

SUPERSESSION OR TRANSLATION OF THE SACRED? JÜRGEN HABERMAS'S TURN TO A "POST-SECULAR SOCIETY"

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Abstract. In this article I place Jürgen Habermas's recent turn to a "post-secular society" in the context of his previous defence of a "postmetaphysical" view of modernity. My argument is that the concept of "postsecular" introduces significant normative tensions for the formal and pragmatic view of reason defended by Habermas in previous works. In particular, the turn to "a post-secular society" threatens the evolutionary narrative that Habermas (following Weber and Hegel) espoused in his major works, according to which modern "communicative" reason dialectically supersedes religion. If this narrative is undermined, I argue, the claim to universality of "communicative" reason is also undermined. Thus, the benefits Habermas seeks to obtain from the recent postsecular project are offset by a destabilization of tenets central to a "postmetaphysical" view of modernity.

I. INTRODUCTION

The article discusses the reflections on faith, reason and secularism that Jürgen Habermas has put forth in his more recent writings, seeking to evaluate them in light of some important theses from previous work.¹ Habermas's recent writings represent a shift away from the narrative of *sublation* of the sacred that dominated all his mature works, from *The Theory of Communicative Action* (vol.1 1981/ vol. 2 1987), to *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1987), to *Postmetaphysical Thinking* (1992) and *Between Facts and Norms* (1996). Wedded to an evolutionary perspective of society, this narrative presented modern secular ("communicative") reason as having successfully superseded religion through a "linguistification of the sacred". Habermas also framed this supersessionist narrative as a transition from metaphysics to "postmetaphysical thinking", a transition to which, as he argues, there is no viable alternative today.

In more recent essays, however, Habermas repositions himself. He now adopts a more cautious position, what I call a position of "containment" of the sacred. In broad lines, this position holds that secular reason must keep religion at a certain distance, while simultaneously being willing to learn from it. No longer cast in the role of a precursor of "communicative reason" (i.e. a prior stage of social evolution that has been overcome by modernity), religion is now portrayed as a domain of meaning independent of secular (communicative) reason, and as a sovereign "intellectual formation" separated from reason by strict borders. The divide between faith and reason cannot be bridged, Habermas claims, as faith contains a core which is opaque to reason. Yet faith and reason cannot be entirely separated either, as the two share a common genealogy. In a "post-secular" society this common heritage could be tapped into, in order to re-open the dialogue between faith and reason.

Jürgen Habermas's recent arguments have touched a raw nerve in our culture, it seems, generating considerable interest in many different scholarly circles, followed by a rapidly swelling secondary literature.

¹ I presented the main argument of this article on various occasions, and I wish to thank here the following people for their comments and support: Simone Chambers, Ronald Beiner, John Harman, David Ingram, Amy Linch, Lucas Swaine, Melissa Williams, Lambert Zuidervart.

In what follows I propose to move the discussion in a direction less explored in this literature.

I want to place Habermas's recent concept of "postsecular" in the wider context of the "postmetaphysical" thrust of his philosophical project. I argue that Habermas's shift from a position of "linguistification of the sacred" to that of translation of the sacred generates serious normative problems for the procedural, universal and pragmatic view of reason at the core of his project and, consequently, for the entire normative framework of liberal democracy he erected on this view. I contend that whatever the benefits Habermas seeks to obtain from the project of "salvaging" translation of religion, these are offset by some significant normative tensions that this recent project generates for tenets central to "postmetaphysical thinking". In short, I argue that the turn to a "post-secular society" bears implications that threaten to destabilize Habermas's commitment to a "postmetaphysical" definition of modernity.

The article has two parts. In the first part, I outline the broad contours of Habermas's evolutionary view of modernity presented in his major works under the rubric "postmetaphysical thinking", and I retrieve the Weberian and the Hegelian dimensions of this view (sections II and III). Against this background, in the second part, I discuss the concept of "post-secular society" at the heart of his recent writings (section IV), and concentrate on the normative tensions the new conceptual alliance between the "postmetaphysical" and the "postsecular" generates for Habermas's thought (section V).

II. HABERMAS'S EVOLUTIONARY VIEW OF MODERNITY. THE WEBERIAN DIMENSION.

"Postmetaphysical thinking" is an expression used by Habermas as a generic description of his philosophical project.² Throughout his writings this expression is found frequently paired with the claim that the "postmetaphysical" mode of thinking has no viable philosophical alternative today. In this section I unpack this claim with a view of bringing into foreground the evolutionary perspective on modern society that underwrites the concept of "postmetaphysical".

Although a complex and multifaceted program, having wide philosophical ramifications, "postmetaphysical thinking" also has an inner core. The heartbeat of the concept of "postmetaphysical" is constituted by the thesis that modern secular reason "sublates" religion through a "linguistification of the sacred". This thesis directly informs Habermas's theory of rationality, as well as his theory of law and democracy and played a major role in his works of the 1980s. To hermeneutically unlock the concept of "postmetaphysical", therefore it is necessary to take a close look at this important thesis.

The term "sublation" (*Aufhebung*) is Hegelian and carries the specific meaning of simultaneous cancelation and preservation. Habermas's use of the term would suggest, at least *prima facie*, that "postmetaphysical thinking" is to be squarely placed within a Hegelian evolutionary perspective on modern society. Although not entirely wrong, this interpretation is ultimately misleading, as Habermas's concept of "postmetaphysical" resists a straightforward Hegelian reading. Hegel's philosophy of history is built on important metaphysical concepts (like *Weltgeist*, for instance), which remain deeply entrenched in his view of modernity. Habermas cannot take over these concepts, as they would saddle and eventually sink the idea of a "postmetaphysical" thought; at the same time, it is difficult to see how one can adopt a Hegelian evolutionary perspective without buying into some of these metaphysical assumptions. Neither a Marxist perspective would do justice, properly speaking, to Habermas's "postmetaphysical thinking". Marx's philosophical appropriation of Hegel's dialectics remains fully caught in (a materialist) metaphysics, which explains why Habermas makes serious efforts to distance himself from these two thinkers (Hegel and Marx), whose metaphysical assumptions (most visible in what Habermas calls their "philosophy of the subject") he indicts as potentially fatal to a free and emancipated society.

