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**The problem of faith and reason after Habermas and Derrida.**

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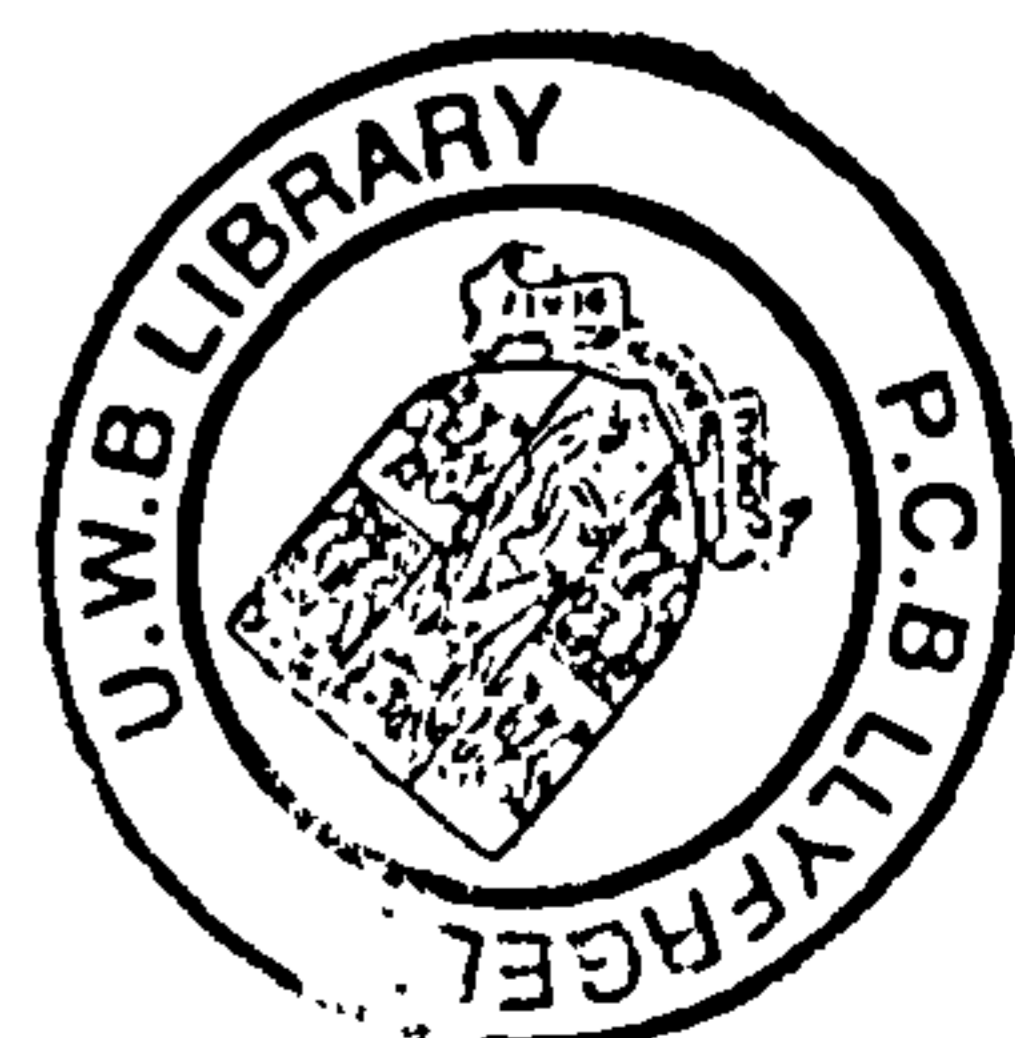
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The Problem of  
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after  
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The aim of the thesis is to seek a way out of the impasse to which Post-Modernism seems to lead theology. It begins by considering the most hopeful resolution of the problem of faith and reason offered in twentieth-century theology, viz. Tillich's reformulation, concluding that 'post-metaphysical' thinking has shown how we must go beyond this. The second chapter points a way forward by comparing and contrasting Tillich's and Habermas' interpretations of reason. Fully to appreciate what is being discussed demands the historical review of the discussion from Kant to contemporary thinkers which is provided by Chapter 3. This leads to the clarification of the problem as one of understanding how a reason claiming to be universal can be related to a faith tradition resting upon particular historical events.

The central section of the thesis is a detailed exposition of Habermas, of the criticism his theories have evoked and an indication of the way in which Derrida's thought can supply the useful correction which Habermas' work needs. Chapter 4 examines Habermas' theory of discourse ethics, noting the Kantian emphasis it reveals, and seeks to assess the contribution of his theories as a recognition of the importance of a communicative reason. Chapter 5 is a further examination of the criticisms made of Habermas – of his understanding of the Freudian idea of the unconscious in particular. Its conclusion is that Habermas' views need to be supplemented by Derrida's better grasp of the other of reason. Chapter 6 introduces Derrida's views of the unconscious in relation to the discussion about the nature of reason, touching upon his interpretations of Freud and considering the central theme of deconstruction. This is examined more fully in Chapter 7 when it is argued that Derrida aims not to undermine reason, but to examine it from 'a step beyond reason'. Though philosophical in his intent he uses both negative theology and ethics as examples of the singularity of the encounter with the other. Chapter 8 pursues Derrida's understanding of singularity through his interpretation of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. The analysis shows how this emphasis on the singularity of the religious encounter cannot be explained without recourse to such arguments as Habermas' theories. In criticizing Caputo's interpretation of Derrida attention is called to the necessity of retaining the tension between the Saying and the Said. In Chapter 9 Derrida's recent views on religion are examined, notably the idea that both faith and reason depend upon an 'acquiescence to the testimony of the other', a pre-autonomous encounter that precedes both religion and rationality. It is suggested that religion is the formulation of mediated singularities. At this point Levinas is introduced into the argument and reason is viewed as receiving from the other beyond the possibility of the I: humans are described as essentially hospitable beings.

The concluding chapter recapitulates the argument and suggests that presenting faith as reason's other can itself be deconstructed on the grounds that the universal and the particular are always co-implicated. These co-implications are uncovered in both Habermas' view of reason and Derrida's concern for singularity. Thus an alternative understanding of the relation between faith and reason as already in contact is suggested. However, this use of Derrida cannot ignore the fact that his thought resists theological appropriation and that Habermas cannot explain why people should be moral. A 'post-metaphysical' approach will not solve the problem of faith and reason, but it does reveal the importance – and the necessity in some sense – of the indeterminacy philosophy provides for theology in a pluralistic situation.



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## Chapter One

# RECENT FORMULATIONS OF FAITH AND REASON

### **Introduction**

This thesis examines the relationship between faith and reason in the light of recent developments in philosophy. In particular, the focus will be on the work of Habermas and his reformulation of reason and on Derrida's attempts to identify deep structures of faith as a consequence of certain targets of deconstruction. The result may be interpreted as a prolegomenon, a necessary preliminary to the discussion of the more significant question of how faith can be related to contemporary thought. Thus the exercise is limited in scope and claims to be no more than a ground-clearing exercise, albeit an essential one. To set the parameters of the subsequent debate, as long as reason is identified with that which is universal, and faith with that which is particular or singular, the relationship between the two will continue to be fraught with problems. If these strict identifications can themselves be challenged then there may be the possibility of another sort of relationship between faith and reason. It is such a possibility that this thesis will establish.

### **Tillich on reason**

To set the debate in context I offer a brief overview of recent encounters between faith and reason beginning with the work of Paul Tillich. Although now widely perceived as dated Tillich's theology represents the most recent attempt to create a theological system which acknowledges a positive role for reason. His major work was his *Systematic Theology*. First published in the 1950s, it is sometimes argued that this represents one of the final attempts to produce a comprehensive re-interpretation of the whole body of Christian doctrine. That itself is significant as it suggests that there has since been an intellectual shift that makes such a project either unworkable or unthinkable. It is, in part at least, that intellectual shift and its implications for theology that will form the subject of this research.

What was Tillich attempting to achieve and how did he go about it? In particular, what was his understanding of reason and how did this shape his theology? It is here that the intellectual shift starts to reveal itself. If, for the sake of convenience rather than accuracy, we use the term Post-Modernity to characterize this shift, it will appear obvious that the nature and role of reason have become the battleground for much contemporary philosophical controversy. One author has described this as a 'rage against reason' (Bernstein 1991, 32). Another description might be that this is the breakdown of the grand narrative of the Enlightenment (Reader 1997, 27). Whether this picture is accurate requires more detailed investigation, but, for an initial mapping out of the



territory, a sketch will suffice. The question would appear to be as follows: if reason has been undermined and/or relativized, what are the implications for theology?

Reading Tillich fifty years on, his approach is both disconcertingly contemporary and disturbingly dated. What is contemporary is his concern to relate the Christian message to the current situation. The actual nature of the latter may have changed in half a century, but the intention is surely still both familiar and necessary, even if apologetic theology does not have the following it did then. However, his assumptions about the role of reason and rationality within that task do sound the product of a now discredited German philosophical tradition, if not of an immediate post-war optimism. Tillich has no doubt that reason must be used constructively in building a theological system. He is keen to make it clear that there is a distinction between the person of faith and the theologian, but it is possible to describe this in terms of different types of reason:

We shall call the organ with which we receive the contents of faith 'self-transcending', or ecstatic reason, and we shall call the organ of the theological scholar 'technical' or formal reason. In both cases reason is not a source of theology... Ecstatic reason is reason grasped by an ultimate concern. Reason is overpowered, invaded, shaken by the ultimate concern (1978, 53).

The distinction here is between content and form. There is a rationality, in the matter of technique, to be attributed to the theological task. This is the form that theology will take, even though the problem of the rational character of theology must remain unsolved. Yet even in the realm of content and the existential commitment of the believer, another form of reason is brought into play. There is a movement among contemporary British theologians to suggest that reason has little to do with the content of belief. This illustrates how theology has changed. Even in the matter of form or structure any mention of reason is likely to engender heated controversy. This is one reason why Tillich's system now seems dated. That there could be such an intimate connection between philosophy and theology feels like an echo from an abandoned past.

One criticism which cannot properly be levelled against Tillich is that of being philosophically simplistic or unsophisticated. His further discussions of the nature of reason itself reveal his rich heritage of German philosophy and the complexities and nuances of the debate. So he is acutely aware that much theological writing about reason has been vague and often depreciatory. Tillich attempts to ground his own perspective in the Kantian definition of the different types of reason – speculative, aesthetic, moral-practical, and technical-practical (Kant 1993, 241) – but tracing these further back to the insights of Plato and Aristotle (Tillich 1978, 72). His major argument is that it is possible to distinguish between an ontological and a technical concept of reason. It is the latter that has become dominant since the breakdown of German classical idealism and the rise of English empiricism. One hears echoes in this of the arguments of Weber, the Critical Theory of Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse, and of course the work of Habermas, on the damaging dominance of instrumental reason (Held 1980).

In many ways Tillich is taking up a similar position to those thinkers in his critique of the over-emphasis on the technical concept of reason. The key difference is that he adheres to the notion of ontological reason whereas, with the exception of Habermas, the others see no way out or beyond the iron cage created by instrumental reason. Whether



Habermas' notion of communicative reason, which will be examined in due course, is the heir of Tillich's ontological reason, or perhaps what the latter must become in the light of the Post-Modern critique, is open to question.

Tillich sees the problem as the separation of technical from ontological reason:

There is no danger in this situation as long as technical reason is the companion of ontological reason and 'reasoning' is used to fulfil the demands of reason. This situation prevailed in most pre-philosophical as well as philosophical periods of human history, although there was always the threat that 'reasoning' might separate itself from reason. Since the middle of the nineteenth century this threat has become a dominating reality. The consequence is that the ends are provided by non-rational forces, either by positive traditions or by arbitrary decisions serving the will to power. Critical reason has ceased to exercise its controlling function over norms and ends (1978, 73).

The result of this is that technical reason itself is impoverished and corrupted and this leads to dehumanizing consequences. Theology's stake in this is to argue for the continued necessary relationship between technical and ontological reason so that both can take their proper place. This is essential for the discussion about the relationship of revelation to reason because this can only take place at an ontological level. At the same time theology must acknowledge the form of reason within the 'destructive structures of existence', in other words, the technical. The problem with the Enlightenment – according to Tillich – is that it confused these two levels of reason and reduced the ontological to the technical. The technical has achieved dominance at the expense of the understanding of the essential nature of reason: the logos that is the basis of the unity of the rational structure of the mind with the rational structure of reality.

As ever with Tillich, there is an almost Hegelian completeness about this description that leaves one wondering how one could ever have misunderstood this or seen it otherwise. Everything fits somewhere, as long as one accepts the basic distinction between the ontological and the existential that lies at the heart of the system. The problem, as will be seen shortly, is that the whole notion of the ontological is now only rarely accepted within contemporary philosophy, and then not in the way that Tillich understands it as a theological concept. Whether one encounters this as Post-Modernity, Post-Enlightenment philosophy, 'Post-Metaphysical' or 'Post-Foundational' thought, the message is that the notion of unity, embodied for Tillich in the logos, has been finally and irrevocably shattered. This grand narrative has been broken down along with the rest. Theology may try to claim otherwise, but then it will find it difficult to pursue critically engaged debate with contemporary philosophy, and that would seem to be a betrayal of the spirit of Tillich's approach. This situation – to use his terminology – would seem to require an alternative to his ontological reason, certainly if apologetic theology is to be sustained or revived.

### **'Post-Metaphysical' thought**

In order to substantiate that the situation in philosophy is as described I turn to an essay by Habermas entitled 'Themes in Post-Metaphysical thinking' (1992a, ch. 3). Habermas acknowledges that recent years have seen a renewed interest in metaphysics but maintains that 'in the sea of de-centered world-understandings, closed worldviews can only stabilize



themselves upon sheltered subcultural islands' (p.29). In other words, theology faces a choice: either it continues to base itself upon a form of metaphysics or ontology, but at the cost of engagement with other intellectual thought-forms and academic disciplines, or it comes out of its cave and attempts to communicate with those others, but must then face the questioning of its philosophical presuppositions. The latter will require a willingness to review and possibly relinquish the claims to a universal and unified view of reality such as advocated by Tillich. It is often the fear of the possible consequences of a 'Post-Metaphysical' approach that drives theologians back onto safe but ever narrowing territory.

Habermas identifies three major strands of metaphysical thought and then proceeds to argue that each has been undermined. In each of these three areas we can recognize that theology has had a significant stake. First, identity thinking. Perhaps more familiar in the phrases 'the One and the Many' or 'the Whole and the Parts', the central concept is that what exists in the world and is therefore finite, has its origin in the unity of something apart from the world and is infinite. Hence the notion of a world-transcendent creator God, or some ground of nature, or Being as opposed to beings. So the One, or the Whole provides the grounding, foundation and indeed the origin of the Many and the Parts. Tillich's interpretation of the logos and thus of ontological reason as the essential relationship between the finite and the infinite is readily recognizable here.<sup>†</sup>

Habermas describes the second strand as idealism. By this he means the notion that there is an internal relationship between abstract thinking and its product. The ideas that we have of reality are indeed already an essential part of that reality and hence our mental representations of it are non-arbitrary. There is thus the promise of a universal unity between human thought and that which is the object of its aim or target. From Descartes onwards human subjectivity and self-consciousness have been understood as the grounds for this transcendental knowledge. In the end, we can trust both our perceptions and our language because they are directly and reliably linked to that which they describe and articulate. This is firmly linked to identity thinking in the sense that it embodies the belief that humans in their finite existence will be re-united or re-integrated into the infinite ground and origin of that existence. The Christian themes of redemption, salvation and reconciliation can be placed within this structure.

Finally, there is a strong concept of theory, seen as being superior to practice. Philosophy has often recommended a life dedicated to contemplation rather than to action. So theory provides privileged access to the truth, even if only for the few. Similarly, contact with the extraordinary or sacred has demanded concentrated meditation, sometimes with a consequent contempt for the world of the everyday, the experiential or the pragmatic. Even theology has been constructed as the preserve of an elite engaged in the theory of Christianity, thus creating a gap between itself and practical, applied or engaged activity.

What are Habermas' grounds for arguing that these characteristic metaphysical themes have been conclusively undermined? He presents four major sources of critique. The empirical methods of the natural sciences have led to the development of a new type of procedural rationality that has cast doubt over identity thinking. Rather than presupposing,

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<sup>†</sup> Two very clear examples are the arguments in *The Courage to Be* and *Love, Power and Justice* where moral and social virtues are grounded in transcendent Being.



in the form of ontological reason that there is one clear, identifiable and unifying target and ground of what human reason through critical thought can obtain, scientific rationality limits itself to supposedly trustworthy methods and procedures. Knowledge expands on the basis of correct and reliable processes of observation, experimentation and the testing of hypotheses, not by establishing links with some deeper level of an external reality. This means that philosophy itself can no longer make claims for a privileged access to the truth.

An increased historical consciousness has been another contributory factor. A new awareness of the contingency of human affairs has supported the view of the finitude of existence and indeed an understanding that reason itself fully participates in the historical process rather than being a universal or decontextualized component of human life. Once again, any notion of ontological reason is fragmented and relativized by the view that reason only exists within particular contexts or traditions. More of this will become clear when Alasdair MacIntyre's work is reviewed.

A philosophy of language has increasingly replaced the Cartesian based philosophy of consciousness as the developing scientific self-understanding has criticized a simplistic subject-object notion of human cognition. No longer is knowledge viewed as the correspondence of language with an external reality as language itself is seen as the means by which humans construct and shape their reality. The process is arbitrary after all. Finally, practice has asserted its authority over theory as language, tradition and context have increased in importance for the self-understanding of rationality.

What is abundantly clear from Habermas' exposition is that reason is right at the heart of these challenges to metaphysical thinking. It is not simply that a technical reason in the form of a scientific rationality has pushed ontological reason to one side. Even those other forms of reason as originally identified by Kant, the speculative, moral-practical and aesthetic, are now understood as related to specific traditions and contexts. The entire balance has shifted away from any notion of a universal, unifying ground or origin at another level of reality to which some form of decontextualized reason could relate or penetrate. The One and the Whole have given way to the Many and the Parts as being the basic nature of reality. Plurality has triumphed over unity, the particular over the universal.

If Habermas is anywhere near the mark, then theology clearly faces considerable challenges. Does it now eschew any contact with reason in any of these contemporary forms thereby risking or openly acknowledging that it is either irrational or at least non-rational? Or does it try to enter the debate about reason and argue for a specifically religious rationality that relates in some way to those contemporary forms?

### **The contextualizing of reason**

Perhaps one of the clearest expositions of the contextualizing of reason is that of Alasdair MacIntyre (1988). Certainly his work has been influential in terms of theological discussion of this subject. A brief examination of his position will highlight the options now facing theology. The main target of MacIntyre's critique is the Enlightenment 'grand narrative' that there is a form of reason independent of any and every context that provides a neutral grounding for human judgement. This notion can be described as 'the view from



nowhere'. As Habermas has suggested, a growing historical consciousness has challenged the idea that there can be any such thing. In other words, any view must be a view from somewhere. The Enlightenment concept of reason is itself merely a local, context-bound tradition, masquerading as something grander and universal. The result of these claims is the exercise of an arbitrary power excluding and oppressing both other traditions and groups of people who do not conform to what is essentially a white, male, middle-class Western intellectual concept.

MacIntyre takes what can be described as an Aristotelian approach to the issues of reason and morality. There is no overall or overarching rationality, only that to be found within a specific tradition. There has to be an agreed starting point or definition of what constitute human virtues or the good life before any forms of rationality can come into play. This presupposes the existence of coherent and identifiable communities sharing specific views on certain key issues. While superficially attractive and convincing, this interpretation raises the twin spectres of relativism and perspectivism and it is worth rehearsing in particular the problems that relativism can create for theology.

It is obvious that there can no longer be a systematic theology built upon the foundation of some version of Tillich's now discredited ontological reason. This may seem a gain rather than a loss for theology if the latter can then present a case for its own specific form of rationality. It could be that theology could free itself from the dominance of other inappropriate forms of reason – for example, that of science with its over-emphasis on evidence and process. However, there is also a potential cost to such a position. How is theology – or any tradition for that matter – to relate to those others who do not share that specific form of rationality? After all, it is reason that has supposedly been the common factor and thus the means of communication across the boundaries between traditions. The danger is that, as judgements can only be made from within the existing traditions, there can be no way of stepping beyond those to exercise a form of critical reasoning. Each group goes to its own corner and rather than coming out talking can only come out fighting. It needs to be said that MacIntyre himself believes that he can successfully ward off this form of relativism, but his arguments on this remain less than convincing (Habermas 1995, 100–4).<sup>†</sup>

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<sup>†</sup> Habermas' criticism of MacIntyre is complex but relates to the latter's argument that one can recognise that a particular ethical tradition has been superseded by another tradition that is perceived to be rationally superior. The basic problem is that this either requires a reconstruction of the original tradition from within its own resources, in which case it is hard to see how the new position can claim to be rationally superior, or else it requires something like a paradigm shift or conversion experience, in which case it is difficult to see what constitutes any continuity between the old tradition and the new. As Habermas says: The recognition of the rational superiority of an alien tradition can be sufficiently motivated from the perspective of one's own tradition only if the learning subject can compare the explanatory power of both traditions in relation to the same problems. But precisely this is denied him, because in the absence of a zone of rational overlap the two traditions are incommensurable (Habermas 1995, 101). Habermas will argue therefore that his concept of communicative reason provides just such a zone of rational overlap and that MacIntyre's lack of such a context-transcending reason leaves him open to the charge of relativism.



The attraction of MacIntyre's critique for theology is that the Enlightenment concept of reason – criticized for its one-sidedness and partiality by both Tillich and Habermas – is now discredited. With this potential threat to Christianity's self-understanding apparently dealt with, theology can start to reclaim its own territory and ignore the challenges of science and philosophy. But I would argue that the price paid for this victory is too high. Without some means of cross-boundary or trans-contextual communication, each tradition ends up incommensurable and isolated. So the neat solution only brings with it a new set of problems. A return to Tillich's ontological reason carries no conviction in the light of the 'Post-Metaphysical' critique. However, the introduction of any new concept of reason, such as Habermas' communicative rationality, risks imposing yet another alien life form on the Christian tradition. Is the only option to abandon any notion of reason whatsoever and to argue for – or tell the story of – a distinctive and non-rational nature for theology? I have argued elsewhere (Reader 1997, 73) that this cure is worse than the disease and that another option must be found.

### **Cupitt's 'Post-Metaphysical' theology**

It will be useful at this stage in the argument to offer an example of what theology might look like if it pursues the 'Post-Metaphysical' or Post-Modern route, in other words, without any recourse to reason. Don Cupitt is the theologian who most immediately springs to mind in this context. Although his thought continues to shift I am taking six 'truths' that he presents as being crucial to this new situation from *The Time Being* published in 1992.

First is the maxim of radical immanence: 'Everything is inside. Nothing is hidden, deep or invisible... Any imagined external reality or standpoint, simply as something imagined, immediately relocates itself on the inside' (p.36). This is an acceptance that metaphysics is in the past, that there is no external referent for religion, but that it is a self-referential practice.

Second is the maxim of universal contingency: 'So everything is contingent... Some things are conventionally or conditionally necessary, natural, real and so forth, but nothing is absolutely necessary, inescapable, foundational or finalizing' (p.37).

Third, meaning is primary. We live in a world of signs and language. It is impossible to see an external reality apart from the cultural constructions for which we ourselves are responsible. We see the world as a moving field of signs, a 'post-Buddhism of the sign' or 'flux of language-formed events' (p.38).

This means, fourthly, that everything is public. As there is no metaphysical realm to which only the initiated have access, the signs that are our world are equally accessible to all. All is surface and all is interpretation. There is no secret realm, no depth beyond what is clearly visible. Then everything is historical and thus subject to change. There are no external essences or substances. Humans create, construct, re-draw and re-envision.

Finally, there is nothing that says that it must all add up or make sense. There is no pre-established harmony between thought and being, no perfect Hegelian or Tillichian ontological realm where everybody will find their place. There is no one thing that can be identified as the meaning of life: 'The meaning of life shows in the difference between one day and the next. Life means away continuously' (p.41).



For Cupitt there is no external reality that is the referent for God, no function for the notion of transcendence and certainly no master-plan for the universe. He follows through perhaps more consistently than any other theologian the implications of the demise of metaphysics. Reason is just another of those outdated concepts that we have used to disguise from ourselves the real nature of our lives: it has promised a grip on and an order for reality that we now have to learn to live without. Cupitt sees all of this as positive, optimistic and encouraging, stripping away from religious practice all the unnecessary philosophical trappings and accretions of recent centuries. One can argue that he strips away so much that nothing identifiable as Christianity remains and that religion generally is reduced to a comfortable and convenient subjectivism. Without going into the details of this here I hope that the question is clear: Can there be another option for theology that both maintains contact with contemporary thought and also acknowledges a recognizable Christian identity?

### **The direction of the research**

I will now offer some pointers to the proposed research. I want to register first of all that it is possible to recognize two distinct camps on the subject of reason. Despite the differences, what they share is a broad acceptance that the situation we now find ourselves in can be accurately described as 'Post-Metaphysical'. Theologians who have responded to this challenge have tended to side with those who either relativize reason or abandon it altogether. Thus figures such as Cupitt, Milbank, Ward, Hauerwas and Lindbeck have been heavily influenced either by MacIntyre or the American pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty (Reader 1997, 64–74). This general approach has been described as Post-Modern, assuming that there is a direct link with such philosophers as Derrida, Lyotard, Foucault and the feminist work of Irigaray and Kristeva. However, this link is by no means as clear and obvious as it seems, resting on the contentious assumptions that these philosophers subscribe to a Nietzschean nihilism and to a total abandonment of Enlightenment concerns. I will not enter into more details here as I have covered this ground elsewhere and it is, to some degree, a distraction from our main question.

What theology has yet to take significant note of is the alternative camp, who, in differing ways, present possibilities for the rehabilitation of reason, albeit in 'Post-Metaphysical' and non-foundational form. I would place in this category the work of Habermas, Derrida and Castoriadis from within philosophy, and Rawls and Dworkin from the fields of political and legal philosophy respectively (see e.g. Caputo 1997; Castoriadis 1997; Habermas, 1997; Rawls 1993; Dworkin 1985). One could also include the approach to the philosophy of science known as Dialectical Critical Realism associated particularly with the work of Roy Bhaskar (1994). It is my contention that theology has yet to establish whether or not the contributions of these thinkers offer an alternative path for a critical engagement with contemporary thought that retains an understanding of reason and rationality. This is the broad area in which research needs to be conducted.

I want to conclude by raising some further questions and possibilities. I have already described Habermas' notion of communicative reason as being a major candidate to be the 'Post-Metaphysical' successor to Tillich's ontological reason. Such a proposition would undoubtedly raise further serious challenges for theology. Firmly built into Habermas'



philosophy is a commitment to both human autonomy and political democracy. Both would appear to undermine a traditional Christian understanding of the authority of revelation and scripture. They might suggest the need for greater human individual freedom to make critical judgements and decisions in the sphere of religious belief and practice than has normally been accepted by religious institutions. These arguments will need to be pursued. At the moment all that needs to be registered is that reason as presented by Habermas requires to be understood as part of a triad including autonomy and democracy.

A further dimension of this debate is the claim that communicative reason is essentially procedural and makes no judgements in terms of content. In Tillichian terminology it is a matter of form rather than content. Tillich would presumably have argued, and I think correctly, that that is not sufficient for theology: content also is required. However, if there is to be that greater freedom and flexibility in what, for the sake of argument, we may call a religious rationality, it may be that we cannot simply look at the Christian faith in isolation. In a plural and multi-faith context perhaps this religious rationality needs to identify deep structures or overlapping concerns that enable it to cross the boundaries of faith traditions. It is in this context that I believe the work of Derrida has a contribution to offer.

If something like this proves justifiable then it would seem to be a pointer towards an idea that can be traced back to Tillich. What I am attempting to describe is not metaphysics but what I would want to call 'metapraxis'. If rationality involves standing back and taking up a critical distance, then this would also be true when rationality is applied in the religious domain. Yet this does not suggest positing a deeper underlying and unifying reality in the manner of metaphysics, rather the much more practical process of open dialogue and democratic participation on the subject of religious belief and practice. It involves the acknowledgement of context as being formative for content. Hence the term metapraxis. But what then is this in relation to more traditional theology?

It does not seem accurate to describe this as philosophy of religion as I am assuming a belief commitment that this discipline does not. Neither is it simply a new form of philosophical theology, although that is perhaps closer to the mark. It may be similar to what Tillich once described as 'metalogue' (1969, 50–6, 70–4); though it needs to be noted that this would not encompass the multi-faith dimension being advocated here. The main point of contact between metalogue and metapraxis is that both assume religious commitment as a given, but then also go on to consider questions of authenticity, structure and meaning in the manner of critical rationality. The object and the act of religious devotion are held together. Such an approach may be capable of establishing a religious rationality that both acknowledges a referent for faith commitment and finds a commonality with other contemporary forms of reason and critical thought. If this is so then it keeps faith with Tillich's intention of relating message to situation, but also does justice to the radical challenge of 'Post-Metaphysical' thought.

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## Chapter Two

### TILLICH AND HABERMAS ON REASON

#### 1. Parallels and differences

In the opening chapter it was suggested that Habermas' concept of communicative reason might be the 'Post-Metaphysical' or 'Post-Foundational' successor to Tillich's ontological reason. This chapter will aim to substantiate that claim and will contain the following sections. First there will be a brief examination of the respective tasks of Tillich and Habermas in dealing with the subject of reason in order to identify both parallel concerns and important differences. Second there will follow a return to Tillich on reason to illustrate how and why it is significant for his overall theological approach. Third I will present a more detailed examination of Habermas' thought and, in particular, an exposition of his arguments in *The Theory of Communicative Action* vols. 1 and 2 with particular reference to his interpretations of Weber and Durkheim. The key themes of rationalization, the linguistification of the sacred, the decentering of world views, and issues of social and system integration and social evolution will come to the fore. It will emerge from this why Habermas believes that his theory of communicative reason avoids the apparent dead end that Critical Theory has reached in its theory of modernity and in what ways it sustains genuine emancipatory content. Finally, in the course of this exposition, the implications of a theological appropriation of a Habermasian approach to reason will become clear, notably with specific reference to the notions of autonomy and democracy.

It may seem somewhat artificial to bring together the work of two scholars from different generations and disciplines. However, it could be argued that they share a common intellectual heritage, both in the German philosophical tradition of Kant and Hegel and the later sociological masters Weber and Durkheim. Both also engage with twentieth-century American intellectual life through encounters with the pragmatist philosophers James, Dewey, Mead and Peirce. There perhaps the parallels might cease but for a common concern to avoid extreme responses to modernity from within their respective disciplines.

In his autobiographical sketch 'On the Boundary' (1973, 314), Tillich makes it clear that he sees his work as steering a middle path between a theological liberalism that too readily identifies the Christian Gospel with the spirit of the age, and a revived neo-orthodoxy associated particularly with the work of Karl Barth that assumes an unbridgeable gap between theology and culture. If the first falls into the trap of reducing the Infinite or the Unconditioned to the thought forms of contemporary culture, the second goes to the other extreme of creating an unrealistic distance between the two. Tillich uses the concepts of autonomy, heteronomy and theonomy to describe his own position.



Late nineteenth-century Protestant liberal theology in the form of dialectical theology imposes a form of heteronomy – that which is other or alien to the expression of God – by too clearly identifying a particular historical form with the subject matter of theology:

...my fundamental theological problem arose in applying the relation of the Absolute, which is implied in the idea of God, to the relativity of human religion. Religious dogmatism...comes into being when a historical religion is cloaked with the unconditional validity of the divine...for no other claim can exist beside the unconditional claim of the divine. But that this claim can be grounded in a finite, historical reality is the root of all heteronomy and demonism (p.314).

It is in reaction to this that Tillich introduces his notion of autonomy, the grasp of the prophetic Protestant principle that whatever is must always be subject to critique in the light of the demands of the Unconditional. However, in the approach of Barth there appears a supernaturalism that represents another form of heteronomy:

The extremely narrow position of the Barthians may save German Protestantism, but it also creates a new heteronomy, an anti-autonomous and anti-humanistic attitude that I must regard as a denial of the Protestant principle (p.314).

Tillich's solution to this has the classic Hegelian overtones of thesis, antithesis and synthesis:

The Protestant principle is not rational criticism but prophetic judgement. It is not autonomy but theonomy, even when it appears, as often happens, in rationalistic and humanistic forms. In the theonomous prophetic word, the contradiction between autonomy and heteronomy is overcome (p.315).

One can see how Tillich's approach to reason fits into this structure. Technical or instrumental reason that is initially a striving for autonomy rapidly descends into heteronomy when it starts making exaggerated claims to be the only method of reaching truth and insight. This can only be overcome by a theonomous ontological reason that retains its roots in the Unconditioned. Yet this is most likely to appear in new strivings for autonomous reason – the rationalistic and humanistic – that offer a critique of any positivistic and neo-orthodox theology. Would Tillich have wanted to argue – had he encountered it – that Habermas' communicative reason is just such a manifestation? But then, communicative reason is what may remain when ontological theonomous reason has been driven from the field by the demise of a foundational metaphysics.

Accepting Tillich's own location of his task as between (or beyond) autonomy and heteronomy, if we turn now to Habermas an interesting parallel begins to emerge. It needs to be acknowledged that his work is still developing, but, nevertheless, there is an underlying consistency in its overall direction. In *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1972), Habermas' major concern was to show that a narrow and positivistic scientific self-understanding could not exhaust the possibilities for human knowledge and that other forms of human exploration retained a wider validity. Without this, any prospects for critical emancipatory practice as hoped for by Marx and then Critical Theory would be an illusion. In Tillichian terms, Habermas was concerned that the search for autonomy through critical reason had reverted to a new heteronomy in the form of a positivistic scientific approach to human knowledge. A particular form of reason was claiming



too much for itself and required a counter-critique (Protestant principle?), in order to restore genuine autonomy.

Habermas subsequently revised his proposed solution to this problem, realizing that the model of critique employed in *Knowledge and Human Interests* – that of psychoanalysis and therapy – was itself still too dependent on what he calls the philosophy of consciousness. In response to this, his later work, that will form the focus of this chapter, shifts to the new paradigm of the philosophy of language and the concept of communicative action. However, his intention of steering between extreme responses to modernity remains stable throughout.

In a series of interviews published in 1986 Habermas answers the question of why he turned to the topic of rationality as the key to developing a critical social theory (Habermas 1986, 104). He makes it clear that it was, in part at least, a response to the German political context of the 1970s. On the one hand, he encountered a revival of neo-conservative ideologies with strong overtones of an authoritarian and anti-democratic politics that he saw as a betrayal of what was still of value of the Enlightenment ideals of autonomy and democracy. On the other was the rise of new potential protest movements often espousing a critique of the effects of instrumental reason yet also bordering on a new irrationality or romanticism – the environmental movement is the most obvious example. The question of what form of rationality might be an appropriate contemporary heir of Enlightenment reason, guarding against both a retreat to an authoritarian or fascist politics and a rejection of the genuine advances made by science and technology, rose to the top of Habermas' practical and theoretical agenda. He was concerned to defend autonomy against new forms of heteronomy. Hence he describes his work on the theory of communicative action as follows:

...my real motive in beginning the book in 1977 was to understand how the critique of reification, the critique of rationalization, could be reformulated in a way that would offer a theoretical explanation of the crumbling of the welfare-state compromise, and of the potential for a critique of growth in new movements, without surrendering the project of modernity or descending into post- or anti-modernism, 'tough' new conservatism or 'wild' young conservatism (1986, 107).

The parallels continue into Habermas' latest major work, *Between Facts and Norms* (1997), which focusses on how the theory of communicative reason and its application in a discourse ethics illuminates the study of law and legal systems. In some ways this now seems closer again both to Tillich's original task and to his own earlier project. Habermas is concerned to explain how legal systems legitimately contain two apparently conflicting components: the interpretation and application of actually existing laws, and the requirement for a wider legitimation based on the norms created by a social consensus. In other words, in the context of a plurality of ethical positions, how can the law both do justice to all of those without imposing one upon the rest and yet retain the confidence and respect of each in sustaining an overall legal process? In the context of the theological debate, this is the tension between the particular and the universal. However, the problem now is that the universal (reason) has either been undermined, or differentiated into its component parts. I will argue that the theory of communicative



reason may be one way in which justice can be done to both the universal and the particular.

Rehg argues that Kant faced a similar question two centuries earlier, but relied on a metaphysical framework and particularly the notion of a pre-established harmony of reason in order to provide an answer. The problem is that this presumes a consensus prior to actual public discourse. Given a plurality of ethical views such a presumption no longer holds:

Nonetheless, Kant's appeal to rational consensus as a regulative ideal captures an important part of the tension in law. If law is essentially constituted by a tension between facticity and validity...then a theory that situates the idealizing character of validity claims in concrete social contexts recommends itself for the analysis of law. This is just what the theory of communicative action allows, without the metaphysical pretensions and moralistic oversimplification we find in Kant (Habermas 1997, xii).

Hence Habermas' latest work is an attempt to steer a middle road between a communitarian position that over-states the importance of the particular ethical tradition or Lifeworld, and a liberalism that is over-abstract, too distant from the problems of the particular and of application, and is always in danger of imposing a particular ethical position under the guise of neutrality (reason!). The autonomy of specific ethical positions is threatened by the heteronomy of a liberalism claiming too much for itself, as Enlightenment reason and a narrow scientism have done before, but, if social and political life is to be held together, there still needs to be some basis for a trans-traditional legitimation for a legal structure. Communicative reason is Habermas' candidate for this role. Tillich's ontological or theonomous reason is too close to Kant's pre-established harmony of reason, yet a total abandonment of rationality would yield social breakdown and new and violent forms of heteronomy.

Simply expressed, the parallel between Tillich and Habermas is that both strive to remain located between autonomy and heteronomy. The difference is that Tillich appeals to theonomous reason whilst Habermas advocates a 'Post-Foundational' communicative reason. Both these ideas now need to be examined in greater detail.

### **Tillich on ontological reason**

Tillich prefaces his exposition of this subject in *Systematic Theology* vol. 1 by acknowledging that much theological discussion of reason is unfortunately vague and that theologians invariably fail to define what they are referring to by this term (1978, 72). He sets out to remedy these faults by being clear and precise. To what extent he succeeds in this is a matter that remains open to question. There is certainly a suspicion that the descriptions to follow are driven by the needs of his own theological system and create their own confusions.

He begins by making the distinction between ontological and technical reason. The former has been predominant in the classical tradition and is to be defined as 'the structure of the mind which enables the mind to grasp and to transform reality' (p.72). As such it operates across and within the other areas as identified by Kant, in other words, the cognitive, aesthetic, practical and technical functions of the human mind. It even includes



the emotional dimension of human life as identified in the search for unity and truth. Tillich is placing himself firmly within the tradition of Aquinas, Spinoza and Hegel.

However, this ontological concept of reason always carries with it a technical concept and the latter sometimes displaces it whenever reason is reduced to the capacity for reasoning. The cognitive functions of reason then predominate and the sense of reason as Logos, the means of the relationship between the human and what lies beyond it, is lost. Tillich maintains that this is exactly what has happened since the middle of the nineteenth century and that the consequences are that either non-rational forces, or arbitrary decisions serving the will to power, now determine the end (telos) of human life. 'Critical reason has ceased to exercise its controlling function over norms and ends' (p.73).

It is interesting to note that Tillich introduces the notion of critical reason at this juncture. However, it is not clear what he is referring to by this, nor how it relates to ontological reason or differs from technical reason. Simply to state that there is such a strand of reason and that it then ceases to function because ontological reason is replaced by the technical surely begs too many questions. One assumes that Tillich would argue that without reason as logos there can be no grounds for any critique, but then this is exactly the domain of Critical Theory and of course of Habermas. Both have attempted to show that there can be critical rationality even though the idea of a pre-differentiated ontological reason has been discredited.

Tillich goes on to argue that the separation of technical from ontological reason has dehumanizing consequences because reason is thus excluded from any discussion about what are appropriate human aims and objectives. Perhaps one might want to counter this by saying that Tillich sets up an unnecessary polarity here, creating too stark an alternative and thus ignoring the potential contribution of other forms of rationality. If reason can also be cognitive, aesthetic, theoretical and practical, subjective and objective, why consign these without further ado to the technical and thus deny them the possibility of exercising a critical function? Is it not possible that these forms of reason might facilitate rational discussion about human objectives?

The key issue that Tillich is concerned to address is that of the relationship between reason and revelation and it is this that appears to drive his interpretation. The point is that technical reason – as defined by Tillich – cannot then be seen as an attack on revelation, for religion stands on the level of the ontological:

The traditional question of the relation of reason to revelation should not be discussed on the level of technical reason, where it constitutes no genuine problem, but on the level of ontological reason, of reason in the sense of logos (p.74).

A possible concern with this is that it sounds like a claim to immunity from criticism – that the real questions of faith are somehow above or beyond the interrogations of science, for example. Perhaps this is to over-state Tillich's position, but it does leave one wondering what could be the basis for critical engagement between theology and other disciplines. How can there be genuinely critical correlation if theology is always free to withdraw to the safe and inviolable territory of the ontological when it comes to real knowledge of faith?

Tillich introduces another distinction at this point in the argument, perhaps aware that



he is vulnerable to some such criticism. The theologian must consider reason as actualized in self and the world and thus dependent on the 'destructive structures of existence and the saving structures of life' (p. 74). So, not only is there a distinction between ontological and technical reason, but also between ontological reason in its 'essential perfection' and in its predicament in the different stages of its actualization in existence, life and history. The latter type of reason is fallible and capable of mistaken judgement and therefore presumably not immune from critique. However it could be argued that this new distinction between essential ontological reason and existential ontological reason serves to confuse rather than to clarify. What is the relationship between the latter and the technical, or for that matter, cognitive, aesthetic or practical reason?

One final example will go to illustrate that Tillich's apparently tight categories create more questions than answers. Within a few pages of the previous discussion he makes yet another attempt to define reason. This time he refers to 'the depth of reason' (p. 79). So: 'the depth of reason is the expression of something that is not reason but which precedes reason and is manifest through it'. Reason points to something beyond itself that both appears in its structures and yet transcends them in power and meaning. Further terms appear immediately: 'substance', 'being-itself', 'ground', 'abyss'. All of these of course have a metaphorical character and the sense in which they 'precede' reason is itself metaphorical. The task here is to protect the essential nature of reason from the challenge of the Enlightenment and rationalism. When the latter attack Christianity as myth, cult or superstition, they are confusing the essential nature of reason with the predicament of reason in existence. 'Essentially reason is transparent towards its depth in each of its acts and processes' (p. 80). So Tillich is still arguing that there is a metaphysical grounding of reason to be identified with the Christian logos and that lies behind or beyond any critique that other forms of reason might launch.

One final quote will link this whole discussion back to the earlier one on autonomy and heteronomy and lead into an exploration of Habermas' arguments:

Autonomy and heteronomy are rooted in theonomy, and each goes astray when their theonomous unity is broken. Theonomy does not mean the acceptance of a divine law imposed on reason by a highest authority; it means autonomous reason united with its own depth... Since God (theos) is the law (nomos) for both the structure and the ground of reason, they are united in him, and their unity is manifest in a theonomous situation. But there is no complete theonomy under the conditions of existence (p. 85).

### **Habermas' theory of communicative reason**

The main objective of this chapter is to establish a significant link between Tillich's concept of ontological reason and Habermas' theory of communicative reason. In particular, I am attempting to argue that it is the latter to which theology should now be giving attention in the changed philosophical context best described as 'Post-Foundational'. Hence one can only claim to be examining Habermas' work from a very specific perspective and one that he himself would not necessarily share. However, it will become clear in what follows that, even though Habermas' interest and intent is largely sociological and philosophical, religious belief and practice play an important role in his overall argument.



The major text for this is Habermas' *The Theory of Communicative Action* published in two volumes (1984 and 1987). What were his aims for this work, begun in the late 1970s and first published in German in the early 1980s? It is clear that Habermas intends to construct a theory of modernity that, while taking seriously the contributions of Weber, Durkheim, Marx and Parsons, avoids the conclusion, associated with Weber in particular, that modern society is destined to entrap itself in an iron cage built by an over-dependence on instrumental reason. We recognize here an affinity with Tillich's concern to challenge the heteronomy represented by this limited manifestation of reason. In pursuing this goal Habermas is affirming his own heritage of the early objectives of Critical Theory that aimed to show that it was possible to launch a critique of capitalism taking into account cultural as well as economic and political factors. One of the problems Habermas seeks to address is that the later work of the Critical Theorists, notably Horkheimer and Adorno's *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1979), shares Weber's negative assessment of potential emancipatory action. Habermas aims to show, through a critical examination of Weber's theory of modernity and selective use of other sociologists, that there is an alternative interpretation of the evolution of modern society. Weber's 'iron cage' is the result of his own one-sided understanding of the processes associated with modernization, commonly referred to as the rationalization of society.

Inevitably, the writing in Habermas' two volumes is dense and complex and the coverage here therefore somewhat schematic. Consequently it is essential to examine the arguments in some detail in order to establish the insights required for this study. In particular, it is Habermas' interpretation of the role of reason and rationality that is central to our concern. Habermas has to show that there is an alternative to the instrumental reason (*Zweckrationalität*) that lies at the heart of Weber's argument, hence the notion of communicative reason. The processes of rationalization or differentiation central to the development of modern society have to be shown to carry this alternative understanding of reason if Weber's iron cage is not to become its predetermined fate. In order to achieve this perspective Habermas draws heavily upon Durkheim's interpretation of the role of religion in social development and this will be a focus later in the chapter.

Before moving on it is essential to establish that Habermas does indeed characterize the contemporary context as 'Post-Foundational' or 'Post-Metaphysical'. He makes this clear in the opening paragraphs of *The Theory of Communicative Action* vol. 1. Philosophy throughout its history has endeavoured to explain the world as a whole, its unity in the multiplicity of appearances, with principles to be discovered in reason. Even Greek thought, though it did not share with the world religions a quest for deity, displays a concern for 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' (p. 1). This is surely close to Tillich's view of ontological reason. However, in Habermas' opinion, this whole philosophical tradition has now been brought into question:

Philosophy can no longer refer to the whole of the world, of nature, of history, of society, in the sense of a totalizing knowledge. Theoretical surrogates for worldviews have been devalued, not only by the factual advance of empirical science but even more by the reflective consciousness accompanying it (p. 1).

Here then, once again, is the crucial challenge to Tillich's position and indeed to



theology's own self-understanding. It is not just the advance of science but the development of reflective consciousness that undermines the possibility of a unifying reason. Once one enters the domain where ideas and beliefs require clear articulation and thus become subject to argument and the processes of justification and validation then reflexivity is inescapable. This is as true for religious beliefs as it is for any other human discourse. Thus it is language itself which becomes the focus for investigation and also possibly the prime location for notions of both hope and promise. In a sense, everything that follows is the working out of the implications of these ideas, both for Habermas and for theology.

The simplest way to convey Habermas' argument is to present it as a series of stages, each of which describes a different period in social evolution. It should be noted that theories of social evolution have tended to be prescriptive and retrospective; in other words, they assume that either a current form of society, or one yet to be achieved, is the aim (telos) of an inevitable process. Everything is designed to lead to a particular stage of social evolution that represents the purpose or objective of human existence. However, it is possible to study social evolution in a less determinist manner. So one can describe what has happened without a view of what was meant to happen or without idealizing some contemporary form of social life. Which of these alternatives represents Habermas' stance and to which might theology subscribe? I suggest that both Habermas and theology attempt to achieve a balance between a description of what has been and a vision of what might be – although their respective visions will be different. Perhaps there is no such thing as a pure theory of social evolution, one that does not harbour some view as to what human social existence should be moving towards. Without such a view it becomes impossible to critique the status quo.

Habermas takes as his starting point a particular form of tribal society that he describes as egalitarian. The crucial question for the sociologist is that of how each society manages to establish and maintain coherence and identity. How do specific societies continue to reproduce themselves in ways that ward off instability and disintegration? In this early form of tribal society it is mythical world views – what we might describe as religious beliefs – that perform this critical function. Kinship relations and systems of economic exchange are also important, but on an ideological level it is religious beliefs and practices that provide the unifying factor. The question then arises as to how and why these systems break down and evolve into new forms. What are the forces that begin to undermine the unquestioned authority of a mythical world view?

It is at this point that Habermas enters into an exposition of Weber's thought, not because he is going to accept it in full, but because he intends to critique and then move beyond it. A major section of *The Theory of Communicative Action* vol. 1 is taken up with a critical exposition of Weber and here it is only possible to offer a summary of the key concepts and conclusions. Even this is not straightforward as Habermas uses this as the occasion to introduce some of his own major themes.

The central and recurrent explanatory concept is that of differentiation. The simplest way of explaining this is that what was once seen as a unity or a whole is increasingly split apart, fragmented, segmented and separated out into new and discrete categories. Although it appears to parallel the familiar philosophical problematic of the one and the



many, in terms of social evolution the idea carries other connotations. Crucially, it suggests the development of a further level of conscious awareness, the reflective consciousness already referred to. The move from the pre-differentiated unity of mythical world views of egalitarian tribal societies towards the differentiation characteristic of modernity is a paradigm shift involving the realization that what was once taken for granted and thus effectively below the level of conscious awareness, is now brought to the surface and seen to exist in a plurality of forms.

The term that Weber adopts to describe this process is rationalization – not to be confused with its current usage in economic parlance. Habermas prefers to talk about the rationalization of the Lifeworld, but this requires further explanation as Lifeworld is a concept that he takes from another source in order to develop Weber's argument. This must now be explained.

Remember that Habermas aims to show that Weber's theory of social evolution is one-sided, leading only to the idea of the dead-end of the iron cage of modernity. To assist in this he requires, amongst other things, to be able to differentiate between two aspects of recent social evolution. In order to do this he makes a distinction between the Lifeworld and the Systems World. The Lifeworld is effectively what remains of the pre-differentiated and unquestioned unity of world views, but now better described as the background assumptions and ideas that supply social cohesion. However, these also involve social structures, for instance, particular forms of family life. The Systems World, by contrast, is to be identified as the sphere of business, commerce and technology – the areas of life where instrumental reason has come into its own and informs and determines decision making processes but without necessary reference to shared aims or values. Both Lifeworld and Systems World are essential components of modern society, but Habermas argues that conflicts now occur where the organisational principles of the Systems World – the steering mechanisms of power and money – start encroaching upon the alternative organisation of the Lifeworld, which relies on the capacity to reach a consensus through open debate. This 'colonization of the Lifeworld' as Habermas describes it, can be seen, for instance, in current debates about the future of the Welfare State, where economic and political imperatives such as lowering direct taxation impinge upon people's decisions about family life.

In order to understand this process Habermas insists that it is necessary to realize that there are three distinct dimensions to the Lifeworld, those being society, culture and personality. Modernity can only be understood if it is possible to identify the impact of social change on each of these three areas. Once the underlying unity of mythical world views comes under threat, there is a growing apart of society, culture and personality and thus of the ways in which they sustain their own coherence and identity. Crucially, that which was once taken for granted and thus not articulated, now requires active and thoughtful participation through debate and discussion. Issues have to be expressed, described and conceptualized and views backed up by argument and justification. Thus language and human communication become central to the reproduction of all three aspects of the Lifeworld. So we get the first hint of how and why a theory of communicative reason becomes significant for Habermas' overall argument:

Subjects acting communicatively always come to an understanding in the



horizon of a Lifeworld. Their Lifeworld is formed from more or less diffuse, always unproblematic, background convictions... In their interpretative accomplishments the members of a communication community demarcate the one objective world and their intersubjectively shared social world from the subjective worlds of individuals and (other) collectives (p. 70).

However, once the processes of modernisation and differentiation set in – the decentering of world views – the tasks of reproducing social life require a more reflective approach:

The more the world-view that furnishes the cultural stock of knowledge is decentered, the less the need for understanding is covered *in advance* by an interpreted Lifeworld immune from critique, and the more this need has to be met by the interpretative accomplishments of the participants themselves, that is, by way of risky (because rationally motivated) agreement (p. 70).

Without going into further detail as to how this process impacts upon the three spheres of society, culture and personality, it is still clear how crucial this idea is for understanding modernity and indeed the development of religious life within this new context. This development of the reflective consciousness and the need to articulate and support one's beliefs and values – if understood in this way – must have a substantive impact upon religious institutions and the very expression of religious beliefs. Habermas' version of communicative reason, if adopted by theology, carries with it the further connotations of democracy and autonomy that present an enormous challenge to religious traditions.

However, it needs to be made clear now how this argument offers Habermas a way of launching his critique of Weber. Within this process of the rationalization or differentiation of the Lifeworld, the critical, innovative capacities of individuals are required in order to reproduce the concepts and values that provide stability and coherence. Yet alongside this communicative action there is also a corresponding increase in strategic or instrumental action. It is on the boundary between these different types of action that conflict occurs. Now the main weakness of Weber's approach to a theory of modernity is that he has only allowed for the operation of strategic and instrumental action. In other words, he interprets the process of rationalization as exclusively an increase in the dominance of instrumental reason, hence he has no grasp of the critical and emancipatory role that can be played by a communicative reason. His is a one-sided and unbalanced interpretation of the process of social evolution, suggesting an inevitability about the process and unable to differentiate between its logic and its dynamics: 'it becomes clear that Weber's intuitions point in the direction of a selective pattern of rationalization, a jagged profile of modernization' (p. 241).

As a result of this skewed interpretation Weber portrays modern society as losing all sense of purpose or meaning and becoming subject to an instrumental reason working through science and technology to encapture humans in this 'iron cage'. Just as Tillich attempts to challenge this form of heteronomy, so Habermas wants to argue that forms of human autonomy remain an alternative possibility. In order to do this though he requires further distinctions.

