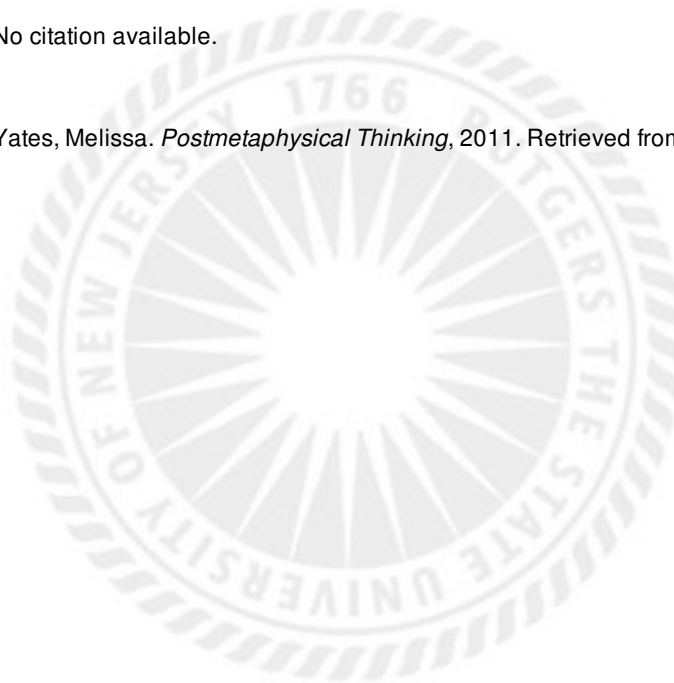


Postmetaphysical Thinking

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TWO

Postmetaphysical thinking

Melissa Yates

The development of empirical research methods in both the social and the natural sciences has deeply impacted the self-conception of philosophy. Jürgen Habermas aims to strike a balance between two ways of understanding the relationship between philosophy and the sciences: between a conception of philosophy as an Archimedean point from which to view the human condition and a conception of philosophy as a mere artefact of Western culturally embedded assumptions. Against the first, Habermas aims to integrate the resources and methods of the social sciences into philosophy and to deny that philosophy can proceed outside of historical and social contexts. On his view, philosophical knowledge is produced communicatively, through socially embedded dialogue. Against the second, Habermas claims fundamental questions about the human condition cannot be answered by purely social or natural scientific approaches. His “postmetaphysical” methodology aims to integrate empirical resources into philosophy without losing sight of what is unique to philosophy: namely, its ability to step back from the empirical data in order to reconstruct in a systematic way underlying universal truths about us, our societies and our place in the world.

Criticism of metaphysical philosophy

In “Themes in Postmetaphysical Thinking” Habermas claims that since Hegel there has been “no alternative to postmetaphysical thinking” (PMT: 29). He means two things by this statement. First, postmetaphysical thinking is something that has developed from specific social

and historical processes. Postmetaphysical philosophy is not merely a philosophical method but a philosophical movement that evolved in response to critiques of what came before. But second, it is not a normatively empty historical development. Postmetaphysical thinking reflects an acceptance of principled critiques of earlier, more metaphysical approaches to philosophical questions.

For Habermas, postmetaphysical philosophy is as much descriptive of our social and historical time as it is descriptive of a valid philosophical methodology. Metaphysical philosophy is, in a sense, stuck in the past. Historical figures that count as metaphysical thinkers include Plato, Plotinus, Neo-Platonists, Augustine, Aquinas, Cusanus, Pico de Mirandola, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, Fichte and Hegel. Against these, ancient materialism, scepticism, late-medieval nominalism and modern empiricism count as antimetaphysical counter-movements (PMT: 29). Since postmetaphysical philosophy is the rejection of metaphysical thinking it is important to begin with a brief discussion of the critiques of metaphysics that Habermas takes for granted.¹

The term “postmetaphysical” might already strike one as misleading, particularly since there are many contemporary philosophers who consider themselves to be metaphysicians. Metaphysics is defined by its ambition to provide a totalizing account of the whole from a transcendent point of view in which ideas are the model or blueprint for matter. The material world is measured against the perfection of an all-encompassing conception of the universe as a whole, supported from an objective, universal perspective above or outside the world. This approach typically elevates the contemplative life of the philosopher as the exemplary or privileged way of life. According to Habermas, what is dangerous about this understanding of philosophy is that it embeds theory itself in a way of life “that promises contact with the extra-ordinary” (PMT: 32). There is an escapism and contempt for the material world in this way of thinking, evidenced by the accounts of salvation that often accompany metaphysical thinking:

Each of the great world religions stakes out a privileged and particularly demanding path to the attainment of individual salvation – e.g., the way to salvation of the wandering Buddhist monk or that of the Christian eremite. Philosophy recommends as its path to salvation the life dedicated to contemplation – the *bios theoretikos*.
(PMT: 32)²