How are we then to interpret the supersessionist bent Habermas gives to the concept of "postmetaphysical thinking"? What is cancelled and what preserved in the modern linguistification of the sacred?

² A succinct treatment can also be found in Melissa Yates, "Postmetaphysical Thinking", in *Jürgen Habermas: Key concepts*, ed. Barbara Fultner (Acumen, 2011).

To answer these questions, we have to go back to Habermas's philosophical roots in the early Frankfurt School thinkers. These thinkers were forced to wrestle with a disturbing fact. All across Eastern Europe (and beyond), the Leninist-Marxist revolutions of the early 20th century invariably and implacably morphed themselves into a bureaucratic totalitarian nightmare and oppressive politics. Despairing of dialectics' healing force, and deeply distrustful of Enlightenment's emancipatory promises, these thinkers turned to Max Weber's theory of rationality to explain a troubled modern condition. Habermas takes heed of this orientation, which makes Weber, rather than Hegel or Marx, his primary source for interpreting social change.³ The Hegelian-Marxist perspective however is not fully abandoned, and Habermas's stance on modernity can be described as a marriage of Weber's empirical social analyses and Hegel's speculative view of history, whose child is a new theory of rationality with universal ambit. Nowhere is this more evident than in Habermas's interpretation of religion.

I now briefly discuss Weber's theory of rationalization, then explain how Habermas uses this theory as a stepping stone for drawing a universalist view of modern reason.

Weber famously argued that modernization is, in its essence, a process of *rationalization* of society. Rationalization has cultural and social aspects. Culturally, rationalization is co-extensive with a process of "disenchantment" of the world and leads to a differentiation of three "cultural spheres" which develop independently, each following its own "inner logic": the sphere of science, that of morality and, finally, that of arts and aesthetic criticism.⁴ Socially, rationalization leads to the differentiation of highly efficient forms of rational domination which are best exemplified by state bureaucracy and the capitalist corporation. Weber thought (and it is this thought that highly resonated with Horkheimer and Adorno and other Frankfurt thinkers) that rationalization as differentiation would eventually lead to nihilism (a generalized lack of meaning) and to a social life highly inimical to individual spontaneity and human flourishing (an oppressive "iron cage").

The moral sphere of modernity, in particular, has been the object of Weber's analysis, and illustrates well the problem of lack of meaning. In modernity, the two cultural spheres of natural sciences and hedonistic art directly collide with the third cultural sphere, the moral sphere, which, under this increasingly powerful twin pressure, would eventually crumble into a perpetual struggle between different ultimate principles, values, ideas. These moral principles no longer commend universal allegiance, a situation that Weber famously described in terms of a neo-pagan struggle between different "gods" and "demons". To simplify what is otherwise a complex and fascinating analysis, Weber thought that disenchantment (secularization) of culture would lead to moral fragmentation, to a proliferation of values embedded in incommensurable frameworks of interpretation which were locked in a perpetual competition for modern citizens' allegiance. In the absence of an overarching normative principle (like in pre-modern metaphysics), it becomes impossible for modern individuals to rationally adjudicate between these different, and often incompatible, values. Yet modern citizens, like any of their counterparts in other times, must act and hence at the very core of a highly rationalized (i.e. disenchanted) society, there opens up a moment of decision that has no further rational ground, a nihilistic moment, which reveals the normative poverty of modernity and the widespread lack of meaning in the life of modern citizens.

In short, if I am permitted to use in this context the words of a poet, in a modern disenchanted world the moral "centre cannot hold" anymore.⁵ This could have well been the motto of Weber's overall view.

3 Weber's theory of modernization, Habermas writes, "still holds out the best prospect of explaining the social pathologies that appeared in the wake of capitalist modernization" (Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action II* (Heinemann, 1987), 303). Although Habermas's interpretation of modernity is fed by multiple intellectual sources (Durkheim, Mead, Parsons, Luhmann, and others), here I focus only on Habermas's appropriation of Weber, as this is most relevant to my concern in this article.

4 These three "spheres" loosely correspond to Kant's differentiation of reason in three distinct moments, cognitive, moral and aesthetic.

5 I use here William Butler Yeats' words from his poem *The Second Coming*. The relevant stanza reads like this: "Turning and turning in the widening gyre/ The falcon cannot hear the falconer;/ Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;/ Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,/ The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere/ The ceremony of innocence is drowned;/ The best

For Habermas, however, *the centre does hold* and he introduces a new theory of rationality in order to prove it. His “communicative” view of reason safeguards moral universalism and makes modern rationalization appear less self-destructive. Habermas is able to inject a positive meaning into the process of rationalization because, grafted on what is generally a Weberian framework of analysis, he adds a (quasi) Hegelian view of history, that centres on *Aufhebung* of religion as a “learning” process. Let’s see how this is supposed to work.

Key to understand Habermas’s argument is to closely trace how “validity” is conceptualized. Habermas introduces the notion of “validity claim”.⁶ He begins with the idea that in any act of communication (with the purpose of reaching common understanding about something in the world) interlocutors raise validity claims. When someone initiates a speech act, he/she also implicitly makes some claims: that what he/she says is true, that he/she is normatively entitled to say that what he/she says, and finally that he/she is sincere in what he says. Three “validity claims”, therefore, a claim to “truth”, a claim to “rightness” and a claim to “truthfulness”, are attached to any speech act (that seeks understanding), forming what Habermas calls the “illocutionary” part of the speech act. This illocutionary part contains a promise (or a warrant) that the initiator of a speech act could bring *reasons*, if challenged, in support of his/her claims. There is a “bonding and binding” connection that, through this warrant, establishes itself in communication, tying all participants together in a process of mutual redeeming of validity claims.⁷

The three “validity claims” Habermas identifies in his program of “formal pragmatics” directly correspond to the three “cultural spheres” from Weber’s narrative. Thus, the modern sphere of science thematizes the validity claim to truth, while the distinct moral-legal sphere thematizes the validity claim to rightness; finally, the sphere of arts and ethical conceptions of good life thematizes the validity claim to truthfulness. This thematization takes place in “rational discourse”, a process of argumentation whereby interlocutors exchange reasons for and against a position. In this process, participants unavoidably make some pragmatic presuppositions, like equality of rights, inclusion, publicity, and lack of deception and of coercion - Habermas calls them “rules of reason”.⁸

In what follows I am concerned less with the details of this analysis and more with pinning down the role “formal pragmatics” plays in Habermas’s evolutionary theory of society.

