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**Postmetaphysical Reason and Postsecular Consciousness: Habermas' Analysis  
of Religion in the Public Sphere**

A Dissertation Presented

by

**Javier Aguirre**

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

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for the Degree of

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in

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**Stony Brook University**

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Abstract of the Dissertation

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by

**Javier Aguirre**

**Doctor of Philosophy**

in

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**2012**

My dissertation is an exegetical, reconstructive and critical project on Jürgen Habermas' recent account of the role of religion in the public sphere. It is an exegetical dissertation insofar as it interprets Habermas' account as presented in his article *Religion in the Public Sphere*. It is reconstructive since it develops an analysis of Habermas' previous works as well as his new thoughts related to the key concepts involved in his argument. Finally, it is critical because it offers as well, based on the previous exegesis and reconstruction, a critical perspective of some of the weakness and deficiencies of Habermas' account.

Among the potential philosophical contributions that I attempted to obtain with the development of my project I count, at least, the following. First, by developing a philosophical-political analysis of the relevance of religion, I hope to be able to problematize, from a Habermasian perspective, questions like (and related to) the following: Do my epistemic beliefs or attitudes toward religion condition my belonging to a democratic-political community? Second, my dissertation will offer an integral and systematic interpretation of Habermas' work hoping to provide solid basis to understand his recent approach on religion. Clearly, an integral interpretation is in a better position to assess, and produce, fair critiques of any philosophical perspective, in this case, Habermas' account of the role of religion in the public sphere. As a consequence, thirdly, I expect my dissertation to produce enough conceptual tools to develop a critique of Habermas' view. This critique, to be sure, will refer to the main conceptual foundations of Habermas' account. Nevertheless, it will also be especially applied to

Habermas' argument on liberal eugenics and PGD (preimplantation genetic diagnosis); an argument that, in fact, he presents as a case in point for understanding the potential contribution of religious doctrines for public debates within a democratic society.

## Dedication Page

To my mom and my dad; the “duty to be happy” is the most precious gift and teaching that I have received from them.

To Rachel; the opportunity to practice and develop the aforementioned duty with you, throughout all my life, already constitutes the greatest idea of happiness that I can ever imagine.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

TAC: Theory of Communicative Action.

BFN: Between Facts and Norms

PGD: Preimplantation Genetic Diagnosis

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## INTRODUCTION

My dissertation is an exegetical, reconstructive and critical project on Jürgen Habermas' recent account of the role of religion in the public sphere.

It is an exegetical dissertation insofar as it interprets Habermas' account as presented in his article *Religion in the Public Sphere*. It is reconstructive since it develops an analysis of Habermas' previous works as well as his new thoughts related to the key concepts involved in his argument. Finally, it is critical because it offers, based on the previous exegesis and reconstruction, a critical perspective of some of the weakness and deficiencies of Habermas' account.

Habermas presents his view of the role of religion in the public sphere as a correction of Rawls' own approach. He agrees with Rawls that at the institutional level of parliaments, courts, ministries and administrations, that is, at the level of the "formal public sphere", no religious argument is acceptable to justify or express any law, decree or policy applicable to all citizens.

Habermas' disagreement with Rawls arises at the level of the "informal public sphere". At this level, Habermas thinks that Rawls' *proviso* is excessive. According to this *proviso*, religious arguments may be introduced in public political discussion at any time, provided that in due course proper political reasons—and not reasons given solely by religious doctrines—are presented that are sufficient to support whatever the religious doctrines are said to support. For Habermas, Rawls' proviso in the informal public sphere represents an unreasonable mental and psychological burden for religious citizens. Hence, he maintains, religious citizens should "be allowed to express and justify their convictions in a religious language if they cannot find secular 'translations' for them" (Habermas, 2006: 10). But this, according to Habermas, has a very controversial corollary referred to secular citizens: they must open their minds to the possible truth content of those presentations.

This aspect is one of the most controversial elements of Habermas' approach, since it implies, at least, the following three duties for secular citizens. First, they cannot dispute the right of believing fellow citizens to make contributions phrased in religious language to public debates. Second, they cannot deny out of hand the potential for truth in religious conceptions of the world. And third, they are expected to participate in efforts to translate relevant contributions from a religious language into a publicly accessible one (Habermas, 2006b: 60).

Among the potential philosophical contributions that I expect to obtain with the development of my project I count, at least, the following.

First, by developing a philosophical-political analysis of the relevance of religion, I hope to be able to problematize, from a Habermasian perspective, questions like the following: can I be a religious person and, at the same time, a democratic citizen? Does my belonging to a religious community necessarily contradict my belonging to a democratic-political community? And, similarly, can I be a secularistic person and, at the

same time, a democratic citizen? Do my epistemic beliefs condition my belonging to a democratic-political community?

Second, I think that a great obstacle for developing a precise understanding of Habermas' account is that while, on the one hand, it presupposes many of Habermas' previous thoughts, especially about argumentation and deliberation in a liberal state, on the other, it relies upon Habermas' recent analysis on religion as well as on his new perspective of a world society. These new analyses and perspective seem both to continue and change Habermas' previous philosophical work. My dissertation will offer an integral and systematic interpretation of Habermas' work providing solid basis to understand his recent approach on religion as well as (some of) his philosophical work itself. An integral interpretation is in a better position to assess, and produce, fair critiques of any philosophical perspective, in this case, Habermas' account of the role of religion in the public sphere.

As a consequence, thirdly, I expect my dissertation to produce enough conceptual tools to develop a critique of Habermas' view. This critique, to be sure, will refer to the main conceptual foundations of Habermas' account. Nevertheless, it will also be especially applied to Habermas' argument on liberal eugenics and PGD (preimplantation genetic diagnosis); an argument that Habermas presents as a case in point for understanding the potential contribution of religious doctrines for public debates within a democratic society. Habermas' argument is complex and controversial enough to demand an analysis on the basis of Habermas' own presuppositions related to his philosophical concepts of language, communicative action, postmetaphysical thinking, religion and deliberative democracy.

In order to develop my project I will present seven chapters and an appendix. The following is the description of all of them.

**Chapter 1. Habermas' Notion of Postmetaphysical Thinking.** The objective of this first chapter is to reconstruct Habermas' notion of Postmetaphysical Thinking. The relevance of this reconstruction is double. On the one hand, it is from the perspective of this mode of thought that Habermas develops his most recent analysis on religion, and, on the other, according to Habermas, postmetaphysical thinking expresses the kind of cognitive presuppositions that secular citizens must develop in order to fully respect their fellow religious citizens.

**Chapter 2. Habermas' First Approach to Religion: The *Tsimtsum*.** The objective of this chapter is to show that Habermas' first approach to religion was developed from a deeply philosophical perspective. It was, indeed, the result of his acknowledgement that philosophy, throughout its history, has nurtured itself from religious traditions. In this chapter I will expound the main elements of a religious theme that caught Habermas' interest from the beginning of his philosophical career, namely the theme of God's contraction (the *Tsimtsum* in Jewish terminology) as an explanation of the universe's creation, a topic analyzed by Habermas in his doctoral dissertation (1954) entitled *Das Absolute und die Geschichte. Von der Zweispältigkeit in Schellings Denken* ("The Absolute and History: On the Schism in Schelling's Thought").

**Chapter 3. Habermas' Second Approach to Religion: The Beginnings of Habermas' Social Theory.** The objective of this chapter is to expound the second, and most known, approach to religion developed by Habermas. This perspective, rather than philosophical, is sociological. I will present Habermas' account of religion as developed in his texts prior to *Theory of Communicative Action (TCA)*, that is, in the texts in which he begins to develop his perspective as a social theorist. Reviewing these texts is important because they show the direction Habermas' thinking is going towards before *TCA*. These texts constitute a useful introductory context before developing a better understanding of Habermas' reflections on religion in *TCA*. In particular, these texts allow us to see why Habermas begins to distance from Adorno's and Marcuse's critical theory and, also, why he begins to discuss Luhmann's perspective.

**Chapter 4. Habermas' Second Approach to Religion: The Theory of Communicative Action.** In this chapter I will expound Habermas' account of religion as presented in his *Theory of Communicative Action*. I will present Habermas' perspective on religion as influenced by his discussions with Weber, Durkheim, and Mead. Habermas' consolidated approach brings together two views of society, namely, the lifeworld and the systems perspectives. I will show how this dual approach determines Habermas' account of religion in relation to the role it has played in the different stages of human evolution.

**Chapter 5. Habermas' Third Approach to Religion: The Role of Religion in the Public Sphere.** The objective of this chapter is to expound Habermas' latest account of religion. This chapter should clarify that in my dissertation the relevant perspective for the analysis of religion belongs to political philosophy or, in other words, that the problem analyzed is the political role and importance of religion in Habermas' account. In order to achieve this objective, I will present Habermas' development of the notion of the "public sphere". In this sense, I will expound i) Habermas' analysis of the public sphere as an institution of the bourgeois society, and ii) Habermas' account of the public sphere as the basis to develop a deliberative democracy. In this latter step I will present Habermas' view on the role of religion in the public sphere of a deliberative democracy.

**Chapter 6. The World Society, Global Public Sphere, and Postsecularism.** In this chapter, I will expound Habermas' analysis of the transformation of the public sphere within what he calls "the postnational constellation". The objective of this chapter is to show that Habermas' account of the role of religion in the public sphere is not limited to the national borders of a deliberative democracy. The political and theoretical contexts of Habermas' proposal, as well as the premises he is relying on, entail not only domestic challenges to liberal democracies but also global challenges to the (emerging) world society. This chapter will have three steps. (I) First, I will present Habermas' remarks on the current postnational constellation and its untamed global capitalism. (II) Second, I will outline Habermas' proposal for a political constitution for the pluralistic world society. (III) Third, I will indicate the role that religion would play within the intercultural debates proper of post-secular societies.

**Chapter 7. Critical Perspective.** This chapter will present a critical perspective of the results of the reconstruction and exegesis developed throughout the previous chapters of the dissertation. I will present four critiques. First, I will assess Habermas' account of the role of religion in the public sphere in light of the fact that religious communities are, besides communities of interpretation, powerful social actors that in many societies can hardly be characterized as democratic and deliberative. Second, I will problematize Habermas' strict commitment to the absolute secularization of the liberal state. I want to suggest that the extension of Habermas' account, namely his perspective of a world society and multiple modernities, casts doubts about its universality. In my third critique I will use the undeniable fact of human mortality in order to suggest a more positive answer to the problem of the permanence of religion. Finally, in my fourth critique I will attempt to develop the same answer from a slightly different idea, namely, the idea of the "irreducible value of the individual". This idea might, in addition, allow us to question Habermas' overemphasis on the political value of religion.

**Appendix: On Liberal Eugenics and P.G.D.** This appendix will illustrate Habermas' thoughts on the role of religion in the public sphere with a concrete discussion in which Habermas himself has engaged, namely, the debate on genetic engineering, liberal eugenics and preimplantation genetic diagnosis (PGD). First, I will expound Habermas' argument and, in the second and final part of the appendix, I will present a critical assessment of it. My criticism has two parts. First I will problematize within Habermas' argument what, in my view, constitutes an illegitimate and non-postmetaphysical assessment of our contemporary lifeworld. Second, by presenting different religious arguments than the one translated by Habermas (or different interpretations of the same argument), I will suggest that Habermas is not being consistent with the force and flexibility of religion that his latest account of the role of religion in the public sphere entails.

...

Before developing the content of my dissertation, it is necessary to present a couple of warnings referred to what the dissertation is not. First, in correspondence with Habermas' own perspective in his recent approach to religion, my dissertation will not present a sociological or philosophical analysis of religion as such. Doubtless the gains obtained from those sorts of examinations will be taken into account, as Habermas himself does. Nevertheless, the ruling perspective of the dissertation refers ultimately to the political relevance of religion. This political importance is justified by historical, sociological and philosophical reasons. However, in the dissertation I will highlight Habermas' own political perspective which refers to how religion's endurance and revitalization presents both intense challenges and helpful resources, not just for liberal democracies, but also for the context of an emerging global public sphere. Second, my dissertation does not aim to reconstruct Habermas' philosophy as such. Undoubtedly, in order to develop my project I visit many of the different stages and angles throughout which Habermas has developed his philosophy. However, the "lens" that I use to read and interpret Habermas' thoughts always are determined by the role that religion plays within them.

## CHAPTER 1. POSTMETAPHYSICAL THINKING

Every rigorous and fertile philosophical reflection on any issue presupposes a previous philosophizing about philosophy's own role, limits and possibilities. To this extent, one could speculate, the best philosophers have been the ones who developed a powerful reflection on philosophy itself. In other words, all great philosophers have always been philosophers of philosophy.

A corollary of this idea is that a rigorous interpretation and powerful criticism of any great philosophical thought demands a careful analysis of the philosopher's presuppositions, or explicit statements, referred to the philosopher's own notion of philosophy.

Affirming (or denying) that a contemporary philosopher, such as Jürgen Habermas, belongs (or will belong) to the exclusive group of the 'Greatest World Philosophers' is something that perhaps requires of the 'objectifying' passing of time. Nevertheless, what we can affirm today is that philosophy's role has been a constant theme of reflection in Habermas' work.

Habermas' remarks have had two intertwined shapes: on the one hand, he has taken very seriously, in his debates with other philosophers, the idea of philosophy assumed by his interlocutors; on the other, Habermas has spared no effort to develop and present his own account of the role that philosophy should have in our historical situation. The result of these two interrelated process is Habermas' notion of Postmetaphysical Thinking.

Thus, in order to understand Habermas' perspective of a postmetaphysical philosophy we require to bear in mind two elements: first, Habermas' assessments of our historical context as determined by Hegel's death and what it amounts to, and second, his discussions with other contemporary thinkers and the philosophical movements they represent, especially, as we will see, Heidegger (Phenomenology), Adorno (Western Marxism), Derrida (Post-structuralism) and Rorty (Analytic Philosophy).

To the extent that the understanding of Habermas' notion of *postmetaphysical thinking* is indispensable to develop a correct interpretation of Habermas' recent proposal about the role of religion in the public sphere, the main objective of this chapter is to analyze such a concept. Habermas' own philosophical work is presented as a postmetaphysical thinking. Hence, in order to understand Habermas' philosophical perspective on religion we must bear in mind its postmetaphysical character from which it is able to enter into a constructive dialogue with religious doctrines. For Habermas, philosophy needs to leave behind its 'metaphysical past' in order to develop an appropriate understanding of its coexistence with religious practice. Philosophy should not overstep its own boundaries by conceiving of itself as a replacement of religion. Thus, a postmetaphysical philosophy should be able to understand the post-secular



character of the current world society. In contrast, a secularistic way of thinking constitutes an extension of metaphysics, even if it is in a negative form.

This is why, according to Habermas, postmetaphysical thinking expresses the kind of cognitive attitude that secular citizens must develop in order to fully respect their fellow religious citizens and learn from their contributions to public debates. In Habermas' words, "the secular awareness that one is living in a postsecular society finds expression at the philosophical level in a postmetaphysical mode of thought" (Habermas, 2008: 119).

In order to develop the analysis of Habermas' notion of postmetaphysical thinking, this chapter will have the following structure. First, I will present Habermas' incipient thoughts on philosophy's role as developed in his 1971 essay *Does Philosophy Still Have a Purpose?* As I will show, although being inchoate remarks, there exists a profound connection and coherence between these thoughts and Habermas' later perspective. Second, I will expound Habermas' reflections from the first part of his 1988 book *Postmetaphysical Thinking Philosophical essays*. I will focus on the remarks that shed light on Habermas' main interlocutors in his discussion of philosophy's contemporary role. It is important to bear in mind that Habermas' postmetaphysical perspective is a meta-philosophical answer to Richard Rorty (Analytic Philosophy), Theodor Adorno (Western Marxism), Martin Heidegger (Phenomenology) and Jaques Derrida (Post-structuralism). These two steps constitute an introductory context that provides a more secure position to understand Habermas' definitive postmetaphysical perspective on philosophy's role.

Hence, afterwards, the third step of the chapter will indicate the main elements that, for Habermas, characterize the metaphysical form of philosophy; a mode of thought that, after modernity, can no longer be sustained.

After concluding this section by presenting Habermas' reasons to claim that metaphysics, as a philosophical way of thinking, is untenable, fourth, I will describe the only option left, namely, a postmetaphysical thinking that represents an answer for metaphysics' decay. Finally, in the fifth section of the chapter, I will expound the roles and purposes that, according to Habermas, philosophy can have in the postmetaphysical context previously described.

## I

In his 1971 essay 'Does Philosophy Still Have a Purpose?' published in the book *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, Habermas presents a systematic, however provisional, remarks on the subject of the role of philosophy. Although Habermas' perspective in this text is in some sense restricted to German philosophy, his concerns and thoughts have a broader range that affect Western philosophy as such. Indeed, the questions guiding Habermas' reflections are the following:

- After the downfall of systematic philosophy, is it still possible to do philosophy?
- Why should not even philosophy itself fade away in the graveyard of a spirit that can no longer affirm and realize itself as absolute?
- Does philosophy still have a purpose today, and will it tomorrow?

Habermas aims to find a tentative answer to these questions by exploring the “tasks legitimately posed for philosophy today, when not only has the great tradition come to an end but so (...) has the style of thought bound to individual erudition and personal testimony” (Habermas, 1983:1).

In regard to the latter aspect, according to Habermas, a personalistic form of philosophy has characterized German philosophy during the last half of the twentieth century. In Habermas’ own words:

In this respect philosophy has never been a science; it remained constantly bound to the person of the philosophical teacher or author (...) I am speaking of the rhetorical gesture with which Heidegger, Jaspers, Gehlen, Bloch, and Adorno have expounded, paraded and spread their ideas as academic teachers before their students and the literary public, in political publications, and even in the mass media (Habermas, 1983: 3).

On the other hand, concerning the end of the great tradition, Habermas follows Karl Lowith’s interpretation<sup>1</sup> according to which the break in tradition - or the downfall of systematic philosophy - is signaled by Hegel’s death.

According to Löwith, ‘Not only does Hegel’s work include a philosophy of history and a history of philosophy, but his entire system is historically oriented to an extent which is true of no previous philosophy” (Löwith, 1991: 31). This historical consciousness of Hegelian philosophy influenced, in Löwith’s view, Hegel’s pupils and successors, as well as his opponents. For Löwith, through the work of Hegel’s pupils and opponents, “it became clear that Hegel’s philosophical theology was really a culmination, a turning point in the history of the spirit and the culture of ancient Europe” (Löwith, 1991: 45).

For Habermas, four structural aspects changed right after ‘the death of the last systematic philosopher of undisputed rank’ (Hegel). These aspects mark the end of the ‘great’ philosophy and, at the same time, indicate the limits and possibilities of the present-day philosophical reflection. The following chart presents a summary of these changes:

	<b>Before Hegel</b>	<b>After Hegel’s death</b>
<b>Philosophy and its task of finding ultimate groundings for any possible</b>	Philosophy and science were considered to be one in the form of a theoretical knowledge with validity reasons susceptible of being made explicit. Even with the arising of particular spheres of knowledge and of the modern natural	Philosophy’s developing and grounding of a cosmology became dependent upon the results of research in the natural sciences. Thus, it had to renounce to its claim of being a foundational science in relation to physics. First, philosophy’s

<sup>1</sup> See Karl Lowith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, Columbia University Press, 1964.

<sup>2</sup> Habermas indicates three: -a fundamental critique of biblical revelation; - declarations of indifference or incompatibility; - grand attempts to identify philosophical knowledge with revelation or revelation with philosophical knowledge.

<sup>3</sup> In Habermas’ words, “In advanced industrial systems, economic growth and the dynamics of total social development have become largely dependent on scientific and technological advances. In the same measure that ‘science’ has become the most important productive force and the subsystems of research and education are credited with a functional primacy in determining the direction of social evolution (Luhmann), all of the following have

<b>knowledge.</b>	sciences, philosophy was conceived as the foundational science to the extent that it claimed to provide ultimate foundations for all theoretical knowledge.	reaction was to appear as epistemology in order to express its claim to ultimate grounding. But with the arising of positivism the only option left seemed to be to become a theory of science.
<b>Philosophy and the relations between theory and practice as a source of legitimation –or critique- of traditions.</b>	Philosophical doctrines and traditions constituted a unity. Philosophy's pretensions to apprehend being as a whole allowed it to take over functions in relation to the legitimation of domination. 'Philosophical criticism never completely left the context of tradition behind" (Habermas, 1983: 10).	Once philosophy was left without the ontological groundings given by the strong link between practical and theoretical philosophy, it lost the possibility of upholding socio-cosmic worldviews. Thus, only now could philosophy become radical critique of the traditions.
<b>Philosophy and its relation to religious' claims for salvation and redemption.</b>	Philosophy claimed to fulfill different functions than religion. Since late antiquity, philosophy had to specify its relationship to the saving truth of the Judeo-Christian redemptive religion. But in none of its solutions <sup>2</sup> , did philosophy offered any promise of redemption, nor wanted to replace the certainty of salvation of religious faith.	Once the idea of the One or the Absolute was lost for philosophy, it became more critical of the idea of the one God. Nonetheless, this criticism allowed philosophy to develop its own claim for salvation and redemption in the form of utopian political ideas of emancipation, liberation and reconciliation.
<b>Philosophy's elitist self-understanding</b>	Philosophy was an occupation exclusively developed by a cultured elite; it was never accessible to the masses that were judged as naturally incapable of philosophizing. For this reason, it needed the "organizational form of a doctrine embodied in individual philosophers" (Habermas, 1983: 17).	Philosophy was established in the faculties of the new universities as "both a specialty and a background ideology of the emerging <i>Geisteswissenschaften</i> and became widespread in the sections of the bourgeoisie that understood themselves as cultured" (Habermas, 1983:13).

Table 1. *Philosophy's characteristics before and after Hegel*

To be sure, the four structural changes indicated by Habermas do not mean that philosophy, after Hegel's death, necessarily has to embrace them uncritically. In other words, Habermas is not suggesting that philosophy has to become a i) mere theory of science, ii) critical of the traditions without any affirmative or normative element, iii) with its own ideas of salvation and redemption, and iv) a ferment for the formation of bourgeois ideology.

These four aspects are difficult to reconcile in any systematic way. For example, it is hard to see, at a first sight, how a theory of science might include its own ideas of salvation and redemption without posing a socio-normative perspective.

Instead of determining by themselves any concrete purpose for philosophy, the four structural changes constitute the challenging context where philosophy must find a legitimate role to play. In other words, what Habermas is suggesting is that if philosophy still has a purpose today, such a purpose, whatever it might be, has to take into account those four changes in the tradition; which is exactly what makes it so difficult to answer the essay's question in an affirmative way. In Habermas' words,

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<sup>2</sup> Habermas indicates three: -a fundamental critique of biblical revelation; - declarations of indifference or incompatibility; - grand attempts to identify philosophical knowledge with revelation or revelation with philosophical knowledge.

A philosophy that absorbs into its awareness the four structural changes mentioned above no longer conceives itself as philosophy; it understands itself as critique. Critical of 'first philosophy', it dispenses with ultimate grounding and affirmative interpretations of being as a whole. Critical of the traditional determination of the relationship of theory and practice, it apprehends itself as the reflective element of social activity. Critical in equal measure of the claims to totality made by metaphysical knowledge and by religious interpretations of the world, it is, with its radical critique of religion, the basis for absorbing the utopian contents of both religious tradition and the cognitive interests in emancipation. Finally, critical of the elitist self-understanding of the philosophical tradition, it takes its stand on universal enlightenment – including itself. At this point, of course, the questions arise whether on the way toward critique and self-critique philosophy has not been robbed of its content, and whether ultimately (...) it offers only the empty exercise of a self-reflection that takes up the objects of its own tradition without still being capable of any systematic idea. If this is the way things stand, does philosophy still have a purpose? (Habermas, 1983: 14).

Although Habermas does not offer a complete response, he does hint a particular task for philosophy that, in many ways, seems to legitimate a role for philosophy in our present-day situation. This task is a substantive critique of science. For Habermas, "If there exists a philosophy in the face of which the question 'Does philosophy still have a purpose?' need no longer be raised, then today, according to our reflections, it would have to be a philosophy of science that is not scientistic" (Habermas, 1983: 17).

Habermas' conception of philosophy as a 'substantive critique of science' constitutes a critical perspective on scientism. For Habermas, scientism is the conviction that identifies knowledge with science, instead of apprehending science as 'one form of possible knowledge', among others.

Habermas trusts that this philosophical critical perspective is not confined to a merely speculative realm. Indeed, insofar as science generates technically usable knowledge that exercises significant social functions<sup>3</sup>, the interpretation and critique of science entails political consequences.

Scientism, for Habermas, has two controversial points that should be disputed. First, scientism cannot produce an account of the historical and social sciences' research practices. Scientism remains blind to the sort of knowledge outside the domain

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<sup>3</sup> In Habermas' words, "In advanced industrial systems, economic growth and the dynamics of total social development have become largely dependent on scientific and technological advances. In the same measure that 'science' has become the most important productive force and the subsystems of research and education are credited with a functional primacy in determining the direction of social evolution (Luhmann), all of the following have taken on direct political significance: the action-orienting notions of theoretical knowledge, of scientific method, and of scientific progress; the connections between technological application and practical enlightenment and the general transposition of scientific information into the practice of life; and the interpretation of the relationships of experience, theory, and consensus-forming discourse" (Habermas, 1983: 15).

of the technological applications that, nonetheless, is indispensable for the orientation of human action. In Habermas' words, "This is exactly the category of knowledge that is functionally necessary for a practically rational guidance of the productive power of science together with its social consequences and by-products" (Habermas, 1983: 16)<sup>4</sup>. Second, scientism cannot produce either an account of the rationality that might be found behind the procedures through which practical questions are clarified. The risk with this limited conception of rationality is that

(...) if practical questions no longer count as capable of truth and if deciding questions capable of being true can lead only to information that is technologically applicable (...), then the connection between scientific-technological progress and social practice that has become relevant today is either a matter of empirical analysis and technical control or altogether inaccessible to rationalization, whether it be left to arbitrary decision or to spontaneously unreflective (or quasi-natural) self-regulation" (Habermas, 1983: 16).

In this scenario, all the issues central to social development would not be considered to belong to the domain of matters able to be discursively clarified and rationally agreed upon. Thus, the steering mechanism for developed social systems would not need to be the democratic planning but the technocratic planning of state bureaucracies. The political consequences of Habermas' incipient notion of philosophy as a substantive critique of science are manifest. It aims to develop, or support at least, a theory of democracy.

Habermas' idea of philosophy as a non-scientistic philosophy of science - or as a substantive critique of science – seeks to respond to the four aforementioned structural changes.

First, it does not claim to be able to develop ultimate groundings for all knowledge. On the contrary it respects the special value of modern sciences in regard to the production of methodologically and institutionalized secured knowledge. It is, after all, a philosophy of science.

Nonetheless, it does not reduce itself neither to epistemology nor to a theory of science. Indeed, coherent with being a radical critique of tradition, this 'new philosophy' aims to develop a critical stance toward the objectivistic self-understanding of the sciences and any scientistic concept of science and scientific progress (Habermas, 1983: 16).

But such a critical view would have practical consequences since it would go "against the twofold irrationality of a positivistically restrictive self-understanding of the sciences and a technocratic administration isolated from publicly discursive formation of the will" (Habermas, 1983: 17). This criticism makes room for the affirmation of democratic ideals that would express utopian elements and claims of emancipation and liberation.

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<sup>4</sup> Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action* with its emphasis on action oriented to mutual understanding is a development of this strand of criticism.

In this sense, philosophy's claims for salvation and redemption are derived from a new way of establishing a link between a theory of the sciences and a practical philosophy.

Finally, such a link also implies a direct consequence in regard to philosophy's elitist self-understanding. Indeed, for Habermas, philosophy's practical influence cannot be achieved if it only remains within the narrow domain of specialized discussions. Philosophy, then, cannot conceive itself as having an immanent power able to influence by itself broader spaces of society. In Habermas' words "A philosophy that idealistically entrusted itself with this power would have forgotten the idea over which philosophy entering the stage of critique had labored for almost a century and a half. In this respect, the future of philosophical thought is a matter of political practice" (Habermas, 1983: 17)<sup>5</sup>.

The tentativeness of Habermas' answer for the question 'Does Philosophy Still Have a Purpose?' is manifest. Nevertheless, the two strands of criticism against scientism allow us to appreciate Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action* as an intellectual effort to justify philosophy's purpose after the arising of modern science. Undoubtedly, once Habermas poses other validity claims different from truth, thus opening room for other sorts of knowledge to be affirmed, philosophy no longer needs to be conceived only as a substantive critique of science.

As we will see, though, Habermas' thoughts on the role of philosophy will continue to respond to the four structural changes mentioned in this early article. In a similar vein, Habermas' discussion with the other philosophers' perspectives on this issue is influenced by his demand that any new purpose for philosophy needs to answer those four structural changes. As we saw, for Habermas, a philosophy too focused on the aforementioned transformations runs the risk of not conceiving itself as philosophy anymore but as critique. Critical of first philosophy, it limits itself to the rejection of any ultimate grounding; critical of the traditional prevalence of theory over practice, it understands itself merely as the reflective element of social activity; critical of the metaphysical and religious traditions, it posits itself as a new successful way of achieving the utopian ideas of authenticity and emancipation; and finally, critical of the elitist self-understanding of the philosophical tradition, it "takes its stand on universal enlightenment – including itself"(Habermas, 1983: 14). For Habermas, as it will be described in the next section, the views of Rorty, Heidegger, Adorno and Derrida trap themselves in the limited spaces opened by these criticisms, without really advancing any positive idea of philosophy as such.

## II

For Habermas, the reduction of philosophy to mere critique made by Rorty, Heidegger, Adorno and Derrida entails one common problem. In all these cases, especially in the three latter, the result of the critique does not really amount to a proper overcoming of metaphysics.

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<sup>5</sup> In this essay, Habermas identified three philosophical approaches characterized by the establishing of a link between a theory of sciences and a practical philosophy, namely, Karl Popper's critical rationalism, Paul Lorenzen and the Erlanger School's methodological philosophy, and the critical theory of Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse.

In 1988, the form of the question about philosophy's role changes since now the question is not if philosophy is possible at all, but how it is (or should be) possible.

The first line of Habermas' book *Postmetaphysical Thinking* is the following intriguing question: 'How modern is the philosophy of the twentieth century?' Subsequently, just a few lines after, Habermas formulates what he considers to be a "more far-reaching question": Has philosophy (...) succumbed to the aging of modernity?

Habermas' two questions seem to suggest the two following options as possible answers:

a) Contemporary philosophy is not modern enough in a time in which modernity is the rule and measure for everything. This first option implies that contemporary philosophy is still making useless efforts for reviving pre-modern conceptual categories from an epoch already overcome, i.e., a metaphysical epoch.

b) Contemporary philosophy is still too modern in a time in which modernity has been overcome. This second option might also be expressed by saying that for trying to be too modern, contemporary philosophy has succumbed and, thus, has to leave room for a new post-modern philosophy.

Interestingly enough, these two possibilities might be closer than what it seems, if it is the case that the alleged overcoming of modernity is nothing but a veiled re-affirmation of those metaphysical categories that modernity wanted to overcome in the first place. This, as we will see, is what Habermas thinks happens with the philosophy of the twentieth century. But, what does he mean by the term 'philosophy of the twentieth century? Who is he referring to? In Habermas' words,

Platonism and Aristotelianism, even rationalism and empiricism, have lasted for centuries. Today things move faster. Philosophical movements are phenomena of effective history. They mask the constant pace of academic philosophy, which with its long rhythms stands athwart the more rapid shifts in issues and schools. Nonetheless, both when it formulates its problems, and when it has an effect on the public at large, philosophy draws from the same sources – in our century, four great movements (Habermas, 1996: 4).

These four movements are: Analytic Philosophy, Phenomenology, Western Marxism and Structuralism. These four movements of thought constitute Habermas' interlocutors in the debate about the role of philosophy nowadays. In each case, Habermas chooses one major figure to analyze his concrete perspective.

Richard Rorty's conception of philosophy as a mere 'edifying conversation', presented in his book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, is used by Habermas to expound his criticism against the analytic tradition<sup>6</sup> (Habermas, 1990, 1-20).

Rorty's conception is based upon his distinction between normal and abnormal discourses. Normal - or commensurable- discourses are discourses that operate with secure criteria of consensus. In contrast, when the fundamental orientations of any discourse can be easily contested, such a discourse can be characterized as incommensurable or abnormal. In Rorty's own words: "Normal discourse (a generalization of Kuhn's notion of 'normal science') is any discourse (scientific, political, theological, or whatever) which embodies agreed-upon criteria for reaching agreement; abnormal discourse is any which lacks such criteria" (Rorty, 2009: 11). For Rorty, traditional philosophy's attempt to "explicate 'rationality' and 'objectivity' in terms of conditions of accurate representation is a self-deceptive effort to eternalize the normal discourse of the day" (Ibid).

Instead of relying on such a self-deceptive image of itself and trying to pass over into normal discourses, philosophy should accept its abnormal character and remain content with developing an 'interesting and fruitful disagreement'. Only then could philosophy become 'edifying'. According to Habermas, Rorty believes that "philosophy as a whole verges on edifying conversation once it has sloughed off all pretensions to problem solving" (Habermas, 1990: 13).

For Rorty, an edifying philosophy, such as that of Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Dewey, aims "to help their readers, or society as a whole, break free from outworn vocabularies and attitudes, rather than to provide 'groundings' for the intuitions and customs of the present" (Rorty: 2009: 11-12).

The main problem with this conception, as Habermas sees it, is that such a "desire for education (...) works to the detriment of the desire for truth" (Habermas, 1990: 14). As Habermas puts it,

If I understand Rorty, he is saying that the new modesty of philosophy involves the abandonment of any claim to reason – the very claim that has marked philosophical thought since its inception. Rorty not only argues for the demise of philosophy; he also unflinchingly accepts the end of the belief that ideas like truth or the unconditional with their transcending power are a necessary condition of humane forms of collective life (Habermas, 1990: 3).

As mentioned before, in his 1971 essay, Habermas had serious doubts that a philosophy that conceived itself primarily as a radical criticism of a 'first philosophy' by dispensing 'with ultimate grounding and affirmative interpretations of being as a whole'

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<sup>6</sup> For Habermas, analytic philosophy's founding documents are G.E. Moore's *Principia Ethica*, and Russell and Whitehead's *Principia Mathematica*. Later, the path between Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and his *Philosophical Investigations* will mark a peripety. Analytic philosophy will finally acquire its imperial position with Quine and Davidson. According to Habermas, nonetheless, "(i)n the end, it empties into the historicism of a postempirical philosophy of science (with Kuhn) and into the contextualism of a postanalytic philosophy of language (with Rorty)" (Habermas, 1990: 5).



is able to be something more than a 'mere critique'. In Rorty, Habermas seems to have found a paradigmatic case of this problematic reductionism. Habermas' words from 1971 can be applied once again, since, in Habermas' view, Rorty's edifying philosophy would offer "only the empty exercise of a self-reflection that takes up the objects of its own tradition without still being capable of any systematic idea" (Habermas, 1983: 14).

In the case of Phenomenology<sup>7</sup>, Martin Heidegger is the most important figure chosen by Habermas to contest another sort of present-day attitude toward philosophy with the shape of a 'dismissive good bye and good riddance" (Habermas, 1990: 11). As Habermas sees it, Heidegger's attempt for destroying or overcoming metaphysics concludes with the affirmation of a heroic farewell to philosophy. For Habermas with the emerging of the empirical sciences philosophy faced two possibilities: on the one hand, a radical assimilation to the natural or human sciences<sup>8</sup>, or, on the other, a division of labor that would guarantee to philosophy an object realm of its own<sup>9</sup>. Nevertheless, Habermas also indicates a third possibility, namely, the turn to the irrational of which Heidegger's approach constitutes a paradigmatic case.

For Heidegger, philosophical reflection has been based on false habits of thinking. Nonetheless, instead of proposing a cure or correction for the devalued and discredited philosophical tradition, Heidegger's philosophy ends up longing for the arrival of a different medium that makes possible a return to the immemorial, that is, to the authentic thinking of Being (Habermas, 1990: 12).

In Heidegger's view, there exists a collectively binding pre-understanding of the things and events that determines the historical destiny of a culture or society. This ontological pre-understanding is based upon horizon-forming basic concepts that, in some sense, prejudice the meaning of any beings. According to Heidegger, metaphysics is the force that, in the West, has dominated the articulation of such a pre-understanding. In addition, in the modern period, metaphysics has manifested itself in a principle according to which "(...) man becomes the center and measure of all beings. Man is the *subjectum*, that which lies at the bottom of all beings, that is, in modern terms, at the bottom of all objectification and representation" (Heidegger, Nietzsche, 1961, volume 2: 61). Subjectivity is, then, the specifically modern understanding of Being. Thus, "being as a whole is thereby transformed into the subjective world of represented objects, and truth is transformed into subjective certitude" (Habermas, 1991:133).

Metaphysics, along with its modern result, subjectivism, is responsible for the arising of the "totalitarian essences of his epoch characterized by the global techniques for mastering nature, waging war, and racial breeding" (Habermas, 1991: 133). Modern subjectivity, as the calculated dealing with perceivable and manipulable objects, expresses the absolutized purposive rationality of the calculation of all acting and planning. "Within this model, even the prior dimension of mutual understanding among

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<sup>7</sup> Habermas considers Husserl's *Logical Investigations* as Phenomenology's founding document, and the path between Heidegger's *Being and Time* and his 'Letter on Humanism' as its most important peripety. For Habermas, Phenomenology had its most recent productive impetus in France with Sartre and Merleau-Ponty).

<sup>8</sup> For Habermas, examples of this move are the following: Moleschoot's materialism, Buchner's post-Machian positivism, Dilthey's dissolution of philosophy into the history of philosophy, and the Vienna Circle's reduction of philosophy into methodology and theory of science (Habermas, 1996: 37).

<sup>9</sup> In some sense, this is what Rorty and the analytic tradition attempted.

subjects appears under the category of 'being able to count on [other] people' (Habermas, 1991:133-136).

Habermas' radical disagreement with Heidegger refers to the null place assigned by the latter to philosophy in virtue of his understanding of the destruction of metaphysics. In Habermas' own words,

Heidegger cannot, however, understand the destruction of the history of metaphysics as unmasking critique, or the overcoming of metaphysics as a final act of disclosure, for the self-reflection that achieves this still belongs to the epoch of modern subjectivity (...) [F]or Heidegger, there remains only the reassuring gesture that for the initiate there is a thinking more rigorous than the conceptual. Wholesale devaluation befalls scientific thinking and methodically pursued research, because they move within modernity's understanding of Being prescribed by the philosophy of the subject. As long as it does not renounce argument, even philosophy stays inside the enchanted circle of objectivism. It, too, has to be reminded that 'all refutation in the field of essential thinking is foolish' (Habermas, 1991: 136).

As Habermas sees it, the undermining of Western Rationalism developed by Heidegger through his critique of metaphysics concludes in the affirmation of a 'mystical thinking of Being' (Habermas, 1996: 37) in which there is no place for argumentation or communication. In Heidegger's later philosophy "Being itself has become sovereign; it rules in an unforeseeable way over the grammatical transformation of linguistic worldviews. Language's power to create meaning is promoted by the later Heidegger to the rank of the absolute" (Habermas, 1996: 42). We are, thus, left with a sort of linguistic historicism, completely powerless under the 'destining of Being' to which we can only wait (and obey) in an attitude of 'expectant indeterminacy'.

Ultimately, Heidegger shares with Rorty the conception of a radical criticism of 'first philosophy' that "dispenses with ultimate grounding and affirmative interpretations of beings as a whole" (Habermas, 1983: 14). But, in addition, in Heidegger's case, philosophy, as "critical in equal measure of the claims to totality made by metaphysical knowledge and by religious interpretations of the world" (Habermas, 1983: 14), claims to absorb "the utopian contents of both religious tradition and the cognitive interests in emancipation" (Habermas, 1983: 14). The great limitation is, nonetheless<sup>10</sup>, that Heidegger's radical critique has no grounds to form and inform the concrete meanings of a 'new understanding of Being'. Philosophy, once again, remains content in the domain of a mere critique; or, in other words, philosophy does not really conceive itself as philosophy. In Habermas' words, from Heidegger's perspective we are only able to

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<sup>10</sup> Leaving aside the political consequences of Heidegger's thought, something that for Habermas, nonetheless, is impossible to do: "In the wake of Hegel, philosophers should no longer become indignant when they are also judged in light of the political implications of their thought" (Habermas, 1996: 12).

“say what philosophy is not and does not want to be; as a non-science, however, philosophy must leave its own status undetermined” (Habermas, 1996: 37-38).

Something similar occurs with (Post)-Structuralism. Habermas’ discussion with structuralism<sup>11</sup> has as its main interlocutor one of the two authors that, according to him, made of structuralism an authentic philosophical thought, once they tried to overcome it, namely, Derrida (Habermas, 1991, 161-184, 238-293)<sup>12</sup>.

In Habermas’ view, Derrida’s idea of deconstruction implies the vanishing of the distinction between philosophy and literature. “The frailty of the genre distinction between philosophy and literature is evidenced in the practice of deconstruction; in the end, *all* genre distinctions are submerged in one comprehensive, all-embracing context of texts” (Habermas, 1991: 190).

Deconstruction, according to Habermas, is a notion developed by Derrida based upon two interrelated aspects: on the one hand, his radical criticism of the philosophy of consciousness with its subject-centered reason and, on the other, an attempt for ‘overcoming’ the *aporia* that has to be faced by everyone who engages in such an extreme criticism.

Derrida’s own radical turn from the philosophy of consciousness to the philosophy of language is manifested in his destructive criticism of the basic concepts of the former. For Derrida, “Every connotation of self-consciousness, self-determination, and self-realization has to have been exorcised from the basic concepts of philosophy before language (instead of subjectivity) can declare its independence” (Habermas, 1996: 207).

In this train of thought, the modern interpretation of the world developed by the philosophy of consciousness is understood simply as one event in an epochal discourse that makes possible, but also prejudices, all innerworld occurrences. Thus, “All validity claims become immanent to particular discourses. They are simultaneously absorbed into the totality of some one of the blindly occurring discourses and left at the mercy of the ‘hazardous play’ among these discourses as each overpowers another” (Habermas, 1996: 209).

According to Habermas, this radical criticism results in the *aporia* that such a totalizing critique of reason aiming to unveil its alleged authoritarian character is developed by using reason’s own tools. Ultimately, so it seems, rational tools are the only available means for uncovering reason’s own deficiency. In Habermas’ own words: “The totalizing self-critique of reason gets caught in a performative contradiction since subject-centered reason can be convicted of being authoritarian in nature only by having recourse to its own tools” (Habermas, 1991: 185).

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<sup>11</sup> According to Habermas structuralism and Western Marxism share something that, at the same time differentiates them from the previous two philosophical movements. In Habermas’ words, “both movements [structuralism and Western Marxism] (...) make their way through human-and social-scientific disciplines before the seed of speculative thought grows in the bed of social theory” (Habermas, 1990: 5). In the case of Structuralism, its ‘non philosophical’ sources are Saussure’s linguistics, Piaget’s psychology, Bachelard’s critique of science, Levi-Strauss’ anthropology and Lacan’s psychoanalysis. For Habermas, Structuralism “was developed as philosophical thought only by the very same attempts to overcome it made by Foucault and Derrida” (Habermas, 1990: 5).

<sup>12</sup> Michel Foucault is the other important figure with whom Habermas discusses the premises and consequences of post-structuralism.

However, according to Habermas, Derrida tries to solve this contradiction by expanding the sovereignty of rhetoric over the traditional domains of logic. As Habermas puts it,

There can only be talk about 'contradiction' in the light of consistency requirements, which lose their authority or are at least subordinated to other demands – of an aesthetic nature, for example – if logic loses its conventional primacy over rhetoric. Then the deconstructionist can deal with the works of philosophy as works of literature and adapt the critique of metaphysics to the standards of a literary criticism that does not misunderstand itself in a scientific way (Habermas, 1991: 188).

Thus, once the distinctions between literal and metaphorical meaning, between serious and fictional speech, and, in particular, between logic and rhetoric disappear, an empty space is left for the affirmation of a 'universal textual occurrence' presided by thinkers as well as by poets.

The deconstructive enterprise can flow freely, since it is not tied to the traditional discursive obligations of philosophy and science. As Habermas sees it, this is why

Derrida does not proceed analytically, in the sense of identifying hidden presuppositions or implications. This is just the way in which each successive generation has critically reviewed the works of the preceding ones. Instead, Derrida proceeds by a critique of style, in that he finds something like indirect communications, by which the text itself denies its manifest content, in the rhetorical surplus of meaning inherent in the literary strata of the texts that present themselves as nonliterary (Habermas, 1991: 189).

For Habermas, however, the greatest weakness of Derrida's conception of deconstruction is that it does not take into account that the rhetorical elements of language, although inevitably present in every linguistic expression, assume entirely different roles. It is only in the self-referentiality of the poetic expressions where the rhetorical elements of language occur in their 'pure form'. In the normal language or everyday life, and even in the specialized language of science, technology, law, morality, economics, political science, etc., the rhetorical elements are tamed and enlisted for the routines of everyday practice and for social purposes of problem-solving (Habermas, 1991: 209).

Furthermore, as Habermas puts it, "Whoever transposes the radical critique of reason into the domain of rhetoric in order to blunt the paradox of self-referentiality, also dulls the sword of the critique of reason itself. The false pretense of eliminating the genre distinction between philosophy and literature cannot lead us out of this aporia" (Habermas, 1991: 210).

In the case of Derrida, then, Habermas sees another case of a 'philosophy' that, partially, by understanding itself as a radical criticism of the traditional 'first philosophy' is not able to offer more than "the empty exercise of a self-reflection that takes up the objects of its own tradition without still being capable of any systematic idea" (Habermas, 1983: 14)<sup>13</sup>.

Finally, Habermas takes part in dialogue with Adorno in order to show the limits of Western Marxism's<sup>14</sup> conception of philosophy (Habermas, 1991, 106-130). Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, in Habermas' view, is an "attempt to rescue the moment of the nonidentical from the assaults of instrumental reason" (Habermas, 1996: 123). Philosophy, thus, is conceived with a single task, namely "to save the dimension of nonidentity that the spirit seeking identity must cut away from the object" (Habermas, 1983: 104).

In Habermas' interpretation of Adorno's philosophical work, the concept of the nonidentical was foreshadowed in his *Dialectics of Enlightenment* where he, along with Horkheimer, directed their attention to "the prehistorically amorphous self that falls prey to the disciplining of an I capable of self-identical and hence identity-seeking thought" (Habermas, 1983: 104).

In their *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer, question the self-certitude of the Enlightenment's self-consciousness that uncritically accepts the results of the history of subjectivity without reflecting on, or trying to rescue, what has been lost or neglected. In this first work,

They go through the *Odyssey* episode by episode to discover the price paid by the experienced Odysseus for his ego to issue from the adventures he has undergone (...) The episodes tell of danger, cunning, and escape, and of the self-imposed renunciation by which the ego, learning to master danger, gains its own identity and takes leave of the bliss of archaic union with internal and external nature (Habermas, 1991: 109).

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<sup>13</sup> This criticism applies to Heidegger, Derrida and, as we will see Adorno as well. In all these three cases, these philosophers develop a radical criticism of reason (and philosophy) without really proposing a new model from which affirmative thoughts can be derived. In this sense, all these philosophies only achieve a self-reflection on philosophy's history and concepts. Afterwards, once Habermas has developed his theory of communicative action, he will this demand for a 'systematic idea' will be transformed into a requirement for the capacity to propose a new paradigm, once the old one has been found valueless. In Habermas' words, "But here, too, a paradigm only loses its force when it is negated in a determinate manner by a different paradigm, that is, when it is devalued in an insightful way; it is certainly resistant to any simple invocation of the extinction of the subject. Even the furious labor of deconstruction has identifiable consequences only when the paradigm of self-consciousness, of the relation-to-self of a subject knowing and acting in isolation, is replaced by a different one - by the paradigm of mutual understanding, that is, of the intersubjective relationship between individuals who are socialized through communication and reciprocally recognize one another-. Only then does the critique of the domineering thought of subject-centered reason emerge in a determinate form - namely, as a critique of Western "logocentrism," which is diagnosed not as an excess but as a deficit of rationality" (Habermas, 1996: 310).

<sup>14</sup> In Habermas' view, at the beginning, Western Marxism, via Lukács, Bloch and Gramsci, re-Hegelianizes Marxist thinking in order to highlight its philosophical dimension hidden by the historical prevalence of political economy. In the twenties, it is influenced by Freudian metapsychology, which inspired the works of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research in New York. Finally, for Habermas, Western Marxism was regrouped as pure philosophy in Adorno's dialectics (Habermas, 1996:5).

In this sense, Adorno and Horkheimer want to show that human beings have shaped their identity by repressing their internal nature in order to make possible the domination of external nature. According to them,

Man's domination over himself, which grounds his selfhood, is almost always the destruction of the subject in whose service it is undertaken; for the substance which is dominated, suppressed and dissolved by virtue of self-preservation is none other than that very life as a function of which the achievements of self-preservation find their sole definition and determination; it is, in fact, what is to be preserved (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 54)<sup>15</sup>.

Hence, the result of humans' domination over nature is, ultimately, a type of humans' domination over themselves that reduces and limits their own nature. In Habermas' words, "(...) mounting technological mastery strikes back at the subjectivity that gets shaped in these conquests (...) Mastery of nature is chained to the introjected violence of humans over humans, to the violence of the subject exercised upon its own nature" (Habermas, 1983: 100-101).

Rationality is thus understood as an instrumental human capacity aiming to dominate external natural forces. So conceived, "reason itself destroys the humanity it first made possible [since] (...) from the very start the process of enlightenment is the result of a drive to self-preservation that mutilates reason, because it lays claim to it only in the form of a purposive-rational mastery of nature and instinct – precisely as instrumental reason" (Habermas, 1991: 110-111). Modern science, morality and art are absorbed by this sort of instrumental rationality that understands itself entirely in the service of self-preservation<sup>16</sup>.

Later, in Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, the nonidentical acquires a greater extent. Indeed, in Habermas' words, "the non identical stands for all the truth that is hit upon by concepts, beyond their abstract scope (...) The utopia of knowledge would be to open up what is nonconceptual by means of concepts, without making it identical with them" (Habermas, 1983: 104).

Adorno envisages practical consequences if a different kind of thought is posed, that is, a non-identical seeking-thought. Indeed, for Adorno the principle of exchange that organizes bourgeois society is the way in which the principle of identity attains

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<sup>15</sup> Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, 1997, Verso, Great Britain.

<sup>16</sup> In Habermas' view, for Adorno and Horkheimer modern science "rejected any emphatic claim to theoretical knowledge in favor of technical utility" (Habermas, 1991: 111). In regard to morality and law, they believe that reason has been driven out of their domains "because, with the collapse of religious-metaphysical world views, all normative standards have lost their credit before the single remaining authority – science" (Habermas, 1991: 111). Finally, according to Habermas, "Horkheimer and Adorno want to demonstrate with their analysis of mass culture that *art* fused with entertainment has been hobbled in its innovative force and emptied of all critical and utopian content" (Habermas, 1991: 112).

universal dominance. In Adorno's words, "In exchange [bourgeois society] finds its social model; through it nonidentical individual natures and achievements become commensurable, identical. The exploitation of the principle (of exchange) relates the whole world to what is identical, toward a totality" (Habermas, 1983: 109).

In this sense, for Adorno, philosophy's role consists in developing a totalizing critique that would open up "the prospect of that magically invoked 'remembrance of nature in the subject in whose fulfillment the unacknowledged truth of all cultures lies hidden (...)" (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 40). As Habermas sees it, Adorno's philosophy aims to turn identity thinking against itself in order for it to become pressed into continual self-denial so that the wounds it inflicts on itself and its objects can be seen. For Habermas, "This exercise quite rightly bears the name negative dialectics because Adorno practices determinate negations unremittingly, even though it has lost any foothold in the categorical network of Hegelian Logic" (Habermas, 1991: 186).

Despite the extant differences between Adorno and Derrida's conception of philosophy, for Habermas, Adorno's perspective also traps itself into the paradox in which every totalizing critique of reason seems to fall. Indeed, the critique itself does not have any other option but to be developed using the same tools declared to be ineffective. For Habermas, if Adorno's critique does not want to renounce the effect of a final unmasking and still want to continue with critique, it has to leave room for a concrete and determinate rational criterion for its explanation of the corruption of the other criteria. In the absent of this, as Habermas notes, Adorno can only recur to art. As Habermas puts it, "Discursive thought cannot identify itself as the decadent form of this knowledge by means of its own resources; for this purpose, the aesthetic experience gained in contact with avant-garde art is needed" (Habermas, 1991: 186). But, for Habermas, this move constitutes another case of the turn to the irrational as a final way out for philosophy, because, from this perspective, philosophy can only say what it is not and does not want to be. Ultimately, for Habermas, Adorno also reduces philosophy to the status of a mere critique. The four strands of criticism that in 1971 Habermas had indicated philosophy seemed destined to take after Hegel's death take a concrete shape in Adorno's thoughts. As Habermas had indicated in a quote worthy of being repeated,

Critical of 'first philosophy', it dispenses with ultimate grounding and affirmative interpretations of being as a whole. Critical of the traditional determination of the relationship of theory and practice, it apprehends itself as the reflective element of social activity. Critical in equal measure of the claims to totality made by metaphysical knowledge and by religious interpretations of the world, it is, with its radical critique of religion, the basis for absorbing the utopian contents of both religious tradition and the cognitive interests in emancipation. Finally, critical of the elitist self-understanding of the philosophical tradition, it takes its stand on universal enlightenment – including itself. At this point, of course, the questions arise whether on the way toward critique and self-critique philosophy has not been robbed of its content, and whether ultimately (...) it offers only the empty exercise of a self-reflection that takes up the objects of its own

tradition without still being capable of any systematic idea (Habermas, 1983: 14).

All these philosophical movements of the twentieth century reach the same conclusion: whether in the name of negative dialectics (Adorno), or the destruction of metaphysics (Heidegger) or deconstruction (Derrida) or edifying conversations (Rorty), philosophy, in one way or another, is proclaimed to be dead. It is, thus, on the context of these pessimistic and fatalistic possibilities that Habermas develops his own account on the appropriate possibilities and limits of philosophy.

To be sure, the coherent picture of Habermas' thoughts about the role of philosophy that has been presented is not completely accurate. There is a crucial change that occurs between his first remarks from 1971, his thoughts from 1988, and his current reflections on the subject. Nonetheless, this difference does not amount so much to a conceptual revision as it does to an acknowledgement from Habermas of new "world-situations". Indeed, while in 1971 Habermas referred to the "collapse of religious consciousness"<sup>17</sup>, in 1988 he expressed his concern for "the spark of a renewal of metaphysics"<sup>18</sup>.

Habermas has in mind three different cases. First, Habermas is thinking about 'serious movements of thought' that try to develop two different versions of metaphysics; one which asserts "itself in the wake of Kant (...) [and] one that is blatantly scrambling back behind Kant's transcendental dialectic" (Habermas, 1996: 28)<sup>19</sup>. Second, Habermas is considering the case of the New Age movements that, ironically, "fill the need for the lost One and Whole by abstractly invoking the authority of a scientific system that is becoming more opaque" (Habermas, 1996:29)<sup>20</sup>. Finally, Habermas also counts among these recent cases of the metaphysical renewing the

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<sup>17</sup> By that time Habermas saw a massive loss of the religious certainty of salvation. In his own words, "In the industrially advanced societies we observe for the first time as a mass phenomenon the loss of the hope in redemption and the expectation of grace (...) For the first time the mass of the population has been shaken in the basic levels of securing its identity; in limit situations it cannot get away from a fully secularized everyday awareness and have recourse to institutionalized or at least deeply internalized certainties" (Habermas, 1983: 18).

<sup>18</sup> For Habermas, "(...) the wave of restoration that has rolled over the Western world for a good decade is also washing an issue up on shore that has accompanied modernity from the beginning: the imitation substantiality of a metaphysics renewed one more time" (Habermas, 1996: 9). Now, as it was mentioned before, Habermas is deeply interested in what seems to be "a new, hitherto unexpected, political importance" of religious traditions and communities of faith (Habermas, 2009:114). To what extent there is, however, a conceptual revision is something that will be evaluated in the following chapters.

<sup>19</sup> The second chapter of Habermas' *Postmetaphysical Thinking Philosophical essays* is dedicated to the discussion of an example of these alternatives, namely, Dieter Henrich's advocacy of a metaphysic capable of enduring after Kant. See *Metaphysics after Kant* (Habermas, 1996: 10-27).

<sup>20</sup> However, already in 1971 Habermas noted the existence of what he called 'ersatz religions'. As he puts it, "Many small subcultural ersatz religions are forming in marginal groups that are extraordinarily differentiated geographically, socially, and with respect to content. These ersatz religions range from transcendental meditation to new communal rituals and half-scientific training programs to collective self-help organizations (often with goals that are only apparently pragmatic) to small activist groups trying to transform the world under the sign of political theology, anarchism, or sexual politics" (Habermas, 1983: 18).



scientific approach that by “elevating empirical scientific thinking itself to the position of an absolute betrayed itself in this antimetaphysical furor” (Habermas, 1996: 28).

In the light of this renewal of metaphysics Habermas thinks that the philosophy of the twentieth century, that is, analytic philosophy (Rorty), phenomenology (Heidegger), post-structuralism (Derrida) and Western Marxism (Adorno) is not able to offer a proper philosophical response. For Habermas, these philosophical movements, especially the three latter, end up posing a *negative metaphysics* that encircles “that which metaphysics had always intended and had always failed to achieve” (Habermas, 1996: 28)<sup>21</sup>. Habermas thinks that a corollary of not being able to develop a proper and affirmative notion of philosophy is the arising of an empty space that is being filled by such a renewal of metaphysics.

In Habermas’ view, the common mistake made by Rorty, Heidegger, Derrida and Adorno is to target an inexistent ‘enemy’. As Habermas puts it,

They are still battling against the ‘strong’ concepts of theory, truth, and system that have actually belonged to the past for over a century and a half (...) They believe they have to tear philosophy away from the madness of expounding a theory that has the last word. Such a comprehensive, closed, and definitive system of propositions would have to be formulated in a language that is self-explanatory, that neither needs nor permits commentary, and thus that brings to a standstill the effective history in which interpretations are heaped upon interpretations without end (...) If reason were bound, under penalty of demise, to hold on to these goals of metaphysics classically pursued from Parmenides to Hegel, if reason as such (even after Hegel) stood before the alternative of either maintaining the strong concepts of theory, truth, and system that were common in the great tradition or of throwing in the sponge, then an adequate critique of reason would really have to grasp the roots at such a depth that it could scarcely avoid the paradoxes of self-referentiality (Habermas, 1991: 408).

For Habermas, from a historical point of view, it is as if they were living in the shadow of the “last” philosopher, as the first generation of Hegelian disciples were (Habermas, 1991: 408). Nonetheless, for Habermas, philosophy’s universalistic questions, as well as its truth claims, are now posed in a very different way. In this sense, although philosophy’s questions continue to be reflected as universal propositions, its truth claims are not raised in a zero-context area. Contrarily, “They are raised here and now and are open to criticism. Hence we reckon upon the trivial possibility that they will be revised tomorrow or someplace else (...) so little is this totalitarian, that there is no call for a totalizing critique of reason against it” (Habermas, 1991: 409).

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<sup>21</sup> According to Habermas, a negative metaphysics is a perspective that still retains an extramundane perspective of a God’s eye view however applied to radically deny “everything that metaphysics once affirmed with the concept of the universal One (...) that the whole is the false, that everything is contingent, that there is no consolation whatsoever” (Habermas, 1996, 145).

In the three following sections, I will expand the stronger claims involved in Habermas' quotes. First, I will recall the main aspects that, for Habermas, characterized metaphysical thinking (III). Then, after presenting, in the same section, Habermas' reasons to claim that metaphysics is untenable, I will describe the new context on which a postmetaphysical thinking has to be posed (IV). Finally, in the concluding section of the chapter, I will expound the roles and purposes that, according to Habermas, philosophy can have in the postmetaphysical context previously described (V).

### III

Habermas uses the expression 'metaphysical' to "designate the thinking of a philosophical idealism that goes back to Plato and extends by way of Plotinus and Neo-Platonism, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, Cusanus and Pico de Mirandola, Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz, up to Kant, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel" (Habermas, 1996, 29). To be sure, Habermas himself is aware of being simplifying and neglecting 'the Aristotelian line" (Ibid). However, he clearly wants to affirm that philosophy itself, from Plato to Hegel, has been deeply metaphysical. Even the allegedly antimetaphysical philosophical movements such as ancient materialism and skepticism as well as medieval nominalism and modern empiricism, remain, for Habermas, within the very same conceptual framework established by metaphysical thinking itself (Ibid)<sup>22</sup>.

Three aspects define the 'horizon of possible thought' set by metaphysics. These aspects are, "the theme of unity within philosophy of origins, the equation of being with thought, and the redemptive significance of the contemplative life; in short, identity thinking, the doctrine of ideas, and the strong concept of theory" (Habermas, 1996, 29)<sup>23</sup>.

"The One and the Many', unity and plurality, designates the theme that has governed metaphysics from its inception" (Habermas, 1996:115), says Habermas. How the one and the many are related is, thus, the question around which metaphysics has always revolved. Metaphysics responds to the problem by tracing the plurality of beings back to one single and unique element. Metaphysical thinking is, because of this, identity thinking.

Metaphysical thinking, thus, privileges the One, the unity, the identity through which all the diversity of the world can be reduced. Although "the One" has had different names and characterizations (a World-Transcendent Creator God, an Essential Ground

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<sup>22</sup> In this sense, all these antimetaphysical movements, as well as many contemporary philosophies that resemble them, might be described as "negative metaphysical thoughts". See note 21

<sup>23</sup> There are many conceptual similarities between the elements indicated here and the aspects that, according to Habermas, characterized philosophical thinking until Hegel's death. See Table. 1. *Philosophy's characteristics before and after Hegel*. Almost three out of four aspects seem to be repeated, although the explanation is now subtler. Indeed, the notion of philosophy as a theoretical and elitist foundational science is clearly maintained. In contrast, philosophy's functions of legitimation and philosophy's relation to religious' claims for salvation and redemption seem to be conceived very differently. In his characterization of metaphysics, Habermas does not mention anything about the lack of criticism of traditions that, according to him in his previous essay, characterized philosophy before Hegel. Nevertheless, one could assume that since those functions of legitimation depended upon the strong link between practical and theoretical philosophy, a relation that as we will see Habermas still mentions characterizes metaphysics, this aspect is also maintained. Trying to establish some correspondence with philosophy's relation to religious claims for salvation and redemption will be much more problematic, though.

of Nature, the Idea of the Good, the First Mover, *Summon Ens*, the Unconditioned, the Absolute Spirit, the Being of beings, etc.), its functionality within every case of metaphysical thought has always remained constant: it is the element that unites all innerworldly things and events as determinate and concrete parts of a totality.

Therefore, all things and events, despite their differences, are made univocal as particular entities belonging to a single whole; something that occurs at two levels, namely, a logical level and an ontological. In Habermas' words,

The one and the many, abstractly conceived as the relationship of identity and difference, is the fundamental relation that metaphysical thinking comprehends both as logical and as ontological: 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 (Habermas, 1996: 30).

As an identity thinking metaphysics both resembles and differentiates from mythical narratives. Habermas defines myth as a system of interpretation that comprehends nature and the human world at once. In Habermas' words, "The deeper one penetrates into the network of a mythical interpretation of the world, the more strongly the totalizing power of the "savage mind" stands out" (Habermas, 1984: 45).

This totalizing power indicates two interrelated dimensions. On the one hand, myths have abundant and precise information about their natural and social environments. Myth's information refers to knowledge about geography, astronomy, meteorology, flora, fauna, economical and technical issues, kinship relations, rites, healing practices, waging war, etc. On the other hand, the totalizing power of myths refers to the way that such a great amount of information is organized. The basic notions with which myths operate organize this information "in such a way that every individual appearance in the world, in its typical aspects, resembles or contrasts with every other appearance. Through these *contrast and similarity relations* the multiplicity of observations is united in a totality" (Habermas, 1984: 45-46).

Thus, although metaphysical thinking continues to be a totalizing perspective that develops a view of the whole, the way in which these perspective and view are developed changes substantially. Indeed, myths recollected the origin of everything in a primordial scene that constituted what is first in the world. In metaphysical thinking, in contrast, "these beginnings are removed from the dimensions of space and time, and abstracted into something first which, as the infinite, stands over and against the world of the finite and forms its basis" (Habermas, 1996: Ibid).

In this sense, the abstraction achieved by metaphysical thinking conceives the unifying order, which is at the basis of the multiplicity of phenomena, as having a conceptual nature. (Habermas, 1996: 30). This is, in other words, the idealist aspect of metaphysical thinking or, as Habermas put it before, the doctrine of ideas that equates being with thought.

Once every phenomenon is related to the one and the whole,

everything innerworldly must be made univocal as a being that is identical with itself, i.e., as an object that is in each case particular. And the explanation for the phenomena that have become objects cannot be sought at the level of the phenomena themselves but only in something that underlies the phenomena – in essences, ideas, forms, or substances, which, like the one and the whole, are themselves of a conceptual nature (Habermas, 1996: 118-119).

As previously mentioned, for metaphysical thinking the relation between the one and the many is both ontological and logical. Therefore, besides first beginning or origin, the one is also the first reason or ground or, as Habermas puts it, ‘the concept of the concept’ (Habermas, 1996: 119).

This new way of developing a totalizing perspective is, for Habermas, the result of a “heroic effort of thought” that went “from the grammatical form and conceptual level of narrations to that of deductive explanation modeled after geometry” (Habermas, 1996: 30).

With this remark, Habermas wants to highlight that metaphysical thinking made possible for the first time a transcendental perspective able to distinguish between the totality of what is and the particular things and events; something that mythological narratives could not do in virtue of its underdeveloped level of conceptual abstractions.

In myths, nature and culture are not properly distinguished. In this sense, mythical narratives present, on the one hand, an anthropomorphic nature, and, on the other, a naturalized and reified culture. As Habermas puts it, myths do not allow “for basic conceptual distinctions between things and persons, inanimate and animate; between objects that can be manipulated and agents to whom we ascribe actions and linguistic utterances” (Habermas, 1991, 115). In addition, mythical interpretations of the world do not separate the notions of ‘true’, and ‘false’, ‘good’, and ‘evil’, from the notions of ‘exchange’, ‘causality’, ‘health’, ‘substance’, ‘wealth’ and others alike. Finally, in Habermas’ view, myths do not develop a complete distinction between language and world: the linguistic worldview, says Habermas, “remains interwoven with the order of the world” (Habermas, 1991, 115).

Myth’s deficient level of conceptual abstractions has a crucial consequence: insofar as mythical worldviews cannot be understood by ‘mythical humans’ as interpretative systems attached to cultural traditions, those worldviews admit neither criticism nor revision. In this sense, revising and criticizing a mythical tradition immediately implies a danger to the order of things and to the identity of the tribe whose existence is completely organized by such myth.

In contrast, the conceptual abstractions developed by metaphysical thinking made possible new interpretations and distinctions not seen before. In Habermas’ words,

Through the powerful abstraction of positing a concept of being different from the entities “inside” the world, the human mind gains an

extramundane point of reference, a distancing perspective, from which the agitated in-one-another and against-one-another of concrete events and phenomena are joined together in a stable whole that is itself freed from the mutability of occurrences (Habermas, 1996: 118).

Once such an extra-mundane point of reference is posited, a new manner of living, based upon the theoretical attitude of the person able to develop an 'intuition of the cosmos', emerges as the most valuable. Metaphysic's transcendental perspective makes possible the affirmation of the *bios theoretikos*, that is, the redemptive significance of the contemplative life or the strong concept of theory as a third aspect of metaphysical thinking.

The primacy of theory over praxis results in the recommendation of contemplation as the most authentic path to salvation. For metaphysical thinking, the *bios theoretikos* "stands at the pinnacle of ancient forms of life, above the *vita activa* of the statesman, the pedagogue, or the physician. Theory itself is affected by being embedded in an exemplary form of life. For the few, it offers a privileged access to truth, while for the many the path to theoretical knowledge remains closed" (Habermas, 1996, 32). This privileged access to truth demands the renunciation of the natural attitude toward the world, because that is the only way to make possible contact with the extraordinary.

In some sense, this latter element of metaphysical thinking is closely related to two aspects that already in 1971 Habermas had identified as characteristics of an old-fashioned mode of philosophizing, namely, the style of thought tied up to individual erudition and personal testimony and the philosophy's elitist self-understanding<sup>24</sup>.

Indeed, the path toward the *bios theoretikos* cannot be walked by anyone; there are, as a matter of fact, many persons naturally excluded. And, if it is the case that some particular individual is able to go all the way, a new congregation of followers has to be founded in order to keep alive the lessons of the Master. Thus, closely related to the Dominicans, the Franciscans, the Jesuits, the Salesians, etc., we would have the Platonists, the Pythagoreans, the Epicureans, the Cartesians, the Kantians, the Hegelians, the Nietzscheans, the Heideggerians, the Derrideans, etc.

The strong concept of theory that results, at a practical level, in the redemptive significance of the contemplative life, is thus the third element that characterizes metaphysical thinking. The other two, let us remember, are identity thinking and idealism.

It is noteworthy that for Habermas the history of metaphysics has a crucial shade, i.e., the emergence of the philosophy of consciousness. In this sense, despite

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<sup>24</sup> It is harder, though, to try to reconcile this element with Habermas' claim that philosophy, before Hegel, did not offer any promise of redemption or salvation similar to religion. In Habermas' own words, "Each of the great world religions stakes out a privileged and particularly demanding path to the attainment of individual salvation – e.g., the way to salvation of the wandering Buddhist monk or that of the Christian hermit. Philosophy recommends as its path to salvation the life dedicated to contemplation – the *bios theoretikos* (...). The sacred origins of theory linger on in the contemplative presentation of the proportions of stellar orbits and cosmic cycles in general – *theoros* denoted the representative sent by the Greek cities to the public festivals" (Habermas, 1996: 32-33). Thus, for Habermas, "the thinking of the philosophy or origins did indeed have an emancipator meaning" (Habermas, 1996: 120). The evolution of the relation between Habermas' philosophy and religion will be analyzed in the next chapter.

the deep criticism directed by nominalism and empiricism against metaphysics (especially against the first two elements), as Habermas puts it,

In a counter maneuver, idealist philosophy renewed both identity thinking and the doctrine of Ideas on the new foundation that was exposed by the shift in paradigms from ontology to mentalism: subjectivity, Self-consciousness, the relationship of the knowing subject to itself, has since Descartes offered the key to the inner and absolutely certain sphere of the representations we have of objects. Thus, in German idealism metaphysical thinking could take the form of theories of subjectivity” (Habermas, 1996: 31).

In regard to identity thinking, the unity and the reference to the whole and the one were guaranteed either by the notion of self-consciousness (Kant) or by the notion of spirit (Hegel). In Habermas’ words: “Either self-consciousness is put into a foundational position as the spontaneous source of transcendental accomplishments, or as spirit it is itself elevated to the position of the absolute” (Habermas, 1996: 32).

Similarly, metaphysics’ idealism is now maintained through the categorical determinations of a productive reason developed by a generative subjectivity. As Habermas puts it, “Whether reason is now approached in foundationalist terms as a subjectivity that makes possible the world as a whole, or whether it is conceived dialectically as a spirit that recovers itself in a procession through nature and history, in either case reason is active as a simultaneously totalizing and self-referential reflection” (Habermas, 1996: 32).

Finally, philosophy of consciousness also incorporates the metaphysical strong concept of theory. In this sense, although now theory is not connected to sacred occurrences that guarantee salvation, “[w]hat remains is the idealistic interpretation placed on distancing the everyday network of experience and interests” (Habermas, 1996: 33). Such a distancing becomes a methodic attitude that should save the scientist or scholar from being trapped inside the net of local prejudices. Theory, therefore, continues to be understood in an absolutistic and pure way, that is, one that conceives it as elevated above experience and the specialized scientific disciplines and, at the same time, sees it “purged cathartically of all traces of its earthly origin” (Habermas, 1996: 33).

Although philosophy of consciousness constituted, for Habermas, a renewal of metaphysical thinking, it also constituted its exhaustion. Habermas regards philosophy of consciousness as a final attempt to maintain a sort of thinking, metaphysical thinking, under social and historical conditions of an epoch that, at the end, will render it untenable.

This new epoch is modernity. For Habermas, “Modernity is characterized by a rejection of the substantive rationality typical of religious and metaphysical worldviews and by a belief in procedural rationality and its ability to give credence to our views in the three areas of objective knowledge, moral-practical insights, and aesthetic judgment” (Habermas, 1990: 3-4). Habermas accepts Weber’s characterization of

modernity as the separation of the religious and metaphysical substantive reason into three different and autonomous spheres: science, morality and art.

There are, however, two additional elements that go along with such processes of differentiation. First, with modernity emerges a new consciousness of time that, secondly, forces the search for a new criterion of self-reassurance created for and by modernity itself.

Habermas is not unaware that the term 'modern' has a long and complex history. He acknowledges, following Hans Robert Jauss<sup>25</sup> that the word 'modern' had already been used for the first time in the late 5<sup>th</sup> century "in order to distinguish the present, which had become officially Christian from the Roman and pagan past. With varying content, the term 'modern' again and again expresses the consciousness of an epoch that relates itself to the past of antiquity, in order to view itself as the result of a transition from the old to the new" (Habermas, 1991b: 4). Habermas thinks that restricting the concept of 'modernity' to the Renaissance is historically too narrow, since, to remind just two examples, already during the period of Charles the Great, in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, as well as in France of the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, at the time of the famous 'Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes', people conceived themselves as 'modern'. Thus, Habermas concludes, "the term 'modern' appeared and reappeared exactly during those periods in Europe when the consciousness of a new epoch formed itself through a renewed relationship to the ancients-whenver, moreover, antiquity was considered a model to be recovered through some kind of imitation" (Habermas, 1981: 3)

However, in Habermas' view, with the emergence of modern science a new belief in the endless progress of knowledge and in the boundless advance towards social and moral betterment arose as well. Hence, a new form of modernist consciousness appeared, namely, "a radicalized consciousness of modernity which freed itself from all specific historical ties" (Habermas, 1981: 4).

As noted before, this new consciousness is characterized by two interrelated aspects: on the one hand, a new consciousness of time that affirmed the exaltation of the present and, on the other, the need for a new criterion of self-reassurance created for and by modernity itself. In Habermas' words,

the secular concept of modernity expresses the conviction that the future has already begun: It is the epoch that lives for the future, that opens itself up to the novelty of the future (...) [Thus], modernity can and will no longer borrow the criteria by which it takes its orientation from the models

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<sup>25</sup> According to Jauss' research, "The earliest known use of the word *modernus* dates to the 490s, the period of transition from ancient Rome to the new Christian world, so one cannot help but wonder whether this new word testifies to an awareness that antiquity has ended and the Christian age begun. In the earliest sources, the word has nothing more than a technical meaning; it marks the boundaries of the current, which is what one might expect from its etymological origins. *Modernus* is derived from *modo* (as *hodiernus* is from *hodie*), and *modo*, at this time, meant something more than "merely" or "only" or "just this moment." In all probability, it already meant now," as well, which is how it survives in the romance languages (Jauss, 333: 2005) [See, "Modernity and Literary Tradition", Hans Robert Jauss Source: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Winter 2005), pp. 329-364 Published by: The University of Chicago Press. This cannot be, of course, Habermas' reference. Habermas refers to *Literarische Tradition und gegenwärtiges Bewusstsein der Moderne* in Jauss, *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1970.

supplied by another epoch; it has to create its normativity out of itself”  
(Habermas, 1991:5-7)

At a philosophical level, for Habermas, Hegel was the first philosopher who developed a clear concept of modernity because he was the first to conceive, as a philosophical problem, “the process of detaching modernity from the suggestion of norms lying outside of itself in the past” (Habermas, 1991: 16). For Hegel, indeed, modernity’s self-reassurance was not only a philosophical problem; it was *the* fundamental problem of his philosophy.

Kant, as it is known, was well aware of the dissolution of the substantialist notion of reason that belonged to the metaphysical tradition. Kant, in this sense, “puts the concept of a reason that divides up into its moments, the unity of which now has only a formal character” (Habermas, 1991:18). Kant, however, was not able to see those differentiations within reason as diremptions and fissures produced by a historical process that, at the same time, called for unification. Developing this perspective is, for Habermas, Hegel’s great value. In Habermas’ words, “Until Hegel, metaphysical thinking was cosmologically oriented; nature was identical with the totality of beings. Now, the sphere of history is supposed to be integrated into this totality” (Habermas, 1996: 130).

Hegel’s transformation of philosophy consisted in elevating contemporary history to the rank of philosophy, putting the eternal in touch with the transitory, the atemporal with what is actually taking place (Habermas, 1991: 51). Hegel’s philosophy was, thus, the first to proclaim that philosophy is only the thought of its age. But, this view unavoidably entails the recognition of itself as the thought of its own age. Once philosophy is seen under this new perspective, the door is opened for the devaluation of philosophy’s totalizing and transcendental aims to the extent that even the end of philosophy could be proclaimed. In Habermas’ words, “(...) when the spirit of the age gained ascendancy over philosophy (...) the modern consciousness of time exploded *the form* of philosophical thought” (Habermas, 1991, 52).

As mentioned before, Habermas agrees with Karl Löwith that ‘Not only does Hegel’s work include a philosophy of history and a history of philosophy, but his entire system is historically oriented to an extent which is true of no previous philosophy’ (Löwith, 1991: 31). In addition, Habermas also believes, paraphrasing Löwith, that when the truths of metaphysics are described solely in subjective and historical terms, ‘then it is all over’ (Löwith, 1991: 38). For Habermas, “With historical consciousness Hegel brought a force into play whose subversive power also set his own construction teetering” (Habermas, 1996: 130).

Habermas, thus, has always maintained Hegel as the point of reference to indicate the occurrence of a structural change within philosophical thought. One of Habermas intentions behind the lectures that constitute his book *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* is to show that the basic conceptual aporias of the philosophy of consciousness indicated by the contemporary radical critiques of modernity were



already discussed by Schiller, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel (Habermas, 1991: 205)<sup>26</sup>. In this sense, as Habermas puts it,

Today the situation of consciousness still remains the one brought about by the Young Hegelians<sup>27</sup> when they distanced themselves from Hegel and philosophy in general. And the triumphant gestures of mutually surpassing one another, in which we gladly overlook the fact that we remain contemporaries of the Young Hegelians, have also been in currency since then. Hegel inaugurated the discourse of modernity; the Young Hegelians permanently established it, that is, they freed the idea of a critique nourished on the spirit of modernity from the burden of the Hegelian concept of reason (Habermas, 1991: 53)

The contemporary radical criticism of reason, in Habermas' view, does not take into account that almost 200-years-old counterdiscourse intrinsic in modernity itself. This is why Habermas concludes that Heidegger, Adorno, and Derrida, "still defend themselves as if they were living in the shadow of the "last" philosopher, as did the first generation of Hegelian disciples. They are still battling against the 'strong' concepts of theory, truth, and system that have actually belonged to the past for over a century and a half. (Habermas, 1991: 408)

For Habermas, thus, "our situation is not essentially different from that of the first generation of Hegel's disciples. At that time the basic condition of philosophizing changed; since then there has been no alternative to postmetaphysical thinking" (Habermas, 1996, 29)<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> In particular Habermas has in mind the criticism expounded by French neostructuralism. In Habermas' words: "The challenge from the neostructuralist critique of reason defines the perspective from which I seek to reconstruct here, step by step, the philosophical discourse of modernity" (Habermas, 1991: ix).

<sup>27</sup> The Hegelian School has traditionally been divided into a right wing (the Old Hegelians), and a left wing (the Young Hegelians). According to Löwith, the differentiation was first made by D.F. Strauss (Löwith, 1991: 53). Nonetheless, Löwith also acknowledges that, since then, there has been a great amount of discussion to define the characteristics of each movement as well as the proper belongings. Therefore, to avoid any confusion, in his book, Löwith applies the term "Young Hegelians" to the radical left among Hegel's pupils and successors, and 'Old Hegelians' to those who preserved his historical way of thinking beyond the period of the revolution, through the entire century, each in his own free way" (Löwith, 1991: 54). He also uses the term 'Neo-Hegelians' to indicate those who, in his own period, have rejuvenated Hegelianism. He refers, in this last category, to B. Croce, Dilthey, Windelband, G. Lasson, R. Kroner, Scholz, etc. In addition, for Löwith, the main Old Hegelians are K. Rosenkranz, R. Haym, J.E. Erdmann, K. Fischer, while the Young Hegelians are L. Feuerbach, A. Ruge, K. Marx, M. Stirner, B. Bauer, S. Kierkegaard. Similarly, every time that Habermas uses the term 'Young Hegelians' he especially mentions Feuerbach, Kierkegaard and Marx. See *Lecture III Three Perspectives: Left Hegelians, Right Hegelians, and Nietzsche* (Habermas, 1991: 51-74).

<sup>28</sup> Habermas recognizes that Hegel himself did consider an alternative that, if he had followed, would have placed the dialectic of enlightenment in a different light. Habermas refers to Hegel's early Jena period in which Hegel was able to grasp some traces of communicative reason. See Habermas, 1991, 27-31.

In addition, Habermas strengthens this perspective by indicating four corrosive sources that have also contributed to the shattering of metaphysical thinking. These four corrosive sources “refer to historical developments that have come to [metaphysical thinking] from outside and have in the final analysis been socially conditioned” (Habermas, 1996: 33).

#### IV

The three elements that characterize metaphysical thinking, namely, identity thinking, idealism, and the strong concept of theory found a secure place within the main concepts of the philosophy of consciousness. Philosophical thought, thus, remained metaphysical. Hegel's system was the last ontological-epistemological-ethical-political building to be metaphysically constructed.

However, in Habermas' view, there occurred four socially conditioned historical developments that have problematized and shattered any form of metaphysical thought. These four corrosive sources are i) the new type of procedural rationality that displaced the material conception of reason, ii) the historical consciousness that detranscendentalizes and situates reason; iii) the shift from the philosophy of consciousness to the philosophy of language; and iv) the relinquishment of the classical precedence of theory over practice that forces philosophy to forfeit its contact with the extraordinary.

According to Habermas, a new type of rationality, that is, a procedural rationality, “has asserted itself since the seventeenth century through the empirical methods of the natural sciences, and since the eighteenth century through formalism in moral and legal theory as well as in the institutions of the constitutional state” (Habermas, 1996: 33). The philosophy of nature and theories of natural law had to face new requirements for justification. These requirements shattered the cognitive privilege of philosophy and rendered dubious the sort of totalizing thinking that aimed at the one and the whole. Three different levels of this process can be distinguished.

Identity thinking presupposed the existence of a material rationality, that is, a rationality that structured and organized the world and its contents, including nature and history. A material rationality refers to a totality that is rational in itself (as the world as such or as a world-constituting subjectivity) from which all its parts participate in reason. “Philosophy remains faithful to its metaphysical beginnings as long as it can assume that theoretical reason will rediscover itself in the rationally structured world, or that nature and history are given a rational structure by reason itself” (Habermas, 1996: 34). However, modern empirical science presupposed an opposed notion of rationality because this notion is now completely dependent upon the procedural rules of the scientific method. Insofar as the metaphysical rationality of contents evaporates into the validity of results, rationality, according to Habermas, is reduced now to something formal. The validity of the results is guaranteed by the rationality of the procedures used for solving the problems (empirical-theoretical or moral-practical). In Habermas' words, “(...) what counts as rational is solving problems successfully through procedurally suitable dealings with reality. Procedural rationality can no longer guarantee an *antecedent* unity in the manifold of appearances” (Habermas, 1996: 35).

At a second level, instead of the difference between essence and appearance we have now the perspectival difference between outside and inside. This new differentiation grounds a methodological separation between the natural sciences (observer or outsider perspective) and the humanities (participant or insider perspective). Indeed, while to the empirical sciences corresponds an objectifying approach to nature based on observation, to the humanities, or the hermeneutical sciences, corresponds the performative attitude of a participant in communication. Thus, as Habermas puts it, “the knowledge of essences that explicates networks of meanings finds no hold on an objectified nature; and the hermeneutical replacement for it is now available only for that sphere of nonbeing in which, according to the conception of metaphysics, the ideal essences should never even have been able to get a foothold” (Habermas, 1996: 36).

Finally, at a third level, “(...) the methodically generated knowledge of the modern sciences loses even its characteristic autarky” (Habermas, 1996: 36). Metaphysical thinking, as shown before, was self-referential. It wanted to grasp the totality of nature and history and, simultaneously, to prove and justify itself as philosophical knowledge – “whether providing ultimate foundations or through the spiraling self-explication of the all-encompassing concept” (Habermas, 1996: 36). In contrast, modern science treats its initial premises as hypotheses that have to be justified through their consequences “-whether through empirical confirmation or through their coherence with other statements that are already accepted” (Habermas, 1996: 36). Therefore, instead of the type of knowledge that metaphysical thinking aimed to attain, that is, a comprehensive, definitive and closed system of statements without interpretations, improvements or innovations, the new procedural rationality assumes the fallibilism of scientific theories, that is, “the unprejudiced openness characterizing the cognitive progress of science” (Habermas, 1996: 36).

But, accordingly, idealism cannot be sustained anymore either. Thus, the procedural rationality calls for a situated concept of reason. In this sense, if the first corrosive source, i.e., procedural rationality, rejected identity thinking, the second source, i.e., the situating of reason, breaks away from the metaphysical aspect of idealism. In the nineteenth century, modernity’s new consciousness of time infused the humanities with a historical consciousness that “rendered the *dimension of finiteness* more convincing in comparison to an unsituated reason that had been idealistically apotheosized” (Habermas, 1996: 34).

In Habermas’ view, reason came to be situated as soon as the first generation of Hegel’s disciples “criticized in the work of their teacher the secret preponderance of what is universal, supratemporal, and necessary over what is particular, variable, and accidental, and thus the idealistic casting given to the concept of reason” (Habermas, 1996: 39).

In this sense, instead of a transcendental concept of reason, the Young Hegelians sought to affirm the priority of what is objective (Feuerbach), the prevalence of material production and social relations (Marx), and the precedence of one’s own existence and will (Kierkegaard). Thus, in the name of objectivity, finitude and facticity, the Young Hegelians made room for a concept or reason “produced in natural history, incarnated bodily, situated socially, and contextualized historically” (Habermas, 1996: 39-40).

Another crucial step of this process was the development of the new cultural sciences that rendered impossible the extramundane perspective of a transcendental subjectivity to which the metaphysical characteristics of universality, supratemporality and necessity were attributed. In Habermas' words, "In their object realms, these sciences encounter formations that are already prestructured symbolically and that possess, as it were, the dignity of products resulting from transcendental accomplishments. Nevertheless, they are supposed to be subjected to a purely empirical analysis" (Habermas, 1996: 40). In Habermas' view, the epistemological significance that Historicism and *Lebensphilosophie* attributed to traditions, to aesthetic experience, and to the bodily, social, and historical individual's existence caused the disappearance of the classical concept of the transcendental subject.

In short, for Habermas, situating reason ultimately amounts to detranscendentalize it, or, in other words, to historicize and individuate the transcendental subject. Something that, in his view, is only accomplished with success with the transition to a new paradigm, namely, a paradigm of mutual understanding (*Verständigung*) (Habermas, 1996: 43). In Habermas' words, "From the possibility of reaching understanding linguistically, we can read off a concept of situated reason that is given voice in validity claims that are both context-dependent and transcendent" (Habermas, 1996: 139). The linguistic turn, in this sense, offered the conceptual tools to develop an analysis of a reason embodied in communicative action.

For Habermas, the transition from the paradigm of the philosophy of consciousness to the new paradigm of the philosophy of language had methodological advantages as well as benefits from the standpoint of content. These advantages interrupted "the circle of a hopeless to-and-fro between metaphysical and antimetaphysical thinking, i.e., between idealism and materialism" (Habermas, 1996: 44). Among these advantages, there are three highly relevant that explain why the linguistic turn succeeds at positing a situated concept of reason.

