

**Lecture no. 4:
The 'propositional content' of religious articulations
and the idea of their 'translation'.
A controversy with Jürgen Habermas.**

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Abstract: In his attempt to accept and spell out valuable aspects of the teachings of the great world religions, Jürgen Habermas has developed and repeatedly defended the idea that these valuable aspects should be seen as semantic content-elements that are couched in symbolic forms that belong to pre-rational cultures. To show their value for him would consequently involve a translation into a different symbol system, a medium that is acceptable not only in religious circles, but in the public sphere, especially in the political controversies taking place in enlightened societies.

The lecture will question the idea that in the field of religion a level of propositional content can be defined and argued about on which identical content-elements of different religions can be semantically equivalent (as the concept of translation requires) and can be assessed from a perspective that is neutral to the religious traditions and their expressive resources. It is argued, however, that the necessity to take cultural differences more seriously than Habermas is willing to do, does neither justify a relativistic position nor should it bring an end to intercultural debates.

In his most recent book, a collection of essays published last year under the title 'Post-metaphysical Thinking, vol. II', Jürgen Habermas gives us his so far most comprehensive account of Religion. (People close to him tell me that he is currently working on a monographic book on this same subject.) In the published book, among many other topics, he is discussing some of my own views concerning Religion. I am glad that I am able to take the opportunity of this lecture to give an account of how I see the points of our disagreement on the basis of this most recent book. But let me begin by mentioning that there is not *only* disagreement between us; I also have *learned* quite a lot from his writings. In an earlier lecture I have compared our way of doing Philosophy with the works of two painters, one of them (and here I mean Habermas) creating huge wall paintings or murals, showing large historical battle-scenes. And indeed I have learned a lot from him about broad-scale movements in the history of human thinking. (As some of you might remember, I have been teaching a course here in Fudan about his 'Knowledge and Human Interest'.) Also, as a young man I have found in his writings many valuable suggestions for authors and books I felt I should read. I appreciate these positive sides of our relation all the more, since in our face-to-face encounters I have always found him an agreeable, helpful person, without any pretentious attitudes on account of his superior age or standing in the intellectual community.

As my analogy with the two painters suggests, I am the one who is creating not murals but miniatures, who is occupied by the details, comparable to what we see on the pages of medieval handwritings. Consequently in this lecture I will have to take a close look at what might seem to be rather specialized questions, in order to explain the roots of our disagreement. These mainly concern topics in the Philosophy of Language, but (as I will try to show) they do have consequences for the overall picture of Religion that his and my position will lead to in the end. So both my first lecture (on Religion) and my second lecture (about Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Language) should be of help for understanding what I will have to say today.

In the **first** part of today's lecture I will give a sympathetic sketch of Habermas' account of the *development* of religious thinking, from the archaic times of tribal rituals, until today. Habermas' main idea is that since rituals *have meaning*, it must be possible to spell out this meaning, more or less completely, in propositional language. And he thinks that this process of 'spelling out' is still going on. One reason for him to think so is that, if we would take this process of spelling out as one that by now has been completed, we were unable to understand why Religion still flourishes today, even in advanced societies, instead of having been absorbed by secular language and secular institutions. So Habermas takes the fact that Religion survives as a symptom for pieces of hidden propositional content that he thinks it's symbolic forms must contain. These pieces of content he wants to save by translating them into a rational, i.e. public language, and this in turn for him makes it necessary to put them into propositional form. And the main reason why he thinks that it is *important* to save them is that he supposes that the binding power that a society needs in order to have shared strong evaluations stems from these hidden propositional contents.

In the **second** part of my lecture I will turn to what I see as the points of our disagreement, and this will involve looking at some details. Especially, I will have to take a closer look at Habermas' use of the terms 'reference', 'predication' and 'proposition'. Here I see a tension in his Philosophy of Language: On the one hand he seems to be quite generous as to what kinds of 'things' he is ready to accept as parts of the 'world' to which linguistic expressions can *refer* and about which we *predicate* and thus form *propositions*. Habermas is no reductive Naturalist. On the other hand I see a tendency in his writing to assimilate all possible propositions to the propositions of *Science*, in the broad German sense of 'Wissenschaft' that encompasses both Natural Science and Social Studies. The wide scope of 'things' that he is ready to accept as part of our world, in his view must be captured by sentences expressing *propositions*, sentences that can be true or false.

For him this seems to be a requirement that is necessary in order to secure that all philosophically serious kinds of contents can be treated in 'rational discourse'. I myself see in this step an assimilation of forms of expression that puts too much weight on these forms. It disregards what for me are important differences in the ways in which expressions of the same form can function, so that insisting on a particular form cannot fulfill the work Habermas expects it to fulfill. He seems to think, for example, that sentences like 'there exists a prime number between five and nine' and 'God exists', 'Peter's motive was jealousy' and 'Peter's uncle was an actor' are true or false *in the same sense*: They all claim propositional knowledge. For my understanding (inspired by Wittgenstein) this means to stay on the grammatical *surface* and thereby miss what I take to be important traits in which Religion differs from scientific and everyday forms of knowledge, traits that I would hesitate to describe with the classical terms 'believing' and 'knowing'.

In this section I will also treat some of the consequences that these disagreements about language meaning have for an understanding of Religion. Especially I will question the claim that the fact that rites are *meaningful* for the people performing them, provides a license for the conclusion that this meaning is of a sort that can (and should, for reasons of rationality) be captured by propositional language. So I question the picture that there is in the relevant cases *a single particular content* that is staying the same but is expressed in *two* different media, the performance of a rite on the one hand and the use

of propositional language on the other. But if I am right in denying this, also the idea of a historical process in which more and more pieces of such alleged content are 'translated' into a discursive language is no longer convincing. It is no longer plausible that in religious ways of life and their ritual 'language', there should be something waiting to be translated into a propositional secular language. Also, it is not clear how it should be possible to define the borders of such a secular language: Can we decide which word or which metaphor belongs to the secular side and which does not?