Two novel conceptual tools are now available for Habermas: the concept of “validity claim” and particularly the idea of pairing the three “validity claims” of the “formal pragmatics” with the three “cultural spheres” of Weber’s narrative of rationalization. With these tools in his hands, Habermas sets out to achieve two difficult tasks at one stroke: repair Weber’s theory of modernization and settle the problem of the universality of modern reason.

It is worthwhile noting that Weber left this problem undecided: while he contended that rationalization should be seen as a *world-wide* process (that is most advanced in the Western World), he was nonetheless reluctant to ascribe a universal dimension to the Western type of modernization: he held that this process appears to be universal from our (Western) point of view.⁹

lack all conviction, while the worst/ Are full of passionate intensity.” See William B. Yeats, *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, revised second edition, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), 187.

6 For a good discussion of the concept of “validity claim” see Joseph Heath, “What Is a Validity Claim”, *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 24, no. 4 (1998).

7 There are two stages of this process “communicative action” and “rational discourse”. The latter is the more demanding, reflective version of the first.

8 In addition to the Weberian and Hegelian-Marxist dimensions already mentioned, “formal pragmatics” introduces a (quasi) Kantian dimension to Habermas’s thought. The pragmatic presuppositions play a *constitutive* role, in the Kantian sense of being “conditions of possibility” of argumentation. However, these presuppositions also contain certain “idealizations” that have “normative content”; they overshoot or transcend the local context, by pointing toward an “ideally expanded audience” (Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms* (MIT Press, 1996), 322), or an ideal communication community. A normative projection, a binding anticipation, is present in them, and this projection plays a *regulative* role for argumentation. Although broadly Kantian in inspiration, Habermas’s “formal pragmatics” collapses the constitutive and regulative roles played by the forms of intuition and the ideas of reason that Kant kept distinct.

9 The relevant passage reads as follows: “A product of modern European civilization, studying any problem of universal history, is bound to ask himself to what combination of circumstances the fact should be attributed that in Western civilization,

Habermas finds this stance ambiguous and not very convincing. He contends (correctly, I would say) that Weber's analysis of modernity is *only* compatible with a universalist reading of the process of rationalization. Weber might have failed to fully embrace the universalist implications of his own theory because, suggests Habermas, he (unjustifiably) narrowed the focus of his analysis of modernity to just one of the three "cultural spheres" mentioned above, the sphere of morality. It is in this sphere that Weber famously identified the ethical ideas of some Protestant communities as powerful motivators for the emergence of capitalism. But it would be hard to deny, Habermas points out, that the other two cultural spheres opened up at the threshold of modernity (the emergence of modern science and modern art) are rather neglected by Weber's analysis of modernity. To use Habermas's own terminology, Weber focused on *just one* of the three "validity claims" differentiated by the modern rationalization (disenchantment) of culture. The theory can be repaired and hence produce a far richer yield, Habermas argues, if its "systematic thrust" was rescued (all three validity claims were attended to).

Expanding the focus of analysis across the entire validity range (science, morality and arts) brings important theoretical benefits for Habermas.¹⁰ The chief one in the context of my discussion here is that the process of modernization can be cast in a more irenic light: the world-wide process of disenchantment of the world (as analyzed by Weber) becomes in Habermas a three-stage "learning process".

This idea ushers in the Hegelian dimension of Habermas's view of modernity and my next section concentrates on it.

III. HABERMAS'S EVOLUTIONARY VIEW OF MODERNITY. THE HEGELIAN DIMENSION.

According to Habermas, the history of humankind can be seen as developing in three stages. The first stage is represented by mythological societies. Validity, at this stage, is not yet distinguished from facticity or, to put it differently, norms are not distinct from facts. Being rather inchoate, the concept of validity remains undifferentiated from the flow of every-day events. Myths do have a cognitive function (they provide explanations of the world), but this is rudimentary.

The second stage is represented by traditional societies. Historically, this stage has been achieved in what Habermas (borrowing from Karl Jaspers) calls the Axial Age.¹¹ Norms are now differentiated from facts, and validity from facticity. For instance, Greek metaphysical systems postulated some ultimate principles as origin and substrate of everyday events. Hence, essence becomes distinct from mere appearance. This distinction has important implications for the social sphere. Norms can be derived from the first principle and thus presented as universal, their validity being grounded in the unconditioned, transcendent and universal nature of the first principle.

The step from myth to logos enables more rational explanations of the world and it therefore represents an important *learning* step: reasons for why a particular state of affairs is (morally) "wrong" can now be adduced, suffering and evil find a rational explanation, and a higher meaning for tragic events in

and in Western civilization only, cultural phenomena have appeared which (*as we like to think*) lie in a line of development having *universal* significance and value." Max Weber, *Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Routledge, 1992), xxviii, my emphasis.

¹⁰ Once the scope of analysis is extended in this way, Weber's view lessens its dark, pessimistic, message. Nihilism and oppression are no longer seen as inscribed in the genetic code of modernity, as Weber thought. These pathological aspects are not generated by the process of rationalization/differentiation of modern culture *per se*. Rather, according to Habermas, they are "side effects" of an *unbalanced* rationalization of culture and society. Habermas calls this skewed, one-sided, rationalization, the "colonization of the lifeworld" by "the system" (where "system" stands for what Weber identified as the most efficient forms of social rationalization, the capitalist corporation and the state bureaucracy). The implication of this view is positive: decolonization is possible and depends on setting rationalization of society on more balanced tracks (and not by eliminating capitalism, as Marx thought). The scientific-technological rational discourse, which plays a hegemonic role in contemporary society, must be balanced by the other two moral-practical and aesthetic-ethical discourses.

