

THE SECULAR SACRED - Michael Bennett (www.michaelbennett.org.uk)

Given the failure of political grand narratives and religious cosmologies to redeem the human suffering and environmental disasters of the twentieth century, it is not surprising that intellectual and artistic circles display a chronic scepticism and disillusionment with either rational or spiritual claims to any kind of universalism – moral or otherwise. The moral universe has lost any traditional or metaphysical ‘givenness’ and has come to be seen as a construct. A construct that is radically and hopelessly contextual and relative. The response to injustice now often seems limited to impotent moralistic indignation.

At the secular level this process has been characterised by the seemingly inevitable hegemony of relativism in its various forms. The most virulent of these is, unquestionably, the radical deconstructionism found in postmodernism. Important though postmodernism has been both as a cultural movement and a valued warrior against the monological philosophy of consciousness and grand meta-narratives, it is, in essence, a subclass of relativism. It is this relativism, in its philosophical and cultural appearances, that underpins the current scenario of a pluralism of worldviews, many of which contradict the now questionable ethos of multiculturalism in that they do not simply offer alternative ways of accessing reality, rather they offer competing and *mutually exclusive* views of the world.

Drawing on Habermas (and many others), I believe that it is possible to reconstruct a form of rational universalism without falling into metaphysical illusions – particularly the illusion that rests on the discovery or assumption of some transcendent point beyond history, culture and language. The crucial step that enables this is the move to a communicative concept of rationality. From this basis I argue for the morally motivating power of a rationally based sense of the secular sacred and the identification with such through reflexive mythological narratives.

How is it possible to bring some stability to our moral universe without falling prey to complete relativism and the violence that shadows it? The undercurrent to a broad swathe of Habermas’s work, including his universal pragmatics, his theory of communicative action and his critique of religion, is his attempt to provide a theoretical basis for the restoration of meaning for people living in pluralist societies. Because the fracturing of traditional and religious worldviews threatens both social solidarity and the existential construction of

meaning for individuals, Habermas's reconstruction of the possibility of meaning that could span particular worldviews is meant to operate at both these levels.

Although religious and traditional beliefs unquestionably do empirically provide an assumed transcendental basis for moral action for large sections of mankind, I feel that, as rationalists we must overcome any distaste we may have for such facts and turn our attention to the need to translate into secular and reflexive terms those beliefs which can provide meaning, moral motivation and inspiration. This process does require a significant degree of mutual tolerance. But, in the final analysis, the need to meaningfully secularise religious values rests on the premise that moral convictions based on religious and traditional worldviews are not open to public discourse, which, in terms of Habermas's theory of communicative rationality, disqualifies them from any claim to validity. This increasingly undermines their power to provide principles of universal validity that can bridge individual and cultural particularities.

The denial of the validity of religious claims to a transcendent universalism does not necessarily leave us bereft of all claims to universalism. Rather, through the theory of communicative rationality, we are offered the possibility of an immanent transcendent grounded in the validity claims of everyday communicative action.

Transcendental consciousness loses the connotations of an "otherworldly" dimension rooted in the realm of the intelligible. It has come down to Earth in the form of everyday communicative practice, which is no longer sublime. Thus, the profane lifeworld has usurped the transmundane place of the noumenal. Although pragmatism retains the transcendental framing of the issue, it defuses the tension between the transcendental and the empirical. To be sure, communicative language use still commits participants to strong idealisations. By orienting themselves to unconditional validity claims and presupposing each other's accountability, interlocutors aim beyond contingent and merely local contexts. But these counterfactual presuppositions are rooted in the facticity of everyday practices. (Habermas 2003a: 17-18)

The epistemological impossibility of being able to gain knowledge of a transcendental leaves reason with no god, Absolute, myth or tradition to fall back on in order to guarantee its validity. But the absence of an external transcendental or Archimedean point does not, as the postmodernists would have it, leave us with a plurality of incommensurable language games

or worldviews. Through the notion of communicative rationality we find universal forms of communication 'for which there is no alternative in any known form of life.' (Habermas 2003a: 20)

When society became more secular, as religious worldviews lost their ability to convince people, it did not descend into an amoral or immoral jungle. The lack of transcendental certitude did not lead to turpitude. One reason for this is that the invariant structures immanent within communication act in an almost unconscious way to guarantee a minimal level of moral and ethical standards. In other words the features of communication as described in Habermas's theory of communicative rationality act, as it were, as a kind of secular sacred. This is one of the reasons why secularisation has not fundamentally fragmented social solidarity.

However this postmetaphysical grounding of the transcendental as something immanent to the human way of life results in philosophy making much smaller claims about what constitutes the moral or the good life. It is no longer equipped to deal with those issues of existential consolation that are a key feature of all religions and mythologies. Communicative rationality therefore refrains from providing any consolation or answer to the fundamental existential personal questions of: moral despair, suffering, injustice, loss of meaning and death.

Given his marginalisation of religion Habermas is right to caution us about the limits of philosophy in its role as a secular counterpart to religion. But he is also correct when he warns us that 'uncoupling morality from questions of the good life leads to a motivational deficit. Because there is no profane substitute for the hope of personal salvation, we lose the strongest motive for obeying moral commands.' (1999: 35) We are left with a moral motivational deficit. As Taylor puts it, the person is bereft of 'moral sources outside the subject through languages which resonate within him or her, the grasping of an order which is inseparably indexed to a personal vision.' (1996: 510)

It is these issues that I address. In my work I consider:

the extent to which it is possible to develop Habermas's theory of communicative rationality such that the invariants that he outlines can act, not only as validity claims in discourse and argumentation, but can also act as anchors for moral behaviour. That

is, for *reflexive* people with a developed competency for acting *autonomously*, the validity claims can act as ‘secular sacred’, that philosophers are not in a privileged position when it comes to the task of awakening moral consciousness, I will investigate some specific ways in which narrative forms can promote moral behaviour and still be compatible with communicative rationality.

References

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