As we approach the 150th anniversary of the publication of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859)—accompanied this year by an unprecedented deluge of Darwinalia—we might pause to consider the condition of secular modernity in its unsteady progress towards establishing a post-religious normativity out of its own theoretical and scientific resources. In the English-speaking world at least, critical reflection appears to have largely given way to polemical bombardment by the likes of Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins, whose books tend to portray religious faith as a pestilent irrationalism manifesting itself in reactionary legislation and acts of terrorism. It is therefore timely that a translation of recent essays by Jürgen Habermas on the subject of religion and its place in the public sphere should make its appearance—even if it remains unlikely that *Between Naturalism and Religion* will manage to find an audience outside the academy.

As a political theorist, Habermas remains committed to a Rousseauian-Kantian ideal of autonomy that presupposes an internal relationship between freedom and rational self-determination that can be recast at the societal level within processes of social integration and political legitimation. According to this view, the legal institutions of ideologically neutral liberal democracies must ultimately rely upon a respect for law that goes beyond mere obedience, and a civic cohesion that exceeds mere tolerance—neither of which can be produced by the state itself (p. 3). Habermas is therefore alarmed by the tendency within populous, multicultural communities to circumvent genuine political deliberation and critical engagement in favour of temporary strategic partnerships. Contentment with a mere *modus vivendi* precludes the possibility of a collective historical learning process that might reinvigorate an apathetic electorate, leaving politics vulnerable to its replacement by the directives of free-market liberalism and ideological extremism.

*Between Naturalism and Religion* stands out from previous collections by virtue of its inclusion of a rare piece of autobiography. It would be presumptuous to make too much of this, since “Public Space and the Political Public Sphere—The Biographical Roots of Two Motifs in my Thought” was written at the behest of the awards committee for the Kyoto Prize in Arts and Philosophy on the occasion of Habermas’ nomination in 2004. But in order to avoid the impression that Habermas’ engagement with
religion represents little more than a retreat into philosophical senectitude, we should try to appreciate the deeply personal nature of the concerns that motivate Habermas’ nuanced interpretation of pragmatism and defence of egalitarian principles of argumentation.

As a schoolboy, Habermas’ exit from the protective surroundings of family life brought him face to face for the first time with the isolation and humiliation that results whenever our unobtrusive intermediary world of shared symbols breaks down. The “harmless acts of discrimination” and “anonymity” Habermas suffered on account of his speech impediment shares an affinity with the sense of difference that is now a common feature of our globalised world and its concomitant features of mass tourism and large-scale migration (p. 16). Increased individuation has resulted in a progressively layered and ever more fragile network of relationships that derives its strength solely from social recognition. Habermas’ description of rational discourse associates enhanced reflexivity with the precision of the written word; only written communication can ameliorate the ever-present risk of rejection inherent to social interaction by virtue of its access to an infinitely larger audience (p. 16). Perceiving the world in its plurivocity, we become aware of our need for a post-metaphysical morality capable of fostering solidarity among strangers.

Habermas speculates that his sensitivity to the intersubjective structure of personal identity may have its origins in a traumatic series of surgeries he underwent as a child in an attempt to correct a cleft palate. This experience of profound vulnerability and dependency revealed to him the deeply social dimensions of human self-understanding: through the lens of communicative rationality, the activity of consciousness, including the exercise of free choice, resembles a “glove turned inside out”: our sense of selfhood is an expression of the intricate weaving together of experience through deliberation and dialogue with others (p. 14). With this in mind, Benjamin Libet’s influential study on human consciousness (which identifies a ‘neural readiness potential’ preceding all subjective decisions to act) is called into question for its misconstrual of conscious ‘willing’ as a mere triggering mechanism for action (p. 154). For Habermas, free will only emerges within the process of evaluating and justifying reasons—it is neither an epiphenomenal residue of genetic imperatives nor the operation of a Cartesian entity divorced from material nature (p. 155). Decisions that come about as a result of deliberation are self-consciously inserted into the chain of causes in a way that is qualitatively distinct from those actions compelled by habit, chance, or neurotic-compulsion (p. 156). If we ignore the intuitive self-evidence of freedom accompanying all intentional
acts—if we abstract from the perspective of the participant—the resulting explanation of the act will always remain impoverished.