First comes the demarcation between strategic or instrumental action and communicative action:

We call an action oriented to success *instrumental* when we consider it under



the aspect of following technical rules of action and assess the efficiency of an intervention into a complex of circumstances and events. We call an action oriented to success *strategic* when we consider it under the aspect of following rules of rational choice and assess the efficacy of influencing the decisions of a rational opponent... By contrast, I shall speak of *communicative* action whenever the actions of the agents involved are co-ordinated not through egocentric calculations of success but through acts of reaching understanding (pp.285-6).

How does Habermas connect communicative action to reason and rationality? The point is that the process of reaching understanding aims at an agreement that meets the conditions of rationally motivated assent to an utterance. Although it is possible to impose agreement by force, that could not be described as a rational process. Why should one person freely choose to agree with another unless the other has presented a reasoned argument backed up by validity claims that can be tested and challenged? 'The speech act of one person succeeds only if the other accepts the offer contained in it by taking (however implicitly) a 'yes' or 'no' position on a validity claim that is in principle criticizable' (p.287). Hence communicative action requires a form of rationality that Habermas wants to argue is embedded in the very operation of language itself – this he describes as a universal pragmatics (p. 287).<sup>†</sup>

There are four types of validity claim implicit in every speech act. First, the speaker presumably intends that the hearer understands what he/she is saying, so that if a problem arises, the hearer can pursue the conversation by asking for a clarification of meaning. Second, the normative context within which a speech act is made has to be appropriate. So, for instance, a priest in full robes walking on to a football pitch and showing a player a red card is clearly out of place, just as a football referee would be out of place coming forward in church to celebrate the Eucharist. Third, any statement must be able to be tested for its truth content and, fourth, the hearer needs to be convinced of the sincerity or truthfulness of the speaker. In other words, communication assumes that it is possible and desirable to be able to discern whether or not a statement is true and the speaker is to be trusted. Habermas' argument is that the very nature of human communication through discourse carries these validity claims and that this holds good in all languages and cultures. Thus there is a form of rationality – essentially procedural – that can still be seen as universal. So, even though the old unifying ontological reason has been undermined, it has its 'Post-Foundational' successor in Habermas' communicative reason. This is essentially the concluding point of *The Theory of Communicative Action* vol. 1, but his exposition is not yet complete.

Having got thus far in the argument and decided that Weber's theory of modernity contains significant limitations, Habermas returns in vol. 2 to the earlier discussion about stages of social evolution and examines the work of Durkheim. This analysis is important for the purposes of this thesis because it focusses on the role of religion in social

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<sup>†</sup> It needs to be noted that the concept of a validity claim being employed by Habermas is an extension of the more familiar usage which refers simply to the matter of testing logical inferences. Habermas is talking about validity claims as claims that are intrinsically publically verifiable through the medium of language.



reproduction and further establishes the link between religion and communicative action. The key concept here is the linguistification of the sacred, meaning the processes through which religious beliefs become articulated and then subject to open debate, and then forms one of the roots of what Habermas describes as communicative reason.

One of the problems Durkheim set out to resolve was how it is possible for people both to belong wholly to themselves and also to belong just as completely to wider social groupings. Religious symbols can be seen as a way of crossing this apparent divide:

Religious symbols have the same meaning for the members of the same group: on the basis of this uniform sacred semantics, they make possible a kind of intersubjectivity that is still this side of the first, second and third persons, but is nevertheless beyond the threshold of sheer collective contagion by feelings (Habermas 1987, vol. 2, 52).

Once this is interpreted as a dynamic process it is possible to understand religious symbolism as the medium of a special form of symbolically mediated interaction. 'Ritual practice serves to bring about communion in a communicative fashion' (p. 52). Hence there is a more detailed explanation of how religion functions in the tasks of social integration and reproduction. But, of course, this is to describe a situation that according to Habermas no longer exists and it is the nature of and reasons for this change that are his real interests here.

In order to provide an explanation Habermas employs yet another distinction, that between the sacred and the profane. It is worth a longer quotation because the argument is significant for our specific concern for the relationship between reason and religion:

I would conjecture that there is a split in the medium of communication corresponding to the segregation of the sacred from the profane domains of life: religious signification, which makes possible a normative consensus and thereby provides the foundation for a ritual co-ordination of action, is the archaic part left over from the stage of symbolically mediated interaction after experiences from domains in which perceptible and manipulable objects are dealt with in a more and more propositionally structured manner flow into communication. Religious symbols are disengaged from functions of adapting and mastering reality; they serve especially to link those behavioural dispositions and instinctual energies set loose from innate programmes with the medium of symbolic communication (p. 54).

There is both a positive and a negative here. On the one hand, it is being argued that religion has lost many of its former functions and is now surrounded by other disciplines such as science that offer mastery and control. On the other, there is a clear link between religion and communicative reason and Habermas states that religious symbolism is one of the three pre-linguistic roots of communicative action (p. 71). If this is to be accepted then it seems that religion is bound to lose wider credibility as well as its social functions as soon as the processes of linguistification or rationalization set in. This is certainly the way that Habermas describes it:

the authority of the holy is gradually replaced by the authority of an achieved consensus... The disenchantment and disempowering of the domain of the sacred takes place by way of a linguistification of the ritually secured, basic, normative agreement; going along with this is a release of the rationality potential in communicative action (p. 77).



This leads to some uncomfortable questions. Is it simply that, as many sociologists suggest, religion belongs to an earlier stage of social evolution and that what remains now is merely a residue, surviving uneasily in the pockets of personal life as yet relatively untouched by modern thought? Or is it rather that religions, like other traditions, are now changing form in the light of the growth of reflective consciousness and the need for open debate and reasoning over matters of belief and value? Habermas appears to be arguing for the second alternative and suggests that all traditions now retain what conviction and authority they have to the extent to which they are subject to criticizable validity claims and thus to the criteria of communicative action:

The authority of the sacred that stands behind institutions is no longer valid *per se*. Sacred authorization becomes dependent instead on the justificatory accomplishments of religious world views (p. 89).

So the price that religion has to pay in a Habermasian world is that it must justify itself by its achievements.

The service that Habermas provides to theology is to set out some of the key considerations that would accompany a 'Post-Foundational' or 'Post-Metaphysical' approach. Theology of course is free to reject this possibility, but, as I suggested in the opening chapter, it then runs the risk of failing to engage seriously with contemporary thought. However, if one shares enough of Tillich's concern to try to construct an apologetic theology that does aim for critical engagement, then the option of withdrawal from the world in that way is not open. In that case the arguments presented by Habermas surely represent one of the major challenges to and points of engagement with theology. Is the picture of the role of religion in social evolution anything like accurate? How could this be established? If theology has its own vision or version of social evolution how does it see this progressing in the light of the theories of modernity or even Post-Modernity?

If one is to seek an answer to these questions then Habermas' concept of communicative reason needs to enter the picture. It may be both the contemporary form of ontological reason and an heir to religious symbolism and world views as a factor in social reproduction and integration. However, the implications of the reflective consciousness associated with it must be taken fully into account. Tradition maintaining itself only on the basis of shared agreement achieved through critical debate requires a theology prepared to be open to question and not claiming immunity from critique. Tradition being willing to allow a greater freedom of interpretation and flexibility of belief requires a theology more amenable to engaging with those beyond its immediate boundaries. A theology responsive to the demands of communicative reason must also acknowledge the requirements of democracy and autonomy in its search for contemporary meaning. It is to a closer examination of these implications that the thesis will turn following a brief historical excursus.

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## Chapter Three

### REASON AND THEOLOGY: AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

#### Introduction

Before the argument moves on to a more detailed examination of the implications of Habermas' work on reason it is important to establish an historical perspective. The objective is to illustrate that at least some of the key issues originate in debates reaching back to the Enlightenment. It will also become clear that theology reflects the divisions and differences that obtain within philosophy.

In order to set a framework for this discussion it will be useful to begin with a comment on Habermas' recent work on law as this sets the scene for subsequent investigation. In the introduction to *Between Facts and Norms* (Habermas 1997, xii) William Rehg traces the problems Habermas is tackling back to Kant:

...Kant's account of legitimacy, as Habermas reads it, ultimately subordinates law to morality. Kant also relied on a metaphysical framework that is no longer plausible: on his account, the possibility of universal acceptability depends on a pre-established harmony of reason beyond the empirical world. Whereas subordinating law to morality oversimplifies the rational bases of legitimacy, invoking a transcendently unified reason presumes consensus prior to actual public discourse. Nonetheless, Kant's appeal to rational consensus as a regulative ideal captures an important part of the tension in law. If law is essentially constituted by a tension between facticity and validity – between its factual generation, administration and enforcement in social institutions on the one hand and its claim to deserve general recognition on the other – then a theory that situates the idealizing character of validity claims in concrete social contexts recommends itself for the analysis of law. This is just what the theory of communicative action allows, without the metaphysical pretensions and moralistic over-simplification we find in Kant.

In other words, Habermas' 'Post-Metaphysical' version of reason attempts to do justice both to the need for a universal dimension to law enshrined in the requirement for recognition, and to the practical reality of its concrete manifestations. Communicative reason caters for both the universal and the particular, to put it in terms of a more familiar philosophical debate, but the universal is not in the form of a reason that predetermines content, as had been the case in the Enlightenment debate with religion.

As will be illustrated shortly, this is precisely the recurrent source of controversy over the relationship between reason and faith and this will be encountered in at least the following forms. First there is a distinction between a reason that claims for itself a God's-eye view and a universal validity that transcends all specific religious viewpoints and a Christian claim to truth that is founded on a particular set of historical events, enshrined in narratives recounted by a particular group of people. This has sometimes



been described as the scandal of particularity. Second, and related to it, is the debate between forms of natural theology that would hold that truth about God is available more widely through the natural order, including human reason, and a revealed theology that holds that truth about God is only accessible through the specific and particular revelation constituted by Jesus Christ. Third, there is a division between those who have held a relatively optimistic view of human nature and human progress linked to its ability to apply reason in the fields of morality, science and religion (liberals), and those who doubt or question whether any such progress is possible and emphasize the fallen nature of humanity (neo-orthodox). Fourth, there is a disagreement between those who would seek to find God's presence in the wider culture and those who see the Christian Gospel as at all times distinct from and critical towards all cultural forms. Finally there is a subsequent distinction between those who advocate a form of philosophical or apologetic theology, explicitly acknowledging and using the insights of other disciplines, and those who adhere to a dogmatic theology, claiming that the only valid sources of authority are those of Scripture and Tradition.

To turn Habermas' title around, the debate in theology is between norms and facts, between validity and facticity. Norms and validity require some notion of reason and a way of crossing boundaries: facticity refers to the actuality of Christian belief and practice from within the faith community. The argument, as in contemporary political philosophy, is between the liberals who are still searching for an order that can cross cultural, ethnic and religious boundaries and the communitarians who maintain that it is only from within the confines of specific communities and narratives that moral and political orders can be identified (Mulhall and Swift 1992).

As will be seen, the tension between reason and theology has arisen because reason has been consistently identified with the first of each of these polarities – the universal; natural theology; an optimistic view of human nature and its capacity for progress; confidence in cultural forms and in the powers of human insight – and these have fed what is broadly described as a liberal approach, both in theology and politics. The battle lines are drawn wherever and whenever each of the above has proved mistaken or unfounded in its optimism and been seen to distort and misrepresent the particularity of the Christian faith. If the approach of Habermas and his colleagues to the nature of reason could offer an alternative path through these debates, doing justice to what is of value on both sides – situating validity claims in concrete social contexts – then theology could perhaps move beyond the polarities outlined above.

For a brief illustration of how the tension between the liberal and the neo-orthodox has dominated theology in recent generations one may turn to the autobiographical essays of Martin Luther King, perhaps known better for his role in the American Civil Rights Movement, yet also clearly a child of his time in terms of theology. He acknowledges that he began his personal pilgrimage as a liberal, cherishing the following values: 'its devotion to the search for truth, its insistence on an open and analytical mind, its refusal to abandon the best light of reason' (King 1992, 55). However, the more he encountered the depth of human evil the greater his questioning of the liberal approach: '...I came to recognize the complexity of man's social involvement and the glaring reality of collective evil. I came to feel that liberalism had been all too sentimental concerning human nature



and that it leaned towards a false idealism' (p. 56). This included a growing disillusion with reason itself:

Liberalism failed to see that reason by itself is little more than an instrument to justify man's defensive ways of thinking. Reason, devoid of purifying power of faith, can never free itself from distortions and rationalizations.

However, this did not lead King to an uncritical adoption of neo-orthodoxy, for he felt that the latter failed to answer basic questions, both because of its pessimism about human nature and because of its doctrine of God:

In its attempt to preserve the transcendence of God, which had been neglected by liberalism's overstress of his immanence, neo-orthodoxy went to the extreme of stressing a God who was hidden, unknown and 'wholly other'. In its revolt against liberalism's overemphasis on the power of reason, neo-orthodoxy fell into a mood of antirationalism and semifundamentalism, stressing a narrow, uncritical biblicism.

King goes on to say that both approaches express a partial truth, and that his own thought has moved on to utilize the existentialism popularized by Tillich as being better able to acknowledge both the conflicts and the hopes in human existence. There is a sense in which King's journey is a cameo of theology since the Enlightenment, a dissatisfaction with the extremes of both liberalism and neo-orthodoxy and an attempt to identify resources that can carry the debate further. Rather than turning to existentialism though, I aim to show that a Habermasian approach to reason is a more appropriate contribution.

### **Kant**

As has already been suggested, it is impossible to do justice to the debate about the relationship between reason and faith without returning to the work of Kant. In significant ways it was Kant who set the terms for the subsequent debate and later contributions presuppose his exposition of the subject. For the philosophy of the time, concerned with the nature of knowledge and the role of human reason within that, the starting point was bound to be the question of how we can claim to know the things that we do and this, in turn, was bound to have implications for human claims to know anything of God. It is now acknowledged that Kant was responsible for a paradigm shift in philosophy where knowledge can no longer be understood as resulting from a correspondence between human concepts and an objective, external reality that provides a metaphysical grounding, but must begin with the human understanding itself, and the forms and categories this imposes upon reality. This being the case, reason becomes central to all human knowing. As Hans Küng says:

Hence the self-knowledge of the human reason, the human capacity for reason in all its dimensions, more precisely the self-knowledge of the pure understanding and the pure reason in so far as with their 'pure' concepts and ideas they a priori constitute and regulate our experiences and their objects. That is the prior, 'transcendental' question put by Kant about the way in which we know objects, about the conditions of the possibility of any human knowledge at all. In this way the whole of reality is constructed from the human subject. But does that mean that Kant denied God? (Küng 1995, 672).



It is clear that he did not, but what Kant does do is to draw a strict demarcation line between faith and reason. Although the caricature of Enlightenment philosophy is of an over-arching confidence in a reason that claims to determine all forms of human knowledge, such a view cannot be attributed to Kant, whose concern was as much the limits of reason and its consequent relation to other domains of human thought. So faith, for Kant, lies beyond the limits of reason. In the preface to the second edition of *The Critique of Pure Reason* he comments: 'I have therefore found it necessary to deny knowledge, in order to make room for faith' (1929, 29). Again, at the close of this volume he states: 'Belief in a God and in another world is so interwoven with my moral sentiment that as there is little danger of my losing the latter, there is equally little cause for fear that the former can ever be taken from me' (p.650).

So it is not the case that Kant's understanding of reason leads in any way to atheism or to a denial of a valid realm for theology. Yet it is the issues of the precise nature of what then remains for theology and what form of Christianity Kant is positing that are of concern to the traditional Christian. Does the strict demarcation between faith and reason do justice to Christianity's self-understanding, or does it dictate terms to theology about where it can fit into a picture that is actually determined by philosophy?

We turn then to a brief examination of Kant's work as it relates to the concerns of this thesis. Kant attempted to demonstrate that the traditional arguments to prove the existence of God were a misguided exercise failing to take into account the limits of human thought. It is equally the case though – according to Kant – that human reason could not disprove the existence of God. What has to be understood is that there are different types of reason in operation and one needs to be clear which is appropriate for particular areas of human activity. As far as faith is concerned Kant believes that the theoretical reason associated with the studies of the physical sciences and mathematics is not appropriate, but that the realm of faith can only have contact with practical or action-guiding moral reason.

Kant's exclusion of theology from the realm of theoretical knowledge is an example of a larger programme for establishing the boundaries of reason that lies at the heart of his critical philosophy. The *Critique of Pure Reason* claims to establish mathematics and physical science on a sure foundation, but only at the price of restricting their scope to mere appearances (phenomena). Things as they are (or may be) in themselves (noumena) are inaccessible to our theoretical knowledge (R.M. Adams in the Introduction to *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason, and Other Writings*, trans. and ed. A. Wood and G. Di Giovanni, 1998, ix).

Within this philosophical framework God is conceived by Kant as a thing in itself, a noumenon, not to be identified with the appearances that are the subject of the greater certainty of the physical sciences. This leaves God however beyond the realm of direct human experience as the categories with which we receive and shape phenomena are not capable of giving us access to this other reality. Clearly this approach will raise serious questions for a particular religious tradition such as Christianity which does claim to have access to God, specifically through revelation and the encounter with the person of Jesus Christ. One must beware though of assuming that this means that Kant reduces theology to morality, or that his concept of God is merely a philosophical abstraction: it is much



more a matter of assigning modes of human thought to their appropriate domains and thereby protecting their integrity. It is also the case that morality plays a considerable role in Kant's overall scheme. This is particularly so in his notion of the good will which is central to his understanding of morality.

Kant's aspiration for the good will is in important ways religious... He indicates that he is looking for something that would be good without limitation, something unqualifiedly good. Will we find empirically, in ourselves or in our neighbours, any will that is good without limitation? Kant (plausibly enough) thinks not. The good will for Kant is therefore a transcendent object of aspiration, in the sense that it transcends any empirically available realization of it, though he does not think of it as transcending the human as such (p. xiv).

So where does this leave Kant's understanding of organized religion and his relationship to the doctrines of Christianity? Kant's religion is indeed to be grounded in practical reason and in that sense can be described as rationalistic; however he does allow that revelation can play a carefully circumscribed role in religious life. Revelation represents the empirical and historical sources of religious belief and practice and its role is to determine the form of a church or ethical community in a way that his own essentially rational doctrines formed by practical reason cannot. This is the ecclesiastical faith that he contrasts with his own pure religious faith. However, for a church to be a true church it must meet certain conditions. First its doctrines and practices must not contradict the principles of rational morality and in that sense it will remain within the boundaries of mere reason. Then it must also assign the pure religious faith of reason priority over its own historically conditioned doctrines and practices, understanding the latter as the means of fostering a public embodiment of the former. Finally, such a church must aim for the point at which these historically bounded factors can be dispensed with as it moves towards a pure religious faith. It is not clear whether Kant believes this will ever happen or whether it is simply an horizon or goal to be aimed for. It is certainly the case then that Kant constructs an understanding of faith, based upon practical reason, that creates points of tension with traditional forms of Christianity.

From this point on one can identify at least most of the polarities that come to form the subsequent debate over the relationship between reason and faith. Which is to be the determining factor, reason or the revelation through Christ claimed by Christianity? If the former dictates content in advance, then it is natural to expect Christianity to object that the essential character of the faith is being denied. Kant's search is for some universal form of religion, if not directly accessible to and lying beyond the scope of reason, then positioned by the limits of reason and having more to do with moral duty than with specific historical events. One also encounters a considerable degree of optimism in Kant's view of what humans can achieve for themselves, an inevitable consequence of the view that knowledge itself is seen as the product of human concepts and categories. Thus the battle lines are drawn between reason and faith, apparently to last to the present day. One final quote from Kant provides a summary of the issues:

Natural theology is such a concept at the boundary of human reason, being constrained to look beyond this boundary to the idea of a Supreme Being...not in order to determine anything relatively to this mere being of



the understanding, which lies beyond the world of sense, but in order to guide the use of reason within the world of sense according to principles of the greatest possible (theoretical as well as practical) unity... Thereby reason does not merely invent a being, but, as beyond the sensible world there must be something that can be thought only by the pure understanding, reason determines that something in this particular way though only of course according to analogy (1977, 101).

The problem for theology is that the apparent consequence of Kant's claim is that reason determines the location of faith rather than faith determining the location of reason and that subsequently there is a failure to do justice to the specifics or the singularity of the Christian faith experience.

### **Schleiermacher**

In order to illustrate further dimensions of the debate about reason and faith we turn to Schleiermacher. In particular, the concerns over the relationship between Gospel and culture and the possibilities of constructing a theology that takes into account the insights of other disciplines, come to the fore in the work of this theologian. Perhaps his major project was to discover ways of making Christianity accessible to and comprehensible for the 'cultured despisers of religion' (1958) – those who having accepted the intellectual conclusions of a developing science, historical scholarship and philosophy, found themselves unable to attribute any credibility to the Christian faith. So Schleiermacher's starting point is exactly those ideas and interpretations that the cultured despisers now took for granted. Hence the philosophies of Kant and Hegel, historical criticism as applied to the foundation documents underlying the biblical revelation, and the literature, art and social life which had become the backbone of contemporary culture, formed the base from which Schleiermacher constructed his theology.

In addition, he was largely responsible for the subdivisions within theology that are now taken for granted: philosophical theology, historical and dogmatic theology, and practical or pastoral theology. The context to which he was responding was one in which theology had lost its pre-eminence, both academically and culturally. The approaches advocated by Kant had been taken up and developed in such a way as to bring further into question the intellectual credibility of a faith that relied so heavily on specific historical events.

Schleiermacher set out to show that one could be both a person of culture and learning and a person of faith. His approach was basically apologetic, a potential resolution of the tensions between Christianity and modernity. It is significant that many of his key contemporaries, for instance Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, had turned away from theology and into either philosophy or art, betraying perhaps a Kantian frustration with traditional Christianity:

Certainly, they had not given up 'religion' completely, but had incorporated it into their speculative metaphysical system – as philosophical thinkers who certainly cannot be said to have denied all religion (above all not the 'piety of thought' claimed by Hegel); however the roots of their life and thought were genuinely philosophical. Many of Schleiermacher's new friends showed only an incomprehension of religion (Küng 1995, 697).



The question becomes 'What is the nature of religion?'. Is the form of religion rejected by its cultured despisers of the essence of Christianity, or is what they reject the result of a series of philosophical accretions? This is what Schleiermacher sets out to prove, very much in reaction against the Post-Kantian form of Christianity. So religion is not to be reduced to morality, or to aesthetics, still less to the speculative reasoning of philosophy. It has its own distinctive character, clearly demarcated from both metaphysics and ethics:

The contemplation of the pious is the immediate consciousness of the universal existence of all finite things, in and through the Infinite, and of all temporal things, in and through the Eternal. Religion is to seek this and find it in all that lives and moves, in all growth and change, in all doing and suffering. It is to have life and to know life in immediate feeling, only as such an existence in the Infinite and Eternal. Where this is found, religion is satisfied, where it hides itself there is for her unrest and anguish, extremity and death. Wherefore it is a life in the infinite nature of the Whole, in the One and in the All, in God, having and possessing all things in God, and God in all. Yet religion is not knowledge and science, either of the world or of God. Without being knowledge, it recognizes knowledge and science. In itself it is an affection, a revelation of the Infinite in the finite, God being seen in it and it in God (1958, 36).

Hence the implication of Schleiermacher's position is that religion is the awareness and articulation of the feeling of ultimate dependence. However, the question remains whether, despite his intention of distinguishing between Christianity on the one hand, and ethics and metaphysics on the other, he has in fact allowed the latter to determine faith's location. By starting from and accepting the presuppositions of the contemporary culture he leaves himself open to the criticism that he has allowed alien or non-Christian criteria to determine the acceptable form and location of faith. Is this not merely another philosophical system, albeit one based on experience and feeling rather than reason?

It would seem that this is not a justifiable critique of Schleiermacher's position, nor does it do justice to his overall intentions and one must beware of attributing to him ideas that stem from a much later polarisation of Gospel and Culture. This becomes particularly evident given a closer examination of Schleiermacher's views on the nature and person of Christ. He claims that the appearance of Jesus Christ in human history is a natural fact, thus emphasizing the humanity of Christ. Yet this does not deny God's agency in these events, or the vocation of Jesus to his messianic office in the context of God's purposes for his creation. It is in the person of Jesus that human nature, so far only realized in an imperfect form, realizes its full potential. This places Schleiermacher within a tradition of Christological thought that includes both St Paul and Irenaeus and he does in fact use the language of the second Adam.

As everything which has been brought into human life through Christ is a new creation, so Christ himself is the second Adam, the beginner and originator of this more perfect human life, or the completion of the creation of man (F.D.E. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, p. 367).

So it needs to be recognised that Schleiermacher had a direct concern for the details



of Jesus' life and that his Christology is essentially historical rather than philosophical. However, there were certain elements of the received tradition that were less amenable to him, notably the views that stress the death or suffering or blood of Christ as a satisfaction of God's honour or the price of redemption or a punishment accepted on our behalf. It is the corporate experience of redemption within the community of believers through the growing of a consciousness of what God would have us become that has more meaning for Schleiermacher, to the point where this may have greater significance than the actual reports of the life of Jesus accessed through Scripture and Tradition. Thus there is in his work a tension between the idea of how Christ is important for humanity, based on his own reading of the Tradition, and the concerns to return to the fine detail of biblical interpretation. Yet there is also a considerable subtlety of understanding that resists any simplistic reduction of his writing to a merely culture-bound interpretation of the Christian faith.

### **Ritschl, Harnack and Troeltsch**

Moving forward in time to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it is necessary to examine how the key themes are played out in the works of three theologians who are often described as the originators of Liberal Theology. That description is probably only justifiable in the most general sense that each was prepared to take note of the findings of non-theological disciplines. When it is used in a judgemental manner it obscures significant differences between the three. Macquarrie treats Ritschl, Harnack and Troeltsch under the heading of 'Positivist Christology' (1990, 251), but is at pains to point out that this is not the same as the 'positive religion' identified by Kant and the young Hegel. Both of those believed that, in its pure form, Christianity would be identical with the religion of reason and be able to do without all dogmas, rituals and priests, and even the historical figure of Jesus. The 'positive religion' to which they referred was Christianity in its institutionalized historical form, attributable to the disciples rather than to Jesus himself. However, this later 'positivist Christology' refers to the broad acceptance of the philosophy that restricts human inquiry to what is observable and testable and thus susceptible to reliable examination. So speculative and metaphysical questions are automatically excluded on the grounds that they are unanswerable.

Hence there is a shift in the work of these three theologians towards the studies of history and ethics. Natural theology and metaphysical arguments for the existence of God are left behind and there is a concentration on the revelation of God in Jesus Christ as a positive datum. Yet this movement can also be seen as related to a revival of interest in Kant's philosophy in the two senses that he was also critical of metaphysics and that he highlighted the idea that morality could point beyond itself to a deeper spiritual reality.

Ritschl picks up some of the familiar themes, the rejection of metaphysics and of the traditional dogmas of the church, which he sees as an illicit mixture of metaphysics and religion. Any emphasis upon faith being confined to the inner life receives considerable criticism, and he is uneasy with Schleiermacher's approach to religion. He focusses his attention on the ethical significance of Christianity but, unlike Kant, he expresses a real belief in the importance of history and a concern for the revelation given in Jesus Christ.



Also, whereas Kant appears to have hoped for a time when a rational, ethical religion would be able to establish itself without recourse to any historical events, Ritschl holds that such an abstract religion is unviable and that the concrete, historical features of Christianity are of the essence: 'There is no religion that is not positive, and there never has been: natural religion, so called, is an imagination' (1900, 539).

However, the first issue with Ritschl is whether he attempts to place too much weight on the actual historical events and their significance for the faith community. He takes up Luther's doctrine of justification and uses it to point to the religious community founded by Jesus Christ, the final realization of which will be the Kingdom of God. So the figure of Christ is not simply a paradigm or exemplar, but is right at the heart of the Christian understanding of a new relationship with God.

If Christ, by what he has done and suffered for my salvation, is my Lord and if, by trusting to the power of what he has done for me, I honour him as my God, then that is a value judgement of a direct kind. It is not a judgement which belongs to the sphere of disinterested scientific knowledge, like the formula of Chalcedon. Every cognition of a religious sort is a direct judgement of value (p. 398).

Second, Ritschl is forced to return to the prior philosophical question of the basis for human knowledge, despite his rejection of metaphysics, and resorts to this notion of value judgement as a substitute answer. Yet there is a real suspicion that in doing this he is merely re-introducing metaphysics in a concealed form. If Ritschl's claim is to be justified then the value judgement cannot be separated from an objective judgement as to what is really the case. As Macquarrie says:

A judgement about what 'really is the case'...could...be called a metaphysical judgement... Whatever we call it, the point is that the ascription of divinity to Jesus Christ is not *merely* a value judgement but entails also the assertion of a relation between Jesus and God (1990, 256).

So there is a concern that Ritschl is unable to avoid the philosophical questions that he claims to eschew. He fails to identify an alternative objective criterion to support his claims, leaving him with what appears to be an arbitrary position. This particular weakness will be encountered in later theological work that also attempts a similar cutting of ties with philosophy.

It is in Harnack's work that we find the high point but also the beginning of the end of Liberal Theology. At the start of the twentieth century he was probably the most influential contemporary theologian and, as such, became the main initial target of the reaction against this approach to theology. His work is of interest in this context because of his belief that it was possible to identify a central core or essence of Christianity, one not to be confused with all the later trappings and accretions attributable to philosophical and cultural influences. The task of the theologian was to liberate this authentic Christianity that would then carry the power of conviction for those who had turned away from the faith. However, this was not simply to be identified with some original, historical or 'primitive Christianity' as his critics assumed, but some basic beliefs no longer weighed down by the doctrines and dogmas of institutional religion. In this sense there is common ground with Kant's search for a religion unshackled from the accidents of history, and yet Harnack does still hold to the importance of Jesus and particularly the content of his teaching.



The specific aspects of his teaching that Harnack highlights are the coming of the Kingdom of God, interpreted as a universal moral commonwealth, God the Father and the infinite value of the human soul, and the commandment of love that lifts human morality to a new dimension. All of this assumes that it is possible to reconstruct a reliable and accurate portrayal of Jesus Christ through historical scholarship, and yet Harnack's own picture of Christ could be seen to rest upon contemporary interpretations as much as upon detailed historical evidence. As with Ritschl, one questions whether this aspect of Harnack's approach can carry the weight he wishes to place upon it. Macquarrie summarizes:

As we move from Kant to Ritschl and Harnack, we see the tide of the historical more and more submerging what had once been regarded as the eternal timeless truths of metaphysics and epistemology. Strauss had indeed pointed out the greatest gulf that separates the modern conception of history from the ancient one and had consigned much of the New Testament record to the realm of myth. But even as late as Harnack there persists the belief in a permanent and unchanging essence of Christianity that has been there from the beginning and can still address us as 'gospel'. Harnack believed that history could purify the gospel by pruning away extraneous developments, but would the reliance on history lead eventually to dissolution? (1990, 264).

Moving on to Troeltsch it is possible to see that this is exactly what now happens. The turn to the historical associated with Ritschl and Harnack is carried to its logical conclusion in Troeltsch's outright adoption of the historical-critical method with its subsequent implications for theology. Although the whole debate may now seem dated, as Van Harvey says, the issues and questions it raises are still on the theological agenda:

The issue with which he wrestled throughout the greater part of his life was the significance of the historical-critical method for traditional Christian belief and theology. He discerned that the development of this method constituted one of the great advances in human thought... Western culture...has always been characterized by a sense of history. But only in the nineteenth century did this manifest itself in a sustained and critical attempt to recover the past by means of the patient analysis of evidence and the insistence on the impartiality and truthfulness of the historian (1967, 3-4).

The precise changes brought about by the application of this method include the making of distinctions between history and nature, fact and myth, the tendency to evaluate events in terms of their origins, and an awareness of the relativity of one's own norms of thought and valuation. It is perhaps the last of these, the awareness of cultural and historical relativism, that poses the greatest challenge to traditional theology.

If theologians were now to continue to place great weight upon the historical events of Christ's life and teaching, were they going to claim an immunity from historical-critical method espoused by the rest of the academic community? In the case of biblical interpretation more generally, were theologians prepared to submit themselves to a way of working that could, at best, yield probability rather than certainty? Even more fundamentally – and here we return to the classic problem of an alien reason imposing both form and content on faith – were theologians prepared to accept the application of a method that was based on assumptions irreconcilable with traditional belief?

If the theologian regards the Scripture as supernaturally inspired, the historian



must assume that the Bible is intelligible only in terms of its historical context and is subject to the same principles of interpretation and criticism that are applied to other ancient literature... If the theologian believes on faith that certain events occurred, the historian regards all historical claims as having only a greater or lesser degree of probability, and he regards the attachment of faith to these claims as a corruption of historical judgement (Van Harvey 1967, 5).

Troeltsch's view was that theology had to adopt the historical-critical method in full if it was to retain any intellectual credibility and that also meant having to live with the consequences of that decision. Thus we encounter again the problem of the scandal of particularity, the clash between what claims to be a universal method of inquiry, and beliefs based on a specific set of historical events. The floodgates had been opened to make theology susceptible to each succeeding form of historical scholarship with the subsequent disruption for its interpretation of the figure of Jesus. The question, says Troeltsch, now facing theology is whether it can continue to place such a central emphasis upon the New Testament accounts when it appears the best they can yield is a degree of probability that certain events occurred as actually recorded. The choice is between cutting theology off from the presuppositions of contemporary scholarship or accepting that its own presuppositions are now subject to the uncertainties of historical scholarship.

A closer examination of Troeltsch's own ideas illustrates an even deeper complexity. A major concern was the extent to which the historian's own assumptions determine the conclusions he reaches. Troeltsch argues that critical historical inquiry rests on three inter-related principles. First is the principle of criticism that acknowledges that our judgements about the past cannot simply be classified as true or false, but can only claim a greater or lesser degree of probability and must always be open to revision. Second is the principle of analogy by which we assume that there is a sufficient degree of similarity between the present and the past that we are studying to justify our judgements. Third there is the principle of correlation, which assumes that events are so related and inter-dependent that no radical change can take place in the historical nexus without effecting a change in all that immediately surrounds it. Troeltsch also believed that these principles were incompatible with traditional Christian belief. So, for example, assumptions about the supernatural events of Jesus' life appear to conflict with the principle of analogy. However, this takes the discussion into the realm of whether this is another instance of modern beliefs about what is possible, dictating terms to a reality where God manifested himself in ways that traditional human thought patterns could not accommodate.

What was to become of theology in Troeltsch's view? Like Harnack he was concerned with the idea that there is an essential Christianity, an identifiable core that could be separated from its particular historical forms, notably its association with hellenistic culture and Greek mythology. So, 'the salvation of persons united with the holy and loving will of God in a kingdom of love is the innermost kernel of the Gospel. The special nature of Christianity is determined by the formulation of its purpose alone' (1913, 261). As with both Ritschl and Harnack the key questions are whether this assumed central core is anything other than an arbitrary conclusion reflecting the author's own prejudices and beliefs, and what remains of Christianity after it has been taken apart by



critical scholarship? Troeltsch appears to place his trust in the continuing significance of Christianity on the person of Christ as the central symbol that any religion needs, but, as Sykes points out, this is a description of the way churches behave, not a justification of that behaviour (1984, 173), and seems a wafer-thin assumption on which to base the validity of the Christian faith. Is there really enough substance left in Christianity to warrant people's trust and adherence once one has accepted the criteria of critical reason, or can the conflict between reason and faith only yield one winner? Liberal Theology now faced its fiercest opponent in the figure of Karl Barth, and it is to his response to the tradition of Ritschl, Harnack and Troeltsch that attention will now turn.

### Barth

There is obviously no possibility of being able to do justice to such a body of theological thought in what is a brief historical reconstruction of a particular aspect of theology. The concern of this chapter is simply to offer an account of the relation between reason and faith since the Enlightenment, and yet it feels as though all that has been narrated so far is merely a prelude to Barth's opening chord. If Kant is the dominant philosopher to date, then Barth has to be his theological equivalent. The latter began his working life within the Liberal establishment, a pupil of both Hermann and Harnack, and also an editorial assistant of the *Christliche Welt*, the most influential journal of Liberal Protestantism. This was the dominant approach of the time and Barth had his own roots within it.

However, a combination of events was to change everything. Barth's own appointment to be pastor of Safenwil, where he was brought face to face with the challenge of preaching the gospel, and the outbreak of the First World War – a turning point for many of his contemporaries within theology – were the decisive factors. In both spheres the inadequacies and limitations of Liberal Protestantism were rapidly exposed. The task of preaching – to become so central to Barth's theology – required a source of inspiration and confidence that the academic theology of the time could not supply. Current political events solicited from the theological establishment a compliant and uncritical response that failed to do justice to any Christian word of prophecy or judgement:

One day in early August 1914 stands out in my personal memory as a black day. Ninety-three German intellectuals impressed public opinion by their proclamation in support of the war policy of Wilhelm II and his counsellors. Among these intellectuals I discovered to my horror almost all of my theological teachers whom I had greatly venerated. In despair over what this indicated about the signs of the time I suddenly realized that I could not any longer follow either their ethics or dogmatics or their understanding of the Bible and of history. For me at least, nineteenth-century theology no longer held any future (1967, 13).

What were the sources of Barth's frustration with the content of Liberal Theology? Clearly the fact that it based its approach on what was essentially a philosophical position that carried with it a humanistic idealism and optimism about the future and a notion of progress founded on the human capacity to exercise reason. For Christianity this meant the reduction of the significance of the person of Christ to an abstract principle or ideal, and that as part of a more general understanding of religion that viewed Christianity as just one of a number rather than as the definitive point of access to God. At the heart



of this rested an emphasis upon humanity rather than upon God, a concentration upon religion as a human activity and achievement rather than upon Christianity as expressing God's call to his people. In addition to this there was a tendency, if not to subordinate Christianity to contemporary culture, then at least to locate it in relation to the dominant cultural ideas and influences. The overall result appeared to be the reduction of theology to a bland moralism that was unable to take a critical distance from predominant political and philosophical ideas. In other words, its basic form could be traced back to the influence of Kant and Schleiermacher and the concern to respond to an external environment permeated by a confidence in reason.

In an address he gave in 1957 Barth acknowledges that he can understand how and why Liberal Theology had developed; however, his complaint is that it went too far in an apologetic direction:

Theology, however, went overboard – and this was its weakness – insofar as confrontation with the contemporary age was its *decisive* and *primary* concern. This was true not only, as happened so often, when it addressed the outside world *ex professo*, in the form of so-called apologetics, but also when it dealt with the questions most proper to itself. Theology never failed to react, whether approvingly or disapprovingly, critically or uncritically, to impulses from outside, at times even with extreme nervousness (1967, 17).

This led to three major consequences. The first is that there is an excess of external stimulation through the encounter with non-Christian ideas that resulted in the neglect of the Christian truth itself. Second there is an uncritical acceptance of some of these ideas at the expense of the development of some key Christian insights. Third there follows a consequent introduction of errors into theology that then gained a certain authority.

Finally, we miss a certain carefree and joyful confidence in the self-validation of the basic concerns of theology, a trust that the most honest commerce with the world might best be answered when the theologians, unheeding the favours or disfavours of this world, confronted it with the results of theological research carried out for its own sake. It did not enter their minds that respectable dogmatics could be good apologetics (p. 18).

Essentially Barth's project was to recapture theology for Christianity and to rescue it from the alien influences of Enlightenment philosophy. What is never really clear in this approach is whether it is advocating a return to a Pre-Enlightenment self-understanding or whether it is arguing for a different and more critical appropriation of Enlightenment ideas. The same ambiguity casts a shadow over contemporary forms of neo-orthodoxy. Is it possible to separate a core or an authentic Christianity from all cultural influences or philosophical ideas and then to do justice to it in its own terms in a way that still performs an apologetic objective? Are Barth and his followers not still pursuing the Holy Grail of an essential Christianity in the manner of Harnack and Troeltsch, albeit more purified from philosophical traits?

Barth would not accept this of course, and he turns his criticism on those who reduce Christianity to merely one form of religion, quoting Schleiermacher and Troeltsch as examples of this mistake (p. 20). He questions whether this actually enabled theology to convince its cultured despisers of its intellectual integrity and credibility and if the price



to be paid for this was a betrayal of Christianity.

The Christian faith had to be understood as a 'religion' if it was to be generally accepted as valid. What if it resisted this classification? What if acceptance was so eagerly sought that Christian faith ceased to be Christian faith as soon as it was interpreted as 'religion'. What if the attempt to give it the 'firm' basis actually removed the real ground from under it? (p. 22)

The result of these attempts to construct an apologetic theology was that the theologians 'were more interested in the Christian faith than in the Christian message' (p. 23). Man's relationship to God replaced God's dealings with man as the focus of their concern. Barth's own early published work, notably his commentary on the Epistle to the Romans sets out to redress the balance and to refocus the theological task, although it is worth noting that, towards the end of his theological output, he does acknowledge that there is some validity in studying the human response to God.

It is clear that Barth's overall approach has significant implications for the relation between reason and faith. Perhaps more than any other recent theologian he has done the most to separate the two themes. In each of his major concerns he battles to extract theology from any philosophical influences. As Bowden states, there are three highlights in Barth's theology: 'God – whose transcendence he stressed to such a degree; Christ – on whom the whole revelation of God to man is centred; and the Bible – through the medium of which that revelation is communicated' (1983, 94). Yet there are weaknesses and problems in each of these areas. Does Barth face up to the question of epistemology in a convincing manner? Kant's question as to the basis of human knowledge is deflected rather than answered on the assumption that any such answer would compromise Christianity with ideas from an alien philosophy. But then theology risks cutting itself off from other disciplines that still struggle with this question and setting up what appears to be an arbitrary and idiosyncratic position. Knowledge of God is a miracle, a gift of God, and God is wholly other and thus beyond all human language. Yet we continue to use the word God on the basis of divine fiat alone.

Similarly with his emphasis on the person of Jesus Christ, Barth's statements read like an attempt to by-pass the difficult questions raised by historical scholarship rather than to tackle them head on. Who and what is this figure of Christ that is so central to Barth, and on what basis do Christians claim to know him or relate to him? Barth appears to be dismissive of all the quests for the historical Jesus, but then is what he presents merely another convenient construct, or simply a reiteration of the classic Christian language without further justification? Finally the Bible itself is understood as a given, the source of the revelation that lies at the heart of the Christian faith. Yet Barth deigns to engage directly with the traditions of biblical criticism and occasionally resorts to forced interpretations of the text in order to support his own position. In each of these key areas he runs the risk of claiming for himself a privileged knowledge and interpretation that he makes no effort to defend or support.

In terms of the polarities identified at the outset of this chapter Barth stands firmly at one extreme. He advocates the unique character of the Christian faith in opposition to any human attempts to discern the truth through reason. There can only be revealed theology, and the role of argument or encounter with God through the natural order is



ruled out in advance. The emphasis is upon human sinfulness and the abject failure of humanity to achieve moral or spiritual progress through its own efforts. Culture is not the realm in which God is to be encountered, neither should theology be over-concerned about adapting to or expressing itself in cultural forms. Finally dogmatic theology is to take precedence over all attempts to construct an apologetics. The best way to engage with the cultured despisers is to stand firm within one's own faith tradition and to preach the word of God without fear or compromise.

What is so important now is that much recent theology has turned back to a Barthian approach in the light of what it believes to be the decisive undermining of Enlightenment reason by Post-Modernity. If there is no universal reason and all that remains are a series of narratives, then Christianity is free once again to tell its story in traditional fashion with confidence and conviction. If all argument is shown to be partial and power-ridden then what remains is to shout the loudest, or to preach with the most self-belief and hope that people will be persuaded by the sheer power of the Christian story. The pendulum has swung back in Barth's direction, but it is still far from obvious whether critical questions have been answered or merely shelved.

### **Pannenberg**

Before bringing the debate right up to date, and noting that Tillich stands in stark contrast to the Barthian approach, we now view the arguments of a more recent German theologian on the subject of faith and reason. The debate has clearly moved on since Barth and Pannenberg is at pains to show that the difficult philosophical questions cannot be by-passed by dogmatic statements. His interpretation of the modern period is that the problem of the relationship between faith and reason has shifted because the initiative has gone over to the side of reason. We note that the theologians to be examined in the final section maintain that the initiative has been taken away from reason by Post-Modernity. However it is Pannenberg's view that:

It is no longer a question of whether the authority of the Christian source of revelation, viz. Scripture, can be accepted by reason without contradiction. In the modern period the question is instead whether reason, after it has been shown that belief on the basis of authority is irrational, can still allow any room at all for the Christian faith (1971, 50–1).

Hence the position that Barth appears to adopt is surely untenable, and the days when theology could just retreat to a standpoint of authority are in the past. This is so because the medieval situation in which the authority of the Christian tradition was unproblematic, has been replaced by the modern context in which questions have now been raised, particularly by the new science of historical criticism. To fail to give attention to these in the manner of Barth fundamentally alters the character of faith itself.

This insistence upon an authority that is no longer generally convincing as an authority takes on the character of an external coercion, and an individual's acceptance of such a claim becomes an arbitrary decision – quite the opposite of what it was earlier, when the acceptance of an authority was grounded in insight into its credibility. If the authority is no longer intelligible as such, and if it no longer convinces our reason of its legitimacy, then all external maintenance of its claim is in vain. For in that case, no matter how much one



may emphasize a prior authority, the believer turns himself into the ultimate ground of faith, as Hume incisively showed (1971, 51–2).

Pannenberg has surely touched upon a vital issue here and offers an explanation of why much contemporary religion, including Christianity, appears to have become a form of subjectivism. As we have learnt from Kant, it is no longer possible to avoid the question of how we know; thus, if knowledge of God can no longer be guaranteed by an appeal to an external authority, the only alternative appears to be the authority or self-authentication of personal experience. If God-talk is no longer about the correspondence of religious language to an objective external reality, then it can only be the articulation of some inner experience or set of values. Again we note in passing that Cupitt's theological non-realism is the logical outworking of this latter position. However, the argument of this thesis is that there is now, following a Habermasian approach, another alternative, a third developing paradigm of truth that goes beyond a pure subjectivism.

Pannenberg is also dissatisfied with dependence upon self-understanding as the basis for the truth of the Christian message, for the simple reason that self-understanding can only be carried out in the wider context of an understanding of the world. There has to be a correlation between the two, in which case the question of the truth of the Christian message involves both ethical and theoretical knowledge. In other words, theology cannot simply choose to ignore or to by-pass the arguments and findings of other disciplines because they have an impact upon how we think of ourselves, whether we acknowledge this or not. Thus whether the challenges to faith emerge from historical criticism or from within the sciences or philosophy, they have to be faced openly and explicitly, or else they will exercise a purely implicit influence. It is not possible to divorce theology from other disciplines. This insight will become crucial in the consideration of those theologians who see Post-Modernity as the occasion and opportunity to do just that.

If the question of the truth of the Christian message is to acknowledge the role of theoretical knowledge, how does this affect the turn to either ethical response associated with Kant, or religious experience as in Schleiermacher? As Pannenberg argues, the opposition between faith and reason continues to be effective even here as both religious and ethical contents are always mediated by theoretical consciousness. Again, failure to acknowledge this reduces the debate between faith and reason to the realm of self-understanding.

The universal validity of a special religious province within the human spirit is what needs to be proven. And beyond this, the peculiar appropriateness of Christian doctrine to this religious disposition must be shown if there is to be any basis for acknowledging the pre-eminence of Christianity over other religions. If such proofs are not forthcoming, the appeal to experience can draw upon only the experience of the individual and thereby transform the Christian faith completely into a phenomenon of subjectivity, claiming no universal obligatoriness (1971, 53).

The fact that this subjective form of religious belief has taken a hold in contemporary society is merely because the sciences have yet to give proper attention to this aspect of human life, 'and therefore leaves it vacant for occupation by subjective tastes which nevertheless remain without any universally binding power' (p. 53). This is what is often



now described as the privatization of religion and is a source of frustration for those who advocate the development of a public theology. Yet how can there be a public theology when theology itself carries no intellectual credibility beyond the confines of the faith community? How can it penetrate beyond these confines unless it can display that it has some stake in the processes of rationality that are at work in the public arena?

Pannenberg is surely correct in saying that theology cannot afford to withdraw from the debate about reason. Abandoning metaphysics, whether it is to retreat to a purely ethical religion, or to one based on religious experience, or to an ultimately subjectivist restatement of dogmatic propositions, does not satisfy the questions raised by Liberal Theology. However, that also is no longer viable in its familiar form as it does appear to sacrifice the particularity of the Christian tradition to a universal reason. What is required is an understanding of reason that can deal differently with the tension between the universal and the particular.

### **The communitarian response: Frei, Lindbeck, Hauerwas and Milbank**

During the last twenty years theological discussion in the USA and to a large extent in Britain has centred on developing the neo-orthodox position, certainly within the broad heritage of a Barthian approach although employing the insights of linguistic philosophy and Wittgenstein in particular, or else espousing an interpretation of Post-Modernity. The objectives however remain familiar: the attempt to free the Christian tradition from the confines of what remains of the Enlightenment and to establish a distinctive Christianity capable of repelling the challenges both of other faiths and of secularisation. The work of Hans Frei and his efforts to liberate biblical interpretation from Enlightenment presuppositions form the obvious starting point. He has argued that biblical interpretation has allowed itself to be shaped by the dictates of reason, thus submerging and distorting the real demands of the Christian message. Thus the assumption of human autonomy has led biblical scholarship to the point where the meaning of the Christian narratives has to be subordinated to or fit in with modern human self-understanding. If Christianity does not coincide with the way we now think of ourselves, so much the worse for Christianity.

What Frei claims to be able to do is to reclaim the prophetic challenge and difference of the Christian tradition by emphasizing its narrative aspect. So the biblical narrative in particular is a story – or series of stories – for Christians to dwell in, not a text to be interpreted for or by those who live outside the world of this text. Hence my use of the term communitarian in this context, making it clear that the meaning and shape of the text can only be discerned once one is already inside and a part of the faith community. There should be no imposition of external criteria of interpretation upon the biblical text.

George Lindbeck has built upon this initial work and extended it to the area of Christian doctrine. Using Wittgenstein's idea of language games he has argued that doctrines are communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude and action, providing the framework within which Christian belief and practice are shaped and perpetuated. It is only once one is within the framework or language game that interpretation of texts is possible and that Christian meaning can be identified. So rather than there being an emphasis upon some sort of religious experience as being the prerequisite for faith, it is



only from within the shared grammar of the Christian community that an experience can be recognized as religious. Following Wittgenstein this is described as a cultural-linguistic approach to theology.

Although such an approach has a superficial attraction and there is an element of truth in the notion that meaning and understanding follow practice and convention as much as they create it, certain questions are left unanswered. How are Christians to go about the task of communicating the faith to those outside the community boundaries? Can Christian ideas and insights have no purchase beyond the 'enclave of recognition'? Does not a cultural-linguistic approach lead only to a form of relativism? If the Christian tradition is as self-sufficient as is being suggested then why does it need to draw upon an external philosophical tradition at all? One may also question whether Wittgenstein intended the concept of language games to lead to the notion of watertight traditions in this way. The danger and limitation, as with Barth, is of setting up what appear to be arbitrary criteria of judgement and placing Christianity so far apart from normal human discourse that it can only dictate its truth from a supposedly safe distance – a location that others may safely ignore. There is also once again the implication that it is possible to identify a pure or essential core of Christianity that remains impervious to external influences.

In terms of the Post-Modern debate it appears that Frei and Lindbeck want to argue both that there can be no Grand Narrative of the Enlightenment, in other words a universal reason that is the final arbiter of truth and meaning, and that Christianity is still the Grand Narrative that offers privileged access to God. Yet a consistently Post-Modern position would hold that there can be no Grand Narratives of any description, only series of local narratives. So Christianity is claiming for itself a privilege that seems arbitrary and immune from external critique. The price of safety is then the end of all meaningful communication. In any case, one may ask which version of Christianity is to be the Grand Narrative. Does not Christianity itself consist of a series of narratives or different interpretations? In which case one is back with the problem of why and how a particular version should claim to be dominant.

Stanley Hauerwas is another scholar from the evangelical stable who adopts a similar communitarian approach. The spur for his reaction against Liberal Theology was the response of Reinhold Niebuhr to the Vietnam War. Despite the fact that the latter was critical of the American government, Niebuhr's only conclusion was that Christians needed to make democracy work more effectively. Hauerwas is critical of this close identification of Christianity with liberal democracy and has since been working to establish a distinctive Christian standpoint on a range of political and ethical issues. Like Lindbeck he holds that it is only from within the Christian community that a Christian approach can be articulated. He is opposed to the idea that the churches should be in dialogue with other groups in order to develop a theology of politics, or of economics, or of whatever the current social concern might be (1991). This is to concede too much ground to the prevailing non-Christian orthodoxies within society. Instead the church should concentrate on identifying and living out its own distinctive narratives and practices.

Part of this rests upon the assumption that liberal democracy is now fading in significance and so Christians would be misguided to become too closely associated with



it. However, there is a more significant dimension to this debate centring on the notion of belief itself. Christianity in the context of liberal democracy, where religious practice is no longer a matter of controversy, tends to become reduced to a matter of belief. This is in contrast to contexts where Christianity was socially and politically condemned and when it was clear that all questions of truth and falsity are political. In that setting what mattered was not belief as such, but rather incorporation into the community of the church. Where believing in Christianity has become a reasonable thing to do – as is the case in liberal democracies – faith loses its cutting edge and becomes just another harmless cultural practice. Against this Hauerwas asserts:

It is my thesis that questions of the truth or the falsity of Christian convictions cannot even be addressed until Christians recover the church as a political community necessary for our salvation... Our beliefs, or better our convictions, only make sense as they are embodied in a political community we call the church (1991, 26).