Finally, in the **third** and last part of my lecture I will step back from my miniature painting in order to give a broader sketch of the differences between Habermas and myself in our understanding of Religion and of interreligious and intercultural communication. It seems to me that these differences, to a considerable extent, *result* from our different views on language. Firstly, I do not see that religious language has a special or private vocabulary, and, secondly, I do not see that we should distinguish believing from knowing by saying that believing rests on authority while knowing rests on publicly asserted and accepted reasons. Instead, Religion in my view has to do with faith, and faith is not the same as uncertain belief. So, for my understanding, on both these counts the necessity (and I also think: the possibility) to 'translate' religious utterances disappears. Some words occurring in religious utterances (like the more technical terms in Philosophy or Physics) will in some contexts surely be in need of an *explanation*. But explanations are, in the cases Habermas is thinking of, in which speaker and hearer share a common mother tongue (think of his discussions with Ratzinger, the later pope Benedict) - explanations are no translations. Also, when a speaker tries to justify a claim with recourse to authority, it is not a *translation* what is needed, but a different kind of *justification*.

And secondly, I do not think that the defining properties of a Religion lie in its propositional teachings concerning matters of fact that could be located on the same level as scientific or everyday facts concerning 'things in the world'. Instead, Religions, for my understanding, recommend and teach, on a practical level, ways of looking at the human condition. The defining characteristic of Religion (as compared to Philosophy) is for me is that it teaches how to acquire and sustain an attitude to this condition that enables the person concerned to cope with life. One can express this by saying that Religion is about the *world as a whole*, but this does not mean that it is about the totality of *things*, except when what a thing is, is determined by the surface grammar of the expressions concerned. But I think that the kind of 'aboutness' that is meant when one says that Religion is 'about the human condition' is not something that can be expressed in propositional terms in the usual logical sense, although in articulating his view of the human condition the speaker will also use sentences exhibiting the *grammatical* (surface) form of a proposition.

1. The development of Religion; making implicit contents explicit

Habermas takes his basic understanding of the *origin* and *development* (and also of the *function*) of Religion from the sociologist Emile Durkheim. Of course, ideas about the origin of Religion must remain a matter of speculation, but it is not implausible that socially performed ritual activities might have been at the beginning, like for example a ritual dance. Habermas thinks with Durkheim that one function the performance of such a ritual had for the participants was to strengthen social coherence. This is quite

plausible in the sense that it is easy to see this kind of function today in simple social activities like celebrating a birthday, eating together, or watching a game of football, but also in the habit of going to church on Sundays. It is also plausible to say that for the participants a ritual like a dance (and also the mentioned modern counterparts) *have meaning*. It is in some sense important or 'meaningful' for the respective persons to participate in such activities. It is important for us also today to cultivate our social relations and to share our understanding of who we are.

A next important step that Habermas takes in his attempt to give an account of the historical development of Religion, is his observation that it seems reasonable to suppose that (on a very general level) in the development of human languages there was a movement from the *implicit* to the *explicit*. On the basis of older theories of language development (developed for example by authors such as George Herbert Mead), but also of the latest empirical findings of research about primates (Michael Tomasello), it is plausible, in the following sense: The first steps into language seem to rely on a practical understanding of the 'scene', in the context of which the first words are learned. So in an ontogenetic perspective we can say that, before understanding words and sentences, the human infant must, in her interaction with the care-taking person, understand (in a practical sense) what is going on: for example, that she is being fed, or being cleaned, or (later) is playing with her mother with a ball by rolling it and expecting it to be rolled back. This understanding of scenes (or, speaking with Wittgenstein, of language games) can be called an *implicit* understanding the sense that the young participant is in command of a 'knowing-how', but is as yet unable to *describe* or *explain* anything about what she is doing. She knows how to play the game, but she cannot formulate rules, for example, that could be used to describe and teach the game. One trivial reason for this inability is that she (so far) has only a very few words.

So there indeed seems to be a sense in which a growth in linguistic competence can be described as a movement from the *implicit* to the *explicit*. But we must note here that Habermas understands this movement in a quite particular way, namely, in the light of his well-known language model that postulates (with Karl Bühler) that in every linguistic utterance we can make out three dimensions. A linguistic act, he postulates, is always one performed by a speaker (first dimension), addressed to one or more hearers (second dimension), and it is always *about* something, i.e., it has a content. To characterize the content side, Habermas uses the traditional logical scheme that was for our modern discussions made canonical by Frege (and for Habermas also by the speech act theorist John Searle): He is speaking about the 'propositional content' which is expressed by (firstly) referring to some entity (or a plurality of entities) and (secondly) predicating something of it (or, in the case of a plurality, saying in what relation these entities stand). Using this scheme, Habermas can say that the development from the implicit to the explicit is a process of 'propositional differentiation': More and more aspects of the scenes that at the beginning of language acquisition have been understood in the practical sense of a *knowing how*, can now be discussed, they can be made topics of debates in which the truth or falsity of propositionally formulated sentences is at stake.

Applied to the development of Religion, this account allows Habermas to say that the meaning of a ritual can to a larger and larger degree be *made explicit*. One step in this development he conceives as the step from a tacit *performance* of the ritual to the *telling of a corresponding myth*. As an example one might think here of a performance in

Ancient Egypt symbolizing the rising of the sun, which in a religious context might be perceived as a life-giving power or person, and a corresponding story *about* the sun and how it is setting out for its daily journey through the sky. Different media, so it seems, can relate the same story. Still later, on Habermas' account, *comments* will be given on the meaning of such myths, and so *theology* will come into existence. This background gives substance to what I had mentioned as Habermas' main idea in his understanding of the *development* of Religion: Since rituals have meaning, it must be possible to spell out this meaning first in myths and then in the claims of Theology, and in both cases a propositional language would be used. In principle, Habermas seems to think, this process of 'spelling out' can be completed, i.e. it can be brought to an end in so far as at this point no meaning elements (in a strict, propositional sense, excluding for example emotional aspects of communication, like Bühler's appealing and expressive function) would be left over on the side of the ritual performance. In this sense, there would be no 'content' left that has not been put into a propositional form. Habermas considers it to be one advantage of such a complete transformation that in the end no content-element will be immune from criticism, because all propositionally formulated knowledge claims have been assessed in the public procedures of rational discourse.

