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RELIGION AND RATIONALITY

A review of Jürgen Habermas, *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity*. Edited and with an introduction by Eduardo Mendieta. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2002. vii + 176 pp. \$45.00 (cloth); \$19.95 (paper).

WHILE JÜRGEN HABERMAS HAS WRITTEN about religion in a number of his works, this collection brings together some of his most important and explicit essays on the topic. Thus, given his stature, this volume deserves considerable attention. Theologians would benefit greatly from grappling with the philosophical position and movement (Critical Theory) defended by Habermas. Philosophers interested in the religious traditions to which philosophy continues to be indebted and who want to critically engage Western theological traditions would benefit from these essays as well.

Some of the essays are somewhat idiosyncratic. The *German Idealism of the Jewish Philosophers* is an intriguing investigation of how Jewish thought, especially Jewish mysticism, became intertwined with German Idealism. *Tracing the Other of History in History: Gershom Scholem's Sabbati Sevi* is a good summary of the work of the great Jewish scholar (and friend of Habermas's). While intellectually interesting, these essays nevertheless do little to forward the constructive discourse between Habermas and religious thought.

The other essays, including the concluding conversation between Eduardo Mendieta and Habermas, forward the constructive discourse significantly. In *Communicative Freedom and Negative Theology: Questions for Michael Theunissen*, and *Israel or Athens: Where does Anamnestic Reason Belong?* Johannes Baptist Metz on Unity amidst Multicultural Plurality, Habermas directly addresses two of his most important theological dialogue partners. The even more constructive essays are *Transcendence from Within*, *Transcendence in this World*, and *To Seek to Salvage an Unconditional Meaning Without God is a Futile Undertaking: Reflections on a Remark of Max Horkheimer*. In all four essays, and to a lesser extent in *On the Difficulty of Saying No*, Habermas works through the central questions that result from a confrontation of his brand of Critical Theory and discourse ethics with religious thought.

The most fundamental question involves transcendence. From where does it come? What is the source of transcendence? Is transcendence ultimately referring to some external, other-worldly reality that grounds and sustains our world and our lives? For conventional theologians, the answer is yes, and God is that external, other-worldly reality. God may be internal (immanent) to this reality as well, but what makes God radically other than anything else is God's transcendence. Consequently, human beings must transcend this world—through reason, meditation, spiritual exercises, etc.—in order to most directly confront the transcendent God. But what if one has abandoned belief in such a God? Can one still speak of transcendence? For Habermas, the answer is yes.

Habermas's theory of communicative action and the discourse ethics that derives from it does utilize the idea of transcendence. However, transcendence is not external to this world and human life, but wholly (not holy!) and completely grounded in human language and communicative action. In summary, our efforts to make truth/claims presupposes a communication community that transcends our personal interests and even local conversation. Habermas writes that "we orient ourselves to validity claims that we can raise only as a matter of fact in the context of our language, of our form of life, whereas the redeemability implicitly co-positing points beyond the provinciality of the given historical context. Whoever employs a language with a view to reaching understanding lays himself open to a transcendence from within" (108). Certainly, what we can say and how we can say it are limited by our specific language community, but redeeming our claims necessarily requires transcending that community to include all real and potential conversation partners. This requirement is obligatory for all people involved in communicative action because "with every successful act of communication, they must orient themselves towards transcending validity-claims" (123). Again, note that the transcendence comes from "within" our language, our world. As Habermas concludes: "Post-metaphysical thought differs from religion in that it recovers the meaning of the unconditional [i.e., the non-contingent, the transcendent] without recourse to God or an Absolute" (108).

This leads to a related question. For many theologians, moral life—ranging from virtues to prohibitions—must be grounded in the transcendent God or else we become victim to a this-worldly relativism that undermines all moral considerations. Can one then be morally motivated without the transcendent God as the ultimate moral authority? Again, Habermas's answer is yes, even if somewhat qualified. His answer puts him in opposition to his teacher, Max Horkheimer, and many others who argue that "there cannot be truth without an Absolute, without a world-transcending power 'in which truth is sublated.'" Without ontological anchoring, the concept of truth is exposed to the inner-

worldly contingencies of mortal men and their changing situations; without it, truth is no longer an idea but merely a weapon in the struggle of life" (103). In such a situation, moral truth simply becomes a tool to serve the interests of human beings or a "weapon" to serve the interests of one group against another. It becomes purely instrumental.