A further implication of Hauerwas' position is that there is no longer any point using argument as a means of communicating the Christian faith to others as that would presuppose the very Enlightenment hope in open, rational and democratic discussion that Christians should reject. There is no basis for a discourse common to and yet also external to different traditions. In other words, there is no universal that can transcend the particularity of the Christian faith, there are only the universal claims of Christianity itself made from within the confines of its own tradition. It is difficult to see how this approach can avoid leading to relativism and creating an arbitrary Christianity so distinct from the surrounding culture as to be both unable and unwilling to communicate with it. One suspects that Hauerwas is making a particular historical form of the church paradigmatic in reaction to a church that is too closely identified with current political forms. Yet this is almost bound to be the response when theology abandons reason altogether.

It would be misleading to categorise the three previous theologians as Post-Modern, but that term can be applied to John Milbank, now part of a group who go under the banner of Radical Orthodoxy (Milbank, Pickstock and Ward, 1999). However, like those just examined, he too wants to maintain that Christianity is still a Grand Narrative, albeit by employing a more sophisticated philosophical route. It is his understanding of reason though that is the main concern here. On one level the argument is the familiar one that theology has allowed itself to be located in a false position by willingly but mistakenly submitting itself to secular reason. He refers to this as 'the policing of the sublime' (1990, 106). Yet he carries this further by arguing that the other disciplines that have been dictating terms to theology are themselves distorted forms of theology. The claim of the social sciences, based on the self-understanding of a supposedly neutral and value-free reason, is itself shown to be partial and ideological. The task of theology therefore is to regain a sense of itself as a social science and even the queen of sciences, at least for those who are on the Christian pilgrimage to the alternative city:

Theology has frequently sought to borrow from elsewhere a fundamental account of society or history, and then to see what theological insights will cohere with it. But it has been shown that no such fundamental account, in the sense of something neutral, rational and universal, is really available. It



is theology itself that will have to provide its own account of the final causes at work in human history, on the basis of its own particular and historically specific faith (p. 380).

Utilizing again the concept of narrative so popular with the advocates of neo-orthodoxy, Milbank suggests that Christianity can do justice to itself by displaying that it has the best story of all – the one that presents a vision of a peaceful and non-violent realm. This is in contrast to secular reason that Milbank interprets as essentially nihilistic and can lead only to social and intellectual anarchy. Thus theology has no need to engage in dialogue with other disciplines or to take note of reason as it is now clear that the latter is a destructive force.

The task of such a theology is not apologetic, nor even argument. Rather it is to tell again the Christian mythos, pronounce again the Christian logos and call again for Christian praxis in a manner that restores their freshness and originality. It must articulate Christian difference in such a fashion as to make it strange (p. 381).

There are very specific criticisms of this position that I have articulated elsewhere (1997, 88–94), and that I will only summarize here. First Milbank's presentation rests upon a questionable interpretation of Post-Modern philosophers such as Foucault, Lyotard and Derrida in which he categorises them as Nietzschean nihilists and fails to acknowledge the extent to which their critique of reason is less its destruction than its reconstruction. Second, he also chooses to ignore the possibility that there is a potential route between the Scylla of foundationalism and the Charybdis of difference using the ideas and resources of Habermas and colleagues. Finally, very much in the manner of the theologians before him who have attempted to abandon philosophy, he is in danger of constructing a purely arbitrary version of Christianity and then claiming an immunity from critique that achieves intellectual safety at the cost of a wider credibility. One might also want to argue that the pressure to create a distinctive Christianity is actually to fall prey to the tendency to construct clear products and packages that is the result of the market forces of the liberal democracies to which Milbank himself is so opposed.

### **Conclusion**

What this brief historical survey has revealed is that the questions that are the focus of this particular study can be traced back at least 200 years and are a further development of the debate about the place of reason in theology that began with the Enlightenment. No satisfactory resolution has yet been identified. Either theology espouses a reason that then endangers the specificity of the Christian tradition or it sets itself apart in such a way that it can be accused of failing to address some of its own philosophical presuppositions and risks its intellectual and cultural credibility. However, a form of reason that could offer a route for making trans-contextual validity claims while not determining the content of the tradition itself may have a contribution to make to this dilemma.



## Chapter Four

### DISCOURSE ETHICS

#### **Introduction**

This chapter contains a more substantial examination of Habermas' work as it relates to the issues of the relationship between reason and faith, especially the tension between the universal and the particular. Is there a form of reason that both transcends specific contexts and yet does not compromise the content of, in this case, the faith tradition of Christianity? It will need to be established whether Habermas' concept of communicative reason in its practical application as discourse ethics can do justice both to the universal elements essential for a context transcending reason and the particular or singular aspects of this religious tradition.

The course of the argument is as follows. First there will be an exposition of how Habermas' interest in communicative reason evolves into his theory of discourse ethics, thus picking up the threads of the discussion in chapter two. Then there follows an examination of Habermas' recent work in the field of law as providing the most obvious practical example of discourse ethics in action. This will be followed by an excursus into the Kantian nature of discourse ethics, emphasizing the way in which Habermas deals with the question of the universal aspects of reason and morality, leading into the exposition of discourse ethics itself. This may appear to be taking a lengthy route to reach the destination but is the best way of allowing the critical theme of the relationship between the universal and the particular to emerge. The penultimate section will summarize the debate between Habermas and Apel – one of his closest collaborators in this field – on the foundational nature of discourse ethics and the concluding part of the chapter will contain a review of the most substantial criticisms of Habermas' theory. At this point it will be possible to grasp both the strengths and weaknesses of Habermas' overall arguments.

#### **From communicative reason to discourse ethics**

In the second volume of *The Theory of Communicative Action* Habermas argues that the authority of the sacred has been broken down by the forces of modernity, thus both redefining the role of religious ideas in social integration and creating a context in which his notion of communicative reason emerges as the new integrating factor. Following Mead and Durkheim Habermas employs the concept of the linguistification of the sacred to describe this process. The turn to language itself has significant implications both for the understanding of tradition and for the operation of what is deemed to supersede it. It is here that we encounter the suggestion that the structural differentiation associated with modernity leads to an increased reflexivity of traditions:

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 relations 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 (1987, 146).

In other words, neither the authority of traditions to determine meaning for peoples' lives nor the actual content of those traditions remain unchallenged or unquestioned. Both become subject to the individual's willingness and capacity to stand back, reflect and even reconstruct. The same process occurs in the relationship of the individual to the state where social and legal norms require public and democratic justification, and in the individual's own identity construction now requiring greater self-awareness and flexibility. Thus communicative reason begins to figure as the crucial component of social reproduction:

These trends can establish themselves only insofar as the yes/no decisions that carry everyday communicative practice no longer go back to an ascribed normative consensus, but issue from the co-operative interpretation processes of participants themselves. Thus they signal a release of the rationality potential inherent in communicative action (p. 146).

The general idea of the reflexivity of traditions is now becoming common currency in sociological circles and sociologists such as Anthony Giddens have developed further the notion of de-traditionalization (1994, 100–4). However, there is still an ambivalence here towards the very notion of tradition. In part this stems from the Enlightenment idea that traditions – particularly religious ones – were inherently oppressive and reactionary, that which reason could now critique and replace. One now encounters a more positive interpretation of the role of tradition as being a legitimate factor in social integration, one that cannot simply be dismissed or denied, but what authority traditions still carry must be subject to judgements derived from an external source. Traditions cannot be self-authenticating, even though one can argue that they perform an important social function. It is the source of that authentication that is so important to Habermas' position:

Universal discourse points to an idealized Lifeworld reproduced through processes of mutual understanding that have been largely detached from normative contexts and transferred over to rationally motivated yes/no positions. This sort of growing autonomy can come to pass only to the extent that the constraints of material production no longer hide behind the mask of a rationally impenetrable, basic, normative consensus, that is to say, behind the authority of the sacred. A Lifeworld rationalized in this sense would by no means reproduce itself in conflict-free forms. But the conflicts would appear in their own names; they would no longer be concealed by convictions immune from discursive examination (1987, 145).

This points towards the conclusion that the rationalization of the Lifeworld and the linguistification of the sacred associated with the dynamics of modernity lead irrevocably to traditions turned reflexive and to discourse itself as the contemporary form of social integration. Uncritical adherence to authoritative traditions is replaced by open public debate on contestable social norms. However, Habermas presents this as an incomplete process and a developing form of social evolution. So, in the early modern period, the realm of the sacred was still identifiable, if only in the guise of artistic activity and through



existing religious and philosophical traditions, but with the secularization of bourgeois culture their immunity from critique is steadily undermined. So

the irrationally binding, sacrally preserved power of a level of rationality that had been superseded in everyday practice begins to wane. The substance of basic convictions that were culturally sanctioned and did not need to be argued for begins to evaporate (p. 353).

In this way the ideological function performed by religious beliefs as part of the background assumptions of a pre-modern Lifeworld is destroyed and the only way forward for such traditions is to submit themselves to discursive interrogation:

The imperatives of autonomous subsystems then have to exert their influence on socially integrated domains of action from the outside *in a discernible fashion*. They can no longer hide behind the rationality differential between the sacred and the profane realms of action and reach inconspicuously through action orientations so as to draw the Lifeworld into intuitively inaccessible functional interconnections (p. 354).

Thus the structural differentiation of society into the realms of science, morality and art works against a discursively-based form of social integration and enables the old traditions to persist in unpenetrated corners of social life. Hence Habermas is able to avoid the picture of a perfectly regulated new social order and can attribute current deformations and dysfunctions to the failings of capitalist society. His project is still to reformulate a Critical Theory and that requires both an ideal towards which society could be progressing and an explanation of why such progress does not occur:

Everyday consciousness sees itself thrown back on traditions whose claims to validity have already been suspended: where it does escape the spell of traditionalism, it is hopelessly splintered. In place of 'false consciousness' we today have a 'fragmented consciousness' that blocks enlightenment by the mechanisms of reification... When stripped of their ideological veils, the imperatives of autonomous subsystems make their way into the Lifeworld from the outside – like colonial masters coming into a tribal society – and force a process of assimilation upon it. The diffused perspectives of the local culture cannot be sufficiently co-ordinated to permit the play of the metropolis and the world market to be grasped from the periphery (p. 355).

It can be seen from this that Habermas' work of the early 1980s presents the picture of a complex process of social evolution. While progress has been made towards a more discursively-based culture in which traditions no longer hold an unquestioned authority, there are still forces working against this, notably the fragmentation of consciousness, allowing pockets of unchallenged tradition to persist. Thus the degree of penetration of communicative reason into social and cultural formation is varied and inconsistent. As one moves into Habermas' later work the challenge for him is still to show that communicative reason has any significant purchase on real human activity. Is it anything other than another abstract ideal so detached from the realities of normal life as not to form the basis of a workable critique? Since the publication of *The Theory of Communicative Action* vols. 1 and 2, Habermas has been at pains to argue that this is not the case, largely through the development of communicative reason into what he terms discourse ethics. The details of this will be examined shortly.



## **Discourse ethics and the law**

Habermas' work of the early 1990s focussed on the subject of law and the way in which a discourse ethics might illuminate some of the tensions involved in its construction and application. An understanding of Habermas' overall project requires attention to this part of his corpus. The issue of social integration is still of concern to Habermas. Given that the 'sacred canopy' of religious and metaphysical worldviews has been torn apart by the forces of modernity and that the subsequent fragmentation of consciousness has impeded the creation of a unified discursive replacement, what is there that can still hold a society together? Legal structures and systems appear to be the obvious candidates. If this is the case, and if Habermas can show how his notion of discourse ethics can contribute to an understanding of this, then it both offers a hope that his version of social evolution is not without grounds and supports the argument that communicative reason has an eminently practical application.

The determining dynamic of this study is that: 'law is two things at the same time, a system of knowledge and a system of action' (1996, 114). Hence the title of Habermas' book, *Between Facts and Norms*. In other words, law has to operate within the tension between what already exists, the context of a particular social structure, and the making of judgements and decisions about the way things ought to be, the construction of norms for appropriate public behaviour. This tension becomes even more complex given the pluralist nature of modern societies and the fact that there is now a range of ethical viewpoints, all wanting a voice in the legal and political processes. As Rehg says in his introduction to the book:

Pluralization and disenchantment undermine the ways in which communities can stabilize themselves against shared backgrounds and authorities that removed certain issues and assumptions from challenge. Modern societies witness an increasing variety of groups and subcultures, each having its own distinct traditions, values and worldview. As a result, more and more conflicts must be settled by reaching explicit agreement on a greater range of contestable matters, under conditions in which the shared basis for reaching such agreement is diminishing (pp. xvii–xviii).

The co-ordinating role of law thus becomes plain. It must both provide a stable social environment in which people can form their own identities as members of different traditions and be constituted by a discursive process that makes laws rationally acceptable to people who are oriented to reaching an understanding on the basis of validity claims. It must be able to do justice both to context and to tradition and to the requirements of social integration and legitimation. This is a contemporary form of the debate between the particular and the universal, or between tradition and reason. Hence the high stakes both for Habermas and the research of this specific project.

Habermas' first challenge is to address the context within which the tension between facts and norms can be appropriately acknowledged. This clearly requires an understanding that goes beyond the immediate issues and establishes the conditions that enable this to happen. An exclusive focus upon the norms of a particular interpretation community cannot perform this function, for then it would not be possible to account for an external referent for the language being employed. At this point Habermas draws upon Peirce's



concept of the ideal communication community in order to describe what he terms a 'transcendence from within':

Even if we cannot break out of the sphere of language and argumentation, even if we must understand reality as what we can represent in true statements, we must not forget that the relation to reality contains a reference to something independent of us and thus, in this sense, transcendent. With each truth claim, speakers and hearers transcend the provincial standards of a particular collectivity, of a particular process of communication localized here and now (p. 14).

Unless it is possible to presuppose even this kind of transcendence from within, related to the very notion of human communication, one that extends across social space and time, it is difficult to see how the study of law as a factor of social integration could move beyond the specificity of particular contexts. In terms of the tension central for both Habermas and this research into the relationship between reason and the particular tradition of Christianity, Peirce's ideas provide a potential bridging principle:

Only this transcendent moment of unconditionality distinguishes the argumentative practice of justification from other practices that are regulated merely by social convention. For Peirce, the reference to an *unlimited* communication community serves to replace the eternal moment (or the supratemporal character) of unconditionality with the idea of an open but ultimately cumulative process of interpretation that transcends the boundaries of social space and historical time from within, from the perspective of a finite existence situated in this world (p. 15).<sup>†</sup>

So in the 'Post-Metaphysical' setting where religious worldviews can no longer provide an overarching framework of explanation, let alone a means of social integration, this is the form that transcendence might take. This element of Habermas' argument is crucial because without it it is hard to see how his approach can avoid sliding into the relativism he so opposes. One might almost argue that the idea of the unlimited communication community is a contemporary secularized version of the Kingdom of God. It is certainly one linchpin of Habermas' overall position that it is discourse that now takes over the co-ordinating and integrating function formerly performed by religious and metaphysical worldviews.

The theory of communicative action does detranscendentalize those realms but replaces them with 'the idealizing force of context-transcending anticipations...in the unavoidable pragmatic presuppositions of speech acts, and hence in the heart of ordinary, everyday communicative practice' (p. 19). Even the most fleeting speech acts rely on potential reasons that could be offered as justification and as therefore rationally acceptable to an unlimited interpretation community. Such validity claims are both grounded in the here and now of locally-bounded practice and yet can be judged in the light of a context-

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<sup>†</sup> Charles S. Peirce (1839–1914) is known as the founder of semiotic pragmatism and a key figure in the school of American Pragmatism. He is of particular interest to Habermas because he argued that interpretation requires a community of interpreters, thus emphasizing its intersubjective nature, and that behind this must rest the concept of an ideal or unlimited community of interpretation acting as the goal or telos of all communication. See Karl-Otto Apel, *Towards a Transformation of Philosophy*, 100–10.



transcending ideal of communication. In this way Habermas hopes to cater for both the particular and the universal.

Such a substantial claim requires further support, particularly in respect of the obvious criticism that will arise both from those who are uneasy with Habermas' objective of context-transcendence and those who are unwilling to concede that religion can no longer perform that transcending or integrating function. Habermas attempts to offer this by recalling his notion of the Lifeworld and its role in the grounding of specific contexts or traditions. Unless there is such a Lifeworld, an horizon of shared unproblematic beliefs, then the validity claims embedded in language would be unable to play an integrating role. 'If communicative action were not embedded in Lifeworld contexts that provide the backing of a massive background consensus, such risks would make the use of language oriented to mutual understanding an unlikely route to social integration' (1996, 22). Presumably, unless there is already substantial agreement or shared understanding in advance, it would be expecting too much of language to create that social integration. However, there is a real problem now because such Lifeworlds themselves exist in increasing numbers and the zones of shared background beliefs shrink as individuals increasingly construct and pursue their own lifestyles and beliefs. In other words, the fragmentation of consciousness, registered by Habermas in his earlier work, is itself a threat to the effectiveness of communicative reason. Social complexity and cultural pluralism place additional burdens on the tasks of integration and communication. So:

how can disenchanted, internally differentiated and pluralized Lifeworlds be socially integrated, if, at the same time, the risk of dissension is growing, particularly in the spheres of communicative action that have been cut loose from the ties of sacred authorities and released from the bonds of archaic institutions? According to this scenario, the increasing need for integration must hopelessly overtax the integrating capacity of communicative action, especially if the functionally necessary spheres of strategic interaction are growing, as is the case in modern economic societies? (p. 26).

Thus we return to the criticism that Habermas' theory of communicative reason is too abstract and idealistic to have any purchase on the complex realities of modern society. This is where the study of law comes forcibly into the picture because, according to Habermas, this is now the only territory where the demands of social integration and thus the application of communicative reason can come into play. Habermas' claim that discourse now replaces religious and metaphysical worldviews as the factor of social integration can best be supported by a study of how legal systems and structures form the main contemporary location for holding together the plurality of Lifeworlds that constitute modern society. If his arguments have no grasp on reality here then his critics' suspicions of practical irrelevance may be confirmed.

The level of Habermas' discussion now shifts once again to examine in greater detail the actual study of legal justification and formation. Why is it that this has now become the contested territory for the debate? In one sense this appears fairly obvious, for the legal system is surely the one place where all the different lifestyles and worldviews that make up a modern society have to come together and agree common ground and accepted practices despite their substantive differences. If this were not the case social anarchy would rapidly ensue, although whether this requires a positive commitment to abide



by certain rules, or merely a negative attitude that abiding by the law is the lesser of a number of evils is an important question. However, Habermas needs to argue that there is a further level of justification required if this system is to work, and this leads into a discussion of how laws are constructed.

The situation now to be faced is as follows. Either the legal order still gains its legitimation from some form of overarching sacred worldview (as was still the case in early modernity) or individual liberties are supplemented by rights of a different type geared to autonomy in the Kantian sense:

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. To this extent, modern law lives off a solidarity concentrated in the value orientations of citizens and ultimately issuing from communicative action and deliberation (p. 33).

Here then is a vital claim for Habermas. People have to be able to feel that, in some meaningful way, they have had a hand in constructing and agreeing the laws by which they are to abide. If this is not the case, if they cannot own both the process of construction as well as its outcome, their individual autonomy will have been denied. If the content of the law can no longer be accepted on the basis of an external authority or sacred tradition, then a practical application of communicative reason, an open and democratic process in which all affected can feel they have been involved, is the only alternative source of legitimation: 'the only law that counts as legitimate is one that could be rationally accepted by all citizens in a discursive process of opinion and will-formation' (p. 135).

Once again though, Habermas has to deepen the level of debate by examining contemporary scholarship relating to the subject of law in order both to locate and to justify his particular stance. A brief reference to this is necessary, not just in order to pursue the flow of Habermas' argument, but also because it highlights again the tension between the particular and the universal that cuts right through both the philosophical and theological discussions. The two contrasting approaches that Habermas expounds are those of Luhmann and Rawls.

Luhmann is associated with the notion of Systems Theory in sociology and particularly with the theory of autopoiesis. This latter idea as applied to the study of law suggests that the legal system is essentially self-referential, closed in upon itself, and therefore largely unable to influence or to be influenced by, other social structures. Although such a perspective can yield valuable research insights Habermas considers it limited and ultimately inadequate to explain how law operates. It emphasizes context, or tradition, the actual facts of what is already in place, at the expense of genuine encounter or dialogue with other contexts or traditions: 'Because the system always constructs its own environments, contact through observation with events beyond the system boundaries can only provide *occasions* for the autopoietically closed legal system to act on itself' (p. 49). An obvious comment here is that a theology pursuing a communitarian or sectarian agenda is going to find itself in a similar isolated and limited position. Such an emphasis upon the particular leaves any subject, law or theology, in an intellectual tight corner from which there seems no escape.



The other major problem with Luhmann's approach from the point of view of the law is that it offers no route to public legitimation: 'even the political process, the public sphere, and political culture present environments whose language the legal system cannot understand' (p. 51). So it is difficult to see in what ways the legal system could gain support across a plurality of Lifeworlds and ethical differences.

Do Rawls' ideas, coming from a background of political liberalism, provide a better explanation of how law operates? Habermas believes not, although again they do make a contribution to a deeper understanding. Rawls errs on the side of the universal and the trans-contextual, particularly through his use of the notion of public reason and an overlapping consensus of comprehensive doctrines. It is Rawls' suggestion that individual communities or traditions can both adhere firmly to their particular beliefs and moral frameworks – their comprehensive doctrines – and also give their agreement and loyalty to a broader concept of the common good or need to establish political consensus through an acknowledgement of what he terms public reason. The problem is, as ever, what happens when there is real conflict between the two levels of argument or belief. Will not the content of the particular tradition have to be abandoned or compromised by genuine adherence to an overriding principle that remains an alien and external force? The precise details of this theory do not need to be elaborated here, but it can be seen from this that Rawls is less concerned with the particularities of specific legal or ethical traditions than with the question of how a modern democratic society is held together in the face of a plurality of different beliefs and practices. In that sense there is much common ground with Habermas, but there are two distinct problems with his overall approach. First, it is far from clear that Rawls' suggestion of an overlapping consensus has any real purchase or practical application beyond the confines of Western liberal democracies such as the United States. It is difficult to see how the citizens of less liberal regimes could feel motivated to bracket their own specific commitments in order to establish a broader political consensus. It is important to note this objection because it could also be seen as applicable to Habermas. The difference – and the critical one – is that Habermas grounds his trans-contextual approach in the nature of language itself, the presuppositions of normal human discourse as found across cultures.

The second objection to Rawls is that his ideas fail to cater for the institutionalization of law. His theory is weak precisely where Luhmann's is strong, i.e. on the actualities of legal systems. Rawls is strong on norms but weak on facts; Luhmann strong on facts but weak on norms. Hence Habermas concludes:

The philosophical discourse of justice misses the institutional dimension toward which the sociological discourse on law is directed from the outset. Without the view of law as an empirical action system, philosophical concepts remain empty. However, insofar as the sociology of law insists on an objectivating view from the outside, remaining insensitive to the symbolic dimension whose meaning is only internally accessible, sociological perception falls into the opposite danger of remaining blind (p. 66).

What Habermas aims to establish is an approach that does justice to both sides of the equation, the facts of the particular tradition and the requirement for an understanding that transcends that tradition and caters for communication and legitimation in a pluralist



and 'Post-Metaphysical' setting. This is precisely the nature of the current debate on the relationship between faith and reason.

Having established the location of his approach as a combination of what is most appropriate from both Luhmann and Rawls, Habermas proceeds to carry out a similar exercise in relation to the work of Kant and Rousseau. Once again this is important from a theological perspective because the tension it highlights is equally important for this debate with reason. The tension here is between private and public autonomy, between individual rights and public law in the field of jurisprudence, and between human rights and popular sovereignty in social-contract theory. This parallels the debate in theology between communitarians and liberals, and the significance of Habermas' contribution is that he draws attention to the weaknesses of both sides and yet aims to construct a position that builds on their respective strengths. Discourse theory as the application of communicative reason is of course the key to this process. The reason for this is that in a 'Post-Metaphysical' setting the legitimation of law requires both an acknowledgement of individual rights and lifestyle choices and a concern and respect for the shared enterprise of creating and sustaining an agreed legal process.

Reasons that are convenient for the legitimation of law, must, on pain of cognitive dissonances, harmonize with the moral principles of universal justice and solidarity. They must also harmonize with the ethical principles of a consciously 'projected' life conduct for which the subjects themselves, at both the individual and collective levels, take responsibility. However, these ideas of self-determination and self-realization cannot be put together without tension (p. 99).

Hence we can interpret the tension as being between the liberal tradition that conceives human rights as the expression of moral self-determination, and the civic republican approach that tends to interpret popular sovereignty as the expression of ethical self-realization. Or again the tension is between a Kantian emphasis upon the autonomy of the individual that challenges or transcends the specifics of particular traditions or contexts, and ideas associated with Rousseau of the need to ground personal ethics in an identifiable and clearly bounded tradition. Although, as Habermas says, Kant and Rousseau themselves may well have wished and intended these two approaches to complement and interpret each other, the current debate is such that Kant suggests more of a liberal reading of political autonomy and Rousseau a republican reading (p. 100).

How does Habermas intend to carry the debate beyond this apparent impasse between the rights of the individual and the requirements of the collective? According to Habermas, what unites the two perspectives is the communicative form of discursive processes of opinion and will-formation. Thus private individuals concerned for their own rights will have to take account of what is in the best interests of the wider collective simply because the pragmatic presuppositions of communication itself require the offering of valid reasons and justifications. Similarly, those placing the emphasis upon the needs of the particular community to establish its own norms cannot ignore the articulated concerns of individuals unless they are to abandon reason for coercion. Both concepts of private and public autonomy 'miss the legitimating force of a discursive process of opinion and will-formation, in which the illocutionary binding force of a use of language



oriented to mutual understanding serve to bring reason and will together – and lead to convincing positions to which all individuals can agree without coercion’ (p. 103). In this ‘Post-Metaphysical’ setting, individuals have to be able to feel that they themselves are the authors of the laws and rights that apply to them and it is this process that brings together the accurate insights of both the liberals and civic republicans. Thus Habermas is led to identify his Discourse Principle as follows: ‘Just those action norms are valid to which all possible affected persons could agree as participants in rational discourses’ (p. 107). This explains the point of view from which norms of action can be impartially justified, and assumes those symmetrical relations of recognition that are built into communicatively structured forms of life. It does not presuppose any judgement about specific moral commitments as these will inevitably cross the boundary between private and public spheres.

If such an undertaking as this proves successful then it would appear that Habermas’ notion of communicative reason both has a practical application in the field of law and can also provide a means of crossing Lifeworld and tradition boundaries without compromising the integrity and content of any specific tradition. What remains in question though is whether a discursive process of law formation as described constitutes a realistic motivating force in a pluralist setting. Habermas believes that the persistent operation of such a system will build up such a motivation, presumably as individuals perceive the advantages that accrue (p. 147). Whether, and under what conditions this can carry conviction is a question to which we must return.

### **The Kantian nature of discourse ethics**

In an article published in 1994 Habermas helpfully elaborates upon the weaknesses of the communitarian approach to politics, setting out why a universalist understanding of morality is still important (Habermas 1994). It is necessary to establish the nature of the connection between Habermas and Kant as this is one of the most controversial and vulnerable aspects of Habermas’ theory of discourse ethics. As has been suggested, a problem with the civic republican approach to politics is that it relies too heavily upon the notion of a shared form of life or collective identity:

Political questions may not be reduced to the types of ethical question where we, as members of a community, ask ourselves who we are and who we would like to be. In its communitarian interpretation the republican model is too idealistic, even within the limits of a purely normative analysis (p. 138).

The advantage of a discourse theory interpretation is that:

...democratic will-formation does not draw its legitimating force from a previous convergence of settled ethical convictions, but from both the communicative presuppositions that allow the better arguments to come into play in various forms of deliberation, and from the procedures that secure fair bargaining processes (p. 138).

The point is that the particular commitments of an ethical community, although forming part of the debate about political norms, are missing a vital dimension, that of how citizens are going to develop norms for regulating their life together in a pluralist setting. Habermas sees this as an essentially moral question, in the Kantian sense, a question of



justice rather than solidarity:

The question having priority in legislative politics concerns how a matter can be regulated in the equal interest of all. The making of norms is primarily a justice issue and is gauged by principles that state what is equally good for all. And, unlike ethical questions, questions of justice are not related from the outset to a specific collective and its forms of life (p. 139).

The legitimation of politically enacted laws must require moral tenets that claim a universal validity. It is clear that contemporary political life involves achieving a balance or compromise between differing or conflicting viewpoints, and ethical discourses, in themselves, are not capable of doing this.

Thus the concept of deliberative politics that Habermas now employs moves beyond a communitarian position without adopting in full the opposing liberal model. It points out the role of opinion and will-formation through open debate and the subsequent ownership of a constitution in which all affected feel that they have had their voices heard:

Discourse theory has the success of deliberative politics depend not on a collective acting citizenry but on the institutionalization of the corresponding procedures and conditions of communication. Proceduralized popular sovereignty and a political system tied in to the peripheral networks of the political public sphere go hand-in-hand with the image of a de-centered society (p. 141).

All of this presupposes that it is possible to achieve high levels of intersubjectivity through both the formal and informal communication networks and processes of a modern society, hence an open and active civil society is as important for this as the legislature and the constitution. In such an environment Habermas believes that citizens will be motivated to participate in both discussions and decision-making. However, there remain the questions of whether and how Habermas has avoided the problems associated with Kantian universalism and succeeded in giving a proper account of the role of ethical communities and traditions. It is to these that we must now turn.

As the material deepens in complexity so it is important to remind ourselves what is at stake here. Essentially it is the struggle between the universal and the particular, between a form of reason that claims to transcend specific contexts and the content of a faith tradition that will not surrender its autonomy to an alien principle. The objective is to establish whether or not Habermas' concept of communicative reason, particularly through its manifestation as a discourse ethics, can bridge this gap and do justice to both the universal and the particular. Attention must now turn to Habermas' treatment of the first half of this equation.

A central section of Habermas' most substantial articulation of his theory of discourse ethics is devoted to the consideration of the subject of universalization. Habermas states that all variants of cognitive ethics take their bearings from Kant's categorical imperative. Habermas' particular concern is not with the varied formulations of this, but with the notion of the impersonal or general character of valid universal commands. Thus anything counting as a moral principle must exclude as invalid any norm that could not meet with the qualified assent of all who are or who might be affected by it. Habermas sees this as a bridging principle, ensuring that the only norms to be accepted are those that express a general will. He acknowledges that the Kantian formulation of the categorical imperative



can lead to formalistic misunderstandings and selective interpretations, but he wants to move beyond these to what he takes as the crucial aspect of Kant's approach. That is that valid norms *deserve* recognition by *all* concerned (1992, 65).

It is not sufficient therefore, for *one person* to test whether he can will the adoption of a contested norm after considering the consequences... True impartiality pertains only to that standpoint from which one can generalize precisely those norms that can count on universal consent because they perceptibly embody an interest common to all affected (p. 65).

This requires the 'ideal role taking' identified by Mead and adopted by Habermas as an essential component of universal discourse. In other words, everybody should be prepared to think themselves into another person's position in order to judge if a norm can be validated from that perspective.

Habermas sees the principle of universalization as a rule of argumentation and as a necessary precursor to the actual principle of discourse ethics. As a bridging principle it can regulate argumentation among a plurality of participants and it suggests the perspective of real-life argumentation, not just an abstract or theoretical stance. Habermas re-emphasizes that it is not enough for a lone individual to stand back and imagine what other perspectives might be:

What is needed is a 'real' process of argumentation in which the individuals concerned co-operate. Only an intersubjective process of reaching understanding can produce an agreement that is reflexive in nature; only it can give the participants the knowledge that they have collectively become convinced of something (p. 67).

Thus Habermas reformulates the categorical imperative to include the dimension of open discourse and practical intersubjectivity. He also makes it clear that discourse ethics requires this as an essential presupposition.

At a later stage in his exposition Habermas returns to the criticisms raised of a Kantian approach, particularly that of an undue formalism that fails to do justice to the actual content of specific ethical traditions. He acknowledges that the principle of discourse ethics makes reference to a procedure and can, to that extent, be characterized as formal. This procedure of practical discourse does not in itself generate justified norms but is a process for testing the validity of norms that are being proposed for adoption. Hence it is dependent upon content being brought to it from the outside:

It would be utterly pointless to engage in a practical discourse without a horizon provided by the Lifeworld of a specific social group and without real conflicts in a concrete situation in which the actors consider it incumbent upon them to reach a consensual means of regulating some controversial social matter. Practical discourses are always related to the concrete point of departure of a disturbed normative agreement (p. 103).

So Habermas is arguing that far from abstracting from specific content, the procedure of discourse ethics presupposes that this will form the substance of the process itself. However, this then leads on to the further criticism that such a neo-Kantian approach leads to selectivity in that some particular values are bound to be discarded as not being susceptible to consensus. Does this mean that the procedure becomes unsuitable for resolving practical questions? Once again Habermas argues that this is not the case, for



what is required here is a procedure that can make sharp distinctions between evaluative statements and strictly normative ones, between the good and the just. The point is that particular cultural values are only candidates for embodiment in norms that may be judged to express a general interest. Discourse ethics provides a procedure for deciding whether or not this is the case. It is necessary then that individuals and communities be prepared to stand back from their specific commitments and take up a hypothetical attitude towards them in order to engage with a different level of discussion. If this is not possible, then the values in question are not capable of rational validation and cannot be attributed with normative status.

The problem with this is that it does still sound as though an external criterion is determining at least the status of, if not the content of, particular traditions, and this is where theology, for instance, might find this reformulated reason objectionable. It is not immediately obvious that Habermas has met this objection. There is perhaps a difference between arguing that the reflexivity of traditions has emerged as a necessity from the consequences of modernity and insisting upon such reflexivity as a prerequisite for rational validation. It does seem that Habermas moves towards the second of these in his exposition. Thus:

Universalist moralities are dependent on forms of life that are rationalized in that they make possible the prudent application of universal moral insights and support motivations for translating insights into moral action. Only those forms of life that meet universalist moralities halfway in this sense fulfill the conditions necessary to reverse the abstractive achievements of decontextualization and demotivation (p. 109).

It is of course precisely this 'meeting halfway' that begs all the crucial questions.

In a further exposition of discourse ethics linking it to Kohlberg's theory of moral development Habermas highlights once again the neo-Kantian nature of his enterprise. In this instance the objective is to show how the theory deals with particular ethical approaches that Habermas wishes to criticize. The first of these is ethical scepticism, in other words the view that ethical judgements reflect no more than the contingent emotions, preferences and decisions of a speaker or actor. Habermas states that, on the basis of the universalization principle, it is clear that moral-practical issues can be decided on the basis of reasons. Thus: 'moral judgements have cognitive content' (1995, 120). This links with Kohlberg's theory that argues for a developmental process in which moral judgements will require the giving of reasons for distinguishing between right and wrong moral judgements.

The second approach that Habermas refutes is that of ethical relativism: the view 'which holds that the validity of moral judgements is measured solely by the standards of rationality or value proper to a specific culture or form of life' (p. 121). Clearly again the principle of universalization rules this out of court by requiring that valid norms are acceptable to all those who are likely to be affected by them, including those not belonging to the specific ethical community. This links directly to the third approach Habermas criticizes, that of a material ethics oriented to issues of happiness and again favouring a particular form of ethical life. Matters of justice and morality have to move beyond such individual traditions and demand that generally acceptable norms only be established by



rational argument. So Habermas is pursuing two objectives here. His first is to distinguish discourse ethics from other forms of ethical theory and the second is to show how the rationality and reflexivity requirements central to his approach have come into force. One could argue that his employment of Kohlberg's theory of moral development – itself open to sustained criticism, particularly from feminist sources – is an attempt to tone down the perceived cultural determinism noted earlier. In other words, it is a way of suggesting that the reflexivity of tradition and the taking of hypothetical and critical stances towards one's own ethical community required by Habermas' approach, is part of an evolutionary development that can be empirically supported by Kohlberg's research. Rather than saying that this is what must happen, thus espousing a form of social determinism, Habermas can argue that it can be seen that this reflexivity is happening as a result of the forces of modernization and that it is likely to happen given the accuracy of Kohlberg's particular theory of moral development. Whether this latter approach is any more reassuring to specific ethical traditions that feel themselves under threat from an alien principle is still open to question. It is the neo-Kantian nature of Habermas' discourse ethics, the demand for universalization, that appears to create the problems, although one also detects the influence of his political commitments.

Does Habermas then escape the well-established criticisms of the Kantian approach to ethics of which he is only too clearly aware? He summarizes the objections levelled against moral theories of the Kantian type under three headings. First there is the question of motivation, of why one should act morally at all. The criticism of a Kantian perspective is that abstraction from a specific grounding for ethical activity and the separation between the right and the good removes any possible sources of motivation. It could be argued that it is only from within the context of a particular ethical tradition that the individual can be moved to respond to any moral imperative. Second, the privileging of a post-traditional and reflexive level of moral judgement can be deemed to lead to abstraction from particular situations and the neglect of questions of the application of norms. Third, the formalist privileging of the universal over the particular seems to imply an atomistic concept of the person and a contractualist concept of society. In each of these three cases the objection is that individual circumstances and characteristics which are factors in moral judgements are not taken into account. The cumulative effect of these criticisms is that it becomes questionable whether it is possible to separate form and content in a Kantian manner, and also whether there can be context-independent conceptualizations of justice. However, if these criticisms stand, then it raises the question of what remains for ethical theory.

The outcome of our reflections leaves us with two alternatives: either we return to the Aristotelianism underlying these criticisms, or we modify the Kantian approach to take account of legitimate objections. Only those who are ready to restore a metaphysical mode of thinking could unhesitatingly embrace the first alternative. Contemporary neo-Aristotelians are not willing to do this (1995, 122).

Habermas outlines his reasons for not being able to embrace the Aristotelian alternative. The most obvious one is the pluralism of individual lifestyles and collective forms of life and the corresponding multiplicity of notions of the good life. A choice must be made between the claim of classical philosophy to place competing ways of life in a hierarchy by



privileging one ethical tradition above the rest, or the modern principle of tolerance that is unwilling to argue that different forms do not at least have an equal right to exist and be recognized. Habermas argues that, without the former metaphysical presuppositions of an external grounding for the pre-eminence of a particular form of life, one is left with exactly the reflexivity that is the basis of discourse ethics. It is not that the substance of specific ethical traditions is undermined by this pluralism, but simply that the existence of other traditions requires a different type of justification and explanation. Neither of these can now be contained within the particular tradition, but will acknowledge that there is a wider horizon.

The horizon of every form of life is fluid, its boundaries permeable. There is no absolute barrier to the 'desire for as much intersubjective agreement as possible'. Practical knowledge can all the more readily claim to be knowledge the more radically we open ourselves to others and expand our local knowledge and ethnocentric outlook – indeed extend our community in a virtual manner such that our discourse ultimately includes *all* subjects capable of speech and action. But this process would yield the perspective Kantians call the moral point of view (p. 124).

If something like this is not adopted, then what remains is an increasingly dogmatic and even fundamentalist approach to one's own ethical tradition. It is difficult to see how it will be possible to critique or to revise the content of a specific way of life if the only means of doing so relies upon that tradition's own resources and if the tradition is denied meaningful access to other traditions. One can indeed argue that a particular ethical tradition contains within itself the seeds of a constant internal critique – and this is a position that Christian theology has sometimes claimed for itself – but the problem is that the grounds for this are not going to be shared by or easily translatable into other traditions. Either they rest upon metaphysical presuppositions that are challenged by other presuppositions of competing traditions, or their claims to a privileged access to the truth are unable to be substantiated beyond the tradition itself. Once the tradition has opened itself up to a pluralist and therefore reflexive environment it must begin the search for the sort of intersubjective and discourse-based grounds that Habermas is pointing towards. In other words, a contemporary reformulation of a Kantian universalism built upon an understanding of the pragmatic presuppositions of communication itself appears to offer the only way forward. It seems to me that this is where theology cannot merely retreat into its own enclave or reservation, but is forced to emerge into a new form of public debate where it must be prepared to justify its beliefs by criteria that are not simply of its own devising. What it can do – as of course can all other traditions – is to enter fully into what becomes an open debate as to what those criteria might be. If discourse theory is to be the way ahead then all traditions need to contribute to a meta-discourse rather than to fall back onto a metaphysics.

Returning to the question of Habermas' vulnerability to the criticisms aimed at a Kantian approach, there are still doubts that may not have been fully addressed, but there is a cumulative weight to the argument that means it cannot be readily dismissed. The alternatives to something like a Habermasian reformulation are themselves even more vulnerable, given the current understanding of pluralism and social evolution.



## **An exposition of discourse ethics**

It is necessary now to offer a fuller exposition of Habermas' theory of discourse ethics. For this I turn initially to a section of *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (1992) that deals specifically with this subject. In order to grasp the nature of this argument it is important to pursue it in some detail. Most of the subsequent criticisms are based on questions arising from the detailed aspects of the theory.

The starting point for this is a justification of the principle of universalization as considered earlier in this chapter. However, the concern there was to show why that idea is important for the overall discussion of reason and faith. The need now is to come to terms with the actual content of Habermas' exposition.

Habermas begins by arguing that the principle of universalization, as itself a rule of argumentation, is implied by the presuppositions of argumentation in general. In other words, it forms an inescapable component of the process whereby people aim to convince others of certain truths or ideas. Yet there are three levels of such presuppositions, and Habermas describes these in order to clarify where the principle of universalization fits in. The first level deals with the matters of logic and consistency. It presumes that reasoning and argumentation have it as an objective to produce intrinsically cogent arguments with which we can redeem or repudiate claims to validity. Habermas follows the work of R. Alexy on the nature of argumentation and offers the following as examples of what he means:

- (1.1) No speaker may contradict himself.
- (1.2) Every speaker who applies predicate F to object A must be prepared to apply F to all other objects resembling A in all relevant aspects.
- (1.3) Different speakers may not use the same expression with different meanings. (p. 87).

It is clear that these presuppositions do not contain any ethical content as such, hence are not the point of departure Habermas is seeking.

The second level concerns the procedures of argumentation, those by which it is possible for different parties in a dispute to test out controversial validity claims. This involves rules of interaction and such issues as accountability and truthfulness. Once again Habermas offers examples taken from Alexy's work.

- (2.1) Every speaker may assert only what he really believes.
- (2.2) A person who disputes a proposition or norm not under discussion must provide a reason for wanting to do so. (p. 88).

Some of these rules do have an ethical import as they touch upon areas related to mutual recognition and the commitment to action oriented to reaching understanding. Once again though, this is not the level that Habermas is pursuing, although, as he does point out:

...the presuppositions of an unrestrained competition for better arguments are relevant to our purpose in that they are irreconcilable with traditional ethical philosophies that have to protect a dogmatic core of fundamental convictions from all criticism (p. 88).

That being the case, this immediately raises a challenge to any Christian involvement with this process to the extent that it is just such an ethical tradition.



However, it is the third level that is critical for Habermas' overall argument, that which identifies that argumentative speech is a process of communication that, in the light of its aim of reaching a rationally motivated agreement, must satisfy improbable conditions. In earlier work Habermas has referred to this as an ideal speech situation, including the requirements of avoiding all repression and inequality. In other words, there are general symmetry conditions that any competent speaker engaging in an argument must presuppose are adequately fulfilled. Habermas refers to Apel's notion of an 'unrestricted communication community' building upon the earlier ideas of Peirce and Mead. The nature of this argument justifies a more detailed exposition in the following section; for now I follow Habermas in once again offering examples from Alexy's work. So the following can be identified as rules of discourse for this level.

- (3.1) Every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in a discourse.
- (3.2)a. Everyone is allowed to question any assertion whatever.
- (3.2)b. Everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatever into the discourse.
- (3.2)c. Everyone is allowed to express his attitudes, desires and needs.
- (3.3) No speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising his rights as laid down in (3.1) and (3.2) (p. 89).

So rule (3.1) defines the set of potential participants while rule (3.2) guarantees them all equal opportunity to contribute to the discussion and to present their own arguments. Rule (3.3) makes it clear that neither coercion nor repression are acceptable as preventing open access to the process of argumentation. It is not enough for Habermas to show that these are particular conventions that may or may not be adopted, he has to argue that these are inescapable presuppositions of any argument whatsoever. To do this he accepts from Apel the belief that it is possible to convince any person contesting this that he is caught up in a 'performative contradiction'.

It is not difficult to imagine the grounds on which critics will engage with these aspects of Habermas' theory, and Habermas himself is all too aware of the awaiting problems. One immediate objection is that Habermas might be saying that all discourse must conform to these rules, then leaving a problem with those many that clearly do not. Habermas draws back from this position and states that 'we have to be content with approximations' (p. 91). So what he needs to claim is not that all discourse does in fact operate in this way, but that all participants in discourse must assume these conditions to be realized as far as is possible in any particular situation. Whether this is in fact either strong enough for Habermas' own purposes, or convincing enough for his critics, is an issue to which it will be necessary to return.

Having hopefully thus displayed how he reaches his principle of universalization, Habermas can now build upon this and establish the principle of discourse ethics itself. What he wants to defend is the idea that anybody entering a process of argumentation must presuppose the rules of discourse (3.1) to (3.3), thereby acknowledging them as universal conditions of that process. Hence the consent of participants in a practical discourse cannot be expected 'unless all affected can freely accept the consequences and the side effects that the *general* observance of a controversial norm can be expected to have for the satisfaction of the interests of each individual' (p. 93).



With this presupposition in place Habermas then moves on to the principle of discourse ethics itself which stipulates: 'Only those norms can claim to be valid that meet (or could meet) with the approval of all affected in their capacity as participants in a practical discourse' (p. 93).

To re-emphasize the importance and centrality of this principle for the discussion of the relationship of reason to faith, the potential of the discourse ethics principle as stated above is that it makes no prejudgements in terms of the contents of particular ethical traditions, yet does claim to offer an appropriate degree of universality, enough to avoid the relativism that may otherwise ensue in a 'Post-Metaphysical' and pluralist setting. At this stage in the argument this has to remain only a potential, as the counter-arguments have yet to be fully considered.

### **The notion of the 'performative contradiction': there is no alternative to discourse ethics**

The final part of this exposition of the notion of discourse ethics requires that the suggestion that the pragmatic presuppositions of argumentation have no realistic or acceptable alternative receives more detailed attention. It is clear by now that this suggestion is one of the key components or building blocks of the argument, particularly if Habermas' claim of universality is to be upheld. Yet Habermas himself is not the only philosopher to employ such a strategy, and there are interesting differences between himself and the other main proponent of this thesis. Drawing these out is of value for the discussion of how this might relate to theology as the central difference touches on the concept of foundations. Is it possible, or even necessary, to try to justify – in a foundational sense – the moral component of discourse ethics, or is it enough to restrict the element of universality to the operation of argumentation? It will be seen that Karl-Otto Apel, one of Habermas' closest collaborators in this field, does want to provide a foundation for the moral principle, whereas Habermas himself differs at this key juncture and draws a firm distinction between moral discourse and practical discourses. This is important because if Apel is correct rather than Habermas there are direct implications for the claim that communicative reason through discourse ethics remains neutral in terms of ethical content.

Habermas acknowledges that there is an issue of considerable substance here when he agrees that sceptics may challenge the notion that it is possible to justify a universalist morality. A cognitive approach can be seen to ensnare its proponents in what has been called a 'Münchhausen trilemma' (1992, 79). In other words, the attempt to justify universal moral principles can leave the cognitivist having to choose between three equally unacceptable alternatives: 'putting up with an infinite regress, arbitrary breaking off of the chain of deduction, and making a circular argument' (p. 79). However, both Apel and Habermas in turn have challenged the status of this objection, arguing that it is essentially a semantic concept of justification and thus too narrow to take into account an exposition of the pragmatic relations between argumentative speech acts. A deductive concept of justification is not what is required here as it is bridging the logical gap in non-deductive relations that is at issue. It is on this level that the debate needs to take place and it is here that Apel's arguments come into play and, in particular, that one can see the force of his



notion of a 'performative contradiction':

One of the key elements in Apel's transcendental-pragmatic line of argumentation is the notion of a '*performative contradiction*'. A 'performative contradiction' occurs when a constative speech act  $k(p)$  rests on noncontingent presuppositions whose propositional content contradicts the asserted proposition  $p$  (p. 80).

An example of this would be an imaginary opponent of Descartes' 'Cogito ergo sum' who wanted to claim 'I hereby doubt that I exist'. The very fact of raising a truth claim for the proposition 'I do not exist' presupposes the validity of the existential assumption 'I do exist'. Thus the speaker effectively contradicts himself.<sup>†</sup>

A similar charge can be successfully levelled at the skeptic of the 'consistent fallibilist' variety who wants to deny the possibility of grounding moral principles, but on the basis of the Münchhausen trilemma. Such an ethical skeptic will have been involved in a 'performative contradiction' if it can be shown that he has to make assumptions that are inevitable in *any* argumentation process. This in fact will be the case, as by virtue of presenting his objections, the opponent will be assuming that validity of at least the logical rules that are essential to any form of argumentation.

In taking part in the process of reasoning, even the consistent fallibilist has already accepted as valid a minimum number of unavoidable rules of criticism. Yet this state of affairs is incompatible with the principle of fallibilism (p. 81).

However, while this argument clearly carries some weight it is really too weak, in itself, to convincingly refute the sceptic's position. It is in the area of argumentation as such that the substantive counter-position can be found. It is not just individual speech acts and arguments that can become prey to 'performative contradictions':

Just as someone interested in a theory of knowledge cannot adopt a standpoint outside his own cognitive acts...so too a person engaged in developing a theory of moral argumentation cannot adopt a standpoint outside the situation defined by the fact that he is taking part in a process of argumentation... Such awareness means giving up futile attempts at a deductive grounding of 'ultimate' principles and returning to the explication of 'unavoidable' (i.e. universal and necessary) presuppositions (p. 81).

In this way Apel believes that he has shown that anybody entering the process of argumentation is automatically committed to certain pragmatic presuppositions of any form of argumentation and that a denial of this by a participant constitutes a 'performative contradiction'. Thus there is a dimension of universality involved in argumentation, a justifiable sense in which 'there is no alternative' but to accept these pragmatic presuppositions.

However, although Habermas agrees with Apel on this point, he does not believe that the further conclusions are in fact justified. So even if it is the case that a participant in an

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<sup>†</sup> It needs to be noted that what makes the statement 'I do not exist' self-contradictory is in fact the utterance of that statement. Any first person statement presupposes the truth of the existential statement the utterer exists.



argumentation is forced to respect an other as a competent subject, to treat that other as an equal partner, to assume their sincerity and so on, they can abandon these transcendental-pragmatic compulsions once they leave the field of argumentation. Discourse cannot be directly transferred or translated into action; therefore it is not possible to achieve Apel's aim of deriving basic ethical norms directly from the presuppositions of argumentation. Hence Habermas argues that Apel is claiming too much to say that moral norms can be grounded in or directly justified by the pragmatic presuppositions of argumentation. All that Habermas wishes and needs to show is that there is indeed such an inescapable element of universalization in argumentative discourse.

The difference between Habermas and Apel can be pursued in greater depth. It seems that Apel intends his version of discourse ethics to be more foundational than that of Habermas, proposing that a particular ethical and political stance takes precedence over all others and that this can be argued for on philosophical grounds. So it must aim at philosophical enlightenment and thus transform the self-understanding of the members of modern society. But, of course, the problem with this is that it appears to return to the unacceptable liberal enlightenment assumption that one can privilege a particular interpretation above the rest. Can Apel successfully avoid this possibility? If not, then he will be compromising discourse ethics by linking it with one specific ethical tradition. As Habermas says:

I suspect Apel hopes to avoid this contradiction, by construing communicative reason as in essence moral-practical reason and then, in virtue of this Fichtean primacy of practical reason, according the philosophical-explanatory discourse distinguished by self-referentiality a pre-eminent position in the hierarchy of scientific discourses. Discourse ethics is supposed to remain neutral over against the plurality of belief systems yet not pay the price of renouncing substantive sources of motivation entailed by its proceduralism (1995, 80).

However, Habermas argues that Apel's attempt to establish an Archimedean point of self-reflection that provides a foundation in discourse ethics for moral reasoning comes to grief in two key areas. First, the scope of application of communicative reason is necessarily general, dealing with the analyses of validity claims across the range of disciplines and subject areas. In order to support his argument Apel would have to narrow this down to a very particular field of application. To move from dealing with what are pragmatic presuppositions of argumentation that are idealizations and basically counter-factual – in other words they are not the way that people do operate most of the time – to derive from these specific norms of right action is to make an unjustified shift of level:

Communicative reason, unlike practical reason, is not itself a source of norms of right action. It spans the full spectrum of validity claims...and hence extends beyond the sphere of moral-practical questions (p. 81).

Hence it can be seen that Habermas is more guarded than Apel in what he is prepared to claim on the basis of the universality of the presuppositions of argumentation.

His second objection to Apel centres on the latter's attempts to present the move to discourse ethics as the basis for a paradigm shift in philosophy itself. In chapter 2 of *From a Transcendental-semiotic Point of View* (1998), Apel sets this out as a progression from ontological metaphysics, through the transcendental philosophy of consciousness to the



third paradigm of transcendental semiotics or intersubjectivity:

Underlying this 'transformation of philosophy' is the idea that the substantive content of metaphysics can be preserved only in the form of global scientific hypotheses that have a fallible status, whereas transcendental reflection on the conditions of objectively valid experience and argument as such uncovers a realm of genuine philosophical knowledge, which, itself infallible, accounts for the presuppositions of fallibilism and thereby satisfies the conditions of an ultimate grounding (1998, 82).