First, philosophy of language does not have to deal with the problem of explaining how self-consciousness can relate to itself without objectifying itself, and thus, losing its spontaneity. "Since Nietzsche, the fundamental conceptual necessity of objectification and self-objectification has also served as the target of a critique, extending to modern conditions of life in general, of thought that control or instrumental reason" (Habermas, 1996: 44). In Habermas' view, behind the radical criticism of reason presented by Heidegger and Derrida, lies nothing but an exaggerated focus on the philosophy of the subject. In other words, these philosophers did not take seriously the change of paradigm. Ultimately, for Habermas, they do not go beyond the philosophy of the subject<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> According to Habermas, "Although Heidegger in his *first* step destructs the philosophy of the subject in favor of a frame of reference, that first makes possible subject-object relationships, in his *second* step he falls back into the conceptual constraints of the philosophy of the subject, as he endeavors to make the world intelligible on its own terms as a process of world-occurrence. For the solipsistically posited Dasein once again occupies the place of transcendental subjectivity" (Habermas, 1991: 150). Also, discussing Derrida's inversion of Husserlian foundationalism through the affirmation of the anonymous, history-making productivity of writing, Habermas indicates that "It is important to note that in the course of pursuing this line of thought Derrida by no means breaks with the foundationalist tenacity of the philosophy of the subject; he only makes what it had regarded as fundamental dependent on the still profounder – though now vacillating or oscillating – basis of an originative power set temporally aflow" (Habermas, 1991: 178-179). Briefly put, for Habermas, "Heidegger and Derrida likewise remain caught up in the intention of *Ursprungsphilosophie*" (Habermas, 1991: 296).

Second, the category of language introduces “relations that the socialized organism of a subject capable of speaking and acting already has to the world, before this subject takes up an objectivating relation to something in the world” (Habermas, 1996: 45).

Third, in a more methodological dimension, with the linguistic turn emerges an intersubjective dimension of validity that is susceptible to be ascertained through experimental practice. Furthermore, in Habermas’ words, “a similar objectivation seems to work when the analysis of mental representations and thoughts is undertaken using the grammatical formations with whose help they are expressed. Grammatical expressions are something publicly accessible; one can read structures off from them without having to refer to what is merely subjective” (Habermas, 1996: 45).

Habermas is aware of the different levels in which the linguistic turn has evolved. As he puts it, “Admittedly, at first the linguistic turn was made within the limits of semanticism, that is, at the price of abstractions that kept the problem-solving potential of the new paradigm from being fully exploited” (Habermas, 1996: 46).

The second step of the linguistic turn is, for Habermas, much more fruitful. This second moment refers to the transition to a formal pragmatics able to give an account of the double structure of the linguistic utterances. This perspective finally acknowledges that “Linguistic utterances identify themselves because they are structured self-referentially and comment upon the sense in which the content expressed by them is employed” (Habermas, 1996: 46). Thus, all those elements previously disregarded because of the overemphasis placed by semanticism on the assertoric sentences can finally be brought to light, namely, the speech situation, the employment of language and its context, and the claims, dialogue roles, and positions of the speaker.

The next step, in Habermas’ view refers to “the analysis of universal presuppositions that must be fulfilled if participants in communication are to be able to come to an understanding with each other about something in the world” (Habermas 1996: 46). These pragmatic presuppositions of consensus formation contain strong idealizations, such as the usage of the same linguistic expressions with identical meaning or the validity claims that, although asserted in a given context, are meant to transcend all context-dependent, simply local validity standards. For Habermas, “These and similar idealizing yet unavoidable presuppositions for actual communicative practices possess a normative content that carries the tension between the intelligible and the empirical into the sphere of appearances itself. Counterfactual presuppositions become social facts” (Habermas, 1996: 47)<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> Habermas, nonetheless, does speak of a ‘residue of metaphysics. As he puts it, “Because the idealizing presuppositions of communicative action must not be hypostatized into the ideal of a future condition in which a definitive understanding has been reached, this concept must be approached in a sufficiently skeptical manner. A theory that leads us to believe in the attainability of a rational ideal would fall back behind the level of argumentation reached by Kant. It would also abandon the materialistic legacy of the critique of metaphysics. The moment of unconditionality that is preserved in the discursive concepts of a fallibilistic truth and morality is not an absolute, or it is at most an absolute that has become fluid as a critical procedure. Only with this residue of metaphysics can we do battle against the transfiguration of the world through metaphysical truths the last trace of “*Nihil contra Deum nisi Deus ipse*.” Communicative reason is of course a rocking hull but it does not go under in the sea of contingencies” (Habermas, 1996: 144).

In summary, once we have, instead of subject-objects relations, subjects capable of speaking and acting, there is no choice but to conceive them as already belonging to a linguistically structured and disclosed world. Language appears as something previous and objective for the subjects. It is there and it makes possible their actions. But, simultaneously, such a linguistically structured and disclosed world only becomes “alive” within the concrete practices of reaching understanding developed by the community of speakers and actors. In this sense, natural languages, on the one hand, open the horizons of the concrete worlds in which socialized subjects can appear, and, on the other, force these subjects to their own independent achievements. As Habermas puts it, “a circular process comes into play between the lifeworld as the resource from which communicative action draws, and the lifeworld as the product of this action; in this process, no gap is left by the disappearance of the transcendental subject” (Habermas, 1996: 43)<sup>31</sup>.

Once rationality has become procedural, and once idealism has been dissolved by a situated concept of reason embodied in language, especially as it appears in everyday practices, the path to salvation through the idea of theoretical contemplation seems absolutely closed. In other words, the three previous elements entail the subversion of the classical precedence of theory over practice; which forces philosophy to forfeit its contact with the extraordinary.

The traditional precedence of theory over practice can no longer be sustained because, as Habermas puts it, “the embedding of theoretical accomplishments in the practical contexts of their genesis and employment gave rise to an awareness of the relevance of everyday contexts of action and communication” (Habermas, 1996: 34). Habermas’ notion of a ‘lifeworld background’ is meant to provide philosophical status to these contexts<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> At the beginning of the chapter it was shown how, for Habermas, analytic philosophy, phenomenology, Western Marxism and structuralism constitute the most important contemporary philosophical movements. Nonetheless, Habermas also sees pragmatism and hermeneutics as important and indispensable agents of contemporary philosophy. For Habermas, they played a crucial role in the developing of the linguistic turn. As he puts it, “Pragmatism and hermeneutics oust the traditional notion of the solitary subject that confronts objects and becomes reflective only by turning itself into an object. In its place they put an idea of cognition that is mediated by language and linked to action (...) Pragmatism and hermeneutics, then, accord a higher position to acting and speaking than to knowing” (Habermas, 1990: 9). However, Habermas wants to deny Rorty’s interpretation of pragmatism and hermeneutics that seems to imply “the abnegation by philosophical thought of any claim to rationality and indeed for the abnegation of philosophy per se” (Habermas, 1990: 9). In contrast, according to Habermas’ interpretation of them, they “mark the beginning of a new paradigm that, while discarding the mentalistic language game of the philosophy of consciousness, retains the justificatory modes of that philosophy in the modest, self-critical form in which I have presented them” (Habermas, 1990: 11). In Habermas’ view, the emphasis that pragmatism and hermeneutics put on the web of everyday life and communication surrounding “our” cognitive achievements make possible the affirmation of an epistemic authority to the community of those who cooperate and speak with one another. The efforts of pragmatism and hermeneutics have allowed us to see that, in Habermas’ words, “Everyday communication makes possible a kind of understanding that is based on claims to validity and thus furnishes the only real alternative to exerting influence on one another in more or less coercive ways. The validity claims that we raise in conversation that is, when we say something with conviction transcend this specific conversational context, pointing to something beyond the spatiotemporal ambit of the occasion” (Habermas, 1990: 19). These concepts, and the role they play in Habermas’ thought, will be analyzed in more detail in chapter three.

<sup>32</sup> Habermas’ concept of the ‘lifeworld’ is of utmost importance for developing the roles that he thinks philosophy must play. This concept will be dealt with in more detail in chapter four. For now, it can be said that it refers to the ‘background environment’ of competences, practices, attitudes, traditions, assumptions etc. that exist ‘behind us’ and that makes possible all our acts of communication. For Habermas, “individual life histories and intersubjectively shared forms of life are joined together in the structures of the lifeworld and have a part in its totalization. The

Nonetheless, Habermas also indicates other efforts to reveal the internal connections between the pre-scientific practices and the subsequent scientific theories. Among these efforts Habermas lists the following: - Pragmatism (from Peirce to Quine), - Hermeneutics (from Dilthey to Gadamer), - Scheler's sociology of knowledge, - Husserl's analysis of the lifeworld, - Merleau-Ponty and Apel's anthropology of knowledge, and Kuhn's postempiricist theory of science.

Without the classical precedence of theory over practice, philosophy cannot justify anymore its privileged access to truth. There is no need of anyone establishing the ultimate groundings of all knowledge. Thus, the recommendation of contemplation as the most authentic path to salvation becomes senseless. There is simply nothing extra-ordinary to be attained by philosophy. Philosophy, ultimately, withdraws into the system of sciences and establishes itself as one academic discipline among others.

In summary, a procedural rationality situated on the achievements of the linguistic turn forms the context in which a postmetaphysical philosophy should find its purpose and roles. These will not be directed toward the extraordinary, but toward the ordinary practices of every day communication.

## V

The second time Habermas offers a systematic and explicit reflection on philosophy's role is his 1983 essay 'Philosophy as Stand-In and Interpreter' published in the book *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*<sup>33</sup>. This new perspective constitutes Habermas' definitive account on the issue.

In this text Habermas aims to challenge Richard Rorty's meta-philosophical arguments that criticize the roles Kant had envisaged for philosophy, namely an usher (*Platzanweiser*) and a judge<sup>34</sup>.

As an 'usher', philosophy has the task of showing the sciences their proper places. It is philosophy's responsibility to differentiate the kinds of cognitions that are valid from the invalid ones. "In championing the idea of a cognition *before* cognition, Kantian philosophy sets up a domain between itself and the sciences, arrogating

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horizons of our life histories and forms of life, in which we always already find ourselves, form a porous whole of familiarities that are prereflexively present but retreat in the face of reflexive incursions. (Habermas, 1996: 16)

<sup>33</sup> In this text, instead of Hegel's death, Habermas points to the devaluation of the 'Master Thinkers' as the signal of the uncomfortable situation of present-day philosophy. According to Habermas, 'Master thinkers have fallen on hard times' (Habermas, 1990: 1). With his remark Habermas wants to remind us about the recent critical perspectives developed against Hegel, Marx and Kant. Hegel, as it is known, was 'unmasked' in the forties by Popper as one of the great enemies of the open society. In the case of Marx, Habermas recalls the accusation as a false prophet made by the New Philosophers in the seventies. Finally, about Kant, according to Habermas, "he is being viewed for the first time as a *maitre penseur*, that is, as the magician of a false paradigm from the intellectual constraints of which we have to escape" (Habermas, 1990:1). The term 'New Philosophers' -*nouveaux philosophes*- refers to the generation of French philosophers who broke away from Marxism in the early 1970s. The most important names of this generation are André Glucksmann, Alain Finkielkraut, Bernard-Henri Lévy, Jean-Marie Benoist, Christian Jambet, Guy Lardreau and Jean-Paul Dollé. The expression 'Master Thinkers' is, in fact, the title of one of the books of Glucksmann. In *Les maitres penseurs*, published in 1977 and translated into English as "Master Thinkers" (Harper & Row, 1980), Glucksmann argues that the horrors of the 20th century were, in some sense, derived from the philosophical thoughts of various German philosopher, i.e., Fichte, Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche.

<sup>34</sup> However, as the previous note suggests, in this essay Habermas is also indirectly debating Glucksmann's view and accusations against German philosophy.

authority to itself" (Habermas, 1990:2). Based on this authority, philosophy would clarify the foundations of the sciences through the definition of the limits of what can and cannot be experienced. This role, as can be seen, refers entirely to the legitimation of scientific knowledge.

In contrast, as a judge, philosophy goes beyond the limits of epistemology. In Habermas' view, another result of Kant's critique of pure reason is that it enables us to criticize the abuses of a reason not limited to phenomena. In this sense, Kant's critique "sets up practical reason, judgment, and theoretical cognition in isolation from each other, giving each a foundation unto itself, with the result that philosophy is cast in the role of the highest arbiter for all matters, including culture as a whole" (Habermas, 1990: 2). Thus, as a judge, philosophy is able to determine what belongs to science, what to art, and what to morality. From this perspective philosophy is supposed to be able to know what no one else can know about, for example, the real worth of psychoanalysis, the justice of certain laws or even economic policies, the value of literary criticism, the reasonability of religion doctrines, etc.

Although Habermas agrees with Rorty in that those roles are "too big" for philosophy, Habermas wants to defend philosophy's claim to reason with the more modest roles of a stand-in (*Platzhalter*) and a mediating interpreter. Ultimately, Habermas' perspective is a correction of Kant's in the sense that instead of an usher (*Platzanweiser*) Habermas proposes a Stand-in (*Platzhalter*), and, instead of a judge, Habermas proposes a mediating interpreter<sup>35</sup>.

In his 1971 essay, Habermas' notion of a philosophy as a substantive critique of science was inspired by a deeper goal, namely, to develop "a philosophical thought in communication with the sciences" (Habermas, 1983: 18). Although Habermas' idea of the purpose of philosophy has become broader, such aim is not lost. Indeed, philosophy in its role of a Stand-in would develop a successful cooperative integration with the sciences.

The emergence of a procedural rationality forces philosophy to determine in a new form its relationship to science. For Habermas,

Philosophy has to implicate itself in the fallibilistic self-understanding and procedural rationality of the empirical sciences (...) Only thus can philosophy contribute its best to a nonexclusive division of labor, namely, its persistent tenacity in posing questions universalistically and its procedure of rationally reconstructing the intuitive pretheoretical

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<sup>35</sup> Although it is unlikely that Habermas has in mind a legal institution when he differentiates philosophy as a judge from philosophy as a mediator, the differences between a judge and a mediator in legal theory and legal practice might be useful to have an overall understanding of Habermas' main point. A judge decides cases as they are presented before her. She is supposed to have the privileged knowledge to determine, from a legal perspective, who is right and who is wrong, or, in other words, who has the right. The parties present their arguments to the judge, but she makes final decision. In contrast, mediation is a form of alternative dispute resolution (ADR). It is a form of resolving disputes between two or more parties. The role of the mediator is not to decide. What the mediator looks for, instead, is to open and promote a dialogue between the parties, to assist them to negotiate their own settlement. As we will see, for Habermas, today, "Philosophy must operate under conditions of rationality that it has not chosen. It is for this reason unable, even in the role of an interpreter, to reclaim some sort of access to essential insights that is privileged in relation to science, morality, or art; it now disposes only over knowledge that is fallible" (Habermas, 1996: 18).



knowledge of competently speaking, acting, and judging subjects (...) This dowry recommends philosophy as an indispensable partner in the collaboration of those who are concerned with a theory of rationality” (Habermas, 1996: 38).

Once philosophy leaves behind its “claim to a privileged access to truth, or to a method, and object realm, or even just a style of intuition that is specifically its own” (Habermas, 1996: 38), pretending to be an usher is not possible anymore. However, its ‘persistent tenacity’ for making universal questions, makes possible philosophy’s role as a ‘stand-in”. In this role, philosophy would be ‘keeping the seat’ and standing in for empirical theories with strong universalistic claims. In many ways, the history of philosophy itself, as well as the history of the sciences, provides a justification of this role. For Habermas, “To those who advocate a cut-and-dried division of labor, research traditions representing a blend of philosophy and science have always been particularly offensive” (Habermas, 1990: 14). Nonetheless, as Habermas notes, these hybrid discourses have not been atypical. Habermas is thinking, thus, on the many cases in which “a philosophical idea is present in embryo while at the same time empirical, yet universal, questions are being posed” (Habermas, 1990: 15). More concretely, Habermas is thinking about the cases of Durkheim, Mead, Weber, Freud, Piaget, Chomsky and many others who “inserted a genuinely philosophical idea like a detonator into a particular context of research” (Habermas, 1990: 15)<sup>36</sup>.

Philosophers, thus, play the role of suppliers of ideas in order to make reconstructive hypotheses for use in empirical settings. Even if it amounts to some degree of speculation, Habermas thinks that “there have surfaced and will continue to surface in nonphilosophical disciplines fertile minds who will give such theories a try” (Habermas, 1990: 15)<sup>37</sup>.

But, does not this amount to make philosophy a servant of the sciences? A sort of *ancilla scientiae*? To be sure, Habermas is completely aware of this risk. This is why he wonders,

If it is true the philosophy has entered upon a phase of cooperation with the human sciences, does it not run the risk of losing its identity? (...) What happens when philosophy surrenders the role of judge in matters of

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<sup>36</sup> Likewise Habermas has in mind the following key concepts that “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” (Habermas, 1990: 15): symptom formation through repression, the creation of solidarity through the sacred, the identity-forming function of role taking, modernization as rationalization of society, deceleration as an outgrowth of reflective abstraction from action, language acquisition as an activity of hypothesis testing, etc.

<sup>37</sup> Habermas admits this is something more likely to happen in the Human Sciences, or using his own term, the Reconstructive Sciences. For Habermas, “Starting primarily from the intuitive knowledge of competent subjects – competent in terms of judgment, action, and language – and secondarily from systematic knowledge handed down by culture, the reconstructive sciences explain the presumably universal bases of rational experience and judgment, as well as of action and linguistic communication” (Habermas, 1990: 15-16).

science as well as culture? Does this mean philosophy's relation to the totality is severed? Does this mean it can no longer be the guardian of rationality? (Habermas, 1990: 16-17).

Habermas believes that the second role for philosophy, namely, that of a mediating interpreter, might guarantee philosophy's relation to the totality as well as its self-conception as the guardian of rationality.

As mentioned before, in the eighteenth century, modernity divided the substantive reason expressed in religion and metaphysics into three different spheres: i) modern science, ii) positive law and post-traditional ethics, and iii) autonomous art and institutionalized art criticism.

Since then, we distinguish within our cultural tradition between three aspects of rationality to the extent that we can separately discuss issues of truth, justice and taste as different dimensions of human life. As Habermas puts it,

Each domain of culture could be made to correspond to cultural professions, in which problems could be dealt with as the concern of special experts. There appear the structures of cognitive-instrumental, moral-practical, and of aesthetic-expressive rationality, each of these under the control of specialists who seem more adept at being logical in these particular ways than other people are (Habermas, 1981: 8).

Furthermore, in Habermas' view, "philosophy had precious little to do with this disjunction" (Habermas, 1990: 17). Hence, none of these spheres seems to need philosophy to ground and legitimate its autonomy and place.

But this process of 'autonomization' has brought forth two negative results: on the one hand, a compartmentalization of the cultural world into three spheres that, seemingly, do not have anything in common. Hence, asks Habermas, "how can reason, once it has been thus sundered, go on being a unity on the level of culture?" (Habermas, 1990, 17). The second negative result, on the other hand, refers to the marked distancing between the experts and the 'general public'. In this latter case, thus, "What accrues to culture through specialized treatment and reflection does not immediately and necessarily become the property of everyday praxis" (Habermas, 1981: 8). In addition, such a distancing causes that "the life-world, whose traditional substance has already been devaluated, will become more and more impoverished" (Habermas, 1981: 9).

Within the context of both the compartmentalization and the distancing just described, Habermas claims that philosophy does have a role to play, namely, being a mediator. In this sense, philosophy would be in charge of i) guaranteeing the unity of reason in spite of the autonomization of science, morality and art, and, ii) keeping a link between everyday communication and expert cultures in spite of the fact that they "are being pushed more and more to the level of rarefied, esoteric forms (Habermas, 1990: 18).

The first type of mediation is developed within the spheres of science, morals, and art. The issue at stake here is to overcome the isolation of each one of those domains or, as Habermas puts it, to “mitigate the radical differentiation of reason and point to its unity” (Habermas, 1990: 18).

Although Habermas does not explain why and how philosophy is able to develop this mediation, he does offer three examples of what he calls countermovements:

For example, in human sciences nonobjectivistic approaches bring moral and aesthetic criticism into play without undermining the primacy of issues of truth. Another example is the way in which the discussion of ethics of responsibility and ethics of conviction and the expanded role of utilitarian considerations within universalist ethics have brought the calculation of consequences and the interpretation of needs into play – and these are perspectives situated rather in the domains of the cognitive and the expressive. Let us finally look at postmodern art as the third example. It is characterized by a strange simultaneity of realistic, politically committed schools on the one hand and authentic followers of that classical modernism to which we owe the crystallization of the specific meaning on the other. In realistic and politically committed art, elements of the cognitive and the moral-practical come into play once again, but at the level of the wealth of forms unloosed by the avant-garde (Habermas, 1990: 18).

To be sure, Habermas’ examples do not justify the existence of a specific role for philosophy. On the contrary, they seem to suggest that all that is needed is that agents belonging to each one of the three indicated spheres of culture open their minds wide enough to see the other spheres and their relations. In other words, all we need are i) scientists sensible enough to morality and art, ii) ethicists interested in cognitive and expressive issues, and iii) politically committed artists. But, even in this case, Habermas does not tell us what ‘sensible enough’, ‘interested in’, and ‘committed’ would amount to. He does not specify either the concrete role that the philosopher would assume. It would seem that, given philosophy’s relation to the three spheres, the philosopher would be able to contribute to the openness of mind of the scientists, the ethicists and the artists. However, this lack of clarity is, to a certain degree, tinged when Habermas describes the second mediation that philosophy should undertake. As Habermas himself acknowledges, the second type of mediation “is a more promising medium for regaining the lost unity of reason than are today’s expert cultures or yesteryear’s classical philosophy of reason” (Habermas, 1990: 18).

This second kind of mediation seeks to establish a connection between everyday communication and the three spheres of expert cultures. In this case, philosophy would be interested in finding ways for them to be joined to the impoverished traditions of the lifeworld without detriment of their regional rationality. In other words, philosophy’s goal is to find ways to set up new balances between the separated moments of reason in communicative everyday life (Habermas, 1990: 19).

In everyday communications, the three spheres are inevitably intertwined. There, cognitive interpretations, moral expectations, expressions, and evaluations overlap and interpenetrate. Thus, in order to face the differentiation of science, morality and art which “has come to mean the autonomy of the segments treated by the specialist and at the same time letting them split off from the hermeneutics of everyday communication”(Habermas 1981: 9), Habermas expects philosophy to renew the project of the philosophers of the Enlightenment. As he puts it,

The project of modernity formulated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by the philosophers of the Enlightenment consisted in their efforts to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art, according to their inner logic. At the same time, this project intended to release the potentials of each of these domains to set them free from their esoteric forms. The Enlightenment philosophers wanted to utilize this accumulation of specialized culture for the enrichment of everyday life, that is to say, for the rational organization of everyday social life. Enlightenment thinkers of the cast of mind of Condorcet still had the extravagant expectation that arts and the sciences would promote not only the control of natural forces, but would also further understanding of the world and of the self, would promote moral progress, the justice of institutions, and even the happiness of human beings (Habermas 1981: 8-9).

For Habermas, thus, philosophy’s role as mediator ultimately amounts to holding on to the intuitions of the Enlightenment<sup>38</sup>. Philosophy, in virtue of its link with the totality of the lifeworld in which all cultural spheres are mixed might “be able to help set in motion the interplay between the cognitive-instrumental, moral-practical, and aesthetic-expressive dimensions that has come to a standstill today like a tangled mobile” (Habermas, 1990: 19).

If we consider more carefully philosophy’s role as a mediating interpreter between the lifeworld and the culture experts, as suggested before, we might be able to have a better understanding of the previous two. Indeed, for Habermas, philosophy’s unique relation to the lifeworld explains and justifies its three roles, namely, that of a stand-in for empirical theories with strong universalistic claims, that of a mediating interpreter between the expert cultures of science, morality and art, and that of a mediating interpreter between those cultures and everyday life. Briefly put, since the lifeworld exists and its complexity transcends the limits of the sciences, which are limited by its domains, methodologies, and particular goals, philosophy, since it is not rooted in any specific domain, is able to go farther than all of them. Philosophy is not committed with any particular content. In this sense, philosophy’s ‘homelessness’

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<sup>38</sup> Habermas’ remarks from 1971 about how philosophy should develop its own claim for salvation and redemption in the form of utopian political ideas of emancipation, liberation and reconciliation seem to be now concretized in advocating for the completion of the project of modernity formulated by the philosophers of the Enlightenment.

makes possible for it to reach everywhere, and thus, grasp aspects of the lifeworld that no other discipline is able to grasp.

But philosophy's relation to the lifeworld is Janus-like. It is near and close at the same time; intimate but fractured. "It maintains just as intimate a relationship with the totality of the lifeworld and with sound common sense, even if in a subversive way it relentlessly shakes up the certainties of everyday practice" (Habermas, 1991: 208).

On the one hand, philosophy is closely affiliated to the lifeworld; it moves within its vicinity. As Habermas puts it, "the lifeworld is always intuitively present to all of us as a totality that is unproblematized, nonobjectified, and pretheoretical – as the sphere of that which is daily taken for granted, the sphere of common sense" (Habermas, 1996: 38). The lifeworld is the source from which philosophy obtains its questions through the problematization of what is merely taken for granted. But, for this very same reason, on the other hand, in virtue of its subversive power of reflection, and of illuminating, critical, and dissecting analysis, philosophy is able to distance itself from it.

From its 'homelessness', philosophical thinking is able to turn back towards science and undertake reflections that no particular science is able to develop. Insofar as philosophy is able to maintain an eye toward the totality of the lifeworld, it is able to continue posing universal questions and supply ideas for the system of sciences. Philosophy's connection to the lifeworld allows it to go beyond the limits entailed by the rigorous methodology of the sciences.

In addition, philosophy, by directing its look to the lifeworld and discovering a reason that is already operating in everyday communicative practice (Habermas, 1996: 50), should be able to overcome logocentric perspectives. According to Habermas, logocentrism is the cognitivistic reduction of reason into only one of its dimensions, namely, that of truth. As Habermas puts it,

The occidental deference toward logos reduces reason to something that language performs in only one of its functions, in representing states of affairs. Ultimately, methodically pursuing questions of truth is the only thing that still counts as rational. Questions of justice and questions of taste, as well as questions regarding the truthful presentation of self, are all excluded from the sphere of the rational (Habermas, 1996: 50).

Philosophy's gaze, in this sense, does not need to be fixated on the scientific system to establish fruitful communication with it. Thus, even in its role as a stand-in, philosophy is not severing its relation to totality.

Similarly, philosophy's vicinity to the lifeworld is precisely what gives philosophy the specific role of a mediating interpreter within the spheres of science, morals and art. This does not mean that artists or scientists cannot accomplish those kinds of mediations by themselves. All that it means is that philosophy is also entitled to work with them in this process. But, as Habermas indicated before, instead of a judge, philosophy can only aspire to be a mediator. "Philosophy no longer directs its own pieces" (Habermas, 1996: 16).

Finally, at a different level, philosophy's vicinity with the lifeworld enables philosophy to defend its richness and multidimensionality. In this sense, philosophy is able to detect when, as Habermas puts it, "the potential for reason that became available with the transition to modernity is selectively utilized" (Habermas, 1996: 50).

Philosophy's defense of the lifeworld is a result of, perhaps, its most important role, namely, that of a mediating interpreter between expert knowledge and every day practices in need of orientation. For Habermas, "the lifeworld must be defended against extreme alienation at the hands of the objectivating, the moralizing, and the aestheticizing interventions of experts cultures" (Habermas, 1996: 18).

Clearly, philosophy's two roles as a mediator interpreter are deeply intertwined. As Habermas puts it,

A reified everyday praxis can be cured only by creating unconstrained interaction of the cognitive with the moral-practical and the aesthetic-expressive elements. Reification cannot be overcome by forcing just one of those highly stylized cultural spheres to open up and become more accessible. Instead, we see under certain circumstances a relationship emerges between terroristic activities and the over-extension of any one of these spheres into other domains: examples would be tendencies to aestheticize politics, or to replace politics by moral rigorism or to submit it to the dogmatism of a doctrine (Habermas, 1981: 11).

In this sense, the perspective of the philosophers should constitute a critical tool to reveal the dangers of what Habermas identifies as 'false sublations' of the compartmentalization of culture. As Habermas puts it, a rationalized everyday life "could not be redeemed from the rigidity of cultural impoverishment through the forcible opening of one cultural domain (...), and the establishment of a link with *one* of the specialized complexes of knowledge. At best, such an attempt merely replaces one form of one-sidedness and one abstraction with another" (Habermas, 1991b: 165). Thus, although it is not necessarily the case, a scientist interested in morality or a politically committed artist may end up simply posing this kind of one-sidedness<sup>39</sup>. But the philosopher, in her role of mediator between the three cultural spheres, insofar as he is also interested in maintaining all the richness of the lifeworld, cannot but react critically against those false sublations.

Hence, the philosopher fails in this if too much trust is put on only one of the moments into which reason has become differentiated. According to Habermas, Karl Popper, Paul Lorenzen and Theodor Adorno make this mistake. In Habermas' words:

Even among the philosophers who currently form something like a rearguard of the Enlightenment the project of modernity is strangely splintered (...). Popper (...) holds to the enlightening force of scientific criticism, whose effects extend into the political domain; for this he pays

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<sup>39</sup> In his essay *Modernity: an Unfinished Project*, Habermas argues that this was indeed Surrealism's mistake.

the price of moral scepticism and a general indifference to the aesthetic. Paul Lorenzen is concerned with how a methodically constructed artificial language in which practical reason will be brought to bear can be effective in reforming everyday life. His conception, however, channels science and scholarship into the narrow paths of justifications analogous to moral-practical justifications, and he too neglects the aesthetic. In Adorno, conversely, the emphatic claim to reason has withdrawn into the accusatory gestures of the esoteric work of art, while morality is no longer susceptible of justification, and philosophy is left with the sole task of indicating, through indirect discourse, the critical content concealed in art” (Habermas, 1991b: 163).

Thus, it is philosophy’s job to present theoretical frameworks that take into account the whole richness of the lifeworld. But, even in this case, philosophy cannot pretend to be a judge. Ultimately, philosophy’s contribution refers to warn us about the deformations of the lifeworld. Philosophy does not possess an affirmative theory of the good life nor rationality conditions of its own. A consequence of this is that the philosopher cannot pretend to be the sort of illuminated Master that the metaphysical thinking depicted. The philosopher simply cannot command the direction of the lifeworld processes.

Habermas offers an interesting example to clarify this point. His example, which I quote at length, comes from Peter Weiss book *The Aesthetics of Resistance*:

A specific variant of the mode of reception I am talking about is captured still better by the heroic process of appropriation the same author depicts in the first volume of his *Asthetik des Widerstandes*. A group of young people in Berlin in 1937, workers who are politically motivated and eager to learn, are acquiring the means to grasp the history, including the social history, of European painting through evening highschool classes. Out of the hard stone of the objective spirit they are hewing the pieces they assimilate, taking them into the experiential horizon of their milieu, which is as far as removed from traditional education as it is from the existing regime, and turning them around until they begin to glow: ‘Our conception of a culture only seldom harmonized with what presented itself as a giant reservoir of commodities, stored-up discoveries, and illuminations. As people without property, we approached what had been accumulated at first fearfully, full of awe, until it became clear to us that we had to provide our own evaluation of all this, that the overall concept could be usable only if it said something about our life circumstances as well as the difficulties and peculiarities of our thought processes’ (Habermas, 1991b: 167).

Habermas' example refers to a mode of reception of art undertaken by laypersons<sup>40</sup>. This reception makes possible that the layperson uses art to relate the aesthetic experiences to their own life problems. In this reappropriation, the aesthetic experience, first of all, renews the interpretation of our needs in whose light we perceive the world; second, it permeates our cognitive significations and our normative expectations, and third, it changes the manner in which all these moments refer to one another. As Habermas puts it, "These young workers went back and forth between the edifice of European art and their own milieu until they were able to illuminate both" (Habermas, 1981: 12). But, as can be seen, they did not need receive the instructions of the 'wise-philosopher' to accomplish those illuminations<sup>41</sup>. As Habermas' puts it, philosophy "can no longer place the totalities of the different lifeworlds, which appear only in the plural, into a hierarchy of those which are of greater or lesser value; it is limited to grasping universal structures of lifeworlds in general" (Habermas, 1996: 18). For this reason, philosophy does not have other option but to use and rely on the experts' knowledge itself<sup>42</sup>. "After metaphysics, the nonobjective whole of a concrete lifeworld, which is now present only as a horizon and background, evades the grasp of theoretical objectification" (Habermas, 1996, 50-51). The lifeworld, says Habermas, is opaque.

Hence, although a postmetaphysical philosophy does maintain a connection with a totality, that is, with the totality of the lifeworld, it is not in the same way as metaphysical thinking claimed to clearly and precisely grasp the universal one. "Postmetaphysical thinking operates with a different concept of the world" (Habermas, 1996: 39).

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At the beginning of chapter, Is mentioned that, according to Habermas, postmetaphysical thinking expresses the kind of cognitive attitude that secular citizens

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<sup>40</sup> For Habermas, nonetheless, "One might pursue similar reflections on the spheres of science and scholarship and morality if one considered that the human, social and behavioral sciences are by no means *fully* divorced from the structures of action-orienting knowledge, and that the focus of universalist ethics on questions on justice is an abstraction that needs to be linked to the problems of the good life it initially excludes" (Habermas, 1991b: 167).

<sup>41</sup> Habermas is also aware that "Modern culture can be successfully linked back up to a practice of everyday life that is dependent on vital traditions but impoverished by mere traditionalism only if social modernization too can be guided into other, noncapitalist directions, and if the lifeworld can develop, on its own, institutions that will lie outside the borders of the inherent dynamics of the economic and administrative system" (Habermas, 1991b: 167). So far I have only presented modernity's characteristics from a cultural perspective. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that Habermas also speaks of a 'social modernization'. Habermas refers with this term to the capitalist modernization of economy and society. In Habermas view, social modernization, "under pressure from the imperatives of economic growth and state administration, intervenes further and further into the ecology of developed forms of life, into the communicative infrastructure of historical lifeworlds (...). Multiple occasions for discontent and protest arise wherever a one-sided modernization guided by criteria of economic and administrative rationality penetrates into spheres of life centered around tasks of cultural transmission, social integration and socialization, spheres of life that are guided by other criteria, namely those of communicative rationality" (Habermas, 1991b: 162). Remarks of this sort, as we will see, are crucial to understand Habermas' proposal on the role of religion in the public sphere. For Habermas, simply put, we are being rendered powerless by the economic and administrative subsystems, and the only way to oppose to that process is by citizens' self-empowerment as truly politically committed agents who maintain a normative perspective according to which "something better is still available to get". Religion, to be sure, does have an important role to play in the developing of such normative perspective. All these issues will be discussed specially in chapter 3 and 4.

<sup>42</sup> Interestingly enough, when Habermas is commenting upon his example of a reappropriating mode of reception of art undertaken by laypersons, he also refers to the latter as "experts in daily life" (Habermas, 1991b: 166).



must develop in order to fully respect their fellow religious citizens and learn from their contributions to public debates. The main goal of this chapter was to develop an analysis of Habermas' notion of postmetaphysical thinking as related to his ideas on the role of philosophy. We are now in a better position to understand Habermas' insistence according to which postmetaphysical thinking "is not exhausted by emphasizing the finiteness of reason or by the combination of fallibilism with anti-skeptical conceptions of truth that has marked the self-understanding of modern empirical science since Kant and Peirce" (Habermas, 2008: 140).

A procedural rationality and a situated concept of reason do constitute two key aspects of postmetaphysical thinking. Nonetheless, as the evolution of the linguistic turn shows, "In the validity spectrum of the everyday practice of reaching understanding, there comes to light a communicative rationality opening onto several dimensions" (Habermas, 1996: 50). It is philosophy's role to defend the legitimacy and vivacity of all these dimensions, some of which a scientifically truncated conception of reason is not able to appreciate.

In addition, insofar as postmetaphysical thinking does not make statements about "the totality", about the constitution of being as such, it cannot pass judgments on 'religious truths'. Postmetaphysical thinking, as Habermas indicates, "insists on the difference between the certainties of faith and publicly criticizable validity claims, (Habermas, 2008: 143).

Interestingly enough, a secularistic scientism does not seem to accept this restriction. According to this view, all religious propositions are false, illusory and meaningless *per se*. However, this assessment is the product of a radical naturalistic worldview that "devalues all types of statements that cannot be traced back to empirical observations, statements of laws, or causal explanations, hence moral, legal, and evaluative statements no less than religious ones" (Habermas, 2008: 140-141). From this perspective, scientism competes with religious doctrines through its pretension of extending "the scientifically objectivating standpoint into the lifeworld by applying it to acting and experiencing persons with the demand for the self-objectification of everyday knowledge" (Habermas, 2008: 245). A postmetaphysical philosophy, developing its role as mediator interpreter, must defend the lifeworld from such objectivating attempts.

## CHAPTER 2. HABERMAS' EARLY APPROACH ON RELIGION

Habermas' first approach to religion was developed from a deeply philosophical perspective. It was the result of his acknowledgement that philosophy, throughout its history, has nurtured itself from religious traditions.

Philosophy's historical task, from this perspective, is a translation of religious intuitions, thoughts, doctrines, etc., to non-religious terms. Philosophical thought, although originated from an intimate relation to religion, seeks to develop a different mode of justification for its claims, a 'rational justification', that is, a justification susceptible of being followed and accepted by any human being regardless of her belonging to a particular religious community<sup>43</sup>. In this sense, although sharing a common form (their mode of justification), the diverse philosophical thoughts might be distinguished in virtue of their different religious roots. Even if we should expect a clear demarcation from its religious origins, it should not be a surprise that such roots might alter the methodology, the type of questions posed, the answers themselves, and, in addition, the goals which guide every kind of philosophical thinking. Therefore, it would seem possible to wide and enrich any philosophical thought by recurring to a religious tradition hitherto unnoticed or, at least, not emphasized.

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<sup>43</sup> In Habermas' own words, "The rationality of beliefs and actions is a theme usually dealt with in philosophy. One could even say that philosophical thought originates in reflection on the reason embodied in cognition, speech, and action; and reason remains its basic theme. From the beginning philosophy has endeavored to explain the world as a whole, the unity in the multiplicity of appearances, with principles to be discovered in reason—and not in communication with a divinity beyond the world nor, strictly speaking, even in returning to the ground of a cosmos encompassing nature and society. Greek thought did not aim at a theology nor at an ethical cosmology, as the great world religions did, but at an ontology. If there is anything common to philosophical theories, it is the intention of thinking being or the unity of the world by way of explicating reason's experience of itself". (Habermas, 1984: 1)

Habermas' first perspective on religion follows this train of thought<sup>44</sup>. Indeed, he explicitly recognizes and differentiates philosophies based on their diverse religious roots. In addition, he claims that some philosophies, in virtue of their particular religious roots, are able to offer explanations that other sort of philosophies cannot.

In his 1960 essay *Ernst Bloch: A Marxist Schelling*, Habermas indicates that it is commonly accepted that "Philosophy in Germany lives so thoroughly out of the Protestant spirit that Catholics practically have to become Protestant in order to do philosophy" (Habermas, 1983: 68). For Habermas, nonetheless, the mainly Protestant, but also Catholic, religious heritage of German philosophy constitutes a limitation that should be acknowledged. In his view, a philosophy developed within the Protestant tradition is excessively focused on history, though not attentive enough to nature. Contrarily, a philosophical thought with Catholic roots runs the risk of losing itself in the idea of nature to the detriment of developing a historical perspective. In Habermas' words, "Harkening to the divine *Logos* in history through hearing and obedience has estranged Protestant philosophy from nature as much as perceiving the *Logos* in nature with the eyes has estranged Catholic thought from history" (Habermas, 1983: 68).

History and nature, for Habermas, might be reconciled in a philosophy that nurtures itself from a different religious tradition, that is, Judaism. As he puts it, "In contrast with the Catholic and Protestant traditions, both of these ideas [history and nature] come together from the very start in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets: the self-actuated liberation of the human race in the course of history and the restoration of a fallen nature" (Habermas, 1983: 68).

For Habermas, the philosophy of Ernst Bloch offers a formula that through rational means tries to release from myth the utopia of such a restoration: Socialism assures a humanizing of nature, and, at the same, a naturalizing of humanity (Habermas, 1983: 68). For this reason, in virtue of its Jewish heritage, Bloch's philosophy was able to play, within the context of German philosophy, a unique mediating function between Protestantism's appeal to history and Catholicism's appeal to nature.

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<sup>44</sup> It remains to be analyzed whether or not this way of framing the relation between philosophy and religion constitutes *per se* an instrumentalization of religion for the sake of philosophy's own development. Habermas, to be sure, makes a constant effort to avoid any kind of instrumentalization. His basic criticism to Kant and Hegel's approaches to religion refers to the fact that, as philosophers, they tried to distinguish within religious doctrines themselves the rational content from the irrational. In this sense, in his recent texts Habermas claims to be speaking with the religious doctrines and not merely about them. As he puts it, "(...) it makes a difference whether we speak with one another or merely about one another. If we want to avoid the latter, two presuppositions must be fulfilled: the religious side must accept the authority of 'natural' reason as the fallible results of the institutionalized sciences and the basic principles of universalistic egalitarianism in law and morality. Conversely, secular reason may not set itself up as the judge concerning truths of faith, even though in the end it can accept as reasonable only what it can translate into its own, in principle universally accessible, discourses" (Habermas, 2010: 16). Nevertheless, to what extent Habermas' own approach really achieves speaking with the 'religious other' and not merely about it, is something that needs to be carefully considered later, especially in the light of a criticism such as the following from Žižek: "Habermas' late interest in religion is not the concern for the hidden content in the religious form; what interests him now is the form itself: believers willing to stake their lives, something missing from anemic-skeptical liberalism. But is this not a vampirism, sucking the energy from believers without being ready to abandon his own secular stance, with full religious belief acting as a mysterious Other?" (Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, p. 352)

To be sure, however, Habermas is aware that the relations between German philosophy and Jewish tradition are not 'inaugurated' by Bloch. In his text *The German Idealism of the Jewish Philosophers* (1961), Habermas analyses the "abysmal and yet fertile relationship of the Jews with German philosophy" (Habermas, 1983: 22), especially within German Idealism.

It is a well-known fact that twentieth century German philosophy was developed mainly by Jewish thinkers; nonetheless, Habermas claims that the most fundamental tenets of German Idealism, traditionally regarded as determined by Protestantism, can also be developed, and even illuminated, by the experience of the Jewish tradition. In Habermas' words, "Because the legacy of the Kabbalah already flowed into and was absorbed by Idealism, its light seems to refract all the more richly in the spectrum of a spirit in which something of the spirit of Jewish mysticism lives on, in however hidden a way" (Habermas, 1983: 21).

*The German Idealism of the Jewish Philosophers* was written by Habermas as his contribution to a series of radio programs devoted to 'Portraits from German-Jewish Intellectual History'. The text is presented as a historical narration through which Habermas expounds a series of names (Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, Herman Cohen, Ernst Cassirer, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Edmund Husserl, Walter Benjamin, etc.) in order to illustrate the complex and multidimensional interactions between Jewish traditions and German philosophy, especially German Idealism.

The philosophical value of the text might be dubious inasmuch as Habermas himself warns that "Wherever genuine philosophizing begins mere reportage comes to an end, and my task was only the latter" (Habermas, 1983: 40). Nonetheless, this text sheds light on two crucial interwoven elements within the relation between Jewish religion and German Idealism that, for Habermas, are deeply valuable and, thus, must be highlighted. These two elements shape Habermas' view on the intrinsic value of religion for philosophy.

First, for Habermas the Jewish tradition within German Idealism contains powerful elements with the potential to move Idealism closer to Materialism. Second, the religious heritage contained within the German Idealism of the Jewish thinkers was, in Habermas' view, the main cause for the production of the ferment of a critical utopia among such thinkers (Habermas, 1983: 42).

The first element leads us to a religious idea that caught Habermas' interest from the beginning of his philosophical career, namely the theme of God's contraction (the *Tsimtsum* in Jewish terminology) as an explanation of the universe's creation; a topic analyzed by Habermas in his doctoral dissertation (1954) entitled *Das Absolute und die Geschichte. Von der Zweispältigkeit in Schellings Denken* ("The Absolute and History: On the Schism in Schelling's Thought"). Afterwards, Habermas expounds the subject again in the following texts: *The German Idealism of the Jewish Philosophers* (1961), *Gershom Scholem: The Torah in Disguise* (1978), *Dialectical Idealism in Transition to Materialism: Schelling's Idea of a Contraction of God and its Consequences for the Philosophy of History* (1978), *Tracing the Other of History in History: Gershom Scholem's Sabbati Sevi* (1997), and *A Conversation about God and the World: Interview with Eduardo Mendieta* (2002).

The second element refers to the aforementioned reconciliation of history and nature within the Jewish tradition, a reconciliation made possible through the Jewish

mystical link between morality and physics (Habermas, 1983: 37). In Habermas' view, Walter Benjamin's historical materialism, which tried to put theology into its service, constituted an attempt to develop a critical utopia out of his religious heritage. Similarly, for Habermas, in the medium of Ernst Bloch's Marxian appropriation of Jewish mysticism, Bloch "combines sociology with the philosophy of nature into a system that today is borne along as is no other by the great breath of German Idealism" (Habermas, 1983: 38).

In what follows I will offer a comprehensive interpretation of the *Tsimtsum*'s elements that Habermas finds appealing for his own philosophical work. In order to develop a more complete perspective, I will also rely on remarks from the Jewish scholar G. Scholem. Scholem refers to Luria's theory as "one of the most amazing and far-reaching conceptions ever put forwards in the whole history of Kabbalism" (Scholem, 1995: 260)<sup>45</sup> (I). Afterwards, I will expound Habermas' analyses of two cases of atheistic philosophers who explicitly nurtured their thought from religious doctrines in order to develop a critical notion of utopia, namely, Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin (II).

## I

For Habermas, the Protestant and Jewish doctrine of God's contraction -the *Tsimtsum* in Jewish terms-<sup>46</sup> especially as he finds it interpreted in Schelling's *The Ages of the World*, offers a path to take Idealism to the limits of Materialism.

In a 2002 interview<sup>47</sup>, Habermas affirms that there is a doctrinal element, shared by Protestantism and Jewish mysticism, which has been of great significance for him. This doctrinal element refers to the mystical speculations of the Protestant thinker Jakob Böhme (1575-1624) about the 'nature' that arises through an act of contraction (the 'dark ground' in God) as well as Isaac Luria's doctrine of the *Tsimtsum*. In Habermas' words,

These two independently developed speculations came together via Knorr von Rosenheim and Schwabian Pietism in the post-Fichtean idealism of Baader and Schelling. In the essay on the 'Essence of Human Freedom' (...) and in his philosophy of the 'Ages of the World', Schelling appropriated this tradition and anchored the tense relation between 'egoity' and 'love' in God himself. The rather 'dark' tendency toward finitization [*Verendlichung*] or contraction is intended as an explanation of God's capacity for self-limitation" (Habermas, 2002: 160).

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<sup>45</sup> The relevance of presenting this usually neglected feature of Habermas' thought will be clearer in the next two chapters of my dissertation after I expound Habermas' 'sociological' perspective on religion, especially as it is presented in *Theory of Communicative Action* and some other 'preparatory texts'. I will claim that although later on Habermas explicitly corrects his own approach, in a very deep sense the idea of God's withdrawal can be considered as a guide for interpreting all his approaches to religion.

<sup>46</sup> The term *Tsimtsum*, according to Gershom Scholem, originally means 'concentration' or 'contraction'. However, if used in a Kabbalistic context, the best translation of the word is 'withdrawal' or 'retreat' (Scholem, 1995: 260).

<sup>47</sup> *A Conversation About God and the World. Interview with Eduardo Mendieta.*

In *The German Idealism of the Jewish Philosophers* one of the thinkers that Habermas mentions is Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929), a Jewish theologian and philosopher who attempted an interpretation of idealist thought out of the depths of Jewish Mysticism (Habermas, 1983: 23). According to Habermas, Rosenzweig is able to see that the factual existence of a contingent world constitutes the basic issue that breaks apart the 'Idealist self-confidence in the power of the concept'. "How can the world be contingent, although it still has to be thought of as necessary? Thought labors in vain on the impenetrable fact that things are so and not otherwise, that the historical existence of human beings is so profoundly bathed in enigmatic arbitrariness" (Habermas, 1983: 21)<sup>48</sup>.

For Rosenzweig, in order to find a solution for this problem, philosophy should, at least, begin by recognizing the reality of the negative. In Rosenzweig's words, quoted by Habermas,

If philosophy wanted not to stop up its ears in the face of the cry of anguished humanity, it would have to start from this: that the nothingness of death is a something; that each new nothingness of death, as a new newly fruitful something, is not to be talked or written away...Nothingness is not nothing, it is something...We do not want a philosophy that deceives us by the all-or-nothing tone of its dance about the lasting domination of death. We want no deception. (Habermas, 1983: 24).

In order to avoid deception, then, we need to take seriously the fact of the existence of slaughter and crying in the world. In other words, we need to be able to see that the world is still involved in a process of becoming, that "the appearances still seek their essence". Habermas believes that, from a theological perspective, the idea of God's

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<sup>48</sup> Almost 30 years later Habermas will repeat this perspective in his discussion of the metaphysical questions and problems which metaphysics is not able to answer. In his own words, "From within the movement of metaphysical thought itself there emerges the third theme in the critique of metaphysics namely, the suspicion that all its contradictions come together in the venerable concept of matter; the latter constitutes the dross, as it were, of affirmative thinking. Should matter, to which innerworldly beings owe their finitude, their concretion in space and time, and their resistance, be determined purely negatively as nonbeing? Must not matter, in which the Ideas are supposed to be deluded and to wane into mere phenomena, be conceived as a principle that not only contrasts with the intelligible but *contradicts* it not merely as privation, as a residue that is left over after the removal of all determinate being and all good, but as an active power of negation that first generates the world of appearance and evil? This question has been insistently repeated from a genetic perspective. Once the primacy of the one, which precedes and underlies everything, is posited why then are there any beings at all, rather than nothing? The question of theodicy is simply a moral-practical variant of this: given the primacy of the good, from which everything is derived, how then does anything evil come into the world in the first place? Schelling still labored away on this question in 1804 and again in 1809 (in his treatise on human freedom). He set himself against the Platonic tradition, in which what is material or evil is represented as a mere shading, weakening, or diminishing of the intelligible and the good, and not as the principle of negating and of egoity, of closing off, of actively striving back into the depths. In his remarkable polemic against the bias toward the affirmative, against the purification and the harmonization of the unruly and the negative, of what refuses itself, there also stirs an impulse to resist the danger of idealist apotheosis the same impulse that directly provides the impetus for the critique of ideology that extends all the way up to the pessimistic materialism of the early Horkheimer and to the optimistic materialism of Bloch" (Habermas, 1996: 123).

contraction (the *Tsimtsum*) is able to achieve such a recognition. In addition, Habermas believes that such an idea has had (and still has) valuable uses in the history of philosophical thought.

The theological objective of the *Tsimtsum* doctrine is to present an account of the Judeo-Christian formula of *creation ex nihilo*. Mythological and metaphysical thought had usually conceived the processes of creation as proceeding from something already preexistent, whether it was chaos or some kind of an antecedent matter. The idea of a *creation ex nihilo*, in contrast, constitutes a novelty because the nothingness from which the absolute will creates the worlds is not conceived anymore as a potency that exists outside the creative power itself (Habermas, 1983: 206).

The new formula of *creation ex nihilo* does not have to face the aporias related to the creation of the preexistent 'materials'. However, it does have to face impasses of its own. Gershom Scholem summarizes them in the following questions: "How can there be a world if God is everywhere? If God is 'all in all', how can there be things which are not God? How can God create the world out of nothing, if there is no nothing" (Scholem, 1995: 260-261). According to Scholem, Luria's idea of the *Tsimtsum* aims to solve these difficulties. For Scholem, in fact, it is the "only serious attempt ever made to give substance to the idea of Creation out of Nothing" (Scholem, 1995: 261-262).

The main contribution of Lurianic mysticism is the idea that the universe arose from a process of shrinkage and contraction insofar as its creation was made possible by an act of withdrawal within God Himself.

Two are mainly the reasons why Habermas is deeply interested in the *Tsimtsum*. First, it offers an explanation of the positivity of evil and of the existence of things independent of God. In this sense, theologically speaking, the *Tsimtsum* is a response to pantheism. From a different view, in addition, the *Tsimtsum* makes possible a perspective according to which the destiny of humanity (and even the destiny of God) depends on human beings themselves.

For Habermas, the *Tsimtsum* is the only way to develop a coherent solution to the theodicy problem, that is, the problem of how evil can exist in a universe created by a perfect and loving God. In other words, the *Tsimtsum* offers an explanation of why an omnipotent and perfect God would have created an imperfect and inharmonious universe.

In the neo-Platonic tradition of the Zohar, evil was defined as the untrue. Therefore, every negative phenomenon (the harmful, the diseased, the hostile, etc.) is understood as a privation, "as the obscuring or weakening of the Ideas, as matter sully[ing] ideal being, so to speak" (Habermas, 2002: 141)<sup>49</sup>. As Scholem puts it, the *Tsimtsum*, in contrast, offers a different account according to which "In the final resort (...) the root of all evil is already latent in the act of *Tsimtsum*" (Scholem, 1995: 263). Furthermore, the doctrine of the *Tsimtsum* offers a counterpoise to the pantheism implied by the theory of emanation. In Scholem's view, the *Tsimtsum* justifies, for every being, a reality of its own, which prevents the "danger of dissolution into the non-individual being of the divine 'all in all'" (Scholem, 1995: 262).

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<sup>49</sup> Here we have an example of a tradition that, contrarily to Rosenzweig's demand, is not able to solve the problem of theodicy properly because it does not take the negative seriously in its distinctive positivity, (Habermas, 2002: 141).

The second element of the *Tsimtsum* that interests Habermas refers to its unique account on redemption and Messianism, which also represents a new perspective of the future with regard to the past. In secular terms, this view constitutes a worldly perspective of resistance against the injustices of the past and the present as well as a normative stance for their redemption and change. Historically speaking, the emergence of the doctrine of the *Tsimtsum* marks a turning point where Jewish mysticism became a 'public force' able to influence Jewish society as a whole. According to Scholem, Kabbalism changed radically after the Exodus from Spain (Scholem, 1995: 244)<sup>50</sup>. Before the expulsion, the Kabbalists were a small and esoteric group interested neither in spreading their ideas nor in trying to promote social and political movements to introduce revolutionary changes into Jewish life (Scholem, 1995: 244). The lack of these interests amounted to a neutralization of Messianic tendencies within Judaism. In Scholem's words:

This comparative indifference to the suggestion that the course of history might be somewhat shortened by mystical means was due to the fact that originally the mystics and apocalyptic had turned their thought in the reverse direction: the Kabbalists concentrated all their mental emotional powers not upon the Messianic end of the world, upon the closing stage of the unfolding universe, but rather upon its beginning (Scholem, 1995: 245).

In other words, the older Kabbalists were more interested in creation than in redemption, or, in any event, redemption was sought by "retracing the path that leads to the primordial beginnings of creation and revelation, at the point where the world-process (the history of the universe and of God) began to evolve within a system of laws. He who knew the way by which he had come might hope eventually to retrace his steps" (Scholem, 1995: 245).

This tendency radically changed with the emergence of Lurianic mysticism. For Scholem, as a consequence of the catastrophe of the Spanish Expulsion, the apocalyptic and Messianic elements of Judaism merged with the traditional aspects of Kabbalism. From now on, the last age was considered as important as the first. The new doctrines started to emphasize the final stages of the cosmological process as well as its beginnings. In addition, and closely related to this new accent, mystical Judaism started to affect the life of Jewish society<sup>51</sup>.

Habermas, to be sure, does not approach the idea of God's contraction directly from Jewish or Protestant mysticism. He finds it mediated by Schelling's remarks from

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<sup>50</sup> Scholem refers to the 1492 Spanish Expulsion of the Jews ordered by the Edict of Expulsion issued by Ferdinand and Isabella (March 31, 1492).

<sup>51</sup> In this sense, Habermas' recent interest on the role of religion in the public sphere has, at least, certain coherence with his earliest approaches to religion via the *Tsimtsum*, that is, a sort of 'public' mysticism that affected the life of a society as a whole.



*The Ages of the World*, which deeply coincide with the main elements of the *Tsimtsum*<sup>52</sup>.

Habermas interprets Schelling's book as an idealistic account of a possibility of redemption for a radically perverted material world. As an idealistic account, thus, it aims to comprehend how such world could have arisen out of the Absolute (Habermas, 2004: 53).

The acknowledgement of the world's corruption is, therefore, the starting point. Schelling, in fact, seems to be very sensitive to appreciate it. According to Habermas, he presents four kinds of 'incontrovertible proofs' to demonstrate the wickedness of the world, namely, i) the power of chance and free will, ii) the frailty and transitoriness of all life (illness and death), iii) the evils of nature (the harmful and poisonous character of nature), and iv) the existence of evil in the moral world.<sup>53</sup>

Following the inner-logic of idealism, a possible end of the perversion of the world can only be posited if an account of its beginning is first explained. In Habermas' words, "If we idealistically presuppose the systematic interconnectedness of the world, then the origin of fragmentation and corruption (in an aimless world that has turned into pain and a reproach against humanity) must already be included in a beginning that begins above all conflict. This is the only way that an overcoming of corruption, an actual end of evil, can be presented as a historical possibility" (Habermas, 2004: 52).

In addition, the account of such a beginning, besides belonging to the Absolute itself, has to constitute, at the same time, a break within the Absolute. We need to be able to understand how the beginning of the corruption of the world belongs to the Absolute itself although, at the same time, is different from it.

Schelling's explanation recurs to Jewish and Protestant mysticism. In these religious traditions such an account was already presented, albeit in a religious language, in the doctrine of the contraction of God or the *Tsimtsum*.

The first part of the doctrine that interests Habermas comes mainly from Böhme's ideas about creation as a result of dialectic inherent in the nature of God; a dialectic between divine wrath and divine love.

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<sup>52</sup> Habermas himself admits that Scholem's book *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1946) surprised him "with the family affinities between the theosophy of Jacob Böhme and the teaching of a man by the name of Isaac Luria" (Habermas, 1983: 200). Thus, according to Habermas, Scholem was the one who showed him that "Behind Schelling's *Ages of the World* and Hegel's *Logic*, and behind Baader, loomed not only the Swabian spiritual predecessors, not only Pietism and Protestant mysticism, but also (mediated by Knorr von Rosenroth) that version of the Kabbalah in whose antinomian consequences were anticipated, more clearly than anywhere else, the figures of thought and preoccupations of the great dialectical philosophy" (Habermas, 1983: 200).

<sup>53</sup> Habermas, in addition, quotes the following paragraph from Schelling: "Every step that leads upwards is delightful, but those reached by falling are horrible. Does not everything bear witness to a fallen world? Did these mountains grow as they stand there? Did the ground which bears us arise from a raising up or a sinking back? And a strong, fixed order did not rule here, but rather, after a limited lawfulness in development, chance settled in. Or who will believe that the waters that were clearly at work everywhere – tearing apart these valleys and leaving behind so many sea creatures in our mountains, and all according to an inner law – who will accept that a divine hand stored hard rock formations on slippery clay, so that they would consequently slide down and bury peaceful valleys sown with human dwellings in terrible ruin, and bury joyful wanderers in the middle of the path. Oh those ruins of ancient human glory that are sought by inquisitive travelers in the deserts of Persia and the wastelands of India – they are not the true ruins; the whole earth is one great ruin, where beasts live as ghosts and men as spirits, and in which many hidden forces and treasures are held fast as if through invisible powers and under the spell of a magician" (Habermas, 2004: 55). The quote is from Schelling, F., *Werke*, IV, Erg. Bd., 135.

According to Böhme, initially there is only a God that wills nothing, a God that is pure joy, absolute bliss, grace, love and simplicity. But creation presupposes the existence of a will and the will to go out of Himself and manifest Himself is something necessarily inherent in God. Thus, for creation to have taken place, as it obviously has, God should have been able to will something. God, then, had to stop being what he was at that moment, namely, pure joy, absolute bliss, grace, love and simplicity, and he had to create a nature for himself.

The doctrine of the two hands of God, included in the Kabbalistic text from the thirteenth-century, the *Sohar*, is meant to represent this moment. According to this doctrine, with his left hand God points and with his right hand he dispenses mercy. “The attribute of stern judgment is also called ‘the wrath of God’. This inextinguishable, fiery wrath that blazes in the ground of God is reined in by God’s love, mitigated by his mercy. But though the flames are held back, they can always strike out and consume the sinners – as a deep hunger, held back only with difficulty by the gentleness of God” (Habermas, 2004: 53-54)<sup>54</sup>.

Therefore, God’s creation of the universe presupposes that first he was able to acquire a nature characterized by a knot of willfulness and egoity. In Böhme’s words, quoted by Habermas, ‘Every will that foes into itself and seeks the ground of its living content ... comes into an ownness [*ein Eigenes*]’ (Habermas, 2004: 54).

There is, then, an initial tension between a dark ground in God and his radiating love; a tension that determines the whole process of creation since, thus, according to this view, neither the primordial impenetrability and power of matter nor the positive character of evil can be evaporated as shadows of the good. There is a positive dark ground, and this dark ground is a nature in God.

For Böhme, in order to explain this tension, it is necessary to posit the idea of a contraction. As Habermas puts it, God’s wrath

Also appears in the complementary picture of pure darkness and the harshness with which things are drawn together, a kind of contraction. Just as in winter, Böhme adds, when it is bitterly cold and water freezes into ice, this force of contraction is what provides true permanence (‘since rigidity causes a body to draw together and keep together, and hardness dries it up, so that it continues to exist as a creature’)(Habermas, 2004: 54).

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<sup>54</sup> Similarly, in Scholem’s words, “(...) the essence of the Divine Being, before the *Tsimtsum* took place, contained not only the qualities of love and mercy, but also that of Divine Sternness which the Kabbalists call *Din* or Judgment” (Scholem, 1995: 263) However, as Scholem indicates, the Divine Sternness, or *Din*, was not recognizable at such; “it was as it were dissolved in the great ocean of God’s compassion, like a grain of salt in the sea (...) In the act of *Tsimtsum*, however, it crystallized and became clearly defined, for inasmuch as *Tsimtsum* signifies an act of negation and limitation it is also an act of judgment (...) The first act, the act of *Tsimtsum*, in which God determines, and therefore limits, Himself, is an act of *Din* which reveals the roots of this quality in all that exists; these ‘roots of divine judgment’ subsist in chaotic mixture with the residue of divine light which remained after the original retreat or withdrawal within the primary space of God’s creation.” (Scholem, 1995: 263).

In this sense, God's first efficacious will is one in which God draws himself together, that is, it is a sort of contraction through which God "includes what he is as love within himself as nature. The contracting force is made into the centre of his existence. In the beginning, the Absolute is the God confined in his own being – a sort of first creation of God through himself" (Habermas, 2004: 58).

This first contraction needs to be followed by a second one through which the conflict of those two principles induced by the first contraction of God must be resolved. This second contraction is the *Tsimtsum*; a contraction that explains the emergence of the world by means of God's withdrawal<sup>55</sup>.

As mentioned before, the *Tsimtsum* aims to explain the formula of *creation ex nihilo*. Furthermore, the doctrine of the *Tsimtsum* is presented as an alternative to the traditional Neo-Platonic notion of emanation. In this previous view, the universe is created by a series of hierarchically descending radiations or emanations from God himself. In Scholem's words,

The older Kabbalists had a much simpler conception of the cosmological process. According to them, it begins with an act in which God projects His creative power out of his own Self into space. Every new act is a further stage in the process of externalization, which unfolds, in accordance with the emanationist doctrine of Neoplatonism, in a straight line from above downwards. The whole process is strictly one-way and correspondingly simple (Scholem, 1995: 260).

According to the *Tsimtsum*, in contrast, in order to make room for his creatures, God had to withdraw. However, since there was nothing outside him, he had to withdraw into himself. God shrank and, in some sense, denied himself in order to clear the way for creation.

The immediate result of the *Tsimtsum* is the creation of the first Adam, namely, Adam Kadmon. In Habermas' view, in fact, the creation and fall of this first Adam is the most important aspect of the doctrine of the *Tsimtsum*<sup>56</sup>.

God created Adam Kadmon bestowed with the unconditional freedom for good and evil. In Schelling's interpretation, God had to assume the risk that Adam might use wrongly such a gift by sinning, that is, by rejecting God's love for the sake of his own will.

For Schelling, the religious figure of Adam Kadmon represents the idea of another Absolute. In this way, Schelling tries to explain i) the existence of absolute freedom, and ii) the origin of perversion. As Habermas puts it,

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<sup>55</sup> In Habermas' words, "A few decades before Böhme, Isaak Luria, the Kabbalist from Safed, used the picture of the Zimzum to conceptualize a backward movement of God into himself, a self-banishment from his own midst" (Habermas, 2004: 54).

<sup>56</sup> In the Kabbalistic tradition **Adam Kadmon** is a term that means the Primal Man. For Scholem, "The decisive point is that, according to this doctrine, the first being which emanated from the light was *Adam Kadmon*, the 'primordial man' (...) *Adam Kadmon* is nothing but a first configuration of the divine light which flows from the essence of *En-Sof* into the primeval space of the *Tsimtsum* (...) He therefore is the first and highest form in which the divinity begins to manifest itself after the *Tsimtsum*" (Scholem, 1995: 265).

For freedom to be misused implies, on the one hand, that it must be absolute freedom, but on the other hand, that it cannot be the freedom of the Absolute itself, because it is not acceptable to think that God is the author of the unholy. The perversion (*Verkehrung*) of the principles and the corruption of the world must therefore result from the exercise of a freedom which is *like* God without being him – the freedom of an *alter deus*, namely Adam Kadmon, the first man (Habermas, 2004: 56).

Schelling introduced the category of another Absolute in order to offer an account, following the inner logic of Idealism, of the possibility of the end to the corruption of the world. The fact that the unholy does not come from eternity might be used as a proof that it does not need to last for eternity either<sup>57</sup>.

God would have found his own life in his alter ego, if Adam Kadmon had decided on love. However, Adam made a wrong use of his freedom, and freed himself from the bond of original creation through a contraction too (Habermas, 2004: 54). Similarly to God, Adam Kadmon performed a contraction in order to be something for himself<sup>58</sup>.

At this point of the process, according to Habermas, it is finally clear why the whole process took place at all. Now we can understand “the motive of that unfathomable act of the first contraction of God, which is surpassed and taken back in a second contraction, and thus the answer to the question of why is there *something* rather than nothing” (Habermas, 2004: 60).

At the beginning, as we saw, God is all what exists; there is nothing out of him. But within himself God has the need to control everything. His absolute domination only has a limit, namely, the reversal of its own absoluteness. God’s domination is necessary. In Habermas’ words,

This domination as a having-to-dominate is the condition that God cannot rise above (*aufheben*), ‘since he would need to rise above himself’. He can only free himself from this single limitation imposed by his own unlimited dominion if something uncontrollable presents itself to him, viz. something like him, something that he indeed *could* rule, but *would* not rule – because he could only have it by not having, in love (Habermas, 2004: 60).

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<sup>57</sup> Similarly, Habermas notes, locating a historical origin of exploitation proves, in the Marxists reasoning, the possibility of its sublation.

<sup>58</sup> We must quote again Böhme’s words: “Every will that goes into itself and seeks the ground of its living content...comes into an ownness [*ein Eigenes*]’. This quotation from Böhme applies to the initial birth in God as much as to the first man’s renunciation, which pulls creation down into the abyss and almost knocks God himself off his throne” (Habermas, 2004: 54).

God's omnipotence, from which he cannot escape, forced him to begin the process of creation; a process that actually begins with his withdrawal (the second contraction or the *Tsimtsum*) and that results in the creation of something that God himself could not control. This is the theme of the creation and fall of Adam Kadmon, the original man. "In order to be able to see Himself confirmed in His own freedom through an alter ego, God must delimit himself precisely within this very freedom" (Habermas, 2002: 161). Thus, God's omnipotence is only complete if he lets something like himself come into existence, "something to which (for the sake of strict identity) God can also lose his own power: with him, the first man, God puts his own fate in jeopardy" (Habermas, 2004: 57).

Only through love and subordination to glorification will God be able to regain power over the conditions of his existence. God only gains dominance if he dominates something like himself, although something that, paradoxically, also evades domination. In Habermas' words, "Absolute control over everything, even over this absoluteness itself, is completed by *renouncing the domination* that is made possible by the production of another Absolute, and thus in the union with something that is utterly uncontrollable. This is the esoteric meaning of the overcoming of divine egoism through divine love" (Habermas, 2004: 60).

The creation of another Absolute that could reject God's love was, thus, necessary. The only way this other Absolute could love God is by willing to do it; it is, after all, another Absolute. Therefore, for the sake of his love and his absolute power, God had to take on the risk that his counterpart might refuse him. And this is exactly what happened. In addition, "This is what explains the brutal fact of a perversion (*Verkehrung*), which we immediately perceive in the corruption of the world, a world that has slipped out of God's hands, whose history is handed over to the 'inverted [ungekehrten] God' of social mankind" (Habermas, 2004: 60)<sup>59</sup>.

After Adam Kadmon's rejection, God longed to return to his previous quite nothingness. However, the only way he could do that was by stepping back into the past, taking what was united in himself as his principles, and positing them as a sequence of periods, namely, as ages of the world (Habermas, 2004: 58). "Up to this point, the God who has stepped back into the past can supervise events (...) In delivering himself to the power of the one he has empowered, he stays in charge until he is opposed by man who, as the other God, can take charge" (Habermas, 2004: 60).

The creation of the second Adam, the earthly one, is nothing but a continuation – and repetition - of the same process at a different level. As Scholem puts it,

Adam Ha-Rishon, the Adam of the Bible, corresponds on the anthropological plane to *Adam Kadmon*, the ontological primary man. Evidently the human and the mystical man are closely related to each other; their structure is the same (...) Here we have also the explanation

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<sup>59</sup> In Scholem's words: "A perfect world cannot be created, because then it would be God himself, who does not multiply himself but can only contract himself. The naiveté that expects God to repeat himself is remote from the kabbalists. Precisely because God can never repeat himself, what must underpin any creation on the part of this God -if I may state it in a Hegelian manner -is alienation, in which the godhead, in order to be itself, has to expel evil from itself." (Habermas, 1983: 206-207).

for the connection between man's fall and the cosmic process, between morality and physics. Since Adam was truly, and not merely metaphorically, all-embracing, his fall was bound likewise to drag down and affect everything, not merely metaphorically but really. The drama of *Adam Kadmon* on the theosophical plane is repeated, and paralleled by that of *Adam Rishon* (Scholem, 1995: 279-280).

The original sin of Adam, the earthly one, repeats the catastrophe on a correspondingly lower plane. But, this time, the process of creation is not anymore on the hands of God. "Now, for the first time, the creation emerges from the inner depths of God and continues in the external history of the world" (Habermas, 2002: 142). From now on, "a humbled God must Himself await redemption, since humanity has taken on the burden of resurrecting fallen nature" (Habermas, 2002: 161)<sup>60</sup>.

The philosophical-materialistic consequences that interest Habermas from the doctrine of *Tsimtsum* are deeply related to the idea that after the *Tsimtsum* the destiny of creation lies basically on the hands of humanity.

Habermas identifies three historical lines of interpretation of the *Tsimtsum*. The first one refers to a materialist dialectic of nature: "For the Lurianic mystic the everlasting creation means that the contraction of God is renewed in each process of nature, that in each and every creative process the contact with nothingness is repeated" (Habermas, 1983: 207). Habermas, to be sure, is more interested in the second and third lines, that is, the one that leads to a revolutionary theory of history, and the one that leads to a nihilism of a postrevolutionary enlightenment.

For the second line, the *Tsimtsum* entails the affirmation, after God's withdrawal, of a realm of freedom and responsibility for others. "God has withdrawn to such an extent that the leading of things back to their primordial place is surrendered to humans (...) To Luria the coming of the Messiah means no more than the signature under a document that we ourselves write" (Habermas, 1983: 207).

According to this view, each sin repeats the process of divine withdrawal; similarly, however, each good act advances the process of redemption and restoration. Right after the emergence of the Lurianic doctrine, Jewish mysticism developed the idea that the magical powers of contemplation might accelerate the process of reestablishing the fallen nature. However, the "later Kabbalah turns this inner movement outward, into a messianic activism that ultimately takes on the more profane meaning of a political liberation from exile. From the early Marx on down to Bloch and the late Benjamin, it takes the form 'no resurrection of nature without a revolutionizing of society'" (Habermas, 1983: 208).

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<sup>60</sup> Habermas emphasizes that "Even the Kabbala regarded the Messiah as merely the seal on a document that must be written by men *themselves*" (Habermas, 2004: 57). Similarly, in Scholem's words, "The process in which God conceives, brings forth and develops Himself does not reach its final conclusion in God. Certain parts of the process of restitution are allotted to man. Not all the lights which are held in captivity by the powers of darkness are set free by their own efforts; it is man who adds the final touch to the divine countenance; it is he who completes the enthronement of God, the King and mystical Creator of all things, in His own Kingdom of Heaven; it is he who perfects the Maker of all things" (Scholem, 1995: 273-274).

The third line of interpretation of the *Tsimtsum* leads to a different result, namely, to a nihilism of a postrevolutionary enlightenment. This third line is related to the religio-historical example of Sabbatianism, a heretical movement that dates back to 1665-6. The movement was founded when Sabbatai Zevi revealed himself as the Messiah. However, the essential feature of the movement is to be found at the moment when he was captured by the Sultan. Sabbatai Zevi was offered the possibility of going over to Islam in order to avoid martyrdom. Faced with these possibilities, Sabbatai Zevi, the Messiah, chose apostasy.

The fall of the Messiah was interpreted following the model of the *Tsimtsum*. In this sense, it was seen as a creative act of descent into the darkness. In Habermas' words, "The model of the descent of God into the abyss provided the warrant for monstrous visions of the redemptive power of the subversive in the heretical messianism of the Sabbatians; it covered as well the pertinent rituals which were supposed to manifest the power of negation in the performance of actions at once destructive and liberating". (Habermas, 1983: 208).

In this sense, antinomian actions were not only justified but promoted. Because the consuming positivity of evil can only be overcome through wickedness itself, the magic of interiority that had, until then, determined the mystical direction of Judaism, suddenly turned into a magic of apostasy. The weak will not prevail over the strong in this corrupted world through rigorous adherence to the Torah; rather, the world is sunk so deep in corruption that it can only be restored by an even greater depravity. The Messiah himself must descend into the realm of evil in order to release the imprisoned divine love (...) The canonization of sin let anarchy loose in the sanctum of the law itself (Habermas, 2004: 65).

From a historical point of view, nonetheless, this antinomian trend was not completely unrelated to enlightenment. Indeed, as Habermas notes, Scholem's work "stresses, and documents in biographical instances, the tendency toward a reversal of mysticism into enlightenment" (Habermas, 1983: 208). As Habermas sees it,

Denied any sort of politico-historical confirmation, radical praxis transposed itself into religious criticism; the rationalism of natural rights inherits the unfulfilled transformation of Sabbatianism into emancipation, even if it is just an emancipation from the ghetto. It is only a step from mystical heresy to the enlightenment: Jonas Wehle, the head of the Prague mystics in 1800, cites the authority of both Sabbatai Zevi and Mendelssohn, Kant and Isaak Luria (Habermas, 2004: 65).

Thus, briefly put, what interests Habermas from the *Tsimtsum* is that a mystical-religious doctrinal element ends up affirming a space 'free of God'. Habermas even

suggests that from Schelling's account the possibility of God himself becoming superfluous seems to be, at least, implicit.

Indeed, "On the one hand, humanity as the *alter deus* makes its own history; on the other hand, as the inverted God it has destroyed the connection with nature and lost its dominion over it; under these conditions, how can mankind break the control of the outer over the inner unless it takes on the outer *externally* and, in that effort (...) mediates itself with nature in social labour" (Habermas, 2004: 65). In Schelling's view the power of the outer can only be overcome or broken if human beings try to turn it against itself, namely through the mastery of nature (Habermas, 2004: 65). For Schelling, not contemplation but the usage of a 'technology directed to the outside' is what will allow human beings to regain control over nature (Habermas, 2004: 66).

However, once this perspective is posited, Habermas wonders:

(...) wouldn't the historical process automatically shed its theogonical skin? As the subject of a history that is no longer synchronized with nature in accordance with identity philosophy, humanity is set free; it can put aside as a superfluous hypothesis the idea of 'the complete humanization of God, of which thus far only the beginnings have taken place'. Indeed, this humanization of God, 'where the infinite will have become finite without impairing its infinitude', could, for its part, be interpreted as the mirror of a man becoming man himself; this leads to the point where, in the shape of socialized humanity, the finite becomes infinite without impairing its finitude (Habermas, 2004: 66)<sup>61</sup>.

In other words, how can we be sure that, after the *Tsimtsum*, God's withdrawal does not imply, purely and simply, God's own death?

Habermas, to be sure, does not categorically affirm this possibility. However, he does end one of his essays on Scholem reminding Scholem's own words when asked about the relevance of kabbalistic thought for Judaism today. As Habermas indicates, in order to answer, Scholem himself used a kabbalistic figure or thought "God will appear as non-God. All the divine and symbolic things can also appear in the garb of atheistic mysticism" (Habermas, 1983: 209). For Habermas, thus, Scholem himself sees in Judaism a spiritual enterprise that lives out of religious sources. Nevertheless, it is one that "may survive even the secularization of those sources" (Habermas, 1983: 209).

In summary, the idea of *Tsimtsum* interpreted as Habermas does via Schelling takes idealism deeply closer to materialism by emphasizing the idea according to which the destiny of human beings ultimately depends on themselves. From this view, even the existence and need of God might seem superfluous. But, for Habermas, this does not mean the rejection of normativism or the embracement of nihilism. Indeed, the materialistic elements of the *Tsimtsum* also imply a perspective that by taking the negative seriously – taking death and suffering seriously – deeply insists on the idea of

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<sup>61</sup> The idea of a finite becoming infinite without impairing its finitude will be developed by Habermas once he directs his view to the nature of human language (See Habermas, 2002)



redemption. In this sense, the space opened by the absence of God can be filled by the affirmation of critical utopias. As Habermas puts it,

Once the authority of the voice that said "I am the Lord, thy God" no longer holds as unquestionably true, there remains only a (...) transformed tradition that knows no crime but one: Whoever cuts off the living bond between the generations commits a crime. Among modern societies, only those who can bring essential elements of their religious tradition, which points beyond the merely human, into the spheres of the profane will be able to save the substance of the human as well". (Habermas, 1983: 210).

Therefore, God's withdrawal opens a space for expressing non-religious utopias that, nonetheless, are rooted in the religious ideals of humanity's redemption and the restoration of its fallen nature. Bloch's and Benjamin's constitute remarkable examples of this possibility.

## II

In Habermas' view, Bloch was able to sublimate Schelling's *Ages of the World* into the Marx of the *Paris Manuscripts*. In this sense, influenced by Schelling, Bloch developed a Marxian appropriation of Jewish mysticism; his idea of utopia was rooted in the heritage of the Kabbalah that was brought into the Protestant philosophy of German Idealism by Schelling.

In his essay on Bloch, Habermas includes two suggestive quotes that indicate Bloch's relation to Jewish mysticism and, especially, to the doctrine of the *Tsimtsum*.

The first one comes from Bloch's *The Spirit of Utopia*. In the second part of the book 'Marx, Death and Apocalypse' - 'On the Way of the World, How What is Turned Inward Can Get Turned Outward', Bloch states that,

For ages matter has been an embarrassment not only for those seeking knowledge, but an embarrassment in itself; it is a demolished house within which the human being did not come forth; nature is a rubbish heap of deceived, dead, rotted, confused, and wasted life. . . . Only the good, thoughtful person holding the key can usher in the morning in this night of annihilation, if only those who remained impure do not weaken him, if only his crying for the Messiah is inspired enough to stir up the saving hands, to ensure for himself in a precise way the grace of attainment, to arouse in God the forces drawing us and himself over, the inspiriting and grace-filled forces of the Sabbath reign, and thus to swallow up in victory the raw, satanic, breathtaking moment of conflagration of the apocalypse and straightaway to vanquish it (Habermas, 1983: 39).

The second quote comes from Bloch's *The Principle of Hope*. According to Bloch,

Human abundance as well as that of nature as a whole . . . , the real genesis, is not at the beginning, but at the end; and it starts coming to be only when society and human existence become radical, that is, take hold of themselves at the roots. The root of history, however, is the toiling, laboring human being, who develops whatever has been given and transforms it. Once he has apprehended himself and grounded being without estrangement and alienation in real democracy, there thus arises in the world something that appears to everyone during childhood and yet within which no one ever was: home (Habermas, 1983: 40).

Although Bloch criticized the myths and the religions of the past as illusions, he also thought that they should be taken "seriously as a pre-appearance of something to be achieved in the future" (Habermas, 1983: 62). In this sense, Bloch attempted to develop a productive link between a past covered by a false consciousness, and a future in which the realization of socialism and true consciousness will become real. On this link rested his idea of utopia; an idea that, according to Habermas, was not characterized by a strong sense of concreteness.

Bloch never emphasized the conditions for the possible realization of his idea of utopia. According to Habermas, two were the causes for Bloch's lack of interest in this issue. First, for Bloch, these conditions had already been sufficiently analyzed and stated by historical materialism. Bloch's aim, thus, pointed somewhere else. Indeed, secondly, Bloch's goal was to save utopia from what he regarded as the 'schematizers with a treasury of quotations' and the 'practitioners from the empty hand'. For Bloch, overemphasizing the 'business' of realizing utopia, ran the risk of ending up betraying it. In this sense, Bloch's efforts were directed to "grasp the dimensions of utopia itself and to fasten upon it so that it cannot be lost to the surviving generations" (Habermas, 1983: 62). Thus, instead of developing a traditional socialist critique of tradition, Bloch chose the path of holding onto the tradition of what has been criticized. For Habermas, Bloch aimed to salvage and rescue whatever might have been true in false consciousness. In Bloch's words, quoted by Habermas, 'Every great culture till now is the preview of something attained, at least to the extent that it could be constructed in imagery and ideas upon the summits of time with a rich view into the distance'" (Habermas, 1983: 63).

In this sense, Bloch's recourse to Jewish Mysticism appears as a way to avoid the over-economicism of Marxism. For Bloch, God might be dead, but "the 'place' he held has survived him; the realm into which humanity had imaginatively projected God and the gods remains behind as an empty cave like space even after the collapse of these hypostases; its "depth dimensions" [*Tiefabmessungen*] (that is to say, those of atheism finitely conceived) betray the outlines of a future realm of freedom" (Habermas, 1983: 63).

Similarly to Bloch, Walter Benjamin's influences from his Jewish heritage were also directed to salvaging tradition. Compared to Bloch, nonetheless, Benjamin

developed deeper reflections pertaining the conditions for undertaking such a task as well as the concrete sphere from which finding the traditions in need of salvation. Benjamin's idea of rescuing critique is a result of these reflections<sup>62</sup>.

Habermas analyses Benjamin's idea of rescuing critique as an alternative or a complement to Marcuse's notion of consciousness-raising or ideology critique

Marcuse's idea of ideology critique is presented within the context of his proposal about the overcoming of bourgeois culture as a whole. In classical bourgeois art Marcuse criticizes the two-sidedness of a world of beautiful illusion that has been established autonomously over the material contradictions of the bourgeois competition and social labor. In this sense, bourgeois art permits "the claims to happiness by individuals to hold good only in the realm of fiction and casts a veil over the unhappiness of day-today reality" (Habermas, 1983: 131).

For Marcuse, art is able to transcend the status quo. In other words, the autonomy of art is powerful enough to justify and present a 'true' perspective insofar as its ideal of the beautiful expresses the possibility of a better and happier life. Art, in this sense, with its beautiful illusion, becomes the medium where bourgeois society expresses its ideals but, simultaneously, intends to hide the fact that they are materially suspended. Therefore, Marcuse's ideology critique is developed within the context shaped by the broader objective of overcoming such an autonomous art by reintegrating culture into the material processes of life. In effect, "The revolutionizing of bourgeois conditions of life amounts to the overcoming of culture" (Habermas, 1983: 131).

In this context, then, the practice of an ideology critique is defined by two further defined objectives. First, it seeks to confront the ideal and the reality in order to emphasize the double content of bourgeois art, namely, a source of explicit legitimation of reality as well as a source of implicit denunciation of it. Second, ideology critique seeks to "prepare the way for a transformation of the thus unmasked material relationships of life and to initiate an overcoming of the culture within which these relationships of life are stabilized" (Habermas, 1983: 136). Ideology critique, by uncovering the particular interest of the ruling class, intends to shake the normative structures that hold captive the consciousness of the oppressed. In this way, ideology critique aims to be an introduction for political action.

Similar to Marcuse's notion of ideology critique, Benjamin's notion of rescuing critique also arises within a broader context, namely, the context of Benjamin's idea regarding the loss of autonomy of post-auratic art. As Habermas notes, Benjamin's claims about the dissolution of the aura of the work of art might seem to be very close to Marcuse's thoughts on the loss of the autonomy of art and the overcoming of culture. Nevertheless, Benjamin's idea of the dissolution of the aura is very different to Marcuse's proposal on the overcoming of art's autonomy.

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<sup>62</sup> Benjamin's thoughts are presented as an art critique. There are, however, strong connections between Benjamin's reflections on art and Habermas' remarks on religion; my claim, in this sense, is that what Benjamin formulated for the case of art is similar to what Habermas is formulating for religion, and Habermas, to be sure, is not unaware of this influence. Habermas, in this sense, aims to open a big enough for developing a sort of 'rescuing critique' of the religious contents. As we will see, though, this 'rescuing critique' is not merely a task of the philosopher nor the art critic. It is an enterprise for any democratic citizen, religious and non religious. In any event, insofar as Benjamin's rescuing critique is also presented as a rejection to esoterism and as a bet for a 'universal illumination' Habermas' own account might be very close to Benjamin's.

For Benjamin, the dissolution of the aura of the work of art entails, as a matter of fact, the disappearance of art's autonomy. Thus, the dissolution of the aura refers, for Benjamin, to the fact that art is no longer separated from the sphere of the material processes of life; art loses its status as an inviolable and authentic sphere compared to the merely material everyday life of human beings. With the destruction of its aura, therefore, "the work of art withdraws its ambivalent claim to superior authenticity and inviolability" (Habermas, 1983: 132).

The aura of the work of art, in this sense, constituted that which through the means of contemplation allowed us to experiment the "transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship between the inanimate or natural object and human beings. The person whom we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To perceive the aura of an object means to invest it with the capacity to look at us in turn." (*I*, p. 298) (Habermas, 1983: 143-144).

The dissolution of the aura implies the trivialization of art. Although the public exhibition of art is now facilitated, its cultural value is deeply lost. Once art is stripped of its aura, a new organization of the perception and reception of art emerges: "As autonomous, art is set up for individual enjoyment; after the loss of its aura it is geared to reception by the masses. Benjamin contrasts the contemplation of the isolated, art-viewing individual with the diffusion of art within a collective, stimulated by its appeal" (Habermas, 1983: 132)<sup>63</sup>.

The dissolution of the aura is a long-time process. For Benjamin, "In prehistoric times, because of the absolute emphasis on its cult value, the work of art was an instrument of magic. Only later did it come to be recognized as a work of art" (*I*, p. 225) (Habermas, 1983: 139). Later on, in the Renaissance a profane cult of beauty was developed that remained valid for 300 years. However, once art leaves behind its cultic basis, the illusion of its autonomy is left behind too. In this sense, the dissolution of the aura is part of a long historical process in which all the elements of tradition were deeply affected. For this reason, Habermas thinks that Benjamin's explanation of the deritualization of art is part of the world-historical process of rationalization that "the developmental surge of the forces of production causes in social forms of life through revolutionizing the mode of production" (Habermas, 1983: 139).

