, although asymmetrical, is the necessary price that religious citizens have to pay for the neutrality of the

²⁵³ See Cristina Lafont "Religion and the Public Sphere: What are the Deliberative Obligations of Democratic Citizenship" in *Habermas and Religion*, eds. Craig Calhoun, Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2013, pp. 230-248 and Cristina Lafont "Religion in the Public Sphere: Remarks on Habermas's Conception of Public Deliberation in Postsecular Society", *Constellations*, 2007, 14(2), 240-259.

²⁵⁴ Melissa Yates, "Rawls and Habermas on Religion in the Public Sphere" *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 2007, 33(7), 880-891.

²⁵⁵ See for instance Andrea Baumeister "The Use of Public Reason by Religious and Secular Citizens: Limitations of Habermas' conception of the role of religion in the public realm". *Constellations* 2011, 18(2): 222-243; Stefan Rummens "The Semantic Potential of Religious Arguments: A Deliberative Model of the Postsecular Public Sphere", *Social Theory and Practice* 2010, 36(3), 385-408; Paolo F. D'Arcais 2008. "Onze thèses contre Habermas", *Le Débat*, 2008, 5 (152): 16-26; Nadia Urbinati, "Laïcité in Reverse: Mono-Religious Democracies and the Issue of Religion in the Public Sphere". *Constellations*, 2010, 17(1), 4-21.

state and freedom of religion. In other words, the whole turn to a “post-secular society” in Habermas is a wrong move because it undermines his theory of deliberative democracy. “Granting a right to ‘monoglot’ political advocacy”, Lafont writes, “would be tantamount to giving up any serious commitment to deliberative democracy” (Lafont, 2007, 253).

However Habermas has been reluctant so far to heed their suggestions. In his reply to Lafont,²⁵⁶ Habermas insists that deliberative democracy depends on citizens practicing a mutual perspective-taking, and this requirement is not fulfilled when some citizens adopt the attitude that nothing of cognitive value can be found in the interventions of other citizens. Such an attitude means that secular citizens do not regard religious citizens as their equals. Habermas seems to remain convinced by Wolterstorff’s argument that the liberal state cannot impose on its religious citizens requirements that are incompatible with a life lived in the light of faith.

In my view, it is easy to see why Habermas resists Lafont’s suggestion that deliberative democracy should remain tightly tied to asymmetrical burdens and an exclusionary approach towards religious reasons. This exclusionary approach, as well as the one-sided burden of citizenship that it presupposes, attest to the fact the liberal state is actually not neutral. The liberalism of all these critics is a comprehensive liberalism, a fighting creed, a doctrine on a par with, and opposed to religion and it therefore cannot provide the ground for a neutral normative framework. All these critics share the assumption that religion is a dangerous holdover from the past that must be replaced (and it has been actually replaced in the West) by a more enlightened, progressive, scientific view of the world. Although Habermas had subscribed to this supersessionist narrative for most of his remarkable career, he is now convinced that this narrative must be amended. In the previous chapter I have discussed the reasons for this change of heart, reasons that I find quite compelling. Moreover it is telling that Habermas’s critics do not engage much with (or simply ignore) these reasons.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁶ Habermas “Reply to my critics” in *Habermas and Religion*, 2013.

²⁵⁷ Habermas’s critics in general remain oblivious to the ambivalent nature of modernity and to its self-destructive tendencies as exposed by a long line of brilliant thinkers from Nietzsche up to Adorno and Foucault. They completely ignore the dangers that scientism pose for the normative framework of our world; the devastating effects of globalization is rarely a topic for them and the colonial history of the West rarely comes into view. In my view it is one Habermas’s merits to be willing to engage with all these issues in a serious way and not just silently glide over them.

If Habermas is not willing to compromise on the idea of state neutrality and symmetrical burdens (and rightly so, one may add) then perhaps a different and more fruitful way of dealing with the challenges I mentioned above is to relax the “institutional translation proviso”. This is what I would like to consider in what follows. I want to show that the idea of state neutrality does not necessarily require the institutional translation proviso, and that, indeed, a liberalism without the proviso is more in line with Habermas’s view concerning democratic deliberation. The translation proviso reflects a lingering Rawlsian influence, which Habermas can dispense with without harm.

Habermas argues that for admittance into the formal public sphere of the state all religious language should be translated or otherwise excluded. Two premises support this requirement. The first premise says that only “universally accessible” reasons should be used beyond the threshold of the states otherwise state neutrality is under threat. The second premise says that religious reasons are not “universally accessible”.

I begin with the first premise. Is state neutrality *always/necessarily* adversely affected if religious reasons are introduced in parliamentary debates? Habermas writes:

“The neutral state, confronted with competing claims of knowledge and faith, abstains from prejudging political decisions in favour of one side or the other. The pluralized reason of the public of citizens follows a dynamic of secularization only insofar as the latter urges equal distance to be kept, *in the outcome*, from any strong traditions and comprehensive worldviews” (Habermas 2003: 105).

As one can see from this passage, it is the *outcome* of state deliberations (laws, regulations, and so on) that must remain neutral towards comprehensive worldviews. One should worry about legislation that discriminates against citizens on the basis of their convictions (religious or not). However my argument is that not all introductions of religious reasons in the parliamentary domain necessarily lead to discriminatory legislation.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁸ Simone Chambers makes a similar argument in “Secularism Minus Exclusion: Developing a Religious-Friendly Idea of Public Reason” in *The Good Society*, vol.19, no.2, 2010, 16-21.

Let's consider the following example. In 2007 an organization that represents over 45,000 churches with more than 30,000,000 members in the USA adopted a declaration against torture.²⁵⁹ This text states that "all humans who are mistreated or tormented are... our neighbours.... In them and through them we encounter God himself". The document also argues that "the cries of the tortured are in a very real sense... the cries of the [The Holy] Spirit". It is not immediately obvious that if a political representative offered these religious reasons in the formal public sphere in order to legally restrict the use of torture (or ban it completely), such a legal outcome would be equivalent to an imposition of a particular strand of Christianity on everyone else.

Many other examples can be found; consider for instance the following text that offers clear religious reasons, this time as part of the heated debates surrounding illegal immigration in the US state of Arizona. The Catholic Bishops of this state drew up a letter entitled "You Welcomed Me", which calls for a more humane treatment of illegal immigrants, many of whom come from Catholic countries south of border. The letter appeals to the parable of the Good Samaritan, but also to Matthew 25:35-40 ("For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was stranger and you invited me in...") and to Hebrews 13:2 ("Do not neglect hospitality, for through it some have unknowingly entertained angels"). Again, it is not immediately straightforward that if a state official chose to quote these Biblical passages in the attempt to change the state immigration laws, such a legal change would automatically impose a Catholic worldview on all citizens of Arizona.

It is therefore the laws and regulations that emerge out of the state-level debates that have to be mutually acceptable to all subject to these laws, and this requirement, I argue, does not depend on having only secular reasons entering the justification of the law. A situation where justificatory debates contain religious appeals and yet the legislative outcome of these debates are generally acceptable to all involved is well within the range of what is possible in

²⁵⁹ This declaration is discussed by Jeremy Waldron in "Two-Way Translation: The Ethics of Engaging with Religious Contributions in Public Deliberation". *Mercer Law Review*, 2012, 63(3), 845-868.

contemporary plural societies. Moreover I would want to suggest that this is actually more in tune with how democratic debates unfold in real life settings.²⁶⁰

5.4 Are religious reasons inaccessible?

In this section I would like to examine the second premise of Habermas' argument. Let's look at religious reasons and their presumed inaccessibility.

First, it is not even clear that one can distinguish between religious (inaccessible) and secular (generally accessible) reasons in as straightforward a manner as Habermas seems to assume. On the basis of empirical studies, sociologists of religion have argued that it is not at all easy to draw this distinction.²⁶¹ Moreover, Habermas himself notes that "the boundaries between secular and religious reasons are fluid" (FK, 109). As Simone Chambers (2010) rightly remarks, purging religion from our language would be like trying to purge Shakespeare from the English language. Many religious appeals have a rhetorical, motivational or inspirational rather than justificatory purpose.

Furthermore, what exactly is inaccessible in religious arguments? As Charles Taylor asks, was Martin Luther King putting forward "inaccessible" arguments when he made the case for racial equality and civil rights in religious terms? ("Dialogue. Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor", 2011). A similar point can be derived from Randall Hansen's work on liberal eugenics. As Hansen shows, the Catholic Church staunchly opposed the widespread appeal of eugenic policies

²⁶⁰ One could point out here the fact that the actual history of many social movements in liberal society has religious origins, from the civil rights movement in the USA, the involvement of many Christian churches in the anti-slavery movements, to the establishment of welfare state policies in England and the popular push for democratization in totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe (Polish *Solidarnost* is a case in point).

²⁶¹ See Dillon, Michele. 2010. "Association for the Sociology of Religion Presidential Address. Can Post-Secular Society Tolerate Religious Differences?" *Sociology of Religion* 71(2): 139-156.

in the 1920s and 1930s in Europe and North America,²⁶² at a time when pretty much everyone in the “progressive” camp was very much enthralled with these policies. In England, Catholics joined forces with labour unions to oppose eugenic policies and they made their arguments in religious terms; one can wonder: what was “inaccessible” in these arguments?

Basically I think that Charles Taylor asks a pertinent question: Would all these arguments have been more “accessible” to the wider public if the actors involved had used Kantian or utilitarian arguments instead?²⁶³

On the other hand, many scientific arguments are so complex, or presuppose very complex mathematical reasoning, that they are quite inaccessible to most of us. Would this imply that they should be kept out of deliberation?²⁶⁴ The same can probably be said about quite a few economic arguments; they rely so much on advanced mathematics or on quantitative data and complex methodology that some of them might as well look like a foreign language to most of us, when first faced with these arguments. Arguments drawing on technology and technological developments may also seem obscure and inaccessible, at least at first sight.

It is very likely that complex societies like ours cannot avoid introducing complex arguments in politics; moreover it is just implausible to argue that democratic deliberation should make no intellectual demands on participants.

I suspect that, in fact, when compared with complex scientific, economic and technology-based reasons, most religious reasons are quite accessible. One does not need a PhD in theology to

²⁶² See Randall Hansen and Desmond King. *Sterilized by the State: Eugenics, Race, and the Population Scare in Twentieth-Century North America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

²⁶³ See Charles Taylor, *The Dialogue...* One has good reasons to doubt that the answer to this question would be “yes”. Graduates students in philosophy find Kantian language very technical and very difficult. And there are numerous academic debates around Kant’s main concepts: what is the “Ding-an-Sich” after all? How can concrete moral duties can be derived from the categorical imperative if this is formal and empty of content? etc. These are topics widely discussed and debated among philosophers to this very day, and it is unlikely that they could have much bearing on citizens’ pressing concerns. Which is not to say that these kind of arguments should not be used in the public political sphere if some citizens choose to do so. But this open policy should apply to all and any type of arguments relevant to the issue at hand, irrespective of their religious character or not.

²⁶⁴ See also Lucas Swaine’s discussion in “Deliberate and Free. Heteronomy in the Public Sphere.” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 35(1-2), 2009, 183-213.

understand the fundamental theological position of Christianity, that God is Love and that we should manifest that love in our dealing with our neighbors and fellow citizens. The striking simplicity and beauty of the poetry of the Book of Psalms is probably the main reason why this text is still widely read today. By contrast, one probably does need an advanced degree in economics in order to fully grasp the arguments of a top economist, in favor or against a particular economic policy, if he chooses to present these arguments, as such (untranslated as it were), in political debates.²⁶⁵

In my view, the main problem with what passes these days as “religious” reasons in our culture is not their complexity or depth, but quite the contrary, their shallowness bordering on sheer inanity. It is the lack of theological depth and understanding that is striking about many religious reasons advanced today in the public sphere. A single example suffices: insofar as some religious citizens use passages from the Book of Revelation in order to argue for a nuclear war because such a war would bring the Second Coming closer, this must be exposed as what it is: a dangerous, war-mongering mindset that should be openly combated. I must stress at this point that I fully share the anxiety of many liberal secular intellectuals over the potential for violence in religion²⁶⁶ and I respect their position. And I can also confess it is this kind of anxiety prompted me to undertake the research that led to the writing of this dissertation.

However, how very different is this argument based on a religious text (which in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, for instance, is regarded with a degree of reservation and has a rather peripheral status) from the arguments of someone like Herman Kahn, an avowed atheist and futurologist, whose *On Thermonuclear War* (Princeton University Press, 1960) has been described as “a moral tract on mass murder: how to plan it, how to commit it, how to get away with it, how to justify it”.²⁶⁷ If anything, what we really need is a proviso against foolish or

²⁶⁵ See Jeremy Waldron’s discussion in “Two-Way Translation: The Ethics of Engaging with Religious Contributions in Public Deliberation”. *Mercer Law Review*, 2012, 63(3): 845-868.

²⁶⁶ For a discussion of the types of challenges religion raises to political philosophy and liberal political theory see Ronald Beiner *Civil Religion. A Dialogue in The History of Political Philosophy*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

²⁶⁷ Herman Kahn is the real life inspiration for the main character of Stanley Kubrick’s movie *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964). The description cited is by James R. Newman in the journal *Scientific American*.

insane or genocidal reasons but on account of their sociopathic character and not necessarily on account of their secular/religious character.

No doubt, some theological arguments do have a complex nature (let's say the debates surrounding "predestination", or "transubstantiation"). When faced with difficult theological arguments, however, nothing stops us from going back to the library and read a few theology books. Thus, it makes a lot of sense to think that, as Waldron (2012) suggests, the demand for accessible/acceptable reasons when it comes to religion has its source, in fact, in an intellectual refusal. As he remarks, most secular opponents of religious interventions in the public sphere misrepresent the sources of what they find unintelligible about religious reasons. Rarely, in fact, is the issue one of inaccessibility/incommensurability or opacity, at least in the situation of intra-cultural dialogue. Most likely the demand for accessibility stems from the fact that: "many people have resolved to have nothing to do with religious thought, and standing firm on that resolution, they demand to be spoken to in secular terms".²⁶⁸

In drawing this section to a close I would like to discuss one more important aspect that would help me make the transition to the next section of this chapter. I would like to point out just how unexpected and quite odd Habermas's argument regarding the general inaccessibility of religious reasons really is, when this argument is placed in the context of his own theory of communicative action.

There is a certain carelessness in Habermas's use of the terms 'accessible' and 'acceptable' when he describes the project of translation: "suppressed or untapped moral intuitions" ("The Political...", 2011, 27) found buried in the world's religious traditions, (i.e. their truth-contents) are to be translated into a "universally accessible language". Most of the time Habermas uses the term "accessible", but sometimes he replaces it with "acceptable", like in this passage from "Faith and Knowledge": "against religion, the democratic common sense insists on reasons which are *acceptable* not just for the members of one religious community" (FK, 332, my emphasis).

²⁶⁸ Jeremy Waldron, "Two-Way Translation: The Ethics of Engaging with Religious Contributions in Public Deliberation". *Mercer Law Review*, 2012, 63(3), 845-868, 17.

I think that Habermas is too careless in the use of these terms. There is a distinction to be made between what is ‘accessible’ and what is ‘acceptable’. Some arguments can be fully accessible to us although we are unable to accept them. We can find an argument intelligible while we disagree completely with it.

Keeping the terms ‘accessible’ and ‘acceptable’ distinct is in fact required by the very theory of speech acts that Habermas relies on (see my discussion in chapter 2). Let me briefly explain why. Communicative action, that is action oriented towards “reaching understanding” about something in the world, works on the basis of interlocutors offering validity claims to one another. According to Habermas, when one performs a speech act, one raises validity claims, and this means that what one actually *does* is to make an offer to one’s interlocutor(s). The interlocutor can accept the offer, in which case communication continues in a unproblematic manner, or he can reject it, in which case communication at the everyday level is interrupted and the whole interaction switches to the more complex level of rational discourse, where the initial offer is redeemed in terms of the reasons one had to hold his speech act as true, as normatively right or as a sincere act. Alternatively, the interlocutor may defer taking up the offer, for the time being.

But note what this communicative sequence presupposes: the interlocutor cannot reject my offer unless he finds it intelligible while he disagrees with it (because he finds it unacceptable). The whole process of argumentation at the core of Habermas’s theory of communicative action works on the basis of this distinction between what one finds ‘accessible’ and ‘acceptable’ as reasons.

Moreover, the possibility of No-saying in communication is the very condition of moving the process of argumentation forward.²⁶⁹ And it is the very condition of Habermas’s claim that this process has a built-in capacity for self-transcendence. Although Habermas has been frequently accused of having a theory of language and meaning too heavily geared towards consensus and agreement (risking thus to continue what in the opinion of any postmodern authors is the

²⁶⁹ For a good discussion of this aspect see Stephen K. White and Evan Robert Farr “‘No-Saying’ in Habermas”, *Political Theory*, 40 (1), 2012, 32-57.

oppressive stress of metaphysics on unity and identity) I would like to note here the *special* (quite essential) role that No-saying plays in Habermas's theory: in the debate with Gadamer, the possibility of saying "No" makes us able to distance ourselves from the tradition in which we are embedded and it underlies Habermas's view of rationalization of lifeworld as a "learning process". Well, one can say "No" to the tradition in which one finds oneself embedded, *only* if one finds this tradition accessible or intelligible but no longer acceptable.

Are there cases when one finds an utterance not only unacceptable but also completely unintelligible? Sure there are. If a person communicates to me in a way that I find completely unintelligible (either because he speaks a language that I do not recognize and I don't speak, or because it appears to me that he does not speak a language at all, but just utters meaningless sounds in my direction), I might be forced to defer taking up this communicative offer, as I am not sure that this is an offer at all. Examples abound; I could be an anthropology professor at U of T visiting one of the last tribes untainted by contact with other cultures in the Amazonian jungle; or I can have in front of me a Pentecostal congregation speaking in "tongues"; or I may face someone who is convinced that some years ago he had been kidnapped by aliens who took him on the mother spaceship, taught him the alien language, and now he is offering to teach me that language.²⁷⁰

What is very important to note is that, according to Habermas's theory of meaning, none of these situations undermines the way "communicative action" works. The presupposition of rationality that I must make in order for communication to work is *counterfactual* (see my discussion of this pragmatic presupposition of communication in chapter 3). I must presuppose that the person talking to me is rational, and that his speech act is valid (raises validity claims), although it may very well turn out that, in fact, what I have in front of me is, sadly enough, a mad person. The fact that the presupposition of rationality (or intelligibility/accessibility for the purpose of present discussion) that I ascribe to an utterance is falsified in the actual process of communication, cannot undermine the unavoidable character of this presupposition and it cannot impede the pragmatics of communication. The presupposition of rationality/intelligibility continues to

²⁷⁰ Taylor offers a discussion of a similar situation in relation to Tocqueville's trip in Michigan in *A Secular Age*, Harvard University Press, 2017, 349-350. See also Maeve Cooke's discussion of Taylor's examples in "Translating truth" (2011).

remain unavoidable for each and every situation of communication despite the fact that, in a given situation, it may be falsified. Moreover, there is no way one can reach this conclusion (that a speech act is irrational/unintelligible) unless conversation continues, it goes back and forth, questions are asked, answers are given, names, words and reasons are exchanged. After all, the presuppositions of communication (best spelled out in the “ideal speech situation”) functions as a regulative ideal, which implies, among other things, that misunderstandings, gaps in communication, moments of incomprehension are to be expected. But they are reasons to continue the conversation and not to stop it. What at first glance appears to me an intelligible speech act should be a reason to continue the conversation and not to terminate it.

It is very surprising that Habermas now embraces the view that religious reasons are not generally accessible (they are accessible only to those who share the religious worldview) as if these reasons cannot be encompassed by the theory of communication he previously endorsed, as if the regulative ideal of reaching understanding with one another just does not extend far enough to cover their case. Again, we can see here that this poses a real threat to the universality of “communicative reason” - which was one of my main arguments in the previous chapter. It is as if Habermas believed that religious persons were permanently trapped within their religious worldview, as if cases of conversion from a religious tradition to another or from a religious to a non-religious view (and vice versa) were just not possible. Well, this flies in the face of how communication processes take place in everyday life: not everyone has a “road to Damascus” moment and many change their fundamental beliefs under the unforced force of arguments and reasons (it appears that I need to defend Habermas against Habermas at this point). Oddly enough, it is as if Habermas, the staunch defender of rationalism and universalism, has suddenly become relativist and is defending a variant of the incommensurability thesis, but only in one particular case: that of religion.

Shall we read this as a Damascene moment for Habermas himself? Well, not really. He has *reasons* for this recent recognition of the strength of the incommensurability thesis. In my next section I will examine more closely Habermas’s reading of religion as the “other” of communicative reason and the reasons he offers for his position that religion is a “special case” of diversity.

5.5 Is faith opaque to reason?

It was one of the main points that I made in the previous chapter that Habermas's post-secular turn goes well beyond treating religion in a functional way, although a lingering functionalism is still present in the project of translation. Indeed, in a post-secular society religion is important insofar as it provides "postmetaphysical" thought with additional normative resources in its fight against the depletion of meaning generated by an economic modernization spun out of control, by the lack of motivational power, by the naturalization of human persons, and all the other problems I mentioned already. Thus religion plays an instrumental role: it is to be plundered of much needed normative and motivational resources and then assigned (*qua* religion) a non-consequential role under the "neutral" umbrella of the liberal state.

This aspect is not lost on many authors critical of Habermas. As Stanley Fish notes, the "post-secular" turn in Habermas proposes "something less than a merger and more like an agreement between trading partners", a bargain in fact. However religion does not really get much out of this bargain: "religion must give up the spheres of law, government, morality and knowledge; reason is asked only to be nice and not dismiss religion as irrational, retrograde and irrelevant. The "truths of faith" can be heard but only those portions of them that have secular counterparts can be admitted into the realm of public discourse".²⁷¹

I agree with Fish (and others) that a certain functionalist dimension is still present in Habermas's discussion of religion. In the previous chapter I linked the lingering functionalism of the post secular turn in Habermas with a strategy of "containment": religion is partially allowed within the differentiated structure of modernity but assigned a rather subordinate role under the requirement of "priority" of communicative reason.

However I also argued that the "postsecular" turn to religion goes beyond a mere functionalist reading of religion. I think this can best be seen in Habermas's discussion of "methodological

²⁷¹ Stanley Fish "Does Reason Know What It Is Missing?" in *New York Times*, April 12, 2010, available at <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/04/12/does-reason-know-what-it-is-missing/>.

atheism”. Habermas insists that any engagement with religion must preserve intact the borders between reason and religion. Religion is a sovereign domain of meaning with a dignity of its own, and philosophy must renounce the rationalist presumption that it can decide what is true and false in religion. This cuts both ways: reason must not attempt to subsume religion but neither should it surrender its ground to religion.

In its strongest form the argument that faith is a sovereign domain of meaning holds that faith has a core that is discursively impenetrable:

“At best, philosophy circumscribes the opaque core of religious experience when it reflects on the specific character of religious language and on the intrinsic meaning of faith. This core remains as profoundly alien to discursive thought as the hermetic core of aesthetic experience, which likewise can be at best circumscribed, but not penetrated, by philosophical reflection” (BNR, 143).

See also the following passage:

“religiously rooted existential convictions, by dint of their if necessary rationally justified reference to the dogmatic authority of an inviolable core of infallible revealed truths, evade that kind of unreserved discursive examination to which other ethical orientations and world views i.e. secular ‘conceptions of the good’ are exposed” (BNR, 129).

The position of methodological atheism contrasts markedly with some of Habermas’s earlier views, in particular with the idea that in a fully rationalized lifeworld religion will become just another ethical doctrine. Habermas now argues that religion cannot be assimilated to ethical diversity and it must be seen as a “special case”. There is a difference *in kind* between religion and ethnic, cultural or philosophical differences.

What does Habermas’s argument regarding the singular case of religion rest on? And how convincing is this argument?

According to Habermas, religious reasons and convictions “depend” on a “specific kind of experience” which “arises from participation in cultic practices, in the actual performance of worshipping in which no Kantian or utilitarian has to participate in order to make a good Kantian or utilitarian argument” (“The Political...”, 2011, 61). Thus, as he writes, religious reasons retain an “internal connection” with “a specific path to salvation”. The “evidence” for religious reasons “does not only depend on cognitive beliefs and their semantic nexus with other beliefs, but on

existential beliefs that are rooted in the social dimension of membership, socialization, and prescribed practices” (“The Political ...”, 2011, 62).²⁷²

I think that this argument is quite problematic for a variety of reasons.

All reasons are rooted in a specific experience (or a specific experiential background). One does not have to go as far as Nietzsche and argue that all philosophy retains an irreducible existential/autobiographical dimension in order to see why this is so.²⁷³ Habermas simply cannot work anymore with something like the Kantian distinction between synthetic and analytic *a priori* arguments. The idea of the existence of *a priori* and synthetic arguments (a knowledge which is prior to knowledge based on experience) must be dropped. “Postmetaphysical thinking” follows a process of detranscendentalization of reason, abandons the Kantian doctrine of “pure” reason and shifts to a view of reason that manifests itself in history, language and culture. This is an “impure” reason, a reason that is always tied to a particular context, to a particular experiential or existential background (although it cannot be reduced to a particular context/experience, according to Habermas). But this implies that, in fact, all reasons are rooted in a *lifeworld*. Although the procedures that guide and constrain the process of exchanging reasons in rational discourse cannot be reduced to a particular *lifeworld* (they are implicit in all *lifeworlds*), the norms, values, principles and reasons that are intersubjectively tested in argumentation for their generalizability originate in our *lifeworld*. The content of argumentation is fed by the experiential background of the *lifeworld*.

Thus religious arguments cannot be so singular in relying on a deep experiential background. And we could look at a few examples in support of this assertion. Take Marxism for instance. Marxism presupposes the *specific* experience of class oppression. Are not Marx’s arguments (also) the expression of the harrowing, desperate experience of masses of people forced into inhumane conditions by the process of early capitalist modernization? Does not their power to convince, to change minds and hearts, depend to some extent on the “social dimension of

²⁷² We should note here that this description may not be generalizable across all religious experience and conviction.

²⁷³ For an interesting account Habermas gives of the existential roots of his own theory of communication see his essay “Public Space and Political Public Sphere - The Biographical Roots of Two Motifs in my Thought” in BNR, pp.11-23.

membership, socialization and prescribed practices”? Certainly according to Marxist theoretical tradition the factory floor and the union membership have an educational/emancipatory role as well - “class consciousness” is formed, maintained and regenerated within the very social dimension Habermas mentions for religion: membership, socialization, common practices.