The significance of this is that whereas Apel still seems to be claiming a privileged status, or even immunity, for philosophy, suggesting that it can provide a foundation for the critique of all other forms of knowledge, Habermas clearly wants to avoid any such claim. For him philosophy has to take its place alongside all the other discourses and should no longer claim special privileges:

It has already forfeited its role as judge and director for the simple reason that there is no hierarchical gradation between discourses and corresponding metadiscourses. The metatheoretical interconnection between theoretical results of the now autonomous disciplines and spheres of knowledge is henceforth assured only by coherence, not by 'grounding' (1995, 83).

What becomes clear from this dispute is that Habermas' position is, in effect, only a weak form of transcendentalism, in contrast to Apel's strong transcendentalism that still claims a foundational role for philosophy. All that Habermas is pointing to when he talks about the universal validity of certain pragmatic presuppositions of argumentation is a factual inescapability of what lies behind this form of human interaction. He does not believe that this is strong enough to form the basis of a new philosophical paradigm in the manner of Apel:

Because we do not in fact have a functional equivalent for rational discourses, we are left with no choice: we *unavoidably* accept the pragmatic presuppositions of this demanding form of communication because there is no alternative (p. 83).

In Habermas' view there is simply no need to take the further step that Apel does and to try to turn this into an ultimate grounding or justification of ethics. In fact, to do this risks compromising the claimed neutrality of discourse ethics by linking it too clearly to a specific tradition. This is crucial if the argument that communicative reason in the form of discourse ethics is not going to dictate content to individual traditions – e.g. Christianity – is to be upheld.

What remains for this exposition is to recognize that the strength of Habermas' position does not rest on some form of proof that his arguments are unassailable. Rather the challenge which faces his opponents is to establish that an approach of this nature can reasonably be dispensed with. The burden of disproof rests with those who will try to show that, given the increased reflexivity of modern subjects and the reflexivity of their relationship to specific traditions in particular, it is possible to present public arguments to support those traditions without engaging in something resembling Habermas' communicative reason. It will always be possible to criticize particular aspects of Habermas' theory, as will be seen shortly, but even its opponents seem to end up with another version of it rather than presenting a convincing alternative or an outright rejection. As one of



the commentators on discourse ethics says:

It will satisfy me simply to make the following claim plausible: if rational will-formation rests on an intersubjective basis, then there exists an immanent practical disposition towards rational co-operation *against which* alternative forms of will-formation can maintain themselves only precariously in today's world, where the need for social co-ordination extends ever more intensely beyond local boundaries. In this sense then, the good of rational co-operation has, for certain domains and on the whole, no viable alternative – at least for reflective agents (Rehg 1997, 159).

Clearly Habermas does not deny that people do in practice and on occasion dispense with the procedures he advocates and defends. He also recognizes that there are areas of social action where to engage in a communicative reason would be cumbersome and indeed unnecessary to achieve the desired aims – the economic sphere being the obvious example. But it is difficult to see how social actors could engage in a public defence of their ethical stances without presupposing Habermas' basic rules of critical engagement and argumentation – at least not without falling into a 'performative contradiction'. Rational co-operation in some openly recognizable format is surely a prerequisite if differences are not to become the occasion for conflict or coercion. If Habermas' theory of discourse ethics points successfully to the way in which this can occur then it need not compromise the integrity of specific traditions and does indeed establish a form of reason that does not dictate terms to theology.

### **The communitarian critique of discourse ethics**

Attention now needs to turn to the various substantive criticisms that have been directed at Habermas' notion of discourse ethics. There is a sense in which the type of arguments employed against Habermas are modified versions of those used against Kant and all other forms of deontological ethics. This is to be expected and welcomed because if Habermas' position cannot take account of these counter-arguments, then clearly no real progress has been made, and discourse ethics will have nothing new to contribute to the discussion of the relationship of faith to reason.

One of the major sources of opposition is thus what has come to be described as the communitarian approach, although that term itself must be treated with some caution. It tends to be used to refer to a group of ethical philosophers who, in different ways, are critical of the contemporary liberalism of John Rawls. So the names of MacIntyre, Taylor, Walzer and Sandal are probably the best known. However, none of these has openly espoused the term 'communitarian' and their respective approaches to the subjects of moral and political philosophy are quite distinctive. It would perhaps be more accurate to retain the term only to refer to writers such as Bellah (1985) and Etzioni (1997), who have made explicit their adherence to this position. In a stricter philosophical sense one might refer to MacIntyre and possibly to Taylor as neo-Aristotelian, but even that requires further qualification and explanation.

Much of the debate between Habermas and MacIntyre can be traced back to the Aristotelian distinction between the realm of *theoria*, the unchanging realities of which we can have universal knowledge, and that of *praxis*, the changing social contexts in



which our actions unfold. As with so many of these contemporary debates it needs to be noted that the later interpretations that are encountered are not necessarily either the only ones available or even the most accurate ones of the original thinker. This is not of direct concern to this thesis which is more clearly focussed on the work of the contemporary philosophers. The issue for discourse ethics is whether it has such a notion of the autonomous subject as an abstract and disembedded agent that there can be no real engagement with the realities of specific contexts. In other words, in terms of this interpretation of Aristotle's distinction, Habermas' theory stands so firmly on the universal side of the divide that it is too divorced from particular situations to be of any use for the exercise of practical reason. Clearly, this debate turns once again on the relationship between the universal and the particular.

Yet the concerns go deeper than this. If the theoretical knowledge of universal truths cannot take account of the uncertainties and contingencies of specific contexts, then their field of relevance is severely constrained. Moreover, it raises the question of where and how individuals learn or are socialized into any ethical tradition. Again, this reflects another supposed interpretation of an Aristotelian distinction, that between *episteme* and *phronesis*, the latter being the practical reasoning that develops from within a particular community or tradition. This distinction has been much in evidence in theology in recent years as various writers have made use of the Post-Modern critique of a universalizing and disembedded reason to emphasize the communitarian interpretation of ethics and to locate theology firmly on that side of the divide (Reader 1997, chs. 4 and 5). The attraction is obvious and also vital for this research. Christianity is a particular ethical tradition that retains its identity and continuity through its narratives and its practices. Christian identity is created and sustained by direct engagement with and the regular practice of certain patterns of behaviour, even more so than through the rather abstract notion of belief or adherence to particular doctrines. This is a particularly convenient interpretation as it counters the challenge of an Enlightenment reason that threatens to undermine the credibility of Christian belief, and it may be seen as a refuge against the reflexivity of contemporary society that again is perceived as threatening. Thus some theologians see a communitarian approach as being the solution to the problems of the survival of a distinctive Christianity.

A slightly different theological perspective, but one that is often seen as adopting the same neo-Aristotelian position, is that of the various contextual theologies (Reader 1994, 2). As their starting point claims to be the context within which particular groups of Christians find themselves, the same issues of local practice, community identity narratives, and a suspicion of universal or globalizing interpretations come to the fore. However, contextual theologies tend not to eschew engagement with other discourses and will employ, for instance, social and political analyses that derive from what might be termed Enlightenment disciplines, so their relationship with a more universalist stance is more complex and nuanced. It is clear though that this essentially philosophical debate has direct implications for contemporary theology.

So there are two major challenges to any neo-Kantian or deontological approach to ethics from the neo-Aristotelian camp. The first is to show that their understanding of the formation of the individual human subject or ethical agent is not so abstract as not



to take into account the influence and role of specific contexts or traditions. The second is to be able to link their theory not only to the issue of the application of moral norms within those contexts, but also to be able to convince the communitarians that there is some realistic degree of motivation underlying their approach. The problem is that the theory may sound fine, but it may not answer the question 'Why be moral?'. Why and how should any individual be so moved by what is only a theory, to translate this into practical action? Habermas has to show how discourse ethics can address these concerns.

First Habermas makes it clear that he rejects the notion of an unsituated and disembodied subject. Both autonomy and freedom are essentially social matters as far as Habermas is concerned. However, what it is not now possible to do is to return in a naive and unreflective way to a setting where one very particular form of life based on certain metaphysical presuppositions is taken for granted. Even the contemporary neo-Aristotelians do not attempt to argue for this. The reason for this is, by now, familiar:

Modern life is characterized by a plurality of forms of life and rival value convictions. For this reason – and not on the account of the empty misgivings of moral theorists – the traditional, established knowledge of concrete ethical life is drawn into a dynamic of problematization that no one today can elude. This awareness of contingency also pervades ethical knowledge and compels it to reflect upon itself (1995, 22).

The individual ethical subject cannot avoid the question of reflexivity because it is impossible to blind oneself to the reality that other ethical options are now available. Hence the issue becomes that of how this changes that person's relationship to their original tradition and then how to relate this to other traditions in ways that do not lead to violence or coercion. These require that the moral subject learns to stand back and consider not only their own ethical tradition, but also those of others.

The moral point of view...requires that maxims and contested interests be generalized, which compels the participants to *transcend* the social and historical context of their particular form of life and particular community and adopt the perspective of *all* those possibly affected. This exercise of abstraction explodes the culture-specific Lifeworld horizon within which processes of ethical self-understanding take place (p. 24).

Thus a process of practical deliberation and reasoned agreement amongst all those potentially affected by a proposed norm of justice is what is now needed. So Habermas' version of moral-practical reason is essentially communicative and intersubjective, a reformulation of the Kantian project.

Yet, because such a process is a matter of procedure and does not directly yield specific content, the question remains of whether it is still too abstract to provide agents with practical guidance. It is here that Habermas introduces the distinction between discourses of justification and discourses of application. Habermas is acutely aware that Kant is deemed to have failed in addressing this issue and does not appear to meet the objection that the proposed universality of the categorical imperative ignores questions of application.

If it indeed were to be the case that Kant neglects the problem of application, his formulations may suggest another view, or at least, a misunderstanding of his view. Discourse ethics has learned from this and makes a careful distinction between the validity



– or justice – of norms, and the correctness of singular judgements that prescribe some particular action on the basis of a valid norm. Analytically ‘...the right thing to do in the given circumstances cannot be decided by a single act of justification – or within the boundaries of a single kind of argumentation – but calls for a two stage process of argument consisting of justification followed by application of norms’ (p. 36).

At a much later stage this particular issue will be revisited as the question of whether and how it is possible for generalized structures of interpretation to take account of the singularity of particular decisions or events must be the subject of a deeper reflection. It can be seen though that Habermas’ formulation here is less a solution than a pathway into further problems. If he is saying that individual situations have to be judged on their merits and in the light of the specific details pertaining to them, then it does in fact seem to weaken the demands of and thus also the relevance of any universal norms. What Habermas presents is not an answer to the tension between universal and particular but merely another way of describing it. It seems as though he is arguing that there are two distinct types of discourse operating at different levels and that the discourse of application is the one that individuals employ in practice to make moral decisions, but that the discourse of justification is there in the background as the means by which one might explain to others the validity of one’s actions. But the problem is that shifting from application to justification then requires unlimited time and unlimited knowledge because the moral agent still has to explain how this particular situation relates to the general norm.

Of course, participants in argumentation could apply this formula properly only if they had unlimited time at their disposal or were privy to complete knowledge that enabled them to predict reliably all situations that could possibly arise. But the principle of universalization, as a rule of argumentation, must retain a rational, and thus operational, meaning for finite subjects who make judgements in particular contexts (p. 36).

Habermas’ response to this is to introduce qualifications that talk about the anticipation of the future interests of potential participants and a proviso that a norm is valid only in unaltered circumstances: ‘Prima facie valid norms remain open to further interpretation in the light of particular constellations of unforeseeable situations of application’ (1995, 37). One does wonder whether the discourses of justification have to be hedged around with so many qualifications in order to provide a convincing link with the discourse of application that they become finally either unworkable or meaningless. One is left having to face questions such as what are the specific conditions that lead one to judge that a particular situation is similar enough in the important respects to another, that one is justified in drawing general conclusions. What constitute the ‘important respects’ and how is that decision made? If such a level of discussion has to be entered into on every single occasion then no decisions will ever get made, for the requisite time will not be available. But then, does not Habermas’ universal level, the discourse of justification, become once again so remote from normal life as to be of no practical relevance?

It has to be acknowledged that it is not clear that Habermas has successfully extricated himself from the familiar problems sometimes mistakenly associated with a Kantian formalism. Nor is it obvious that he presents a convincing answer to the vexed question



of motivation. The best that he can offer to the question of the nature of the connection between the universalist level of discourse ethics and adherence to a particular ethical tradition is that they must meet each other halfway (p. 207). At best this requires further elaboration, at worst it merely begs the question. Why should anybody enter into that compromise?

None of this is to deny that Habermas does make a genuine and concerted attempt to bridge the gap between Kantian universalism and the counter-claims of a communitarian approach. As Rehg says:

Habermas goes some way towards accommodating the neo-Aristotelian concern with community in terms of a moral commitment to *solidarity*. Since personal identity can be achieved only through socialization, the moral concern with autonomy and equal respect is inextricably bound up with an interest in the preservation and promotion of intersubjective relationships of mutual recognition, and hence of forms of communal life in which they can be realized (p. xxvii).

So it is certainly Habermas' intent and concern to do justice to individual ethical traditions within his overall framework. Unless such a project can be successfully formulated it is difficult to see how there can be a form of reason that does not do violence to the specifics of the Christian tradition. What is not so certain is whether Habermas has succeeded in this and one wonders whether his subsequent shift into the subject of law is a tacit recognition that this is the only level at which the theories of communicative reason and discourse ethics appear to have any practical purchase. However, I would argue that Habermas' failures – if such they are – have to be instructive, for the alternative, a total split between theology and a form of trans-contextual rationality, leaves faith adrift and isolated. To summarize the dilemma: either Habermas' theory remains so abstract as to have no practical connection with individual ethical traditions, or it carries within itself a substantive ethical stance that then disqualifies it as a universalizing theory. If the first is true then theology can simply ignore it as another version of an already discredited universalizing reason; if the second is true then it appears that Habermas' approach is no more than another specific ethical tradition from which theology may or may not differ. Whether this objection can be met is the issue to which we now turn.

Probably the most sustained and coherent critique of Habermas' discourse ethics on the grounds that it already relies upon an unacknowledged ethical position – an understanding of what is good rather than what is right – is to be found in the work of Charles Taylor (1989, 85–8). Taylor himself tries to argue that modern morality does indeed rest upon the presupposition of certain goods, or hypergoods, but he is also clear, as is Habermas, that it is not now possible to return to a universally shared metaphysical worldview, and that there therefore will indeed be disagreement over what constitutes the good. However, unlike Habermas, he remains unconvinced that a procedural concept of rationality can create the necessary motivational connections with sources of ethical judgement. In this sense Taylor finds common cause with the communitarian position that seeks to ground ethical conviction in particular sets of practices or traditions. In Habermas' view though, this leaves Taylor himself in a dilemma. He both wants to show how ethical motivation is in fact embedded in certain sets of values, and also to argue that certain of these values



are a good thing and should form the basis of a contemporary approach to morality. In familiar philosophical terminology, he moves from being descriptive to being prescriptive. As Habermas says:

Taylor is interested not merely in a descriptive cultural history of the configurations of values that have attained preeminence in the modern era but in the justification of the self-understanding that has become *ineluctable* for us in the modern age. This analysis is by no means value neutral; on the contrary, it makes fundamental value orientations explicit and understands itself as an *ethics of the contemporary era* (1995, 72).

Habermas goes on to identify what he believes to be the four theses underlying Taylor's position. First, the ethical systems we encounter do provide frameworks within which people can orientate their lives and make evaluations regarding what is good, and thus a level of objectivity in that such evaluations rest upon something greater than just personal preferences. Second, he assumes that the good is in fact independent of the wills of particular subjects, even though the only access to this is through particular languages and ethical practices. Third, Taylor identifies three significant contemporary moral sources: the Christian notion of the love of God; the Enlightenment notion of the self-responsibility of the subject capable of acting autonomously; and the romantic belief in the goodness of nature, particularly as expressed in art. Yet there is a shallow and often unreflective awareness of these three sources and thus conflict between them. Taylor's aim is to bring these tensions out into the open and thus seek for a resolution. Fourth, it is Taylor's goal then to establish these sources as the legitimate base for contemporary morality, but he is left with the problem of how this might be achieved in a 'Post-Metaphysical' context. His main recourse is to art and aesthetics as the major routes to motivation now left available. Habermas of course is far from convinced that this provides a reliable means of answering the question 'Why be moral?'. Can an increase in reflexivity and an acknowledgement of those three major sources of ethical values, in themselves, lead to the deeper commitment to the good that Taylor is advocating? Habermas would seem to have a case here, but then his own position on the importance of rational co-operation for moral reasoning creates a dilemma of a different kind.

Once again it is the claim to neutrality in Habermas' discourse ethics that comes under scrutiny. Is it not the case after all that Habermas himself elevates one particular good – that of rational autonomous co-operation – above all the rest? Unless there is a shared commitment to this value it is difficult to see why people should be prepared to operate the approach that Habermas is advocating. But then the claims to both universality and neutrality appear to be undermined because this value itself belongs to a particular tradition and set of ethical practices, that normally associated with some form of liberalism. Why should one adopt the goal of rational mutual understanding when there are so many other possible alternative sources of motivation? Is not Habermas guilty of building this into his theory as if it were an automatic or essentially uncontested value when it is in fact highly contestable? If this goal is to be identified so clearly with one specific ethical tradition then it is difficult to see how Habermas is any better placed than Taylor. As Rehg sums up:

...if accepting a discourse-ethical procedure depends on the prior acceptance



of some hypergood or constitutive conception of the good of human life, then it would seem that discourse ethics depends on prematurely settling a competition among conceptions of the good. In that case discourse ethics either presupposes as settled precisely the kind of issue it claims one cannot settle in universally binding terms, or it presupposes as indisputable precisely the kind of thin conception of the common good that it claims should be the *result* of moral discourse (1997, 118).

So there seems to be a circularity about Habermas' argument that is damaging to his overall position. This would be crucial for a theology that proposed adopting discourse ethics, for one is then left back with the original problem of a form of reason that does predetermine or dictate content embedded within another specific tradition. Hence the claim that discourse ethics does not impose an alien set of values upon the Christian faith tradition would seem to be seriously undermined.

The question of whether Habermas' approach does commit him to a constitutive good in the way that Taylor suggests thus warrants further investigation. It is necessary to be clear on what grounds this objection to discourse ethics stands. First, if Taylor is correct that modern society is characterized by conflict over different ethical goods, then it is difficult to see how advocacy of a particular ethical good – rational co-operation in this case – can claim to resolve those very conflicts. It becomes merely part of the problem rather than a potential solution. Second, there is the neo-communitarian argument adapted by Taylor from MacIntyre, that substantive ethical goods can only be recognized as operating from within an identifiable and clearly-bounded community of ethical practice. Hence even discourse ethics and its procedural concept of justice could only be effective if grounded in such a context. The notion that it could somehow float across or between different traditions renders it ineffective in any conflict resolution. Third, and related to it, is Taylor's understanding that contemporary conflicts over the sources of morality go so deep that a purely procedural concept would fail to engage people at the very point where those conflicts are most heated. Unless there were already a high degree of prior ethical consensus – in which case the requirement for the conflict resolution promised by a discourse ethics is drastically reduced – it is impossible to see how such conflicts could be resolved by procedure alone. Either discourse ethics says too much by adhering to a value embedded within a specific tradition, or it says too little and fails to engage with the depths of the conflict.

However, it could be argued against Taylor that this strong interpretation of the state of contemporary morality is, in itself, an overstatement, and in danger of putting any sort of rational conflict resolution out of reach almost by definition. If the connection between ethical values and communal identity and personal formation is as substantial as described, then agreement with another or a shift of position, would seem to require a conversion of identity itself. This is surely to exaggerate what happens in practice and does suggest that making such a strong connection between values and specific traditions is, at least, open to question. Again, this is a critical area for theology, particularly a version of it that finds it convenient to work with that strong assumption, eager to establish a firmly-bounded community identity, but with the consequent danger of artificially creating an intellectual isolationism. But then, if the communitarian position is indeed



overstated, there may be more flexibility and malleability in the Christian tradition than many are comfortable to accept. These concerns in themselves, though, do not meet the objection that Habermas himself is advocating a particular conception of the good, and this still requires a deeper analysis.

What is there in Habermas' own exposition of discourse ethics that would substantiate Taylor's charge that it contains a commitment to a particular good? Returning to the earlier discussion on universalization, it is clear that it rests upon the assumption that resolving conflicts by reasoned agreement is presented as being a good thing. Then this becomes so because modern society is described as pluralist, as containing potentially conflicting ethical traditions that could easily resort to violence if peaceful methods of conflict resolution, i.e. reasoned agreement, are not adopted. Thus avoidance of violence is a prior motivation for the adoption of discourse ethics. Habermas also links the value of a discourse ethical procedure with the notion of respect for personal integrity and well-being, although there could be a conflict between maintaining one's integrity by adhering to a moral principle in the face of challenge, and the presumption that it is better to avoid violence at all costs, even if that means compromising or sacrificing one's principles. There does seem to be a thinly veiled imperative behind Habermas' approach that it is more important to avert the danger of violent conflict than to adhere to one's ethical values or tradition. Whether one agrees with this or not – and many might want to disagree – this does then appear to constitute a very particular conception of what is good. Rehg, in his detailed commentary on discourse ethics, wants to argue that Habermas need not deny that it draws its motivating power from exactly such a constitutive good (1997, 137). The main basis for this argument appears to rest upon exactly how and where the good of rational co-operation fits into Habermas' overall position. In particular, does this good become *theoretically* prior to justice in discourse ethics? What Habermas does in fact argue is that rational co-operation has such a unique status in relation to all other possible goods that its priority simply is the priority of right over the other goods. So there is a difference of kind at work in this process.

Habermas constructs this position in the following way. In a reply to Agnes Heller, who raises a very similar objection to that of Taylor, he argues first that communicative rationality cannot be a particular value as it must be accepted or presupposed by anybody once they have decided to settle disputes on the basis of argument. Second, a decision not to argue at all is not a viable alternative as social relationships can only be sustained to the extent that subjects are prepared to take each other seriously at a communicative level i.e. to respond to the illocutionary force of one another's claims. Third, because these structures of argumentation remain essentially formal, they do not advocate a particular form of life or specific ethical tradition. In other words, we return to the position described earlier that there is no alternative to the approach of communicative reason, hence it is inappropriate to categorize it just one good alongside others, or to identify it with one particular ethical community.

In what ways and under what conditions could Habermas support these claims? It does seem reasonable to argue that, from within a particular life context, once one has entered into a disagreement, the most sensible and logical way of trying to resolve it is by using communicative reason, by appealing to publically accessible validity claims. However, it



does not answer the question as to why someone from outside that tradition or culture should necessarily agree to use this process of settling differences. It may be that Habermas would want to suggest that, in a modern, pluralist and global setting, this increasingly becomes the best way of settling disputes, but this seems a weak basis for his position. As Rehg says:

If rational co-operation is a constitutive good for discourse ethics, and if the grounds for accepting such a good to the extent Habermas requires reside in a particular historical experience, then discourse ethics begins to look as though it ultimately rests on a style of argument more akin to Taylor's genealogical 'articulation of moral sources' which aims to reconstruct the deeper, thicker considerations that lead one to adopt the good of morality to begin with (1997, 144–5).

Something further is surely required if Habermas' claims are to gain substantive support, and that must relate to his argument that discourse ethics is not bounded by or embedded in a particular ethical tradition, that its very formalism means that it can, in principle, relate to all possible cultures. This is clearly derived from a theory of social evolution and Habermas' specific view that one can identify both individual and collective learning processes that lead to increased reflexivity. This will not take the form of a predetermined Hegelian style philosophy of history arguing that this process will necessarily occur, but a weaker form of argument to the effect that, once historical circumstances begin to move in this particular direction, there is a growing likelihood that people will see the advantages of dealing with disagreements through rational argumentation and thus a discourse ethics. 'One argues not that certain historical developments *had* to happen but how, given the prior level of learning, no *rational alternatives* existed within certain limits' (p. 146). So although the particular position presented does relate directly to a Western cultural experience, it is also possible to translate this into other cultures, as societies move in a globalizing and thus potentially reflexive direction.

It seems to me that if there is a strength in this overall argument, then it is probably only available from an accumulation of evidence. It will still be the case that a specific individual or ethical community may choose not to engage with others either in dispute at all, or in disputes to be tackled by reasoned argument and rational co-operation. However, given the likely consequences of such a course of action, the burden of proof will surely be upon those who choose *not* to engage in those ways and to show how this non-engagement is justifiable. Even this would require a commitment to participate in a Habermasian style communication at some stage. It is not so much that there is no alternative, but rather that the alternative of isolation, possibly leading to violent conflict, is increasingly unthinkable and unworkable. In that sense one could support the proposition that the good of rational co-operation is not one amongst others, but one that precedes all further discussion of specific goods.

The question remains whether Habermas' overall position is so seriously weakened by subsequent qualifications that it ceases to be of any real use, or whether those qualifications necessarily result in a coherent reformulation of Habermas' theories and an understanding of reason with which theology could still engage. I want to argue for the second of these



and to continue to suggest that, although there are significant points where Habermas' ideas are vulnerable to criticism, these can lead to a creative revision rather than to an outright rejection. It is surely to be expected that a framework of interpretation as ambitious as that of Habermas will contain blind spots and questionable arguments, but the point is that he has performed the major task of presenting the format for a 'Post-Metaphysical' reason that others can then refine and revise.

### **Discourse ethics and the problem of consensus**

One of the more obvious points of vulnerability in Habermas' theory is his apparent emphasis upon consensus. Although it can be shown that this is overstated, it is important to register the outlines of this criticism, as, once again, it impinges upon the relationship between faith and reason. The major suspicion that the Christian tradition will have of Habermas' argument is that it suppresses or denies vital elements in its own beliefs and practices. In particular, if it were the case that Habermas implicitly advocates consensus as the prime objective of communicative reason or discourse ethics, then this could be too high a price to pay for those with a Christian commitment. There will surely be a point beyond which Christians should not be prepared to go in compromising their own tradition, even though such a sacrifice would achieve a peaceful consensus. Indeed, it could be argued that practical progress towards the sort of society Habermas himself is advocating, is often the result of particular groups refusing to be silenced by an existing social consensus and standing up for alternative beliefs. Resistance to apartheid in South Africa would seem to be an obvious example. However, it may be that this argument rests upon a simplistic interpretation of Habermas' position. Is social consensus the primary objective of discourse ethics?

A significant critique of the work of Habermas, Apel and Rawls, has been produced by Nicholas Rescher (1993). Having stated that his main target is the idea that consensus should be the central objective of social and political life, he goes on to describe his project in a way that does not sound too different from the three thinkers just mentioned:

...the stance advocated here is a pluralism that rejects both indifferentist relativism and dogmatic absolutism. Such a view seeks to occupy a middle ground between a traditionalistic rationalism that sees our cognitive and practical problems as admitting of only one possible solution dictated by reason alone, and a postmodern relativism that dissolves every sort of position into the indifferentism of personal interests, 'matters of taste', group custom, or other such non-rational factors that can be mobilized in the interest of consensus formation (1993, 2).

What Rescher aims to advocate is interpretability rather than the cognitive agreement he identifies as consensus, and acquiescence rather than the practical agreement in matters of social and political interaction that he identifies with a Habermasian stance on discourse. In order to do this he needs to show that the notion of consensus is unable to carry the weight that thinkers such as Habermas place upon it.

Rescher presents a number of grounds on which he bases his objection to any theory of consensus. First is the claim that cogent argument – presumably a reference to Habermas' early emphasis upon the unforced force of the better argument – can only lead in the



direction determined by its initial premises. Hence there is already a severe limitation on Habermas' theory. In addition:

...no matter how widely accepted a contention on some significant issue may be, the prospect as often as not remains that some will (quite defensibly) dissent from it – a prospect that is virtually ever-present and ineliminable given the inevitable variation in people's information and situation (p. 7).

Thus the ground shifts immediately to what appears to be a logical objection: whatever is agreed, there will always be those who disagree. Obvious as this point is, does it really damage Habermas' position as severely as Rescher imagines? We have already seen that Habermas is sensitive to this counter-argument, and that he also makes it clear that he is talking about the underlying conditions or presuppositions of argumentation rather than about its practical outcomes. Nevertheless, he does require real argumentation to be a component of discourse ethics. So what response can be made to Rescher's initial objections? It needs to be pointed out that his rapid shift from the logical to the empirical disguises what is a very static concept of argumentation. There is surely an important difference between the type of abstract philosophical argument that derives conclusions directly from premises and the argumentative discourse related to matters of social, political and moral judgements where conclusions are going to be more contestable and the objective of the process is not to offer conclusive proof, but to attempt to get others to change their minds. Habermas is clearly more concerned with this latter territory where argument serves the purpose of helping people to see things differently or of enabling them to grasp another point of view, even though they may then not accept it. This is less to do with reaching consensus in terms of content than with agreeing on a procedure that it is reasonable to adopt given the very pluralism that Rescher himself emphasizes. A dynamic process, where differences and disagreements are to be expected, is the appropriate context in which Habermas' theory is to operate and where its effectiveness is to be judged.

Rescher develops a further line of objection, pointing out that we are 'imperfect agents operating in an imperfect world' (p. 9), and thus, in many cases, the limited knowledge available to us is likely to put consensus beyond our reach. Thus: 'consensus appertains to rationality as an ideal, not as a realizable "fact of life"' (p. 9). Two responses immediately present themselves. First Habermas has always been clear that what he is talking about as the 'ideal communication community' is an idealization. It is a counter-factual idea or regulative ideal that provides a criterion by which to judge the way things are in practice. Thus the comment that we live in an imperfect world does not, in itself, undermine Habermas' position. Second, there is a danger that, as with Taylor's argument noted earlier, the standards or objectives of argumentation are set so high that they never could be attained, in which case the objection that they are beyond reach rests purely on an over-stringent definition. Once again, it may be suggested that Rescher has failed to engage with the substance of Habermas' theory.

However, a fourth line of approach would appear to present more formidable problems for Habermas. The objection that there is a circularity in Habermas' arguments is a more difficult one to meet. Habermas correctly distinguishes between a *de facto* consensus that may fortuitously be correct, and a rational consensus that is based on the implementation of the norms of reason. But if the latter is the line to be taken in Habermas' theory of



argumentation, then the link between consensus and rationality is indeed correct but trivial. As Rescher says:

We cannot now clarify rationality in consensual terms without vitiating circularity, seeing that we need to have recourse to rationality in explicating the sort of consensus that is to be at issue. What Habermas' theory of consensus ultimately demands is not just any old consensus, but a consensus produced through an adherence to rational principles. What counts for him is consensuality reached 'solely by force of cogent argumentation'. And then we can extract rationality from consensuality all right, but only because we put it there in the first place (1993, 13).

If this is the case it might be better just to talk about rationality and to leave a concern for consensus out of the picture altogether.

It does indeed seem that Habermas is vulnerable to this line of criticism, and it does relate back to the concern that he in fact privileges not only a particular form of argumentation, but also the specific cultural context in which it is likely to be deemed appropriate or acceptable. Again, as noted before in the debate with Taylor, Habermas can be seen to be advocating rational argumentation as a good in its own right. The issue is whether this can be defended against the charge of cultural imposition and claim the required degree of universality. For this Habermas has to appeal beyond philosophy to his particular theory of social evolution. It could be argued that there is a necessary circularity in this form of argument, but it is not the logical circularity that Rescher suggests, rather a dependence upon supporting evidence from the disciplines of sociology and social psychology. In other words, social and personal life is in fact moving in the direction of greater reflexivity, requiring a greater degree of rational argumentation if agreement is to be achieved and conflict avoided. However, this direction is contingent upon other external factors that may be challenged or changed, so that the circular connection between rationality and consensus may be broken. The circle is not a logical one in the way that Rescher suggests, but rather a cultural and developmental one.

A similar charge of circularity is levelled by Rescher at Habermas' connection between morality and consensus. This refers directly to the exposition of discourse ethics and the presuppositions of what forms a rational process of argumentation, in particular the idea that all those directly affected by a practical discourse should have the opportunity to participate in it. Rescher is concerned that this stipulation is not sufficient to guarantee the morality of the discourse. It could, for instance, be the case that a consensus so achieved may still rest upon the use of morally questionable means – presumably some form of coercion or indoctrination. The question then is that of the grounds for judging such a process immoral. Habermas would surely want to argue that the genuine needs of all concerned had not been taken into account in the process of argumentation, but is the immorality one of process or of content? If the process is correct, i.e. rational in Habermas' terms, but the outcome immoral, then the criteria of evaluation cannot be purely procedural. Then those criteria must be external to the process and derived from another source, presumably a particular ethical tradition that states the unacceptability of coercion or indoctrination in the articulation of needs. So Habermas may not escape the charge that he is surreptitiously importing the values of a specific ethical community.



Hence the perceived circularity in his argument – morality is read out of it only because it was already disguised within it in the first place.

However, as before, it may be possible for Habermas to escape by arguing that, in our current global, 'Post-Metaphysical' and pluralist setting, it would be highly unlikely that any group or culture would try to launch a public argument justifying the use of coercion or indoctrination. This is an interesting but contestable position. One can imagine political regimes arguing either that such a tactic is essential for national security, or that it is appropriate for the particular developmental stage of its people. So it does appear that Habermas' presuppositions are more closely related to the cultures of Western liberal democracies than he would prefer to accept. This is not to suggest that such regimes would not use coercive tactics, just that they are less likely to be open about them. But then, many people, including perhaps many Christians, would want to identify with Habermas' ideal that only non-coercive forms of argumentation are either morally acceptable or rational.

It seems to me that, even though it is possible to identify gaps and weaknesses in Habermas' position, the real challenge to his critics is to present a convincing argument that they would either do things differently, or that they could justify an alternative base for contemporary social and political activity. Thus there may indeed be a degree of circularity behind Habermas' discourse ethics, but perhaps this is inescapable, and perhaps there can be virtuous as well as vicious circles in this arena. As an example of this, Rescher himself, offering his own substantive position on the possible justification of adhering to a particular set of values in a pluralist setting, wants to say that this can be based upon rationality:

Values are not irrationalizable. A perfectly good rational defence of one's cognitive value-system can be built up, but such a defence will itself have to be value-geared – and thus not without an element of probative circularity. People can in principle and often do in practice hold their values (cognitive ones included) for perfectly good reasons – albeit always reasons that themselves are ultimately evaluative in nature, and thus potentially variable (1993, 103).

In a sense, this appears to differ from Habermas' argument only in that it explicitly acknowledges the role of particular values in the process of justification. However, this is achieved by begging the very question with which Habermas is struggling, that of the nature of rationality in a pluralist, 'Post-Metaphysical' setting. For Rescher, rationality seems to be the unquestioned or invariable factor in the equation, while the realms of discourse and of values are allowed to shift. For Habermas it is discourse that plays the constitutive role as both a traditional rationality and ethical values are subject to change. Whether Rescher makes any gains by this means is perhaps open to question.

Rescher's overall argument is that consensus in social and political life is neither a realizable nor a desirable objective. Since Habermas is interpreted as setting this as his primary goal both discourse ethics and communicative rationality are denied any validity. However, this is surely to misinterpret Habermas' intentions. There is in fact less distance between Rescher and Habermas than the former prefers to acknowledge, in the sense that both are concerned with the question of how social co-operation is to be sustained in a pluralist context. Rescher emphasizes acquiescence and intelligibility, Habermas



the possibilities of agreement and processes of rational argumentation. One senses that Rescher interprets Habermas as still a Marxist at heart, in other words, wanting to impose a particular way of life and to engage in social engineering, hence consensus is really to be read as coercion:

The polity of consensus proceeds from a fundamentally socialistic commitment to the co-ordination and alignment of individual action into the uniform social order of 'rationalized' central planning... By contrast, the polity of pluralism abandons the goal of a monolithically unified 'rational order' for the 'creative diversity' of a situation of variegated rivalry and competition (1993, 187).

So Rescher argues that such diversity offends Habermas' own search for a tidy and unified social order and implies that discourse ethics is really a thinly disguised socialist mechanism based on a restricted vision of human interests and of the common good. In other words, the procedures of rational argumentation harbour a specific political programme that would convert pluralism into a new unified order. One can see how Habermas inadvertently lays himself open to this interpretation, but I do not believe that that is to do justice to the intention of his theory. To substantiate this we move forward to a recent reformulation of discourse ethics designed to counter the objection that it is inherently authoritarian.

One of the classic objections against theories of democratic will-formation and majority rule is that a *de facto* social consensus becomes confused or conflated with a valid consensus. Just because a particular norm receives the support of the majority of a population does not automatically mean that the norm is a morally acceptable one. We have already encountered this concern within Rescher's critique of discourse ethics. However, Habermas is aware of this problem and his attempt to address it involves the use of the concept of general or generalizable interests, and this is where the risk of authoritarianism can become visible.

A mere empirical consensus does not in itself produce legitimate obligation. Nor, for that matter, is it stable. Moreover, it has no authoritative character if it can be changed at will and if it depends only on our momentary agreement. Habermas thus repeats his stress on the centrality of the idea of general interest to discourse ethics (Cohen and Arato 1992, 365).

There needs to be a way of distinguishing between the particular interests that might hold sway in a pluralist society and such general interests, and of course, Habermas wants to link this to the discursive procedure of giving and then arguing for reasons for the defence of a particular norm. However, as Cohen and Arato point out, there is a danger here that Habermas is confusing the processes of raising and arguing validity claims with the rationality or cognitive character of the truth claims involved in statements of fact.

To treat normative validity claims like cognitive truth claims would be to confuse the object domains explored by practical and theoretical discourse, respectively. Practical discourse refers to a world (the 'social world') experienced and even reconstructed in the performative attitude, that is, the attitude of participants... Theoretical discourse, even about society, requires objectifying the social actors and their actions. The language of general or generalizable interests is theoretical in this sense (p.366).



This is where the problem of a potential authoritarianism lies as Habermas assumes that the test of the validity of a norm can be based on the generality of interests. This leads all too readily into objectivism and the danger of an external source dictating a particular content to the process of open discourse. It is still reasonable for Habermas to state that the objectivity of judgement is rooted in the structure of argumentation itself because we are not then dealing with a value that is brought in from outside the process. But once the discussion turns to the matter of general interests and need interpretations, then the level of discourse is being applied to content rather than process and this is where the problems lie. Either such a discussion about what constitutes such general needs is inconclusive and therefore cannot contribute to a procedure that claims to be universal, or else it determines in advance what is of general interest, thus denying differences and conflicts and becomes the authoritarian mechanism that both Rescher and Habermas are anxious to avoid. This is of critical concern to theology that will want to defend a particular set of understandings and values. Is a reformulation available that will answer this problem?

Cohen and Arato suggest that the term 'general interest' must give way or priority to the idea of 'common identity'.

In societies characterized by a plurality of value systems, modes of life, and individual identities, discourse ethics provides a way of discovering or reaffirming what, if anything, we who come into contact with one another and who are affected by the same decisions and laws have in common (p. 368).

It is through discourse that we affirm and constitute who we are, a collective identity that goes beyond our individual identities and differences. It is this collective identity of a community rather than any notion of general interests that can then provide the minimum criterion, with respect to content, of the legitimacy of norms. It could of course be argued that a collective identity is just as likely to carry authoritarian implications as are general interests, but Cohen and Arato believe that the counter to this is the idea that a core component of such collective identity is the principle of democratic legitimacy:

The principle of democratic legitimacy involves a level of justification that has become reflexive and a procedural principle that is universalizable... (it)...presupposes a postconventional, post-traditional orientation to our own traditions, or at least to those aspects of our tradition and collective identity that have become problematic. Moreover it implies that only those aspects of our collective identity and common tradition that are compatible with the principles of democratic legitimacy and basic rights can provide the content of valid political norms (p. 369).

Clearly then any tradition that continues to operate in an authoritarian mode cannot make a contribution to the development of valid social and political norms. This is a substantial claim and has significant implications for all the traditions and ethical communities that might commit themselves to such a process. Its force lies in the fact that Western liberal democracies do, in theory at least, adopt the principle of democratic legitimacy, and the related interpretation of social life as being pluralistic and 'Post-Metaphysical', and encourage the reflexivity of both individuals and traditions. Yet there must remain the question of whether particular traditions can locate themselves within such a structure without compromising or undermining their beliefs or practices. In relation to the Christian tradition, can it espouse the principle of democratic legitimacy



from within its own framework of beliefs without sacrificing its integrity? If not then, according to Cohen and Arato and possibly Habermas, it cannot be allowed to play any part in the formation of social and political norms. Only a reflexive tradition, willing and able to be critical of elements of its beliefs and practices that are problematic, can participate in public life. Here is the crux of the challenge to Christianity, if it is to adopt a Habermasian understanding of reason.

There is of course a more general question as to whether Habermas' discourse ethics, or any of its reformulations, can respect the integrity of the individual traditions that go to make up the societies that are committed to the principle of democratic legitimacy. Of the religious traditions, Christianity is perhaps the one most likely to be comfortable with the practices of democracy. This may certainly not be true of those religions more deeply embedded in non-Western cultures. Does this mean that they are to be excluded from the processes of public debate on moral and political norms? Perhaps it will be the case that, if they cannot or will not accept the rules of engagement of such societies, they deliberately exclude themselves from this level of participation.

### **Conclusion**

At the end of this examination of Habermas' discourse ethics and of some of the more substantive criticisms of his approach, it remains to sum up its potential contribution to the subject of the relationship of reason to theology. Given that the alternatives of continuing to operate with the Enlightenment metanarrative of a universalizing, objectifying reason, or of adopting a Post-Modern rejection of any form of reasoning are both to be rejected, it would seem that something like Habermas' reformulation of a communicative reason is a better option to pursue. This is still, as yet, the most closely argued and convincing attempt to develop a 'Post-Metaphysical' or 'Post-Foundational' understanding of rationality. However, the theory does suffer from significant weaknesses that have to be taken into account in any developing relationship with the Christian tradition. Most of these stem directly from Habermas' claims to some degree of universality. So, for instance, it does seem clear that his ideas have more purchase in Western liberal democracies already wedded to the idea of democratic legitimacy, and that their application to other cultures and contexts is less obvious. There is also the concern that, despite his own stated intentions, the particularities of individual traditions and ethical communities within those liberal democracies may not receive the recognition and respect that they might deserve. Although his political objectives are democratic rather than authoritarian, it is not always easy to see how he can avoid determining both procedure and content for other traditions. The claim that discourse ethics does not advocate or imply a particular conception of the good life, thereby compromising any supposed neutrality in relation to other traditions, can only be defended in a complex and convoluted manner. Whether this defence could be received and understood by traditions that perceived themselves to be under threat appears to be an open question. In addition, and this is an aspect that must be developed further, there is a suspicion that what is still a heavily rationalistic approach to both social and moral formation, is not able to take account of the affective or emotional dimensions of human behaviour. The characteristic Post-Modern themes of difference, the other, and the suppression of that which does not fit into universalizing



categories need to be brought into a more direct engagement with the Habermasian position. Without these, discourse ethics is in danger of presenting a one-sided view of moral life and may be prematurely rejected by religious traditions that themselves are eager to strive for justice for those who are the victims and the repressed others of Enlightenment reason.



## Chapter Five

### FROM HABERMAS TO DERRIDA THE OTHER OF REASON

#### **Introduction and objectives**

Although some of the major objections to Habermas' theory of communicative reason and the consequent construction of a discourse ethics have already been referred to, there remains what may be the most significant challenge to his position as hinted at in the conclusion of the preceding chapter. In Habermas' view reason is essentially cognitive and it thus struggles to account for the other dimensions of human subjectivity described as the affective or the emotional. It is not that Habermas neglects or makes no attempt to acknowledge this dimension in his work but that his means of interpreting and incorporating the affective aspects of subjectivity either fail to convince or leave one uncertain as to whether he has really done justice to the range of issues involved. There is indeed the other of reason according to the philosophy of consciousness that Habermas believes is now to be superseded by the paradigm of intersubjectivity, but what becomes of this area of human experience within the new paradigm? Can human feelings, let alone the even more complex areas referred to as the pre-conscious or the unconscious convincingly be incorporated into Habermas' theories, and, if not, does this undermine his general approach to reason or can it be supplemented by a more carefully developed interpretation? The aim of this chapter is to explore this question and to develop Habermas' view with specific reference to the work of Derrida and, to a lesser extent, that of Levinas.

The first section looks in greater depth at Habermas' early approach to the tasks of psychoanalysis and his interpretation of Freud in *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1972) leading into his later challenge to the philosophy of consciousness. These interpretations will themselves be challenged on the grounds that he builds too much on his theory of language and communication and fails to do justice to the affective dimension of human subjectivity. This challenge will then be taken up from a feminist perspective that argues for a supplemented understanding of a Habermasian approach and this will be contrasted with a more substantial critique made on the basis of a different interpretation of the dynamic unconscious. The suggestion will then be taken up that the work of Derrida can offer an effective counter-balance to Habermas' overly cognitive approach to reason and reflexivity and that an understanding building upon both perspectives may be more fruitful for the debate on the relationship between reason and the Christian tradition.

#### **Habermas on Freud: putting the unconscious into language**

Habermas' primary objective in *Knowledge and Human Interests* was to establish the base for a critical hermeneutics and to argue that the perceived gap between the natural



and the human sciences could be closed by an acknowledgement that the self reflection required by all human inquiry is influenced by non-cognitive factors. Within this project an interpretation of psychoanalysis as represented by Freud plays a central role. Although Habermas was subsequently to abandon psychoanalysis as his model for tackling the challenge of systematically distorted communication and move to the theory of communicative reason as already examined in an earlier chapter, this early work is significant as being the foundation for Habermas' approach to the affective dimension. Within it is to be encountered his understanding of the unconscious and the role of language as articulating this dimension of human subjectivity.

Freud's analysis of dreams is a key focus for this discussion, providing an example of the depth hermeneutics that Habermas intends to develop. The symbols experienced in dreams are beyond the scope of normal interpretation because they do not obey the grammatical rules of ordinary language or the culturally learned patterns of experience. According to Habermas, they represent the blockages or distortions in an individual's own self-understanding:

Because the symbols that interpret suppressed needs are excluded from public communication, the speaking and acting subject's communication with himself is interrupted. The privatized language of unconscious motives is rendered inaccessible to the ego, even though internally it has considerable repercussions upon that use of language and those motivations of action that the ego controls. The result is that the ego necessarily deceives itself about its identity in the symbolic structures that it consciously produces (1972, 227).

This being the case the normal model of interpretation or even translation between two languages does not apply in the task of psychoanalysis. The patient is unable to receive in such a direct manner the meaning of his or her own dream symbols because communication is already disturbed and thus the role of the analyst is to instruct the patient in reading his own texts and in translating symbols from a mode of expression deformed into a private language into the mode of expression of public communication. This requires then not merely translation but self-reflection on the part of the patient himself in the course of which what has been unconscious is brought into the realm of consciousness.

Habermas is swift to acknowledge that this is more than a purely cognitive process, but it is nevertheless still clear that the task of articulation is central to the success of psychoanalysis:

The analytic process of making conscious reveals itself as a process of reflection in that it is not only a process on the cognitive level but also dissolves resistances on the affective level. The dogmatic limitation of false consciousness consists not only in the lack of specific information, but in its specific inaccessibility. It is not only a cognitive deficiency, for the deficiency is fixated by habitualized standards on the basis of affective attitudes (p. 229).

The hoped-for outcome of this is that the patient remembers for himself the meaning of the symbols on the basis of what the analyst has presented as a possible reconstruction, and will have restored to him through this process of self-reflection the forgotten or suppressed part of their life history. This common endeavour is known as the 'working-through' of the interpretations of the unconscious.



One can see immediately from this exposition that Habermas holds a very optimistic view of what psychoanalysis can achieve. The mere articulation of the hidden areas of a person's life is deemed to initiate a successful process of healing and restoration within which distortions of internal communication are conclusively dealt with. The concept of resistance means a keeping from the consciousness, so once what lies in the unconscious is brought to the higher level through public communication the distortions of meaning will have been swept away. So sure is Habermas of this interpretation of Freud's work that he states:

Starting with the experiences of the physician's communication with his patient, Freud derived the concept of the unconscious from a specific form of disturbance of communication in ordinary language. For this he would really have needed a theory of language, which did not exist at the time and whose outlines are only just beginning to take form today (p. 238).

It is clear that, in Habermas' view, whether we are dealing with instincts, or needs, it is only because these can take shape in and through language and can then be interpreted or reinterpreted that it is possible to think about the unconscious at all. Once that task has begun the possibility of successful treatment of symptoms and eradication of distortions of meaning comes readily into reach. However, this requires a theory of language – the one that Habermas himself is intent on developing and which may only be present in Freud in embryonic form. The question here is whether this is an accurate and convincing interpretation of Freud's theory and practice of psychoanalysis or whether Habermas is merely reading back into it his own ideas and concerns. There is much evidence to suggest that this latter interpretation is closer to the truth and that Habermas has failed to grasp Freud's understanding of the nature of the unconscious and the limits of language both to articulate and reconcile this deeper level of human subjectivity.<sup>†</sup>

Even the concept of instinct that is applied to animal behaviour is derived privately from the pre-understanding of a linguistically interpreted, albeit reduced human world; in short, from situations of hunger, love and hate. The concept of instinct, when transferred back from animals to men, is still rooted in meaning structures of the Lifeworld, no matter how elementary they may be. They are twisted and diverted intentions that have turned from conscious motives into causes and subjected communicative action to the causality of 'natural' conditions. This is the causality of fate, and not of nature, because it prevails through the symbolic means of the mind. Only for this reason can it be compelled by the power of reflection (Habermas 1972, 256).

In his later work Habermas moves away from the task of developing a depth or critical hermeneutics and taking psychoanalysis as his primary model of how distorted communication can be corrected. According to Habermas, this approach was still tied too closely to the philosophy of consciousness that he subsequently wished to abandon. However, even though he does then attempt to leave behind the philosophy of consciousness and to replace it by the paradigm of intersubjectivity and the theory of communicative reason, the general theme of dealing with the pre-conscious or unconscious

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<sup>†</sup> Freud 1980, 775-6; Eagleton 1990, 265. The argument that Habermas has failed to do justice to Freud's interpretation of the unconscious is pursued in greater detail on pp. 88-9 below.



by understanding it as essentially linguistically mediated remains and, in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1987), the other of reason, the dimension of the affective and emotional, is still effectively subordinate to Habermas' cognitive version of reason and reflexivity. The idea that there is a dimension of human subjectivity that lies beyond language, Habermas sees as another symptom of the exhaustion of the philosophy of consciousness. Rather than dealing with the aporia generated by the traditional concept of the human subject,

A more viable solution suggests itself if we drop the somewhat sentimental presupposition of metaphysical homelessness, and if we understand the hectic to and fro between transcendental and empirical modes of dealing with issues, between radical self-reflection and an incomprehensible element that cannot be reflectively retrieved, between the productivity of a self-generating species and a primordial element prior to all production – that is to say, when we understand the puzzle of all these doublings for what it is: a symptom of exhaustion (1987, 296).

Instead, within the paradigm of mutual understanding, where individuals take up the performative attitude of participants in interaction, subjects will be able to leave behind this observer perspective upon themselves. While the latter still holds sway, no mediation is possible between the different levels of human subjectivity and the divide between the rational and the affective continues to predominate:

As soon as linguistically generated intersubjectivity gains primacy, this alternative no longer applies. Then ego stands within an interpersonal relationship that allows him to relate to himself as a participant in an interaction from the perspective of alter. And indeed this reflection undertaken from the perspective of the participant escapes the kind of objectification inevitable from the reflexively applied perspective of the observer. Everything gets frozen into an object under the gaze of the third person, whether directed inwardly or outwardly (p. 297).

This process will equally hold true for the thought of the subject philosophy that oscillates between what is supposedly conscious and unconscious. Individuals engaged in mutual understanding will do so with reference to a shared Lifeworld, and it will be the components of this background that provide the content of communication, not some questionable assumptions about a pre-linguistic individual subjective reality. The latter still rests upon the presupposition of a division between inner and outer nature, outer nature being the realm of reason and objectivity; inner being the province of affectivity and subjectivity. The debate between the Enlightenment and the Counter-Enlightenment reaction of Romanticism has been set up on precisely these lines and Habermas wants to leave this debate behind because it posits the existence of a level of human subjectivity not accessible to either language or reason and always threatening to emerge in a violent and irrational manner.

in its putative sovereignty, reason that has evaporated into subjectivity becomes the plaything of unmediated forces working upon it, as it were, mechanically – forces of the internal and external nature that have been excluded and rendered into objects (p. 306).

It is this view of subjectivity that becomes the basis for the other of reason, the realm of the human body, desire and the feelings, and creates the myth of a repressed



and inaccessible area of human experience, positing humans as essentially split and irreconcilable personalities. Even philosophers such as Heidegger who seek to escape the Western metaphysical tradition and those such as Foucault identified with a Post-Modernity that apparently questions the very nature of the subject, fail to finally escape the philosophy of consciousness with its implications for a divided subjectivity. They remain within the old paradigm and construct an area of human experience immune from the operation of a communicative reason.

The spatial metaphor of inclusive and exclusive reason reveals that the supposedly radical critique of reason remains tied to the presuppositions of the philosophy of the subject from which it wanted to free itself. Only a reason to which we ascribe a 'power of the key' could either include or exclude. Hence inside and outside are linked with domination and subjugation: and the overcoming of reason-as-powerholder is linked with breaking open the prison gates and vouchsafing release into an indeterminate freedom. Thus, the other of reason remains the mirror image of reason in power (p. 309).