¹¹ Between 800 BC and 200 AD. This is the historical epoch when Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Judaism and Greek metaphysics emerged.

human life can be rationally posited.¹² “Might” can be separated from “right” and theories of justice can be articulated.

The Axial Age is the age of metaphysics and of the great monotheistic religions. An impartial, “God’s eye perspective”, is differentiated from the flow of everyday events and this, as Habermas stresses, constitutes a tremendously important achievement (a cognitive step forward): it allows us to separate “validity from genesis, truth from health or soundness, guilt from causality, law from violence, and so forth”.¹³

However, the advent of modernity brings about another transition, this time from logos to “post-metaphysical thinking”. Again, the relevant change regards the concept of validity. The global learning process set off in the metaphysical age continues with another “learning” step: the concept of validity is now untied from the concept of transcendence (from-without-our-world) and freed from whatever metaphysical ballast was attached to it (like abstract/ideal first principle, the absolute, or creator God).¹⁴ This metaphysical background, although it enabled cognitively more complex explanations of the world when compared to mythical thought, is now exposed as illusory¹⁵ and therefore limiting: the metaphysical age entangled scientific claims with moral and ethical claims, and anchored all of them in a first principle/transcendent divinity, which impairs knowledge.

Only when normative validity is split (mainly with Kant, but as a result of a process set off by the nominalist revolution in the 14th and 15th centuries) into the three distinct claims of truth, rightness and truthfulness, and then severed from the metaphysical/religious background that previously sustained it, this tripartite differentiation releases a rational potential that could establish a truly rational, free and emancipated society.

Important for my purpose is to note here is that the step from metaphysical to “postmetaphysical” enables a form of rationality that supersedes the rationality of the metaphysical/religious age (reason inscribed in the structures of the world/nature/cosmos - logocentric reason). “Communicative rationality” is no longer a substantive reason, it is a procedural view of reason that plays itself out in the argumentative redeeming of validity claims.

At this point I have all the necessary means to clarify the way in which Habermas uses the Hegelian term *Aufhebung* (which was the issue with which I began my discussion) and determine what is cancelled and what preserved from metaphysical/religious thought.

The doctrinal content or the (cognitive) substance of metaphysical systems/positive religion is fed into the process of rational argumentation alongside the three distinct dimensions of validity, and thus critically dissolved in the acid of the specialized rational discourses of science, morality and ethic/aesthetic, where only the “uncoercing force” of the better argument counts. Truth, under “postmetaphysical” conditions, is a “validity claim” redeemed in fallible manner on the basis of empirical evidence and rational argumentation. For Habermas, as for the whole positivist tradition, knowledge of reality (of facts or states of affairs) is public, testable and fallible. Scientific communities of researchers are its proper home.

In the moral sphere, the content of religious doctrines migrates without rest in “discourse ethics”, a rational discourse that tests moral principles for their generalizability/universality and thus replaces “the authority of the sacred”.¹⁶ For Habermas (as for the entire Kantian tradition) morality revolves around what is “right” (i.e. what is “equally good for all”), distinct from what is “good” (conceptions of the good or exemplary life). The latter belong to the third sphere, the sphere of ethics.

12 To take an example: in the story of Job, the validity of Job’s just life is not undermined by the tragic losses he suffers; he remains a just person in the eyes of God, even if the events of his life would suggest something else and all his friends unite in condemning him. Health is no longer coterminous with gods’ favour (unlike in mythological societies). A higher viewpoint is now available from where events can be judged in their true light, or in their essence, we could say.

13 Jürgen Habermas, *Religion and Rationality* (Polity Press, 2002), 158.

14 This rendition of modernity fits quite well, in my view, what Charles Taylor calls a “subtraction story” of modernity.

15 See, for instance, the following passage: “... chances are fading that we can bring together again, in a posttraditional everyday practice, those moments that, in traditional forms of life, once composed a unity — a diffuse one surely, and one whose religious and metaphysical interpretations were certainly *illusory*” (Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action II*, 330, my emphasis).

16 “Only a morality, set communicatively aflow and developed into a discourse ethics can replace the authority of the sacred” (Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action II*, 92).

It is in this sphere that religious contents (doctrines) may find quarter in modernity, but devoid of their aspiration to universality. They are accepted only in their ethical aspects, as relevant for this or for that community of believers. Religious doctrines may retain some *limited* relevance in the ethical sphere, due to insights about what constitutes a good or exemplary way of life for this or that community (but not universally). The third sphere thematizes the claim to truthfulness and, in this sense, religion becomes a self-clarification discourse, tied to the identity and authenticity of a community. In other words, insofar as it still survives in modernity, religion is just another type of ethical diversity, no different from any other ethical doctrine (let's say Aristotelian or utilitarian). There is nothing special about religion (or the sacred) anymore.

To sum up, the *content* of religion/metaphysics is dissolved and critically assimilated in the three rational discourses regulated by “communicative” reason.