Feminist theoretical arguments arise out of the specific experience of women’s oppression and of being subject to “patriarchy”. And what about postcolonial theory and arguments? Are they not tied to a specific deep existential background that only people subjected to colonial treatment have access to? As Charles Taylor remarks, one could as easily point to a “deep psychological background”²⁷⁴ behind Kant’s rhetoric of the *Achtung für das Gesetz* and the “starry sky above and the moral law within”.²⁷⁵

Does the fact that all reasons are rooted into some existential background imply that we have to *fully share* that particular background in order to understand (have access to) these reasons? Are only women able to understand/accept (or be moved by) feminist arguments? On Habermas’s own theoretical premises the answer to this question cannot be “Yes”, because this answer would require us to see *worldviews* as closed and interlocutors trapped inside their respective *lifeworlds*, a thesis Habermas has always rejected. It follows that we can find one another’s reasons accessible/intelligible even if we don’t fully share or have access to the different experiential backgrounds that inform these reasons.

I think therefore that Charles Taylor is on the right track to deny that a “deep experiential background” can be brought to discriminate between discourses, some opaque, inaccessible and therefore singled out for translation and some others universally accessible. Taylor, for instance, does not see a difference between a Kantian ethics, an utilitarian or an Aristotelian one and the Christian ethics for instance, at least not one so significant that only the latter has to be translated into something else.

²⁷⁴ Charles Taylor, “Dialogue. Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor”, in *The Power of Religion...*, 2011, 63.

²⁷⁵ Charles Taylor, “Dialogue. Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor”, in *The Power of Religion...*, 2011, 64-65.

5.6 Habermas's Reformation

There is another reason why taking religion to be opaque to discursive reason is problematic: Habermas tends to reduce religion and religious experience, which is itself multivalent and plural, to a variant of Protestant fideism.²⁷⁶ In my view, this is a direct consequence of Habermas's contention that metaphysics is no longer plausible under modern conditions. I think that one can see the reductionist tendency of this move most clearly in his essay "Transcendence from within..." and I would like to go back very briefly to this text from 1992. In this essay Habermas argued that after the "collapse" of metaphysics (see my discussion in Chapter 1) only three paths remain open to theology. 1) One is the Protestant path taken by Kierkegaard and leading to Barth which "appealed to *kerygma* [preaching] and faith as a source of religious insight absolutely independent from reason" (2002, 76). 2) Another is the path taken by "Enlightened Catholicism" which "relinquishes that status of a special discourse and exposes its assertions to the whole range of scientific discussion" (2002, 76). 3) Finally, there is the path of "methodological atheism" taken by theologians like Jens-Glebe Möller for instance. This path demythologizes Christian dogmas using the theory of communicative action and communicative reason.

According to Habermas, the last two paths are quite implausible today. Enlightened Catholicism (Catholicism after Vatican II) continues to appeal to the synthesis between Greek metaphysics and Christian faith, a synthesis that has become highly problematic with the demise of metaphysics. The relatively recent dialogue (2005) between Habermas and former Pope Benedict XVI shows that Habermas has not changed his view on this point. He criticizes Ratzinger for exactly this aspect, namely that Catholicism continues to remain wedded to the process of Hellenization of Christianity.

As for the last path, a theology construed on the basis of Habermas's own theory of communicative action, Habermas finds it "convincing", however he fears that it may be

²⁷⁶ For a critique of Habermas's view of religion as being inadequate or non-representative or just too narrow see Michele Dillon (1999) Junker-Kenny (2011), Nagl-Docekal (2010), Schmidt (2007).

irrelevant because he suspects that few religious people actually see themselves this way (2002, 77). The claim here seems to be that to the extent that theological discourse modernizes too much and adopts the universal claims of Habermas's theory of communicative action, it ceases to be religious.

In light of these considerations, it becomes clear that for Habermas only the Kierkegaardian path remains plausible under "post-metaphysical" conditions. And this is exactly the path in which faith becomes "absolutely independent" from reason.

But note here the complications this view raises for those cognitive preconditions (the new ethics of citizenship) that Habermas regards as necessary for a post-secular society. Recall that the cooperative process of translation in the public sphere depends on certain "cognitive preconditions": on the one side the secular citizen is required to reflect on the limits of his own secular views with the purpose of identifying and actually rejecting whatever secularist (exclusionary, anti-religious) or naturalist (scientistic) tones they may contain; this is described by Habermas as a "learning" process. On the other side, however, religious citizens must also go through a learning process. Religion must modernize or "shape up", as Wolterstorff (2013) puts it, as a precondition for being admitted as a legitimate contributor to the modern democratic process. Three conditions must be met: religion must come to terms with religious pluralism, it must accept "the priority" of (communicative) reason in the sphere of law and morality and it must accept the authority of science for "mundane knowledge". Moreover, as these conditions are rather shifts in how one sees the world, *Gestalt* switches or changes in mentality, they cannot be externally imposed (by legislation for instance) and must come about from within religious worldviews themselves.

The requirement to "learn", modernize and shape-up in the direction pointed by communicative reason directly conflicts with the view that faith must be seen as entirely independent from reason. The fact that Habermas requires religion and religious citizens to enter a learning process and accept (from inside, i.e. be convinced by) whatever secular reason holds to be valid in morality and law, on the one side, and whatever science holds currently as valid knowledge, on the other side, is difficult to reconcile with the premise that religion and reason are absolutely independent of each other. If the perspective of faith and reason cannot be bridged and if religion

has a core which remains “abysmally alien” to reason, how can religion be required to become more “reflective”?

I would like to signal here, very briefly, a few other ambiguities related to the idea of religion “shaping-up”. Habermas asks religion to shape up by accepting the priority of science in mundane questions, but it is interesting to note that Habermas’s own “postmetaphysical thinking” does not adapt indiscriminately to the authority of science. Sometimes the authority of science, like the authority of technology for that matter, can be a false authority. It was Habermas who in 1968 wrote a book titled *Technik und Wissenschaft als Ideologie* (English version 1970) and it is Habermas who in his recent writings comes out strongly against the toxic normative implications of what he calls “scientism” and “hard naturalism”. The borders between what is “hard” and what is “soft” naturalism, however, are not so clear-cut or beyond contestation, as Habermas would have it. He may want to draw these borders differently from how most theologians or religious people would do it, but that does not mean that there should not be room for contestation or discussion here.

Furthermore, what the “shaping-up” (modernization) of religion may imply in concrete terms is not so clear after all. In my view, there is a certain vacillation in Habermas with respect to what “modernized” or “reflective” faith means: sometimes Kant’s “rational religion” (*Vernunftreligion*), other times Kierkegaard’s view of faith, as discussed above, some other times Protestantism in general, are presented as “modernized” faith. Quentin Skinner remarked quite a while ago, in a piece written for *The New York Review of Books*, that Habermas’ philosophical project is informed by a culturally Protestant worldview.²⁷⁷ I think that this remark rings truer today (in the postsecular phase of his thought) than at the time of *The Theory of Communicative Action*.

Because I already commented on two of the conditions that describe a “reflexive” faith (the priority of science and that of communicative reason) let me very briefly look now at the first

²⁷⁷ See Q. Skinner “Habermas’s Reformation” in *The New York Review of Books* October 7, 1982. Although Skinner’s point is rejected by Thomas McCarthy (“Defending Habermas” *The New York Review of Books* January 20, 1983) with good reasons, I think however that there is some truth to Skinner’s view. At least if we look at the main intellectual sources Habermas uses (Kant, Hegel, Weber, Kierkegaard) I don’t think it so farfetched to argue that one can place Habermas within a culturally Protestant understanding of world and history.

condition. A modernized religion, says Habermas, must also “come to terms with the cognitive dissonance” of encountering competing religious truths and accept the principle of religious freedom and religious tolerance.

First, what does the idea of “cognitive dissonance” imply more exactly? Is Habermas’s claim here that “modernized” religious persons must hold the truth of their own faith in a “reflexive” manner? I think that this is the (or at least one of the plausible) direction(s) of his arguments, and we have to remember that for Habermas reflexivity is related to *fallibility*. This would suggest that by religion having to “come to terms” with facing competing religious truth claims, Habermas means that religious citizens must learn how to hold the truth-claims of their faith in a fallible manner, more on the model of scientific and moral claims from Habermas’s theory (which are put forth and thematized as reflexive and fallible claims). If this is the case, let me remark that the theory of truth Habermas espouses is far from having achieved universal acceptance, even among professional philosophers; which means that religious believers are held to a standard that not even Habermas’s colleagues in departments of philosophy can be held to; moreover the combination between fallibilism and unconditionality (as I noted already in my second chapter, for Habermas the validity claim to truth, as well as the process of rational redeeming of this claim, preserve a moment of unconditionality but on fallible premises) is absolutely peculiar to Habermas’s theory of communicative action and communicative reason. To hold religion to this standard of reflexivity means in fact to say that theologians and believers should become Habermasians; there is nothing wrong with this, in principle, except that Habermas himself has rejected this scenario, as we just saw above: he thinks that a theology influenced by his own communicative reason is no longer a religion for true believers (his argument against Glebe Möller).

Second, I would argue that there is no “cognitive dissonance” involved in encountering other denominations or other faiths. In fact this kind of encounter has probably been the predominant predicament in the course of history for many communities of faith. I wonder if this is not in fact our existential predicament *per se*.²⁷⁸ If there is cognitive dissonance involved in the fact that we

²⁷⁸ I am pressing here against Habermas what is basically a Gadamerian point. I draw on the very good discussion of Gadamer that Ronald Beiner offers in chapter 8 of his *Political Philosophy, What is and why it matters?* (2014). On page 131, Beiner quotes Gadamer: “the conflict of traditions we have today does not seem to me anything

meet people who hold different religious beliefs than ours, why should we think that this dissonance is deeper or more troubling than the dissonance involved in the secular modern mind being able to switch across the distinct spheres of aesthetic, scientific and moral values? If the modern mind has acquired the capacity to nimbly switch between the three distinct value spheres of modernity of science, morality and art (which is very counterintuitive), why the religious mind cannot develop a similar capacity to engage with arguments from a different tradition without this situation forcing some cognitive dissonances for the religious consciousness?

Third, Habermas seems to imply that unless the truths of faith are held in a fallible manner, religious diversity leads to violence. In other words, we can have religious tolerance only if religion “modernizes”.²⁷⁹ I want to stress right off the bat that I totally agree with the requirement of non-violence towards other faiths. This is indeed an important problem and, as I mentioned, I fully share the anxiety of many secular liberals over religious fanaticism or fundamentalism. But we have to ask ourselves if a view of religion as completely divorced from reason is reassuring in this sense. What we need instead is serious and responsible theological reflection that exposes fanaticism as a pernicious adulteration of religious dogmas. We need a theology for the public realm that stresses the common good, counterweights the facile appetite for miracles and subjects direct insights into God’s will to rigorous deliberation and sound doctrinal reasoning. And we need a theology that is able to clearly draw a stark contrast between the truths of religion and the distortions introduced by those who want to relativize and use these truths for their own economic, political or violent purposes. It seems however that aberrant interpretations can be better exposed as such precisely when one takes seriously the truths of his/her faith and resists their irresponsible relativization.

exceptional. Phronesis is *always* the process of distinguishing and choosing what one considers to be right [in the face of competing horizons]”. Similar points are made by Gadamer in his response to MacIntyre. As R. Beiner puts it very well: “for the committed hermeneuticist this is the human situation per se: we find ourselves at the intersection of not-easy-to-commensurate horizons and we are obliged to help them speak to each other. We thereby give effect to our essentially dialogical nature” (132). I fundamentally share this Gadamerian insight into our dialogical nature and into our obligation to lessen the potential for conflict and violence by putting these horizons into dialogue.

²⁷⁹ I do not have here enough space to discuss Habermas’s conception of tolerance which, like his concept of autonomy, is complex and multi-layered. For the rather limited purpose of my discussion in this sections I take reflexivity and fallibilism of claims to be conditions for his view of tolerance, although I accept that this interpretation requires more refinement and that there may be reasonable disagreement here. I thank Simone Chambers for pressing this point against me. To defend my interpretation more fully I would need to engage in a complex analysis that I simply cannot pursue here.

Violence, moreover, has a complex genealogy and needs, economic resources and territorial expansion (needs as old as human society), imperialism, colonial projects, greed, self-aggrandizing, or sheer lust for power are almost always fundamental ingredients of social and ethnic violence. Sometimes religious faiths are involved in acts of violence. When this happens then yes, by all means, they should be held accountable and, in fact, they must be criticized against their own normative claims (in all major religions there are important normative resources for peace and hospitality, for charity, for a meaningful relation with the other). However focusing on religion (and on Christianity, in particular, à la Diderot, Voltaire and other *philosophes*) as the source of societal violence has the unfortunate effect of making us oblivious to the potential for violence in secular ideologies, which in my view far exceeds that in religion. I do not intend here to fight long fought battles, but we could take for instance the potential of violence involved in “social Darwinism”. As this was as applied to relations between “races” in Europe in the 1930’s is well known. Less known and discussed are the perverse effects that “evolutionary biology” (riding the wave of immense prestige that science holds in modern society) has had on liberal and progressive thought.²⁸⁰ Many other examples can be found, but I will mention just one: comrade Iosif Visarionovic Stalin; in 1932 alone, for instance, around 85 000 orthodox priests were shot in the Soviet Union. It is as if Voltaire’s dream of strangling the last king with the entrails of the last priest has finally come close to completion. The Nobel Prize winner and dissident writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn puts the total number of people who passed through the system of forced labour camps collectively known as “the Gulag” at 50 million. The exact number of deaths due to harsh conditions in these camps is impossible to know, however some estimations put it at 10 million.²⁸¹ Actually it is quite staggering that after the death camps of the 20th century²⁸² one would still muster the energy to talk about the Catholic Inquisition

²⁸⁰ I am thinking here of policies of forced sterilization of the socially unfit. Liberal eugenic policies are analyzed by Randall Hansen and Desmond King. *Sterilized by the State: Eugenics, Race and the Population Scare in Twentieth-Century North America*, Cambridge University Press, 2013. For an excellent discussion of the affinity between eugenic policies and progressive thought see Michael Freeden “Eugenics and progressive thought: a study in ideological affinity”, *The Historical Journal* 22/3, 1979, 645-671.

²⁸¹ The figure is advanced by Alexandr Yakovlev, former Soviet ambassador to Canada (1973-1983), and head of the Commission on the Rehabilitation of Soviet Oppression Victims, in his memoir: *Maelstrom of Memory: From Stolypin to Putin*. The *Encyclopedia of Genocide* put this figure at 40 million. See vol.1 1999, 28.

²⁸² “In total, during the first eighty-eight years of [the twentieth] century, almost 170 million men, women, and children were shot, beaten, tortured, knifed, burned, starved, frozen, crushed, or worked to death; buried alive,

(which I do not support, of course) and “the religious wars” of the 17th century as the best illustration of political violence.²⁸³

5.7 The paradox of successful translation

So far in my discussion I explained why, in my view, the argument that religion is a special case of diversity is beset by insuperable difficulties. This argument underestimates the extent to which, after the detranscendentalization of reason, reason becomes impure, rooted in the existential context of *lifeworld*. It also selectively highlights one particular strand of religious experience as paradigmatic for all religion and this is, paradoxically enough, a view of religion very difficult to reconcile with the requirement that faith must become more “reflective” and must modernize.

However there is another reason why the opacity argument is highly problematic in the context of Habermas’s recent writings. And this is a crucial point for my discussion in this chapter and in this dissertation more generally. The argument that religion has a core which is opaque to reason stands in direct tension with the intentions and aspirations that animate Habermas’s recent turn to a “postsecular society”. The project of “salvaging” moral intuitions from religious language and then translate them into the language of reason stands in flagrant antagonism with the idea that philosophy (philosophical reflection) can at best “circumscribe” but not “penetrate” the core of religious experience which, like the core of an aesthetic experience, remains “profoundly alien” to discursive thought.

drowned, hanged, bombed or killed in any other of the myriad other ways governments have inflicted deaths on unarmed, helpless citizens and foreigners. Depending on whether one used high or more conservative estimates, the dead could conceivably be more than 360 million”. The *Encyclopedia of Genocide*. Santa Barbara, California: ABC-Clio, vol. 1, 1999, 28.

²⁸³ My discussion here of the potential for violence in secular ideologies cannot be really taken to be directed against Habermas, as he is, of course, very much aware of the tragic history of the 20th century. This discussion is more the expression of a personal frustration with a certain secularist stance that can be traced back to radical Enlightenment. I wish to thank Melissa Williams for pressing me on this point.

It was one of my main arguments in the preceding chapter that once the normative framework of modernity takes a “postsecular” turn, important normative tensions emerge, the most significant of which is a direct threat to the claim to universality of communicative reason. I also argued that reason’s universality now depends on how successful the project of translation can be proved to be. It is therefore important to examine very carefully the idea of successful translation. The following discussion focuses strictly on this issue and closes the chapter.

I want to interrogate what exactly makes translation successful. How do we know that religious contents have been successfully transferred into rational discourse? What is decisive for what constitutes a successful translation? A related set of questions of interest to my discussion are the following: How can we possibly know if along with the cognitive content some part of the “dogmatic shell” is not also taken over (or smuggled in) by the translation? Or, conversely, how much cognitive substance can be extracted? Everything? How can we possibly know that some of it is not left behind? Does translation have an end point? Or must it be seen as an open-ended process? Moreover, would it be possible to identify a criterion that could help us discriminate between a bad translation and a good one?

These are difficult questions and no quick answers can be derived from Habermas’s recent writings. The best way to tackle these questions, I would like to suggest, is to approach them indirectly. Thus I want to see first if Habermas offers examples of philosophical translation and then second I want to determine more precisely what sets these examples apart from Habermas’s own project of “salvaging” translation.

Habermas does offer a few examples of philosophical translation of religious content. One important such example is offered by Kant’s moral philosophy.²⁸⁴ As Habermas writes, “Kant’s moral philosophy can be understood in general terms as an attempt to reconstruct the categorical ought of divine imperatives in discursive terms” (BNR, 228). The transcendent divine standpoint is re-articulated by Kant into an inner-worldly universal moral point of view. Thus “the transcendental philosophy”, writes Habermas, “has the practical meaning of transposing the transcendent divine standpoint into a functionally equivalent *inner-worldly* perspective and to

²⁸⁴ For a good discussion of Kant see Ronald Beiner *Civil Religion*, Cambridge University Press, 2010, Chapter 17.

preserve it in the form of the moral standpoint” (BNR, 228). Moreover, the cognitive content of the Judeo-Christian idea of God’s kingdom on earth is taken over and salvaged by Kant under the form of a republic under the laws of virtue. Again let me quote Habermas here: “The translation of the idea of the rule of God on earth into the concept of a republic under laws of virtue shows in an exemplary way that Kant associates the at once critical and self-critical differentiation between knowledge and faith with receptiveness to the possible cognitive relevance of the contents preserved in religious traditions” (BNR, 228).²⁸⁵

Another example of translation, according to Habermas, can be found in secular philosophers like Feuerbach and Marx. In their work, as Habermas points out, “the idea of the kingdom of God on earth as an ethical community is ... supposed to find a secular embodiment in the revolutionary form of the emancipated society” (BNR, 231). In fact, the emancipatory content of the Judeo-Christian promise of redemption is actively pursued by modern philosophy from Hegel to Marx and in the Hegelian Marxist tradition more generally, with more or less destructive implications for the religious (dogmatic and institutional) “shell” in which this content is found. Indeed, as Habermas remarks, “theological motifs are not difficult to discern, whether in Bloch’s philosophy of hope grounded in the philosophy of nature, in Benjamin’s despairing, but messianically inspired notion of rescue and recovery, or in Adorno’s austere negativism” (BNR, 232).

However, the attempt to translate the emancipatory potential of the Judeo-Christian story of salvation extends beyond the confines of Western Marxism. Philosophers like Schleiermacher or Kierkegaard have also made such original attempts. As Habermas points out, whereas the Hegelian Marxist philosophy is after the *collective* emancipatory moment, Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard seek to recover the *individual* salvation that they see as the core of faith (BNR, 232).

As a side note, if one contemplates the list of examples discussed by Habermas, one might find it difficult to avoid a very unpleasant feeling: it was Carl Schmitt who famously argued that all important normative concepts of modern political theory are in fact secularized theological concepts and Habermas’s discussion of translation (oddly enough) seems to lend some support to

²⁸⁵ See also Habermas “A Genealogical Analysis of the Cognitive Content of Morality” in *The Inclusion of the Other*, 1998, pp.3-46.

Schmitt's claim. In what should be a more palatable association, Habermas's list of examples of translation may also bring to mind Nietzsche's words: "from ourselves we moderns have nothing at all"²⁸⁶, a claim that Habermas fought hard to prove wrong over the years.

I think that the relevant question at this point is the following: is there anything that would distinguish the regenerative contact with religious traditions proposed by Habermas's "postmetaphysical" thought in the form of "salvaging" translation from previous attempts at translation of religious traditions? What sets Habermas's "salvaging" translation apart from all the other translations in the history of philosophy?

The answer to this question is to be found in Habermas's claim that "postmetaphysical thinking", unlike many philosophical attempts to translate and secularize religious contents, respects religion by insisting on the "borders" between them. The following passage is revealing: Kant, Habermas contends, "understood the reflexive assimilation of religious content in terms of a progressive replacement of positive religion by a pure rational religion rather than as the genealogical reconstruction of a historical context of emergence of which reason itself is a part" (BNR, 228).

We have here a very important indication of what successful translation may mean: "salvaging" translation is not assimilation and replacement but a "genealogical reconstruction".²⁸⁷ It is a reconstruction that traces the context of emergence of the normative framework of modernity back to the Axial Age.²⁸⁸ Thus as Habermas writes, in a "post-secular society" "secularization functions less as a filter separating out the contents of traditions than as a transformer which redirects the flow of tradition" (AWM, 18). Translation is not a "hostile take-over" (FK, 335), it is not a filtering out of religious contents while the dogmatic structure of religion is destroyed;

²⁸⁶ Nietzsche, *On The Advantages and Disadvantages of History for Life*, Cambridge, 1980, 24.

²⁸⁷ For a good discussion of the idea of genealogy in Habermas's recent writing see Amy Allen "Having One's Cake and Eating it Too: Habermas's Genealogy of Post Secular Reason." In *Habermas and Religion*, eds. Craig Calhoun, Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, 132-154.

²⁸⁸ "The cleavage between secular knowledge and revealed knowledge cannot be bridged. Yet the perspective from which postmetaphysical thinking approaches religion shifts once secular reason takes seriously the shared origin of philosophy and religion in the revolution of worldviews of the Axial Age (around the middle of the first millennium BCE)" (AWM, 17).

translation should instead be seen more like a process which steers the flow of tradition towards outcomes equally acceptable to everyone.

To put Habermas's main point in bringing up the idea of a common origin of faith and reason in the Axial Age in a sharper form, this idea, if taken seriously, reveals the fact that religion *is not the other* of secular reason; religion is part of reason's development and history.

I hold that the argument of a common genealogy of faith and reason is strong enough to ground the *possibility* of "salvaging" translation. But this argument cannot yet ensure the *success* of translation. We still need to probe more into what constitutes a successful translation.

It is clear that Habermas now understands the entire normative self-understanding of modernity, - the differentiations of validity claims and rational discourses, the emergence of the capitalist economy and modern bureaucratic state, the establishment of a higher level of reflexivity for modern personality, indeed the entire "postmetaphysical" framework - as the result of a philosophical translation of the Western Judeo-Christian heritage. Unlike other attempts at translation in the history of philosophy, Habermas's postmetaphysical thinking does not aim to replace and destroy religion.²⁸⁹

So can one affirm that Habermas's "postmetaphysical thinking" is a *successful* translation of the moral content of Judeo-Christian tradition? This is what I want to explore at this point.

There are subtle differences between portraying "postmetaphysical" modernity as the result of linguistification of the sacred (before the postsecular turn) and as the result of translation of the sacred (after the postsecular turn). Linguistification of the sacred was premised on a process of *Aufhebung* of religion and involved what I would call a rather "thin" interpretation of the legacy of religion in modernity: the religious/metaphysical residue that communicative reason still preserves from Judeo-Christianity (and metaphysics) must be understood in logico-

²⁸⁹ Habermas's appeal to Jaspers's concept of Axial Age and his talk of a common genealogy of reason and religion suggest that all major religious traditions and the Greco-Roman thought must be counted in what Habermas means by philosophical translation. However all his examples of philosophical translation goes back to Judeo-Christianity: Kant, Hegel, Marx, Kierkegaard. This explains why I focus on this tradition in the following discussion, although I agree that we need to probe further into the import of Jaspers's concept of Axial Age for Habermas's discussion of philosophical translation. I thank Melissa Williams for pressing me on this point.

developmental (i.e. formal) terms and consists simply in a cognitive perspective (the distinction between facts and norms). I have already discussed how this is supposed to work, but I add here one important fact in support of my interpretation of a “thin” religious residue in modernity: the *justification* Habermas offered for communicative reason was completely independent from any religious tradition (Christian or otherwise); the “rational reconstruction” of communication (as I showed in Chapter 3) boils down to an analysis of the pragmatic role of validity claims in all communication and this analysis has nothing whatsoever to do with any particular religious tradition. This “rational reconstruction” is put forward as a fallible hypothesis and therefore its plausibility depends on empirical corroboration. In *TCA* Habermas offered an “indirect” justification for the program of formal pragmatics, by showing how the concept of communicative reason can solve some of the most intractable problems present in the social theory of Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Mead and Parsons. He also used the idea of “performative contradiction” in order to defend formal pragmatics. None of these justificatory steps can be traced in any way to the moral or cognitive content of religion.

Translation of the sacred, as opposed to the linguistification of the sacred, introduces a “thicker” interpretation of the religious legacy in modernity. Abandoning the idea of *Aufhebung* of religion, Habermas now places a heavier emphasis on the common genealogy of faith and reason and thus he takes the main concepts of “postmetaphysical thinking” to be the result of a transfer of the cognitive content of the Judeo-Christian tradition into the language of reason.