Habermas thinks that we have not yet reached this state of a complete 'translation' from meaning-in-performance to meaning-in-sentences; the process of making implicit elements of content explicit is still going on. One reason for him to think so is that, if this process were completed, Religion, as an archaic form of expression, would no longer flourish; it would have been completely absorbed by secular language (and secular institutions) and would therefore be superfluous for the enlightened person. (Which does not exclude, of course, that an enlightened person still enjoys dancing. Only the *propositional* aspects of Religion are no longer needed, according to such a view.) But since Religion is alive and well even in highly developed countries, and it seems to be not convincing to think that this is only because of its emotional aspect, we are well advised to look for further elements of *content* that at the moment are still hidden in religious practices, and we should try to *translate* them into our normal, secular language. This is advisable because there are reasons to think that there is something important in them, something that we should preserve, especially since it seems to be related to (possibly be even the source of) strong normativity. So it is the coherence of society that troubles Habermas, and also the prospect that, if we had accomplished the translation he envisages, we would be able to evaluate the translated content in a critical way. Metaphorically speaking, we would be able to throw away the rubbish and keep the truth.

From the picture as I have painted it so far it seems to be convincing to say that on the implicit stage in the process of language acquisition and also regarding the remaining implicit elements of later stages (these might be described as '*partly* explicit') we should not speak of *knowledge* in the strict sense. In a well-known and helpful terminology we can say that 'knowing how' has to be distinguished from 'knowing that'. Here I am on Habermas' side in insisting that in many contexts a so-called 'tacit knowledge' (or 'knowing how') should not be treated as a special kind of knowledge. For example, we should be very careful to consider where it does and where it does not make sense to speak about 'unconscious' knowledge. In many cases, what we are confronted with is not that the person knows something. It is more that he has what Kant called a 'faculty of judgement'; she finds her way in a certain area of life, like teaching or art criticism, without being able to explain or teach her ability, for example by writing down rules.

But I think that I am stricter than Habermas is in insisting on this distinction. For example, I do not think that all forms of 'knowing-how' can be transformed into a 'knowing-that', I do not think that generally the process of explicating or explaining a certain 'knowing-how' should be described as a transformation of one and the same content from one form of 'having access' to it (practical knowledge, knowledge by acquaintance) to another form of access which then can be called knowing *this same content* in the strict sense of propositional knowledge (or 'knowledge by description'). To explain my doubts, I turn again to the example of some early ritual like a dance or a special ceremony of eating. Here we can distinguish three different senses in which we can say that such a ritual has a meaning:

Firstly, this can mean that it is *important* for the persons performing or watching it. It has a place in their social activities; it connects to other things they do or refrain from doing. In a comparable way, a work of art, even abstract, i.e. non-representational art, may be said to have a meaning; it connects to other works in the history of art and should be seen in their context. The philosopher Arthur Danto has to offer a helpful terminology here when he speaks of the '*aboutness*' that works of art for him must always have. For example, a pop art painting by Roy Lichtenstein can be a comment on paintings produced by abstract expressionists like Jackson Pollock and to understand the Lichtenstein it is helpful to know this. But I would like to distinguish this 'aboutness' from a semantic content in a stricter sense. What Danto means by 'aboutness' is typically explicated by comments, by pointing to the history of painting, or to relations a particular work has to other works of art, etc. Therefore, *explaining* the 'aboutness' of a painting does not mean to mentally take hold of a particular content it would have, and to express this same content in the medium of language. The art critic is not *making the same statement* in the medium of words that the artist has made in the medium of paints on canvas. So in the case of art the activity of explaining something is no translation. This provides us with a reason for asking whether something like this also holds good in Religion.

This seems plausible if again we think of a ritual dance or a ritual meal. Such a ritual will surely be connected to other activities of the social group in which it is performed. We can *describe* this connectedness and thereby explain it or (in one sense of this word) make transparent (some of) its *meaning*. It might for example be connected with the rising of the sun. We can say that a ritual is *about* the sunrise, in the sense that it is related to activities like watching the sun rising, producing a picture of the sun, etc. But I have doubts about the legitimacy to describe all aspects of this type of aboutness in terms of a specific propositional content that can be expressed with help of different media (in our case: the performance of a rite and the utterance of propositional sentences). We can ask why in the case of art it seems obvious that nobody would be willing to give away a particular painting in exchange for a book of comments about this same painting. Surely the collection of comments can be valuable for a better understanding of the work; it can catch some aspects of its meaning. But *propositions about* the work of art are no substitute for the work itself. And I think that the reasons for this are not located only on an emotional, personal level of attachment. I rather think that there are aspects of the 'aboutness' (of the meaning) of the painting that resist a transformation or translation into propositional form.

What I would expect as Habermas' answer to this challenge is the following. He would surely admit that there are more relevant meaning-aspects in art as well as in ritual than only content, as is clear from his discussion of the four types of claims every speaker must make with an act of communication: Besides truth there are the claims of intelligibility, of truthfulness in the sense of honesty, and of normative correctness. The last two are concerned with what Paul Watzlawick has called the 'relationship-aspect' of communication and to Bühler's 'appeal' and 'expression of emotion', and Habermas surely accepts them as important aspects of meaning. But he seems to insist that in all acts of communication a *propositional meaning* (2) can be detected, and this is the component he is interested in for his translation project. But I have doubts here. Although my example of the sun ritual can be said to *be about the sun* in a sense that is comparable to a *story* about the sun, must there really always be a *propositional* content in acts of communication, a type of content that is more than Danto's aboutness? Habermas himself discusses an example of a silent performance in which there clearly is a content in this strict sense:¹ Somebody receives a guest in his house and by silently nodding to an adjacent room and putting his finger at his lips he asks the guest to be quiet, because someone else is sleeping in the room he is gesturing at. Here we have a non-linguistic performance with a clear content in the sense that we can easily supply a sentence the person could have whispered that would have been semantically equivalent to his gesturing. But is this always the case?

To illustrate my doubts, I would like to turn to an example provided by Charles Taylor. It is not unlike the one given by Habermas, but it points into a different direction. It is a kind of communication, it is also a 'performance', it certainly shows 'aboutness' in Danto's sense, but it has no content in the strict sense that would allow us to formulate an equivalent expression in propositional language. Taylor reaches the point of his argument in two steps. Here is the first one (I quote):

"Let us say that you and I are strangers travelling together through some southern country. It is terribly hot, the atmosphere is stifling. I turn to you and say: 'Whew, it's hot.' This does not tell you anything you did not know; neither that it is hot, nor that I suffer from the heat. Both these facts were plain to you before. Nor were they beyond your power to formulate; you probably already had formulated them."² Taylor then comments: "What the expression has done here is to *create a rapport* between us..." ('meaning' no. 3) and a little later he continues: "To talk about this kind of conversation in terms of communication can be to miss the point. For what transpires here is not the communication of certain information." And he adds: "What is really wrong with the account in terms of communication is that it generally fails to recognize public space. It deems all states of knowledge and belief to be states of individual knowers and believers. Communication is then the transmittal, or attempted transmittal, of such states." So Taylor's point is here, using the language that I have used so far, that in the example he discusses it is not the propositional *content* of what is said that is important, but what he calls the creation of a rapport, or a public space.