Benjamin's idea of the dissolution of the aura is part of what Weber called the 'disenchantment of religious-metaphysical worldviews'. With the emergence of the civil society, the economic and political systems were uncoupled from the cultural system. In

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<sup>63</sup> Here, according to Habermas, we have a deep difference between Marcuse's and Benjamin's analyses of art. Benjamin, unlike Marcuse, conceives the dissolution of autonomous art "as the result of an upheaval in techniques of reproduction. In a comparison of the functions of painting and photography, Benjamin demonstrates in exemplary fashion the consequences of new techniques moving to the fore in the nineteenth century. In contrast with the traditional printing methods of pouring, casting, woodcarving, engraving, and lithography, these techniques represent a new developmental stage that may be comparable to the invention of the printing press. In his own day Benjamin could observe a development in phonograph records, films, and radio, which was accelerated by electronic media. The techniques of reproduction impinge on the internal structure of works of art. The work sacrifices its spatio-temporal individuality, on the one hand, but on the other hand it purchases more documentary authenticity. The temporal structure of ephemerality and repeatability, which replaces the uniqueness and duration typical of the temporal structure of the autonomous work of art, destroys the aura, "the unique appearance of a distance," and sharpens a "sense for sameness in the world." (*I*, pp. 222 ff.) Things stripped of their aura move nearer the masses, as well, because the technical medium intervening between the selective organs of sense and the object copies the object more exactly and realistically. The authenticity of the subject matter, of course, requires the constructive use of means for realistic replication (that is, montage and captioning of photographs" (Habermas, 1983: 135)

addition, the ideology of fair exchange undermined the traditionalistic worldviews that used to shape all the realms of human life, including art. From now on, the work of art began to be defined as a commodity freed from the context of ritual. Once liberated from the context of ritual, art could be enjoyed by “the bourgeois reading, theater-going, exhibition-going, and concert-going public that was coming into being in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries” (Habermas, 1983: 139). Thus, it is the development itself of the process through which art gained its autonomy what, afterwards, causes its liquidation as well.

For Benjamin, then, unlike for Marcuse, it did not make much sense to attack an art already in the process of its dissolution. In contrast to the critical demands that Marcuse raises against bourgeois culture, Benjamin’s critique is developed as part of a descriptive account that “observes a functional change in art, which Marcuse only anticipates for the moment in which the conditions of life are revolutionized” (Habermas, 1983: 134). But, if this is case, what kind of criticism could be developed from this perspective? According to Habermas, Benjamin’s criticism develops a “mortification of the art work only to transpose what is worth knowing from the medium of the beautiful into that of the true and thereby to rescue it. (Habermas, 1983: 136). This transposition is possible, and desirable, within the context of Benjamin’s conception of history<sup>64</sup> and of experience.

According to Benjamin, "Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim." ("Theses on the Philosophy of History," I, p. 254) (Habermas, 1983: 136). This power shapes a sort of secret and tacit agreement between the past generations and the present one. For Benjamin, this agreement forces us to develop an “ever-renewed critical exertion of historical vision toward a past in need of redemption; this effort is conservative in an eminent sense, for every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably." (I, p. 255) (Habermas, 1983: 136).

The past has to be redeemed in order to interrupt the ‘continuum of history’ that represents the permanence of the unbearable. The idea of progress, thus, is considered as a catastrophic eternal return. Nonetheless, such a continuum is susceptible of being interrupted by affirming a new ‘present’ that rescues from the oblivion experiences so far forgotten<sup>65</sup>.

The interruption of the continuum of history is achieved through broadening of our notion of experience<sup>66</sup>. As Habermas puts it,

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<sup>64</sup> For Habermas, in Benjamin’s notion of history the heritage from Jewish mysticism becomes absolutely manifest. In Habermas’ words, Benjamin’s theses on the philosophy of history “are among the most moving testimonies of the Jewish spirit” (Habermas, 1983: 34).

<sup>65</sup> In this sense, for Benjamin, "History is the object of a construction whose site forms not homogeneous and empty time but time filled by the 'presence of the now' (*Jetztzeit; nunc stans*). Thus, to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with the time of the now, which he blasted out of the continuum of history (Habermas, 1983: 136-137).

<sup>66</sup> This is why Benjamin’s rescuing criticism depends upon a theory of art which is a theory of experience (Habermas, 1983: 146). However, for Habermas, Benjamin’s theory of experience is founded on his linguistic philosophy (Ibid, 146-150).

When Benjamin, as a student, still trusted himself to sketch "The Program of Coming Philosophy" (GS, II, p. 159), the notion of an un mutilated experience already stood at the center of his reflections. At that time, Benjamin polemicized against "experience reduced to point zero, the minimum of significance," against the experience of physical objects with respect to which Kant had paradigmatically oriented his attempt at an analysis of the conditions of possible experience. Against this, Benjamin defended the more complex modes of experience of people living close to nature, madmen, seers, and artists. At that time he still had hopes of restoring a systematic continuum of experience through metaphysics. Later he assigned this task to art criticism, supposing that it would transpose the beautiful into the medium of the true, by which transposition "truth is not an unveiling, which annihilates the mystery, but a revelation and a manifestation that does it justice." (O, p. 31)

Thus, rescuing criticism aims to find, within the medium of art, richest and more complex experiences that have been condemned to ostracism. The ultimate objective, then, is to take out humanity of a path in which it appears as "hopelessly deprived of its vocation to a good and just life and exiled into the cycle of sheer reproduction and survival" (Habermas, 1983: 137). This deprivation and exile is what Benjamin called the 'mythic fate', that is, "the enemy that threatens the dead as much as the living when rescuing criticism is missing and forgetting takes its place" (Habermas, 1983: 137).

Thus, by interrupting the mythic fate, the task of the critique is to rescue fragments of experience that constitute an endangered tradition. The history of art is a crucial part of this tradition.

Benjamin's criticism seeks in art the development of a criticism against the modernization of forms of life caused by the forces of production. For Benjamin, this modernization was tantamount to "a compulsion toward repetition which is just as pervasive under capitalism- the always-the-same within the new" (Habermas, 1983: 138). In this sense, unlike Marcuse's notion of critique, Benjamin's rescuing critique does not aim to overcome a past characterized by oppression and falsity. In the contrary, it aims to find in such a past all the "moments in which the artistic sensibility puts a stop to fate draped as progress and enciphers the utopian experience in a dialectical image the new within the always-the-same". (Habermas, 1983: 138)<sup>67</sup>.

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<sup>67</sup> This is the reason why allegories, the 'counternotion of symbols' are essential for Benjamin. For Habermas Benjamin's emphasis on allegories is developed against Cassirer's emphasis on symbols. In Habermas' words, "Cassirer had conceived every content of myth, philosophy, art, and language as the world of symbolic forms. In that world's objective spirit, human beings communicated with one another, and in it alone were they able to exist at all, for in the symbolic forms Cassirer believed himself capable of saying with Goethe the inconceivable is wrought, the ineffable is brought to speech, and the essence is brought to appearance. But Benjamin recalled that history in all that it contains from the outset of the untimely, the painful, the failed -is shut off from expression through the symbol and from the harmony of the classical pattern. Only allegorical representation succeeds in portraying world history as a history of suffering. Allegories are in the realm of thoughts what ruins are in the realm of things: "To preserve the unfreedom, imperfection, and brokenness of the sensible, the beautiful physis, was essentially denied to classicism. Precisely this, however, the allegories of the baroque, hidden beneath their bold pomp, bring out with hitherto unanticipated emphasis (...) According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures. . . . There is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was

Benjamin's rescuing critique, then, aims to rescue from the oblivion all those moments, all those events, and all those protagonists, which progress has not taken into account. For Benjamin, those moments, events and protagonists have an immense potential for releasing a broader notion of experience than the one offered by modernity. Habermas deeply emphasizes the fact that Benjamin was always concerned with a public and open sort of rescuing. Benjamin's commitment with exoterism deeply contrasts with Adorno's option for an esoteric rescue of moments of truth within art, or, as he puts it, Adorno's strategy of hibernation<sup>68</sup>. For Benjamin, in contrast, "the true moments of the tradition will be rescued for the messianic future either exoterically or not at all" (Habermas, 1983: 141)<sup>69</sup>.

Benjamin's commitment for esoterism explains what seems to be an ambivalent assessment of the dissolution of the aura in the sense that in some passages Benjamin regards it as a negative result, while in others it seems to be a positive phenomenon.

Indeed, insofar as the aura of the work of art kept the historical experience of a past that needed to be revitalized, its destruction entails a great risk for the definite loss of that experience. As mentioned before, the aura of the art allowed the preservation of an experience that "needs to be critically conserved and appropriated if the messianic promise of happiness is ever to be redeemed" (Habermas, 1983: 144).

However, for Benjamin, once art was fully stripped of its cultic element, and thus, the aura collapsed, the esoteric access to the work of art and its cultic distance from the viewer disappeared too. The contemplation characterized by a solitary enjoyment was not the ruling model anymore (Habermas, 1983: 144). What once was contained in the

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transmitted from one owner to the other." [Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York, 1969), p. 256]" (Habermas, 1983: 34). Furthermore, we have here another clear difference between Marcuse and Benjamin. According to Habermas, Marcuse limits his analysis to the classical periods of bourgeois art. "He is oriented toward a notion of artistic beauty taken from the symbolic forms within which essence comes to appearance. The classic works of art (in literature this means especially the novel and the bourgeois tragic drama) are suitable objects for a critique of ideology precisely because of their affirmative character, just as in the realm of political philosophy rational natural right is suitable on account of its affirmative character. Benjamin's interest, however, is in the nonaffirmative forms of art. In his investigation of the baroque tragic drama he found in the allegorical a concept that contrasted with the individual totality of the transfigurative work of art. Allegory, which expresses the experience of the passionate, the oppressed, the unreconciled, and the failed (that is, the negative), runs counter to a symbolic art that prefigures and aims for positive happiness, freedom, reconciliation, and fulfillment. Whereas the latter needs ideology critique for decodifying and overcoming, the former is itself suggestive of critique" (Habermas, 1983: 134).

<sup>68</sup> As Habermas puts it, "In opposition to the false overcoming of religion, Adorno -like Benjamin an atheist, if not in the same way - proposes bringing in utopian contents as the ferment for an uncompromisingly critical thought, but precisely not in the form of a universalized (sic) secular illumination. In opposition to the false overcoming of philosophy, Adorno - an antipositivist, like Benjamin - proposes bringing a transcendent impetus into a critique that is in a certain way self-sufficient, but does not penetrate into the positive sciences in order to become universal in the form of a self-reflection of the sciences. In opposition to the false overcoming of autonomous art, Adorno presents Kafka and Schoenberg, the hermetic dimension of modernity, but precisely not the mass art that makes the auratically encapsulated experience public" (Habermas, 1983: 141-142).

<sup>69</sup> According to Habermas, Brecht, who must have served as a kind of reality principle for Benjamin, brought Benjamin around to breaking with his esotericism of style and thought (Habermas, 1983: 129). In Habermas' view, Benjamin's rejection of esoterism was a necessary option he had to take in the face of the rise of fascism. As he puts it, "Benjamin once wrote to Adorno that "speculation sets out upon its necessarily bold flight with some prospect of success only if, instead of donning the waxen wings of esotericism, it sees its source of power in construction alone." (NLR, p. 76) Benjamin turned against the esotericism of fulfillment and happiness just as decisively. His intention (...) is "the true, creative *overcoming* of religious illumination . . . a secular illumination, a materialist, anthropological inspiration" (R, p. 179), for which solitary ecstasy could at most serve as a primer" (Habermas, 1983: 145).

experience of the aura was released by the shattered shell of aura, namely, the broadening of an experience that is able even to transform the objects into a counterpart. In Habermas' words,

A field of surprising correspondences between animate and inanimate nature is thereby opened up wherein things, too, encounter us in the structure of vulnerable intersubjectivity. In such structures, the essence that appears escapes the grasp after immediacy without any distance at all; the proximity of the other refracted in the distance is the signature of a possible fulfillment and a mutual happiness. Benjamin's intention aims at a condition in which the esoteric experiences of happiness have become public and universal, for only in a context of communication into which nature is integrated in a brotherly fashion, as if it were set upright once again, can human subjects open up their eyes to look in return (Habermas, 1983: 144-145).

Once art is deritualized, the risk of its absolute trivialization and the loss of its experiential content becomes actual. However, such a deritualization also makes possible the universalization of the experience of happiness. In Habermas' words,

Benjamin (...) calls *secular* the illumination he elucidates in terms of the effect of surrealist works that are no longer art in the sense of autonomous works but manifestation, slogan, document, bluff, and counterfeit. Such works bring us to the awareness that "we penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognize in it the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectical optic that knows the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday." (R, p. 190) This experience is secular because it is exoteric" (Habermas, 1983: 145).

Thus, the secular illumination of Benjamin's rescuing critique is possible once the experience hidden under the aura of the work of art is likely to become exoteric in virtue of the dissolution of the aura's protective shell. Rescuing critique, thus, takes up "again a semantics that is pried piece by piece from the interior of myth and released messianically (that is, for purposes of emancipation) into works of great art at the same time as it is preserved" (Habermas, 1983: 146).

Habermas is aware that one of the deep flaws of Benjamin's notion of rescuing criticism is its lack of articulation with a concrete political praxis<sup>70</sup>. However, Habermas

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<sup>70</sup> Here we have another difference between Marcuse and Benjamin. According to Habermas, "When it [consciousness raising critique] uncovers within apparently universal interests the particular interest of the ruling class, ideology critique is a political force. Insofar as it shakes the normative structures that hold the consciousness of the oppressed captive and comes to term in political action, ideology critique aims to dismantle the structural violence invested in institutions. It is oriented toward the participatory eradication of the violence thus set loose. Structural violence can also be released preventatively or reactively from above; then it has the form of a fascist partial



highlights that one of Benjamin's great contributions is to have rescued a category that to a certain extent had been obscured by the new myth of progress, namely, happiness. As we saw, ultimately, Benjamin's enemy was the 'myth of progress'. Rescuing critique, in this sense, constituted his attempt to fight against this myth. And against this myth he proposed rescuing critique. In Habermas' words,

Now that myth is wearing the robes of progress, the images that tradition can find only within the innermost recesses of myth are in danger of toppling over and being forever lost to rescuing criticism. The myth nesting within modernity, which is expressed in positivism's faith in progress, is the enemy against which Benjamin sets the entire pathos of rescuing. Far from being a guarantee of liberation, deritualization menaces us with a specific loss of experience. (Habermas, 1983: 142-143)

Benjamin's contribution should be analyzed, according to Habermas, within the context of a tradition of critical thinking that has produced the differentiation between three pair of concepts: hunger–prosperity, repression–liberty, and failure-happiness.

Marx's concept of exploitation did not distinguish properly between poverty and domination. "The development of capitalism has taught us in the meantime to differentiate between hunger and oppression. The deprivations that can be provided against by an increase in the standard of living are different from those that can be helped, not by the growth of social wealth, but by that of freedom" (Habermas, 1983: 155-156). For Habermas one of the contributions of Ernst Bloch is to have introduced such a distinction. As he puts it, "The more the possibility grows in developed societies of uniting repression with prosperity (that is, satisfying demands directed to the economic system without necessarily having to redeem the genuinely political exigencies), the more the accent shifts from the elimination of hunger to emancipation" (Habermas, 1983: 156).

Similarly, for Habermas, Benjamin's philosophy was able to highlight another pair of veiled categories, namely, failure and happiness. In Habermas' words, "besides hunger and repression, failure; besides prosperity and liberty, happiness. Benjamin regarded the experience of happiness he named secular illumination as bound up with the rescuing of tradition. The claim to happiness can be made good only if the sources of that semantic potential we need for interpreting the world in the light of our needs are not exhausted" (Habermas, 1983: 156).

Following Benjamin's remarks, thus, Habermas wonders about the possibility of achieving emancipation without happiness and lacking in fulfillment, just like it is possible to reach prosperity without eliminating repression (Habermas, 1983: 156). To be sure, however, Habermas is aware that Benjamin would not have shared his concern insofar as for Benjamin happiness was a massive experience for the masses spiritual

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mobilization of the masses, who do not eradicate the violence unleashed but "act it out" in a diffuse manner" (Habermas, 1983: 153). In contrast, the type of criticism developed by Benjamin, that is, a "criticism that sets out to rescue semantic potential with a leap into past *Jetztzeiten* has a highly mediated position relative to political praxis. On this, Benjamin did not manage to achieve sufficient clarity" (Habermas, 1983: 153).

and sensual. From Benjamin's totalizing perspective progress was indeed only recognized as happiness. In Habermas' view, nevertheless,

This forces us to construe the economic and political systems in concepts that would really only be adequate to cultural processes: Within the ubiquity of the context of guilt, revolutions are submerged beyond recognition (...) In the melancholy of remembering what has been missed and in conjuring up moments of happiness that are in the process of being extinguished, the historical sense for secular progress is in danger of atrophy. No doubt these advances generate their regressions, but this is where political action starts. (Habermas, 1983: 157)

In this sense, for Habermas, happiness should not become now an all-encompassing notion that indistinctly includes the ideas of prosperity and freedom. These improvements, according to him, might not create new memories, but they do dissolve old and dangerous ones.

Nonetheless, Habermas does glean from Benjamin his critique of an empty progress; a critique "directed against a joyless reformism whose sensorium has long since been stunted as regards the difference between an improved reproduction of life and a fulfilled life (or, better, a life that is not a failure)" (Habermas, 1983: 157). Thus, Habermas wonders,

Can we preclude the possibility of a meaningless emancipation? In complex societies, emancipation means the participatory transformation of administrative decision structures. Is it possible that one day an emancipated human race could encounter itself within an expanded space of discursive formation of will and yet be robbed of the light in which it is capable of interpreting its life as something good? The revenge of a culture exploited over millennia for the legitimation of domination would then take this form: Right at the moment of overcoming age-old repressions, it would harbor no violence but it would have no content either. Without the influx of those semantic energies with which Benjamin's rescuing criticism was concerned, the structures of practical discourse - finally well established - would necessarily become desolate". (Habermas, 1983: 158).

Habermas' early reflections on religion were deeply concerned with the preservation of a rich source of critical-normative perspectives for coping with a reality full of suffering and misery. The religious idea of redemption, in this sense, constitutes, a legitimate key for developing a utopian perspective that opposes such reality.

For Habermas, one of the most important influences of Jewish thinking is its ability to look toward the past only as a way to affirm a future in which the world as a

whole will be redeemed and its reconciliation will be achieved. It is in this way in which, as we saw, Habermas believed that the German Idealism of the Jews was able to produce the ferment of a critical utopia<sup>71</sup>. This is the perspective from which Habermas interprets and positively values Bloch's and, especially, Benjamin's thought.

Habermas' recent account of the role of religion in the public sphere seems to share Benjamin's concerns about saving an experiential content indispensable for the political situation of our present. Benjamin's rescuing critique, to be sure, appeared as a critique directed to the works of art. Nevertheless, insofar as Benjamin's presuppositions to develop such a critique do share many of the concerns of the latest thoughts of Habermas, it seems possible to conceive Benjamin's notion of rescuing critique as the sort of methodology that Habermas is proposing for making possible the translation of the valuable semantic content conserved within the religious doctrines.

In this sense, following Habermas' own comparison between Marcuse's ideology critique and Benjamin's rescuing critique, we could affirm the following. From the perspective of an ideology critique religion is unmasked. This is the Marx's critique of the *Philosophy of Right* and of the *Jewish Question*. This kind of critique points to unveil the class' interests hidden under the religious ideas. However, from a different perspective, namely that of a rescuing critique, we would assume that not every religious content is a representation of class' interests. In contrast, from the perspective of Benjamin's rescuing critique, we can affirm that the mask itself is an instance of a valid need and a legitimate desire. In this sense, thus, religion is not necessarily considered as opium. It can be a critical tool for society because it is a critical approach of reality.

Benjamin and Bloch, to be sure, assumed as valid the premises of Historical Materialism. Habermas, as it is known, developed his work with the intention of renewing it. His *Theory of Communicative Action* is a product of this. From this perspective, the potential relations between philosophy, political praxis and religion should now be defined with these new lens. This is why, in the following two chapters, Habermas' sociological approach to religion will be expounded. This approach is well known for the deep limitations in which religion is presented. And although such assessment is far from being untrue, it might be very useful, nevertheless, to keep in mind Habermas' early interest in the *Tsimtsum*. Indeed, as we saw, the religious doctrine of God's contraction contains a thought-provoking theological conclusion: "In the visible happening of nature is disclosed the growth of an invisible realm in which God himself looks forward to his redemption: God, in the redemption of the world by human beings and of human beings in relation to the world, redeems himself" (Habermas, 1983: 24). From this perspective it would seem that from the very

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<sup>71</sup> According to Habermas the heritage of Greek Idealism heritage was not able to accomplish this by itself. In Habermas' view, Greek's Idealism could not understand that "True lastingness is constantly in the future. Not what always was is lasting; not what gets renewed at all times, but solely what is to come: the kingdom." (Habermas, 1983: 24). Already in this early approach Habermas knew that this was something that could only be recognized by a perspective able to appreciate language's role in human life. In this sense, Idealism's deep flaw, whether Greek or German, was to deny its linguistic body. For Habermas, "Idealism condemned language as the instrument of knowledge and elevated a divinized art as its substitute" (Habermas, 1983: 24). Thus, for Habermas, already in these early reflections, philosophy had to "open itself up to the underlying logic deposited in the language" (Habermas, 1983: 24). Interestingly enough Habermas also thinks that Jewish Mysticism is able to criticize and complement Idealism in virtue of a powerful kabbalistic idea: language reaches God because it is sent out from God.

beginning God's will entails the opening of a space in which the destiny of creation depended upon creation itself.

### CHAPTER 3. HABERMAS' APPROACH TO RELIGION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SOCIAL THEORY. THE TEXTS PRIOR TO THEORY OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION

Habermas' interest in social theory is grounded on the conclusions of the research developed in his book *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1968). To be sure, Habermas will end up abandoning the [anthropological-epistemological version of the project as it was articulated in \*Knowledge and Human Interests\*](#)<sup>72</sup>. However, [the intentions behind such a project remained, although denuded of their anthropological and epistemological garb. In fact, Habermas' research agenda as was first developed in \*Knowledge and Human Interests\*](#) led him to conclude that a "radical critique of knowledge is possible only as social theory" (Habermas, 1971: vii).

In his *Postscript to Knowledge and Human Interests*, Habermas clarifies that there are two reasons for highlighting the connection between a theory of knowledge and social theory. First, the constitutive elements of social systems cannot be fully understood without clarifying the cognitive accomplishments that depend on the notion of truth but [which are](#), at the same time, referred to action. Second, the attempts to reconstruct the cognitive competences of the subjects can be tested, at least indirectly, by using them as elements to develop a theory of social evolution.

In this sense, our ideas related to the role that knowledge plays for human beings could only be grounded within the framework of a theory of the history of the species

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<sup>72</sup> In "A Postscript to Knowledge and Human Interests", published in *Philosophy of Social Sciences* 3 (1973): 157-189, Habermas affirms that, besides some conceptual flaws related, for example, to a lack of a precise distinction between objectivity and truth, he also stopped believing that a systematic critique to scientism was necessary. To be sure, it is not that the scientific tendencies had disappeared within contemporary philosophy. It is just that, according to Habermas, the context of the debate shifted. Therefore, Critical Theory could focus since then on elaborating a theory of communicative action.

and of social evolution. Hence, any attempt to ground, or reformulate, any notion of a *priori* conditions of the possibility of experience presupposes an account of how the subject of any possible experience is itself a product of the history of the species and of nature. If the cognitive competences of such a subject need to be logically reconstructed, their natural and historical genesis should be explained as well.

This is why Habermas' reexamination of the theme of the traditional concept of theory, as presented in *Knowledge and Human Interests*, needs to be seen within the context of his analysis of the relations between social evolution and rationalization.

We already dealt with the traditional concept of theory in Chapter 1 when the main aspects of metaphysical thinking were described. In *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Habermas affirms:

The word "theory" has religious origins. The *theoros* was the representative sent by Greek cities to public celebrations. Through *theoria*, that is, through looking on, he abandoned himself to the sacred events. In philosophical language, *theoria* was transferred to contemplation of the cosmos. In this form, theory already presupposed the demarcation between Being and time that is the foundation of ontology. This separation is first found in the poem of Parmenides and returns in Plato's *Timaeus*. It reserves to logos a realm of Being purged of inconstancy and uncertainty and leaves to *doxa* the realm of the mutable and perishable. When the philosopher views the immortal order, he cannot help bringing himself into accord with the proportions of the cosmos and reproducing them internally. He manifests these proportions, which he sees in the motions of nature and the harmonic series of music, within himself; he forms himself through mimesis. Through the soul's likening itself to the ordered motion of the cosmos, theory enters the conduct of life. In ethos theory molds life to its form and is reflected in the conduct of those who subject themselves to its discipline. (Habermas, 1971: 301-302)

In *Knowledge and Human Interests* Habermas attempted to contrast this traditional concept of theory with a notion of theory conceived as *critique*. In the *Appendix* Habermas presents the following five theses that in some sense summarize the systematic perspective he is trying to develop. These theses are: i) the achievements of the transcendental subject have their basis in the natural history of the human species; ii) knowledge equally serves as an instrument and transcends mere self-preservation; iii) knowledge-constitutive interests take form in the medium of work, language, and power; iv) in the power of self-reflection, knowledge and interest are one; and v) the unity of knowledge and interest proves itself in a dialectic that takes the historical traces of suppressed dialogue and reconstructs what has been suppressed. In what follows, I will elaborate further on the main aspects of these five theses.

Habermas posits three knowledge-constitutive interests that, in his view, have been developed throughout the natural history of the human species.

The first interest is the cognitive interest in technical control over objectified processes. This interest corresponds to the orientations of empirical-analytic sciences and responds to the human being's vital need to make predictions and control their surroundings. The knowledge produced by empirical-analytical sciences is predictive knowledge.

The second interest is practical-cognitive. It refers to the different consensus that can be attained within the framework of a self-understanding constituted by traditional practices. Human beings also have an interest in the preservation and expansion of the intersubjectivity that makes possible the orientation of actions based on mutual understanding. Beyond "mere observation", human beings develop their existence in virtue of practices in which understanding an intersubjective meaning is essential. The historical-hermeneutic sciences develop this interest in a systematic and reflective way.

Finally, the third interest is an emancipatory cognitive interest. For Habermas, this interest is systematically developed by the sciences of social action such as economy, sociology, political science, etc. These sciences have the job of describing invariant regularities of social action. However, they also take care of unveiling the cases in which those invariant regularities of social action are the result of "ideologically frozen relations of dependence that can in principle be transformed" (Habermas, 1971: 310). In this case, these sciences are critical social sciences, and their main goal is to transform the level of unreflected human consciousness through fostering processes of self-reflection. Self-reflection, thus, is the methodological framework of these critical social sciences. These sciences operate under the assumption that self-reflection "releases the subject from dependence on hypostatized powers. Self-reflection is determined by an emancipatory cognitive interest. Critically oriented sciences share this interest with philosophy" (Habermas, 1971: 310).

Habermas suggests that, ironically, this emancipatory interest might explain the attempts of the traditional notion of theory of banishing every possible interest from the realm of theory in order to guarantee truth and objectivity. As Habermas puts it,

In the Greek tradition, the same forces that philosophy reduces to powers of the soul still appeared as gods and superhuman powers. Philosophy domesticated them and banished them to the realm of the soul as internalized demons. If from this point of view we regard the drives and affects that enmesh man in the empirical interests of his inconstant and contingent activity, then the attitude of pure theory, which promises purification from these very affects, takes on a new meaning: disinterested contemplation then obviously signifies emancipation. The release of knowledge from interest was not supposed to purify theory from the obfuscations of subjectivity but inversely to provide the subject with an ecstatic purification from the passions. What indicates the new stage of emancipation is that catharsis is now no longer attained through mystery cults but established in the will of individuals themselves by means of theory. In the communication structure of the polis, individuation has progressed to the point where the identity of the individual ego as a stable entity can only be developed through identification with abstract laws of

cosmic order. Consciousness, emancipated from archaic powers, now anchors itself in the unity of a stable cosmos and the identity of immutable Being (Habermas, 1971: 306-307).

Additionally, for Habermas, the cognitive interest in technical control over objectified processes, the practical interest in preserving and expanding intersubjectivity, and the emancipatory interest in self-reflection are products of both the human belonging to nature as well as the human's cultural break with nature. They both realize natural drives and foster the very human tendency to be released from the constraints of nature. These three interests are the result of the very unique human being's position in "the order of nature". This is why, for Habermas, *the achievements of the transcendental subject have their basis in the natural history of the human species*.

Any notion of rationality should take into account such a unique position of human beings. Reason is, in this sense, both an organ for adaptation for human beings (similar to claws and teeth for the rest of the animals), and a cultural product that defines a breaking with human's dependence on nature. The natural history of the human species is indeed a "natural history", but insofar as it is the history of that particular being called "human", it is also, in every moment, a cultural history. As Habermas puts it,

Even the interest in self-preservation, natural as it seems, is represented by a social system that compensates for the lacks in man's organic equipment and secures his historical existence against the force of nature threatening from without. But society is not only a system of self-preservation. An enticing natural force, present in the individual as libido, has detached itself from the behavioral system of self-preservation and urges toward Utopian fulfillment (Habermas, 1971: 312).

The reproduction of life is not the only goal of human beings cognitive processes. Human cognitive processes reproduce life at the same time that they define it. Human beings are not interested in reproducing any kind of life but, if possible, just the "good life". This is why, for Habermas, *knowledge equally serves as an instrument and transcends mere self-preservation*.

The three human interests constitute three viewpoints from which human beings apprehend reality. They ground three categories of possible knowledge: first, information that expands human beings' power of technical control; second, interpretations that allow the orientation of action within common traditions; and third, reflections that free consciousness from its dependence on hypostatized powers. For Habermas,

these viewpoints originate in the interest structure of a species that is linked in its roots to definite means of social organization: work, language,

and power. The human species secures its existence in systems of social labor and self-assertion through violence, through tradition-bound social life in ordinary-language communication, and with the aid of ego identities that at every level of individuation reconsolidate the consciousness of the individual in relation to the norms of the group. Accordingly the interests constitutive of knowledge are linked to the functions of an ego that adapts itself to its external conditions through learning processes, is initiated into the communication system of a social lifeworld by means of self-formative processes, and constructs an identity in the conflict between instinctual aims and social constraints. In turn these achievements become part of the productive forces accumulated by a society, the cultural tradition through which a society interprets itself, and the legitimations that a society accepts or criticizes (Habermas, 1971: 313).

Hence, we can affirm that *knowledge-constitutive interests take form in the medium of work, language, and power*. Knowledge, nevertheless, relates to interest in a different way in each one of those categories.

There does not exist a “free-interest knowledge”. But human beings’ self-reflective capacities allow us to be aware of the interest behind our activities. In this sense, “the mind can always reflect back upon the interest structure that joins subject and object a priori: this is reserved to self reflection. If the latter cannot cancel out interest, it can to a certain extent make up for it” (Habermas, 1971: 313-314).

For this achievement, the medium of language plays a crucial and distinctive role. Insofar as language raises us out of nature, it is closely connected to the human interest in autonomy and responsibility. In addition, human beings are able to know the nature of language. For Habermas, the structure of language itself “speaks to us” about the possibilities of autonomy and responsibility.

In the other two mediums, that is, in work and in power, the restrictions are greater. But, for Habermas, language contains the promise of a universal and unconstrained consensus. This is why, for Habermas, in *the power of self-reflection*, achieved through the means of language, *knowledge and interest are one*.

Habermas notes that human communication has a double structure. We can only understand with each other about any sort of experiences and any kind of propositional content if, simultaneously, there occurs a meta-communication about a prior choice to establish an interpersonal relationship. In this sense we need to be able to talk about something and, in addition, to recognize that the person with whom we are talking to is able to understand our statements and talk back.

In addition, language operates as some sort of “transformer device”. Through language, our individual sensations and feelings (whether of pleasure or displeasure) become assertions, wishes, satisfactions or sufferings. As such, all of them are presented with a claim to objectivity, one that, if unfulfilled, can be judged, through language again, as merely subjective.

Our perceptions of objects can be expressed, through our statements, as objective. Even our personal wishes can be expressed as objective too. In this case, they aspire to express interests that can be generalized through norms of action in the



way of precepts. Similarly, our satisfactions, insofar as they appear as “objective” can be justified based on criteria for evaluation. They are, precisely, valuations. Language “gives” us statements (declarative judgments), precepts (normative judgments), and valuations (evaluative judgments). Through all of these, we express an objective “experiential content”.

But the alleged objectivity of our perceptions can only be reached through the intersubjectively shared structure of the objects of any possible experience. Similarly, the alleged objectivity of our precepts and valuations is based on the intersubjectively binding character of our norms of actions and our criteria for evaluations. In any event, we can distinguish between some interests and valuations that “cannot” be generalized. Therefore, the universality of interests and valuations depends on the norms and values that are intersubjectively recognized in certain circumstances.

However, the promise of universal and unconstrained consensus “hidden” in the structure of human language is just that: a promise, and not an accomplished or given fact. As Habermas puts it, “only in an emancipated society, whose members' autonomy and responsibility had been realized, would communication have developed into the non-authoritarian and universally practiced dialogue from which both our model of reciprocally constituted ego identity and our idea of true consensus are always implicitly derived” (Habermas, 1971: 314).

The traditional concept of theory assumed that such a non-authoritarian communication has been possible everywhere and at any time. This has been part of the ontological illusion of pure theory. Philosophy has mistakenly believed that the autonomy and responsibility found within the structure of language are real instead of mere anticipations of something possible to achieve (Habermas, 1971: 314).

In this sense, the traditional concept of theory has performed an ideological role. It has not taken into account the historical and structural deformations of communication caused by the two other mediums of work and power. This is why the job of the philosopher is, for Habermas, to discover “in the dialectical course of history the traces of violence that deform repeated attempts at dialogue and recurrently close off the path to unconstrained communication” (Habermas, 1971: 315). Only then philosophy furthers “the process whose suspension it otherwise legitimates: mankind's evolution toward autonomy and responsibility” (Habermas, 1971: 315). Only then, according to Habermas, *the unity of knowledge and interest proves itself in a dialectic that takes the historical traces of suppressed dialogue and reconstructs what has been suppressed.*

Habermas is completely aware that the earlier Frankfurt [School Generation](#), [or what has been referred to as the “first generation,”](#) attempted to develop a perspective similar to the one hinted in his five theses. But Habermas thinks that he needs to revisit the subject again from a different perspective. One of the most important reasons for this, as we will see later, refers to the aporias produced by the totalizing critiques of reason as developed by the earlier Frankfurt [School thinkers](#).

Thus, in order to develop a good notion of social evolution Habermas will have to get closer to social theory. However, according to Habermas we do not have theories that offer a successful account of social evolution<sup>73</sup>. There are, to be sure, four different

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<sup>73</sup> Habermas is developing these remarks in the 60s and 70s.

theories that seem to go in the right direction<sup>74</sup>. But, insofar as none of them appears as complex and powerful enough, the efforts of social theorists should be directed towards producing a theory that combines their strengths and avoid their weakness.

These four theories are i) Historical Materialism, ii) Action Theory, iii) Behavioral Psychology, and iv) Functionalist Systems Theory.

i) According to Habermas, the conceptual tools and the presuppositions of Historical Materialism are not valid anymore. However, Historical Materialism taught us that a theory of social evolution must be a history of the human species. Thus, we need to be able to explain, first, the transition from primitive societies into civilizations and the appearing of class societies; second, the further transition into modernity and the appearing of capitalists societies; and third, the dynamics of a conflicting world society. In addition, Historical Materialism taught us that a successful theory of social evolution must be reflexive, that is, it must be able to explain its own conditions of emergence. It must be able to give an account of itself.

ii) In the case of Action Theory, Habermas thinks that it is an approach that needs to develop an attempt to reconstruct the general presuppositions for communication, that is, the general structure of actions oriented to understanding. However, it has successfully given us the notion of an agent within concrete situations susceptible of being regulated and interpreted. By doing this, it has shown us the strong connections between interaction and language.

iii) Although Behavioral Theory has not been able to develop an account of different levels of learning and complexity, Habermas thinks that it offers a useful psychological theory of learning susceptible of being applied to different social fields. It suggests, in this sense, the idea of social evolution as learning processes.

iv) Finally, for Habermas, Systems Theory needs to be seriously taken into account because, as a functionalist theory, it provides an approach of the complexity of societies that can be easily connected with the idea of evolution. In this sense, evolution is seen as increases in complexity. However, Systems Theory needs to clarify its object of application as well as its basic concepts. Otherwise, it risks becoming into a linguistic game without any explicative force.

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In what follows I will expound Habermas' account of religion as developed in his texts prior to *Theory of Communicative Action* (TCA), that is, in the texts in which he begins to develop his perspective as a social theorist. The texts I am using to reconstruct Habermas' perspective are, mainly, *Toward a Rational Society*<sup>75</sup>, *Legitimation Crisis*<sup>76</sup>,

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<sup>74</sup> In order to present this analysis I am using Habermas' *La Reconstrucción del Materialismo Histórico*. Ch 5. La comparación de teorías en la sociología: el caso de la teoría de la evolución, Taurus, 1981, Madrid. The original in German is: *Zur Rekonstruktion des historischen Materialismus*, 1976, Surkhamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main.

<sup>75</sup> Especially, *Chapter 6 Technology and Science as 'Ideology'*. It was published in 1968. The English translation was published in 1970.

<sup>76</sup> Especially, *Part II Crisis Tendencies in Advanced Capitalism Chapter 7 Theorems of Motivation Crisis and Part III On the Logic of Legitimation Problems Chapter 4 The End of the Individual?* It was published in 1973. The English translation was published in 1975.

*Communication and the Evolution of Society*<sup>77</sup> and *La Reconstrucción del Materialismo Histórico*<sup>78</sup>. Reviewing these texts is important because they allow us to see the direction Habermas' thinking is going towards before *TCA*. These texts constitute a useful introductory context before developing a better understanding of Habermas' remarks on religion in *TCA*. (I) First, I will indicate the aporias that Habermas finds in a totalizing critique of reason as developed especially by Marcuse and Adorno. I will also indicate why, for Habermas, Luhmann becomes another crucial "dialogue-partner" that needs to be seriously taken into account. (II) Then, I will expound Habermas' conceptual framework constituted by the notions of work and interaction. With this dual framework Habermas begins to answer to the challenges posed both by Marcuse and Adorno, on the one hand, and Luhmann, on the other. Based on this dual framework Habermas will present an incipient typology of the evolution of human societies that will end up emphasizing the legitimation problems that modern capitalist societies have to solve. (III) Afterwards, I will show how Habermas uses his dual framework with critical and emancipatory purposes. (IV) After this, I will indicate some explicit remarks on religion entailed by Habermas' incipient social theory. (V) Finally I will conclude this chapter with some preparatory remarks for the analysis of Habermas' approach of religion in his *Theory of Communicative Action*.

## I

Habermas' book *Technology and Science as 'Ideology'* is dedicated to Marcuse on his seventieth birthday<sup>79</sup>. As a 'gift' to one of his greatest direct influences, Habermas questions Marcuse's approach of the Weberian concept of rationality. By doing this, Habermas aims to analyze the illegitimate extension of the concept of purposive rational action, which has, in Habermas' view, mistakenly become the only possible representation of the idea of rationality itself<sup>80</sup>.

It is noteworthy that this illegitimate extension is expressed in two levels. On the one hand it refers to 'reality itself', or, in other words, to the main way in which societal modernization has taken place in the West. According to Habermas, with the concept of rationality, Weber attempted to describe the form of capitalist economic activity, bourgeois private law, and bureaucratic authority (Habermas, 1970: 81). In this sense, rationalization means the extension of instrumental action to areas of social life such as

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<sup>77</sup> Especially, *Chapter 3 Historical Materialism and the Development of Normative Structures*. It was published in 1976. The English translation was published in 1979.

<sup>78</sup> Especially, Chapter 4 ¿Pueden las sociedades complejas desarrollar una identidad racional? This text, which does not have an English translation, is a longer version of the speech offered by Habermas in January 19, 1974, on the occasion of his receiving the Hegel Prize granted by the city of Stuttgart. There is, however, a partial translation of the text: 'On Social Identity', *Telos 19* (Spring 1974): 91-103). The text appeared in a 1976 book titled *Zur Rekonstruktion des historischen Materialismus*.

<sup>79</sup> According to Habermas, Marcuse's works, along with Adorno's, were the greatest direct influence on him (p. 249 *Perfiles Filosófico Políticos*, Spanish Translation. *Diálogo con Herbert Marcuse – 1977*).

<sup>80</sup> This problem, which will be present throughout Habermas' sociological reflections, is crucial to understand Habermas' most recent account on religion.

urbanization of the social, technification of transport and communication, etc., that is, to areas previously ruled by traditional legitimations (religious and metaphysical)<sup>81</sup>. For Habermas, as we will see, this extension is illegitimate and deeply problematic because many of these areas of social life respond, by their own nature, to a different logic. Hence, all the richness and complexity of these domains of human life are deeply impoverished once they become one-dimensional under the instrumental and limited logic of means and ends.

The second level of illegitimate extension of the notion of purposive rationality is, so to speak, a 'theoretical one'. This level refers to the sociological and philosophical approaches that have tried to develop an account of the first kind of illegitimate extension. In Habermas' view, these theorists have not been able to offer a solid conceptual perspective that does not reduce itself to the theoretical framework of purposive-rationality.

For Habermas, Weber's notion of rationality was not broad enough. Hence, Weber was not able to appreciate that, despite its imperialistic extension, purposive rationality is not the only kind of rationality that we can find in modern societies. In this way, Habermas agrees with Marcuse's critique according to which what Weber called 'rationalization' actually veils a specific form of unacknowledged political domination (Habermas, 1970: 82)<sup>82</sup>. For Habermas, nonetheless, Marcuse's perspective is mistaken too. Indeed, although the historical and social extension of purposive rationality is a result of political and economical domination, this does not imply that such a form of rationalization is ideological *per se*. For Habermas, Marcuse's radical critique is unable to see that there is a legitimate place for purposive rationality in regard to human existence.

A corollary of Marcuse's perspective is that social emancipation would entail the existence of a "complementary revolutionary transformation of science and technology themselves (Habermas, 1970: 85). Indeed, if modern science and technology is nothing but the result of a historical form of political and economical domination, we can expect that the abolition of such a domination would bring about a new form of science and technology. Habermas presents the following quote from Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man* to prove that the aspiration of a New Science is implied in Marcuse's thought:

'The point which I am trying to make is that science, by virtue of its own method and concepts, has projected and promoted a universe in which the domination of nature has remained linked to the domination of man -a link which tends to be fatal to this universe as a whole. Nature, scientifically comprehended and mastered, reappears in the technical

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<sup>81</sup> In this way, in Habermas' words, "The progressive 'rationalization' of society is linked to the institutionalization of scientific and technical development. To the extent that technology and science permeate social institutions and thus transform them, old legitimations are destroyed. The secularization and 'disenchantment' of action-orienting worldviews, of cultural tradition as a whole, is the obverse of the growing 'rationality' of social action (Habermas, 1970: 81). From this perspective, scientific and technical developments are agents that weaken the legitimating force of religious worldviews, which, thus, would seem to be useless and irrational.

<sup>82</sup> Habermas is commenting especially on the following texts by Marcuse: "Industrialization and Capitalism in the Work of Max Weber", "Freedom and Freud's Theory of the Instincts", and "One-Dimensional Man".

apparatus of production and destruction which sustains and improves the life of the individuals while subordinating them to the masters of the apparatus. Thus the rational hierarchy merges with the social one. If this is the case, then the change in the direction of progress, which might sever this fatal link, would also affect the very structure of science-the scientific project. Its hypotheses, without losing their rational character, would develop in an essentially different experimental context (that of a pacified world); consequently, science would arrive at essentially different concepts of nature and establish essentially different facts'." (Habermas, 1970: 86)<sup>83</sup>.

For Habermas, nonetheless, the idea of a 'New Science' is completely misleading<sup>84</sup>. Habermas offers two reasons to reject such an idea.

First, in Habermas' view, the interpretation of modern science as a "science of the particular human project of capitalism" presupposes the need to conceive and describe a different kind of science, something that does not seem feasible in any way. Second, an alternative "new science" would require as well a "new technology". However, in Habermas' view "technology, if based at all on a project, can only be traced back to a "project" of the human species as a whole, and not to one that could be historically surpassed" (Habermas, 1970: 87)<sup>85</sup>. As Habermas puts it, "The idea of a New Science will not stand up to logical scrutiny any more than that of a New Technology, if indeed science is to retain the meaning of modern science inherently

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<sup>83</sup> The quote is from Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 154.

<sup>84</sup> Interestingly enough, in this text, Habermas links the aspiration of a "New Science" with the influence of certain trends of religious mysticism in Marcuse as well as in other thinkers. In Habermas' words, "In several passages Marcuse is tempted to pursue this idea of a New Science in connection with the promise, familiar in Jewish and Protestant mysticism, of the "resurrection of fallen nature." This theme, well-known for having penetrated into Schelling's (and Baader's) philosophy via Swabian Pietism, returns in Marx's Paris Manuscripts, today constitutes the central thought of Bloch's philosophy, and, in reflected forms, also directs the more secret hopes of Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer, and Theodor W. Adorno" (Habermas, 1970: 85-86).

<sup>85</sup> To strengthen his perspective Habermas presents Arnold Gehlen's argument according to which there is an immanent connection between the technology that we use and the structure of purposive-rational action. In Habermas' words, If we comprehend the behavioral system of action regulated by its own results as the conjunction of rational decision and instrumental action, then we can reconstruct the history of technology from the point of view of the step-by-step objectivation of the elements of that very system. In any case technological development lends itself to being interpreted as though the human species had taken the elementary components of the behavioral system of purposive-rational action, which is primarily rooted in the human organism, and projected them one after another onto the plane of technical instruments, thereby unburdening itself of the corresponding functions. At first the functions of the motor apparatus (hands and legs) were augmented and replaced, followed by energy production (of the human body), the functions of the sensory apparatus (eyes, ears, and skin), and finally by the functions of the governing center (the brain). Technological development thus follows a logic that corresponds to the structure of purposive-rational action regulated by its own results, which is in fact the structure of work. Realizing this, it is impossible to envisage how, as long as the organization of human nature does not change and as long therefore as we have to achieve self-preservation through social labor and with the aid of means that substitute for work, we could renounce technology, more particularly our technology, in favor of a qualitatively different one" (Habermas, 1970: 87)

oriented to possible technical control. For this function, as for scientific-technical progress in general, there is no more 'humane substitute' (Habermas, 1970: 88)<sup>86</sup>.

In addition to this, for Habermas, Marcuse's totalizing critique of reason ends up facing the same aporias than Adorno's radical perspective. As we saw in chapter 1, Adorno's perspective ends up romanticizing a new conception of reason and advocating for a re-enchantment of nature. Similarly, Marcuse's view ends up looking for an inexistent non-capitalist science.

Adorno's and Marcuse's analysis entail that "it is no longer possible to place hope in the liberating force of Enlightenment" (Habermas, 1991: 107). Indeed, from Adorno's critical perspective, as Habermas puts it,

The human race has removed itself even further from its origins in the world-historical process of enlightenment, and yet has not dissolved the mythic compulsion to repetition. The modern, fully rationalized world is only seemingly disenchanted; there rests upon the curse of demonic reification and deadly isolation. In the paralyzing effects of an idling emancipation is expressed the revenge of primordial forces upon those who had to emancipate themselves and yet could not escape. The compulsion toward rational domination of externally impinging natural forces has set up the subject upon the course of a formative process that heightens productive forces without limit for the sake of sheer- self preservation, but lets the forces of reconciliation that transcend mere self-preservation atrophy. The permanent sign of enlightenment is domination over an objectified external nature and a repressed internal nature (Habermas, 1991: 110).

As we saw in chapter 1, Adorno understood rationality as an instrumental human capacity aiming to dominate external natural forces. So conceived, "reason itself destroys the humanity it first made possible [since] (...) from the very start the process of enlightenment is the result of a drive to self-preservation that mutilates reason, because it lays claim to it only in the form of a purposive-rational mastery of nature and instinct – precisely as instrumental reason" (Habermas, 1991: 110-111).

Modern science, in Adorno's view, has been absorbed by instrumental reason. Hence, instead of theoretical knowledge, modern science is only interested in technical utility. Similarly, reason "has been driven out of morality and law, because with the collapse of religious metaphysical worldview, all normative standards have lost their credit before the single remaining authority: science" (Habermas, 1991: 111). Finally, art has rejected any critical and utopian content, lost its innovative force and become mere entertainment. In summary, "in cultural modernity, reason gets definitively stripped of its validity claim and assimilated to sheer power" (Habermas, 1991: 112).

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<sup>86</sup> For Habermas, the defenders of the idea of a "New Science" are really revealing something else. Indeed, insofar as the idea of a "New Science" would conceive of nature not as an object to be mastered but as an opposing partner to be "listened to", for Habermas, what is hidden behind those longings is nothing but the intuition of the existence of an alternative structure of action besides purposive rational action, namely, symbolic interaction.

In this sense, for Adorno, the role of philosophy is to develop a totalizing critique that would open up “the prospect of that magically invoked ‘remembrance of nature in the subject in whose fulfillment the unacknowledged truth of all cultures lies hidden (...)” (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 40).

However, Adorno’s perspective traps itself into the paradox in which every totalizing critique of reason falls: the critique itself does not have any other option but to be developed using the same tools declared to be ineffective. For Habermas, if Adorno’s critique does not want to renounce the effect of a final unmasking and still want to continue with critique, it has to leave room for a concrete and determinate rational criterion for its explanation of the corruption of the other criteria.

In addition, Adorno’s critique does not offer an account of other aspects of modernity that does not seem to fit so easily into the model of reason as a total process of instrumentalization. In this sense, we do not have any explanation for the specific theoretical dynamic that continually pushes the sciences beyond merely endangering technical useful knowledge. Also, there is no explanation for the universalistic foundations of law and morality which, although imperfectly, have been incorporated into the institutions of constitutional and democratic states and societies. Finally, with regards to art, Adorno’s totalizing critique is useless to explaining the

productivity and explosive power of basic aesthetic experience that a subjectivity liberated from the imperatives of purposive activity and from conventions of quotidian perception gains from its own decentering-experiences that are presented in works of *avant-garde* art, that are articulated in the discourses of art criticism, and that also achieve a certain measure of illuminating effect (...) in the innovatively enriched range of values proper to self-realization (Habermas, 1991: 113).

Therefore, for Habermas, a better way to analyze the illegitimate and mistaken extension of the concept of purposive rational action requires to develop a better conceptual framework than the ones offered by Marcuse and Adorno. This better conceptual framework must, on the one hand, continue offering a critical account of the actual expansion of purposive rationality in modernity, but in addition, on the other, it must describe all the phenomena that are not included within the notion of purposive rationality.

In addition, this better conceptual framework needs to be based on the conceptual developments of social theory and social evolution.

Habermas’ interest in offering a successful account of the notion of social evolution was developed, as we saw before, within the context of four different theoretical perspectives: Historical Materialism, Action Theory, Behavioral Theory and Systems Theory. According to Habermas, nonetheless, none of them offered an accurate theory of social evolution,

For Habermas, this is largely due to the problem that none of them presents a proper definition of “the social” itself. Thus, they failed in successfully determining the object of their own theory.

Based on his analysis of these four theories Habermas states that he is beginning to think of society as “a set” of systems that, through actions linguistically coordinated (instrumental and social), appropriates the external nature (by means of processes of production) and the inner nature (by means of processes of socialization).

This notion would allow us to think of evolution as an increasing in complexity related to processes of differentiation. Clearly, Habermas is explicitly recognizing the conceptual achievements of systems theory. This is why, for him, Niklas Luhmann becomes another very important “dialogue partner”.

Luhmann's systems theory focuses on three deeply interconnected topics, namely, systems theory as societal theory, communication theory, and evolution theory.

Communication is the core element of Luhmann's theory. For him, social systems are conceived as systems of communication. Similarly, society is thought as the most encompassing social system. Society as a whole is nothing but the system of all social systems (past, present and future) that rules social evolution itself.

Instead of the subject, Luhmann places the concept of system. Thus, instead of the knowing subject – world of knowable objects relations, we have the system-environment relations. The *explanandum* is now how the systems are maintained and expanded, instead of how the subject knows itself and the world surrounding her. But the system is no “I”. Therefore, the concept of identity does not work anymore as a good *explanans*.

A system, for Luhmann, is defined by a boundary between itself and its environment. Such a boundary keeps the system apart (and safe) from an infinitely complex and chaotic exterior “world”. The interior of the system is thus a zone of reduced complexity. The idea of “the world” is now replaced by many system-environment relationships. The system differentiates itself from the environment but at the same time constitutes it as a universal horizon of meaning for itself.

Communication, in addition, is a process through which the system selects only a limited amount of the information available outside. This process is called “reduction of complexity”. Luhmann understands “meaning” (*Sinn*) as the criterion according to which information is selected and processed. According to Habermas, Luhmann “defines ‘meaning’ prelinguistically as a referential context of possibilities that is related to the intentionality of experience and action” (Habermas, 1987: 369). Hence, instead of subjects capable of being self-conscious, Luhmann's account offers us “meaning – processing systems”.

Meaning defines the distinctive identity of the system. Such an identity, furthermore, needs to be constantly reproduced by the processes of communication. In this sense, it is dependent upon what is considered meaningful and what is not. If a system fails to maintain its identity, it ceases to exist as a system. As a consequence, it dissolves back into the environment it emerged from. This aspect refers to the idea that systems are *autopoietic*<sup>87</sup>.

According to Habermas, Luhmann's concept of *autopoiesis* indicates that every element used in the system has to be generated by the system itself and cannot be taken over from its environment as ‘ready-made’. In this sense, the self-relatedness of

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<sup>87</sup> Luhmann adapted this term from the Chilean neurobiologists Maturana and Varela. See Maturana and Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition*, 1980, Reidel, Dordrecht, The Netherlands.



the operations of meaning-processing systems has the primarily practical meaning of *self-generation*, not the theoretical meaning of self-presentation” (Habermas, 1987: 371).

That the social systems are *autopoietically closed* means that although they use and rely on resources from their environment, those resources do not become part of the systems' operation. In this sense, each system works strictly according to its very own code and has no understanding at all of the way other systems perceive their own environment. The economy, for example, is entirely defined by money, which means that there is no independent role in the economic system for extraneous aspects to it such as moral values.

To be sure, all systems are environments for one another. But “unlike subjects, they cannot join together into aggregates of higher – level systems; nor are they embedded from the start in such a totality, as its moments” (Habermas, 1987: 371)

Habermas identifies, at least, three aspects of Luhmann's theory that need to be positively valued<sup>88</sup>.

First, Luhmann's model of systems theory is successful at showing that the network of possible interactions is not reduced to the conscious meaning that the agents subjectively attribute to their actions. There is, especially in our contemporary societies, a great amount of interactions that, although rational and intentional, are not planned or thought through by the agents. There is, as a matter of fact, a whole network of relations that solve social problems in such a way that it does not require that the particular individuals or the social groups consciously decide every detail of such interactions. In this sense, insofar as the idea of a collective subject offered by philosophy of consciousness has proven itself to be untenable, the concept of “systems”, as unities able to solve problems through “suprasubjective” processes of learning, appears to be extremely useful.

Second, Habermas highlights Luhmann's concept of “society” as a system that rules social evolution. For Habermas, such a concept constitutes a perspective that explains social evolution in terms of the increasing inner complexity that the systems have to develop in order to defend and support their structures through decreasing the complexity of the world – environment. At the same time, the structural changes that each particular system has to develop makes more complex the environments of the other systems. They are forced, thus, to increase their selectivity and to increase their own inner complexity. In Habermas' view, these ideas allows us to understand evolution as a sort of cosmic learning process through which the world grows in complexity and, so to speak, expands.

Finally, Habermas values positively Luhmann's idea of the existence of “evolutionary acquisitions” that allow us to demarcate stages of socio cultural evolution. These evolutionary acquisition, according to Habermas, are four: i) techniques of generalization which allows a harmless indifference to the differences; ii) methods of

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<sup>88</sup> In order to present the following analysis I will use Habermas' *La Lógica de las Ciencias Sociales*, Ch. III. El Funcionalismo en Ciencias Sociales. 6. Discusión con Niklas Luhmann (1971) *¿Teoría Sistemica o Teoría Crítica de la Sociedad?*, 1988, Tecnos, Madrid. The original German version is: *Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften*, 1982, Surkhamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main. Unfortunately very few texts of the debate between Habermas and Luhmann have been translated into English.

differentiations, especially the functional differentiation that increases selectivity; iii) reflexive mechanisms that allow the application of the processes to themselves, and finally iv) communication means such as power, money, truth, love, etc., which guarantee the portability of the results of the selective operations.

For Luhmann, these evolutionary acquisitions have the same status than Parsons' 'evolutionary universals'. In this sense, they constitute findings that are so important for the subsequent evolutions that they do not appear only in one same place. In contrast, it is more likely that different systems under very diverse conditions produce the same findings. For Habermas, briefly put, the great contribution of Luhmann to a theory of social evolution consists in the suggestion of the four aforementioned "evolutionary universals", in Parsons' language. They are useful for the analysis of a historic-universal process of the expansion of the competences of control and self-regulation of the social systems.

Despite these conceptual gains, Habermas also finds deep conceptual flaws within Luhmann's theory. The great mistake and danger refers to the totalizing character that Luhmann's perspective entails.

For Habermas Luhmann falls into many contradictions once he keeps the conceptual framework of systems theory and attempts to extend it to processes mediated by a different kind of "meaning".

There is a deep difference between social systems and organic systems. In the first ones, the learning processes are developed and organized through communications that occur in everyday language. Therefore, the concept of system needs to be developed in connection with a theory of communication applied to every day language. However, Luhmann does not have anything to say about the linguistically generated intersubjectivity: the genuinely linguistic intersubjectivity proper to agreement and communicatively shared meaning.

In addition, for Habermas,

Systems theory lets cognitive acts, even its own, meld into system's achievements of mastering complexity and thus takes away from knowledge any moment of unconditionality. Systems theory understands itself as functional analysis and, owing to the reference problems that comes with this method, sees itself as seamlessly woven into the functional context of self-maintenance – with neither the power nor the intention of transcending these contexts in any way (Habermas, 1987: 371-372).

Once Luhmann's approach becomes total, it is not possible anymore to conceive of two different perspectives, namely, the theoretician of the systems theory, on the one hand, and, on the other, the historical-practical actor.

For Habermas, Luhmann's theory leaves us without any possibility to develop critical perspectives. From Luhmann's view, it is not possible anymore to think about the possibility of developing a centering comprehension of the whole based on self-knowledge. We have now "centerless" societies for which the concept of "identity"

cannot be used anymore. “But if modern societies have no possibility whatsoever of shaping a rational identity, then we are without any point of reference for a critique of modernity” (Habermas, 1987: 374).

In Habermas’ view, if we accept Luhmann’s theory, we end up with the idea that debates on practical problems need to be replaced by an analysis presented in terms of social technology. Ultimately, for Habermas, Luhmann is offering a theory that represents, so to speak, the superior form of a technocratic consciousness that sees practical issues merely as technical issues. As such, practical discussions do not need to assume the form of public and unrestrained discussions.

In his theory, Luhmann replaces the notion of “reason” by the notion of the “self-enhancing and self-maintenance of the system”. “By taking this approach, Luhmann also goes beyond a critique of reason that aims at revealing the power of self-maintenance to be the latent essence of subject-centered reason” (Habermas, 1987: 372-373). However, interestingly enough, “Under the title of systems rationality, reason, now liquidated as irrational, *professes* exactly this function: It *is* the ensemble of the conditions that make systems maintenance possible” (Habermas, 1987: 372-373). This is why, for Habermas, Luhmann’s theory’s objectifying effect reveals that it does not constitute a real alternative to the Western cognitive-instrumental one-sidedness of cultural and societal rationalization. At the end of the day, Luhmann’s system theory is nothing but another attempt to establish an objectivistic self-understanding of human beings and their world. As such, “It is not really sociology, but more like those metatheoretical projects that fill the function of worldviews” (Habermas, 1987: 384).

As we saw from the beginning of this chapter, Habermas’ approach to social theory is in search for a balance between two extreme poles. On the one hand Habermas faces Marcuse’s and Adorno’s totalizing critique of reason that ends up waiting for a new re-enchanting of nature or a developing of a non-capitalist science and reason. On the other hand, Habermas also faces Luhmann’s system theory that becomes untenable once it is developed as a totalizing account of every single aspect of contemporary societies.

For Habermas, the main problem with these two radical approaches is that they operate with a very limited concept of reason. Habermas, in contrast, thinks that human societies have developed a multidimensional rationality. Thus, social theory needs to offer a more disaggregated concept of reason. This is why, as we will see, Habermas’ *Theory of Communicative Action* is presented as a theory of different types of reason that, without ending up with a total critique of reason, allows for an account of processes of progress as well as of processes of regression.

## II

In his analysis prior to his *Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas tries to develop a multidimensional notion of rationality by positing two different concepts of rationality that are projections of work and language, and, as such, projects of the human species as a whole. These two notions of rationality are a product of humanity, and not of an individual epoch, a specific class or a concrete situation that can be overcome. For this reason, there has to be a legitimate place for each one of them, and this is what Habermas thinks should be protected.

Within this dual framework, the political and economical domination of the actual state of affairs refers to the imperialistic position that nowadays holds purposive rationality. In Habermas' words, what must be analyzed is the "meaning of the expansion of the rational form of science and technology, i.e., the rationality embodied in systems of purposive-rational action, to the proportions of a life form, of the "historical totality" of a life-world" (Habermas, 1970: 90).

As we will see, Habermas' new categorical framework refers to his incipient distinction between *work* and *interaction*. This pair of concepts configures Habermas' new framework constituted by two notions of rationality, namely, purposive rational-action and symbolic interaction.

With the concept of "work" or "purposive-rational action" Habermas understands, first of all, instrumental action. Instrumental action is the kind of human action determined by technical rules based on empirical knowledge. "In every case they imply conditional predictions about observable events, physical or social. These predictions can prove correct or incorrect" (Habermas, 1970: 91). Second, purposive-rational action also refers to the conduct of rational choices where action is governed by strategies based on analytic knowledge. These actions "imply deductions from preference rules (value systems) and decision procedures; these propositions are either correctly or incorrectly deduced" (Habermas, 1970: 92). In both cases purposive-rational action refers to the sorts of actions that try to accomplish defined goals under given conditions. Nonetheless, "while instrumental action organizes means that are appropriate or inappropriate according to criteria of an effective control of reality, strategic action depends only on the correct evaluation of possible alternative choices, which results from calculation supplemented by values and maxims" (Habermas, 1970: 91-92).

On the other hand, by 'interaction' Habermas understands communicative action or symbolic interaction. It refers to the sorts of actions governed by binding consensual norms. These norms "define reciprocal expectations about behavior and (...) must be understood and recognized by at least two acting subjects. Social norms are enforced through sanctions. Their meaning is objectified in ordinary language communication (Habermas, 1970: 92).

The two different kinds of rationalities describe two different types of validity. The validity of technical rules and strategies depends entirely upon the validity of the empirically true or analytically correct propositions. In contrast, the validity of social norms depends upon "the intersubjectivity of the mutual understanding of intentions and [is] secured by the general recognition of obligations" (Habermas, 1970: 92).

The violation of rules is another criterion to ground the distinction that Habermas is presenting. Indeed, if our action violates valid technical rules or strategies, the result or the condemnation is a factual failure. The punishment, so to speak, is decided by reality itself. This action is described as incompetent. But, if our action violates consensual norms, the result is different because, in this case, the sanctions are connected with the rules only externally. In other words, they are created by convention.

In addition, once we learn the rules of purposive-rational actions we get skills that will allow us to solve problems. In contrast, the learning of social norms supplies us with personality structures and motivations that, at the same time, allow us to follow norms.

We internalized the norms and, thus, we find motivations to follow them (Habermas, 1970: 92).

Finally, at a general level, the symbolic interactions of a society refer to what Habermas calls the “institutional framework of a society”, that is, “the norms that guide symbolic interaction” (Habermas, 1970: 93). Examples of subsystems guided by the institutional framework are family and kinship structures. They are mainly based upon moral rules of interaction. On the other hand, at a general level, purposive rationality constitutes systems of purposive rational (instrumental and strategic) action. Here the examples are the economic system and the state apparatus.

All these differences make it possible to draw the following analytical distinction. In Habermas’ words,

I shall distinguish generally at the analytic level between (1) the institutional framework of a society or the sociocultural life-world and (2) the subsystems of purposive-rational action that are "embedded" in it. Insofar as actions are determined by the institutional framework they are both guided and enforced by norms; insofar as they are determined by subsystems of purposive-rational action, they conform to patterns of instrumental or strategic action” (Habermas, 1970: 93-94).

In addition, according to Habermas, “In terms of the two types of action we can distinguish between social systems according to whether purposive-rational action or interaction predominates” (Habermas, 1970: 93). This makes possible to develop a typology of the evolution of human societies. In this typology, we will be able to find a) Habermas’ incipient notion of religion, and b) the role that, according to Habermas, religion plays within each type of society.

Habermas presents his typology as a description of the sociocultural phases of the history of mankind. In this sense, based on his distinction between work and interaction, Habermas presents three categories of societies, namely, i) Archaic Societies, ii) Traditional Societies and, iii) Modern Societies. However, to be more precise, Habermas subdivides the Traditional Societies in two sub-classes: Primitive Civilizations and Developed Civilizations. In what follows I will expound the main characteristics of each one of those stages of the sociocultural evolution of the human species. I will mainly emphasize the role that religious worldviews play in them. In this way I hope to be able to identify enough elements to reconstruct Habermas’ concept of religion.

*i) Archaic Societies.* Habermas uses this term to describe the primitive human communities that existed until the end of the Mesolithic period. According to Habermas, there are several indications that in these human groups “purposive-rational actions could only be motivated at all through ritual attachment to interactions” (Habermas, 1970: 114). In these human groups, then, we cannot find a profane and independent domain of subsystem of purposive rational action. Every single detail of the life of the groups was fixed by their institutional framework, which, at the same time, was rigidly

and absolutely determined by their founding myths. In virtue of this, the structure of these societies was entirely determined by kinship.

As mentioned in the first chapter, for Habermas mythical thinking is analogical because it generates analogies between natural and cultural phenomenon. In mythical thinking nature is anthropomorphized and human coexistence is naturalized within a totality of similarities and correspondences. Every existent element is related to another one, shaping thus a universal network of interactions. In mythical worldviews, every entity is conceived as identical with the others, as if each one of them were made of the same material: humans, rocks, plants, animals, gods. In this sense, the tribe is not a reality susceptible of being clearly separated from its members or from nature. According to Habermas, at this level there cannot be identity problems because their condition is the differentiation between the individual, the particular and the general, something firstly observed in the polytheistic religions of the primitive civilizations.

In summary, mythical worldviews provided for each perceptible element a proper and meaningful place. In this way, mythical worldviews were able to cope with the contingencies and the uncertainties of a society that, given its low development of productive forces, could barely control its surroundings.

*ii) Traditional Societies.* For Habermas, the term 'traditional societies' refers to civilizations. In this sense, a traditional society has three general traits: a) a centralized ruling power through which political power is organized around a state; b) a socio-economical division according to which the distribution of social obligations and rewards depends on class membership and not merely on kinship status; and c) a central worldview that legitimates political power and converts mere power into authority (Habermas, 1970: 94)<sup>89</sup>. Accordingly, the existence of a 'complex religion' is a defining element of any civilization. Indeed, for Habermas, the complexity of religious worldviews can be used to distinguish two sub stages within the traditional societies, namely, primitive and developed civilizations.

*Primitive civilizations.* For Habermas, these are the societies of the polytheist religions. In these worldviews, the gods still adopt a human shape. Furthermore, they act arbitrarily and have a life domain of their own, but they are also constrained by an abstract fate.

In Habermas' view, these kinds of worldviews show an incipient desacralization of the natural environment. Also, they make possible a partial autonomization of the political institutions in regard with the cosmic order. Indeed, they allow for the existence of an open space in which contingencies and surprises have to be actively controlled by individuals.

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<sup>89</sup> For Habermas, the emergence of civilizations required also a material base. In his own words, "Civilizations are established on the basis of a relatively developed technology and of division of labor in the social process of production, which make possible a surplus product, i.e. a quantity of goods exceeding that needed for the satisfaction of immediate and elementary needs. They owe their existence to the solution of the problem that first arises with the production of a surplus product, namely, how to distribute wealth and labor both unequally and yet legitimately according to criteria other than those generated by a kinship system" (Habermas, 1970: 94). A profane realm of subsystems of purposive- rational action seems to have separated out from the institutional framework of symbolic interaction in the first settled cultures, based on the domestication of animals and cultivation of plants. But it was probably only in civilizations, that is under the conditions of a class society organized as a state that the differentiation of work and interaction went far enough for the subsystems to yield technically exploitable knowledge that could be stored and expanded relatively independently of mythical and religious interpretations of the world. At the same time social norms became separated from power-legitimizing traditions, so that "culture" attained a certain independence from "institutions." (Habermas, 1970: 114)

According to Habermas, the new forms of religiosity that appear between the human beings and the gods (beg, sacrifice, worship), presuppose a new idea, namely, that the human individual arises from the universal contexts or ordered substances and forces. This new idea implies that the human groups can be defined more precisely and their identity can be distinguished, on the one hand, from the general cosmic order, and, on the other, from the identity of each one of its members. However, there is not enough room to jeopardize the identity-forming processes.

*Developed Civilizations.* These civilizations appeared with the emergence of the great universal religions. According to Habermas, these worldviews made possible the existence of universal validity claims. For Habermas, the new transcendental, omniscient, absolutely fair and graceful God of Christianity represents a useful example of this new rational development. These new worldviews make possible an ego identity freed from all sort of concrete norms and roles. In other words, they make possible a fully individuated being. Indeed, for Habermas, the idea of an immortal soul paves the way to an idea of freedom according to which “the individual has an infinite value”.

In this last stage, the religious system does not depend on the state or the polis but on the community of believers to which all human beings potentially belong insofar as God’s commands are universal. In this sense two orders are differentiated, namely, the meaning-giving religious contents and the imperatives of maintaining the state.

Despite their differences, both instances of traditional societies have in common that their ‘institutional framework’, deeply informed by their religious worldviews, is ‘superior’ in regard to their subsystems of purposive rationality. As Habermas puts it,

The stable pattern of a precapitalist mode of production, preindustrial technology, and premodern science makes possible a typical relation of the institutional framework to subsystems of purposive-rational action. For despite considerable progress, these subsystems, developing out of the system of social labor and its stock of accumulated technically exploitable knowledge, never reached that measure of extension after which their “rationality” would have become an open threat to the authority of the cultural traditions that legitimate political power (Habermas, 1970: 95).

From this perspective, in a traditional society, on the one hand, the institutional framework is grounded on the unquestionable force of legitimation developed by mythical-religious-metaphysical interpretations of reality, and, on the other one, the development of subsystems of purposive-rational action is kept within the limits of the legitimating efficacy of cultural traditions (Habermas, 1970: 114).

The institutional framework of traditional societies, in this sense, precludes “critically challenging the traditional form of legitimation. This immunity is a meaningful criterion for the delimitation of traditional societies from those which have crossed the threshold to modernization” (Habermas, 1970: 95). Accordingly, when this relation is affected, we have modern societies.

*iii) Modern societies.* For Habermas, the modern period refers to

that process of rationalization which commenced with loss of the "superiority" of the institutional framework to the subsystems of purposive-rational action. Traditional legitimations could now be criticized against the standards of rationality of means-ends relations. Concurrently, information from the area of technically exploitable knowledge infiltrated tradition and compelled a reconstruction of traditional world interpretations along the lines of scientific standards (Habermas, 1970: 114).

The overturning of the superiority of the institutional framework was possible in virtue of the development of the capitalist mode of production, which, in Habermas' view, made possible the permanent extension of subsystems of purposive-rational action. In this sense, once

the new mode of production becomes fully operative through the institutionalization of a domestic market for goods and labor power and of the capitalist enterprise, (...) traditional structures are increasingly subordinated to conditions of instrumental or strategic rationality: the organization of labor and of trade, the network of transportation, information, and communication, the institutions of private law, and, starting with financial administration, the state bureaucracy (Habermas, 1970: 98).

As a consequence, the power-legitimizing and action-orienting religious worldviews lost their convincing force. According to Habermas, Weber's notion of 'secularization' aims to describe the two main aspects of this consequence. In this sense, in Habermas' words,

First, traditional worldviews and objectivations lose their power and validity as myth, as public religion, as customary ritual, as justifying metaphysics, as unquestionable tradition. Instead, they are reshaped into subjective belief systems and ethics which ensure the private cogency of modern value-orientations (the "Protestant ethic"). Second, they are transformed into constructions that do both at once: criticize tradition and reorganize the released material of tradition according to the principles of formal law and the exchange of equivalents (rationalist natural law). Having become fragile, existing legitimations are replaced by new ones. The latter emerge from the critique of the dogmatism of traditional interpretations of the world and claim a scientific character. Yet they retain legitimating functions, thereby keeping actual power relations inaccessible to analysis and to public consciousness (Habermas, 1970: 98-99).



To be sure, from the perspective of the social theorist that Habermas is adopting in these texts, the main problem is not the concealment as such but the unsuccessful fulfilling of the legitimating functions. In other words, the new legitimations developed by the capitalist society are not able to fulfill successfully their role.

In *Legitimation Crisis* Habermas analyses two patterns of motivation crucial to the continued existence of the political and economic systems in advanced capitalist societies, namely, civil and familial privatism. Habermas' hypothesis is that they are being systematically destroyed<sup>90</sup>.

On the one hand, civil privatism denotes "an interest in the steering and maintenance [*Versorgung*] performances of the administrative system but little participation in the legitimizing process, albeit participation appropriate to institutionally provided opportunities (...) Civil privatism thus corresponds to the structures of a depoliticized public realm" (Habermas, 1975: 75).

On the other hand, familial privatism "consists in a family orientation with developed interests in consumption and leisure on the one hand, and in a career orientation suitable to status competition on the other. This privatism thus corresponds to the structures of educational and occupational system that are regulated by competition through achievement" (Habermas, 1975: 75).

For Habermas, although those privatisms are necessary for the development of advanced capitalist societies, they also depend upon "cultural patterns that represent a peculiar mixture of pre-capitalist and bourgeois elements of tradition" (Habermas, 1975: 76). In this sense, "Capitalist societies were always dependent on cultural boundary conditions that they could not themselves reproduce; they fed parasitically on the remains of tradition" (Habermas, 1975: 76). In other words, the motivational structures that bourgeois society requires are not completely reproduced by bourgeois ideologies<sup>91</sup>.

In some sense, civil privatism implies an active and a passive side, coexisting in a permanent tension. The citizen of a capitalist society must be, in this sense, interested in the administrative system, but not too much. It is important that she, for instance, votes and pays taxes. But she has to trust that, at the end of the day, the experts will be able to solve the problems that might arise. According to Habermas, the active side of this citizen is determined by traditions of bourgeois formal law. She is a citizen with rights that determine her expectations. However, as Habermas puts it, "with regard to a rather passive attitude *vis-à-vis* processes of will-formation, it remains tied to the traditionalistic civic ethic, or, even to familial orientations" (Habermas, 1975: 76). In Habermas' words, "The political theories of the bourgeois revolutions demanded active civil participation in a democratically organized will-formation. However, bourgeois democracies, the old as well as the new type, require supplementation by a political culture that screens participatory behavioral expectations out of bourgeois ideologies

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<sup>90</sup> In Habermas' words, "I speak of a motivation crisis when the socio-cultural system changes in such a way that its output becomes dysfunctional for the state and the system of social labor" (Habermas, 1975: 75).

<sup>91</sup> The secular components that constituted bourgeois ideology are, mainly, an empiricist or rationalist theory of knowledge, the new physics, and the universalistic value system of modern natural law and utilitarianism (Habermas, 1975: 77-78).

and replaces them with authoritarian patterns remaining from pre-bourgeois traditions” (Habermas, 1975: 76). Habermas quotes Almond and Verba:

If Elites are to be powerful and make authoritative decisions, then the involvement, activity, and influence of the ordinary man must be limited. The ordinary citizen must turn power over to elites and let them rule. The need for elite power requires that the ordinary citizen be relatively passive, uninvolved, and deferential to elites. Thus the democratic citizen is called on pursue contradictory goals; he must be active, yet passive; involved, yet not too involved, influential, yet deferential (Quoted by Habermas, 1975: 77)<sup>92</sup>.

The case of familial privatism is analogous. On the one hand it is shaped by the possessive individualism and the Benthamite utilitarianism. On the other hand, in contrast, “the achievement-oriented vocational ethos of the middle class, as well as the fatalism of the lower class, need to be secured by religious traditions. These traditions are transposed into educational processes through corresponding family structures and techniques of childrearing” (Habermas, 1975: 77). In this sense, while the middle classes needed a repressive authority of conscience and an individualistic achievement orientation, the lower class needed an external superego structures and a conventional work morality (Habermas, 1975: 77). As Habermas puts it, “The ‘Protestant ethic’, with its emphasis on self-discipline, secularized vocational ethos, and renunciation of immediate gratification, is no less based on tradition than its traditionalistic counterpart of uncoerced obedience, fatalism, and orientation to immediate gratification” (Habermas, 1975: 77).

Thus, for Habermas,

Bourgeois culture as a whole was never able to reproduce itself from itself. It was always dependent on motivationally effective supplementation by traditional world-views. Religion, having retreated into the regions of subjective belief, can no longer satisfy neglected communicative needs, even in conjunction with the secular components of bourgeois ideology (that is, an empiricist or rationalist theory of knowledge, the new physics, and the universalistic value system of modern natural law and utilitarianism) (Habermas, 1975: 78).

In Habermas’ view, bourgeois ideologies are not able to offer the following elements<sup>93</sup>:

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<sup>92</sup> G.A. Almond and S. Verba, *The Civic Culture* (Boston, 1965).

<sup>93</sup> The only possible exception that Habermas finds within bourgeois ideologies refers to bourgeois art. For Habermas bourgeois art “has taken up positions on behalf of the victims of bourgeois rationalization” (Habermas, 1975: 78). In this sense, art is still able to offer accounts on the “desire for a mimetic relation with nature; the need for living together in solidarity outside the group egoism of the immediate family; the longing for the happiness of a

- An appropriate solution for contingency and the risks of existence: guilt, sickness and death<sup>94</sup>.
- A proper mediation mechanism with nature (external nature and one's own body).
- An intuitive access to relations of solidarity within groups or between individuals.
- An open enough space for a real political ethic<sup>95</sup>.

Old style politics, that is, the politics of non-modern societies was dependent upon a traditional form of legitimation. Accordingly, politics was defined by the institutional framework. This relationship guaranteed the infusion of practical goals into politics. In this sense, the notion of a good life common to all the society was defined in the context of such practical goals and the institutional framework. But, according to Habermas, in modern societies, especially as they have been developed in advanced capitalism, the functioning of the system "eliminates practical questions and therewith precludes discussion about the adoption of standards" (Habermas, 1970: 103). Capitalism, to be sure, in Habermas' view, did not have the necessary elements to develop a stable pattern of legitimation. Nevertheless, the result in late capitalism is even worse. The tasks of government present themselves as technical instead of political ones. "Therefore the new politics of state interventionism requires a depoliticization of the mass of the population. To the extent that practical questions are eliminated, the public realm also loses its political function" (Habermas, 1970: 104)

Nevertheless, for Habermas, this move does not really eliminate the institutional framework of a society. It is still there, and it is still distinct from the system of purposive rational actions. "Its organization continues to be a problem of practice linked to communication, not one of technology, no matter how scientifically guided" (Habermas, 1970: 104). Thus, what we have now is an unsuccessful attempt of legitimation that leaves unfilled a vital need for legitimation (Habermas, 1970: 104).

### III

Habermas' conceptual framework aims to justify two different types of action and rationality that are "natural" to human beings. As Habermas puts it, "Purposive-rational action represents the form of active adaptation, which distinguishes the collective self-preservation of societal subjects from the preservation of the species characteristic of

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communicative experience exempt from imperatives of purposive rationality and giving scope to imagination as well as spontaneity" (Habermas, 1975: 78). According to Habermas, this is possible because art does not have specific tasks in the economic and political systems of advanced capitalism. Art places itself outside the system of needs. Habermas follows the interpretation that goes from Schiller to Marcuse according to which art is an explosive ingredient built into the bourgeois ideology. However, Habermas is not completely convinced of this. Art, as an explosive ingredient, is still too ambivalent. In Habermas' words, "But art infiltrates the ensemble of use values only when it surrenders its autonomous status. It can just as easily signify the degeneration of art into propagandistic mass art or into commercialized mass culture as, on the other hand, transform itself into a subversive counterculture. No less ambivalent is adherence to formalist art that, on the one hand, resists pressures for assimilation to market-determined needs and attitudes of consumers (...) but that, on the other hand, remains inaccessible to the masses and thus also prevents exoteric preservation of emphatic experiences – in Benjamin's words, secular illuminations" (Habermas, 1975: 86).

<sup>94</sup> As Habermas puts it, "In the face of individual needs for wholeness, they are disconsolate" (Habermas, 1975: 78).

<sup>95</sup> For Habermas, bourgeois ideologies only offer an objectivistic self-interpretation of acting subjects.

other animals<sup>96</sup>” (Habermas, 1970: 115). Human beings, unlike other animals, or at least much more than them, have been able to control the relevant conditions of life in order to adapt the environment to our needs instead of merely adapting ourselves to nature.

In addition, purposive rationality and symbolic interaction serve to develop an account of human history. In this account, however, Habermas finds a constant. In Habermas’ words, “From the very beginning the pattern of human sociocultural development has been determined by a growing power of technical control over the external conditions of existence on the one hand, and a more or less passive adaptation of the institutional framework to the expanded subsystems of purposive-rational action on the other” (Habermas, 1970: 115).

In Habermas’ view the alterations of the institutional framework have been derived, whether immediately or mediately, from new technologies or improved strategies (in the areas of production, transportation, weaponry, etc.). This means that they have not had an active adaptation, but a passive one. In Habermas’ words, “They are not the result of planned purposive-rational action geared to its own consequences, but the product of fortuitous, undirected development” (Habermas, 1970: 115). For Habermas, nonetheless, only after the critique of bourgeois ideology were we able to become aware of this disproportion between those two sorts of adaptations (active and passive). This critique allowed us to unveil the dynamics of capitalist development and to raise awareness on public consciousness about this<sup>97</sup>.

Habermas interprets Marx’s idea that men make their history, but not with ‘will or consciousness’ along with his view of the disproportion between the passive adaptation of the institutional framework and the active subjection of nature. In Habermas’ perspective, “It was the aim of Marx’s critique to transform the secondary adaptation of the institutional framework as well into an active one, and to bring under control the structural change of society itself. This would overcome a fundamental condition of all previous history and complete the self-constitution of mankind: the end of prehistory” (Habermas, 1970: 116).

For Habermas, nonetheless, Marx’s idea was expressed ambiguously. It is not clear if it means a practical mastery of previously ungoverned processes of social development or if it is a merely technical problem. This latter possibility implies to “bring society under control in the same way as nature by reconstructing it according to the pattern of self-regulated systems of purposive-rational action and adaptive behavior.” (Habermas, 1970: 117). According to Habermas, technocrats of capitalist planning as well as the socialist bureaucrats share this intention in common. However, as Habermas puts it, “the technocratic consciousness obscures the fact that this reconstruction could be achieved at no less a cost than closing off the only dimension that is essential, because it is susceptible to humanization, as a structure of interactions mediated by ordinary language” (Habermas, 1970: 117).

Habermas, in this sense, frames the problem in terms of finding a productive tension between the passive and the active adaptation. Our pathologies of the present

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<sup>96</sup> Habermas also refers to Arnold Gehlen’s argument according to which there is an immanent connection between the technology that we use and the structure of purposive-rational action.

<sup>97</sup> Here Habermas seems to be still relying on the Marxist tradition of an ideology critique.

world and our problems of legitimation could be dealt with if the institutional framework stops being so passive and reacts to the extension of the purposive rational system developed within capitalism<sup>98</sup>. Habermas seems to believe, just as Marx thought, that the transformation of the institutional framework into an active force is something possible and desirable

In his reflections from the 70's Habermas already offers a view of what he thinks the solution is (how to produce the active adaptation of the institutional framework), and he is aware of the open space that should be filled by groups with emancipatory purposes<sup>99</sup>.

First, as mentioned before, we have to acknowledge and distinguish the two sorts of rationality: purposive-instrumental, on the one hand, and symbolic, on the other. Second, we also have to be aware that at the level of subsystems of purposive-rational action, scientific-technical progress has forced the reorganization of many social institutions, and it seems to be a continuing process. For Habermas, this process of scientific and technological development can be a potential for liberation and emancipation only if it does not displace the other kind of human rationalization, that is, symbolic interaction. In Habermas' words, "Rationalization at the level of the institutional framework can occur only in the medium of symbolic interaction itself, that is, through removing restrictions on communication" (Habermas, 1970: 118). Therefore, in the light of the socio cultural effects of the development of the subsystems of purposive-rational action, it is necessary to develop as well, at all levels of political and repoliticized decision-making processes, a "Public, unrestricted discussion, free from domination, of the suitability and desirability of action-orienting principles and norms" (Habermas, 1970, 118-119).

Habermas thinks that the following might be the consequences in case that such a process of generalized reflection were made possible. In his own words,

A rationalization of social norms would, in fact, be characterized by a decreasing degree of repressiveness (which at the level of personality structure should increase average tolerance of ambivalence in the face of role conflicts), a decreasing degree of rigidity (which should multiply the chances of an individually stable self-presentation in everyday interactions), and approximation to a type of behavioral control that would allow role distance and the flexible application of norms that, while well-internalized, would be accessible to reflection (Habermas, 1970: 119)

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<sup>98</sup> We can see here that Habermas is not really concerned with eliminating capitalism, but with legitimating it. In Habermas' words, in a more recent text, "Without the political taming of an unbounded capitalism, the devastating stratification of world society will remain intractable" (Habermas, 2003b: 36). In this sense, Habermas philosophy's goal is simply to tame capitalism, instead of overthrowing it.

<sup>99</sup> In his book *Legitimation Crisis*, Habermas puts his confidence on the 'fundamental conviction of communicative ethics' and the experimental complexes of countercultures in which post-auratic art is incorporated'. He believes that, under certain conditions, they still might achieve an important motive-forming power. Interestingly enough, these conditions refer to the way adolescents are raised, that is, to a non conventional outcome of adolescence. In other words, Habermas is still focusing on the youth for finding a potential for critique of the system. In 'Toward a rational society' he referred to the students as a powerful emancipatory force.

Habermas thinks that although a process of rationalization at this level does not imply an increase in technical control over objectified processes of nature of society, it furnishes the members of society with the opportunity for further emancipation and progressive individuation (Habermas, 1970: 119).

Habermas' idea of utopia is the development of an "unrestricted communication about the goals of life activity and conduct against which advanced capitalism, structurally dependent on a depoliticized public realm, puts up a strong resistance" (Habermas, 1970: 119).

In this sense, the main goal is to stop the process of the depoliticization of the masses. In addition, the realm of the public sphere, which is actually administered through the mass media, should be recovered for political and practical discussions<sup>100</sup>.

The difference between progress in systems of purposive-rational action and emancipatory transformations of the institutional framework, or, in other words, between technical and practical problems, needs to be acknowledged and politically used. For Habermas, simply put, the public opinion must be repoliticized. The problem, of course, is to find out the sources of that repoliticization of the desiccated public sphere. For Habermas, the old class antagonism does not have a protest potential able to do that. In his words, "For the present, the only protest potential that gravitates toward the new conflict zone owing to identifiable interests is arising among certain groups of university, college, and high school students" (Habermas, 1970: 120).