What is the main implication of this new view? The “rational reconstruction” of the normative content of modernity differs from the “genealogical reconstruction” of this content, in that genealogical reconstruction (as translation) presupposes that modernity takes over from the religious tradition of the Western World *something more* than just a formal cognitive perspective. Now specific moral content from this legacy is incorporated into “postmetaphysical thinking”.

This implication however raises problems; if “postmetaphysical thinking” is a translation of the substantive moral content of a *particular* religious tradition (Judeo-Christian in this case), how convincingly can one claim that it should be accepted by other religions (say Buddhism, or Hinduism) or by people of no religion? Was not Habermas’s prior view of linguistification of the sacred, insofar as it took only a formal perspective from religion, better suited to uphold a

universal, “postmetaphysical” view of modernity? The infiltration of substantive content from a particular religious tradition (through translation) into the very core of what Habermas reconstructed as the unavoidable conditions of communicative reason can only reduce the plausibility of presenting these conditions as universals.²⁹⁰

Moreover, to return to the question that guides my reflections, to what extent can one say that Habermas’s postmetaphysical thinking represents a *successful* translation of the moral/cognitive content of the Judaic ethics of justice and the Christian ethics of love? Think of the latter in particular: love seems to be partial rather than impartial, substantive rather than formal or procedural, and asymmetric rather than symmetric. I am thinking here of the special place the poor, the meek and the vulnerable take in Christianity - as Nietzsche understood it so well, and deeply despised it. One could argue that a better way to translate the Christian ethics of universal brotherhood into rational secular language is represented by Marxism rather than by Habermas’s “postmetaphysical thinking”. Like Christianity, Marxism is partial to those who suffer (under the yoke of bourgeois class rule), it has a substantive view of emancipation (in a classless society) and it is asymmetric in that it privileges the exploited class (the proletariat) in the class struggle. The writings of Ernst Bloch, for instance, suggest these view connections.

I think this points to a more general question vis-à-vis the project of philosophical translation: what exactly distinguishes a good from a bad translation? Are there no contemporary critics of Habermas’s postmetaphysical thinking (viewed now as translation of the sacred)? As Ronald Beiner has pointed out, Habermas seems to assume that everyone has been won over by the postmetaphysical narrative he offers and, in one way or another, has become Habermasian.²⁹¹ Beiner is not alone in this, as even sympathetic Habermasians make similar points. For instance, Thomas McCarthy remarks that many “reflective participants” in the debates on the relationship between faith and reason “will not...simply grant the truth of his [Habermas’s] theory of communicative action; nor the adequacy of his analytic, comparative and evolutionary account of the world religions, which, though by no means simply derived from that theory, is expressly

²⁹⁰ Habermas accounted for this problem with the distinction between genesis and validity: human rights come out of a western tradition but they can be justified more broadly. It is easier to defend this distinction, it seems to me, in the previous view of “postmetaphysical thinking” rather than in the postsecular paradigm.

²⁹¹ In one of the comments he made in response to an earlier draft of this dissertation.

framed by it”.²⁹² Important contemporary philosophers like Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, writing from within the evolved and reflective framework of modernity, reject this evolutionary account (McCarthy, 2013, 117).

Moreover, how and why is Heidegger’s philosophy of Being, for instance, and in particular Heidegger’s philosophy after the *Kehre*, which reads as a quasi-religious philosophy, so very different from what Habermas means by “salvaging” translation? Or why can’t Derrida’s reflections on *archewriting* be seen as successful translation of the cognitive content of Judaism, for instance? Especially as Habermas himself points out that Derrida’s philosophy nourishes itself from Jewish religious sources (letter against the spirit) and agrees with the interpretation of Derrida’s philosophy as a program of “scriptural scholarship” (see my discussion in Chapter 2). Why is a program of scriptural scholarship (if this is indeed what Derrida is doing) less successful in translating religion into the language of reason than what Habermas means by “postmetaphysical thinking”?

Habermas seems to imply that Heidegger’s philosophy of Being “smuggles in”, illegitimately as it were, religious motifs into the rational language of philosophy. However, how is one to decide what is illegitimate and what is legitimate transfer of meaning in translation remains unspecified. Against Heidegger, Habermas holds that reason should not “borrow the authority, and the air of a sacred that has been deprived of its core and become anonymous”. As he writes: “there is no insight to be gained by having the day of the Last Judgement evaporate to an undetermined event in the history of being” (FK, 335). I agree with Habermas on this score. However, one could feel tempted to ask: have we really gained much by having the day of the Last Judgement evaporate to a very elusive Ideal Speech Situation? One could argue that the Ideal Speech Situation and the pragmatic “idealizations” of argumentation (that as Habermas admits, still retain a portion of the

²⁹² I agree with R. Beiner and T. McCarthy. In my first chapter I discussed Habermas’s claim that there is no alternative to postmetaphysical thinking, and I tried to give this claim the best defence possible on Habermas’s own theoretical premises. But I think that it is hard to deny that there is something of an “end of history” air about Habermas’s philosophical project; of course, it would be wrong to say that history has ended with Habermas’s postmetaphysical thinking; history does continue, but it seems to flow in a single direction, that constrained/directed by the regulative ideal of ideal speech situation. Somehow Habermas’s rational reconstruction of the ideal speech situation is supposed to preempt further philosophical debates on the nature of truth and the relationship between truth and society.

idealist heritage of metaphysics, while he simultaneously denies they have a metaphysical nature) also deprives the sacred of its core and makes it anonymous.

On a different note, how could Habermas possibly be sure that something from the “dogmatic shell” of Judeo-Christianity has not also been taken over (or smuggled in), along with its cognitive content, in the translation realized by the “postmetaphysical thinking”? Postmodern authors and theorists interested in an agonistic view of democracy, for instance, have argued (true, sometimes in a too strident and overblown manner) that Habermas’s stress on reaching understanding, and on the procedural unity of reason carries on the pernicious tendency of metaphysics toward unity at the expense of diversity and, to that extent, it takes over some of the oppressive character of metaphysics.²⁹³

The only criterion that I can think of to help us differentiate between good and bad translation, going back to those reasons which lead Habermas to engage in the postsecular turn, is how convincingly translation is able to provide resources to be drawn of by the larger public in the struggle against the destructive forces of global capitalism and scientific naturalism. Is Habermas’s “postmetaphysical” project very convincing in this regard? Political theorists supporting the fight of oppressed people in the non-Western context and thinkers writing in the tradition of “liberation theology” in Latin America (like Gutierrez, Boff, and Dussel) have pointed out that this fight needs something more than impartial and formal rules of argumentation; this fight needs something far stronger than principles like D and U which embody an impartial point of view of “what is equally good for all”.²⁹⁴ When this impartial standard is applied to a world rife with inequality and oppression, this standard in fact might reproduce rather than dissolve the existing asymmetries of power. This is a rather large claim and it cannot be my purpose here to discuss it and engage with these complex debates, as this would lead me too far afield. However, I do want to remark, in relation to the question of what is good

²⁹³ For agonistic democracy see Chantal Mouffe “Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism”, in *Social Research* 66(3), 1999, 745-758. and (2000) “For an Agonistic Model of Democracy”, in Noel O’Sullivan (ed.) *Political Theory in Transition*, New York, Routledge, 2000; Aletta Norval, *Aversive Democracy*, Cambridge University Press, 2007.

²⁹⁴ See the discussion of liberation theology in the interview with Habermas taken by Eduardo Mendieta: “A Conversation About God and the World” in *Religion and Rationality. Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity*, Polity Press, 2002, pp.165-167.

and what is bad translation, that other philosophical projects (like liberation theology, for instance) may provide a better translation of Christianity than his own project.

At this point of my analysis I would like to raise my argument to a more general level and bring home the essential import of my reflections so far in this section.

I argue that the idea of *successful* translation is very paradoxical, at least in the context of Habermas's discussion of "post-secular society". To clearly see the paradoxical nature of this idea, consider the following hypothetical question: would anyone (religious or agnostic) recognize herself in the "salvaging" translation? If the answer is 'Yes', what is the point of keeping the dogmatic shell intact? Why not destroy it? Insofar as dogmatism is now successfully emptied of its rational content, why would anyone (religious or agnostic) want to keep it? After all, if indeed it would be possible to operate this kind of separation (*Wahrheitsgehalt*/dogmatic shell), perhaps Kant (and Hegel and Marx) had a point in his (their) insistence that "dogmatism" should be done away with. Unless Habermas wants now to claim a newly found appreciation/recognition for religious dogmatism, which I seriously doubt, then he must give us a reason as to why the dogmatic shell of religion should be "respected" and not destroyed by philosophy once translation has been successful.²⁹⁵

Therefore, on my view, it makes sense to claim, as Habermas does, that one should "respect" what is left behind, after the act of translation has been performed, *only if* one also assumes that no translation can entirely capture whatever cognitive content is there in religion. Only if one admits that rational content remains present in religion and that translation cannot fully empty the moral content of religion (only if some cognitive/moral *rest/excess* will always remain present in the dogmatic "shell"), can the idea of respect for religion be legitimately used to differentiate Habermas's project from other philosophical projects. Habermas's turn to a "post-secular society" becomes a convincing philosophical move *only if* he also concedes that there are

²⁹⁵ One way to respond to the objection I raise here would be to say that dogmatism must go but not all religious belief is dogmatic in the way that Habermas uses this term. I absolutely recognize my religious beliefs in secular arguments and that does not make me want to jettison my religious beliefs. I thank here to Simone Chambers for pointing this out to me.

limits to *any and all* salvaging attempts at translation. Such a concession, however, explodes the very idea of *successful* translation.

On the other side, if the answer to the question raised above is ‘No’, if no one (religious or agnostic) recognizes/identifies himself in/with translation, what is the point of attempting to translate religion anyway? If nobody can identify himself with the translation, it means that those resources of solidarity and meaning that Habermas seeks to retrieve will never be transferred to the “salvaging” translation and they will remain intact in their initial home, there where people’s deepest commitments, their deep attachment to fundamental values also reside. One could direct against Habermas here the point Habermas himself directed against those contemporary theologians who incorporated his theory of communicative action in their theologies. Why does Habermas reject this as an example of successful translation? Well, because nobody recognizes himself in this translation - communicative theology is no longer a theology for true believers. But this seems to imply that neither Habermas’s “postmetaphysical thinking”, as translation of Judeo-Christian content, is able to be a rallying banner for true believers. And insofar as it incorporates substantive cognitive content from a particular religious tradition, it cannot offer an attractive alternative for secular citizens either.

5.8 Conclusion

I argued in this chapter that Habermas's project of salvaging translation is plagued by insuperable difficulties. The institutional translation proviso seems unnecessary and suffers from overreach. Moreover, the idea of non-destructive philosophical translation raises problems of its own.

My aim in this chapter was to show that there is a deep ambiguity at the very core of Habermas's project of "salvaging" translation. This project rests on two premises that are in tension with each other. The first premise affirms the "special case" of religion. Religious faith, Habermas argues, is qualitatively different from other ethical convictions and conceptions of the "good life". The second premise affirms that faith and reason share a "common genealogy" and this explains why translation is at all possible. When they are held together these two premises create a deep tension in Habermas's conception of "post-secular society": the first premise affirms that faith is the "other" of reason (the "opacity" argument); the second premise however denies that faith is the "other" of reason – if religious faith were truly "opaque" to reason, translation would not be possible in the first place.

This tension remains unresolved in Habermas's recent writings and comes to the fore with particular force in the contention that there are limits to translation. The idea of a *successful* (non-destructive) translation is paradoxical insofar as it presupposes the existence of limits to translation. It makes sense to argue that secular reason should respect religion only if the act of translation of religious cognitive content does not fully capture this content. Only if one accepts that the transfer of meaning into the language of reason leave behind an excess that fails to be fully appropriated, does it make sense to argue for respect for religion and for a "non-destructive" relation.

To put all this into a nutshell, insofar as Habermas wants to go beyond a functionalist reading of religion and respect religion as a sovereign domain of meaning, he must concede that there are

limits to what translation can “salvage” from religion.²⁹⁶ However the idea of inherent limits to salvaging translation undermines the claim to universality of communicative reason. The conceptual alliance between postmetaphysical and postsecular proves to be uneasy and ultimately self-damaging.

In the remaining chapter of my dissertation I want to examine more closely the limits of translation. As we saw in the present chapter, Habermas accounts for these limits with the argument that religion has a core that remains opaque to reason. I think Simone Chambers explains Habermas’s position well: “just as there are certain aesthetic experiences that are beyond the power of rational philosophy to articulate, explain, and make transparent...[Habermas] implies, however, that within the group of experiences that remain ‘opaque to philosophy’ there is a subset that could be described as religious/moral experiences (feelings/intuitions). They involve our intuitive responses to moral violations. They are morally significant, but so far only religious language has been able to articulate them with any precision” (Chambers 2007, 217).

Like Charles Taylor, however, I remain suspicious of the possibility of drawing such phenomenological distinctions. Such distinctions are highly problematic: if religion *is* the other of reason then the analytical distinction between what is opaque and what is available for translation seems arbitrary. What standing does reason have to draw such a clinical distinction between what is cognitive content, what is experiential faith and what is just dogmatic dross that should be left behind (but not destroyed) if it is separated from religion by strict borders? Reason has no means to draw this kind of distinction without buying into the rationalist premise that it can determine what is true and what is false in religion, a premise that Habermas now explicitly shuns.

If faith *is not* the other of reason then translation seems redundant and the thesis that secular reason should enjoy priority over religion becomes harder to defend. There is no way to decide *a*

²⁹⁶ Robert Bellah writes: “Whereas earlier he [Habermas] famously wrote that the truths of religion will probably all eventually be translated into rational discourse, when I asked him when we were together in 2005 if he still believes that, he said he doesn’t any longer”. See Robert N. Bellah (2010) “Confronting modernity: Maruyama Masao, Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor” in Michael Warner et al. (ed.) *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, Harvard Univ. Press, p.50-51

priori in which direction the dialogue in which the religious and the secular citizen are equally engaged will lead: perhaps the result of the encounter between secular reason and religion may end in *conversion* to a religious point of view, strictly under the force of the better argument, of course. Or, in any case, religion cannot be kept out of the moral and legal structure of society, as Habermas seems to do when he insists on the priority of secular reason.

In what follows I argue however that there is a different way of tackling the problem of translation and account for its limits, and that is to shift the focus from what makes religion problematic (the special case of religion) to the question of the philosophical means postmetaphysical reason uses in its translation project. Perhaps the ambiguity at the very core of Habermas's attempt to give a postsecular turn to his postmetaphysical thought is not caused by the special case of religion. It may actually be caused by some self-imposed limitations of reason in the process of its "de-transcendentalization", that is in the transition from "metaphysical" reason to "communicative" reason. The limits of translation may have nothing to do with a dubious phenomenology of religious experience and everything to do with the post-Kantian character of Habermas's "postmetaphysical thinking".

There are at least three moral problems that seem to defy "salvaging" translation and could thus constitute strong cases for the perennial significance of religion. I would suggest that philosophical thought has not yet been able to convincingly translate the deep moral intuitions preserved by religious language regarding: 1) the issue of the redemption of unjust suffering in the past; 2) what is unique and irreplaceable about our individuality; 3) and the issue of what we owe one another, here and now, but also across generations. Put differently, these are the issues of hope, unique individuality and that of (intergenerational) solidarity.

In the last chapter of my dissertation I want to choose one of these topics, that of hope, and look at how exactly this moral issue is accounted for in Habermas's "postmetaphysical thinking". What philosophical means are there in Habermas's project to approach the topic of hope? What secular resources are available to deal with it? Answering this question would give us a clearer picture of why "salvaging" translation runs into limits. It would also allow me to engage with the question of whether these limits can be overcome.

Chapter 6 Postmetaphysical Hope?

6.1 Introduction

Religious language, Habermas writes in a recent essay, remains unequalled in its “differentiated possibilities of expression and to sensitivities with regards to lives that have gone astray, with regard to societal pathologies, with regard to the failure of individuals’ plans for their lives, and with regard to the deformation and disfigurement of the lives that people share with one another” (DS, 43-44).

Translation of religious content into rational language is possible in principle, as faith and reason share a common genealogy. However rational translation appears to be impaired by some inherent limitations and therefore not all moral intuitions can be successfully salvaged in a universally accessible language. Habermas concedes that something is missing in translation: “... the lost hope for resurrection is keenly felt as a void”. “When sin was converted to culpability, and the breaking of divine commands to an offence against human laws, something was lost” (FK, 333).

Have these limits of translation something to do with religion (its special case) or, quite the opposite, with “postmetaphysical thinking”? While Habermas defends the first alternative and argues that religious experience has an opaque core which cannot be successfully redeemed in publicly testable terms, I argue in this chapter for the second alternative. In what follows I link the limits of rational translation (what is missing in translation) to the post-Kantian nature of Habermas’s “postmetaphysical thinking”.

There are a number of powerful moral intuitions that philosophy has yet to fully capture and which signal the limits of “salvaging” translation. Among these intuitions, one finds the problem of unjust suffering in the past, the issue of universal reconciliation with (and redemption of) nature, and the unique and irreplaceable nature of individuality. Perhaps also included here should be the issue of social solidarity with strangers and that of moral freedom as posed anew by the possibility of manipulation of human genetic code. All these moral/philosophical themes seem to reveal a

weakness on the part of secular philosophy to match the power of articulation found in religious language and hence they attest to the unexhausted semantic force of religious traditions.

In this final chapter of my dissertation I choose one of these issues, the moral issue of suffering and hope, and examine what kind of normative resources Habermas's "postmetaphysical thinking" has available to account for this problem. In *Critique of Pure Reason* Immanuel Kant argued that all philosophy ultimately must answer the following questions: what can I know? What should I do? What may I hope for? Here then I take up Kant's third question and pose it to Habermas: what may I hope for once the normative content of modernity is re-articulates on "postmetaphysical" premises?

6.2 The "inner voice that things must come out differently": Kant and the postulates of reason

As an entry point to the discussion of hope under postmetaphysical conditions I begin with an exchange of letters between Max Horkheimer and Walter Benjamin. This dialogue eloquently captures what is at stake in my discussion.

Reflecting on the countless innocent victims of the past, Max Horkheimer wrote in a letter to Walter Benjamin: "what happened to those human beings who have perished cannot be made good in the future. They will never be called forth to be blessed in eternity. Nature and society have done their work on them and the idea of a Last Judgment... is only a remnant from primitive thought which denies the negligible role of the human species in natural history and humanizes the universe". Horkheimer continues with these famous lines: "past injustice has happened and is over and done with. Those who were slain were really slain". To this materialist conception of history with its clear closure vis-à-vis the past, Benjamin opposes a philosophy of history based on anamnestic solidarity with the oppressed, the downtrodden, and the victims of history. He stresses that history is not merely a science but a form of remembrance, an "empathetic memory" (*Eingedenken*). In "empathetic memory", Benjamin writes in response to Horkheimer, "we have

an experience that prohibits us from conceiving history completely nontheologically, which is not to say that we can write history in directly theological concepts”.²⁹⁷

I think that Benjamin gives expression to an important intuition: we should take neither a secular (materialist) interpretation of history, nor a providential view of history as mutually exhaustive. There seems to be, according to Benjamin at least, a normative distance, an intellectual space, that opens up between historical-materialism and theology and I wonder whether this normative space may not have enough conceptual resources to tackle the problem of unjust suffering in the past. In what follows I explore this possibility and later in this chapter I discuss Benjamin’s concept of *Eingedenken*. Now, however, I take a moment to explain why the exchange between these two first generation Frankfurt School thinkers is highly relevant to the question of salvaging translation in Habermas.

I argue that the project of translating of the moral content of religion reaches a limit when it tries to account for the suffering of innocent victims in the past. Justice, in its postmetaphysical, procedural form, has no means to account for the suffering of those who have fallen victim to the “slaughter bench” of history (to invoke here Hegel’s words). The march of history has completed its work on them and there isn’t much that could be done to redeem the loss. For a procedural idea of justice the slain are really slain, as Horkheimer aptly put it.

However, I argue that the question why the innocent suffer cannot be morally indifferent. And neither can the question of whether death has the last word for those who suffered unjustly in the past be brushed aside as a mere sentimental lament over the negligible role of humanity in a universe that has become *unheimlich*. In fact, the problem of unjust suffering reveals a very important *rational need* and I argue that any moral theory with universal ambitions must respond to this need. To put this differently, my point is that in order to ground a truly comprehensive and universal view of justice, secular reason must be able to somehow fill the gap that yawns once the

²⁹⁷ This exchange is quoted by Thomas McCarthy *Ideas and Illusions*, MIT Press, 1991, p.207.

metaphysical thought of absolute justice is no longer available.²⁹⁸ ‘Making sense’ of past suffering is connected to the question of hope because if there is indeed no sense to be had of past suffering, or indeed no sense to be had from the unfolding of history, then we have no grounds to hope for a future (in this world or the next) where justice prevails. Without such a hope it is hard to imagine why we should fight for or even be concerned about justice.

Kant was the first modern philosopher to confront this problem head on, as he was the first philosopher to systematically criticize and reject traditional metaphysics (in the second part of the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant attacks ontological arguments for God’s existence) and the philosophical paradigm of *prima philosophia* more generally.²⁹⁹ Kant’s response to the question of suffering and hope comes in the form of the doctrine of the postulates of reason. In what follows I want to examine this doctrine, and then discuss Habermas’s arguments as to why, ultimately, Kant’s rational postulates are philosophically untenable.

In *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant introduces three rational postulates which, as he argues, reason must make in its practical (moral) application: the existence of the free will, the immortality of the soul and the existence of God. These postulates play a very important role in the context of Kant’s practical philosophy because they ground a rational conception of hope. In making sense of the discrepancies that occur in our life between the worth of our moral behaviour and the measure of happiness that befalls us, the doctrine of the postulates provides necessary conditions

²⁹⁸ Dostoevsky also invoked this problem through the voice of Ivan Karamazov.

²⁹⁹ One could trace the beginnings of this critical shift that culminates in Kant’s anthropological turn back to Descartes or even back to Machiavelli, Hobbes and Locke. Most likely, however, it should be traced to the nominalist innovations in scholastic theology back in the 13th century, as John Milbank’s *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (1990), for instance, showed. The same point is made by David Bentley Hart (2003) in his impressive theological treatise *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*. Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age* (2007) also takes nominalism and Descartes as important moments in the anti-metaphysical lineage of modernity, a claim that can be found in Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* as well. A good discussion of this topic can also be found in Michael Gillespie’s *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (2008). My own view is that this shift can be traced even further back, to the great schism of 1054, which was the moment when Latin Christendom chose to walk on its own (over-rationalist, some may want to say) path. Be this as it may, the issue of the exact beginnings of the radical shift to subjectivity which dominates modernity is of secondary importance to my discussion here. I follow Habermas (and Hegel) in taking Kant’s transcendental idealism to be emblematic for this shift: “the essence of the modern world gathered into its focal point in Kantian philosophy” (Habermas PDM, 19).

for moral action and keeps moral despair at bay. This is captured very well by Adorno when he writes that the secret core of Kantian philosophy is the “unthinkability of despair”.³⁰⁰ To put Adorno’s insight differently, one could say that the rational possibility of hope is an essential ingredient of Kantian rationalism and of the view of modernity underpinned by it.

Habermas’s main critical point against Kant is that the doctrine of the “highest good”, on the basis of which Kant introduces the postulates, cannot be reconciled with the deontological character of Kant’s transcendental idealism. As Habermas notes: “A deontological ethics that construes all moral action as action in conformity with morally justified norms cannot make the self-binding of the autonomous will to moral insights in turn contingent on an end” (BNR, 219-220). However this is exactly what Kant is doing when he insists that the practical use of reason requires us to make the “highest good” (which includes happiness) an object of our will.

Habermas’s point is simply that teleology cannot be introduced on deontological assumptions. Morally right actions do not need an end in order to be moral, they require only conformity with the form of the moral law. In fact, one of the most important points raised by Kant in *Critique of Practical Reason* is that moral imperatives (unconditionally valid imperatives) are insensitive to the consequences of moral actions in history and society. Following these imperatives in our actions makes us at most “worthy of happiness”, and not happy as such. “Given the unconditionally binding character of a moral law based exclusively on the fact of the sense of duty”, as Habermas puts it, Kant’s promotion of the “highest good” as an end given by practical reason comes close to collapsing the autonomy of the will into heteronomy of the will. Kant insists nevertheless that we have a duty to strive for the realization of the “highest good” and he wants to convince us that aiming at the “highest good” is contained in the respect for moral law (BNR, 219). Habermas does not find this very convincing (and correctly so, one might add).

But why does Kant insist on the doctrine of the “highest good”? Why does he emphatically require that we should make “the highest good” into an object of our will?

³⁰⁰ Theodor W. Adorno *Negative Dialectic*, translated by E. B. Ashton, Seabury Press, 1973, p. 385, quoted also by Habermas in BNR, p.221.

The answer is, it seems to me, that he is forced to do so because no (universal) moral theory can afford to ignore the problem of the suffering of the just person. Neither the modern shift to a sovereign subject as the ground of all morality, nor the re-positioning of moral theory on strong deontological premises, can write off this moral issue from philosophy. I argue therefore that the doctrine of the highest good in Kant is not a superfluous theoretical eccentricity which needlessly introduces tensions for the deontological framework of his moral philosophy. This doctrine is, in fact, Kant's response (inadequate as it may be) to a very important rational need, the same need that comes to the fore in the written exchange between Horkheimer and Benjamin.

Reduced to its basics, Kant's argument is that even if the moral law cannot promise happiness, we ought to strive for happiness, and it is our inner rational voice that commands us to do so. Indeed, Kant argues that there is no promise in the moral law, as nothing in the moral law could link the moral worthiness of a moral person to the actual amount of happiness that person enjoys. There is a gap between being worthy of happiness (virtuous) and being happy as such. And yet, the suffering of a just person touches us deeply or, as Habermas writes in his discussion of Kant, "the phenomenon of unjust suffering violates a deep sentiment" in us (see Habermas BNR, 215). The empirical fact of a virtuous person that suffers, and our emotional response to this situation, reveal that we are witnessing a deep moral transgression in this case.

