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Talking to God by Talking to Others: Theodor Adorno and Jürgen Habermas on Religion

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ABSTRACT

The Frankfurt School of Critical Theory is one of the most influential schools of thought developed in the twentieth century but nonetheless widely misunderstood. In particular, a notion persists that the Frankfurt School is hostile to religion. Yet, the writings of two of its most important iconoclasts, Theodor Adorno and Jürgen Habermas, reveal a more nuanced approach. Adorno and Habermas, in a fascinating dialogue with religion from which they develop a critical-normative perspective of religion, contrast against the views on religion developed by the “masters of suspicion” of the nineteenth century—Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud. The Frankfurt School eventually built upon these social-functional and genealogical perspectives. For Adorno, religion is in conversation with his notion of an “ethics of suffering,” whereas Habermas believes it speaks to an essential dimension of humanity through its process of “communicative reason.” Religion for both Adorno and Habermas occupies a critical form of social critique and articulates an aspect of the human experience.

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I. Introduction—The Redemption of Philosophy

For he delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper. He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight.

—*Psalm 72: 12-14, New Revised Standard Version*

We should not accept philosophy as unfeeling and solipsistic. In a world seemingly consumed by human suffering, the reduction of “the love of wisdom” to intellectual games in the dusty columns of the shuttered ivory towers of the academy both shocks and horrifies. The philosophical life should be inherently concerned with the lives of others. The pursuit of critical questioning should push the world towards emancipation, yet our current philosophical dialogues seem stagnant. Thus, we need to discover a new path out of Plato’s cave into illumination and liberation. It is often thought that after the Enlightenment philosophy abandoned religion for the sake of reason and that the alleged darkness of faith would give way to the bright day of the light of reason. Myth was no longer needed. Rationality would liberate us both from falsehood and suffering. Yet, although we have undoubtedly advanced technologically, our morality has not progressed. Often, reason and technological advancement further human suffering rather than fixing it. While we are blinded by our fast and shiny technological advances, the last centuries—since the dawn of the Enlightenment—have seen the darkest of times. We may have stopped talking to God a long time ago, but in the silence, we have found no transcendence. Now is the time to take that pilgrimage outside of Jerusalem’s walls, up to Golgotha, to find out whether a tomb we thought was sealed is empty. We need to see if there is anything we can learn from the inexplicable.

Staring at the ruins of modernity is the position in which philosophers Theodor W. Adorno

and Jürgen Habermas found themselves while meditating upon the most important problems of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As two of the most prominent figures in the “Frankfurt School of Critical Theory” movement, Adorno’s and Habermas’ critiques of modernity are essential to addressing the problems of today. Unlike their predecessors Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche who rejected religion in addressing modernity for their own respective reasons, Adorno and Habermas sought to elucidate the dialectic between faith and reason, belief and knowledge—searching for its meaning and “semantic potentials.” Nietzsche articulates a genealogical analysis of religion. Adorno applies his critical negative dialectical approach to religion. Habermas views religion as a form of communicative anamnestic critique. Both Adorno and Habermas have a critical normative view of religion. Adorno and Habermas ultimately conclude that if one is truly concerned with the problem of human suffering, she must be willing to wrestle with God.

II. Letting Go of God with Sadness

Religion is such a varied and diverse subject; each person may come to a discussion of it with her own assumptions and conceptions. Therefore, it is integral to narrow the scope of religion to a precise definition in order to explore religion in a fruitful and intelligible way. For the purpose of this paper, religion will be restricted to an organized set of beliefs about the divine with the following three attributes: is monotheistic, is institutionalized, and has a corpus of sacred texts. Specifically, this will restrict religion to the three major Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and, thus, their conceptions of God.

Philosopher Paul Ricœur, notably stated in his work, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, “Three masters, seemingly mutually exclusive, dominate the school of suspicion: Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. It is easier to show their common opposition to a phenomenology of the sacred, understood as a propaedeutic to the ‘revelation’ of meaning, than their interrelationship within a single method of demystification.”¹ Ricœur argues that three major thinkers of the nineteenth century—Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud—can be connected, in spite of their differences, on their mission of demystifying the sacred. The three return to ideas about religion throughout their various works. Marx approached religion from his theory of historical materialism. Nietzsche undergoes a genealogical examination of religion. Freud views religion through his psychoanalytic lens. While it may be easy to simply consider the “masters of suspicion” as anti-religious in their polemics, below the surface their views are more nuanced. Humankind has reached the point where it is necessary to kill God, yet God has made us into the very beings we are.