Only a different paradigm, that of intersubjectivity, can move philosophy away from this split in subjectivity. In other words, only a communicative rationality built upon a theory of language and thus articulating what is described as pre-conscious or unconscious can counter the divisive influence of Romanticism. So even though Habermas appears to have left behind the specific model of psychoanalysis he believes is derived from Freud, his basic understanding of the other levels of human subjectivity remains intact. This aspect of Habermas' theory also fits conveniently into his concerns over the future of social integration and the ways in which a capitalist and bureaucratized society inhibits the personal learning processes he associates with modernity.

What are the factors that hold back the spread of communicative rationality as Habermas conceives it? A central one is the spread of organizational rationality as it appears to widen the gap between the possible articulation of the affective dimension and that dimension itself. The individual's ability to exercise critical reflection upon needs and desires is damaged by the failure to gain linguistic and therefore public access to this inner selfhood. Habermas has to be able to explain why his apparently optimistic view of the social development encounters blocks and resistances, and the pathologies that form this explanation refer directly back to the issue of making the unconscious conscious through language. However, this can only be convincing if it is the case that what remains unconscious can be attributed to distortions in language and therefore in communication. Once inner needs and desires are expressed in language and thus brought into the public arena their true interpretation will come to the surface and become subject to the critical reflection of the enlightened subject. All of this raises significant questions about Habermas' understanding of the unconscious and, in particular, its relationship to language.

As already pointed out, it is not that Habermas neglects the affective dimension in human subjectivity, but the doubts arise when examining the ways he chooses to relate this to his primary concern of the development of autonomy through the strengthening of communicative rationality. So the latter is not a sufficient condition for individual and collective autonomy and needs to be supplemented by a focus on the human emotions, hence Habermas' references to Freud's accounts of unconscious drives and motivations.



The demands of rationality and happiness require reconciling within Habermas' view of communicative reason. For a useful summary of Habermas' position I turn to Anthony Elliott in *Social Theory and Psychoanalysis in Transition* (1992).

1. From the standpoint of communications theory, the unconscious is characterized as a result of the desymbolization of public communication. The repressions engendered produce a privatization of language which distorts public communication. As the depository of distorting influences within the psyche, the unconscious is viewed by Habermas as a defective element in human subjectivity.
2. Developing the contention that psychic reality is a prime example of 'systematically distorted communication', Habermas seeks to link the distortions of the unconscious to the social phenomena that produce heteronomy and alienation, such as ideology and power.
3. Connecting the psychoanalytic goal of the lifting of repression to the tasks of ideology critique, Habermas contends that the process of emancipation entails the elimination of unconscious determinants in human activity to secure the self-reflective movement towards autonomy and free communication. At the collective level, this demands the organization of social relations in such a way that 'interpreted needs' become accessible to the 'communicative structures of action' (p. 109).

The questions raised by this overall approach are as follows. First, is Habermas' understanding of the unconscious consistent with Freud's, and, if not, is this of serious concern for his theory of communicative reason? Second, is Habermas' concept of autonomy still too formalistic to accommodate human needs and desires in anything but the most abstract manner? Third, in moving away from the idea that the unconscious is to be privileged as the other of reason, is Habermas in danger of losing the creative and positive understanding of the dynamic unconscious that is required for a fuller understanding of both personal and social relations? Behind each of these lies the problems Habermas creates by assuming such a direct link between language and the unconscious. All human needs and desires – according to this version – are potentially open to linguistic articulation and it is only through such articulation that distortions can be corrected and communication become free from manipulation. Thus there is no area of the human psyche inaccessible to self-reflection and the operation of communicative reason. The latter is dominant even in the realm of the affective and the emotional.

Joel Whitebrook suggests that Habermas has produced in this a seriously flawed reading of Freud and that his 'linguistification of the unconscious' destroys the main insights of Freudian psychoanalysis. Following Freud the pre-linguistic realm, human drives, desires and the body itself cannot be contained within Habermas' 'linguistic idealism'. Habermas' excessively rationalistic account of the conscious/unconscious dualism fails to capture Freud's emphasis on an 'inner foreign territory' of the self, that which remains inaccessible to articulation (in Bernstein 1985, 157). Furthermore, Habermas ignores the possibility that there is a creative process of transformation between the affective dimension and the articulation of needs and desires. There is a view, to be examined further shortly, that the unconscious as a pre-linguistic realm of subjectivity actively produces images, forms and representations which render social relations and the institutionalized world possible and that it is thus a mistake to try to reduce the unconscious to linguistic, social or cultural codes. If Habermas were correct in his view that articulation leads directly



to the eradication of distortions in meaning then it would follow that the realm of the unconscious would wither away, whereas Freud maintained that the unconscious is indestructible, a permanent and inescapable feature of human subjectivity.<sup>†</sup> Habermas appears to move from the justified belief that it is possible to talk about inner nature to the unjustified assumption that inner nature is linguistic as such, thus compromising a cardinal tenet of Freudian psychoanalysis that the body is independent of language. For Habermas, everything is potentially transparent, whereas for Freud there will always remain that level that resists articulation.

As a result he (Habermas) is in danger of losing sight of the opposition between reason and the drives altogether. With both Marcuse and Habermas, utopianism results from the failure to grasp theoretically the dialectic of harmony and disharmony between human rationality and its instinctual substratum (p. 157).

It certainly seems that Habermas is guilty of misreading Freud in order to assimilate him to his own agenda. Then there is the further issue of whether Habermas can really do justice to the domain of human affectivity within his formalistic framework. If desires and feelings can become available only to critical self-reflection if they are fully defined in social linguistic life by becoming the subject of discussion, then what of the theory of repression, the insight that certain features of the inner life specifically resist being drawn into the realm of discourse? It would seem that, according to Habermas' reading, reason must always defeat desire and that the human subject is capable of knowing itself too well. There will be no internal other that remains beyond the capacity for linguistic self-reflection. Elliott provides a more convincing counterpoint:

...it is not a matter of bringing internal pathologies and deformations to light in the hope of exhausting their influence, but rather of giving expression to our inner nature. The social conditions in which an expressive subjectivity can be universally developed requires not the elimination of uncomprehended needs and phantasies, but the cultivation of an emotionally responsive cultural framework in which human particularities, identities and desires are essential to collective autonomy (p. 118).

Despite Habermas' claims to the contrary he fails convincingly to dispose of the other of reason within the new paradigm of intersubjectivity and this must remain a serious concern for the viability of his theory of communicative reason. The question is whether this failing undermines his theory or whether there is a version of it that can accommodate these criticisms. To offer a perspective on this issue a feminist critique of Habermas' understanding of autonomy will now be examined.

### **A feminist account of autonomy**

The standard feminist critique of the Enlightenment view of human autonomy is now

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<sup>†</sup> It needs to be noted that one can draw a distinction between Freud's use of therapy to articulate the unconscious through language in cases where there was neurosis and his theoretical view that there are areas of the unconscious which remain inaccessible to such articulation. It appears that Habermas effectively generalizes from Freud's practical application of therapy to the conclusion that all aspects of the unconscious, not just those that display pathological symptoms, are susceptible to articulation.



well established (Benhabib 1992; Jantzen 1998; McAfee 2000). In essence it centres on the suggestion that autonomy is conceived as belonging to a distant, disembodied and disembodied self, totally unrelated to real life characteristics and contexts. Thus self-identity is portrayed as self-control and self-ownership, minimizing both the importance of the body and the dimensions of the affective and emotional. Recent feminist reconstructions have rejected the idea that autonomy is unacceptable and argue that it is only a particular historical interpretation of it that needs to be challenged. In other words, a reformulation taking into account feminist insights is what is required. Those insights include the idea that self-identity is related to being located in a plurality of shifting and even conflicting systems of meaning, that an awareness of bodily needs and desires is intimately bound up with the capacity for rational reflection and action. There is the further notion that identity is not unitary but multiple and remains non-transparent in certain respects as some dimensions of subjectivity will always resist attempts at rational retrieval, and the conclusion that transparency can become a repressive aim as it denies the importance of pre-linguistic and non-linguistic dimensions of subjectivity. It might appear that at least some of these insights precisely match the criticisms that have been levelled at Habermas and that the latter would automatically be identified with the Enlightenment concept of autonomy unacceptable to feminists.

However, it is instructive to register that there are those from within the feminist camp who view Habermas' theory of communicative reason as a means to reformulating the concept of autonomy in a positive direction. Thus the position of Maeve Cooke:

Habermas' theory has the advantage that it offers a relational account of the identity of the self without reducing this identity to the intersubjective relationships and contexts of meaning in which the self is located at any given time: furthermore his theory places value on the self's capacity to distance itself reflectively from its everyday desires, volitions and behaviours while acknowledging the self's non-rational motivations (Cooke 1999a, 275).

Even so this is only a starting point for the necessary reformulation as it is still not clear whether Habermas' approach can accommodate the view that there are pre-linguistic and non-linguistic dimensions of human agency. Cooke seems reasonably optimistic that Habermas' notion of the intersubjectivity of reason does not directly conflict with the recognition of other dimensions of subjectivity required by feminism, although she is aware that such a view is controversial:

...Habermas' specific proposals for 'postmetaphysical' conceptions of truth and justice have been subjected to several kinds of criticism, not least by feminist writers. Feminist critics have focussed above all on problems connected with his conception of moral validity (justice), querying what is perceived as its abstractly universal impulse, they have argued that Habermas' theory of moral validity – notwithstanding his relational model of self-identity – disregards the locatedness and embodiedness of concrete selves concerned with matters of justice (p.275).

Habermas' theory has an appeal in that it is an attempt to be non-foundational and does acknowledge the essential relatedness of the human subject. It is, however, not yet clear whether his attempts to establish context-transcending criteria within language itself necessarily limit the understanding of a fuller subjectivity. In a further development of



her argument in favour of utilizing Habermas' theory to develop a feminist version of autonomy Cooke employs his distinction between morality and ethics in order to support her position (Cooke 1999b, 186). She argues that Habermas identifies two dimensions in which the subject develops its identity: first, self-determination as a moral agent; second, self-realization as an ethical agent. It is the latter that includes the ideas of locatedness as well as the concrete and bodily-affective identity and the capacity for integration, coherence and rational reflection. So the ethical dimension takes into account the embodied and embedded nature of human subjectivity.

It is a being located in specific webs of relationships with others, a being with specific commitments, convictions, needs and desires that guides its ethical judgements and actions and form the basis for its efforts to shape its own life history: at the same time, it is capable of reflecting on its commitments, needs and desires, of integrating them into a coherent narrative of self-identity (pp. 186–7).

Rational accountability is another aspect of this ethical identity as it is expected and even demanded of the individual that they will be prepared to argue for and to justify the positions they adopt to those around them. However, none of this

...implies that all dimensions of subjectivity are rationally retrievable nor denies that subjects may be embedded in multiple, conflicting and shifting contexts and may derive pleasure from the experience of fluidity and fragmentation. Admittedly, the latter are not dimensions of subjectivity especially emphasized by Habermas (p. 187).

It seems to me that there is a clear conflict here between Elliott's and Cooke's interpretations of Habermas. Although it is not perhaps entirely obvious whether Cooke is only referring to the fluidity and fragmentation espoused by a Post-Modern view of subjectivity and saying that Habermas has given no real attention to this, it would seem that she is committed to the view that Habermas does not hold that all dimensions of subjectivity are rationally retrievable. For Elliott and Whitebrook however this is precisely the problem with Habermas' view of subjectivity and the one that seriously questions his arguments for communicative reason. Perhaps Cooke is too sanguine in her argument that Habermas' theory can be accommodated within a feminist framework, or perhaps she is right in saying that something like this version of reason is indeed necessary if the stark alternatives of either an Enlightenment or a Post-Modern approach are to be avoided.

At this point Cooke moves into a discussion of the weakness of Habermas' position in describing and justifying how an ethical agent can present a particular concept of the good life, and the fact that his concept of morality is too abstract to contribute to this debate although it can counterbalance the specific distortions of particular ethical communities. This range of issues has already been covered in the previous chapter. The critical question here is whether Habermas' position on the nature of the unconscious as being fully amenable to articulation conclusively undermines his understanding of human subjectivity and thus his theory of communicative reason, or whether the other of reason, the affective dimension, can receive an alternative recognition that can supplement Habermas' approach. It is significant that at least one feminist writer believes that the latter is the case.



### **Castoriadis: autonomy and the unconscious**

At this stage in the argument it seems useful to examine the work of Castoriadis as a clear counterpoint to Habermas' approach. Returning to the three key issues of Habermas' interpretation of the unconscious, his formalistic concept of autonomy, and his claim to have effectively negated the other of reason, it will be of value to study some of the alternatives. Castoriadis has important insights to offer into the first two of these issues; the third will require moving into the work of Derrida and Levinas.

It has already been seen that Habermas holds a negative view of the role of the unconscious in human subjectivity. He sees it as the site of distortions and misunderstandings, the source of individual pathologies that is susceptible to articulation and then to the clarifying criteria of communicative reason. Such clarification is deemed to be a prerequisite for Habermas' concept of autonomy, the way in which individuals gain control over their own lives, including exercising critical reflection on the whole area of feelings, needs and desires. The concern is that this is to assume a transparency in self-understanding that fails to capture the full depth of subjectivity and indeed can even become a source of repression through its denial of the dimension that resists and remains beyond articulation. To what extent are these concerns justified and, if they are, what impact does this have on Habermas' overall theories of communicative reason and discourse ethics?

What is required is a clear exposition of the relationship between the unconscious and human autonomy. Returning to Freud, one of the maxims of his psychoanalytic theory was 'Where Id was, Ego shall come to be.' Ego refers broadly to consciousness, and Id as the origin and place of drives refers to the unconscious. Although this maxim suggests that the unconscious be brought into the realm of the conscious – as Habermas appears to interpret the process – much clarification of Freud's intention is still needed. According to Castoriadis it does not mean either the suppression of drives or the elimination or absorption of the unconscious, but rather the Ego taking its proper place as an agency of decision (in Curtis 1997, 177). Autonomy thus becomes consciousness's domination over the unconscious:

If to autonomy – that is, to self-legislation or self-regulation – one opposes heteronomy – that is legislation or regulation by another – then autonomy is my law, opposed to the regulation by the Unconscious, which is another law, the law of another, other than myself (p. 177).

However, this raises the question of what it means to say that regulation by the unconscious is the law of another. This is clearly not a literal other, but an other within myself. As Lacan puts it:

The Unconscious is the discourse of the other: it is to a great extent the depository of intentions, desires, cathexes, demands, expectations – significations to which the individual has been exposed from the moment of conception and even before, as these stem from those who engendered and raised him (quoted, p. 177).

So autonomy means my discourse taking the place of the discourse of the other, the replacing of an alien discourse that is speaking through me. Once again though this does not specify what this alien discourse is, nor does it answer the question of whether it can



simply be eliminated. Castoriadis summarizes this eloquently:

The essential characteristic of the discourse of the other...is its relation to the imaginary. It has to do with the fact that dominated by this discourse, the subject takes himself to be something he is not (or is not necessarily) and that for him, others and the entire world undergo a corresponding disguised misrepresentation. The subject does not express himself but is expressed by someone, and therefore exists as part of another's world (certainly disguised in turn). The subject is dominated by an imaginary, lived as even more real than the real, yet not known as such, precisely *because* it is not known as such (p. 178).

So the subject allows itself to be defined by the discourse of the other, without even recognizing that this is what is happening. The conflict here is not between the drives and reality, but rather between drives and reality on the one hand, and their imaginary elaboration within the subject on the other. The Id in Freud's maxim is thus this function of the unconscious which cathects imaginary reality, autonomizes it and confers on it the powers of decision. It is this function that is to be replaced by a discourse that is mine. However, what is a discourse that is mine according to this understanding?

Clearly such a discourse must have negated the discourse of the other, not necessarily in its content, but in as much as it is the decision of the other: 'In other words, a discourse that, by making clear both the origin and sense of this discourse, has negated it or affirmed it in full knowledge of the relevant facts, by relating its sense to that which is constituted as the subject's own truth – as my own truth.' (p. 179).

The problem is that it now becomes clear that if Freud's maxim is taken in an absolute sense – as Habermas appears to do – it proposes an inaccessible objective. My discourse could never become wholly mine in the sense that it is being defined here. For one thing, the subject can never begin all over again and start with a blank sheet of paper, and, for another, the very notion of the subject's own truth is itself problematic. The same problems arise with the relation to the imaginary function of the unconscious.

How can we conceive of a subject that would have entirely 'absorbed' the imaginative function, how could we dry up this spring in the depth of ourselves from which flow both alienating phantasies and free creations truer than truth, unreal deliria and surreal poems, this eternally new beginning and ground of all things, without which nothing would have a ground, how can we eliminate what is at the base of, or in any case, what is inextricably bound up with, what makes us human beings – our symbolic function, which presupposes our capacity to see and to think in a thing something which it is not? (p. 179).

If Castoriadis is correct here – and I would suggest that this is certainly a more dynamic and accurate understanding of the role of the unconscious than is to be found in Habermas – then it gives a different slant to Freud's maxim. It is not that the Ego replaces the Id on a once-for-all basis, but that there is an ongoing process of the human subject taking up what has been identified as the discourse of the other, that negotiation and redefinition are permanent tasks in the construction of the self. So it is not a matter of an awareness that is once achieved and then established, but of another relation between the conscious and the unconscious, another attitude of the subject with respect to himself, a constant engagement



with the creative dimension of the imaginary. As Castoriadis concludes:

Autonomy is therefore not an elucidation without remainder, nor is it the total elimination of the discourse of the other unrecognizable as such. It is the establishment of another relation between the discourse of the other and the subject's discourse. The total elimination of the discourse of the other unrecognized as such is an unhistorical state (p. 180).

The human subject cannot be captured by an abstract moment of philosophical subjectivity because it is always already traversed through and through by the world and by others. There is no pure Ego that has finally purged itself of all misinterpretation and distortions, but an active agent always in the process of reorganizing its own contents, acknowledging that the discourse of the other is a permanent feature of this dynamic. Hence there will never be a 'proper truth' of the subject in an absolute and unchanging sense, but constant participation in a process of struggle towards an autonomy that remains partially beyond reach. It is the aspect of the unconscious as a dynamic and creative component of human subjectivity that Habermas appears to deny or neglect. His negative interpretation of the unconscious leads him to view it solely as a source of distorted communication to be dealt with by articulation and then as an object of critical reflection. However, in Castoriadis' view the unconscious is itself a prime mover in both of these processes and cannot simply be treated as separate from them, an object to be analysed, clarified and then controlled by a conscious rationality.

Does this mean that communicative reason is thus shown to be a complete illusion based on a fundamental misunderstanding of human subjectivity? Does it mean that there is a domain of human subjectivity, that of the unconscious, or the pre-linguistic or pre-conscious, that is immune from the operation of communicative reason, although it might still have its proper place in the sphere of social and political relationships? Could there be an equivalent of communicative reason that can operate within the sphere of affectivity, the realm of needs, feelings and desires, in which case Habermas' theory could be supplemented or revised rather than abandoned?

In order to pursue these questions I intend to examine further Castoriadis' work on the imaginary. How is one to settle the question of how distinct, different, other and therefore inaccessible is the domain of the unconscious? If Habermas asserts a view that the unconscious is in principle capable of being turned into an object of articulation, then analyzed, reflected upon and made completely transparent to self-understanding, it is possible to argue that Castoriadis tends towards the opposite extreme where there is a danger that the unconscious has such an independent existence that it effectively posits subjectivity as irrevocably split and undermines any sense of human agency and thus autonomy. This now needs to be tested. It is important also to register that this issue can be interpreted as the conflict central to the debate between theology and reason, that between the universal and the particular. Habermas is still at pains to build upon that which goes beyond the particular, the general structures of human communication. Castoriadis is more concerned to do justice to the individual characteristics or dimensions of human subjectivity that elude such generalizing tendencies, the particularity of the individual radical imaginary. The dangers or limitations of both approaches may offer clues as to how the theological discussion should proceed.



In his major work *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, Castoriadis provides a lengthy exposition of Freud's understanding of the role of the human psyche in producing and forming representations. Castoriadis' own view is that it is pointless to seek the origin of representation outside of representation itself. The psyche is that which forms and imagines:

it is the radical imagination that makes a 'first' representation arise out of a nothingness of representation, that is to say, out of nothing (p.283).

Although such a view can be read out of Freud's work it is one that he never explicitly stated. Thus is it a major contention that there is no subject that can be separated from psychical representation and then itself be studied in some objective manner, rather it always already exists as the origin of all representation and as fully engaged in the drives and phantasies associated with the unconscious. This becomes clear for Castoriadis when one investigates the issue of desire. Desire is perceived to be the subject's awareness of a lack of a desired object, but how is it possible to speak of an object that is lacking if the psyche has not first posited this object as desirable? Yet, if one tries to pursue this line of investigation back and attribute this lack as a characteristic of the subject itself one enters an infinite regress. What is it about the subject that means that an object represents a lack for it? There is no answer to this question beyond the one that the psyche has already constituted itself in that particular way. Hence it is a mistake to focus on a specific item as being the cause of that lack; what is at issue is the role of the psyche itself in imagining itself in that manner.

For the creativity of the psyche enters in here as radical imagination, as the emergence of representation (phantasying) and the alteration of representation, thereby rendering absurd the idea that the breast or the anus are the 'cause' of a phantasy as well as the idea that the oral or the anal can be assigned once and for all to a universal and complete determination-determinacy (p.290).

So the lack of an object is itself a psychical creation. The psyche must make something be, even something that is not, and then relate to it as a lack. In other words, the psyche has an almost independent and self-determining existence and is itself the source of its own representation and subsequent relating to what become objects of desire. Castoriadis uses this to interpret Freud's understanding of the unconscious itself. It is not that there exist in the unconscious truths or fictions that it is difficult to distinguish because of some lack of clarity or internal distortion, but...

The element of existence belonging to the Unconscious is unrelated to truth or non-truth, radically different from these determinations, it belongs to another region of being. As unconscious, the radical imagination brings itself into being, makes be that which exists nowhere else and which, for us, is the condition for anything at all to be able to exist. It is this non-being...which Freud calls 'psychical reality' (pp.291-2).

Thought processes and mediations in the form of language are subsequent to this psychical representation and so the ideas of truth and fiction are themselves derivatives of the unconscious and have no real purchase upon it.

In the Unconscious there is no index of reality, no index of truth – this means that there is not and cannot be either 'reality-testing' or 'rationality-testing': there is no representation of words as words that would convey some sort of



rationality: there is not and cannot be any symbolism, anything symbolic. What can exist as 'perception', in the absence of an index of reality or reality-testing, can only be simply 'perceptions', that is, *self*-representation – not as the representation of an 'inside' distinct from and in opposition to an 'outside', but the representation, prior to this distinction of *everything* (as) *self*, or *self*(as) *everything*... (p.293).

What is of concern as this exposition unravels is that Castoriadis is close to placing the unconscious in such a distinct and unassailable location that its otherness or difference merely reverses the dominance of reason, becomes the latter's mirror image in a parallel psychical universe. If this is what is happening then it provides no real solution to the problems of relating the conscious to the unconscious, the universal to the particular, the complete self-identity of reason to the hidden subjectivity of the affective or emotional. In his valid attempt to attribute a more positive and creative role to the unconscious, one which prevents it being reduced to language or being dissolved by some reflective self-transparent reasoning self, Castoriadis reverts to the other extreme and places it beyond any rational articulation.

Once the psyche has suffered the break up of its own monadic 'state' imposed upon it by the 'object', the other and its own body, it is forever thrown off-centre in relation to itself, oriented in terms of that which it is no longer. *The psyche is its own lost object*... This loss of self, this split in relation to the self, is the first work imposed on the psyche by the fact of its being included in the world – and it can happen that the psyche refuses to perform it (pp. 296-7).

If this view is adopted consistently then it is difficult to see how Castoriadis can avoid undermining his own descriptions and conclusions. That which is different from and other to consciousness, rationality and all truth and reality-testing becomes itself the only source of imagination and creativity, in which case, all attempts at articulation and rational explanation – including his own – are brought into question. It is the equivalent of a negative ontology, positing as a foundation that which could never be a foundation because it is a non-being. We have to question whether there is not another way of acknowledging the other of reason, be that the unconscious or the realms of need, desire and the body, or the affective and emotional dimension of human subjectivity, that does not destroy the notion of reason itself. If Habermas appears too close to a view where there is a form of reason that cannot do justice to that which does not fit into its scope, then Castoriadis seems to present a simple reversal of this polarity between reason and unreason where the latter subsumes all human activity into its domain. Neither of these approaches is capable, by itself, of acknowledging a dialectic or ongoing tension between reason and its other. What is still being sought is another relationship between reason and its other, between the universal and the particular.

### **An alternative other of reason**

As in the previous chapter reviewing other criticisms of Habermas' theories one moves towards the conclusion that something like his notion of communicative reason is required if human thought is not to revert to a state of relativistic anarchy. Although there are clear problems with and weaknesses in his approach, rather than abandoning



it altogether it seems more fruitful to search for ways of revising and supplementing it, hence the importance of Cooke's contribution from a feminist perspective. One of the major alternatives to Habermas' thought has supposedly been posed by what is known as Post-Modernity, within philosophy commonly associated with the works of Baudrillard, Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard, amongst others. As already suggested, this particular categorization is potentially misleading, concealing significant differences between these philosophers. However, Habermas himself – certainly on the evidence of *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* – has tended to view these authors in a similar negative light, maintaining that they each equally fail to escape from the philosophy of consciousness which both they and he claim to have left behind. The focus in this section of the chapter will not be upon Habermas' own interpretation of these thinkers but upon the work of subsequent interpreters who wish to argue for some sort of rapprochement between the two camps, most notably between Habermas and Derrida. This continues the theme of searching for an alternative understanding of the other of reason that neither subsumes it under the mantle of reason itself, as Habermas is in danger of doing, nor sets it up as an independent ontological principle thereby threatening to destroy any concept of reason.

We turn first to recent work of Peter Dews who argues that both Derrida and Foucault have shifted towards a recognition that Habermas' intersubjective paradigm contains important insights. Since Foucault died in 1984 it is really in Derrida's latest writings that the common ground becomes more evident. In his early work he can be interpreted as taking a fairly dismissive approach to the issues of intersubjectivity, viewing them as yet another symptom of the logocentric tradition he is eager to deconstruct. However...

Derrida can now be seen as acknowledging – at least implicitly – that this 'collucution' cannot be understood in terms of pure *différance*, if such *différance* is viewed as logically prior to any element of shared identity. For he admits that even the most radical exercise in deconstruction must rely on, and take its departure from, a grounding moment of agreement, regardless of how many aspects of the agreement are questioned subsequently. Without an underlying core of semantic stability, it would be impossible for 'dissemination' even to begin (Dews 1999, 88).

I will return to detailed explanation of Derrida's terminology in the following chapters. At this stage the intention is only to register the terms of the possible rapprochement with Habermas. What this appears to suggest is that Derrida at least now accepts that a Habermasian approach does not necessarily have to be repressive, that it may be possible from within the paradigm of intersubjectivity properly to acknowledge the affective dimension of human subjectivity, and thus that a form of communicative reason may avoid subsuming the other of reason within itself. 'There seems to be a new recognition that the concept of intersubjectivity can represent the possibility of a *breakthrough*, a disruption of some of the constraining, "logocentric" features of the subject-object framework' (p. 89).

From the other side of the equation it is also clear that Habermas believes that this new paradigm of mutual understanding can avoid the possibility of invoking a disruptive, extramundane alterity which is heterogeneous to reason in order to validate its critical



standpoint since it

...conceives of intersubjective understanding as the telos inscribed into communication in ordinary language, and of the logocentrism of Western thought, heightened by the philosophy of consciousness, as a systematic *foreshortening* and *distortion* of a potential always already operative in the communicative practice of everyday life, but only selectively exploited (Habermas 1987, 311).

As has already been noted, Habermas' view is that the critique of reason derived originally from Nietzsche and traceable down through Foucault and Derrida, places the other of reason – the affective and the aesthetic – spatially outside the sphere of intersubjectivity, thus remaining tied to the philosophy of consciousness. The same criticism could be applied to the work of Castoriadis. Against this exclusion model Habermas wishes to promote a

diremption model of reason (which) distinguishes solidary social practice as the locus of a historically situated reason in which the threads of an outer nature, inner nature and society converge (p. 306).

The question is exactly how does Habermas hope to achieve this reconciliation of inner and outer nature, and does he succeed in doing justice to the other of reason within his intersubjective paradigm? The other major attempt in the history of philosophy to achieve something similar was the work of Hegel and, as Dews notes, he reverted to the language of love and religious communion and a Grand Narrative of unified reason in order to do this. It is precisely such a unifying view of reason that Habermas is anxious to avoid. At this point Dews offers a potentially significant alternative:

What will be at issue is Habermas' implicit assumption that, with the vanishing of pre-modern forms of *Sittlichkeit*, there is no longer the possibility of a philosophical position which accepts the existence of a reconciling, intersubjective power of reason, but denies that this power is *theoretically* retrievable. If such a position were conceivable, however, then a third possibility would have to be reckoned with, obviating the stark choice offered us by Habermas. The options would no longer simply be between, on the one hand, a hypostasized 'other' heterogeneous to reason, which reduces reason to a thin veneer masking more elemental forces, and, on the other hand, reason as the advance towards the telos of agreement inhabiting communication. There would emerge a different conception of what might be termed 'reason *as* and *in* the other', a reconciling power which nevertheless transcends the conceptual grasp of finite human beings (Dews 1999, 91–2).

Dews then goes on to suggest that Habermas is incorrect to propose that his is the only possible paradigm of intersubjectivity and that, in fact, one can as convincingly see in the work of Lacan another alternative that comes closer to achieving the objective as just described. The argument is that Lacan also interprets the task of psychoanalysis as the clarifying of meaning through the interaction between patient and analyst, but that he placed a greater emphasis than Habermas on the notion of truth or truth-telling as an inescapable presupposition of that process. The details of this are not of direct interest here, but what is of greater significance is the way that Dews suggests that both Lacan and Habermas utilize the work of George Herbert Mead, again with a differing emphasis. What is of particular note is Mead's distinction between the 'I' and the 'me'. The latter



describes the socially constructed self, established through processes of identification with the reaction of others and through the social process as a whole, described in turn as the 'Generalized other'. However, this internalized 'me' does not exhaust the being of the self, as there is also the 'I' which embodies the pre-reflectively, spontaneous, impulsive and creative dimensions of human agency. Lacan makes a parallel distinction between 'le moi' (Das Ich), and 'le je' (the subject of the unconscious), and for Lacan as for the later Mead there are only indirect traces of 'le je'. This is clearly different from Habermas' approach which does assume a transparency and direct accessibility of all dimensions of human subjectivity and thus is always in danger of objectifying and alienating the affective and the unconscious.

By retaining an element of inaccessibility both Lacan and Mead protect a certain flexibility, creativity and imaginative potential for the pre-reflective unconscious aspect of the self that Habermas seems intent on foreclosing. The problem with this, as already noted, is that Habermas is unable to account for or acknowledge the particularity or singularity of individual experience, that which remains unique and not ultimately amenable to the generalizing influence of public discourse. If there is indeed validity in this alternative view of human subjectivity and should it in some way be related to the religious experiences familiar to the Christian tradition – amongst others – then it is here that Habermas' communicative reason needs to be both challenged and supplemented by an alternative perspective. Although Dews' candidates of Mead and Lacan are suggestive, I intend to turn to Derrida as the primary source of this alternative.

### **Honneth on the other of justice**

In this section it will be made clear that precisely the same issues and tensions come to the surface in the examination of the moral dimension of Habermas' approach. The study of the unconscious reveals the problems that communicative reason has in taking account of the internal other and the study of justice reveals the problems that discourse ethics has in taking account of the external other. What the two areas have in common is the concern for particularity, that which escapes the generalizing tendencies of Habermas' Kantian approach.

As Honneth suggests, the central difficulty highlighted by a Post-Modern interpretation of ethics is that of those who are excluded by the prevailing and normative moral philosophies and ethical practices. It is the particularity of concrete persons or social groups that challenges the universalizing movement of most moral systems. Those who are different, non-identical, who do not fit the recognizably partial concepts of the disembodied and disembedded self, present the greatest dilemmas for an understanding of justice. Yet there is still a spectrum of possibilities for Post-Modern ethics arising from these problems. The threatened element of particularity emerges in a number of different areas; the singularity of a social language game; the irrevocable difference of all human beings, or the individual human being's constitutive need of help. These three can be responded to in turn by an extended form of socially equal treatment; an intensification of ethical sensitivity or as an asymmetrical obligation between people. It is Honneth's contention that it is only the last of these three that represents a real challenge to



Habermas' discourse ethics. It is also only in Derrida's recent work, that which returns to an interest in Levinas, that a moral point of view emerges which goes beyond the conceptual horizon of discourse ethics. The crucial point is that of equal treatment and whether this can in fact represent justice given the particularity of human beings and their circumstances.

Following Honneth's argument, it is fairly easy to see that Habermas' understanding of morality can take account both of the requirement for socially equal treatment and the need for an increased sensitivity. Habermas at least claims that real needs can be accommodated through the open discourse involved in his approach, and this can thus include an ability to listen to the feelings of others and a willingness to be emotionally involved. The concept of Care encompasses genuinely human responses to individual needs and desires. However, even here there are reservations as to whether the external other is fully recognized in this process or whether he or she is still finally subsumed within what could be an alienating and objectifying procedure. Thus Habermas utilizes Mead's notion of ideal role-taking as the basis for the reciprocal element of discourse ethics. Only if one is prepared to place oneself in the position of the other person can an individual reach communicative understanding. Yet even this role taking can be either cognitive or affective. If it is the first, then the emphasis will be upon the argumentative character of moral discourse. If it is the second, then establishing reciprocal empathy will be the dominant feature. There is no doubt that Habermas prefers the first of these options on the grounds that the second can lead all too easily to an affectively shielded particularism. The danger is that moral discourse would become dependent upon chance emotional ties and lose the function of being a co-operative search for truth that relates only to reasons. This is the familiar tension between the particular and the universal and the Kantian concern that morality can only be founded upon the latter.

There is a further area where doubts arise as to whether Habermas' discourse ethics can fully take into account the external affective dimensions. The moral discourses he advocates are particular patterns of conduct, but does Habermas advocate these as empirical – just the way life happens to be going at the moment – or as normative – the way things ought to be going because this is really the best thing? Habermas claims that it is the first of these, and that open engagement in moral discourse is the result of increased reflexivity and actual learning processes. This is how he is able to claim that discourse ethics can guarantee to meet particular forms of life halfway. However, is this not in fact misleading if what Habermas is really saying is that engaging in open moral discourse is a good thing, a value to be positively encouraged? So the affective capabilities involved should be actively striven for, not just accumulated *en route* if things happen to work out that way. In which case why not say that the capacity for visualizing individual particularities otherwise described as empathy might as well be recognized as itself a communicative virtue? Honneth surely has a valid point here, and this is one aspect in which Habermas' approach could be supplemented, thus acknowledging the difference of the external other.

Up to this point however the discussion is still within the basic horizon of discourse ethics. One can still maintain that the acknowledgement of the necessity for an affective openness to the particularity of the other depends upon the universalist idea that every



subject should have the opportunity to express his claims and needs in Habermasian unconstrained fashion. It is Derrida who pursues the debate beyond this stage by raising the question of whether only a moral perspective that is in a relation of productive opposition to the idea of equal treatment can come to terms with the individual subject in his difference to all others. It is in the phenomenon of friendship that this issue is highlighted.

What interests him (Derrida) primarily is the question of how two intersubjective attitudes that refer to different kinds of human responsibility form a synthesis. In every relation of friendship, Derrida claims, there is first a dimension of the relationship to the other in which he or she appears in the role of the concrete, unrepresentable individual person...a second dimension of intersubjectivity is a factor in friendship...in which the other person appears in the role of the generalized other (Honneth 1995, 308).

Hence there is an inescapable tension within any relationship of friendship where the other person wants to be treated both as unique and as a moral being on a level with all others. If the latter part of the equation is missing then what remains is love, not friendship. If the former part is not present then the relationship is one of respect, but again not friendship. Can this tension be maintained in actual human relationships, or are the two different means of relating opposed in principle and thus irreconcilable?

The issue becomes acute as soon as one attempts to apply this understanding in the fields of either law or a universalizing morality. The doing of justice has traditionally been identified with an impartial or equal treatment of every individual regardless of any bonds of personal affection. But how can this be to do justice in a relationship of friendship which presupposes that the other is not just any other, but a particular individual with legitimate demands upon my time and concern? This leads to the conclusion that the idea of justice itself contains this irreconcilable tension. So there is a demarcation line

...between justice (infinite, incalculable, rebellious to rule and foreign to symmetry, heterogeneous and heterotropic) and the exercise of justice as law or right, legitimacy or legality, stabilizable and statutory, calculable, a system of regulated and coded prescriptions (Derrida 1990, 959).

In this Derrida is drawing upon the work of Levinas, in particular his belief that the relation between ontology and ethics needs to be reversed in order to give expression to the existential priority of the interpersonal encounter. The face of the other human being 'always already' places upon me an obligation to respond that goes beyond what I was prepared to offer and bursts the boundaries of any pre-constructed moral system based on equality. There is an infinite responsibility and a demand for unlimited care and help that cannot fall within the realm of calculation or even reciprocity. The significance of this for Derrida will be examined in greater detail at a later stage. However Derrida goes beyond Levinas in suggesting that the two approaches to equal treatment and unequal treatment are opposed in principle and that a due acknowledgement of this is in fact what is now required.

This conflict is irresolvable because the idea of equal treatment necessitates a restriction of the moral perspective from where the other person in his or her particularity can become the recipient of my care, for my showing him or her boundless concern and providing unlimited help would mean tending



to neglect the moral duties that follow from the reciprocal recognition of human beings as equals. And this conflict is productive because the viewpoint of care continually provides a moral ideal from which the practical attempt to gradually realize equal treatment can take its orientation – in a self-corrective manner; for it is only that kind of responsibility which is developed in loving concern for individual persons that brings about the moral sensorium with which the possible suffering of all other human beings can also be perceived (Honneth 1995, 315).

The point of this is both clear and crucial. The response to the particularity of the individual person, grounded in the affective dimension of human subjectivity is the real measure and criterion by which all attempts to strive for justice are to be judged – surely an essentially biblical insight! Yet such partiality and lack of symmetry in relationships can never form the basis for a universalizing ethics nor for justice; it can only ever be the horizon for both. The tension between what can be aimed for and the vision of what should be, is entirely creative and productive and should *not* be resolved nor the two sides of the equation reconciled. The critique of Habermas, from a Derridean perspective, is that he attempts to achieve just that reconciliation through his philosophy rather than maintaining that tension. In so doing he fails to do justice to the particularity of both the external and the internal other. However, it would be equally dangerous to abandon his side of the equation because that would represent a denial of the gap between the horizon and the reality, but from the perspective of the latter. So what seems to be required is a balance or a dialectic between Habermas and Derrida.

### **From Habermas to Derrida (and back)**

Finally we turn to the suggestion of another philosopher that there is creative work to be done in the territory opening up between Habermas and Derrida. Simon Critchley explicitly follows on the contribution of Honneth and is in basic agreement with his comments.

I am in substantial agreement with his argument. I think that Honneth's paper opens the possibility of a reciprocal rectification of the two philosophical currents that could be said to define the conflictual space of European philosophy today, namely the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory on the one hand, represented by Habermas, and 'postmodernism' or deconstruction on the other, represented by Derrida (1999a, 268).

However, Critchley believes that in addition to the need to supplement the framework of discourse ethics by an ethics of care, there is an equal need for supplementation in the other direction. So what is lacking in the work of Derrida and Levinas is a full theorization of the passage from care to justice. Something like the categorical imperative procedure, capable of assessing and testing the validity of moral norms and values and arbitrating in the light of certain shared and binding principles is also required. Although Levinas offers a suggestive idea here, the passage from the other to the third person (*le tiers*), from ethics to justice, thus opening up a space where this can happen, neither he nor Derrida provide any great substance for this suggestion. Hence

...what Honneth's paper opens up is the possibility of a marriage between the Habermasian and Derridean frameworks, that is, between universalism and



antiuniversalism, that might take us beyond the shared impasse and mutual hostility of the contemporary modernity/postmodernity debate (p.269).

Critchley is pointing out areas of thought for further development rather than offering definitive answers here, and it is these suggestions that will be followed up later in the thesis. However, a little more can be said about Levinas' idea of the third and its role in an understanding of justice. It seems clear that there are firm connections here with Derrida's claim that the idea of justice must consider the particularity of each individual subject, and that justice is the undeconstructible condition of possibility for deconstruction itself. It is only in relation to the singularity of the other that the idea of justice can arise at all. Yet Levinas adds a further dimension to the asymmetry of the relation to the other which allows him to go beyond Derrida in specifying the political and judicial consequences of this concept of justice. This dimension is that of the third, as Levinas claims that 'the third party looks at me in the eyes of the other' (1969, 213).

This means that my ethical obligations to the other always take place within a political context, a public realm where the question of justice for others and for humanity as a whole can be raised.

Thus the introduction of the third introduces the dimension of universality and the ethical asymmetry of the relation to the other is supplemented by the symmetry of relations amongst equals. In short, the moment of the third in Levinas is the moment when the principle of equal treatment and universality presupposed by discourse ethics can be grafted on to the asymmetry of the ethics of care. It is a third party that marries Habermas and Derrida (Critchley 1999a, 273-4).

There are two critical questions that need to be addressed. As already raised, can one convincingly supplement Habermas' theories in this way without thereby undermining the very basis of his ideas? In Cooke, Dews and Critchley we encounter three philosophers who claim that this is possible, given that Habermas does express a concern to include within his theories a recognition of individual needs and desires. An alternative view would be that the way in which he portrays and locates the other of reason is a means of suppression and cannot take an adequate account of the affective dimensions of human subjectivity. There is a parallel question that needs to be raised in the interpretation of Derrida. Does the acknowledgement of a dimension of universality as just described undermine Derrida's approach to singularity, or can that too be supplemented in the way that Critchley suggests? The answers to both these questions are critical for this research as they hold the key for a continuing relationship between reason and faith.

It is necessary though to see how Critchley defends his view that the Derridean framework can be supplemented by a universalist perspective. Basically his argument is that Derrida acknowledges that there is an inescapable political dimension to the consideration of justice that cannot simply be reduced to or equated with an ethics founded on concern for the particularity of the other. This leads to a number of aporias, but these just have to be recognized as such rather than being resolved.

For both Derrida and Levinas, then, there is not a tension between an ethics of care and an ethics of equal treatment, for the latter is not ethical but *political*. The fundamental aporia in deconstruction, to my mind, is the relation between ethics and politics (p.275).



In greater detail, Derrida views the realm of politics as the sphere of the undecidable. In other words, decisions have to be made at this collective level, and they are always made in the knowledge that this means choosing not to follow alternative paths that may well have been equally correct or legitimate. There is no secure way of crossing the divide between the ethical response to particular needs and the decisions required for political ordering and structuring. Such decisions then are both undecidable and impossible and yet have to be made. Critchley suggests that this is the area where the possible rapprochement between Derrida and Habermas needs to be tested.

Derrida insists that judgements have to be made and decisions have to be taken, provided it is understood that they must pass through an experience of the undecidable. But my question to Derrida would be, *what* decisions are taken, *which* judgements are made? My open question to Honneth would be: can the Habermasian framework of discourse ethics supplement deconstruction at this point, providing a rational procedure for legitimating and testing decisions and judgements? (pp. 275–6).

In a later article Critchley revisits these themes and offers a possible additional ground for contact between the Habermasian and Derridean frameworks based upon some of Derrida's more recent comments on the nature of language and communication. These suggest that the two philosophers may share an horizon, if no more, and that Derrida is prepared to acknowledge that the dimension of universality needs to be attended to. His comments refer to a theme that will be the subject of examination later in the thesis, that of the messianic, but here as applied to language.

There is no language without the performative dimension of the promise, the minute I open my mouth I am in the promise. Even if I say that 'I don't believe in truth', or whatever, the minute I open my mouth there is a 'believe me' in play. And this 'I promise you that I am speaking the truth' is a messianic a priori, a promise which, even if it is not kept, even if one knows that it cannot be kept, takes place and *qua* promise is messianic (Derrida 1996, 82).

The hint that anyone making a promise and then refusing to acknowledge the claims involved in this is engaging in a 'performative contradiction' has clear Habermasian overtones. It also confirms that Derrida recognizes the collective, social and political dimensions of his own recent work and the possibility that this demands a universalist perspective that goes beyond his own emphasis upon the ethical response to the particularity of the other. Once again though, these comments serve to raise questions about a closer link with a Habermasian framework rather than offering easy answers. Furthermore, as Critchley points out, there remains a significant tension between such a framework and Derrida's emphasis on the infinite responsibility called for by the encounter with the other.

But infinite responsibility only arises within the context of a singular experience: that is, within the empirical event of a concrete speech act, the performative dimension of the promise. However, and here we begin to see the limits of any rapprochement with Habermas, what takes place in the concrete linguistic event is a relation to an other, what Derrida calls a singularity, which is an experience of *infinite indebtedness*. Thus the messianic a priori describes the structure of intersubjectivity in terms of an asymmetrical



obligation that I could never meet, to which I could never be equal (Critchley, 1999b, 108).

Thus it becomes clear that any hasty reconciliation between Habermas and Derrida is likely to suppress their real differences and devalue their respective insights into the nature of ethical relationships and indeed one's relationship with one's own internal other. What can be said with some confidence is that the substance of the contemporary debate on the relationship between the universal and the particular, between a Habermasian trans-contextual approach to reason and morality and a Derridean emphasis upon the singularity of ethical experience and the affective dimension of human subjectivity, provides the most fruitful ground for pursuing the question of a renewed relationship between reason and faith. The task now is to examine Derrida's contribution in greater detail focussing specifically upon the notions of deconstruction, singularity and the messianic and his own thoughts on Freud and the unconscious. It is here that clues may be found to the nature of the other of reason to supplement Habermas' approach.



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## Chapter Six

### DERRIDA, FREUD AND THE OTHER OF REASON

As a direct counterpoint to Habermas' approach to psychoanalysis and his understanding of the other of reason it will be appropriate to turn to two essays by Derrida. Another reason for tackling the material in this way is that the best means of illustrating what deconstruction involves is to observe it in action. The first essay was originally a lecture delivered in 1991 on the subject of resistance to analysis. Derrida's argument will be pursued in detail.

Derrida takes the 'Dream of Irma's Injection' from Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud 1980, 196) as a way into the question of why there is now a growing resistance to psychoanalysis and, in particular, to the notion of resistance itself. Behind this lies a concern for reason and its limits, and whether psychoanalysis can find a suitable lodging in the history of reason. He focusses upon the specific comments within Freud's account, the first drawing out of his own dream the image of Irma, his patient, being unwilling to accept his solutions of the problem manifested by her symptoms. He sees in this a law of psychoanalysis, that anyone refusing to accept the analyst's solution to their problems is displaying resistance. Freud seems to have no understanding that resistance might be something other than this refusal of the order of sense, the unwillingness to recognize the veiled truth that the analyst is making clear and interpreting. The second comment is Freud's reference to the umbilicus, the *Nabel* of the dream. Derrida describes this as the general proposition that every dream always carries within it at least one place that is impenetrable, unfathomable and unanalysable, a knot that cannot be untied. Immediately then we return to the problem encountered in Habermas' interpretation of psychoanalysis. Is everything in principle susceptible to articulation and interpretation, or is there that which always remains beyond that process, beyond the realm of sense or reason? It seems clear from other comments of Freud that his position is the latter, that there are forces of meaning and truth that resist analysis, but what is not entirely clear is whether he views such resistance as an ultimate limit of interpretation, or whether it too can be broken down. Is there a meaning beyond the analysis even though one may not be able to penetrate it, or is it the case that there is a structural limit preventing us from going beyond and thus ever deciding whether there is sense present or not?

As Derrida notes, this very same question haunts the nature of Enlightenment itself. On the one side is an Enlightenment progressivism that believes that resistance to understanding can be removed, liberated, unbound and so on, and, on the other, is a fatalism or pessimism of desire that accepts a permanent and unalterable element of darkness and sees the unanalysable as itself a resource for Enlightenment. Yet there is a further question within the first of these strands, that of whether the insoluble knot



or umbilicus is of the stuff of sense, or whether it is radically heterogeneous and thus beyond the reach of all interpretation. Is the other of reason so other as not to be even recognizable as such? Hence the issue of resistance touches upon some of the deepest concerns of both Derrida and Habermas.

What of Freud's view on this?

It is thus not a matter of simply and in total neutrality substituting an unveiled truth for what resists it, but rather of leading the patient to awareness by actively and energetically using counter-resistances, other antagonistic forces, through an effective intervention in a field of forces. Freud always maintained that resistance could not be removed by the simple discovery of the truth or by the simple revelation to the patient of the true meaning of a symptom (Derrida 1998, 17).

At this stage in the process – if it occurs – the analyst is not employing certain rules or techniques – the parallel for the meaning of Enlightenment is clear – but resistances can only be lifted by the intervention of an affective factor, and here Derrida quotes Freud directly:

Besides the intellectual motives which we mobilize to overcome the resistance, there is an affective factor, the personal influence of the physician, which we can seldom do without, and in a number of cases the latter alone is in a position to remove the resistance (Freud in Derrida 1998, 18).

For Derrida this raises vital questions about the whole history of philosophy, at the level at which it relies on intellectual analysis for its thinking. If it cannot take account of the affective dimension then there would appear to be two totally different types of analysis in use. Even if it can, then the most it can achieve is a working towards the lifting of resistances by acknowledging the affective level. In any case it certainly suggests that there is not simply one tradition of analysis at work here, but indeed two, so there is no unity of the concept of analysis, no single tradition passing down from philosophy to psychoanalysis.

Even here though there are complications, as within the original Greek term for analysis there are two different motifs in operation. The first could be called an archaeological one drawing on a return to the originary, the simplest or most elementary, that which cannot be broken down any further. The second is more eschatological, referring to an untying, unknotting, dissolution or even absolution as some form of deliverance from confusion is finally achieved.

The point of this lengthy exposition characteristic of Derrida's approach is to make it clear that the concept of resistance to analysis cannot unify itself, and that therefore there is not and cannot be just one thing referred to by the term psychoanalysis. It carries within itself at least a double meaning, and this is neither a sign of failure, nor of paralysis, but just the way it is. In which case, it becomes no simple task to identify what is the other of psychoanalysis – or for that matter, the other of reason.

Derrida is clear that this was never a secret for Freud, as he recognized no fewer than five types of resistance, each calling for different analytical strategies. He then chooses to focus attention on what he claims is the strongest resistance, or rather the thread of the irreducible resistance, that of the repetition compulsion.



The paradox that interests me here is that this repetition compulsion, as hyperbolic paradigm of the series, as absolute resistance, risks destroying the meaning of the series to which it is supposed to assure meaning...but still more ironically, it defines no doubt a resistance that *has no meaning* – and that moreover, is not a resistance (p. 23).

There is, in other words, a point beyond which no analysis can pass, and it is that which threatens to undermine all other levels of analysis. The response of the patient is simple but devastating to the whole process: 'I would prefer not to'. This is not a resistance to be analysed and then unravelled, but a non-response or non-resistance, and literally the end of the story. There really is no answer to this position, either for psychoanalysis or for Enlightenment reason.

At this point Derrida again shifts the focus and sets out to draw to the listener's attention two entangled necessities highlighted by the discussion of resistance. First, that of a double bind: every resistance presupposes an internal tension, but since a purely internal tension is impossible, there must be that which is other to or outside the resistance. But then how is this resistance to be understood? Second, resistance must refer to that which remains, the rest after the process of analysis, but then this other can be neither ontological nor of the order of psychoanalysis, so what is it? How then do these two necessities interact with each other?

Derrida now uses this question to examine deconstruction itself.

Why am I tempted to compare what induced me into the temptation of thought – in the names of deconstruction, trace, dissemination (which could be followed by twenty or so other names, that without being synonyms belong to the same class) – with analysis and with this nonanalysis that one could call, for example, dialectic, even though these two are incomparable and what is more, even though thought constantly commanded one to resist this comparison and to set out on another path? On a third path that would not be a third path and would unbind the symbolic or dialectic pact, that is, the insistent authority of the three or the third? (pp. 26–7).

So we now begin to see some of the tensions within deconstruction itself. There is certainly an analytic moment involved, an element of undoing, desedimenting, decomposing and an insistence on the unbinding that recognizes that different strands are to be disassociated because already 'out of joint'. Yet there is also the other moment of analysis as earlier identified, that of a return to an origin, an archaeological motif. However, deconstruction resists this double motif in the sense that it questions the very possibility of a return to the origin, the desire to rejoin the simple at the place where it all began. As will be seen in due course, this is one of the key targets of deconstruction.

What is the deconstruction of presence if not the experience of this hyper-analytic dissociation of the simple and the originary? At the heart of the present, at the origin of presence, the trace, writing, or the mark is a moment of referral to the other, to otherness, a reference as difference that would resemble an a priori synthesis if it were of the order of judgement and if it were thetic. But in a pre-thetic and prejudicative order, the trace is indeed an irreducible binding (pp. 26–7).