#### IV

At this stage of his philosophical reflections Habermas did not see religious groups as having any sort of potential to promote the aforementioned repoliticization. Although Habermas acknowledges that in traditional societies the legitimation of political power derived from religious worldviews, he seems convinced that in modern societies such a need cannot be fulfilled by religion, at least not in the same way. In Habermas' words, "(...) the resuscitation of immediate political domination (in the traditional form of legitimation on the basis of cosmological worldviews) has become impossible. For traditions have already been disempowered. (...) Formally democratic government in systems of state-regulated capitalism is subject to a need for legitimation which cannot be met by a return to a prebourgeois form" (Habermas, 1970: 102).

Religion, as we saw, is a worldview that obeys the logic of interaction contexts. In this sense, "Their logic accords with the grammar of systematically distorted communication and with the fateful causality of dissociated symbols and suppressed motives" (Habermas, 1970: 96). Religion, thus, is an encompassing perspective of the world that offers an account of the most important issues of human being's collective life as well as of the particular history of each individual. The topics that religious worldviews deal with refer to issues about justice and freedom, violence and oppression, happiness and gratification, poverty, illness and death. These themes are expressed through notions of victory and defeat, love and hate, salvation and damnation.

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<sup>100</sup> See the first part of Chapter 5.

In virtue of these characteristics, nonetheless, religion is much more than a “mere” legitimation force. Indeed, Habermas accepts what, according to him, is one of the assumptions of classical sociology, namely, that subjects capable of speaking and acting “could develop the unity of their person only in connection with identity-securing worldviews and moral systems. The unity of the person requires the unity-enhancing perspective of a life-world that guarantees order and has both cognitive and moral-practical significance” (Habermas, 1975: 117-118).

From this perspective, religion appears as a world-maintaining interpretative system with the fundamental function of avoiding chaos and overcoming contingency. Thus, besides the functions regarding the legitimation of power, that is, the legitimation of orders of authority and basic norms, religion also had ‘meaning-giving’ functions. In Habermas’ words,

Religious systems originally connected the moral practical task of constituting ego- and group-identities (differentiation of the ego *vis-à-vis* the social reference group on the one hand, and differentiation of the collective *vis-à-vis* the natural and social environment on the other) with the cognitive interpretation of the world (mastery of problems of survival that arise in the confrontation with outer nature) in such a way that the contingencies of an imperfectly controlled environment could be processed simultaneously with the fundamental risks of human existence. (Habermas, 1975: 118-119)

Habermas is referring to the “crises of the life-cycle and the dangers of socialization, as well as of injuries to moral and physical integrity (guilt and loneliness, sickness and death)” (Habermas, 1975: 119).

The ‘meaning’ that religion offered was, nonetheless, ambivalent. On the one hand it offered a meaning that went beyond mere appearances. Religion presented a claim to ‘know’ the real causes of the happenings. From this perspective, human beings “ought not to be satisfied with fictions but only with ‘truths’ when they wish to know why something happens in the way it does, how it happens, and how what they do and ought to do can be justified” (Habermas, 1975: 119). On the other hand, the meaning offered by religion is also presented as a promise of consolation. In this sense, “proffered interpretations do not simply bring the unsettling contingencies to consciousness but make them bearable as well – even when, and precisely when, they cannot be removed *as contingencies*” (Habermas, 1975: 119).

In summary, as a meaning-giving interpretative system, religions originated as an effort to produce an illusion of order able to counterbalance the drastic and radical experiences of contingency that humanity had to deal with in primitive stages of social development<sup>101</sup>. Thus, religion appeared as a unity-enhancing perspective of a lifeworld that guaranteed order.

This second function of religion has also been softened and increasingly dissolved by the development of capitalism. And, according to Habermas, this implies

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<sup>101</sup> Habermas is following the anthropological researches of C. Levi-Strauss.

that modern societies, besides having legitimation problems referred to the system as a whole, also have problems referred to the identity-securing life of the modern individuals and collectives groups.

Indeed, if religion's functions of legitimation turned out to be incompatible with the generalized social-structural forces of the economic and administrative systems and the expansion of the strategic-utilitarian action to more areas of social life, religion's functions of offering meaning were not compatible either with the cognitive attitudes proper of the scientific systems.

In modern societies cognitive dissonances appeared between religious worldviews and the scientific system. According to Habermas the imperatives of the scientific system become general through the expansion of formal schooling. In Habermas' words, such imperatives form a 'kind of positivistic common consciousness'. In this sense, once the sciences established a monopoly on the interpretation of outer nature, the inherited general interpretations were devalued.

For Habermas, this changed the way we perceive and deal with human contingencies. In Habermas' words, now, "contingencies are recognized and, to a large extent, technically mastered and their consequences made bearable. Natural catastrophes are defined as world-wide social events (*Sozialfalle*), and their effects are blunted by large-scale administrative operations" (Habermas, 1975: 119). Nonetheless, Habermas also thinks that with growing complexity in areas of social co-existence, new contingencies have arisen. In this field, in contrast, there has not been developed a "proportionate growth in the ability to master" them. Therefore, concludes Habermas, "the need for interpretations that overcome contingency and divest not-yet-controlled accidents of their accidental character no longer arises in relation to outer nature; but it is regenerated in an intensified form by suffering from uncontrolled societal processes" (Habermas, 1975: 119-120).

But Habermas thinks that social sciences cannot take on the functions that general worldviews once had. In fact, for him,

at the same time that they dissolve the metaphysical illusion of order last produced by the objectivistic philosophy of history, they contribute to an increase in avoidable contingencies; for in their present state they do not produce technical knowledge that society could use for mastering contingency; nor do they have confidence in the ability of strong theoretical strategies to penetrate the multiplicity of *apparent*, nominalistically produced contingencies and make the objective context of social evolution accessible (Habermas, 1975: 120).

Habermas also indicates that general theories, whether of social development or of nature, do hold the promise of meaning by aiming to the overcoming of contingencies. However, they do it in a different way than the previous religious worldviews. In Habermas' words, "they aim at methodically removing from this promise the ambivalence between truth claim and a merely illusory fulfillment. We can no longer



avert recognizable contingencies by producing a rationalizing illusion” (Habermas, 1975: 121).

In any event Habermas also thinks that at the level of the risks of the individual life, “a theory that could interpret away the facticities of loneliness and guilt, sickness and death is, to be sure, not even *conceivable*. Contingencies that are irremovably attached to the bodily and moral constitution of the individual can be raised to consciousness only as contingency. We must, in principle, live disconsolately with them” (Habermas, 1975: 120). Therefore, for Habermas, given our human condition, ultimately, we will not be able to get rid of the contingencies related to loneliness and guilt, sickness and death. These, for Habermas, are “irremovably attached to the bodily and oral constitution of the individual”.

Be that as it may, in this second scenario Habermas finds a void as well. The moral-practical task of constituting ego and group identities and, by doing this, cope with human contingencies, which used to be fulfilled by religion does not seem to be accomplished by anything else.

For Habermas, modern science has taken control of a domain that has been left freed since the transcendental God’s withdrawal, and now we are left with a desacralized and desocialized nature. For Habermas the emergence of modern science ends up questioning the religious interpretation of nature, that is, nature as a creation. The knowing subject is thus faced with an objectified nature.

Previously, religion was in charge of providing a representation of society as a whole. But, in addition, religion also provided a system of integration of a normative unitary consciousness for all members of society. In our modern societies, there does not seem to be any institution capable of fulfilling this function in the same way.

However, Habermas thinks that framing the issue in this way is inaccurate and ineffective. Indeed, for him, it is pointless to look for a substitute to religion. It must be accepted that in our complex societies we do not constitute our unity anymore based on worldviews that materially prescribe a common identity. Habermas thinks that in our complex societies a common identity can only be developed using formal grounds about the structure itself that makes possible for the individuals to form their own identity<sup>102</sup>.

It is noteworthy nonetheless, that already in this period of his work Habermas acknowledges the flexibility of the religion. He is aware of “the repoliticization of the biblical inheritance observable in contemporary theological discussion (Pannenberg, Moltmann, Solle, Metz), which goes together with a leveling of this-worldly/other worldly dichotomy” (Habermas, 1975: 121). For Habermas, this ‘new’ perspective does not imply a radical atheism that liquidates the idea of God.

However, Habermas also wonders if the idea of a ‘personal God’ can also be sustained or salvaged in this ‘critical mass of thought’, as he calls it. He thinks that, in contrast,

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<sup>102</sup> Within this context we need to remember again Habermas’ discussion with Luhmann. In this sense, we must remember that Habermas agrees with Luhmann in that our modern complex societies cannot form their identity as previous forms of society used to do it. Habermas is thinking in the case of civilizations [that](#) formed their identity around a state and fixed in a particular worldview.

The idea of God is transformed (*aufgehoben*) into the concept of a *Logos* that determines the community of believers and the real life-context of a self-emancipating society. 'God' becomes the name for a communicative structure that forces men, on pain of a loss of their humanity, to go beyond their accidental, empirical nature to encounter one another *indirectly*, that is, across an objective something that they themselves are not (Habermas, 1975: 121).

Thus, although Habermas seems to be aware of the new theological tendencies that have gained terrain, he suggests that such tendencies imply an idea of God according to which it merely represents a way of referring to a communicative structure which, on the basis of the reciprocal recognition of their identity, forces the participants involved to raise themselves above the randomness of a merely external and physical existence.

## V

Habermas' reflections before *TCA* are deeply focused on developing a concept of rationality that allows him to offer a critical and normative account of the results of the processes through which traditional societies became modern. Habermas' account, on the one hand, aims to be critical insofar as it intends to describe the deformations and pathologies that arose from such processes. It is supposed to be normative, on the other hand, because its goal is also to indicate new patterns of development in order to correct such deficiencies. Those new patterns, nevertheless, have to be consistent with the profound and, perhaps irretrievable breakdown that took place with the emergence of social and cultural modernity. For Habermas, recurring to pre-modern remedies cannot solve pathologies and deformations of modern societies. In other words, we simply cannot recover our losses by renouncing to our gains.

Habermas' new concept of rationality seems to point towards a dualistic framework that aims to develop an account of the two different types of rationality developed by human beings, namely, purposive-rationality and communicative rationality. Habermas' thesis, in this respect, is that they are results of the natural and socio-cultural evolution of the human species. As such, they define what being human means.

Their interaction and level of development has differed throughout human history, as well of our level of awareness of them. Thus, the main task of a historical reconstruction of human history is to describe such a development. It is in this sense that Habermas' conceptual framework also attempts to reconstruct historical materialism, that is, to take it apart and put it back together in a new form in order to attain more fully the goals it set for itself (Habermas, 1979: 96). In Habermas' words:

(...) the category framework developed by Marx in the basic assumptions of historical materialism requires a new formulation. The model of forces of production and relations of production would have to be replaced by the more abstract one of work and interaction. The relations of production

designate a level on which the institutional framework was anchored only during the phase of the development of liberal capitalism, and not either before or after. To be sure, the productive forces, in which the learning processes organized in the subsystems of purposive-rational action accumulate, have been from the very beginning the motive force of social evolution. But, they do not appear, as Marx supposed, under all circumstances to be a potential for liberation and to set off emancipatory movements- at least not once the continual growth of the productive forces has become dependent on scientific-technical progress that has also taken on functions of legitimating political power. I suspect that the frame of reference developed in terms of the analogous, but more general relation of institutional framework (interaction) and subsystems of purposive-rational action ("work" in the broad sense of instrumental and strategic action) is more suited to reconstructing the sociocultural phases of the history of mankind (Habermas, 1970: 113-114).

Habermas' new and, according to him, more powerful frame of reference will be fully developed in *TCA*. As a result of the analysis of the texts prior to *TCA*, we are ready to recognize that such a frame of reference will determine Habermas' reflections on religion. In this sense, in *TCA* we will find an account of religion in relation to the role it has played in the different stages of human evolution.

As we saw from the beginning of this chapter, Habermas' approach to social theory is in search for a balance between two extreme poles. On the one hand Habermas faces Marcuse's and Adorno's totalizing critique of reason that ends awaiting for a new re-enchanting of nature or a developing, out of nowhere, of a non-capitalist science and reason. On the other hand, Habermas also faces Luhmann's system theory that becomes untenable once it is developed as a totalizing account of every single aspect of contemporary societies.

For Habermas, the main problem of these two radical approaches consists in that they operate with a very limited concept of reason. Habermas, in contrast, thinks that human societies have developed a multidimensional rationality. Thus, social theory needs to offer a more disaggregated concept of reason. This is why, as we will see, Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action* is presented as a theory of different types of reason that, without ending up with a total critique of reason, allows for an account of processes of progress as well as of processes of regression.

From Luhmann, Habermas will try to rescue his idea that the structural changes of global social systems that mark historical epochs are produced by non-individual learning processes. Habermas will maintain that in order to talk about social evolution we need to offer an account of the solution of steering problems and the underlying learning mechanisms that some societies were able to produce while others were not.

However, Habermas wants to leave room for the idea that although Luhmann's processes of differentiation and selectivity might be correctly regarded as signs of

evolution, they can also constitute signs of an actual block on what a real social evolution should entail<sup>103</sup>.

As we saw, Habermas cannot accept Luhmann's blindness to the fact that social evolution also depends on other kind of learning processes. For Habermas, a really successful theory of social evolution able to develop a proper account for the complexity of the social systems needs to differentiate at least three dimensions: (i) the scientific-technological progress, which is derived from accumulative learning processes within the context of a reality constituted by the realm of functions of the instrumental action (the display of the productive forces); (ii) the increase in the capacity for control and self-regulation of the social systems, which is the result of the learning processes within the framework of strategic actions or social technical planning (the generation of strategies and organizations, invention of control techniques and self-regulation); and finally, (iii) the emancipatory changes within the systems of institutions that are the result of learning processes related to ideologies (generation of legitimation demands, innovation within the field of justifications and the introduction of a critique full of practical consequences).

Habermas thinks that Luhmann's systems theory is only adequate for the second dimension. Therefore, for Habermas we should be able to develop other kind of "evolutionary universals". These universal should refer to the structures through which we can i) acquire knowledge technically usable (and expand it, that is, to make scientific and technical progresses); b) acquire functionalist knowledge (and expand it, that is, improve the strategies and mechanisms of control and regulation); and c) acquire knowledge relevant for our praxis (and expand it, that is, transform it into processes of emancipatory enlightenment).

Habermas will face these challenges with the conceptual framework of a theory of communicative action; a framework that also takes into account the human actions linguistically coordinated.

In his *Theory of Communicative Action* Habermas will elaborate on the idea that the evolutionary learning process of the human species should be understood within the framework of a theory that explains the evolutionary gains of the social systems by relating two issues: a) what steering problems have been solved in an innovative way, and b) what competences have made possible such innovations.

The second issue takes us explicitly to the structures of personality and to the idea that there is also an ontogenetic process of learning that, somehow, needs to be related with the phylogenetic process of learning. In some sense, the ontogenetic processes of learning affect evolutionary social advances. Habermas thinks that once the steering capacity of the social systems, which is structurally limited, appears to be less powerful than the unavoidable problems that it faces, it can recur, in certain circumstances, to the surplus power stored in the learning capacities of the individuals or the collectives that are accessible through a worldviews. The system of society makes use of them in order to institutionalize new levels of learning.

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<sup>103</sup> For Habermas, Luhmann's theory "effects a shift in perspective that leaves the self-critique of modernity at odds with itself without any object. A systems theory of society applied to itself can do anything but take up an affirmative stance toward modern's society growth in complexity" (Habermas, 1987: 368).

Thus, social systems may constitute new structures once the process of learning of the socialized subjects has taken place. The capacity to direct society reaches a higher level in this way.

For Habermas, then, we also need an ontogenetic theory of development of cognitive, linguistic, and interactive competences. This theory needs to be related with the phylogenetic perspective of social evolution as expressed in Luhmann's systems theory. Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action*, as we will see, constitutes an alliance of different theoretical traditions<sup>104</sup>.

## **CHAPTER 4. RELIGION IN HABERMAS' THEORY OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION**

Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action (TCA)* aims to three deeply intertwined goals. First, it develops a notion of communicative rationality. Second, to a great extent as an answer to Luhmann, it presents a dual concept of society, namely, as a lifeworld and as a system. Third, based on all of the above, it offers a theory of modernity able to develop a critical account of our social pathologies.

The development of the notion of communicative rationality must fulfill two basic requirements. On the one hand, it cannot have the untenable transcendental aspects of the metaphysical perspectives of reason, but, on the other, it cannot reduce the notion of "human reason" to a narrow cognitive-instrumental model.

As we saw in the previous chapter, Habermas will elaborate his notion of "communicative rationality" based on the processes of achieving understanding in language. As Habermas puts it,

The concept of reaching an understanding suggests a rationally motivated agreement among participants that is measured against criticizable validity claims. The validity claims (propositional truth, normative rightness, and subjective truthfulness) characterize different categories of a knowledge

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<sup>104</sup> As we will see in the following chapter, besides Historical Materialism, Action Theory and Systems Theory, Habermas will also recur to Piaget's notion of evolutionary logic. From Piaget's perspective Habermas highlights four elements: i) the existence of evolutionary cognitive, linguistic, and interactive dimensions susceptible of being analytically differentiated; ii) the existence of learning mechanisms such as accommodation, assimilation, identification, interiorization, etc; iii) the existence of universal types of problems related to action (technical disposition over the objectified reality, consensual regulation of action conflicts); iv) the existence of multiple dimensions on which the solutions to the problems are accumulated (for example autonomy in relation to external and internal nature); and v) the existence of stages of the cognitive, linguistic, and interactive, development. In Habermas' *Communication and the Evolution of Society, Ch. 3. Historical Materialism and the Development of Normative Structures*, 1979, Beacon Press, he tries to match a history of the evolution of worldviews with the development of the ego. For this, Habermas uses a theory of ontogenesis as presented especially by Psychoanalytic and Cognitive Developmental Psychology. From this perspective we have four stages of human development: a) the symbiotic, b) the egocentric, c) the sociocentric-objectivistic, and d) the universalistic. See Habermas, 1979: 100-103. Although the correspondences are not completely linear, Habermas does present a close correspondence between the evolution of the ego and the evolution of societies and worldviews.

embodied in symbolic expressions. These expressions can be more closely analyzed in two ways—with respect to how they can be defended and with respect to how actors relate through them to something in a world. The concept of communicative rationality points, on the one side, to different forms of discursively redeeming validity claims (...); on the other side, it points to relations to the world that communicative actors take up in raising validity claims for their expressions. (Habermas, 1984: 75).

Habermas' notion of communicative rationality aims to explain how the following four traits of our modern rationality were possible:

a) *The availability of formal concepts for the objective, social and subjective worlds.* Communicative rationality differentiates three validity claims (propositional truth, normative rightness and subjective truthfulness) and three corresponding attitudes (objectivating, norm conformative and expressive). However, these distinctions were not always present. Indeed, for Habermas, “The mythical concept of powers and the magical concept of conjuring systematically impede the separation of an objectivating attitude to a world of existing states of affairs from a conformist or nonconformist attitude to a world of legitimately regulated interpersonal relations” (Habermas, 1984: 49).

b) *The possibility of self-reflection.* In the modern understanding of the world, the principles and interpretations stored in our tradition might be placed in question and subjected to critical revision. In this way, “internal interconnections of meaning can be systematically elaborated and alternative interpretations can be methodically examined. Cognitive activities of the second order emerge: learning processes guided by hypotheses and filtered through arguments in the domain of objectivating thought, moral-practical insight, and aesthetic perception” (Habermas, 1984: 71).

c) *The existence of specialized forms of argumentation that makes possible the social institutionalization of the aforementioned learning processes.* Habermas refers, by this, to the emergence of cultural subsystems for science, law and morality, and art “in which traditions take shape that are supported by arguments rendered fluid through permanent criticism but at the same time professionally secured” (Habermas, 1984: 72).

d) *The existence of a partially independent domain of actions oriented to success.* This independence is affirmed with regard to the domain of actions oriented to reaching understanding and the imperatives of a communicative understanding that has to be constantly renewed. For Habermas, such an independence makes possible “a societal institutionalization of purposive-rational action for generalized goals, for example, the formation of subsystems, controlled through money and power, for rational economics and rational administration” (Habermas, 1984: 72).

As indicated in the previous chapter, Habermas needs to place his notion of communicative rationality in an evolutionary perspective in which the outcome of such a process is the rise of the modern understanding of the world. On the one hand this is why Habermas will have to develop, as a second general objective of TCA, a dual

concept of society. However, on the other hand, such an evolutionary perspective also requires that Habermas recur to Piaget<sup>105</sup>.

The four aforementioned characteristics of our modern understanding of the world are ultimately interconnected by the idea of *decentering* that Habermas finds in Piaget's concepts of learning processes and cognitive development.

From this perspective, the development of the three formal-world concepts is the result of learning processes developed by the human species. Habermas admits to be tacitly using a concept of learning used by Piaget to expound the ontogenesis of structures of consciousness (Habermas, 1984: 67).

Piaget's stages of cognitive development are not characterized in terms of new contents, but in terms of structurally described levels of learning abilities. Habermas suggests that there might be some similarities in the way that the new structures of worldviews emerged<sup>106</sup>. As he puts it,

The caesurae between the mythical, religious-metaphysical, and modern modes of thought are characterized by changes in the system of basic concepts. With the transition to a new stage the interpretations of the superseded stage are, no matter what their content, *categorically devalued*. It is not this or that reason, but the *kind* of reason, which is no longer convincing. A devaluation of the explanatory and justificatory potentials of entire traditions took place in the great civilizations with the dissolution of mythological-narrative figures of thought, in the modern age with the dissolution of religious, cosmological, and metaphysical figures of thought. These *devaluative shifts* appear to be connected with socioevolutionary transitions to new levels of learning, with which the conditions of possible learning processes in the dimensions of objectivating thought, moral-practical insight, and aesthetic expressive capacity are altered." (Habermas, 1984: 68).

Piaget's distinction between the learning of structures and the learning of contents allows him to conceive a wide notion of cognitive development, that is, one that extends to worldviews as a whole (Habermas, 1984: 68).

According to Habermas, when Piaget discusses the development of intelligence he refers to the development of "structures of thought and action that the growing child acquires constructively in active confrontation with external reality, with processes in the objective world" (Habermas, 1984: 68). In this sense, for Habermas, Piaget's concept of cognitive development also refers to the construction of an "internal universe". Cognitive

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<sup>105</sup> We must remember that Behavioral Psychology was one of the four theories that Habermas was working on in order to develop his own notion of social evolution.

<sup>106</sup> In his book *Communication and the evolution of society* Habermas explores in more detail this idea, especially in *Chapter 3 Historical Materialism and the Development of Normative Structures* (pp. 100-101). There, Habermas, based on Piaget, offers a systematic account of homologies between ego development and the evolution of worldviews. Despite the dangers of drawing hasty parallels (Habermas indicates five clear limitations) Habermas thinks that certain homologies can be found.

development, therefore, presupposes a process of demarcation: on one hand, a universe of objects, and, on the other, a unique universe of the subject. As Habermas puts it, "The growing child works out for himself, equiprimordially, the concepts of the external and internal worlds in dealing practically with objects and with himself" (Habermas, 1984: 68).

In addition, Habermas indicates that within this process of cognitive development Piaget further distinguishes between assuming the reality of physical objects and assuming the reality of social objects. Thus, "the external universe is differentiated into the world of perceptible and manipulable objects on the one hand and the world of normatively regulated interpersonal relations on the other" (Habermas, 1984: 68).

The contact with an external nature is established through instrumental actions, that is, through positing ends and trying to achieve them using certain means. This process results in the acquisition of norms of efficiency. In contrast, the contact with a social nature is established through the interaction with other social agents. This interaction allows us to recognize and construct a system of moral norms.

From the fact that Piaget's notion of cognitive development entails the construction of a reference system that permits the simultaneous demarcation of the objective, the social and subjective worlds, Habermas infers that "Cognitive development signifies in general *the decentration of an egocentric understanding of the world*. Only to the extent that the formal reference system of the three worlds is differentiated can we form a reflective concept of "world" and open up access to the world through the medium of common interpretive efforts, in the sense of a cooperative negotiation of situation definitions" (Habermas, 1984: 69).

A subjective world, that entails the notion of our own internal world, makes possible the thought of the internal world of others. Simultaneously, it makes possible to contrast them with an external world, which is different to both of them. Hence, as Habermas puts it,

Ego can consider how certain facts (what he regards as existing states of affairs in the objective world) or certain normative expectations (what he regards as legitimate elements of the common social world) look from the perspective of another, that is, as elements of alter's subjective world. He can further consider that alter is for his part considering how what he regards as existing states of affairs and valid norms look from ego's perspective, that is, as a component of ego's subjective world. The subjective worlds of the participants could serve as mirror surfaces in which the objective, the normative, and the subjective-for-another are reflected any number of times (Habermas, 1984: 69)

In addition, nonetheless, the formal-world concepts have an integrating function. In this sense, they "prevent the stock of what is common from dissolving in the stream of subjectivities repeatedly reflected in one another. They make it possible to adopt in common the perspective of a third person, that is, a nonparticipant" (Habermas, 1984: 69).



Habermas will use Piaget's analysis on the individual's cognitive development as a model to conceive the development of worldviews. From Habermas' view, in both cases we can describe a structure-forming process that becomes more and more general an abstract until it reaches a point in which the awareness of the process itself is possible. At this point of decentration, in both cases, development can take on a reflective form. In the case of the development of worldviews, modernity, for Habermas, represents such a moment of decentration<sup>107</sup>. On this basis Habermas will be able to place mythical, religious-metaphysical, and modern worldviews in a hierarchy, according to the degree of decentration of the world-understandings they make possible (Habermas, 1987: 189).

However, in order to develop such a parallel between the ontogenesis of the individuals and the phylogenesis of the human species, Habermas will have to recur too to the social theory of Weber, Durkheim, Mead, and, especially, Parsons and Luhmann. This is why, as mentioned before, the second general objective of *TCA* is to develop a dual concept of society, namely, as a lifeworld and as a system.

In this sense, *TCA* constitutes an account of a civilizational stage of humanity (modernity) as a process of rationalization that takes form in different spheres of human interaction.

Habermas' first step is to analyze Weber's theory of rationalization. Habermas will highlight, on the one hand, Weber's description of the structural change that occurred in religious worldviews once the value spheres of science, morality and art were differentiated, and, on the other, Weber's idea of the selective pattern of capitalist rationalization<sup>108</sup>. Nevertheless, Weber's approach is limited because it is entirely developed within the presuppositions of the paradigm of a theory of consciousness. This is why Weber's analysis overemphasizes the notion of purposive rationality<sup>109</sup>.

Habermas' second step is, thus, to reconstruct Weber's problems from a perspective based on a different paradigm, namely, the paradigm of language and communication; something that he thinks can be achieved by analyzing, in a joint way, Durkheim's and Mead's theories. In Habermas' words,

Mead's foundation of the social sciences in a theory of communication and Durkheim's sociology of religion fit together in such a way that the concept

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<sup>107</sup> Habermas thinks that the very development of a theory of society is dependent upon social evolution itself. In this sense, "The more the material reproduction of the communicatively structured lifeworld is expanded and differentiated, the more it calls for a systems theoretical analysis to get at the counterintuitive aspects of sociation" (Habermas, 1987: 310). Similarly, "If we assume that the human species maintains itself through the socially coordinated activities of its members and that this coordination has to be established through communication—and in certain central spheres through communication aimed at reaching agreement—then the reproduction of the species *also* requires satisfying the conditions of a rationality that is inherent in communicative action. These conditions have become perceptible in the modern period with the decentration of our understanding of the world and the differentiation of various universal validity claims" (Habermas, 1984: 397). In addition to this, Habermas also suggests that the threat of the colonization of the lifeworld, which places in question the symbolic structures of the lifeworld as a whole, might explain why such structures have become accessible to us (Habermas, 1987: 403).

<sup>108</sup> For Habermas, Weber's "approach still holds out the best prospect of explaining the social pathologies that appeared in the wake of capitalist modernization" (Habermas, 1987: 303).

<sup>109</sup> Habermas reaches this conclusion after analyzing the Marxist reception of Weber by Lukacs – Horkheimer – Adorno. See Habermas, 1984, From Lukacs to Adorno: Rationalization as Reification. pp. 339-403.

of interaction mediated by language and regulated by norms can be given an explanation in the sense of a conceptual genesis. The idea of the linguistification of the sacred [*Versprachlichung des Sakralen*] provides a perspective from which Mead's and Durkheim's assumptions regarding the rationalization of the lifeworld converge (Habermas, 1984: 141).

Mead and Durkheim's accounts are limited too, nevertheless, because they only allow us to develop a concept of society from the perspective of communication and the lifeworld. For Habermas, in contrast, we need to develop a view that accounts for the fact that the integration of society can take place through other means besides communicative action (Habermas, 1987: 150). Habermas is recognizing Luhmann's relevance within the debates on the concept of social evolution.

For this reason, finally, Habermas will take up Parson's work in order to develop a conceptual strategy to connect the basic concepts developed from a systems theory approach with those developed from a communication approach. Habermas elucidates the basic conceptual structure of a two-level concept of society (as a lifeworld and as a system) with reference to the theoretical problems that he found in Parson's perspective (Habermas, 1987: 310).

In the following pages I will reconstruct Habermas' own reconstruction inasmuch as it serves us to clarify his thoughts on religion "encapsulated" in his *magnum opus*.

(I) First, I will present Habermas' analysis of Weber. I will emphasize the role that, according to Habermas, religion plays at a) the beginning of the process of world historical disenchantment of which modernity is the final stage, and at b) the end of that process. This last moment refers to the role that, for Weber, religion might have in our times. (II) Second, I will expound Habermas' approach of Mead and Durkheim. It will be useful to show, on the one hand, Mead's remarks on language as an element to explain the emergence of normative interactions, and, on the other, Durkheim's thoughts according to which our normative consciousness has to be traced back to religious symbolism. Habermas combines both approaches to present his idea of the linguistification of the sacred. (III) Third, I will present Habermas' consolidated approach that brings together two views of society, namely, the lifeworld and the systems perspectives. In these reflections<sup>110</sup> Habermas presents his final thought on the role of religion within the conceptual apparatus of TCA. (IV) Finally, I will offer some conclusions about Habermas' approach on religion from his social theory.

## I

For Weber, modernization is a continuation of the world-historical process of disenchantment. The results of this process, at the stage of modernity, can be seen in three different dimensions: a) society, b) culture, and c) personality<sup>111</sup>.

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<sup>110</sup> To be sure, Habermas refers to these reflections as 'provisional' because according to the structure of TCA he will need to contrast them with Parson's theory. Only after having established a dialogue with Parson's view will Habermas consider his own approach as non-provisional.

<sup>111</sup> Habermas re-arranges Weber's remarks on modernity by using Parson's division of a) society, b) culture and c) personality. As we will see later, Habermas keeps this division to describe the structural components of the lifeworld.

At the level of society, modernity is the differentiation of the capitalist economy and the modern state. “They complement one another in their functions so as to mutually stabilize one another” (Habermas, 1984: 158).

At the level of culture, modernity means the appearance, out of religious traditions, of the different spheres of the cognitive, the aesthetic -expressive and the moral evaluative. “With science and technology, with autonomous art and the values of expressive self-presentation, with universal legal and moral representations, there emerges a differentiation of *three value spheres, each of which follows its own logic*” (Habermas, 1984: 163-164)<sup>112</sup>.

Finally, at the level of personality, modernity is represented by the emergence of a methodical conduct of life. For Weber, this aspect seems to be the most relevant factor to explain the rise of capitalism. Such a methodical conduct of life is represented by the emergence of the protestant ethic and its value orientations and behavioral dispositions. In other words, a post-conventional moral orientation arises. From now on, the individual herself needs to decide how to orient her life independently of the tradition and conventions in which she was brought up.

It is noteworthy that for Weber these three manifestations of Western rationalism are preceded by a religious rationalization. In this sense, as Habermas indicates, “Weber deliberately brings this universal-historical process of the disenchantment of mythical interpretive systems under the concept of rationalization as well” (Habermas, 1984: 167). For Weber, the great world religions contributed to this process of rationalization because they overcame magical beliefs (Habermas, 1984: 175). Weber conceives the differentiation of cultural value spheres, one of the key aspects of Occidental rationalism, as a result of “*the rationalization of religious worldviews*” (Habermas, 1984: 186).

This perspective allows Weber to frame religion in an evolutionary path toward rationalization. From here, Habermas will highlight the following general characteristics of religion.

First, all world religions arise from the same problem, that is, the problem of theodicy. In this sense, “Rationalization is tied to a theme that is common to all world religions: the question of justifying the unequal distribution of life's goods. This *basic ethical problematic*, which bursts the bounds of myth, arises from a need for a religious explanation of suffering that is perceived as unjust” (Habermas, 1984: 201). Suffering, in tribal societies, appears as a symptom of a secret guilt. According to Weber, “Individuals continually suffering, mourning, ill, or otherwise unfortunate were, according to the nature of their suffering, believed either to be possessed by a demon or burdened with the wrath of a god whom they had insulted.” (Habermas, 1984: 201). But suffering needed to be revalued in order for personal misfortune to be considered unjust. Religious worldviews, in this sense, made possible the idea “that individual misfortune can be undeserved and that the individual may cherish the religious hope of being delivered from all evil, from sickness, need, poverty, even from death” (Habermas, 1984: 201). Based on this idea, new sorts of communities could be founded, namely, religious communities independent of ethnic associations established for the redemptory fates of individuals.

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<sup>112</sup> Cultural differentiation was analyzed in the first chapter.

Second, all world religions point in the same direction, namely, a disenchanting understanding of the world purified of magical ideas (Habermas, 1984: 196). Habermas indicates how, for Weber, there are two deeply interwoven measurements for the rationalization of a worldview: i) its eradication of magical thought (disenchantment), and ii) its systematic organization or dogmatization<sup>113</sup>.

From Weber's perspective, the overcoming of magical thinking occurs in several dimensions. In an ethical sense, rationalization as disenchantment refers to the relationships between the believer and the divine being. Once the relation between the individual in need of salvation and a transcendent, morally demanding sacred power is established in communicative terms, the individual is able to systematize his innerworldly relations from "the abstract standpoint of a morality to which either only the chosen—the religious virtuosos—or all of the faithful are subject in the same way (Habermas, 1984: 212).

Habermas indicates that for this type of rationalization to occur the following three requirements must be fulfilled:

- (a) the distillation of a world concept, abstracted from a single point of view, for the totality of normatively regulated interpersonal relations; (b) the differentiation of a purely ethical attitude, in which the agent can follow and criticize norms; and (c) the development of a concept of the person that is at once universalistic and individualistic, with its correlates of conscience, moral accountability, autonomy, guilt, and so forth (Habermas, 1984: 212-213).

These three conditions make possible that, instead of a devout attachment to concrete and traditional orders of life, we can have a free orientation to universal principles.

In a cognitive dimension, in contrast, disenchantment refers to the demythologization of the knowledge of what is, which makes possible the manipulation of things and events. For Habermas, "The more the instrumental intervention into, and the theoretical interpretation of, empirical processes can be separated from one another, the more strictly the individual can in turn systematize his lifeworld relations (in this case from the abstract standpoint of a cosmological-metaphysical order) to the laws of which all phenomena are subject without exception" (Habermas, 1984: 213). Just like in the case of ethical disenchantment, for cognitive disenchantment to occur the following conditions had to be achieved: a) the distillation of a formal world-concept for the whole of what is, with universals for the lawlike spatiotemporal interconnection of entities in general; (b) the differentiation of a purely theoretical attitude (set off from practice), in which the knower can contemplatively ascertain the truth, make and contest statements; and (c) the development of an epistemic ego in general, which can give itself over to the contemplation of what is, freed from affects, lifeworld interests,

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<sup>113</sup> In Weber's words, quoted by Habermas, "To judge the level of rationalization a religion represents there are two principle yardsticks, which are in many ways interrelated. One is the degree to which the religion has divested itself of magic; the other is the degree of systematic unity it gives to the relation between God and the world and correspondingly to its own ethical relation to the world." (Habermas, 1984: 205).

prejudices, and the like. (Habermas, 1984: 213). In virtue of these three conditions the fixation on the surface of concrete phenomena that is anchored in myth was replaced with the disinterested orientation to general laws underlying the phenomena.

However, according to Habermas, from a Weberian perspective, something else was needed to make possible the step from religious worldviews to the modern, disenchanted, and decentered understanding of the world. The notions of “God”, “Being”, “Nature” that guarantee the unity of the rationalized worldviews, whether metaphysical or religious, make possible the development of arguments and perspectives connected with them. Nevertheless, such founding notions cannot be exposed to argumentative doubt. They, in this sense, do not make possible within themselves the differentiation of descriptive, normative and expressive aspects. All these aspects are, so to speak, fused within the fundamental concepts of religion and metaphysics. For Habermas, this betrays the existence of remnants of a past mythical thought. “This protects the rationalized worldviews, as worldviews, from consequences that would endanger the tradition-securing modes of pious belief or reverential contemplation” (Habermas, 1984: 214).

In contrast, the modern understanding of the world does not recognize those limits. The critical power of modern hypothetical thought, according to Habermas, does not accept any barrier of that sort.

Thus, the process of rationalization could only be completed with the generalization of the level of learning that was attained with the conceptual apparatus of religious-metaphysical worldviews. For Habermas, it was necessary to “apply the modes of thought achieved in ethical and cognitive rationalization consistently to profane domains of life and experience” (Habermas, 1984: 214).

Weber explains the generalization of ethical rationalization with the emergence of the Protestant ethic of the calling. From Habermas’ perspective, this allows Weber to explain the penetration to all extra-religious departments of life of the religious asceticism that flowered in medieval monastic orders. The Protestant ethic of the calling made possible the subjection of profane actions to the maxims of the ethics of conviction.

However, according to Habermas, Weber did not seem to be interested in the emergence of modern science as a way to explain the generalization of cognitive rationalization. For Habermas, “the uncoupling of theory from the *experiential domains of practice*— particularly from those of social labor—had to be overcome. Theoretical argumentation had to be rejoined above all with those experiential domains accessible from the technical perspective of the craftsman” (Habermas, 1984: 215). In this sense, within a Weberian perspective, Habermas thinks that the experimental natural sciences were the responsible of such a generalization. As he puts it,

the social carriers of those strands of tradition that were combined, amazingly, in modern science—the Scholastics, the Humanists, and above all the engineers and artists of the Renaissance—played a role in releasing for purposes of research practice the potential stored in cognitively rationalized worldviews—a role similar to that played by the

Protestant sects in transposing ethically rationalized worldviews into everyday practice”(Habermas, 1984: 214-215).

In summary, for Weber, the modern structures of consciousness are the result of a universal-historical process of worldview rationalization, that is, of a disenchantment of religious-metaphysical worldviews. Religion itself, as a generalized sublation of magical thought, contributed to the establishment of the conditions that made possible the modern understanding of the world.

However, interestingly enough, Weber does not seem to find any place for religion once the process of rationalization is sufficiently advanced. From Weber’s view the Protestant ethic of the calling satisfies only the starting conditions of capitalist society. However, at the end, such an ethic is not able to secure the conditions for its own stabilization. “In Weber’s view, the subsystems of purposive-rational action form an environment that is destructive of the Protestant ethic in the long run; this is all the more so, the more these systems develop in accord with the immanent laws of capitalist growth and of the reproduction of state power” (Habermas, 1984: 228). In the long run, the moral-practical rationality of the ethic of conviction is replaced by “a utilitarianism that owes its existence to an empiricist reinterpretation of morality, namely to a pseudomoral revaluation of purposive rationality, and that no longer has an internal relation to the moral sphere of value” (Habermas, 1984: 228)

This is, according to Weber, the “paradox of the Protestant ethic of vocation”: It fulfills the starting conditions for modernization, but later one, “the modernization process itself reacts back upon and undermines the value-rational foundations of purposive-rational action” (Habermas, 1984: 241). At the end, the religious ethics itself is replaced by an instrumental and utilitarian attitude toward the world. As a result modernity entails two negative consequences to humanity, namely, radical loss of meaning<sup>114</sup> and freedom<sup>115</sup>.

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<sup>114</sup> Loss of meaning is related to the differentiation of the cognitive-instrumental, moral-practical, and aesthetic expressive spheres. Meaning is lost insofar as unity, for Weber, cannot be regained. As Habermas puts it, “Differentiations already arise within segmentary tribal societies. There, antagonisms between different spheres of life can still be held in check by means of a mythical interpretation of the world: Each sphere is represented by a particular primordial power that communicates with all other powers. Polytheism is a late form of this mythical view, which makes it possible to personify the competition among life problems as a struggle among the gods and to project it into the heavens. At the developmental level of civilizations, society is differentiated according to occupational groups and social strata, so that the unity of the lifeworld can no longer be so readily guaranteed by mythical interpretations of the world. Now religious metaphysical worldviews carry out this unifying function, and all the more impressively the more they are rationally organized. It is, however, just this integrative achievement that is placed in question in modern societies by the differentiation of cultural spheres of value. To the degree that the rationalization of worldviews issues in modern structures of consciousness, worldviews as *such* fall to pieces” (Habermas, 1984: 244-245)

<sup>115</sup> Weber’s thesis of the loss of freedom refers to the idea that everything becomes dependent on the demands of purposive-rationality. In Weber’s words, quoted by Habermas, “One of the fundamental elements of the spirit of modern capitalism—and not only of that but of all modern culture— viz. rational conduct on the basis of the idea of calling, was born—this is what this discussion has sought to demonstrate— from the spirit of Christian asceticism... for when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into workaday life and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the vast and mighty cosmos of the modern economic order, which is bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production. This cosmos today determines, with irresistible force, the lifestyles of all

After analyzing Weber's own aporias as well as Weber's reception on Marxist theory<sup>116</sup>, Habermas concludes that all of that evinces the exhaustion of the paradigm of the philosophy of consciousness, and the need for a new paradigm, namely, the paradigm of the theory of communication. "The critique of instrumental reason, which remains bound to the conditions of the philosophy of the subject, denounces as a defect something that it cannot explain in its defectiveness because it lacks a conceptual framework sufficiently flexible to capture the integrity of what is destroyed through instrumental reason". (Habermas, 1984: 389).

The paradigm of communication, in contrast, is able to put in its proper place the cognitive instrumental aspect of reason; it appears, in effect, as part of a more encompassing notion of communicative rationality. This is why, for Habermas, Mead's theory of communication might offer more powerful conceptual tools. "Mead knows as well as Piaget that instrumental actions are set within the cooperative interrelations of group members and presuppose regulated interactions. The functional circuit of instrumental action cannot be analyzed independent of structures of cooperation, and cooperation requires social control regulating group activities" (Habermas, 1987: 44).

From this new perspective, the primary phenomenon that needs to be explained is not the knowledge and mastery of an objective nature, but the intersubjectivity of possible understanding. As Habermas puts it,

The focus of investigation thereby shifts from cognitive-instrumental rationality to communicative rationality. And what is paradigmatic for the latter is not the relation of a solitary subject to something in the objective world that can be represented and manipulated, but the intersubjective relation that speaking and acting subjects take up when they come to an understanding with one another about something. In doing so, communicative actors move in the medium of a natural language, draw upon culturally transmitted interpretations, and relate simultaneously to something in the one objective world, something in their common social world, and something in each's own subjective world" (Habermas, 1984: 391-392).

The new paradigm of communication seeks to explain the basic human experience of "coming to an understanding". As Habermas notices, what is unique of such a process is that it presupposes the adjective "uncoerced", which implies that it is, simultaneously, a descriptive and a normative concept. "From the perspective of the participants, coming to an understanding is not an empirical event that causes *de facto* agreement; it is a process of mutually convincing one another in which the actions of participants are

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the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only of those directly concerned with economic acquisition. Perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized fuel is burnt" (Habermas, 1984: 247-248).

<sup>116</sup> Habermas, 1984, From Lukacs to Adorno: Rationalization as Reification. pp. 339-403. These aporias were analyzed in their main aspects in the previous chapter when the deficiencies of Marcuse's and Adorno's totalizing critique were presented.

coordinated on the basis of motivation by reasons. 'Coming to an understanding' refers to communication aimed at achieving a valid agreement" (Habermas, 1984: 392).

## II

The main premise of Mead's analysis of the human experience is that, in Mead's words, quoted by Habermas, "In man the functional differentiation through language gives an entirely different principle of organization which produces not only a different type of individual but also a different society" (Habermas, 1987: 4). Language, in this sense, has constitutive significance for the sociocultural form of human life.

Mead's task is to describe the structural aspects of symbolically mediated interaction. For Mead, an evolutionarily new form of communication is founded with the appearance of symbols that can be used with the same meaning. Mead "views the *conversation of gestures* found in developed vertebrate societies as the evolutionary starting point for a development of language that leads first to the *signal language* stage of symbolically mediated interaction and then to *propositionally differentiated speech*". (Habermas, 1987: 5)<sup>117</sup>.

Mead's account is relevant for Habermas because it helps him to develop a model of human cooperation in correspondence with the socio-evolution of human beings. In order to do so, however, Habermas will need to reformulate Mead's problem in the following terms: "how can ego bind alter by a speech act in such a way that alter's actions can be linked, without conflict, to ego's so as to constitute a cooperative interrelation?" (Habermas, 1987: 26).

Habermas, following Mead's remarks, indicates that the key for coordination is found in the addressees' positive or negative responses, however implicit, to the speaker's utterance. In this sense, the speaker's utterance "has an illocutionary *binding effect* only when it permits responses that are not simply arbitrary reactions to expressions of the speaker's will" (Habermas, 1987: 26). Any particular utterance allows for positive or negative responses to the criticizable validity claims that it, explicitly or implicitly, proposes. Any hearer of such an utterance can contest it "in three respects: depending on whether it is expanded to a statement of fact, an expression of feeling, or a command, they can call into question its truth, its sincerity, or its legitimacy" (Habermas, 1987: 26). These are, as mentioned before, the three basic modes available in any communicative action.

In the three basic modes of communicative the binding power depends on the internal relation of their validity claims to reasons. In Habermas' words,

Because, under the presuppositions of communicative action oriented to reaching understanding, validity claims cannot be rejected or accepted without reason, there is in alter's response to ego a basic *moment of insight*, and this takes the response out of the sphere of mere caprice,

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<sup>117</sup> Habermas will complement Mead's analysis by making explicit that symbolic interaction in social roles presupposes too a transition to normatively regulated actions in which behavioral schemes and dispositions are symbolically restructured (Habermas, 1987: 43). Habermas will use Wittgenstein's idea of 'following a rule'.



sheer conditioning, or adjustment—at least that is how participants themselves see it. So long as in their speech acts they raise claims to the validity of what is being uttered, they are proceeding in the expectation that they can achieve a rationally motivated agreement and can coordinate their plans and actions on this basis—without having to influence the empirical motives of the others through force or the prospect of reward, as is the case with simple impositions and the threat of consequences. (Habermas, 1987: 27).

Once the basic modes of communicative action have been differentiated, from an evolutionary perspective, the linguistic medium of reaching understanding is able to bind the will of actor who displays a communicative attitude. “Ego can exercise this illocutionary power on alter when both are in a position to orient their actions to validity claims” (Habermas, 1987: 27).

However, as noted before, the three basic modes of communicative action have not always been differentiated in the socio-evolutionary history of human beings.

This clear fact evinces the limitations of Mead’s analysis. He developed his concepts not from a phylogenetic perspective but merely from an ontogenetic view. Mead reconstructs his theory, as Habermas puts it, “only from the ontogenetic perspective of the growing child. He has to presuppose at the level of the parents’ socializing interaction the competences for speech and interaction that the child is to acquire” (Habermas, 1987: 43).

For this reason, Habermas recurs to Durkheim’s theory of the origins of religion and ritual in order to close the phylogenetic gap left by Mead’s approach.

Durkheim’s analysis of religion beliefs, which are seen as the expression of a collective consciousness deeply rooted in tribal history, explains the role of sacred symbols in the development of the transit from gesture-mediated to symbolically-normative-mediated interactions.

Religious symbolism is the archaic core of norm consciousness. Religion, in Durkheim’s view, can be partially used as the phylogenetic *explanans* to the emergence of the normative intersubjectivity both produced and presupposed by language.

Durkheim’s main interest as a social theorist was to explain the normative validity of institutions and values. In Habermas’ view, “only in his later work, however, which culminated in 1912 in his sociology of religion, did he succeed in unearthing the sacred roots of the moral authority of social norms” (Habermas, 1987: 49).

Insofar as for Durkheim the sacred constituted the foundations of morality, the nature of the sacred objects constitutes a key to explain the development of morality. As Habermas puts it, Durkheim found that

In the case of totemic animals or plants the symbolic character is evident anyhow: they are what they signify. Taboos prevent them from being treated as profane things, for example, from being consumed as food. All sacred objects—flags, emblems, decorations, tatoos, ornaments, figures, idols, or natural objects and events—share this symbolic status. They

figure as signs with conventional significations, and they all have the same semantic core: they represent the power of the sacred; they are "collective ideals that have fixed themselves on material objects." (Habermas, 1987: 51).

From the fact that religious symbols have the same meaning for the members of the same group, Habermas concludes, interpreting Durkheim's work, that they make possible a new type of subjectivity that goes "beyond the threshold of sheer collective contagion by feelings" (Habermas, 1987: 52).

An additional aspect of Durkheim's account refers to the deep connection that the force of religion to produce such a normative consensus has with ritual practices. As Habermas indicates, Durkheim

looks upon rites as the more primordial element of religion. Religious convictions are already formulated in a grammatical language; they are the common property of a religious community whose members assure themselves of their communality in cultic action. Religious belief is always the belief of a collectivity; it proceeds from a practice that it at the same time interprets" (Habermas, 1987: 52).

Any religious representation is, thus, a collective representation that expresses a collective reality. The rites "are a manner of acting which take rise in the midst of the assembled group and which are destined to excite, maintain or re-create certain mental states in these groups." (Habermas, 1987: 52).

But despite its explanatory power, Habermas thinks that Durkheim's approach is still too mentalistic and remains trapped within the limits of the philosophy of consciousness. It is not a coincidence, after all, that Durkheim uses the term "collective consciousness" as an attempt to represent society as a whole.

Nevertheless, for Habermas, it is already remarkable that religion is not presented as a primitive and inaccurate theory of reality that is supposed to present a whole picture of society and the world. In Habermas' words, "When ritual practice is seen as the more primordial phenomenon, religious symbolism can be understood as the medium of a special form of symbolically mediated interaction. Ritual practice serves to bring about communion in a communicative fashion. It can be seen in ritual actions that the sacred is the expression of a normative consensus regularly made actual" (Habermas, 1987: 52).

In Durkheim, Habermas finds a more dynamic view of religion. This dynamism is represented by the fact that Durkheim emphasizes the role that reunions, assemblies and meetings, that is, ritual practices, play for upholding and reaffirming the collective sentiments and ideas that configure the unity of society as well as the personality of its members.

The religious ceremonies of the ritual practices are not a case of depiction. Durkheim successfully shows that

They are rather the exemplary, repeated putting into effect of a consensus that is thereby renewed. It is a question of variations on one and the same theme, namely, the presence of the sacred, and this in turn is only the form in which the collectivity experiences "its unity and its personality' Because the basic normative agreement expressed in communicative action establishes and sustains the identity of the group, the fact of successful consensus is at the same time its essential content (Habermas, 1987: 53)

Mead's phylogenetic gap, thus, can be closed by Durkheim's explanation of the collective identity and normative consensus historically developed within the medium of religious symbols and interpreted in the semantics of the sacred. Normative consciousness, in this sense, presupposed the prior emergence of a religious consciousness, regenerated and maintained through ritual practice, that was able to secure social identity (Habermas, 1987: 53).

To be sure, for Habermas, Durkheim's mentalistic premises should be corrected using again Mead's theory of communication. This 'reversal' move will allow Habermas to formulate the idea of the linguistification of the sacred in order to explain more appropriately the process of sociocultural development that will produce the structures of linguistically mediated, normatively guided interactions (Habermas, 1987: 46).

The idea of the linguistification of the sacred expresses the thesis according to which once "the rationality potential ingrained in communicative action is released, the archaic core of the normative dissolves and gives way to the rationalization of worldviews, to the universalization of law and morality, and to an acceleration of processes of individuation" (Habermas, 1987: 46).

Such a linguistification is possible insofar as the strong connections between religious symbols and cultic practices are progressively weakened. In order to see this, nonetheless, we need to have a broader perspective that does not reduce religion entirely into cultic activities. For Habermas, "we can give a nontrivial meaning to the religious origins of institutions only if we take into account the religious world-interpretation as a connecting link between collective identity and institutions" (Habermas, 1987: 56).

For Habermas, in tribal societies the mythical worldviews

are still so tightly interwoven with the system of institutions, that they explicate it rather than subsequently legitimate it. These worldviews establish an analogical nexus between man, nature, and society which is represented as a totality in the basic concepts of mythical powers. Because these worldviews project a totality in which everything corresponds with everything else, they subjectively attach the collective identity of the group or the tribe to the cosmic order and integrate it with the system of social institutions (Habermas, 1987: 56).

In this sense, mythical worldviews “function as a kind of drive belt that transforms the basic religious consensus into the energy of social solidarity and passes it on to social institutions, thus giving them a moral authority. (Habermas, 1987: 56)

It is only with the arising of civilizations when religious worldviews, among others, have the function of legitimating political leadership. These more elaborate worldviews, at this more advanced stage of social development, contain a potential for grounding available for the justification of the political order or the institutional framework of society. “Thus they lend support to the moral authority or validity of basic norms” (Habermas, 1987: 56).

Social development entails, from this perspective, a change in the interrelation between normative consensus, worldviews and institutional system. Habermas aims to highlight how the channels of linguistic communication appear as a key element to explain that change. As he puts it,

Whereas ritual actions take place at a pregrammatical level, religious worldviews are connected with full-fledged communicative actions. The situational interpretations entering into everyday communication are fed by worldviews, however archaic; worldviews can, in turn, reproduce themselves only by way of these processes of reaching understanding. In virtue of this feedback relation they have the form of cultural knowledge, a knowledge that is based on both cognitive and socially integrative experiences (Habermas, 1987: 56).

Durkheim’s notion of “collective consciousness”, as we saw, aimed to represent a normative consensus established, secured and regenerated by the ritual practice of a community of believers that orient themselves to religious symbols. In tribal societies, “the intersubjective unity of the collective presents itself to them in concepts of the holy” (Habermas, 1987: 60). In this way, acknowledging such a role of religion is Durkheim’s strategy to explain the development of system of institutions and the structures of socialized individuals<sup>118</sup>.

For Habermas, however, there is an additional element that Durkheim overlooks. Habermas, taking into account Mead’s thoughts, thinks that it is possible to derive it from Durkheim’s own account<sup>119</sup>. This element is the mediating function played by linguistic communication. In Habermas’ words,

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<sup>118</sup> For Habermas, “Durkheim attempted to trace the normative validity of institutions back to a normative agreement tied to religious symbols; similarly, he traced the personal identity of individual group members back to the collective group identity expressed in those symbols” (Habermas, 1987: 61).

<sup>119</sup> According to Habermas, “The idea of a linguistification of the sacred is, to be sure, suggested by Durkheim, but it can be worked out only along the lines of a Meadean attempt at reconstruction” (Habermas, 1987: 91)

Normatively guided action presupposed grammatical speech as a medium of communication. The interrelation between collective consciousness, on the one side, and, on the other side, norms that can be applied to specific situations and personality structures that can be attributed to individuals, remains unclear so long as the structure of reaching understanding in language has not been cleared up (Habermas, 1987: 61).

In this sense, only in and through communicative action “can the energies of social solidarity attached to religious symbolism branch out and be imparted, in the form of moral authority, both to institutions and to persons” (Habermas, 1987: 61). This process is what Habermas calls the “linguistification of the sacred”. According to it, “the socially integrative and expressive functions that were at first fulfilled by ritual practice pass over to communicative action; the authority of the holy is gradually replaced by the authority of an achieved consensus. This means a freeing of communicative action from sacrally protected normative contexts” (Habermas, 1987: 77). The ritually secured, basic normative consensus is disenchanting and disempowered by way of a process of linguistification that releases the rationality potential encapsulated in communicative action. “The aura of rapture and terror that emanates from the sacred, 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” (Habermas, 1987: 77).

The basic religious consensus is dissolved, and the power of political authority loses its sacred supports. Now, “the unity of the collectivity can be established and maintained only as the unity of a communication community, that is to say, only by way of a consensus arrived at communicatively in the public sphere. (Habermas, 1987: 82).

In order to explain in more detail the different stages of the linguistification of the sacred Habermas also offers the following thought-experiment of a process that starts with a hypothetical initial state and ends with the conditions of a modern society. Habermas wants to illustrate and clarify what “the change to communicative action—at first narrowly circumscribed by institutions— meant for the process of hominization, and why the linguistic mediation of norm-guided action could have supplied the impetus for a rationalization of the lifeworld”. (Habermas, 1987: 86)<sup>120</sup>.

The first stage is an imaginary ‘Durkheimian zero point of society’. The sacred domain of this society does not need a linguistic mediation of ritual practice. In addition, its profane domain does not permit a linguistic mediation of cooperation (Habermas, 1987: 87). In this limit case of a totally integrated society “Religion serves only to interpret existing ritual practices in concepts of the holy; without a strictly cognitive content, it has not yet taken on the character of a *worldview*. It secures, in the sense of cultural determinism, the unity of the collectivity and largely represses conflicts that might arise from power relations and economic interests”. (Habermas, 1987: 87). The significance of language in this scenario is minimal. For Habermas, “In a seamlessly

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<sup>120</sup> According to Habermas, “The construction I am proposing is based, on the one hand, on the limit state that Durkheim assumes for a totally integrated society, and on the other hand, on the disintegrating effects that speech acts, by virtue of the structures we have analyzed, give rise to when the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld gets tied to communicative action” (Habermas, 1987: 86).

integrated society, the religious cult is something like a total institution that encompasses and normatively integrates all actions, whether in the family or in the area of social labor, to such a degree that every transgression of a norm has the significance of a sacrilege" (Habermas, 1987: 87). In addition, there is not a real separation between the structures of worldviews, institutions and individual personality. All of them are fused, via the religious symbols, in the collective consciousness constitutive of the identity of the group.

In a second stage of development we can observe a substantial change within the religious symbols. They, once can be connected up with communicative action, are transformed into an actual religious worldview.

At this stage, the normative and expressive contents of experience encapsulated within the sacred domain can be expressed in the form of propositions. In this sense, they become "cultural knowledge", and religion becomes a cultural tradition in need of being communicatively continued. In addition, two spheres are distinguished more clearly: a profane and a sacred domain. There is, nonetheless, a deep connection between these two spheres: the profane sphere is ultimately determined by the sacred. As a worldview, thus, religion claims a connection with the profane domains of instrumental action and social cooperation, and, with such a claim to totality, it constitutes its character as worldview. In Habermas' words,

To the extent that everyday communicative practice is given its proper weight, worldviews have to process the profane knowledge streaming into them, the flow of which they can less and less control; they have to bring this knowledge into a more or less consistent connection with moral-practical and expressive elements of knowledge. The structural aspects of the development of religious worldviews, which Durkheim and Weber sketched in complementary ways, can be explained by the fact that the validity basis of tradition shifts from ritual action over to communicative action. Convictions owe their authority less and less to the spellbinding power and the aura of the holy, and more and more to a consensus that is not merely reproduced but *achieved*, that is, brought about communicatively. (Habermas, 1987: 88-89)

In this sense, a new concept of validity that has a genuinely linguistic nature is developed within religion itself. The old institutions entirely grounded in the sacred become dependent upon the binding effect of consensus formation in language (Habermas, 1987: 89). "Then social integration no longer takes place directly via institutionalized values but by way of intersubjective recognition of validity claims raised in speech acts. Communicative actions also remain embedded in existing normative contexts, but speakers can explicitly refer to the latter in speech acts and take up different stances toward them" (Habermas, 1987: 89).

For Habermas, this entails two consequences in relation to the validity and the application of norms. First, the authority of the sacred that supports institutions is no longer valid by itself. As Habermas puts it, "Sacred authorization becomes dependent

instead on the justificatory accomplishments of religious worldviews (...) So long as moral-practical elements of knowledge are mixed up with expressive and cognitive-instrumental elements in the basic concepts of mythical and religious-metaphysical worldviews, the latter can serve to explain and justify institutional systems” (Habermas, 1987: 89). However, the possibility of dissension appears within the worldviews themselves as well as a result “of a growing need for specification of altered and increasingly complex action situations” (Habermas, 1987: 90).

Second, in regards to the application of norms, Habermas affirms that

To the degree that communicative actors themselves take over the application of norms, the latter can become simultaneously more abstract and more specialized. The *communicatively mediated* application of action norms depends on participants coming to shared situation definitions that refer simultaneously to the objective, the normative, and the subjective facets of the situation in question. Participants in interaction must *themselves* relate the relevant norms to the given situation and tailor them to special tasks (Habermas, 1987: 90)

The third and final stage of this process, namely, modern societies, is a natural development of the already started linguistification of the sacred. In modern societies the linguistification becomes more and more radical. “Norm-guided interaction changes its structure to the degree that functions of cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization pass from the domain of the sacred over to that of everyday communicative practice. In the process, the religious community that first made social cooperation possible is transformed into a communication community standing under the pressure to cooperate”. (Habermas, 1987: 92)

The outcome of this process, started by a change in religion itself is similar to the results of Weber’s approach. Religion seems to be dissolved in discourse ethics. “Inasmuch as the sacred domain was constitutive for society, neither science nor art can inherit the mantle of religion; only a morality, set communicatively aflow and developed into a discourse ethics, can replace the authority of the sacred *in this respect*. In this morality we find dissolved the archaic core of the normative, we see developed the rational meaning of normative validity”. (Habermas, 1987: 92).

In summary, the linguistification of the sacred refers to the increasing prevalence and institutionalization of structures of action oriented to mutual understanding. In this sense, cultural reproduction, social integration and socialization do not entirely depend on their sacred foundations. In contrast, they are guaranteed by linguistic communication<sup>121</sup>.

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<sup>121</sup> For Habermas, “the rationality inherent in speech can become empirically effective to the extent that communicative acts take over the steering of social interactions and fulfill functions of social reproduction, of maintaining social lifeworlds. The rationality potential in action oriented to mutual understanding can be released and translated into the rationalization of the lifeworlds of social groups to the extent that language fulfills functions of reaching understanding, coordinating actions, and socializing individuals; it thereby becomes a medium through which cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization take place” (Habermas, 1987: 86).

To the extent that communicative action takes on central societal functions, the medium of language gets burdened with tasks of producing substantial consensus. In other words, language no longer serves merely to *transmit* and actualize prelinguistically guaranteed agreements, but more and more to *bring about* rationally motivated agreements as well; it does so in moral-practical and in expressive domains of experience no less than in the specifically cognitive domain of dealing with an objectivated reality. (Habermas, 1987: 107)

For Habermas this process can be seen in the fact that “the continuation of traditions, the maintenance of legitimate orders, and the continuity of the life histories of individual persons become more and more dependent on outlooks that refer, when problematized, to yes/no positions on criticizable validity claims” (Habermas, 1987: 107).

Habermas, to be sure, does not accept Durkheim and Mead’s perspectives. In this sense, even the idea of the linguistification of the sacred needs to be complemented. Similarly to what he did with Weber, he corrects many of Mead’s and Durkheim’s ambiguities from their own premises. But there is a structural failure that Habermas finds and that force him to give a new step toward a different own account. This failure refers to the need of a system theory that complements the perspective of a society and its evolution given by communicative theory. In Habermas’ words,

The material reproduction of society— securing its physical maintenance both externally and internally—is blended out of the picture of society understood as a communicatively structured lifeworld. The neglect of economics, warfare, and the struggle for political power, the disregard for dynamics in favor of the logic of societal development are detrimental, above all, to Mead’s reflections on social evolution. Precisely insofar as social integration has more and more to be secured via communicatively achieved consensus, there is a pressing question as to the limits of the integrative capacity of action oriented to reaching understanding, the limits of the empirical efficacy of rational motives (Habermas, 1987: 110-111).

In addition, Habermas indicates three fictions that we have to assume when we identify society with the lifeworld. These fictions refer to three presuppositions that unavoidably we have to assume: i) the autonomy of the actor<sup>122</sup>, ii) the independence of culture

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<sup>122</sup> According to Habermas, “As members of a sociocultural lifeworld, actors satisfy in principle the presuppositions for responsible participation and communication. Responsibility means here that they can orient themselves to criticizable validity claims (...) If society consists only of relations entered into by subjects acting autonomously, we get the picture of a process of sociation that takes place with the will and consciousness of adult members” (Habermas, 1987: 149). But, as Habermas, is aware of: “Actors never have their action situations totally under control. They control neither the possibilities for mutual understanding and conflict, nor the consequences and side effects of their actions; they are, to borrow a phrase from W Schapp, “entangled” in their (hi)stories” (Habermas, 1987: 149).



and<sup>123</sup>, iii) the transparency of communication<sup>124</sup>. For Habermas, nonetheless, these three fictions lose power as soon as we accept that the integration of society can take place through other means besides communicative action. (Habermas, 1987: 150). In other words, society needs to be conceived from a dual perspective, as a lifeworld and as a system. As presented in the previous chapter, Habermas' debate with Luhmann led him to conclude that systems theory presented a good model to explain social evolution and social progress.

### III

Habermas' dual perspective of a two level concept of society that combines the aspects of lifeworld and system aims to account for, on the one hand, the mechanisms of coordinating action that bring together the action orientations of the participants in interactions, and, on the other, "the mechanisms "that stabilize nonintended interconnections of actions by way of functionally intermeshing action consequences" (Habermas, 1987: 117).

A human society is, in fact, constituted both by actions coordinated and integrated by consensus achieved communicatively and by actions coordinated and integrated by the result of a non-normative regulation of the behavior of individuals that goes beyond the control of the actors. The first case corresponds to social integration while the latter refers to systemic integration. They, according to Habermas, call "for a corresponding differentiation in the concept of society itself" (Habermas, 1987: 117)<sup>125</sup>, namely as a system and as a lifeworld.

From this dualist perspective Habermas will finally develop his own account of social evolution that explains, on the one hand, the process of rationalization of the lifeworld, and, on the other, the process of continual growing in complexity of societal systems (Habermas, 1987: 118).

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<sup>123</sup> In Habermas' words, "The concept of the lifeworld also suggests that culture is independent from external constraints. The imperative force of culture rests on the convictions of the actors who draw upon, test, and further develop transmitted schemes of interpretation, valuation, and expression. From the perspective of subjects who are acting communicatively, no alien authority can be hiding behind cultural symbolism. In the situation of action, the lifeworld forms a horizon behind which we cannot go; it is a totality with no reverse side. Accordingly, it is strictly meaningless for members of a sociocultural lifeworld to inquire whether the culture in whose light they deal with external nature, society, and internal nature is empirically dependent on anything else" (Habermas, 1987: 149).

<sup>124</sup> For Habermas, "Finally, participants in communication encounter one another in a horizon of unrestricted possibilities of mutual understanding. What is represented at a methodological level as hermeneutics' claim to universality, merely reflects the self-understanding of lay persons who are acting with an orientation to mutual understanding. They have to assume that they could, in principle, arrive at an understanding about anything and everything. As long as they maintain a performative attitude, communicative actors cannot reckon with a systematic distortion of their communication, that is, with resistances built into the linguistic structure itself and inconspicuously restricting the scope of communication" (Habermas, 1987: 149-150).

<sup>125</sup> For a recent analysis of Habermas' distinction between lifeworld and system, see "System and Lifeworld" by Joseph Heath in *Jürgen Habermas: Key Concepts*, ed. Barbara Fultner, 2011. Another level of distinction that Habermas' differentiation gives us is the following. The notion of the lifeworld gives us a society constituted "from the perspective of acting subjects as the lifeworld of a social group" (Habermas, 1987: 117); the notion of the system gives us a society conceived from the observer's perspective according to which society is a "system of actions such that each action has a functional significance according to its contribution to the maintenance of the system" (Habermas, 1987: 117).

In the following pages I will expound Habermas' notion of communicative action and lifeworld. Afterwards, I will expound Habermas' account of the socio evolution of human societies from the perspective both of a rationalization of the lifeworld and a growing in complexity of the system of society. Habermas' notion of lifeworld is presented as a complementary concept to communicative action.

As mentioned earlier, "Communicative action relies on a cooperative process of interpretation in which participants relate simultaneously to something in the objective, the social, and the subjective worlds, even when they thematically stress only one of the three components in their utterances" (Habermas, 1987: 120). The reference system of the three worlds appears, in this sense, as an interpretative framework within which speaker and hearer develop their common situation definitions. Therefore, when participants in communication reach an agreement concerning the validity of an utterance, and, thus, come to an understanding, they are intersubjectively recognizing the validity claim the speaker raised for such an utterance. But, according to Habermas, the whole reference system of the three worlds and, thus, the three possible validity claims operate at all times. In this sense, as Habermas puts it,

Consensus does not come about when, for example, a hearer accepts the truth of an assertion but at the same time doubts the sincerity of the speaker or the normative appropriateness of his utterance; the same holds for the case in which a speaker accepts the normative validity of a command but suspects the seriousness of the intent thereby expressed or has his doubts about the existential presuppositions of the action commanded (and thus about the possibility of carrying it out) (Habermas, 1987: 121).

Hence, communicative action implies that when a hearer accepts an explicit validity claim she is also acknowledging and accepting the other two implicitly raised validity claims. Otherwise, according to Habermas, she ought to make known her disagreement.

But the participants in interactions that can be described as communicative actions would never be able to accomplish such a consensus if they did not presuppose a profound background of pre-defined situations. Every communicative action, in this sense, operates under "suppositions of commonality in respect to the objective, social, and each's own subjective world. With this reference system, participants in communication suppose that the situation definitions forming the background to an actual utterance hold intersubjectively" (Habermas, 1987: 122).

With the concept of "lifeworld" Habermas aims to describe those background suppositions of commonality. The lifeworld "appears as a reservoir of taken-for-granted, of unshaken convictions that participants in communication draw upon in cooperative processes of interpretation" (Habermas, 1987: 124). Expressed from the perspective of the linguistic turn and the theory of communication that Habermas embraces, the lifeworld is, more precisely, the "culturally transmitted and linguistically organized stock of interpretive patterns (...) [as well as the] interconnections of meaning

holding between a given communicative utterance, the immediate context, and its connotative horizon of meanings” (Habermas, 1987: 124).

Insofar as the lifeworld supplies participants in communicative interactions with unproblematic, common, background convictions that are conceived as guaranteed, the participants always find the relations between the three worlds already preinterpreted. In our everyday situations we cannot find completely unfamiliar situations. In Habermas’ words,

Every new situation appears in a lifeworld composed of a cultural stock of knowledge that is "always already" familiar. Communicative actors can no more take up an extramundane position in relation to their lifeworld than they can in relation to language as the medium for the processes of reaching understanding through which their lifeworld maintains itself. In drawing upon a cultural tradition, they also continue it (Habermas, 1987: 125).

This configures the transcendental aspect of the lifeworld. Communicative actors cannot but move within its horizon. “The structures of the lifeworld lay down the forms of the intersubjectivity of possible understanding” (Habermas, 1987: 126).

It is noteworthy that Habermas’ notion of the lifeworld is ‘non-culturalistic’. This means that it is also constituted by backgrounds related to institutional orders and personality structures. The lifeworld, in this sense, comprises also individual skills and socially customary practices.

The multidimensionality of Habermas’ concept of the lifeworld corresponds to the multidimensionality of communicative actions. Communicative actions do not lead only to achievement understanding. In addition, for Habermas, when agents come to an understanding about something in the objective world they are, at the same time, participating in interactions through which they develop and reaffirm their memberships in social groups as well as their own identities. Communicative actions are not only processes of interpretation in which cultural knowledge is involved. They are, at the same time, processes of social integration and socialization.

The complementarity between communicative actions and the lifeworld is permanent. Communicative actions both use and renew the background context of the lifeworld in the three dimensions indicated. As Habermas puts it,

In coming to an understanding with one another about their situation, participants in interaction stand in a cultural tradition that they at once use and renew; in coordinating their actions by way of intersubjectively recognizing criticizable validity claims, they are at once relying on membership in social groups and strengthening the integration of those same groups; through participating in interactions with competently acting reference persons, the growing child internalizes the value orientations of

his social group and acquires generalized capacities for action (Habermas, 1987: 137).

Communicative action, thus, develops three different purposes. First, under the aspect of mutual understanding, it transmits and renews cultural knowledge. Second, under the aspect of coordinating action, it promotes social integration and the establishment of solidarity. And third, under the aspect of socialization, it serves the formation of personal identities. Accordingly, for Habermas, the lifeworld has three structural components: culture, society and personality.

Culture, for Habermas, is the “stock of knowledge from which participants in communication supply themselves with interpretations as they come to an understanding about something in the world” (Habermas, 1987: 138). The cultural reproduction of the lifeworld secures the continuity of tradition and the coherence of knowledge for daily practice. “Continuity and coherence are measured by the rationality of the knowledge accepted as valid” (Habermas, 1987: 138)<sup>126</sup>.

Society refers to “the legitimate orders through which participants regulate their memberships in social groups and thereby secure solidarity” (Habermas, 1987: 138). The social integration of a lifeworld guarantees the connection of the new situations with existing conditions in the social world. For Habermas, “it takes care of coordinating actions by way of legitimately regulated interpersonal relations and stabilizes the identity of groups to an extent sufficient for everyday practice” (Habermas, 1987: 140)<sup>127</sup>.

Finally, by personality Habermas understands “the competences that make a subject capable of speaking and acting, that put him in a position to take part in processes of reaching understanding and thereby to assert his own identity” (Habermas, 1987: 138). In this case the socialization of the members of a lifeworld “secures for succeeding generations the acquisition of generalized competences for action and sees to it that individual life histories are in harmony with collective forms of life”(Habermas, 1987, 141)<sup>128</sup>.

The three components of the lifeworld are deeply interwoven. In fact, the reproduction of each one of them also contributes to the reproduction of the others. Culture, on the one hand, provides legitimations for existing institutions and, on the other, socialization patterns for the acquisition of competences for action. Society’s

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<sup>126</sup> According to Habermas, “This can be seen in disturbances of cultural reproduction that get manifested in a loss of meaning and lead to corresponding legitimation and orientation crises. In such cases, the actors' cultural stock of knowledge can no longer cover the need for mutual understanding that arises with new situations. The interpretive schemes accepted as valid fail, and the resource “meaning” becomes scarce” (Habermas 1987: 140).

<sup>127</sup> For Habermas, “This can be seen in disturbances of social integration, which manifest themselves in anomie and corresponding conflicts. In such cases, actors can no longer cover the need for coordination that arises with new situations from the inventory of legitimate orders. Legitimately regulated social memberships are no longer sufficient, and the resource “social solidarity” becomes scarce (Habermas, 1987: 140-141).

<sup>128</sup> As Habermas sees it, “This can be seen in disturbances of the socialization process, which are manifested in psychopathologies and corresponding phenomena of alienation. In such cases, actors' competences do not suffice to maintain the intersubjectivity of commonly defined action situations. The personality system can preserve its identity only by means of defensive strategies that are detrimental to participating in social interaction on a realistic basis, so that the resource “ego strength” becomes scarce” (Habermas, 1987: 141).

contribution to the other components consists, on the one hand, “in legitimately regulated social memberships of individuals and, on the other, in moral duties or obligations” (Habermas, 1987: 141)<sup>129</sup>. Finally, personality’s contribution “to maintaining the other two components consists, on the one hand, in interpretive accomplishments and, on the other, in motivations for actions that conform to norms (see Figure 21)”. (Habermas, 1987: 141).

To be sure the relations of the components of the lifeworld and the range of the communicative actions have evolved. In modern societies they are not anymore what they used to be in archaic or traditional ones.

Habermas uses the concept of the lifeworld in order to reformulate Mead’s and Durkheim’s idea of the linguistification of the sacred and, thus, offer his own explanation of the evolutionary process of human societies.

Once the concept of the lifeworld is posited, such an evolution can be redefined as a process of differentiation of the structural components of the lifeworld. The result of this process is that every time more and more contexts of interaction “come under conditions of rationally motivated mutual understanding, that is, of consensus formation that rests in the end on the authority of the better argument” (Habermas, 1987: 145). This process, according to Habermas, includes three levels.

The first level refers to a structural differentiation of the components of the lifeworld as such. At this level culture, society and personality develop their own logics and rules<sup>130</sup>. As a result, cultural traditions can continuously be revised, legitimate orders are such in virtue of the formal procedures for creation and justification of norms, and, an abstract ego-identity is defined mainly through self-steering. In addition, “the yes/no decisions that carry everyday communicative practice no longer go back to an ascribed normative consensus, but issue from the cooperative interpretation processes of participants themselves. Thus they signal a release of the rationality potential inherent in communicative action” (Habermas, 1987: 146).

The second level refers to a differentiation, within the three components of the lifeworld, of form and content. Cultural traditions lose their strong link to the concrete contents with which they needed to be connected in mythical worldviews. “They shrink to formal elements such as world-concepts, communication presuppositions, argumentation procedures, abstract basic values, and the like (Habermas, 1987: 146). Similarly, in the case of society, in modern societies, principles and procedures of legal order and morality are less dependent on concrete forms of life. Finally, for personality, “the cognitive structures developed in the socialization process are increasingly detached from the content of cultural knowledge with which they were at first integrated in “concrete thinking.” The objects in connection with which formal competences can be exercised become increasingly variable” (Habermas, 1987: 146).

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<sup>129</sup> According to Habermas, “the central stock of cultural values institutionalized in legitimate orders is incorporated into a normative reality that is, if not criticism- proof, at least resistant to criticism and to this extent beyond the reach of continuous testing by action oriented to reaching understanding” (Habermas, 1987: 141).

<sup>130</sup> As Habermas puts it, “In the relation of culture to society, structural differentiation is to be found in the gradual uncoupling of the institutional system from worldviews; in the relation of personality to society, it is evinced in the extension of the scope of contingency for establishing interpersonal relationships; and in the relation of culture to personality, it is manifested in the fact that the renewal of traditions depends more and more on individuals’ readiness to criticize and their ability to innovate” (Habermas, 1987: 146).

The third level refers to the growing reflexivity of symbolic reproduction. This reflexivity appears as a functional specification of all the reproduction processes of the lifeworld. Cultural transmission, social integration and socialization, or child rearing, is specialized and professionalized. In modern societies we have a professional treatment of the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld; something that, at the same time, makes possible its reflective refraction.

However, as indicated before, an account of the evolution of the lifeworld cannot be offered without taking into account the perspective of society as a system. For Habermas, briefly put, the evolution of the lifeworld has also been determined by the growing complexity of the subsystems of a society.

From the system perspective, the emergence of new system mechanisms and corresponding levels of complexity determines the stages of social evolution (tribal societies, traditional societies and modern societies) (Habermas, 1987: 154).

As mentioned before, the actions of the agents of a society are coordinated “not only through processes of reaching understanding, but also through functional interconnections that are not intended by them and are usually not even perceived within the horizon of everyday practice” (Habermas, 1987: 150). In the case of capitalist societies the market is the most important example of a norm-free regulation of interactions. The market, in Habermas’ words, “is one of those systemic mechanisms that stabilize nonintended interconnections of action by way of functionally intermeshing action consequences” (Habermas, 1987: 150)<sup>131</sup>.

From this dual perspective, society is an “entity that, in the course of social evolution, gets differentiated both as a system and as a lifeworld. Systemic evolution is measured by the increase in a society’s steering capacity, whereas the state of development of a symbolically structured lifeworld is indicated by the separation of culture, society, and personality” (Habermas, 1987: 152). In addition, those two levels of development entailed a third one. The rationalization of the lifeworld and the increment in complexity of the system entail also their mutual and reciprocal differentiation from one another. This third level of development is called by Habermas ‘uncoupling’.

Habermas’ general idea of the process of uncoupling of the lifeworld and the system is the following: “the lifeworld, which is at first coextensive with a scarcely differentiated social system, gets cut down more and more to one subsystem among others. In the process, system mechanisms get further and further detached from the social structures through which social integration takes place” (Habermas, 1987: 154).

Thus, any fair account of the evolution of human society needs to be able to provide an explanation of those three levels, namely, the rationalization of the lifeworld, the increase in complexity of the systems of society, and their corresponding uncoupling.

Habermas, based on that idea, tries to provide such an account and, by doing it, he offers yet another classification of the evolution of human societies from tribal ones to modern ones; all of this from a three level perspective: as sociocultural lifeworlds, as self-maintaining systems, and as societies ‘suffering’ the consequences of their

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<sup>131</sup> As mentioned before, Habermas analyzes Parson’s work in order to solve the problem of connecting “in a satisfactory way the two conceptual strategies indicated by the notions of ‘system’ and ‘lifeworld’” (Habermas, 1987: 151).

uncoupling. In what follows, I will expound Habermas' account insofar as it serves us to finally obtain Habermas' remarks about the role of religion in this process. I will focus, in addition, on a concrete effect that the tendency toward an uncoupling of system and lifeworld produces. This effect is the production of certain "forms of mutual understanding".

For this reason, parallel to the presentation of Habermas' account of social evolution from tribal to modern societies I will also expound his remarks on a systematic history of the forms of understanding. Habermas' notion of a "form of understanding" is, according to him, analogous to Lukacs' idea of "forms of objectivity". As Habermas sees it, for Lukacs, forms of objectivity are "principles that, through the societal totality, preform the encounters of individuals with objective nature, normative reality, and their own subjective nature" (Habermas, 1987: 187). Similarly, for Habermas, but now operating under the premises of the new paradigm of communication, there seem to exist some formal properties that condition the ways in which an intersubjective experience might emerge. In this sense,

A form of mutual understanding represents a compromise between the general structures of communicative action and reproductive constraints unavailable as themes within a given lifeworld. Historically variable forms of understanding are, as it were, the sectional planes that result when systemic constraints of material reproduction inconspicuously intervene in the forms of social integration and thereby mediatize the lifeworld (Habermas, 1987: 187).

For Habermas, thus, just like it is possible to conceive a history of the evolution of the rationalization of the lifeworld and the growing in complexity of the system of society, it is also possible to conceive a history of the evolution of their uncoupling. One of the aspects of this latter historical account that can be rescued refers to the effects that such uncoupling ends up producing in the lifeworld. This is the systematic history of forms of mutual understanding.

### *Archaic or Tribal Societies.*

From the perspective of the lifeworld, archaic societies constitute the most primitive stage of social evolution. In these societies, according to Habermas, the notion of the lifeworld seems to find its strongest empirical foothold (Habermas, 1987: 156). In these societies "structures of linguistically mediated, normatively guided interaction immediately constitute the supporting social structures"<sup>132</sup>. (Habermas, 1987: 156).

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<sup>132</sup> Habermas compares these societies with the one from his thought experiment using Durkheim's thoughts. According to him, "The small, prestate societies, which have been studied above all by English social anthropologists in Africa, Southeast Asia, and Australia, differ from Durkheim's ideal type of an almost homogeneous, and nearly ultrastable, primitive society by their comparatively greater complexity and their surprising social dynamism. Residual tribal societies do, however, resemble Durkheim's picture of segmental societies with a pronounced collective consciousness". (Habermas, 1987: 156).

Archaic societies can well be represented as an omnipresent lifeworld that reproduces itself as a whole with every interaction that occurs within it.

Habermas is aware that the sketch of a “collectively shared, homogeneous lifeworld is certainly an idealization, but archaic societies more or less approximate this ideal type by virtue of the kinship structures of society and the mythical structures of consciousness” (Habermas, 1987: 157).

In these societies the kinship system is composed of families ordered according to relations of legitimate descent (Habermas, 1987: 157). This system represents an all-encompassing institution that defines social memberships. Every possible differentiation can only be developed within the kinship dimensions of sex, generation, and descent (Habermas, 1987: 157).

The kinship system is sustained by the myths of the community<sup>133</sup>. The members of the tribe are always a cultic community. Insofar as the social norms of tribal societies cannot be guaranteed by the state’s power of sanction, social control must be culturally anchored and mythically grounded. “Sacrilege” is the name given to the violations of the kinship system’s central norms. “The place of the missing external sanctions is taken by a mythical worldview that immobilizes the potential of speech for negation and innovation, at least in the domain of the sacred” (Habermas, 1987: 159).

As we know, mythical interpretive systems “assimilate external and internal nature to the social order, natural phenomena to interpersonal relations, events to communicative utterances” (Habermas, 1987: 158). Mythical worldviews do not distinguish between the objective, social, and subjective words. The sociocultural lifeworld as a whole becomes part of a single world that takes on an objective form. Furthermore, mythical worldviews “do not even draw a clear line between interpretations and the interpreted reality (...) There is no concept of the nonempirical validity that we ascribe to symbolic expressions. Concepts of validity such as morality and truth are merged with empirical concepts such as causality and health” (Habermas, 1987: 159).

From this perspective, insofar as every possible action orientation is predetermined by myths, there cannot be a distinction between actions oriented to mutual understanding and actions oriented to success. Similarly, a “participant’s “no” cannot yet signify the critical rejection of a validity claim. Myth binds the critical potential of communicative action, stops up, so to speak, the source of inner contingencies springing from communication itself” (Habermas, 1987: 159)<sup>134</sup>.

Habermas’ systemic analysis of archaic societies is, as can be expected, brief. The complexity of these societies is very low. However, despite its simplicity, small family groups were able to increase their complexity “either by becoming internally differentiated or by combining themselves into larger social units” (Habermas, 1987: 161). This is why Habermas’ systemic analysis of these societies consists in indicating

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<sup>133</sup> To be sure, for Habermas, this constitutes a rather flexible limitation. As he puts it, “In the framework of mythical worldviews, there is no categorical distinction between society and its natural surroundings. Thus there can be no social groups so alien that they could not connect up with a given kinship system” (Habermas, 1987: 158).

<sup>134</sup> Habermas, nonetheless, makes the following warning about the homogeneity of these societies. In his words, “This pronounced homogeneity of the lifeworld should not blind us to the fact that the social structure of tribal societies already provides a relatively large scope for differentiation”. (Habermas, 1987: 159).



the mechanisms through which they were able to “expand their complexity within the range for structural variation set by kinship relations” (Habermas, 1987: 160).

These mechanisms are found, according to Habermas, in the dimensions constituted by power and exchange relations. As he puts it, “Apparently, the complexity of these social systems adjusts to changing demographic, ecological, and social conditions in the environments; the processes of differentiation and dedifferentiation take place by way of both segmental differentiation and stratification” (Habermas, 1987: 163).

Segmental differentiation takes place via exchange relations. One of the concrete examples that Habermas uses to illustrate this idea refers to the processes of exchange of women, normed by rules of marriage (Habermas, 1987: 161). This is not, nevertheless, the only possible case of exchange<sup>135</sup>.

Broadly speaking, then, segmental differentiation refers to the processes through which more and more specialized subgroups emerged within given social groups. It also includes the processes where similar social units join together in larger units with the same structure. In this case, hence, “The complexity of the society is increased by “by way of horizontally stringing together similarly structured groups” (Habermas, 1987: 161).

Stratification, in contrast, refers to power relations. In tribal societies, power is established by generalized prestige, which, at the same time, is grounded genealogically via divine origins or descent. Stratification ensures that the decision of a part, that is someone authorized to issue directions, is attributable to the whole. “In stratified tribal societies the members of the more distinguished, older descent groups lay claim to positions of leadership. A status system based on prestige allows for integrating tribes of considerable size” (Habermas, 1987: 162).

Clearly, in these societies an uncoupling between the lifeworld and the system does not yet take place. The system-differentiating strength of the mechanisms of exchange and power formation is entirely dependent on the kinship relations and the mythical worldviews<sup>136</sup>. For this reason, archaic societies present a complete interweaving of systemic and social integration.