I think that so far Habermas need not have a problem, because in this case there is something *additional* to content. But now Taylor goes on and modifies his example in a way that questions Habermas' account. Taylor writes: "Think again of the case where I

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² Theories of Meaning, Philosophical Papers I, 259

turn to my neighbor in the hot train carriage; and instead of saying, 'Whew, it's hot in here', I just smile, look towards him, and say 'Whew!', wiping my brow. This can establish a rapport, which phase will indeed normally be followed by usual conversation; but might not be – let us say we have no language in common." And Taylor comments: "Here we have an expressive use of signs, which is unconnected with a characterizing or representative use. There is no depiction in my whole utterance, which combines speech and gesture. Even my mopping my brow is not a depiction. I really need to wipe the perspiration. What I do is lay it on thick, I mop ostentatiously. That is in the nature of this kind of expressive sign. But I really mop."³ These last words seem to fit perfectly well for a ritual like a dance: I certainly has a meaning that can be commented on like in the cases of Danto's aboutness. It establishes a rapport (a fact that fits quite well to Durkheim's theory about the function of religion), but it does not contain acts of referring or predicating, it has no propositional content. Or, as Taylor puts it, it does not depict anything. But if it has an 'aboutness' it would not be correct to reduce its meaning by saying that its function is 'only emotional', it would 'only express feelings' or would only 'appeal' to the communication partner to do something.

2. Reference, predication, and propositional content: A closer look

My last considerations were meant to raise some doubt as to whether all acts of communication (and especially ritual communication) must necessarily contain a content of a type that allows us to 'spell it out', i.e. to transform or translate it in such a way that it will have a propositional form and will express this very content, that before has been hidden, has been present only in an 'implicit' way. I have mentioned Danto's 'aboutness' and Taylor's example of the train trip, as cases that can cast some doubt on such a claim. I will now turn to a passage in Habermas' book in which he himself seems to feel this kind of doubt, and I will discuss the way he takes to preserve his claim of a universal (if sometimes hidden) propositionality in all acts of communication. Here is a quotation from his book:

"Think of a ritual dance. While the rhythmic movements in performing the activity express a sharing of intentions and inspire a copying of the gestures as well as they inspire each participant to take the perspective of the others, so that obviously an intersubjective experience is created, the third arrow of the triadic structure of the sign points to the void." So the case that Habermas is looking at is similar to Taylor's second example: There seems to be nothing that is represented, nothing that would be 'depicted'. When Habermas speaks of 'three arrows' pointing in different directions, he means Karl Bühler's *speaker*, *hearer*, and *state of affairs*, and he observes that there seems to be nothing to which the arrow for pointing to a 'state of affairs' would point in this case.

But while Taylor takes his example as showing that not all communication must have a propositional content, a depicted 'state of affairs', in order to be meaningful for the participants, Habermas wants to cling to Bühler's model, he wants to be able to name a state of affairs also for this case, and so takes a *second* look at his example of the dance. He seems to be determined to find *something*, some state of affairs of which he can say that it is the *object of reference* of the dance. So he continues the text I have quoted (after

³ p. 264

having said that the third arrow seems to point to the void): “ – as long as we look, in order to say what has been experienced and intended, for an object or a state in the *objective* world. The dimension, in which we have to look for the missing object of reference seems to be the evolutionarily new dimension of the socially shared life itself which has first been generated by symbolically mediated communication”⁴ So unlike Taylor, Habermas maintains that also in such cases of ritual communication there is a reference, there is a ‘state of affairs’ which in the act of communication is represented. So our next question has to be: A reference or ‘state of affairs’ in what sense? And what does it mean to say that we are looking for something in the “dimension of the socially shared life”?

At this point we must try to get clear about Habermas’ use of the term ‘objective world’. In the passages just quoted, he first found that there is no reference in the sense of “an object or a state in the *objective* world”. Does this mean that entities in the realm that he mentions in his second step, i.e. entities in the “dimension of the socially shared life” are not objective, are not part of the world, or does he mean to say that once they have come into existence through socially shared activities, they do belong to the (objective) world? I think that other passages in Habermas speak for the second reading, as does our general acquaintance with his work as not trying to defend a reductive naturalism. He would not subscribe to the thesis of Winfried Sellars that only Physics can tell us what entities really exist. For him, also social facts are facts.

On the other hand there are sentences that seem to contradict this reading, for example when he says that in communicative action we would presuppose the objective world “as the totality of objects that exist independently of our description”.⁵ It is not easy to see what the phrase ‘existing independently of our description’ is supposed to mean; Habermas can hardly speak of the Kantian ‘thing in itself’ (Ding an sich). But what *does* he mean? Are statements like ‘here are five apples’ concerned with states of affairs that exist independently of our description (which intuitively seems plausible)? But does this mean that the state of affairs itself contains an object that ‘corresponds’ to (is depicted by) the word ‘five’, which does not sound convincing at all. So shall we rather say that the occurrence of the numeral ‘five’ in our description means that what we are speaking about does *not* exist independently of our description, because *we* have developed Mathematics as one of our means of description? Numbers do not themselves seem to be ‘parts’ of the state of affairs as it exists ‘independent of our means of description’. Here I can also remind you of the main example of my first lecture: What shall we say about the statement ‘there is a prime number between five and nine’? Are not numbers a means of our description of the world; or do they exist in a realm independent of our means of describing the world, like Frege had thought?

Returning to the text of Habermas we find that a few lines later he makes a general defining remark on this problem when he says: “Everything that is made the content of a proposition, is treated as a subject (Thema), as something given or existent in the world.”⁶ If this is what he thinks, numbers are clearly entities that ‘exist in the world’, because we make them the content of propositions like ‘the number seven is prime’. But

⁴ p. 67 f.

⁵ P. 24 f.

⁶ „Denn alles, was zum Inhalt einer Proposition gemacht wird, wird als etwas in der Welt Gegebenes oder Bestehendes zum Thema.“ 25

what will this mean for Religion: Must a Christian believer of our days claim that God 'exists in the world', and what would this mean?