It is not simply that postmetaphysical philosophy rejects these accounts of salvation. Habermas emphasizes further that philosophy is itself

distorted by the drive to purify itself of reliance on the material world. Purity in a metaphysical system is only attainable if philosophy defines the terms of its own debate in a self-justifying way without reliance on sensory experience.³ To attain objective knowledge about the world, on this view, the philosopher should strive to be disembodied, to occupy a neutral or transcendent position outside her cultural and historical context.⁴

Postmetaphysical philosophy presupposes that there is no such observer-position available for the philosopher because we are all deeply conditioned by our historical contexts. In Habermas's terms, we are all participants, embedded in a world that serves as the presupposed background for all of our judgements, philosophical or otherwise.⁵ Our linguistic context is one of the most important features of this background, since it makes possible our philosophical projects; for Habermas, there is no way for us to get behind that, so to speak. So, according to postmetaphysical philosophy, we must begin philosophy with a sober acceptance of the fact that philosophical reasoning is deeply embedded in particular linguistic contexts.⁶ This "linguistic turn" in philosophy effectively shifted metaphysical thinking away from the solipsistic philosopher, instead conceiving of philosophy as a communicative process.

Postmetaphysical philosophy still occupies a unique position and has a distinctive purpose, however, independent of empirical science. As Habermas puts it:

What remains for philosophy, and what is within its capabilities, is to mediate interpretively between expert knowledge and an everyday practice in need of orientation. What remains for philosophy is an illuminating furtherance of lifeworld processes of achieving self-understanding, processes that are related to totality. For the lifeworld must be defended against extreme alienation at the hands of the objectivating, the moralizing, *and* the aestheticizing interventions of expert cultures. (PMT: 17–18)

The image of a philosopher-mediator requires of postmetaphysical thinking an engagement and responsiveness to social and natural sciences unprecedented in philosophical thinking. The goal for postmetaphysical philosophers remains to analyse lifeworld structures from a critical distance, to systematize fundamental human conditions: but this time without the pretence of occupying an extraordinary vantage point.

Habermas uses the term postmetaphysical thinking to describe the kind of philosophy that can still be done even in light of the deep social

embeddedness of the practice of philosophy. This chapter explicates five key ideas that constitute Habermas's postmetaphysical approach to philosophy: (i) the detranscendentalized use of reason, (ii) rational reconstruction, (iii) weak transcendentalism, (iv) context-transcending validity, and (v) soft naturalism.

The detranscendentalized use of reason

Habermas rejects the metaphysical pretence of purification from bodily elements to occupy a position above or beyond the world. Rationality is itself embedded in historically conditioned practices, which contain assumptions about the right kinds of questions, the appropriate kinds of evidence, and the legitimate philosophical agendas. By speaking of the "use of reason" Habermas emphasizes a *practice* of reasoning that is not capable of being purified or rendered neutral of its historical conditions. In this way the subject of knowledge is "detranscendentalized": finite and only capable of philosophical reflection because she has a wealth of everyday and commonsense knowledge already.⁷

For Habermas, one of the most significant components of our inescapable historical embeddedness is that our communicative practices enable knowledge. In "Communicative Action and the 'Use of Reason'" Habermas explains, "Detranscendentalization leads, on the one hand, to the embedding of socialized subjects into the context of a lifeworld and, on the other hand, to the entwining of cognition with speech and action" (BNR: 30). Everyone reaches adulthood with fundamental communicative assumptions, and over the course of everyday life competent language users adopt a wide range of complicated communicative norms. In many ways, human embeddedness in specific linguistic background cultures is the starting point for Habermas's philosophical project. When we advance knowledge claims, such as when we say that "germs do not spontaneously generate", we can do so only from within highly regulated communicative structures on the assumption that these claims are evaluable by others within our linguistic communities. It is in this sense that philosophers can advance knowledge claims only as participants within the context of communicative practices.

According to Habermas, two important assumptions make possible the communicative practice of advancing knowledge claims. First, detranscendentalized subjects presuppose a common world shared by others. For instance, we pragmatically presuppose that the world is "objective" in the sense that it is "the same for everyone", whenever we refer to something in the world.⁸ When someone refers to a chair

as being made of wood the presupposition is that there are objects in our world that we can all identify as chairs. In addition, Habermas argues that we presuppose a shared social world in our practices of justifying moral claims. Postmetaphysical thinking takes for granted this presupposition of a shared world that is knowable by all of us in common (BNR: 43).

Second, a detranscendentalized use of reason proceeds on the assumption that philosophical knowledge claims must be justified in the form of reasons advanced *to* others. Habermas explains:

As speakers and addressees ... communicatively acting subjects encounter one another literally at eye level by taking on first- and *second*-person roles. By reaching an understanding about something in the objective world and adopting the same relation to the world, they enter into an interpersonal relationship. In this performative attitude *toward* one another, they share communicative experiences *with* one another against the background of an intersubjectively shared – that is, sufficiently overlapping – lifeworld. (BNR: 40)

Instead of aiming to remove philosophical thought from the impurity of everyday contexts, postmetaphysical thinking proceeds on the assumption that all knowledge claims are advanced in the context of our relationships with other communicating subjects. Our claims can only be understood, or rationally redeemed, against the backdrop of a wide range of pretheoretical assumptions about our shared world. Meeting each other “at eye level” contradicts the conception of the theorist as metaphorically outside or above the material world.