¹Paul Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), 32. https://www.google.com/books/edition/Freud_and_Philosophy/FyeHc74riT0C?hl=en&gbpv=0

Marx's perspective on religion expresses the most dualistic position of the three masters of suspicions. Religion is simultaneously a positive and negative force on the progress of human existence. In his introduction to "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right," Marx opines, "Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people."² What does it mean for religion to be both the expression of and the protest against real suffering? Marx is building off the work of Ludwig Feuerbach who argues that the idea of God reflects the essence of human beings instead of being its own separate cosmic divine being. God does not create humans; humans have created God. He is made in our own image. Thus, the idea of God expresses both the alienation and the reification of the human. God is human alienation inasmuch as he shows divine mercy to the poor, the downtrodden, and the alienated yet exerts his wrathful justice against the rich, the powerful, and the alienator. God is the hope of those alienated by the structure of oppressive political economy. Yet as the product of humans, God also reflects another product of humanity, the state, which is fundamentally a political economy. Consequently, God is also the state and society's "logic in popular form, its spiritual point d'honneur ... its moral sanction," as Marx asserts.³ God is then also the moral justification of the unjust structure of the state; the divine is justification of the untenable status quo. God embodies both of these contradictory forces simultaneously. Marx returns to religious language throughout his writing as he knew it was a powerful expression of the alienation of the human condition. He also believed that the critique of religion was finished, but the critique has not taken the next step. The critique of religion should lead to the critique of the state that it sustains, which is ultimately the critique of political

²Karl Marx, "Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right 1844," marxists.org., Accessed January 3, 2024. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>.

³Marx, "Introduction to A Contribution."

economy.

The genealogical method of understanding religion is articulated by the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche in his text, “On the Genealogy of Morality,” and later analyzed by Michel Foucault in the essay, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History.” The genealogical method examines how the meanings of ideas and concepts have historically changed and how they shape the current world. It is a revolution against historical positivism, history as a relational system of development in favor for a view of history that looks at events as the reversal of relationships of power. Foucault opines, “[G]enealogy retrieves an indispensable restraint: it must record the singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality.... [I]t rejects the metahistorical deployment of ideal significations and indefinite teleologies.”⁴ Genealogy is focused on something that changes over time, what causes ideas to move from a discreet isolated accident into dominant ideology. “On the Genealogy of Morality” applies the genealogical method to investigate conceptions of religion and by proxy, certain religions—specifically, Judaism and Christianity.

Nietzsche is intensely interested in the way that religion has historically formed the human being. He begins the polemic with the claim, “We are unknown to ourselves, we knowers: and with good reason. We have never looked for ourselves, —so how are we ever supposed to find ourselves?”⁵ In this text, Nietzsche lays out a “genealogical” approach to the way that religion has shaped our conception of morality. “On the Genealogy of Morality” is meant to be an investigation into what has made us into the moral beings we are today. Nietzsche contends that Judaism and Christianity are the forces primarily responsible for creating morality in modernity. Judaism was originally “slave morality” in opposition with the noble morality. “Slave morality” is the

⁴Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” n.d., copy in possession of author.

⁵Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality and Other Writings*, 3rd ed., ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 3.

ressentiment of the Jews against the morality of their masters. Judaism reverses the noble worldview, declaring the lowly to be good and the powerful to be wicked. For Nietzsche the Jewish movement of revenge has transformed the world into its current state, as he asserts, “[T]he slaves’ revolt in morality begins with the Jews: a revolt which has two thousand years of history behind it and has only been lost sight of because it was victorious.”⁶ This “slave revolt in morality” eventually manifests itself in Jesus Christ, the idea that God himself became a suffering, crucified, and dying human. This suffering God exacted revenge for the downtrodden over the arc of history, so that even if God is questioned in modernity the morality that invented him never is. We created God in order to domesticate ourselves into moral animals. Religion was a necessary burden to create ourselves into the very humans we are in morality. However, we have forgotten our own history and the genealogy of the formation of our morality. The invention of God has become an impediment to our flourishing. We can no longer progress in our autonomy, power, and artistic expression in the shadow of God. Thus, it is necessary for us to relieve ourselves of the burden of God to ascend in our humanity.

Freud describes religion in his work, *The Future of an Illusion*, as “the most important item in the psychical inventory of a civilization.”⁷ In Freud’s analysis of religion, it is an instrument of civilization and of the process of civilizing the human. There are three distinct parts of the human psyche--the superego, the id, and the ego. The superego is the expression of outside restraints placed on the individual. The cultural expectations, societal rules, and familial relations that weigh restrict the id. The id is the repressed desires of someone, their natural inclinations that are typically related to both sex and violence for Freud. The mediator between these two forces is the ego, which is the way that one perceives herself. Thus, religion can be seen as the most powerful

⁶Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 18.