What Derrida means is that deconstruction has no choice but to participate in that which it aims to deconstruct. This is the double bind of every exercise of deconstruction,



that it accepts and appears to search for that which it presumes is not possible or discoverable, an originary moment, and also accepts and appears to contradict the opposite of the unbinding and unravelling that is equally essential to the process. So as with the double necessity of resistance there is both that which is deemed to remain external to the tensions – an origin that is itself to be questioned – and that which remains in addition to the unbinding, even though that appears to posit an irreducible difference. The internal contradictions, the tensions that are themselves brought into question, cannot be simply dissolved or resolved by this exercise of deconstruction as they are always inescapably implicated in the process. As it has been aptly described, deconstruction is like sitting on the branch as one is sawing it off the tree. There is simply no other way. The further implication of this is that the process never reaches a final destination. Whatever identifications and differences deconstruction brings to the surface, there are always other possibilities that could be pursued, and deciding which path to follow and therefore which to ignore is always going to carry the infinite burden of responsibility. That is what it is to make a decision, to know that one could always have chosen otherwise. This does not make the process meaningless or arbitrary, but a necessary exercise of judgement that must take place before any further judgements can be made. The recognition of this permanent divisibility is one of the key components of deconstruction.

The question of divisibility is one of the most powerful instruments of formalization for what is called deconstruction. If, in an absurd hypothesis, there were one and only one deconstruction, a sole *thesis* of 'Deconstruction', it would pose divisibility, difference as divisibility. Paradoxically, this amounts to raising the analytical stakes for a thinking that is very careful to take account of what always rejects analysis (the originary complication, the nonsimple, the origin under erasure, the trace, or the affirmation of the gift as trace). This paradox is merely apparent; it is because there is no indivisible element or simple origin that analysis is interminable. Divisibility, dissociability, and thus the impossibility of arresting an analysis, like the necessity of thinking the possibility of this indefiniteness, would be perhaps, if one insisted on such a thing, the truth without truth of deconstruction (pp. 33–4).

Hence there is this permanent and inescapable double bind. There is a law (of sorts) at work here ('one must analyse endlessly' or 'there is always more to be analysed') and yet also the acknowledgement of that which will always resist analysis. This itself undermines any concept of law or analysis. Enlightenment reason partakes in this same double bind, the order of reason remains in force, but that which escapes it also remains in the equation and that then neither to be resolved nor dissolved.

Returning to one of the key concerns of the previous chapter, one is tempted to search for a straightforward answer to the question of whether what is termed the unconscious is fully susceptible to articulation and interpretation. Habermas' suggestion that it is appears to conflict with Freud's position that there will always remain that which resists analysis and escapes the reach of reason. Derrida's response to this problematic is *not* to offer a straightforward answer, but to begin to unravel the range of possibilities behind some of the answers. So if it is indeed the case that there remains that which is resistant to analysis, that in itself does not determine the answer to a further key question. In other words, does that which lies beyond still participate in the order of sense and reason, even though



it cannot be penetrated, or does it rather defy any such description? In either instance it is still not clear whether or not psychoanalysis can find a suitable lodging within reason as there are different forms of resistance and one in particular that threatens to undermine the very concept of resistance. This analysis is like entering a labyrinth from which there is no escape but merely a multitude of interminable pathways. So the question remains, is there an other of reason that is so heterogeneous to the very concept of reason that it undermines the possibility that reason and order can offer sense and respite from chaos? Can there be an order when the nature of the area under discussion seems to escape any ordering? As Freud seems to suggest, if any real success of analysis in overcoming resistance relies upon the affective dimension – the intervention of the personality of the analyst in the process – what is the realistic purpose and objective of analysis that claims to operate according to rules or techniques that transcend such a personal dimension? Is this not the particular outperforming the universal? One might be tempted to conclude that the concept of reason represents a case of self-deception on the part of humans who are really driven and determined by forces they refuse to recognize. In order to make it clear that this is *not* a conclusion shared by Derrida, an earlier essay on the work of Foucault will now be examined.

Derrida of course is a former student of Foucault and at the start of this review of the latter's *A History of Madness* he acknowledges both his debt to his teacher and the ambivalence he feels at launching a critical examination of his work. However, as with all other expositions that Derrida counts as deconstruction, this is not an attempt to destroy the work of the other, but to draw to the surface some of the hidden strands and presuppositions that are to be found. His starting point in this instance is the very task that Foucault has set himself: to write a history of madness in which madness itself is the subject and is allowed to speak for itself.

Foucault wanted to write a history of madness *itself*, that is madness speaking on the basis of its own experience and under its own authority, and not a history of madness described from within the language of reason, the language of psychiatry *on* madness (Derrida 1997, 34).

In other words, the very concept of madness, the location it inhabits in current language and thought, is already determined by that which claims to be its other, classical reason, and Foucault is determined to try to escape this trap by releasing madness to be itself – whatever that may be. For Derrida, the maddest aspect of Foucault's work here is this very attempt clinically to separate the two themes. Hence we are once again in the domain of the nature of the relationship between reason and the other of reason and Derrida intends to draw out the ambiguities and complexities of even attempting this type of project.

This determination to bypass the domination of reason expresses itself uneasily in Foucault's book. At times he appears completely to reject the language of reason or order by appealing to a supposed more originary silence on the subject of madness. However, Derrida questions whether such an archaeology of silence can actually escape the order of reason...

...is there a history of silence? Further, is not an archaeology, even of silence, a logic, that is, an organized language, a project, an order, a sentence, a syntax,



a work? Would not the archaeology of silence be the most efficacious and subtle restoration, the *repetition*, in the most irreducibly ambiguous meaning of the word, of the act perpetrated against madness – and be so at the very moment when this act is denounced? (p. 35).

Derrida is suggesting that all of our language is inescapably caught up with the history of reason, so that even the attempt to escape this influence is still within its domain. In which case how would it be possible for Foucault to achieve his objective in this way? The only way to convey silence would be to keep silent in which case Foucault's project would never even begin. Derrida's argument here is vital for all those who would attempt to leave behind either metaphysics or reason. There is a sense in which this includes Habermas, and yet there is another sense in which the link between language and reason comes very close to a Habermasian position. It is also very critical of what is often portrayed as the Post-Modern position on a rejection of reason.

Since the revolution against reason, from the moment it is articulated, can operate only *within* reason, it always has the limited scope of what is called, precisely in the language of a department of *internal* affairs, a disturbance. A history, that is, an archaeology against reason doubtless cannot be written, for, despite all appearances to the contrary, the concept of history has always been a rational one (p. 36).

To be fair to Foucault, Derrida does acknowledge that this problem receives attention in *The History of Madness*, that there is an awareness that all attempts at articulating the other of reason themselves participate in the order they claim to subvert. However, Foucault's strategy here is to suggest that one can place oneself within the vicinity of madness despite this ambiguity, that there is an indirect encounter with the subject available through the attempts to describe and articulate it. Yet even this fails to escape the problem, in Derrida's view, as one is always already within the domain of language even in saying this at all, and thus still within the domain of reason. Even in saying that something cannot be said, one is still saying something. So although Foucault is sensitive to this sort of question, Derrida feels that he does not give it sufficient methodological or philosophical consideration.

This suggests that another strategy might be feasible – one which we note is another constant theme in this sort of exercise and a regular target for deconstruction. Is it not possible to return to a moment in time when the split between reason and madness had not yet occurred? Was there not a point of origin, a logos, which preceded the decision to separate the two themes? The search for this point would be something quite different from an archaeology of silence. Foucault does at one stage appear to suggest that this is what he is trying to do, but does his work go back far enough in intellectual and cultural history to achieve this – should it be possible?

But this common root, which is a logos, this unitary foundation is much more ancient than the medieval period, brilliantly but briefly evoked by Foucault in his very fine opening chapter. There must be a founding unity that already carries within it the 'free trade' of the Middle Ages, and this unity is already the unity of a logos, that is, of a reason: an already historical reason certainly, but a reason much less determined than it will be in its so-called classical form, having not yet received the determinations of the 'classical age' (p. 39).

Yet there is no real evidence that Foucault seriously attempts this strategy and this, in



itself, is a worry to Derrida for the simple reason that he is left with no way of defending and arguing for the particular historical framework for his work. Either his definition of classical reason and the placing of it within medieval times is purely arbitrary, or there are unsubstantiated assumptions about earlier periods of history that are both implicit and open to other interpretations. More disturbing however is the underlying assumption that such a project is feasible and can contribute to an overcoming of metaphysics or reason.

The attempt to write the history of the decision, division, difference, runs the risk of construing the division as an event or a structure subsequent to the unity of an original presence, thereby confirming metaphysics in its fundamental operation. Truthfully, for one or other of these hypotheses to be true and for there to be a real choice between them, it must be assumed in *general* that reason can have a contrary, that there can be an other of reason, that reason itself can construct or discover, and that the opposition of reason to its other is symmetrical. This is the heart of the matter (pp. 40–1).

Given the way that Foucault defines and then goes about his task, it is clear that reason and madness define each other. They are bound together by a common framework of reference that can neither be simply split apart nor traced back to a point of origin, in which case the very attempt to construct a history of madness in distinction from a history of reason is misconceived. It certainly cannot be convincingly tied to recent developments in psychoanalysis or psychiatry or even to a medieval development of 'classical reason'. Derrida is surely right then to suggest that the wider question of whether there can be an other of reason, one accessible to reason itself, is the heart of the matter, and here is the direct connection to his later comments on the unconscious. Given the nature of language itself and the self-understanding of reason which is presupposed, there can be no straightforward answers to these questions, but merely a series of pathways leading to further questions that are themselves undecidable. The underlying suggestion in Derrida's approach is that misunderstandings and problems occur as and when individual thinkers claim that they have identified one of the possibilities as *the* path to follow, because such a decision can only be made at the expense of the other possibilities. This closure of interpretation always fails to do justice to the range of options available and invariably proceeds on the assumption that the other options have been definitively excluded or dealt with, whereas they remain in force as an other that continues to determine and define. In which case it is finally impossible to decide whether or not there is an unconscious so heterogeneous to human articulation that it lies beyond the grasp of reason, or whether or not there is such a thing as madness that also escapes the clutches of reason and thus, in some sense, becomes its other. The implication of this notion for reason itself is precisely parallel and must raise doubts about any attempt at redefinition, including that of Habermas. Does Habermas' concept of communicative reason actually presuppose that which it claims to exclude? Derrida's answer is surely that it does. And can there be any such attempt that could avoid this inner conflict? The practical response to this is not to abandon such attempts because this problem is inescapable. It is not that there is another way around this problem but rather that one needs to remain constantly alert to its continual operation. There is no choice but to enter this intellectual minefield if one is to engage with philosophical questions. It is of the nature of thinking that the critical



issues remain unresolved, or, if they appear to have been resolved have been so at a cost that is too high. The projects of resolution then enter another dimension that can perhaps better be described as political or ethical, for it is here that decisions have to be made and the responsibility accepted for these decisions. This will emerge in later chapters as a further dimension to the debate about the nature of the relationship between faith and reason as we move into more detailed examination of Derrida's contribution to the issues involved.



## Chapter Seven

### DERRIDA, REASON AND DECONSTRUCTION

#### Introduction

It is not possible to describe Derrida's understanding of reason without making substantial reference to his notion of deconstruction. Although much recent work – and indeed Derrida's own later comments on deconstruction – make it clear that this process is not an attempt to destroy reason or to idolize some form of irrationality, both of these caricatures still appear in popularizing interpretations of his work. Before going into greater detail as to how deconstruction relates to the subjects of both faith and reason it is therefore necessary to address these essentially negative and misleading interpretations.

One recent commentator argues that it is incorrect to describe Derrida as either a postmodernist or a poststructuralist, even though there are significant points of contact (Howells 1999, 2). The main reason for this assertion is that, unlike either of those two approaches, Derrida retains a concern for truth and does not advocate a free play of interpretation where something can be taken as meaning anything and the suggestion that there are constraints upon interpretation are abandoned. In fact, Derrida is the exact opposite of either a lazy or nihilistic interpreter of texts. Much of his work consists of a detailed and rigorous reading of texts requiring a high degree of knowledge and intellectual discipline. Howells' definition of deconstruction is worth quoting in full.

Deconstruction may set out to 'read between the lines', or even 'read against the grain', but it always attempts to read and understand. The so-called 'play' of interpretation which Derrida refers to as 'dissemination', is a play in the linguistic mechanism perhaps, but it is not the 'free play' beloved of some of Derrida's less rigorous followers. It is rather the demonstration of textual self-contradiction which is the essence of the deconstructive project. It differs from the standard philosophical technique of finding flaws in the logic of an opponent's argument in that the contradictions uncovered reveal an underlying incompatibility between what the writer believes him- or herself to be arguing and what the text itself actually says. This gap between authorial intention and textual meaning is a key focus of deconstruction (p. 3).

In due course this will provide one of the keys to unlocking a different relationship between reason and faith, but there are prior stages to the argument. Following reference to Derrida's own comments on the link between reason and deconstruction, there will be an examination of some of Derrida's early work as a further example of deconstruction in action. In particular it will need to be shown that Derrida does not indulge in a simple dismissal or negation of the metaphysical ideas that he attempts to deconstruct. His argument rather is that an interpretation always already necessarily carries within itself the other that it claims to have excluded, so any dualisms or polarities cannot be resolved by simple recourse to one term of the equation, as its 'other' is always presupposed. This



will be seen to be true for reason itself. Such an understanding also has implications for what Derrida calls negative theology and theological interpretations of transcendence: and these too will be examined. Finally, there will be reference to more recent arguments surrounding possible connections between deconstruction and both ethics and politics as these will lead further into the debate about the links between reason and faith. It is in the field of ethical inquiry that the concerns of Habermas, Derrida and Levinas find a common focus, as will be revealed in due course. This is to be expected as it is here more than anywhere that the issue of relating the universality of reason and morality and the particularity or singularity of individual situations comes to the fore. Can there be from within philosophy a 'step beyond reason' that is not a negation of it, but an opening up of a different relationship between the particular and the universal? This is the question that will emerge from the more detailed study of Derrida's writings on deconstruction.

It will be crucial in all of this to keep sight of the central question of this study, that of how a reason that has to claim some degree of universality can be reconciled to the ideas of faith as particular or singular, without predetermining or compromising the latter's direction or content. It may be that deconstruction can provide clues as to identifying a different relationship between the two terms in the equation.

### **Deconstruction as 'irrationality'**

Given Howells' comments on deconstruction bringing to light the gap between authorial intention and textual meaning, one should perhaps treat Derrida's own responses to questions about deconstruction with a certain degree of caution. If one of the points is that an originator of a text is often unaware of the other possibilities that lie behind what he or she has written, then no self-interpretation can be granted definitive status. Nevertheless, it does not seem unreasonable to take Derrida's own interpretation of the nature and tasks of deconstruction as at least a starting point for further discussion. One of the key questions facing deconstruction is whether it is founded on an assumption that reality is determined by chaos and uncertainty, what one might term a negative ontological principle, the danger then being that one simply replaces reason and truth with their opposites. This is the major criticism of Castoriadis' work on the dynamic unconscious, to which he effectively grants independent status, thus completely displacing any concept of conscious reasoning. To simply replace reason by the other of reason is to gain nothing, as it merely negates the very structures of language and communication central to the debate. In a published interview, Derrida is faced with the charge emanating from Habermas, amongst others, that he is engaging in a form of irrationality. Derrida responds by pointing out that raising questions about reason is not to be equated with antirationalism.

If there is here and there in France a critique of reason, e.g. by me myself, then that doesn't at all mean a rejection of reason, but, on the contrary, to a large extent a responsibility and a consciousness of the responsibility of the philosopher before reason... If you ask about the origin of the principle of reason, of the *Satz vom Grund*, then obviously this question is not regulated by reason and is not simply under the authority of the principle of reason. Indeed this requires a certain step beyond the realm of legitimation which is defined by the principle of reason. But this step beyond does not stand in



opposition to the principle of reason, rather it first opens the possibility of questioning reason (in Rötzer 1995, 43).

So deconstruction is operating in this location a step beyond reason, as if looking back at the ground just behind to examine how it appears from a different perspective. Does this mean then that deconstruction continues to operate according to the mode of familiar rational critique, through the application of rules, procedures and analytical techniques, or does it not fall into that pattern? Once again, the answer is somewhat enigmatic.

Deconstruction is no technique. It is concerned with texts, singular situations, signatures, with the entire history of philosophy within which the concept of method has constituted itself. When deconstruction investigates the history of metaphysics and of the concept of method, it simply can't present itself as a method... Deconstruction is therefore not simply a method of reading texts in the narrow sense (p.44).

In fact it may be easier to say what deconstruction is not than to say what it is as one could argue that it will be different in each instance in which it is employed. Hence it is not the application of certain rules or techniques, nor is it a recognizable or repeatable form of critical analysis, nor is it a set of hermeneutical principles. In other words, it is particular rather than universal because, if it were not, it would be participating in the reason that it is attempting to look back on from a different perspective. If what we have argued is correct, there is no one method or identifiable technique called deconstruction.

This is where many who believe themselves to be followers or imitators of Derrida have gone wrong, assuming that there is such a thing as an agreed process of deconstruction that they can then apply to various subject areas or texts. This kind of argument can be pursued to a very negative and destructive conclusion. One could argue that only Derrida really understands what he is talking about here and that only Derrida's work can be described as deconstruction and even that is not helpful or informative because each instance has to be followed along its own distinctive path. There is no example, definitive or otherwise, of deconstruction at work. Hence the very term 'deconstruction' can lead any potential imitators, including the present study, onto a false trail.

Enigmatic though this may sound, it does begin to move towards the area of tension between the universal and the particular that lies at the heart of the debate about the relationship between reason and faith. Whatever deconstruction is, it is moving into a territory or location that believes itself to be a step beyond reason and thus is not to be identified with reason, but is also not a rejection or negation either of reason or of the other of reason. Since to claim a generality beyond the particular is to participate in reason itself, it becomes impossible to describe the process under a general heading, and yet, once one engages in language and communication it is impossible not to use terms that are more than particular. Thus deconstruction, or whatever it is, is an exercise in the impossible, but it is the only way in which reason can be approached differently. It is of the order of a different relationship to reason. Should such a thing be possible, it would surely have direct implications for the relationship between reason and faith.

Clearly, part of the difficulty in conducting a serious examination of what deconstruction is, is that Derrida is challenging the view that it is even valid to say that deconstruction can be clearly and unequivocally identified with any one technique or process. Yet, since



it is one way in which he has described what he is attempting to do and because it has become one of the established public ways of referring to his work, it is impossible to read Derrida without attempting a reading of deconstruction. So, is deconstruction a new form of discipline in its own right, one which stands in a particular relationship to all other disciplines? Or is it perhaps a metadiscipline, underlying how all other disciplines operate? Once again Derrida does not offer a straightforward answer.

First of all, it isn't a discipline. A discipline is a knowing that can be communicated. Up to a certain point you can learn deconstructive procedures, but deconstruction itself isn't an object of instruction, not a knowing that you could transmit. It's therefore not a discipline, above all not a metadiscipline. Previously, we spoke about deconstruction, but for me the word deconstruction is not a master-word (p. 54).

What lies behind all such attempts to establish a description of or an operating formula for deconstruction is the assumption that it must be located in a predetermined place or space in relation to all other accepted areas of thought and knowledge. It is as if we can only feel secure with deconstruction if we can say with confidence 'this is where it fits in the scheme of things'. But to do that would be to place it back within the domain of reason, when it is that very domain that is being brought into question. However, as Derrida says:

You want unconditionally that this thing can be placed in a pre-given space. But it's exactly what can't be placed... Deconstruction is questioning and more than questioning in respect to the organization of domains (p. 55).

One possible consequence of Derrida's stance is that his elusiveness merely masks a claim for immunity from critique. If deconstruction does not fit anywhere, defies definitive description and can only be identified as it operates in singular situations and with Derrida as its one and only operator, then it is difficult to see how anybody else could gain enough purchase on it even to criticize it, let alone to know that one was employing it. However, Derrida draws back from this conclusion and argues that once one is engaged in a particular field or area of discourse, the rules, content and criteria pertaining to that specific area then come into play. So it is possible to criticize the manner in which deconstruction intervenes in a given area of competence.

When, for example, I read Kant from a deconstructive standpoint and know there can be a competent reading, then I can't say any arbitrary thing. At the moment, therefore, that deconstruction asserts itself... I accept critique because these areas possess rules of argumentation and validity (p. 55).

Although whatever this process of deconstruction involves is a step beyond reason and thus cannot be located in relation to the normal ordering of things as that would be to submit to reason, once the process is engaged within a particular field of thought or with a specific text, then it does have to offer an account of itself in relation to that ordering, if it is to avoid being arbitrary or nihilistic. This is possibly where the Habermasian criteria for effective communication would come into play. Given that deconstruction only exists when it is encountered in such operations it does then have to deal with reason in the form in which it is encountered in specific engagements. Thus there is an apparent paradox: deconstruction is both not of the domain of reason and also must participate



in the domain of reason. Yet if its key insight is that any interpretation always already presupposes its other, this is exactly as one would expect it to be, otherwise deconstruction would itself be immune from deconstruction and that would be to privilege one side of the equation (either reason or its other), and this is precisely what deconstruction refuses to do. Thus the paradox is only apparent, as what is under discussion does maintain an inner consistency in holding a dual relationship to reason. Further implications of this will now be examined.

### **Derrida's early work and deconstruction**

As with many philosophers whose output spans a considerable period of time, secondary commentators have launched a debate as to whether or not Derrida has significantly shifted his general approach. I am not convinced that this is a particularly fruitful path to follow and would prefer to see his work as a process of development in which the continuities outweigh the discontinuities. In which case it is important to make some limited reference to Derrida's early work as setting the context for more detailed examination of his recent writing. It is worth recording that Derrida studied phenomenology in Paris with Levinas and Ricoeur. Major early influences were Hegel, Heidegger and Husserl, and it is, in particular, Husserl's work that provides the starting point for Derrida's programme. It was a perceived weakness in phenomenology that set Derrida on the path of deconstruction. Phenomenology's attempt to ground human knowledge in experience, evidence and self-presence led Derrida to examine its underlying assumptions, and although the detail of this lies beyond the scope of this study, a broad outline of the arguments will prove of value.

In Derrida's view Husserl displays a lack of philosophical reflectiveness in his adoption of certain key axioms. In particular, he holds a one-sided and even simplistic understanding of the very language and symbols so central to phenomenology. The failures and misunderstandings which dog the transmission of knowledge and understanding Husserl sees as contingent errors that can and should be overcome, whereas Derrida maintains that they are an essential and inescapable reflection of human finitude. Even here then Derrida is concerned to acknowledge the other possibilities that are part of all human knowledge and interpretation and to argue that they are not mistakes to be overcome or rectified, but always already part of the original understanding. This is to take seriously the idea that reason itself has a history and that that history is related to specific and contingent aims shaped by humans themselves. In other words, the equation of reason with an absolutely transcendent logos is to deny the reality of human reasoning and imagination which can never capture the completeness and complexity required by Husserl. The latter appears to believe that there is no gap between reality and understanding and that humans can have direct and unmediated access to an external world and thus that all misunderstandings can, in theory at least, be corrected. However, this itself is contradicted by Husserl's own account of perception as involving memory and anticipation, retention and protention. If these are indeed part of the picture then a gap does open up between what is perceived now and the influence of what is remembered of before. As Howells says:

the continuity between the 'now' and the 'not-now' introduces alterity into the self-identity of the present moment, and this alterity is the paradoxical



condition of presence. All possibility of simple self-identity is therefore undone (1999, 22).

The difference, gap, alterity or whatever term one employs to mark this discontinuity is not a contingent error to be overcome, but is constitutive of the very fabric of human experience. If this were not the case then both reflection and representation would not be possible. The so-called supplements or added extras to the description of human understanding are in fact no such thing, as they are essential to and constitutive of the whole process. Language is at the heart of philosophical self-understanding and must form the starting point for philosophical reflection.

Truth and subjectivity do not exist in a realm prior to language, they depend on language for their very existence. Husserl's desire to preserve the immediacy of presence has been thwarted by the logic of his own argument: there is no original presence, only representation; no direct intuition, only mediated knowledge; no pure present moment, only a contamination of past and future; no self-identity, only irremediable self-division and difference. The phenomenological enterprise is doomed to failure for there can be no return to 'things in themselves' because 'the thing itself is always concealed'. Self-presence and ideality have been infinitely deferred (p.22).

Hence all the philosophical terms that are taken to imply completeness, unity and an unquestioned foundation such as presence, logos, reason and identity cannot preserve themselves against the opposites that they claim to have been excluded. Absence, division, difference and non-identity are always to be found alongside the positive terms of the equation. From this point Derrida then launches out on a series of detailed expositions of philosophical and literary texts, each time drawing out the hidden or denied possibilities that the original author has failed to acknowledge. This is the beginning of what we have been describing as deconstruction, although, as we have seen, Derrida does not intend to remain wedded to this as a master word. It is as if he wants the reader to see beyond the terms themselves to a pattern that continues to be repeated and that rests at the heart of Western philosophy. So one encounters in Derrida's work a deconstructive process aimed at a series of words that have been used to describe the concept of a founding centre or unity. Thus, 'origin, end, arche, telos, eidos, ousia, consciousness, God, man', amongst others, all of them versions of the notion of a self-present being and central to the history of Western metaphysics, are subjected to a similar treatment. All such terms represent the human search for a secure and unassailable centre for knowledge, and all betray the fact that they are substitutes to be replaced as their inadequacies are revealed. However – and this is critical – it is *not* as though one day the true term will be found and the gap finally filled, for Derrida is of the view that all such attempts are doomed to failure. Yet neither is it the case that the attempts will one day cease because we have finally escaped the snare of Western metaphysics. For Derrida there is no escape, as the only terms we have available are always already inescapably implicated within a metaphysical framework. Once again this brings philosophy back to the apparent paradox and the impossibility of deconstruction.

### **Derrida on Rousseau and reason**

As the exploration of Derrida's work deepens it seems appropriate to provide brief explanations of some of his key terms and ideas. One of the major targets in his early



writing is what he calls Logocentrism. What he is referring to by this is a philosophy of presence:

A world-view which understands being in terms of presence: the unmediated presence to consciousness of the world, and the self-presence of consciousness. Logocentrism is a form of 'onto-theology', or religion of being; in other words it subordinates all difference to the plenitude of presence resumed in the logos and determines the archaeological and eschatological meaning of being in terms of presence or Parousia (Howells 1999, 48).

It also has a direct implication for all theories of language as it presupposes there is an unmediated relationship between thought and language, words and things, speech and writing. So the signifier in language is always the direct representation of the original signified; misunderstanding and misrepresentation are contingent errors that can be successfully rectified. Derrida sometimes refers to this as the myth of the transcendental signified. The logos as metaphysical foundation for knowledge guarantees the identity or infallible identification between thought and being, and enshrines a reassuringly stable and hierarchical view of the world. In Derrida's opinion, Logocentrism is at fault by denying all alterity and difference and subsuming all such aspects of human finitude within an overarching ontology. To the extent that reason partakes of this philosophical position and is the guaranteed order of movement from being to thought, it too will become a target for deconstruction.

A further significant development of Derrida's work is his attention to the distinction between writing and speech. Speech has often been assumed to be the original form of human communication, whilst writing is merely a derivative form. However, this idea also contains the logocentric thinking that Derrida intends to bring into question. He argues that writing and speech are too dissimilar for writing to 'derive' from speech, and yet writing and speech both share many of the characteristics usually associated only with writing, especially the inscription and the lasting institution of the sign. Derrida uses the term *archi-écriture* to refer to this aspect of signification:

it does not mean writing in the narrow sense but rather connotes those aspects of writing shared with speech which are denied and repressed in theories that have an investment in maintaining the natural and unmediated nature of the spoken word (p. 49).

Once again we encounter here the characteristic Derridean themes of the exclusion of alterity and difference and the understanding that these are always already presupposed by the metaphysical terms from which they appear to have been excluded. Derrida's aim in this process of deconstruction is not to reverse the terms in the equation so that writing, for instance, is now seen as being more originary than speech or the true foundation of human communication, but to bring about a reconsideration of the dominant term, in this case speech. Derrida's usage of the term *archi-écriture* as a lever in this reconsideration is echoed or repeated in two more of his central terms, the *trace* and *différance*. So the *trace* is not simply a matter of letters on a page any more than *différance* is simply a matter of difference. Both are designed to bring to the surface the hidden or excluded elements of human communication and are a means of opening up that further consideration and questioning that Derrida aims to pursue. Both are as enigmatic as deconstruction itself as they participate in a metaphysical self-understanding while also trying to move a step



beyond it in order to bring it into question.

*Différance* is, Derrida maintains, not a word like other words, for it is what makes the meaning of words possible: neither a word nor a concept, neither active nor passive, neither cause nor effect, but productive of division and differences. Its difference from 'difference' is silent, detectable only in written form and inseparable from the 'trace' (p. 50).

The *trace* points to the possibility of an inscription of meaning present in but prior to the actual writing of the letter. Thus it challenges the logocentric view that all possible complete meaning is already present within each term and yet it does not suggest that there is some prior or deeper origin of meaning that has yet to be identified, for that would be merely to push logocentrism one stage further back. The very idea of an origin, a founding and complete presence or level of being is itself deconstructed by the terms *trace* and *différance*.

It is clear by now that Derrida's major objective is to disrupt and disturb the identity thinking that characterizes Western metaphysics and philosophy in general. All his key terms are a means to this end and not themselves to be turned into a new foundation or grand theory. However, this is not presented as the end of metaphysics in the sense of its final overcoming, but as a way of highlighting its limits and its limitations, acknowledging that thought and language have not escaped its influence.

In order to reveal how Derrida's approach impacts upon the accepted philosophical understanding of reason a brief examination of his essay on Rousseau in *Of Grammatology* will now be offered (1998, Part 2, ch. 2). As is invariably the case with Derrida's work this essay is a model of close and detailed textual exploration and does not claim to offer a definitive interpretation but to bring to the surface the hidden differences and other possibilities within the text. Derrida's starting point is the notion of the supplement as encountered in Rousseau's theory of writing.

According to Rousseau, writing is a supplement to speech, that which is added to the original form of human communication. As such writing is not natural:

It diverts the immediate presence of thought to speech into representation and the imagination. This recourse is not only 'bizarre' but dangerous. It is the addition of a technique, a sort of artificial and artful ruse to make speech present when it is actually absent (p. 144).

Derrida then proceeds to open up the ambiguities within the notion of the supplement. The idea of a supplement can itself be understood in two distinct but related ways. First it suggests that it is a surplus, one plenitude enriching another plenitude, the fullest measure of presence. So, for instance, the ideas of art, image and representation are seen as supplementing a nature that is already complete in itself and thus self-sufficient. This is the way that nature appears to be thought of by Rousseau. Second, and in contrast to this first understanding, any supplement does indeed supplement what is already present. 'It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place-of*; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void. If it represents and makes an image, it is by the anterior default of a presence' (p. 145). As such then it is not one plenitude being added to another, but a sign that the original presence being supplemented is not actually complete in itself, but has a gap waiting to be filled. Derrida maintains that both of these notions of the



supplement operate in Rousseau's text, although the emphasis varies. What both uses have in common is the idea that the supplement is essentially exterior to, or even alien to, that to which it is being added. So one is left with the difficult interpretation that nature, which, in Rousseau's view, is complete in itself, can and must be added to by something from the outside, from outside itself. That which appears to be a fullness of identity and a unity requires the supplement of that which is other to it, which is seen to be of the order of alterity and difference.

This then raises questions of how one is to interpret the relationship between nature and culture on the one hand and nature and education on the other that form a central core of Rousseau's text. It is difficult to see how either relationship can be anything other than a scandal or catastrophe, a deliberate perversion of that which should require no supplement, already being perfect in itself. For Rousseau this leads to the same conclusion about reason, as it too is deemed to partake of the same plenitude of being. Neither reason nor nature can tolerate the supplement as it represents the introduction of an alien element that undermines their own presupposed self-sufficiency.

reason is incapable of thinking this double infringement upon nature: that there is a *lack* in nature and that *because of that very fact* something is *added* to it. Yet one should not say that reason is *powerless to think this*; it is constituted by that lack of power. It is the principle of identity. It is the thought of the self-identity of the natural being. It cannot even determine the supplement as its other, as the irrational and the non-natural, for the supplement comes *naturally* to put itself in nature's place. The supplement is the image and representation of nature. The image is neither in nor out of nature. The supplement is therefore equally dangerous for reason, the natural health of reason (p. 149).

The difficulty for the thinking of reason as described in this passage is surely that of positing a location for the other of reason that neither subverts nor destroys it. If the other of reason is alien and exterior to it in the manner of this dangerous supplement, then it is impossible to see how reason itself can even acknowledge that this is the case. That which is different is so different as to not even register within reason's grasp of reality. Yet, this does not seem to be the case, as reason can at least acknowledge that there is this supplement. Then however, that which is the other is either brought within the domain of reason so that it ceases to be the other, or it challenges it from a location that is neither in nor out of reason, or possibly both in and out. The apparent paradox highlighted before whenever one is faced with the problem of describing the relation between reason and its other in terms of identifiable or determined locations now returns. The very language that we use appears incapable of describing this relationship. The step beyond the order of reason both needs to escape from it and is yet unable to do so.

In the closing stages of his examination of Rousseau's text, Derrida focusses on this problem area. Reading a text itself participates in this increasingly familiar paradox. Although it may seem as though any exercise in interpretation is an attempt to move beyond the text, to access a location that is other than the text, because if that were not the case we are not dealing with interpretation but only mere repetition, it is not possible to reach a point beyond language or outside of writing in general (op. cit., 158). It is in this context that Derrida coins the phrase that is so often quoted as being a form of



reductionism or nihilistic relativism – ‘There is nothing outside of the text.’ (It needs to be emphasized that this contestable interpretation of Derrida is a common one and that it is not accepted within this thesis.)

*There is nothing outside of the text* (there is no outside text: *il n’y a pas de hors texte*)... What we have tried to show by following the guiding line of the ‘dangerous supplement’, is that in what one calls the real life of these existences of ‘flesh and bone’, beyond and behind what one believes can be circumscribed as Rousseau’s text, there has never been anything but writing; there have never been anything but supplements, substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references, the ‘real’ supervening, and being added only while taking on meaning from a trace and from an invocation of the supplement, etc. (p. 158).

In other words, there is no location in the sense of pure unmediated presence, logos, or metaphysical grounding that exists independently of the writing of the text. There is no transcendental signified that guarantees a direct relationship between the words and an external reality. The reason for this is that the otherness, the differences, the lack of presence brought to the surface by Derrida are inherent in the very language we use, even when we try to get beyond the limitations of language itself. Text in this context does not refer to a specific piece of writing, but to that which is the nature of writing itself, in the same way as *trace* is more than the marks on the page and *différance* more than actual difference. All these terms point to the conditions in which any of the conventional meanings of text, trace and difference can operate at all. In that sense they are transcendentals, but without being transcendental in the conventional sense of a metaphysical grounding.

Those who search for or attempt to posit a pure location external to the reality they are attempting to examine, who believe that there is a step beyond that can also be a step into a domain or location totally apart from the reality in question, are doomed to disappointment or self-deception. There is no such place. What there is, or can be, is a step beyond always subject to error and misunderstanding that itself always remains related to the area in question in complex and contradictory ways. It is not an overcoming or leaving behind of metaphysics, reason or presence, but the possibility of another relationship to each of these. Therefore we can only begin from wherever we are, not from a point of departure outside the text, in other words outside of the nature of language itself. Thus in the debate about the relationship between faith and reason one is always participating in the domain of language and seeking for other ways of describing that relationship from within language itself.

If we consider, according to the axial proposition of this essay, that there is nothing outside the text, our ultimate justification would be the following: the concept of the supplement and the theory of writing designate textuality itself in Rousseau’s text in an indefinitely multiplied structure – *en abyme* (in an abyss) – to employ the current phrase. And we shall see that this abyss is not a happy or unhappy accident. An entire theory of the structural necessity of the abyss will be gradually constituted in our reading: the indefinite process of supplementarity has always already *infiltrated* presence, always already inscribed there the space of repetition and the splitting of the self (p. 163).



One could almost take this complete quotation and replace 'text' with 'reason', as long as 'reason' meant the very conditions which enabled reason to be possible rather than the conventional meaning of reason as identity thinking. There is nothing outside reason – in that modified sense – not even the other of reason, in other words, not even faith, not even the particularity of a specific religious tradition. But this is not the same as saying that there is reason (identity thinking) that subsumes faith or determines its content or meaning, but a way of pointing to the possibility of another relationship between faith and reason. This is the path that has yet to be opened up and pursued. The next task is to consider what deconstruction can offer to an understanding of negative theology.

### **Deconstruction and negative theology<sup>†</sup>**

It needs to be made clear from the outset that the following exposition does not represent Derrida's attempt to 'do theology'. Negative theology is merely another domain that is of interest and concern to Derrida and that may be helpfully illuminated by an encounter with deconstruction. Yet the fact that it is of interest and concern to him is not to be ignored either. This also does not represent the working out or articulation of Derrida's own approach to religion or faith and is not a description of his own position in relation to God. Yet that this subject area is of importance to him is itself of significance. All of this needs to be registered because there is a temptation to read out of the text to be studied ready-made answers to our questions, whereas what Derrida intends us to attend to are the double themes, apparent paradoxes or ambiguities brought to the surface by the engagement between deconstruction and negative theology.

In this particular text (*On the Name*, 1995), it must be noted that Derrida presents the reader with a conversation between two voices. This appears to be the only adequate way of approaching a discussion about God:

- Sorry, but more than one, it is always necessary to be more than one in order to speak, several voices are necessary for that...
- Yes, granted, and par excellence, let us say exemplarily, when it's a matter of God (p. 35).

This both highlights the importance of the caveat above – which voice is Derrida's? – and reflects the very nature of negative or apophatic theology. The voice here immediately says both one thing and its apparent opposite. 'I am saying that it is impossible to say anything about God'. So there is an impossibility of doing justice to what cannot be said, and yet this itself requires to be said. There is also an echo of otherness here – is there then a God beyond being when it is the case that nothing can be said? – as well as a potential theological search for God. Different or multiple voices are thus already built into this exposition and an implicit acknowledgment that the enterprise in hand involves an attempt to go beyond normal and permitted boundaries, to step beyond the limits and frontiers of theology and language itself.

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<sup>†</sup> It needs to be emphasized that Derrida's interpretation of negative theology is not to be identified with the more familiar and traditional theological interpretations. For a useful discussion of this subject in Derrida's writings see the essay by Jean-Luc Marion entitled 'In the Name: How to avoid speaking of Negative Theology' and Derrida's response to this in eds. Caputo and Scanlon 1999, pp. 20–47.



What is being attempted here is, strictly speaking, impossible, to think about God as beyond or other to all that can be thought. In this Derrida sees a parallel to the process of deconstruction itself.

This thought seems strangely familiar to the experience of what is called deconstruction. Far from being a methodical technique, a possible or necessary procedure, unrolling the law of a programme and applying rules, that is, unfolding possibilities, deconstruction has often been defined as the very experience of the (impossible) possibility of the impossible, of the most impossible, a condition that deconstruction shares with the gift, the 'yes', the 'come', decision, testimony, the secret, etc. And perhaps death (p. 43).

What both deconstruction and negative theology share is that they are an interruption or disruption in the regime of the possible, a striving for the beyond that can only be attempted but never finally achieved – apparently. This double movement or split voice is characteristic of both areas of thought. Both also bring to our attention the limitations of language – using it to put into words that which cannot be articulated – a language that necessarily participates in the orders of reason and metaphysics when what is being sought is itself of another order – if there can be one.

Derrida then takes some of the key texts of negative theology – Augustine, Eckhart and Angelus Silesius – and draws out the image of the desert as being a common way of trying to capture this experience of the impossible. To find what cannot normally be found, the disciple, the seeker after truth, must go out into the desert where there is Nothing, as Nothing is what lies beyond the word of God. This also has echoes of deconstruction and the nature of the decision as requiring a way or a path that has yet to be forged or identified.

Isn't the desert a paradoxical figure of the *aporia*? No (pas de) marked out (trace) or assured passage, no route in any case, at the very most trails that are not reliable ways, the paths are not yet cleared...unless the sand has already re-covered them. But isn't the uncleared way also the condition of *decision* or *event*, which consists in opening the way, in (sur)passing, thus in going *beyond*? In (sur)passing the *aporia*? (p. 54).

Yet despite this powerful image of the desert and the description of the task of negative theology (and deconstruction?) as creating a path out into the unknown and uncharted territory (otherwise the way would be known in advance), negative theology has grown as a tradition, a culture and a discipline in its own right. Thus it becomes what, by one definition, it cannot be, a set of recognizable and well-trodden paths charted by those who have already gone before. Negative theology is both uncharted territory and yet has been charted, just as language cannot be used to describe what lies beyond and yet always has to be used to describe and communicate that very limitation.

Into the midst of this contradictory equation comes the word, or the name God. God of whom nothing can be known and nothing can be said except that there is the name 'God'. So this name must somehow be kept safe, be preserved as that which marks out the location of the impossibility of knowledge or description.

'God' 'is' the name of this bottomless collapse, of this endless desertification of language. But the trace of this negative operation is inscribed *in* and *on* and *as* the *event* (what *comes*, what there is and which is always singular, what finds



in this kenosis the most decisive condition of its coming or upsurging). There *is* this event, which remains, even if this remnant is not more substantial, more essential than this God, more ontologically determinate than this name of God of whom it is said that he names nothing that is, neither this nor that (pp. 55–6).

At this point one can start being overwhelmed by the density of Derrida's terminology, his deliberately enigmatic use of language and the close attention paid to every single word and the play upon its other possible meanings. All of these appear to be strategies, means of propelling the reader into a location that escapes all definition, that one can never be certain according to the order of reason whether it exists or not. There is that which is so different, other, heterogeneous, alien to language itself, that can only be hinted at or pointed towards by the most difficult and opaque terminology and yet requires and demands that it be approached in a disciplined and identifiable manner – the tradition, institution and culture of negative theology. It is certainly not clear whether Derrida is doing conventional theology or specific faith traditions any favours here. He may be pointing to their necessity but also at the same time to their inadequacies at fulfilling the task that they set themselves – articulating a reality that, if it exists, defies all articulation. One could argue that all attempts at a determinate or specific faith are condemned to failure from the outset, not by a reason that forces its other into exile, but by its own internal criteria. The only possible path to faith is automatically closed off by the attempts of religious traditions to claim they have knowledge of and have appropriated the path to faith. As soon as traditions, cultures and institutions become established, then the name of God becomes reduced and devalued and its location has been lost.

I was only wanting to suggest that in the cultural or historical zone in which the expression 'negative theology' appears as a sort of domestic and controlled appellation, the zone in sum of that Christian philosophy whose concept Heidegger was saying was as mad and contradictory as that of a squared circle, apophasis has always represented a sort of paradoxical hyperbole (p. 63).

Yet, as one might expect of Derrida, even this is not the final word on the matter. What is required in this domain of negative theology, and this is what deconstruction might have to offer here, is an attempt to think the conditions for the possibility of this apparently impossible task. Is there at least a (non)metaphysical transcendental that can open a path to articulating the transcendent? It is precisely this possibility that Derrida proceeds to explore. Is there a formal possibility of saying: X 'is' beyond what 'is', 'x is without being'? (p. 64).<sup>†</sup> There is in the sense that the paradoxical hyperbole *announces*:

It announces in a double sense: it signals an open possibility, but it also *provokes* thereby the opening of the possibility. Its event is at once revealing and producing, *post-scriptum* and prolegomenon, inaugural writing (p. 64).

It is as if the very act of putting these things into words creates the possibility that there is something here that can be thought after all. Even in the act of denying, negating

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<sup>†</sup> Derrida is either unaware of or not interested in the logical point that existence is not a predicate and that predicating something of a subject is commonly seen as being different from making an existential statement.



or contradicting one is perversely confirming the possibility, although it may turn out to be impossible. The passion – as Derrida describes it – the task and burden of faith as a believer might recognize it, is to pursue this path in spite of what logic or formal reason might appear to recommend. In that sense negative theology has to work against itself and in spite of itself and take perhaps a ‘leap of faith’ beyond its awareness of its own impossibility.

In the most apophatic moment, when one says ‘God is not’, ‘God is neither this nor that, neither that nor its contrary’ or ‘being is not’ etc.; even then it is still a matter of saying the entity (*étant*) such as it is, in its truth, even were it meta-metaphysical, meta-ontological. It is a matter of holding the promise of saying the truth at any price, of testifying, of rendering oneself to the truth of the name, to the thing itself such as it must be named by the name, *that is, beyond the name* (p.68).

To repeat the caveat at the beginning of this section, those searching for grounds for faith should resist the temptation to read into this anything like either an argument for the existence of God or clues to Derrida’s own personal commitment. All that he is talking about here is a ‘formal possibility’ and then that only in relation to an interest in whether negative theology can have a fruitful encounter with deconstruction, whether each can illuminate the other. Derrida’s concern is to pursue a line of thought and there is no guarantee that it will lead to a place of comfort or safety for the conventional believer. In fact it does not, for the point that Derrida now takes up is that negative theology is itself a double or split voice and that the fact that it has to work against itself in the way just described, suggests that there is an internal division between those of an apophatic disposition who would pursue the formal possibility of speaking of a ‘beyond’ and those intent on building their faith on the specific revelation or textual authority underlying the institutional churches. Hence:

...for a while now I have the impression that it is the idea itself of an identity or a self-interiority of every tradition (*the one* metaphysics...*the one* Christian revelation...*the one* tradition, self-identity in general, the one etc.) that finds itself contested at its root (p.71).

The further details of this suggestion will be pursued in greater depth in following sections as Derrida develops this insight in ways crucial to this study. At this stage it is important simply to register that Derrida is raising the possibility of a form of faith independent of any specific revelation or indeed tradition, an idea similar to that of Kant when trying to define a religion within the limits of mere reason, but in this case with its own particular perspective on both faith and reason. Those who follow such a path, Eckhart, Kant and maybe Derrida himself, will invariably find themselves at odds with religious authorities and institutions. Negative theology therefore is not a comfortable place to be located in.

To return to the main thread of Derrida’s text: what happens once the formal possibility has been opened up and the intention to pursue the apophatic trail has been announced? Where might this lead? One is returned to the question of place or location, the issue of going where it is not possible to go. Then Derrida raises a further critical question.

Is this place created by God? Is it part of the play? Or else is it God himself? Or even what precedes, in order to make them possible, both God and his



Play? In other words it remains to be known if this nonsensible (invisible and inaudible) place is opened by God (which would again be some other thing perhaps), or if it is 'older' than the time of creation, than time itself, than history, narrative, word etc. (pp. 75–6).

So what is not known is whether this place is opened by the event that is the response of faith to seek what is beyond, or whether it is 'impassively foreign' like *chora* to all that might be encountered, including what is named God. Is it so different as to resist even that which faith may be seeking? These two possibilities appear incompatible, one at least accessible to the quest for what is beyond or other, the second so other as to be beyond accessibility: the other as totally other. Yet even this apparent incompatibility is not clear cut as we are constantly faced with these two possibilities, there are others that may be so totally other as to be inaccessible – this is the dynamic of deconstruction. Once again the attempt to articulate this term leads to a division and a difference that can be both a relation and a separation. So, at the heart of negative or apophatic theology is to be found this double possibility familiar from all other areas that have been subjected to deconstruction; either the place of the positive response, the event of revelation, and the human attempt to create a path into that which may be beyond, or the place of such alterity and heterogeneity that only a certain passivity can be called for, this latter not a foundation or the equivalent of the transcendental signifier but 'the very spacing of deconstruction' (p. 80). Between these two there cannot be a straightforward decisive choice in the sense of individual autonomy because they already form the realm within which choices can be made. They are the conditions within which negative theology operates, the transcendental of that which is concerned with transcendence and beyond which one cannot pass. The question that will need to be pursued is whether this understanding will lead to another relationship between faith and reason, between the universal and the particular.

### **Deconstruction and ethics**

This section will refer to recent scholarship which argues for a particular connection between deconstruction and both ethics and politics. It has already been seen that there is not a direct line of argument from deconstruction to theology – negative or otherwise – but that there is a relationship between them that requires attention. The exact nature of that relationship has still to be made clear. The reason for examining a possible link between deconstruction and ethics is to examine whether the nature of this relationship might provide clues for that between deconstruction and faith. As always with Derrida, this will mean encountering ideas that require further development in later sections of the study.

Before entering directly into this debate it seems appropriate to offer another description of deconstruction from Derrida himself in order to refocus the argument. This is a lengthy but particularly illuminating quotation.

All that a deconstructive point of view tries to show, is that since convention, institutions and consensus are stabilizations...this means that they are stabilizations of something essentially unstable and chaotic. Thus, it becomes necessary to stabilize precisely because stability is not natural: it is because there is instability that stabilization becomes necessary: it is because there



is chaos that there is a need for stability. Now, this chaos and instability, which is fundamental, founding and irreducible, is at once naturally the worst against which we struggle with laws, rules, conventions, politics and provisional hegemony, but at the same time it is a chance, a chance to change, to destabilize. If there were continual stability, there would be no need for politics, and it is to the extent that stability is not natural, essential or substantial, that politics exists and ethics is possible. Chaos is at once a risk, and a chance, and it is here that the possible and the impossible cross each other (Derrida 1996, 84).

A commentary on this quotation would yield access to nearly all the major themes of Derrida's recent writing in addition to the obvious link back to his earlier work. First, all deconstruction does is to bring to the surface in particular instances, the underlying instability. It does not have to create instability because it is already there. Second, this instability does begin to sound like an ontological principle in this quotation. The natural order of things is chaos, not order, and it is clear that Derrida puts the emphasis upon a negative ontology; non-identity rather than identity; difference rather than self-identity and so on. Can he then avoid the trap of a mere reversal of terms as he claims to do? Third, law, politics, institutions and even ethics are interpreted as the human attempts to shore up the worst effects of this instability and they are only necessary because chaos is always threatening to break through. If reason and complete order were the order of the day then there would be no need for decisions, either political or ethical, for all the correct answers would be laid out in advance. Reason is the attempt to hold the line at the floodgates and to leave the barbarians outside the city walls. It must always fail, even though it is essential, but it is within this failure that freedom, opportunity for change and creativity become possibilities. So it is not that humans can do without law, politics and reason, but that the essential instability which makes them necessary is always waiting to break through, and therein lies both the threat and the possibility of change and freedom. There is something almost biblical in this passage of Derrida's, something approaching the Christian juxtaposition of law and grace. Within this equation Habermas would appear to be on the side of law, politics and reason and Derrida on the side of grace as that which recognizes the necessity of reason but can also redeem it from its own worst excesses. However, this is to anticipate, and the potential connection between deconstruction and ethics must now be outlined.

Simon Critchley's *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (1999a), was the first major attempt to establish such a connection. As the subtitle suggests, the book uses the work of Levinas to reveal an ethical dimension to deconstruction. Two points need to be registered at the outset. First, Critchley is clear that there can be no direct derivation of an ethics from deconstruction, rather he hopes 'to demonstrate that the pattern of reading produced in the deconstruction of...philosophical texts has an ethical structure' (p.2). Second, when he speaks of ethics it will be referring to a Levinasian understanding of the term. Thus: 'it will become clear that the relation of the ethics of deconstruction to conventional moral philosophy, or even applied ethics, will be at best oblique, and perhaps even critical' (p.3). So there is not an ethics of deconstruction as such, but rather the possibility of showing that the two can operate within the same domain. The key idea that Critchley adopts from Levinas is that ethics consists of the



unconditional response to the other, that alterity and difference constitute the base line for any truly ethical stance. Further to this, all attempts to philosophize on this response, to put it into language and then order and categorize it, risk distorting the essence of the ethical demand which is characterized by encountering the face of the other. Philosophy, through reason, is always an attempt to reduce the other to the same, non-identity to identity, and thus fails to capture the radical nature of ethics. Immediately there is a parallel with Derrida's consideration of negative theology, where it is clear that all attempts to say what cannot be said, to articulate the ineffable, must miss the mark. Yet it is also in the saying of what cannot be said that the encounter with the other is formulated in an ethics and that the challenge of alterity achieves articulation and takes on a recognizable form. Deconstruction moves within the realm of the possibility of this impossibility, the double reading of all terms that claim order and simultaneously unveil the underlying chaos.

Deepening the discussion one encounters the idea of singularity that will be the focus for the next section of this study. For Levinas, it is in the alterity and difference of the other that I meet the ethical demand. 'The Other who approaches me is a singular other who does not lose him or herself in a crowd of others' (p. 17). This singularity of encounter or experience is what constantly undermines all attempts to create an ethics in the sense of an ordered and articulated response. Once one reduces the singular other to a category or more general order, the radical nature of the ethical demand has been lost. Once again there is the double bind of having to say what cannot be said, of placing a unique encounter under a general heading that can only distort it. In a sense there can be no ethics as either a philosophy or a system for both compromise the singularity of the other, and yet this is always what has to happen. There may be an echo here of the relationship between reason and faith: the ordering that always threatens to compromise the particularity of the religious encounter and yet which must take place if that encounter is to be articulated and communicated. It is not as if one could escape this impossibility.

Derrida's reading of Levinas draws out the deeper problems of the language that has to be employed in developing an ethics. That language still, of necessity, participates in a metaphysical order that both Derrida and Levinas (and Heidegger and Nietzsche before them) believe has now reached the end of its creative life, and yet which we seem unable to do without or to move beyond. Critchley sums this up under the Derridean heading of closure (*clôture*).

Broadly stated, the problem of metaphysical closure describes the duplicitious historical moment – *now* – when 'our' language, concepts, institutions and philosophy itself show themselves both to belong to a metaphysical or logocentric tradition which is theoretically exhausted, while at the same time searching for the breakthrough from that tradition (p. 20).