Rational reconstruction

While Habermas accepts that philosophy cannot proceed from a vantage point that transcends historical context, he also aims to preserve philosophy’s ability to critically examine background cultures. We are all embedded in contexts that we cannot analyse from the outside, but we should not conclude that we cannot rationally understand these contexts, or that we are unable to criticize them. Instead, philosophy can take a critical distance on these background assumptions from within by rationally reconstructing their basic features.

Rational reconstruction begins with empirical investigation. For instance, a rational reconstruction of communicative practices begins

with an analysis of the uses of language by everyday speakers.⁹ Competently communicating subjects abide by wide-ranging rules that structure their communication. Everyday speakers have an implicit knowledge of these deeper structures and rules, and the task of rational reconstruction is to make explicit this tacit knowledge. Habermas describes this point in “Historical Materialism and the Development of Normative Structures”: “*reconstruction* signifies taking a theory apart and putting it back together again in a new form in order to attain more fully the goal it has set for itself” (CES: 95). When someone advances a claim about the temperature outside they do so as a participant in a communicative practice regulated by assumptions about what counts as reasons for knowledge claims about temperatures.¹⁰ At the surface level communicative subjects do not know these rules and structures, but in practice their action presupposes an implicit understanding of them. As Thomas McCarthy puts it, the goal of rational reconstruction “is not a paraphrase or a translation of an originally unclear meaning but an explicit knowledge of rules and structures, the mastery of which underlies the competence of a subject to generate meaningful expressions” (1993: 131).¹¹ Rational reconstruction does not attempt to improve language or speech; it is a theoretical method for analysing the *conditions of possibility* for language and speech with the aim of discovering universal presuppositions adopted by communicative subjects.

Habermas describes the task of rational reconstruction as a twofold process of making explicit the implicit rational structure of language and speech. The first depends on formal pragmatic analyses, where the theoretical aim is to develop an account of the universal rules that must be presupposed to make sense of different kinds of communicative acts. Rather than merely giving an account of how subjects use language and speech in everyday contexts, formal pragmatics attempts to systematically organize and articulate fundamental conditions of everyday speech and language. For instance, communicative action oriented towards understanding is only possible on the background assumption that speakers should offer reasons for the knowledge claims that they advance. The success of reconstructions of formal pragmatic conditions of language and speech depends crucially on how well the reconstructive theory provides the rational grounds for the empirically observable uses of language and speech in everyday contexts.

But rational reconstruction does not merely aim to provide a deeper understanding of these empirically observable communicative acts. A second component of Habermas’s reconstructive project concerns the historic evolution of species-wide competences of communicating subjects (McCarthy 1993: 138). Habermas refers to this second component

of rational reconstruction as an attempt to understand the *generation* of the formal pragmatic presuppositions of competent communicatively acting subjects in the essay “What is Universal Pragmatics?” (CES: 13).

The process of rational reconstruction addresses a transcendental question. The reconstructive task is to determine the conditions of possibility of, in this case, communicative action. These conditions are meant to have the force of universally presupposed rules and structures, but they are not knowable *a priori*, independently of experience. This is a crucial contrast with transcendentalist approaches adopted by earlier metaphysical thinkers. McCarthy explains that, in contrast with the Kantian transcendental project, Habermas’s rational reconstructions “are advanced in a hypothetical attitude and must be checked and revised in the light of the data, which are gathered *a posteriori* from the actual performances and considered appraisals of competent subjects” (*ibid.*: 131). Reconstructive theories can be assessed only by real-world communicative actions. This resonates with several important commitments of postmetaphysical thinking. Reconstructive projects can only be taken up from within the conditions of communicative action under the reconstructive lens, not from a transcendent position outside these structures. Moreover, instead of treating empirical experience as something that distorts the purity of rational projects, reconstructive approaches in philosophy explicitly depend on these experiences and observations as necessary data to check the success of the theories.

Weak transcendentalism

The transcendental nature of rational reconstruction might make it appear that Habermas is himself using the metaphysical methods that he has criticized. Kant called his project transcendental because it sought the *a priori* conditions that make experience of the world possible. While Habermas’s understanding of rational reconstruction also aims to discover “conditions of possibility”, his approach does not attempt to discover the conditions of experience in general. Instead, he poses a different transcendental question: “How is mutual understanding (among speaking and acting subjects) possible in general?” (*ibid.*: 130). This question cannot be addressed aprioristically because it depends on an analysis of the use of language and speech by communicatively acting subjects (which is only knowable *a posteriori*). This *weak* version of a transcendental question relies on empirical experience at two different points. First, reconstructing the conditions of mutual understanding requires analysing communication among everyday speakers. Second,

conclusions advanced about these conditions through reconstructive arguments must continuously be tested against everyday experience. The results of reconstructive projects cannot be demonstrated *a priori*. Instead, as Habermas explains in “What is Universal Pragmatics?”, “we term *transcendental* the conceptual structure recurring in all coherent experiences” (CES: 21–2).