However, modern reason preserves the formal features first made possible by metaphysics. Two great accomplishments distinguished metaphysics from mythology: the impartial (God's eye) perspective and the concept of “unconditionality”. Impartiality and unconditionality ground the concept of validity, as well as reason's universality. Absent these two features, validity collapses into facticity and reason into power; this holds true for the metaphysical age no less than for the “postmetaphysical” age. Thus, “communicative” reason keeps these two important attributes of validity, while re-constituting them in a “postmetaphysical” manner.¹⁷

Impartiality is now distilled out of the pragmatic presuppositions of argumentation and of the rules of reasons identified by “formal pragmatics”.¹⁸ I cannot discuss further this point here, as the other concept, that of unconditionality, is more relevant for my present discussion. This concept takes a post-metaphysical meaning as well. As Habermas argues, although validity claims are held in a fallible manner, they are raised here and now, in a particular context, they cannot be reduced to this context, however. Although always operative within culture, history and nature, communicative reason retains a moment of unconditionality, which enables it to “burst open” any local boundaries.¹⁹ The validity claims implicitly raised in argumentation *point beyond* cultural and historical contexts towards “an ideal speech situation”, where the rational redemption of these claims would be complete and universal agreement would be achieved. In other words, there is a “transcendence-from-within” our linguistically constituted world that is built into the process of rational argumentation and that enables modern reason to generate normativity out of its own resources (independent of metaphysical/religious traditions).²⁰

17 In contrast with Kant's deontological view of reason, “communicative reason” is no longer a “pure” reason. It is a “de-transcendentalized” reason, situated in language, culture and history. Although impure, “communicative reason” preserves however the deontological outlook of Kant's view. The unconditionality of moral norms is no longer grounded in the timeless structures of a sovereign “subject”, but in the pragmatic presuppositions speakers unavoidably make when they seek to reach understanding.

18 Rational argumentation is governed by the following principle of discourse (D): only those norms are valid that could meet with the assent of all affected by them. Moral discourse, in particular, is governed by the following universalization principle (U): “All affected can accept the consequences and the side effects its *general* observance can be anticipated to have for the satisfaction of everyone's interests (and these consequences are preferred to those of known alternative possibilities for regulation)” (Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (MIT Press, 1990), 58). (U) embodies the impartial “moral point of view” from which all moral disagreements can be rationally adjudicated.

19 Take the validity claim to truth. As Habermas argues, it is a *pragmatic* feature of how we use language (speech) that when we hold something to be true we do not mean it to be true only for us (for our community, or our cultural, historical, linguistic context). We claim it to be true across all contexts (unconditionally true, that is). However, we are aware, of course, that further arguments, new scientific findings or technological developments, may very well prove our initial claim to be false. Thus, all three validity claims discussed are held in a fallible manner. According to Habermas, the fallible manner in which speakers hold the three validity claims *does not* undermine the unconditional character of these claims. It is this peculiar coupling of unconditionality and fallibilism that is the distinctive mark of Habermas philosophical project. The question whether this combination is really a viable (or even coherent) philosophical project remains, in my view, one of the most important challenges to Habermas's theory of validity claims and, consequently, to his thesis of “linguistification of the sacred”.

20 “Communicative” reason achieves thus the normative boot-strapping of modernity. In PDM, Habermas places this view of reason in a line that continues “the dialectic of Enlightenment” set in motion by Kant, Hegel and Marx, who all aimed to offer a rational equivalent to - and thus replace - religion (see, for instance, Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of*

I close this part of my article with a brief summary of the main points discussed so far.

In Habermas, the traditional concept of transcendence (from without our world) is replaced by the “transcendence-from-within” of the process of moral argumentation regulated by U, while the unconditionality once attached to some ontological principles (or divine revelation) is transferred over to the unconditionality of validity claims raised in everyday communication. As Habermas puts it, the sacred is linguistified and made into a mundane event, by which he means that the binding/bonding force of validity claims *replaces* the integrative force of religion.²¹

Because “postmetaphysical” reason does not jettison impartiality and unconditional validity, reason’s unity, according to Habermas, is not threatened by modern secularization *cum* differentiation, as Weber thought. The erosion of the religious foundations in the process of disenchantment of the world does not have to lead to fragmentation of reason and conflict between the three cultural spheres of modernity. No longer guaranteed by a metaphysical/religious principle, the unity of reason resides simply in the procedural conditions of argumentation: *the same procedures* regulate the thematization of validity claims across the fragmented spheres of modernity.²²

Habermas is able to repair Weber’s theory and inject a positive meaning into the process of rationalization of modern society, because he reads into this process a (quasi) Hegelian supersessionist perspective of “learning”, in which the concept of “validity claim” does the heavy lifting. He is thus able to flatly deny that disenchantment of the world bogs modernity down in a polytheistic quagmire. Disenchantment is not at all a loss to be bewailed; if anything, the differentiation of science from morality and art is a gain to be celebrated, as it unfetters “communicative” rationality from crippling metaphysical assumptions and thereby brings about an undeniable *increase* in rationality.

The important conclusion I would like to draw from my analysis is that the universality of communicative reason (in its procedural unity across the spectrum of three validity claims) cannot be upheld unless the learning process just mentioned is presupposed. The universality of the (D)/(U) principle is premised on this narrative of replacement: one cannot claim universality for “discourse ethics” if one does not also claim that religion has been already replaced/superseded by “communicative reason”. “Communicative reason” develops its full potential *only when* the three aspects of validity (truth, rightness and truthfulness) are splintered in distinct “validity claims”, removed from their pre-modern anchoring in a transcendent God, and gradually institutionalized in three distinct cultural spheres of science, moral-legal discourse and ethical/aesthetic discourse.

The universality of Habermas’s view of reason is inextricably linked to and essentially depends on this evolutionary narrative. “No universality of reason without *Aufhebung* (supersession) of religion”, this could well summarize my discussion in this section.

Modernity (MIT Press, 1987), 84). Kant, Hegel and Marx failed to achieve this task, due to faulty philosophical premises (what Habermas calls “philosophy of the subject”). By taking a turn to pragmatism and analytic philosophy, Habermas presents his “postmetaphysical thinking” as succeeding where all other modern philosophers failed.

21 See, for instance: 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, *The Theory of Communicative Action II*, 77).