Taking his cue from Adorno, Habermas argues that the “objectivating perspective” of natural science, especially in the area of prenatal genetic screening, represents a manifestation of instrumental reason that wrongfully subsumes external nature to a technologically manipulable set of resources (p. 199). This myopic, self-empowering subject achieves mastery over external nature only by eliminating or repressing the expression of its own inner nature. Trivialising the uniqueness and spontaneity accorded to participants in communication is not an achievement of scientific neutrality, but a metaphysically compromising assertion of will. Similarly, the secularist rejection of the cognitive content of religion fails to acknowledge the ethical burden of postmetaphysical philosophy, which remains ‘post-Christian’ without completely evacuating its Christian heritage (p. 210). Kant’s critique of the limitations of religious faith was also an attempt at a “saving appropriation” of categorically binding moral law (p. 211). By emphasising reason’s epistemic dependence on the detranscendentalised content of religious faith (including ideas of emancipation, alienation, and forgiveness), Habermas counters Whiggish narratives of unencumbered progress with the suggestion that the liberating promise of modernity still remains unfulfilled (p. 226). For Habermas, religion not only serves as a repository for those modes of human experience that lack any functional market equivalent, it also restores our sense of humility: the lesson learned from the dialectic of enlightenment is that the irrationality we might ascribe to a religious or cultural Other is in fact the historical birthright of liberal-capitalist culture itself.

Habermas is one of a generation of Germans “lucky to be born late” (p. 18). An accidental witness to history, he was too young to be absorbed into the murderous ressentiment of the Reich, yet old enough to be affected by the sense of collective responsibility that followed upon the demise of a criminal but immensely popular regime. This evaporation of familial certainties brought with it a feeling of anger at those elements of German society unable or unwilling to acknowledge their own culpability. The arid apolitical elitism still prevalent in German universities after the war forced Habermas to keep his left-leaning political concerns separate from his philosophical interests.

This artificial separation came to an abrupt end in the summer of 1953, when Habermas’ friend, Karl-Otto Apel, presented him with a copy of Heidegger’s recently republished An Introduction to Metaphysics—still unrevised, still evincing the same unabashed evocation of originary values
of the *Volk* (p. 20). For a once devoted disciple of Heidegger, this denial of moral and political responsibility revealed the limitations of a philosophy burdened with Platonist essentialism, a tolerance of “creative violence”, and an anti-Western scepticism towards Enlightenment egalitarianism (p. 20). Such Romantic pretensions were thoroughly alien to the generation of students who had just experienced the postmetaphysical unravelling of an ideologically tainted value system. Habermas and Apel would later work together to devise a theory of discourse ethics that sought to rescue the residual normativity located in rational argumentation itself. Discourse theory preserved the cognitive value of normative statements by locating its ‘truth’ within the fallible consensus compelled by the ‘unforced force’ of better reasons. However, Habermas’ later attempts to differentiate a morally neutral function of positive law from the pragmatic presuppositions of argumentation were criticised by Apel, who continues to claim that the normative intuitions guiding discourse are by themselves sufficiently deontologically binding—assuming that democratic societies are allowed the opportunity to cultivate an appropriate “ethics of responsibility” (p. 94).

For Habermas, the regulative idealisations that help to determine the rational acceptability of contested statements cannot themselves be deemed infallible (p. 97). To assert the priority of morality over law subverts the performative meaningfulness of democratic self-determination and underestimates the historical blindness of any situated rationality (p. 79). It is precisely because the regulative ideals of equal treatment and reciprocity continue to highlight the distortions and limitations of contemporary political practice that they must not be absorbed into the actual functioning of political power—otherwise we lose our means of recovering from a criminal historical past as well as our ability to envisage a cosmopolitan future (p. 321).