⁷Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, ed. James Strachey, trans. James Strachey (New York: D.W. Norton & Company, 1961), 14.

force of the superego. God is the ultimate father figure who forces us to repress our id. Civilization creates religion through a process in order to accomplish its goals. This is what makes religion an illusion not an error. It is not merely a mistake about reality but has a desire to it. We do not just know God exists; we want God to exist. This illusion is given to us as a means of civilizing. The falsity of religion has created us into the very beings we are in modernity. However, in modernity we no longer need religion as the primal father figure disciplining our id. Having been formed by religion, we can now structure civilization by rationality rather than religious doctrine as Freud elucidates, “if we were to leave God out altogether and honestly admit the purely human origin of all the regulations and precepts of civilization.... People could understand that they are made, not so much to rule them as, on the contrary, to serve their interests; and they would adopt a more friendly attitude to them and instead of aiming at their abolition, would aim only at their improvement.”⁸ From this psychoanalytic perspective, religion was useful for part of our historical development but must now be rejected if we are to continue to socially evolve.

Now it is revealed that the three masters of suspicion do not merely cast God aside without examination or thought. All three have their own perspective on God and yet come to a similar conclusion. God has created us into the very beings we are now, but it is now necessary to kill him. It is not that there never was nor still is not any value to God, but his influence on the human species must come to end if we are to progress. For Marx, God expresses both reification and alienation of the human. Religion gives us language to voice our alienation, and its critique should eventually lead to critique of the political economy of the state. For Nietzsche, God is the manifestation of slave morality that has shaped the course of history thus far but no longer needs to. For Freud, the heavenly Father is the most effective civilizing Father, culture’s most useful way of suppressing our id. Yet we can utilize reason to psychoanalytically balance us and continue

⁸Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, 41.

civilizing us. Over a hundred years later, God has not yet died, and religion still is a major influence in our world. Why have we not followed the lessons of the masters and not abandoned God?

III. Reflections from Damaged Life

Theodor Adorno opens the final section of his book, *Negative Dialectics*, by declaring, “We cannot say anymore that the immutable is truth, and that the mobile, transitory is appearance.”⁹ Though Adorno was speaking broadly about the radical shift that needed to take place in metaphysics, the truth of Adorno’s own life overflowed with movement and transience. Born to a Catholic mother and Jewish father on September 11, 1903, in Frankfurt, Germany, Adorno would later subtitle *Minima Moralia*—a gathering of reflections on ethics, modern society, and mass cultures—*Reflections from Damaged Life*. He grew up in the intense German nationalism of World War I and experienced the subsequent economic and cultural fallout that plagued the defeated nation. Adorno pursued his passion for both philosophy and music as a student, the latter remaining a lifelong passion. Indeed, music served as the foundation for his aesthetic theory. He eventually accepted a habilitation with famed theologian Paul Tillich on the existentialist philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard. Upon earning his full professorship in 1931, he began researching at the Institute for Social Research whose academics and theories would later come to be known as the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. At the same historical moment, the Nazis took over the German government as Adolf Hitler seized full dictatorial powers in 1933. In this contentious climate, the Institute for Social Research served as a multi-disciplinary platform to study authoritarianism and fascism from a Marxist approach. With a faculty largely made up of Jews, both the Institute’s mission and composition made it an obvious target for the Third Reich. Thus, the Institute, along with many German intellectuals, went into exile in the early 1930s—joining a broader exodus of German intellectuals. Adorno, labeled both a non-

⁹Theodor W. Adorno, "Meditations on Metaphysics," in *The Frankfurt School on Religion: Key Writings by the Major Thinkers*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Routledge, 2005), 175.

Aryan and a cultural Bolshevik, was prohibited from teaching. He fled for England and eventually the United States. Adorno remained abroad until 1949 when he returned to teach in Germany. He remained a prominent public intellectual there until his death in 1969.

As one of the foundational thinkers of the Frankfurt School, Adorno represents a tradition stemming from Kantian idealism to Hegelian dialectic to Marxist materialism that are synthesized in the Institute for Social Research. While it is difficult to succinctly summarize any philosophical school of thought, the core of Critical Theory critiques the failures of modernity, preserving and expanding the critical reflection of the Enlightenment. Critical Theorists recognize that the political solutions of the twentieth century—fascism, communism, and capitalism—are systems of oppression so they seek another path. If philosophy is fundamentally a life of radical questioning, then the questions upon which Critical Theory consist are concerned with human suffering as well as attempts to develop a *praxis*, action with a rational purpose, to confront inhumanity. Ostensibly, Adorno is a self-proclaimed atheist and student of Marx's sociological analysis, yet he does not fully accept the political-economist's functional prescription of religion. Adorno does not simply reduce religion to an archaic social behavior that should be abandoned but instead explores what talking with God might have to say about the human condition.