Kant understood very well that, after all, it cannot be a matter of indifference for a rational human being if on the one hand his/her moral conduct brings him/her happiness or not. Or if, on the other hand, one's crimes are punished or not. In *Critique of the Power of Judgement* Kant puts it in the following way: "... it could not in the end make no difference if the person has conducted himself honestly or falsely, fairly or violently, even if to the end of his life he has found at least no visible reward for his virtues or punishment for his crimes. It is as if they heard an inner voice that things must come out differently".³⁰¹

³⁰¹ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, Guyer edition, Cambridge, 323. This passage is also quoted by Habermas in BNR, 215. Similar ideas are found in Kant's *Religion within the Boundaries of Reason Alone*. For a good commentary see Ronald Beiner, *Civil Religion*, chapter 17.

It is clear however that, on Kant's own philosophical premises, the gap between virtue and happiness cannot be bridged. The sum total of our actions necessarily falls short of achieving the rational end of happiness (achieving the highest good) simply because the rational subject cannot be in control of the causal world. Thus, in the dualist Kantian framework (which separates natural causality from the spontaneous causality of reason in the moral sphere), the rational need that things must come out differently can only be met by *postulating* a supreme natural cause (an all-redeeming God) who bridges the gap between virtue (the moral worthiness of our moral actions) and actual happiness. This need also compels Kant to postulate the existence of the soul and its immortality, so that justice can be fully achieved. It is on the basis of these two postulates that Kant advances the famous claim that he wanted to restrict metaphysics in order to make room for faith.

For the purpose of my discussion in this chapter, I find it interesting to see how Habermas reads this famous declaration of Kant. Kant does not attempt, contends Habermas, to reintroduce God through the back door, as it were. Kant was not after the Christian concept of *fides* (the ecclesiastical faith) but after the *mode* of faith.³⁰² "Kant wants to preserve a moment of promise, but stripped of its sacred character" (Habermas, BNR, 222). He is interested, writes Habermas, in "the rational equivalent for the attitude of faith, the cognitive posture of the believer" (Habermas, BNR, 221). In other words, Kant is after a *rational* faith: faith simply as the "trust in the attainment of an aim the promotion of which is a duty but the possibility of the realization of which it is not possible for us to have insight into" (Habermas, BNR, 221-222).

In Habermas's interpretation, therefore, Kant's interest in the Judeo-Christian religious heritage is primarily secular: "rather than the promise of the afterlife represented by the existence of God (or even the immortality of the human soul), what interests him is the prospect of the promised kingdom of God *on earth*..." (BNR, 222). The Judeo-Christian notion of a God who acts in history

³⁰² "Kant's primary concern here is not to subsume all religious contents under concepts but to integrate the pragmatic meaning of the religious *mode* of faith as such into reason" (Habermas, BNR, 222).

serves Kant to transpose the idea of the “kingdom of ends” from the intelligible realm into an inner-worldly utopia (BNR, 222) as expressed by his view of “ethical community”.³⁰³

It now becomes clear why Habermas takes Kant to be offering an important example of salvaging translation of religion (as I mentioned in my previous chapter): Kant wants to “rescue the contents of faith and the religious commitments that can be justified within the bounds of reason alone. The *critique* of religion is bound up with the motive of *saving* appropriation” (BNR, 211).

However, according to Habermas, Kant’s saving appropriation of religious content through translation is beset by two significant flaws: first Kant takes it to be an *overcoming* of Christian religion (in a manner similar to Hegel’s intention). As the preceding chapter made clear, Habermas renounces such a “take-over” intention, insisting on the importance of keeping strict boundaries between religion and secular philosophy and on the importance of a dialogical relationship between the two.³⁰⁴

Second, and this is the important point for the present discussion, Habermas argues that with the concept of “rational faith” Kant’s translation takes *too much* from religion (in the doctrine of the “highest good” and the corresponding postulates). As Habermas writes: “Kant wanted to rob religion of more substance than practical reason can in all seriousness endure” (BNR, 239). In the end, the doctrine of the “highest good” cannot be reconciled with the deontological premises of Kant’s moral philosophy. As Habermas puts it, Kant wanted to have the (religious) cake and eat it too (BNR, 227).

I agree with Habermas that Kant is (most likely) guided by a secular interest in religion. I see Kant’s “rational faith” as a quasi-empty concept, in fact. One cannot have the radical conception

³⁰³ An ethical-civic community organized solely in accordance with laws of virtue. An all-encompassing, ever more inclusive “kingdom of virtue”. Kant cited by Habermas, BNR, 225-226.

³⁰⁴ “Here I want to distinguish between *rationalist* approaches that (in the Hegelian tradition) *subsume* [*aufheben*] the substance of faith into the philosophical concept, from *dialogical* approaches that (following Karl Jaspers) adopt a critical attitude toward religious traditions while at the same time being open to *learning* from them” (Habermas, BNR, 245).

of moral autonomy that Kant introduces in his practical philosophy and at the same time keep a robust idea of transcendent divinity.

However, if we turn to Habermas's "postmetaphysical thinking", the rational need that forced Kant to introduce the concept of rational faith and the doctrine of postulates does not vanish. Quite the contrary, it morphs now into an intractable difficulty for postmetaphysical thinking. Let me explain why I think this is so.

As is well known, beginning with the late 1970s, Habermas engaged in a linguistic turn departing from the predominantly Marxist perspective he had espoused in his early writings. This turn to language, according to Habermas, has a crucial advantage: it enables a philosophical program of detranscendentalization of reason which does not jettison reason's unconditional character. The linguistic turn helps Habermas situate reason in language, culture and history, while he can still keep the deontological premises of Kant's moral philosophy. The unconditional character of moral norms is no longer grounded in the timeless structures of a rational and sovereign subject, but in a pragmatics of language (as I discussed in chapter 3).

To put this in the context of my discussion in this section, Habermas resolves the tension between teleology and deontology (a tension very much present in Kant's practical philosophy) in favor of deontology. Keeping the deontological dimension of Kant's practical philosophy, Habermas simply drops the doctrine of the "highest good". Hence, when compared to Kant's transcendental idealism, Habermas's "postmetaphysical" project gains in coherence. But this increase in coherence comes at a price. Abandoning the doctrine of the highest good, Habermas also abandons the concept of "transcendence" from the conceptual arsenal of postmetaphysical philosophy, as it is clear from this passage, for instance: "For, with this concept [of a "transcendence that penetrates the world from outside"], philosophy circumscribes the archaic origins of the utopian energy for 'promoting the highest good' over whose source a detranscendentalized reason no longer claims any power. It can provide a discursive reconstruction only of a transcendence from within" (BNR, 242).

Habermas is clear on the fact that "sober" postmetaphysical thinking must drop the attempt to appropriate the thought of transcendence (from outside this world). This thinking no longer has

the philosophical foothold to introduce something like the Kantian rational postulates. Thus “postmetaphysical” thinking can no longer ground a concept like “rational faith”. “Rational faith” à la Kant becomes extraterritorial to reason and its proper home, according to Habermas, must be found in what he calls “modernized” religion.³⁰⁵ Communities of believers must develop a (Kantian) rational faith as part of the efforts required of them to “modernize” or become more “reflective”. What Kant meant by “rational faith” becomes for Habermas a part of the “cognitive burden” that believers must carry in a “post-secular society” and it cannot belong to “postmetaphysical thinking” as such (this can also be put in the context of Habermas’s claim that modern *lifeworld* must meet “postmetaphysical thinking” halfway).

All these gestures of renunciation however invite the question: can Habermas’s “postmetaphysical thinking” provide *any* response to the rational need that Kant considered significant enough to require the doctrine of the highest good, even at the cost of undermining the deontological framework of his moral philosophy? Does the “inner voice that things must come out differently” that Kant still heard, find any resonance in Habermas’s “postmetaphysical” thought?

I would like to remark at this point that, in my view, it is not at all clear that the Kantian postulates and the doctrine of the “highest good” are strong enough to supply what reason misses in the wake of the shift away from metaphysics. Kant’s doctrine of the “highest good” might account for undeserved suffering in the present and in the future (this suffering will diminish as we progressively move towards a cosmopolitan order) but it is quite clear that the two postulates cannot at all account for the problem of undeserved suffering in the past. Indeed, as Habermas remarks, in Kant “the soteriological context of sin, repentance, and reconciliation, and thus the eschatological faith in the *retroactive power of a redemptive God*, take a back seat to the duty of earthly moral exertion” (BNR, 214, my emphasis). We ourselves must work for moral perfection which is projected into a future “ethical community”, a community which is secular and achievable in this world due to our moral efforts. I find Habermas’s interpretation to be correct again. After all, a *postulate* (an idea) of the rational subject cannot be endowed with retroactive power acting

³⁰⁵ Habermas “The Boundary...”, p.239. “What [Kant] meant with the mode of rational faith holds more for the reflective self-understanding of members of religious communities, and of cultural groups in general, shaped by strong, identity-forming traditions” (p.239).

in history: the dualism of Kantian philosophy prevents such an extension of our rational ideas onto the domain of “things-in-themselves”. Once the utopian and radical vision of liberation present in religious traditions³⁰⁶ is re-worked by Kant’s transcendental philosophy into an inner-worldly, forward-oriented, secular utopia, the past is silently overlooked and ignored.

However, without the Kantian doctrine of the “highest good” and his concept of “rational faith” the moral claims of those unjustly suffering and in particular the moral claim of the innocent victims of the past become an intractable philosophical difficulty. The *rational need* to which Kant at least tried to respond with these philosophical innovations becomes thus for Habermas’s postmetaphysical thinking a painful lacuna, a “disruption of normative consciousness”. And Habermas is forced to admit that “postmetaphysical thinking” simply cannot make up for this lack: the “disruption of normative consciousness” “also manifests itself in the dwindling sensitivity to social pathologies, indeed, to social deprivation and suffering in general. A sober postmetaphysical philosophy *cannot compensate* for this lack, which was already felt by Kant” (Habermas, BNR 239, my emphasis).

I argue therefore that any attempt to transfer substantive moral/cognitive content that is available in metaphysics and religious traditions concerning the issue of hope and redemption of undeserved suffering runs into limits as Habermas’s “postmetaphysical thinking” is simply not equipped philosophically to absorb it through translation. Translation runs into limits not necessarily because religious content is opaque and inaccessible to reason, but simply because “postmetaphysical thinking” does not possess the required conceptual and normative resources to deal with this kind of questions. The limits are internal to reason and they stem from Habermas’s re-positioning of philosophy on “postmetaphysical” premises and from his decision to solve the Kantian tension between deontology and teleology in favour of deontology (abandoning thus the Kantian doctrine of the “highest good”).

³⁰⁶ Think for instance of the Ezekiel’s prophecy of the valley of dry bones (Ezekiel 37).

Are these postmetaphysical limits fixed, immutable, beyond repair? or are they flexible enough to permit us an attempt to enlarge them, perhaps transcend them, and thus make the Habermasian project of salvaging translation a more successful (or plausible) philosophical project? Can one use Habermas to go beyond Habermas and cash in on the aspirations and intentions that animate the postsecular turn of his recent writings? This is what I want to discuss in what follows.

6.3 Habermas's concept of "fallible hope"

In order to answer these questions, I argue, we must clarify the vexing issue of whether Habermas's thought has any conceptual means that would correspond to Kant's concept of rational faith? This question is important and interesting, as I think that a legitimate case can be made to the effect that traces of the inner-worldly utopian impulse from Kant can still be discerned in Habermas's thought. For instance, Habermas does not completely abandon the concept of transcendence, as he talks about "transcendence-from-within" and about "self-transcendence". Moreover, something of Kant's secular aspiration for a civic-ethical republic under the laws of virtue survives in Habermas's view of a progressively rationalized *lifeworld*. And the same orientation towards the future that dominates Kant's moral and social philosophy is recognizable in Habermas's evolutionary social theory as well: modernization is presented as a "learning process" (i.e. cognitive advance) and Habermas's "postmetaphysical thinking" remains tied in more than one way to the idea of progress.

Thus, if the Kantian doctrine of the "highest good" is no longer available to support a concept of rational faith in Habermas, perhaps it is the Hegelian-Marxist framework that we should turn to in order to find the missing ground for a conception of hope within Habermas's procedural/deontological framework. This is what I would like to explore in this section.

I want to narrow my discussion of hope in Habermas by focusing on the idea of progress. This idea is an important ingredient of Habermas's defence of modernity and his "postmetaphysical thinking" relies heavily on an evolutionary theory of society. Lurking in this evolutionary view, of course, is the danger of falling back on teleology, which is exactly what he criticizes in Kant. Habermas is however aware of this danger. He writes: "the proceduralist concept of rationality

that I propose cannot sustain utopian projects for concrete forms of life as a whole. The theory of society within which my analysis takes place can at best lead to diagnostic descriptions which allow the ambivalence of contrary tendencies of development to emerge more clearly.”³⁰⁷

However, it seems to me that Habermas cannot get off the hook so easily. It is not enough to claim that the procedural view of reason he espouses is not tainted by (or escapes) teleology. After all this procedural view of reason does involve certain pragmatic *idealizations*. I think therefore that when the question “What may I hope for?” is raised, two tasks present themselves in front of us: first, it must be determined more precisely what exactly allows Habermas to defend the idea of progress without falling back on teleology and, second, what is the philosophical basis for the idea of progress in Habermas’s thought.³⁰⁸

Such an analysis is germane to my topic in this chapter, because it will help us understand the basis for what Habermas calls a “fallible hope”, a concept that can be found in scattered passages in his work. It appears in the following passages, for instance: “on this side of a *spes fidei* nourished by the Kierkegaardian dialectics of despair, there is room for fallible hope, instructed by a sceptical, but non-defeatist conception of reason” (RR, 113). “This *docta spes* is not to be despised, even though it can sometimes be devastated” (RR, 113).

In what follows I would like to clarify the philosophical basis for the concept of fallible hope in Habermas’s thought and the way in which I propose to do this is by examining the philosophical nature of the idealizations contained in the concept of “communicative reason”.

How are we to understand the philosophical nature of these idealizations and of the concept of “ideal speech situation” that is present in Habermas’s work? And what is the conceptual link between this ideal situation and the idea of progress in his thought?

³⁰⁷ Habermas “Transcendence from within...” in *Religion and Rationality*, p.87.

³⁰⁸ For a recent discussion of this topic see Amy Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, Columbia University Press, 2016.

As I discussed at large in chapter 3, the concept of “reaching understanding” plays an important role in Habermas’s social theory, because it identifies a form of social coordination that cannot be reduced to more instrumental or manipulative forms of social interaction. “Reaching understanding” unfolds as a process of rational redeeming of validity claims;³⁰⁹ in its reflective form, this is an argumentative process in which participants take a yes/no position and exchange reasons for or against a position. In this process, participants unavoidably make some pragmatic presuppositions (like publicity, inclusion, equality of rights and lack of deception and of coercion). A relatively uncontroversial way to understand the status of these presuppositions in Habermas’s formal pragmatics is to say that they spell out the *conditions of possibility* of reaching understanding in communication. This makes sense and it is intuitively plausible. Indeed, rules like equal voice, inclusion and lack of coercion must be seen as making possible this special type of linguistic praxis which is rational argumentation. Thus, they play a *constitutive* role (in a Kantian sense): we have to presuppose all these conditions in order to argue, as departing from them would turn argumentation into something else: into bargaining, influence, threat, strategic games etc. To put it differently, we have to think backward, as it were: we have to ask ourselves what would have to be the case in order for the praxis of argumentation to succeed.

However, even this relatively uncontroversial way of understanding the role of the pragmatic presuppositions must be carefully qualified: Habermas’s pragmatics of communication is not Kantian all the way down; he resists transforming the formal pragmatics into a transcendental foundationalist program, as is clear from his debate with Karl-Otto Apel. Formal pragmatics has a “quasi-transcendental” status, which means that the reconstruction of these presuppositions of communication must be understood as a fallible hypothesis that depends on corroboration from other empirical sciences (I discussed this aspect in chapter 3).

However, interpreting the pragmatic presuppositions as conditions of possibility of “reaching understanding” is not the whole story in Habermas. These conditions of possibility have normative

³⁰⁹ To be precise, there are two stages of “reaching understanding”: “communicative action” and “discourse”. The first takes place in everyday interactions against the consensual background of lifeworld. The second is a more demanding practice that subjects the validity claims raised rather unreflectively in communicative action to a more demanding, reflective, argumentative examination.

content, says Habermas, and (as he often stresses) they contain some *idealizations*. Which means that a binding anticipation, a projection, is present in them. So we have to think not only backward but forward as well.³¹⁰ Now the question becomes: how are we to understand this pragmatic anticipation that participants in rational discourse unavoidably make, *and* remain mindful at the same time of Habermas's warning that his procedural conception of (communicative) rationality cannot "sustain utopian projects for concrete forms of life"?

This is a complex question, not least because Habermas has changed his view over time with respect to how he framed the anticipatory role of the pragmatic presuppositions of argumentation. Let me trace here very briefly the evolution of his thought on this important issue and discuss the impact of these changes on the problem of "fallible hope".

In his earlier writings on pragmatics of communication, Habermas explicitly put forward the thesis that "reaching understanding" should be viewed as the *telos* of communication. This quite clearly suggests concretistic connotations for the pragmatic idealizations. The very idea of *telos* (at least as discussed by Aristotle, or by Hegel, for that matter) implies that that which is the *telos* of something is actually reachable/achievable in space and time. The *telos* of a form of life belongs to that form of life and flourishes or comes to plenary self-expression in that form of life. To say that "reaching understanding" is the *telos* of communication implies that the idealizing anticipation contained by the presuppositions of communication can be conceived as referring to a utopian community that could be approximately realized in social practice. This is an "ideal speech situation", universally extended in space and time, where we become fully transparent to ourselves and to one another in a general consensus and, as the *telos* of communication, this situation must be viewed as achievable in history, at least in principle, probably in a distant future.³¹¹ This

³¹⁰ That we should understand "idealizations" not only by thinking backwards (as conditions of possibility of understanding) but also forward (they have an anticipatory force) is clear from Habermas's discussion of idealizations in *TJ*. See for instance the following passage: "The practice of action oriented to mutual understanding forces on its participants certain *totalizing anticipations*, abstractions and transgressions of boundaries" (*TJ*, 99, my emphasis). See also: "The *idealizing anticipation* associated with argumentative presuppositions displays its operative efficacy in its critical function..." (*TJ*, 108).

³¹¹ A good discussion of this issue can be found in Maeve Cooke, *Re-presenting a Good Society*, Cambridge, MA: 2006.

interpretation finds support in some of the formulations Habermas used in his early writings, like the “prefiguration of a form of life” (but it should be noted that already in the 1980s he took pains to distance himself from the utopianism implied by this view of ISS).³¹²

Habermas has also appealed to the Kantian concept of “regulative idea”. On this reading, ISS could be understood more like a regulative ideal, on the model of Kant’s regulative ideas. Being regulative, ISS is rather a projection, a vantage point, like a “*focus imaginarius*” (I use Kant’s formulation here), a focal point guiding communicative interactions, and not something like a social ideal that can be effectively reached in history. Although ISS can be asymptotically approached, there will always remain a gap between our communicative action, here and now, and the fully transparent, fully inclusive and fully rational ideal speech situation.

He conceded that formal pragmatics made a rather peculiar and “paradoxical” use of the Kantian concept of “regulative idea”, as ISS “cannot be subsumed under the classical [Kantian] opposition between the ‘regulative’ and the ‘constitutive’”. In fact, Habermas collapsed the Kantian distinction: the pragmatic idealizations are at once constitutive and regulative of argumentation.³¹³ Over time, however, Habermas has chosen to downplay the concept of the “ideal speech situation”. In more recent writings, he shifts the emphasis onto the less utopian sounding concept of “transcendence-from-within” and the “context-transcending” character of validity claims. For instance, in *Between Facts and Norms* Habermas warns against an “essentialist misunderstanding” of the (counterfactual) idealizing presuppositions assumed by participants in argumentation. These idealizations should rather be viewed as “a methodological fiction” (or a thought experiment), that does not however “abstract from the ‘finitude’ of communicative social relations”.³¹⁴ Thus,

³¹² See TCA 1, 73ff; see also Habermas “A Reply to my Critics” in Thompson and Held eds. *Habermas. Critical Debates*, Cambridge, MA, 1982, p. 261 ff.

³¹³ See for instance *Justification and Application*, p. 164 ff. “To put it paradoxically, *the regulative idea of the validity of utterances is constitutive* for the social facts produced through communicative action. To this extent I go beyond Kant’s figures of thought..., though without embracing the totalizing viewpoint of Hegel” (J&A, 165, my emphasis).

³¹⁴ “The essentialist misunderstanding is replaced by a methodological fiction in order to obtain a foil against which the substratum of *unavoidable* social complexity becomes visible. In this harmless sense, the ideal communication community presents itself as a model of ‘pure’ communicative sociation” (BFN, 323).

analytical focus must be shifted away from the projection of a “final state of an agreement not subject to revision” (implied by the concept of ISS) and directed to the “process of justification”.³¹⁵ If we place all this in the context of my present discussion of the problem of hope, my argument is that the initial teleological understanding of the pragmatic idealizations has the advantage of providing a firmer base for hope under “postmetaphysical” conditions. It is very hard to see how a meaningful conception of hope can be grounded in a “methodological fiction”.

However, precisely to the extent that the teleological view of communication (which Habermas inherits from the Hegelian-Marxist framework with which his earlier writings were still closely aligned) enables a more robust conception of hope, this view also has unsettling implications for the postmetaphysical character of Habermas’s thought.

For one thing teleology is rooted in metaphysics. Thus, on this view, the anticipatory force in language that moves things forward, the teleological push towards self-actualization, must be understood as a metaphysical entity. The “binding and bonding” illocutionary force of “communicative action” and of the pragmatic anticipation present in rational communication must be anchored in a metaphysical view of language, which would place Habermas’s thought in close proximity to the concept of *logos* from the Platonic-Christian tradition. However, as I showed in chapter 2, with respect to metaphysics, Habermas sides with the post-Nietzschean line of thought as he remains convinced that metaphysics (and in particular metaphysical foundationalism) leads to repressive projects: metaphysics projects a unifying framework over a recalcitrant world and therefore it always involves a violent subsumption of what is irreducibly singular and different to a metanarrative weaved from universal and abstract principles.

Second, to the extent that ISS is understood teleologically, Habermas finds himself in exactly the same position for which he criticizes Kant: it is difficult to reconcile teleology with deontology. The source of normative (moral) obligation in Habermas must come from the procedures he reconstructs on the basis of the unconditional validity claims that speakers (counterfactually) raise.

³¹⁵ See Habermas “From Kant’s ‘Ideas’ of Pure Reason to ‘Idealizing’ Presuppositions” in *Truth and Justification*, p.101.

It cannot come from a metaphysical *telos* that unfolds in communication and, insofar as society reproduces itself not only through instrumental action but also through communicative action, it unfolds in history as well in the direction of a socially achievable Ideal Speech Situation.

Habermas now explicitly rejects the idea that ISS can be framed in teleological terms.³¹⁶ At this point however nagging questions rear their head once again: how should we understand the binding anticipation expressed in the pragmatic idealizations of argumentation, if it cannot be seen as part of a teleological view of language? Where does the pragmatic anticipation obtain its binding force from?

Shifting to a (quasi-) Kantian solution, which takes the idealizations to be a regulative idea, does not fully shield Habermas's position from serious challenges. In the final analysis, Kant's conception of regulative ideas depends on the metaphysical framework of Kantian philosophy. Thus the *force* of these rational ideas to orient behaviour stem from the mental structure of the rational subject. I am not sure that transferring the Kantian concept of regulative idea to a formal-pragmatic analysis would be able to preserve this motivational force. Habermas no longer has a similar metaphysical framework available: the pragmatic presuppositions that speakers unavoidably make once they enter a process of rational argumentation cannot be anchored in some timeless *a priori* structures of the rational subject, nor can they be derived from an ontological view of language.

So the initial question still awaits an answer: where does the binding and bonding force contained by the pragmatic idealizations come from? What exactly generates it? A possible answer to this question would be to make the (rather Hegelian) suggestion that language has a mind of its own, with structures similar to the mental structures of the rational subject in Kant. On this view, the binding anticipation in communication would stem from the structures of the mind of language, which perhaps could be understood on the model of the Hegelian World-Spirit, but in a more restricted manner, as encompassing language and not the whole world. Habermas makes no such

³¹⁶ See for instance Habermas TCA1, 293. For a critique of understanding the ideal speech situation in a teleological key, see Albrecht Wellmer's objections in *The Persistence of Modernity*, MIT Press, 1991.

argument, as an argument of this kind would place him back on the territory of “philosophy of the subject”.

The point I wanted to press in this discussion is that, lacking the metaphysical support that Kant or Hegel still had available, “postmetaphysical thinking”’s resources for hope are, in fact, very slim. The shift away from viewing ISIS as *telos* of communication thins out significantly the kind of conceptual resources that Habermas’s “postmetaphysical thinking” can mobilize when the problem of hope is raised. Thus Habermas is forced to advance a concept like that of “fallible hope” without being able to offer a firm ground for this concept.

At this point one could legitimately attempt to push this discussion one step further and ask if there is *any* ground available in Habermas thought for the concept of “fallible hope”? After all, what is this concept based on? Why is it not simply the expression of a wish, of a yearning, that simply cannot find a basis in Habermas’s “postmetaphysical” thought?

In the less utopian sounding language of his later writings, where the emphasis is put on the context-transcending character of validity claims and on the concept of “transcendence-from-within”, a lot seems to hang on the following key point: can the *counterfactual* validity claims raised in communication be proven to be *effective*? I argue that the Habermasian concept of “fallible hope” must be placed in the context of his arguments regarding the counterfactual, but *nonetheless effective*, character of the validity claims and let me briefly explain why.