I think that all the quoted remarks *taken together* allow the conclusion that Habermas clearly does not opt for a kind of reductive Naturalism. But we have to be careful to understand what it is that he opts for instead. As I understand him, his position amounts to what I would call a purely *formal* or 'grammatical' definition of 'referring', of 'predicating', and of 'state of affairs', and consequently, for a formal and therefore an extremely wide understanding of the phrase 'thing in the world': *Everything* we can speak about, if we can establish that it is a rational way of speaking, is a 'thing in the world' in this extremely wide sense. Before turning to the consequences that such a view has in the Philosophy of Religion, I will now discuss some details of our disagreement.

As I had tried to explain in my original Vienna paper, my main objection is that the kind of work that is required from philosophers when they try to understand what is valuable in Religion, does not have the nature of a *translation*. It is important here, that the term 'translation' that Habermas uses again and again is understood in a literal sense. For example, it is a well-known fact that certain elements of the Religion of Ancient Egypt have had an influence on early Christian thinking. This kind of influence can be found everywhere in the world of literature: When writing his 'Faust', Goethe was influenced by Marlowe. Thomas Mann was influenced by Goethe when writing his own 'Dr. Faustus', etc. But this does not make the Christian teachings that are so influenced *translations* of the Egyptian teachings, or Thomas Mann's book a translation of Goethe or Marlowe. So I think that if Habermas' translation thesis is to be taken seriously it must mean more than a claim of an influence in the history of human writing. For example, it cannot just be an inspiration about figures and plots. A strong indicator that Habermas indeed means (or has originally meant) more than this kind of influence is that for him it is important to speak of *propositional* content when he looks for semantic elements in Religion that are worth while to be preserved. So we have to look for elements of meaning in the propositional sense: To what entities does a certain religious text refer and what does it claim about these entities? Only when the philosopher who is trying to translate the content has given answers to these questions (in a secular language, of course) can we say that he has singled out a *propositional* content and only then can we try to assess it as true or false in the sense in which sentences can be true or false.

When we look at Habermas' new book, however, we find that he does not substantiate his translation thesis in a way that would allow a literal reading of the expression 'translation'. In his answer to my criticism, on the level of single words he does not give examples of translations, but of historical influences. He is correct in calling them "fairly trivial", but they fail to give support to his claim. So for example he correctly mentions that there is an etymological connection between the secular German term '*bitten*' (meaning: to ask somebody for something) and the word '*beten*' (meaning: to pray). But for my understanding this connection does not at all mean that between these two words we have a relation of semantic equivalence or *translation*.

Habermas seems at some places to be ready to accept such a criticism, when he, for example, speaks of a "partial translation". This fits well to the overall picture we get from him. He seems to claim that the religious term 'beten' has two elements of meaning, one is a secular element, translated by 'asking for', a second one is the religious element,

which so far is not accessible to a secular language, and therefore is still waiting for translation. So the meaning of 'to pray' would contain two elements. We could write this down as 'asking for + x', and the meaning component symbolized by 'x' would be the religious meaning element. Habermas has no proposal as to what to put in for this x. We can speculate whether a phrase like 'and God is the addressee' would point into the direction he has in mind. But this will only work when also for 'God' he has a proposal to make, as to how this name could be translated into a secular referring expression, so that in the end there would be a secular proposition. I admit that it might be asking too much of him when we demand to hear his own proposal for such a translation, since his very claim is that some of the religious content-elements are still hidden from our view, and this will, in many cases, include: hidden also from *his* view. But still it would have helped to see at least a few convincing examples for a successful translations of words.

But I also have some general doubts. I am not convinced of the atomistic view of 'meaning elements' that would be different from words and paragraphs and would enable one to speak of 'partial translations' in a directly content-related sense. And I do not find it helpful to think that such meaning-atoms must be translated one by one, in order to finally achieve the goal of a 'complete' translation, one that is able to preserve what is valuable in Religion by having spelled it out, having made it explicit. Also in other areas of cultural development such an atomistic approach seems to fail. Think of the terms 'love' and 'sex' as being used by, for example, our parents on the one hand, and our children on the other, in order describe certain relationships they have to some of their friends. I do not think that it would be helpful to say that the modern term 'sex' is a *partial translation* of 'love', although the relation that had in a particular case been described with help of the word 'love' might have included a sexual relation. A 'partial translation' of a paper might leave out the first paragraph or the last sentence, but the relation of parts and wholes does not hold on the level of 'pure content', and also, I think, Habermas cannot mean a part-whole relationship on the level of the 'state of affairs' spoken about. To give a trivial illustration: 'steering wheel' is not a partial translation of 'car' although all functioning cars have as one of their parts a steering wheel. So entities and states of affairs might have parts that go together in a certain way, but this does not mean that their descriptions have corresponding parts and the sentence has a corresponding structure. Also it does not mean that translations of these descriptions again have parts ordered in an isomorphic way. I am astonished to see here a way of atomistic thinking about meaning that normally is associated with the early Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*.

When I now turn from words to sentences (in their function as expressions of propositions) we must note that Habermas does not supply a single example for a propositional content that has made its way from a specific Religion to our secular realm. If such an example should support the translation-thesis in its literal reading of a semantic equivalence relation between two sentences, it would have to show that we have two referring expressions naming the same object, and two synonymous predicate expressions. Here too, I would suppose that Habermas has in mind continuities and influences in the history of human thought, but not translations in the literal sense. From my knowledge of his other writings I would suppose that he might point to an example of the following kind: The relation one might see between the Christian teaching, that every human person has been created by God, on the one hand, and the modern doctrine of Human Rights, on the other, might be seen by him as a case of a 'translation'. But I think that also here, where we have a case of a meaning relation between two sentences,

i.e. of propositional content that can be true or false, what we find are not cases of translation in any strict sense. The two sentences considered are not equivalent on a semantic level. To be more explicit: Is a sentence like 'evolution has produced human beings that by nature are such that nobody is allowed to interfere with the preconditions of their being persons' a *translation* of a sentence like 'God has created Adam and Eve'? Is it even an attempted translation, something like the 'partial translation' Habermas has in mind; is it, in this sense, an imperfect translation? I would claim that it is not; it is not *any kind* of translation.