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<sup>135</sup> According to Habermas, “With respect to the establishment of lasting reciprocities between initially alien groups, the ritual exchange of valuables is a functional equivalent for the exchange of women. In his classical study of the circulation exchange of valuable but not really useful gifts in the archipelago of eastern New Guinea, Malinowski showed how the normatively required exchange of two sorts of symbolic objects (bracelets and necklaces not used as ornaments) brought about partnerships (in pairs) among several thousand members of tribes, scattered over a very large area. Like the potlatch observed by Boas among the Kwakiutl and the system of indebtedness observed by Leach among the Kachin, this exchange of valuables can be seen as an example of an exchange mechanism that transforms bellicose relations into reciprocal obligations. At any rate, the ritual exchange of valuable objects and the symbolic consumption of useful objects serve less to accumulate wealth than to foster sociation, that is, to stabilize friendly relations with the social environment and to incorporate foreign elements into their own system” (Habermas, 1987: 161).

<sup>136</sup> As Habermas puts it, “Systemic mechanisms have not yet become detached from institutions effective for social integration. Thus, an important part of the circulation of economic goods is dependent on kinship relations; services circulate primarily in the noneconomic form of normatively required, reciprocal measures of assistance (...) In the nonmonetarized economic activities of archaic societies, the mechanism of exchange has so little detached itself from normative contexts that a clear separation between economic and noneconomic values is hardly possible. Only where the mechanism of exchange is at the same time an integral element of the kinship system can it develop its full, complexity-increasing dynamics” (Habermas, 1987: 163). Similarly, as mentioned before, power relations are entirely grounded on mythical perspectives.

In this sense, the mythical understanding of the world is not affected by any form of uncoupling. Myths and rituals flow freely, but they do not allow the differentiation of the structural elements of the lifeworld nor the usage of all the potentiality of communicative action. All those elements are, nevertheless, captured by rituals and myths.

The ritual practices of tribal societies contain assertoric, normative and expressive elements. As Habermas puts it,

the element of normatively regulated action is noticeable in the quality of obligation that emanates from the ritually conjured, at once attracting and terrifying, powers; the element of expressive action is especially clear in the standardized expressions of feeling in ritual ceremonies; finally an assertoric aspect is also present inasmuch as ritual practice serves to represent and reproduce exemplary events or mythically narrated original scenes (Habermas, 1987: 192-193).

Such a capture is possible in virtue of the shielding effect that myths have on rituals. In Habermas' words,

mythical thought shields ritual practice from the tendencies toward decomposition that appear at the level of language (with the differentiation between action oriented to mutual understanding and to success, and the transformation of adaptive behavior into purposive activity). Myth holds the same aspects together on the plane of interpretation that are fused together in ritual on the plane of practice. An interpretation of the world that confuses internal relations of meaning with external relations among things, validity with empirical efficacy, can protect ritual practice against rips in the fabric woven from communicative and purposive activity indistinguishably (Habermas, 1987: 193).

To be sure, this does not mean that profane contexts of cooperation with goal-oriented actions do not exist. The areas of production and warfare demand the development of cooperation and a division of labor under rule of action oriented to success.

Nevertheless, everyday practice is entirely connected with myths and their narrative accounts of the orders of the world and society. In addition, the "know-how" that appeared in the aforementioned domains could not yet take the form of explicit knowledge. The mythical system of interpretation secured via rituals did not allow for any differentiation between profane and sacred domains. In the long run, no differentiation is possible between the claims to truth, truthfulness and rightness<sup>137</sup>.

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<sup>137</sup> For Habermas this totality "was first broken up in a methodical fashion when, with the advent of writing, a stratum of literati arose who learned to produce and process texts." (Habermas, 1987: 193)

As mentioned before, the uncoupling of the lifeworld and the systems is a result of their own internal evolution. Lifeworld and system gets differentiated as, on the one hand, the lifeworld's rationality is developed and, on the other, the complexity of the system increasingly grows. Each one of those processes, that is, the rationalization of the lifeworld and the increment of complexity of the systems, depends on the other. On the one hand, increases in complexity required the structural differentiation of the lifeworld. On the other, the structures of the lifeworld themselves were affected by the increasing of system complexity<sup>138</sup>.

Thus, because the lifeworld is being rationalized the systems are able to grow in complexity. Likewise, the increases in complexity of the systems pave the way to the rationalization of the lifeworld. Finally, as the lifeworld was becoming rational and the systems were growing in complexity both of them got differentiated from each other. This multidimensional process begins with the arising of civilizations.

### *Traditional Societies. Civilizations*

The development of political power and stratification in the shape of a state is central to understand the transition from archaic to traditional societies or civilizations. In Habermas' words,

With the formation of genuinely political power that no longer derives its authority from the prestige of leading descent groups, but from disposition over judicial means of sanction, the power mechanism detaches itself from kinship structures. Organizational complexity constituted at the level of political domination becomes the crystallizing nucleus of a new institution: the state. (Habermas, 1987: 165)<sup>139</sup>.

In this developed stage of political domination the kinship system does not determine anymore the whole process of social stratification. Politically guaranteed social classes emerged which are not completely grounded on birth.

Moreover, the state is now the organization that embodies the capacity for action of the community as a whole. However, unlike in the tribal societies, this form of political

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<sup>138</sup> For Habermas, "the more complex social systems become, the more provincial lifeworlds become. In a differentiated social system the lifeworld seems to shrink to a subsystem" (Habermas, 1987: 173).

<sup>139</sup> Habermas' account of social evolution is based on the fact that four mechanisms are responsible for new levels of differentiation that, in addition, entail changes in the institutional basis of societies. These four mechanisms are, in their order of historical appearance, i) Segmentary Differentiation, ii) Stratification, iii) State Organizations, and iv) Steering Media. The mechanisms of i) Segmentary Differentiation and iv) Steering Media operate through exchange relations. The mechanisms of ii) Stratification and iii) State Organizations operate through power relations. The mechanisms of i) Segmentary Differentiation and ii) Stratification remain tied to pre-given kinship structures. The mechanisms iii) State Organizations and iv) Steering Media cause the emergence of new social structures. For Habermas, "As each mechanism takes the lead in evolution, it characterizes a higher level of interaction at which the preceding mechanisms are at once downgraded, sublated, and refunctionalized" (Habermas, 1987: 165). See figure 24 and 25 in *TCA vol. 2*, pp. 166-167.

order needs to be legitimated. And this function is fulfilled by religion. The order guaranteed by the state “can be brought into the lifeworld only at the cost of an illusory interpretation of class society, that is, through religious worldviews taking on ideological functions” (Habermas, 1987: 172-173).

In societies organized around a state, a new need for legitimation, hitherto unknown, appears. This need, as mentioned before, was unthinkable in tribal societies. “In societies organized through kinship, the institutional system is anchored ritually, that is, in a practice that is interpreted by mythical narratives and that stabilizes its normative validity all by itself” (Habermas, 1987: 188). In contrast, the authority of the laws of the state is guaranteed by the ruler’s power of sanction, which, cannot be based entirely on pure repression. The power of sanction itself needs to be based on a legal order. For this reason, in Habermas’ words,

(...) laws need to be intersubjectively recognized by citizens; they have to be legitimated as right and proper. This leaves culture with the task of supplying reasons why an existing political order deserves to be recognized. Whereas mythical narratives interpret and make comprehensible a ritual practice of which they themselves are part, religious and metaphysical worldviews of prophetic origin have the form of doctrines that can be worked up intellectually and that explain and justify an existing political order in terms of the world-order they explicate” (Habermas, 1987: 188).

Habermas notes that, compared to the inequality of strongly hierarchized tribal societies, the social inequality that emerges with civilizations can be considered deeper. Although social mobilization is extended once social labor is not rigidly dependent on kinship relations, the emergence of a stratified class society also entails, from the perspective of social integration, “an increase in social inequality, wholesale economic exploitation, and the juridically cloaked repression of dependent classes” (Habermas, 1987: 188).

Within the context of this extended inequality Habermas finds the ideological functions of legitimation played by religious worldviews. Religion, in this sense, appears as a force that contributed to keep latent as far as possible “the functions of exploitation and repression fulfilled by rulers and ruling classes in the systemic nexus of material”. (Habermas, 1987: 188).

When Habermas tries to offer an explanation of the effectiveness of religion’s ideological functions of legitimation, he reveals that he shares Weber’s idea according to which all the world religions had a same topic, namely, the explanation of the unequal distribution of earthly goods (Habermas, 1987: 188). In Habermas’ words,

Theocentric worldviews put forward theodicies so as to reinterpret the need for a religious explanation of suffering perceived as unjust into an individual need for salvation, and thus to satisfy it. Cosmocentric

worldviews offered equivalent solutions to the same problem. What is common to religious and metaphysical worldviews is a more or less clearly marked, dichotomous structure that makes it possible to relate the sociocultural world to a world behind it. The world behind the visible world of this life, behind the world of appearances, represents a fundamental order; when it is possible to explain the orders of a stratified class society as homologous to that world-order, worldviews of this kind can take on ideological functions. The world religions pervaded both popular and high cultures; they owed their overwhelming efficacy to the fact that with the same set of assertions and promises they could satisfy the need for justification at very different levels of moral consciousness simultaneously (Habermas, 1987: 188-189).

In addition, Habermas clarifies that this could only have been achieved because religious worldviews immunized cultural traditions against any kind of dissonant experiences. This immunization was achieved by the systemic restrictions placed on communication by religion. As Habermas puts it,

Although religious-metaphysical worldviews exerted a strong attraction on intellectual strata; although they provoked the hermeneutic efforts of many generations of teachers, theologians, educated persons, preachers, mandarins, bureaucrats, citizens, and the like; although they were reshaped by argumentation, given a dogmatic form, systematized and rationalized in terms of their own motifs, the basic religious and metaphysical concepts lay at a level of undifferentiated validity claims where the rationality potential of speech remains more tightly bound than in the profane practice of everyday life, which had not been worked through intellectually” (Habermas, 1987: 189).

Religion, in this sense, fused together the ontic, normative and expressive aspects of validity claims; granted, not in the same way that myths did it. However, for Habermas, the basic concept of religious and metaphysical worldviews “proved to be resistant to every attempt to separate off the aspects of the true, the good, and the perfect” (Habermas, 1987: 194). In addition, religious worldviews demanded a corresponding belief attitude that was fixed and rooted culturally. These two elements rendered powerless any possible objections against injustice and inequality that could arise from the profane spheres of everyday communication. Religious concepts were, in this sense, immunized; and with them, the whole structure of power that they justified. For Habermas, in this sense, “within the domain of the sacred, communication remained systematically restricted due to the lack of differentiation between spheres of validity, that is, as a result of the formal conditions of possible understanding”(Habermas, 1987: 189). The traditional foundations of these societies, placed on the sacred domain, simply could not be put in risk.

From Habermas' perspective, a religious form of understanding limits possibilities of communication insofar as it does not "differentiate sufficiently among the various validity claims".

However, Habermas recognizes that, unlike myth, the dichotomous structure of religious worldview leaves room for a "demythologized this world" and a disenchanting everyday practice. In this sense, as he puts it, "In the realm of profane action, structures take shape that break up the holistic concept of validity". (Habermas, 1987: 194) Thus, at this stage we already have a differentiation between orientations to success and to mutual understanding. In addition, agents can see the difference between the different basic pragmatic attitudes. In Habermas' words,

A polity with a state and conventional legal institutions has to rely on obedience to the law, that is, on a norm-conforming attitude toward legitimate order. The citizens of the state must be able to distinguish this attitude—in everyday actions as well—from an objectivating attitude toward external nature and an expressive attitude vis-a-vis their own inner nature. At this stage, communicative action can free itself from particularistic contexts, but it stays in the space marked out by solid traditional norms (Habermas, 1987: 194).

Thus, in the lifeworld of these societies we can see a differentiation of specific validity claims. Also, purposive activity attains a higher level of rationality. In Habermas' view, "When truth claims can be isolated, it becomes possible to see the internal connection between the efficiency of action oriented to success and the truth of empirical statements, and to make sure of technical know-how" (Habermas, 1987: 195). Only in this way practical professional knowledge can assume an objective form and be transmitted via teaching. As a result, purposive activities are no longer attached to age and sex roles. However, all of this is confined only at the profane realm. As we saw, society as a whole is covered by a religious worldview that these differentiations cannot reach.

### *Modern Societies*

From the perspective of their lifeworld, early modern societies are characterized by the distinction of the autonomy of one validity claim, namely, the one related to science. Science, in these societies, is institutionalized.

The other validity claims, nonetheless, remain tied to religious worldviews. As Habermas puts it,

An autonomous art retains its aura and the enjoyment of art its contemplative character; both features derive from its cultic origins. An ethics of conviction remains tied to the context of religious traditions, however subjectivized; postconventional legal representations are still

coupled with truth claims in rational natural law and form the nucleus of what Robert Bellah has called "civil religion." (Habermas, 1987: 195).

Art, morality and law are not yet totally "disengaged from the sacred domain so long as the internal development of each does not proceed unambiguously under precisely one specific aspect of validity" (Habermas, 1987:195).

But even religion begins a process of change and development. For Habermas, "the forms of modern religiosity give up basic dogmatic claims. They destroy the metaphysical-religious "world beyond" and no longer dichotomously contrast this profane world to Transcendence, or the world of appearances to the reality of an underlying **Essence**" (Habermas, 1987: 195).

In everyday action, or profane realms, the differentiation of validity claims begins to flow unrestrictedly. Inner logics and inner principles of argumentation start to be developed. Thus, besides the differentiation of the basic pragmatic attitudes, modern agents can conceive of different levels of action and argumentation. The emergence of positive law and posttraditional legal institutions presupposes

that participants are in a position to shift from naively performing actions to reflectively engaging in argumentation. To the extent that the hypothetical discussion of normative validity claims is institutionalized, the critical potential of speech can be brought to bear on existing institutions. Legitimate orders still appear to communicatively acting subjects as something normative, but this normativity has a different quality insofar as institutions are no longer legitimated per se through religious and metaphysical worldviews (Habermas, 1987: 195-196).

In addition, purposive activity becomes more independent from normative contexts. In virtue of the legal institutionalization of the monetary medium, action oriented to success loses its link with norms of action. Now it can be steered entirely by egocentric calculations of utility and does not need to be connected to actions oriented by mutual understanding. As a result,

This strategic action, which is disengaged from the mechanism of reaching understanding and calls for an objectivating attitude even in regard to interpersonal relations, is promoted to the model for methodically dealing with a scientifically objectivated nature. In the instrumental sphere, purposive activity gets free of normative restrictions to the extent that it becomes linked to flows of information from the scientific system (Habermas, 1987: 196).

Thus, from a system perspective, in modern societies system differentiations is deepened. As just presented, in traditional societies the state concentrated the society's capacity for action. By contrast, according to Habermas, "modern societies do without the accumulation of steering functions within a single organization. Functions relevant to society as a whole are distributed among different subsystems. With an administration, military, and judiciary, the state specializes in attaining collective goals via binding decisions. Other functions are depoliticized and given over to nongovernmental subsystems" (Habermas, 1987: 171).

Therefore, in modern societies the state goes through a profound reorganization. This reorganization is related to the deep development of the mechanism of exchange, namely, money. Indeed, "In the framework of societies organized around a state, markets for goods arise that are steered by symbolically generalized relations of exchange, that is, by the medium of money. However, this medium has a structure-forming effect for the social system as a whole only when the economy is separated off from the political order" (Habermas, 1987: 165). In Habermas' view this is exactly what happened in Europe during the early modern period. With the capitalist economy a subsystem differentiated out via the money medium aroused; "a subsystem that in turn necessitated a reorganization of the state. In the complementary relationship between the subsystems of the market economy and modern administration, the mechanism of steering media—which Parsons referred to as symbolically generalized media of communication—finds its appropriate social structure" (Habermas, 1987: 165).

The capitalist economic system implies a whole new level of system differentiations. It makes possible the foundation of a subsystem – the steering medium of money- that does not depend on normative contexts. "The capitalist economy can no longer be understood as an institutional order in the sense of the traditional state; it is the medium of exchange that is institutionalized, while the subsystem differentiated out via this medium is, as a whole, a block of more or less norm-free sociality" (Habermas, 1987: 171).

Money, as a special exchange mechanism transforms use values into exchange values. The natural economic exchange of goods becomes commerce of commodities. To be sure, traditional societies already had internal and external markets. It "is only with capitalism, however, that we have an economic system such that both the internal commerce among business enterprises and the interchange with noneconomic environments, private households, and the state are carried out through monetary channels" (Habermas, 1987: 172).

In this sense, capitalist enterprise, and, thus, modern administration appear as systematically independent units within norm-free subsystems (Habermas, 1987: 172). The link to the lifeworld is no longer necessary. "These systemic interconnections, detached from normative contexts and rendered independent as subsystems, challenge the assimilative powers of an all-encompassing lifeworld" (Habermas, 1987: 173). We have, thus, a deep and radical uncoupling of system and lifeworld that, according to Habermas, is experienced in modern society as a particular type of objectification. As he puts it, "the social system definitively bursts out of the horizon of the lifeworld, escapes from the intuitive knowledge of everyday communicative practice, and is henceforth accessible only to the counterintuitive knowledge of the social sciences developing since the eighteenth century" (Habermas, 1987: 173).



Once this process continues until reaching our contemporary situation, the consequences regarding the role of religion in this last stage of social evolution do not seem clear. Habermas, nevertheless, affirms that,

with the development of modern societies, the sacred domain has largely disintegrated, or at least has lost its structure forming significance. At the level of completely differentiated validity spheres, art sheds its cultic background, just as morality and law detach themselves from their religions and metaphysical background. With this secularization of bourgeois culture, the cultural value spheres separate off sharply from one another and develop according to the standards of the inner logics specific to the different validity claims. Culture loses just those formal properties that enabled it to take on ideological functions (Habermas, 1987: 196).

The result of this process is, at the end, that “systemic mechanisms suppress forms of social integration even in those areas where a consensus-dependent coordination of action cannot be replaced, that is, where the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld is at stake. In these areas, the mediatization of the lifeworld assumes the form of a colonization” (Habermas, 1987: 196). This is, for Habermas, ‘the irresistible irony of the world-historical process of enlightenment’, namely, “the rationalization of the lifeworld makes possible a heightening of systemic complexity, which becomes so hypertrophied that it unleashes system imperatives that burst the capacity of the lifeworld they instrumentalize” (Habermas, 1987: 155).

#### IV

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Habermas’ *Theory of Communicative Action* aimed to three deeply intertwined goals. First, Habermas attempted to develop a notion of communicative rationality. Second, he wanted to develop a dual concept of society, namely, as a lifeworld and as a system. Third, based on all of the above, Habermas intended to develop a theory of modernity able to offer a critical account of our social pathologies. In the concluding section of this chapter I will present a reflection on the role that *TCA* leaves to religion according to each one of the aforementioned goals. I will also offer some critical remarks about the ambiguities of such roles. These incipient critiques, to be sure, will be offered as provisional remarks that will be further developed in the last chapter of the dissertation.

#### *Communicative Action and Piaget’s Notion of Decentering*

As we saw, Habermas used Piaget’s ideas on learning processes, cognitive development, and decentering in order to place his notion of communicative rationality in an evolutionary perspective in which the outcome of such a process is the rise of the modern understanding of the world. Piaget’s remarks on individual cognitive development are used by Habermas as a model to conceive the development of

worldviews. According to Habermas, in both cases we can describe a structure-forming process that becomes more and more general an abstract. The final result is a point in which the awareness of the process itself is possible. At this point of decentration, in both cases, development can take on a reflective form. In the case of the development of worldviews, modernity, for Habermas, represents such a moment of decentration.

Based on this, as we saw, Habermas placed mythical, religious-metaphysical, and modern worldviews in a hierarchy, according to the degree of decentration of the world-understandings they make possible (Habermas, 1987: 189).

It is not clear, nonetheless, how Piaget's notion of decentering, from which such a strong hierarchy is posited, allows, at the same time, the developing of an explanation of the 'remainders'.

Religion, as we saw, appears as a worldview that ultimately connects in a deep and strong sense the three worlds differentiated by communicative action and their correspondent validity claims. A religious argument, in this sense, derives its strength from blending together the truthful, the rightful and the beautiful. This aspect limits, at the long run, the possibility of self-reflection as well as the development of specialized forms of argumentation. This is why religion might be regarded as a "blocker of communicative rationality". In this sense, the religious understanding of the world seems to allow for a lesser degree of decentration compared to the modern understanding of world.

This would not be a problem if Habermas accepted the thesis of the unavoidable disappearance of religion, as he seems to be tacitly doing at this time of his philosophical work. However, if the perspective shifts, as we already saw is the case with Habermas' thought, it is not clear how the ideas of evolution and decentering can still be maintained.

Habermas, to be sure, will not abandon the idea of decentering. In his recent work he still uses it as a way to explain social progress, especially in the field of morality. In a recent interview<sup>140</sup>, when asked about the meaning of societal progress once we stop explaining modernization in terms of secularization, Habermas affirmed that progress in morality and law amounts to "the decentering of our ego- or group-centered perspectives, when the point is to nonviolently end conflicts of action". For Habermas, "These social-cognitive kinds of progress already refer to the further dimension of the increase in reflection, that is, the ability to step back behind oneself. This is what Max Weber meant when he spoke of 'disenchantment'". Interestingly enough, he thinks that we cannot go back, at least not intentionally, to a stage prior to the results of those learning processes.

Nevertheless, Habermas seems to admit now the existence of a process of decentration and self-reflection within religion itself. According to him the following specifically modern form of religious consciousness is the result of such a process that, as we saw, characterizes modernity itself, namely, "a reflective faith that relates itself to other religions and respects the fallible insights of the institutionalized sciences as well as human rights".

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<sup>140</sup> See A Postsecular World Society? On the Philosophical Significance of Postsecular Consciousness and the Multicultural World Society. An Interview with Jurgen Habermas by Eduardo Mendieta. <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/A-Postsecular-World-Society-TIF.pdf>. Available April-2012.

It remains to be analyzed, thus, whether or not Habermas' use of Piaget's notion of decentering in *TCA* is compatible with his more recent use of such a concept.

### *Habermas' Methodology in TCA and the Role of Religion in the Rationalization of the Lifeworld*

Habermas' second objective was to develop a two level concept of society that rigorously connected the lifeworld and system paradigms.

The methodology chosen by Habermas to develop his account is to work up the sociological approaches to a theory of societal rationalization (Habermas, 1984: 140). Habermas attempted to link up his reflections with the well-developed tradition of social theory. As we saw, this was not intended as a merely historical account. What Habermas aimed, instead, was to take up the "conceptual strategies, assumptions, and lines of argument 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" (Habermas, 1984: 139-140).

Habermas, to be sure, was always aware that his strategy had several limitations. One of them was that it could be seen as less demanding because to develop a history of theory with a systematic goal does not require, among other things, any empirical work.

Nevertheless, there were unique advantages too. One of them, as Habermas puts it, was that

reconstructions of the history of theory have the advantage that we can move back and forth between basic action-theoretic concepts, theoretical assumptions, and the illustrative use of empirical evidence, and can at the same time hold fast to the fundamental problem that is our point of reference, namely the question of whether, and if so how, capitalist modernization can be conceived as a process of one-sided rationalization (Habermas, 1984: 140)

The second advantage is related to Habermas' own conception of the relation between different social-scientific paradigms. This second advantage is crucial to understand Habermas' presentation of the accounts of Weber, Mead, Durkheim, and Parsons. In Habermas' own words:

(...) social-scientific paradigms are internally connected with the social contexts in which they emerge and become influential. In them is reflected the world- and self-understanding of various collectives; mediately they serve the interpretation of social-interest situations, horizons of aspiration and expectation. Thus for any social theory, linking up with the history of theory is also a kind of test; the more freely it 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. (Habermas, 1984: 140).

In this sense, Habermas' own system was presented as the culmination of a theoretical unfolding developed by social theory, especially from the works of Weber, Mead, Durkheim, and Parsons<sup>141</sup>.

As previously presented, in order to explain social evolution, Habermas posited a bidirectional principle: while the rationalization of the lifeworld contributed to the growing complexity of system society, simultaneously, the latter also contributed to the first.

However, when Habermas unfolded his perspective, his accent was, in regards to religion, too much on the first part of his principle and not enough in the second one. Habermas' account was not able to describe to what extent and in what ways the rationalization of the lifeworld, via religion, affected the complexity of the system of society. Habermas was not able to offer this account because he did not pay enough attention the ways in which the rationalization of the lifeworld was a product of the rationalization of religion itself.

Thus, if Habermas regards his own account as more complete than the approaches of Weber, Mead, and Durkheim, we need to highlight, though, that, in regard to religion, there are important elements that got lost.

Habermas' explanation of the influence of the rationalization of the lifeworld on systems evolution refers, mainly, to the differentiation of the symbolic structures of the lifeworld. According to him, such a differentiation made possible that organized spheres of action could detach themselves from lifeworld contexts. This is the path of rationalization and modernization suggested by Weber and accepted, in some sense, by Habermas himself. But, as we saw, Habermas conceived religious worldviews as representing an obstacle for rationalization and modernity insofar as they kept dogmatically together the three symbolic structures of the lifeworld. In this way religion created the dogmatic foundations that legitimated political power in traditional societies.

For Weber, nonetheless, modernity is already a *continuation* of the world-historical process of disenchantment of religion. But, from Weber's account, this could be interpreted in two ways. First, modernity is a process in which religion is disenchanted. This is, as we saw, Habermas' main emphasis. In addition, though, Weber also means that religion is part of the process insofar as it started it. There is, in this sense, a religious rationalization.

Habermas' final account, that is, when he expounds his dual concept of society, does not incorporate Weber's emphasis on the influence of religion in the process of rationalization. Religion, from Weber's perspective, freed human beings from myth insofar as religious worldviews made possible the revaluation of individual suffering and the appearance of individual needs for salvation. These two aspects, recognized by Habermas, "made the question of the ethical meaning of what is meaningless the point of departure for a religious thought pushing beyond local myths" (Habermas, 1984: 201).

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<sup>141</sup> In this sense, in what we could call a "Hegelian move", Habermas' theoretical perspective is presented as the most updated but also as the most synthesizing.

Nevertheless, Habermas does not pursue these reflections. Interestingly enough, however, he does find appealing to insist on an element that Weber did not notice. This element, to be sure, is related to the influence of the increasing of system complexity to the rationalization of the lifeworld. For Habermas, briefly put, “religions did not fall from heaven”. As he puts it,

They are the result of learning processes that set in as the ideas of justice established in tribal societies clashed with the new reality of class societies. Without exception, world religions developed within civilizations, that is, within the framework of societies organized around a state, in which there emerged new modes of production independent of the kinship system and corresponding forms of economic exploitation. To be sure, the potential for conflict had first to be released by prophets in order that the masses, who were ‘everywhere engulfed in the massive, archaic growth of magic’, might be ‘swept into a religious movement of an ethical character (Habermas, 1984: 201-202)<sup>142</sup>.

Habermas, then, seems to be too eager to correct Weber’s perspective insofar as it did not take into account the influence of the growing systemic complexity in the explanation of the emergence of religion. However, when it comes to his own account, Habermas does not incorporate properly all the possibilities opened up by that emergence.

None of this, that was already present in Weber and Durkheim<sup>143</sup> as well, survives in Habermas latest movement of reflection. He seems to take for granted the dissolution of religion at an advanced stage of linguistification. It seems that Habermas accepts too hastily Weber’s diagnosis according to which the Protestant ethics, at the long run, ends up vanished.

Perhaps this is the reason why, in *TCA*, Habermas does not draw a clear distinction between myths and religion. At some moments he speaks indistinctly of mythological and religious worldviews, while, at other moments, he seems to be interested in differentiating them.

In summary, it seems that Habermas’ analysis emphasized too much the thesis according to which with the appearance of the state and media-steered subsystems higher levels of integration take shape.

It is as if Habermas’ own thought becomes a prisoner of the problem that Habermas himself is trying to denounce, namely, the colonization of the lifeworld by functionalist reason. Habermas’ own perspective is, in this sense, too close to the functionalist analysis

Habermas is aware that the assumption of the two-level concept of society must be undertaken with methodological rigor in order to avoid confusing the two paradigms.

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<sup>142</sup> Habermas calls this a “sociological explanation” that Weber did not pursue very far.

<sup>143</sup> Indeed, as we saw, for Durkheim, religious symbolism was already developed at a grammatical level. The appearance of religious symbolism was already an important moment within the process of linguistification. In addition, all the emphasis that Durkheim put on the importance of rituals is completely absent in Habermas’ account.

However, I think he does not succeed in highlighting the importance of some elements arising from one of those paradigms, in this case, the religious elements as originated in the lifeworld of human societies that constituted propellers of their rationalization.

### *Religion, Social Pathologies and Sociology*

Habermas' third objective in *TCA* was to offer a general theory of modernity able to explain the social pathologies that, according to him, are today becoming "increasingly visible". Such pathologies are explained by the fact that "communicatively structured domains of life are being subordinated to the imperatives of autonomous, formally organized systems of action" (Habermas, 1984: Xi).

From the perspective of the process of rationalization of the lifeworld we can affirm that capitalist modernization destroys traditional life-forms without salvaging their communicative substance. "Capitalist modernization destroys these forms of life, but does not transform them in such a way that the intermeshing of cognitive-instrumental with moral-practical and expressive moments, which had obtained in everyday practice prior to its rationalization, could be retained at a higher level of differentiation" (Habermas, 1987: 329).

As we saw in the first chapter, Habermas thinks that the job of the philosopher is to foster the processes of bringing together, in a posttraditional everyday practice, all those moments of reason that used to constitute a unity in traditional societies. For Habermas, nonetheless, such a unity was diffuse and illusory given its dependence on religious and metaphysical interpretations (Habermas, 1987: 330).

For this reason, faced to the need for indicating possible solutions, Habermas cannot see religion as one of them. Habermas explicitly affirms that it is highly implausible to attempt to renew, with an historically enlightened consciousness, the traditional padding that capitalist modernization has devoured" (Habermas, 1984: xii). Religion, conceived as an essential element of such a 'traditional padding', is simply not seen as element of resistance for the colonization of the lifeworld.

Habermas, to be sure, does not believe that the process of colonization is irresistible. As he puts it, "The transposition of communicative action to media-steered interactions and the deformation of the structures of a damaged intersubjectivity are by no means predecided processes that might be distilled from a few global concepts" (Habermas, 1987: 391).

Habermas thinks that within modern societies we can still find potential for protests that can oppose to the process of the colonization of the lifeworld. In his own words,

They no longer flare up in domains of material reproduction; they are no longer channeled through parties and associations; and they can no longer be allayed by compensations. Rather, these new conflicts arise in domains of cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization; they are carried out in subinstitutional— or at least extraparliamentary—forms of protest; and the underlying deficits reflect a reification of communicatively structured domains of action that will not respond to the

media of money and power. The issue is not primarily one of compensations that the welfare state can provide, but of defending and restoring endangered ways of life. In short, the new conflicts are not ignited by distribution problems but by questions having to do with the grammar of forms of life (Habermas, 1987: 392).

When Habermas presents a list of the concrete movements that represent such a potential for protest he does include “religious fundamentalism” as one of them (Habermas, 1987: 393). He also accepts that “Of international significance are the autonomy movements struggling for regional, linguistic, cultural, and also religious independence” (Habermas, 1987: 393).

Habermas divides the potential for protest in two categories, namely, emancipatory potentials, on the one hand, and potentials for resistance and withdrawal, on the other. The first kind has an offensive character while the second kind is merely defensive. In this sense, “The resistance and withdrawal movements aim at stemming formally organized domains of action for the sake of communicatively structured domains, and not at conquering new territory” (Habermas, 1987: 393).

The emancipatory potentials seem to be related to a universal scope, that is, one that continues the tradition of bourgeois – socialist liberation movements. This is why, insofar as the feminist movements “struggle against patriarchal oppression and for the redemption of a promise that has long been anchored in the acknowledged universalistic foundations of morality and law” (Habermas, 1987: 393), Habermas characterizes them as emancipatory and offensive. However, feminist movements also have defensive elements, which are related to their particularism. In Habermas’ words,

The emancipation of women means not only establishing formal equality and eliminating male privilege, but overturning concrete forms of life marked by male monopolies. Furthermore, the historical legacy of the sexual division of labor to which women were subjected in the bourgeois nuclear family has given them access to contrasting virtues, to a register of values complementary to those of the male world and opposed to a one-sidedly rationalized everyday practice (Habermas, 1987: 393-393).

Habermas also presents a distinction within resistance movements according to which “we can distinguish further between the defense of traditional and social rank (based on property) and a defense that already operates on the basis of a rationalized lifeworld and tries out new ways of cooperating and living together” (Habermas, 1987: 393).

According to Habermas, the renewed religious fundamentalism represents “a painful manifestation of deprivation in a culturally impoverished and one-sidedly rationalized practice of everyday life. For this reason, ascriptive characteristics such as gender, age, skin color, neighborhood or locality, and religious affiliation serve to build up and separate off communities, to establish subculturally protected communities supportive of the search for personal and collective identity” (Habermas, 1987: 395).

Habermas, nevertheless, is not able to identify any emancipatory potential for these religious groups. He only makes comments on the fundamentalists ones. It seems that behind this lack of interests in religious groups as emancipatory forces lies Habermas' tacit acceptance of the eventual disappearance of religion. This acceptance, to be sure, seems highly compatible with the notion that Habermas has of sociology.

As we saw, Habermas recurs to social theory and to sociology because, in his view, sociology is a discipline whose theme, from its beginning, was "the changes in social integration brought about within the structure of old-European societies by the rise of the modern system of national states and by the differentiation of a market regulated economy" (Habermas, 1984: 4).

Sociology, according to Habermas, is the "science of crisis *par excellence*": it concerned itself above all with the anomic aspects of the dissolution of traditional social systems and the development of modern ones. (Habermas, 1984: 4). The classical figures of sociological thought proposed conceptual categories that were supposed to "capture the most important aspects of the transition from "community" to "society" (Habermas, 1984: 6).

Sociology, then, is thought by Habermas as a discipline mainly interested in the aftermath of the dissolution of traditional social systems; in other words, as a discipline interested in explaining the dissolution of religion.

In this sense, despite of being aware of the changes and multidimensionality of religion, Habermas does not seem to be too interested in explaining these processes and make them compatible with his theory of modernity<sup>144</sup>.

As we saw in chapter two, Habermas' early interest in the *Tsimtsum* contained a thought-provoking theological conclusion. At the end, God's withdrawal opened a space for expressing non-religious utopias. From this perspective, it can be said that from the very beginning God's will entails the opening of a space in which the destiny of creation depended upon creation itself.

Similarly, in Habermas' account of religion from the perspective of social theory, religious consciousness withdraws and opens a space for the development of communicative ethics. In this latter context God "becomes the name for a communicative structure that forces men, on pain of a loss of their humanity, to go beyond their accidental, empirical nature to encounter one another *indirectly*, that is, across an objective something that they themselves are not" (Habermas, 1975: 121). As a result, if from the theological perspective of the *Tsimtsum*, the existence and need of God might seem superfluous, the same seems to happen in regards with religion from the perspective of social theory.

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<sup>144</sup> We saw that for Habermas, with the arising of civilizations, religious worldviews had the function, among others, of legitimating political leadership. Habermas, to be sure, explicitly uses the expression "among others" when he introduces this function of religion. However, he never offers an account of those other functions. This clearly limits his account of religion in *TCA*. As I will show in the following chapter, Habermas will accept this unjustified limitation in his text *Transcendence from Within, Transcendence in this World*.



## CHAPTER 5. RELIGION AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

The objective of this chapter is to expound Habermas' latest account of religion. I will show that, in this last stage, the relevant perspective for the analysis of religion belongs to political philosophy or, in other words, that the problem analyzed is the political role and importance of religion.

In order to achieve this objective I will present Habermas' development of the notion of the "public sphere". (I) First, I will describe Habermas' early analysis of the public sphere as an institution of the bourgeois society. (II) In the second part, I will expound Habermas' account of the public sphere as the basis to develop a deliberative democracy. On the basis of this, (III) in the third section of the chapter, I will analysis Habermas' proposal for the role of religion in the public sphere of such a model of democracy.

### I

On Habermas' seventieth birthday, his students honored him with a celebratory book (*Festschrift*) that bore the title *Die Öffentlichkeit der Vernunft und die Vernunft der Öffentlichkeit* (*The Public Sphere of Reason and the Reason of the Public Sphere*). Such a title was highly appropriate because, according to Habermas himself, "the public sphere as a space of reasoned communicative exchanges is the issue that has concerned me all my life" (Habermas, 2008: 12)

In Habermas' view, ultimately, his notion of the 'public sphere' is meant to offer an account of the unique social nature of human beings. Indeed, for Habermas, sociability is not the quintessential aspect of human beings. As it happens, many other species of animals live within social groups. Thus, it is not social existence as such what

makes human beings different from other species. In contrast, if we were to explain what is truly special about the social nature of humans, we would need to translate Aristotle's idea of *zoon politikon* "quite literally: man is a political animal, that is, an animal that exists in a public space. To be more precise, human beings are animals that, by virtue of being embedded from the outset in public networks of social relationships, first develop the competences that make them into persons" (Habermas, 2008: 13-14).

Our own biological features of newborn mammals evince such an embedding. Indeed, "If we compare the biological features of newborn mammals, we observe that no other species enters the world as immature and as helpless as we do. Nor is any other animal dependent for so long a period of rearing on the protection of the family and a public culture intersubjectively shared with conspecifics" (Habermas, 2008: 14).

Despite these anthropological remarks, it has to be noticed that Habermas' first systematic approach to the idea of the public sphere was deeply historical and sociological. Indeed, in Habermas' *Habilitationsschrift* titled *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, he analyzed the genesis and concept of the bourgeois public sphere. There, he presented the historical context of British, French, and German developments in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in order to derive the ideal type of the bourgeois public sphere. Habermas showed how the emerging and later structural transformation of the bourgeois public sphere was rooted in the transformation of state and economy.

To be sure, Habermas' goal was both descriptive and normative. Indeed, his description of the bourgeois political and cultural life of the seventeenth through mid twentieth centuries aims to recover the elements of truth and emancipation contained within the institutional practices of a reason made public through the boundaries of the bourgeois public sphere.

The book has seven chapters<sup>145</sup>, nevertheless, in virtue of its theoretical aims it could be said that it is conceptually divided into two sections. While the first part of the book presents the arising and origin of the bourgeois public sphere, the second part offers an account of its structural transformation and final disintegration.

Habermas' goal, in the first part, is to describe the emergence, meaning and functionality of the modern category of 'publicness', especially in regard to its potential as a mode of social integration and coordination for human life.

In Habermas' view, the bourgeois public sphere is a category typical of an epoch. This means that it cannot be conceived as a return, successful or unsuccessful, to an old Greek institution<sup>146</sup>.

Greek society offered a strong division between public and private issues: whereas the private sphere of the *oikos* represented a realm of necessity, the public space was thought as a space of freedom and autonomy. As such, the public realm

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<sup>145</sup> I. Introduction: Preliminary Demarcation of a Type of Bourgeois Public Sphere, II Social Structures of the Public Sphere, III Political Functions of the Public Sphere, IV The Bourgeois Public Sphere: Idea and Ideology, V The Social-Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, VI The Transformation of the Public Sphere's Political Function, VII On the Concept of Public Opinion.

<sup>146</sup> Furthermore, for Habermas, "Sociologically, that is to say by reference to institutional criteria,-a public sphere in the sense of a separate realm distinguished from the private sphere cannot be shown to have existed in the feudal society of the High Middle Ages" (Habermas, 1991c: 7).

constituted by free citizens depended on the private autonomy of each one of them as master of a household. However, the freedom of the citizens was constituted only by their participation in the public affairs of the *polis*.

The bourgeois society also presented a deep division between the public and the private. However, in this new case, the public sphere was constituted by a public of private individuals who participated in open discussions in which, in principle, anyone is potentially admitted. Thus, the individuality and the freedom of the participants were previously formed in the private realm, especially in their conjugal family. The private realm is, thus, one of freedom, one that, in addition, needs to be defended against the domination of the state. Such a defense demands the participation of the individuals within the public sphere, which, nevertheless was conceived as belonging to the private realm. In Habermas' words,

The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules' governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor. The medium of this political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent: people's public use of their reason (Habermas, 1991c: 27)

Hence, the bourgeois public sphere would not have been possible without the fundamental separation between society as a private realm and the ruler or the state as a public realm. The bourgeois public sphere is, in this sense, based on the notion of a civil society that appears as "the genuine domain of private autonomy [that] stood opposed to the state" (Habermas, 1991c: 12).

In addition, for Habermas, the arising of the political bourgeois public sphere required two prior developments. First, the institution of the family was reconstituted as an intimate sphere that grounded both the evaluative affirmation of ordinary life and of economic activity and the participation of its patriarchal head in the public sphere. Second, the public sphere was initially constituted in the world of letters<sup>147</sup>, which paved the way for its subsequent orientation to politics. These two processes were intertwined. According to Habermas, for example, early novels helped to circulate a vision of intimate sentimentality, communicating to the members of the literary public sphere just how they should understand the heart of private life. In Habermas' words,

(...) before the public sphere explicitly assumed political functions in the tension-charged field of state-society relations, the subjectivity originating in the intimate sphere of the conjugal family created, so to speak, its own public. Even before the control over the public sphere by public authority

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<sup>147</sup> Habermas sometimes speaks of "The public sphere in the world of letters" (*literarische Öffentlichkeit*).

was contested and finally wrested away by the critical reasoning of private persons on political issues, there evolved under its cover a public sphere in apolitical form – the literary precursor of the public, sphere operative in the political domain. It provided the training ground for a critical public reflection still preoccupied with itself—a process of self-clarification of private people focusing on the genuine experiences of their novel privateness (Habermas, 1991c: 29).

Furthermore, the literary public sphere also contributed to develop institutional bases. These ranged from meeting places (such as coffee houses) to journals to webs of social relationships. According to Habermas, by the first decade of the eighteenth century London had 3000 coffee houses<sup>148</sup>. Similarly, in France and in Germany salons and table societies spread rapidly.

Therefore, as Habermas puts it,

The process in which the state-governed public sphere was appropriated by the public of private people making use of their reason and was established as a sphere of criticism of public authority was one of functionally converting the public sphere in the world of letters already equipped with institutions of the public and with forums for discussion. With their help, the experiential complex of audience-oriented privacy made its way also into the political realm's public sphere. The representation of the interests of the privatized domain of a market economy was interpreted with the aid of ideas grown in the soil of the intimate sphere of the conjugal family. The latter and not the public sphere itself (as the Greek model would have it) was humanity's genuine site (Habermas, 1991: 51)<sup>149</sup>.

One of the aspects that contributed the most to the development of a public sphere politically oriented was, in Habermas' view, the development of the press. "Developed out of the system of private correspondences and for a long time overshadowed by them the newspaper trade was initially organized in the form of small handicraft business" (Habermas, 1991: 181)

In its origins, the press appears as a business activity focused entirely in news reporting. Subsequently, it started to introduce ideologies and concrete viewpoints. In

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<sup>148</sup> For Habermas, the primary place where the bourgeois public sphere began its development was Britain (Habermas, 1991c: 57ss).

<sup>149</sup> Habermas is aware of the differences between the two types of public spheres. Indeed, "The circles of persons who made up the two forms of public were not even completely congruent. Women and dependents were factually and legally excluded from the political public sphere, whereas female readers as well as apprentices and servants often took a more active part in the literary public sphere than the owners of private property and family heads themselves" (Habermas, 1991c: 56).

this second stage, a new political element was connected with the merely economical of the “good business”. In this phase, in Habermas’ words,

(...) even the newspaper enterprises consolidated in the hands of publishers continued to give their editors the kind of freedom that in general characterized the communication of private people functioning as a public. The publishers procured for the press a commercial basis without, however, commercializing it as such. A press that had evolved out of the public’s use of its reason and that had merely been an extension of its debate remained thoroughly an institution of this very public: effective in the mode of a transmitter and amplifier, no longer a mere vehicle for the transportation of information but not yet a medium for culture as an object of consumption (Habermas, 1991: 183).

Thus, the commercial purpose present in the press of that time did not determine its functionality. Indeed, “violating all the rules of profitability, they often were money losers from the start. The pedagogical and later increasingly political impulse could be financed, so to speak, by bankruptcy” (Habermas, 1991: 182)

For Habermas, mainly three aspects characterized the bourgeois political public sphere. First, it preserved “a kind of social intercourse that, far from presupposing the equality of status, disregarded status altogether” (Habermas, 1991: 36). In Habermas’ view, potential inclusiveness was the principle of the emerging public. In principle, anyone who had access to cultural products had the potential to be a part of the culture-debating public. Now, as Habermas clarifies, “Not that this idea of the public was actually realized in earnest in the coffee houses, the salons, and the societies; but as an idea it had become institutionalized and thereby stated as an objective claim. If not realized, it was at least consequential” (Habermas, 1991: 36).

Secondly, the principle of inclusiveness was conceived in a dynamic way. Accordingly, “Wherever the public established itself institutionally as a stable group of discussants, it did not equate itself with the public but at most claimed to act as its mouthpiece, in its name, perhaps even as its educator - the new form of bourgeois representation” (Habermas, 1991: 37)<sup>150</sup>.

Finally, the third aspect refers to the fact that “discussion within such a public presupposed the problematization of areas that until then had not been questioned” (Habermas, 1991: 36). All sort of subjects over which churches and state authorities had exercised the monopoly of interpretation became in principle generally accessible to discussion.

It is noteworthy that Habermas’ analysis emphasizes the economic foundations of the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere. In this sense, “The social precondition for this ‘developed’ bourgeois public sphere was a market that, tending to be liberalized,

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<sup>150</sup> “Accordingly, the public that might be considered the subject of the bourgeois constitutional state viewed its sphere as a public one in this strict sense; in its deliberations it anticipated in principle that all human beings belong to it. The private person too, was simply a human being, that is, a moral person” (Habermas, 1991c: 85)

made affairs in the sphere of social reproduction as much as possible a matter of private people left to themselves and so finally completed the privatization of civil society” (Habermas, 1991: 74). Capitalism’s contribution was, thus, the development of a new and stronger sense of privacy as free control of productive property. In the case of France and Germany this can be seen in the codification of civil law that guaranteed basic private freedoms<sup>151</sup>.

In the same vein, the idea of equal owners of commodities in the market fostered the fundamental parity among persons and individuals in the public sphere. Clearly, not everybody was considered a legal subject. Nonetheless, those who were considered as legal subjects did appear immediately in a more or less undifferentiated category of persons. Once these notions were extended into the doctrines of *laissez-faire* and even free trade among nations, the notion of civil society as the private sphere emancipated from public authority developed to its fullest extent, even if it lasted, as Habermas puts it, only for “one blissful moment in the long history of capitalist development” (Habermas, 1991: 79)<sup>152</sup>.

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<sup>151</sup> Indeed, “ Where the constitutional state did not emerge as a fact out of the older formation of a state structured by estates (as in Great Britain) but was sanctioned (as on the continent) by a piece of legislation on which it was founded, that is, a basic law or constitution, the functions of the public sphere were clearly spelled out in the law. A set of basic rights concerned the sphere of the public engaged in rational-critical debate (freedom of opinion and speech, freedom of press, freedom of assembly and association, etc.) and the political function of private people in this public sphere (right of petition, equality of vote, etc.). A second set of basic rights concerned the individual's status as a free human being, grounded in the intimate sphere of the patriarchal conjugal family (personal freedom, inviolability of the home, etc.). The third set of basic rights concerned the transactions of the private owners of property in the sphere of civil society (equality before the law, protection of private property, etc.). The basic rights guaranteed: the spheres of the public realm and of the private (with the intimate sphere at its core); the institutions and instruments of the public sphere, on the one hand (press, parties), and the foundation of private autonomy (family and property), on the other; finally, the functions of the private people, both their political ones as citizens and their economic ones as owners of commodities (and, as “human beings,” those of individual communication, e.g., through inviolability of letters)” (Habermas, 1991c: 83).

<sup>152</sup> Habermas acknowledged the great presuppositions of classical liberal economics. As he puts it, “It conceived of a system whose immanent laws afforded the individual a sure foundation for calculating his economic activity rationally according to the standard of profit maximization. Each person made such calculations for himself, without collusion with others; the production of goods was subjectively anarchic, objectively harmonious. The first presupposition was thus economic: the guarantee of free competition. The second one postulated that all commodities were exchanged according to their “value”; the latter, in turn, was to be gauged in terms of the quantity of labor required for its production. In all this the commodities in question included both the goods produced and the labor power producing them. Since this condition was only fulfilled if each supplier produced his commodities himself, and if, conversely, each laborer possessed the means of production himself, the second presupposition amounted to a sociological one: the model of a society of petty commodity producers. It was related to the first insofar as the economic presupposition of the independent formation of prices implied the sociological one of a relatively widely and evenly distributed ownership of means of production. The third presupposition was a theoretical one first introduced by the elder Mill and handed down in a later formulation as Say's Law. According to this law, under conditions of complete mobility of producers, products, and capital, supply and demand would always be in equilibrium. This meant that no production capacities would be idle, that labor reserves would be fully utilized, and that the system would be in principle crisis-free and in equilibrium on a high level that at any given time was commensurate with the state of development of the forces of production. Under these conditions, but only under these, would each person have an equal chance, with ability and “luck” (the equivalent for the lack of transparency of the nevertheless strictly determined market dynamics), to attain the status of property owner and thus of “man,” that is, the qualifications of a private person admitted to the public sphere—property and education. As was apparent from the polemical function of political economy itself, these conditions were by no means fulfilled even in the first half of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the liberal model sufficiently approximated reality so that the interest of the bourgeois class could be identified with the general interest and the third estate could be set up as the nation during that phase of capitalism, the public sphere as the organizational principle of the bourgeois constitutional state had credibility” (Habermas, 1991c: 86- 87).

In Habermas' view, the change of these economic conditions determines the transformation and disintegration of the bourgeois public sphere, which is, as mentioned before, the topic of the second half of the book. As he puts it,

The central topic of the second half of the book is the structural transformation, embedded in the integration of state and society, of the public sphere itself. The infrastructure of the public sphere has changed along with the forms of organization, marketing, and consumption of a professionalized book production that operates on a larger scale and is oriented to new strata of readers, and of a newspaper and periodical press whose contents have also not remained the same. It changed with the rise of the electronic mass media, the new relevance of advertising, the increasing fusion of entertainment and information, the greater centralization in all areas, the collapse of the liberal associational life, the collapse of surveyable public spheres on the community level, etc. (Habermas, 1992: 436)

The model of the bourgeois public sphere presupposed a strict separation between the public and the private realm. However, the growth of a market economy ended up blurring such a distinction. On the one hand, private agents increasingly assumed public power, and, on the other, the state penetrated what used to be a purely private realm. In this context, the development of the welfare state appears as a process through which different interest groups from civil society take over the public sphere to demand social rights and protection of the state<sup>153</sup>. "The more society became transparent as a mere nexus of coercive constraints, the more urgent became the need for a strong state" (Habermas, 1991: 144). Therefore, from two different perspectives, state and society became interwoven and, thus, the clear distinction between private and public realms was hard to recognize.

As a result, the idea that from the private spheres of the family, the economy or the work, autonomous and relatively equal agents with an equal potential to participate in public discourses could emerge was simply untenable.

The emergence of giant corporations evinced the great difference and inequalities within civil society. The liberal bourgeois public sphere conceived only of horizontal exchange relations between individual commodity owners. Under these conditions, no actor was expected to gain such a position of power where she could have complete power over someone else. However, conditions of imperfect competition and dependent prices made possible that social power became deeply concentrated in a few private hands. In this new context, relations characterized by one-sided dependency appeared. "Processes of concentration and crisis pulled the veil of an exchange of equivalents off the antagonistic structure of society. The more society

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<sup>153</sup> For Habermas, "Finally, over and above its normal administrative concerns the state also took over the provision of services that hitherto had been left to private hands, whether it entrusted private persons with public tasks, coordinated private economic activities within the frame of an overall plan, or became active itself as a producer and distributor" (Habermas, 1991c: 147).

became transparent as a mere nexus of coercive constraints, the more urgent became the need for a strong state” (Habermas, 1991: 144).

One immediate consequence of the appearing of powerful private agents such as giant corporations was the development of mass consumption. This development entailed the replacement of the public sphere in the word of letters with a private world of culture consumption. In Habermas’ words,

The bourgeois ideal type assumed that out of the audience-oriented subjectivity's well-founded interior domain a public sphere would evolve in the world of letters. Today, instead of this, the latter has turned into a conduit for social forces channeled into the conjugal family's inner space by way of a public sphere that the mass media have transmogrified into a sphere of culture consumption. The deprivatized province of interiority was hollowed out by the mass media; a pseudo-public sphere of a no longer literary public was patched together to create a sort of superfamilial zone of familiarity. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, the institutions that until then had ensured the coherence of the public as a critically debating entity have been weakened. The family lost the function of a "circle of literary propaganda”(Habermas, 1991: 162).

The transformation of the press, “the public sphere’s preeminent institution”, into a mass press is another crucial element of the disintegration of the public sphere. “The mass press was based on the commercialization of the participation in the public sphere on the part of broad strata designed predominantly to give the masses in general access to the public sphere” (Habermas, 1991: 169). However, insofar as “psychological facilitation” became an end in itself in order to achieve a commercially fostered consumer attitude, the mass press lost its political character.

This can be seen in the fact that the content of the newspapers with massive editions began to change. First, political news and political editorials on certain topics were eliminated. Then, editorial opinions receded behind information from press agencies and reports from correspondents. Moreover “critical debate disappears behind the veil of internal decisions concerning the selection and presentation of the material” (Habermas, 1991: 169). This selection entailed that public affairs, social problems, economic matters, education, and health are pushed into the background. In contrast, corruption, accidents, disasters, sports, recreation, and social events take over the pages of the new press.

Interestingly enough, in Habermas view, the success of the press, as a critical bourgeois institution, caused its own disintegration as well.

Only with the establishment of the bourgeois constitutional state and the legalization of a political public sphere was the press as a forum of rational-critical debate released from the pressure to take sides ideologically; now it could abandon its polemical stance and concentrate



on the profit opportunities for a commercial business (...) In a situation of greatly lowered price per copy and a multiplied number of buyers, the publisher could count on selling a correspondingly growing portion of space in his paper for advertisements (Habermas, 1991: 184)

Following this trend, new forms of mass media appeared. "Nonverbal communications (...) replaced to a greater or lesser extent the classical forms of literary production" (Habermas, 1991: 169). These new media, such as radio, film, and television, reduced

To a minimum the distance that a reader is forced to maintain toward the printed letter—a distance that required the privacy of the appropriation as much as it made possible the publicity of a rational-critical exchange about what had been read (...) In comparison with printed communications the programs sent by the new media curtail the reactions of their recipients in a peculiar way. They draw the eyes and ears of the public under their spell but at the same time, by taking away its distance, place it under "tutelage," which is to say they deprive it of the opportunity to say something and to disagree. The critical discussion of a reading public tends to give way to "exchanges about tastes and preferences" between consumers—even the talk about what is consumed, "the examination of tastes," becomes a part of consumption itself. The world fashioned by the mass media is a public sphere in appearance only. (Habermas, 1991: 170-171).

In addition, the radical commercialization of the press easily allows for its manipulation. The interdependency of the marketing of the editorial section with that of advertising section transforms the press into a gate through which privileged private interests are able to dominate and invade what used to be a public sphere open to every private people.

All these trends, originated during the nineteenth century, continued developing in a more radical way in the media of the twentieth century. The mass medias, in this sense, have become public corporations and great complexes of societal power. As a result, "whereas formerly the press was able to limit itself to the transmission and amplification of the rational-critical debate of private people assembled into a public, now conversely this debate gets shaped by the mass media to begin with" (Habermas, 1991: 188).

Politics too suffers deep transformations in this process of structural transformation of the bourgeois public sphere. Indeed, insofar as the new mass communication means are not interested in rational critical debates, a personalized politics seems to prevail. Candidates are stars, and citizens are consumers-clients.

Law and political domination can no longer be justified by the principle of publicity, that is, by a public rational and critical discussion among equal citizens. Although the participation of the public is called upon more frequently and in incomparably more diverse ways in virtue of the immensely expanded sphere of

publicity, what is searched for is not so much rational justification and discussion but acclamation. In Habermas' words, "The public sphere becomes the court before whose public prestige can be displayed- rather than in which public critical debate is carried on" (Habermas, 1991: 201).

Publicity, in this new context, "is achieved with the help of the secret politics of interests groups: it earns public prestige for a person or issue and thereby renders it ready for acclamatory assent in a climate of non public opinion" (Habermas, 1991: 201).

For Habermas, this new meaning of publicity affects all levels of the state: the parliament, the judicial system, the citizens, as well as the political parties. (Habermas, 1991: 205-207). In this latter case, advertising becomes one of their most important ruling principles. Political marketing, thus, emerges. "Party agitators and old style propagandists give way to advertising experts neutral in respect to party politics and employed to sell politics in an unpolitical way. Although this tendency has been visible for a long time, it prevailed only after the Second World War, with the scientific development of empirical techniques of market and opinion research" (Habermas, 1991: 216).

In this context, citizens become a passive force. As Habermas puts it,

Citizens entitled to services relate to the state not primarily through political participation but by adopting a general attitude of demand-expecting to be provided for without actually wanting to fight for the necessary decisions. Their contact with the state occurs essentially in the rooms and anterooms of bureaucracies; it is unpolitical and indifferent, yet demanding. In a social-welfare state that above all administers, distributes, and provides, the "political" interests of citizens constantly subsumed under administrative acts are reduced primarily to claims specific to occupational branches (Habermas, 1991: 211).

Once the public sphere is forced to assume advertising functions, it becomes a vehicle for political and economic propaganda. As a consequence, the public sphere becomes unpolitical as a whole and pseudo-privatized (Habermas, 1991: 175). The passive culture of consumption and the extended largely apolitical sociability made impossible the development of the critical activity of public discourse.

As we can see, Habermas, sharing the views of the Frankfurt School, thinks that mass democracy is an insurmountable obstacle for the development of a critical public sphere. The arising of such a form of democracy buries the notion of general interest by favoring a consumerist orientation. The idea of being able to reach a general interest was replaced by the idea of having to negotiate compromises among different and irreconcilable interests; advertising and negotiation replaces rational critical debates with the possibility of reaching rational agreements. "The process of the politically relevant exercise and equilibration of power now takes place directly between the private bureaucracies, special-interest associations, parties, and public administration. The public as such is included only sporadically in this circuit of power, and even then it is brought in only to contribute its acclamation" (Habermas, 1991: 176).

Habermas does not want his analysis to be interpreted as a proposal to recover the old and lost bourgeois public sphere. As he puts it, "Any attempt at restoring the liberal public sphere through the reduction of its plebiscitarily expanded form will only serve to weaken even more the residual functions genuinely remaining within it" (Habermas, 1991: 208).

Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that what Habermas expects, namely, to find forms of democratic public discourses that institutionalize the principle of publicity as the leading force of public rational-critical debates and social integration, does seem to be very close to a revival of the old and lost liberal public sphere. In his own words,

Institutionalized in the mass democracy of the social welfare state, (...) the idea of publicity (...) is today realizable only as a rationalization (...) of the exercise of societal and political power under the mutual control of rival organizations themselves committed to publicity as regards both their internal structure and their interaction with one another and with the state. Only in proportion to advances in this kind of rationalization can there once again evolve a political public sphere as it once existed in the form of the bourgeois public of private people that is to say, "... [a] society that, beyond the periodic or sporadic state-commandeered elections and referenda, has a real presence in a coherent and permanent process of integration" (Habermas, 1991: 210).

Be that as it may, it is not difficult to see that Habermas' approach overestimates the degeneration of the public sphere. Similarly, the public consequences of mass media do not have to be as radically negative as Habermas presented them in his early book. Habermas himself recognizes this deficiency when he revisits the text almost 30 years later<sup>154</sup>. As he puts it, "my diagnosis of a unilinear development from a politically active public to one withdrawn into a bad privacy, from a "culture-debating to a culture-consuming public," is too simplistic. At the time, I was too pessimistic about the resisting power and above all the critical potential of a pluralistic, internally much differentiated mass public whose cultural usages have begun to shake off the constraints of class" (Habermas, 1992: 438).

However, in spite of the deficiencies of Habermas' first project, the general intention that guided it still remains. The task is to show how under the current conditions of the mass democracies it is possible for the public "to set in motion a critical process of public communication through the very organizations that mediatize it" (Habermas, 1991: 232).

The philosophical premises that Habermas accepted by the time of his research did not allow him to resolve such a problem. In his own words, "further advances were necessary to produce a theoretical framework within which I can now reformulate the questions and provide at least the outline of an answer" (Habermas, 1992: 441).

The new theoretical framework mentioned by Habermas is, of course, his theory of communicative action. In this sense,

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<sup>154</sup> See Habermas and the Public Sphere, edited by Craig Calhoun, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1992.

The theory of communicative action intends to bring into the open the rational potential intrinsic in everyday communicative practices. Therewith it also prepares the way for a social science that proceeds reconstructively, identifies the entire spectrum of cultural and societal rationalization processes, and also traces them back beyond the threshold of modern societies. Such a tack no longer restricts the search for normative potentials to a formation of the public sphere that was specific to a single epoch. It removes the necessity for stylizing particular prototypical manifestations of an institutionally embodied communicative rationality in favor of an empirical approach in which the tension of the abstract opposition between norm and reality is dissolved. Furthermore, unlike the classical assumptions of historical materialism, it brings to the fore the relative structural autonomy and internal history of cultural systems of interpretation (Habermas, 1992: 442-443)

The next step is to develop these conceptual achievements into a theory of democracy. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, according to Habermas himself, the underlying theory of democracy was linked to Wolfgang Abendroth's concept of a socialist democracy evolving out of the democratic, constitutional welfare state<sup>155</sup> (Habermas, 1992: 443).

In Habermas' own view, such a theory of democracy still conceived society as a self-organized totality: "The society that administers itself, that by means of a legal enactment of plans writes the program controlling all spheres of its life, including its economic reproduction, was to be integrated through the political will of the sovereign people" (Habermas, 1992: 443). Society, from this perspective, is viewed as an association writ large that directs itself using law and political power.

However, as we know from the previous chapter, in Habermas' perspective, the high level of complexity of functionally differentiated modern societies cannot be properly understood if we continue operating under such a holistic notion. As Habermas puts it, that perspective does not provide "access to the realities of an economic system regulated through markets and of an administrative system regulated through power". (Habermas, 1992: 443). Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action*, in contrast, offers a two-level concept of society, as lifeworld and as system, that necessarily has deep implications for a theory of democracy.

From this concept, the state apparatus and the economy system appear as action fields with their own logics and rationality. As a consequence, democratic and political integration are incompatible processes that just cannot be developed within such fields. Therefore,

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<sup>155</sup> Wolfgang Abendroth (2 May 1906 – 15 September 1985) was a socialist German jurist and political scientist. Habermas' book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* is, in fact, dedicated to him.

The goal is no longer to supersede an economic system having a capitalist life of its own and a system of domination having a bureaucratic life of its own but to erect a democratic dam against the colonializing encroachment of system imperatives on areas of the lifeworld (...) A radical-democratic change in the process of legitimation aims at a new balance between the forces of societal integration so that the social-integrative power of solidarity-the "communicative force of production"--can prevail over the powers of the other two control resources, i.e., money and administrative power, and therewith successfully assert the practically oriented demands of the lifeworld (Habermas, 1992: 444).

In this context, "the question remains of how, under the conditions of mass democracies constituted as social-welfare states, a discursive formation of opinion and will can be institutionalized in such a fashion that it becomes possible to bridge the gap between enlightened self-interest and orientation to the common good, between the roles of client and citizen" (Habermas, 1992: 448-449). Therefore, the notion of a "political public sphere" can be used to describe all those conditions of communication that make possible a discursive formation of opinion and will on the part of the citizens of a democratic state.

But these remarks lead us to the place where Habermas systematically develops his theory of deliberative democracy as well as a renewed concept of a "political public sphere, namely, his book *Between Facts and Norms (BFN)*.

## II

This second section of the chapter will be developed in three steps. First, I will expound the relationship between Habermas' account of democracy presented in *Between Facts and Norms* and his previous theoretical framework developed in his *Theory of Communicative Action*. Afterwards, I will analyze Habermas' concept of deliberative democracy within the context of two competing views, namely, the liberal model and the republican. Finally, I will elaborate on the concept of the public sphere as a pivotal element in Habermas' model of deliberative democracy. This will allow me to introduce the question about the roles that religion could and should play within this 'space'; a question that will be approached in the next part of the chapter (III).

Habermas' perspective developed in *Between Facts and Norms* is not merely an application of his theory of communicative action but, rather, an extension and complement. It is, thus, a proof of *TCA's* often unrecognized pluralistic aspect (Habermas, 1996b: x). As he puts it, "the basic assumptions of the theory of communicative action also branch out into various universes of discourse, where they must prove their mettle in the contexts of debate they happen to encounter" (Habermas, 1996b: x). Contemporary law and politics are some of these universes of discourse.

For Habermas, after the "collapse" of metaphysical thinking, analyzed in chapter 1, an approach based on the idea of an unveiled teleology present in history or in the nature of human beings cannot justify nor explain the normative aspect of modern law

within the contemporary and pluralistic world societies. Recurring to the fortuitous resources of successful histories and traditions is not a secure path either.

Habermas' theoretical framework constituted by his theory of communicative action is presented, thus, as the most successful attempt to answer the challenges offered by a radical and skeptical critique and denial of reason within the political field, "whether in the dramatic form of a post-Nietzschean critique of reason or in the more sober variety of a systems functionalism that neutralizes anything that, from the participant perspective, appears obligatory or at all meaningful" (Habermas, 1996b: 3).

As shown in chapter 3, Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action* presents a different concept of reason. Indeed, instead of practical reason, Habermas describes a communicative one. This, as he puts it, "involves more than a change in terminology" (Habermas, 1996b: 3). Briefly put, there are four deep substantial changes.

First, a communicative reason, that is, a reason transposed into the linguistic medium, is useful to reconstruct the competences and structures of consciousness that have in fact been operative in history.

Second, communicative reason is not ascribed to any individual actor or any macro subject, whether at the level of the state or the society as a whole.

Rather, what makes communicative reason possible is the linguistic medium through which interactions are woven together and forms of life are structured. This rationality is inscribed in the linguistic *telos* of mutual understanding and forms an ensemble of conditions that both enable and limit. Whoever makes use of a natural language in order to come to an understanding with an addressee about something in the world is required to take a performative attitude and commit herself to certain presuppositions. In seeking to reach an understanding, natural-language users must assume, among other things, that the participants pursue their illocutionary goals without reservations, that they tie their agreement to the intersubjective recognition of criticizable validity claims, and that they are ready to take on the obligations resulting from consensus and relevant for further interaction. These aspects of validity that undergird speech are also imparted to the forms of life reproduced through communicative action. Communicative rationality is expressed in a decentered complex of pervasive, transcendently enabling structural conditions, but it is not a subjective capacity that would tell actors what they ought to do" (Habermas, 1996b: 3-4).

Therefore, third, communicative reason is not conceived as an immediate source of prescriptions. Its normative content derives from the fact that agents, acting communicatively, do not have other option but to commit themselves to counterfactual pragmatic presuppositions.

That is, they must undertake certain idealizations—for example, ascribe identical meanings to expressions, connect utterances with context-transcending validity claims, and assume that addressees are accountable, that is, autonomous and sincere with both themselves and others. Communicatively acting individuals are thus subject to the "must" of a weak transcendental necessity, but this does not mean they already encounter the prescriptive "must" of a rule of action—whether the latter "must" can be traced back deontologically to the normative validity of a moral law, axiologically to a constellation of preferred values, or empirically to the effectiveness of a technical rule (Habermas, 1996b: 4).

The tension between idea and reality emerges within the very facticity of linguistically structured forms of life.

Finally, fourth, communicative reason extends the notion of rationality to a whole spectrum of validity claims, namely, the claims to propositional truth, personal sincerity, and normative rightness. However, it pertains only to insights, that is, to criticizable statements that can be clarified argumentatively. In other words, communicative reason does not include reasons related to the actual motivation and guiding of the will.

Normativity in the sense of the obligatory orientation of action does not coincide with communicative rationality. Normativity and communicative rationality intersect with one another where the justification of moral insights is concerned. Such insights are reached in a hypothetical attitude and carry only the weak force of rational motivation. In any case, they cannot themselves guarantee that insight will issue in motivated action (Habermas, 1996b: 5)

These four aspects must be taken into account when interpreting Habermas' extension of communicative rationality to the fields of a normative theory of law and morality.

From this perspective, the forms of communication that confer legitimacy on political will-formation, legislation, and the administration of justice appear as part of a more encompassing process in which the lifeworlds of modern societies are rationalized under the pressure of systemic imperatives. At the same time, such a reconstruction would provide a critical standard, against which actual practices—the opaque and perplexing reality of the constitutional state—could be evaluated. (Habermas, 1996b: 5)

As mentioned before, *BFN* is also a complement of *TCA* because Habermas' interest on legal theory allows him to explain how the reproduction of modern societies can

proceed on the fragile grounds of communicative actions and their context-transcending validity claims. It is necessary to explain “how the validity and acceptance of a social order can be stabilized once communicative actions become autonomous and clearly begin to differ, in the view of the actors themselves, from strategic interactions” (Habermas, 1996b: 25). For Habermas, the medium of law makes possible such an explanation because it creates “highly artificial communities, associations of free and equal legal persons whose integration is based simultaneously on the threat of external sanctions and the supposition of a rationally motivated agreement” (Habermas, 1996b: 8)<sup>156</sup>.

It must be noticed that in *BFN* Habermas repeats his “three-stage” account of the evolution of human societies.

Accordingly, first of all, in societies based on kinship, “institutions protected by taboos form a site where cognitive and normative expectations merge and harden into an unbroken complex of convictions linked with motives and value orientations” (Habermas, 1996b: 23-24). Both mythical narratives and ritual practices hinder the thematization of the cultural knowledge and the social practices of tribal societies.

Second, the results of the processes of disenchantment of the mythical world make possible a more or less freely thematizable contents of a tradition set communicatively aflow. Nevertheless, traditional societies are held together by the power of religious and metaphysical worldviews. In these societies, thus, “even the law still feeds on the self-authorizing force of the religiously sublimated sacred realm. For example, the notion of a higher law familiar in the medieval tradition of law was still rooted in the sacred fusion of facticity and validity. According to this idea, the law made by the ruler remained subordinate to the Christian natural law administered by the Church” (Habermas, 1996b: 26).

In modern societies, all these conditions change. In this final stage of human development, the normativity of the social orders must be maintained without metasocial guarantees. Therefore, “the burden of social integration shifts more and more onto the communicative achievements of actors for whom validity and facticity—that is, the binding force of rationally motivated beliefs and the imposed force of external sanctions—have parted company as incompatible” (Habermas, 1996b: 26).

However, in *BFN* Habermas admits that communicative action, by itself, might not be enough to achieve social integration within the disenchanted, internally differentiated and pluralized lifeworlds of contemporary societies, especially if we take into account the intense growing of both systemic and strategic interactions caused by the development of capitalist economy.

As previously noticed, Habermas recurs to a communicative theory of law in order to account for the possibility of such an integration. For this, positive law should have to bind together and assign different tasks “to the two strategies for dealing with the risk of dissension found in communicative action, that is, the strategies of circumscribing communication and giving it unhindered play” (Habermas, 1996b: 37).

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<sup>156</sup> In *BFN* Habermas pursues “the dual goal of explaining how the theory of communicative action accords central importance to the category of law and why this theory in turn constitutes a suitable context for a discourse theory of law. Here my concern is to work out a reconstructive approach that encompasses two perspectives: the sociology of law and the philosophy of justice” (Habermas, 1996b: 7).



Within Habermas' conceptual framework developed in *TCA*, law, as a reflexive system or rules, belongs to the societal component of the lifeworld. However, insofar as such a component reproduces itself only in conjunction with the other two, namely culture and personality, legal actions "constitute the medium through which institutions of law simultaneously reproduce themselves along with intersubjectively shared legal traditions and individual competences for interpreting and observing legal rules (...) All three components share cooriginally in the production of legal actions" (Habermas, 1996b: 80-81).

However, law also reaches the subsystems of money and administrative power. As Habermas puts it, "institutions of private and public law make possible the establishment of markets and governmental bodies, because the economic and the administrative system, which have separated from the lifeworld, operate inside the forms of law". (Habermas, 1996b: 40)

Modern law, thus, is connected with all three resources of integration: money, administrative power, and solidarity. In Habermas' words,

(...) the legal code not only keeps one foot in the medium of ordinary language, through which everyday communication achieves social integration in the lifeworld; it also accepts messages that originate there and puts these into a form that is comprehensible to the special codes of the power steered administration and the money-steered economy. To this extent the language of law, unlike the moral communication restricted to the lifeworld, can function as a transformer in the society-wide communication circulating between system and lifeworld. (Habermas, 1996b: 81)

In order to achieve this, law should be able to produce the willingness to comply both through factual constraint and legitimate validity. According to Habermas, this is only possible if citizens see themselves as the authors of the rules that coerce them. As he puts it, "For without religious or metaphysical support, the coercive law tailored for the self-interested use of individual rights can preserve its socially integrating force only insofar as the addressees of legal norms may at the same time understand themselves, taken as a whole, as the rational authors of those norms" (Habermas, 1996b: 33).

*BFN*, thus, is especially an account of how the legitimacy of law ultimately depends on communicative action and communicative power. In other words, it is an account of how the legitimacy of law depends on the institutionalized communicative practice of citizens who, as participants in rational discourses, must be able to examine whether a contested norm meets with, or could meet with, the agreement of all those possibly affected (Habermas, 1996b: 104).

According to Habermas, three elements have to be properly combined in order to establish a concept of law and democracy able to guarantee the kind of legitimacy described above. These elements are the private autonomy of citizens (as expressed and saved in the notion of fundamental rights), democratic citizenship (as expressed in the idea of popular sovereignty), and an independent public sphere.

The first element guarantees everybody's right to pursue a life of her own. Modern constitutions establish, for this reason, a system of equal basic liberties for all the citizens, equal access to, and legal protection by independent courts, and the separation of power between the legislative, judicial, and executive branches.

The second element is meant to institutionalize the inclusiveness of free and equal citizens in the political community. Modern constitutions must guarantee and encourage the political participation of interested citizens. For this reason, they establish equal rights of association, participation, and communication, periodic elections, a diverse system of parties that compete for power based on different programs and platforms, and the majority principle for political decisions.

The third aspect constitutes an intermediary domain between state and society that encourages the formation of considered public opinions. In Habermas' view, modern constitutions establish the necessary separation between state and society, especially through a market economy, but also through freedom of press, freedom of speech, and through regulations guaranteeing mass audiences and civil society access to the public sphere and preventing the monopolization of arenas of public communication by political, social, or economic interests (Habermas, 2009: 141). For Habermas, "The functional separation between the administrative state and a capitalist economy explains why modern societies with democratic constitutions depend on the mediating functions of a public space which is responsive to the spontaneous inputs and stances of the citizens" (Habermas, 2009: 140).

Three models of democracy have attempted to offer a successful account of such elements, namely, the liberal model, the republican and the deliberative.

The liberal tradition, for Habermas, betrays a clear preference for the first element, namely, the liberties of private citizens. As a result, it ends up neglecting the other two elements. In contrast, the republican and the deliberative models "stress the political participation of active citizens in the democratic process and in the formation of considered public opinions" (Habermas, 2009: 141). Nevertheless, according to Habermas, the republican tradition, deeply focused on the notion of "the common good", does not seem to be sensitive enough to the pluralism and multiculturalism of modern societies.

For this reason, Habermas believes, the deliberative model of democracy, properly understood and developed, might be able to save the strengths of the two other traditions without succumbing to their weaknesses.

Habermas recognizes that "the deliberative paradigm has had less impact on the history of political ideas than classical liberalism or republicanism" (Habermas, 2009: 143). His aim, thus, is to show that the deliberative paradigm is the best suited to pose a normative account within the context of our complex modern societies.

The deliberative model emphasizes the reasonableness of discourse and negotiations. The cooperative search for shared solutions to problems is the guiding principle of the whole system. In this sense, "The procedures and communicative presuppositions of the formation of democratic opinion and will serve as the most important sluices for the discursive rationalization of the decisions of the government and of the administration" (Habermas, 2009: 144).

The deliberative model assumes that political deliberation has a cognitive potential. Therefore, it presupposes that people change their minds and perspective

when, in a dialogical attitude, they debate with each other about the pros and cons of any issue. In this way, opinions stop being “mere opinion”, and become “considered opinions”<sup>157</sup>.

In what follows, I will present the way in which Habermas believes such considered opinions are formed. I will emphasize his notion of the public sphere. However it is noteworthy that, in Habermas’ model, deliberation must take place all across the political system. As Habermas puts it, “Only across the full scope of the process of legitimation can ‘deliberation’ perform the filtering function which justifies the supposition that the process of political will formation fishes the reasonable elements of opinion formation out of the murky streams of political communication” (Habermas, 2009: 160).

Habermas identifies, in national societies, three levels of circulation for the cycle of political communications.

First of all, a level of institutionalized discourse constitutes the center of the political system, that is, where the binding decisions take place. Second, the level of “media-based mass communication” is configured by the more or less passive public of readers, listeners, and viewers. This is the level where public opinions take shape. Third, there is the level of everyday communication in civil society in which most of the communications are face-to-face and the latent attitudes of potential voters take shape.

The following chart summarizes Habermas’ view of this structure:

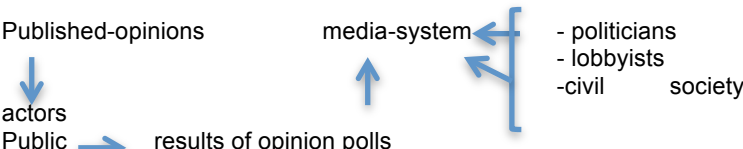
Modes of communication	Arenas of political communication	
Institutionalized discourses and negotiations	Government, administration, parliaments, courts, etc.	Political system 1) State institutions
Media-based mass communication in dispersed public spheres		2) Political Public Sphere
Communication among the addressees	Arranged and informal relations, social networks and movements	3) Civil Society

Table 2. Levels of Political Communications

The first level refers to the core of the political system, that is, the state and its familiar institutions of the parliaments, the courts, the executive and administrative bodies, the

<sup>157</sup> According to Habermas, ‘considered public opinions’ mainly constitute “a pair of contrary, more or less coherent opinions, weighted in accordance with agreement and disagreement, which refer to a relevant issue and express what appears at the time, in the light of available information, to be the most plausible or reasoned interpretations of a sufficiently relevant – though generally controversial – issue” (Habermas, 166: 2009).

coalition panels, the committees, etc. The products of this level are laws, political programs, judicial findings, official guidelines, public policies, regulations and measures, etc. All these are the result of institutionalized deliberation and decision-making processes.

The third level is civil society. However, this term does not have the traditional meaning. Indeed, it is not the bourgeois society of the liberal tradition. It does not have a Hegelian connotation (system of needs: a market system involving social labor and commodity exchange). It does not include the economy as constituted by private law and steered through markets in labor, capital, and commodities. Rather, as Habermas puts it,

its institutional core comprises those nongovernmental and noneconomic connections and voluntary associations that anchor the communication structures of the public sphere in the society component of the lifeworld. Civil society is composed of those more or less spontaneously emergent associations, organizations, and movements that, attuned to how societal problems resonate in the private life spheres, distill and transmit such reactions in amplified form to the public sphere. The core of civil society comprises a network of associations that institutionalizes problem solving discourses on questions of general interest inside the framework of organized public spheres. These "discursive designs" have an egalitarian, open form of organization that mirrors essential features of the kind of communication around which they crystallize and to which they lend continuity and permanence (Habermas, 1996b: 366-367).

Finally, the level that mediates between the two previous levels is the public sphere. The public sphere is, thus, an intermediate space of deliberation situated between the formally organized discussions and negotiations at the center of the political system and the informal conversations which take place in civil society at the periphery of the political system. As Habermas puts it, "The public sphere forms the loosely structured periphery to the densely populated institutional centre of the state, and it is rooted in turn in the still more fleeting communicative networks of civil society" (Habermas, 2009: 159).

Like the lifeworld, the public sphere is reproduced by communicative actions. The public sphere, however, does not refer to the functions of the contents of everyday communication. It refers, rather, to the social space generated in and by the communicative actions of the persons. In Habermas' words,

Every encounter in which actors do not just observe each other but take a second-person attitude, reciprocally attributing communicative freedom to each other, unfolds in a linguistically constituted public space. This space stands open, in principle, for potential dialogue partners who are present as bystanders or could come on the scene and join those present (...)

Founded in communicative action, this spatial structure of simple and episodic encounters can be expanded and rendered more permanent in an abstract form for a larger public of present persons. For the public infrastructure of such assemblies, performances, presentations, and so on, architectural metaphors of structured spaces recommend themselves: we speak of forums, stages, arenas, and the like. These public spheres still cling to the concrete locales where an audience is physically gathered. The more they detach themselves from the public's physical presence and extend to the virtual presence of scattered readers, listeners, or viewers linked by public media, the clearer becomes the abstraction that enters when the spatial structure of simple interactions is expanded into a public sphere (Habermas, 1996b: 361).

The public sphere, thus, branches out into a variety of overlapping arenas: local, regional, national and international<sup>158</sup>. They can be specified by their functions, thematic, foci, density of communication, organizational complexity, range, etc. All of them, however, are potentially accessible to laypersons. In this sense, the public sphere includes, as Habermas indicates, "from the episodic publics found in taverns, coffee houses, or on the streets; through the occasional or "arranged" publics of particular presentations and events, such as theater performances, rock concerts, party assemblies, or church congresses; up to the abstract public sphere of isolated readers, listeners, and viewers scattered across large geographic areas, or even around the globe, and brought together only through the mass media" (Habermas, 1996b: 374).

Porosity and permeability are two strong characteristics of the public sphere. Accordingly, even if we can realize such manifold differentiations, all those areas remain porous and permeable to one another. In Habermas' words,

The one text of "the" public sphere, a text continually extrapolated and extending radially in all directions, is divided by internal boundaries into arbitrarily small texts for which everything else is context; yet one can always build hermeneutical bridges from one text to the next. Segmented public spheres are constituted with the help of exclusion mechanisms; however, because publics cannot harden into organizations or systems, there is no exclusion rule without a proviso for its abolishment. In other words, boundaries inside the universal public sphere as defined by its reference to the political system remain permeable in principle (Habermas, 1996b: 374).

However, we can try to specify the political public sphere by the topics discussed within it, namely, perceived social problems in the light of competing requirement of justice that trigger political demands from a wide variety of social actors.

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<sup>158</sup> The topic of the international public spheres will be the analyzed in the next chapter.

These actors are, for instance, committed citizen groups, advocates, churches, intellectual within civil society, etc. Habermas groups all the potential actors in three main categories.

The first group belongs to the center of the political systems and is constituted by politicians and political parties. The second group is related to the functional systems of society and it is composed of lobbyists and special interest groups. Finally, the third group comes from civil society itself: advocates, public interests groups, churches, intellectuals, and NGO's<sup>159</sup>.

In Habermas' model, all these actors have the function of producing public opinions, that is, "clusters of controversial issues and inputs to which the parties concerned intuitively attach *weights* in accordance with their perceptions of the cumulative 'yes' and 'no' stances of the wider public" (Habermas, 2009: 165). These public opinions, on his part, exert influence. "They form a milieu to which thoughts and feelings adjust, and thereby they exercise an indirect pressure on opinions and attitudes" (Habermas, 2009: 165). In the long run, therefore, they influence the formation of mentalities.

Finally, the influence of the public opinions should affect two complementary sides. On the one hand, it is supposed to affect the practice of an attentive government, and, on the other, it is supposed to affect the "mass public from which it originated and which now becomes reflexively aware of the opinions which acquired supremacy within its midst" (Habermas, 2009: 165).

A final element to be noticed in Habermas' account refers to the role of media. According to Habermas, "the networks of media and of news agencies form the infrastructure of the public sphere" (Habermas, 2009: 164). In this context, media professionals are supposed to produce an elite discourse using the contributions of various actors. Within the theoretical framework of *BFN*, Habermas even refers to the media as a special sort of actor. As he put it back then, "A third group of actors<sup>160</sup> are the journalists, publicity agents, and members of the press (...) who collect information, make decisions about the selection and presentation of "programs," and to a certain

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<sup>159</sup> In Habermas' model this latter actor is crucially important. As he puts it, "The political public sphere can fulfill its function of perceiving and thematizing encompassing social problems only insofar as it develops out of the communication taking place among those who are potentially affected. It is carried by a public recruited from the entire citizenry. But in the diverse voices of this public, one hears the echo of private experiences that are caused throughout society by the externalities (and internal disturbances) of various functional systems—and even by the very state apparatus on whose regulatory activities the complex and poorly coordinated subsystems depend. Systemic deficiencies are experienced in the context of individual life histories; such burdens accumulate in the lifeworld. The latter has the appropriate antennae, for in its horizon are intermeshed the private life histories of the "clients" of functional systems that might be failing in their delivery of services. It is only for those who are immediately affected that such services are paid in the currency of "use values." Besides religion, art, and literature, only the spheres of "private" life have an existential language at their disposal, in which such socially generated problems can be assessed in terms of one's own life history. Problems voiced in the public sphere first become visible when they are mirrored in personal life experiences. To the extent that these experiences find their concise expression in the languages of religion, art, and literature, the "literary" public sphere in the broader sense, which is specialized for the articulation of values and world disclosure, is intertwined with the political public sphere". (Habermas, 1996b: 365).

<sup>160</sup> Here Habermas refers to the following distinction: "One can distinguish, at least tentatively, the more loosely organized actors who "emerge from" the public, as it were, from other actors merely "appearing before" the public" (Habermas, 1996b: 375). The media, thus, refers to a third kind of actors.

extent control the entry of topics, contributions, and authors into the mass-media-dominated public sphere” (Habermas, 1996b: 376)<sup>161</sup>.

As can be seen, Habermas offers a much more optimistic picture of the potentials of the public sphere than the one sketched in his early work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Habermas, to be sure, is still aware that “a public sphere dominated by the electronic mass media is as much an instrument of manipulation and indoctrination (with private television often playing a deplorable vanguard role) as of information” (Habermas, 2006b: 145). Nonetheless, he is now prepared to admit that, *under favorable conditions*, the media-dominated public sphere is still able to generate considered public opinions and thus contribute to “the deliberative quality of the political process in the way envisaged for this sector by the deliberative model” (Habermas, 2009: 167).

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In spite of the evolution of Habermas’ concept of the public sphere, it must be noticed that religion does not receive any kind of special treatment in the analysis. At the most, churches and religious communities are considered one potential actor within the category of actors stemming from civil society.

This neglect of religion had already been indicated by Habermas’ critics since his first approach to the concept of public sphere. David Zaret, for instance, explicitly developed this line of criticism in his text ‘Religion, Science, and Printing in the Public Spheres in Seventeenth- Century England’ published in the book *Habermas and the Public Sphere*<sup>162</sup>.

According to Craig Calhoun, the editor of the aforementioned book,

Habermas implicitly follows the philosophers in imagining that religion and science must stand in a sort of hydraulic relationship to one another. For all their criticism of the Enlightenment, Adorno and Horkheimer (at least until his old age) also shared this view that religion must decline as enlightenment progresses. That secularization is part and parcel of modernity and, closely linked to the rise of rational critical discourse, goes unquestioned. This view contributes to Habermas’s blind spot on the role of religion both as a central thematic topic in the early public sphere and as one of its enduring institutional bases. This is true not only of England, where religious debate was perhaps as important as literary discourse in paving the way for the political public sphere. It was also true in France, where the anticlerical obsessions of many leading Enlightenment thinkers

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<sup>161</sup> For a particular discussion on the role of the press in a political public sphere See ‘Chapter 8. Media Markets, and Consumers: The Quality Press as the Backbone of the Political Public Sphere’, in Habermas, *Europe The Faltering Project*, 2009, Polity Press, Cambridge.