For Kant, there was a stark distinction between empirical investigation and transcendental philosophy.¹² For this reason, Habermas is sometimes reluctant to use the term transcendental at all because he worries that it might lead to a misunderstanding of his project (CES: 25). But Habermas is committed to the idea that postmetaphysical philosophy can make use of weakly transcendental approaches. For instance, he defends our presupposition of a shared objective world as transcendently necessary in this weaker sense because “it cannot be corrected by experiences that would not be possible without it” (BNR: 41). Any attempt to deny the idea of a shared objective world could only be advanced communicatively. And, if Habermas is right, any communicative action can only be made sense of against the backdrop of an assumption of a shared objective world. This means that we cannot but assume that there *is* such a world whenever we attempt communicative action. He explains, “The formal-pragmatic supposition of the world creates placeholders for objects to which speaking and acting subjects can refer. However, grammar cannot ‘impose’ any laws on nature. A ‘transcendental projection’ in the weak sense depends on nature ‘meeting us halfway’” (BNR: 42). The objects in our shared world are not constituted by the fact that we refer to them; our *knowledge* of them is so constituted.

Another weakly transcendental supposition that Habermas supports is the claim that we must all presuppose we are engaged with rational beings when we communicate:

In their cooperative interactions each must ascribe rationality to the other, at least provisionally. In certain circumstances, it may turn out that such a presupposition was unwarranted. Contrary to expectation, it might happen that the other person cannot account for her actions and utterances and that we cannot see how she could justify her behavior. ... This supposition states that a subject who is acting intentionally is capable, in the right circumstances, of providing a more or less plausible reason for why she did or did not behave or express herself this way rather than some other way. Unintelligible, odd, bizarre, or enigmatic expressions prompt follow-up questions because they implicitly

contradict an unavoidable presupposition of communication and therefore trigger puzzled or irritated reactions. (BNR: 36)

The presupposition of rationality in others (until proven otherwise) is here defended by reference to examples of irrationality. This kind of rationality is primarily practical: we presuppose that people generally can justify their actions to others. If we encounter a person who is sleep-walking and cannot explain what he is doing, we look for an unusual explanation for his action because we presuppose that unless something unusual is going on the person could give reasons for what he is doing.

Habermas uses his weakly transcendental approach to derive significant moral and political conclusions. In addition to the presupposition of a shared objective world Habermas also thinks we necessarily presuppose a shared “social world”, regulated by an understanding of legitimate interpersonal relationships (BNR: 46; cf. also TCA 2: 127). If we take for granted that all persons are capable of rationally justifying their actions then we need an understanding of how we adjudicate this exchange of reasons in a social context. Habermas argues that:

If the process of argumentation is to live up to its meaning, communication in the form of rational discourse must allow, if possible, all relevant information and explanations to be brought up and weighed so that the stance participants take can be inherently motivated solely by the revisionary power of free-floating reasons. (BNR: 49)

Speakers necessarily presuppose that others are rationally capable of justifying action; they also presuppose that rational discourse involves an exchange of reasons that is improved by the incorporation of as much relevant information as possible. In the context of democratic deliberations Habermas advances four further transcendental presuppositions. The first is that democratic deliberations are public and inclusive, such that everyone who could make a contribution that pertains to a controversial matter is included. The second is that everyone has equal rights to engage in communication and an equal opportunity to speak. The third is that participants exclude deception and illusion from their arguments. And the fourth is that communication is not coerced, but is instead “free from restrictions that prevent the better argument from being raised and determining the outcome of the discussion” (BNR: 52). Seyla Benhabib defends these weakly transcendental presuppositions in *The Claims of Culture* as the norms that are “in a minimal sense necessary for us to distinguish a consensus, rationally and freely

attained among participants, from other forms of agreements that may be based on power and violence, tradition and custom, ruses of egoistic self-interest as well as moral indifference” (2002: 67). According to Benhabib, we cannot deny the difference between rationally motivated consensus, as opposed to agreement that results from force and manipulation.¹³ This supports a weakly transcendental account of the norms necessary for rationally motivated agreements. As she puts it:

This would not be a strong transcendental argument proving the necessity and singularity of certain conditions without which some aspect of our world, conduct, and consciousness *could* not be what it is. A weak transcendental argument would demonstrate more modestly that certain conditions need to be fulfilled for us to judge those practices to be of a certain sort rather than of a different kind. For example, without showing equal respect for one’s conversation partners, without an equal distribution of these rights to speak, interrogate, and propose alternatives, we would find it hard to call the agreement reached at the end of a conversation fair, rational, or free. This does not mean that these conditions do not themselves permit interpretation, disagreement, or contention, or that they are rooted in the deep structure of human consciousness. (2002: 38)