The three validity claims raised with every speech act (truth, rightness and sincerity) are *counterfactual*: in every act of communication we raise these claims *as if* we are in possession of truth here and now, *as if* we are normatively right here and now and *as if* we are fully transparent to ourselves, again, here and now. According to Habermas however, these claims point beyond the mere “here and now” (the present context of our communication). These validity claims, and their rational redeeming in argumentation, effect a learning process. Thus, it is one of Habermas’s most

important arguments that these validity claims, although counterfactual, are nonetheless *effective*.³¹⁷

How is this supposed to work more exactly? Let's take the validity claim of truth as an example. Even if I know that what I hold to be true here and now (on the basis of the information currently available, the best scientific method etc.) *may not* be the ultimate truth (as at some point in the future it may be proved false on the basis of new information, new methods or facts etc.), I still hold it *as if* it is really true, true now and forever and in all possible worlds (such is the pragmatic meaning of the term "truth" - we would not be using the term "true" if we did not believe that this is the ultimate truth for everyone and for all time). Truth is truth for everybody or not at all. Habermas must argue that this pragmatic "as if" is not a completely fictional or an empty presupposition, and that it does have some power, it does have a certain effect on our behaviour. What these idealizations *do* (how effectively or successfully remains an important - and vexing, I should say -, philosophical problem for Habermas) is a partial *bracketing* (or neutralization)³¹⁸ of the current social and political conditions, permeated as these are by asymmetries of power, economic inequality etc. A lot therefore depends on Habermas's claim that this bracketing (abstraction from the current conditions) is not simply an empty presupposition that speakers implicitly make, without a direct and real impact on the empirical situation in which communicators find themselves. He is compelled to argue that the counterfactual bracketing *does* have (some) force to push forward the situation of communication (in the direction of the better argument), and insofar as society reproduces itself through communication, it *does* push our *lifeworld* in the direction of a fuller rationalized *lifeworld*.

³¹⁷ On the important claim that the "counterfactual idealizations" are *effective* (play a "factual role") "in structuring processes of mutual understanding and in organizing contexts of interaction" see for instance Habermas *TJ*, p.85. See also: "... these unavoidable presuppositions of argumentative practice, no matter how counterfactual, are by no means mere constructs. Rather they are *operatively effective* in the behaviour of the participants themselves" (*TJ*, 108).

³¹⁸ See for instance *TJ*, 99. See also the following passage where Habermas links the anticipatory force of idealizations to an act of bracketing from current social conditions: "Thus Kant's idealizing anticipation of the whole is carried over from the objective to the social world. In the performative attitude of participants in argumentation, this "totalization" is connected with a "neutralization": they prescind from the obvious gap between, on the one hand, the ideal model of an "endless conversation" that is completely inclusive both socially and thematically, and on the other hand, the finite, spatiotemporally limited discourses that we actually engage in" *TJ*, 102.

The big claim is this: although *counterfactual*, these idealizations are nonetheless *effective* in history and society.³¹⁹ The process of rationally redeeming the counterfactual validity claims in communication effects a process of self-transcendence of our species which unfolds in history and thus move us closer to a better state, a freer and more rational society.³²⁰

So far in this chapter my analysis showed that Habermas's "postmetaphysical thinking" possesses very limited philosophical resources to deal with the question of suffering and with the question of hope, more generally. Lacking a metaphysical support, Habermas is forced to simply remove the problem of unjust suffering in the past from the territory of philosophy and to articulate a concept of "fallible hope" which depends entirely on the claim that the pragmatically raised validity claims, although counterfactual, are nonetheless effective in history.

Under these conditions, I want to argue, any attempt to translate substantive content from religious traditions concerning the important moral issue of innocent suffering and hope will unavoidably run into limits. This happens not necessarily because religious content is opaque and inaccessible to reason, but simply because postmetaphysical thinking does not possess the required conceptual and normative resources to deal with this kind of question.

³¹⁹ This should not be understood in a causal mode: reasons are not causes, and yet they cannot simply be viewed as epiphenomenal in accounting for social action; Habermas remains very cagy about any causal claims. What he frequently says is that we can reconstruct the movement into modernity in communicative/discourse terms. It can be understood as a progressive effectuation of the power of communication. However, Habermas refers with equal frequency to "objective" processes that confront us from outside. Activating his pragmatist side, Habermas argues for instance that metaphysics is no longer viable today because "objective" trends and forces have undermined its claims (see my discussion in chapter 2). Moreover, his analyses in TCA referring to the reproduction of society from one generation to the other on the two axes of instrumental action and communicative action allows one to suggest that they reconstruct (at least) some segments of *objective* processes that led to the demise of metaphysics. After all Habermas's linguistic theory and his social theory must be read together, and the concept of "communicative reason" acquires its full relevance in the context of Habermas's view of modern society and modernity.

³²⁰ In order to give some substance to all these claims, which seem overly abstract and more relevant to philosophical debates than to empirical questions, Habermas has recently tried to put some more flesh on the idea of "fallible hope", and in a recent essay he discusses what he calls "the realistic utopia of human rights". As he writes: "human rights constitute a realistic utopia insofar as they no longer paint deceptive images of a social utopia that guarantees collective happiness but anchor the ideal of a just society in the institutions of constitutional states themselves." See Habermas, "The Concept of Human Dignity and the Realistic Utopia of Human Rights", *Metaphilosophy* 2010, 41/4, 464-79, 476. In this article Habermas argues that human rights remain conceptually tied to the Kantian concept of "human dignity": in *Groundwork*, Kant opposed this concept to that which has a price and defended it on the basis of the transcendental idea of an "end in itself". A question that can be raised, I think, is how exactly can Habermas revive the Kantian concept of "human dignity" in the absence of the metaphysical support of Kant's transcendental idealism (the philosophy of the subject)?

In the remaining part of this chapter I ask whether “postmetaphysical” philosophy’s internal limits can be enlarged or even transcended. Moreover, what would this require in terms of how Habermas’s project should be modified? I explore this question by looking at some important thinkers who placed the problem of innocent suffering and hope at the very centre of their thought.

6.4 Solidarity with metaphysics at the time of its fall: Theodor W. Adorno

“A sense of shame”, Adorno writes, “bids philosophy not to repress Georg Simmel’s insight that its history shows amazingly few indications of the suffering of humankind”.³²¹ And in an essay titled *Wozu noch Philosophie* he also notes: “The undiminished persistence of suffering, fear, and menace necessitates that the thought that cannot be realized should not be discarded. After having missed its opportunity, philosophy must come to know, without any mitigation, why the world - which could be paradise here and now - can become hell itself tomorrow”.³²²

Here lies, it seems to me, a very important difference between Adorno and Habermas, a difference which is highly relevant to my discussion in this chapter: “the thought that cannot be realized” in history, argues Adorno, “should not be discarded”, because abandoning this thought would also write the problem of suffering out of philosophical thinking, and this can only perpetuate the suffering, fear and menace present in our world.

I interpret Adorno’s insight as directing us to re-examine the legacy of metaphysics and to question Habermas’s arguments about the collapse of metaphysics and about the lack of alternative to postmetaphysical thinking (discussed by me at large in the first chapter). Adorno seems to argue that a philosophical way of thinking unwilling to surrender the problem of suffering in history - a

³²¹ Theodor W. Adorno *Negative Dialectics*, translated by E. B. Ashton. London and New York, Routledge, 1973, 154.

³²² See Adorno, “Why Still Philosophy?” *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2005, 14.

way of thinking still capable of hearing the inner whisper that says ‘things should come out differently’ - must preserve solidarity with metaphysics at “the time of its fall” (ND, 408).

I find this claim very intriguing, and in what follows I want to probe it further. What type of solidarity with metaphysics can one still defend in late modernity? If we accept that metaphysics missed the moment of its realization in history, that it has failed to offer the basis for a better, more rational society, and if we also accept that, quite the contrary, metaphysical metanarratives might engender oppressive political projects, why should this not be compelling evidence that we need to completely discard (the truth of) metaphysics and engage in a postmetaphysical turn as Habermas has proposed in his work?

While he concedes that philosophy can no longer see itself in possession of the metaphysical concept of “the absolute”, Adorno nonetheless argues that philosophy must retain “the emphatic concept of truth”. As he writes: “this contradiction is its element. It defines philosophy as negative”.³²³ Only in this “negative” form can philosophical thinking remain sensitive to the negativity of suffering in history.

In the limited space that I have in this section I want to look at the connection Adorno posits between “the emphatic concept of truth” and the problem of hope. The question that interests me is whether Habermas’s view of truth is perhaps a truncated view of truth that limits any possible engagement of postmetaphysical thinking with the problem of suffering and hope?³²⁴

Adorno’s “emphatic concept of truth” is a comprehensive idea of truth, which cannot be reduced to notions of warranted assertability under ideal conditions or to correctly formed propositions. For Adorno truth cannot be reduced to validity, as is the case for Habermas. While Habermas takes rational validity (as redeemed in a process of exchanging reasons) to be the decisive criterion of

³²³ Adorno, *Critical Models*, 7.

³²⁴ In this and the next section on Walter Benjamin I want to explore the possibility that Habermas may reconnect with the utopian-critical yearning that permeated the works of the early Frankfurt School thinkers (Adorno and Benjamin in particular). The question is this: has not in fact Habermas taken a wrong turn back in the 1970s when he launched the program of formal pragmatics as a quasi-transcendental equivalent for Kantian transcendental philosophy? Was not in fact the abandonment of the utopian-critical dimension still present in the early Frankfurt School a step which depleted Habermas’s “postmetaphysical thinking” of vital normative resources?

truth, Adorno “locates the authentication of truth in ‘emphatic experience’” (*Erfahrung*).³²⁵

Communication and discourse cannot be decisive for truth, according to Adorno, because the life conditions under which communication takes place in our late modern society are so severely damaged that intersubjective agreement (even counterfactual, I would add) cannot provide truth criteria. Therefore truth must be kept distinct from what is plausible. As he writes: “Direct communicability to everyone is not a criterion of truth. We must resist the all but universal compulsion to confuse the communication of knowledge with knowledge itself, and to rate it higher, if possible - whereas at present each communication step is falsifying truth and selling it out... Truth is objective and not plausible” (ND 41). Insofar as societal conditions are distorted by class structure, consumerism and possessive hubris, the communicative testing of truth claims simply cannot do the work that it is expected from it: “today every step toward communication sells out the truth and makes it false” (ND 41/51-2).

Truth therefore cannot be reduced to an intersubjective process of testing of validity claims, because truth preserves an intimate connection to what Adorno calls “emphatic” or “metaphysical” experience (*Erfahrung*) (I say a few more words about this below). This kind of experience allows suffering to speak in a way in which philosophical concepts, with their subsuming and unifying thrust cannot; moreover, for Adorno, letting suffering speak becomes a condition for all truth: “the need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth. For suffering is objectivity that weighs upon the subject” (ND 17-18).³²⁶

³²⁵ Lambert Zuidervaart *Social Philosophy after Adorno*, Cambridge University Press, 2007, 77. In this section I draw on Zuidervaart’s discussion of the topic of truth and hope in Adorno’s thought from this book, especially in sections “Suffering, Hope and Societal Evil”, pp. 58-76, and “Emphatic Experience”, 95-106. I have also made use of his discussion of Adorno’s concept of artistic truth from *Artistic Truth. Aesthetics, Discourse, and Imaginative Disclosure*, in particular chapter 6, “Artistic Truth”, 118-139.

³²⁶ “The need to express suffering is a primary motivation for Adorno’s critique of identitarian thought, his insistence on non-identity, his emphasis on conceptualizing the non-conceptual, and the stress his philosophy places on linguistic presentation and conceptual constellations”. The motivation for discussing these themes “lies in a ‘philosophical experience’ where suffering and the need to express it are as unavoidable as they are compelling. For suffering defies discursive treatment, yet it calls for conceptual comprehension if philosophy is to resist both forgetting and perpetuating suffering. Although such comprehension will not render suffering conceptual, it will seek to understand its societal causes and social significance”. (Zuidervaart, *Social Philosophy after Adorno*, 61).

But this emphasis on experience and on the need to give expression to suffering should not mislead us in the direction of a radical rejection of discursive thinking. The (emphatic) experience tied to (unspeakable) suffering and truth cannot however be completely divorced from conceptual thinking either: if suffering is to acquire a voice (if it must speak), it must find some conceptual expression. It is this pendulum swing between the pole of an ineffable, emphatic, metaphysical experience, and the pole of discursive thinking that constitutes the heartbeat of Adorno's negative philosophy. His "negative dialectics" should be read as an attempt "to rescue within philosophy that which resists philosophy's own subsumptive concepts" (Zuidervaart, SPA, 77). If philosophy is to resist forgetting the negativity of suffering, *that* which resists the identity compulsion of conceptual thinking (what Adorno calls the "non-identical"), *that* which eludes the concept, must be comprehended in thought and find conceptual expression.³²⁷

To place all this in the context of my discussion in this chapter, I argue that Adorno is wrestling here with the same rational need that underlies Kant's moral philosophy: the suffering of the past must be accounted for within philosophical thought. The following passage from *Negative Dialectics* directly supports my interpretation. The thought that death is final and absolute, writes Adorno, is "impossible to consider" (ND, 371). As he also notes: "If death were ... absolute [then] everything is nothing; all that we think... is thought into the void; none of it is truly thinkable" (ND, 371). To give Adorno's insight a starker form: there simply cannot be any hope for a transformed society if death has the final word. This insight, I suggest, is similar to the thought animating Kant arguments for the practical necessity to postulate immortality of the soul and the existence of God.

But if death cannot have the final word, Adorno remains reluctant to give precise content to the prospect of the good society. He resists the final reconciliatory move of Hegelian dialectics, and he regards the positive thought of absolute reconciliation as equally impossible: "Our metaphysical faculty is paralyzed because actual events have shattered the basis on which speculative metaphysical thought could be reconciled with experience" (ND, 362). After Auschwitz, Adorno notes, affirming the thought of an absolute reconciliation would be equivalent to a betrayal of the

³²⁷ "Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream" (Adorno, ND 362).

victims. “The whole is untrue”, writes Adorno, in a direct reference to Hegel’s “the whole is true”. Instead, Adorno’s refusal points toward a new categorical imperative: so arrange your thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen again.

As a condition of letting suffering speak, therefore, Adorno requires philosophical thought to relentlessly turn against itself. He defines dialectics as a self-reflection of thinking: “ If negative dialectics calls for the self-reflection of thinking, the tangible implication is that if thinking is to be true - if it is to be true today, in any case - it must also be a thinking against itself” (ND, 365). I would like to dwell more on this central insight of the negative dialectic because I think that the main dimensions on which this insight unfolds itself in Adorno are relevant to my analysis of Habermas.

First, a thinking that incessantly turns against itself in self-reflection thrives more on a fragmentary style of writing and less on systematic conceptual analysis. Meaning is compressed into dense passages that resist paraphrase, permeated by prophetic and visionary undertones. Philosophical reflection within a damaged life takes the form of a message in a bottle thrown into the sea during a universal shipwreck. This contrasts with Habermas’s constant attempt to claim a scientific form to his “reconstruction” of pragmatic conditions of argumentation. It also contrasts with his insistence that the theoretical reconstruction of these conditions stands in need of corroboration from empirical research in various fields, as if a positive corroboration of this kind could conclusively validate “universal pragmatics”. Adorno may be closer here to Gadamer’s main insight from *Truth and Method* that the scientific method cannot yield truth, than to Habermas’s lingering positivism.

Second, the turn against itself of thinking is also linked with what Adorno in “Meditations on Metaphysics” calls “micrological” metaphysics. This kind of metaphysics receives its material from a disfigured and untrue existent reality (from what exists here and now) but configures the lament to form a script (ND, 407). Micrological metaphysics re-arranges the network of relationships among objects in order to create a “legible constellation of things in being” (ND, 407). This constellation opens the possibility of “seeing” the world differently, as the child from Marcel Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* sees the favourite village from a distance, and is

moved by the promise of happiness present in this experience (see ND, 373). The existent (reality/the world) can be disclosed anew in its irreducible uniqueness.

Third, the self-reflective capacity of thinking also comes forward in Adorno's stress on the *transient (das Vergängliche)*. Transcendence must be thought of by means of what is transient. Truth, and any metaphysical idea in general, must be thought of temporally. The direct implication of this is that Adorno's thought retains a very important socio-critical dimension, envisaging a radical transformation of our societies. "Hope", writes Adorno, is "physical" (or corporeal) "resurrection" (ND, 401) and the object of this hope is a future society "without unfulfilled needs (*ohne Lebensnot* - ND 398)".

I think that this insistence on the transience of metaphysical truth, which is central to understanding Adorno's "negative" dialectic, is very relevant to the kind of problem Habermas is facing in his attempt to defend the idea of progress. Although it is correct to say that Adorno resists the positive thought of absolute reconciliation, as I noted above (he resists the impulse to give a clearly delineated substance to a radically transformed society), it should be stressed here that Adorno *does not* abandon the thought of transcendence, nor does he abandon the truth-content of metaphysics. In fact, Adorno's position is that only by keeping open the utopian-critical dimension of metaphysics can we avoid foreclosing the possibility of a radical transformation of the present society. The possibility of escaping the nightmare of a totally administered society vitally depends on remaining faithful to the truth of metaphysics "at the time of its fall". In other words, for Adorno the possibility of hope remains intrinsically linked to metaphysical truth.

I take this to be an alternative solution to Habermas's conundrum who, as I have shown in my previous section, feels compelled to follow the "postmetaphysical" route in order to avoid teleology. Habermas rejects metaphysical truth (as well transcendence) in order to avoid the problems that the teleologies of Hegel and Marx run into. Adorno, like Habermas, is very much aware of these problems and he also rejects the Hegelian type of teleology; that is, he refuses (in the wake of Auschwitz) to embrace something like the metaphysical concept of the absolute. But unlike Habermas, Adorno thinks that the possibility of progress, the possibility of a radical transformation of society, depends not on philosophical thinking surrendering the idea of

metaphysical truth altogether and adopting a postmetaphysical identity.³²⁸ On the contrary, such possibility depends precisely on keeping open the utopian-critical dimension of metaphysics centred on the thought of transcendence. “No light falls on men and things without reflecting transcendence” (ND 404).

Transcendence no longer appears in the light that Habermas’s “postmetaphysical thinking” casts on things, and this may reveal a congenital infirmity of Habermas’s philosophical position. Rejecting full transcendence, Habermas attempts nonetheless to preserve a residual metaphysical impulse in the concept of “transcendence-from-within” our lifeworld. As I tried to show in this chapter, this concept only allows for a much weakened, inner-worldly dimension that can no longer offer a firm basis for hope in a transformed society. However, this creates problems for Habermas’s recent project of “salvaging” translation, I argued, as such a transfer of religious cognitive contents is irremediably impeded by the limited philosophical means that “postmetaphysical” thinking has available in translation. Moreover, in the thought of the third generation of the Frankfurt School, even this fragile inner-worldly utopian striving is abandoned.³²⁹

Against this deflationary trend to which most post-Adornian critical theorists subscribe, I think that Zuidervaart rightly insists on the weight the metaphysical concept of truth still carried in Adorno’s thought. I would like here to add one remark in support of his interpretation, by going back to the main topic that I have pursued in this chapter: the issue of innocent suffering in the past. I want to emphasize just how radical Adorno’s idea of a transformed world, *ohne Lebensnot*, really is. In the transformation of the world he explicitly includes the redemption of past suffering of innocent victims, as it is clear from this passage: this is a world where “not only extant suffering

³²⁸ One could wonder if Habermas is no longer interested in metaphysics precisely because he has surrendered the possibility of a radical transformation of society. Unlike his predecessors in the Frankfurt School, he no longer envisages a radical transformation of capitalist society, and a certain feeling of resignation dominates his writings; this did not escape commentators, see for instance William Scheurmann “Between Radicalism and Resignation: Democratic Theory in Habermas’s *Between Facts and Norms*”. In *Habermas. A Critical Reader*, ed. by Peter Dews. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999, 153-177.

³²⁹ The exchange between Albrecht Wellmer and Lambert Zuidervaart is relevant here. Zuidervaart argues that Wellmer is wrong to interpret Adorno’s “Meditations on Metaphysics” as an attempt to go beyond metaphysics (in *Social Philosophy after Adorno*, 49-50). See also what Zuidervaart has to say about James Bohman, Martin Seel and Nikolas Kompridis in *Artistic Truth...*, 119-120.

would be abolished *but also suffering that is irrevocably past would be revoked*" (ND 404, my emphasis). Well, no inner-worldly utopia, and no postmetaphysical, residual, quasi-Kantian regulative ideal can possibly revoke this suffering. Equally radical is Adorno's view of "remembrance of nature", which I simply do not have enough space to discuss here.

However, assuming the argument above is correct and that Adorno's thought could open up alternative resources to Habermas's "postmetaphysical" view by linking hope to fidelity to the truth-content of the metaphysical idea, a question still remains. How exactly might Adorno's "emphatic concept of truth" be made relevant to Habermas's concept of truth as a "validity claim"? How could the argumentative redemption of the validity claim to truth in Habermas be placed into a beneficial relation to a more metaphysically-inflected view of truth, so that a more robust basis for hope can be provided for Habermas's thought?

The point is not to completely abandon Habermas's stress on validity with regard to questions of truth and meaning. This would be impossible without a complete overhaul of Habermas's thought, and I am not suggesting such a radical transformation. After all, Adorno's conception of truth as being authenticated by emphatic experience *does* have some problematic features, as some of Adorno's critics (Habermas included) have correctly pointed out. For instance, "emphatic experience" seems to be the privilege of rare individuals,³³⁰ although Adorno remains reluctant to give an account of the cultural or sociological traits that would be necessary for having philosophical experience.³³¹ As a side note, I would like to suggest that for a possible illustration of Adorno's insight we might look in the direction of ascetic Christianity: if our modern world is so dominated by the blind forces of instrumental reason and bureaucratic control, then special attention should be given to those who reject the radically distorted sociality reigning supreme today and literally live "outside" our world. It is the articulation of emphatic experience offered by the monastics on Mount Athos, for instance, that should retain an important place in our public debates and deliberation. However I do share the concern regarding the self-authenticating

³³⁰ Adorno's insight comes interestingly close to Max Weber's claim that in late modernity hope to resist the impersonal trends towards suppression of spontaneity and bureaucratic control resides in some remarkable individuals - those who possess a higher capacity of creating meaning.

³³¹ Zuidervaart, *Social Philosophy after Adorno*, 99.

character of metaphysical experience in Adorno, the fact that “the experience being articulated cannot be challenged”.³³² This fact serves as a basis for the charge that Adorno espouses an esoteric view of truth and for the suspicion of elitism, a charge that Adorno’s successors, Habermas in particular, have been quick to level.

Habermas’s critique is not completely misplaced, because, indeed, if our societal conditions are so radically distorted as Adorno claims they are (if the whole is false), the question is how can there still be metaphysical experiences, how can one speak *at all* of hope, of truth, of a new categorical imperative, and of letting suffering speak? What are the sources of hope in Adorno for a society *ohne Lebensnot* if our situation in late modernity is so dismal?

Adorno’s response to this objection would be that something in the object (*in der Sache*) presses towards utopia. Hope arises because, as Adorno writes, “something in actuality [*in der Sache*]” presses toward “the humanly promised other of history” (ND 404) (this is Adorno’s thesis of the priority of the object). No matter how weak and disfigured, traces of the other in history, traces of unredeemed promises, are still present in the contemporary world.³³³ The promise of religious traditions (ND 401) can be such a resource of hope.³³⁴ In a more Marxist vein, Adorno also points to the advanced state of productive forces in today’s society as holding the potential for

³³² Zuidervaart, *Social Philosophy...*, 100. See also: “Adorno’s idea of truth cordons truth-authenticating experience off from intersubjective testing” (*Social Philosophy...*, 98). This is a problem, indeed, and I think that Habermas’s stress on validity as intersubjective testing of claims to truth or normative rightness is important and it must be preserved in any account of truth. This applies even to radical metaphysical experiences that, at first sight, are intimately private and non-communicable. If we take for a moment, as I want to suggest, Saul’s awakening on the road to Damascus as an example of emphatic or metaphysical experience, it is significant that after his sight was restored and after he spent three years “in the desert” (in Arabia), St. Paul travelled to Jerusalem to meet St. Peter, and again, some years later, the other disciples, to present to them what he was preaching in order, as he put it, “to make sure I was not running or had run in vain” (Galatians, 2:2). In the same way, none of the monks on Mount Athos can possibly claim that his emphatic experience should not be checked against the writings of St. Basil, St. Gregory of Nyssa, or St. John Chrysostomos and against the living tradition on the basis of which Christianity has survived for so many centuries. In my view, the Habermasian kind of (public and) intersubjective testing of validity claims should remain an important ingredient of any claim to truth, including religious truth.

³³³ It is very interesting to see the way in which Adorno interprets the doctrine of the “intelligible” world from Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. Hope arises because the non-identical (that which cannot be reduced to conceptual thinking) presses against any attempt to grasp it in conceptual thinking without remainder: Kant is forced to recognize this with the concept of *Ding-an-Sich*.

³³⁴ A very similar claim is present in the thought of Ernst Bloch; see the three volumes of his *The Principle of Hope*, Cambridge MA, The MIT Press, 1986.

transforming society. And, finally, works of art (Beethoven's music, for instance) are such crevices in the shell created by the identity compulsion of modernity: "Even in an age when they fall silent, great works of art express hope more powerfully than the traditional theological texts, and any such expression is configurative with that of the human side - nowhere as unequivocally as in moments of Beethoven" (ND 397).

We reach here a very important point for my discussion in this chapter. Authentic works of art play a significant role in Adorno's account of metaphysical experience and the emphatic concept of truth. For Adorno, the import (*Gehalt*) of an authentic work of art is capable of truth (it can be true or false), although it cannot be reduced to questions of propositional validity. Works of art are like "self-inflicted wounds on the body of society," and because modern Western societies, with their bureaucratic-administrative drive for control and domination, with their utilitarian and logico-argumentative bias, have placed art at the periphery of social life rendering it "functionless", modern artworks can challenge a "bewitched reality". They can negatively embody utopia and thus serve as "the social antithesis of society".³³⁵

However, in order to remain open to Adorno's insights about artistic truth, and its connection to metaphysical experience and hope for a radically transformed society, Habermas has to build disclosure more closely into the theory of communicative action. I think the following suggestions would serve this purpose: truth should not be reduced to validity, although the Habermasian stress on validity could remain an important ingredient of truth; also the import of a work of art should not be reduced to aesthetic validity and consigned to a third "cultural sphere" that argumentatively redeems aesthetic validity independent from morality/law and science; finally, the disclosive/revealing power of language must be accorded a larger role and the relation of the problem-solving and the poetic functions of language must be carefully re-calibrated.

One possible way to accomplish all this is to rescue and give a more prominent role to some of Habermas's reflections on "aesthetic rationality" that can be found scattered in his writings, as

³³⁵ See Zuidervaart *Social Philosophy after Adorno*, 10, 17, 23. Because, as Adorno argues, "Western society strips art of overt social functions, the best modern art can engage in a determinate negation of society and thereby offer both utopian vision and social critique" (10).