Adorno explores the relationship between theology and modernity in his essay, "Reason and Revelation," which begins with an acknowledgment of rationality's winning the arguments of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Philosophy has moved on from revelation, consigning it to oblivion. Religion, like most other human inquiries, has ceded most of the discourse to positivism and the market. Adorno observes that religion has been commodified as a product to be bought and sold, reducing it to just another section of a magazine. It has become a cultural

artifact ripe for advertising, therefore becoming part of a new, profane worship: the idolatry of the market. Consequently, the appeal of religion in the twentieth century is an attempt to repeal the status quo of *ratio*. As Adorno attests, “it is not the truth and authenticity of the revelation that are decisive but rather the need for guidance, the confirmation of what is already firmly established, and also the hope that by means of a resolute decision alone one could breathe back meaning into the disenchanting world under whose absence we have been suffering so long.”¹⁰ Religion expresses the desire to hold onto meaning in the meaningless machinery of modernity, yet it has erased revelation’s inherent mysticism that cannot be understood by rationality in order to transform it into a rationality.

Adorno borrowed the Kierkegaardian expression “leap of faith” and socialized it into a critique of reason. People lack the vocabulary to properly respond to the dehumanization of modernity and therefore look to revelation to fight reason, not understanding that the consuming mechanized reason is opposed to reason itself. Adorno concedes that religion provides a certain means of reflecting on *ratio* but that “this self-reflection cannot stop at the mere negation of thought itself, a kind of mythical sacrifice, and cannot realize itself through a ‘leap.’”¹¹ Revelation is incomplete for what is necessary for a critique of the current human condition. This is exemplified in religion as a response to annihilation. In the age of nuclear destruction, the belief that humans will inevitably destroy themselves is orthodoxy so there is a natural desire for transcendence. The inevitability of mutually assured destruction is a modern reinterpretation of the theological conception of “original sin,” making believers in the bomb shelters. Thus, religion demonstrates the anti-utopian fear of the *δήμος* (*daimos*). This is emblematic of the problem of the modern “positive religion” that seeks to critique *ratio* on *ratio*’s terms. Religion

¹⁰Theodor W. Adorno, “Reason and Revelation,” in *The Frankfurt School on Religion*. ed. Mendieta, trans. Henry W. Pickford, 168.

¹¹Adorno, “Reason and Revelation,” 168.

needs to be understood for its claims and worldview rather than another cog in modernity.

Revelation destroys itself when appealing to reason. All of this leads to religion's being caught in a modern predicament with its relation to the world. Adorno captures the paradoxical nature of religion in the contemporary world; if its claim to eternally revealed truths change in response to modernity, it would cease to be religion, "[o]r contemporary reality would be confronted with demands that are unrealizable or that fall short of their most essential concern, the real suffering of people."¹² So, what then is the value of religion? Its essential core is meant to speak to the despair of reality, yet in its purity it is irrelevant. An attempt to transform it into an effective modern *praxis* would mutilate it beyond comprehension.

¹²Adorno, "Reason and Revelation," 173.

IV. The Transformational Stench of the Death of Metaphysics

Adorno moved past the Marxist conception of religion as merely a social function and instead presents a normative model. He argues that there is some form of a pure theological *note bene* that cannot be explained in material terms. His view of religion is metaphysical, but that does not mean that it is abstract and unchanging. As Adorno outlines in his seminal text on logic and metaphysics, *Negative Dialectics*, metaphysics must transform after the Holocaust. The Enlightenment rationality of Immanuel Kant and dialectical logic of Georg W.F. Hegel propose a logic of necessary progress in history that becomes untenable in the wake of the crisis of modernity. The Holocaust exposed the falsehood of inevitable progress in modernity. Kant's and Hegel's metaphysical projects have become antiquated since they cannot account for the moral regress of the Holocaust. In the essay, "Reason and Revelation," Adorno decries the uselessness and self-contradictory nature of "positive religion," but "Meditations on Metaphysics" similarly critiques the positivism of Kant and Hegel attesting, "After Auschwitz, our feelings resist any claim of the positivity of existence as sanctimonious, as wronging the victims; they balk at squeezing any kind of sense, however bleached, out of the victims' fate."¹³ By creating a necessary metaphysical arc to history, Hegel sacrificed the victims of history to the god of rational Enlightenment. When laying his initial theory of history in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel describes his movement of Spirit (*Geist*) coming to know itself through the process of history as the "Golgotha of the Absolute Spirit," meaning that history is the process of death and rebirth that ultimately leads to transcendence. For Adorno, this presents itself as a disturbing secular theodicy. In one famous incident from philosophy's autobiography, Voltaire became indignant to Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's declaration of a theodicy of God creating our current