<sup>162</sup> See *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. by Craig Calhoun, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1992.

were ancestors of the very antireligious assumptions Habermas inherits".  
(Calhoun, 1992: 35-36)<sup>163</sup>.

For these critics, it is deeply surprising that Habermas does not emphasize the role of religion when he presented, in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, his account of how the family contributed to give rise to a notion of "pure and undifferentiated" humanity.

In addition, it is remarkable too Habermas' blindness, or at least his silence, to the role played by religious communities around the world in so many processes of democratization and public discourses supporting civil rights.

As presented in this section, Habermas was especially sensitive to the criticisms developed against his first book. He corrected many of these deficiencies in his second approach in *BFN*. However, in regard to the role of religion in the public sphere it is fair to indicate, against Habermas, that simply affirming that Churches and religious communities are an actor of civil society is just not enough. It is clear, then, that Habermas' work had been lacking a direct and explicit treatment of the role of religion in the public sphere.

### III

Habermas, perhaps, should have developed earlier an explicit account of the role of religion in the public sphere even if the only reason for doing so would be to avoid misunderstandings of his own philosophy.

In this context, it is noteworthy Rorty's perspective<sup>164</sup> on the role of religion in the political debates of a democracy because he presents his own view, in fact, as a "Habermasian" one. Rorty, indeed, explicitly thinks that what he is presenting is coherent with a Habermasian account of the role of religion in the public realm of a democracy<sup>165</sup>. Ironically, as we will see, Habermas' account of the role of religion in the public sphere is diametrically opposed to what Rorty interprets in Habermas' own work<sup>166</sup>.

For Rorty, Habermas is a philosopher who, like him, embraces the ideals of the Enlightenment. From this perspective, according to Rorty, the secularization of public

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<sup>163</sup> See Calhoun Craig, 'Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere', *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. by Craig Calhoun, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1992. The following quote from Habermas' early book seems to favor this interpretation: "The major tendencies that prevailed by the end of the eighteenth century are well-known, The feudal powers, the Church, the prince, and the nobility, who were the carriers of the representative publicness, disintegrated in a process of polarization; in the end they split into private elements, on the one hand, and public ones, on the other. The status of the Church changed as a result of the **Reformation**; the anchoring in divine authority that it represented-that is, religion-became a private matter. The so-called freedom of religion historically secured the first sphere of private autonomy; the Church itself continued to exist as one corporate body among others under public law. (Habermas, 1991c: 11-12)

<sup>164</sup> Rorty's position on the subject can be found in his brief essay titled *Religion As Conversation-Stopper* which can be found in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, Penguin Books, 1999, England.

<sup>165</sup> Rorty is discussing and criticizing Stephen L. Carter's *The Culture of Disbelief How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion*, Anchor Books, 1994

<sup>166</sup> Habermas' account looks very similar to Carter's own position.



life is regarded as the Enlightenment's central achievement. In this sense, the role of the philosopher is to make that her fellow citizens rely less on tradition and, thus, be more will to experiment with new practices and institutions.

In Rorty's view, the compromise that the Enlightenment reached with the religious citizens consists in privatizing religion and keeping it out of the public realm. In Rorty's view, contemporary liberal philosophers such as Rawls and Habermas "think that we shall not be able to keep a democratic political community going unless the religious believers remain willing to trade privatization for a guarantee of religious liberty" (Rorty, 1999: 170-171).

For Rorty, religion needs to be privatized because "in political discussion with those outside the relevant religious community, it is a conversation-stopper" (Rorty, 1999: 171). The argument "X political position should be hold because it is required by a particular understanding of God's will" constitutes, within a pluralist circle, a radical end to a conversation. According to Rorty, the natural reaction from a non-believer would be the following: "So what? We weren't discussing your private life; we were discussing public policy. Don't bother us with matters that are not our concern." (Rorty, 1999: 171).

Now, in order to show how Habermas' account of the role of religion in the public sphere is diametrically opposed to what Rorty interprets in Habermas' own work, I will first of all, present the new general perspective from which Habermas develops his new approach. Second, I will expound how Habermas' postmetaphysical approach to religion is constructed largely based on Kant's philosophy of religion as well as its reception by Hegel, Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard. After presenting the main aspects of Habermas' postmetaphysical look at religion, I will elaborate on the new light in which such a perspective is able to see the role played by religion in human evolution. Finally, I will analyze the immediate factual and theoretical context in which Habermas' account of the role of religion in the public sphere lies, and, then, using an illustrative example, I will describe such an account.

The question about the role of religion in the public sphere needs to be explicitly directed to problem of the nature of the religious phenomenon itself. Habermas needs to explain whether or not it might be the case that "religious believers' moral convictions are somehow more deeply interwoven with their self-identity than those of atheists with theirs" (Rorty, 1999: 174). Rorty, of course, seems to deny this idea. Habermas, in contrast, as we will see, is willing to give it some credit.

Habermas develops his final account of religion from a political perspective. As such, his account refers to how the endurance and revitalization of religion constitutes both a challenge and a potential resource for liberal democracies as well as for an emerging global public sphere.

However, as just mentioned, Habermas' look in this final approach to religion also constitutes an attempt to overcome the perspective of a complete outsider: although as a philosopher, Habermas does make a serious effort to understand the religious phenomenon in itself.

It must not come as a surprise that Habermas' perspective is also the product of his debate with theologians. The public starting moment of this new debate was the conference organized on October 7-9, 1988 at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. The title of the conference was "Critical Theory: Its Promise and Limitations for a Theology of the Public Realm".

In order to answer the challenges of the theologians, Habermas' postmetaphysical perspective cannot abstain to dispute theological affirmations in virtue of its previously alleged meaninglessness (Habermas, 1983: 12)<sup>167</sup>. In contrast, Habermas now wonders about the possibility of a "rational sublation" of religious and theological contents "without destroying the import of religious doctrines" (Habermas, 2002: 99).

The Catholic theologian Johann Baptist Metz is one of the main partners in this new stage of debate and conversation. In Habermas' words, "The thought of Johannes Baptist Metz fascinates me – not least because I recognize common purposes at work, albeit across a certain distance. The fact that similar problems should arise both for the theologian and for someone who adopts the philosophical position of methodological atheism is less surprising than the parallels between the answers" (Habermas, 2002: 129).

In his essay titled *Israel or Athens: Where does Anamnestic Reason Belong?*, Habermas elaborates on Metz's attempt to rescue "Christian reason" from the domain of Greek metaphysics. From Metz's perspective, "A philosophical conception of reason derived from Greece has so alienated a Hellenized Christianity from its own origins in the spirit of Israel that theology has become insensitive to the outcry of the suffering and the demand for universal justice" (Habermas, 2002: 130).

In this text, Habermas acknowledges the crucial role played by religion in the development of modernity. Unlike in *TCA*, modern thought is not presented anymore as a simple overcoming opposed, in many senses, to the previous religious thought. Modern thought, in contrast, is conceived now, partially at least, as the product of religion itself.

According to Habermas, without the subversion of "Greek metaphysics by notions of authentically Jewish and Christian origin, we could not have developed that network of specifically modern notions which come together in the thought of a reason which is both communicative and historically situated" (Habermas, 2002: 132)<sup>168</sup>.

Habermas finds two concrete fields in which philosophy and theology can interact.

The first of them refers to the problem of theodicy or, in other words, to the question of the meaning and salvation of those who have suffered unjustly. In this area, philosophy might be able to appropriate in its own language the semantic potentials preserved by religious traditions. However, from Habermas' view, this appropriation does not entail the weakening and vanishing of the religious doctrines themselves.

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<sup>167</sup> Let us remember this old quote: "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 (Habermas, 1983: 12).

<sup>168</sup> These notions are, for Habermas, the following: the concept of subjective freedom and the demand for equal respect for all (specially for the stranger in her own distinctiveness and otherness); the concept of autonomy, the concepts of socialized subjects (who are individuated by their life histories but also considered as irreplaceable individuals and members of a community; and the concept of liberation (understood both as an emancipation from degrading conditions as well as an utopian project of a harmonious way of life). In addition, for Habermas, "the irruption of historical thought into philosophy has fostered insight into the limited span of human life. It has made us more aware of the narrative structure of the histories in which we are caught up, and the fateful character of the events that confront us. This awareness includes a sense of the fallibility of human mind, and of the contingent conditions under which even our unconditional claims are raised" (Habermas, 2002: 133).

The history of philosophy offers clear examples of this interaction in all those philosophical thoughts that have insisted on “the positivity and obstinacy of the negative” (Habermas, 2002: 134). This perspective had already been elaborated by Habermas in his remarks on the *Tsimtsum*. However, now Habermas clearly and explicitly affirms that appropriation does not have to mean the exhaustion of the original source.

Furthermore, Habermas now accepts that his own philosophy can be regarded as a case of this appropriation. In Habermas’ words,

Now it is argumentative reason itself which reveals, in the deeper layer of its own pragmatic presupposition, the conditions for laying claim to an unconditional meaning. It thereby holds open the dimensions of validity-claims which transcend social space and historical time. In this way it makes a breach in the normality of mundane events, which are devoid of any promissory note. Without this, normality would close itself hermetically against any experience of a solidarity and justice which is *lacking*. (Habermas, 2002: 134)<sup>169</sup>

In this first field philosophy has to recognize its own limitations. This means that philosophy should not try to offer the sort of assurances that religious worldviews present. Philosophy “stands under the sign of a transcendence from within, and has to content itself with the reasoned resolve of a skeptical but non-defeatist ‘resistance to the idols and demons of a world which holds humanity in contempt’” (Habermas, 2002: 135).

The second field in which a positive interaction between philosophy and theology can take place refers to Metz’s idea of the “Polycentric World Church”<sup>170</sup>. In this second domain philosophy seems to be able to have a more active and influencing role. Philosophy “can even assist a theology which aims to clarify the status of Christianity and the Church in the light of pluralism of cultures and understandings of the world” (Habermas, 2002: 135).

Philosophy, in this sense, might interact with religious discourses and suggest them ways to develop self-reflective analysis. In the case of Christianity, for instance, philosophy is in a good position to affirm that it “cannot start from the ‘idea of an ahistorical, culturally unbiased and ethnically innocent Christianity. Rather, it must remain aware both of theological origins and of its institutional entanglement with the history of European colonialism’” (Habermas, 2002: 135).

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<sup>169</sup> More explicitly, Habermas affirms: “I would not object to the claim that my conception of language and of communicative action oriented toward mutual understanding nourishes itself from the legacy of Christianity. The ‘telos of reaching understanding’ (...) may well nourish itself from the heritage of a *logos* understood as Christian, one that is indeed embodied (...) in the communicative practice of the religious congregation. Already the communicative – theoretical version of the concept of emancipation in *Knowledge and Human Interest* could be ‘unmasked’ as the secularizing translation of the divine promise of salvation” (Habermas, 2002: 160).

<sup>170</sup> See Johann Baptist Metz, *A passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity*. Paulist Press, New York, 1998.

As a result of this self-reflection, Christianity has to recognize that in multicultural societies human rights and the principles of the constitutional state constitute the common aspects for a political culture which unites all citizens. Hence, “Christianity cannot expect its ethically saturated conceptions of the history of salvation or of the created order to receive universal recognition *in the same sense* as a procedurally formulated theory of law and morality” (Habermas, 2002: 136).

This kind of self-reflection must be able to reach the context of a multicultural world society. Clearly, in this case self-reflection has to be more far-reaching and deeper. This is why philosophy is indeed in a very good position to develop an active and influencing role. As Habermas puts it, “in the case of the dialogical contest between religious and metaphysical worldviews, a common conception of the good which could play the same role as this shared legal and moral basis is lacking. This means that this contest has to be played out with a reflexive awareness that all concerned move in the same universe of discourse, and respect each other as collaborative participants in the search for ethical-existential truth” (Habermas, 2002: 137).

For Habermas, the philosophical spirit of political enlightenment with its emphasis on a secularized world of moral and rational-legal universalism constitutes a powerful contributor to develop the principles for a truly polycentric world Church.

As we will see, Habermas’ new approach of religion consists in the deepening of the relations and tensions between these two fields of interaction.

In his debate with the theologians, Habermas’ text *Transcendence from Within, Transcendence in this World* is of utmost importance. In this essay Habermas explicitly recognizes two flaws within his previous account of religion.

First, Habermas accepts that his description of religion in *TCA* was too narrow, too functionalistic, and, thus one-sided. In contrast, he now affirms, “Even in traditional societies, the world religions do *not* function *exclusively* as a legitimation of governmental authority: in their origin and in their core, they are often protest movements against the basic trend of a society’s development and attempt to ground other ways for human beings to relate to one another and to reality as a whole” (Habermas, 2002: 79)<sup>171</sup>.

Second, Habermas also recognizes to have subsumed “rather too hastily the development of religion in modernity with Max Weber under the “privatization of the powers of faith” (Habermas, 2002: 79). This led him to suggest the collapse of religious worldviews; a collapse that left only one choice, namely, the affirmation of secular principles of a universalist ethics of responsibility.

It is noteworthy that Habermas is not denying that, in Western societies, after modernity, the role of religious worldviews changed and their influence weakened. However, what he explicitly affirms now is that the social scientist cannot simply project developing trends forward in a straight line. Similarly, the philosopher has to accept that “intuitions which had long been articulated in religious language can neither be rejected nor simply retrieved rationally” (Habermas, 2002: 79). Therefore, in Habermas’ view, “The process of a critical appropriation of the essential contents of religious tradition is still underway and the outcome is difficult to predict” (Habermas, 2002: 79).

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<sup>171</sup> I will refer to the issue later when I discuss Habermas’ remarks on the role of religion and a new form of legitimating political power.

In *Transcendence from Within, Transcendence in this World*, Habermas summarizes what according to himself constitutes his new position in regards to religion. According to Habermas, “As long as religious language bears with itself inspiring, indeed unrelinquishable semantic contents which elude (for the moment?) the expressive power of a philosophical language and still await translation into a discourse that gives reason for its positions, philosophy, even in its postmetaphysical form, will neither be able to replace nor to repress religion” (Habermas, 2002: 79)<sup>172</sup>. This is a quote from Habermas’ book *Postmetaphysical Thinking*. In this sense, Habermas’ new perspective on religion is also derived from his remarks on the role of a postmetaphysical philosophy.

Habermas’ remarks on Kant’s philosophy of religion presented in *The Boundary between Faith and Knowledge: On the Reception and Contemporary Importance of Kant’s Philosophy of Religion*<sup>173</sup> offers us a good place to begin the reconstruction of his postmetaphysical analysis of religion.

Kant’s philosophy of religion has two poles that create an intrinsic tension. On the one hand, Kant, the enlightener, wants to tame religion through the authority of reason. On the other hand, however, Kant, the moralist, does not want to surrender to the enlightened defeatism of unbelief. “Against skepticism, he wants to rescue the contents of faith and the religious commitments that can be justified within the bounds of reason alone” (Habermas, 2008: 211).

The first strand of Kant’s thought is the result of the proud declaration of independence of the secular morality of reason from theology. Philosophy feels capable of differentiating the rational from the irrational within religious doctrines. Reason alone becomes the standard for interpreting ecclesiastical faith. From this perspective, articles of faith, such as the resurrection of the body of Christ, have to be rejected as historical embellishments. Reason “must also strip central articles of faith, such as that God became man in the person of Jesus Christ, of their essential meaning and reinterpret divine mercy, for example, into an imperative of self-reliance” (Habermas, 2008: 214).

The second pole of Kant’s philosophy of religion is related to the problem of motivation, or to be more precise, to the problem of the practical reason’s lack of motivation to act morally. From Kant’s moral philosophy, happiness is not guaranteed to the human being that conducts morally. At most she shows herself to be worthy of experiencing happiness. “Morality is supposed to make the virtuous person worthy of happiness, not happy as such”. (Habermas, 2008: 215).

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<sup>172</sup> This is a quote from Habermas’ book *Postmetaphysical Thinking*. Indeed, there he affirmed: “Viewed from without, religion, which has largely been deprived of its world-view functions, is still indispensable in ordinary life for normalizing intercourse with the extraordinary. For this reason, even postmetaphysical thinking continues to coexist with religious practice 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” (Habermas, 1996b: 51).

<sup>173</sup> Habermas’ remarks on Kant’s philosophy of religion and its reception, especially by Hegel, Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard, gives us more clues about what Habermas aims to do in his own account. In this essay Habermas recalls the boundaries that Kant draws in his philosophy of religion and then turns to the historical reception and contemporary relevance of this attempt to appropriate religious contents on a rational basis (Habermas, 2008: 212).

Therefore, once morality and the promise of happiness have been disconnected, Kant believes that religion's suggestive and inspiring narratives and images might be able to play a motivational role for following moral rules. "Kant supplements moral thought with the dimension of the prospect of a better world for the sake of morality itself, to reinforce its confidence in itself and to preserve it from defeatism" (Habermas, 2008: 221).

In Habermas' view, nonetheless, the two poles from which Kant develops his philosophy of religion entail, at the end, insurmountable contradictions. Kant's contradictory intention to treat religion both as a heritage and as an opponent is deeply problematic. It is hard to explain how, in Kant's view, religion is both "the source of a morality that satisfies the standards of reason", and "an obscure refuge to be cleansed of obscurantism and zealotry". For Habermas, briefly put, Kant's "goal of assimilating religious contents in a reflexive manner conflicts with the aim of the critique of religion to decide questions of the truth and falsity of these contents in a philosophical manner. Reason cannot have its religious cake and eat it" (Habermas, 2008: 227).

In addition to Kant's philosophy of religion, Habermas also analyzes the reception of Kant's approach by three philosophers: Hegel, Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard.

For Habermas, Hegel is right at criticizing Kant for attempting to measure religion against the yardstick of the abstract and empty concepts of the understanding. Hegel, nonetheless, also "upholds the claim of the philosophical enlightenment to justify the truth content of religion in rational terms" (Habermas, 2008: 230). In Hegel's view, "With the concept of the absolute mind that externalizes itself in nature and history and then recuperates itself reflexively in this other, philosophy incorporates the fundamental idea of Christianity and makes the incarnation of God into the principle of its own dialectical thought" (Habermas, 2008: 231).

However, in regard to the reflexive assimilation of religious contents, instead of the Kantian progressive replacement of positive religion by a pure rational religion, Hegel brings forth the thought of the genealogical reconstruction of a historical context of emergence of which reason itself is a part.

In any event, Hegel does maintain the same perspective held by Kant of a philosopher who approaches religion from a privileged and superior standpoint. Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard, in contrast, present a perspective that attempts to respect and value religion in its very otherness.

Schleiermacher is not interested so much in the contents of religious faith but in the question of what it means to have faith.

In the performativity of having faith, Schleiermacher discovers the feeling of utter and reflexive dependence that characterize every conscious life. From Schleiermacher's perspective, in the process of intuitive self-reassurance, the finite subject turned toward the world "becomes conscious of its dependence on another being who first makes conscious life possible prior to our intentional distance from what we receive from the world and what we bring about in it". (Habermas, 2008: 233).

Schleiermacher's perspective allows the accommodation of religious pluralism within society and the state without making violence to religious traditions. The feeling of dependence characteristic of the human species that was found in the act of having a faith, whatever it may be, is easily seen as branching out into different traditions once it

“assumes the practical form of an ecclesiastically practiced faith as believers unite to form communicative communities”. (Habermas, 2008: 234).

The recognition of the philosophical insight of the common rational origin of all world religions should lead to religious communities to find a legitimate place within the differentiated structure of modern societies. In Habermas’ view, Schleiermacher perspective makes it easy for religious communities to “practice mutual tolerance, recognize the secular order of the liberal state, and respect the authority of the sciences specialized in factual knowledge without damaging their respective claims to truth vis-a-vis members of other confessions and nonbelievers” (Habermas, 2008: 234)<sup>174</sup>.

Similar to Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard’s approach represents an attempt to demarcate between reason and religion from the side of revealed faith. “In this way, Kierkegaard turns Kant’s transcendental self-restriction of reason against its own anthropocentrism. It is not reason that sets restrictions on religion, but religious experience that shows reason its place” (Habermas, 2008:235). Religion forces reason to reflect on its deepest foundations and, thus, to discover its origin in an other of himself. The Kierkegaardian impulse to will to be oneself “should lead the finite mind to transcend itself and hence also to recognize its dependence on an absolute other in which individual freedom is founded” (Habermas, 2008: 236). As a result, for Kierkegaard, the secularized self-understanding of modern reason is overcome.

It is noteworthy that in addition to the influences of Kant, Hegel, Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard, Habermas’ postmetaphysical perspective on religion is also constructed as a response to the deep threat to the normative content of Western.

As presented in Chapter 1, Habermas shares the characterization that Hegel made of the achievements of modernity with the concepts ‘self—consciousness’, ‘self-determination’, and ‘self—realization’. As he puts it, “Self-consciousness is a function of the growth in reflexivity in the context of a perpetual revision of dissolved traditions, self-determination is the result of the predominance of egalitarian and individualistic universalism in law and morality, and self-realization the result of the pressure toward individuation and self—direction under conditions of a highly abstract ego identity” (Habermas, 2008: 238)

However, as described in chapters 3 and 4, in Habermas’ view, this normative consciousness is being threatened from within by the uncontrolled process of modernization itself. The integrative mechanisms of the market and bureaucracy have extended and colonized social space in which the guiding principles should be social solidarity and social integration. This has caused the uncontrolled development of social interactions oriented to individual success to the detriment of social interactions oriented to understanding. This was, briefly put, Habermas’ diagnosis of modernity in *TCA*. Now, to this dark picture, he further adds that “the establishment of new technologies that deeply permeate substrates of the human person that used to be regarded as “natural” promotes a naturalistic self-understanding among experiencing subjects in their interactions with one another (Habermas, 2008: 238-239)<sup>175</sup>.

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<sup>174</sup> However, Habermas is aware that the danger of overemphasizing this conception is that the “integration of the Church into society and the privatization of faith rob the religious relation to transcendence of its disruptive power within the world” (Habermas, 2008: 234).

<sup>175</sup> This issue will be expanded and discussed in the Appendix.

Within this context, postmetaphysical thinking is just not powerful enough to offer a general solution to the dwindling sensitivity to social pathologies and to social deprivation and suffering that we can find in Western societies. In Habermas' view, postmetaphysical thinking "can no longer draw on the kind of reasons that could elevate a single motivating worldview above all others, specifically, one which satisfies existential expectations, provides binding orientations for life as a whole, or even offers consolation" (Habermas, 2008: 239).

Within the plurality of conception of what a good life is and competing worldviews, disagreement between them is something to be rationally expected. In this context, philosophy does not have other choice but so assume a role of translator-mediator and promote moral, legal and political harmony. In this context, philosophy's role consists in fostering "enlightenment concerning the legitimate diversity of the substantive life plans of believers, members of different faiths, and unbelievers" (Habermas, 2008: 240).

Philosophy, thus, cannot assume the posture of an allegedly superior competitor of those diverse views themselves. As an interpreter, nonetheless, what philosophy can do is to foster "the revival of sensibilities, thoughts, and motives that, although they spring from other resources, would remain buried if they were not brought into the light of public reason through philosophical conceptualization". (Habermas, 2008: 240).

In order to achieve this, thus, postmetaphysical thinking needs to follow "Hegel's heritage" and interpret "the suggestive images and thick narratives of the major world religions as the history of a mind that awaits reflexive appropriation through the labor of the concept" (Habermas, 2008: 240). From this interpretation, philosophy forces itself to be interested in the eventual uncomprehended religious traditions and misunderstood communal practices insights, intuitions, expressive possibilities, sensibilities, and modes of social interaction which, "although not inherently alien to public reason, are too enigmatic to be spontaneously absorbed into the communicative circuits of society as a whole" (Habermas, 2008: 240). In all these contents, according to Habermas, philosophy might have an enormous potential to regenerate modernity's atrophied normative consciousness. They even might put the exultant march of capitalist modernization in a different light by reviving sensibilities that have become blunted to social pathologies.

However, as both Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard's perspective indicate, philosophy's rapprochement to religion needs to be performed not from the perspective of a superior judge, but from the perspective of a peer in search of a fruitful dialogue. Philosophy, thus, should acknowledge religion as a counterpart of equal rank.

As we saw, Schleiermacher's account of religion presents it as a contemporary phenomenon attuned with the complexity of modernity. In particular, for Habermas, Schleiermacher constitutes a case of a "modernization of religious consciousness from "within" that then links up with the normatively indispensable conditions of postconventional law, with the pluralism of worldviews, and with scientifically institutionalized factual knowledge" (Habermas, 2008: 242).

In any event, philosophy must know as well that even if dialogue takes place, religion will always remain different to philosophy. Thus, philosophy also needs to acknowledge the irreducible heterogeneity of a religious faith "that unreservedly rejects



the anthropocentricity of a form of philosophical thought that takes its point of departure from within the world” (Habermas, 2008: 242). In Habermas’ words,

Philosophy can draw rational sustenance from the religious heritage only as long as the source of revelation that orthodoxy counterposes to philosophy remains a cognitively unacceptable imposition for the latter. The perspectives which are centered either in God or in human beings cannot be converted into one another. Once this boundary between faith and knowledge becomes porous, and once religious motives force their way into philosophy under false pretenses, reason loses its foothold and succumbs to irrational effusion (Habermas, 2008: 242- 243)

This is why Habermas’ postmetaphysical approach to religion describes an agnostic position that attempts to make a clear distinction between belief and knowledge<sup>176</sup>. It is, in addition, a dialogical approach able to “adopt a critical attitude toward religious traditions while at the same time being open to learning from them”. (Habermas, 2008: 245).

Thus, philosophy should not attempt to decide what is true or false in religion. The internal questions of the validity of religion should be left to the rational apologetics of each religious worldview. The role of philosophy refers, in contrast, to salvage cognitive contents from religious traditions. These contents are considered as cognitive by philosophy because they “can be translated into a form of discourse decoupled from the ratcheting effect of truths of revelation. In this discourse, only “public” reasons count, hence reasons that have the power to convince also beyond the boundaries of a particular religious community” (Habermas, 2008: 245).

A postmetaphysical approach to religion is, furthermore, able to appreciate the history of philosophical thought as a long process of translating crucial religious contents into the language of philosophy. As Habermas indicates, “There is a certain self-deception in the secularist self-understanding of a “scientific” philosophy that sees itself exclusively as the heir of Greek philosophy and as a natural adversary of religion” (Habermas, 2010: 6).

In contrast, as mentioned before, concepts like person and individuality, freedom and justice, solidarity and community, emancipation, history and crisis constitute conceptual traces that the religious monotheistic traditions in connection with Greek philosophy have left in contemporary philosophical thought. For Habermas, furthermore, “We cannot know whether this process of appropriating semantic potentials from a discourse that in its core remains inaccessible has *exhausted* itself or if it can be continued. The conceptual labor of religious writers and authors such as the young Bloch and Benjamin, Levinas, or Derrida speaks in favor of the continuing productivity of such a philosophical effort” (Habermas, 2010: 4).

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<sup>176</sup> Similarly, for Habermas, philosophy should not attempt to “blur the difference that exists between faith and knowledge in the mode of taking-to-be-true. Even if thinking about the postsecular situation should result in an altered attitude toward religion, this revisionism may not change the fact that postmetaphysical thinking is a secular thinking that insists on distinguishing faith and knowledge as two essentially different modes of taking-to-be-true”. (Habermas, 2010, 5)

It is necessary to quote again Habermas' idea according to which "As long as religious language bears with itself inspiring, indeed unrelinquishable semantic contents which elude (for the moment?) the expressive power of a philosophical language and still await translation into a discourse that gives reason for its positions, philosophy, even in its postmetaphysical form, will neither be able to replace nor to repress religion" (Habermas, 2002: 79).

This statement, as we can see, entails two possibilities. On the one hand, Habermas might be implying that philosophy's goal consists in completely assimilating and translating all desirable religious content. On the other hand, however, it might mean that, for Habermas, "religion will forever resist all efforts at such an intervention – and that it thus always will remain inassimilable and inaccessible, and in a certain sense thus also autonomous and unavoidable" (Habermas, 2002: 163).

Interestingly enough, directly confronted with these two options<sup>177</sup>, Habermas' answer was: "I don't know. That will emerge if and when philosophy carries on its work on its religious heritage with more sensitivity than it has so far" (Habermas, 2002: 163).

Habermas, to be sure, does not want to make projections onto the future. This unavoidably makes his answer unclear and ambiguous. However, he also offers two additional remarks that show that if he is pushed, it seems that his answer will be that religion will resist and remain inassimilable and inaccessible.

First, for Habermas, when philosophy seeks to re-express what it learns from religion in a discourse that is independent of revealed truth, that is, when philosophy successfully achieves a philosophical translation, such a translation "inevitably loses the performative meaning of the living faith." (Habermas, 2002: 164). There is, thus, an irreplaceable remnant that religious communities keep alive.

Second, according to Habermas, "it would be the worst kind of intellectualism to expect that philosophy's "way of translation" could completely appropriate the forms of experience preserved in religious language" (Habermas, 2002: 164).

Be that as it may, a corollary of philosophy's dialogical relationship to religion refers to the position that postmetaphysical thinking acquires in relation to the sciences. Indeed, once philosophy rejects a secularist self-understanding, philosophy also rejects the project to merge with science or emerge into one (Habermas, 2010: 5).

Philosophy, by retaining its reflective dimension, and approaching religion from a postmetaphysical perspective, is in a good position to develop a rejection of scientism. In Habermas' words,

For scientism, religious convictions are false, illusory, or meaningless *per se*. On this conception, legitimate knowledge must be able to find support at the "level" reached by the socially institutionalized empirical sciences at any given time. The validity of religious convictions, too, is measured exclusively by this yardstick; hence the religious language game, if only for grammatical reasons, must be rejected as cognitively empty. The practical evaluation of religion — whether it must be regarded as dangerous and, if necessary, treated therapeutically or whether it must be resisted —

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<sup>177</sup> This question was asked by Habermas' interviewer Eduardo Mendieta.

depends solely on the empirical investigation of its causes, functions, and consequences (Habermas, 2008: 244-5).

Scientism develops a naturalistic worldview, and, in addition, extends its scientifically objectivating standpoint to society as a whole. As a consequence, scientism enters into a genuine relation of competition with religious doctrines. The main problem is that, as Habermas indicated before, a “metaphysically affirmed atheism is also no longer possible” (Habermas, 2002: 69)

Habermas’ postmetaphysical approach allows him to see in a new light the role of religion in human evolution. Indeed, now, the very explanation of the possibility and development of the cultural modernization of the West goes through the themes of the Judeo-Christian heritage. Sociologically speaking, “the modern forms of consciousness encompassing abstract right, modern science, and autonomous art (...) could never have developed apart from the organizational forms of Hellenized Christianity and the Roman Catholic Church, without the universities, monasteries and cathedrals” (Habermas, 2002: 147).

However, these are not the only sorts of reasons. Indeed, in Habermas’ view, the terms ‘precursor’ or ‘catalyst’, used to describe the role of Christianity within the development of the normative self-understanding of modernity, do not do justice. As Habermas puts it,

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 consciousness, human rights and democracy, is the direct legacy of the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. This legacy, substantially unchanged, has been the object of a continual reappropriation and reinterpretation (Habermas, 2002: 149).

In a deep contrast with *TCA*, Habermas offers now a much more subtle distinction between mythical and religious worldviews. Habermas highlights that the idea of God as the unified, invisible Creator and Redeemer, signified a breakthrough in relation to the early mythic narratives. For Habermas, with “this idea, finite spirit acquired a standpoint that utterly transcends the this-wordly” (Habermas, 2002: 148).

Habermas now directs his attention to the powerful cognitive impulse of the “Axial Age”<sup>178</sup> that allowed human societies to emancipate from the chain of lineage and from the arbitrary will of mythic powers. From this perspective, the world religions that emerged at that time “pierced through the uniform, flat surface of narratively interwoven, contingent appearance, thus tearing open the gap between deep and surface structure, between essence and appearance, which first granted humanity the freedom of reflection and the power to distance itself from the abyss of immediacy” (Habermas,

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<sup>178</sup> The term “Axial Age” was coined by Karl Jaspers in order to describe the period from 800 to 200 BC. During this period, in Jasper’s view, similar revolutionary thinking emerged in India, China, and the West.

2002: 158). The new concepts elaborated by these new religious worldviews made possible distinctions such as validity from genesis, truth from health or soundness, guilt from causality, law from violence, etc.

Habermas had already presented this line of thought in *TCA*. However, what he now emphasizes and distinguishes more clearly are the following two results: one the one hand, a new cognitive aspect for morality, and, on the other, a new form of legitimation for political power.

The first result refers to the role of religion in the rationalization emergence of a normative consciousness. There is, thus, a monotheistic foundation of the validity of our moral norms. From a historical perspective, “The biblically transmitted prophetic doctrines furnished interpretations and reasons that imbued moral norms with the power to generate public agreement; they explained why God's commands are not arbitrary injunctions but can claim validity in a cognitive sense”. (Habermas, 1998: 8).

It is true that the bible justifies its commands appealing to the *revealed word of God*. The authority of an omnipotent God forces unconditional obedience. However, this is not their only source of authority. Moral commands are also regarded as expressions of the will of an all-wise Creator and an all-just and loving Redeemer.

Habermas distinguishes two different kinds of reasons to respect and obey the divine commands. First, metaphysical reasons grounded in the order of creation, and, second, soteriological reasons grounded in the history of salvation.

The metaphysical justification appeals to a world order created by the wise legislation of the Creator. Human beings and human community possess a privileged status within this creation. In this line of thought, everything is endowed with teleological significance, and human beings, as part of the order of Being, must deduce from this order what they are and what they ought to be. The rational content of moral laws, thus, “receives ontological confirmation from the rational order of Being as a whole” (Habermas, 1998: 9).

On the other hand, the second kind of reasons, namely, the soteriological justification of moral commands, appeals to the justice and goodness of a Redeemer and to the idea that at the end of time he will fulfill his promise of salvation and reward all those who have followed a moral life.

In light of his commands, God judge s each person's life in accordance with his just deserts. His justice ensures that his judgment will be consonant with the unique life history of each individual, while at the same time his goodness allows for human fallibility and for the sinfulness of human nature. Moral commands acquire a rational meaning both from the fact that they point the way to personal salvation and from the fact that they are applied in an impartial manner. (Habermas, 1998: 9)

These two lines of justification made possible a further distinction between two aspects of morality. It must be noticed that, in this train of thought, every person has a twofold communicative relation to God. On the one hand, every person is a member of the community of believers with whom God has entered into a covenant. On the other hand,

every person is unique and stands “alone” before of God in responding to her own life history. Nobody can replace her or represent her in this case. This two-level structure determines

one's moral relation—mediated by God—to one's neighbor under the aspects of **solidarity** and of **justice** (...) As a member of the universal community of believers, I am bound by solidarity to the other as my fellow, as “one of us”, as an unsubstitutable (*unvertretbar*) individual; by contrast, I owe the other equal respect as “one among all” persons who, as unique individuals, expect to be treated justly. The “solidarity” grounded in membership recalls the social bond that unites all persons: one person stands in for the other. The uncompromising egalitarianism of “justice,” by contrast, calls for sensitivity to the differences that set each individual apart from others: each person demands that others respect him in his otherness. The Judaeo-Christian tradition regards solidarity and justice as two sides of the same coin: they provide two different perspectives on the same communication structure (Habermas, 1998: 10)

The second result that emerged in the Axial Age was a new form of legitimation for political power. Here, the difference with Habermas’ argumentation in *TCA* is deeper and clearer.

This second aspect is closely related to the debate about the contemporary meaning and relevance of the concept of ‘the political’. As Habermas puts it,

we owe the first *conceptions of the political* to the *nomos*-thinking of Israel, China, and Greece, in general to the power of articulation of the metaphysical and religious worldviews then emerging. As soon as the human spirit liberates itself for the individual search for salvation from the snares of a happening whose flood is narratively ordered and dominated by mythical powers—a liberation accomplished by reference to a god beyond the world or to the world-immanent vanishing point of a cosmic lawfulness—the political ruler can only be perceived as the human *representative* of the divine, and no longer as its own *embodiment*. As a human person, he too is from now on *subject* to the *nomos*, by reference to which all human action is measured. (Habermas, 2010, 11).

In early human history, the legal system derived its coercive force from the political power of the state. But the latter needed a legitimizing force in order to be accepted as just; this force was obtained from sacred law. For Habermas, “The law and the monarch’s judicial power owe their sacred aura to the heritage of the mythical narratives that now fused the ruling dynasties with the divine. At the same time, archaic ritual practices were transformed into state rituals” (Habermas, 2010: 18).

This made possible for society to represent itself, as a whole, in the figure of the ruler, and this representation, produced by the legitimizing fusion between politics (in a primitive stage), and mythical narratives constituted the symbolic dimension to which, according to Habermas, 'the political' refers. In Habermas' words: "*The political (...)* designates that symbolic field in which the early civilizations first formed an image of themselves" (Habermas, 2010: 17).

Nonetheless, the definitive moment of the arising of 'the political' is not the moment of the mythical narratives. Doubtless, these narratives and their correspondent rites accomplished the function of expressing a collective identity. However, for Habermas, 'the political', since it refers to bureaucratically organized societies, implied an additional moment of reflexivity which the primitive tribal societies of the myths and rites lack. In Habermas' words,

The collectivity sees itself mirrored in the ruler's self-representation as a political community that *intentionally* – i.e. consciously and deliberately- produces its social cohesion through the exercise of political power. Thus, 'the political' means the symbolic representation and collective self-understanding of a community that differs from tribal societies through a reflexive turn to a *conscious* rather than spontaneous form of social integration (Habermas, 2010: 18).

Hence, 'the political' 'appears' for the first time in mythical societies that were able to reach certain level of organization and, thus, self-reflexivity, that is, societies such as the ancient empires of Mesopotamia and Egypt.

Nevertheless this is just a primary moment of 'the political', primary and primitive. For Habermas, although some mythical narratives along with hierarchical forms of royal bureaucracies were able to produce 'the political', what mythical narratives could not do is to discursively thematize it.

This is why, for Habermas, the first discursively elaborated conceptions of 'the political' were produced by the worldviews elaborated in Israel, China, and Greece. In other words, they were produced by the cognitive advance of the Axial Age, that is, by the articulatory power of the metaphysical and religious worldviews then emerging.

In this second and definitive moment of 'the political', reflexivity is deeper. According to Habermas the worldviews that emerged in the 'Axial Age' made possible perspectives "that enabled the emerging intellectuals elites made up of prophets, wise men, monks, and itinerant preachers to transcend events in the world, including political processes, and to adopt a detached stance toward them *en bloc*" (Habermas, 2010: 18).

The value of this second and definitive moment, for Habermas, cannot be underestimated. According to him, this transcendent perspective made possible for the political rulers to be opened to criticism. Indeed, once a transcendent reality is posited, the political ruler cannot be seen anymore as the manifest embodiment of the divine; rather he is, at most, its human representative. In the same vein, from now on, he can be said to be moving away from the divine orders, since, he, "as a human person, is

also *subordinated* to the *nomos* in terms of which all human action must be measured” (Habermas, 2010: 19).

It must be noticed how, from the very beginning, for Habermas ‘the political’ was characterized by an intrinsic tension. Indeed, although the worldviews of the Axial Age made possible the legitimation of political authority, they also made possible something else, namely, the critique to that authority. The political, thus, is characterized by an antagonistic tension between religious and political powers. On the one hand, the state power embraced religious doctrines because they could secure the consent of religious groups and institutions. On the other, religious beliefs always preserved a moment of intangibility and irreducibility in virtue of their relevance for individual salvation. Briefly put, “Though the religiously backed belief in legitimacy can well be manipulated, it is never totally at the disposition of the ruler” (Habermas, 2010: 19).

It is true that the religious element of the political contributed to the legitimation of political authority. This was, as we know, the perspective that Habermas emphasized in *TCA*. Nevertheless, that element also made room for the possibility of pointing to ‘something else’, to ‘something beyond’. In this sense, the tension could also be described as a tension between the actuality of the political power (the fact of the force) and the new transcendent and normative perspective created by religion according to which “something better is still possible”.

Now, after recognizing in a new way the role of religion in human evolution, Habermas’ postmetaphysical look is able to offer us the following conceptualization of religion, a conceptualization that can be used to discuss religion’s relevance for our contemporary world.

For Habermas, “Every religion is originally a “worldview” or “comprehensive doctrine” also in the sense that it claims the authority to structure a form of life as a whole” (Habermas, 2008: 111).

Nevertheless, religions are a very special sort of comprehensive doctrine because they are particularly capable of articulating moral intuitions, especially with regard to vulnerable forms of communal life. As Habermas indicates, “(...) holy writings and religious traditions articulate, subtly spell out, and hermeneutically keep alive over thousands of years intuitions about fall and redemption, about a saving exit from a life experienced as being without salvation” (Habermas, 2006b: 257).

For Habermas, in the life of religious communities, there still remains intact experiences and intuitions about “sufficiently differentiated possibilities of expression and sensibilities for misspent life, for societal pathologies, for the failure of individual life plans and the deformation to be seen in distorted life contexts” (Habermas, 2006b: 257). An additional and crucial element that distinguishes religious doctrines is its intrinsic relation to rituals. According to Habermas is it this inherent connection what determines his new approach to religion. As he puts it,

“(…) this time I am interested in the complex of ritual and myth not for social-theoretical reasons (as in the *Theory of Communicative Action*), but because ritual survives in the communal cult practice of world religions. When we ask ourselves today what distinguishes “religion,” in this narrower sense of the still formative “strong” traditions, from other

worldviews, then these practices are the answer. Religions do not survive without the cultic activities of a congregation. That is their “unique selling proposition” (Habermas, 2010: 5).

For Habermas, in modernity religion is the only contemporary phenomenon that still offers an access to the world of experience of ritual. This claim, nonetheless, rests on the assumption that not each and every repetitive conduct should be called “ritual”. Ritual, in Habermas’ view, must be seen as a very peculiar form of communication. “This form distinguishes itself, first, by the *absence of a relation to the world* in a self-referential communal practice circling around itself. Second, it distinguishes itself by the *holistic semantic content* of an undifferentiated, not yet propositionally differentiated use of different iconic symbols (such as dance and song, pantomime, decorations, body painting, etc.)” (Habermas, 2010: 9).

Ritual, thus, is a very specific archaic experience which only religious congregations keep open an access to. This constitutes the most important acknowledgement that philosophy has to realize in relation to religion in order to see it as a “different other” but, at the same, a different other contemporarily relevant because ritual represents a source of societal solidarity for which the enlightened morality of equal respect for all does not provide a real, motivational equivalent (Habermas, 2010: 5).

Finally, although this archaic element has remained fixed in religious communities, it is noteworthy that, for Habermas, religious consciousness is not petrified, rigid and unchangeable. Religion has gone through a very complex process of adaptation. Indeed, “Western culture has witnessed a transformation of religious consciousness since the Reformation and the Enlightenment. Sociologists describe this “modernization” of religious consciousness as a response of religious traditions to the challenges posed by the fact of religious pluralism, the emergence of modern science, and the spread of positive law and secular morality” (Habermas, 2008: 136). In this process, religion has had to give up its claim to interpretive monopoly. In virtue of this, and given its evolving character, Habermas sees it as feasible for communities of faith to be able to i) develop an epistemic attitude toward other religions and worldviews that they encounter within a universe of discourse hitherto occupied only by their own religion, b) develop an epistemic stance toward the independence of secular knowledge from sacred knowledge and the institutionalized monopoly of modern scientific experts, and c) develop an epistemic stance toward the priority that secular reasons enjoy in the political arena (Habermas, 2008: 13-14). However, this laborious work of hermeneutic self-reflection needs to be developed from within the perspective of religious traditions themselves<sup>179</sup>.

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<sup>179</sup> For Habermas, in our culture, this “has been accomplished in essence by theology and, on the Catholic side, also by an apologetic philosophy of religion that seeks to explicate the reasonableness of faith” (Habermas, 2008: 137). Habermas clearly indicates, “in the final instance it is the faith and practice of the religious community that decide whether a dogmatic processing of the cognitive challenges of modernity has been “successful” or not; only then can believers accept it as a “learning process.” The new epistemic attitudes can be described as ‘acquired by learning’ only if they result from a reconstruction of articles of faith that is convincing for people of faith, in the light of modern conditions of life to which there are no longer any alternatives. If those attitudes were merely the contingent result of conditioning or forced adaptation, then the question of how those cognitive preconditions for the reasonableness of a liberal civic ethos are met would have to be answered a la Foucault — namely, as a result of the kind of “discursive



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Before presenting Habermas' account of religion in the public sphere, we need to expound again Habermas' diagnosis of our present day context as well as the normative expectations that his model of deliberative democracy presupposes on its citizens. These two elements constitute the most important aspects of the context of Habermas' proposal.

The first of these elements refers to the aforementioned diagnosis of modernity according to which "markets and administrative power drive societal solidarity—that is, a coordination of action in accordance with values, norms, and a usage of language oriented toward communication—out of ever more areas of life" (Habermas, 2006b: 258).

As a result, politics do not seem able to wield "a steering influence on the diverging subsystems in order to put a halt to the tendencies toward social disintegration" (Habermas, 2009: 25). Today, under conditions of globalized capitalism, the political capacities for consciously influencing social integration have become dangerously restricted.

The picture sketched by systems theory according to which politics, understood as a means of democratic self-determination, has become impossible and superfluous, seems to be, every day, more dangerously accurate.

Autopoietic functional subsystems conform to logics of their own; they constitute environments for one another, and have long since become independent from the undercomplex networks of the various lifeworlds of the population. "The political" has been transformed into the code of a self-maintaining administrative subsystem, so that democracy is in danger of becoming a mere facade, which the executive agencies turn toward their helpless clients (Habermas, 2010: 15-16)

Therefore, Habermas is interested in finding ways to save social integration, which proceeds with the presupposition of rational agents who, in order to act and reach their agreements, have to rely upon the normative structures of the lifeworld, from falling completely to systems integration, which only responds to functional imperatives<sup>180</sup>. "It is therefore also in the constitutional state's own interest to treat with care all cultural sources upon which the consciousness of norms and the solidarity of citizens draw" (Habermas, 2006b: 258).

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power" that imposes itself in the apparent transparency of enlightened knowledge. Of course, this answer would contradict the normative self-understanding of the constitutional state" (Habermas, 2008: 138).

<sup>180</sup> Let us remember that one of the main reasons why Habermas sees this tension as unavoidable is because he thinks that capitalism cannot be replaced. As he puts it, "(...) there is no reasonable exit-option left to us from a capitalist world society today, after the failed experiment of Soviet communism" (Habermas, 2002: 153).

This first element, as can be seen, is closely related to the second, that is, to the role of citizens within a deliberative democracy. In Habermas' words,

Citizens should actively exercise their communicative and participatory rights, not only with regard to their own best interests but also with respect to the public good. This requires a greater motivational outlay, one that cannot be legally commanded (...) The readiness, if need be, to vouch for one's fellow citizens, although they are and remain unknown to oneself, as well as the willingness to sacrifice one's own concerns for the general interest may only be suggested to the citizens [*Burger*] of a liberal community. (Habermas, 2006b: 253 – 254).

For Habermas, this presupposes, among other things, active, open-minded and tolerant citizens. In this context, the risk, according to Habermas, is that "Under the constraint of economic imperatives that increasingly hold sway over private spheres of life, individuals, intimidated, withdraw more and more into the bubble of their private interests. Willingness to engage in collective action, the awareness that citizens can at all collectively shape the social conditions of their lives through solidaristic action, fades under the perceived force of systemic imperatives" (Habermas, 2010: 16).

Thus, once religion is regarded by Habermas as a force able to generate the motivational resources that every deliberative democracy needs, it, undoubtedly, must be treated carefully. Citizens under this model, let us remember, have to be conceived as authors of the law rather than their merely addressees

It must be noticed that Habermas' account of the role of religion in the public sphere is also a consequence of the ethics of citizenship that should be embraced by citizens who accept the constitution of the liberal state. In this sense, "(...) the liberal state (...) must not discourage religious persons and communities from also expressing themselves politically as such, for it cannot know whether secular society would not otherwise cut itself off from key resources for the creation of meaning and identity" (Habermas, 2008: 10).

Religion, Habermas is aware, cannot be reduced to morality. It cannot be assimilated to ethical value orientations either. Nevertheless, it is also true that religion "keeps alive an awareness of both elements. The public use of reason by religious and nonreligious citizens alike may well spur deliberative politics in a pluralist civil society and lead to the recovery of semantic potentials from religious traditions for the wider political culture" (Habermas, 2010: 28)<sup>181</sup>.

It is noteworthy that Habermas' proposal on the role of religion in the public sphere is presented as a correction of Rawls' own approach. In order to present the

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<sup>181</sup> We must notice that Habermas does not blindly defend religion as a positive force for democracy. In his words, "There is of course no reason to now count *blindly* on the motivational powers of religion against the neoliberal desolidarization of society. As we know, these motivational powers are politically highly ambivalent. The democratic constitutional state does not harmonize with every religious practice, but only with a non-fundamentalist one" (Habermas, 2010: 9).

details of Habermas' account I will use the example of a hypothetical political public debate about same-sex marriage<sup>182</sup>.

At first sight, the public debates about same-sex marriages would not seem to constitute a good case for emphasizing the positive aspects of religious doctrines for a deliberative democracy. However, with my example I expect to show that one of the advantages of Habermas' approach is that it recognizes that religious doctrines are so diverse and complex that even within the seemingly negative role that they might play in the debates about same-sex marriages, the door must be left opened for the introduction of other kinds of religious arguments that point at a different direction. In addition, I think that the example of a public debate about same-sex marriage will be useful to show that Habermas' approach does not represent a blind defense of religion.

Let us suppose that a fictitious state called the United States of the Deliberative Democracies (USDD) is engaged in a public debate about the possibility of enacting a Law allowing same-sex marriages. The USDD is a highly pluralistic society composed of a diverse citizenry with very different worldviews and life projects. However, the majority of them are religious people. Some of them are "simply" religious enough to accept as valuable for their lives the most important guiding precepts of their religion. But they also consider relevant other type of values, i.e., political values like equality, freedom, human dignity, etc., as they are expressed in their constitutional rights. Other religious citizens are much more radical in their faith. They are people for whom religion plays an integral role in their life. For them, religion represents a "totalizing trait of a mode of believing that infuses the very pores of daily life" (Habermas, 2006b: 8). The religious values of these citizens are the most important normative element of their life.

In the USDD there are also non-religious citizens. Some of them tolerate religion and are able to see it as an important part of social life, even if it is not for them. Others are radical atheists who believe that "religion is the opiate of the people". In some cases these radical atheists are passionately pro-science who believe that every religious viewpoint represents a false picture of the world. For these 'scientific citizens', "religious convictions are false, illusory, or meaningless *per se* (Habermas, 2009: 244).

The pluralism of the USDD is far more complex than this description but, for the sake of this exposition let us group all the citizens in the following four categories: Radical Religious, Soft Religious, Soft Atheists and Radical Atheists.

In the public political debate about the same-sex marriage law, many citizens of the first group, namely, the Radical Religious, firmly believe that homosexuality represents a perverse and abnormal behavior that, thus, cannot be protected by the state. These citizens justify their idea by appealing to an interpretation of the sacred book of their religion.

Let us suppose that a Radical Religious citizen intervenes in the debate by saying that the law should not be enacted because, as the Bible says, 'If a man lies with

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<sup>182</sup> It is well known that citizens' perspective on same-sex marriage is highly influenced by their religion. According to the *2010 Annual Religion and Public Life Survey* conducted by Pew Research Center for the People & the Press and the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life 35% of citizens admit that religion is the top influence on their thinking about same-sex marriage. One of the conclusions of the poll survey was that "In contrast with many other social and political issues, religion is clearly an important influence on public opinion about same-sex marriage and abortion. Significant numbers of Americans report that religion is the most important factor in their thinking about these topics, and sizeable numbers of churchgoers hear about them from their clergy" See <http://pewforum.org/Politics-and-Elections/Few-Say-Religion-Shapes-Immigration-Environment-Views.aspx#3>.

a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They must be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads” (Leviticus 20:13). This citizen clarifies that she is not proposing death penalty for engaging in homosexual activities. Nonetheless, she wants to conclude that homosexuality should not be supported by the society or by the state. For many religious citizens this interpretation is unquestionable insofar as it is the authoritative interpretation of their religious community. Hence, a state that allows and protects the existence of same-sex marriage is equivalent to a state that allows and protects other sinful acts, such as murder itself. This argument is partially supported by some citizens belonging to the Soft Religious group, but is clearly rejected by both Soft and Radical Atheists.

According to Rawls’ perspective it does not really matter if there is a majority of citizens that accepts the argument: a law in the USDD could not be accepted or rejected based entirely on those kinds of reasons. For Rawls, “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—and not reasons given solely by comprehensive doctrines—are presented that are sufficient to support whatever the comprehensive doctrines are said to support” (Rawls, 1997: 783). This means that, besides the religious argument, the Radical Religious citizen would need to present another argument that does not depend completely on their religious faith.

Many supporters of the law from the two Atheist groups of citizens are very happy with this proviso, especially those in the Radical Atheists group since, according to them, every religious reason is always, in one way or another, deceitful and alienated. In some sense, they interpret Rawls’ proviso as establishing that religious reasons are reasons with very few, or even no value to constitute public reason. These citizens are confident that religious reasons and religious citizens, so devalued in the public sphere, will finally disappear.

Nevertheless, the Radical Religious citizen who proposed the argument does want to participate in the debate as a truly democratic deliberative citizen. But, it seems that the only way for her to do so is to have at hand non-religious reasons that allow her to oppose same-sex marriages. She can understand why many atheist citizens rejoice, namely because at the end of the day, she ought to propose only non-religious reasons for her position.

Perhaps many Soft Religious citizens might be able to come up with secular justifications. However, it seems unlikely that Radical Religious citizens might do so too, and this difficulty is not necessarily caused by a lack of imagination. It seems plausible that many Radical Religious citizens just do not understand why those reasons which originate in their religion, the most important feature of their life, cannot count at all within the political system in which they live. After all, the USDD’s political constitution protects the right to religious freedom. Rawls’ proposal seems to presuppose that religious citizens are going to be able to choose, in any case, from two parallel pools of reasons, namely, religious and non-religious reasons. However, it seems clear that being religious consists precisely in prioritizing religious over non-religious reasons every time that one is forming one’s own convictions.

Rawls’ approach, thus, imposes a heavy mental and psychological burden on religious citizens. This burden might threaten political integration of those citizens in the USDD for they are only left with two choices if they want to participate in the public

debates. First, they may abandon their religious radicalism and, perhaps, adopt a softer form of religion. Or, second, they may stay as they are. But they should be aware that their freedom of speech and their right to participate in public deliberations are highly restricted. This means, thus, that in the USDD they happen to be second-class citizens, even though, as previously noted, their political constitution includes the right to religious freedom.

For these reasons, according to Habermas, Rawls' approach needs to be corrected, or, at least, clarified. For Habermas, if it were the case of a debate taking place at, for example, the parliament, the religious argument would not be a valid argument for accepting or rejecting the law. Habermas accepts Rawls' restriction but only for political deliberations taking place at the institutional level of parliaments, courts, ministries, and administrations, i.e., in the deliberations that take place at the core of the political system. Nevertheless, for Habermas, the requirement of offering corroborating non-religious reasons in political deliberations developed within the informal public sphere must be eliminated. In this sphere, both Radical Religious and Soft Religious citizens can offer exclusively religious reasons to reject the law that intends to protect same-sex marriage. In other words, they can, if they want to, use the Leviticus argument to reject the law.

According to Habermas, they can hope that their religious reasons may be successfully translated into non-religious reasons. But this entails an obligation to translation assumed by all citizens. Habermas' proposal indicates that the two kinds of religious citizens must accept that ultimately, in the institutional deliberations, only non-religious reasons count for determining coercive policies addressed to all citizens. However, secular citizens, like all citizens, must share the burden of attempting to translate religious reasons into non-religious reasons. In order to do so, according to Habermas, all citizens have to take religious reasons seriously and cannot deny the potentially translatable truth content of religious reasons.

Habermas' proposal aims to guarantee a better normative social integration of our four categories of citizens, insofar as it guarantees a legitimate place for religious citizens, both Radical and Soft religious, to express their own reasons in the informal public sphere. In this way, the informal public sphere is left open to possible learning processes and cultural changes. Based on this theoretical normative framework, it seems that the debate on the same-sex marriage law can finally take place in a democratic way for all our four categories of citizens are allowed to participate. Let us take a look at what this development would appear to be.

Religious citizens are allowed to offer their most sincere and compelling reason to reject the same-sex marriage law. For them, the law should not be enacted because, according to their religious doctrine, homosexuality represents a perverse and abnormal behavior. One of these citizens, as we saw, quoted Leviticus 20:13 according to which 'If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable'. This citizen offered this reason hoping to find a successful translation in order to affect the debate at the institutional level.

Let us suppose that one of their fellow citizens offers the following argument as a possible form of translation: "Sexual union is the reciprocal use that one human being makes of the sexual organs and capacities of another. This is either a natural use (by which procreation of a being of the same kind is possible) or an unnatural use, and

unnatural use takes place either with a person of the same sex or with an animal of a nonhuman species. Since such transgressions of laws called unnatural or also unmentionable vices, do wrong to humanity in our own person, there are no limitations or exception whatsoever that can save them from being repudiated completely” (Kant, 6: 278). For this religious citizen the law should not be enacted because the state should privilege the natural unions over the unnatural ones. The notion of ‘marriage’ should be exclusively used for the former.

But, one might ask, does this argument really amount to a complete translation of the explicitly religious one? It seems it does not, insofar as it is completely dependent on a particular definition of “natural marriage”, a definition that does not have to be accepted by everyone. Hence, the alleged unnatural character of same-sex marriages is no longer clear. In the explicitly religious argument same-sex marriages are said to be unnatural, ultimately, because they contradict God’s commands as expressed in Leviticus 20:13. The new argument, in contrast, does not explicitly clarify the origins of the unnatural character of same-sex marriages. If, on the other hand, somehow the new argument depends on similar reasons about the immorality of homosexuality, then we have to conclude that it is not really a translation of the religious argument but that it is the same one. Either way, neither argument seems to amount to a true translation of the religious argument.

The Soft Religious citizen who offered the translation clarifies that heterosexual marriages are natural insofar as they are directed to procreation; a natural act for all human beings. Hence, the state should be interested in protecting and encouraging these kinds of unions above all the others by giving them special and unique rights. But, once again, is this really a translation of the original religious argument? The first argument derives its conclusion (the law should not pass) from a strong moral and metaphysical claim about the perversion and abnormality of homosexuality as prohibited by God’s eternal laws (Leviticus 20:13). The second argument derives the same conclusion from the state’s alleged, but unproven, interest in promoting procreation.

In any event, all this shows that the translation requirement functions as a catalyzer for motivating conversation and debate. In this way, it guarantees that religion does not become into a conversation stopper, like Rorty suggests. However, at the end of the day, as Habermas indicates, religious believers are the ones who would decide if a concrete argument constitutes a successful case of translation. The philosopher, at least in her role as philosopher, does not have any privileged position in this debate.

What the philosopher seems to be able to do is to indicate that the Radical Atheists citizens do not have any right to stop paying attention every time that any “irrational religious citizen” offers religious reasons to reject same-sex marriage. This behavior, in Habermas’ model, is regarded not only as rude but also as antidemocratic. Even the non-dogmatic and non-hot-headed atheist citizens who do not leave the room or do not stop paying attention, are now told that in Habermas’ model they cannot think anymore that religion is “the opiate of the people”.

In this sense, in our hypothetical debate, suddenly, many Radical Atheists citizens find themselves in a very discomforting place. They used to regard themselves as the most important agents of modernity.

Many Radical Atheists citizens do not understand why their fellow religious citizens are allowed to adopt their own cognitive stances in the informal public sphere and offer exclusively religious reasons against same-sex marriage but, at the same time, they, the 'illustrated and emancipated ones', have to open their minds to the possible truth of religious beliefs. Surprisingly enough, they find themselves in the same situation as their fellow Radical Religious citizens. They are left with two options. First, they may abandon their atheistic radicalism and, perhaps, adopt a softer form of atheism. Or second, they may stay as they are. But, they should be aware, nonetheless, that their freedom of speech and their right to participate in public deliberations are highly restricted. Somehow in the USDD they happen to be second-class citizens.

In our debate, then, any Radical Religious citizen would be entitled to offer an argument against same-sex marriage based on his religious perspective on the perversions of homosexuality but, at the same time, no Radical Atheist citizen would be allowed to express his beliefs according to which religion is 'the opiate of the people'.

Habermas justifies the burden that he places on Radical Atheists citizens as a way to avoid a meaningless debate among citizens who maintain their own secular or religious cognitive stances. If all Radical Atheists citizens reject the Leviticus argument simply for being produced by a manipulated and deceived mind, we might have serious difficulties reaching a final normative consensus. In a more dramatic scenario, Radical Atheists citizens might decide to leave the room if religious arguments are allowed.

This is what Habermas' proposal aims to avoid. Therefore, from Habermas' perspective, what the Radical Atheists citizens have to do is to listen when their fellow religious citizens express their arguments, no matter how fundamentalist or radical they seem. However, no Radical Atheist citizen may affirm that those arguments are produced by a deceived consciousness. Even if they think they are, they must be aware that in that room and in that moment neither the validity of religion nor the existence of God are being discussed.

A Radical Atheist citizen may sincerely believe that religions are not merely 'archaic relics of pre-modern societies', but, even worse, 'the opiate of the people'. Nevertheless, as long as she provides counter arguments for all the religious claims brought to the informal public sphere, she is fulfilling her obligations as a democratic citizen.

Radical Atheist citizens do not have to open their minds to the possible truths of religion pertaining to the perversion of homosexuality. All they have to do is to provide arguments to support, in this case, the same-sex marriage law. For instance, they could indicate to their fellow religious citizens that their moral and religious arguments ultimately imply a harsh discrimination and an institutionalization of second-class citizens. They could simply say that gay and lesbian couples should be treated no differently than their heterosexual counterparts and that they should be able to marry like anyone else.

Granted, at first sight, in the Leviticus argument presented in the hypothetical debate it is very hard to appreciate any of those 'positive' aspects that Habermas thinks can be found in religious doctrines.

However, if we were to develop the example more fully we might see different aspects. For example, we can think of a different Religious citizen who offers another interpretation of the Leviticus argument. According to her what this passage is saying is

that throughout history every society has upheld the institution of marriage as a bond between a man and a woman. According to this citizen, there is a very powerful reason for that, namely, to defend the future itself of society as represented by stable and safe unions in which healthy children can be raised. Hence, according to this allegedly secular translation, the law should not be approved in virtue of the potential and unmeasured damages it could have on the mental and physical health of children. For this citizen, the laws in the USDD are built upon a Judeo-Christian worldview, which has been expressed in their laws on marriage throughout the history of his country. But what those laws really express, by affirming that marriage is a sacred union between a man and a woman, is that society should always encourage what is best for children, namely, a mother and a father who raise them in a stable and protected relationship called 'marriage'<sup>183</sup>.

Expressed in this way, the argument now depends upon two 'extra-religious' claims. On the one hand, the historical claim according to which 'every human society has always privileged the institution of marriage over other kinds of relationships', and, on the other, the 'medical' claim according to which mental and physical healthy children can only be raised by a family constituted by a man and a woman. Those two claims can now be contested by indicating the multiple types of family unions that have existed in different societies and in different time-periods. In addition, the claim about the children's health can also be disputed by appealing to scientific research proving the opposite. Developed in this way, the example now shows how and why, for Habermas, every citizen, including of course religious citizens, should accept the authority of scientific knowledge in order to fulfill the normative expectations of democratic citizenship. In other words, once a claim susceptible of being debated by scientific means is raised in the public sphere, the institutionalized monopoly of modern scientific experts should have a privileged position that must be taken into account.

In our fictitious debate, this becomes an important problem that must be faced by the two groups of religious citizens. If they are not able to connect, in addition, the egalitarian individualism and universalism of modern law with the premises of their religion, they fail in their duties as democratic citizens. And, indeed, secular citizens, radical or soft, are in a good position for showing them this failure.

If a religious belief is clearly incompatible to constitutional values, there is nothing to learn there. Nonetheless, given the special character that Habermas ascribes to religion, he also wants to leave open the space for religious arguments. Accordingly, no citizen is in a position to judge *a priori*, that is, before hearing the religious arguments, that there is nothing valuable in them. A failed case of translation is not enough to reject the possibility of translation itself; especially when it is not difficult to find many relevant cases of successful translations. In Habermas own words, for instance, "The translation of the notion of man's likeness to God into the notion of human dignity, in which all men partake equally and which is to be respected unconditionally, is such a saving translation. The translation renders the content of biblical concepts accessible to the general public of people of other faiths, as well as to nonbelievers, beyond the boundaries of a particular religious community" (Habermas, 2006c: 257).

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<sup>183</sup> See The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. **An Argument Against Same-Sex Marriage: An Interview with Rick Santorum**, <http://pewforum.org/Gay-Marriage-and-Homosexuality/An-Argument-Against-Same-Sex-Marriage-An-Interview-with-Rick-Santorum.aspx>. Available March 2011.



Returning to our debate, we could also think of another Religious citizen offering a very different kind of religious argument. Let us suppose the following scenario: here is a citizen who has been uncomfortably witnessing the intensity of the debate between the Radical Atheist citizen, who thinks religion is the opiate of the people, and the Radical Religious citizen, who thinks that, based on Leviticus, homosexuality is a human perversion. This citizen is a heterosexual woman who has been married for years. As such, she does not seem to have any particular direct interest in the law. However, she feels that she just cannot stand the perpetration of an injustice. Indeed, this citizen has an interpretation of Christianity that “includes positively within itself what appears to go contrary to life. It teaches us to view as divine even what is repugnant, odious, and loathsome: ‘Lowliness and poverty, scorn and contempt, disgrace and misery, suffering and death’; it even teaches us to love sin and crime as ways by which to go forward” (Löwith, 1991: 23)<sup>184</sup>. To be sure, she does not think that homosexuality is described by any of those adjectives. But her religious perspective, based on such principle of love, motivates her to fight harshly against any kind of discrimination. This would be, then, according to Habermas himself, a radical religious citizen for whom religion also represents a totalizing trait of a mode of believing that rules her entire life<sup>185</sup>. Nonetheless, for this citizen, homosexual couples should not be discriminated against in any way.

This citizen disagrees with the way in which her fellow religious citizens are using the sacredness of marriage as an argument to reject its extension to same-sex couples. From such a perspective, gay couples might aspire to develop, at the most, some sort of “erotic love”, but never the kind of love blessed by God that only a man and a woman are able to achieve. Only for this sort of relationships should the institution of marriage be reserved. However, for her, aside from the fact that this perspective is usually committed with reproduction as a necessary goal of marriage (a conception that would seem to be very close to a hard naturalistic view of human relations), the defenders of that view also seem to presuppose that homosexual people are not able to cultivate a sort of ‘sacred moral love’. In this sense, what actually seems to be presupposed here is the idea that homosexual people are less committed to monogamy than straight people. Hence, same-sex marriages would really be “open marriages” where the two people

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<sup>184</sup> According to Karl Löwith this quote is Goethe’s interpretation of Christianity.

<sup>185</sup> We could say that such a citizen belongs to one of the religious communities that have actually supported, in one way or another, same-sex marriage, namely, the Episcopal Church, or the Evangelical Lutheran Church, or the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations or the United Church of Christ. In 2006 the Episcopal Church stated its “support of gay and lesbian persons and [opposition to] any state or federal constitutional amendment” prohibiting same-sex marriages or civil unions (Resolution A095). Although the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America defines marriages as a lifelong covenant of faithfulness between a man and a woman”, in August 2009 it adopted asocial statement on human sexuality that supports a broad diversity of families, including those constituted by same-gender couples. Similarly, in 1996b, the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations adopted a resolution in support of same-sex marriage. Finally, in 2005, the United Church of Christ’s General Synod voted to legally recognize and advocate in favor of same-sex marriage (See **Religious Groups’ Official Positions on Same-Sex Marriage** ANALYSIS July 27, 2010, <http://pewforum.org/Gay-Marriage-and-Homosexuality/Religious-Groups-Official-Positions-on-Same-Sex-Marriage.aspx>). Within Judaism there are Orthodox movements that do not sanctify same-sex union but there are as well Reform and Reconstructionist Jewish movements that do support gay and lesbian rights, including same-sex marriage. A common position of all these religious movements is to “allow congregations that choose to do so to recognize, support and hold publicly accountable lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships” (Ibid).

involved would have a weaker sexually, psychologically, socially, and emotionally commitment to one another. Thus, the argument continues, in case of having children, the negative consequences of their weak commitment would be devastating for them. For her, nonetheless, this way of reasoning might constitute a good case for the application of the Parable of the Good Samaritan interpreted as emphasizing the idea that a person of a social group ‘commonly disapproved’ is indeed able to exhibit moral behavior superior to the behavior displayed by people from ‘approved groups’<sup>186</sup>.

Doubtless, this citizen belongs to a minority group within the larger categories of Radical and Soft religious citizens. However, her voice, in Habermas’ account, should also be heard in the informal public sphere, and, in this case, it does seem to be a voice from which secular citizens can learn. For a secularist citizen<sup>187</sup>, nonetheless, this religious perspective would be as deceitful and false as the other ones. It is noteworthy, then, that Habermas’ proposal is aware of two complex phenomenon that a secularistic attitude is not able to see, namely, i) religious diversity and ii) the existence of inter and intra religious domination<sup>188</sup>. In Habermas’ words, “Secular citizens or those of other religious persuasions can also learn something from religious contributions under certain circumstances, for example, when they recognize buried intuitions of their own in the normative truth contents of a religious utterance” (Habermas, 2008: 131).

The third Radical Religious citizen would be on the same side as a Soft Atheist citizen who proposes the following argument. For this Soft Atheist citizen, the law does not constitute a threat against the sacred institution of marriage but, contrarily, a safeguard. This citizen thinks that a society with successful marriages is indeed a more stable, safer, and, in general terms, better society. For him, one of the USDD’s

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<sup>186</sup> **Luke 10:25-37** “Behold, a certain lawyer stood up and tested him, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life. He said to him, “What is written in the law? How do you read it?” He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind;\* and your neighbor as yourself.” He said to him, “You have answered correctly. Do this, and you will live. ”But he, desiring to justify himself, asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus answered, “A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who both stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead. By chance a certain priest was going down that way. When he saw him, he passed by on the other side. In the same way a Levite also, when he came to the place, and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, as he traveled, came where he was. When he saw him, he was moved with compassion, came to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. He set him on his own animal, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. On the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii, and gave them to the host, and said to him, ‘Take care of him. Whatever you spend beyond that, I will repay you when I return.’ Now which of these three do you think seemed to be a neighbor to him who fell among the robbers?” He said, “He who showed mercy on him.” Then Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.” In many contemporary interpretations of the parable it goes unnoticed that the relationship between the Jews and Samaritans was one of hostility. Nonetheless, for the religious citizen of our example the conflict between Jews and Samaritans is an essential context on which the parable must be read.

<sup>187</sup> Habermas distinguishes between secular and secularist. As he puts it, “I make a terminological distinction between ‘secular’ and ‘secularist’. Unlike the neutral stance of a secular or unbelieving person who regards religious validity claims agnostically, secularist adopt a polemical stance towards religious doctrines which retain a certain public influence even though their claims cannot be scientifically justified. Today secularism often appeals to a ‘hard’, that is, scientifically grounded, version of naturalism” (Habermas, 2009, 74).

<sup>188</sup> See Rajeev Bhargava (2010). According to the Pew Forum U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, conducted in 2007, among mainline Protestants overall, 56% think homosexuality should be accepted. A new poll conducted in 2010 shows that 31% of all Protestants support gay marriage, while 59% are opposed. In contrast, 46% of all Catholics are in favor and 42% are opposed. Finally, 76% of Jewish are in favor, and 18% are against it. Finally, “roughly six-in-ten of the religiously unaffiliated (61%) favor same-sex marriage, including fully 78% of atheists and agnostics and 54% of those who say their religion is “nothing in particular.”

problems is that it has too few marriages. Thus, he thinks that it is good to extend marriages to homosexual people. For this citizen, then, “The signal we need to send now is that everybody should be getting married. The big cultural problem with the family in [USDD] is not that gay people want to get married - it's that straight people are not getting married or not staying married. And to me, one of the important cultural effects of gay marriage will be to send a very strong signal that marriage is something that is available to and expected of everybody, not just a few”<sup>189</sup>.

This last religious citizen exemplifies the case of a citizen whose religious values, which do not contradict the political value of equality, motivate her to participate in the political debate seeking public good. For Habermas, as we saw before, this is indeed the kind of attitude that characterizes a citizen of a liberal state. From this perspective, religion is regarded by Habermas as a force able to generate the motivational resources that every democracy needs, especially since, in Habermas' model of democracy, citizens have to be conceived as authors of the law rather than their merely addressees.

For Habermas, then, the participants in the debate of our example should not reject the Leviticus argument simply on account of its religious aspect, nor can they refer to the lack of corroborating secular reasons provided by the same citizen that offered it. The reasons to reject the argument, in contrast, have to be reasons pertaining the non-recognition of pluralism, the public authority of the sciences, or the egalitarianism of our constitutional principles.

Religious citizens who participate in the debates developed in the informal public sphere of a liberal state are always constrained by the democratic principles of such state, even if they participate by offering exclusively religious arguments<sup>190</sup>.

In this sense, it has to be noticed that Habermas never stops emphasizing the burdens that religious citizens have to accept if they really want to be democratic citizens. They have to admit that in the liberal state government and its legitimacy is rooted in secular grounds. In Habermas' words, “the constitution of the liberal state is self-sufficient with regard to its need for legitimation, that is, (...) it can draw upon the resources of a set of arguments that are independent of religious and metaphysical traditions” (Habermas, 2008: 253). Thus, even if in the informal public sphere religious citizens are allowed to express religious arguments, they should do so knowing that ultimately their arguments will have to be measured against the standards derived from the fact of pluralism, the public authority of the sciences, and the egalitarianism of constitutional principles. Hence, although indirectly, religious citizens are in fact constrained in debates that take place in the informal public sphere. At the end of the day, as Habermas puts it,

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<sup>189</sup> See The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life **An Argument For Same-Sex Marriage: An Interview with Jonathan Rauch**, available at <http://pewforum.org/Gay-Marriage-and-Homosexuality/An-Argument-For-Same-Sex-Marriage-An-Interview-with-Jonathan-Rauch.aspx>. Available March 2011.

<sup>190</sup> In Habermas' words, “After all, the conflict between one's own religious convictions and secularly justified policies or proposed laws can only arise because even the religious citizen is already supposed to have accepted the constitution of the secular state for good reasons. He no longer lives as a member of a religiously homogeneous population within a religiously legitimated state” (Habermas, 2008: 129)

What must be safeguarded is that the decisions of the legislator, the executive branch, and the courts are not only *formulated* in a universally accessible language, but are also *justified* on the basis of universally acceptable reasons. This excludes religious reasons from decisions about all state-sanctioned -- that is, legally binding -- norms. Apart from that, I do not believe that secular citizens can learn anything from fundamentalist doctrines that cannot cope with the fact of pluralism, with the public authority of the sciences, and with the egalitarianism of our constitutional principles<sup>191</sup> (Habermas, 2010: 8).

Habermas' proposal on the role of religion in the public sphere implies a great advantage that must be highlighted. Indeed, Habermas' account does not aim to distinguish between rational religious doctrines and irrational ones. For him, "in the final instance it is the faith and practice of the religious community that decide whether a dogmatic processing of the cognitive challenges of modernity has been 'successful' or not; only then can believers accept it as a 'learning process'" (Habermas, 2008: 138). Nonetheless, Habermas' proposal also clarifies that, from the perspective of the constitution of the liberal state, religious doctrines will indeed be differentiated on the basis of whether or not they cope with the fact of pluralism, with the public authority of the sciences, and with the egalitarianism of our constitutional principles. But, in addition, from the very same perspective of the liberal state, it is expected that secular citizens will draw such distinction as well. In Habermas' words, "As long as religion continues to play a vital role in the informal communication networks of the public sphere, all citizens must be aware of the fact that democratic legitimation in the mode of deliberative politics is supposed to spring from the interaction between reason-giving religious and non-religious citizens alike" (Habermas, 2009: 20).

The consciousness of the secular citizens is, in this way, closely related to the open attitude of postmetaphysical thinking toward religion. For both of them, thus, the future of religious is open. Future projections are impossible to make, but, if necessary, they would have to act under the presupposition according to which religion will continue to exist. Otherwise, "Secular citizens who encountered their fellow citizens with the reservation that the latter cannot be taken seriously as modern contemporaries because of their religious mindset would regress to the level of a mere *modus vivendi* and abandon the basis of mutual recognition constitutive for shared citizens." (Habermas, 2009, 77).

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<sup>191</sup> As Habermas had already indicated: "The Christian churches must meet the challenges of globalization by appropriating their own normative potential more radically. The *Oecumene* is only now becoming ecumenical in a non paternalistic sense; only now is the Church becoming a polycentric world Church (...) In modern societies, religion doctrine has to accommodate itself to the unavoidable competition with other forms of faith, and other claims to truth. It no longer moves in a self-contained universe directed, so to speak, by its own absolute truth. Every religious doctrine today encounter the pluralism of different forms of religious truth – as well as the skepticism of a secular, scientific mode of knowing that owes its social authority to a confessed fallibility and a learning process based on long-term revision" (Habermas, 2002: 149-150). Similarly, "modern faith must become reflexive. Only through self-criticism can it stabilize the inclusive attitude that it assumes within a universe of discourse *delimited* by secular knowledge and *shared* with other religions" (Habermas, 2002: 150).

## CHAPTER 6. THE WORLD SOCIETY, GLOBAL PUBLIC SPHERE, AND POSTSECULARISM

In the previous chapter I presented Habermas' remarks on the rise and transformation of the bourgeois public sphere as well as his more recent analysis of such a notion within his theory of a deliberative democracy. I showed that Habermas' account of the role of religion in the public sphere must be interpreted within the context of his political philosophy. Habermas account, thus, constitutes an expansion of his previous thoughts on the nature of the role of deliberation within a democratic society.

The participation of religious citizens is, for Habermas, a very special case (hitherto neglected by his own philosophy) that deserves to be especially analyzed in virtue of its unique characteristics.

In this chapter, I will expound Habermas' analysis of the transformation of the public sphere within what he calls "the postnational constellation". This new phenomenon has begun to configure an emerging global public sphere that corresponds to a dawning world society.

To be sure, this third level of analysis should not be seen as a posterior step that Habermas' thought has given, after reconsidering the role of religion in the public sphere of national democracies. Contrarily, Habermas' shift of analysis, that has finally lead him to consider religion as a special case that needs to be carefully and particularly analyzed, is, to a large extent, the result of his concern with the rise of a multicultural society, especially within Germany and Europe in general.

One of the great merits of Habermas work as a philosopher has been his "attunement" to the "spirit of the times". Indeed, Habermas' remarks on what he has called the "motivational deficits of modern democracies" has been inspired by his observation and evaluation of events such as the unification of Germany in 1989; an unification that took place without a proper referendum that reflected a public consensus produced by the communicative freedom of the citizens of East and West Germany<sup>192</sup>.

Similarly, the posterior unification of Europe developed mainly by economical imperatives without the proper political institutions that could support and control them constitutes another case to show the lack of political and communicative commitment from politicians and citizens that are not able to expand their democratic "loyalty" beyond their national borders.

At the same time, such a motivational deficit has also been accompanied by the renewal of the political importance of religion. As Habermas puts it, "Religious traditions and communities of faith have gained a new, hitherto unexpected political importance since the epoch making historical juncture of 1989-90" (Habermas, 2008: 114).

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<sup>192</sup> Habermas explicitly recognizes that when it comes to theory building we should be able to take into account crucial historical developments (Habermas, 2009: 110). As we will see, this is why Habermas rejects the idea that a world republic is the best solution to establish a model of a constitution for a global society.

The general impression of a “worldwide resurgence of religion” is caused, according to Habermas, by three overlapping phenomena, namely, i) the missionary expansion of the major world religions; ii) their fundamentalist radicalization, and iii) the political instrumentalization of their inherent potential for violence.

(i) All around the world, religious organizations and churches (of the five major religions, namely, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islamism, Judaism and Christianity) are growing, especially in Africa and in the East and Southeast Asian countries<sup>193</sup>. In the case of Latin America, the recent secular movements that have decreased the power of the Roman Catholic Church as the majoritarian religion or even as the religion of the state have created a space for the impressive development of Evangelical Christian churches.

(ii) According to Habermas, the fastest-growing religious movements can be easily described as “fundamentalist” insofar as they combat the general achievements of the modern world or they decide to withdraw from them. “Their forms of worship combine spiritualism and adventism with rigid moral conceptions and literal adherence to holy scripture” (Habermas, 2009: 61). However, we can also appreciate a big variety of “new religious movements” marked by what Habermas calls a “Californian syncretism”. Furthermore, “In Japan, approximately 400 such sects have arisen, combining elements of Buddhism and popular religions with pseudoscientific and esoteric doctrines” (Habermas, 2009: 62).

(iii) Usually when we think of examples of a political unleashing of the potential for violence inherent in religion, we think in the examples of Islamic terrorism. As Habermas puts it, “Often smoldering conflicts with profane origins first become ignited when they are coded in religious terms. This holds for the ‘desecularization’ of the Middle East conflict as much as for the politics of Hindu nationalism and the enduring conflict between India and Pakistan” (Habermas, 2009: 62). However, the mobilization of the religious right in the United States in order to support the invasion of Iraq constitutes another well-known example.

In the particular case of Europe, the impression of the resurgence of religion has been caused mainly by the increasing presence of Islam.

Over the recent years, European nations have had to face a difficult dilemma. First, they seem to be pushed to affirm their Jewish and Christian identity and heritage. From this perspective, the exclusion from the European Union of a Muslim nation such as Turkey seems easily justified.

This option, nevertheless, entails the renunciation of the ideals of freedom, equality and fraternity among all human beings. European ideals, thus, would be reserved only for human beings that happen to have a Jewish or Christian heritage.

In other words, this option entails to surrender to the idea that the current interactions between Eastern and Western societies are nothing but a “clash of civilizations”. This idea presupposes a radical reading of multiculturalism according to which Eastern and Western worldviews are simply incommensurable. “From this contextualist perspective, cultural ways of life appear to be semantically closed

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<sup>193</sup> According to Habermas, “In the People’s Republic of China, the political repression of the Falun Gong sect has highlighted the large number of ‘new religions’ whose followers are thought to number as many as eighty million” (Habermas, 2009: 62).

universes, each of which holds fast to its own unique standards of rationality and truth claims. Therefore each culture is supposed to exist for itself as a semantically sealed whole, cut off from discursive processes of reaching an understanding with other cultures” (Habermas, 2009: 72).

Habermas, of course, is a radical opponent of this view. This is why in his recent work on the topic of human rights and global society he has had to refute Carl Schmitt’s ideas on international justice and world society. As Habermas puts it, Schmitt “was convinced that competing conceptions of justice are incommensurable. Competing states or nations cannot agree on a single-conception of justice, and certainly not on the liberal concepts of democracy and human rights” (Habermas, 2006b: 190). Clearly, this view justifies a radical skepticism concerning the possibility of developing intercultural dialogues on universally acceptable interpretations of human rights and democracy. For Habermas, nonetheless, this view does not take into account the very foundations of Western modernity as expressed in the normative self-understanding of modernity characterized by the productive ideas of self-consciousness, self-determination, and self-realization.

This is why instead of such a radical view of multiculturalism, Habermas proposes that Europe should favor a different option. For him, and this is the second horn of the dilemma, European nations should confront their own blind spots on the role that religion has played in their own development and evolution. As a result, European nations should critically reflect on their own processes of secularization and regard them as one among many different options<sup>194</sup>.

Thus, without undermining the secular nature of their political institutions, European nations should be willing to make them more flexible in order to allow the integration of Muslims into European societies. This change, as we know, refers mainly to a critical reflection on the role of religion in the public sphere of a democracy.

We can see that Habermas’ reflections on the role of religion and the developing of a global society are the result of the efforts of an European thinker that, nevertheless, tries hard to go beyond his own cultural limitations. In other words, in his recent thoughts we can see that, without denying the cultural and social achievements that Europe can offer to the whole world, Habermas is trying really hard to “clean” his own philosophy from any Eurocentric traits.

Among the achievements of European culture that, as a matter of fact, have become diffused across the globe we can count evangelical Christianity, the secular gains of science and technology, Roman law and the Napoleonic Code, the nation state, democracy, human rights, etc.

However, more important than those concrete European products, Habermas thinks that two specific experiences should be mentioned, rescued and deepened. In Habermas’ words,

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<sup>194</sup> As Habermas puts it, “In the secular societies of the West, everyday moral intuitions are still shaped by the normative substance of so to speak decapitated, legally privatized, religious traditions, in particular by the contents of the Hebrew morality of justice in the Old Testament and the Christian ethics of love in the New Testament. These contents are transmitted by processes of socialization, though often only implicitly and under different titles. (Habermas, 1998: 7-8)

In the course of its history, Europe, more than any other culture, has confronted deep structural conflicts and tensions, in the social as well as the temporal dimension. This fact no doubt also explains Europe's aggressive expansionist tendencies and its high potential for violence. What interests me in the present context, however, is that Europeans have also responded in productive ways to these challenges, and in the process have learned two principal lessons: to live with long-term, stabilized conflicts and to adopt a reflexive attitude toward their own traditions (Habermas, 2006: 104).

These lessons, for Habermas, have produced institutional arrangements for productively resolving, or at least stabilizing, intellectual, social, and political conflicts. As Habermas puts it,

In the course of painful and often fatal struggles, Europe has learned how to cope with the rivalry between ecclesiastical and secular powers, the cleavage between faith and knowledge, the endemic conflicts between religious confessions, the antagonisms between city and country, court and city, town and gown, and, ultimately, with the enmity and rivalry between belligerent nation-states. Our success lay not in solving these conflicts, but rather in stabilizing them and transforming them into a source of innovative energies through ritualization. This dialectical mode of problem-solving finds conceptual expression in the idea of recognizing 'reasonable disagreements' that is, the rational expectation that in many cases agreement will not be forthcoming (Habermas, 2006: 104).

For Habermas, then, this fact of Europe's history, rescued, interpreted and emphasized in a non-Eurocentric way, should constitute a reason to be hopeful on the possibility of developing deeper intercultural dialogues among all the nations of the world.

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These introductory remarks constitute the general background of this chapter where I aim to show that Habermas' account of the role of religion in the public sphere is not limited to the national borders of a deliberative democracy. The political and theoretical contexts of Habermas' proposal, as well as the premises he is relying on, entail not only domestic challenges to liberal democracies but also global challenges to the (emerging) world society. Habermas' account presupposes a self-reflection of Western Modernity that, in contrast to *Theory of Communicative Action*, explicitly leaves room for the possibility of affirming a plurality of secularization processes and multiple modernities.

This chapter will have three steps. (I) First, I will present Habermas' remarks on the current postnational constellation and its untamed global capitalism. (II) Second, I will outline Habermas' proposal for a political constitution for the pluralistic world



society. (III) Finally, I will indicate the role that religion would play within the intercultural debates proper of post-secular global societies.

## I

The classic ideas of democracy and republican autonomy were developed within the context of societies constituted as nation-states. A state defined by a territory, fueled by a popular economy, and confined within national borders formed a historical constellation in which democratic processes assumed a, at least partially, convincing institutional form.

The idea of the nation was crucial to construct a new form of collective identity for the members of the state beyond the traditional loyalties to their village, family or clan. The idea of the nation made possible the cultural integration required by the political mobilization of the subjects of the state. In Habermas' words, the cultural symbolism "of 'a people' secures its own particular character, its 'spirit of the people', in the presumed commonalities of descent, language, and history, and in this way generates a unity, even if only an imaginary one. It thereby makes the residents of a single state-controlled territory aware of a collective belonging" (Habermas, 2001: 64)

In this way, the cultural substrate offered by a national consciousness made possible civil solidarity. Even if they remain strangers to one another, members of the same nation feel responsible enough for one another and are willing to make 'sacrifices' such as assuming military service or paying redistributive taxes.