Speakers will no doubt find themselves disappointed by actual democratic deliberation for failing to live up to these regulative ideals. For Habermas, these suppositions are examples of the conditions of possibility for legitimate democratic deliberation. The fact that we experience disappointment with our actual experiences in their failure to live up to our expectations serves as further evidence that we presupposed them in the first place.¹⁴

Context-transcending validity

Habermas’s philosophical methodology is transcendental because it questions the conditions of possibility of mutual understanding; it is *weakly* transcendental because it abandons the goal of aprioristically determined conditions of experience and instead takes as its point of departure analyses of the use of language and speech by everyday communicative actors. This is a broadly postmetaphysical approach because it takes for granted that the subjects of transcendental knowledge are themselves embedded in historical contexts and that rational

reconstruction cannot be pursued from a God's-eye point of view. At the same time, Habermas denies that postmetaphysical thinking undermines our ability to reconstruct the transcendental presuppositions, in particular the conditions of mutual understanding, as *universally valid*. Transcendental conditions are not knowable independent of experience but they admit of context-transcending validity, according to Habermas. This is crucial if rational reconstruction is to serve as a resource for moral and political criticism of dominant cultural practices, which he thinks it should. Habermas's approach thus requires a delicate balance between his rejection of metaphysical attempts to theorize from a transcendent perspective and his defence of the postmetaphysical attempt to defend transcendental knowledge claims as valid in a context-transcendent way.

Habermas describes context-transcendent validity as a process of "immanent transcendence" (BNR: 35). Rational reconstruction of fundamental communicative structures is a project undertaken by a philosopher-participant who is a competent language user in a specific social and historical context. She cannot occupy a context-independent perspective on the world, nor can her references to objects in the world be experienced independently of habits and anticipations about the world. All knowledge of the world, according to postmetaphysical thinking, is constituted communicatively (BNR: 35–6). That means that the process of knowledge-acquisition is itself a communicative process: it develops in the course of an exchange of reasons and evidence among communicatively competent speakers and addressees who advance *knowledge claims*.¹⁵ When we advance knowledge claims *as valid* we pragmatically presuppose that validity claims are universally valid within a relevant domain. As William Mark Hohengarten puts it, "Validity means validity for every subject capable of speech and action" (PMT: ix). The presuppositions of these validity claims depend on the context of the claim: whether it refers to the objective world, the social world, or the subjective world. In each system of reference we presuppose different conditions of validity. When a geologist claims that continents continuously move by a process of plate tectonics he advances a knowledge claim that presupposes a shared objective world with continents such that the referent is the same for all of us. He also advances the claim as universally valid: if it is a true claim then it reflects something true about the earth and the continents. The geologist advances this claim from within the context of a social and historical context of scientific theories and assumptions, but the claim advanced is meant as a context-transcending claim about the objective world. By reconstructing the communicative practice of justifying a claim about the objective world *as valid* we discover presuppositions of this practice.¹⁶

According to Habermas, we can also rationally reconstruct the transcendental conditions of validity claims advanced about the social world, the world constituted by *normatively* sanctioned actions. This reconstructive task also begins with empirical experience of communicative processes employed by speakers when advancing moral validity claims. Such claims also refer to a shared world and aim for universal validity, but the referents of moral terms are more ambiguous because they do not admit of the kind of scientific analysis that validity claims about the objective world do. So, for instance, when someone advances the moral claim that all persons should be afforded freedom of conscience they do so not as a claim that is only valid *for us* but instead as a context-transcendent validity claim about all persons. The question for Habermas is, then, under what conditions can moral claims be valid in this way?¹⁷ In the context of moral discourse his answer to this transcendental question depends on his reconstruction of what he calls the “moral point of view”, or the ideal speech conditions under which communicatively acting subjects could arrive at morally valid conclusions. These ideal speech conditions systematically account for the rules of moral discourse in a context-transcending way.¹⁸ The process of *justifying* a moral claim *as valid* is one that must be structured to satisfy these ideal speech conditions, to the extent possible.¹⁹

Habermas’s defence of the possibility of postmetaphysical context-transcendent validity claims rejects the idea of cultural incommensurability. While he takes for granted the criticism of metaphysical thinking for its pretence of purity and cultural neutrality, he warns against the conclusion that we lack access to universally valid knowledge claims about the objective world.²⁰ There are inevitable challenges in attempts to translate knowledge claims from one linguistic community to another, but Habermas argues that people can achieve mutual understanding because “in presupposing a shared objective world, they orient themselves toward the claim to truth, that is, to the unconditional validity they claim when they make a statement” (BNR: 36). Claims to context-transcendent validity, because they refer to our shared world, remain open to criticism from all perspectives. This is why exposure to different cultural contexts provides an important resource for subverting dogmatic and conservative assumptions.²¹

Soft naturalism

Postmetaphysical thinking proceeds from the criticism of metaphysical philosophy in terms of its commitments to totalizing worldviews,

solipsistic accounts of self-consciousness, denunciations of the material lives of everyday practices in favour of purified rationality, and the pretence to occupy an extra-worldly objective vantage point. Philosophy today can only proceed postmetaphysically, according to Habermas. In the place of metaphysical approaches to philosophy, Habermas endorses a weakly transcendental project of rationally reconstructing fundamental presuppositions of implicit commonsense knowledge claims. This approach rejects the Kantian aim of apriorism in favour of an empirical starting point: the analysis of everyday intuitions about communicative practices from the participant perspective. Not surprisingly this admission of an empirical starting point has required that his philosophical project be interdisciplinary, drawing from resources in social and natural sciences. It is, however, important to stress that philosophy retains a role and research project unique from the empirical sciences. Philosophy will continue to thrive in a postmetaphysical age.