David Ingram has argued: “such rationality could not be adequately compassed by a procedural model of argumentation...For what was needed was not a form of rational argumentation that would be subordinated to one or other of the value spheres, but a form of rational teleology that would show what no form of ideal speech could possibly show - complete realization of a life of freedom and happiness at the level of individual and collective life. We have now located in the corpus of Habermas’s writings a conception of aesthetic rationality that satisfies this last condition” (Ingram, 1987, 184).³³⁶

Another promising attempt, this time in a more direct relation to Adorno, is offered by Lambert Zuidervaart’s work, which seeks to preserve Adorno’s intuition about “artistic truth” without abandoning Habermas’s stress on the intersubjective testing of validity claims.³³⁷

A transformation of Habermas’s project in this direction would allow for a more meaningful engagement with the content of religious traditions, and it would permit a more successful translation of religious content into the language of reason.³³⁸

³³⁶ See also David Ingram, “The Subject of Justice in Postmodern Discourse: Aesthetic Judgement and Political Rationality”. In *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity*, ed. by Maurizio Passerin d’Entreves and Seyla Benhabib, MIT Press, 1997, pp. 269-302 and his more recent discussion in *Habermas, Introduction and Analysis*, Cornell University Press, 2010.

³³⁷ “Elaborated at greater length, my proposal could provide a way to build disclosure into the very fabric of communicative action, rather than relegating it to a preliminary stage within language usage. At least it would offer a different perspective on propositional validity, both by tying it more closely to imaginative disclosure than standard truth theories allow, and by indicating truth itself to be a multidimensional idea whose reduction to propositional truth leads to theoretical impoverishment and practical dead ends. Adorno’s intuitions about artistic truth would not be blind, although to articulate them would require Habermasian concepts that are not empty” (Zuidervaart, *Artistic Truth*, 139).

³³⁸ The project of building disclosure into Habermas’s theory of validity claims could be pursued in a couple of other philosophical directions. I am thinking of Paul Ricoeur’s work on “living metaphor”, for instance. I would also tentatively suggest here Merleau-Ponty’s reflections on cognitive sciences and language or Charles Taylor’s more phenomenological view of language, self and society. The aim of such discussion would be to weaken Habermas’s narrative of strict differentiation of “validity claims” (and “cultural spheres”) and to put some “flesh of the world” (Merleau-Ponty) back on the strictly formal unity of reason. This is needed, I argue, if religion is to be successfully translated into the language of reason and not remain its opaque other.

6.5 “Fanning the spark of hope in the past”: Walter Benjamin

In this section I turn my attention to another thinker associated with the Frankfurt School, Walter Benjamin. In his work, I want to suggest, one can find additional insights that shed light on what generates the limitations of Habermas’s “postmetaphysical thinking”. I would like to concentrate my analysis on Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History”³³⁹ because it is in this text more than in any other that questions of hope, suffering and the redemption of the past are directly addressed.

One aspect relevant to my concern in this chapter appears in Benjamin’s investigations into the mimetic power of language and the role of “allegory”. Only allegorical interpretation, claims Benjamin (as opposed to the “symbolic form” of neo-Kantian Ernst Cassirer, and by extension, I want to suggest, to other neo-Kantians like Habermas himself), “succeeds in portraying world history as a history of suffering. Allegories are in the realm of thought what ruins are in the realm of things”.³⁴⁰

There are a couple of interesting research questions that one could pursue here: what could be the place of a figure of thought like allegory, or metaphorical language more generally, in the architectonic of the validity claims from Habermas’ thought? In what way is the formal-pragmatic model of trying to reach understanding about something in the world to be expanded in order to account for allegorical interpretation?

The more general point that could be raised, starting from the Benjaminian emphasis on allegory as the figure of language best suited to preserve sensitivity to suffering, is whether the theory of meaning used by Habermas is not overly (and perhaps unnecessarily) narrow in its scope. This point is similar to the one I have already discussed in the previous section with respect to Adorno’s intuitions about the truth-content of the work of art. The problem seems to be generated by

³³⁹ See Walter Benjamin “Theses on the Philosophy of History” in *Illuminations*, Schocken Books, 2007, 253-264. All my references are to this edition.

³⁴⁰ Habermas “The German Idealism of the Jewish Philosophers” in *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, 34.

Habermas's rather strong thesis that meaning is tied to validity: in order to understand the meaning of an utterance, I have to know the kind of reasons that make it acceptable. Ultimately, meaning is tied to argumentation and to the logico-argumentative form of language, which seems to exclude a large class of linguistic utterances from the domain of what is meaningful. Cognition and knowledge (public, intersubjective, and fallible) are generated in the first two spheres centred on the validity claims of truth and rightness. The poetical (world-disclosing) power of language is framed by Habermas as either coming to expression in the third sphere of authenticity and ethical-existential discourse (thus with local, non-universal, validity) or in the unreflective communication of the *lifeworld*, where all three validity claims are intermeshed and undifferentiated. Thus, allegorical or metaphorical uses of language can carry truth and moral validity only in an unreflective mode or not at all.

However, in the limited space that I have in this section, I would like to shift the focus of my analysis from questions of meaning and truth to a different aspect of Benjamin's thought, and that is Benjamin's view of time. I think that in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Benjamin articulates a vision of time that sheds light on an important philosophical limitation of Habermas's "postmetaphysical thinking". In the final section of this chapter I revisit this question in relation to memory, this time however in the context of political theology.

Benjamin's hope is revolutionary hope: only a messianic-inspired revolution would be a real and serious match for the twin forces that Habermas has identified as highly noxious and destructive, namely global capitalism and scientific naturalism. In an interesting twist for a Western Marxist,³⁴¹ Benjamin claims that the main source from which these forces derive their tremendous

³⁴¹ For a good discussion of Benjamin's *Theses...* set in contrast to Marx's historical-materialism see R. Beiner "Walter Benjamin's Philosophy of History" in *Political Theory*, vol.12 no.3, August 1984, pp.423-434. The central argument of Beiner's article is that "In his 'Theses', Benjamin seeks to define, for the first time, a historical materialist *historiography*." "Historical reflection" has a "redemptive function" and "remembrance" a "saving power". "Benjamin seeks to explain how one can be both a historian and a historical materialist, without defining or justifying the activity of historiography in terms of the immediate needs of revolutionary action. I believe that this had never been done before, strange as it may seem, and that in this way Benjamin defined a new scope for the historical materialist tradition", p. 425. In my analysis of the *Theses...* I distinguish three semantic levels for the Benjaminian redemption of the past, the first regards the *writing* of history (this would correspond closely to Beiner's discussion), the second regards the *making* of history (revolution) and the third, which I think is impossible to ignore in Benjamin, is *eschatological*, drawing on the (Jewish) *messianic* faith in the coming of the Redeemer.

power in today`s world is the strong belief in progress that dominates modernity. Thus Benjamin looks to the past as a way to break out of the modern compulsion for progress and in this context he puts forward the concept of “empathetic remembrance” of historical victims. His *Theses...* can be read as “an ethical and political drive to redeem humanity`s oppressed”.³⁴²

To put Benjamin`s *Theses* in the context of my discussion so far in this chapter, I argue that the Benjaminian text responds to the same rational *need* that was the impetus behind Kant`s doctrine of postulates: unjust suffering must be accounted for and redeemed. In contrast to Kant, however, who shared the bourgeois fear of religious enthusiasm (disdainfully called *Schwärmerei*) and wanted to get rid of the “dwarf of theology”, Benjamin believes that only by embracing this dwarf, “which today, as we know, is wizened and has to keep out of sight”, could historical-materialism “be a match for anyone” at the chess table of the world politics (Thesis I, *Illuminations*, 253). For Benjamin, therefore, class struggle acquires messianic dimensions.

In Thesis II he writes: “There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim. That claim cannot be settled cheaply” (*Illuminations*, 254).

I find this claim very intriguing. What is the relation between this messianic power and the power of self-transcendence that Habermas assigns to communicative reason? What does the Benjaminian weak messianic power consist of? In other words, what kind of redemption of the past does Benjamin propose, more exactly, and what is the nature of hope in his work?

I propose to answer this question on three distinct levels. First the redemptive power we possess manifests itself in the duty to redeem the victims of the past in the way in which we (our generation,

³⁴² Quoted by Judith Butler in her “Is Judaism Zionism?” in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*. Judith Butler, Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, Cornel West, New York: Columbia University Press, p.81. This passage, quoted by Butler in her essay, is from Gabriel Piterberg, *The Returns of Zionism*, London: Verso, 2008. As Butler insists in “Is Judaism Zionism?”, Benjamin`s view cannot be subsumed under the “redemptive historical narrative” given by Gershom Scholem to the establishment of the state of Israel and the return of the Jewish people from exile. Benjamin`s view has universal connotations (“no one people could claim the monopoly on dispossession”) relevant for all of humankind, and it is in fact an escape from the teleologic history of nationalism.

every new generation) *write* history. According to Benjamin, however, the level of historiography does not settle what we owe to the victims of the past. Erecting a monument or a memorial, would be an insufficient reckoning with the past, a rather cheap settlement, as it were. Nor can it be settled, I argue, by a process of “coming to terms with the past” (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*) – all that Habermas’s postmetaphysical thought can do. Although these remain important imperatives (far from me to deny the need for such a process)³⁴³ *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* means, in fact, that the past is put in the service of the present, it is discussed from the perspective of the present. From Benjamin’s perspective, I want to suggest, it remains a cheap settlement with the past because the slain are put in the service of our present political purposes, of our present and future achievements, and ultimately in the service of the prevailing political power (the capitalist status quo).

Shaking off any kind of congratulatory complacency, writing history for Benjamin, as part of the “weak” redemptive power we possess, requires for instance that we shed our innocence about the great cultural achievements of civilization: “there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism”. “... Without exception the cultural treasures” of our past “have an origin” which cannot be contemplated “without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries” (Thesis VII, *Illuminations*, 256). To forget this is to write the history of the victor, says Benjamin, and as “all rulers are the heirs of those who conquered before them” (Thesis VII, *Illuminations*, 256), the historian becomes “a tool of the [present] ruling class” (Thesis VI, *Illuminations*, 255).³⁴⁴ This is not far from prostitution, Benjamin suggests: it is “to be drained

³⁴³ My argument here is *not* that erecting monuments and engaging in a process of coming to terms with the past (through education and teaching history in schools, for instance) are unimportant aspects. Quite the contrary, I think that these are fundamental requirements for any claim to honouring the victims of the past. My argument here is that, from a Benjaminian perspective, these requirements are just (very) *partial* moments of doing justice to victims: redemptive historiography aims to unsettle the present as well. It aims to radically interrupt doing business as usual, and it rejects the picture in which we could sing a song, offer flowers at a memorial, and then go about our busy lives in a capitalist society as nothing happened. I think this can be better seen in the other two dimensions of Benjamin’s thought in the *Theses*..., the revolutionary and theological ones.

³⁴⁴ To write history for the victor means to write for the current rulers: “Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the *present* rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures...” (Thesis VII, *Illuminations*, p.256, my emphasis).

by the whore called `Once upon a time` in historicism`s bordello” (Thesis XVI, *Illuminations*, 262).

The messianic power we possess involves other, deeper things, as well. It involves, for instance, discarding a naïve trust in progress.³⁴⁵ It involves a new conception of time. It involves a new conception of language. All these elements can be better grasped if we analyze the other two dimensions of the redemption of the past that, I argue, are discernible in Benjamin`s *Theses*.

On a second level, our weak power to redeem the victims of the past manifests itself not only in how we *write* history but also in how we *make* history. This is very important, and it is the revolutionary bent of Benjamin`s thought. “In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it” (Thesis VI, *Illuminations*, 255). He certainly includes in this exhortation the Marxist tradition (as well), especially in its “official” form developed after the victory of the October Revolution and the establishment of the Soviet Union.³⁴⁶

³⁴⁵ We have to remember that fascism in Europe was hailed as a progressive, modern ideology and Benjamin, a contemporary and tragic victim of this ideology, certainly recognized this fact. He had no doubts that there is strong link between the blind belief in progress which characterized interbellic Europe and the Enlightenment more generally, and the legitimation of Fascism and Nazism. He writes: “One reason why Fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm. The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are still possible in the twentieth century is *not* philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge – unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable (Thesis VIII, *Illuminations*, 257)”. The view of history that gave rise to Fascism is history as progressive development based on a linear conception of time as “homogeneous” or “empty” in which events are placed one after another “like the beads of a rosary” (Thesis XVIII, *Illuminations*, 263). It is to this view of time that Benjamin opposes what he calls Messianic time.

³⁴⁶ What seems to be ringing in this passage is the echo of the great purge of `35-`38 and the Stalinist gulag that must have reached the European left movement by the time Benjamin was writing these *Theses*, which was shortly before he committed suicide on the Franco-Spanish border on September 27, 1940. But the real shock to Benjamin and many other Western Marxists was the infamous pact between Stalin and Hitler (23 August 1939). “At a moment when the politicians in whom the opponents of Fascism had placed their hopes are prostrate and confirm their defeat by betraying their own cause, these observations are intended to disentangle the political wordlings from the snares in which the traitors have entrapped them. Our consideration proceeds from the insight that the politicians` stubborn faith in progress, their confidence in their “mass basis”, and, finally, their servile integration in an uncontrollable apparatus have been three aspects of the same thing. It seeks to convey an idea of the high price our accustomed thinking will have to pay for a conception of history that avoids any complicity with the thinking to which these politicians continue to adhere” (Thesis X, *Illuminations*, 258). The “stubborn faith in progress” is not only the legitimizing force of Fascism but also the commitment that thwarts the revolutionary movement of the world proletariat. It is what actually stunts and deforms the struggle for emancipation. Marxism becomes “vulgar”, dogmatic and what is worst of all conformist. A new “conception of history” has to be created in which the past and not the future, claims Benjamin, should guide our revolutionary energies.

However, and this is one of the central insights of Benjamin's *Theses*, revolution must find guidance not from the future but from the oppressed past. The beautiful and enigmatic image of the angel of history that Benjamin finds in one of Paul Klee's paintings (*Angelus Novus*) (see Thesis IX, *Illuminations*, 257-258) makes this insight more explicit: the storm that blows into the open wings of the angel of history and that thus prevents him from healing the world, has a clearly identified origin - it comes from Paradise. Our stubborn belief in progress is the "storm" that violently drives the angel into the future, while one catastrophe after another hurls a growing "pile of debris" in front of his feet. It is significant that the angel has his face turned towards the past: history, as the angel sees it, is one catastrophe after another. He contemplates the violence and growing wreckage of history, but he is unable to stay, "awaken the dead", and "make whole what has been smashed"³⁴⁷ because he is propelled into the future by the strong winds of progress. These winds have caught in his wings and they are just too powerful. What the revolutionary working class forgets, writes Benjamin, is that the "sinews of its greatest strength" comes from "the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren".³⁴⁸ The past and not the future should guide our revolutionary-redemptive efforts.

What is brilliant about Benjamin's analysis in *Theses* is the underlying complexity of the text: Benjamin knows that the deeply entrenched belief in progress cannot be unsettled unless the conception of time on which it rests is dismantled. Thus, to the view of time as "homogeneous" and "empty" in which events are placed one after another "like the beads of a rosary" (Thesis XVIII, *Illuminations*, 263), Benjamin opposes what he calls "Messianic time". This is a conception of time in which the present is not the transition between a past moment and a future one anymore, but becomes "a cessation of happening" (the *Jetztzeit*, which is in fact the

³⁴⁷ The idea of making whole again what has been smashed is of Cabbalistic origin (cf. the notion of *tikkun*). See Gershom Scholem *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, New York, Schocken, 1976, pp.233-234. See also his *Major Trends of Jewish Mysticism*, 1941.

³⁴⁸ "Social Democracy thought fit to assign to the working class the role of the redeemer of future generations, in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength. This training made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren" (Thesis XII, *Illuminations*, 260).

theological-mystical *nunc stans*).³⁴⁹ At moments of emergency or intense danger (perhaps Habermas's insistence on the danger involved in globalization and scientific naturalism?) this cessation of happening allows the oppressed past to "burst open" into the present and thus the present and the past are fused together into a new unity, a "monad". The structure of this monad, in which the oppressed past "flashes up", gives us the revolutionary chance to "blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history" (Thesis VII, *Illuminations*, 256).

There is no doubt that for Benjamin the proletarian revolution is such a blast of the oppressed past into the present: "thus, to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with the time of the now (*Jetztzeit*) which he blasted out of the continuum of history. The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome reincarnate. It evoked ancient Rome the way fashion evokes costumes of the past... it is a tiger's leap into the past... the same leap in the open air of history is the dialectical one, which is how Marx understood the revolution" (Thesis XIV, *Illuminations*, 261).³⁵⁰ Revolution redeems the oppressed past, and revolution is what our "weak messianic power" requires from us. This is why our coming was expected on earth by many past generations.

Now, accepting this Benjaminian claim, I would like to raise the following question: can revolutionary redemption be exhaustive? Could the rescuing of the past be total and complete? Could the revolutionary fusion of past and present be an *absolute* one, a fusion without remainder, a rescuing of every moment of history? These questions are important because Benjamin *does* seem to have in mind a redemption of *every* moment of history - thus an absolute redemption. He says in Thesis III: "... nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history" (so he *does have* in mind an absolute redemption). "To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past - which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in

³⁴⁹ "History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now (*Jetztzeit*)" (Thesis XIV, *Illuminations*, 261). "A historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop" (Thesis XVI, *Illuminations*, 262). "A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only when he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. He takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogenous course of history..." (Thesis XVII, *Illuminations*, 263).

³⁵⁰ One unmistakably finds in this passage echoes of Marx's discussion of bourgeois revolutions in *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*.

all its moments. Each moment it has lived becomes *citation à l'ordre du jour* – and that day is Judgement Day” (Thesis III, *Illuminations*, 254).

I argue therefore that there is a third semantic level of Benjamin’s concept of redeeming of the past, and this level is theologically inflected. A possible interpretation of the above passage is the following: any revolutionary redemption remains incomplete until the true coming of the Messiah. Our messianic power is *weak*. We cannot awaken the dead and make the world whole again by ourselves – only God or his angels are able to do that, and that is what will happen at the Judgement Day.

Like Kant, Benjamin is forced to posit (or to entertain) the possibility of something like a final divine judgment when justice is comprehensive and evil is dealt with. Unlike Kant, however, Benjamin takes proletarian revolution to be the human and divine cooperation that fulfils universal justice. There is the same rational *need* at play here, and a lot depends on how Benjamin understands the “*weak*” from our “weak messianic power”.

There is a wide debate regarding just how secular Benjamin’s messianism really is. To my mind there are passages in the *Theses* that are very difficult to reconcile with a purely secular conception of redemption. Let’s read this one, for instance: “We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The Torah and the prayers instruct them in remembrance, however. This stripped the future of its magic, to which all those succumb who turn to the soothsayers for enlightenment. This does not imply however, that for the Jews the future turned into homogeneous, empty time. *For every second of time was the straight gate through which the Messiah might enter*” (Thesis XVIII B, *Illuminations*, 264, my emphasis).³⁵¹

³⁵¹ A possible secular interpretation of this thesis would be to say that the waiting, being ready and making the world a fit place for the Messiah is what is really important, while the theological dimension of messianism would be less important. To my mind this interpretation weakens so much Benjamin’s insight that it risks rendering it irrelevant: why would I wait, and be ready, and work to transform the world (which implies that I ought to make some very real sacrifices in my life) if the person of the Messiah is elided from the picture? Waiting in itself has no transformative power, otherwise waiting, say, for Godot would also do the work required, which it cannot be, of course. In any case, I would resist transferring onto Benjamin’s *Theses*, a Kantian reading which holds that making oneself worthy of happiness is what is really important (it has moral worth) and not happiness in itself.

Clearly this is the model of Benjamin's *Jetztzeit* as opposed to the historical time (empty, homogeneous), and it is directly and unambiguously linked by Benjamin himself with the Jewish religious tradition centred on remembrance and hope for the (very real) coming of the Redeemer. Or take this passage from Thesis VI: "The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as a subduer of Antichrist. Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even *the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious" (*Illuminations*, 255, my emphasis). In my view, saving the dead from the victorious enemy cannot really be only the work of the historian, no matter how gifted he may be at "spanning the spark of hope in the past".³⁵²

Moreover, I argue that a purely secular reading of Benjamin (like Judith Butler's for instance) cannot account for the following paradox: Benjamin, the revolutionary thinker, cannot actually *want* a victory of the proletarian revolution. Would not such victory place the working class in the "triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate"? Would not *this* be what Benjamin dreads most? The only secular way to solve this paradox is something like a permanent revolution. Was Benjamin really proposing a permanent revolution? What sort of society could ever be established on the premise of a permanent revolution? In a more theological key, this paradox would dissolve itself since proletarian revolution is the straight gate through which the Messiah truly comes. Only such a human-divine cooperation would redeem every moment of the past, would count every suffering on this earth and would make the world whole again.

We are a long way from Habermas's concept of fallible hope, which cannot possibly bear so much religious substance: "... profane reason", writes Habermas, "remains skeptical before the mystical

³⁵² Butler's interpretation takes the opposite view: "The Messiah is neither a person nor a historical event; it can be understood neither as anthropomorphism nor as teleology; rather it is a memory of suffering that interrupts and reorients the politics of this time". Butler "Is Judaism Zionism?" in *The Power of Religion...*, 83. Would not this be a cheap settlement with the past? The past seen only with the eyes of the present, and for the present?

causality of an act of remembrance inspired in salvific terms and does not offer any credence to the mere promise of restitution.”³⁵³

But one may wonder, however, whether this reluctance to ascribe theological substance to Benjamin’s insights does not blind Habermas to Benjamin’s warning against the devastating effects of an unwarranted belief in progress. The same reluctance may also render Habermas oblivious to the importance of temporal dimensions of communicative action, a thread of my discussion that I pick up in the next section. In this way Habermas’s commitment to resistance against the twin forces of global capitalism and scientific eugenic projects is seriously debilitated. His project of translation of religious contents from his recent writings is also undermined, as any such translation on the terms Habermas sets for it will unavoidably dim the messianic, widely-inspiring, light of these contents.³⁵⁴ From a Benjaminian perspective, one could say that mere “good reasons” will never heal the world.

³⁵³ Habermas “Israel and Athens, or to Whom Does Anamnestic Reason Belong” in *The Frankfurt School on Religion*, ed. E. Mendieta, Routledge, 2005, 296.

³⁵⁴ One could come to Habermas’s defence here and argue for a more deflationary understanding of translation: translation could mean less substitution (or supplanting) of messianic insights and more making certain insights open to all while retaining, say, the inspiring messianic dimension for some. From a Benjaminian perspective, however, this is far less than what is needed to radically transform our society.

6.6 Habermas and political theology: Johann Baptist Metz and Helmut Peukert

The previous section raised the question of the temporal dimension of communicative action. In this section I want to concentrate strictly on this dimension, by looking at yet another attempt to reckon with the problem of suffering and hope, an attempt rooted in more explicitly religious commitments this time. My overriding concern however remains the same: how does this discussion reflect upon the limitations of Habermas's "postmetaphysical thinking"?

More so than any other 20th century theologian, Johann Baptist Metz has put the suffering of the innocent at the centre of his writings and placed eschatology at the very core of theology. Alongside Jürgen Moltmann (born in 1926) and Jürgen Habermas (born in 1929), J. B. Metz (born in 1928) belongs to the same generation of German intellectuals, too young to be fully drawn into the horrors of the Second World War, but not too old (and hardened) to face the moral catastrophe of the Holocaust without a radical shattering of their moral universe and a radical questioning of their cultural/national identity.

Given their common biographical background in the experience of the radical eruption of evil in history in Nazi Germany, I find it very interesting to contrast Metz' "political theology" and Habermas's "postmetaphysical thinking" as two distinct (and possibly complementary) responses to the same problem of evil and suffering in history.

The most interesting difference between Metz and Habermas is their different views on the constitution of reason. While Habermas proposes to unhinge reason from substantive ethical (identity-forming) conceptions, and to transform it into a procedural and postmetaphysical "communicative" reason, Metz defends an "anamnestic" view of rationality which seeks to anchor reason in "dangerous memory", a memory of suffering which is highly subversive and disrupting for any totalitarian political project.

Although Metz's claim is a general claim about the constitution of reason, he thinks that "anamnestic" reason can best be discerned in biblical traditions. As he writes, this view of reason "resorts to the indissoluble unity of reason and memory - and precisely this seems to me to be

repressed or forgotten in the Enlightenment type of rationality in search of freedom”.³⁵⁵ To be effective as an emancipatory force in history, Metz argues, reason needs memory.

However, not any kind of memory would do the work. In *Faith in History and Society*, Metz distinguishes between different types of memory. Of interest to him are “dangerous memories, memories which make demands on us”.³⁵⁶ These kinds of memories have “subversive features”: “such memories are like dangerous and incalculable visitations from the past”. As he also writes: “It is not by chance that the destruction of memory is a typical measure of totalitarian rule. The enslavement of men begins when their memories of the past are taken away. All forms of colonization are based on this principle. Every rebellion against suffering is fed by the subversive power of remembered suffering. The memory of suffering continues to resist the cynics of modern political power”.³⁵⁷

The concept of “dangerous memory” allows Metz to stake out a third position in the debate between Habermas and Gadamer. Metz depicts history as “dangerous tradition”. History, he writes, is neither “a distanced material for historical criticism” (the antiquarian view of history - history as museum) nor a “mere background for an occasional festive interpretation of our existence” (that is history put in the service of the present). “As the remembered history of suffering, history retains the form of ‘dangerous tradition’. This subversive tradition resists any attempt to do away with it by means of a purely affirmative attitude towards the past (as, for example, in hermeneutical theories) and by means of a wholly critical attitude toward the past (as, for instance, in ideology criticism)”.³⁵⁸ Metz thinks that the dangerous memory of suffering cannot be reduced to the two positions defended by Gadamer and Habermas in their dialogue. *Memoria passionis* is a kind of anti-knowledge which opposes the identification of *praxis* in our society with control of nature, with instrumental domination and bureaucratic control of social life (what

³⁵⁵ “Freedom in Solidarity” in Johann-Baptist Metz and Jürgen Moltmann *Faith and the Future. Essays on Theology, Solidarity, and Modernity*, with an intro by F.S. Fiorenza, Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, 1995, 76.

³⁵⁶ Johann Baptist Metz *Faith in History and Society*, The Seabury Press, 1980, 109.