In addition to its dependence on the idea of nation, the national constellation also relied on a classical twofold conception of sovereignty, namely, external and internal. On the one hand, external sovereignty "designates the capacity of a state to maintain its independence and hence the integrity of its borders in the international arena, if necessary by military force" (Habermas, 1998: 170). Internal sovereignty, on the other hand, refers to the state's capacity, "based on the monopoly of the means of violence, to maintain law and order in its own territory by means of administrative power and positive law" (Habermas, 1998: 170)

These classic ideas of sovereignty and nation determined entirely the relation among the different nation-states in the world. For international law, sovereign states were the only valid agents of international relationships.

In addition, this view justified one of the main principles of traditional international law, namely, the principle of non-intervention. According to this principle, "independent nation-states in the international state of nature should act freely in accordance with their own interests because the security and survival of the collective are non-negotiable values for its members and because, from the point of view of an observer, conflicts between collective actors are still best regulated by the imperatives of instrumental rationality" (Habermas, 2006: 25)

As can be seen, under these premises it is hard to conceive a binding force of reciprocal legal obligations for the international community of sovereign national-states. Indeed, as Habermas puts it,

According to the tradition of liberal nationalism, the core norms of international law, i.e. the principle of state sovereignty and the prohibition on intervention in domestic affairs, follow from the principle of popular sovereignty. The competence of the state to assert itself toward the outside is the reflection of the democratic self-determination of the citizens within the state. The state must have the right and the ability to uphold the identity and the form of life supported by the democratic community and to protect itself against other nations, if necessary with military force. Internal self-determination requires protection against the threat of foreign domination (Habermas, 2008: 319).

However, as Habermas indicates, nowadays many different forces are challenging such a national constellation. “Today, developments summarized under the term “globalization” have put this entire constellation into question” (Habermas, 2001: 60).

For this reason, in Habermas’ view, we are experiencing now a postnational constellation. A world previously dominated by nation-states is in transition toward the postnational constellation of a global society. “States are losing their autonomy in part as they become increasingly enmeshed in the horizontal networks of a global society” (Habermas, 2006b: 115-116)

With the term “globalization” Habermas aims to describe the process of “increasing scope and intensity of commercial, communicative, and exchange relations beyond national borders. (2001: 65-66). In this sense, for him, globalization refers to the different processes that have produced a worldwide expansion “of trade and production, commodity and financial markets, fashions, the media and computer programs, news and communications networks, transportation systems and flows of migration, the risks generated by large-scale technology, environmental damage and epidemics, as well as organized crime and terrorism” (Habermas, 2006b: 175).

Globalization is, thus, a multidimensional phenomenon. However, its economical aspect might be the most notorious one. Indeed, “Global economic transactions, if measured against nationally limited economic activity, are reaching a level achieved in no other previous epoch, and directly affect national economies on a previously unknown scale” (Habermas, 2001: 66). For this reason, it is easy to see that the economical aspect of globalization has put under increasing pressure the form of national-state institutionalization.

The processes of globalization, then, are

altering the social parameters for the *de facto* independence of sovereign states. Nation-states can no longer secure the boundaries of their own territories, the vital necessities of their populations, and the material preconditions for the reproduction of their societies by their own efforts. In spatial, social, and material respects, nation-states encumber each other with the external effects of decisions that impinge on third parties who had no say in the decision-making process. Hence, states cannot escape the

need for regulation and coordination in the expanding horizon of a world society (Habermas, 2006b: 176).

The interdependencies of an increasingly complex world society, the sheer scale of the problems which states can solve only through cooperation, the growing authority and density of supranational institutions, regimes and procedures, the economization of foreign policy, and the blurring of the classical boundary between domestic and foreign policy, are some of the current global phenomena that form a new postnational constellation.

Clearly, such a complex phenomenon cannot be assessed in a simplistic and Manichean way. However, it is not difficult to see that one of its most important consequences is a globally untamed capitalism that has brought forth the pathologies of the Western form of societal modernizations.

Hence, global markets, mass consumption, mass communication and mass tourism spread the standardized products of a mass culture shaped mainly by the tastes of the citizens of the United States. As Habermas puts it, "The same consumer goods and fashions, the same films, television programs, and bestselling music and books spread across the globe; the same fashions in pop, techno, or jeans seize and shape the mentalities of young people in even the most far-flung places; the same language, English assimilated in a variety of ways, serves as a medium for understanding between the most radically different dialects" (Habermas, 2001: 75).

To be sure, this homogenization cannot be seen only as a West-East dichotomy for all Western societies feel the leveling out of their strongest national differences and the weakening of their strongest local traditions<sup>195</sup>.

This is why Habermas feels confident to apply to this current global situation the conceptual analysis presented by him in this *TCA*. However, interestingly enough, Habermas' dual perspective of a society as a system and as a lifeworld appears slightly modified.

The language used by Habermas is one of the differences. Indeed, instead of systems or subsystems, Habermas speaks now of networks. In Habermas' own words,

Horizontal relations of exchange and interaction, which are constructed through the market decisions of independent actors, are often stabilized through efficiently generated, positively valuated action consequences. This form of "functional integration" of social relations *via networks* competes with an entirely distinct form of integration - with a "social integration" of the collective lifeworld of those who share a collective identity; a social integration based on mutual understanding, intersubjectively shared norms, and collective values (Habermas, 2001: 82, *emphasis added*).

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<sup>195</sup> However, as mentioned before, this situation cannot be interpreted in simplistic and Manichean terms. As Habermas himself notes, there is a very subtle dialectic between leveling and creative differentiation. Indeed, "Reacting to the homogenizing pressure of a material world culture, new constellations often emerge which do not so much level out existing cultural differences as create a new multiplicity of hybridized forms" (Habermas, 2001: 75).

As we know from *TCA*, for Habermas these two forms of integration have marked European history since the Middle Age. This dynamic, according to Habermas, has produced opening and closure effects. In Habermas' words,

The spread of exchange networks for commodities, money, persons, and information demands an explosive degree of mobility. The spatial and temporal horizons of a lifeworld, on the other hand, no matter how broadly they extend, always form a whole that is both intuitively present but always withdrawn to an unproblematic background; a whole which is closed in the sense that it contains every possible interaction from the perspective of lifeworld participants. Expanding and intensifying markets or communication networks ignite a modernization dynamic of opening and closure. The proliferation of anonymous relations with "others" and the dissonant experiences with "foreigners" have a subversive power. Growing pluralism loosens ascriptive ties to family, locality, social background, and tradition, and initiates a formal transformation of social integration (Habermas ,2001: 82)

More important than the change of vocabulary, we have now a slightly different assessment of these processes of opening and closure. First, Habermas is more explicit about the complex and bidirectional dynamic of these processes insofar as both the lifeworld and the networks mutually influence one another. In addition, he is also more explicit about the ambivalent positive as well as negative results of both sorts of integration<sup>196</sup>. These two aspects can be seen in the following words by Habermas, which I quote at length:

With each new impulse toward modernization, intersubjectively shared lifeworlds open, so that they can reorganize, and then close once more. Circling around this formal transformation, classical sociology came up

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<sup>196</sup> These were some of the weakness we identified in *TCA*. But now, as can be seen, Habermas is trying to present a more balanced picture of social modernization. Indeed, "Against this background, the trends toward the debureaucratization of public services, the de-hierarchicalization of professional organizational forms, the de-traditionalization of familial and gender relations and the de-conventionalization of consumer patterns and lifestyles could all appear in a more favorable light. The increasing differentiation among forms of interaction and mentalities, the reliable party affiliations of voters, the new influence of subpolitical movements on organized politics, and most importantly the growing autonomization and individualization of the choice of life projects, all grant a certain charm to the relentless processes of dissolution that characterize organized modernity. But these positive aspects all have their flipside: the "flexibilization" of career paths hides a deregulated labor market and a heightened risk of unemployment; the "individualization" of life projects conceals a sort of compulsory mobility that is hard to reconcile with durable personal bonds; the "pluralization" of life forms also reflects the danger of a fragmented society and the loss of social cohesion. Although we should take care not to assume an uncritical view of the achievements of the social welfare state, we must also not blind ourselves to the costs of its "transformation" or collapse. One can remain sensitive to the normalizing force of social bureaucracies without closing one's eyes to the shocking price that a reckless monetarization of the lifeworld would demand" (Habermas, 2001: 87)

with ever new descriptions of it: from status to contract; from primary to secondary groups; from community to society; from mechanical to organic solidarity; and so on. The impulse toward opening is generated by new markets, new means of communication, new modes of commerce and cultural networks. For those affected by it, "opening" entails the ambivalent experience of increasing contingency: the disintegration of formative and hitherto authoritarian forms of dependencies; the liberation from relationships that are as orienting and protective as they are prejudicial and imprisoning. In a word, the opening of a strongly integrated lifeworld releases individuals into the ambivalence of expanded options. It opens their eyes to new possibilities, but also increases their risk of making mistakes - which will then, at least, be their own mistakes, which they can learn from. Each individual is confronted with a freedom that obliges him to count on himself alone, and that isolates him from others as it compels him to take a strategic-rational view of his own interests. And yet this freedom also enables him to enter into new social ties and to creatively draft new rules for living together with others" (Habermas, 2001: 83).

In spite of these subtle differences, Habermas does maintain the solution he offered in *TCA*. As he puts it,

If this liberalizing impulse is to avoid running into socio pathology - bogging down at the phase of de-differentiation, alienation, and anomie-then the lifeworld must successfully reorganize the structures of self-consciousness, self-determination, and self-realization that have shaped the self-understanding of modernity. Lifeworlds that have disintegrated under the pressure of opening have to close themselves anew - now, of course, with expanded horizons (Habermas, 2001: 83).

However at a global level, this situation seems to be even more complicated because the existent democratic states do not have enough power to intervene and try to vouch for more democratic, inclusive and transparent processes of globalization.

The only solution would be to develop political institutions able to generate integration processes that tame the expansive systemic integrations brought forth by the development of global capitalism. For Habermas, a kind of globalization developed without socio-pathological side-effects requires at least that politics catches up with globalized markets in a way that does not regress below the legitimacy conditions for democratic self-determination.

A 'catch up politics', in this sense, is a reflexive politics oriented to strengthening political power<sup>197</sup>. At a "national" level, this would be the role of Habermas' model of a

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<sup>197</sup> Habermas, we must remember, does not believe in the power of money to stabilize itself. As he constantly indicates, "The successful use of political power has to be measured by criteria other than economic ones: money can't simply replace power. Instead, the foregoing analysis suggests the transnational task of bringing global

deliberative democracy. At a global level, however, it is not so clear what sort of political institutions or practices could assume the role of catching up with globalized markets.

Traditional philosophical-political theories centered on the conventional concepts of the sovereignty of the nation-states are not able to offer the necessitated theoretical frameworks capable to respond to the existent Social Darwinism among the states of the world.

Those theories cannot go beyond their view according to which the world of states is nothing but an anarchic set of independent nation-states making more or less rational decisions in order to preserve and expand their own power. Even if we conceive the states as economic utility maximizers instead of accumulators of political power the main limitation of this model is not avoided: we can only conceive of strategic interactions among independently operating power.

In addition, the only solution that those traditional philosophical-political theories can propose is to introduce a “world state” at the top level of a multilevel organization. However, as we will see, for Habermas, such a solution entails a level of legitimation too difficult (and unnecessary) to fulfill.

For this reason, we irremediably need to take into account the actual challenges of the processes of globalization and, within the very same context of the postnational constellation, propose the development of new forms for the democratic self-steering of society that are able to have global effects.

## II

According to Habermas, political theory needs to revise three aspects of its conceptual apparatus. First, and most important, the traditional concept of national sovereignty must be adapted to take into account the new political realities that go beyond the nation-state. Second, the notion of the state’s monopoly on force needs to be compatible with the idea “that supranational law is backed up by the sanctioning powers that remain the preserve of nation-states” (Habermas, 2008: 319). Finally, the world society needs to be conceived according to its reality, that is, as a stratified world society.

The first change, as we saw, is related to the fact that we are now in a highly interdependent global society. In this new context, internal sovereignty includes, besides the traditional idea of maintaining law and order, the effective and material protection of the citizens’ civil rights. On the other hand, external sovereignty

today calls for the ability to cooperate with partners as much as the capacity to defend oneself against external enemies. Fulfilling the social contract also presupposes that the sovereign state is willing and able to

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economic networks under political control, as an alternative to futile adaptations to the imperatives of locational competition. (Habermas, 2001: 81). Similarly, “The regulatory power of collectively binding decisions operates according to a different logic than the regulatory mechanisms of the market. Power can be democratized; money cannot. Thus the possibilities for a democratic self-steering of society slip away as the regulation of social spheres is transferred from one medium to another (Habermas, 2001: 78). And, in the same vein, “The criteria for the exercise of legitimate power are different from those by which economic success is measured; for example, markets, unlike polities, cannot be democratized” (Habermas, 2006: 83).

participate equally in collective efforts to address problems that arise at the global and regional levels and can only be solved within the framework of international or supranational organizations. This presupposes both the renunciation of the right to go to war and the recognition of the duty of the international community to protect the population of a criminal or failing state against its own government or what is left of it. (Habermas, 2008, 320)

The second conceptual revision refers to the idea that, ultimately, the states must retain their monopoly on force even if they agree to transfer the right to impose sanctions and to intervene to a world organization. Habermas, as mentioned before, does not want to transform such a world organization into a world republic with a global monopoly on force. As he puts it, “a ‘world republic’ is not the only institutional form which the Kantian project could assume as an alternative to the surrogate of a league of nations. The requirements for a ‘cosmopolitan condition’ understood in sufficiently abstract terms are not fulfilled by the model of a constitutional state projected onto a global scale alone” (Habermas, 2006b: 137). For Habermas, thus, the constitution of an inclusive world organization should not be compared with the constitution of the sovereign states. The structural differences between those two processes are so deep that it is better to think of different models for the former.

The last conceptual adjustment is meant to take into account the structural differences that exist around the globe. In Habermas’ words, we must speak of a ‘stratified world society’ “because the mechanism of the world market couples increasing productivity with growing impoverishment and, more generally, processes of economic development with processes of underdevelopment. Globalization splits the world in two and at the same time forces it to act cooperatively as a community of shared risks”. (Habermas, 1998: 183).

The international community must have as one of its more important goals the overcoming of the existing social tensions and economic imbalances. Habermas thinks that this requires a new notion of peace understood as a “process which unfolds in a nonviolent manner and which aims not merely to prevent violence but to satisfy the real preconditions for a peaceful coexistence of groups and peoples”. (Habermas, 1998: 185)

Habermas’ proposal for the constitution of the pluralist world society is constructed on the basis of these three conceptual revisions. Habermas’ proposal is a world society constitutionalized in the form of a multilevel system. The traditional state-centered system of international law only conceived one sort of player (the nation-states) and two playing fields (internal affairs and international relations). In contrast, Habermas’ view of a constituted cosmopolitan society conceives three different collective actors and three different arenas.

First, the agent of the supranational arena is a reformed world organization in charge of the functions of securing peace and promoting human rights at the supranational level. In Habermas’ words,

In a multi-level global system, the classical function of the state as the guarantor of security, law, and freedom would be transferred to a supranational world organization specialized in securing peace and implementing human rights worldwide. However, the world organization would not have to shoulder the immense burden of a global domestic policy designed to overcome the extreme disparities in wealth within the stratified world society, reverse ecological imbalances, and avert collective threats, on the one hand, while endeavoring to promote an intercultural discourse on, and recognition of, the equal rights of the major world civilizations, on the other (Habermas, 2008: 333).

This first kind of problems, according to Habermas, has to be solved taking into account the inherent meaning of cultures and world religions. “Politics must engage with these issues in a spirit of hermeneutic open-mindedness through the prudent balancing of interests and intelligent regulation” (Habermas, 2008: 334). For this reason, they need to be treated within the context of transnational negotiation systems.

The second arena is, thus, an intermediate transnational level constituted, mostly, by continental regimes that would deal with global economic and ecological issues within the framework of permanent conferences and negotiating forums.

Habermas has in mind the cases of the “natural” continental regimes such as the United States, China and Russia, but, especially, the more “political” case of the European Union.

According to Habermas, the European Union constitutes a model for other regions “because it harmonizes the interests of formerly independent nation—states at a higher level of integration, thereby creating a collective actor on a new scale” (Habermas, 2008: 326). However, as mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, in order to be a real and promising model, the European Union should achieve a level of political integration that enables it to pursue democratically legitimized goals both at Europe and at another places of the world. As Habermas puts it,

Today, the European Union constitutes a broad continental region which is spanned by a dense network of markets in the horizontal dimension, but is subject to relatively weak political regulation by indirectly legitimated authorities in the vertical dimension. Since member states, by transferring their sovereignty in currency matters to the European Central Bank, have lost their ability to steer their economies by adjusting exchange rates, the heightened competition we are likely to see within the single currency zone will give rise to problems of a new order magnitude (Habermas, 2006: 84).

In any event, Habermas believes that this process should be replicated in all the regions of the world. Thus, the various world regions should form continental regimes, similar to the European Union, with enough power to develop political policies of their own.



In Habermas' words,

What I have in mind are regional or continental regimes equipped with a sufficiently representative mandate to negotiate for whole continents and to wield the necessary powers of implementation for large territories. Politics cannot intentionally meet the spontaneous need for regulation of a systemically integrated, quasi-natural global economy and society until such time as the intermediate arena is populated by a manageable number of global players. The latter must be strong enough to form shifting coalitions, to produce a flexible system of checks and balances, and to negotiate and implement binding compromises — above all on issues concerning the structure and boundary conditions of the global ecological and economic systems. (Habermas, 2008: 324- 325)

Finally, nation-states constitute the lower national level. In Habermas' model the nation-states would not disappear. They are, in fact, responsible of establishing the new world order with the only instrument available to them, that is, international law treaties. In Habermas' view, "The world organization must be permanently buttressed by power centers organized at the state level if it is to constitute the main pillar of a legal pacifism backed up by power" (Habermas, 2008: 323).

It is noteworthy that although Habermas reaffirms the importance of the nation-states in his proposal for a world society, his idea of "the nation" is wider than the traditional conception. As he puts it,

On this conception, the lowest, but supporting, 'national' level of the political system of the world society would be represented by the states that currently make up the United Nations. Although the political constitution of these members would have to conform to the constitutional principles of the world organization, the reference to nation-states suggests a false comparison with the first generation of nation-states that emerged in Europe. Moreover, it does not take account of the wide variations in the developmental paths taken by other states that developed out of immigrant societies (USA, Australia), old empires (China), the collapse of new empires (Russia), European decolonization (India, Africa, Southeast Asia), and so forth. In the present context, the most important thing is that these nation states, notwithstanding all of their other differences, represent the most important source of democratic legitimation for a legally constituted world society (Habermas, 2008b: 447)<sup>198</sup>.

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<sup>198</sup>In any event, Habermas still thinks that the states have an important role to play. In his own words, "States remain the most important actors and the final arbiters on the global political stage. Admittedly, they have to share this arena with global players of a different kind, such as multinational corporations and non governmental organizations, which pursue their own agendas in the media of money or influence. However, only states can draw on the resources of law and legitimate power. Even if non governmental actors can satisfy the initial regulatory needs of cross-border

Based on his conceptual proposal, Habermas argues for concrete reforms to the UN. These reforms refer mainly to three issues: the establishment of a world parliament, the construction of a global judicial system, and the reorganization of the Security Council<sup>199</sup>.

However, a crucial aspect of Habermas' proposal refers to the role of an eventual global public sphere in the legitimation of the institutions of the world society. For Habermas, "The legislative decisions of the Security Council and the General Assembly require a more robust, if indirect, form of legitimation from a well-informed global public opinion" (Habermas, 2006b: 174).

Insofar as the international institutions acquire more relevance and the traditional nation-states lose competences, there emerges a gap between the new need for legitimation required by governance beyond the nation-states and the traditional institutions and procedures that, at least partially, have been able to generate democratic legitimation with the borders of the nation-states<sup>200</sup>.

This gap affects the very structure of the nation-states. Indeed, within the expanding network of international organizations, already the political decisions that are being taken affect the populations of the nation-states in such a way that the international treaties behind them do not provide sufficient legitimation.

As mentioned before, the public spheres of the nation states make possible a permanent monitoring of, and participation in, "decision-making by the citizens by formulating and implementing policies (through political parties, general elections, nongovernmental organizations, citizen initiatives, and social movements)" (Habermas, 2009: 182). Nowadays, in contrast, the citizens of the nation-states are finding out about the results of the negotiation processes developed by the delegates of national governments in international organizations only when ratification by parliament is required, that is, when the moment for monitoring and participating does no longer exist.

For Habermas all these legitimation deficits can only be solved with the emergence of public spheres that go beyond national borders public.

The shape of these public spheres should not be, in Habermas' view, a domestic public sphere writ large. Habermas, in contrast, is advocating for the opening of the circuits of communication within the national arenas. In this sense, Habermas does not want to propose an image of a super-public sphere superimposed on the national public spheres. "On the contrary, the mutually translated processes of communication within the national spheres must intersect in such a way that the relevant contributions from each arena are absorbed osmotically by all the others" (Habermas, 2006: 102-103)

Nevertheless, it has to be noticed that Habermas does present some reflections on the possibility and meaning of a global or supranational public sphere.

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functional systems through private forms of legislation (e.g. corporations that institutionalize market relations with the aid of international law firms), these regulations will not count as 'law' if they are not implemented by nation-states, or at least by agencies of politically constituted international organizations (Habermas, 2006b: 176).

<sup>199</sup> For Habermas' remarks on these reforms see (1998, 186-188), (2008, 334-342), and (2008b 449-451).

<sup>200</sup> According to Habermas, for example, "the institutions of the European Union are legally founded on international treaties but they exercise decision-making competences that intervene so deeply in the social relations of the member states that they can no longer be legitimized on this foundation alone" (Habermas, 2008b: 445).

For Habermas, it is undeniable that “a temporary worldwide awareness of particular occurrences such as catastrophes or wars can arise. The Vietnam War was probably the first historical event which achieved global awareness in a strict sense. A kind of transient global public sphere crystallized around it via the channels of the respective national news reporting and commentary” (Habermas, 2009: 182). However, it is also true that “the perpetuation of transnational decision-making processes is not being offset by the emergence of continuous forms of monitoring and commentary of comparable scope. The international institutions do not satisfy the essential prerequisites of transparency, accessibility, and responsiveness either” (Habermas 2009, 182)

In any event, Habermas does recognize the existence of a twofold need for legitimation at the supranational level. This twofold need refers, on the one hand, to the negotiations and resolutions of the General Assembly, and, on the other, to the legislative, executive, and adjudicative practice of the UN organs such as the Security Council, Secretariat, Courts, etc. According to Habermas, despite their differences, the need for legitimation could be satisfied in both cases if a functional global public sphere emerges. As Habermas puts it, “Vigilant civil society actors who are sensitive to relevant issues would have to generate worldwide transparency for the corresponding issues and decisions and provide the opportunity for cosmopolitan citizens to develop informed opinions and take stances on these issues”. (Habermas, 2008b: 451).

This diffuse world public opinion would exert, nonetheless, a weak form of control over the interpretive, executive, and judicial decisions of the world organization. It would be armed with, as Habermas calls it, the “weak sanctioning power of naming and shaming” (Habermas, 2008b: 451). “For the mobilizing power that an alert global opinion acquires at critical moments of world history and transmits to governments through the channels of the national public spheres can have a major political impact, as is shown by the worldwide protests against the invasion of Iraq in violation of international law”. (Habermas, 2008b: 451). In this way, a supportive global public sphere would help to avoid that the hegemonic law of the stronger entrenches behind the façade of the world society.

In any event, the scope of this global public sphere would be limited to the common goals of the supranational organization, namely, to securing peace and protecting human rights. Thus,

The requisite solidarity among world citizens need not reach the level of the implicit consensus on thick political value-orientations that is necessary for the familiar kind of civic solidarity among fellow-nationals. Consonance in reactions of moral outrage toward egregious human rights violations and manifest acts of aggression is sufficient. Such agreement in negative affective responses to perceived acts of mass criminality suffices for integrating an abstract community of world citizens (Habermas, 2006b: 143)

This agreement, nevertheless, constitutes already a great challenge. It would require a consensus, at least, in the following two areas. First, it needs a shared historical consciousness able to account for the non-simultaneity of the different societies that are, nonetheless, simultaneously dependent on a peaceful coexistence. Second, it must develop at least a normative agreement on a general intercultural meaning and interpretation of human rights (Habermas, 1998: 185).

Beyond these general areas Habermas does not believe that the solution for the legitimation problems of the new world society consists in constructing a supranational public sphere. For Habermas, in contrast, the transnationalization of the existing public spheres might be a much more promising solution. “For the latter could become more responsive to one another without any need for drastic changes in the existing infrastructure. At the same time, the boundaries of the national public spheres would become portals for mutual translations” (Habermas, 2009, 183)

Undoubtedly, Habermas is more familiar with the potentialities of the transnationalization of an European public sphere. This is why most of his remarks are directly related to the European case. They can, nevertheless, be easily extrapolated to other regions of the world.

Language, for instance, constitutes a particular challenge that the European Union has had to face. Indeed, “Within the European Union there are at present 13 different officially recognized languages. At first sight, this linguistic pluralism seems to represent an insurmountable obstacle to the creation of a pan-European political community” (Habermas, 2006: 103). This is why the best option has been the establishment of a common second first language, that is, English. An option that, nevertheless, requires more time to be fully developed. Clearly, developing pan – Asian or pan- African public spheres demand a very similar challenge. Even a South-American or Latin-American public sphere needs to solve the problem of linguistic pluralism because any of those two options seems feasible without the proper integration of Brazil as well as the different indigenous languages that still exist in that part of the world.

Another element that needs to be taken into account to develop transnational public spheres is the existence of a strong “transnational press”. For Habermas, in order to achieve that stage, the existing newspapers should expand their role to provide information concerning the political problems and controversies which trigger the same issues (European, or American, or African) in the other member states. However, according to Habermas, even Europe is still very far away from this scenario. Indeed,

If we search for English-language newspapers with a multinational readership, all we find are the *Financial Times* and *The Economist* read by the business elite, or the *International Herald Tribune* (including a digest of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*) read by a political class – not exactly European papers. These media outlets do not offer a promising model for cross-border communication. In the audio-visual sector, the bilingual television channel Arte represents a more convincing model, though it remains inspired by the image of a supranational public sphere in which different nationalities participate. As an alternative, let us imagine that the

established mode of publication during summit meetings of the European Council were to become standard. In this way, the questions affecting the common interest of citizens across Europe could be made accessible to them. The national media of one country would merely have to take up and comment on the substance of controversies being conducted in other member countries. Opinions and counterpositions could then develop in parallel around the same kinds of issues, information, and arguments in all member countries, regardless of where they originate. The fact that these horizontal back and forth flows of communications would have to pass through the filter of communications would in no way impair the essential function of cross-border, but shared, political opinion and will-formation (Habermas, 2006: 103)

In any event, and perhaps more important than the latter two conditions, the developing of such transnational public spheres requires the extension of solidarity among the different citizens of the nations that would constitute them. In the case of Europe, as Habermas puts it,

It is beyond dispute that the *sine qua non* for a democratic will-formation on a pan-European scale that is capable of sustaining and legitimating positively coordinated and effective redistributive policies is greater solidarity at the base. Civic solidarity, which has hitherto been limited to the nation-state, will have to be widened to encompass all citizens of the Union, so that, for example, Swedes and Portuguese will be ready to vouch for one another. Only then can they be reasonably expected to support a roughly equal minimum wage, or, more generally, the creation of equal conditions for forging individual life plans, which will, to be sure, continue to exhibit national features (Habermas, 2006: 87).

Against the skeptics that doubt that this will ever be possible because an “European people” does not yet exist, Habermas argues that we need to bear in mind that “in the European states in the nineteenth century, national consciousness and civic solidarity – the first modern form of collective identity – were produced only gradually with the help of national historiography, mass communication, and universal conscription” (Habermas, 2006: 87). Therefore, for Habermas, instead of a defeatist attitude, we should embrace a patient one that expects that the learning processes that made possible the development of a national and democratic consciousness continue beyond national borders.

This is why, for Habermas, no international public sphere, whether transnational or even supranational, can emerge if the citizens of the various nation-states, as well as the nation-states themselves do not develop some learning processes that end up altering their own their self-understanding.

### III

A politically constituted world society requires that both governments and populations learn to adopt new orientations and self-understandings.

In the case of the states, Habermas believes that their self-understanding needs to be transformed into the consciousness of members of international organizations with rights and duties. In this way, the obligations that the states have assumed as part of the international community, or as agents within transnational networks, would have to be taken into account and made compatible with their national interests. As Habermas' puts it, "One of the required learning processes involves internalizing the norms of the world organization and acquiring the ability to pursue one's own interests by prudently merging into transnational networks" (Habermas, 2008: 326). Clearly, this might be easy to achieve by smaller states that have always been deeply "exposed to the full force of the imperatives of an increasingly globalized economy and the pressures to cooperate of an increasingly complex world society to internalize the norms of the world organization" (Habermas, 2008b, 453). For these smaller states, the majority of states of the world, is easier than for the major powers to see themselves as members and co-players of the international community of states.

In the case of the citizens, their learning processes refer to overcoming "an obstinate frame of mind historically bound up with the evolution of the nation state. In the course of the regional amalgamation of nation-states into empowered global actors, national consciousness, hence the existing basis of an already highly abstract form of civic solidarity, would have to undergo a further extension". (Habermas, 2008b: 453). Habermas expects that the citizens of these "cosmopolitan nation-states" take their civic solidarity to an even higher level of abstraction in order to make possible the process of integrating nation-states into continental regimes. From this perspective, for instance, the citizens of privileged nations have to accept the existence of duties toward the citizens of disadvantaged nations.

This kind of situation, nevertheless, as Habermas puts it, is by no means new. Indeed, similar questions have historically arisen within individual states. "When the constitution in federations such as Germany calls for revenue sharing among the states and regions aimed at producing "equal living conditions," it has to be assessed in which cases and respects civic solidarity can claim priority over the regional self-interest of those living in the thriving and well-to-do states" (Habermas, 2009: 122)

Habermas, to be sure, is optimistic about the development of these transnational learning processes. He presents, in fact, two very concrete reasons for his optimistic attitude.

First, the recent historical developments seem to favor his view. Indeed, "With the monstrous mass crimes of the twentieth century, states as the subjects of international law forfeited the presumption of innocence that underlies the prohibition on intervention and immunity against criminal prosecution under international law" (Habermas, 2009: 109).

Second, even within the difficulties and dangers of the current global situation, Habermas find reasons to be optimistic. These difficulties and dangers refer to the existence of a

gentle pressure toward globally coordinated action exerted by the awareness of global dangers. The dangers are manifest: ecological imbalances, asymmetries in standards of living and economic power, large-scale technologies, the arms trade (in particular, the spread of atomic, biological, and chemical weapons), terrorism, drug-related criminality, and so forth. Those who do not completely despair of the learning capacity of the international system have to rest their hopes on the fact that the globalization of these dangers has in fact long since united the world into an involuntary community of shared risks (Habermas, 1998: 185-186)

In any event, as can be expected, religion can easily be seen as an insurmountable obstacle for the development of such learning processes. “The current worldwide political instrumentalization of the major religions (...) increases tensions at the international level. Within a cosmopolitan order, this perceived clash of civilizations would above all impede the transnational negotiation systems” (Habermas, 2008: 326). This is why, Habermas’ remarks on the role of religion in the public sphere entail cosmopolitan consequences.

As we saw, in Habermas’ proposal of a world society’s political constitution, the nation-states, as well as their citizens, need to learn to change both their behavior and their self-image within the multilevel system outlined above. Otherwise, such a system would not be able to produce any democratic self-steering effects.

For the secular democracies of the West this entails the self-reflection on their own process of secularization. Within this context, Habermas’ account of the role of religion in the public sphere appears as one of the contributions from the citizens of the Western democracies that would make possible an intercultural dialogue; a dialogue that is actually being developed within their own national public spheres<sup>201</sup>. After all, as Habermas puts it, “all European nations now find themselves on the path toward a multicultural society” (Habermas, 2001: 73).

Thus, if we conceive the modernization of public consciousness as a learning process that affects and changes both religious and secular mentalities and attitudes by forcing everybody to critically reflect on their respective limits, then the international tensions between major cultures and world religions do not need to be interpreted as insurmountable clashes of civilizations. This is why, according to Habermas, the predominantly secular societies of the West need to understand themselves as post-secular societies.

A ‘post-secular’ society, in Habermas’ view, must have had a prior process of secularization. Hence, Habermas is particularly thinking in the societies of Western Europe, and countries such as Canada or Australia in which the religious ties of their population have steadily loosened, especially since the end of the Second World War.

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<sup>201</sup> Interestingly enough, for Habermas, religion constitutes also a pacemaker of this process. In this sense, religious consciousness has had to experience a learning process. And it has been successful in many cases. As Habermas puts it, “The advance in reflexivity exacted from religious consciousness in pluralistic societies in turn provides a model for the mindset of secular groups in multicultural societies” (Habermas, 2008: 270).

“In these regions, the awareness of belonging to a secularized society had become more or less universal” (Habermas, 2009: 59). In these societies, in addition, the idea that religion might finally end up disappearing (the secularization hypothesis) used to be easily accepted.

From a sociological point of view, these societies served as a model to posit the secularization hypothesis. In Habermas’ view, three were the main aspects of this hypothesis.

First of all, it relied on the idea that religion was undermined by an anthropocentric understanding of a disenchanted world produced by progress in science and technology. Under the premises of that progress, the totality of empirical states and events appears as susceptible of being explained in causal terms. As a consequence, religion lost influence because a “scientifically enlightened mind cannot be easily reconciled with theocentric and metaphysical worldviews” (Habermas, 2009: 60).

The second element refers to the functional differentiation of social subsystems that took place in modernity. As a result, the religious organizations lost control over law, politics, public welfare, education, and many other human realms until then controlled by them. The only proper function that they kept referred to administering the means of salvation. In consequence, the exercise of religion became a predominantly private matter, and religious communities suffered a deep loss in public influence and relevance.

Finally, the third element refers to the development from agrarian to industrial and post-industrial societies. This development leads “to higher levels of welfare and increased social security; and with the easing of everyday risks and growing existential security, individuals have less need of a practice that promises to cope with uncontrolled contingencies through faith in a ‘higher’ or cosmic power” (Habermas, 2009: 60).

The secularization hypothesis seemed to be confirmed by the path taken by the affluent European societies. In contrast, the development of the United States seemed to contradict such a hypothesis. The vibrant religious communities and the high number of religiously committed and active citizens of the United States were regarded as an exception to the rule. In any event, the United States used to be regarded simply as an “exception to the rule”.

However, nowadays the situation tends to be differently assessed. As Habermas notes, sociologists are assuming now the end of the secularization hypothesis. Indeed, once we take into account the globally extended perspective on other cultures and world religions, the normal case seems to be the United States, while Europe appears as the exception or the deviant path. In Habermas’ words, “global changes and the conflicts flaring up all around us in connection with religious issues inspire doubts as to whether the relevance of religion has actually waned. Ever fewer sociologists support the long unchallenged hypothesis that there is close connection between social modernization and the secularization of the population” (Habermas, 2009, 59).

In this context, Habermas uses the expression “post-secular” to “describe modern societies that have to reckon with the continuing existence of religious groups and the continuing relevance of the different religious traditions, even if the societies themselves are largely secularized” (Habermas, 2010, 3). In these societies, “religion



retains a certain public influence and relevance, while the secularistic certainty that religion will disappear everywhere in the world as modernization accelerates is losing ground” (Habermas, 2009, 65).

But we can extend the notion of “post-secular”, and use it to describe the change of consciousness that, as a matter of fact, the citizens of the largely secularized societies have been realizing, especially in virtue of three phenomena, namely, i) the way in which a global media constantly presents global conflicts as being dependent, for better or worst, on religious keys<sup>202</sup>; ii) the increasing awareness of how religious principles determine public opinions through their participation in the public sphere<sup>203</sup>; and iii) “the immigration of ‘guest-workers’ and refugees, especially from countries with traditional cultural backgrounds<sup>204</sup>” (Habermas, 2009: 64).

In any event, it is noteworthy that Habermas does not totally dismiss the secularization thesis. For him, “the data collected globally still provide surprisingly robust support for the defenders of the secularization thesis” (Habermas, 2009: 62).

In this sense, we must notice that Habermas’ view still maintains some aspects that were developed in *TCA*. As he puts it,

It remains true that in the course of the differentiation of functional social systems, churches and religious communities increasingly confined themselves to their core function of pastoral care and had to renounce their wide-ranging competencies in other social domains. At the same time, the practice of faith also assumed more personal or subjective forms. A correlation exists between the functional specification of the religious system and the individualization of religious practice (Habermas, 2009: 63).

Nevertheless, in Habermas’ view, revisions have to be made in the field of the rash inferences and generalizations that used to be presented based on the secularization hypothesis. As he puts it, “The loss of function and the trend towards individualization do not necessarily lead to a loss in the influence and relevance of religion, either in the

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<sup>202</sup> For Habermas “This circumstance shakes the secularistic confidence that religion is destined to disappear and inoculates the secular understanding of the world against triumphalism. The awareness of living in a secular society is no longer bound up with the certainty that cultural and social modernization can advance only at the cost of the public influence and personal relevance of religion” (Habermas, 2009: 63-64).

<sup>203</sup> According to Habermas, religious organizations have become communities of interpretation. As such, they “can influence the formation of public opinion and will by making relevant contributions, whether convincing or objectionable, on key issues. Our pluralist societies provide a responsive sounding board for such interventions because they are increasingly split over value conflicts in need of political regulation. Whether it be the dispute over euthanasia, over bioethical issues in reproductive medicine or over questions of animal protection and climate change – in these and similar cases the key premises are so opaque that it is by no means settled from the outset which party can draw on the more convincing moral intuitions” (Habermas, 2009: 64).

<sup>204</sup> According to Habermas, “In European societies, which have not yet completed the painful transition to post-colonial immigrant societies, the issue of the tolerant coexistence of different religious communities is exacerbated by the difficult problem of integrating immigrant cultures into the host society. While coping with the pressures of globalized labor markets, social integration has to be accomplished also under the humiliating conditions of growing social inequality” (Habermas, 2009: 65),

public arena and culture of any single society or in the personal conduct of life. Quite apart from their weight in numbers, religious communities can still claim a 'seat' even in the life of societies where secularization is far advanced" (Habermas, 2009: 63).

Therefore, insofar as the public consciousness of any secularized society has to adjust itself to the continued existence of religion, such a society, according to Habermas, has to be depicted as 'post-secular'. Hence, the revisions refer, according to Habermas, more to the predictions concerning the future role of religion than to the substance itself of the secularization hypothesis.

Citizens of the Western secular democracies must acknowledge that globally the world religions display a continuing vitality. In the emerging world society, all the members aiming to develop intercultural dialogues have to accept the premise that all societies are modern societies. As Habermas puts it, "Today we find ourselves in the transition to a multicultural world society and are wrestling with its future political constitution. (...) Global modernity looks like an open arena in which participants, from the viewpoint of different paths of cultural development, struggle [*streiten*] over the normative structuring of social infrastructures that are more or less shared". (Habermas, 2010: 8).

This normative structuring of social infrastructures has been historically achieved, to a large extent, in virtue of the great culture-forming power of the great world religions.

Just like our Western self-understanding of modernity appears in a process of confrontation with our own traditions, the same process has been constantly developed in other parts of the world. There, too, other world citizens need to reach back to their own traditions in order to face the challenges of societal modernization.

Indeed, for Habermas,

The globalization of markets, the media, and other networks no longer leaves nations any realistic prospect of opting out of capitalist modernization. Neither can non-Western cultures evade the challenges of secularization and a pluralism of worldviews generated by an inadequately regulated process of modernization that they also actively pursue. They will only be able to assert their cultural distinctiveness against a capitalist world culture shaped by the West by finding paths to "alternative modernities (Habermas, 2008, 310).

In order to do this, they need to use their own cultural resources to open their own religious and cultural consciousness. According to Habermas,

The challenge for these cultures is to find functional equivalents for the European innovation of the separation of church and state in responding to similar challenges. To the extent that they are successful, their constructive adaptation to imperatives of social modernization will not represent a submission to alien cultural norms any more than the change in mentality and detraditionalizing of religious communities in the West

was merely a submission to liberal norms of equality (Habermas, 2008, 311).

Intercultural discussions about the way to develop a more just international order cannot be conducted one-sidedly. Participants in those discussions have to be able to assume the symmetrical conditions of mutual perspective-taking. In those debates “the West” must see itself as one participant among others, one participant that, like all the others (even the non-Westerns), must be willing to be enlightened by others about its blind spots. Otherwise, in Habermas’ view, the social-Darwinist power games traditionally developed between the states cannot be brought under control. Indeed, without proper intercultural dialogues the social-Darwinist “catch as catch can” that rules international relations cannot be overcome. This is why, taming capitalism, globally unleashed and run wild, and channeling it in socially acceptable ways requires the acceptance that religion still has a very important role to play in the modern world society.

## CHAPTER 7. CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

As mentioned in the introduction, my dissertation is an exegetical, reconstructive and critical project on Jürgen Habermas' recent account of the role of religion in the public sphere.

The exegesis and reconstruction of Habermas' account guided my work throughout chapters 1 to 6.

In Chapter 1 I analyzed Habermas' notion of Postmetaphysical Thinking. Such a reconstruction was important mainly because it is from the perspective of that mode of thought that Habermas develops his analysis on religion. Also, because, according to Habermas such a mode of thought expresses the kind of cognitive attitude that secular citizens must develop in order to fully respect their fellow religious citizens and learn from their contributions to public debates.

In Chapter 2 I presented what can be regarded as "Habermas' first approach to religion". I expounded the main elements of a religious theme that caught Habermas' interest from the beginning of his philosophical career, namely the theme of God's contraction (the *Tsimtsum* in Jewish terminology) as an explanation of the universe's creation.

Chapters 3 and 4 presented Habermas' second approach to religion. This time, his perspective was deeply sociological. In Chapter 3 I analyzed Habermas' account of religion developed in his texts prior to *Theory of Communicative Action* (TCA), that is, in the texts in which he begins to develop his perspective as a social theorist. In Chapter 4 I presented Habermas' analysis from his magnum opus *The Theory of Communicative Action*.

Finally, in Chapter 5 and 6 I analyzed Habermas' third and final account of religion, namely, the account that deals with the role of religion in the public sphere of a deliberative democracy. I expounded i) Habermas' analysis of the public sphere as an institution of the bourgeois society, ii) Habermas' account of the public sphere as the basis to develop a deliberative democracy, and iii) Habermas' reflections on the emerging global public sphere (Chapter 6). In all these cases, especially in the last two of them, I analyzed the role played by religion.

In this final chapter, I will present a critical perspective of the reconstruction and exegesis developed throughout the previous chapters. I will highlight what I consider to be some of the weakness and deficiencies of Habermas' account.

I will present my criticism in four steps. (I) First, I will assess Habermas' account in the light of the fact that religious communities are, besides communities of interpretation, powerful social actors that in many societies can hardly be characterized as democratic and deliberative. (II) Second, I will question Habermas' strict commitment to the absolute secularization of the liberal state. I will suggest that the extension of Habermas' account, namely his perspective of a world society and multiple modernities, casts doubts about its real universality. Indeed, once we take into account the perspective from which Habermas develops his approach, the principle of the secular

character of the state does not seem to be necessarily “universal”. In my two last critiques I will problematize Habermas’ constant ambivalence with regard to the permanence of religion. (III) In my third critique I will use the undeniable fact of human mortality in order to suggest a more positive answer to the problem of the permanence of religion. (IV) Finally, in my fourth critique I will attempt to develop the same answer from a slightly different idea, namely, the idea of the “irreducible value of the individual”. This idea might, in addition, allow us to question Habermas’ overemphasis on the political value of religion. ’

## I

As we saw in chapters 3 and 4, Habermas developed an account of a dual concept of society based on the dynamic relations of systems and lifeworlds. This dual concept allowed Habermas to present an account of human evolution and progress complex enough to keep a normative stance, on the one hand, without, on the other, being completely reduced to a particular and biased eurocentric view of human development.

As we suggested at the end of chapter 4, in *TCA* Habermas seemed to overemphasize the systemic aspect of his dual concept of society. In contrast, since *Between Facts and Norms*, Habermas’ perspective now seems to stress the lifeworld.

From this perspective, “the integration of a highly complex society cannot be carried out in a systems paternalistic fashion, that is, in a manner that bypasses the communicative power of the public of citizens” (Habermas, 1996: 352). In this sense, the very functioning of the subsystems requires a common language able to perceive and articulate the relevant issues and standards of evaluation referred to society as a whole. It requires, thus, an ordinary language that circulates throughout society and that goes beyond the special codes of each of the subsystems<sup>205</sup>. For Habermas, the fact that ordinary language needs to be used in the political public sphere as well as in the parliamentary complex in order to deal with macrosocial problems indicates that we cannot conceive politics and law as autopoietically closed systems. As a corollary, the constitutionally structured political system remains open to the lifeworld. “For institutionalized opinion- and will-formation depends on supplies coming from the informal contexts of communication found in the public sphere, in civil society, and in spheres of private life. In other words, the political action system is embedded in lifeworld contexts” (Habermas, 1996: 352).

Habermas, to be sure, is aware that the supplies coming from such informal contexts of communication are very different insofar as the power of the agents of the civil society is indeed very different. As he puts it, “The players who feature on the virtual stage of the public sphere form a hierarchy, depending on which category of

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<sup>205</sup> For Habermas, “Ordinary language is the medium of communicative action through which the lifeworld reproduces itself (...) The action systems specialized for cultural reproduction (education) or socialization (family) or social integration (such as law) are not totally separated in their operation. Through the shared code of ordinary language, each of these systems also concomitantly satisfies the functions of the other two and thus maintains a relation to the totality of the lifeworld. The core private spheres of the lifeworld, which are characterized by intimacy and hence by protection from publicity, structure encounters between relatives, friends, acquaintances, and so on, and link together the members’ life histories at the level of face-to-face interactions” (Habermas, 1996: 353-354).

power of capital they have at their disposal. Favorable opportunities to transform power into public influence through the channels of mass communication are not equally distributed. Some types of actors regularly enjoy better opportunities to intervene than others” (Habermas, 2009: 171).

Habermas uses the term “social power” as a “measure for the possibilities an actor has in social relationships to assert his own will and interests, even against the opposition of others” (Habermas, 1996: 175). Social power, says Habermas, “rests on status within a stratified society and is generally attached to positions within functional systems” (Habermas, 2009: 168). However, for Habermas, in capitalist societies, economic power is also a class of social power. As a matter of fact, according to Habermas, it is the dominant form of social power.

With this in mind, in *Between Facts and Norms* Habermas distinguished two kinds of actors of the public sphere. On the one hand we have the actors that, so to speak, arise from the public and take part in the reproduction of the public sphere itself. On the other hand, we have the actors who already occupy a space in the public life of the society. These actors use an already pre-existing space. The large and well-organized interest groups that are anchored in various social subsystems are an example of these latter actors. These actors affect the political system through the public sphere in a relatively easier way.

In Habermas’ words,

One can distinguish, at least tentatively, the more loosely organized actors who "emerge from" the public, as it were, from other actors merely "appearing before" the public. The latter have organizational power, resources, and sanctions available from the start. Naturally, the actors who are more firmly anchored in civil society and participate in the reproduction of the public sphere also depend on the support of "sponsors" who supply the necessary resources of money, organization, knowledge, and social capital. But patrons or "like-minded" sponsors do not necessarily reduce the authenticity of the public actors they support. By contrast, the collective actors who merely enter the public sphere from, and utilize it for, a specific organization or functional system have their own basis of support. Among these political and social actors who do not have to obtain their resources from other spheres, I primarily include the large interest groups that enjoy social power, as well as the established parties that have largely become arms of the political system. They draw on market studies and opinion surveys and conduct their own professional public-relations campaigns (Habermas, 1996: 375)

Habermas seems aware that these actors might pose a challenge for his idea of deliberative democracy. As he puts it,

the disposition over social power provides some parties with a privileged opportunity to influence the political process in such a way that their interests acquire a priority not in accord with equal civil rights. Businesses, organizations, and pressure groups can, for example, transform their social power into political power by way of such interventions, whether they do so directly by influencing the administration or indirectly by manipulating public opinion. (Habermas, 1996: 175)

But, in Habermas' ideal model, the conversion of social power into influence over political decision-making needs to take place in a transparent manner, that is, such a conversion cannot bypass the normal public channel (Habermas, 2009: 168). One way to do it, according to Habermas, is through the use of a public language able to offer convincing reasons and shared value orientations. For Habermas, this is what the political parties do when they inform the public about demands, strategies or outcomes, in order to wage negotiations<sup>206</sup>.

Clearly, in many societies churches or religious communities would be appropriately classified in this kind of "problematic" actors. Thus, according to Habermas' own remarks, we can cast doubts on their "emancipatory powers". In this sense, these religious organizations can become illegitimate power-holders on the public sphere by blocking relevant topics, requisite information and appropriate arguments and not letting them cross the threshold of the institutionalized processes of deliberation and decision – making (Habermas, 2009: 167).

Many democracies of Latin America constitute an example to illustrate this particular danger, that is, the case of societies in which one religious community, in this case the Catholic Church, has an enormous social power<sup>207</sup>.

Habermas' account might not be useful enough to address all the issues and questions that arise from the participation of religious groups in the public sphere of these societies. Habermas' view of religion seems to assume that the power of religious communities lies entirely on their "moral status", like he explicitly suggests in *Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy still have an Epistemic Dimension? The Impact of Normative Theory on Empirical Research* (Habermas, 2009: 168). However, in countries like Colombia, it is clear that the Catholic Church's economic power makes it a very special and powerful kind of social agent.

As Julieta Lemaitre indicates<sup>208</sup>, in issues regarding gender, sexuality and reproductive rights, the Catholic Church in Colombia can hardly be characterized as a democratic and emancipatory agent<sup>209</sup>.

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<sup>206</sup> In any event, Habermas also thinks that these kinds of contributions are vulnerable. For him, if these public opinions are based on an undeclared infusion of social power, they lose their credibility as soon as such an infusion is made public.

<sup>207</sup> See Jorge Enrique Precht Pizarro, *La Laicidad del Estado en Cuatro Constituciones Lationamericanas*, Estudios Constitucionales, noviembre, año / vol 4, número 002, Centro de Estudios Constitucionales Santiago, Chile, pp. 697-716.

<sup>208</sup> See Julieta Lemaitre Ripoll, "Anticlericales de nuevo. La iglesia católica como un actor político ilegítimo en materia de sexualidad y reproducción en América Latina." *Derecho Y Sexualidades*, in: **DERECHO Y SEXUALIDADES: SELA**, 286 - 304, 2009.

The very development of the “nation-states” in Latin America has been made within the context of the social and economic power of the Catholic Church. Although in many of those countries Catholicism is not anymore the official religion, the power of the Church continues to allow it to exercise a great influence in the political issues of those countries. The freedom of religion, within this tradition, does not seem to take into account the excessive *de facto* power of the Catholic Church.

Hence, there might exist a substantial difference between the power of the religious communities within the Anglo Saxons countries and other European countries, on the one hand, and the power of the Catholic and Christian churches in Latin America. In this latter case, the homogeneity of the religious affiliation of their societies as well as the historical influence of the Catholic Church configures a distinctive situation for which Habermas’ account of the role of religion in the public sphere might be inappropriate<sup>210</sup>.

Lemaitre offers three reasons to justify this “particularistic” situation: first, the popularity of the Church as the biggest and powerful religious community, second, its great economic resources and its closeness to the political authorities, in particular through secret -or partially secret societies -such as the Opus Dei or the Knights of our Lady (*Milicia Sanctae Mariae*), and third, an institutional tradition in which the Church-state separation is too recent or, at most, too incipient. In virtue of this, in many cases the Church still keeps some sort of political representation and has decisive roles within the elaboration and implementation of public policies pertaining health and education (Lemaitre, 2009: 301).

In addition, we must remember that besides social power, Habermas also refers to another kind of power that can be both emancipatory and restrictive: media power. This kind of power, which is based on the technology and infrastructure of mass communication “consists in general in the ability to decide about the choice of content of a program and about its format – in other words the perspective from which an issue is presented or framed” (Habermas, 2009: 169).

This power is very dynamic insofar as any other social agent can use it. In this sense, for instance, politicians and political parties are constant and privileged suppliers of information. However, representatives and spokespersons of functional subsystems also enjoy privileged access to the media. Indeed, “Due to their higher level of organization and greater material resources, lobbies and special interest groups are able to employ professional techniques of public relations and political marketing to transform their social power into public influence” (Habermas, 2009: 170).

Clearly, in societies in which a particular religious community has a considerable amount of social power, it also enjoys media power. In Latin American societies it is common to see Catholic priests making daily statements about politics in the media. Their statements constantly look for restricting sexuality and reproductive rights.

In these societies, thus, the Catholic Church is not an ordinary agent, and given its anti-pluralist and anti-deliberative character, it might seem that Habermas’ account

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<sup>209</sup> Lemaitre offers two reasons. First, the Church has systematically attempted to block deliberation and political participation. Second, the content of its participation within the public debates is openly discriminatory towards the rights of women and homosexuals.

<sup>210</sup> See Lemaitre, 2009, 301.



belongs to a context in which no religious organization is constituted as a great social majority.

In this sense, if the liberal tradition has been characterized by its concerns with regard to finding appropriate controls and limits to any excessive power that can threaten equality and freedom, it might seem that in some societies the power of a religious organization such as the Catholic Church needs to be limited in many ways in which Habermas' account does not precise. Habermas, briefly put, seems to be too optimistic pertaining the emancipatory powers of religious organizations.

But, perhaps, the real problem is that Habermas' account of the role of religion in the public sphere is deeply ambiguous with regard to the role that the liberal state can perform to foster the learning process that religious and secular citizens must develop in order to fulfill their duties as democratic citizens.

As presented in Chapter 5, in Habermas' view, the legitimation of the liberal state does not need to rely on religious or metaphysical worldviews.

However, the situation is completely different with regard to the motivational expectations of the liberal state from its citizens. The citizens of a deliberative democracy are supposed to understand themselves as the authors of law and not merely as their addressees. Therefore, as Habermas puts it, "Citizens as co—legislators are supposed to make active use of their communication and participation rights, which means using them not only in their enlightened self—interest but also with a view to promoting the common good. This demands a more costly form of motivation that cannot be legally exacted" (Habermas, 2006: 105).

This is why, for Habermas, a duty to vote would be as alien to a constitutional democracy as some sort of legally prescribed solidarity. In this sense, it seems that the deliberative democracies cannot rely on their legal and political power to guarantee the pre-political foundations that they need.

In *Between Facts and Norms*, after acknowledging that his model of deliberative democracy depended on the capacities and habits of their citizens to perceive, interpret, and present society wide problems by developing more or less spontaneous processes of opinion formation, Habermas affirmed that "The development of such lifeworld structures can certainly be stimulated, but for the most part they elude legal regulation, administrative control, or political steering" (Habermas, 1996: 358-359).

There exists an unavoidable connection between the role of the citizens in a democracy and their own ethical and cultural lifeworlds<sup>211</sup>. This is why if these lifeworlds are deeply religious, the state does not have other option but to rely on them as a

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<sup>211</sup> Richard Bernstein captures this problem with the term "the paradox of the democratic constitutional state". As he puts it, "To appreciate the context for Habermas's normative recommendations about the epistemic conditions for a postsecular society, I want to indicate what I take to be his primary worry. There is a paradox that lies at the heart of a democratic constitutional state. The legitimacy and practice of a democratic state is dependent on the political virtues that are expected of its citizens but which cannot be legally enforced. Unless there is a democratic ethos of civil solidarity where free and equal citizens respect and listen to each other in dealing with contentious political issues, the very fabric of the state is threatened with disintegration. But although these political virtues are required for the legitimacy and functioning of a democratic state, they cannot be legally imposed. Indeed, given the constitutional freedom of conscience and religion, the state cannot legally impose or limit the religious beliefs and comprehensive views of any of its citizens. What I am calling the paradox of the democratic liberal state is that it cannot (by its own principles) legally impose what is required for its own legitimacy and functioning" (Bernstein, 2010: 162-163).

source of the solidarity that it cannot prescribe by itself. Habermas' account of the role of religion in the public sphere is largely inspired by this unavoidable "fact".

Prescribing solidarity is undoubtedly naïve and pointless. However, this does not mean that the liberal state is absolutely defenseless to fight against the discrimination and injustice that takes place within civil society itself. In other words, it is not clear that there is absolutely nothing that a democratic state can do in order to influence the development of lifeworlds (religious or not) that are themselves anti-democratic.

Habermas' account of the role of religion in the public sphere expects that religious citizens relate their beliefs in a self-reflexive way to the claims of competing worldviews. In addition, they must accept the prevalence, at least in some areas of social life, of secular knowledge. Finally, they are supposed to incorporate within their own beliefs the egalitarian individualism of modern law and universalistic morality. In Habermas' view, they should develop learning processes that enable them to engage democratically with other religious communities and with secular citizens.

To be sure, my criticism refers to Habermas' lacks of clarity with regard to the problem of the role of the state in dealing with religious communities that do not seem to be prepared to develop such learning processes.

In *What is Meant by a Post-Secular Society? A Discussion on Islam in Europe* he says that "such a change in mentality cannot be prescribed, nor it can be politically manipulated or forced through law; at best it is the result of a learning process" (Habermas, 2009, 75). However, immediately afterwards, he admits that "Learning processes can be fostered, but they cannot be morally or legally ordered" (Habermas, 2009, 75). Similarly, in an earlier work, Habermas had accepted that "the requirement of complex mentalities highlights an improbable functional imperative whose fulfillment the liberal state can scarcely influence through the legal and administrative means at its disposal" (Habermas, 2008: 144).

But what does "stimulation", "fostering", or "scarcely influencing" mean and entail? The absence of clarification within Habermas' account seems to end up favoring unequal and discriminatory structures existing within religious communities<sup>212</sup>.

Habermas' account seems reluctant to support any intervention in the internal affairs of religious institutions. As we saw in both Chapters 1 and 5 this can be regarded as a corollary of his strict separation between faith and knowledge. For Habermas, "the perspectives which are centred either in God or in human beings cannot be converted into one another" (Habermas, 2008: 242). Habermas' critique of Kant, as we saw, indicates that philosophy does not have the right to judge what may be true or false within the context of religious traditions.

As a result, nor the philosopher nor the state are entitled to discriminate between good and bad religious practices or beliefs. Habermas does endorse a strict separation between the Church and the state. This is why, at the end, as he puts it, "only those concerned and their religious organizations can decide whether a "modernized" faith is still the "true" faith (Habermas, 2008: 145).

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<sup>212</sup> As Andrea Baumeister indicates "Recent feminist discourses, for example, highlight the prima facie tensions between a commitment to the norm of gender equality and many religious practices and traditions" (Baumeister, 2011: 222). See, for example, Martha Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1999); Monique Deveaux, *Gender and Justice in Multicultural Liberal States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), and Anne Phillips, *Multiculturalism without Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 2007).

However, Habermas needs to acknowledge that such a separation has been historically used as a shield for religious communities to escape critical (and legal) scrutiny. In many cases, the equality of traditionally marginalized members of religious communities has been historically compromised using such a shield.

In this sense, even if we accept that the state cannot order something to be accepted as the “true faith, it seems that with regard the religious institutions, their hierarchies and power relations, the state should have a more active role.

As we saw in Chapter 5, one of the great merits of Habermas’ account is to avoid the misleading idea that religion should be privatized. However, Habermas’ reluctance with regards to the state’s intervention in the structure of religious communities seems to entail some sort of privatization as well; that is, privatization of religion as non critical scrutiny from society and the state; in other words, privatization as the affirmation of an area outside the legal jurisdiction of the state.

This is why, in order to avoid this negative consequence, “recent feminist discourses not only point to the detrimental effects of many established religious practices upon women, but have also highlighted the difficulties women members of religious communities face in their attempts to secure greater freedom and equality within a religious setting” (Baumeister, 2011: 233)<sup>213</sup>.

Historically, the voice of women’s members of the religious communities has been traditionally silenced. As a result, voices powerful enough to challenge the dominant interpretation of religious principles and propose alternative readings of religious texts have not been heard<sup>214</sup>.

The case of Sister Margaret A. Farley is a good example of this situation. In 1984 she was one of 97 theologians and religious persons who signed “A Catholic Statement on Pluralism and Abortion”, a document calling for pluralism and discussion within the Catholic Church regarding the Church’s position on abortion. She has written six books, the most famous, perhaps, is *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Social Ethics* published in 2006. In this book she presents her religious views on love, gender and sexuality. Since the publishing of the book, Sister Farley has been in a constant debate with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Very recently, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published a notification according to which among “the many errors and ambiguities of this book are its positions on masturbation, homosexual acts, homosexual unions, the indissolubility of marriage and the problem of divorce and remarriage”. The notification concludes, “With this Notification, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith expresses profound regret that a member of an Institute of Consecrated Life, Sr. Margaret A. Farley, R.S.M., affirms positions that are in direct contradiction with Catholic teaching in the field of sexual morality. The

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<sup>213</sup> According to Baumeister, in *Multicultural Jurisdictions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Avelet Schachar “discusses the difficulties devout Jewish women face with regard to Jewish divorce law, which allows a husband to “anchor” a wife in a religious marriage – even if the relationship has formally been terminated by the state – by refusing to consent to a religious divorce (the *get*) thereby denying her the opportunity to remarry within the Jewish faith. In the absence of a Jewish divorce, any children an “anchored” woman has with another man are regarded under Jewish family law as illegitimate and thus are not admissible as members of the Jewish community” (Baumeister, 2011: 242).

<sup>214</sup> “Thus, for example, the feminism of many Muslim feminists remains firmly rooted in Islam and movements such as Women Living Under Muslim Law (WLUML) have demanded not just a right to the equal treatment of their religious community, but also the right to engage in their communities on their own terms” (Baumeister, 2011: 234).

Congregation warns the faithful that her book *Just Love. A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* is not in conformity with the teaching of the Church. Consequently it cannot be used as a valid expression of Catholic teaching, either in counseling and formation, or in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. Furthermore the Congregation wishes to encourage theologians to pursue the task of studying and teaching moral theology in full concord with the principles of Catholic doctrine”.

Based on cases like this one, we might conclude that a true commitment to freedom of religion entails a more active state aiming to empower previously marginalized voices; something that the state already does in many other fields.

Therefore, it seems possible and even necessary to conceive of political and legal mechanisms that encourage processes of critical reflections within the religious communities themselves about the dominant interpretations of their norms and values<sup>215</sup>.

Previously, we noted that Habermas’ account seemed too optimistic with regard to the emancipatory power of religion as an actor within civil society. At the same time, however, it seems that Habermas’ account is too pessimistic with regard to the state’s legal and administrative means as tools to facilitate the change in mentality required by an ethics of democratic citizens<sup>216</sup>.

Thus, because Habermas does not critically analyze the impact of power relations within religious communities and institutions, he does not present a positive and clear idea on how the state could influence the background conditions in order to bring about the learning processes that he advocates.

Endorsing a strict separation between the state’s legal and administrative means, on the one hand, and religious communities, on the other, does not take into account the many ways in which they intermingle.

In some sense, religion is itself partially construed by law. Many state’s decisions delineate the scope and character of the religious realm of its citizens. This is why in many occasions the state needs to assess the extent to which a proposed law may impact the core of their religious practices. The state needs to decide, for example, whether or not religious organizations should be allowed to set up their own schools, and whether or not they should be allowed to discriminate in the employment of their staff on religious grounds. Also, the state needs to decide whether or not exemptions on religious grounds from sex discrimination legislation should be restricted to the

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<sup>215</sup> According to Baumeister, in “Family Law Issues In A Multicultural Setting: Abolishing Or Reaffirming Sex As A Legally Relevant Category? A Human Rights Approach,” (Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights 20, no. 4, 2002: 423–443), Titia Loenen “cites an interesting example of potential state intervention in the Netherlands, where several Moroccan women, who had already obtained a divorce under Dutch law against their husbands will, asked for a legal order from a Dutch court to force their husbands to repudiate them in accordance with the Islamic code that governs Moroccan family law. Not only do many Moroccan women strongly identify with the rules and practices of their community, a failure to obtain a divorce under Islamic law would leave these women at risk of prosecution for adultery should they return to Morocco and would lead to children of any subsequent marriage under Dutch law being regarded as illegitimate” (Baumeister, 2011: 242).

<sup>216</sup> In contrast, Baumeister notes that “Both Deveaux and Shachar aim to develop institutional mechanisms that grant minorities, including religious communities, a degree of self-governance on the condition that traditionally marginalized and potentially vulnerable group members are able to challenge the existing power relations and dominant interpretations of norms and values within the group. To facilitate such challenges, Deveaux and Shachar propose two distinct and innovative models. Whereas Deveaux’s approach invokes the principles of democratic deliberation, Shachar employs the idea of joint governance. See Shachar, *Multicultural Jurisdictions; Deveaux, Gender and Justice in Multicultural Liberal States*” (Baumeister, 2011: 242).

appointment of priests, or whether or not religious organizations should be free to follow their traditional practices, even if this means that women are effectively debarred from a whole range of positions<sup>217</sup>.

Even deciding to grant absolute freedom to religious organizations in all these fields is already a decision taken by state and enforced with its legal and administrative tools. Thus, law “inevitably shapes the scope of and the dynamics within the religious realm and the notion of a clearly demarcated religious sphere that is both epistemically and institutionally sovereign significantly misconstrues this complex relationship between law and religion” (Baumeister, 2011: 235)<sup>218</sup>.

## II

From a methodological point of view, Habermas’ proposal of a political constitution for the pluralist world society reaffirms his conception of philosophy as a mediating-interpreter. In this case, philosophy is mediating between political science and jurisprudence. Philosophy’s role, briefly put, refers to conceptual clarification<sup>219</sup>.

Nevertheless, “clarification” has a normative sense. It is, after all, a philosophical sort of clarification.

When it comes to the topic of the role of religion in the world society, Habermas qualifies his own methodology. He indicates two possibilities, namely, the sociological perspective of an observer, and the normative-philosophical perspective of a participant.

Habermas presented his remarks on a postsecular society from the perspective of a sociological observer who attempts to give an account of the presence of religion in the largely secularized societies. As Habermas puts it, “In these societies, religion retains a certain public influence and relevance, [and] the secularistic certainty that religion will disappear everywhere in the world as modernization accelerates is losing ground” (Habermas, 2009, 65).

A different perspective must be assumed if the question refers to the self-understanding of the members of a post-secular society and the expectations that they must have from one another if they want to guarantee that social relations within the limits of the nation states remain civil despite the increase of cultural and religious pluralism<sup>220</sup>.

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<sup>217</sup> See Baumeister, 2011: 235

<sup>218</sup> We have to notice, nevertheless, that Habermas laments the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Wisconsin v. Yoder* (1972) that gave the Amish the right to exempt their children from public education after the age of fourteen. For Habermas, the Supreme Court “accepts a violation of the civil rights of juveniles to basic education that would enable them to make their way in complex societies (Habermas, 2008: 299). Hence, to be fair, this first line of criticism refers to the fact that Habermas does not develop such a perspective. He does not clarify what “to stimulate” and “to foster” mean, and, for the reasons presented Habermas’ silence is highly problematic.

<sup>219</sup> As Habermas puts it, “(...) nowadays philosophy can at most play the ancillary role of elucidating the concepts employed in the specialized treatments of international lawyers and political scientists. Whereas the role of political science is to describe the state of international relations and that of jurisprudence is to give an account of the concept, validity, and content of international law, philosophy can try to clarify certain basic conceptual features of the development of law in the light of both existing constellations and valid norms” (Habermas, 2006b: 117)

<sup>220</sup> According to Habermas, “All European societies are confronted with this question today” (Habermas, 2009, 65).

There is, then, a categorical difference between the notions of 'postmetaphysical' and 'postsecular'. According to Habermas, "Postmetaphysical thinking remains secular even in a situation depicted as "postsecular"; but in this different situation, it may become aware of a secularistic self-misunderstanding" (Habermas, 2010, 3).

As such, postmetaphysical thinking is a way to establish intercultural dialogues. Postmetaphysical thinking, in this sense, can be regarded as an achievement with universal human relevance. Nevertheless, the main relevance of postmetaphysical thinking refers to the West. Indeed, for Habermas, postmetaphysical thinking is a historical product of the West. It is the result of the activity of philosophizing conceived as a discipline whose royal path is self-reflection (Habermas, 2010, 7). Postmetaphysical thinking is presented by Habermas as the last step of such a process of self-reflection.

Habermas, to be sure, does not exclude the possibility that other cultures might have developed their own processes of self-reflection with slightly different results. However, Habermas thinks that postmetaphysical thinking is powerful enough to delimitate an "interculturally shared "space of reasons" (Habermas, 2010, 7).

In this sense, postmetaphysical thinking should be able to develop proper philosophical analyses, that is, "proposals about the right understanding of the kind of reasons that today may *prima facie* expect to "count" interculturally" (Habermas, 2010, 7). For this reason, the conceptual reconstructions offered by Habermas' postmetaphysical thinking appear as a metaphilosophical proposal that refers not only to Western thought but to contemporary thought as such<sup>221</sup>.

There is, however, another level that needs to be distinguished. This level refers to the arguments that we may actually use when attempting to achieve concrete intercultural understandings. In this case, we participate, allegedly with the self-understanding gained by postmetaphysical thinking, in intercultural discussions about a concrete and specific political topic. In this scenario, "we comport ourselves as second persons to the participants from other cultural backgrounds (...), we do not comport ourselves as philosophers who wish to discover the characteristics of reasons that we presume to be universally acceptable, but we direct ourselves to the problems to be solved *themselves*" (Habermas, 2010, 7).

With this distinction in mind we might wonder about the level of Habermas' account of the role of religion in the public sphere. Is this the product of a postmetaphysical philosopher or is it an attempt of a Western participant to solve a problem without claiming universal validity for such a solution?

Although the first option seems to be the better answer, the Western accent is never lost. In this sense, those two possibilities are not really as different as Habermas would want us to believe.

Habermas does believe in the existence of "universal principles for the role of religion". However, he also admits that his account is charged with some sort of "contextualism". It is revealing, in this sense, that Habermas does not find unreasonable that his proposal for greater tolerance within the public sphere for religious arguments might be understood as the philosophical-political articulation of the political practices of

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<sup>221</sup> These proposals, nevertheless, as Habermas himself admits, are "exposed to the critical discussion among disciplinary peers" (Habermas, 2010, 7)

the citizens of the United States<sup>222</sup>. In this sense, Habermas admits that the criticism directed against the laicist understanding of the separation of state and church is indeed a European view. However, for Habermas, in a country like the United States, “in which the President publicly prays in office, the criticism that orients itself by the same principles should aim in the opposite political direction” (Habermas, 2010: 7).

Habermas accepts that the differences among the political cultures of the Western societies might justify that “the universal principles for the public role of religion—in general for what we in the West call the “separation of church and state”—would have to be specified and institutionalized differently in each local context” (Habermas, 2010: 9-10).

Thus, although ambiguously, I think that Habermas’ account of the role of religion in the public sphere is indeed presented as a philosophical one, and, as such, one that claims universal validity. However, once Habermas admits differences of “application” within the Western societies themselves, the question about the role of religion in the public sphere of non-Western societies re-appears with a new light. These societies, as Habermas affirms, have had their own, and different, processes of secularization and modernization.

In order to think about this issue, we might want to take a look at Habermas’ remarks about the intercultural disputes over human rights. As we saw, within his proposal of a constitution of the pluralist world society, this topic would have supranational relevance.

According to Habermas, “The European conception of human rights is open to attack by the spokespersons of other cultures (...) because autonomy implies a secularized political authority uncoupled from religious or cosmological worldviews” (Habermas, 2001: 127). From fundamentalist religious perspectives (whether Islamic, Christian or Jewish), their own truth claims are absolute in the sense that they should be enforced even through political power.

But Habermas is aware that fundamentalists are not the only ones who challenge the secular legitimation of political power through human rights, and, thus, the uncoupling of politics from religious authority. Habermas mentions the case of Indian intellectuals who “expect the mutual toleration and cross-fertilization of Islamic and Hindu religious cultures to develop more from a reciprocal interpenetration of the modes of religious perception of both cultures than from the neutrality of the state toward worldviews. They are skeptical about an official politics of neutrality that merely neutralizes the public meaning of religion” (Habermas, 2001: 127).

Habermas’ perspective, as he acknowledges, might be regarded as an apologetic reflection on the Western mode of legitimation. Nevertheless, he also affirms that he is not arguing that “the answer found by the West is the only one or even the best one” (Habermas, 2001: 128).

In Habermas’ words, “hermeneutical reflection on the starting point of a human rights discourse among participants of different cultures draws our attention to normative contents that are present in the tacit presuppositions of any discourse whose goal is mutual understanding” (Habermas, 2001: 129). In this sense, “independently of their cultural backgrounds all the participants intuitively know quite well that a consensus based on conviction cannot come about as long as symmetrical relations do

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<sup>222</sup> This possibility is suggested by Habermas’ interviewer, namely, the philosopher Eduardo Mendieta.

not exist among them - relations of mutual recognition, mutual role-taking, a shared willingness to consider one's own tradition with the eyes of the stranger and to learn from one another, and so forth" (Habermas, 2001: 129). Only after mutually recognizing these elements, can we "criticize not only selective readings, tendentious interpretations, and narrow-minded applications of human rights, but also that shameless instrumentalization of human rights that conceals particular interests behind a universalistic mask - a deception that leads one to the false assumption that the meaning of human rights is exhausted by their misuse". (Habermas, 2001: 129).

In this sense, self-reflection and self-criticism should not be considered an exclusive Western tendency. In any intercultural dialogue, those two elements are expected from all the participants, Western or non-Western.

However, Habermas' defense of the absolute secular character of the state of any democracy might be a remark that lacks of the necessary processes of self-reflection that Habermas is defending. In this sense, the secular character of the state, as well as Habermas' proposal of clearly distinguishing between the arguments in an informal public sphere and the arguments in institutional deliberations, seems to be more a merely European historical product than a universal criterion to decide what a democracy is. It has to be noticed that as a fundamental element of Habermas' account of the universal principles for the public role of religion, the absolute secular character of the state appears as a yardstick to measure democracies. Indeed, as he puts it, "The secularization of state power is the hard core of the process of secularization. I see this as a liberal achievement that should not get lost in the dispute among world religions" (Habermas, 2010: 1)

Also, for Habermas,

In my view, positions that do not wish to subject the political influence of religious voices to formal constraints blur the limits without which a secular state cannot maintain its impartiality. What must be safeguarded is that the decisions of the legislator, the executive branch and the courts are not only *formulated* in a universally accessible language, but are also *justified* on the basis of universally acceptable reasons. This excludes religious reasons for decisions about all state-sanctioned, that is legally binding norms" (Habermas, 2010: 7).

Habermas affirms that intercultural debates on human rights provide us with an opportunity to become aware of our own blind spots. I wonder to what extent Habermas' rigid stand on the secular character of the state is indeed one of his deepest blind spots.

Habermas offers mainly two arguments to defend the universality of the principle. First, he affirms that "legitimations based on religions or worldviews of this sort are incompatible with the inclusion of equally entitled non-believers or persons of other persuasions" (Habermas, 2001: 127). The second conceptual move is a clarification of the principle of toleration that lies behind the neutrality of the state. According to Habermas, "the principle of toleration itself is not directed against the authenticity and



truth claims of religious confessions and forms of life; rather, its sole purpose is to enable their equally entitled coexistence within the same political community” (Habermas, 2001: 128).

However, Habermas also offers a historical argument when he recognizes that “The conception of human rights was the answer to a problem that once confronted Europeans - when they had to overcome the political consequences of confessional fragmentation” (Habermas, 2001:128).

Habermas’ claim according to which other cultures are being confronted now in similar fashion is undoubtedly strong<sup>223</sup>. Nevertheless, it does not justify the claim that the only way to proceed is by strictly banishing religion from their “institutional public spheres”.

It does not seem to be inconceivable to think of certain religious or metaphysical language that, nonetheless, is not necessarily oppressing for secular citizens or citizens with a different religious affiliation. If translations are possible between different religious languages as well as between religious and secular languages, as Habermas’ account accepts it, then we have to accept that it can go both ways. If in the Western model of a democracy, some religious claims are susceptible of being translated into a secular language in order to be taken into account within the formal public sphere, why can we not conceive that the same result is achievable but, this time, starting from an already institutionalized religious claim (for example a religious argument incorporated in a general law applicable to all citizens) into a “broader” secular language?

Let us think for example in a political constitution of a democracy that includes a generic allusion to “God’s protection”. In Habermas’ model, this simple element might entail the non-democratic character of that political system. However, any religious citizen might be able to interpret such an allusion according to her own religious worldviews. In addition, the non-believer or atheist citizens might interpret that element as a reminding of human being’s unavoidable contingency. Or she might consider that aspect of their constitution as an element according to which political power and status do not exhaust all the possibilities of an authentic human existence<sup>224</sup>.

Granted, not all religious claims would be susceptible of this process. However, secular citizens, or citizens from other religions, might be able to agree on which elements can or cannot be translated. In other words, they should be the ones who decide, at least in some cases, which religious or metaphysical content is definitively oppressive and authoritarian and, thus, unbearable.

To be sure, the criticism that I am presenting does not have to take the shape of an intercultural problem between non-Western democracies and Western democracies. It might very well be the case that Habermas’ strict commitment to the institutional proviso may end up causing problems to the Western democracies themselves.

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<sup>223</sup> As Habermas correctly observes “the conflict of cultures takes place today in the framework of a world society in which the collective actors must, regardless of their different cultural traditions, agree for better or worse on norms of coexistence” (Habermas, 2001: 128). As a consequence, “The autarkic isolation against external influences is no longer an option in today’s world. (...) the pluralism of worldviews is also breaking out inside societies that are still conditioned by strong traditions. Even in societies that, culturally speaking, are comparatively homogenous, a reflexive reformulation of the prevailing dogmatic traditions is increasingly hard to avoid”. (Habermas, 2001: 128).

<sup>224</sup> I will develop this line of thought deeper in the next section.

Indeed, in a similar vein, Maeve Cooke indicates that Habermas' absolute commitment with the translation proviso at the formal – institutional level might end up threatening the political autonomy of religious citizens. In Cooke's words,

If reasons based on ethical and religious worldviews are ruled out as reasons for the acceptability of laws and political decisions, the resulting conception of political autonomy is biased in favor of citizens with postmetaphysical worldviews. Only such citizens can aspire towards self-legislation on the basis of rational insight (...) This implies that the regulative force of the idea of political autonomy, understood by Habermas as self-legislation based on rational insight, is significantly impaired for religious believers and for those who hold ethical worldviews of a metaphysical kind. (Cooke, 2006: 198)

For Cooke, we should accept the inclusion of religious and other metaphysical contributions on all levels of democratic deliberation (informal or institutional).

Cooke, to be sure, understands the historical value of the principle of neutrality defended by Habermas. In this sense she agrees that the secular state is indeed a historical achievement that was the result of historical learning processes largely accompanied by much violence and suffering. However, insofar as historical learning processes are essentially open-ended and can be reinterpreted in light of new situations, she thinks that even such a principle can be critically reevaluated in our historical situation<sup>225</sup>. According to Cooke,

Other societal factors that I see as supporting the need for reconsideration include the increased migration to the West of religious believers, for whom the Western experience of secularization as a historical achievement is remote or even alien. Such believers have not internalized the particular historical and cultural traditions on the basis of which the

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<sup>225</sup> Habermas himself acknowledges that the principle of neutrality and secularization has had different historical readings. As he puts it, "In Europe, the term 'secularization' first had the juridical meaning of a forced conveyance of church property to the secular state. This meaning was then extended to cover the rise and development of cultural and social modernity as a whole. Ever since, 'secularization' has been subject to contrasting evaluations, depending on whether its main feature is seen as the successful taming of clerical authority, or as the act of unlawful appropriation. According to the first reading – 'taming' – religious ways of thinking and forms of life are replaced by rational, in any case superior, equivalents; whereas in the second reading – 'stealing' – these modern ways of thinking and forms of life are discredited as illegitimately appropriated goods. The replacement model suggests a progressivist interpretation in terms of disenchantment modernity, while the expropriation model leads to an interpretation in terms of a theory of decline, that is, unsheltered modernity. Both readings make the same mistake. They construe secularization as a kind of zero-sum game between the capitalistically unbridled productivity of science and technology on the one hand, and the conservative forces of religion and the church on the other hand. Gains on one side can only be achieved at the expense of the other side, and by liberal rules which act in favor of the driving forces of modernity. This image is inconsistent with a postsecular society which adapts to the fact that the religious communities continue to exist in a context of ongoing secularizations. It obscures the civilizing role of a democratically shaped and enlightened common sense that makes its way as a third party, so to speak, amid the *Kulturkampf* confusion of competing voices" (Habermas, 2003: 103- 104).

secular basis of political authority was once regarded as justified. Reasons of this kind, combined with reasons pertaining to the political autonomy of citizens who do not subscribe to postmetaphysical thinking, suggest that it is time to reconsider the arguments for the secular basis of political authority (Cooke: 2007: 234)

What Cooke thinks should be preserved is the idea of argumentation as a non – authoritarian approach to questions of truth and knowledge. This is why she thinks we can distinguish between non-authoritarian approaches and authoritarian approaches to truth. According to Cooke’s distinction, a non-authoritarian approach to truth and knowledge is based on the idea that knowledge of truth is deeply connected with the linguistic practices of human agents in historically specific, sociocultural context. In addition, for her, such an approach ties knowledge of truth to argumentative justification. This entails the capacity and willingness to defend one’s validity claims with reasons in an open-ended and inclusive process of argumentation. In this sense, a non-authoritarian approach does not believe that truth can be gained independently of the exchange of arguments with others. As Cooke puts it,

Citizens who internalize and practice non-authoritarian modes of reasoning reject authoritarian conceptions of practical knowledge; such conceptions restrict access to knowledge to a privileged group of people and tend to assert the availability of a standpoint removed from the influences of history and context that could guarantee the unconditional validity of claims to truth and rightness; in adopting a non-authoritarian view of practical knowledge, citizens acknowledge the essential contestability of claims to truth and rightness and the ways in which these claims are subject to the influences (of history and context. Equally, citizens who internalize and practice non-authoritarian modes of reasoning reject authoritarian modes of practical justification, which split off the validity of propositions and norms from the reasoning of the human subjects for whom they are proclaimed to be valid; in adopting non-authoritarian modes of reasoning, citizens regard only those laws, principles, and policies as valid for which reasons are available that they are able to see, or come to see, as their own reasons. (Cooke: 2007: 234-235)

As we can see, in Cooke’s view, a non-authoritarian approach to truth can very well be religious. For her, Habermas’ perspective of religious thought is still too indiscriminate. He does not acknowledge the deep difference between religious belief that are epistemologically authoritarian and those that are not. “The former claim to have knowledge of truth without mediation through language, in abstraction from history and context, and independently of argumentation; the latter acknowledge the influences of

language, history, and context on our knowledge of truth and make such knowledge dependent on argumentative justification (Cooke: 2006: 199).

We can distinguish, thus, two different ways of understanding the claims to truth of religious doctrines. First, they can be understood as grounded on the certainty of religious experience. In this case, “the certainty of the experience, and by extension the truth of the teachings, is unshakeable and hence immune to critical challenge” (Cooke, 2006: 199). In contrast, on the second understanding, “the truth of the teachings is merely supported by religious experiences; these count as evidence supporting claims to validity that must be subjected to critical interrogation in argumentation” (Cooke, 2006; 199).

Hence, a viewpoint should not be excluded from processes of democratic legislation and decision-making just for being coined in a religious language but, instead, for being authoritarian.

Cooke’s premises, I think, reinforce my own criticism presented before. Habermas has explicitly stated that in our contemporary intercultural debates the Western thinkers should be concerned with not being “perceived as crusaders of a competing religion or as salespeople of instrumental reason and destructive secularization” (Habermas, 2003: 103).

This is why Habermas’ latest thoughts are aimed to open a door for all the Western democracies with a similar background to establish an intercultural dialogue with non-Western democracies or even with other Western democracies with different historical backgrounds. However, it seems that in his account of religion in the public sphere Habermas does not foresee the consequences, for developing intercultural dialogues and fostering the integration of a world society, of labeling a state as non-democratic just for including in its constitution religious or metaphysical elements; even if these elements are not authoritarian.

It seems to me that the reasons offered by Habermas to justify the necessity of the secular character of the state still betray his Western-European and, especially, German background. Clearly, the history of Europe and Germany offers good reasons to recommend the superiority of the “secular reason” over any kind of religious language. However, if Habermas is really committed with an account that admits multiple modernities, such a recommendation should not be presented as a universal principle for any democracy.

### III

In my third line of criticism, I want to problematize Habermas’ ambivalent view on the permanence of religion. In the previous chapters I showed the evolution of Habermas’ analysis of religion. The result, despite Habermas’ own intentions of developing a peaceful, harmonious and cooperative relationship with religion, does not seem to be a fully coherent and clear picture.

As we saw, in his book *Postmetaphysical Thinking* Habermas affirmed: “As long as no better words for what religion can say are found in the medium of rational discourse, it [communicative reason] will even coexist abstemiously with the former, neither supporting it nor combatting it”. (Habermas, 1996: 145). Clearly, the last part of the passage indicates a harmonious coexistence between communicative reason and

religion. Nevertheless, the first part is still too vague. Indeed, we can wonder, what happens if “better words can be found”? Does this possibility entail not peace but war? Or, is Habermas assuming that, ultimately, in regard to many aspects of human life those “better words” will just never be found?

Similarly, in a more recent text, Habermas affirmed: “Even viewed from outside, it could turn out that monotheistic traditions have at their disposal a language whose semantic potential is not yet exhausted (*unabgegoltenen*), 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” (Habermas, 2002: 71). In this case, as can be easily seen, the “not yet” reaffirms Habermas’ unclear assessment.

However, at other occasions, even within the same texts, Habermas seems to be more committed with the idea that religion will ultimately persist. Indeed, as he puts it, “On the premises of postmetaphysical thought, philosophy cannot provide a substitute for the consolation whereby religion invests unavoidable suffering and unrecompensed injustice, the contingencies of need, loneliness, sickness, and death, with new significance and teaches us to bear them” (Habermas, 2002: 108). From this perspective, as we saw in Chapter 5, religion seems to constitute a perdurable source of societal solidarity indispensable for the democratic state.

But in an even more recent text, Habermas shows again his hesitancy: “This of course in no way precludes the possibility that this source, protected in the meantime by religious communities and often used toward politically questionable ends, will run dry one day” (Habermas, 2010, 5).

The “Habermasian literature” has recognized this ambivalence. Among many other scholars<sup>226</sup>, for example, Simone Chambers believes that Habermas’ remarks on the persistent power of religious language can be interpreted in two ways. First, we can say that Habermas is suggesting that the rescuing of moral intuitions from religious language is a matter of historical development. This first line of interpretation may be used to conclude that once the lifeworld has become fully secularized, religion will indeed be obsolete because the process of translation will be complete. “Under other circumstances, in another time, we might not need religion as a vehicle to express normative truth” (Chambers, 2007: 219). In contrast, the second line of interpretation is based on the analogies that Habermas constantly draws between religious language and aesthetic images. Thus, while “the content of these images might change over time, our essential openness to them does not. Thus, the power of religious language is not due to our level of historical/cultural development, but rather to something about the way we experience the world. On this reading, religion (or something like it) will always have the power to communicate truth.” (Chambers, 2007: 219-220).

Habermas’ perspective on religion, even in its most recent development, seems to be trapped in this dual interpretation.