Habermas's strategy is to preserve the moral point of view, guarding it against both moral relativism and instrumental reason, but to do so without turning to a metaphysical claim (God) that cannot be validated or redeemed. He concedes that philosophy cannot provide a rationally compelling or even irrefutable reason for us to be moral. We are moral, for Habermas, as a consequence of our upbringing—the relationships we form, the institutions in which we are raised, the norms we are taught, etc (81). Religion has played and continues to play a role in this, but religion is not necessary for this to happen. Neither is philosophy. Religion and philosophy, in fact, do very different things. In one of his most important passages, Habermas concludes:

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. But even today philosophy can explicate the moral point of view from which we can judge something impartially as just or unjust; to this extent, communicative reason is by no means equally indifferent to morality and immorality. However, it is altogether a different matter to provide a motivating response to the question of why we should follow our moral insights or why we should be moral at all. In *this* respect, it may perhaps be said that to seek to salvage an unconditional meaning without God is a futile undertaking, for it belongs to the peculiar dignity of philosophy to maintain adamantly that no validity claim can have cognitive import unless it is vindicated before the tribunal of justificatory discourse. (108)

Metaphysical thought cannot validate or redeem its truth claims, and thus must remain distinct from philosophy. Metaphysical thought may be able to inspire us and move us to do morally exemplary acts, but this does not rationally prove its truth claims. Philosophy, on the other hand, is all about validating or redeeming truth claims but, indeed, this may not lead to inspiration. All it can lead to, though this is enough for Habermas, is an understanding of the moral point of view.

This leads to our third area of questioning. Can we be rigorously philosophical, cognizant of the limitations of philosophy, *and* attuned to religious sensibilities? Are we confronted with the choice of either throwing a theological mask on our philosophical positions in order to recognize our grounding in our religious

traditions *or* abandoning these religious traditions in order to remain philosophically rigorous? Though it might seem like Habermas would choose the latter, he in fact rejects the dichotomy, choosing instead a position between the two options.

In a number of essays, Habermas notes our indebtedness to our religious traditions. He recognizes that important concepts like freedom, equality, and liberation have religious roots and that these roots continue to nourish our understanding of these concepts (132-3). He writes that “[u]niversalistic egalitarianism, from which sprang the ideals of freedom and a collective life in solidarity, the autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, the individual morality of conscience, human rights and democracy, is the direct legacy of the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love” (149).

Recognizing this legacy of our religious traditions does not mean, however, that we have to uncritically accept their metaphysical truth claims or even couch our positions in metaphysical terminology. He argues that the “metaphorical use of words [by philosophy] such as ‘redemption,’ ‘messianic light,’ ‘restoration of nature,’ etc, makes religious experience a mere citation. In these moments of its powerlessness, argumentative speech [philosophy] passes over beyond religion and science into literature, into a mode of presentation that is no longer directly measured by truth claims” (75). Theologians who merely use religious language for its emotive force rather than argumentative purpose only obfuscate communication. The theologian may use such terms, but in order to engage the philosopher in conversation these terms must be “translated” in order to produce truth claims that could be validated or redeemed by a communication community. This is part of a “program” that Habermas refers to as “methodical atheism” – in which theological or metaphysical claims are subject to the rules of communicative action for validation or redemption (77). Any theology or philosophy that does not submit to such rules, “loses its philosophical seriousness” (160).

Whether or not the program of methodical atheism would lead to the collapse of religious discourse is an open question for Habermas (77, 163). Nevertheless, this is the only way in which philosophers could take theologians seriously. This is something for which Habermas hopes, and he sees it in the work of theologians like Theunissen and Metz.

For many, where Habermas ends up will seem uninspiring and not very hopeful. In a world that often seems to be moving further and further away from the ideal of the global village, where ever greater atrocities are conjured up and perpetrated, and resources for spiritual and humanist rejuvenation are losing their force, it is exactly the hope found in our religious traditions that would

seem to be in great need. How can we face the future *without* the kind of hope that religion has so effectively provided to past generations? Habermas is under no illusion that philosophy can answer the call. But neither does he believe we can naively return to a blind acceptance of metaphysical thought. Yet, he does hold out hope—a hope perhaps based on the preservation of the moral point of view through his theory of communicative action and its discourse ethics. But it is also a hope that in the end he only can call an “intuition.”

If historical progress consists in lessening, abolishing, or preventing the suffering of vulnerable creatures, and if historical experience teaches that on the heels of advances finally achieved, consuming disaster closely follows, then there are grounds for supposing that the balance of what can be endured remains intact only if we give our utmost for the sake of the possible advances. Perhaps it is such assumptions, which, indeed, can give no confidence for a praxis whose certainties have been taken away [metaphysical thought], yet can still leave it some hope. (82)

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