³⁵⁷ Johann Baptist Metz *Faith in History and Society*, The Seabury Press, 1980, 110.

³⁵⁸ Johann Baptist Metz *Faith in History and Society*, The Seabury Press, 1980, 110.

Adorno has called the nightmare of a totally administered society). It radically interrupts politics as “business as usual”.

Thus one of the central theses defended by Metz is that *memoria* is constitutive for modern concepts like rational emancipation and freedom. This thesis has a few important implications for the problem of hope in history and creates an instructive contrast to Habermas’s “postmetaphysical thinking”.

The first implication is that history must be placed at the very core of theology: “For the Judeo-Christian religion, unlike all other great religions of the world, history has a specific importance. Christianity is dominated by the vision of *God and history, God in history*”.³⁵⁹ The concern with history also leads Metz to stress the “indispensable” Jewish legacy in Christianity. This legacy has been, at times, “overshadowed by its Hellenistic Greek legacy, which is more inclined toward an ahistorical dualism”, whereas the Jewish legacy was a “thoroughly historical way of thinking” (*idem*).³⁶⁰ History of salvation, according to Metz, cannot be divorced from the “adventure of our historical lives”. As he writes in the essay “Theology in the Struggle for History and Society”:

“The history of salvation, about which Christian theology speaks, is that same world history, shot through with a constantly threatened and disputed but unshakeably promised hope: the hope of God’s justice, which also includes the dead and their past sufferings, and forces the living to be interested in justice for all. Faith in the messianic God, God of the resurrection of the dead and judgement, God before whom not even the past is fixed (before whom past sufferings do not disappear into the impersonal abyss of an anonymous, eternally indifferent evolution). This faith is not opium to lull us in humanity’s historical struggle; it is the *guarantee and measure* of the dignity of every human person”.³⁶¹

³⁵⁹ See Metz “Theology in the Struggle for History and Society” in J-B Metz and J. Moltmann *Faith and the Future*, pp. 49-65, 53.

³⁶⁰ Johann Baptist Metz *Faith in History and Society*, The Seabury Press, 1980, 110. See also his discussion of this topic in “Christians and Jews after Auschwitz. Being a Meditation also on the End of Bourgeois Religion” in *Love’s Strategy. The Political Theology of J. B. Metz*, Trinity Press International, 1999, 39-52.

³⁶¹ J-B Metz “Theology in the Struggle...”, 53-54, my emphasis.

This view of history can be set in an instructive contrast to Habermas's attempt to marry Kantianism to Darwinism (as he sometimes describes his project), which he then takes as a normative basis for an evolutionary view of modernity. In this progressive view, indeed, the past suffering gets lost in the "impersonal abyss of an anonymous, eternally indifferent evolution".

Echoing Benjamin's *Theses*, J. B. Metz writes: "we tend, consciously or unconsciously, to define history as the history of what has prevailed, as the history of the successful and the established. There is hardly any reference in history as we know it to the conquered and defeated or to the forgotten or suppressed hopes of our historical existence. In history, a kind of Darwinism in the sense of the principle of selection (*Vae victis!*) tends to prevail".³⁶²

Bringing this insight in the context of my discussion of Habermas's recent question "What is Missing?", one tentative answer to that question would be: a different view of history. "Postmetaphysical thinking" is forced to write the problem of innocent suffering out of philosophy because it relies on a faulty view of history.

Making memory constitutive of reason has a second implication as well, in that Metz places a strong emphasis on the social-critical dimension of theology, and on the concept of *praxis*. Suffering in history, according to Metz, must become a central theological concern,³⁶³ and this brings him into a very interesting intellectual dialogue with important themes from the thought of

³⁶² J-B Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 111.

³⁶³ As he writes in the Preface to J-B Metz and J. Moltmann *Faith and the Future...*, viii: "... theology, as I understand it, is first and foremost a theology sensitive to suffering". Three main challenges, all three centred on the question of suffering, must confront theology today: "I have grasped the conversation with *Marxism* as a coming to grips with the dramatization, in terms of social critique, of the question of suffering. *Auschwitz*, the *Holocaust*, or better, the *Shoa*, has thrust me more and more relentlessly before the question of why we hear and see so little of this horrible suffering - or, for that matter, of any of the story of the world's suffering - in our Christian theology. And the inclusion of the non-European world, especially the hitherto so-called 'third world', into the purview of theology has shifted social suffering and misery, as well as the suffering of the (culturally, racially, ethnically) 'other', quite into the radius of theology's *logos*". See also this passage from *Theology of the World*: "Eschatology is not simply a region of Christian theology; it must be understood radically: as the form of all theological statements" (90). A similar point about the importance of social suffering for theology is made in the essay "Theology in the Struggle for History and Society". See Metz and Moltmann *Faith and the Future...*, 51.

the first generation of the Frankfurt School thinkers, Adorno, Horkheimer and Benjamin in particular.

However, it is the third implication of the link between *memoria* and freedom (rational emancipation) from Metz's thought, that is most relevant to my discussion of Habermas. And this brings me to Metz's concept of "political theology". Theology, according to Metz, must become political. Theology, he writes, is "never simply politically innocent".³⁶⁴ By this Metz means to stress the primacy of justice: "the only interest that is appropriate to theology, because it is an universal interest, is hunger and thirst for justice, undivided justice, justice for the living and the dead. Hence questions about God and the praxis of justice, can no longer be separated. In other words, the praxis of Christian faith always has an interest in universal justice, and is, thus, both mystical and political". Only by linking justice to "questions about God" can justice become truly universal.

Clearly, this conception of political theology is too strong for Habermas and "postmetaphysical thinking" cannot accept this linkage. However it is not by chance that in his later writings Habermas concedes that something is missing and has become very interested in the political aspect of (Judeo-) Christianity. Habermas in fact shares Metz's stress on *praxis* and he is keen on tapping into this religious passion for universal justice through a project of translation. It seems, however, that the normative language into which he wants to translate religion is too narrow and limited to capture and preserve this passion for justice and solidarity (and especially for the "undivided justice, justice for the living and the dead" that Metz talks about). For Habermas, the Christian *memoria passionis* can only be part of the prehistory of freedom.³⁶⁵ There simply is no room within the pragmatic projection of an ideal speech situation and among the binding

³⁶⁴ In "Theology in the Struggle...", 51.

³⁶⁵ This is a point that, in a different form, was implied in my discussion of the nature of the legacy of Judeo-Christianity in "postmetaphysical thinking" (see chapter 3). I interpreted this legacy as being rather "thin", in the sense that what is kept from religion in transitioning to modernity is simply a "cognitive perspective", which allows Habermas to validate the distinction between facts and norms. Christianity is part of the pre-history of freedom in the sense that "communicative" reason is fully released only with the breakup of the unity of the three validity claims (the good become separate from the domain of morality, and these two from the domain of arts) and the elimination of their grounding in God. Thus, as any modern Enlightener, Habermas takes freedom (as rational emancipation) to really begin only with the transition to a post-Christian, post-metaphysical society.

idealizations of argumentative discourse for something like “the dangerous memory” of Christianity.

By contrast, Metz argues that “... the Christian *memoria* insists that the history of human suffering is not merely part of the prehistory of freedom, but remains an inner aspect of the history of freedom. The *imagination of future freedom is nourished from the memory of suffering*, and freedom degenerates wherever those who suffer are treated more or less as a cliché and degraded to a faceless mass”.³⁶⁶ As he also puts it: the dogmas of faith are “dangerous and liberating ideas”.³⁶⁷

In Habermas’s thought, clearly, this memory of suffering no longer nourishes “the imagination of future freedom” (in the anticipation contained by the pragmatic “idealizations” of argumenation and the concept of “transcendence-from-within”), and this could be partially responsible for why the project of rational translation of religion runs into limits. The political aspect of Christianity, which Habermas is after with the project of “salvaging translation”, resists transfer into an alien (postmetaphysical) political language. As Metz writes, “Christian theology is not political because it has surrendered Christianity to an alien political ideology”. It is political because it tries to preserve the “dangerous memory of the messianic God, the God of the resurrection of the dead and judgement. Theology’s political root in this remembrance is much more than mere political rhetoric”. Thus “stories of setting out and hope, stories of suffering and persecution, stories of resistance and resignation, are at the centre of the Christian understanding of God”. And as Metz stresses, *remembering* and *telling* “are basic forms of Christian language”.³⁶⁸

We reach here an insight that in various forms comes to the fore in the writings of Adorno and Benjamin as well. The logico-argumentative language that is central to Habermas’s view of normative validity may not be able to preserve the practical import of dangerous memory.

³⁶⁶ J-B Metz “The Future in the Memory of Suffering” in J-B Metz and J. Moltmann *Faith and the Future...*, p. 11, my emphasis.

³⁶⁷ J-B Metz “Theology in the Struggle...” in J-B Metz and J. Moltmann *Faith and the Future...*, p. 52.

³⁶⁸ J-B Metz “Theology in the Struggle” in J-B Metz and J. Moltmann *Faith and the Future...*, p. 52.

Memory, Metz insists, takes on *non-argumentative* forms. He writes: “the ‘mediation’ of the memory of suffering is always practical. It is never purely argumentative, but always narrative in form, in other words, it takes the form of dangerous and liberating stories”.³⁶⁹ The world-disclosing power of language, for Habermas, has no bearings on questions of validity (or only a very limited one, as in the case of aesthetic validity), and this may be one of the root-problems of postmetaphysical thinking.

Another aspect common to both Habermas and Metz that is germane to my discussion in this thesis is Metz’s critique of postmodernism. In the postmodern attacks on a “totalizing way of talking” and metanarratives, biblical monotheism, as Metz writes, plays the role of scapegoat; “it is regarded as the godfather of a predemocratic, antipowersharing autocracy, the father of an obsolete patriarchalism, the forerunner of totalitarian ideologies of history; in short as a mania for uniformity in religious garb”.³⁷⁰ In contrast, mythical polytheism is lauded as a “guarantee” of “an innocent multiplicity of life”. “A new cult of innocence, deeply unpolitical”, “enjoyment of myths”, an aesthetic attitude, a “voyeuristic attitude toward social and political crises” and “new-age fantasies”, all form a new religion spreading in secularized Europe. “In the postmodern manner, what is proposed is the abandonment of all universalities and single-minded reason”. In a manner similar to Habermas, Metz is highly sensitive to the possible political implications of this aesthetic-mythical view of multiplicity and of this newly found innocence for humanity. Can we afford this innocence? asks Metz. “Were not the Jews, before being sent to the gas chambers, excluded metaphysically and legally from” the “unity and equality of all human beings”? For the German theologian, postmodern aesthetic-mythical innocence looks rather like an “excuse-making strategy”: “the excuse for the individual in the face of historical and social catastrophes in the world is that the individual does not exist” (the “death of the subject” being one of the main ideas of postmodernism).

Metz stresses the need, and I must say here that I totally share his view, to incessantly defend the unity and equality of all human beings, and thus “against the mythical ban of a posthistorical world,

³⁶⁹ J-B Metz *Faith in History and Society...*, p. 110.

³⁷⁰ J-B Metz “Theology in the Struggle” in J-B Metz and J. Moltmann *Faith and the Future...*, p. 55.

Christianity compels us... to speak again and again of humanity and solidarity, oppression and liberation, and to protest against injustices crying to heaven”.³⁷¹

To sum up, I would like to suggest that the main thrust of Metz’s discussion is to drive home a point that is rather similar to Adorno’s insight that we must remain in solidarity with metaphysics even at the time of its fall; the point is that we should question the radical critique of metaphysics launched from many postmodern quarters, as we should question Habermas’s reliance on this critique in order to affirm the necessity of going beyond metaphysics in the direction of a “postmetaphysical thinking”.

I want to close my analysis in this chapter with a discussion of a very interesting thesis. This thesis holds that Habermas’s “postmetaphysical thinking” and his view of “communicative reason”, far from being able to leave metaphysics behind, do in fact necessarily presuppose the reality of that which in the Judeo-Christian tradition is called God. This is the thesis that Helmut Peukert, one of J. B. Metz’s disciples, puts forth in his theological treatise *Science, Action and Fundamental Theology. Toward a Theology of Communicative Action* (1984).

Peukert writes from within the context of Metz’s view of history and theology and he accepts the constitutive role of memory for reason and emancipation that Metz posits (as delineated by me above). But Peukert goes further than Metz and subjects Habermas’s theory of communicative action to a direct, thorough and systematic critique. He aims to prove that Habermas’s “postmetaphysical thinking” gets caught in an inescapable “inner contradiction” which, when pushed to its logical conclusions, points to (or reveals) a reality that grounds and generates communicative action. That reality is what theologians would call God.³⁷²

³⁷¹ J-B Metz “Theology in the Struggle” in J-B Metz and J. Moltmann *Faith and the Future...*, p. 56.

³⁷² A similar strategy is detectable in the work of Michael Theunissen. Like Peukert, Theunissen begins with a lack in Habermas’s theory of communicative reason; but if Peukert emphasizes the case of death and that of the innocent victims of the past to question the universality of communicative reason, Theunissen focuses on the phenomenon of despair and the challenge this phenomenon raises for a secular “postmetaphysical” view of reason. Echoing some of Kierkegaard’s arguments, but starting off with research in psychiatry, theology and looking at various conceptions of selfhood, Theunissen puts forth the argument that the only way out of despair for a finite agent is to abandon recurrent attempts at positing himself and acknowledge in this positing the reality of an infinite Other. See Michael

Let's see how this argument is supposed to work. Communicative action, writes Peukert, is "... directed in its very structure toward the mutual recognition of the equal standing and unconditional solidarity of the partners" in dialogue (p.231). Indeed, I think that this is an accurate depiction of the conditions that obtain for the Habermasian "ideal speech situation". Now consider, says Peukert, what would be the status of the persons living in an increasingly rationalized society, best approximating these conditions of equality, mutual recognition and universal solidarity. These human beings live a meaningful life in solidarity and freedom; they live an emancipated, rational and fulfilling life (or at least a *more rationalized* life than other human beings before them).³⁷³ They "enjoy the benefits of all the history before them" and are like "the final winners of history"³⁷⁴ (or they can be seen this way, in comparison with preceding generations). However their life of solidarity in freedom has been made possible by the sacrifice of innumerable victims of the past. The very condition of a meaningful life in solidarity and mutual recognition is owed to the sacrifice of those who "have been annihilated without blame or guilt" (231). For these human beings the very possibility of "reciprocal presence in action is destroyed" (232). They cannot be brought into the network of reciprocal recognition and universal solidarity of a meaningful life, although they were the ones who made this very life possible.

Theunissen, *The Other: Studies in the Social Ontology of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Buber*, The MIT Press, 1986 and Kierkegaard's *Concept of Despair*, Princeton University Press, 2005.

³⁷³ One should carefully attend here to Habermas's claim that the Ideal Speech Situation and the concept of "rationalized lifeworld" should not be interpreted as a universal social ideal that can be transposed into a future (realizable) societal reality. Peukert therefore must avoid reading Habermas as positing such a socially achievable ideal. With this cautionary condition in place, however, I think that Peukert's argument still has a bite. For his argument to work, Peukert does not need to read Habermas as positing a final stage of history. The evolutionary view of society that Habermas articulates on the basis of the "pragmatic idealizations" of argumentation is enough for his purpose: this view allows Habermas to argue that some social transformations can be understood (or theoretically "reconstructed" if we want) as embodying a "learning process". But this quite clearly implies that some individuals, flesh and bones human beings, can be regarded as living in a *lifeworld* which is *more rationalized* than the one shared by other individuals before them. And this progressive picture is all that Peukert needs to make his argument work.

³⁷⁴ These are Metz's words cited by Peukert in his book. The whole passage from Metz's "Unsere Hoffnung" reads like this: the word of the resurrection of the dead "is a word of justice, a word of resistance against any attempt simply to truncate the ever-renewed desire and search for the meaning of human life and to reserve this meaning for those who are ever to come, who have already somehow managed through it all, to a certain extent for those lucky ones who are the final winners and who enjoy the benefits of our history" (Metz "Unsere Hoffnung" pp. 25-41, I, 3, quoted by Peukert *Science, Action and Fundamental Theology*, 237). Peukert takes this passage to illustrate the inseparable link posited by Metz in his theology between the idea of universal solidarity and the hope in resurrection: solidarity has an inescapable "eschatological dimension". Peukert's book applies this insight to Habermas's theory of communicative action.

When this situation is acknowledged, the very “basic normative structure of [communicative] interaction, namely reciprocity and solidarity, is destroyed as a possibility of action”. And insofar as “the same structure assured the possibility of the identity of subjects” in emancipated and rational society, “the actor... is hence threatened with destruction at the very core of his being” (232).

What kind of exit could one find out of this *aporia*? One could attempt to exclude completely the memory of the other. “This”, as Peukert writes, “would be identical with the attempt to deny reality” (232). A different route out would be to surrender the whole idea of solidarity. One could conclude from the experience of annihilation of innocent persons that one should cynically use all one’s powers to assert and pursue his own interests in a complete disregard to others; we thus end up with strategic action and the advancement of one’s (more or less) enlightened self-interest. Even more cynically, one could see oneself as a limited natural being locked into a struggle of mutual destruction and thus “regress behind the threshold of the achievement of a basic norm of communication” (232) into a Hobbesian situation.

Finally one could “simply direct one’s solidarity to others and finally to the future generations”, which is in fact the only alternative that Habermas (or Kant or Marx) can take up. But this alternative, as Peukert correctly argues, does not resolve the “inner contradiction” of communicative action.

The important question is this: can the very principle of “unconditional solidarity in action” be conceived of in a way that does not repress “the fate of the innocently annihilated, but rather preserves it by remembering it”? (232). How is the memory of the victims even thinkable?³⁷⁵

³⁷⁵ As Peukert writes: “if the other is viewed as reciprocally recognized and recognizing partner in action, his death can no longer simply be ascertained as a matter of fact. The memory of the other as the one who acted for the benefit of the one who is now remembering is only possible in such a way that one returns to the possibilities of action opened up by the one who has gone to his death; hence he is present, remembered and affirmed as an actor in the other’s practice of communicative action. However, opposed to this presence and affirmation is the well-established fact that the other has been annihilated in his innocence and that one benefits from his annihilation” (232-233).

At this point Peukert makes a suggestion that becomes very important in the context of my discussion in this chapter: what Habermas's theory of communicative action misses is a proper conceptualization of death. The temporal horizon of communicative action must open up to an attempt at conceptualizing this radical experience. But how is this to be done?

One possible way to achieve this would be to look at Heidegger's philosophy (or Kierkegaard's, or existentialist philosophy, more generally), as Heidegger offers an analysis of death as constitutive of the identity of human beings. For Heidegger, the anticipation of one's death is the possibility of authentic (or meaningful) existence. One's death radically individualizes the *Dasein*: death as the furthest horizon of authentic self-existence refers back to the facticity of free existing and to the necessity of concrete decisions. The kind of temporal dimension that characterizes this relation is the moment of decision. The moment of decision is ec-static, it is outside time (the regularly understood time as an equal succession of moments - one could see here a clear similarity with Benjamin's discussion of the dilatation of time in moments of danger, akin to the *Jetztzeit* of a mystical experience) and it is at the same time the origin (the ground) of concrete experience.

However Peukert remarks, rightly I think, that this kind of Heideggerian analysis might not be really useful to Habermas's theory of communicative action. The main reason for this is that Habermas's theory relies very heavily on an account of intersubjectivity, while Heidegger's analysis shows death to radically individualize the human subject. Therefore, as Peukert argues, a different route is necessary. And he proposes a sketch of how this can be conceived along the lines of a "fundamental theology".

The basic point Peukert wants to press is that the intersubjective dimension of the experience of death can be preserved only if the reality of a redeeming God is presupposed. The inner contradiction of communicative action points to a reality that is presupposed and experienced by this action. That is the reality of a redeeming God who grounds a truly universal view of solidarity

and recognition of each human being, including those who are dead and to whom the living persons owe their meaningful existence.³⁷⁶

As Peukerts sharply puts it, Habermas's communicative action is directed to and discloses the experience of God:

“discourse on God has here been introduced as discourse on the reality to which communicative action in solidarity even with the dead is directed, in such a way that it asserts this reality for others and thereby also for the actor” (238).³⁷⁷

³⁷⁶ See also: “The confrontation with the Judeo-Christian tradition forces a theory of communicative action in universal solidarity to give an account of the reality presupposed and experienced in this action. The reality of God can be determined through this action” (p.237).

³⁷⁷ Habermas resists Peukert's conclusion. For a good discussion of Habermas's position see T. McCarthy “Critical Theory and Political Theology: The Postulates of Communicative Reason” in *Ideals and Illusions: On Reconstruction and Deconstruction in Contemporary Critical Theory*, MIT Press, 1991, 200-17. Central to Habermas's resistance, as McCarthy explains, is the idea that to argue from a need to the reality of what meets the need is not truly a cogent argument. I am not sure however how this really fends off the force of Peukert's argument; Peukert seems to be interested in fully unveiling what is already presupposed by Habermas's concept communicative reason: the idea of universality (of reason) implies a reconciliation that includes the dead. In a way, one could say that Peukert reconstructs a condition that is constitutive to Habermas's theory, i.e. an unavoidable condition that is already implicitly present in the theory of communicative reason and that allows it to work. How is this very different from how Habermas reconstructs some unavoidable conditions of possibility for communicative action and articulates them an Ideal Speech Situation? See also M. Pensky's discussion of this problem in “Solidarity with the Past and the Work of Translation” in C. Calhoun&all eds. *Habermas and Religion*, pp. 301-321; in note 23 on page 446 Pensky calls Peukert's a “quaint” because “premodern” argument, that “retreats” behind the threshold established by Kant. In my view, what matters is not really if an argument can be qualified as “pre-“, “post-“ or just “modern”, but whether the argument under consideration is good or not. It might very well be the case that in this debate Pensky, McCarthy and Habermas have resolved to resist the “uncoercing force” of what might happen to be the better argument. This would indeed be quint for theorists who give this force a great role to play in their work.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

We have reached the end point of a long journey. In this concluding chapter I do three things. I draw together the main threads of my discussion of hope from the last chapter and sum up my critique of Habermas on this topic. Then I place my discussion of hope in the larger context of my analysis of the “postsecular” turn in Habermas’s thought and briefly restate the main arguments I advanced in this dissertation. Finally, I switch to a forward looking approach, and offer a few final reflections on the relevance of my analysis in this dissertation for any further exploration of the topics I addressed so far.

Hope. In this dissertation I revisited one of Immanuel Kant’s famous questions: “*what may I hope for?*”, directing this question to Habermas’s “postmetaphysical” project. As this project can no longer rely on the metaphysical support that allowed Kant to engage meaningfully with the question of hope, I asked what normative resources could Habermas’s “postmetaphysical thinking” rely on (if any at all) to address this question?

My discussion showed that Habermas’s “postmetaphysical thinking” has, in fact, limited conceptual resources to account for this important problem of practical reason. An analysis of Kant’s concept of “rational hope” and of Habermas’s critique of this concept helped me make my case. While Kant criticized traditional metaphysics, he nonetheless wanted to preserve the motivational pull that metaphysical concepts exert on moral life, in the form of some “postulates” of practical reason. The doctrine of the postulates (free will, the existence of God, and the immortality of the soul) and the doctrine of the “highest good” played a very important role in Kant’s moral theory. In a universe turned around a sovereign subject and devoid of ontological certainties, these doctrines provided motivation for moral action and kept moral despair at bay. As Adorno once very well noted, the “unthinkability of despair” is the secret of Kant’s philosophy. Habermas however takes issue with the doctrine of the postulates of reason and criticizes the presence of the concept of the “highest good” in Kant (happiness as an end given to will by practical reason) as an attempt to introduce teleological concepts within a deontological theory. Such an attempt, Habermas argues, dents the deontological framework of Kant’s moral theory,

threatening to make it inconsistent. Morally right actions do not need an end in order to be moral, they require only conformity with the form of the moral law, and Kant's promotion of the "highest good" as an end given by practical reason comes close to collapsing the autonomy of the will into heteronomy of the will.

Transitioning from "pure" to impure reason, Habermas's "postmetaphysical thinking" detranscendentalizes the framework of Kant's moral theory and places reason in language, culture and history. Sticking to the deontological structure of Kant's theory, reconstituted now in the form of linguistic procedures for argumentation,³⁷⁸ Habermas simply abandons the Kantian doctrine of the postulates of reason. As he argues, for a sober "postmetaphysical" philosophy, the concept of a "transcendence-from-without" our world is no longer available. With this move, I argued, Habermas's project gained in philosophical coherence but only at the price of transforming the question of hope into an almost intractable problem for "postmetaphysical thinking". And yet Habermas's project relies heavily on an evolutionary theory of society and the idea of progress remains an important feature of this project. In his writings one can also find scattered references to a concept of "fallible hope". This is a conception of hope, he suggests, that the weaker but "non-defeatist" view of "communicative" reason he proposes can still sustain. In order to understand the genesis of this conception, however, Kant is no longer of help, and I turned to the Marxist-Hegelian heritage of Habermas's thought.

I examined the philosophical ground for Habermas's view of hope by looking at the counterfactual "idealizations" contained by the illocutionary part of the communicative speech acts. As Habermas argues, the "validity claims" that speakers unavoidably make in "communicative action", although raised here and now, point beyond their local context toward an "ideal speech situation" (ISS). Thus, they embody a "transcendence-from-within" our world (an immanent transcendence), and it is this view of transcendence that allows Habermas to argue for a progressive view of society. My analysis examined this concept, seeking to determine more precisely the possible connections between these pragmatic "idealizations" and Habermas's evolutionary view of society. In other

³⁷⁸ In Habermas, the unconditional character of moral norms is no longer grounded in the timeless structures of a rational and sovereign subject, but in a pragmatics of language.

words, I wanted to probe in more depth the link Habermas posits between his linguistic theory and his social theory.