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<sup>226</sup> Cooke recognizes too the same ambivalence that I am presenting here. According to her, “By the end of that decade, however, he [Habermas] occasionally acknowledges the—at least, temporary—importance of religion as a semantic resource for postmetaphysical philosophy. For example, in the concluding passage of a 1988 essay he remarks that even postmetaphysical thinking will be able “neither to replace nor to repress religion, so long as religious language is the bearer of a semantic content that is inspiring and even indispensable”; to be sure, he also hints that its indispensability might be the result of a deficiency in the explanatory force of philosophical language that might someday be overcome (Habermas, 1992, p. 51.)” (Cooke, 2006: 188).

I would like to suggest that, at the end, Habermas was never able to get away from the inherent ambiguity of the mystical doctrine of the *Tsimtsum*.

As we saw in Chapter 2, the doctrine of God's contraction is a theme that has been present in Habermas' thought since the beginning of his philosophical career. Even in later texts in which Habermas is not dealing explicitly with such a topic, he still offers implicit or explicit references to it.

In *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* Habermas discusses Benjamin's idea that "each respective generation bears the responsibility not only for the fate of future generations but also for the innocently suffered fate of past generation" (Habermas, 1991: 14). According to Habermas, "This need for redemption on the part of past epochs who have directed their expectations to us is reminiscent of the figure familiar in both Jewish and Protestant mysticism of man's responsibility for the fate of a God who, in the act of creation, relinquished his omnipotence in favor of human freedom, putting us on an equal footing with himself" (Habermas, 1991: 14).

Similarly, In *TCA* when Habermas discusses the topic of the linguistification of the sacred in Durkheim and Mead he affirms that "The *rationalization of worldviews* expresses itself in a process of abstraction that sublimates mythical powers into transcendent gods and finally into ideas and concepts and, at the cost of shrinking down the domain of the sacred, leaves behind a nature bereft of gods" (Habermas, 1987: 83, *emphasis added*).

Also in *TCA*, when Habermas criticizes Parson's idea of the telic system he makes a reference to the *Tsimtsum*. I quote at length:

The telic system is supposed to occupy an analogous position. Parsons conceives of it as a region that indirectly influences communicative action via the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld. He is evidently postulating a supernatural counterpart to physicochemical nature and to the genetic nature of the human species. The ultimate structures supposedly enjoy the same autarchy, the same independence from the structures of the lifeworld as inorganic and organic nature. But there are no indicators accessible to social-theoretical analysis for a transcendence that is independent in this way from the communicative practice of human beings, from their sacrifices, entreaties, prayers, no indicators for a god who, to borrow an image from Jewish mysticism, does not himself have to be redeemed through the efforts of human beings. (Habermas, 1987: 256, *emphasis added*).

The theme of God's contraction (the *Tsimtsum* in Jewish terminology) as an explanation of the universe's creation interested Habermas since the very beginning of his philosophical career. Habermas analyzed the topic explicitly in his doctoral dissertation (1954) entitled *Das Absolute und die Geschichte. Von der Zweispältigkeit in Schellings Denken* ("The Absolute and History: On the Schism in Schelling's Thought"). Afterwards, Habermas expounds the subject again in the following texts: *The German Idealism of the Jewish Philosophers* (1961), *Gershom Scholem: The Torah in Disguise*

(1978), *Dialectical Idealism in Transition to Materialism: Schelling's Idea of a Contraction of God and its Consequences for the Philosophy of History* (1978). However, as we saw from the three quoted passages, the theme never disappeared. In a 2002 interview<sup>227</sup>, Habermas admitted that such a religious doctrine has been of great significance for him.

As analyzed in Chapter 2, according to the *Tsimtsum*, in order to make room for his creatures, God had to withdraw into himself. God shrank and, in some sense, denied himself in order to clear the way for creation. The philosophical-materialistic consequences that interest Habermas from the doctrine of *Tsimtsum* are deeply related to the idea that after the *Tsimtsum* the destiny of creation lies basically on the hands of humanity. Thus, briefly put, what interests Habermas from the *Tsimtsum* is that a mystical-religious doctrinal element ends up affirming a space 'free of God'. Habermas even suggests that the possibility of God himself becoming superfluous seems to be, at least, implicit. Indeed, Habermas wonders:

(...) wouldn't the historical process automatically shed its theogonical skin? As the subject of a history that is no longer synchronized with nature in accordance with identity philosophy, humanity is set free; it can put aside as a superfluous hypothesis the idea of 'the complete humanization of God, of which thus far only the beginnings have taken place'. Indeed, this humanization of God, 'where the infinite will have become finite without impairing its infinitude', could, for its part, be interpreted as the mirror of a man becoming man himself; this leads to the point where, in the shape of socialized humanity, the finite becomes infinite without impairing its finitude (Habermas, 2004: 66).

In this sense, we cannot really be sure that after the *Tsimtsum*, God's withdrawal does not entail God's own death.

Habermas, to be sure, does not categorically affirm this possibility. However, he does end one of his essays on Scholem reminding Scholem's own words when asked about the relevance of kabbalistic thought for Judaism today. As Habermas indicates, in order to answer, Scholem himself used a kabbalistic figure or thought "God will appear as non-God. All the divine and symbolic things can also appear in the garb of atheistic mysticism" (Habermas, 1983: 209).

The doctrine of the *Tsimtsum*, thus, seems to contain a contradictory evaluation. On the one hand, it is an account of God's role in the creation of the world, but at the same time, on the other, it is an account that threatens to make God dispensable. Hence, it seems that after all, Habermas' recent account of religion is still trapped within his earlier intuition related to the *Tsimtsum*.

But, do we really have to accept this trait of mysterious mysticisms in a philosopher that throughout his career has attempted to distance from mystic and irrational views?

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<sup>227</sup> A Conversation About God and the World. Interview with Eduardo Mendieta.

I think that if we use and expand Habermas' most recent anthropological remarks presented in his book *The Future of Human Nature*, we might be able to develop a more coherent view on the permanence of religion.

In such a book, as will be expounded with more detail in the Appendix, Habermas relies on Hannah Arendt's idea of natality as a constitutive element of human condition.

Indeed, as an essential element of his argument against liberal eugenics Habermas accepts the idea that the natural fact of birth grounds the possibility of any idea of moral freedom. For Habermas, we "experience our own freedom with reference to something which, by its very nature, is not at our disposal" (Habermas, 2003: 58). This "something" is the natural fact of birth. According to Habermas, "Philosophy has but rarely addressed this matter. One of the exceptions is Hannah Arendt, who in the context of her theory of action introduces the concept of "natality" (Habermas, 2003: 58).

Habermas offers the following quote from Arendt's book *The Human Condition* in order to justify his claim:

(...) the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting. In this sense of initiative, an element of action, and therefore of natality, is inherent in all human activities. Moreover, since action is the political activity par excellence, natality, and not mortality, may be the central category of political, as distinguished from metaphysical, thought (Arendt, 1998: 9)<sup>228</sup>.

However, the fact that one of Arendt's great contribution to philosophy, as Habermas indicates, had been to emphasize natality as the central category of political thought<sup>229</sup>, does not mean that Arendt denies the importance of mortality.

Habermas himself has made some sporadic remarks on death and mortality. In *Legitimation Crisis* Habermas affirmed that at the level of the risks of the individual life, "a theory that could interpret away the facticities of loneliness and guilt, sickness and death is, to be sure, not even *conceivable*. Contingencies that are irremovably attached to the bodily and moral constitution of the individual can be raised to consciousness only as contingency. We must, in principle, live disconsolately with them" (Habermas, 1975: 120). Of all the contingencies mentioned by Habermas, clearly, death is the most unavoidable.

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<sup>228</sup> The quote can be found in Habermas, 2003: 59.

<sup>229</sup> Similarly, according to Margarte Canovan, "The most heartening message of *The Human Condition* is its reminder of human natality and the miracle of beginning. In sharp contrast to Heidegger's stress on our mortality, Arendt argues that faith and hope in human affairs come from the fact that new people are continually coming into the world, each of them unique, each capable of new initiatives that may interrupt or divert the chains of events set in motion by previous actions" (Introduction to the *Human Condition*, xvii)



In *TCA* Habermas explicitly connects the unavoidability of death with the persistence of religion when discussing Condorcet's perspective on progress and perfection.

According to Habermas, Condorcet "reinterprets the concept of perfection according to the model of scientific progress. Perfection no longer means, as it does in the Aristotelian tradition, the realization of a telos found in the nature of a thing; it signifies instead a process of improvement that does have a direction but is not teleologically limited in advance. Perfection is interpreted as progress" (Habermas, 1984:146).

The obstacles for progress are mainly, according to Condorcet, prejudice and superstition. Therefore, ultimately, in Condorcet's view, scientific knowledge as interpreted by the philosopher of the Enlightenment is the key for progress.

This concept of knowledge "devalues, as if with one blow, inherited religious, philosophical, moral, and political opinions. In the face of the power of this tradition, the sciences take on the function of enlightenment" (Habermas, 1984: 146). From this perspective, a lack of scientific knowledge is the ultimate cause of explanation of all moral and political errors. In this sense, for Condorcet, "There is not a religious system nor a supernatural extravagance that is not founded on ignorance of the laws of nature" (Habermas, 1984: 147).

Once human sciences follow the lead of the natural sciences we may expect, according to Condorcet, progress in the morality of the individual as well as in the forms of civilized association. The progress of civilization entails, for Condorcet, a republic that guarantees civil liberties, an international order that secures world peace, a society that promotes economic growth and enough technical progress to eliminate social inequalities.

In addition, Condorcet expects

the complete annihilation of the prejudices that have brought about an inequality of rights between the sexes"; he expects the elimination of criminality and degeneration, the conquest of misery and sickness through hygiene and medicine; he believes "that the day will come when death will be due only to extraordinary accidents." In other words, Condorcet believes in eternal life before death. This conception is representative of eighteenth-century philosophy of history, even if it could receive such a pointed formulation only from a contemporary of the French Revolution" (Habermas, 1984: 147- 148).

Habermas, of course, does not share this model of progress. According to him, one of the main presuppositions on which this model rests is the idea that all problems to which religious and philosophical perspectives had previously offered answers can now be rationally resolved as scientifically manageable problems (or, at least, they can now be unveiled as illusory problems). This is why, for Habermas, Condorcet's expectation that death could be eliminated is not a mere curiosity. Behind it, as Habermas puts it, "lies the view that the experiences of contingency and problems of meaning that were

previously interpreted in religious terms and worked off in cult practices can be radically defused. Otherwise there would remain a rationally irresolvable residual problem, which would mean, in spite of everything, that the value of a problem-solving capability based on science alone would be palpably relativized.” (Habermas, 1984: 149)

Habermas revisits briefly this idea, with a specific reference to Condorcet, in his essay on Marcuse titled “The Differing Rhythms of Philosophy and Politics Herbert Marcuse at 100”. There, Habermas recalls the words of Marcuse after the death of his first wife, Sophie: “The idea that death is a part of life is false, and we should take much more seriously Horkheimer’s notion that it is only with the elimination of death that humanity could be truly happy and free” (Habermas, 2001: 157). “Eternal life in the here and now”, says Habermas, “Marcuse appropriated a vitalistic version of this profoundly un-Protestant conception, which goes back to Condorcet. Despite all the progress in gene technology, it has, so far, yet to be realized” (Habermas, 2001: 157).

Finally, much more recently in his book *An Awareness of What is Missing* Habermas comments on the peculiarity of Max Frisch’s memorial service. As he puts it,

On April 9, 1991, a memorial service for Max Frisch was held in St Peter’s Church in Zurich. It began with Karin Pilliod, Frisch’s partner, reading out a brief declaration written by the deceased. It stated, among other things: ‘We let our nearest speak, an without an ‘amen’. I am grateful to the Ministers of St Peter in Zurich...for their permission to place the coffin in the church during our memorial service. The ashes will be strewn somewhere’. Two friends spoke. No priests, no blessing. The mourners were made up of intellectuals, most of whom had little time for church and religion. Frisch himself had drawn up the menu for the meal that followed. At the time the ceremony did not strike me as peculiar. However, its form, place and progression *were* peculiar. Clearly, Max Frisch, an agnostic who rejected any profession of faith, had sensed the awkwardness of non-religious burial practices, and by his choice of place, publicly declared that the enlightened modern age has failed to find a suitable replacement for a religious way of coping with the final *rite de passage* which brings life to a close. (Habermas, 2010b: 15-16).

In this opportunity, as can be seen, Habermas interprets Frisch’s intentions at planning his own memorial service the way he did, as a declaration that, at the end, enlightenment was not able to overcome religion with regards to coping with death (my own or the one of my beloved ones).

Although sporadic, Habermas’ remarks on death seemed to go in the opposite direction of Condorcet. In this sense, death is conceived by Habermas as an unavoidable and insolvable contingency that, as a rationally irresolvable residual problem, at the end, defeats the blind optimism of the enlightenment.

These remarks can be closely connected with Arendt’s own perspective on mortality.

In Arendt's view, both the plurality and mortality of human beings make politics both miraculously open and desperately contingent.

According to Arendt the *vita activa* of the human beings is developed by three fundamental human activities: labor, work and action. As fundamental, each one of them corresponds to one of the basic conditions under which human beings develop their life on earth<sup>230</sup>. However, as Arendt puts it,

All three activities and their corresponding conditions are intimately connected with the most general condition of human existence: birth and death, natality and mortality. Labor assures not only individual survival, but the life of the species. Work and its product, the human artifact, bestow a measure of permanence and durability upon the futility of mortal life and the fleeting character of human time. Action, insofar as it engages in founding and preserving political bodies, creates the condition for remembrance, that is, for history (Arendt, 1998: 8).

As it was mentioned before, Arendt attempts to posit natality as the central category of political thought. However, this does not mean that mortality lacks of political relevance. Indeed, for Arendt,

Men are "the mortals," the only mortal things in existence, because unlike animals they do not exist only as members of a species whose immortal life is guaranteed through procreation. The mortality of men lies in the fact that individual life, with a recognizable life-story from birth to death, rises out of biological life. This individual life is distinguished from all other things by the rectilinear course of its movement, which, so to speak, cuts through the circular movement of biological life. This is mortality: to move along a rectilinear line in a universe where everything, if it moves at all, moves in a cyclical order (Arendt, 1998: 18-19).

In addition to this, Arendt presents some concrete remarks about the relationship between mortality-immortality, on the one hand, and religion (Christianity), on the other.

For Arendt, after the fall of the Roman Empire, the rise of the Christian gospel offered the idea of an everlasting individual life (Arendt, 1998: 21). Christianity brought a new promise of immortality by bringing hope "to those who knew that their world was

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<sup>230</sup> For Arendt, "Labor is the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body, whose spontaneous growth, metabolism, and eventual decay are bound to the vital necessities produced and fed into the life process by labor. The human condition of labor is life itself. Work is the activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence, which is not imbedded in, and whose mortality is not compensated by, the species' ever-recurring life cycle. Work provides an "artificial" world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings. Within its borders each individual life is housed, while this world itself is meant to outlast and transcend them all. The human condition of work is worldliness. Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world" (Arendt, 1998: 7).

doomed, indeed a hope beyond hope, since the new message promised an immortality they never had dared to hope for” (Arendt, 1998: 314).

Arendt also recognizes that

this Christian immortality that is bestowed upon the person, who in his uniqueness begins life by birth on earth, resulted not only in the more obvious increase of otherworldliness, but also in an enormously increased importance of life on earth (...) The point is that Christianity—except for heretical and gnostic speculations—always insisted that life, though it had no longer a final end, still has a definite beginning. Life on earth may be only the first and the most miserable stage of eternal life; it still is life, and without this life that will be terminated in death, there cannot be eternal life. This may be the reason for the undisputable fact that only when the immortality of individual life became the central creed of Western mankind, that is, only with the rise of Christianity, did life on earth also become the highest good of man (Arendt, 1998: 316).

This is why Arendt sees Western secularization in a very critical way. According to her,

The victory of the animal *laborans* would never have been complete had not the process of secularization, the modern loss of faith inevitably arising from Cartesian doubt, deprived individual life of its immortality, or at least of the certainty of immortality. Individual life again became mortal, as mortal as it had been in antiquity, and the world was even less stable, less permanent, and hence less to be relied upon than it had been during the Christian era. Modern man, when he lost the certainty of a world to come, was thrown back upon himself and not upon this world; far from believing that the world might be potentially immortal, he was not even sure that it was real. And insofar as he was to assume that it was real in the uncritical and apparently unbothered optimism of a steadily progressing science, he had removed himself from the earth to a much more distant point than any Christian otherworldliness had ever removed him. Whatever the word "secular" is meant to signify in current usage, historically it cannot possibly be equated with worldliness; modern man at any rate did not gain this world when he lost the other world, and he did not gain life, strictly speaking, either; he was (...) thrown into the closed inwardness of introspection, where the highest he could experience were the empty processes of reckoning of the mind, its play with itself. (Arendt, 1998: 320)

As we will see in the appendix, Habermas’ argument against liberal eugenics develops an anthropological view according to which being a human being means to have a body that is grown and suffered; a body that is both a body that we are and a body that we

have. From this perspective, “To be human is to take up the challenge of the contingency of our bodily nature, realizing that this is a factum with which we must struggle, and come to terms” (Mendieta, 2004: 728). I think that Habermas should give the next step and affirm the permanence of religion from the natural fact that such a body is, undoubtedly, a mortal one.

Interestingly enough the fact of death invites us to think that within each human being we can find some sort of irreducible spirit. I think that this is what Habermas is hinting at when he brought about the case of Frisch’s death and the awkwardness of non-religious burial practices.

Indeed, besides of the hope for another world or a beyond, the religious burial practices remind us about the sacred and unique mystery of human life (and death). This sacredness and mystery might be understood as a reminder that the human individual cannot be reduced to any of her particularities, especially that one of being a citizen.

#### IV

According to Zizek, “Habermas’ late interest in religion is not the concern for the hidden content in the religious form; what interests him now is the form itself: believers willing to stake their lives, something missing from anemic-skeptical liberalism” (Zizek, 2011: 352). Thus, Zizek wonders, “is this not a vampirism, sucking the energy from believers without being ready to abandon his own secular stance, with full religious belief acting as a mysterious Other?” (Zizek, 2011: 352).

Zizek’s perspective is certainly too radical and not completely accurate insofar as Habermas’ is making a deep effort to establish channels of communication between philosophy and such a “mysterious Other”. However, I do think that in his account of the role of religion in the public sphere Habermas is, so to speak, politicizing too much the value and relevance of religion. In other words, by overemphasizing the political relevance of religion Habermas is neglecting other aspects of the religious realm that, on the one hand, might be able to tell us more about the issue of the permanence of religion, and, on the other, might end up being highly relevant for a truly human democracy.

In order to develop my final critique I want to use Troels Nørager’s perspective as presented in his book *Taking Leave of Abraham*.

Nørager’s perspective is very useful to insist on the idea of the “irreducibility of the human spirit”. Religion, in this sense, appears as a constant reminder that human experience is not exhausted by the political realm or by any other.

Nørager’s book presents a critical interpretation of Kierkegaard’s own interpretation of Genesis 22<sup>231</sup> as developed in *Fear and Trembling*. Nørager thinks that

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<sup>231</sup> Genesis 22 presents the story of the Binding of Isaac or the Akedah or Aqedah. This is the passage: **1** And it came to pass after these things, that God did prove Abraham, and said unto him: 'Abraham'; and he said: 'Here am I.'. **2** And He said: 'Take now thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest, even Isaac, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt-offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.' **3** And Abraham rose early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son; and he cleaved the wood for the burnt-offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him. **4** On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off. **5** And Abraham said unto his young men: 'Abide ye here with the ass, and I and the lad will go yonder; and we will worship, and come back to you.' **6** And Abraham took the wood of the burnt-offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took in his hand the fire and the knife; and they

Genesis fits perfectly Kierkegaard's broader purpose of challenging the philosophy of his time which, in Kierkegaard's view, i) tried to put the demands of morality over religion, ii) presented the 'universal' as having more relevance than the 'particular' and single individual, iii) conceived that the primary task of the individual was to become one with society, or, in other words, to surrender her private beliefs in favor of the common good, and iv) presented religion and faith as a stage to be left behind on the journey to the higher reason of Hegel's absolute spirit.

To be sure, Nørager is interested in developing an interpretation of Kierkegaard's analysis that is relevant for contemporary political debates. From this perspective,

Kierkegaard is in F&T presenting an answer to a classic conundrum in Christian tradition: How can and how should the religious person live in society? This is a question Jesus addresses in the New Testament (the story of the rich young man; Jesus saying 'Render unto Caesar', etc.) and which prompted major Christian theologians like Augustine and Luther to make a distinction between two realms or kingdoms, one of them spiritual, the other secular (Nørager, 2008: 55).

Kierkegaard, in Nørager's view, qualifies this distinction by affirming, instead, the eternal and spiritual realm against the temporal and material one. For Nørager, in our time, this problem may be expressed in the following form: Is religion and democracy compatible? And what is the proper role of religion and religious arguments in the public square? (Nørager, 2008: 55)

Kierkegaard challenges the Hegelian perspective according to which the individual, at following her ethical task, should bring herself into a harmonious relation to society and its norms. For Kierkegaard this entails the annulment of the individual's singularity.

To be sure, a religious perspective is not the only one from which we can insist that the individual is always more than her role and value as a citizen. However, there are at least two reasons why religion accomplishes this in a very convincing way.

First, every religion presents a strong connection with the idea of human fulfillment and flourishing. In this sense, every human being is seen as searching for fulfillment and for a sense of fullness, but to be religious means to experience fullness as coming from a power beyond the individual.

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went both of them together. **7** And Isaac spoke unto Abraham his father, and said: 'My father.' And he said: 'Here am I, my son.' And he said: 'Behold the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt-offering?' **8** And Abraham said: 'God will provide Himself the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son.' So they went both of them together. **9** And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built the altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar, upon the wood. **10** And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. **11** And the angel of the LORD called unto him out of heaven, and said: 'Abraham, Abraham.' And he said: 'Here am I.' **12** And he said: 'Lay not thy hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him; for now I know that thou art a God-fearing man, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from Me.' **13** And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in the thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt-offering in the stead of his son. **14** And Abraham called the name of that place Adonai-jireh; as it is said to this day: 'In the mount where the LORD is seen.'

Second, every religion grounds the existence of an absolute duty to God. For Kierkegaard, according to Nørager's interpretation, faith "only begins where philosophy and reason cannot reach further, and in order to drive home this point he tries to convince his reader that there exists an absolute duty to God". (Nørager, 2008: 58). Let us remember the famous passage from Luke that justifies, for Christianity, this idea: "If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple" (Lk 14:26f).

This is why the passage of the "Binding of Isaac" is so important. In fact it can be easily conceived as the most dramatic case in which the idea of an absolute duty to God is at stake<sup>232</sup>.

As Nørager puts it,

Given the fact that, theologically speaking, every Christian is the inhabitant of two kingdoms, a believer's relation to society is likely to be characterized by a certain distance to the existing political order. This is an 'inner' (or inward) distance however, and it may even be considered healthy for two reasons: One is that it serves as a reminder that 'the political' is not the final (and sometimes not even the most important) word about our human situation. Another is that by maintaining a certain distance and not attributing to the realm of Caesar more than timely and finite significance, it may often prove possible to be of more service to society. (Nørager, 2008: 236)

On this basis we can develop a different assessment for the potential contributions coined in religious language that are made even in the formal public sphere and the institutional spaces of a deliberative democracy, that is, my first criticism developed earlier. Indeed, the symbolic references to God that we can still find in preambles to constitutions where the people acknowledge to be ultimately answerable to God may be interpreted as a reminder of a healthy sense of humility to judges and law-makers<sup>233</sup>. In this sense, "philosophy of religion may find cause to remind political philosophers that it is consonant with the spirit of democracy itself that it be considered a fallibilistic project. Hence, should a tendency to hypostasize or deify democracy arise, it may be worthwhile to argue that a fallibilistic consciousness is one way of taking seriously the Christian virtue of humility". (Nørager, 2008: 222)

To be sure, recognizing that the individual is always more than her role as a citizen is an open idea susceptible to be interpreted in many ways.

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<sup>232</sup> To be sure, Nørager's perspective is that we should take leave of Abraham, as the title of his book indicates. For Nørager, in addition, Kierkegaard's interpretation at the end leads to a religious absolutism that might justify religiously sanctioned acts of terror. However, Nørager also wants to rescue the valid point that Kierkegaard is making, "namely that religion is not reducible to morality, and that the individual is always more than his role as a citizen in society" (Nørager, 2008: 78).

<sup>233</sup> See Nørager, 2008: 222.

When governments set up ethics committees where the voice of theology or the church is welcomed in order to face the challenges posed by contemporary medical technology, politicians sense that fundamental issues concerning our view of man and what it means to be human are at stake. This would be one case where such politicians are recognizing Kierkegaard's point, namely, that the individual is always more than her role as a citizen.

Nørager even dares to propose another proviso in order to counter-balance Rawls's proviso that, as we saw, Habermas still maintains at the institutional level. Nørager's proviso states: "We will give commitment and loyal support to the political order provided it is (at least implicitly) recognized that man is not reducible to his role as a citizen" (Nørager, 2008: 223).

From this perspective, my third and fourth critiques indicate that Habermas might be "politicizing" religion too much. Indeed, if we have a greater sensitivity to, on the one hand, the factual mortality of human nature and, on the other, its irreducible character, we might not only end up categorically affirming the permanence of religion but, in addition, without being afraid of becoming apologetics, we might also be rooting for such a permanence.



## APPENDIX: ON LIBERAL EUGENICS AND P.G.D

Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, written in 1932, presented the topic of freedom and its enemies in an (for his time) unlikely dystopian fashion. For many decades, Huxley's book did not seem to draw a good picture of any real threat to humanity and freedom. The dystopian futures, at that time, seemed to be more similar to Orwell's *1984*.

Nevertheless, in many different ways if read it today, 80 years after it was written, it is very difficult not to feel that Huxley's *Brave New World* presents a rather accurate prediction of our very present.

In Huxley's own words from the preface,

The theme of *Brave New World* is not the advancement of science as such; it is the advancement of science as it affects human individuals. The triumphs of physics, chemistry and engineering are tacitly taken for granted. The only scientific advances to be specifically described are those involving the application to human beings of the results of future research in biology, physiology and psychology. *It is only by means of the sciences of life that the quality of life can be radically changed.* The sciences of matter can be applied in such a way that they will destroy life or make the living of it impossibly complex and uncomfortable; but, unless used as instruments by the biologists and psychologists, they can do nothing to modify the natural forms and expressions of life itself. The release of atomic energy marks a great revolution in human history, but not (unless we blow ourselves to bits and so put an end to history) the final and most searching revolution. *This really revolutionary revolution is to be achieved, not in the external world, but in the souls and flesh of human beings* (Huxley, 2004: 8, *emphasis added*).

Also, in 1958, when he "revisited" *Brave New World*, Huxley affirmed that,

During the past century the successive advances in technology have been accompanied by corresponding advances in organization. Complicated machinery has had to be matched by complicated social arrangements, designed to work as smoothly and efficiently as the new instruments of production. *In order to fit into these organizations, individuals have had to deindividualize themselves, have had to deny their native diversity and conform to a standard pattern, have had to do their best to become automata* (Huxley, 2004: 253-254, *emphasis added*).

In this way, it would seem that Habermas' recent remarks on liberal eugenics might be regarded as Huxleyan. Indeed, just like Huxley, Habermas has been throughout his philosophical career deeply concerned with the topic of human freedom.

His idea of human freedom is represented by what he regards as the normative contents of modernity that needs to be protected and expanded, namely, "self-consciousness, "self-determination", and "self-realization". As he puts it, "Self-consciousness is a function of the growth in reflexivity in the context of a perpetual revision of dissolved traditions, self-determination is the result of the predominance of egalitarian and individualistic universalism in law and morality, and self-realization the result of the pressure toward individuation and self—direction under conditions of a highly abstract ego identity" (Habermas, 2008: 238).

Already in his *Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas maintained that the uncontrolled and selective process of modernizations itself has threatened from within such a normative consciousness. Back then, he referred to the idea of the colonization of the lifeworld developed by the imperatives of a systems logic. Nowadays, similarly, he affirms that "The division of labor between the integrative mechanisms of the market, bureaucracy, and social solidarity is out of kilter and has shifted in favor of economic imperatives that reward forms of social interaction oriented to individual success" (Habermas, 2008: 238-239).

In addition, nowadays he is also concerned by the fact that the developing of new technologies is deeply permeating aspects of the human person that used to be regarded as "natural". This, according to him, "promotes a naturalistic self-understanding among experiencing subjects in their interactions with one another" (Habermas, 2008: 239). Therefore, as Huxley, Habermas believes that the creation of genetically standardized human beings might entail their very own "deindividuation". Indeed, once mental operations are radically naturalized into neurological events, the idea of free will becomes nothing but a set of chemical reactions taking place within the brain.

The risks, thus, are enormous, and, according to Habermas, we might be failing to recognize them and discuss them. And this discussion, to be sure, needs to include all the voices that might have something relevant to say.

One of these voices is the religious voice. For Habermas, the moral intuitions contained within many religious traditions might constitute a highly useful tool to orient ourselves as we face the hitherto unknown challenges that technology is bringing forth.

As Habermas notes, modernity's normative self-understanding was also the result of secularization and the liberation from the constraints of politically powerful religions (Habermas, 2008: 238). Ironically, however, it seems that religion might offer elements that, although external to political liberalism, seek to protect and preserve one of its most important foundations, namely, the sacredness and uniqueness of the individual<sup>234</sup>.

This is why this appendix will be aimed to illustrate Habermas' thoughts on the role of religion in the public sphere with a concrete discussion in which Habermas himself has engaged, namely, the debate on genetic engineering, liberal eugenics and preimplantation genetic diagnosis (PGD).

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<sup>234</sup> Interestingly enough, as it is known, in Huxley's dystopian image there is no place for God or religion.

In the first part, I will expound Habermas' own argument and, in the second one, I will present a critical assessment of it.

In the first part of this appendix I will present Habermas' argument as offered by him in his book *The Future of Human Nature* and his essay "An Argument against Human Cloning: Three Replies" published in *The Postnational Constellation*. (I) First I will describe the concrete object of Habermas' remarks, that is, PGD and liberal eugenics. (II) Second, I will explain why, for Habermas, his own postmetaphysical perspective does not seem to be adequate to engage on this debate. (III) After presenting a religious argument that, in some sense, as Habermas himself recognizes, matches Habermas' own train of thought, (IV) I will expound Habermas' perspective on PGD and liberal eugenics. (V) Finally I will conclude my exegetical work by indicating a crucial distinction that, although unavoidably blurry and polemical, Habermas wants to keep.

## I

In *The Future of Human Nature* Habermas discusses the risks of the new kind of technologies developed by the combined efforts of reproductive medicine and genetic engineering, especially Preimplantation Genetic Diagnosis (PGD)<sup>235</sup>.

The term PGD describes methods of testing embryos generated by in vitro fertilization. The genome of one or two cells of a several-days-old embryo – usually during the so-called 8-cell stage (blastomere), i.e. about three days after fertilization) - is tested for certain mutations or chromosomal abnormalities that may result in a disorder, before the embryo is transferred to the uterus.

PGD can also be used to identify the embryo's sex, the presence of a certain disability or even the embryo's suitability as an organ or tissue donor. In Habermas' words, PGD is recommended "in the first place, to parents wanting to rule out the risk of transmitting a hereditary disease. If found to be deficient, the embryo screened in the test-tube will not be implanted in the mother, thus sparing her an abortion at a later stage as a result of prenatal diagnosis" (Habermas, 2003, 17).

Habermas, to be sure, does not offer a detailed account of PGD. The reason is that Habermas is not really interested in PGD, but in the possible consequences of uncritically accepting technologies *such as* PGD. In Habermas' view, the following medium-range scenario of development is not unlikely to happen.

As a first step, the population in general as well as the political public sphere and parliament may come to feel that preimplantation genetic diagnosis *as such* may be morally permitted or legally tolerated if limited to a small number of well-defined cases of severe hereditary diseases which *the persons who are potentially affected by them in the future cannot be reasonably expected to cope with*. With the advances of biotechnology,

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<sup>235</sup> It is noteworthy that Habermas explicitly calls his essay an "attempt", "seeking to attain more transparency for a rather mixed-up set of intuitions" (Habermas, 2003: 22). And later on he admits, "I am personally far from believing that I succeeded, be it halfway, in this pursuit. But neither do I see any analyses of a more convincing nature" (Habermas, 2003: 22). In this sense, although it is not mentioned that this essay is one of Habermas *Kleine Politische Schriften*, the polemical and political character of the text is evident. On this issue, see Mendieta, 2004.

and with gene therapy meeting with success, regulations will later be extended to cover genetic intervention in somatic cells (or even in the germ line) for the purpose of preventing such (and similar) hereditary diseases. This second step which, given the choice made in the first place, is not only non-objectionable but consistent, leads to the necessity of drawing a line between these 'negative' eugenics (assumed to be justified) and 'positive' eugenics (still considered problematic). But since this line is not sharp – both on conceptual and practical grounds – our intention of making genetic interventions *stop* at the threshold of enhancing human beings confronts us with a paradoxical challenge: in the very dimensions where boundaries are fluid, we are supposed to draw and to enforce particularly clear-cut lines (Habermas, 2003, 18-19).

Therefore, within the context of this possible path of development, Habermas elaborates an argument to oppose liberal eugenics<sup>236</sup>. According to this already popular perspective, once we admit that the line between therapeutic and enhancing interventions might be impossible to define, the choice of the goals of gene-modifying interventions should be left to the individual preferences of market participants. Liberal eugenics refers to the practice that “entrusts into the genome of an embryo to the discretion of the parents” (Habermas, 2003: 78).

For liberal eugenics, thus, the use of reproductive and genetic technologies must be embraced if and only if the choice of the goals of enhancing human characteristics and capacities is left to the individual preferences of consumers or users, rather than to the authority of the state. In this sense, in liberal societies “eugenic decisions would be transferred, via markets governed by profit orientation and preferential demands, to the individual choice of parents and, on the whole, to the anarchic whims of consumers and clients” (Habermas, 2003: 48). It would be, therefore, a simple extension of ordinary procreative freedoms.

In addition, the defenders of liberal eugenics compare genetic interventions with the accepted processes of socialization and education that already depend on the parents. According to this train of thought, “If special tutors and camps, training programs, even the administration of growth hormones to add a few inches in height are within parental rearing discretion, why should genetic intervention to enhance normal offspring traits be any less legitimate?”<sup>237</sup> (Habermas, 2003: 49).

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<sup>236</sup> Habermas, to be sure, wants to be cautious. As he puts it, “As long as we consider in time the more dramatic borderlines which the day after tomorrow might be crossed, we can approach today’s problems with more composure” (Habermas, 2003: 20).

<sup>237</sup> Habermas is aware that there can be still another mode of a “liberal argument”. Indeed, “The question of whether a society ought to refrain from doing something that it has the power to do quickly becomes a question of rights. Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim mentions an article by a well-known American jurist in favor of permitting human cloning, which introduces the argument that the production of cloned human beings should not be met with legal obstacles since any preventive legal discrimination would in fact lead to the marginalization of a new minority group. Clones would be even more badly “marked” than other Minorities. As I read this article by Lawrence Tribe in the New York Times at the beginning of December, I was initially impressed. The liberal argument - as distinguished from the pressures of the market-liberal side - does indeed have a normatively convincing force. On the other hand, it ought to make us reflect on two things. Before we scrutinize the way that we might see cloned human beings, we would have to ask how they would see themselves - and whether it is a view that we ought to impose on them. Second, the

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Habermas' reflections need to be consistent with his postmetaphysical perspective according to which philosophy does not have other option but to restrain itself regarding binding positions on substantive questions of the good life. These questions, generally speaking, are questions about what I should do with the time I have to live. In other words, they refer to how I should live my life in order to have a meaningful, successful and happy existence.

Philosophy used to regard itself as "the teacher of the good life". However, as we saw in chapter 1, philosophy could fulfill such a role by assuming a metaphysical perspective with an encompassing point of view able to offer an account of nature a history. As Habermas puts it,

The order of the cosmos and human nature, the stages of secular and sacred history provided normatively laden facts that, so it seemed, could also disclose the right way to live. Here 'right' had the exemplary sense of an imitation-worthy model for living, both for the life of the individual and for the community. Just as the great religions present their founders' way of life as their path to salvation, so also metaphysics offered its model of life – for the select few, of course, who did not follow the crowd. The doctrines of the good life and of a just society – ethics and politics- made up a harmonious whole (Habermas, 2003: 2)

Under the new conditions of modernity, nonetheless, such a perspective is untenable. The pluralism of worldviews and the spreading individualization of lifestyles define the new context in which, as we saw too in chapter 1, philosophy can only assume a role of a stand-in and an interpreter. In this new context, the "just society" does not have other choice but to leave to the individuals the decision about what to do with their lives.

To be sure, practical philosophy still has normative content. But it restricts itself to moral questions instead of ethical issues. Practical philosophy aims to "clarify the moral point of view from which we judge norms and actions whenever we must determine what lies in the equal interest of everyone and what is equal good for all" (Habermas, 2003: 3). The moral perspective, thus, defines rights and duties that everyone ascribes to one another. It is, thus, a deeply inclusive "we-perspective".

In contrast, the ethical perspective refers to our own life from a first person perspective. It is an account of what is best for "me" or for "us" from a concrete and particular view. It relates to a particular life history of a unique form of life.

For Habermas, "The moral point of view obliges us to abstract from those exemplary pictures of a successful or undamaged life that have been handed on in the

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premise itself is dubious. This is also my question to the sociologists: Is the normalization of new technologies which initially provoke our moral indignation unavoidable in this case of homunculi reproduced by genetic technology? Or can moral reasons, if publicly convincing, not also have an empirical effect? (Habermas, 2001: 165-166) Beyond these questions, nevertheless, Habermas does not develop any more remarks related to this sort of liberal argument.

grand narrative of metaphysics and religion” (Habermas, 2003: 3). Philosophy, to be sure, can nourish from these traditions. But philosophy “retires to a metalevel and investigates only the formal properties of processes of self-understanding, without taking a position on the content themselves” (Habermas, 2003: 4).

This does not mean, nevertheless, that philosophy cannot differentiate between progress and regressions. As we saw in chapters 3 and 4, the concept of communicative rationality allows us to produce normative elements which can be used to critically assess particular situations. These elements, as presented before, are based on the preservation of the richness of the linguistically structured lifeworld which makes possible the forms of communication through which we reach an understanding with one another about something in the world and about ourselves.

Now, interestingly enough, in dealing with PGD Habermas runs against the very limits of his own perspective. As he puts it, “This postmetaphysical abstention runs up against its limits in an interesting way as soon as questions of a ‘species ethics’ arise. As soon as the ethical self-understanding of language-using agents is at stake *in its entirety*, philosophy can no longer avoid taking a substantive position. It is just this situation that we find ourselves in today” (Habermas, 2003: 11).

For Habermas, the development of technologies such as PGD constitutes a new kind of power and intervention hitherto unknown. Indeed, “What hitherto was ‘given’ as organic nature, and could at most be ‘bred’, now shifts to the realm of artifacts and their production” (Habermas, 2003: 12)<sup>238</sup>.

In the particular case of human beings, the boundaries between the nature that we “are” and the endowments that we produce to ourselves disappear. In Habermas’ words,

Up to now, both the secular thought of European modernity and religious belief could proceed on the assumption that the genetic endowment of the newborn infant, and thus the initial organic conditions for its future life history, lay beyond any programming and deliberate manipulation on the part of other persons. What is placed at our disposal today is something else: the previous *uncontrollability* of the contingent process of human fertilization that results from what is now an *unforeseeable* combination of two different sets of chromosomes (Habermas, 2003: 13).

The moral questions raised by the breadth of biotechnological interventions are, for Habermas, of an altogether different kind because they refer to the ethical self-understanding of humanity as a whole. In this new context, thus,

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<sup>238</sup> For Habermas, these new technologies entail a situation “in which parents who want to have their own child start with a conditional decision. They know from the beginning that, following the diagnosis, they either have to choose among several options, or must make a binary decision between the implantation of the destruction of just one embryo. This already betrays an *intention to improvement*. The selection is based on a judgment of the quality of a human being and therefore expresses a desire for genetic optimization (...) The desire for children makes the parents arrange a situation in which they have *freely to dispose*, on the basis of a scientific prognosis, over the termination or continuation of a prepersonal human life. This instrumentalization is an unavoidable part of the situation once preimplantation genetic diagnosis is permitted” (Habermas, 2003: 97-98).

Formal arguments no longer suffice to maintain the substance of this self-understanding in the face of competing proposals. Rather, today the original philosophical question concerning the 'good life' in all its anthropological generality appears to have taken on new life. The new technologies make a public discourse on the right understanding of cultural forms of life in general an urgent matter. And philosophers no longer have any good reasons for leaving such a dispute to biologists and engineers intoxicated by science fiction (Habermas, 2003: 15).

### III

In this new and dangerous context, Habermas sees a concrete example in which a "religious argument", if properly translated, has a lot to say to both secular and religious citizens.

This argument is based on the first book of Moses, Genesis 1: 27: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him". It is needed, of course, an interpretation of this brief passage, especially in regard to the meaning of the phrase "in the image of God".

First, according to Habermas, we need to acknowledge that love presupposes recognition of the self in the other. Similarly, freedom requires mutual recognition. "So, the other who has human form must himself be free in order to be able to return God's affection" (Habermas, 2003: 114). However, this other always remains a God's creature. This means that she cannot be of equal birth with God. In Habermas' view, we find here a religious intuition according to which "God remains a 'God of free men' only as long as we do not level out the absolute difference that exists between the creator and the creature. Only then, the fact that God gives form to human life does not imply a determination interfering with man's self-determination" (Habermas, 2003: 115).

Insofar as God remains in every moment at, so to speak, a different dimension, in regard to human beings, God does not need to abide by the laws of nature like a technician or a biologist or a computer scientist. This is why we can understand that God enables, and at the same time obliges, humans to be free.

In addition, the structure of dependency between human beings and God indicates the existence of a different relation between the creatures of God themselves. Accordingly, their freedom, and their life depend on keeping this relation. This means that no one can or should attempt to take the place of God.

An entirely new situation would arise if the difference presupposed in the very same idea of creation disappeared. This would be the context in which a peer would take the place of God. As Habermas puts it, this is what would happen if "a human being would intervene, according to his own preferences and without being justified in assuming, at least counterfactually, a consent of the concerned other, in the random combination of the parents' sets of chromosomes" (Habermas, 2003: 115).

In Habermas' view, this religious intuition suggests that the first human being who would determine, at her own discretion, the "natural essence" of another human

being would destroy the equal freedoms that exist among persons of equal birth in order to ensure their difference (Habermas, 2003, 115).

However, the argument that “we should not play to be God”, expressed in this way, is a religious argument. And, although powerful and convincing for some believers, in a pluralistic society, we should be able to find reasons that “may reasonably be expected to meet with a rather general acceptance” (Habermas, 2003: 20), especially if those arguments are expected to be taken into account in institutionalize public discussions.

The job of the secular citizen, as well as of the postmetaphysical philosopher, nevertheless, is to listen to the religious doctrines and try to rescue the semantic contents hidden within them that can be accepted, once they are expressed differently, by a more general public.

In some sense, this is what Habermas himself does in the debate on liberal eugenics. Habermas’ own argument, as we will see, follows the same line of thought of this religious argument.

#### IV

Generally speaking, Habermas’ argument against liberal eugenics is “guided by the question of the meaning, for our own life prospects and for our self-understanding as moral beings, of the proposition that the genetic foundations of our existence should not be disposed over” (Habermas, 2003: 22).

Habermas’ perspective is presented as a reflection originated by the increasing reflexivity of a modernity that realizes its own limits. For Habermas, “Genetic manipulation could change the self-understanding of the species in so fundamental a way that the attack on modern conceptions of law and morality might at the same time affect the inalienable normative foundations of societal integration” (Habermas, 2003: 26).

Habermas posits what he calls an “ethics of the human species”, which captures crucial features of the identity of the human species as such. These features can be seen as pillars on which our conceptions of law and morality have been built. In this sense, by blurring the distinctions between “the grown” and “the made”, “the subjective” and “the objective”, the developments of biotechnology are gradually affecting and undermining those features.

First of all, then, we need to describe Habermas’ idea of the *species -ethics*. We need to remember that Habermas is attempting to develop an argument “which is at once conclusive and neutral with respect to competing worldviews, a neutrality we are anyway committed to by the constitutional principle of tolerance” (Habermas, 2003: 38). In the matter of the nature of unborn life he tries to remain neutral to ethical conceptions (religious or naturalists). Arguments that affirm, or deny, that the embryo, from the very beginning, possesses human dignity, and thus enjoys the absolute protection of life of persons who are subjects possessing basic rights, are not ethically neutral arguments. This is why Habermas tries to develop a deeply abstract philosophical perspective related to an appropriate ethical self-understanding of the human species.

This perspective, to be sure, does not refer to the moral point of view as described before, nor to any particular ethical perspective. It refers, in contrast, to “those



intuitive self-descriptions that guide our own identification as *human beings* – that is, our self understanding as members of the species” (Habermas, 2003: 39). The human being, in his anthropological universality, is everywhere the same. In this sense, Habermas’ idea of an ethics of the human species refers to the basic conditions that must be fulfilled in order to still have an understanding of ourselves as normative creatures<sup>239</sup>.

Therefore, the species-ethics refers to a minimal ethical self- understanding of the species without which no moral or ethical point of view would have been developed<sup>240</sup>.

For Habermas, we need to reach this high conceptual point because “The perceived, and dreaded, advances of genetic engineering affect the very concept we have of ourselves as cultural members of the species of ‘humanity’ – to which there seems to be no alternative” (Habermas, 2003: 40).

Basically there are two interrelated distinctions that are being blurred, namely the distinction between the grown and the made, and between having a body and being a body. Habermas identifies two possible negative consequences of these dedifferentiations: “first, that genetically programmed persons might no longer regard themselves as the sole authors of their own life history; and second, that they might no longer regard themselves as unconditionally equal-born persons in relation to previous generations” (Habermas, 2003: 79).

The first possible negative consequence refers to the relation between human freedom and the fact that the genetic material of a newborn has always been conceived as “fate” (from a religious perspective) or a something entirely contingent, that is, as the product of an accidental process that the growing person has to find her own responses to. “In either case, there is one condition that remains essential if we are to bear the burden of responsibility for our actions: No person may so dispose over another person, may so control his possibilities for acting, in such a way that the dependent person is deprived of an essential part of his freedom” (Habermas, 2001: 164). However, if one person intervenes in the genetic makeup of another, this condition is no longer fulfilled.

The risk that Habermas sees in this scenario is that for such a person, once she has learned that she has been designed by another person, her perspective “of being a grown body may be superseded – in her objectivating self-perception – by the perspective of being something made. In this way, the dedifferentiation of the distinction between the grown and the made intrudes upon one’s subjective mode of existence” (Habermas, 2003: 53). This can be seen, especially, in the possible relation that this designed person might develop towards her own body.

For human beings, being a body is, in some sense, a primal experience<sup>241</sup>. The idea of “having a body” arises in us only through “being” this body in proceeding with

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<sup>239</sup> In this context, Habermas wonders, “Do we still want to understand ourselves as normative creatures – indeed, what role should morality and law play in the regulation of social interaction that could as well get rearranged in norm-free functionalist terms?” (Habermas, 2003: 15).

<sup>240</sup> For Habermas the religious interpretations of the self and the world that arose during the Axial Age converge in this.

<sup>241</sup> Habermas is using Helmut Plesnner’s distinction between *Leib* and *Körper*. . See on this topic Axel Honneth and Hans Joas, *Social Action and Human Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

our life. “Cognitive developmental psychology has shown that having a body is the result of the capacity of assuming an objectivating attitude toward the prior fact of being a body, a capacity we do not acquire until youth. The primary mode of experience, and also the one ‘by’ which the subjectivity of the human person lives, is that of being a body” (Habermas, 2003: 50).

However, in the case of a genetically designed person, the idea of ‘having a body’ might become primary, while the idea of ‘being a body’ appears as subordinate. As a consequence, the possibility of moral action might become dubious.

A moral person, for Habermas, needs to think of herself as acting and judging by herself. She needs to conceive of herself as inexchangeable. In addition, the capacity for a moral person to be herself might presuppose the awareness of a peaceful relation with her own body. As Habermas puts it,

The body is the medium for incarnating the personal mode of existence in such a way that any kind of self-reference, as for instance first person sentences, is not only unnecessary, but meaningless. It is the body that our sense of direction refers to, denoting center and periphery, the own and the alien. It is the person’s incarnation in the body that not only enables us to distinguish between active and passive, causing to happen and happening, making and finding; it also compels us to differentiate between actions we ascribe to ourselves and actions we ascribe to others. But bodily existence enables the person to distinguish between these perspectives only on condition that she identifies with her body. And for the person to feel one with her body, it seems that this body has to be experienced as something natural – as a continuation of the organic, self-regenerative life form which the person was born (Habermas, 2003: 57-58).

As can be seen, Habermas is suggesting that the possibility of any idea of moral freedom requires a reference to something which, by its very nature, is not at our disposal. This element, for Habermas, is the natural fact of birth. In Habermas’ words,

In acting, human beings feel free to begin something new because birth itself, as a divide between nature and culture, marks a new beginning. What is suggested by this is, I believe, the onset, with birth, of a differentiation between the socialization fate of a person and the natural fate of her organism. It is only by referring to this difference between nature and culture, between beginnings not at our disposal, and the plasticity of historical practices that the acting subject may proceed to the self-ascriptions without which he could not perceive himself as the initiator of his actions and aspirations. For a person to be himself, a point of reference is required which goes back beyond the lines of tradition and the contexts of interaction which constitute the process of formation through

which personal identity is molded in the course of a life history (Habermas, 2003: 59)<sup>242</sup>.

Therefore, our awareness of freedom, as well as our capacity of being ourselves, presupposes that we did not, and nobody else either, dispose of our own natural fate that produced our bodily existence. It must remain, thus, as a natural fate that goes beyond the process of socialization.

To be sure, Habermas' argument does not deny the possibility of a more optimistic scenario in which the genetically manipulated person "may assimilate the 'alien' intention which caring parents long before his birth associated with the disposition to certain skills much in the same way as might be the case, for instance, for certain vocational traditions running in a family" (Habermas, 2003: 61)

In this optimistic case, the person appropriates her parent's expectations as aspirations of her own, and sees them as opportunities as well as obligations to engage in efforts of her own. In this case, "no effect of alienation from one's own existence as a body and a soul will occur, nor will the corresponding restrictions of the ethical freedom to live a life of one's own be felt" (Habermas, 2003: 61).

However, for Habermas, the sole possibility of a different scenario should be enough to oppose to liberal eugenics. Hence, "as long as we cannot be sure that this harmony between one's own intentions and those of a third party will inevitably be produced, we cannot rule out the possibility of *dissonant* cases. Cases of dissonant intentions illuminate the fact that natural fate and socialization fate differ in a morally relevant aspect" (Habermas, 2003: 61)

In other words, these possible dissonant cases warn us that a person genetically altered might be more likely to feel that the scope for a possible use of her ethical freedom has been irremediably blocked by a prenatal design<sup>243</sup>. She will not be able to conceive of herself as a truly free human being because she will always share the authorship of her own life and her own destiny with someone else. Here, we can clearly see the affinities with the religious argument as Habermas interpreted it. In both cases, indeed, "the necessary beginning presupposition for a life history of one's own is that it is removed from the arbitrary will of a peer" (Habermas, 2003: 125).

In summary, for Habermas, "Eugenic interventions aiming at enhancement reduce ethical freedom insofar as they tie down the person concerned to rejected, but

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<sup>242</sup> This constitutes an explicitly Arendtian move. Habermas accepts that birth, being a natural fact, fulfills this requirement of constituting a beginning we cannot control. Habermas agrees that "Nativity", to use Arendt's category, is thus an essential condition of human nature (Habermas, 2003: 58).

<sup>243</sup> Unlike in the cases of education or "normal processes of socialization" Habermas thinks that the adolescent genetically programmed does not have the opportunity to respond and break away from her parent's preferences. The adolescent cannot revise them by critical reappraisal. She cannot engage in a revisionary learning process. "The genetic program is a mute and, in a sense, unanswerable fact; for unlike persons born naturally, someone who is at odds with genetically fixed intentions is barred from developing, in the course of a reflectively appropriated and deliberately continued life history, an attitude toward her talents (and handicaps) which implies a revised self-understanding and allows for a *productive* response to the initial situation" (Habermas, 2003: 62).

irreversible intentions of third parties, barring him from the spontaneous self-perception of being the undivided author of his own life” (Habermas, 2003: 63)<sup>244</sup>.

The second negative and devastating consequence of uncritically admitting technologies such as PGD refers to the fact that the persons genetically modified might no longer regard themselves as unconditionally equal-born persons in relation to previous generations.

This second case is related not so much to the capacity of “being oneself” but with the fact that liberal eugenics would also create a completely new interpersonal relationship. As Habermas puts it,

The irreversible choice a person makes for the desired makeup of the genome of another person initiates a type of relationship between these two which jeopardizes a precondition for the moral self-understanding of autonomous actors. A universalistic understanding of law and morality rests on the assumption that there is no definite obstacle to egalitarian interpersonal relations. Of course our societies are marked by manifest as well as structural violence (...) However we could not be scandalized by this if we did not know that these shameful conditions might *also* be *different*” (Habermas, 2003: 63)

Genetic programming creates an irreversible dependence on another person, one that opposes to the idea of equality that lies at the basis of the democratic and constitutional state itself.

The act of the program designer is completely one-sided. As such, it proceeds in an absolutely paternalistic by setting the course of the life history of the dependent person. This person is only left with the option of interpreting such an act. The possibilities of revising it or undoing it are, however, shut off. “The consequences are irreversible because the paternalistic intention is laid down in a disarming genetic program instead of being communicatively mediated by a socializing practice which can be subjected to reappraisal by the person ‘raised’” (Habermas, 2003: 64).

The blurring of the distinction between “the natural” and “the made” performed by creating designed human beings entails the preclusion of a symmetrical relationship between such persons and their programmers. In Habermas’ words, “Eugenic programming establishes a permanent dependence between persons who know that one of them is principally barred from changing *social* places with the other. But this kind of social dependence, which is irreversible because it was established by ascription, is foreign to the reciprocal and symmetrical relations of mutual recognition proper to a moral and legal community of free and equal persons” (Habermas, 2003: 65).

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<sup>244</sup> However, as we will see later, Habermas admits negative eugenics. Indeed, as he puts it, “Only in the negative case of the prevention of extreme and highly generalized evils may we have good reasons to assume that the person concerned would consent to the eugenic goal” (Habermas, 2003: 63).

Habermas disregards the possibility that the democratic constitutional state, with its own means, might be able to alleviate all these potential and negative consequences. In other words, for Habermas, we cannot expect the state to be able to compensate for this lack of intergenerational reciprocity by institutionalizing legal procedures to reestablish the disrupted symmetry on the level of generalized norms. In the context of a democratically constituted pluralistic society where every citizen has an equal right to an autonomous conduct of life, practices of enhancing eugenics cannot be 'normalized' in a legitimate way, because the selection of desirable dispositions cannot be *a priori* dissociated from the prejudgement of specific life-projects" (Habermas, 2003: 66). In other words, the neutrality of the state would be compromised by attempting to legally establish valid options of enhancing eugenics.

Within a democratic legal order, citizens enjoy equal private and public autonomy if all of them mutually recognize each other's autonomy. Therefore, a person "who sets himself up as master over the genetic material of another revokes this fundamental reciprocity" (Habermas, 2001: 165)

Granting explicit rights to genetically designed persons is not a real solution because as we saw before their own capacity to see themselves as bearer of potential rights is in question. "With the realization of the noncontingency of her manufactured biological origins, the young person risks losing a mental presupposition for assuming a status necessary for her, as a legal person, to actually enjoy equal civil rights" (Habermas, 2003:78).

## V

In conclusion, for Habermas, there is a strong connection between the contingency of a life's beginning not at our disposal and our freedom to give an ethical shape to our lives. In this sense, in Habermas' view, the person whose genetic code has been prenatally altered "may upon learning of the design for her genetic makeup, experience difficulties in understanding herself as an autonomous and equal member of an association of free and equal persons" (Habermas, 2003: 79).

To be sure, Habermas' argument is not only concerned with the moral self-understanding of these hypothetical persons who might have been produced through means of PGD or liberal eugenics. His argument refers, in addition, to the moral self-understanding that we would be accepting or presupposing by uncritically allowing liberal eugenics.

It is noteworthy that Habermas aims to introduce a subtle distinction in order to leave room for negative or therapeutic eugenics. This distinction refers to the attitude in which the genetic intervention is developed.

In the model of liberal eugenics, the genetic designer "assumes both an optimizing and an instrumentalizing attitude toward the embryo: the eight-cell embryo's genetic composition is to be improved according to subjective preferences" (Habermas, 2003: 96).

In contrast, in the case of therapeutic gene manipulations, the embryo is approached as the second person she will one day be. As such, there exists a well-founded counterfactual assumption of a possible consensus reached with another person able to say yes or no. Although at present, the consent cannot be obtained,

therapeutic interventions strongly assume that they might be confirmed later. Hence, “*assumed* consensus can only be invoked for the goal of avoiding evils which are unquestionably extreme and likely to be rejected by all” (Habermas, 2003: 43). In this sense, in Habermas’ model, it is the job of the democratic process itself to be able to produce sufficiently convincing criteria for what must be conceived as ‘sick’, or a ‘healthy’, bodily existence.

Habermas, to be sure, is aware that this is not, in any event, a peaceful solution. As he puts it,

Public discussions among citizens on the permissibility of such negative eugenics measures will be touched off anew each time lawmakers propose another entry on the list of indicated genetic disorders. Each new authorization of a prenatal therapeutic genetic intervention constitutes a tremendous burden for those parents who have principled reasons for not wanting to make use of the license. Whoever deviates from a permitted or even a familiarized eugenic practice, and takes the risk of an avoidable birth defect into the bargain, has to fear accusations of neglect, and possibly the resentment of their own child. In anticipating these consequences, requirements for justification (which confront the lawmaker at each step in this path) are fortunately quite high. Though the terms of the debates remain different, the general opinion – and will – formation will be just as deeply polarized as it was in the abortion debate (Habermas, 2003: 91).

Thus, Habermas’ perspective ends up with the institutionalization of a permanent state of controversy within the different democratic states. In his view, this is the only way in which the advances of genetic engineering do not entail a negative harm to our self-understanding as human beings committed to moral judgments and actions.

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In the second part of the appendix, I will present a critical evaluation of Habermas’ argument. (I) I will begin by noting the peculiar form that the argument has. Then, I will develop my critical perspective in two steps. (II) First I will problematize within Habermas’ argument what, in my view, constitutes an illegitimate and non-postmetaphysical assessment of our contemporary lifeworld. (III) Second, by presenting different religious arguments than the one translated by Habermas (or different interpretations of the same argument), I will suggest that Habermas is not being consistent with the force and flexibility of religion that his latest account of the role of religion in the public sphere entails.

I

First of all, it is noteworthy that Habermas develops his argument in a very peculiar form. He is careful enough to never categorically affirm that, once liberal eugenics becomes an accepted practice the negative and devastating consequences that he is foreseeing will in fact take place.

What he affirms, in contrast, is that since we cannot disregard such devastating and dangerous consequences, we should be extremely careful in our reflections and democratic legislations, and this, as we saw, means to ban liberal eugenics and only to leave open a small window for democratically discussing the scope of negative or therapeutic eugenics.

Habermas' argument could be expressed as a long chain of "mights". In this sense, says Habermas, accepting unconditionally PGD *might* take us to accepting liberal eugenics. Accepting liberal eugenics *might* take us to accepting human cloning. Accepting human cloning *might* alter our own self-understanding as human beings. Such a change of self-understanding *might* entail devastating consequences for our very notions of autonomy and freedom, and *might* impact negatively the universal achievements of modernity and democracy. Since (and this is the premise that many critics fail to notice) we cannot rule out that all this long chain of "*mights*" *might* in fact take place, we should ban liberal eugenics and only leave open a small window for democratically discussing the scope of negative or therapeutic eugenics

The peculiar form of the argument has to be noticed if we want to develop a fair critique of it<sup>245</sup>. Commonly, I think, Habermas' critics fail to notice such a peculiarity and, thus, accuse him too hastily of genetic determinism. Habermas' argument, to be sure, is much more subtle than that.

In any event, in virtue of its peculiar form, Habermas' argument is very difficult to contest. Anyone familiar with legal trials knows that to prove a negative fact is almost impossible. This is why the legal institution of the presumption of innocence is also a matter of common sense. Indeed, insofar as in many cases it would be almost impossible to prove that I did not commit a crime that I am being unjustly accused of, it makes more sense that the prosecution has the burden of proof, and thus it has to prove the positive fact that I committed the crime.

Similarly, in order to reject completely Habermas' argument we would need to prove a negative fact, namely, that it is false that we cannot rule out the negative and devastating consequences that Habermas is foreseeing<sup>246</sup>.

In this sense, even if we present good reasons for indicating that accepting PGD does not necessarily lead us to accepting liberal eugenics, or that accepting liberal eugenics does not necessarily lead us to accepting human cloning, or that human cloning does not necessarily entail a devastating change of our self-understanding as

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<sup>245</sup> According to Mendieta, "although *The Future of Human Nature*, "does not carry anywhere in either its title or subtitle the descriptive 'Kleine Politische Schriften', which we have come to associate with Habermas's polemical texts, this is clearly a political text. It is not strictly a philosophical or socio-theoretical piece. The philosophical arguments, or the reference to philosophical arguments and texts, in this lengthy essay are presented only in order to support political arguments about how we should treat the genetic interventions from a legal-political standpoint". (Mendieta, 2004: 723).

<sup>246</sup> To be sure, I am not claiming that Habermas is making an *argumentum ad ignorantium*. Clearly, Habermas is not affirming that since we cannot prove that there are not going to be negative and devastating consequences, thus, there are going to be negative and devastating consequences.

autonomous and free moral agents, Habermas' argument maintains certain force. Indeed, unless our arguments absolutely rule out Habermas' long *chain of mights*, Habermas will always be able to come back and asks us: "yes, but what if..."

## II

I am aware that the criticism that I am going to develop might not escape "Habermas' trap". However, as my first step, I want to begin by suggesting that Habermas' *chain of mights* is built upon an illegitimate and anti-Habermasian premise. Briefly put, I think that insofar as Habermas' fears are based on a non-postmetaphysical interpretation of our lifeworld, such a *chain of mights* is not consistent with Habermas' own philosophy.

As we saw in Chapter 1, for Habermas, the job of the postmetaphysical philosopher is to defend the plurality and richness of the lifeworld. However, the philosopher must be aware that the totality of the lifeworld that she must defend is not the same as the totality of the metaphysical One. In Habermas' words, "Taking the unity of the lifeworld, which is only known subconsciously, and projecting it in an objectifying manner onto the level of explicit knowledge is the operation that has been responsible for mythological, religious, and also of course metaphysical worldviews" (Habermas, 1996: 142-143)

If such a difference is neglected, we end up hypostatizing the totality of the lifeworld as the speculative idea of the One of the metaphysics. However, it seems to me that this is exactly what Habermas is doing when he appears to be so sure about the details, traits and potentialities of our lifeworld.

In *The Future of Human Nature*, Habermas affirms,

Our lifeworld is, in a sense, "Aristotelian" in its constitution. In everyday living, we don't think twice before distinguishing between inorganic and organic nature, plants and animals and, again, animal nature and the reasoning and social nature of man. The fact that these categorical divisions are so persistent, even though they are no longer connected with ontological claims, can be explained by referring to perspectives that are closely interlaced with certain modes of dealing with the world (Habermas, 2003, 44).

To a large extent, it is based on this remark that Habermas further indicates, "the categories of what is *manufactured* and what has *come to be by nature*, which in the lifeworld still retain their demarcating power, dedifferentiate" (Habermas, 2003: 46). According to Habermas such a distinction, so rooted within our lifeworld, makes possible a further distinction between two modes of action, namely, the technical use made of matter, on the one hand, and the cultivating or therapeutic attitude toward organic nature, on the other hand. In Habermas' words, "The empathy, or 'resonant comprehension', we show for the violability of organic life, acting as a check upon our practical dealings, is obviously grounded in the sensitivity of our own body and in the



distinction we make between any kind of subjectivity, however rudimentary, and the world of objects which can merely be manipulated” (Habermas, 2003: 47).

However, I think that Habermas is illegitimately confusing the general idea of the everyday world with his more complex concept of the lifeworld. By doing this, he is dangerously close to converting the lifeworld into the metaphysical One.

It is undeniable that in our everyday life we assume all the distinctions that Habermas mentions. However, this does not rule out the possibility that our lifeworld is much more complex than what such assumptions seem to suggest. Hence, if this is the case, as I think it is, this might mean that our lifeworld will have the necessary elements to deal positively with the negative consequences that Habermas envisions.

In this sense, Habermas seems to be assuming that if we were to attempt to transform what is grown into what is made we would be jeopardizing our lifeworld<sup>247</sup>.

Although Habermas recognizes that such distinctions do not have an ontological character, he does not seem to be aware of the implications of such a claim. This means, among other things, that the “what is grown” – “what is made” distinction is susceptible of waxing and waning with technological and scientific shifts (Mendieta, 2004: 732).

In addition, the very evolution of human beings has been marked by an interweaving between “what is grown” and “what is made”. As Mendieta puts it,

We could argue along with Engels that the hand evolved because of the invention of the tool, and that the invention of agriculture and the use of fire made of us the animals that we are today. Pigs, cows, and horses exist in nature, true, but not like those we have domesticated, bred, selected and pedigreed. In fact, we could argue that the cows and horses known to us are unlike those we may be able to find in nature, and in a strict sense they are unnatural, they are created, rather than found or discovered (...) The fact remains, we have created ourselves in the process of domesticating nature, and in the process of domesticating nature we have transformed our own nature. The domestication of nature has been the domestication of our nature; the humanization of nature, has been the de-naturalization of humanity” (Mendieta, 2004: 733).

It seems, thus, that our lifeworld is much more complex than what Habermas is thinking. Therefore, unless Habermas wants to claim that he has a clear and pristine knowledge

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<sup>247</sup> Similarly, according to Karin Christiansen, one common line of criticism against Habermas argument rejects such a “bleak” conception of our interaction between technology and human nature and points out the “futility of maintaining any absolute distinction between the natural and the artificial. These distinctions, [Habermas’ critics] claim are based on essentialist and to some extent metaphysical ideas about the human constitution, which can no longer be maintained” (Christiansen, 2009: 148). Also, for Mendieta, Habermas’ argument makes “two highly questionable assumptions here: first, that if we seek to intervene in our bodies by making them less ‘arbitrary’ we are converting ourselves into our own creation; and second, that we would be betraying our human nature were we to attempt to transform what is grown into what is made. These two assumptions are reducible to one essential distinction, between inner and outer nature, between the biological and the cultural, between what is grown and what is made, or between what is created and what is invented” (Mendieta, 2004: 731-732).

of the lifeworld, he just cannot say that the “what is grown-what is made” distinction is so fundamental that something that seems to oppose it would distort our lifeworld.

Habermas’ long chain of “mights”, to be sure, is not eliminated by these remarks. However, they are useful to suggest that such a chain might be based on highly controversial and problematic metaphysical presuppositions that Habermas should not be doing.

Be that as it may, I also think that Habermas should revisit his claim that “Holy scriptures and religious traditions (...) have articulated intuitions concerning transgression and salvation and the redemption of lives experienced as hopeless, keeping them hermeneutically vibrant by skillfully working out their implications over centuries” (Habermas, 2008: 110)

Indeed, as I will show in the final part of my argument, it might be the case that if we listen and translate more carefully some of those religious voices, we might end up concluding that such a life that Habermas is regarding as potentially hopeless (the life of the genetically intervened human being) is, in contrast, as full of autonomy and freedom (but also obstacles and despairs) as the life of the rest of us.

### III

As we saw, Habermas presented his argument as a secular translation of a religious intuition expressed in Genesis 1:27.

However, it seems to me that the same passage can entail the opposite conclusion. Indeed, one could say that Genesis 1:27 entails the reassuring message that even if another fellow human being were to intervene in my genetic traits, that single fact would not be enough for her to become God. She is also created by God in his own image and nothing can be done to change such a hierarchy.

Habermas decides to interpret Genesis 1:27 in, so to speak, strictly prescriptive terms. In this sense, for him, human beings should never attempt to be God, which would be the case if human cloning or liberal eugenics were accepted.

However, I think that the passage also bears a less prescriptive and more descriptive interpretation. In this sense, the richness of the passage simply reminds us that whatever we do (and this includes liberal eugenics and even human cloning), in the end, the difference between human beings and God will never disappear. Simply put, we will never level out the absolute difference that exists between the creator and the creature.

Therefore, even if “a human being would intervene, according to his own preferences and without being justified in assuming, at least counterfactually, a consent of the concerned other, in the random combination of the parents’ sets of chromosomes” (Habermas, 2003: 115), the peer relation will not change. And, fortunately, there are many religious intuitions that can help us understand and navigate throughout the appearances that might tell us the opposite.

In what follows, I would like to explore briefly what two different religious traditions, namely Judaism and Islamism, might be able to contribute to these complex debates.

According to the Jewish scholar Yitzchok Breitowitz the idea that humanity is made in the image of God entails an intrinsic tension. Indeed, Genesis Chapter 1 and Genesis Chapter 2.1 describe two different paradigms of Adam.

In Chapter 1, Adam is described in almost divine terms. Thus, being the image of God entails autonomy, power, and the capacity to judge, create and dominate. Accordingly, human beings are conceived as collaborative partners with the Divine in the task of improving the world. From this perspective, according to Breitowitz, “in lieu of the commonly-invoked expression that “it is wrong to play G-d,” one might assert not only that is it not wrong to play G-d, but indeed to some degree that is exactly what we are supposed to do (...) So in effect, Genesis Chapter 1 calls on the human being to be an actor, to be an intervener, to be a changer, to be a transformer, because being so is an exemplification of being in the G-dly image” (Breitowitz, 2002: 326-327).

On the other hand, Genesis Chapter 2 seems to offer a different vision of humanity. Insofar as human beings are made from the dust of earth, their mission is not to conquest and to dominate but to preserve and protect.

In this sense, thus, Genesis presents a tension between the greatness and power of human beings (Chapter 1), on the one hand, and the subservience and submission to the mysteries of the universe and the divine (Chapter 2), on the other. Hence, as Breitowitz puts it,

Human beings must live in a perpetual state of tension and contradiction between realizing their divinity by the exercise of power, wisdom, and control and at the same time recognizing the need to submit to that which is greater and all-knowing. If one merely embodies the redemptive aspect of man that is exemplified in Genesis Chapter 2, one is in a state of quiescence, passivity, and immobilization. If, on the other hand, one only emphasizes Genesis Chapter 1, then one displays a hubris and arrogance that ultimately would be self-destructive as one proceeds down a path, the old slippery slope path, that would lead to all sorts of horrors, some of which have been seen and experienced in the tragedies of the twentieth century and some of which we sadly continue to experience today (Breitowitz, 2002: 327).

As a result, just stating “anything goes” or just stating “it is wrong to play God” is a mere simplification of an unavoidable tension. The only authentic option is to attempt to “achieve a precarious balance between two alternative, contradictory but complementary visions of human beings in their relationship to the world and in their relationship to the Divine, to navigate a dilemma that dates from the very inception of Adam” (Breitowitz, 2002: 328).

On this basis, Breitowitz wonders about the legitimate purposes that the Jewish tradition might have for the creation of a human being through cloning. For him, as a matter of fact, there is, at least, the commandment to be fruitful and multiply. As he indicates, “infertility is a serious emotional and physical problem for everyone, but for Jews who are committed to tradition, there is a certain extra pain in infertility simply

because they are not able to fulfill one of the divine commandments in Genesis Chapter 1” (Breitowitz, 2002: 331)<sup>248</sup>.

As we saw, one of Habermas’ main concerns referred to the possibility that a cloned human being would not be able to develop her life in an autonomous and reflective way.

However, if we take into account Breitowitz’ perspective, it seems that the Jewish tradition has enough elements to help us understand that such a fear might be ungrounded. According to Breitowitz, “the Jewish tradition would consider clones to be autonomous individuals even though they share the same genetic endowment as someone else. Judaism does not believe that biology is destiny; humans are more than the sum of our genes” (Breitowitz, 2002: 337).

He refers to a passage in the Talmud that illustrates this view. Clearly, the Talmud does not talk about DNA. However it does talk about *mazal*. According to Breitowitz, *mazal* is a term used to refer to the constellation that one is born under, that is, to certain hard-wired propensities of nature. Thus, with this term, the Talmud aims to address the tension between those traits of one’s personality that might seem to be immutable and unchangeable, on the one hand, and, one’s ability to make autonomous choices, on the other. I quote Breitowitz at length:

The Talmud says: He who is born under the red planet of Mars will inevitably be a spiller of blood; he will love the sight of blood. He cannot help that and cannot change it. But he may choose to be a *shochet*—a slaughterer of kosher animals—or a *mohel*—a ritual circumcisor—or a murderer (Talmud Shabbat 156a). This is a tremendously important statement because it indicates that a person is born with a certain immutable pattern. There are genetic bases for all sorts of behavior, but these behaviors can be sublimated and channeled in positive and constructive ways (...) Everybody is born with certain propensities. Even before the genome project, we all knew that some people have an angrier temperament, some people an excitable temperament, and some people a more genteel temperament. Every person has what he/she has. But there also is an X-factor that we call the soul, the *neschama*, the *Tzelem Elokim*—the G-dliness within the personality that enables both a manual override and the ability to sublimate and direct and channel one’s natural propensities. This is exactly how one should view a clone. A clone of Einstein does not have to be a physicist, and a clone of Michael Jordan does not have to like basketball. There is singularity, there is uniqueness, there is individuality, and there is the potential for virtuous choices. A clone of Hitler might become another Mother Teresa. Not only do different environmental influences yield different people, but even if two people with the same genetic endowment were somehow subject to the exact same

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<sup>248</sup> In addition, for Breitowitz, another legitimate purpose would be to “generate genetically compatible tissues for transplantation” (Breitowitz, 2002: 332).

environmental influences, their capacity for differential moral choice could indeed produce significantly different human beings. Given this, the concept of a clone being psychologically burdened, with no sense of self, is a false perception” (Breitowitz, 2002: 337-338).

Thus, expressed in secular terms, in the end, a genetically intervened person would not be more determined than we ourselves (non genetically intervened persons) have been. “Genetically engineered persons have to face the ‘fallenness’ of their existence just as much as we have to. A clone is no less responsible for their life-histories than we are. A life-history is never determined by a genotype; this latter provides only the putty, as it were, from which we fashion our meaningful life-plans” (Mendieta, 2004: 733).

It seems clear that with regard to PGD the same or similar remarks used to discuss human cloning would apply.

Mark Popovsky, another Jewish scholar, indicates that “Parents employing PGD, no doubt, want to provide their children with the best possible chance at a healthy and happy life” (Popovsky, 2007: 701). According to him, the Biblical command in Leviticus 19:16 “Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor” entails a mandate to actively work towards the health and well being of others. In this sense,

Any Jew who has the ability to help someone avoid illness and fails to do so stands in violation of this precept. Parents who do not aggressively ensure the health of their children are especially culpable. There is no question that from the moment of birth onward, any medical intervention which might prevent or delay disease is morally obligatory unless that intervention itself might cause harm. A parent who failed to provide basic antibiotics, for example, to a child with cystic fibrosis would rightly be viewed as negligent. At first glance, the principle of beneficence here suggests that a parent should (or, at least, may) use PGD technology to have a child free from genetic disease. (Popovsky, 2007: 700- 701)<sup>249</sup>.

Interestingly enough, this Jewish duty can also be translated into a more general secular duty compatible with the kind of reflexive modernity that Habermas thinks might be threatened by liberal eugenics. Indeed, in a Habermasian language of

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<sup>249</sup> However, for Popovsky, “Arguing strongly that we have an ethical obligation to heal the sick does not necessarily imply that we have an obligation to actively intervene with the intention of preventing sick people from coming into existence. (Popovsky, 2007: 701). Therefore, for him, “While preimplantation genetic diagnosis may provide benefits to some individuals, the harms that will likely follow from its expanded use demand severe restrictions on the technology from a Jewish perspective. A couple at an increased genetic risk of bearing a child with a serious genetic disease will find solid Jewish legal grounding to employ PGD when all the following criteria are met: (1) the child will certainly manifest the disease should it be carried to term; (2) the disease is fatal or associated with prolonged and extreme suffering; and (3) the disease has no effective therapies at present. PGD may also be used, according to Jewish tradition, in certain circumstances to produce a child who will make a suitable stem cell or bone marrow donor for an older sibling with a fatal disease as long as a rigorous set of safeguards is followed. PGD for other purposes such as to bear a child with a lowered disease risk (e. g., a child without BRCA1 & 2 mutations), to select the sex of a child, or to choose other traits is not ethically permissible within Judaism”. (Popovsky, 2007: 710)

communicative freedom and psychical and symbolic vulnerability we can express a “duty to ensure the well-being of other human beings. In other words, we are not only at the very least allowed to seek to prevent harm from coming to any other human, but we are commanded to seek the well-being of others, especially if this well-being is within our power. This argument covers our duties for future generations, and in this way, we may say that the temporal arrow points in the direction of the future (Mendieta, 2004: 736)<sup>250</sup>.

From this perspective, thus, modernity’s own premises, as well as a Habermasian perspective, seem to recommend that we should embrace and support PGD and even certain forms of genetic optimization<sup>251</sup>.

Interestingly enough, the Islamic tradition does not seem to be too far away from the Jewish perspectives previously analyzed.

Mohammad Motahari Farimani<sup>252</sup> presents an Islamic perspective to justify the same idea that we propose and that we saw also confirmed partially by a Jewish argument, that is, the idea that we will never level out the difference between God and her creatures. Indeed, for him, “the act of creation by God is of a nature wholly different from technological advances and that creation as ascribed to God cannot be ascribed to science” (Motahari, 2007: 145- 146). From this perspective, once God appears as the unique creator, cloning is inconsequential.

To reach his conclusion, Motahari used the distinction put forth by Avicenna between real cause and preparatory cause. From this ontological framework,

Biologists, when they clone, are procuring the required conditions for the appearance of the phenomenon in question. By no means do they *create* the phenomenon—they do not fundamentally bring anything into existence. Therefore, if a biologist were to die upon completing a cloning project, the product would survive independently. Biologists, therefore, are neither creators nor causes. They are mere preparers or facilitators, and

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<sup>250</sup> Mendieta is interpreting from a Habermasian perspective Peter Singer’s “preventive principle”. For Mendieta, such a principle is “a formalization of a common intuition that we are under an obligation to prevent harm from coming to not just our children but others as well, especially if this harm can be crippling and dehumanizing. This preventive principle, furthermore, ‘simply says that prenatal diagnosis and selective terminations [abortions] are permissible if they are a way of avoiding a condition that it would be child abuse to inflict on one’s child’. Indeed, parents are liable for child neglect and abuse. The moral intuition has in fact been translated into legislation, and a catalogue of rights; rights that we are able to appeal to when there have been cases of egregious medical malpractice, or even simple medical neglect. The responsibilities parents must assume vis-à-vis the welfare of their children have expanded with our increased knowledge about potential dangers and imminent hazards. In turn, our legal systems have grown and become more detailed and explicit about what kinds of things we are liable for precisely in order to give a legal representation of our increased moral responsibility” (Mendieta, 2004: 735).

<sup>251</sup> Furthermore, for Mendieta, “it is no longer a matter of seeking to bar liberal eugenics legally, but rather of seeking to develop policies and legislation that would grant to all the equal access to the benefits of genomic technologies. And to seek to develop these policies is not a mere capitulation to commercial, medical and scientific *fait accomplis*, but rather a legally enacted political act of self referential modern post-conventional moral consciousness” (Mendieta, 2004: 738).

<sup>252</sup> Mohammad Motahari Farimani teaches at the University of Tehran in the Faculties of Theology and Philosophy as well as in the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute in Qum, Iran.

their role is no different from that of a farmer in producing a crop or parents in producing an embryo (Motahari, 2007: 147-148)<sup>253</sup>.

From this perspective, thus, theoretical and technological advances in modern biology and human reproduction have not blurred the line between the divine act of creation and human capabilities. For Motahari, “Despite what some may think, the light of the traditional notion of creation has not waned in the least, and scientific activity can never be considered identical to or even of the same order as God’s act of creation” (Motahari, 2007: 151)<sup>254</sup>.

Insofar as there is not a high religious authority that represents all Muslims, it is almost impossible to conclude that any particular perspective is “the correct” or at least “the most accepted” interpretation. For this reason, a “*fatwa* (legal opinion) pertaining to the application of new science and innovation becomes difficult under such conditions. Still, studying the intent of the law in Islam (*maqasid al-shar'*), scholars are able to conclude that Islam places great emphasis on all types of research provided that the benefit is paramount with as little harm as possible to all involved” (Agha Al-Hayani, 2008: 788).

After it was announced to the world in 1997 that Dolly the sheep had been cloned, Muslim religious scholars and Muslim scientist held two conferences to discuss cloning from an Islamic perspective. Such conferences were organized by the Islamic Organization of Medical Sciences (IOMS) and the International Islamic Fiqh Academy (IIFA)<sup>255</sup>.

According to the conclusions of the conferences,

Cloning does not bring into question any Islamic belief in any way. Allah is the Creator of the universe but He has established the system of cause-and-effect in this world. When we sow a seed in the ground, it is Allah who produces the effect. God is the Creator, man is the sower.” The majority has concluded that cloning is permissible when dealing with plants and animals but not humans because the latter would create extremely

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<sup>253</sup> Motahari quotes the following sources from the Qur’an: “The Qur’an explicitly denies that the person who is called the farmer is the real farmer. The real farmer is God: “Have you considered the soil you till? Do you yourselves sow it, or are We the Sowers?” (The Qur’an 56/63–64) Likewise, in relation to the role of parents in producing the child: “Have you considered the seed you spill? Do you yourselves create it, or are We the creators?” (56/58–59). (Translations are from Arberry 1982.)” (Motahari, 2007:151)

<sup>254</sup> Similarly, according to Fatima Agha Al-Hayani “Sheikh Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, the late spiritual guide of Shi’i Muslims in Lebanon, stated that “it is false to say that cloning is an attempt to intervene in the divine creation. No new laws were invented. [Scientists] have not invented new laws; they have discovered new laws for the organism, just like they discovered laws of in-vitro fertilization and organ transplants. They made these discoveries because God allowed it. We must emerge from the dark ages to which science is an anathema” (Agha Al-Hayani: 2008: 793)

<sup>255</sup> Mohammed Ghaly is an assistant professor of Islamic Studies at Leiden University, Faculty of Humanities, Leiden Institute for Religious Studies, Matthias de Vrieshof. In his article, Ghaly offers a comprehensive analysis of these conferences.

complex and intractable social and moral problems (Agha Al-Hayani, 2008: 793)<sup>256</sup>.

Now, with regards to the less complex topics of IVF, embryonic stem cell research and PGD, the Islamic debate is not too different from the Jewish discussions either.

Indeed, the technique of in vitro fertilization (IVF), essential for PGD, was already approved by the Muslim scholars if the following conditions were fulfilled: the process must involve a married couple, during their marriage, with the consent of both, and leftover embryos must be destroyed if the marriage ends or one of them dies (Ghaly, 2010: 25).

According to Agha Al-Hayani,

Whether embryonic stem cell research or genetic alteration is ethically acceptable in Islam depends on the benefits derived from such applications. What is most important for the scholars is to adhere to the concepts of compassion, mercy, and benefit to everyone including the rights of the fetus and the mother as expounded in the Qur'an and the Sunnah. One could begin by quoting the purpose of the message of Islam. A majority of Muslim scholars accept in vitro fertilization and regard it as a compassionate and humane scientific procedure provided that the sperm and the egg are those from a married couple. The majority of Muslim scholars state that the "spare" embryos should be either frozen or destroyed (Agha Al-Hayani, 2008: 791-792)<sup>257</sup>.

From this perspective, thus, PGD should be encouraged if, besides fulfilling the aforementioned conditions for IVF, it may save the fetus from inheriting genetic disorders, and reduces the possibility of having to choose to terminate the pregnancy following a diagnosis of a probably genetic disorder. Therefore, according to Zahraa and

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<sup>256</sup> Nevertheless, according to Ghaly, there were some pro-cloning-human perspectives. As he puts it, "Despite the dominance of those opposed to cloning, especially reproductive cloning, there were pro-cloning advocates at both conferences. Representing the pro-cloning trend in the Casablanca conference was Kuwaiti scholar 'Abd Alla-h Muhiammad 'Abd Alla-h, who served as a judge in the Kuwaiti Supreme Court. He did not submit a paper but expressed his opinion during the discussions. He spoke about the controversial reproductive cloning. To him, using this as a medical treatment for infertility in legally married couples should not be problematic in Islamic law, especially because procreation is one of the main objectives of marriage in Islam. He referred to the scientists, who unanimously agreed that a child born through reproductive cloning would have percent of the father's genetic characteristics. Hence, such a child would be produced by a husband and a wife during a legally valid marriage and after the full period of pregnancy. How can we say to such couples that this child is not yours? 'Abd Alla-h wondered. He argued that such an opinion would be rigorism (tashaddud). Finally, to overcome the negative connotations of the term "cloning" for some of the religious scholars, 'Abd Alla-h suggested using another expression such as "treating infertility between married couples." (Ghaly, 2006: 26-27).

<sup>257</sup> According to Agha Al-Hayani, "Many Muslim countries such as Turkey, The Academy of Scientific Research and Technology in Egypt, and the National Fatwa Council in Malaysia support embryonic stem cell research and therapeutic cloning (Dabu 2005). Finally, there is consensus against cloning except for married infertile couples in the very far future". (Agha Al-Hayani, 2008: 794).



Shafie, “the technique of PGD should be encouraged, as it helps to reduce the risk of passing parents' genetic disorders to their children” (Zahraa and Shafie, 2006: 164).

This view is supported by three *hadiths* (Prophetic traditions). In their own words,

The first hadith is the Prophet's (pbuh) saying that translates, 'Select your spouse carefully in the interest of your offspring because lineage is a crucial issue.' The second translates, 'Do not marry your close relatives because you will beget weak offspring.' The third does not, in fact, relate to the Prophet but to his Companion 'Umar Ibn Al-Khattab (the second Caliph), who, noting that the Saib tribe intermarried too frequently, told them, 'You have weakened your descendants. You should marry strangers'. (Zahraa and Shafie, 2006: 164).

For Zahraa and Shafie, according to the above, we can conclude that “the technological benefits of PGD should be utilised to create a healthy Muslim community (Zahraa and Shafie, 2006: 164)<sup>258</sup>.

In conclusion, similarly to the Jewish tradition expounded before, it seems that Islamic law supports the use of PGD if it is used for the benefit of humanity and for alleviating human suffering. Therefore, just like Habermas suggests in his general account of the role of religion in the public sphere, we do well by listening carefully to the religious arguments that are proposed to judge contemporary political debates. However, it seems that many of those arguments are useful to ground a different perspective to the one offered by Habermas himself. Indeed, those arguments indicate that, at the end, the life of the genetically intervened human being (a life that Habermas is regarding as potentially lost) might be, in contrast, as full of autonomy, freedom and happiness (but also their opposites) as the life of the rest of us.

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<sup>258</sup> Zahraa and Shafie reminds us that the International Islamic Centre for Population Studies and Research organized an International Workshop on 'Ethical Implications of the Use of ART for Treatment of Infertility Update' at Al-Azhar University in Cairo in November 2000. "Having recognized that PGD was capable of genetic manipulation for purely cosmetic enhancement, such as making people taller, stronger, more athletic, or more intelligent, the Workshop was critical, and concluded that these practices are totally not permissible. The Workshop, however, recommended that the use of PGD must be clearly beneficial, and focused only on alleviating human suffering in cases of genetic diseases and pathological conditions." (Zahraa and Shafie, 2006: 165)

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