22 The argumentative redemption of the claim to “truth” in the scientific sphere is structurally similar to the argumentative redemption of the validity claim to “rightness” in the moral-practical sphere, and similar to the argumentative redemption of the claim to “truthfulness” in the ethic/aesthetic sphere. It is worthwhile noting though that the third sphere poses problems for Habermas’s argument. Moral discourse is “analogous” to scientific discourse, according to Habermas, while the third discourse does not fit neatly this tripartite architectonic. Insofar as the claim to truthfulness pertains to the inner world of the speaker “as the totality of the experiences of the speaker to which he has privileged access” (Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action I*, 309), the analogy with the other two claims is somehow wobbly. I thank here the anonymous reviewer of EJPR for raising this point, which deserves a more detailed discussion than I could possibly make here. Part of the problem, it seems to me, is that in the third sphere Habermas lumps together aesthetic conceptions, ethical doctrines of “good life” and speaker’s subjective experiences. In any case, Habermas saw religion’s survival into modernity as relevant under its ethical aspects. Only with his recent writings, religion becomes a “special case” of ethical diversity.

IV. THE RETURN OF THE SACRED. RECALIBRATING THE RELATION BETWEEN FAITH AND REASON IN A "POST-SECULAR SOCIETY".

Habermas's latter writings, after the "Faith and Knowledge" speech delivered in Frankfurt's main cathedral, closely after the terrorist attacks from 9/11/2001, alter quite significantly the picture of "postmetaphysical modernity" I reconstituted above. As Habermas now argues, reason and faith must be seen as two independent domains of meaning which are separated by strict borders. The philosophical perspectives centered on faith and reason cannot be bridged. Despite the presence of these borders, however, faith and reason have a "common genealogy"; hence, they must be seen as complementary rather than opposed "intellectual formations". The relationship between these two formations must be one of dialogue and reciprocal learning in a "post-secular" society, a learning process which is guided by a clear *primacy* of "communicative reason" vis-à-vis religion and by a project of "salvaging" *translation*.

I argue that this new picture, dominated by the idea of clear borders between faith and reason, delivers a fatal blow to the supersessionist view previously endorsed by Habermas. The idea of strict borders implies quite clearly that "communicative reason" *will never be able* to replace religion. This implication raises, in my view, serious normative challenges to the "postmetaphysical" project of modernity.

To bring these tensions fully into light, a good start is to look at the points of disjuncture between the old and the new picture. One important such point regards the status of the religious/metaphysical traditions surviving into modernity.

In the old picture, which assumed an accomplished supersession of religion, religious traditions must be seen as remnants of a by-gone era whose persistence into the "postmetaphysical" stage is barren of normative implications. The empirical presence of these traditions in contemporary societies was seen a *transitory* fact, awaiting their full demise under the sun of "communicative reason", and raised no cognitive challenge to Habermas's "postmetaphysical" view of modernity. To better understand this point, I would like to take the risk of giving it some historical sense. What Habermas had in mind, it seems, was a little bit like the situation towards the end of the Roman empire, when rulers still clung to a mythological worldview although Christianity has already taken over as source of normative legitimacy. Although pagan ideas and values might have still floated around, they have already been superseded as source of normative legitimacy by a global learning process that has moved forward. Something similar must be assumed for the transition from (pre-modern) metaphysical age into modernity: metaphysical ideas might still be with us for a while, however they have already lost power to legitimize normative behaviour. As these transformations are of *longue durée*, the continuing presence of these ideas in a "postmetaphysical" age is not a source of concern. Habermas shared, like so many social theorists of the second half of the 20th century, the main expectation of the so-called "secularization theory", that religion will one day wither away.

The first crack in this supersessionist picture appears a few years after the publication of the massive *Theory of Communicative Action*. Habermas lessens a bit the grip of the supersessionist interpretation and partially retreats from the view that religion is an illusory view of the world. *TCA* gave religion a "one-sided, functionalist description", he accepts.²³ He also raises some doubts about the supersessionist narrative he espoused so far: *TCA* suggested too quickly an affirmative answer to the question whether discourse ethics can inherit the mantle of religion. "...It could turn out", Habermas writes, "that monotheistic traditions have at their disposal a language whose semantic potential is not yet exhausted". Therefore, whether religious truths migrate without remainder in "discourse ethics" should be seen rather as

23 The world-religions in traditional societies, Habermas now accepts, "do *not* function *exclusively* as a legitimation of governmental authority". As he writes, quoting David Tracy, at their core they are often protest movements that "attempt to ground other ways for human beings to relate to one another and to reality as a whole" (Habermas, *Religion and Rationality*, 79).

an open question.²⁴ In *Postmetaphysical Thinking* (1992) Habermas coins the ambiguous phrase “abstemious coexistence” to describe the relationship between faith and reason.²⁵

These doubts, however, are not strong enough to put a serious dent into the supersessionist narrative, which continues to dominate Habermas’s thought in this period. He warns against attempts to return to a metaphysical unification of truth, morality and the good, which he regards as implausible. “Insights cannot be forgotten at will”, he remarks; the learning process leading to “postmetaphysical thinking” cannot be rolled back.²⁶ Frankly speaking, in the 1980s Habermas was concerned less about the challenge posed to “postmetaphysical thinking” by religious traditions, and more about the threats to this project coming from postmodernist quarters. It was Nietzsche, rather than Christ, that he worried about at the time. The complete rejection of metaphysics (rather than the survival of metaphysics) was the “regressive tendency”²⁷ he feared. Such rejection would be equivalent to a return to a mythological stance, which would collapse validity into facticity and reason into power. Under modern conditions, this is highly dangerous, to say the least.