Habermas demarcates this unique role for philosophy from empirical science in his rejection of a brand of naturalism that seeks to reduce all knowledge to scientifically demonstrable knowledge. In response to this reductionism Habermas defends what he calls a “soft naturalist” position against “hard naturalism”.²² Naturalism holds that everything that exists is a part of the natural world. Habermas accepts this, but denies it makes transcendental claims unjustified or unintelligible. Instead he posits the presupposition of a shared objective world as a condition of communicative rationality and conceives of this world as something we inevitably refer to in the course of advancing knowledge claims.²³ This sort of transcendentalism grants an epistemic priority to well-justified claims about the natural world. In response to religious fundamentalist critics of his political philosophy, for example, he unapologetically sides with the best theories supported by natural science as deserving of unqualified political support: we should take for granted that dinosaurs existed even if that conflicts with some fundamentalist religious views.²⁴

Hard naturalists support the stronger view that all knowledge claims must be reduced to scientific knowledge claims, often leading to a deep scepticism about the force of *normative* knowledge claims. In various places Habermas refers to hard naturalism also as “scientistic naturalism”. “‘Scientism’ means science’s belief in itself: that is, the conviction that we can no longer understand science as one form of possible knowledge, but rather must identify knowledge with science” (KHI: 4). In *Knowledge and Human Interests* Habermas argues that philosophy of science and positivism fail to question the legitimacy and presuppositions of scientific methodology, instead taking for granted an objective and universal methodological stance. For this reason, he

argues, early positivism “succumbs to the same sentence of extravagance and meaninglessness that it once passed on metaphysics” (KHI: 67).²⁵ Habermas rejects the assumption that the merits of naturalism vindicate a broad-based reduction of all knowledge claims to scientific knowledge claims. In particular, he thinks that humans have developed so that we take for granted a shared social world too. According to soft naturalism scientific approaches remain appropriate for claims about our shared objective world but do not exhaust what we can know about our shared social world. In his terms, “reality is not exhausted by the totality of scientific statements that count as true according to current empirical scientific standards” (BNR: 153).

A classic example of the tension between hard and soft naturalist approaches is evidenced in the philosophical debate about the compatibility of freedom and determinism. According to hard naturalism, humans must be conceived as part of the natural world in a way that focuses on the material aspects of humans: we have bodies that are moved to act by other material causes, whether those causes are internal (brain functions) or external (other bodies) to us. Hard naturalists might, for example, explain what we take to be intentional movements in neurobiological terms: we lift our hand because our brain sends a signal to our hand and causes it to move. According to a narrowly determinist explanation our actions are causally explained by previous material events. We are not “free” to choose one among many courses of action because whatever we do will always have been caused by material causes. Hard naturalism, according to Habermas, takes for granted that accounts of free will or “reasons for action” are pseudo-scientific explanations that should be reduced to their scientific, material explanations (BNR: 207). Soft naturalism does not compete with attempts to scientifically understand material causality or neurobiology, but also does not reduce our everyday understanding of “acting on reasons” to these causes.²⁶

A soft naturalist accepts that humans exist in the natural world, and that empirical studies can serve as an important corrective on socially accepted and commonsense beliefs. But according to the soft naturalist we must also be able to account for our non-scientific experiential assumption that we view ourselves as free. When we give explanations for running five miles we do not typically give the material causal story, even if it is a true one. We give *reasons* for our *choice* to run five miles.²⁷ A soft naturalist assumes that these kinds of explanations are also crucial to understanding why we do things and that the scientific reduction of such explanations to neurobiological functions of the body misses the target. According to Habermas:

A will is formed, however imperceptively, *in the course of* deliberations. And because a decision *comes about* as the result of deliberations, however fleeting and unclear they may be, we experience ourselves as free only in the actions that we perform to some degree consciously. ... Only a reflective will is free.

(BNR 155–6)

This is not a claim about biology, but rather a claim about our practical knowledge of ourselves.²⁸

For Habermas, hard naturalists mistakenly overextend the lessons of science. Scientific knowledge is itself communicatively structured by participants taking part in processes of argumentation and justification. Scientific research cannot proceed wholly outside this participant perspective, as if from a purely observer point of view.²⁹ The problem evidenced by the hard naturalist parallels his analysis of a problem with some religious fundamentalists. A religious fundamentalist who denies that dinosaurs existed millions of years ago for the reason that it conflicts with religious texts fails to accept the burden of justifying claims about the objective world according to the methods of empirical science, a cognitive requirement given the evolution of knowledge claims in modern times. The hard scientist who denies that there are any claims of justice because claims about justice cannot be vindicated by reference to objects in the natural world has also failed to accept the division of labour between kinds of knowledge claims. Normative knowledge claims require normative reasons and cannot be settled by mere reference to empirical evidence.