¹³ Adorno, "Meditations on Metaphysics," 175.

predicament as “the best of possible worlds” in the face of the tragedy of the Lisbon earthquake of 1755. A theodicy attempts to absolve God from the evil of existence, but to do that it must explain that evil is ultimately good or meaningful. Hegel famously argued for this philosophy because he did not want it to become a “slaughter bench.”¹⁴ However, his insistence on everything pushing towards a *τελος* (*telos*) turns meaningless suffering into a necessary step. Theodicy is a consequence of positive religion just as slaughter is a consequence of positive dialectics. What we faced with in the Holocaust is “total nullity” — the utter destruction of the human being from whence nothing can be derived.

In place of the positive dialectic, Adorno asserts a negative, critical dialectic. A negative dialectic is one in which the self-reflection of rationality is not resolved into something objective and positive but instead remains in the critical dialogue, a reason yet to be embodied. Something that is truly *nihil*, completely negative and devoid of meaning, becomes perversely assimilated positive totality in a positive dialectic. For Adorno, this is offensive to the victims of history and their experiences of destruction. This inhumanity is not just demonstrated in the Holocaust, but as Adorno mourns, “Absolute negativity is in plain sight and has ceased to surprise anyone.... What the sadists in the camps foretold their victims, ‘Tomorrow you’ll be wiggling skyward as smoke from this chimney,’ bespeaks the indifference of each individual life that is the direction of history.”¹⁵ Adorno proclaimed that after Auschwitz, metaphysics (which includes theology) must be transformed; its current state is untenable in response to “absolute negativity.” Therefore, what was once the credo of bourgeois resignation, “What does it really matter?”¹⁶ must be a serious question of philosophy. Kant’s five categorical imperatives are

¹⁴Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind* (London: S. Sonnenschein, 1910); Adorno, “Meditations on Metaphysics,” 175.

¹⁵Adorno, 176.

¹⁶Adorno, 177.

inadequate to regulate morality after World War II, so Adorno proposes that there is a new categorical imperative that demands a new responsibility of humanity: to prevent the Holocaust from happening again. The transformation that metaphysics must undergo is a contradiction as it must integrate materialism into its dialectic. While metaphysics is often portrayed as being opposed to materialism, a metaphysics with no concern for the material reality of human beings is morally bankrupt. Metaphysical morality can only be redeemed from its death by materialism. Human suffering is a material reality from which there is no metaphysical escape. Adorno explains, “The somatic unmeaningful stratum of life is the stage of suffering, of the suffering within the camps, without any consolation out of the mind, and out of culture, the mind’s objectification.”¹⁷

Philosophy has long been interested in the relation between mind and body, and the philosophical trajectory from René Descartes to Hegel has posited that the mind is the essential part of the human. The mind is superior to the body and can overcome anything of the body. Yet, there is no metaphysical retreat from human suffering, no solace found in rationality. Adorno conjures the image of when somebody encounters a rotting carcass to demonstrate that death is a material violence rather than an ontological release. We have an uncomfortable visceral reaction to the sight and smell of a carcass; the confrontation with death creates a bodily revulsion. Morality after the Holocaust must reject a purely positivistic metaphysics and integrate itself with materialism in order to remain moral. The human being needs to be understood not only as a metaphysical being but as a material being who suffers and dies. Adorno illustrates, “Even in his formal freedom, the individual is as fungible and replicable as he will be under the liquidator’s boot.”¹⁸ The human being may have formal freedom and the

¹⁷Adorno, “Meditations on Metaphysics,” 178.

¹⁸Adorno, “Reason and Revelation,” 176.

human as an idea is free, but he or she does not necessarily have material freedom, which is the freedom that matters. Kant argues that the fundamental experience of a human is rationality; therefore, his morality is an ethics of rationality. Hegel contends that the fundamental experience of a human is freedom; therefore, his morality is an ethics of freedom. These are both ontological ethics, built upon the human as a metaphysical idea. Adorno emphatically opposes these notions. Instead, he declares that the fundamental experience of a human being is suffering; therefore, his morality is an ethics of suffering. The moral and ethical life is the one that stands with the suffering masses and fights for their deliverance. This ethics of suffering is both emotivist, meaning that it necessitates feeling the pain of the other, and individualizing, meaning it is attentive to the particular suffering of an individual.