This picture changes only after 2001. In his writings after this year, Habermas signals quite clearly that the empirical persistence of religion in contemporary society must be interpreted in a different key. Religious traditions, he now writes, ought not to be seen as “archaic relics of premodern societies persisting into the present”.²⁸ The presence of religion in modernity no longer reflects a temporary circumstance that one day will vanish under pressure from the structural differentiation of modernity. A “post-secular society”, he writes, must *adapt* “to the fact that religious communities continue to exist in a context of ongoing secularization”.²⁹

As Habermas now concedes, the empirical persistence of religion raises a “cognitive challenge” to philosophy.³⁰

This point is important. What it really says is that the empirical persistence of religion in late modernity carries normative import and demands therefore some sort of theoretical self-correction. One obvious way to go about this, is to try to disassociate the “postmetaphysical” framework of modernity from the problematic assumptions of the secularization theory. And indeed, Habermas abandons now the thesis that “communicative reason” is able to supersede religion, replacing this thesis with the idea of a common genealogy between reason and faith and with a project of “salvaging” translation of religion. Accordingly, the thesis of linguistification of the sacred is reformulated as translation of the sacred: “For philosophy, ‘linguistification’ can only mean discovering the still vital semantic potentials in religious traditions and translating them into a general language that is accessible beyond the boundaries of particular religious communities - and thereby introducing them into the discursive play of public reasons”.³¹

24 “Whether then from religious truths, after the religious world views have collapsed, nothing more and nothing other than the secular principles of a universalistic ethics of responsibility can be salvaged, and this means: can be accepted for good reasons, on the basis of insight” - this is an open question (Habermas, *Religion and Rationality*, 79).

25 “Communicative reason does not make its appearance in an aestheticized theory as the colorless negative of a religion that provides consolation. It neither announces the absence of consolation in a world forsaken by God, nor does it take it upon itself to provide any consolation. It does without exclusivity as well. As long as no better words for what religion can say are found in the medium of rational discourse, it will even coexist abstemiously with the former, neither supporting it nor combating it” (Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking* (MIT Press, 1992), 145). Observe, however, that this position of “abstemious” coexistence does not imply a serious reconsideration of the supersessionist view of modernity, because it expresses just a temporary inability: for *as long as* no better words can be found for what religion has to say, is the later accepted in this non-combat relation. It may very well happen that right words will be found one day. The same idea in Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, 51.

26 Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 84.

27 Habermas, *Religion and Rationality*, 159.

28 Jürgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion* (MIT Press, 2008), 138.

29 Jürgen Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature* (Polity Press, 2003), 104.

30 Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking II* (Polity Press, 2017), 143. Religion is no longer seen exclusively as part of the ethical domain (the third sphere) of modernity. Religion is now a “special case” of ethical diversity. Rainer Forst debates this point.

31 Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking II*, xiv.

V. "POSTMETAPHYSICAL" OR "POSTSECULAR" MODERNITY?

Unlike the thesis of "linguistification" of the sacred, the project of translation of the sacred no longer aims to replace religion. "Postmetaphysical thinking", seen now as translation of the sacred, fosters a "non-destructive" secularization. Translation is the mode of non-destructive secularization, writes Habermas. Philosophy must renounce the rationalist presumption that reason can determine what is true and false in religion. Kant, Hegel, Feuerbach, Marx, all shared this presumption and tried to force the demise of religion (while rescuing its rational kernel). Habermas's "postmetaphysical thinking" is no longer animated by such a "take-over" intention, and insists on the importance of keeping strict boundaries between religion and secular philosophy.³²

Moreover, there might be some important normative benefits secular reason could accrue from restructuring its relationship with faith in a post-secular direction. In fact, Habermas warns us, it would be wise for late modernity to re-open the dialogue between faith and reason.

This dialogue, he suggests, could *strengthen* secular ("communicative") reason which is now confronted with unprecedented challenges; among these challenges he includes the corrosive influence of a radical postmodern critique of modern rationalism with its "defeatist" undertones; he also includes the unbridled expansion of capitalism at a planetary level and the massive social and moral problems caused by it; finally, reason may need the resources of meaning preserved by religious communities in order to counteract some tendencies that stem from a blind faith in science (what he calls a *scient-istic* naturalism) and that carry disturbing moral implications (liberal eugenics³³ is an instance of such tendencies). In all these areas, by translating religious insights into its own language, "communicative reason" could regenerate itself.

Habermas's recent writings draw a picture that insists on borders between faith and reason, presents religion as a "complementary formation", and concedes an independent sovereignty for the religious realm, which is rooted in religious language's unmatched power to disclose meaning.

What this new picture suggests, it seems to me, is something like a new diplomacy. Habermas is telling a tale of two cities: reason and faith are like two cities facing one another, with their own borders, domains and citizens; these two cities have a common ancestry and have been at war with one another many times in their tumultuous history. Borrowing from Leo Strauss, we could call these two cities Athens and Jerusalem. However, for Habermas, the relation between Athens and Jerusalem is not fully dialogical and reciprocal. This relation is a project of "salvaging" translation: moral intuitions which still lay buried deeply within this heritage must be extracted from their dogmatic shell and translated into the universally accessible language of reason. What we have here is more like one city, Athens, scouting out the other city's territory for rational content that has to be "salvaged" and brought back where it *de facto* belongs: within the walls of the rational city. This looks more like incursions into foreign (rather hostile) territory rather than dialogue from equal positions. It looks as if secular reason seeks to plunder religion of much needed normative resources, only to contain it to a rather *subordinate* position. For there is a certain asymmetry in the relation between the two cities: secular reason holds priority over religion.

This is most visible in the constraining conditions religion must accept in a "post-secular society". As Habermas writes, religious consciousness must first "come to terms with the cognitive dissonance of encountering other denominations and religion. It must, second, adapt to the authority of the sciences which hold the societal monopoly of secular knowledge".³⁴ Finally, "religious citizens must develop an epistemic stance toward the *priority* that secular reasons also enjoy in the political arena. This can suc-

32 "Here I want to distinguish between *rationalist* approaches that (in the Hegelian tradition) *subsume* [*aufheben*] the substance of faith into the philosophical concept, from *dialogical* approaches that (following Karl Jaspers) adopt a critical attitude toward religious traditions while at the same time being open to *learning* from them" (Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 245).

33 Interventions at the level of human genome in order to improve its make-up.

34 Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*, 104.

ceed only to the extent that they embed the egalitarian individualism of modern natural law and *universalistic* morality in a convincing way in the context of their comprehensive doctrines”.³⁵

As this last passage suggests, Habermas seems to think that the idea of translation can do the same work for “postmetaphysical” modernity as the idea of replacement (*Aufhebung*) did, namely to sustain the universality of the moral theory; in addition, there is a bonus: more room for a legitimate presence of religion in modernity.