What we have instead in the case mentioned might be called a *pragmatic equivalence*, in contradistinction to a *semantic* one. This expression would mean to say that the *practical wisdom* taken from either version might be the same. But this neither *is* in itself, nor does it presuppose an equivalence on the semantic level. Therefore we might well speak of historical *lines of influence* of one religion on another religion or of influences religious ideas have had on secular teachings, but in both these cases, what we are speaking of are not translations. In a comparable fashion, two ways of telling how one could get from here to Peoples Square might be *pragmatically equivalent* in the sense that they can help two people to achieve the same result in different ways, namely, to meet each other at People's square. But this does not at all mean or require that the two descriptions of the two ways are *translations* of each other.

From all this I conclude that what is really at stake here is not propositional truth, but rather the 'truth' (or adequacy, or practical helpfulness) of sentences (like in traditional formulations of wisdom) or (in most religious cases) of whole stories. I would like to turn to two passages in Habermas' text in which he seems to acknowledge this. In his new introduction to the volume under discussion he tells us that in his older writings he made a step that he now considers to have been "too hasty and too inclusive."⁷ This was the assumption "that the rationally motivating binding power of good reasons ... can *generally* be seen as stemming from a pre-verbal common understanding that at first was secured by ritual, but then finds its way into language." (13) The route that the contents of the domain of the sacred take into language, Habermas says, he sees somewhat different today: "Only when ritual meanings found their way into language by means of mythical tales, the psychodynamic opposition between good and evil (which has been tacitly present in the performance of the rituals, H.J.S.) was able to assimilate itself to the binary code of propositions and utterances (being true or false and truthful or untruthful) and establish a third validity claim, that of right and wrong." (14) I take this to mean that Habermas acknowledges that mythical stories that are shared by a community can to a certain degree perform the function that in older times was performed by rituals. And 'performing the same function' is a *pragmatic* equivalence relation, not a semantic relation as is claimed by the translation thesis.

I think that this is quite plausible, and I also think that this step from a performance of rites to the telling of a story by means of language either created or improved the possibility to reflect on the understanding that the members of the cultural group had developed of their situation and were transmitting from one generation to the next in the beginning with the help of their *rites*, but also (on the new stage in their development) as by sharing the mythical *stories*. I can also agree that ethical validity claims of the type 'this is how you treat your wife' or 'this is how you prepare the burial

⁷ „...vorschnell von der überinklusive Annahme ausgegangen...“ (Seite 13)

of your dead father' can on the new stage of development be stated and (in principle can be critically assessed) in a new (more explicit) way.

I wonder, however, about the next steps to be taken in this line of thought. I had mentioned that Habermas in his discussion of a ritual dance, first finds that the arrow normally pointing to a 'state of affairs', in ritual communication points into the void and that he then proposes to say that it *does* point to something after all. I quote him again: "The dimension, in which we have to look for the missing object of reference seems to be the evolutionarily new dimension of the socially shared life itself which has first been generated by symbolically mediated communication." Does this allow us to say that the 'missing object' is (in my words) 'the understanding that the members of the respective cultural group have developed of their situation', the understanding that they are transmitting from one generation to the next, by social activities and by telling stories? It might sound queer to call 'the understanding that a social group has of itself' an *object in the world*. But if I am right in thinking that Habermas has a purely formal understanding of 'object' or 'thing' (defining it as everything that we can speak about), then it clearly makes sense to consider whether we want to say that what a ritual or a myth is referring to is this object 'self-understanding'. (Habermas himself often speaks about our 'self- and world-understanding'.)

What I do not see, however, is the reason why Habermas wants to assign the special role to *single propositions* and to *the propositional form*. Why is it not a *myth as a whole* that articulates and transmits through the generations a particular view of the human condition, a view that is characteristic for this particular Religion or culture? Certainly myths and other stories are meaningful for the members of the group out of which they have grown, and questions about aspects of their meanings can be *explained* to newcomers and can be discussed in a way comparable to a discussion of meaning-aspects of works of art that I have mentioned earlier under the title of their 'aboutness'. But this does not mean that it makes sense to speak in an isolating fashion of 'the meaning' of such a myth, and to attempt to formulate it in terms of its 'propositional content', so that the sentence expressing the content could then be translated into a semantically equivalent sentence of a secular language that can be judged as being true or false. So my proposal at this point is to look at the *function* of a myth or story *as a whole*, to discuss its meaning in terms of its 'aboutness', and to give up the idea that if we, as enlightened members of advanced societies want to take it seriously, must first translate it into a number of propositions, each of which can individually be judged as to its truth or falsehood.

When Habermas asks whether an enlightened person must take Religion seriously as a contemporary expression of our spiritual life, we can note that he sounds a bit perplexed by the fact that this doubtful question *is* applied to religion today (especially by himself), but not to art. He writes (75): "It is interesting to see that we do not ask this question with regard to the modern forms of art, although the attempt to express in words the content ('Gehalt') of symphonies and paintings, of architectural forms, of designs, and ornaments, of ballet-performances or sculptures, even in the writings of professional art critics meets similar limits of discursive explication. Aesthetic experiences can be approached and commented on conceptually (i.e. in words, HJS) but cannot be captured ('einholen') in explicit propositions without a rest." Yes, indeed. But I would think that, instead of being perplexed about the case of art, it is worthwhile to ask if not the same is true for Religion. If aesthetic and religious experiences are alike in this respect, the

conclusion we should draw from this (like from the example I have quoted from Charles Taylor) would be to give up the idea that the meaning we want to preserve from traditional religious teachings must be of the propositional kind.

I had mentioned in my introduction that one of the motives for Habermas' insistence to bring the expressions of all respectable kinds of content into the propositional form is that he thinks he can in this way preserve the privileged status of rational discourse, and this includes, I think, that it will guarantee that the question of truth and falsehood can be raised. In his discussion of my view of Religion he expresses his fear that my understanding might endanger this privileged status. But of course Habermas must be aware that the propositional form alone does not guarantee the rationality of a piece of discourse, because we can express claims about witches and fairies in a propositional form, and indeed we normally do so when we tell fairy tales. So Habermas adds that the language used must be accessible to all participants (i.e., no words are allowed the meanings of which are claimed to be knowable only by insiders, in our case: only by religious believers) and that reasons brought forward must also be acceptable for all; for example, they must not exclusively rest on the authority of religious teachers. (199) If these additional demands are fulfilled, Habermas seems to think, because of the obligatory propositional form of all truth claims, the participants can (firstly) get hold of the 'thing' that the claim is about (i.e. they can understand the reference act) and then (secondly) investigate whether the act of predication (and thus the proposition that the speaker claims to be true) is justified.