Modern society is constructed in such a way as to not only further human suffering but also to prevent the bystander from understanding ethics from the standpoint suffering. Adorno refers to culture as “the mind’s objectification,”¹⁹ the material manifestation of metaphysics. All culture after the Holocaust wants to return to the status quo, of life before the *Shoah* because it is unwilling to confront its need for transformation. Even protest against culture becomes sublated into the culture as it had already accepted the premise that the culture has been exposed to be. Adorno expresses the trapped nature of the human living in modern culture, “Whoever pleads for the maintenance of this radically culpable and shabby culture becomes its accomplice, while the man who says no to culture is directly furthering the barbarism which our culture showed itself to be.”²⁰ Culture, metaphysics, and even theology need to change after the Holocaust. They need to recognize that the “trench religion” of human suffering is a survival mechanism for victims, not necessarily an accurate summation of atrocities. Yet, Adorno also argued that

¹⁹Adorno, “Meditations on Metaphysics,” 178.

²⁰Adorno, 179.

revelation could not transform itself to fit modern needs or it would cease to be faith.

Revelation's truth-claims are necessarily universal and eternal; it is *causa sui* truth. How can we hold onto both ideas, that theology must change but also that it cannot? Does this indicate that we must abandon religion, not because of modernity but in order to overcome it?

V. The Suffering Servant and the Crucified God

Clearly, Adorno moves past a social-functional model of religion, typically espoused by materialists such as Marx, to a normative model in which it is not merely reduced to a primitive human behavior. Instead, religion expresses some metaphysical yearning that must transform in the crisis of modernity. In the introduction to the polemic, “On the Genealogy of Morality,” Nietzsche claims that while philosophers often argue about what morality is and what it means to be moral, no one ever questions the value of morality itself. Analysis of the value of morality requires a history of morality, which Nietzsche proceeds to outline. Nietzsche separates two different conceptions of morality, “Good and Bad” and “Good and Evil,” one from the other. The former notion he associates with “noble morality” as opposed to the “slave morality” of the latter. The initial meaning of “good” was formed by nobles, those who have power in a society, as a term to describe their actions. This aristocratic term was contrasted with “bad” that was associated with the common people. “Good” and “bad” then denote what is instrumentally useful or not useful for the powerful; it is the moral license of the chasm between the mighty and the plebian. The idea of morality as “Good and Evil” is the revenge of the masses—specifically, Jews— and an attempt at reversing the current power dynamic, as Nietzsche writes vitriolically:

It was the Jews who, rejecting the aristocratic value equation (good = noble = powerful = beautiful = happy = blessed) ventured, with awe-inspiring consistency, to bring about a reversal and held it in the teeth of the most unfathomable hatred (hatred of the powerless), saying: “Only those who suffer are good, only the poor, the powerless, the lowly are good; the suffering, the deprived, the sick, the ugly, are the only pious people, the only ones saved, salvation is for them alone.”²¹

According to Nietzsche, Jews started a moral revolution that has come to dominate history. This morality of love finds its locus in hatred and revenge; it is an expression of slaves’ resentment,

²¹Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 17.

self-hatred at their situation, that becomes political vindication. Jesus of Nazareth is the ultimate encapsulation of this hatred masquerading as love. In the salvation of “the poor, the sick, the sinners,”²² Jesus is seen by Nietzsche as the ultimate nefarious revenge of the Jews, a Jew killed by Jews so that their philosophy could be accepted by Gentiles, “that mystery of an unthinkable final act of extreme cruelty and self-crucifixion of God for the salvation of the human race?”²³ The paradox of the salvation of a dying God is an idea that has taken over history. The movement of this morality of resentment seeks to tame Nietzsche’s ideal picture of what a human being should be: the “blond beast.” A human of “noble race,” the “blond beast” is someone who has broken free from culture and is able to exert one’s own power. The highest calling of a human is to dominate over others and have no concern for slave morality or for the slave. True love of humans is not found in the compassion of those who suffer but instead in the fear of man, which is produced by the “blond beast.” The fundamental experience of the human being is the desire to dominate, a need to be a beast of prey. Even Judaism and Christianity are an expression of it; religion is the hope that the slaves will one day be able to exert transcendental power—that prey will transform themselves into predators.