This account of the demarcation of science and philosophy plays an important role in Habermas's conception of the transcendental requirements of citizenship in pluralistic democracies. For example, his defence of the separation of church and state presupposes that all citizens have "self-modernized". A crucial component of self-modernization is the acceptance of secular knowledge in scientific domains. In particular, religious citizens must distinguish between the kinds of evidence and reasons that can be used in favour of claims about the objective world and the kinds of justifications for dogmatic claims of faith. This is relevant in public debates over educational policies concerning evolution, for instance. While he does not characterize adoption of this epistemic stance as a civic duty, Habermas does see it as a necessary precondition for legitimate civic engagement ("Religion in the Public Sphere", BNR: 137).

Despite this, Habermas also insists that religious language has an important and perhaps irreplaceable role to play in public deliberation.³⁰

He takes for granted that religious language sometimes conceals deep, universal moral truths that have not yet been adequately understood in secular terms. In “Religion in the Public Sphere” he explains:

Religious traditions have a special power to articulate moral intuitions, especially with regard to vulnerable forms of communal life. In corresponding political debates, this potential makes religious speech into a serious vehicle for possible truths contents, which can then be translated from the vocabulary of a particular religious community into a generally accessible language. (BNR: 131)

Religious citizens should, on his account, provide religious reasons for their positions on laws and policies to make possible processes of public learning. Secular citizens, moreover, are tasked with helping translate religious reasons that arise in informal public debate into secular alternatives for the purposes of formal processes of legislation. This approach demonstrates Habermas’s commitment to the idea that science does not have priority in moral deliberation, and that philosophy cannot presuppose clean demarcations between secular and religious moral deliberation.

Philosophic discourse is itself embedded in contingent historical contexts. According to postmetaphysical thinking, philosophy should take for granted the priority of scientific claims about the objective world. But this does not entail a priority of scientific claims about the social world, nor does it rule out the possibility that religious claims contain important universal moral truths. By rationally reconstructing communicative assumptions within scientific, moral and religious discourse philosophers can provide universal insights about the kinds of deliberative contexts that are oriented towards understanding without the pretence of occupying a transcendent vantage point. Weakly transcendental claims about communicative rationality shed light on processes of scientific justification no less than on processes of moral justification. Our presupposition of a shared objective and social world makes possible communicative acts of justification and points the way to a uniquely philosophic task, namely, reconstruction of the universal conditions of scientific and moral understanding.³¹

Notes

1. Habermas does not take himself to be advancing these criticisms in a unique way. Instead, in “Themes in Postmetaphysical Thinking” Habermas takes himself

- to be surveying successful objections advanced by a wide range of historians, sociologists, psychologists and philosophers.
2. See also KHI: 301, on the religious origins of the word “theory”.
 3. In “Metaphysics after Kant” Habermas writes: “Philosophy no longer directs its own pieces. This holds true even for the one role in which philosophy does step out of the system of sciences, in order to answer *unavoidable* questions by enlightening the lifeworld about itself as a whole. For, in the midst of certainties, the lifeworld is opaque” (PMT: 16).
 4. Habermas’s criticism of the objectivism of metaphysics can be traced back to *Knowledge and Human Interests*: “[A]s long as philosophy remains caught in ontology, it is itself subject to an objectivism that disguises the connection of its knowledge with the human interest in autonomy and responsibility (*Mündigkeit*). There is only one way in which it can acquire the power that it vainly claims for itself in virtue of its seeming freedom from presuppositions: by acknowledging its dependence on this interest and turning against its own illusion of pure theory the critique it directs at the objectivism of the sciences” (KHI: 311).
 5. Jeffrey Flynn’s (2009) book review of Jürgen Habermas’s *Between Naturalism and Religion* makes clear the significance of the participant and observer perspectives in Habermas’s communicative theory of rationality.
 6. In “Themes in Postmetaphysical Thinking”, Habermas writes, “The embedding of theoretical accomplishments in the practical contexts of their genesis and employment gave rise to an awareness of the relevance of everyday contexts of action and communication. These contexts attain a philosophical status in, for example, the concept of a *lifeworld background*” (PMT: 34). For a discussion of the lifeworld, see Chapter 4 by Heath in this volume. For a discussion of the pragmatics of communication, see Chapter 3 by Fultner.
 7. See KHI: ch. 6, “The Self-Reflection of the Natural Sciences: The Pragmatist Critique of Meaning”.
 8. In “Communicative Action and the ‘Use of Reason’” Habermas argues: “To say that the world is ‘objective’ means that it is ‘given’ to us as ‘the same for everyone.’ It is linguistic practice – especially the use of singular terms – that compels us to make the pragmatic presupposition that such a world is shared by all. The referential system built into natural languages ensures that any given speaker can formally anticipate possible objects of reference. Through this formal presupposition of the world, communication about something in the world is intertwined with practical interventions in the world. Speakers and actors reach an understanding about and intervene in one and the same objective world” (BNR: 31). Cf. also discussion of worlds in TCA 2. For a discussion of the presuppositions of communications, see Chapter 3 in this volume.
 9. Habermas takes the idea of rational reconstruction from Chomsky, who developed the idea in the context of grammatical theory (CES: 14–20). Thomas McCarthy explains this point in *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas*: “Habermas’s conception of a universal pragmatics rests on the contention that not only phonetic, syntactic, and semantic features of *sentences* but also certain pragmatic features of *utterance* – that is, not only language but speech, not only linguistic competence but ‘communicative competence’ – admit of rational reconstruction in universal terms” ([1978] 1996: 274).
 10. Habermas attributes this idea to Dieter Heinrich in “Metaphysics after Kant”: “All species competences of subjects capable of speech and action are accessible to a rational reconstruction if, namely, we recur to the practical knowledge to