Habermas also wishes to avoid the instrumentalist excesses of utilitarianism and legal positivism. He therefore denies that the moral duty to take seriously the needs of anonymous fellow-citizens can be secured through legal sanctions alone. Liberal democratic states do not enhance their legitimacy by attempting to administer the expression of individual preferences, but neither can they simply enforce the tolerance of religious or cultural minorities (p. 120). Article 16 of the 1776 Virginia Bill of Rights was the first-ever constitutional guarantee of religious freedom based on *mutual respect* for the religious freedom of others. Habermas distinguishes the respect accorded to citizens by one another from the paternalist protectionism implied by the concept of *laïcité*, which by the
time of France’s Third Republic was understood primarily as barring the potentially malignant influence of cults in civil society (p. 118). The voluntarism acclaimed by the American model provides the theme for Habermas’ critique of John Rawls’ ‘public use of reason’. For Rawls, the practice of deliberation is facilitated by a moral “duty of civility” which entails a readiness to listen to others—but only as long as others express their concerns using “generally accessible reasons”, i.e. reasons that are justified without invoking comprehensive doctrines or a particular faith (p. 122). For Habermas, it is unfair to expect religious citizens of liberal democracies to shoulder the psychological burden of maintaining two mutually exclusive personal and public identities, especially since such a stark choice only encourages the devout to withdraw from the public sphere altogether (p. 138). At the same time, Habermas rejects Nicholas Wolterstorff’s unreserved endorsement of religious belief exerting influence over democratic lawmaking. According to Wolterstorff, compromises across ideological divides are best settled through majoritarian decisions. But this overlooks the real problem of legitimation in constitutional states: the very respect participants are expected to have for democratic procedures cannot be maintained if existing arrangements are seen to express the particular interests of dominant majorities. The disaffection and fragmentation already evident in many modern democracies will only be further exacerbated by encouraging members of the political community to encounter one another solely as representatives of irreconcilable religious and ideological divides.

Habermas’ agnostic refusal to pass final judgment on the cognitive content of religious belief is empowering insofar as participants in informal public debates are actively encouraged (contra Rawls) to express convictions that have shaped their identities and established a sense of fellowship among their community of believers (p. 140). It is only at the institutional threshold of public office that the devout are entreated (contra Wolterstorff) to abstract from their religious convictions in order to carry out their duties as lawmakers within a pluralist society. However, it is difficult to see how giving secularists and devout believers ‘separate but equal’ cognitive burdens will facilitate the Kantian goal of securing law upon principles of rational insight. On the one hand, the ‘institutional threshold’ of public office defines the standard of general accessibility in exclusively secular terms, so that the normative content of religious tradition must first be divested of all metaphysical trappings before it can provide the basis of a proposed law. On the other hand, within the informal sphere of civil society, secularists are entreated to abstain from an assessment of the truth-value of religious
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claims, in favour of a respectful, critical engagement (p. 113).

Two problems present themselves: first of all, if religious citizens attach little or no value to the cognitive content of legislative decisions, their obedience to the law becomes merely functional or strategic. In the U.S., both the constitutional protection of a woman’s right to an abortion as well as the legal recognition of gay marriage (in an increasingly limited number of states) have been described by cultural conservatives as impositions brought about by a liberal elite, and these sentiments have in the past been translated into outrageous acts of vigilantism against innocent people seen to represent contentious laws. Secondly, Habermas’ call for ‘critical engagement’ appears to refer to something beyond mere tolerance, since ‘tolerance’ only signifies the respectful absence of rational agreement between mutually opposed positions (p. 258). But how then are ‘modest’ post-secular humanists to be allowed to differentiate between religious claims that still have semantic value (desire for emancipation, fellowship, and the alleviation of poverty) and those religious beliefs that ought to be condemned as repugnant (the condemnation of homosexuality as an abomination, the subservience of women to men, or the description of the Holocaust as divine judgment)?

Habermas says that postmetaphysical philosophy must be “willing to learn” from religion, that in acknowledging the limits of its own scientific and historical understanding, philosophy will avoid replacing devotion to God with an equally unqualified faith in human omnipotence. But does this mean that moral obligations will always ultimately transcend philosophical language? Such an admission would be anathema to Hitchens or Dawkins, who look no further than biology or neuroscience to answer the fundamental questions of human existence. To his credit, Habermas’ writing is still imbued with the sense of outrage first voiced by the college radical disillusioned by the achingly slow process of collective learning that followed Germany’s occupation and reconstruction. The idea of a public sphere where political pugilism is replaced by critical dialogue is no mere intellectual exercise but a description of a vital outlet we sorely need. While it remains unclear whether Habermas expects the two universes represented by religion and postmetaphysical philosophy to remain in dissensus or be transformed through dialogue, Between Naturalism and Religion is effective in its demonstration of a public intellectual’s duty to move beyond rhetorical victories and accept the challenge of actually improving the discursive level of public debates.

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