This point is not at all obvious, however. If my interpretation from the first part of this article is correct, Habermas’s theory of modernity posited a rather strong link between the idea of a dialectical supersession of religion and the claim to universality of communicative reason. The latter depended on the first. Therefore, a retreat from the supersessionist narrative is bound to have destabilizing effects on the theory of communicative reason.

I argue that the thesis of “priority” of reason over religion, unlike the thesis of “supersession” of religion by reason, is not strong enough to uphold modern reason’s universality anymore. Habermas’s shift from *Aufhebung* of religion to the idea of priority of reason over religion comes with a price: the price is weakening the claim to universality of communicative reason.

For how universal “communicative reason” (and the “ethics of discourse”) can be said to be, if religion is accepted as an “intellectual formation” *complementary* to communicative reason and separated by strict borders from the latter? If reason cannot determine anymore what is true and what is false in religion, it means that reason has reached some limits. Outside these limits there remains a domain (the religious domain) that is not simply irrational or devoid of meaning. Although religion becomes extra-territorial to reason, there are moral intuitions buried in its domain that await to be “salvaged” and put into the accessible language of reason.

I contend that once the *Aufhebung* narrative is dropped and replaced by the narrative of translation and “priority” of communicative reason over religion, the universality of communicative reason comes under threat. Reason’s universality depends now on the *success* of translation. The universality of “communicative reason” stands or falls with the project of “salvaging” translation: if translation can be said to be successful, that is if the moral intuitions buried in religious tradition/language are successfully extracted from the religious shell, then indeed “communicative” reason can save its claim to universality (even in the absence of an *Aufhebung* of religion). Translation becomes in Habermas’s recent writings the linchpin that holds together the old project of “postmetaphysical” modernity and the new project of “a post-secular society”.

However, how can Habermas be sure that “salvaging” translations will be found for every contentious issue that may occur in the public sphere of complex, plural societies? This question becomes especially troubling in light of Habermas’s own arguments regarding the existence of a core of religion which remains “opaque” to secular reason.³⁶

At a more general level, the problem is that criteria for what constitutes a “successful” translation of religion need to be specified. It is not very clear, after all, what exactly makes an act of philosophical translation successful or not.

This point, in my view, cuts deep, as one can question to what extent “postmetaphysical thinking” is a successful translation of the sacred, as Habermas seems to assume.

35 Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 137, my emphasis. See also: religious consciousness must “relate itself to competing religions in a reasonable way; leaves decisions concerning mundane knowledge to the institutionalized sciences, and makes the egalitarian premises of the morality of human rights compatible with its own articles of faith” (Jürgen Habermas, “The Political”: The Rational Meaning of a Questionable Inheritance of Political Theology”, in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (Columbia Univ. Press, 2011), 26–27).

36 See the following passage: “At best, philosophy circumscribes the opaque core of religious experience when it reflects on the specific character of religious language and on the intrinsic meaning of faith. This core remains profoundly alien to discursive thought as the hermetic core of aesthetic experience, which likewise can be at best circumscribed, but not penetrated, by philosophical reflection” (Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 143).

To give some flesh to the tentative argument I am pressing here, let's take, for instance, Heidegger's philosophy of Being, and in particular Heidegger's philosophy after the *Kehre*, which reads as a quasi-religious philosophy. Why would not this be a successful "salvaging" translation of the sacred? Or, to take another example, why can not Derrida's reflections on *archewriting* be seen as successful translation of the cognitive content of Judaism, for instance? Especially as Habermas himself points out that Derrida's philosophy nourishes itself from Jewish religious sources and agrees with the interpretation of Derrida's critique of metaphysics as a "program of scriptural scholarship".³⁷ Why is a program of scriptural scholarship (if this is indeed what Derrida is doing) less successful in translating religion into the language of reason than what Habermas means by "postmetaphysical thinking"?

Habermas remains critical of these philosophical translations. He implies that Heidegger's philosophy of Being "smuggles in", illegitimately as it were, religious motifs into the rational language of philosophy. However, how one is to decide what is an illegitimate and what is a legitimate transfer of meaning in translation remains unspecified. Against Heidegger, Habermas holds that reason should not "borrow the authority, and the air of a sacred that has been deprived of its core and become anonymous". He writes: "there is no insight to be gained by having the day of the Last Judgement evaporate to an undetermined event in the history of being".³⁸ One could totally agree with Habermas on this score (as I do), and yet feel tempted to turn this question to Habermas himself: have we really gained much by having the day of the Last Judgement evaporate to principles like (D)/(U) and a very elusive Ideal Speech Situation? One could argue that the "idealizing presuppositions" of communicative action also deprive the sacred of its core and make it anonymous. Particularly as Habermas considered these idealizations to have a clear and marked anti-metaphysical effect: "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"*", he once wrote.³⁹

VI. CONCLUSION

In his recent writings Habermas abandons the supersessionist narrative that played a central role in *The Theory of Communicative Action* and *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* and adopts a more modest philosophical position. From the idea that "postmetaphysical thinking" replaces religion, Habermas has retreated to a more restrained position that affirms the *priority* of "postmetaphysical thinking" over religion. This position accounts better for the empirical evidence of the persistence of religion in late modernity having also the advantage that it may bring modern reason some important normative benefits. Through translation, religious traditions could provide secular reason with normative insights in reason's fight against the damages inflicted to its normative claims by "scientistic" naturalism, on one side, and by the postmodern radical critique of reason, on the other.

I argue in this article that by coupling the two concepts, "post-metaphysical" and "post-secular", Habermas walks down a path fraught with serious philosophical tensions. Whatever advantages switching to a post-secular stance may create, they are offset by important normative tensions this stance creates for the "postmetaphysical" framework of modernity defended by Habermas over the years. My analysis suggests that the secularist (supersessionist) narrative was more central to this framework than Habermas seems to admit. Therefore, it is not possible to drop this narrative and move to a "post-secular" view without thereby weakening the very concept of "postmetaphysical".

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