- which we intuitively lay claim in tried-and-true productive accomplishments” (PMT: 14).
11. See also McCarthy 1996 [1981]: 277.
 12. See CES: ch. 1 for further discussion of weak transcendentalism in contrast with Kantian transcendentalism: “From now on, transcendental investigation must rely on the competence of knowing subjects who judge which experiences may be called coherent experiences in order to analyze this material for general and necessary categorical presuppositions. Every reconstruction of a basic conceptual system of possible experience has to be regarded as a hypothetical proposal that can be tested against new experiences. As long as the assertion of its necessity and universality has not been refuted, we term *transcendental* the conceptual structure recurring in all coherent experiences. In this weaker version, the claim that structure can be demonstrated a priori is dropped” (CES: 21).
 13. See Benhabib’s defence of “weak justification” (1992: 30–31).
 14. Cf. Chapter 7 by Olson in this volume.
 15. Habermas terms this “immanent transcendence” in an ironic way, inasmuch as transcendence is traditionally opposed to immanence.
 16. As described above, one of these presuppositions is that all persons share this objective world; it would not make sense to advance the claim that the continents are moving in a non-context-transcending sense (“the continents are moving *to me* but not *to you*”).
 17. He accepts that many claims about our social world do not have these universal goals, such as when we advance claims about norms that apply to culturally specific groups, which he calls ethical (as opposed to moral) claims. For Habermas, the validity of ethical claims cannot be determined in a context-transcendent way.
 18. The concept of ideal speech conditions varies in different discourse contexts. The above example applies specifically to moral discourse, but Habermas also extends this idea to other forms of discourse, including legal discourse, religious discourse and discourse concerning international relations. See this volume, Chapters 8, 11 and 10, respectively.
 19. See the section on weak transcendence above for examples about these context-transcendent conditions of moral discourse.
 20. William Mark Hohengarten further explains this point in the introduction to *Themes in Postmetaphysical Thinking*: “Validity claims can of course only be raised within particular language games and forms of life; yet, while *immanent* in particular contexts of communication, they can always claim a validity that *transcends* any and all of them” (PMT: xi).
 21. Thomas McCarthy explains this point in *Ideals and Illusions*: “It is important to see that the context transcendence of the ideas of reason harbours not only a dogmatic but also a subversive potential: claims to validity are permanently exposed to criticism from all sides. ... it invites an ongoing critique of dogmatism, prejudice, self-deception, and error in all their forms” (1993: 5).
 22. See also *Truth and Justification*.
 23. Against idealism, he thinks that we constitute our knowledge of the objects in the natural world through communication, but not the objects themselves. When we advance claims about the natural world, nature has to meet us halfway.
 24. See Habermas’s essay, “Religion in the Public Sphere” (BNR: 114–47).
 25. For a discussion of the connections between the rejection of epistemology by positivism and philosophy of science see ch. 4 of KHI, “Comte and Mach: The Intention of Early Positivism”.

26. Cf. Habermas (2003b). Habermas develops his account of soft naturalism in response to issues raised by Searle in contemporary philosophy of mind.
27. Cf. Habermas's discussion of Putnam, "Norms and Values: On Hilary Putnam's Kantian Pragmatism" (TJ: 213–36).
28. Habermas responds to reductions of reasons to neurobiological processes: "In tracing all mental process back to the causal interaction between the brain and its environment in a deterministic manner and in denying the capacity of the 'space of reasons' – or, if you will, the level of culture and society – to intervene, reductionism seems no less dogmatic than idealism, which sees the originary power of the mind also at work in all natural processes. But bottom-up monism is only more scientific than top-down monism in its procedure, not in its conclusions" (BNR: 165).
29. Failing to accept this feature of scientific knowledge leads to the same problems suffered by metaphysical thought in the attempt to present knowledge claims with the force of a God's-eye point of view.
30. For further discussion, see this volume, Chapter 11.
31. I would like to thank Jon Garthoff and Barbara Fultner for useful and provocative comments on this chapter.