I myself think that to insist on the propositional form does not really help much because (as I have explained in my Wittgenstein lecture) this form is a matter of what Wittgenstein calls the 'surface structure' of language. In my Religion-lecture I have spent a considerable amount of my time on an attempt to show that a claim like 'there is at least one prime number between five and nine' only *sounds* like a sentence such as 'there is at least one subway station between *Shanghai Railway Station* and *Peoples Square*. 'Getting hold of the thing spoken about' means something completely different in the case of the number seven and the case of the subway station. Among Wittgenstein's favorite examples of the potentially misleading character of the reference-predication structure are statements with the help of which we speak about 'mental states and events'. Since Habermas is no reductive naturalist, things like motives and intentions for him do belong to the 'things in the objective world'. But I think that Wittgenstein has shown conclusively that when I speak of my intention, 'getting hold of the thing spoken about' is again something quite different both from the everyday-case of the subway stations and also from the more complicated case of the prime numbers. Again what is needed in order to avoid confusion is a practical acquaintance with the *uses* of the expressions in question. And this includes that in some cases we have to look at the uses of whole phrases and even whole stories.

Turning to Religion and looking at singular sentences as examples, I would claim that in sentences like 'God is full of mercy' or 'nirvana and samsara are the same' the acts of reference and predication have to be understood in ways that are again so different from the cases discussed, that the observation that both of these claims exhibit the propositional form does not help for an attempt to assess their rationality in the context of discourse. Concerning the first sentence it is not at all clear what it would mean to 'get hold of God as the thing spoken about'. Surely the position taken by Habermas on this point is not the one taken by Richard Dawkins: Empirical investigations in outer space

will not find an object that by religious people is called 'God'. Dawkins concludes from this that such a 'thing' does not exist, which Habermas does not. If one is talking to a person educated in an atheistic surrounding, it is clearly necessary to give an *explanation* at this point. But again I ask: Will this take the form of a translation? – The same question can be raised with respect to the second part of the proposition: What does 'full of mercy' mean when this quality is ascribed to God? Again I think the problem is not of the kind that could be solved by proposing a translation; we *know* the meaning of 'mercy'. But it is reasonable for the person brought up outside the Christian religion to ask for an explanation. So these are my reasons for thinking that Habermas puts too much weight on the propositional form. Explanations of the particular religious contents are needed in any case, regardless of the *form* of the religious utterance. Propositional sentences need as much explanation as hymns or prayers do.

I now want to return to larger semantic units like myths and other stories and to the question whether they, like art, may exhibit an 'aboutness' but not a 'content' that could be expressed propositionally in a more than surface-oriented way. If I am right in supposing that for Habermas also 'the way in which we understand ourselves and the world' is a thing in the world because we can speak about it, then again the sheer fact that the mentioned expression can be the subject of a sentence does not tell us much. In philosophical or scientific speculations about what kinds of objects self-understandings are (for example, when some philosophers ask whether they can be located in the brain), their grammatical status as 'things spoken about' can even lead us astray. This can be compared to the example discussed by Charles Taylor that he commented by saying that calling it a case of communication is on the edge of getting it wrong, because it invites us to look for a piece of information that is communicated, and the whole point of his example was that in his case there is no such information. So we might indeed say that Religion is about the ways, in which we understand ourselves, and the world; I myself would endorse this claim. But what sort of 'thing' is a 'way of understanding'? How can we discuss different 'ways of understanding' and their qualities? How do these qualities relate to the truth of single sentences, can a 'content' of a story be put into a single propositional sentence? And can we then judge whether this sentence is true or false? Are such transformations necessary in order to facilitate rational discourse?

3. The general picture: Religion and rational discourse, believing and knowing

When I now step back in order to give a sketch of the overall pictures that on the one side Habermas' and on the other my own account give of Religion, one way of characterizing the differences between the two is to say that Habermas has a *one-level model* whereas I myself would try to defend a *two-level model*. In speaking of only one level in the case of Habermas, I mean to say that he is concerned with what he considers to be elements of propositional truth in religious forms of symbolization that, even if they are not easily accessible, still are *of the same kind* as truths in our ordinary secular lives. Without this premise, it seems to me, the translation-view cannot be made intelligible. If religious truths were of a completely different kind, it would be impossible to understand what a *translation* of them could be.

But of course also Habermas recognizes a *difference* between *religious* teachings on the one hand and the truth claims we encounter in our *ordinary secular lives*, on the other. So what is this difference, in his view? It fits to what I call his *one-level model* that what

he sees as characteristic of this difference is, firstly, a difference in *vocabulary*: Religious language contains words, the meanings of which for a secular person are not easily accessible. And secondly Habermas sees a difference in the ways that are admissible for a *justification* of truth claims. In Religion, an appeal to *authority* counts as a justification, but this is not the case in an enlightened secular context. Both these differences are not differences of level, in my way of speaking, because also in the secular realm we can differentiate for example between the vocabulary of Physics and the vocabulary of Biology. Likewise, in our school years, justification by appeal to the authority for example of a teacher was common practice.

Religious vocabulary, Habermas claims, includes single expressions and presumably also more complex ways of talking that only religious people can understand, because these expressions are rooted in a special practice from where their meaning derives. People with a secular orientation do not share this practice and therefore do not (or do not fully) understand these words. This idea, I think, is the heart of the translation project. To mention one more of his examples, when a believer speaks of a behavior as being 'sinful', the secular person may ask herself whether what is meant here is the same as what she would express with the word 'bad', or 'very bad indeed', or something else, for which in the secular vocabulary no translation has yet been found.

Concerning the second characteristic that Habermas attributes to religious communication, namely, that there is a difference as to what modes of justification are admissible, some of its aspects might have to do with his translation thesis, but others might not. In the latter case, the difference in terms of acceptable ways of justification (namely, that in Religion, but not in secular discourse justification by authority is acceptable) is independent of the purported difference in languages. So for example the Christian statement that Jesus of Nazareth was the 'son of God' can either be treated as being intelligible (given that, for argument's sake, we at the moment do not question the intelligibility of the name 'God') and has to be accepted on the authority of Jesus, even if the secular person finds it difficult to believe. Or the whole sentence can be treated as being in need of translation. But in this second case, from my point of view the question has to be raised whether it is really a *translation* of the sentence 'Jesus was the son of God', what we are looking for, or rather an *interpretation* of the sentence: What does it mean for the community concerned when it is said that a religious teacher or a prehistoric Chinese emperor is said to be a 'son of God' or 'the son of Heaven', what are the *uses* of these ways of speaking?