The schism between Adorno and Nietzsche could not be more clear: an ethics of suffering as opposed to an ethics of power. “On the Genealogy of Morality” is a demonstration of the garbage culture that reinforces the suffering of others, its rambling words dripping with anti-Semitism and racism. The text presents itself as examination of the history and value of morality, but it is apologia for amorality. Nietzsche yearns for an age when the noble and mighty dominate, as if history before, during, and after him does not crush the slave under its boot. The philosophical life is meant to be a critique of this accepted morality, not a worship of

²²Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 18.

²³Nietzsche, 18.

it. After Auschwitz, we have lived in a world dominated by “blond beasts” who exerted their unhinged predation against prey. This world led to the destruction of human beings, the destruction of Jews who Nietzsche so vilely blames for his impotence in modernity. If the fundamental experience of the human being is the noble desire to oppress others, we have not only killed God but also morality, philosophy, and the human being itself. Adorno emphatically argues for the value of slave morality, an ethics of suffering. Nietzsche is disgusted by the idea of a God who suffers and stands with those who suffer. The divine and transcendent should be an expression of individual’s power not a mutilated Jew hung upon a noble Roman’s cross. Nietzsche’s genealogical view of religion is anti-human because it loathes religion’s transformational nature. It does not understand that transformation is a necessary movement for morality. Nietzsche resents religion for saying the “blind will see,” for though he sees he is blind to what “the Good” truly is.²⁴ Religion has shaped the current understanding of the world for ill and must be abandoned.

The critical normative view of religion recognizes that the nature of religion expresses what Habermas calls “semantic potentials,” which are essential to an ethics of suffering. Transformation is not opposed to philosophy but instead its fundamental activity. Adorno discloses as much at the end of *Minima Moralia* contending, “Philosophy, in the only way it is to be responsive in the face of despair, would be the attempt to treat all things as they would be displayed from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but what shines on the world from redemption; everything else is exhausted in reconstruction and remains a piece of technique”²⁵

²⁴John 9:39 (New Revised Standard Version).

²⁵Jürgen Habermas, “The German Idealism of the Jewish Philosophers,” in *Religion and Rationality Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 58.

VI. Translating ΛΟΓΟΣ (*Logos*) into Communicative Anamnestic Reason

Nietzsche's paranoid genealogy paints the conspiracy that Jewish ideas have come to dominate modern thought. Habermas disagrees, arguing in "The German Idealism of the Jewish Philosophers" that Jewish influence on philosophy, specifically German philosophy, is often erased. Habermas is one of the most influential public intellectuals in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries whose work often focuses on communication, reason, liberal democracy, modernity, critical theory, and more recently religion. Born in 1929, Jürgen Habermas was born with a cleft palate, which condemned him to a childhood of intense suffering (because of the numerous operations he had to undergo) and alienation (because he found that many people did not understand his distorted voice). He had to hide his birth defect when he was a part of the Hitler Youth lest he be tossed into oblivion with the "unfit." After graduating with a degree in philosophy, he became a journalist and then returned to academic philosophy later. Habermas joined the Institute for Social Research at the invitation of Adorno. Habermas famously engaged in public debate with other German academics on whether the Holocaust was a distinctive event in history. Habermas elucidated that the purpose of history is to stand with its victims and to learn how to prevent further suffering. Habermas initially had an anthropological philosophical perspective postulating that humans had three distinct knowledges: instrumental, understanding things as objects in order to achieve end; relational, understanding of others and one's impact on others; and emancipatory, striving for liberation. However, he would eventually understand humans linguistically; therefore, he contended that all three types of knowledge are combined in language. Habermas is an ordinary language philosopher, meaning he believes that language is a form of actions or a worldview onto itself. Languages have three forms of truth claims: objective, subjective, and relational.

For Habermas, language is essential to understanding the human and to be human, in his view, is to be a creature of language. In “Transcendence from Within, Transcendence in This World,” he declares that language and religion are structured in the same way. They both make objective, subjective, and relational truth claims, but the similarities do not end there. The means through which one transcends language is through language. Religion and language both have a universal emancipatory instinct, and religion’s instinct is invaluable: “[I]t could turn out that monotheistic traditions have at their disposal a language whose semantic potential is not yet exhausted [*unabgegoltene*], that shows itself to be superior in its power to disclose the world and to form identity, in its capability for renewal, its differentiation, and its range.”²⁶ This is a continuation of Adorno’s normative view of religion, i.e. faith is an essential source of meaning and *praxis* for emancipation.

