

Jürgen Habermas. *Postmetaphysical Thinking II*. Trans. Ciaran Cronin. Polity 2017. 272 pp. \$69.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780745682143); \$24.95 USD (Paperback ISBN9780745682150).

The philosophical tweeter will want to summarize Habermas's new selection of essays on *postmetaphysics* into a few tweets. Here are a few of the possible tweets: Question: when there is no longer a gold standard, how do we tell the cash-value of competing worldviews, religions, philosophical outlooks, including secularism, and even whole cultures? Answer: only through a continuing discussion among the observers and participants. The tweeter might get a response from another tweeter with this tweet: Impossible: No gold standard = everything is up for grabs, and the only discussion among competitors amounts to shouting and bullying. The tweeter who identifies with Habermas might quickly punch in the following characters in a tweet reply: rational discussion can be universal as long as we treat all with equal respect and dignity.

Jumping from twitter space into intellectual space, let's go back a few steps and ask: what was Habermas' strategy for dropping the *intellectual gold standard* or a universal criterion for determining the truth or falsity of different worldviews, religions, philosophical outlooks, and even scientific theories, and moral codes? Does Habermas go as far as dropping universal criteria for weighing the intellectual value of scientific theories and moral codes? Habermas is of two minds. For one side of Habermas's thinking, everything, including science, is open to continuing discussion. On the other side, the principles of morals and politics are categorical ultimates as the framework for discussion.

The obvious objection: *postmetaphysics* is only post for everything but morality and politics. The metaphysics or unarguable set of ultimate principles that applies to morality and politics is the humanist-enlightenment metaphysics of human dignity and equality. Hence, Habermas's philosophy is internally inconsistent. To be truly consistent as a *postmetaphysics* thinker one must also leave open to ultimate rejection the humanist principles of universal respect and tolerance. Let's come back to the issue of Habermas's consistency later. Now let's focus on Habermas's strategy for dropping the pretense to having an intellectual gold standard as found in this selection of essays.

The strategy develops as a response to the project of change in everything as due to the inevitable unfolding of the laws of X (where X=history, or cognitive psychology, or psychoanalytic dynamics, or technological/economic progress or ...). Habermas frames a response to Imre Lakatos. 'From the point of view of *rational reconstruction*, my aim is to show that this history [the prehistory of postmetaphysical thinking] can also be represented as a sequence of solutions to problems ... Imre Lakatos, for example, attempted to reconstruct paradigm shifts in the history of science in an analogous way' (93). *Rational reconstruction* refers to a null-hypothesis such that representation of historical development as a sequence of solutions to problems excludes a-rational accidents from history such as natural disasters and unintended consequences. *Postmetaphysical thinking* functions in general terms as a relativistic guide to the interpretation of historical change whether for science, philosophy, or religion. A crucial question that is raised whenever we talk about standards and criteria in the *postmetaphysical* philosophical world: Is there anything that escapes the relativistic guide or standard? But there is another, more immediate question: how in the *postmetaphysical world* of philosophy can we discuss alternatives without the misunderstanding, shouting and bullying that is a virtualy ingrained aspect of the current world? One might wonder about the importance of this question when everyone can remain at peace in their own intellectual cubbyhole especially in the *postmetaphysical philosophical world* where cultures and *conceptual systems are taken to be incommensurable* (by many), though not by Habermas. (See footnote 24, 261-264, for Chapter 10, Section VII, 220-1.)

Habermas approaches the question of how to conduct cross-cultural or cross-viewpoint discussion by posing the background question: ‘How *should* we understand ourselves as members of a post-secular society and what *must* we expect from one another in order to ensure that, in firmly entrenched nation-states, social relations remain civil even under conditions of cultural and religious pluralism?’ (215). The post-secular society does not close the door to religion from entering into the public forum of discussion. Indeed the *post-secular* society opens the door to the public forum of discussion to all the varieties of science, philosophy, culture, and religion. Hence, only in societies where the public forum of discussion can be accessed by all regardless of viewpoint, do we have the discussion of how to interact and talk with each other in a civil manner, at the least, with a degree of understanding and rationality at the best. Furthermore, the very question of how to rationally talk with each other in a rational manner requires a social universe where there is a civil society with a universal public forum that crosses national and cultural boundaries. If we don't have this form of social universe now, how can we now carry on universal rational discussions? How can we realistically develop a theory of such a universal public forum? However, there is another prior and practical question—a show-me-how-it's-done question—that requires discussion: how does Habermas, an author in the international philosophical forum, engage with philosophers outside his own school of philosophy or outside his own intellectual collaborators?