Few aspects of Habermas's thought have met a more direct barrage of difficult questions, generated more debates and have been subjected to more intense scrutiny by friends and foes alike than the ISS. Due to important challenges raised to this idea, Habermas changed his mind over time on how to frame the role of the "pragmatic idealizations". Key here is to look at how he frames the concept of "reaching understanding" in language. This concept is important because it provides a mechanism of social coordination that, according to Habermas, cannot be reduced to more instrumental, strategic or manipulative mechanisms of social coordinations. It is therefore this concept of "reaching understanding" that fills the gap between his linguistic and social theory and allows Habermas to formulate his evolutionary view of society. "Reaching understanding" unfolds as a process of rational redeeming of validity claims;³⁷⁹ in its reflective form, this is an argumentative process in which participants take a yes/no position and exchange reasons for or against a position. In this process, participants unavoidably make some pragmatic presuppositions (like publicity, inclusion, equality of rights and lack of deception and of coercion). These presuppositions play a constitutive role, in the Kantian sense of being conditions of possibility of argumentation. However, they also contain certain "idealizations" that have "normative content". These presuppositions overshoot or transcend the local context, by pointing toward an "ideally expanded audience" (BFN, 322), or an ideal communication community. A normative projection, a binding anticipation, is present in them, and the question is how to understand the philosophical nature of this projection.

In an earlier stage of his work, Habermas contended that "reaching understanding" should be viewed as the *telos* of communication. This would suggest concretistic connotations for the idealizing anticipation contained by the presuppositions of argumentation, which can be conceived as referring to a utopian community universally expanded in space and time, to an ideal that could

³⁷⁹ To be precise, there are two stages of "reaching understanding": "communicative action" and "discourse". The first takes place in everyday interactions against the consensual background of lifeworld. The second is a more demanding practice that subjects the validity claims raised rather unreflectively in communicative action to a more demanding, reflective, argumentative examinations.

be approximately realized in social practice. This interpretation also found support in some of the formulations Habermas used, like the “prefiguration of a form of life” (later however he distances himself from the utopianism implied by this view). He also appealed to the Kantian concept of “regulative idea”, noting that the use of this concept in the context of the “formal pragmatics” would be rather peculiar, as it did not fall in line with the classical Kantian opposition between the ‘regulative’ and the ‘constitutive’.

Over time, however, Habermas has downplayed the concept of the “ideal speech situation” and has shifted the emphasis onto the concept of “transcendence-from-within” and the “context-transcending” character of validity claims. In later work, Habermas warns against an “essentialist misunderstanding” of the (counterfactual) idealizing presuppositions assumed by participants in argumentation; they should rather be viewed as “a methodological fiction” (or a thought experiment). Our attention should be directed to the “process of justification” and no so much to “the final state of an agreement not subject to revision” (implied by the concept of ISS).

Placing Habermas’s sinuous trajectory on how to conceptualize the pragmatic “idealizations” in the context of my discussion of hope, I argued that the initial teleological framework held a more promising perspective in delivering resources for hope in Habermas. The shift away from the utopian view of “idealizations” as projecting an ideal community thins out significantly the kind of conceptual resources Habermas’s “postmetaphysical thinking” can mobilize when the problem of hope is raised. It is hard to see how a meaningful conception of hope can be grounded in a “methodological fiction”. However, the utopian understanding of “idealizations” entangles Habermas in difficult questions regarding how this utopian projection can be sustained in the absence of a metaphysical support (that Kant or Hegel relied on)? It also raises the question if Habermas does not find himself in exactly the same position that he criticizes Kant for? It is difficult to reconcile teleology with deontology. Habermas is in the situation of wanting to keep a strict procedural framework for morality (and normative validity, more generally) and at the same time cash in on the aspiration to reconciliation and happiness that have a metaphysical/religious origin.

In a final analysis, one cannot remain strictly formal or procedural in one’s moral theory and simultaneously retain a robust concept of hope. In the less utopian sounding context of the concept

of “transcendence-from-within”, I suggested that a lot hangs on Habermas’s (quite problematic) thesis that the “validity claims” raised in “communicative action”, although counterfactual, were nonetheless *effective* in history.

In the end, I argued, “postmetaphysical thinking” cannot really give us hope. Without much transcending force or normative pull to it, Habermas’s concept of “transcendence-from-within” carries a false aura, closing in on an immanentist view. Borrowing a term coined by Charles Taylor, we could say that Habermas’s concept of transcendence is fully situated within the “immanent frame” characteristic of modernity, which, as I argued, leaves us bereft of meaningful resources for hope.

Hope is so important, however. To say that we need a strong view of hope today would be a vast understatement and few reasonable people would deny, I think, the relevance of this problem for the contemporary conditions. We have just left behind a century that witnessed two devastating world wars and the terrifying totalitarian experiments on the right and on the left; these led to the haunting atrocities of the European death camps which surpassed the wildest intimations humankind had previously had into the nature of radical evil; they also led to the unprecedented expansion of the state control over the mind and bodies of modern citizens, culminating in the enslavement and working to death of many millions of people in the vast network of labour camps (generically called the “gulag archipelago”). If we draw the line, in what would be a satanic arithmetic, the culture of death and destruction that engulfed the most progressive and enlightened part of the world in the 20th century is responsible for the staggering figure of more than 170 million people exterminated in the worst kind of atrocities ever witnessed in the history of humankind.³⁸⁰

“No summer’s bloom lies ahead of us, but rather a polar night of icy darkness and hardness...”,³⁸¹ Max Weber warned the world in 1919, and we could ponder if a lucid glance at our recent history

³⁸⁰ See *Encyclopedia of Genocide*. Santa Barbara, California: ABC-Clio, vol. 1, 1999, 28.

³⁸¹ See Max Weber “Politics as a Vocation” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills eds. New York: Oxford University Press, 1946, 128.

would not, in fact, vindicate Weber's prophetic vision rather than the Hegelian-Marxist view of a progressive history, within which, no matter in how guarded a manner, Habermas still wants to situate himself? The Angel of History in W. Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History* sees history as catastrophe, as a pile of debris growing skyward, and it is this perspective, some may want to argue, rather than the immanentist view of a progressive history guided by the "cunning of reason" (Hegel), that holds the correct reading of modernity. In which case, we should be wise to consider very seriously the possibility that W. Benjamin was right to insist that our struggle to heal the world depends on a "messianic" perspective.

As we entered the 21st century, the signs of the time do not bode well. Our current situation is marked by instability, terrorist attacks, the rise of religious fundamentalism, civil wars, and recurrent political and economic crises that in many contexts are reminiscent of the interwar situation of the Weimer Republic.³⁸² A colossal global inequality, that has recently attained the obscene mark of 1% of the world's population owning 50% of the world's wealth, paralyses social action and desiccates sources of solidarity. In addition, our time is marked by massive social upheavals, environmental disasters, and unprecedented immigration flows. On top of everything, the ghastly spectre of nuclear war and total annihilation has become again a very threatening presence.

Something is indeed "missing" in the "postmetaphysical" picture of modernity articulated by Habermas in his major works, and his more recent writings reveal a heightened awareness of this fact. In the last pages of my dissertation I used the works of Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin and Johan Baptist Metz, to better understand the weaknesses of this picture and to make some tentative suggestions as to what is missing in Habermas's "postmetaphysical thinking".

Post-secular society. My investigation into the sources of hope of Habermas's "postmetaphysical" project is part of a larger set of arguments that I presented in this dissertation. I used the problem of hope under "postmetaphysical" conditions to illustrate what I take to be an endemic problem of

³⁸² A country like Greece, for instance, seemed to be caught in a very resilient vicious cycle that resembles the economic situation of interwar Germany. It is probably only the all-embracing pull of the European Union that provides enough political and social stability to prevent Greece from descending into chaos and civil unrest or war.

Habermas's thought. Habermas's retreat to a procedural position, I argue, is responsible for a poverty of normative resources which limits the ability of the "postmetaphysical" language to offer robust insights into what is needed to repair a seriously damaged *lifeworld*. This normative poverty of postmetaphysical language generates, I argued, difficulties for the project of "salvaging translation" of religion's cognitive content into the "generally accessible" language of reason that Habermas has recently proposed in order to strengthen and regenerate "postmetaphysical thinking".

The main aim of my analysis in this dissertation was to evaluate this project of "salvaging translation" from Habermas's recent writings against the backdrop of his mature philosophical thought. In a series of recent essays published in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 9/11/2001, Habermas has argued that liberal democracy would benefit from a more substantial engagement with the religious traditions existing in contemporary plural societies. Openly conceding that "something is missing" in the secular project of Enlightenment, Habermas has advanced some important reasons as to why a renewed dialogue with religion in a "post-secular society" would bring tangible benefits to secular reason.

Religious language, Habermas now contends, has a "power of articulation" of some deep moral intuitions that has as yet not been matched by philosophy.³⁸³ Valuable moral insights lie buried in religious traditions and a project of "salvaging translation" could release these insights from the "dogmatic shell" in which they are encapsulated, transfer them into the "generally accessible language" of reason, and make them available to the wider society.

Salvaging translations of this kind, Habermas suggests, could help counteract the poverty of meaning plaguing late modernity, could remind everyone of the importance of human dignity and

³⁸³ See for instance these passages: religious language remains unequalled in its "differentiated possibilities of expression and to sensitivities with regards to lives that have gone astray, with regard to societal pathologies, with regard to the failure of individuals' plans for their lives, and with regard to the deformation and disfigurement of the lives that people share with one another" (DS, 43-44). See also: "pure practical reason can no longer be so confident in its ability to counteract a modernization spinning out of control armed solely with the insights of a theory of justice. The latter lacks the creativity of linguistic world-disclosure that a normative consciousness afflicted with accelerating decline requires in order to regenerate itself" (BNR, 211).

solidarity, and restore reason's confidence in its ability to provide normative grounding for modernity. Translation seems to be especially important in relation to vulnerable forms of life and solidaristic causes, as it connects the liberal public sphere to "sources of energy" and "inspiration" that secular thought by itself seems unable to supply.

In short, religion could help secular reason regenerate itself in a "post-secular society".

Habermas argues that such a project of normative regeneration becomes highly necessary in view of the "social pathologies" generated by a modernity that is increasingly "spinning out of control", a "derailed" modernity, as he now writes. Among these pathological aspects, he includes all the destabilizing factors mentioned by me above, with the undercutting of the idea of solidarity by the rapid expansion of global capitalism and the violent rejection of the modern normative project by religious fundamentalist groups signalled as the most worrying such aspects. He also mentions the prospect of the instrumentalization of human beings in genetic engineering (spurred by a scientific "naturalism") as another toxic development where the alliance through translation between "communicative reason" and religion would have a positive contribution to make. In addition, salvaging translations could bolster reason's self-confidence when confronted with the "defeatist" view of modern rationalism espoused by "postmodern" thinkers, from Heidegger to Foucault and Derrida.

I think that Habermas's recent writings offer convincing arguments as to why "postmetaphysical thinking" must reach outside of its territory and open a dialogue with religious thought. I also find his recent diagnosis of the current political, social and economic conditions to be correct. Once again, it seems to me, Habermas shows that he possesses a fine intuition. As an engaged intellectual, he intervened in major contemporary debates and took a stand on all major events of his time. In all these public interventions, this intuition rarely failed him, even when his stand, in very contentious cases, put him at odds with what most analysts held as a legitimate reading of the events.³⁸⁴ He has refused to insulate his theoretical commitments from relevant historical developments and had the courage and intellectual honesty to reject what was no longer defensible

³⁸⁴ For instance, to his credit, Habermas opposed the illegal bombing campaign in Yugoslavia.

in his work and moved beyond or re-worked earlier positions. And it seems to me that his recent arguments regarding the need to re-connect secular reason to the religious heritage of the Western World are directed by, once again, a valid intuition.

In this dissertation I supported Habermas's recent attempt to uncouple modernity from a secularist worldview and I defended his critique of a "rigid and exclusive secularist self-understanding of modernity" (RPS, 138). I also defended his suggestion that an ampler contribution of religion to democratic politics could produce benefits that secular liberal societies would be wise to attend to.

However, my discussion advanced two lines of argument that were critical of Habermas's position.

First, my analysis showed that the concept of a "post-secular society" introduced in recent writings raised significant normative tensions for the "postmetaphysical" character of Habermas's philosophical and theoretical thinking. In particular, the idea of a "non-destructive secularization" (as translation) collides with the evolutionary narrative that Habermas (following Max Weber) espoused in *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981/1987), *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1990) or *Postmetaphysical Thinking* (1992), according to which modern "communicative reason" is able to sublimate religion. However, if this supersessionist narrative is undermined, I argued that the claim to universality of "communicative reason" is weakened, as this claim depends now on the "success" of the project of translation. As the universality of reason is one of the core tenets of Habermas's philosophical and political project, the entire "postmetaphysical" reading of modernity comes under threat.

Second, I argued that there were limits to what Habermas's "postmetaphysical" view of reason could transfer from religion into its own idiom. Habermas himself concedes that "salvaging translation" runs into some limits and he accounts for these limits with the argument that faith has a core that remains opaque to secular reason. Being rooted in communal forms of worship and tied to cultic practices, the core of faith cannot be brought under the rational conditions guiding public deliberation.

I questioned Habermas's interpretation of religion and I argued that the limits to translation are in fact internal to the procedural view of "communicative" reason. They stem from the post-Kantian

nature of Habermas's philosophical project. This is where my analysis of the question of hope in Habermas played its part. Habermas's thought can mobilize very limited conceptual resources in order to deal with this important question. In these conditions, I argued that any attempt to transfer the substantive moral/cognitive content available in metaphysics and religious traditions onto the issue of hope and redemption of undeserved suffering would most likely run into some limits, as Habermas's "postmetaphysical thinking" is simply not equipped philosophically to absorb this content through translation. Translation runs into limits not necessarily because religious content is opaque and inaccessible to reason, but simply because "postmetaphysical thinking" does not possess the required conceptual and normative resources to deal with this kind of questions. The limits are internal to reason and they stem from Habermas's re-positioning of philosophy on "postmetaphysical" premises. Given the intrinsic poverty of "postmetaphysical thinking", any religious claims/insights regarding hope, and by extension, regarding solidarity, human dignity, and many other important concepts, would fall outside the scope of "postmetaphysical" reason, they would in fact become extraterritorial and ultimately opaque to the philosophical language of reason.

Thus, the gist of my argument in this dissertation is that although Habermas is right in his diagnosis of the contemporary condition and his arguments for a postsecular turn in democratic politics are persuasive, it is far from clear that the project of "salvaging" translation can accomplish all the things Habermas aims to accomplish by bringing religion back in, so long as he remains committed to a "postmetaphysical" version of modernity. In a final analysis, Habermas's strong line between religion and reason works against a political theory that is really open and welcoming to religion and the "postmetaphysical" limitations lead us down an unpromising road when it comes to secularization and navigating religious pluralism.

Revisiting metaphysics. So where does all this leave us? What is the take home message of all this, or the moral of the narrative that I presented in this dissertation? What kind of judgement would this lengthy analysis of the normative tensions generated by Habermas's turn to a "post-secular society" allow us to pass on Habermas's "postmetaphysical" philosophical project? Looking forward, which way should one go if the constellation of the problems discussed by me in this dissertation is to be further examined?

I tend to believe that the focal point of any theoretical effort to improve on Habermas's attempt at offering viable solutions to our current predicament must be a reconsideration of the modern perspective on metaphysics.

A large number of the problems investigated by me in this dissertation stem, in my view, from Habermas's at once abrupt and ambivalent treatment of metaphysics. He emphatically declares that metaphysics is *kaput*, and that the emancipatory content of modernity must be retrieved and reframed on postmetaphysical premises (as there is no alternative to this project). At the same time, however, Habermas's "postmetaphysical thinking" can retrieve and rescue the normative content of modernity *only* insofar as it "still retains portions of the idealist heritage" (BFN, 9) of metaphysics. This metaphysical residue takes the form of some linguistic "idealizations" that Habermas links to the (slightly contradictory) concept of a "transcendence-from-within" our world. And he takes pains to (sharply) distinguish this view of transcendence from the traditional concept.

Not only does this view of transcendence give us a too light, and ultimately misleading, perspective on recent history and on the modern predicament (something is missing in this view, as Habermas is now keenly aware), but it also seems too weak to sustain, by itself and in itself, the emancipatory claims of modernity. The external help of religion is needed (in the form of translation), doubts linger however on how and if this can really be obtained.

I think therefore that we must revisit Habermas's rationale for this ambivalent and paradoxical position. In my view, much of the vexing nature of the situation in which Habermas's "postmetaphysical thinking" lands itself in has to do with the postmodern critique of metaphysics. It is not an accident that the turn to religion in Habermas's recent writings is fed by a heightened anxiety over the postmodern distrust of metaphysical rationalism. This suspicion is a sensitive or neuralgic point for Habermas and we must re-open the case for his rejection of metaphysics.

The debate between Habermas and postmodern thinkers has been covered by a large literature, in which Habermas is usually cast as an implacable opponent to postmodernism. I find this picture dominated by a stark opposition largely correct and yet deceiving in important respects. What we have here is a complex engagement. Although Habermas does oppose postmodernism in essential

points, my view is that, overall, Habermas gives in too much (and not too little) to the postmodern line of thought.

Habermas agrees, in point of fact, with much of the substance of the postmodern arguments. For instance, and this is not at all a small point, Habermas agrees with the argument that grounding modernity on the metaphysical premises of a rational sovereign “subject” would replicate the reductionist tendency of traditional (pre-Kantian, that is) metaphysics. In relation to the latter, in particular, Habermas’s critique sounds very similar to what post-Nietzschean thinkers find objectionable in the metaphysical mode of thought.

It is in light of this underlying agreement in his debate with post-Nietzschean thinkers that Habermas seeks to reframe the philosophical concept of reason used by Kant, Hegel and Marx in strictly procedural terms. Such a retreat to a procedural position, he argues, is a necessary move in order to fend off the critique of metaphysical rationalism launched by Nietzsche and carried on by many contemporary “postmodern” thinkers. Due to this critique, Habermas’s philosophical project aims to retrieve and rescue the emancipatory potential of modernity on post- (or non) metaphysical premises. He also presents this project as re-working Marx’s “historical materialism” on the basis of a turn to linguistic philosophy and pragmatism. As we saw, the concept of “postmetaphysical” is ambivalent and paradoxical, still tied in a residual relation to metaphysics, while suffering from a self-inflicted poverty of normative resources.

We could wonder if this is not a too high price to be paid for appeasing the postmodern camp? Which camp is not easily appeased anyway. We could note here that, in fact, in the eyes of contemporary post-Nietzscheans, Habermas’s strategy has not really succeeded in deflecting their critique of metaphysics. The most cursory glance at postmodern literature shows that Habermas’s “postmodern” opponents are not really convinced by his “postmetaphysical” arguments. They indict Habermas’s project as offering just another variant of a metaphysical “metanarrative”: far from being able to leave metaphysics behind, Habermas’s appeal to “idealizations” and to the pragmatic projection of an idealized consensus in an “ideal speech situation”, the postmodern critics argue, reveals the presence of the homogenizing tendencies inimical to diversity, agonism and difference, that these critics associate with metaphysics. Neither are committed Marxists very willing to concede that Habermas’s arguments for a pragmatic and linguistic version of historical

materialism work better than Marx's initial version of materialism. The focus on constitutional studies, legal institutions and procedural conditions for public deliberation, they argue, signals a certain resignation in Habermas, being a far cry from Marx's picture of emancipation based on a radical reorganization of labour processes. In their view, Habermas's project has, in fact, abandoned the radically emancipatory thrust of Marxism and morphed into another variant of liberalism.

I want to suggest that perhaps the time has come for Habermas to finally acknowledge that the ambivalence at the core of his thought's relationship with metaphysics is not conducive to a winning philosophical project and it must be clarified one way or the other. Perhaps the time is ripe (because so out of joint) for Habermas, and for us all, to fully face up to the fact that the normative project of modernity can ground and stabilize its emancipatory claims only by remaining open to a metaphysical perspective. After all, this should not be such an outlandish claim for someone whose intellectual roots are in the Frankfurt School tradition. Adorno, Horkheimer, Benjamin, Bloch are a few thinkers associated with this tradition who tied the idea of emancipation to the utopian-critical dimension of the religious-metaphysical *Weltanschauung*. The moment we take seriously the need for metaphysics, however, some legitimate questions must be addressed. In what follows I can only tentatively tackle these issues here and in closing my discussion, I am forced to make a series of suggestions and claims that I will not be able to substantiate with careful exegetic effort. Some of these may strike the reader as bold and perhaps unwarranted and I openly concede that reasonable people may disagree with my remarks. With this cautionary note in place, I would like to say the following.

One pressing question that must be addressed regards the validity of the "postmodern" critique of metaphysics. Have all postmodern critics been wrong to look suspiciously at metaphysics? This is a question that must be considered closely. The point is, I think, to revisit and shed critical light on the underlying area of agreement between Habermas and his postmodern opponents by making some necessary distinctions.

To challenge the postmodern reading of metaphysics (and offer a critique of their critique) is no easy task. It is, in fact, a formidable task, as many "postmodern" authors are brilliant thinkers, and some of their insights into the sources of the malaise of contemporary condition are very powerful

and, to a large extent, very persuasive. Nietzsche is, in my view, one of the most clear-sighted philosophers, even though I reject the perspectivism at the core of his philosophy and I am repulsed by his politics. I also find Heidegger's critique of humanism and in particular his critique of technology to be impressive and valid, and I can confess here that I first read Heidegger when I was an undergraduate student in Polytechnic school; it made a great impact on me at the time and, in retrospect, I can say that this critique contributed to no small extent to my later decision to not pursue a career as an engineer in electronics. I am also very much attracted by Heidegger's view on poetry and language, even though, ultimately, I remain sceptical (like Habermas) of his philosophy of "Being".

However, I think that the reading of metaphysics the post-Nietzschean thinkers offer can be challenged and it must be challenged and I would like to tentatively offer here a thumbnail sketch of how this can be done. The point I want to press is that weakening the postmodern perspective on metaphysics depends on introducing some cracks in three pictures that hold many contemporary thinkers captive. I find these pictures to be illusory (or ideological, to use a Marxist term), and unmasking them as such, would help loosen their grip on a large part of contemporary philosophical thought.

The first picture centres on the claim that postmodern philosophy would take us beyond modernity. It can be shown, I argue, that "postmodern" philosophy, in its essence, heightens to paroxysm some defining aspects of modernity, and therefore this philosophy is espousing a hyper modernity, rather than proposing something that would lead us beyond modernity. Therefore, we should contest the view that this philosophy offers valid counter measures to modernity's pathologies. Ultimately, I read postmodern thought as espousing a fluid ontology of violence which leads to a nihilistic mythology of power, whose political expression, most likely than not, is of totalitarian nature.

This being said, however, it seems to me that the postmodern line of thought raises a valid critique of the Enlightenment project, and their takedown on the metaphysical rationalism at the heart of Kant's, Hegel's and Marx's projects is well executed and persuasive. The whole idea of a modernity being able to bootstrap itself, to ground its normative standard out of its own resources (which reminds me of one of the stories of my childhood, that of Baron Münchhausen), is an

illusion, an ideological view (as fantastic as the exploits of the baron), and until it is unmasked as such, it will miscarry again and again, with pathological consequences for the modern *lifeworld*. Habermas partially recognizes this, with his argument that the philosophical paradigm within which Kant, Hegel and Marx worked, what he calls “the philosophy of the subject” is exhausted and must be abandoned.

In the context of my present discussion, the following important point must be underscored: clearly, not *any* metaphysical perspective would supply the normative resources needed to repair or heal a damaged modern *lifeworld*. The metaphysical picture of a sovereign and self-mastery “subject”, standing against a world that he attempts to know and control, has failed to deliver what it promised; so also did the materialist metaphysics embedded in Marx’s view of history.

With the above remarks, I am still rather close to Habermas. However, I would like to raise another point, which signals my departure from Habermas. If “postmodern” philosophy is on firmer terrain in its critique of the Enlightenment project, legitimate doubts can be raised, I think, on its reading of the traditional pre-Kantian metaphysics, which I find far less persuasive. While it is important to stay vigilant against the dangers of exclusion and authoritarianism, I want to suggest that we need to re-examine, explore and rediscover metaphysical traditions for sources of plausible hope. Although there are many possibilities, I would like to offer the following example. The tradition of Patristic philosophy has resources that have yet not been fully explored by modern philosophy. The latter has adopted, I think, an unacceptably narrow view of this tradition. Let me briefly try to defend this point here. Habermas takes Kant’s critique of this tradition in *Critique of Pure Reason*, as well as Heidegger’s attempt at “destruction of metaphysics”, followed by Derrida’s deconstruction of metaphysics, by Deleuze and many others, to be correct and valid. However, this is in fact a contentious view. What Kant criticized was primarily scholastic philosophy, and Heidegger’s critique of the “onto-theological” problem can be shown in fact to follow a line first open in Western philosophy by Duns Scotus.³⁸⁵ Well, this is far from exhausting the wealth of normative resources available in pre-Kantian theology and the line that originates in the

³⁸⁵ See for instance Gillian Rose’s discussion in *Dialectic of Nihilism. Post-structuralism and Law*, Wiley-Blackwell, 1986, 104-7. See also John Milbank’s discussion of Heidegger in *Theology and Social Theory. Beyond Secular Reason*, second edition, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006, 298-309.

nominalism of Scotus and continues with William Ockham, Luther, Kant, and also Heidegger, can be legitimately criticized by a line that runs from Plato and Aristotle to Augustin and Aquinas.

It is striking, in fact, that none of these great modern and postmodern philosophers, from Kant to Deleuze or Derrida, seriously engaged with Patristic philosophy. After all, it is the thought (as well as the lived experience) of St Athanasius, pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, St. John Damascene, Gregory of Nyssa and the other Church Fathers, that gave substance to the legacy they all criticize. I can only explain this narrowness by the fact that all these critics buy into Nietzsche's equation of Platonism with Christianity, without probing or testing this equivalence any further. I recognize, of course, that this is a claim that would need further support, but I would like to suggest that this equation is an illusory picture and we need to step outside of it.

The important point of all this is to get over the modern fear of metaphysics. We have to let go of this fear if the light of hope is to shine again over a late modernity ridden with many intense dangers.

“Wo aber Gefahr ist, da wächst / das Rettende auch” (“Where danger is, grows / the saving power also”), Hölderlin wrote in the hymn *Patmos*. In his essay on technology, Heidegger used these lines in the context of his philosophy of “Being”, but I would like to close my discussion by returning to the original context of Hölderlin's text. The hymn is dedicated to that disciple who ended his life in exile on the Patmos island, the “prophet that was loved by God” as the poet put it, so let “love” and not fear have (and be) the last word in this dissertation.

To the Western World, I dare say this: “*Remember Thy First Love*” (Rev.2:4/5)!

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