As Habermas explores in “Faith and Knowledge,” the language of modernity is inadequate to speak to the totality of human suffering today. The language that is now used in the secular, liberal state relies on a translation of conceptions from religion. “Sin” has been translated into “culpability,” but something was lost in translation. “Sin” is about the relationship of an individual’s actions to God and others; it compels one to move closer to God and others as a response to sin. Instead, “culpability” severs relationships with others, disowning one’s responsibility with others. If one is concerned with culpability, he or she is more concerned about not receiving blame rather than behaving morally. When “grace” is translated to “dignity,” it loses the essentiality of forgiveness to the conception that is a tragedy as

²⁶Jürgen Habermas "Transcendence from Within, Transcendence in this World," in *The Frankfurt School on Religion*, ed. Mendieta, trans. Eric Crump and Peter P. Kenny, 306.

Habermas bemoans:

The wish for forgiveness is still bound up with the unsentimental wish to undo the harm inflicted on others. What is even more disconcerting is the irreversibility of *past* sufferings—the injustice inflicted on innocent people who were abused, debased, and murdered, reaching far beyond any extent of reparation within human power. The lost hope of resurrection is keenly felt as a void.²⁷

One religious conception that Habermas believes is necessary and powerful force for critique in the secular world is anamnestic reason. Anamnestic reason is first articulated by critical theorist Walter Benjamin as an alternative to dominating reason of modernity. Reason is typically thought of as procedural and empty, reifying existence into rationally understood objects. This form of instrumental reason is the inheritance of Greek philosophy. Anamnestic reason is the reason of remembrance. This tension between *ratio* and *memoria* is center of anamnestic reason that strives to remember the past suffering in order to emancipate the future. Anamnestic reason is not rationality for its own sake, disinterested in real humans, but instead intensely concerned with human beings. The dialogue between Jewish anamnestic reason and Greek reason is the foundation of Western civilization and the Enlightenment, yet anamnestic reason gives us a path to transcend the failures of both. Habermas illuminates, “Remembrance saves from ruin that which we do not want to lose and that, nevertheless, finds itself in the greatest of dangers.”²⁸ The secular, liberal state is the progeny of the Enlightenment and modernity. The liberal state must operate as a secular entity, not beholden to any religion, yet its foundation is built upon religious language and conceptions. It presupposes semantic potentials that it cannot generate itself. Religion communicates a range

²⁷Jürgen Habermas, “Faith and Knowledge,” in *The Frankfurt School on Religion*, ed. Mendieta, trans. Hella Beister and William Rehy, 333.

²⁸Jürgen Habermas, “Israel and Athens, or to Whom Does Anamnestic Reason Belong?” in *The Frankfurt School on Religion*, ed. Mendieta, trans. Eduardo Mendieta, 293-302.

of semantic potentials that are important for both critiquing the current world and alleviating the suffering of others. Therefore, Habermas reasons that religion must have a voice in the public square, "Secularized citizens, insofar, as they are acting in their role as citizen of a state, should neither deny a truth potential to religious world views as a matter of principle, nor dispute the right of believing fallow citizens to make contributions to public discussions in religious language."²⁹ The way these religious semantic potentials are self-articulated by citizens is through prayer.

²⁹Jürgen Habermas, "On the Relation between the Secular Liberal State and Religion," in *The Frankfurt School on Religion*, ed. Mendieta, trans. Matthias Fritsch, 348.

VII. Conclusion—The Difference between Philosophy and Prayer

What is the difference between philosophy and prayer? Are they not both the search for the transcendent, for the good, for truth? They are the hope against hope. In the age of scientific positivism, idolatry of the market, oppressive states, and nihilistic impulses, is it time to abandon both of them? In the face of the social-functional religion of Marx or the genealogical religion of Nietzsche, Adorno and Habermas ultimately conclude that if one is truly concerned with the problem of human suffering, one must be willing to wrestle with God. Theirs is a normative view of religion as self-reflective critique that still has meaning that needs to be heard. We can develop the most insightful and philosophical understanding of the world, but it is useless without *praxis*, actionable compassion for those who suffer. Yet, the tragedy human of existence is that the full potential of our power and knowledge may not be enough to help everyone, and it certainly cannot undo what happened to those who have already suffered. Thus, we are like the Psalmist crying out to God for those who have no helper, yearning for the redemptive transformation of suffering. Maybe if we develop an ethics of suffering and stand with the oppressed, silent no longer, we will speak to God. For God is not found among the “blond beasts” but as author of the Gospel of Matthew states:

“... For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” Then they also will answer, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” Then he will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.”³⁰

Adorno’s and Habermas’ insights into the dialectic between faith and reason, which is a

³⁰Matthew 25: 42-45 (New Revised Standard Version).

dialectic of the unfinished translation of such a religious affirmation, can help us rescue the semantic potentials of this gospel into philosophical *praxis*. A critical normative understanding of religion allows one to develop an ethics of suffering and a language for deliverance.

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