Habermas has had a running discussion with John Rawls. The second and third essay of the four essays in Section III are dedicated to carrying on the discussion with Rawls, at least, in the broad sense of the intellectual afterlife. Habermas also includes Richard Rorty, Donald Davidson, and the later Ludwig Wittgenstein, among other philosophers outside continental Europe, in his discussions. Those philosophers, also inhabit the international philosophical (virtual intellectual) world, and now suffer the fate of intellectual autopsies. Though they are not conspecific with Habermas, they do share the *postmetaphysical philosophical world* outlook. However, they use different terminologies stemming from the Anglo-American analytic world. Wittgenstein is exceptional in having developed a private philosophical style and language, but whose philosophical twists and turns formed the philosophical fly-bottle inhabited by the mainstream of Anglo-American analytic philosophy. So, they more or less prove the point that Habermas is making about the centrality and dominance of *postmetaphysical thinking* and do not exactly escape the arena where he finds a home for rational and civic intellectual discussion. But in a strange way, Habermas's discussions with his conspecifics on the Continent provide a more serious test for Habermas's plea for a civic international public forum for rational discussion.

Reading the second and third of the three essays in Section II is akin to listening in on one side of a telephone conversation between members of the same family—a bit of bickering, a bit of supportive talk, a bit of defensive talk, and a bit of rational argument. The first essay is an interview. The second and third essays consist of replies to discussions of Habermas's works at a conference or symposium about Habermas exclusively. Such discussions among conspecific philosophers, in general, test civility and rationality better than do discussions among alien species of philosophers. Philosophical conspecific discussions are laced with internal competition either for the taking up the mantle of the current philosophical patri/matri-arch or for taking over the philosophical leadership from the matri/patri-arch. Even so, though Habermas is watching his back, he makes a fundamental point about the social structure required for a public forum of civil and rational conspecific discussions: ‘the practical reason of political philosophy, rather than the truths proclaimed by religious communities, must have the final say when it comes to justifying secular constitutional principles. But that does not prevent me from adopting an agnostic stance on the dogmatic foundations of the validity claims of an enlightened religious interlocutor’ (97). In this quotation, we see that *postmetaphysical thinking* allows skepticism towards intellectual principles but not towards

the principles of practical reason governing morality and politics. This bifurcation between theoretical and practical reason is indicative of a split mind in Habermas's *postmetaphysical philosophy*: an internal contradiction making *postmetaphysical thinking* subject to immanent criticism.

However, the three essays in Section I about the *Lifeworld*, I think, reveal the necessity of having two minds—a skeptical mind for intellectual matters and a metaphysical or dogmatic mind for matters of moral and political principles. In the concrete reality of everyday living, humans have learned how morality and politics are fundamental to living in communities: ‘the lifeworld can be described as the insurmountable ... horizon of experience, and as the uncircumventable ... communicatively socialized everyday existence’ (4). Because linguistic communication proceeds via ‘yes’ and ‘no’ responses to reciprocally raised and criticizable validity claims, participants in communication are exposed to the objections of opponents and can also revise their concepts *in the light of reasons* when compelled by unexpected negative experiences’ (22).

Does this theory of the *lifeworld* resolve the apparent contradiction in Habermas's postmetaphysical thinking between theoretical reason and practical reason? Morality and politics are part of the structure of the *lifeworld* and directly develop from the *lifeworld*. Theoretical reason that involves critical interchange among people with different outlooks is an indirect product of the *lifeworld*. I suggest that the reader of this book admit that *metaphysical thinking*, as it appears in this selection of essays, is open to further discussion including an *immanent critique*.

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