This is the liminal context in which deconstruction operates: 'the double refusal both of remaining within the limits of the tradition and of the possibility of transgressing that limit' (p. 20). This is the problem of taking a step beyond reason and metaphysics when the only language available to us still participates, although ambiguously, within those very orders. How can we ever be certain that we have indeed stepped beyond the limit and that we are not still within the domain of reason etc? It seems that we cannot, and yet we



are still doomed to make the attempt. To what extent then can Habermas' communicative reason be 'Post-Metaphysical' as he claims that it is? Has metaphysics finally been left behind, or does it still continue to operate, but now as the excluded and unrecognized 'other' of this new order? If this new order is so different, so other from what has gone before, then how can we even recognize it, let alone articulate it, or is the argument of Habermas that this is a process of evolution at work in society rather than a complete revolution? These questions are the daily bread of deconstruction. Deconstruction is 'an openness towards the other' (Derrida in Kearney 1984, 124); 'the desire to keep open a dimension of alterity, which can neither be reduced, comprehended, nor, strictly speaking, even *thought* by philosophy' (Critchley 1999a, 29). Deconstruction is the disruption of that which only appears to be stable, settled and complete. It does not aim to create chaos, but to release the other possibilities that are always already there, including the response to the singularity of the other encountered in the ethical demand. In that sense at least there is a clear link between deconstruction and an ethical and political concern for those repressed others whose voices are drowned out by existing institutions and orders. There is also a connection with Habermas' concern that all those directly affected by political or moral decisions should have their views registered and acknowledged in the decision-making process.

Further consideration of the possible connections between Derrida and Levinas will follow in later sections. The objective at this point is to highlight how deconstruction operates within the realm of a questioning of reason and to suggest further areas of inquiry. The notion of singularity has emerged as potentially central to this debate and has clear resonances for the issue of relating reason to faith. If Christianity is built upon the interpretation of the experience of the 'particular' and reason is the 'universal', in what ways can they relate other than through conflict or compromise? Does the notion of singularity illuminate this discussion? The underlying question appears to be that of just how radical is the difference, alterity or non-identity between reason and faith. If the one is only interpreted as the other's other, then what possibilities of relationship remain? If the two are so different, then recognition and relationship appear impossible, but what if both should always already participate in the same order by virtue of the very language we use, that which alone facilitates articulation and communication? This question emerges as deconstruction inquires into understandings of the unconscious, of the ambitions of negative theology, and the realm of ethics, each being interpreted as other to the orders of reason, metaphysics, law and politics. Derrida is eager to pursue the possibility of another relationship – neither as conventionally understood, nor as being seen as impossible, although the reasons for both are acknowledged – and it is this same possibility that will be pursued for the relationship between reason and faith.



## Chapter Eight

### DERRIDA – REASON AND SINGULARITY

In order to present an argument that the notion of singularity as employed by Derrida contributes to the debate about the exact relationship between reason and faith, this chapter will focus upon one specific text, that in which Derrida examines Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* (Derrida 1995a). This in turn offers a very particular interpretation of the account of Abraham's call to sacrifice his son Isaac as found in Genesis chapter 22. It does need to be noted that Derrida's interpretation of Kierkegaard would be viewed as somewhat unorthodox by contemporary scholarship. However, the concern of this thesis is Derrida's work as such and so I do not intend to enter the wider debate about the acceptability or otherwise of this particular reading of Kierkegaard.

At the start of his exposition Derrida recalls that the title of Kierkegaard's book refers, perhaps indirectly, to a passage from St Paul's Epistle to the Philippians where the disciples are enjoined to work out their own salvation in fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12), suggesting that this is so because it is God alone, God as other, who has no need to share his reasons with human beings and who will decide and dispose. There is a secret here, inaccessible to human thought, that will be the controlling and determining factor. It is in the knowledge of this that humans live 'in fear and trembling'. This is true effectively by definition.

God doesn't give his reasons, he acts as he intends, he doesn't have to give his reasons or share anything with us: neither his motivations, if he has any, nor his deliberations, nor his decisions. Otherwise he wouldn't be God, we wouldn't be dealing with the other as God or with God as *wholly other* [*tout autre*]. If the other were to share his reasons with us, if he were to speak to us all the time without any secrets, he wouldn't be the other, we would share a type of homogeneity (p. 57).

To engage in any sort of discourse is immediately to presuppose that homogeneity that cannot be true if God is wholly other to humanity. Reading the account of Abraham and Isaac one encounters the same dynamic at work. Abraham speaks to nobody of what God has commanded him to do. He has to keep the secret, both because of the enormity of what he has to do and because he has no explanation for it in any case. 'He is sworn to secrecy because he is in secret' (p. 59).

However, by not speaking about it, Abraham transgresses the ethical order. By keeping the secret he betrays all that we can know as ethics – perhaps this is a step beyond ethics? It is through his very silence that his singularity is most eloquently expressed.

...Abraham doesn't speak, he assumes the responsibility that consists in always being alone, entrenched in one's own singularity at the moment of decision. Just as no one can die in my place, no one can make a decision, what we



call 'a decision', in my place. But as soon as one speaks, as soon as one enters the medium of language, one loses that very singularity. One therefore loses the possibility of deciding or the right to decide. Thus every decision would, fundamentally, remain at the same time solitary, secret, and silent (pp. 59–60).

In other words it is language itself that deprives us of our singularity, our uniqueness as individual human beings, because once we have spoken we are no longer alone. By speaking we renounce our liberty and our responsibility to ourselves. This idea appears to contradict what is accepted as the conventional wisdom in both normal life and moral philosophy, that responsibility is both public and non-secret. Yet for Kierkegaard, according to Derrida, any public attempt to account for our actions, to articulate our motivations and purposes, is a betrayal of our true responsibility. All articulation, as is all writing, is a supplement, an addition, even a substitute for what is really taking place. Thus the ethical in this commonly accepted sense is a temptation to be resisted, and silence is the only appropriate response to the call of the other (God).

It needs to be made totally explicit how much of a scandal and a paradox Kierkegaard's view is for philosophy. From Plato to Hegel and, for that matter, from Kant to Habermas, the assumption has been that the ethical must be the universal and that, as universal, it must be that which can be disclosed. The responsibility of the individual is to articulate his or her reasons and reasoning in ways that are publically accessible and open to full scrutiny. To refuse to do this, as Abraham does, is to defy the accepted procedures and presuppositions of philosophy and ethics. Thus is encountered the most extreme opposition between reason and faith.

There are no final secrets for philosophy, ethics, or politics. The manifest is given priority over the hidden or the secret, universal generality is superior to the individual; no irreducible secret that can be legally justified... – and thus the instance of the law has to be added to those of philosophy and ethics; nothing hidden, no absolutely legitimate secret. But the paradox of faith is that interiority remains 'incommensurable with exteriority' (p. 63).

The conventional concept of duty also comes into conflict with Kierkegaard's views. Duty to God as normally understood also participates in universality and generality. If I obey God 'out of duty', then this is to devalue and to betray the singularity of God's call to the individual and the response that would be appropriate. Acting only out of duty, in this sense, represents a dereliction of one's absolute duty to God.

Abraham's obedience to God's command represents a responsibility and a decision that cannot be located within the normal range of human ethical activity. Yet it is a reflection of Abraham's love, both for his son and for God. It is only because he loves Isaac that the sacrifice he is called upon to make has such profound meaning. The gift of death or the granting of death, as that which above all confers singularity upon the other person – after all it is only death that marks each of us out as unique, that nobody can go through for me – only counts as sacrifice because the life to be ended is of such importance to Abraham. 'Abraham must love his son absolutely to come to the point where he will grant him death, to commit what ethics would call hatred and murder' (p. 65). It is because this act defies all explanation or justification that it in turn exemplifies the singularity of the relationship between Abraham and his God. In the instant of decision, to anybody



else, including and especially his own family, this act must appear to be madness, perhaps the other of reason in that sense, and at least a paradox in terms of conventional ethics. As Derrida says:

The paradox cannot be grasped in time and through mediation, that is to say in language and through reason... If it can be said, it belongs to an atemporal temporality, to a duration that cannot be grasped: something one cannot stabilize, establish, *grasp...apprehend*, or *comprehend*. Understanding, common sense and reason cannot seize...conceive, understand or mediate it; neither can they negate or deny it (p. 65).

Abraham's decision must not be capable of being fitted into what others could recognize as the normal scope of ethical behaviour, for that description would then make it appear as if he had acted out of duty. To act out of love must appear as its own opposite if it is to be this absolute commitment and responsibility – the unconditional response. All recognizable forms of human morality and law have themselves to be sacrificed and betrayed if Abraham is to hear and to obey the call of God, to respond to the absolute singularity of the other. The secret cannot be communicated.

The other as absolute other, namely, God, must remain transcendent, hidden, secret, jealous of the love, requests, and commands that he gives and that he asks to be kept secret. Secrecy is essential to the exercise of this absolute responsibility as sacrificial responsibility (p. 67).

At this point one might be tempted to object that this whole story is so extreme that it bears no relationship to the normal order of human living, let alone offer any insight into the true nature of moral behaviour. However, Derrida argues that it does in fact illustrate the most common and everyday experience of responsibility. As soon as I am called upon to respond to another person I am faced with the reality that by taking up that response I am having to deny or to neglect my possible duty to any others who will be equally worthy of my response. It is impossible to fulfil my responsibilities to all the others who can legitimately make a claim upon me, so by deciding to respond to one, I engage in a process of sacrifice. Furthermore, there is no way in which I can describe, rationalize or justify why I should respond to this person and not to another. In the universal order of morality and even in the Christian understanding that anyone in need is my neighbour and thus a legitimate demand on my time, there is no way of differentiating between possible responses. The notion of singularity is central to Derrida's argument here, both the singularity of the absolute other, i.e. God, and that of any other human being:

...what binds me thus in my singularity to the absolute singularity of the other, immediately propels me into the space of risk or absolute sacrifice. There are also others, an infinite number of them, the innumerable generality of others to whom I should be bound by the same responsibility, a general and universal responsibility (what Kierkegaard calls the ethical order). I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another without sacrificing the other other, the other others (p. 68).

The result of this is that the concepts of responsibility, decision and even duty are condemned from the outset to paradox, scandal and aporia. Even in the moment when I respond out of responsibility to one person I am aware that I am sacrificing the very principle of ethics – the call to respond to all those who are other – by limiting the



possibility of responding to any others. This is no accident or mere contingency, a mistake to be corrected, but in fact the way things are and will be. Thus even when I make a commitment to engage in any sphere of human activity I am thereby deciding that other possibilities are going to be ruled out and that certain legitimate obligations to my fellow beings will have to be abandoned. By placing my own family in a position of privilege above others because I take this as my responsibility as a parent, for instance, I am engaging in this inescapable dynamic. The singularity both constitutes the nature of responsibility and simultaneously undermines it.

The critical challenge to reason and thus to the moral order as conceived by Habermas entailed by this, is that it is not possible to articulate, let alone defend, one's decision to respond to one rather than to another.

I can respond only to the one (or to the One), that is, to the other, by sacrificing the other to that one. I am responsible to any one (that is to say to any other) only by failing in my responsibility to all the others, to the ethical or political generality. And I can never justify this sacrifice, I must always hold my peace about it. Whether I want to or not, I can never justify the fact that I prefer or sacrifice any one (any other) to the other (p. 70).

So Abraham's situation as that of not being able to tell anyone else what he is doing or why, is precisely the one that we all face on a daily basis when we take a decision about our responsibility. Sacrifice is endemic to the process. Further:

There is no language, no reason, no generality or mediation to justify this ultimate responsibility which leads me to absolute sacrifice... (p. 71).

This is the heart of the problem of the relationship between reason and faith expressed in perhaps its most extreme form. The two orders are apparently so different, so alien to one another in this interpretation that they are incapable of any contact let alone mediation. To respond to the wholly other is to surpass, to go beyond the reach of and even to negate what may be contained in a universal or even general description. Absolute singularity – if there is such a thing – makes this inevitable. However, it does need to be noted that this is Derrida drawing out from a text of Kierkegaard a possible interpretation of an account from the Book of Genesis. In other words, it is far from being Derrida's final or only word on the subject, for, if it were, there would be no more to be said.

For Kierkegaard, Abraham is the knight of faith, not the tragic hero who can put his dilemma into words and agonize by sharing it with others, but the lone individual before God whose only response can be 'Here I am'. Beyond that he can say nothing, not even to God. There is only the practical response of placing Isaac upon the altar and raising the knife, at which stage the deed is already effectively done, even though God then rescinds the order. The unconditional (and unreasonable) response to the unconditional (and unreasonable) demand has already been made and God can now be sure that Abraham has understood what is required of the person of faith. The response of faith is one of action, not of words, and although this is easy to say and cheap to write, costing nothing, the reality is that it must cost everything, requiring absolute sacrifice. So the ideas of secrecy, of exclusivity and of silence in the face of the call are central to Abraham's response and to Kierkegaard's understanding of faith. The knight of faith is not a teacher, passing faith on by word of mouth, but a mute witness, carrying out an inexplicable command.



Abraham is a witness of the absolute faith that cannot and must not witness before men. He must keep his secret. But his silence is not just any silence. Can one witness in silence? By silence? (p. 73).

This is the challenge that the Habermasian position must offer and is possibly even the ultimate challenge of reason to faith. It is not simply a matter of bringing an alien order under the auspices of a reason that would then determine or compromise its original content, but a question of whether there is any content capable of being articulated in the first place. Can one witness in silence? Can one communicate to others the matter of faith when it cannot be put into words at all? Then how can one even write or talk about faith when the only thing to be said is that nothing can be said about it? This is exactly the same problem identified by Derrida in his examination of the other of reason (madness) in the work of Foucault and Freud, and another instance of the aporia being highlighted by deconstruction and also the context in which negative theology is seen to be operating. As one might expect, Derrida is not prepared to offer a straightforward answer to such a question, but will instead draw out the different and conflicting possibilities.

Derrida moves on to consider a passage from Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*, where the narrator, a lawyer, cites the book of Job. However, the test to which Bartleby is subjected can perhaps more creatively be compared to that of Abraham. Bartleby's response to the test though is to say 'I would prefer not to', not 'Here I am', and within this response the other possibilities begin to emerge. It takes on the responsibility of a response without response.

It evokes the future without either predicting or promising; it utters nothing fixed, determinable, positive, or negative. The modality of this repeated utterance that says nothing, promises nothing, neither refuses or accepts anything, the tense of this singularly insignificant statement reminds one of a nonlanguage or a secret language (p. 75).

This very indeterminacy creates a tension; a provisional reserve is present in this response as if Bartleby were about to announce a proviso but then does not go on to articulate it. 'I would prefer not to, but if I have to then...' Derrida reads this silent proviso back into Abraham's response. Is it not likely that Abraham would have preferred that God did not require of him that he sacrifice his son, let alone that he should not tell anyone else what he was about to do and why? If this is so then there is a moment of hesitation, reserve, or even doubt, even for this knight of faith. Is there a question for Abraham of whether there can be a silent witnessing in this fashion? Sooner or later he would have to give an account, render an explanation of his actions, if only to his family. The order of language and thus of reason would come into play within the singularity of his relationship with at least one other person – his wife. Derrida raises the question of whether this logic of sacrificial responsibility would be affected or displaced should a woman intervene in some consequential manner, but then chooses to leave the question in suspense. He says that the woman's place in both accounts (Abraham and Bartleby) is central, but does not go on to develop this comment. To try to make sense of this would not only involve us in speculation but would probably lead us too far from our argument.

Derrida concludes that it is of the very nature of decisions that they can be neither guided nor controlled by knowledge. If we knew what was the correct course of action,



if there were no doubts on the matter, there would be no decision to be made. The correct action would have been predetermined. So the element of secrecy, that which cannot be made manifest or rendered according to reason, remains a constant in the concept of decision. This does not though remove the paradox from Abraham's particular decision.

Abraham's decision is absolutely responsible because it answers for itself before the absolute other. Paradoxically it is also irresponsible because it is guided neither by reason nor by an ethics justifiable before men or before the law of some universal tribunal. Everything points to the fact that one is unable to be responsible at the same time before the other and before others, before the others of the other (p. 77).

It needs to be made clear that Derrida is not saying that reason and ethics are of no account, that they should not enter into the equation at all. Rather he is showing how reason and faith may be located in relation to one another, according to one particular interpretation. If faith is of the order of singularity, as it does appear to be if God is the wholly other, then reason does seem to be excluded from its domain by virtue of its quest for universality. However, if faith also requires a witness which, although involving a secret and silence, in addition implies some degree of articulation, then it will be brought back into some relationship with reason. The exact nature of this relationship has yet to be identified.

Is God solely to be described as 'wholly other' and how can an answer to this be determined? Furthermore, although the individual response of faith may correctly be described as a singularity, can the subsequent structuring of faith through religious institutions and traditions be contained under the same description? The singularity of the response becomes mediated through language, social interaction and the formation of groups and structures, thus creating the particularity of a religious tradition. This process cannot escape the domain of reason if only because language itself participates in that domain even while striving to go beyond it. Should this be described as the formation of mediated singularities? Then religion in this sense becomes a strange half-way house between the secret of the individual encounter with God (the singularity) and the conventional requirements of reason and morality (the universal). It would be premature at this stage to confine faith exclusively to the sphere of singularity and Derrida himself is aware of the dangers of making such a move.

Our faith is not assured, because faith can never be, it must never be a certainty. We share with Abraham what cannot be shared, a secret we know nothing about, neither him nor us. To share a secret is not to know or reveal the secret, it is to share we know not what: nothing that can be determined. What is a secret that is a secret about nothing and a sharing that doesn't share anything? (p. 80).

Thus Derrida draws out the logic of Kierkegaard's interpretation of Abraham, but key questions remain unanswered, as he suggests. There has to be the possibility that if the wholly other is so completely heterogeneous, the other of reason so different that it cannot be articulated, even inadequately and indirectly, the dynamic unconscious so inaccessible to language, that none of these locations either exist or signify anything within the realm of human experience. A step beyond into what is totally unknown and, by definition,



unknowable, becomes a meaningless idea. The beyond must still have some relationship to the here and now for it to be recognized as the beyond. As already stated, Derrida draws back, correctly, from positing an absolute heterogeneity or difference, and that leaves the question of reason still open for debate.

### **Caputo's 'Kingdom of Singularities'**

One of the temptations inherent in a theological encounter with Derrida's recent work is to read into it a particular agenda. Whilst it is legitimate to utilize certain insights in what becomes a theological argument, it is more questionable to start claiming Derrida himself as an advocate of a specific theological stance. It was seen in the previous chapter that Derrida's interest in negative theology was more a further example of deconstruction in operation than a direct attempt to establish an apophatic theology. Similarly, with his essay on Kierkegaard, Derrida is more intent on describing how the issues raised are consonant with this questioning of reason and ethics than in arguing for a particular theological understanding. However, in a recent work covering much of the scope of Derrida's writing that is of interest to this study, John D. Caputo does appear to appropriate the philosopher in a partisan manner (Caputo 1997). This will now be contrasted with Critchley's interpretation that offers a strictly philosophical position. To put the debate in its starkest terms, Caputo identifies Derrida with a Kierkegaardian stance while Critchley places him in closer proximity to Levinas. The difference is significant as Caputo's argument can lead to a closure or limitation of possibilities while Critchley's leaves options open.

According to Caputo Derrida sides with Kierkegaard and St Paul in being prepared to sacrifice both any concept of ethics, and indeed the word 'ethics' itself, in the response to that which is wholly other. That which can be calculated and made subject to the order of reason must be abandoned under the challenge of obligation and responsibility. This may appear to bear a superficial resemblance to Levinas' approach, but Caputo draws a distinction.

We should emphasize that when Kierkegaard says 'ethics' he means the universal or general which cannot bind me in an unconditional way; when Levinas says 'ethics' he means the unconditional which does not bind me in a general way, although general obligations can be derived from it, or follow along after it (p. 206).

Derrida apparently subscribes, like Kierkegaard, to the notion of an unconditional obligation, one beyond ethics, meaning a responsibility to singularity which forces the individual to transcend or to sacrifice any generalizable obligations to the community. If this is so, then he differs from Levinas who believes that it is possible to make the transition from singularity to justice (universality) without any sacrifice or loss.

Kierkegaard and Derrida, on the other hand, are willing to make the sacrifice of ethics; they think that obligation is an abyss, that any attempt to formulate such a wisdom of love, or of obligation, is caught up in an aporia, scandal and paradox, that our duties clash in irreconcilable conflicts, awash in incommensurability, and that obligation begins to move only when one is paralyzed by the aporia in which one is caught (p. 207).

Whilst one can recognize this in Derrida's text I believe that Caputo is ignoring the difference between Derrida offering an interpretation, one of the possibilities, within



Kierkegaard's writing, and what may constitute Derrida's own position. He is also setting up a distinction between religion and ethics, with Kierkegaard representing the former and Levinas the latter, and then placing Derrida in the Kierkegaard camp. I agree that Derrida draws out of Kierkegaard's text the idea that Abraham holds a secret that he cannot share with others, and that any such sharing would be to participate in the orders of reason and ethics, but what Caputo chooses to omit is Derrida's questioning of whether there can be such a secret, one that cannot be shared. I interpret this as meaning that Derrida deliberately leaves this question open, whereas Caputo prefers to see Derrida foreclosing the options in favour of Kierkegaard. I think that this is to claim too much and to identify Derrida too closely with a specific theological position.

The same problem arises when Caputo goes on to comment on Derrida's thoughts on God as being 'wholly other'. He takes it for granted that Derrida himself is accepting this as an appropriate theological term, whereas I feel it is clear that he is using the language conditionally. In other words, Derrida is saying that if it is the case that God is to be described as 'wholly other', then certain conclusions follow from that, some of which he identifies. That is quite different from Derrida committing himself to that particular description of God or arguing that it is appropriate. I believe that this mistake leads Caputo into an overly dogmatic interpretation of both Derrida and deconstruction. If 'what can be said about Abraham's relation to God can be said about my relation without relation to every other as wholly other' (Derrida 1995a, 78), then:

This religious paradox is really a paradigm, and the knight of faith *extraordinaire* is an exemplar of the ordinary. Deconstruction wants to universalize this exception, to say that we are always already caught up in exceptionality, caught up in a singular secret that we cannot communicate to others. The religious exception, the singularity of the religious situation in which ethical generality is suspended, is always upon us (Caputo *op. cit.*, 208).

However, as the quotation from Derrida makes clear, he is only saying 'if it is the case that', 'if it can be said', not that it is definitely so. One should also be wary of saying that deconstruction wants to 'universalize' anything, as we have already noted Derrida's caveat on employing this as a master term. One should beware of stating that deconstruction is any one thing. Then again, to argue that the religious exception is itself a paradigm example, seems to be contrary to Derrida's intentions. If singularity is taken seriously, there can be no examples as each instance is only itself, not a representative of a more general category. Caputo is in danger of sliding back into the universalizing categories he claims to be avoiding. Derrida's point is surely that it is impossible to avoid this danger and that one should at all times be alive to this rather than assuming, as Caputo appears to do, that one can somehow escape its clutches. Were Derrida to be siding with Kierkegaard, as Caputo suggests, he would be selling out to one side of the equation, that of the other of reason – in this case, faith – as being totally alien and inaccessible, heterogeneous to the orders of reason and ethics. This is precisely what Derrida refuses to do as he intends to keep open the other possibilities of relationship, including another relationship between faith and reason.

Caputo allows the language and his own theological concerns to determine his reading



of Derrida, thus, the Kingdom of God

...becomes a kingdom of joy, a kingdom of pure singularities, without or beyond, above or before the Law... The kingdom is a kingdom of singularities (pp.228–9).

The idea is seductive and one can see how Caputo arrives at it, but it neither does justice to the complexity of Derrida's thought nor tackles the issue of religion as a series of mediated singularities. If we move on to examine Critchley's interpretation of Derrida's relationship to Levinas and thus his views on how deconstruction stands in relation to ethics, we encounter a greater subtlety of argument. In Levinas' *Totality and Infinity* (1969), the claim seems to be that the challenge of the face-to-face relation, the singular other, exceeds and precedes the ontological language of the philosophical tradition. Yet, the ethical relation takes place in and as language – thus a language that can be respectful of the otherness of the other. Derrida's point 'is that Levinas' attempt to find an ethical opening beyond philosophical or ontological language *within* language, cannot succeed *except* by addressing the problem of *closure*' (Critchley1999a, 258). As seen in the previous chapter, this refers to the dynamic where a tradition is perceived to be theoretically exhausted or at its limit, and yet has not been successfully overcome or left behind. Derrida's problem with what Levinas says in *Totality and Infinity* is that his aim of using the totalizing language of the ethical tradition to go beyond that tradition is just an illusion. Levinas, as Foucault and Heidegger before him, is left trying to speak philosophically about that which cannot be spoken of philosophically. At this stage in his work Levinas has not recognized this double bind.

However, in his later work, notably *Otherwise than Being* (1981), Levinas incorporates the lesson of the Derridean problem of closure into his attempted articulation of the ethical, thus responding to Derrida's intervention on the subject. In particular, Levinas introduces the model of the Saying and the Said as a way of explaining how the ethical signifies within ontological language. The Saying is my exposure to the other, my inability to refuse the other's approach, and it is not to be reduced to any specific linguistic content, but is more the act or performance of the face-to-face relation. The Said, by contrast, is precisely the statement, assertion or proposition, that which can be either true or false. The question then becomes that of how my Saying is to be Said in a way that does not betray nor distort this Saying. How can one's exposure to the other as face-to-face resist being lost in or distorted by its articulation in a language that has exhausted its resources? In effect, the issue is that of the possibility of a mediated singularity – mediating through language that which is always beyond language. The proposed answer is that the language of ethics works within an economy of betrayal, where the reduction of the Saying to the Said is inescapable, but, the Saying is always likely to disrupt and disturb the Said nevertheless. The Said will appear inadequate and so will call for another Saying, and so the process continues. Hence:

...the philosopher's effort is to enact a spiralling movement within language, a non-dialectical oscillation between the Saying and the Said. The reduction uses the unavoidable language of the Said, and attempts to unsay the Said by finding the Saying within it; yet, and this is crucially important, this reduction is never pure or complete, the reduced Said retains a residue of the unsaid Said within it (Critchley op.cit., 260).



Obscure as this may sound, it both makes sense of deconstruction as the constant movement of releasing that residue of the unsaid Said within the reduced Said, and offers a way of explaining how that which cannot be articulated remains in relationship to articulation. Thus the problem of singularity is not finally overcome, but takes place in this oscillation between the Saying and the Said. This will have implications for the discourse of faith and will provide a way into the debate about the relationship between faith and reason as both will be acknowledged within the dynamic between Saying, (the singularity of the encounter with the other), and the Said, (the mediation or articulation through language and within the order of reason). The point for the moment is to note that, contrary to Caputo, it can be argued that Derrida stands in close proximity to this position of Levinas, intent, as Critchley says, on affirming this 'Yes-saying to the unnameable' (p.263). In other words, he does not give up on the task of trying to articulate that which lies beyond, even though he recognizes the impossibility of this. Thus he does not share the view of Kierkegaard's Abraham that the secret cannot be shared. The awareness of the limits of language, its entrapment within metaphysics and reason, does not lead Derrida to lapse into silence, but to continue to struggle with what can be said within its confines. If that were not the case, then there would be no role for deconstruction as releasing the other possibilities and as bringing to the surface that which lies hidden. Singularity is not the straightforward other of reason as being inaccessible or impenetrable, but perhaps both challenges and nourishes it from a location yet to be identified. In addition, the structures of human communication of such concern to Habermas remain a vital part of the equation, a way of understanding how the Said operates within a Saying that constantly escapes its domain.



## Chapter 9

### DERRIDA ON REASON AND RELIGION

It was noted in the last chapter that it is tempting, but potentially misleading, to assume that Derrida strays into the subject areas of negative theology and Kierkegaard's treatment of the Abraham and Isaac story with an explicit theological concern. Clearly, these areas are of interest to him, but not in an orthodox theological sense. I will argue in this chapter that Derrida does display an explicit interest in the subject of religion, but only in an idiosyncratic though potentially illuminating manner. It is crucial to keep in view the general tone and direction of Derrida's work. Even though the words and ideas that he uses might change, his own comments on deconstruction as a means of disrupting and destabilizing stable and accepted interpretations provide a key to his project.

In 1994 Derrida was a contributor to a meeting of philosophers that took place on the Isle of Capri to debate the future of religion. I will draw heavily upon the subsequently published text as offering arguably his most significant work in this area to date (chapter 1 in Derrida and Vattimo (eds.) 1998). His starting point is the relationship between religion and technology and the ways in which the former both externally reacts against the abstraction of what he calls 'technoscience' and also internally is complicit with it. Immediately there is a doubling, splitting or disrupting of religion's own self-understanding.

*In this very place, knowledge and faith, technoscience ('capitalist' and fiduciary) and belief, credit, trustworthiness, the act of faith will always have made common cause, bound to one another by the band of their opposition. Whence the aporia – a certain absence of way, path, issue, salvation – and the two sources (p. 2).*

This is taking place in the context of a resurgence of religion globally, and the growing political power of religious fundamentalisms, so the focus is not exclusively Christian. As ever, Derrida is eager to explore the aporia that he believes he has uncovered and to see where it leads. Of the three places or locations he identifies as aporetic, the island, the Promised Land and the desert, it is the latter that motivates his interest – a link back to his writing on negative theology. He also wants to make it clear that he is not writing as an official representative of a specific religious tradition, as a priest or theologian, but neither is he taking the so-called Enlightenment stance that banishes religion from the public domain. What interests Derrida is what a religion 'within the limits of reason alone' – an explicit reference to Kant – would look like today, particularly in the light of the continuing development of democracy. Is there a form of faith that does not depend essentially upon a particular historical revelation and that may have a link with some understanding of reason? Derrida sees this question as opening up a place of both discussion and conflict. Immediately we are once again at the heart of this study and the potential relationship between a universalizing reason and the particularity of



a faith tradition.

*How then to think – within the limits of reason alone – a religion which, without again becoming ‘natural religion’, would today be effectively universal? And which, for that matter, would no longer be restricted to a paradigm that was Christian or even Abrahamic? (p. 14).*

In pursuing this project there are two temptations. The first is to follow the path of an ontotheology in an Hegelian fashion, searching for some form of absolute knowledge as the truth of religion; in other words for a determinate philosophical foundation for what religion claims to be. The second is to pursue a Heideggerian quest for a revealability that precedes or grounds the specific revelations of religious traditions, a discourse on the conditions within which faith can and does arise. The second of these may now appear to be the more attractive option as it searches for a deep structure of religious experience that is independent of particular revelations and is thus consistent with Kant’s original intention.

Derrida though is determined to press beyond both of these possible paths, not in order to leave them permanently behind, but in order to gain a perspective upon them from that ‘step beyond’. This requires moving out into that desert place from which one may view the connections between the particular religious traditions and the philosophical issues just raised. As with other subject areas where deconstruction plays a role, there is the permanent ambiguity of closure – the attempt to articulate that which remains inaccessible to articulation using language that has reached its limits but that has yet to be surpassed or overcome. Hence the inevitable doubling or splitting of the terminology available to us. The two tracks or sources that open up in this context Derrida names the ‘messianic’ and the ‘*chora*’, and it is these that he goes on to examine. Both themes have occurred elsewhere in Derrida’s works, the first in *Specters of Marx* (1994) and the second in a chapter of *On the Name* (1995b). We turn first to the notion of the messianic, or messianicity without messianism.

*This would be the opening to the future or to the coming of the other as the advent of justice, but without horizon of expectation and without prophetic prefiguration. The coming of the other can only emerge as a singular event when no anticipation sees it coming, when the other and death – and radical evil – can come as a surprise at any moment (Derrida and Vattimo (eds.) 1998, 17).*

This is a form of deep structure, a structural condition or possibility within human history where that which is other breaks in, impinges, disrupts and challenges. Although this sounds like the world-disclosing or revolutionary moment of collective revelation, it can also mean the individual experience of encountering the other in the sense of the ethical demand described by Levinas. Derrida employs the characteristically enigmatic turn of phrase that will repay deeper consideration.

*Interrupting or tearing history itself apart, doing it by deciding, in a decision that can consist in letting the other come and that can take the apparently passive form of the other’s decision: even there where it appears in itself, in me, the decision is moreover always that of the other, which does not exonerate me of responsibility (p. 17).*

A number of crucial issues emerge from this. Is Derrida positing a location that is



pre-linguistic or, as Dews describes it, pre-ontological? (1995, 11). Is this an other of reason that cannot be articulated and that challenges Habermas' claims to be able to put everything into language? Is the use of the prefix 'pre' illuminating or obscuring here, perhaps suggesting a place that precedes or is more originary than that of articulation? If the messianic is what is to come, even though it is conditioned by a structure that enables it to happen, is there not a future dimension to this that would challenge the notion that it comes before or precedes? All of this is difficult enough, but there is also the key issue of autonomy. What Derrida is describing is a moment that is not one of individual choice or decision, but the encounter with the other (the other's decision in me), that cannot be interpreted in those terms. Abraham's response to God in the singularity of the moment is perhaps also of this order. One knows what has to be done and only subsequently do the familiar orders of either reason or faith come into play. Of course, there is no way of articulating or explaining such moments, yet we are doomed to make the attempt to do just that. It is the moment of recognition, of realization, that point of contact with another person after which life will never be the same again, or when things suddenly fall into place and make sense. The 'penny drops' (Ramsey 1957, 19 and *passim*). These moments arrive unannounced and take place without or before conscious decision on my part and yet I then have the responsibility for what happens subsequently. That we know that these things can and do happen – like falling in love – shows that the messianic is a structural element of human experience, even though the specific content will vary from context to context. Such an understanding, if it should prove to be of some validity, would also be a challenge to Habermas' notion of the self-transparent autonomous subject so crucial to his views on democracy. Is Derrida pointing to a limit on reflexivity, or does this idea totally undermine the suggestion that each individual is capable of interpreting and then shaping their own life in a deliberate and conscious fashion? These questions will return at the conclusion of the study.

Continuing the theme of the messianic, Derrida links this clearly to a desire for justice, as this will carry the expectation that it too will one day break through into the existing order. Yet because it is 'of the future' and therefore not susceptible of being determined in advance, there is also a connection with the idea of faith.

*This abstract messianicity belongs from the very beginning to the experience of faith, of believing, of a credit that is irreducible to knowledge and of a trust that 'founds' all relation to the other in testimony. This justice, which I distinguish from right, alone allows the hope, beyond all 'messianisms' of a universalizable culture of singularities; a culture in which the abstract possibility of the impossible translation could nevertheless be announced. This justice inscribes itself in advance in the promise, in the act of faith or in the appeal to faith that inhabits every act of language and every address to the other (Derrida and Vattimo (eds.) 1998, 18).*

Once again Derrida packs into a few sentences a whole range of critical concerns. The idea of a universalizable culture of singularities seems like a contradiction in terms, and yet, when placed in the context of a hope for the future that is not to be identified with any one religious tradition, it is extremely thought-provoking. That there could even be such an impossible expectation is a challenge to the understanding that it is impossible to articulate any content for what is to come. It is not specific content though that emerges as



the source of this hope, but that there is a structure or a condition for hope embedded in language itself, in the act of promising, the faith that must underlie each such performance that the promise will be kept, and that all of this occurs in each encounter with another person. There are surely connections here with Habermas' notion of communicative reason, itself relying on the ideas of trustworthiness and truth within the intersubjective encounter. To employ language at all is to operate on the assumption that such validity claims can be redeemed and, as both Habermas and Apel suggest, to act otherwise is to be engaged in a 'performative contradiction'. There is also again the clear link with Levinas and the ethical dimension of the encounter with the other. So with the idea of a universalizable culture of singularities Derrida seems to be spanning the divide between reason as universal and faith as particular by tracing both back to an inheritance or origin in singularity. He goes on to say that:

*The universalizable culture of this faith...alone permits a 'rational' and universal discourse on the subject of 'religion' (p. 18).*

It would seem that Derrida is giving some support to the idea offered earlier in this thesis that Habermas' concept of communicative reason does have a positive role to play in the relationship between reason and faith. For Derrida this refers to a '*faith without dogma*' (p. 18), the understanding that the performative event underlying any tradition or institution cannot belong to the set that it founds or justifies, so there must be an implicit appeal to an event beyond, a transcendental moment such as Habermas sees in the employment of language or that religion identifies in the moment of revelation. The content of this will vary, as has been stated, but there will be something like this at work at this pre-autonomous location: '*the decision of the other in the undecidable*' (p. 18). This also applies, according to Derrida, to the spheres of science and technology where there will have to be a basic trust, a faith in the processes at work, if both are to operate effectively. So there is indeed a type of universal rationality visible beneath the hope for justice, the general structure of the messianic, and wherever both religions and technoscience are found. But, if there were only this, then Derrida would be following without remainder the Heideggerian temptation enumerated earlier, and this would be to ignore the other track or path that he believes needs to be followed.

This second way or name for what it is Derrida is attempting to identify is '*chora*', a term originally derived from Plato.

*From the open interior of a corpus, of a system, of a language or a culture, chora would situate the abstract spacing, place itself, the place of absolute exteriority, but also the place of bifurcation between two approaches to the desert (p. 19).*

The difference between *chora* and the messianic is that the latter can still be related to the order of reason as we have just seen, whereas *chora* is so other, so heterogeneous, that it cannot be formulated in any familiar philosophical or theological terminology. It cannot be related in any way at all to the content of specific traditions in the way that the messianic can at least have an identifiable link with particular messianisms.

*Chora is nothing (no being, nothing present), but not the Nothing which in the anxiety of Dasein would still open the question of being. This Greek noun says in our memory that which is not reappropriable, even by our memory, even by our 'Greek' memory; it says the immemoriality of a desert in the desert of which it is neither a threshold nor a mourning (p. 21).*



At this point, or in the face of this level of impossibility, the only way to respect the infinite alterity of this singularity is by silence. Religion here becomes '*reticence, distance, dissociation, disjunction*' (p. 22). Presumably then there can be no connection at all between reason and faith in this path or understanding. The two are so alien, so heterogeneous as not to even recognize one another, not even the other as other. This (im)possibility remains on the table just as does the (im)possibility of the pre-linguistic structure of the messianic where faith and reason may discover a common source. Even here then Derrida's deconstruction, doubling or splitting of options, does not provide straightforward or unequivocal support for a particular answer to the question of the relationship between reason and faith, and the questions posed to a Habermasian solution remain as vital as before.

In a substantial post-scriptum to this initial exposition Derrida goes more deeply still into the issue of the nature of religion. Part of the problem is that it is not easy to extricate religion as such from all the other strands of human life with which it is commonly entangled. So, for instance, politics, ethics, economics and the judicial all remain related to religion in ways that are often obscured from view. This is more complex than just identifying a particular conflict as being 'a war of religion', as it refers to those deeper structures of experience that Derrida is eager to draw out. In part this is to do with the very word 'religion', its possible derivations and meanings, but it is also related to the themes of faith and trust, and the awareness of a dimension that we feel the need to call sacred, holy or set apart. The task that Derrida sets himself is to try to think through this complex of connections and relationships without falling into the trap of allowing any one term in the discussion – either reason or religion – to become dominant or determining. This is certainly to avoid the Enlightenment view that the two must be irrevocably separated and that reason is the only strand to be taken seriously. Rather, what will be revealed is that religion and reason share a common source.

Beyond this opposition and its determinate heritage (no less represented on the other side, that of religious authority), perhaps we might be able to try to 'understand' how the imperturbable and interminable development of critical and technoscientific reason, far from opposing religion, bears, supports and supposes it. It would be necessary to demonstrate, which would not be simple, that religion and reason have the same source (p. 28).

Derrida is referring here to reason as philosophy and science as technoscience, the production of knowledge geared towards specific practical goals and the performance of particular tasks. What leads Derrida then to suggest that reason and religion develop in tandem is that both draw on the common resource of responding to that which is encountered before the technical questions come into play. So once again we are in the realm of an order that is pre-autonomous, the response to the other that is the trigger for subsequent action. Yet, this common source goes unrecognized and immediately leads to an opposition, a splitting which is the familiar characteristic of the ensuing relationship.

As for the *response*, it is *either or*. *Either* it addresses the absolute other as such, with an address that is understood, heard, respected faithfully and responsibly; or it retorts, retaliates, compensates and *indemnifies itself* in the war of resentment and of reactivity. One of the two responses ought always



to be able to contaminate the other. It will never be proven whether it is the one or the other, never in an act of determining, theoretical or cognitive judgement. This might be the place and the responsibility of what is called belief, trustworthiness or fidelity (pp. 28–9).

I take Derrida to be saying that there is a structure of human operation, that of the pre-autonomous response to the other that predetermines the subsequent paths pursued by religion and reason and that, in the subsequent pursuit, the co-implication of the one with the other is either denied or repressed. Each becomes an other for the other in the sense of opposition or hostility. To expect either side to acknowledge that they share a common source is to ask too much as they in fact feed off their supposed opposition. It is this splitting or dualism that then determines their relationship. To admit that they share a common heritage would be for both religion and reason to risk losing a clear and separate identity, even so their deeper relatedness continues to operate at a largely unseen level. Perhaps it can only ever be this way.

Then, as one would expect with Derrida, there is not simply one strand in religion itself, but a further splitting that needs to be identified. On the one hand is the experience of sacredness or holiness, that which remains unscathed and beyond the influence of other areas of human activity. On the other is the experience of belief, the trustworthiness presupposed in any act of faith, the blind confidence that things are as they are believed and stated to be.

These two veins (or two strata or two sources) of the religious should be distinguished from one another. They can doubtless be associated with each other and certain of their possible co-implications analyzed, but they should never be confused or reduced to one another as is almost always done. In principle it is possible to sanctify, to sacralize the unscathed or to maintain oneself *in the presence* of the sacrosanct in various ways without bringing into play an act of belief, if at least belief, faith or fidelity signifies here ‘acquiescing to the testimony of the other’ – of the *utterly other* who is inaccessible in its absolute source (p. 33).

The point is that the act of ‘acquiescing to the testimony of the other’ does not have to involve the sacred at all. It is – like the messianic – a structure that operates across a range of human activities and experience. It is to be found in the realm of science and technoscience just as much as it is in the realm of religion. So much always has to be ‘taken on trust’, or accepted as given, even if only for the time being. If one had to rely in every single instance on the singularity of one’s own personal experience or encounter before believing anything and then taking action, there would be permanent paralysis. The question is not ‘Will I trust?’, but ‘Whom will I trust?’ Though religion may speak of trust mainly if not exclusively as trust in an absolute and inaccessible other, the general structure of trust is equally familiar from other areas of activity. Derrida’s concern, once again, is that of autonomy, if that is taken to mean only trusting one’s own judgement or obeying one’s own law. If one necessarily has to ‘acquiesce to the testimony of the other’ – be it the ‘expert’, the scientist or even the parent – in order to function most of the time, then what is left of autonomy? Is this really an appropriate way of describing how humans function, at least in the vast majority of cases? In which case the supposed opposition between reason and faith on the basis that the former upholds autonomy while the latter



denies it, is really a misunderstanding or misrepresentation. Once again one is taken back to that deeper structure of human experience, the initial encounter with the other that precedes and undergirds action and responsibility, as a key to understanding the relationship between reason and faith.

It is worth setting out in greater detail the senses in which reason can be interpreted as 'an acquiescence to the testimony of the other'. It is more difficult to accept this in the case of reason than of faith as the latter can readily be understood as a response to the singularity of the call or command of the wholly other, as in the story of Abraham and Isaac, or as a decision to accept the authority of an external religious tradition. Enlightenment reason would tend to view both as an undermining of autonomy, the surrendering of individual judgement to a power in conflict with reason itself. Yet, if it can be seen that reason also operates according to the same structure, then the differences between them may be less than the Enlightenment has tended to suggest. One can identify at least four related ways in which reason might entail 'acquiescing to the testimony of the other'. First, it could be an acceptance that reason is the best way of dealing with things, of analyzing, interpreting and then making decisions. But then this acceptance will not itself be based upon reason, but upon a deeper commitment that is a response to an other, perhaps to the Enlightenment tradition or to a belief in the value of rationality. Second, it might be a matter of accepting that a particular understanding of reason is preferable to the alternatives. We learn from Kant, Weber and Habermas, let alone from Derrida that reason is not a unified concept, but that one can identify different kinds of reason. On what basis does one choose to follow one rather than another? Presumably not on the basis of reason, for that would either beg the question or be a circular argument. Third, it could mean that one agreed that the methods of analyzing, weighing-up, calculating and measuring provide the best methods of making decisions, practical, moral or political. This may be a reductionist form of reason, but it is probably now the most familiar and often employed aspect of it, and it is based on assumptions about calculability that reflect an ontological commitment rather than an argument from reason. In other words, one believes that life is such that it can be dealt with in this way; that it is susceptible to calculation. It is important to note that Derrida highlights the fact that contemporary religion also engages in calculation and succumbs to the order of the measurable, particularly when it is concerned with its own power and influence. Finally, reason might entail the belief that objectifying, referring to everything as if it were an external reality, is the correct way of understanding the world, but again this would appear to be an ontological commitment, a belief about the way things are, not a direct consequence of the operation of reason.

Each of these four possibilities is in fact an instance of 'acquiescing to the testimony of the other', the acceptance of a way of looking at oneself or the world that does not derive directly from what is normally portrayed as autonomous judgement. To accept any form of reason is to agree to a principle which is other to the individual person, unless one is to equate reason with a natural or innate human capacity, now an increasingly questionable stance. What now tend to be equated with natural or innate capacities are the drives, emotions, instincts or views of the unconscious that are variously interpreted as the other of reason, as was seen in an earlier chapter. It is against these and in opposition to them



that reason is employed in countering the excesses and dangers of 'acquiescing to the other' of the body or the unconscious. Similarly faith and religion are located in the camp of the other of reason in the belief that the task of reason is to tame and control them and to neutralize their public influence. What emerges from this is that the dualism between faith and reason can itself be deconstructed, that both terms of the polarity always already contain key elements characteristically identified with its opposite. Faith in the form of institutional religion inhabits the order of calculability, just as reason inhabits the order of ontological commitment normally associated with religion. This is not to discredit nor to destroy either, but to reveal their hidden shared assumptions.

As has already been suggested, this debate refers crucially to the idea that there is a moment or location beneath both reason and faith that is not of the order of autonomy and that is difficult to describe in conventional philosophical terminology. Derrida is eager to attempt this task though, and does so in a further encounter with the thought of Levinas (Derrida 1999). The word 'hospitality' is seen to provide an initial key to this attempted explanation, referring, as it does, to the two other ideas of attention and welcome. Each includes the familiar Levinasian theme of responding to the face of the other person. It is impossible though to place a chronology on this process, to say that a specific aspect of the encounter precedes an other, as there is an infinity here, that which lies beyond the realm of calculation. Which comes first, the welcome or the response? It is not possible to determine this. What is clear is that this is a moment of affirmation, of saying 'Yes' to the opening of a relationship that then leads to reaction and response. The other person is already co-implicated in this process, so to that extent it is *not* a matter of autonomy so much as the decision of the other in me. Derrida suggests that it is because it is this way in human encounter that a decision of any sort is possible. If there were a pure autonomy – a decision that were wholly and exclusively 'mine' – then no decision would ever be required. For there to be freedom and choice there must always be the other possibilities and options that can only arise from the presence of another person. So it will not be possible to say which comes first, the affirmation and response of both parties is essential to the encounter of welcome and the response of hospitality.

It is as if the welcome, just as much as the face, just as much as the vocabulary that is co-extensive and thus profoundly synonomous with it, were a first language, a set made up of quasi-primitive – and quasi-transcendental – words. We must first think the possibility of the welcome in order to think the face and everything that opens up or is displaced with it: ethics, metaphysics or first philosophy, in the sense that Levinas gives to those words (Derrida 1999, 25).

In the encounter it is then the receiving on both sides that is brought to our attention, a receiving that goes beyond the capacity of either individual to give or to respond. The importance of this is that reason can itself be interpreted as precisely this hospitable receptivity.

Reason itself is a *receiving*. Another way of saying it, if one still wishes to speak within the law of the tradition, though against it, against its inherited oppositions, is that reason *is* sensibility. Reason itself is a welcome inasmuch as it welcomes the idea of infinity – and the welcome is rational (p. 26).

The opening up or welcome of the one to the other in a way that transcends what



is already there in either, the 'acquiescence to the testimony of the other', is a way of grasping what reason is. This is pre-autonomous, or perhaps better expressed, not of the order of autonomy nor of heteronomy, and without it there would be no learning, no encounter that enables both parties to move beyond their respective current positions. For there to be something new as a result of establishing a relationship, something that was not already there, the idea of an infinity becomes central. Derrida emphasizes this by offering his own version of a quotation from Levinas.

To approach the Other in discourse is to *welcome* [my emphasis] his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore to *receive* [Levinas' emphasis] from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity. *But* this also means: to be taught. The relation with the Other, or Discourse, is a non-allergic relation, an ethical relation, *but* inasmuch as it is *welcomed* [my emphasis again], this discourse is a teaching (p. 27).

So reason is that which is in a position to receive. It is the capacity to receive, to be open to the infinity of the other. Reason is the law of hospitality. As such it is certainly not about self-conscious control or the exercise of an abstract autonomy. In which case it once again has a link with religion in the sense that one derivation of the term refers to the collecting and binding that are part of a welcoming and receiving of the other. None of this is something one chooses or determines but is of the singularity of the encounter with the other that Levinas sees as at the heart of ethics: that which precedes all articulation and formulation.

This might appear to be a long way from Habermas' concept of communicative reason, but there may be deeper connections. What both Derrida and Levinas are pointing towards here is after all intersubjective in nature, something taking place within human relationships and definitely not some abstract principle of calculation. For Habermas the difficulties would arise over the issues of language and autonomy. Both self-transparency and deliberate reflexivity would appear to be challenged by Derrida's description of reason, unless what he is talking about is a deeper structure that underlies the processes of communication. Perhaps the Habermasian criteria of effective communication – truth, truthfulness, comprehensibility and normative appropriateness – indeed presuppose the openness, receptivity and welcome to and of the other that Derrida and Levinas draw to our attention. If Habermas is concerned with trust in human communication then trust can be seen as just that openness to an other that is Derrida's concern. Beyond this there is another possible link over the issue of justice and the collective dimension as suggested by Critchley elsewhere (1999a, 231–2), as Derrida goes on to talk about 'the third', that which is not just of the order of the two singularities engaged in a direct encounter.

It may be recalled that Critchley has suggested that if the Habermasian emphasis upon intersubjectivity needs to be supplemented or counterbalanced by Derrida's notion of singularity, then the latter's concern for the primacy of the individual encounter itself requires supplementing by a Habermasian concern for justice and the law. In the notion of 'the third' Derrida, once again drawing upon Levinas, does turn his attention to these issues. The arrival of the third person is, as the singularity of the encounter with the single other, both unannounced and not of the order of autonomy. Introducing a third person



into the equation, a person before whom the dealings of one with a single other take on a different perspective and become more open to a detached judgement, represents the entry of justice into the picture. Justice is the presence of the third, and the opening of a dimension of greater intersubjectivity into the process. Direct relationship and accountability are immediately replaced by issues of comparison, systems and rules and all the ways of dealing with one another that cannot be confined to a singular encounter. All of this is both unavoidable and necessary. This dimension of human activity is not an added extra, nor is it derived from the face-to-face encounter, for it is co-originary with it. It is the questioning of the ways that we deal with one another, but from a different and equally valid perspective.

The question, but also, as a result, justice, philosophical intelligibility, knowledge, and even, announcing itself gradually from one person to the next, from neighbor to neighbor, the figure of the State. For, as we will hear, all this *is necessary* (Derrida 1999a, 31).

With the birth of this question begins the passage from ethical responsibility – the realm of the singular encounter – to juridical, political and philosophical responsibility. Presumably Habermas would want to add moral responsibility to this list as it too – in his eyes – participates in the more than singular, the universal dimension of human thought. Once one enters this domain other questions immediately come to the surface, notably those involving measurement and calculation, and this is where thinkers such as Kierkegaard and possibly even Levinas locate the compromise and the betrayal of ethics. Converting the particular into the general always risks losing sight of the unique requirements of a specific situation. Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, for instance, could never be justified by the criteria of a universal system of morality.

Derrida is clear though that the introduction of the third, the entry of justice into the equation, is necessary, even though it represents a betrayal and a compromise.

...if the face to face with the unique engages the infinite ethics of my responsibility for the other in a sort of *oath before the letter*, an unconditional respect or fidelity, then the ineluctable emergence of the third, and, with it, of justice, would signal an initial perjury... Silent, passive, painful, but inevitable, such perjury is not accidental and secondary, but is as originary as the experience of the face. Justice would begin with this perjury (p. 33).

The danger of such a description, it seems to me, is that it appears to set up such an unrealizable ideal of the purity of the single encounter that any encounter which is not of this order – and that will surely be the vast majority of encounters – is automatically seen as second-class, as devalued and less worthy of attention. The reality of human interaction is that it very rarely aspires to such an ideal, even though that ideal might provide a legitimate criterion or horizon towards which one should be aiming. In the meantime, in the interim before this ideal is reached – if it ever is – humans have to find ways of ordering their relationships and interactions in a collective and systematic manner. Hence the development of rules, regulations, institutions and traditions, none of which can remain true to or ever fully encapsulate the ideals of the singular encounter. What needs to be acknowledged is that both domains are essential and that attention given to the one should not be at the expense of the other. So it is tempting to conclude that Habermas



focuses upon the areas of collective activity, the domains of law, justice, morality and democracy, whilst Derrida and Levinas focus upon the nature of the singular encounter, that which escapes and eludes both articulation and formalization. Yet that would be too simplistic as both Habermas and Derrida are aware of the other side of the equation and do attempt to cater for this within their work. The domains cannot be separated, as both philosophers realize, for what they have in common is a concern to understand what it is to be a human being, and it is here that the similarities and the differences become most acute. At least Derrida does acknowledge that the more than singular dimension represented by law and justice is an essential part of the equation and he does suggest that there is a common root or structure that underlies both the singular and the universal.

These infinite complications do not change anything about the general structure from which they are, in truth, derived: discourse, justice, ethical uprightness have to do first of all with *welcoming*. The welcome is always a welcome reserved for the face (p. 35).

It is difficult to know whether Derrida and Levinas feel that the domains of politics, law and ethics are any more than a necessary evil, given that they see in them an economy of betrayal, the compromise of the Saying through the operation of the Said. The notions of welcome and hospitality do perhaps offer a more positive perspective on these areas whilst still retaining a degree of idealism. The main point of connection with a Habermasian approach is over the issue of autonomy and whether or not Derrida and Levinas undermine this notion altogether or supplement it with their suggestions about the primacy of the face-to-face encounter. If hospitality is infinite, as Levinas suggests, can it play any part in our normal understanding of politics, or does it place the encounter in such an alien order or location that the two must remain forever separate? As was seen in the previous chapter, Derrida does not intend to go that far. He is more inclined to say that hospitality can give rise to a politics, law or justice that we can still name as such, even though our concepts fail to capture what it is we strive to express. This is not to resolve the tensions involved in this articulation, but to hold onto them as an essential part of our own self-understanding.

Because intentionality is hospitality, it resists thematization. An act without activity, reason as receptivity, a sensible *and* rational experience of *receiving*, a gesture of welcoming, a welcome offered to the other as stranger, hospitality opens as intentionality, but it cannot become an object, thing, or theme. Thematization, on the contrary, already presupposes hospitality, welcoming, intentionality, the face. The closing of the door, inhospitality, war and allergy already imply, as their possibility, a hospitality offered or received: an original or, more precisely, pre-originary declaration of peace (p. 48).

What is being suggested here then is that the encounter is pre-originary, it does precede or take place before the structured possibilities of human relating can come into being. Whether one is talking about peace or hostility, or even autonomy or heteronomy, there must already have been the welcome and reception encapsulated in the notion of hospitality. We are essentially hospitable beings, already open to receive or to reject the encounter with the other.

For hospitality is not simply some region of ethics, let alone...the name of



a problem in law or politics, it is ethicity itself, the whole and the principle of ethics (p. 50).

What we are, as humans, is inscribed within this notion of hospitality: so without this there would presumably be no issues of human communication and no Habermasian communicative reason could come into play. Hospitality is not a restriction of freedom or a limitation on autonomy but rather the basis upon which there can be either freedom or autonomy. One is always already a hostage in the sense of being given over to the approach of the other, and one is always already a host in the sense of being open to receive the approach of the other.

This being-‘hostage’ of the subject surely is not, any more than its being-‘host’, some late attribute or accident that would supervene upon it. Like the being-host, the being-hostage is the subjectivity of the subject as ‘responsibility for the Other’ (p. 55).

Reminding ourselves that this is still Derrida on Levinas and not necessarily Derrida expounding his own views, it does appear that there is a close proximity between the two and that Derrida is accepting that hospitality as described is constitutive of human subjectivity. ‘Acquiescing to the testimony of the other’ can also be related to this notion and so here perhaps is another way of articulating that common source of the particular and the universal, the singularity of the encounter with the other and the structured generality of ethics, justice and politics. In this case there is also common ground for faith and reason, another relationship between them that avoids the two extremes of complete heterogeneity or of a compromise and betrayal of homogeneity.



## Chapter 10

### DECONSTRUCTING REASON: RECONSTRUCTING FAITH

#### **Introduction**

The question of the nature of the relationship between faith and reason has been a constant in Christian theology. The objective of this thesis is to show ways in which two contemporary reformulations from within philosophy throw a creative light on this issue. The conclusion will both draw together the threads of the argument so far and expand upon certain key areas. Consequently the conclusion will contain the following sections: a summary of the current state of the overall debate; a final evaluation of Habermas' work on communicative reason and discourse ethics as they impinge upon the theological concern; suggestions as to how particular ideas derived from Derrida can be used to supplement Habermas' perspectives in ways of interest to theology and a final section describing the resulting options for ways of understanding the reason-faith relationship and the questions that arise from this. As with any piece of research the ground to be gained itself becomes the basis for further exploration and it will be argued that the juxtaposition of ideas from Habermas and Derrida now appearing on the horizon in philosophy does not provide neat answers to theology's own questions but rather deepens the debate in a challenging and creative way.

#### **Faith and reason in context**

It was seen in the early stages of the thesis, both from the work of Tillich and the historical survey of the subject area starting from Kant that, whatever the particular solution proposed, the relationship between faith and reason has posed a central question to theological self-understanding. In a sense this question has become equated to that of the nature of the relationship between theology and philosophy, but that merely reflects the extent to which these two disciplines have moved apart since the Enlightenment. According to a widely accepted view it was the latter that proved to be the watershed in the relationship. However, it is arguable that this is an oversimplistic interpretation of a complex intellectual movement, and itself the product of a theological perspective that wishes to argue for a clear and definitive disjunction between faith and reason. The straightforward account of the Enlightenment as the triumph of rational autonomous thought at the expense of tradition, with religion increasingly equated with superstition or myth, ignores the extent to which key thinkers such as Kant remained engaged with serious theological questions and presupposed a continuing relationship between faith and reason. It was not so much that the links between the two were irrevocably severed, as that the balance of power in the definition of the links shifted away from theology, and the



subsequent location that theology found itself in became increasingly uncomfortable for committed Christians. Thus the trite account that sees the Enlightenment as the end of the relationship requires critical questioning. Similarly, the recent interpretation of what is called Post-Modernity, seen to be the undermining of the Enlightenment understanding of reason and thus heralding the dawn of a new golden era for faith needs to be treated with considerable scepticism. Neither account gives credit to the extent to which the key intellectual figures from Kant, through Kierkegaard and down to Derrida, struggle to redefine the relationship between faith and reason, but never abandon the area as of no further concern. If there were not an always-already existing relationship why continue to be troubled with the task of describing it, even if the conclusion should be that the two are finally heterogeneous? One could see the relationship as the long-running and unresolved love affair at the heart of Western culture, its current state at any one period determining other areas of human self-understanding, among them ethics and politics.

I shall rehearse the areas of tension in the relationship that have come to the fore as a result of developments in both philosophy and theology over the last two hundred years. Much still derives from Kant's original reformulations and his attempt to see if there could be a religion within the limits of mere reason. On the assumption that reason deals with matters of universal validity, it is the particularity of Christianity, its dependence on specific historical events and basis within a certain context and culture, that provide a cause for scandal. Kant's objective was not to undermine Christianity, but to place it on a sounder intellectual footing. By describing reason in the various facets of its operation, Kant demarcates the areas appropriately susceptible to speculative thought, and indeed their limits. Constructing on the basis of these what a structure of religion would have to look like to claim a universal validity, Kant conveniently arrives at a particular version of Christianity as matching that description. This is not a matter of proving anything by the power of human argument, for example the existence of God; for this would be to misunderstand what philosophy can offer to theology: rather it is a matter of locating a theology that can claim universal validity despite its connection with particularities.

By engaging in this intellectual task, Kant effectively defined the state of the relationship between faith and reason up to the present moment. Even Derrida now explicitly acknowledges that he is engaged in a contemporary version of the Kantian task. His notion of the messianic is an attempt to identify a structure recognizable from within a number of different religions and yet not dependent on any of them. This will be one of the crucial points of debate later in the conclusion.

Whether or not one sympathizes with Kant's project, it is impossible to ignore its implications for the debate. Critical questions are raised for theology. First, can Christians recognize themselves in this form of the faith that Kant has devised? Is a Christianity shorn in this way of its links to the particularities of the life of Jesus Christ, the collective witness of the Gospel texts, the circumstances of that period of Judaism and the life of the early church, let alone the very concept of revelation, still recognizable as such? As these questions were worked through by subsequent thinkers, so the answers were increasingly negative. Thus it seemed as though a reason set free from theological presuppositions and acting as an independent arbiter on matters of faith was bound to undermine the real bases for belief. Reason was now determining both the form and content of acceptable



belief and in danger of producing a version of Christianity that was abstract and detached from life experience. If this was the only way that belief could be made 'reasonable', then maybe it would be better to accept that Christianity was not reasonable at all. It needs to be repeated that this was *not* Kant's intention, but it becomes all too easy to see how this is the way the arguments developed.

So the second concern that theology was bound to have with Kant's reformulation was whether Christianity should have any contact with reason at all. Reason was no longer a handmaid of faith, helping it to clarify and systematize its beliefs through ethics and doctrine, but now the master of faith, determining what was acceptable according to its own external criteria. The subsequent episodes in the now fraught relationship as described earlier in this thesis through glances at the work of Schleiermacher, Harnack, Ritschl, Barth, Pannenberg and so on, are struggles to play out various aspects of the Kantian problematic. For instance, how can historical study be allowed to contribute to theology if it is determined by the (by now) alien criterion of reason? How much can and should be based on a search for the historical Jesus? Is there an essence of the Christian faith that can be clearly differentiated from its surrounding culture as dominated by reason? If revelation is the determining criterion for Christian truth and belief then how can one justify making this subject to a criterion derived from an opposed and hostile tradition (reason)? What happens is that faith and reason are seen to represent two heterogeneous and alien orders and thus to be forever engaged in a power struggle.

One has noted that Tillich begins his *Systematic Theology* by attempting to redefine the relationship between reason and revelation, correctly recognizing that this is one of the major pressure points in the debate and that unless he can clarify the precise nature of the relationship then very few people are likely to accept his use of reason – in whatever form – within the theological task. For Barth in his vehement critique of the prevailing orthodoxy of liberal protestantism, the implications of Christianity compromising itself by allowing itself to be made subject to an alien tradition were all too clear: Christianity had sold its soul and had to be called back to account by the Word of God. The self-inflicted judgement of human conflict represented by the First World War was itself paralleled by the judgement on a Christianity that had lost its way and become too engrossed in its surrounding culture. Confrontation, conflict and prophecy were the true nature of the Christian vocation in such troubled times and *not* the mediation, democratic debate and reasonable negotiations of the intellectual and cultured classes.

Thus had the battle lines between faith and reason become drawn since Kant's first attempt to identify a religion within the limits of mere reason. A number of points need to be registered. First, there is the largely unquestioned identification of reason with that which is universal and of faith with that which is particular. I will suggest later that this can be deconstructed. Second is the deepening hostility and conflict between what are now seen as opposing orders, that of reason and that of faith, with faith being identified with all those other areas that are also not 'of reason'. Thus any creative relationship between the two is interpreted as making one subject to the other and is portrayed as a power struggle. Third there is the way in which theologians continue to try to justify their discipline in relation to some concept of reason, even though they may claim to be ignoring it altogether. Fourth, the division that emerges within theology and also perhaps



the philosophy of religion, between form and content and raises the question for those who belong to a faith tradition of whether this is a valid or helpful distinction. Fifth there are the deeper implications of polarizing faith and reason as each the other's other and the ways in which faith then so easily becomes equated with all the other 'others of reason' – the irrational; the subjective; the affective or emotional dimension of human subjectivity; the unconscious; the private as opposed to the public; the inarticulable as opposed to the communicable and so on. In other words, faith is excluded from, or by definition excludes itself from, all areas determined by the order of reason (the universal), for instance, politics; morality; economics; science; education and academia generally. Hence my earlier comment on how the current understanding of the nature of the relationship between faith and reason influences so many other key areas of human self-understanding. The implications of the apparent break-up between faith and reason continue to reverberate through Western culture.

This is the setting within which some of the recent ideas of Habermas on reason and Derrida on faith have a contribution to make. It is worth offering a lengthy quotation from the introduction to a book based on a conference bringing together Derrida and the French theologian Jean-Luc Marion as substantiating precisely where this tranche of ideas fits into the debate:

Let us suppose that the inaugural and constituting act of modernity in the seventeenth century was an act of exclusion or bracketing; that the modern epoch turns on an *epoche*, a methodological imperative, in which modernity made up its mind to abide by human reason alone. In the *via moderna*, the rule will be that we are to make our way along a way (*meta-odos*) illuminated by the light of reason alone, of what *was called* reason in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. If that is so, then one way to think of the effect we were trying to provoke in this conference is to imagine its participants as engaged in the common pursuit of pushing past the constraints of this old, methodologically constricted, less enlightened, strait and narrow Enlightenment, which found it necessary to cast 'reason' and 'religion' in mortal opposition (Caputo and Scanlon (eds.) 1999, 2).

In other words, instead of accepting the existing definition of the relationship between faith and reason, the attempt must now be made to look at both terms in the debate to see whether the problem can be re-cast. This could be described as a new or further Enlightenment, one within which religion is not simply excluded, but finds its own authentic voice – not a voice filtered out or drowned by 'reason'. It is the contention of this thesis that a juxtaposition of key ideas from Habermas and Derrida is crucial to this project. We turn initially once again then to an evaluation of Habermas' work on reason.

### **Habermas' reformulation of reason**

As has been shown in this thesis, Habermas is probably the major contemporary exponent of a reformulated Enlightenment project, the original one having become seriously derailed for reasons that he has been at pains to explain.

Although starting his intellectual exploration from within the specialized and Marxist-orientated field of Critical Theory, Habermas has expanded his horizons to draw upon the



areas of ego-psychology, functionalist sociology and of course philosophy. All of this is in the service of the attempt to develop a concept of reason that does not lead into Weber's iron cage produced by an instrumental rationality but to develop instead a procedural understanding of reason that takes seriously the demands of a pluralist world. His thought has continued to develop and it needs to be acknowledged that he may yet produce further versions of his theories. However, we can only deal with the current state of development. Thus earlier chapters have dealt in depth with his proposals for a communicative reason, the development of a discourse ethics and its application in the field of law, as well as some of the complex background areas on which he draws.

The objective at this stage is not to repeat those expositions, but to form some possible conclusions, particularly asking the question of the extent to which his ideas can contribute to a new understanding of the relationship between faith and reason. In that respect it is crucial to bear in mind why faith now finds engagement with reason so difficult as well as to search for alternative formulations of both terms. Reason has been guilty of dictating terms to faith, of determining according to its own external criteria what a reasonable faith might be and thus locating it in a position where its radical otherness, difference and prophetic capabilities are seriously undermined. Far from being the neutral tool of thought that it claims to be, (the 'view from nowhere'), reason is itself the product of a tradition that is alien to Christianity and so cannot take account of the particularities of faith. Thus it imposes upon faith its own determinate content under the guise of a harmless neutrality, reducing it to a minimum core of beliefs resembling a slightly mythological humanism and distorting its message to a lowest common denominator morality. Such is the general form of the argument against reason presented by much contemporary theology.

Habermas has only a limited interest in theology's problems with reason. In fact one of the obvious reasons against using a Habermasian position for theological purposes would be that he appears to share and indeed perpetuate the old Enlightenment view of traditions in general and religion in particular, in other words that they sustain an outdated and unacceptable world view. However, it has been shown earlier in this thesis that Habermas' views are more subtle than this. Within the framework of his evolutionary sociology, religious traditions have played a crucial role in the development of the Lifeworld. The development of a pluralist and capitalist society in which the shared and unquestioned background assumptions of the Lifeworld are brought into critical questioning and made more explicit through what he calls 'the linguistification of the sacred' make religious traditions subject to a more general reflexivity. So it is not that religion has ceased to be important, but rather a question of whether and how religious traditions will adapt and survive in an environment within which there is no immunity from critical questioning and people are no longer prepared to accept beliefs and interpretations on the basis of an external religious authority. Can a religious tradition such as Christianity cope with this increased reflexivity where individuals are required to offer both their reasons and their reasoning for holding the beliefs that they do within a public forum and through open and critical discourse?

I suggest that it would be a mistake simply to dismiss Habermas' work as alien to theology on the grounds that it perpetuates the old Enlightenment view. In fact, I argue that Habermas' description of the way in which cultural and social life is evolving carries



a great deal of credibility and that religious traditions are now facing the challenges of an increased reflexivity. To refuse this challenge is to fall into the camps of fundamentalism. However, the other reason for giving serious attention to Habermas' work is his attempt to formulate a reason that claims to be procedural rather than substantive, thus *not* violating the specific content of individual traditions. Does this attempt succeed? If not, can it be supplemented in ways that salvage its core identity, through insights from Derrida for instance? If this too were to fail, what are the implications for Christianity of operating in a context where there is no convincing concept of reason?

To tackle the last question first, I have argued elsewhere that to abandon every concept of reason will lead to an environment within which Christianity becomes isolated and ineffective (Reader 1997, 16). Unless there is an agreed assumption that it is possible to communicate across and between traditions and lifeworlds global conflict resulting from social and cultural fragmentation cannot be avoided. I also argue that humans can communicate effectively across cultural, linguistic and religious boundaries, without necessarily compromising their beliefs. It may be that there is no blueprint for this process, no single guaranteed method that fits all situations and that different means have to be developed for different circumstances, but then something like Habermas' concept of communicative reason does have a part to play here. The other obvious objection to the extreme fragmentation view of cultural pluralism, is that traditions and cultures are by no means as monochrome or as watertight as that theory seems to suggest. The basic fact is that humans do succeed in communicating with one another and that most private and public life is based on the assumption that this is possible, despite the personal and cultural differences. Disagreements do sometimes get resolved, either through compromise or a genuine change of heart or mind. Of course it is also true that communication fails and that disagreements readily descend into conflict and violence, but this is surely a scenario that most would want to avoid, the limit being where beliefs and values are threatened with destruction. So the concern is that if there is not something like Habermas' view of communicative reason in operation, then the practical consequences of the resulting political and moral anarchy would be unacceptable to a tradition that preaches peace and reconciliation.

How are Habermas' basic arguments to be evaluated? I shall argue that it will be useful to return to one of Derrida's key notions as outlined in the previous chapter. It will be recalled that, in his search for a common origin for faith and reason, he coined the phrase 'acquiescence to the testimony of the other' and I then went on to show how standing within the tradition of the Enlightenment could be usefully interpreted in this way – even advocating reason requires a certain acquiescence. On one level this is simply saying that any argument or position rests on certain basic assumptions and that those may or may not be made explicit. If they are not, if they remain hidden and unacknowledged, then the original argument can always be subject to deconstruction – the disruption and destabilization that come from the failure to recognize the other possibilities excluded by those hidden assumptions. It is not that this can ever be avoided, however clear and self-aware the original argument, but that this is always going to be the way things are, given the nature of language and communication.

I now intend to apply something like this to certain parts of Habermas' work and



– if necessary – to refer to this as a deconstruction of his concept of communicative reason. The various critics of his position have drawn out and questioned his hidden presuppositions and attention needs to be given to the most important of these. First his claim that the concept of communicative reason is purely procedural and does not contain a substantive understanding of either truth or reason. I remain unconvinced by this argument, and equally unconvinced that it is possible to develop an exclusively procedural concept of reason, although I accept the force of what Habermas is attempting to achieve. If there is a reason that is to be universal – and from Kant onwards at least this has been a defining capacity of reason – then it must not fall prey to the beliefs and assumptions of a particular tradition. Especially in a global, multi-faith and pluralist culture, how can all the different groups be expected to subscribe to a way of operating that favours or enshrines the views and beliefs of one group at the expense of another? Hence though I can understand why Habermas wants to claim a neutral, universal, context-independent or context-transcending notion of reason, unless this is understood as a regulative ideal – an horizon to be aimed for but never achieved – I cannot see how this can work in practice.

So, returning to Habermas' four criteria for effective communication – understanding or comprehensibility, truth, truthfulness or sincerity, and normative correctness – one major criticism is that he employs a contestable concept of truth. Clearly Habermas rejects the correspondence theory and he seems to be left with a version of the consensus theory – truth is that which enough people at a given time and place come to accept as being true. Indeed something like this appears to be built into his later development of discourse ethics: *x* being accepted as a moral norm requires that all those potentially affected by its adoption should have had a free hand in the democratic process of its formulation. In a pluralist culture where differing and conflicting interests and values need to be negotiated and – if possible – reconciled, one can once again see the force of this argument.

However, this is still a very particular notion of truth, clearly identifiable as being derived from a Western liberal tradition of democracy and toleration. Hence one can question Habermas' claim to neutrality. In a similar vein it has been seen that Charles Taylor argues that Habermas presupposes a particular concept of the good in his work on discourse ethics. For Habermas, the good appears to mean rational autonomous co-operation. Now although Rehg launches a defence of this along the lines that it is hard to see how or why anybody should engage in serious moral discourse unless they do subscribe to the value of rational autonomous co-operation – and there is a force to this argument as well – it still seems to be the case that there is a substantive concept of the good in operation here. The question is, whether this could ever be otherwise? Unless there is some genuine substance and content to the notions of truth, reason or the good, then it is difficult to see how they can be of any real use, even in a Habermasian procedure, or how the latter can provide criteria for what is acceptable or unacceptable without importing such hidden assumptions.

At this point though one returns to the original problem between faith and reason. Are the substantive concepts used by Habermas acceptable to the person of faith, or do they represent the values of an alien and hostile tradition? Hence if I accept a Habermasian position then am I in fact a Western liberal in democratic mode and not a true Christian?



Does the Christian tradition contain its own distinctive and non-negotiable concepts of truth and the good that could never be reconciled or be comfortable with even a Post-Enlightenment stance of this sort? Is truth only available through revelation, as mediated perhaps by the authorities of scripture and tradition and thus inevitably at odds with the notion of truth as consensus? This is where I will in due course draw upon Derrida further to illuminate this debate, using in particular the notions of singularity and mediated singularities articulated through language and communication. The objective will be to re-think the relationship between the universal and the particular that lies behind this debate. I do not see the Habermasian and the Christian positions as mutually exclusive alternatives, but as points on a spectrum of possibilities, offering limits and critical perspectives on one another.

The main point at this stage is to argue that Habermas' position becomes of more use if there is an explicit acknowledgement of the substantive concepts that he holds. Then at least the real differences can be brought into the debate and further progress made. Hence we need now to refer to another aspect of Habermas' work that requires critical examination. In the chapter reviewing Habermas' understanding of the unconscious, questions were raised as to how effectively his theories could take into account the non-cognitive aspects of human subjectivity. It has been argued by various critics – not least those from a feminist perspective – that Habermas does not give due attention to the embodiedness of the human subject, let alone the realms of feelings, needs and desires. Although Habermas is aware of this possible weakness of his approach and does attempt to build the affective dimensions into his ideas of subjectivity and indeed reflexivity, it is arguable that he does not go far enough. As one recent commentator has suggested, it can be seen that Habermas operates with what is still a metaphysical concept of subjectivity, a substance-ontological view of the self (McAfee 2000, 17). Once again I believe this is a significant criticism and, as McAfee says, Habermas does adopt very specific assumptions in addition to and to a certain extent, in spite of, the new emphasis upon intersubjectivity:

These presuppositions include the following:

- a substance ontological metaphysics
- a psychoanalytical theory based on ego psychology, where the ego is a primordial substance
- human nature as ideally autonomous and self-transparent, language as a tool
- an ideal of universalizability
- identity developed by stepping back from context.

(Cf. Cooke 1999b, Benhabib 1992.)

These provide an excellent summary of the problems already identified in this area of Habermas' work. Without returning to the details of this, the issue is whether Habermas is explicit and self-critical enough about these particular assumptions. There are other creative possibilities for interpreting human subjectivity that he automatically rules out by adopting these specific presuppositions. That is inevitable. Yet the direction that he takes is still closely tied to an Enlightenment view of the subject as a rational, autonomous individual, albeit one locked into networks of intersubjective communication and democratic processes. Does this make his work unusable or unacceptable to a Christian perspective?



I would argue that his contribution here is valuable but limited and does require supplementing by feminist authors such as Cooke, Benhabib and McAfee (op. cit). In particular, I advocate working on the possibility of an affective reflexivity – a critical self-awareness embracing the dimensions of feelings and desires. If Habermas' notion of reflexivity is too cognitive then perhaps it could be supplemented by such a notion of affective reflexivity related more directly to the singularity of the person, the encounter or the individual relationship. This might involve acknowledging the more instinctive dimensions of subjectivity (e.g. maternal drives, family patterns etc.); the ways in which a male-dominated view of reflexivity tends to drown out or ignore the voices of the 'other'; and the role of story telling as contrasted with analytical discourse as a way of articulating needs and desires. All of this would contribute to a fuller and more dynamic interpretation of the human subject than that currently held by Habermas.

The tensions drawn out by this debate are still those between the universal as represented by Habermas, and the particular or the singularity of the person or encounter as represented by both some feminists and Derrida using Levinas. Both need to be kept in the discussion. It is not a matter of adopting one and abandoning the other, but of drawing both into a more fruitful engagement.

In summary then I argue that some version of Habermas' theories of communicative reason and discourse ethics is necessary if Christianity is to avoid retreating into a fundamentalist corner. However, the clear weaknesses of his position, particularly the need to acknowledge and challenge his presuppositions about truth, the good, human subjectivity, the unconscious and the use and limits of language need to be addressed. Habermas is not immune from 'acquiescing to the testimony of the other' and he remains very close to certain central Enlightenment concepts despite his claims to be 'Post-Metaphysical'. Perhaps the fundamental weakness of what appears to be a basically optimistic and transparent approach to the human project is a lack of acknowledgement of the other dimensions of human subjectivity, those that resist articulation. However, it would be a mistake to equate that with a failure to identify the potential role of religious traditions as this would be to isolate faith from reason once again. Habermas' range of ideas should discourage theology from making that error.

### **The Derrida supplement**

There are four clear areas where there is overlap between the ideas of Habermas and Derrida and where interaction could prove fruitful for theology. As stated earlier, combining elements of the work of these two philosophers who have often appeared hostile to one another has begun to happen in philosophy itself, notably in the writings of Richard Bernstein (1991), Peter Dews (1995) and Simon Critchley (1999a and b). However, this project has yet to impinge on theology and so this thesis represents an initial attempt to define the territory. Thus the following section needs to be seen as the beginning of a project rather than a fully worked-out programme and is consistent with the general intention of the thesis to offer a clearing of the ground before further investigation can take place.

The whole area of language is without doubt a concern both Habermas and Derrida share. That in itself does not take the discussion very far, as there may be seen to be substantial differences between what the two are trying to achieve. At first sight there is



a world of difference between Habermas' early concerns for an ideal speech situation and his subsequent four criteria for effective communication on the one hand and Derrida's various episodes of deconstruction on the other. After all, Habermas appears to be operating with an essentially optimistic view of human communication. He assumes that it is at least worth the effort to try to clear up misunderstandings and to make meanings accessible and transparent. He assumes levels of trust and sincerity between people. If it were not accepted that these were achievable objectives then the very structures of communication could not operate. To contravene these criteria consistently would be to engage in a 'performative contradiction', as defined by Apel.

Once again, this essential optimism is in evidence in Habermas' work on Freud and the unconscious. Pathologies will be corrected once the hidden levels of subjectivity are articulated and thus brought into the domain of the four criteria. Even in discourse ethics there is a genuine hope that turning needs, desires, interests and motives into the forms of a public discourse will yield the open debate necessary for the formulation of moral norms. Similarly, in the field of law, as it becomes for Habermas the latest example of his communicative reason in action, will formation and democratic process require high levels of reflexivity and self-awareness. So it would indeed seem that Habermas is largely positive about what can be achieved through language and discourse.

Derrida, on the other hand, appears to be far less sanguine on the issues of accessibility and transparency. After all, deconstruction – itself impossible to define or describe in a definitive manner – is about revealing the hidden or unacknowledged assumptions or ideas behind all language. It is a process of destabilization, accepting that all meaning and interpretation are an arbitrary closure of possibilities, a settling on a particular formulation that could always have been otherwise. Even though this is not a matter of subscribing to the anarchic relativist position that anything can mean anything, it is still essentially destabilizing and unsettling.

It would appear then that Habermas advocates an approach in which meaning can be settled and determined, whereas Derrida is constantly pointing out that meaning and interpretation are radically indeterminate. Habermas believes that language is capable of clarity and at least a degree of certainty: for Derrida it is essentially opaque and the source of continual uncertainty. Hence it could be argued that the two thinkers are deeply opposed on this most fundamental of subjects. However, without denying these significant differences, it could be argued that they share an horizon for language, even if not the means of getting there. Both are deeply concerned with how language is used to generate meaning, and with the implications for ethical, social and political issues. Maybe it is the case that Habermas is too optimistic about what can be achieved through articulation and open discourse, but then all the more reason to counterbalance his work with that of Derrida who is more alert to the inescapability and inevitability of distortions and disruptions. The point is that neither of them gives up on the attempt to struggle towards meaning, towards communication and even agreement through language. It needs to be remembered that early in his work Habermas acknowledges that the notion of the ideal speech situation is a regulative ideal. In other words, it is an horizon towards which we aim, but in the knowledge that we will fall short of it and in the belief that it provides us with legitimate criteria for judging current practice. One could be tempted to see



this as a form of partially realized eschatology, albeit a secularized one: the Kingdom of God as the hope for clear, successful and unambiguous communication. Derrida reveals to us that current practice will always involve the exclusion of alternative meanings and interpretations, but then, in the idea of the messianic he too presents an horizon, a structure of human experience that gives glimpses of meaning, hospitality, justice and democracy to come. They may never arrive, but, like a regulative ideal, they are there to motivate humans to work towards something better. All of Derrida's key terms seem to operate in this way, as horizons, unconditional versions of the normal human experience of the particular term. Commenting on his use of the word hospitality, Derrida says:

So I need what Kant would call the regulative idea of pure hospitality, if only to control the distance between in-hospitality, less hospitality, and more hospitality (Caputo and Scanlon (eds.) 1999, 133).

One could, I believe, argue then that both Habermas and Derrida hold a concept of hope, of expectation that there is present within language itself the seeds or the kernel of a better way of being. Habermas may put more emphasis upon the determinate and Derrida on the indeterminate nature of communication, but this is a difference of emphasis not of general orientation. How might this help theology in its task of re-casting the relationship between reason and faith?

I would suggest that the fact that these two philosophers, from very different backgrounds and yet both concerned with developing a new form of Enlightenment, identify within language a messianic structure or an horizon of hope taking us beyond current practice, reveals that the concerns of reason and faith are more closely intertwined than has recently been believed. This is not to reduce theology to philosophy, nor to predetermine the content of Christian belief, but to argue that there is here a relationship, one of respect and recognition rather than of hostility and opposition. Derrida's notion of the messianic is clearly a crucial example of this, but I will defer further consideration of this to the final section as one recognizes this is a component of the traditional debate.

The second area in which there may be fruitful engagement between Habermas and Derrida is the classic philosophical debate on the universal and the particular. As has already been pointed out, this lies at the very heart of the question of the nature of the relationship between reason and faith. Reason is invariably identified with the universal and faith with the particular. Once again it is tempting to see a stark opposition between Habermas, as being concerned with universality, and Derrida, as being a proponent of singularity or particularity. To pursue that for a moment: there is a strong Kantian flavour to much of Habermas' more recent work, beginning with discourse ethics and then moving into his interest in the law. The major difference between Kant and Habermas is that Habermas, like others such as Rawls, interprets universality in terms of procedure rather than substantive content. One can see why this should be so given that the practical challenge is that of obtaining political agreement in the context of a pluralist world of conflicting interests, values and beliefs. So it is clear why Habermas should choose this route. However, as was pointed out in the previous section of this chapter, Habermas' claim to neutrality is undermined by his implicit employment of determinate concepts of truth and the good. I cannot see how this can be avoided, nor do I believe that it is necessarily the conclusive barrier to democratic discourse that Rawls and Habermas believe it to be. I argue that open



debate on matters of morality and politics in the manner that these thinkers advocate it, requires not the denial of interests in the shape of a disputed claim to neutrality, but rather a declaration of interests. Being open and honest about where one is coming from, 'laying one's cards on the table' in the sense of being explicit about one's values and beliefs is the appropriate starting point for honest debate. Then it becomes legitimate to agree process and procedure so that all may feel they have been fully engaged and their voices heard in the ensuing discussion. In other words, it is not possible to separate out the universal and the particular in the definitive way that Habermas suggests. In that sense I believe Derrida may be offering a more appropriate interpretation here, even though, as was seen in chapter 8 above on his interpretation of Kierkegaard, he can err too much on the side of singularity. So what does Derrida contribute to this issue?

The discussion of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* just referred to is a significant offering on the subject of singularity. The idea that once one attempts to articulate and describe a unique personal experience something is inevitably lost in the meaning is surely one that would be readily embraced by members of faith communities. According to Derrida's interpretation of Kierkegaard one can take this to the extreme conclusion that any attempt to put such an experience into words is a complete betrayal of its reality. One can only ever keep silent. Thus Abraham can explain to no one, not even his family, why he was about to sacrifice his son. We return here to the concerns about the limits of language and articulation, but need to beware of attributing this extreme position to Derrida himself.

As argued in the relevant chapter, Derrida takes a different line using ideas of Levinas on the inescapable tension between the Saying and the Said. We do not need to repeat the details of this, but merely to point out that Derrida does not give up on the task of articulation whilst always recognizing its limitations. Thus it is *not* a matter of a simple opposition between the singularity of the experience or the encounter and the universality entailed by turning that into language and concepts. *Both* are always already and inescapably facets of human life and interaction. Always to keep silence over matters of faith, for instance, is to consign faith to solipsism. One cannot avoid a degree of compromise and betrayal in articulating one's experiences – if one is determined to portray language in that negative fashion – if faith is to be communicated, but neither does one imagine that the full depth and reality of the experience can be carried through the language. So there is an acknowledgement of finitude but not a final note of resignation or despair.

I have coined the phrase 'mediated singularities' as a way of trying to capture this tension using Derrida's insights. I also suggest that religious traditions are one step further back from mediated singularities themselves as they require the formulation of articulated experience into particular practices, beliefs and doctrines. Thus these are particulars rather than singularities, although they will build upon the mediated singularities of individuals or communities. It has to be recognized that religious traditions such as Christianity already participate at the level of universality through the use of language and concepts and thus fall into the Habermasian domain.

What becomes clear is that the sharp distinction between universal and particular – or singular – used in this debate is, to an extent, inaccurate and unhelpful. What Habermas and Derrida help us to see, through their failings as well as their successes, is that in



normal human life and interaction, elements of the universal and the particular are always already combined. To separate them out, claiming reason as exclusively universal and faith as exclusively particular is to ignore the true nature of communication. 'Pure' singularity and indeed 'pure' universality may not exist but might be further candidates for Habermas' and Derrida's regulative ideals. The relationship between reason and faith may be closer and more complex than is often recognized.

The third area for consideration returns to earlier discussions about the nature of human subjectivity. It has already been established that Habermas remains close to what is an identifiable version of the Enlightenment view of autonomy, even though this is now set in a context of intersubjectivity. The objection to this would be that it offers an overly determinant view of subjectivity, emphasizing rationality at the expense of feelings, needs and desires and underplaying the permanently disruptive aspect of the unconscious. It might then be assumed that Derrida would simply represent those other forces as undermining and disturbing the positive view of reflexivity. However, although Derrida is interested in these aspects of subjectivity, as was seen from his work on Freud and Foucault, this is not his most significant contribution to the debate. As will be recalled, the question that is raised by Derrida, drawing on the work of Levinas, is whether there is a level of human functioning that precedes both autonomy and heteronomy. In the face to face encounter with the other, the moment of recognition and of the infinite ethical demand, there is a pre-autonomous or even pre-conscious human reaction. Only when this has taken place do the familiar issues of autonomy and heteronomy, and thus even perhaps of reason and faith, come into play. Derrida uses the key Levinasian terms of welcome, hospitality, the self as hostage to the other, the decision of the other in me, that he finds so suggestive. Perhaps the crucial phrase that Derrida uses is 'acquiescence to the testimony of the other', as a way of describing the initial encounter and the trust that has to be established if a relationship is to be pursued. 'Testimony' does not have to be limited to the idea of offering a verbal account. It is the acquiescence that points towards the pre-autonomous reaction: that welcome to the infinity of the other person that always goes beyond what I was ready to offer or receive. The boundaries of my ego, let alone the parameters of my protected and supposedly self-sufficient identity are penetrated by the other's smile or glance and a relationship has already begun.

This whole raft of imagery is certainly attractive and suggestive and contains a serious philosophical concept on the nature of human subjectivity. Two questions emerge: does this imagery make sense, and then if it does, does it contradict a more familiar notion of human autonomy such as that of Habermas or could it be used to supplement it? One can recognize enough of what Derrida and Levinas are saying to accept that there is indeed such a level of human functioning, although there is a strand of idealism behind it that perhaps needs to be questioned.<sup>†</sup> Is this really an ideal of human encounter and interaction, the way things are on certain exceptional occasions, but not in itself a constant structure of human experience? Is this another horizon Derrida would have us glimpse or the normal nature of human encounter? I assume that Levinas does believe it is the norm, but it is not so clear whether this is the case for Derrida. He does after all talk about

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<sup>†</sup> I am using the term idealism here in its non-philosophical sense.



the regulative ideal of pure hospitality and the unconditional welcome, recognizing that conditionality is a regular aspect of human encounter.

If this pre-autonomous encounter with the other is a necessary presupposition for all further interaction and relationship, then I can see no reason why more familiar ideas of autonomy should not come into play at the next stage in the process of encounter. This is a potential supplement to Habermas rather than a contradiction. On the other hand, even if it is more of an ideal or horizon, then one could still argue that Habermas' notions of autonomy and reflexivity have some validity, provided that they can be supplemented by an understanding of affective reflexivity as suggested earlier.

How does this contribute to the debate about the relationship between reason and faith? Remembering that the classic Enlightenment polarisation places reason with autonomy and faith with heteronomy – submitting oneself to the order of an external tradition rather than exercising one's own judgement – then Derrida's ideas could surely be significant. If there is a level of human encounter that precedes what we normally think of as either autonomy or heteronomy and both reason and religion once formulated involve 'acquiescence to the testimony of the other', then the characteristic polarisation of reason and faith is once again called into question. Both are always already engaged in the pre-autonomous encounter with the other and it is only in the subsequent working-out of the relationship that the differences and distinctions being to emerge. It is *not* that this working out process can be avoided or that the differences are not genuine ones – although they may be less significant than is sometimes suggested – but that there is a recognition that reason and faith have already been co-implicated by the initial encounter. Hence, if these insights into human subjectivity have validity, reason and faith can be seen to exist in close proximity to one another.

The final area in which Habermas' and Derrida's work can be brought into fruitful engagement is that of democracy. It is obvious that a commitment to the democratic process is a cornerstone of Habermas' approach. More recently this has developed into what is known as the concept of deliberative democracy (Habermas 1989). The principle of all those potentially affected being fully involved in decision-making processes is also central to his ideas on discourse ethics. Whilst these ideals may be admirable, it is possible to question the extent to which they can be achieved. There is once more a very positive and optimistic tone to Habermas' work, tending to suggest that if his ideas were to be followed then improvements in political life would surely follow. Clearly this links to his view of humans as capable of achieving rational autonomous co-operation and reaching a consensus even on matters where beliefs and values conflict. To counter this, there is always the fear that certain groups will have their interests destroyed in a process of compromise and that minority concerns will fall prey to the pressure of majority rule. For those within faith communities who may hold views, for instance on abortion, that are out of step with the majority, such a prospect is deeply disturbing. There is a serious question as to whether 'truth' and indeed moral decisions or guidelines should be determined by this sort of democratic process. It is understandable then that there should be suspicion towards a Habermasian approach from within religious traditions. It may feel once again as though an alien reason is imposing its will on a particular and different tradition. On the other hand, one might want to argue that the principle of all having their say



in the decision-making process is a reflection of a religious belief in the equal value of all people. The problem has always been that of translating this belief into collective and political decisions.

This is where Derrida's ideas provide another creative counterpoint. Not only does he hold firmly to the notion that democracy is still to come – an horizon never fully to be achieved – but he has crucial and realistic insights into the difficulties of making decisions. The fact that there is a real decision to be made in a particular instance, shows that other choices and options from the one taken will continue to have validity. If this were not so there would be no decision, the one clear-cut correct course of action would require no choosing. We tend to imagine that this difficulty of making decisions only applies to deep dilemmas, but, as seen in the earlier chapter on the Abraham and Isaac story, Derrida shows that even the most mundane issues such as choosing to devote time to one's family or a particular area of work carry an element of sacrifice or undecidability. Whichever way I choose there will always have been other legitimate demands on my energies that I have chosen to ignore or neglect.

If this is true for individual decisions and personal ethical dilemmas then the problem is magnified when it comes to politics. One can never know for certain that x was the right course of action to follow, nor whether y may not have yielded better results. In that sense it is not possible to offer conclusive and definitive public justifications for decisions taken. Yet decisions have to be made and we have to do the best we can given all the limitations. This may appear to undermine Habermas' more optimistic view of deliberative democracy suggesting, as it does, that one can and should always offer public reasons and justifications for decisions taken. However, I believe it is less a matter of open conflict here than of a difference of emphasis, with Derrida drawing out the aporias of all decision-making and perhaps being more realistic about the inherent ambiguities and conflicts. This recognition of human finitude and limitations and insight that democracy is an ideal that may never be achieved may be more amenable to a Christian stance. Yet this is not to abandon democracy, nor to provide excuses for abandoning politics and public life, nor to negate the necessity of offering public reasons and justifications for decisions. Thus the Habermasian perspective on politics still has validity within its domain, supplemented by these elements of Derridean realism.

What are the implications for the reason-faith relationship? Predictably, to guard again against an overly-rapid and simplistic polarisation that would place democracy and indeed public morality into the corner of reason, and the aporia of individual decisions into the corner of faith. Both individual and collective decisions engage with the reason turned into deliberative democracy of Habermas, and the singularity turned into particular traditions better represented by Derrida. Members of faith communities should be committed to involvement in the development of democratic politics even though, or especially because, they themselves represent a different set of voices and an unfamiliar perspective. The juxtaposition of the work of Habermas and Derrida encourages engagement whilst acknowledging differences and points of conflict. Christians would want to identify with the interpretation that justice, peace and even democracy are still to come.

Having reviewed these four areas I conclude that bringing together key ideas from Habermas and Derrida, one can argue that reason and faith are indeed capable of



a closer and more fruitful relationship than that advocated by much recent theology in its reaction to the Enlightenment. This has been achieved so far by concentrating on the side of reason and by supplementing Habermas' reformulations with ideas of Derrida. In the final section I will concentrate exclusively on Derrida and his potential reformulation of faith.

### **Derrida and a reconstruction of faith**

It needs to be acknowledged that the previous section and the ideas for a different relationship between reason and faith owe more to the contribution of Derrida than of Habermas. What I have just attempted could be seen as a deconstruction of Habermas' notions of communicative reason and discourse ethics, in other words a drawing out of the destabilizing factors of the other interpretations of language, reason, human subjectivity and democracy excluded by Habermas' own readings. I have then tried to show how making connections with Derrida's own less determinate interpretations of each of these areas provides fuller accounts that can help to re-cast the relationship between reason and faith. It does need to be emphasized that this exercise is *not* about reducing one term in the equation to the other, nor about creating a new synthesis between them. Significant differences and potential conflicts between them remain, but it would seem that continued critical engagement between faith and reason becomes a practical and intellectual necessity. Thus the Enlightenment view – if such there has been – that reason can neatly cut itself adrift from faith can now be brought into question from within philosophy itself, and some recent theological views that reason has been so discredited as to leave the field open for faith to re-establish itself as the Grand Narrative is also shown to be misconceived. What is required is a different relationship between faith and reason, one in which both sides can acknowledge and respect differences but also identify shared concerns, interests and possible horizons.

It also needs to be made clear that a straightforward adoption of a Derridean perspective does not lead unequivocally to such a conclusion. Referring back to the previous chapter on reason and religion, it does need to be registered that the idea of a closer relationship between the two is only *one* of the possibilities. Derrida is adamant that the possibility that there is in fact no relationship between reason and religion, or rather that they are so heterogeneous as never to be able to tell whether there is a relationship or not, has to remain on the table. This is perfectly consistent with Derrida's general approach within which the other possibilities are not subjected to closure and a level of indeterminacy remains inevitable. Thus it could be argued that the case just presented of supplementing Habermas with Derrida does not keep faith with the latter's intentions. This could be attributed both to the greater determinacy of the Habermasian approach to reason and to a theological imperative to search for clearer answers. I do not believe that this has to be seen as a problem but rather as an inescapable consequence of faithfully following two very different thinkers in their pointers to a way forward from the twentieth century impasse.

However, there is surely an equal responsibility to offer the more Derridean interpretation of the key theological concerns, not because it automatically provides alternative answers, but because it offers other perspectives on the debate. For this



reason I want to touch finally on Derrida's ideas of the messianic, of God, of *chora* and of the non-foundational nature of ethics and politics, each of which, once again, has implications for faith.

There is a tension at the heart of Derrida's notion of the messianic. Derrida portrays this concept as something like a general if not a universal structure of human experience, thus demarcating what he is talking about from the specific historical messianisms of Christianity, Islam and Judaism. We have seen that he himself refers back to Kant's search for a religion within the limits of mere reason in this context. Thus it is possible to interpret what he is doing here as some form of religious studies or philosophy of religion. Yet Derrida is also aware that this displays an ambivalence towards the actual historical messianisms, one that he fails to resolve. One of his major commentators, John D. Caputo, tries to deal with this by suggesting that what Derrida offers is *not* a general structure of messianism of which Islam, Judaism and Christianity are each examples, but itself another singular messianism, one eschewing all explicit religious content (Caputo 1997, 142). This would be consistent with Derrida's unease with the general notion that x can be an example of y. However, Derrida himself is less keen on this solution as he makes clear in a three-way conversation with Caputo and Richard Kearney:

Even if messianicity is totally heterogeneous to messianism, there is this belonging to a tradition, which is mine as well as yours. I do not refer to it in the way you do here, but it is our language, our tradition, and I would like to translate one into the other without erasing the heterogeneity of the two (reply by Derrida in Caputo and Scanlon (eds.) 1999, 135).

This is surely to return to the tension between the universal and the particular and thus the classical formulation of the problem between reason and faith. Derrida though is clearly opposed to the suggestion that messianicity as he describes it should be exclusively equated with reason, philosophy or the universal and the particular messianisms with the particularity of faith and tradition. He requires a translation between the two that does not erase heterogeneity, thus a recognition of both commonality and differences. This is very much what I too have been trying to advocate.

However, Kearney raises what must always remain a question here for the person of faith: is this messianicity, even with its connection to a specific tradition, ever enough to inspire the commitment characteristic of the particular messianisms? In other words, is this not just the latest version of the Kantian cold and abstract 'religion within the limits of mere reason', stripped of any detail that is essential for real encounter?

If we now shift this discussion to the neighbouring territory of the problems of talking about God where parallel difficulties apply, Kearney's fears become even more acute:

By seemingly releasing the 'desire of God' from any particular tradition of revelation and narrative, does deconstruction not make it difficult for us to address this human need to identify God, to look for at least *some* sort of credentials before taking him in – or being taken in? In prizing God free from both onto-theology (where idols abound) and from the biblical messianism with which Levinas and the negative theologians still affiliate themselves, does deconstruction not leave us open to *all* comers? (Kearney 1999, 126).

So not only does Derrida leave us with the problem of an unexplained religious motivation, but this level of indeterminacy also raises the issues of religious authority,



boundaries and criteria, but without offering answers. It is clear that it is the indeterminacy of Derrida's overall approach that creates these gaps and resists their being filled. Perhaps for both Kant and Derrida, as individuals with faith of a sort, but not one to be identified with any particular religious tradition in an orthodox manner, these questions are less important. For those within faith communities, concerned about belonging, boundaries and orthodoxy, they are always going to appear more significant. Is that the most one can say? That the significance of these issues depends upon where one is located in the debate? This may be correct, although one might want to add that there is a practical argument that as religious institutions and traditions increasingly lose their influence and credibility and individuals exercise reflexivity in matters of faith, keeping notions of God alive may require something like Derrida's less determinate approach. A religion working at the boundaries of a deconstructed reformulated reason could certainly be of more significance than a faith determined to retreat into fundamentalism.

The debate may never become that clear-cut and it is important to note that discussions have taken place between Derrida and the French theologian Jean-Luc Marion on their differences in interpretations of God, the Gift and messianism precisely along these lines. In each case Derrida remains determined to press beyond the particularities of tradition and to leave open the gaps represented by those terms, whereas Marion argues that these locations can be inhabited by ideas directly derived from the Christian tradition. I refer to this not in order to resolve the debate, but to draw attention to it as a significant continuing tension in this project.

For Marion, it is a matter of releasing an excess of givenness beyond the limits of any concept to conceive of or of any word to name it, a givenness that saturates any subjective condition or precondition that would contain its overflow or pre-delineate its possibility. For Derrida, the impossible is the stuff of a faith or a desire with which we *begin*, which sets us in motion. We have always to do with what is *always yet to be given*, a givenness to come, a givenness which is *never given*... The impossible is like a Messiah whose very structure is never to appear in the present and who, by thus deferring his appearance, keeps the future open... (Caputo and Scanlon (eds.) 1999, 8).

Keeping the future open is the critical issue here. Derrida will not foreclose the possibilities, so constantly presents us with terms that, although superficially familiar, defy determined meaning and easy definition and instead open up locations of thought beyond the normal. Yet these are never to become the base or foundation for a new philosophy or faith. Hence his employment of the term *khora* in his recent work on religion and reason. Once again this returns Derrida to the tension between the universal and the particular, between the indeterminacy of his locating of a faith that will engage with reason and a faith that remains heterogeneous to any form of reason:

If I am interested in the *khora*, I am trying to reach a structure which is not the *khora* as interpreted by Plato, but by myself against Plato. I do not know if this structure is really prior to what comes under the name of revealed religion or even philosophy, or whether it is through philosophy or the revealed religions, the religions of the book, or any other experience of revelation, that retrospectively we think what I try to think. I must confess, I cannot make the choice between these two hypotheses... Since it is impossible for me to



choose between these two hypotheses, my last hypothesis is that the question is not well posed, that we should displace the question, not to have an answer, but to think otherwise the possibility of these two possibilities (Kearney in Caputo and Scanlon (eds.) 1999, 73).

At this point one is tempted to abandon the debate because there is no clear way of resolving it. How one might choose between a more determinate and contentful traditional religious position such as that of Marion and the determinately indeterminate stance of Derrida as a committed philosopher and a person of some faith defying definition, I do not know. Derrida wants the question re-cast and, in a sense, his comment on thinking otherwise the possibility of these two possibilities – in other words the two possibilities that reason and faith might be related and that reason and faith might not be related – is the conclusion of the thesis. I have tried, in the company of Habermas and Derrida, to think about these two possibilities in another way, working on the assumption that even no relationship is still a form of relationship. If one engages in this exercise, one releases the tensions, aporias and apparently endless debates such as those on messianicity, the naming of God and *chora*.

Yet there is a footnote on the actual nature of this exercise that would have to be taken on board by theology. Critchley, commenting on Derrida's work on the singularity of the encounter with the other and its connections with the formulations of ethics and politics, describes Derrida's approach as both non-foundational and also non-arbitrary (Critchley 1999b, 276–7).<sup>†</sup> Translating this to the work on reason and faith, one could say that Derrida pursues a non-foundational approach to faith by refusing to be tied down to a particular religious tradition, but that he is also committed to an ordered collective response to this through communication and considered practice. Although content is indeterminate beyond certain limits, form and structure do have to be determined through language and therefore cannot be arbitrary. This, I would suggest, is another way of thinking the relationship between the singular and the universal, between faith and reason, between love and justice, and organized religion, much like the collective particularities of ethics and politics operates within these inescapable tensions. Is this really to compromise belief or principle?

*It is the demand provoked by the other's decision in me that calls forth political invention, that provokes me into inventing a norm and taking a decision. The singularity of the context in which the demand arises provokes an act of invention whose criteria is universal (op. cit., 277).*

If one could say the same about religious invention, then perhaps here in both Habermas and Derrida one encounters a model for a non-foundational and yet non-arbitrary Christianity.

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<sup>†</sup> Of course it is not necessarily the case that acknowledging a plurality of religions leads to a non-foundational position. It is equally possible to reach the conclusion that what is required is a new foundational synthesis of religions in the manner of John Hick, for instance. Derrida's approach here is reminiscent of Kant in the sense that he is searching for some deep structure of faith not derived from any specific tradition and yet also not unrelated to the particular tradition of Christianity either – albeit in its messianic form.



The conclusion that emerges from this research is that a key characteristic of a reformulated approach along these lines is that the tension between a view of the faith and reason relationship that emphasizes their proximity and a view that acknowledges their distance and even heterogeneity must be retained. Neither side of the equation must be allowed to negate the other. Even in the process of defining one as the other's 'other' one is supposing some form of relationship and requiring an acknowledgement of both identity and difference. To know the other as 'other' assumes an awareness of both what is shared and what is not shared. On reflection, no reason can finally protect itself from the singular or particular, whatever the nature of its claims to universality, nor can any faith tradition protect itself from the challenges of universality or a transcontextual reason once it enters the domain of language and communication. Although this appears to be essentially a theoretical point, I believe it can be shown that the strict demarcation between reason and the 'other' of reason, remembering that faith is only one of the 'others' of reason, is deeply damaging to both contemporary culture and forms of religious expression. Once faith is equated with the other 'others' of reason, the subjective, the unconscious, the affective dimension of human subjectivity, it loses any critical contact with public life and those domains of reality in turn become immune from the critical and prophetic questioning of a faith tradition. Reason is reduced to the mechanical operation of a thought process serving the needs of science and economics and faith is reduced to the sphere of the pastoral and the domestic. The result is an impaired view of the nature of human beings resting on a split personality and a refusal to try to integrate emotion and reason. The pastoral and political consequences of this impairment are immense, hence the urgency for a reformulation of the reason–faith relationship.



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