And this brings me to the second model. What are the characteristics of the *two-level model* that I myself would want to defend? A second level gets into the picture with my claim that the truths we philosophers are looking for in religious communication are *not* of the same kind as truths in our ordinary secular lives, truths about tables, trees, or animal species. But my reason for saying so is not because Religions treat of special transcendent objects, like spirits and ghosts and that for some reason objects from this transcendent realm cannot really be captured by a literal use of language. For my understanding, a second level of meaning comes in because the subject matter of religious communication is the human condition or central aspects of it. A ritual dance, a religious myth or story tells us something about our human situation, seen through the eyes of the particular tradition that these acts of communication belong to. In this respect I see religious teachings as comparable to what children can learn from fairy tales. As the child-therapist Bruno Bettelheim has shown, children learn from fairy tales

something important for their emotional life with their parents, for example. But in order to be able to learn this kind of content, it is not at all necessary that they falsely think that these tales are true in a literal sense. Of course, children cannot explain what they have learnt, but the therapist can see (and he can also explain) that they did so.

If we assume for a moment that such a view can be defended, it is obvious that it does not entail the claim that religious communication is characterized by a special vocabulary that would be intelligible only for insiders. The vocabulary of fairy tales and myths in most cases is well known to the general readers. Typically, small children can understand such tales, and in case they do not understand an old-fashioned expression, it can easily be explained. For this reason, if such a tale in a given situation is difficult to comprehend, the usual remedy is to comment on it, to characterize its 'aboutness', but not to try to translate it, proposition by proposition, or as a whole. We have encountered an acknowledgement of this way of explaining the meaning of something in Habermas' writing on the case of art. Likewise, asking for the meaning of a fairy tale is not asking for a formulation of its 'propositional content' in terms taken from a different language. In this sense I would want to say that the level of explaining the meaning of a myth (what does it say about the human condition?) is *one level above* the literal meaning of the words and of the story told, and so again we can say that what we need here is not a translation, but a comment on the use of the story.

Therefore, Habermas is quite right when he says that in my attempts to understand Religion I am not so much interested in specific doctrines as taught by a specific religious tradition, but rather in 'religiosity'. I can agree to this if it means: I am (in a first step) interested in the *pragmatics* of religious discourse: What is it that is at stake in religious communication? And for this reason I suppose that he is also correct in expecting that, in the end, the content of the sentences that *he* will one day reach as the results of his translation project, will be closer to what the believers themselves would want to claim. But for my understanding it is crucial that, in our times, a considerable number of claims that sound as if they would compete with scientific or everyday knowledge can be interpreted in such a way that a competition does not arise; they can (in a wide sense) be read metaphorically. To say that God has created the world for me does not mean to defend a cosmology that could stand as an alternative to science. Therefore, if I want to make intelligible the value of religious teaching, I need a second level of content. *In speaking about cosmological matters* Religion states something about our lives as humans on this earth, but the cosmology here can be interpreted as a means of expression, not as a truth claim that can compete with science. This again shows that for me a translation on the propositional level is not what is needed.

If this distinction between a one-level model in the writings of Habermas and a two-level model in my own view is transparent, it is not surprising that there is a corresponding difference between our ways of understanding the opposition between believing and knowing. As I have mentioned in my introduction to this lecture, I read Habermas as understanding a phrase like 'person P believes that a' in the sense that P thinks that 'a' is true, but that she knows that she has no sufficient reasons to do so. So we are on the level of examples like: Do I *only believe* that I have switched off the lights before leaving the apartment (because I have the habit of doing so), or do I really *know* this, have I checked? Since Habermas thinks that in religious contexts many claims are made that have not been checked (and in many cases presumably are impossible to check, like pronouncements about the last judgement) it seems natural to say that they are 'only

believed' on the basis of the authority of the religious teachers of the respective tradition, they are not really known. Seeing things in this way would again mean to stay on only *one* level of meaning: the 'literal', 'propositional', or 'factual' level.

But I think that Habermas is not committed to claiming that *all* religious statements have to be read on a literal level, and he certainly knows enough about the history of theology to have seriously considered non-literal readings for at least *some* religious doctrines. But then he should also be able to see that at least in these cases what a philosopher tries to furnish is not a translation of the sentences expressing such a doctrine, but an explanation of their 'aboutness'. And if he could accept the claim that religious teachings are about the human condition, he has, in this very step, accepted what I call the 'second level'. If now I myself were asked what religious *belief* is (in contradistinction to everyday- or scientific *knowledge*), my first answer would be to point to a difference in *subject matter*, not in the *degree of certainty* that the one or the other kind of propositions would have. Religious teachings have as their subject matter 'the human condition'. This subject matter is typically treated by telling stories, and these stories (as wholes) can be more or less '*adequate*' on the second level of meaning, regardless of their *truth* on the first (i.e. the literal) level. To discuss such a claim of the adequacy of a story or a whole tradition of stories is different from assessing truth claims that are couched in single sentences or whole theories. And so I would say that religious belief (or 'faith', to distinguish the religious from the everyday- and the scientific realm) is not a kind of uncertain knowledge, but instead is a kind of trust a person has for a particular view that is shared by a religious community and spelled out in the forms of life of a religious tradition.

Therefore it is a misunderstanding when Habermas thinks that it is my intention to do away with the distinction between religious belief and everyday- or scientific knowledge. I want to keep the distinction, but I would like to draw the borderline in a different way. For me, religious belief has to do with the human situation, whereas knowledge has to do with the 'things in the world', be it our everyday-world or the world of the sciences. So for me 'the human situation' is no 'thing in the world', although, considered on the grammatical surface, we can talk about 'it'. So it is not the degree of certainty of what we say, but it is a question of the subject matter we are talking about that separates these two modes of being related to content. This does not rule out that our view of the human situation relies on trust to a larger degree than our view of everyday- and scientific matters, and this fact might be expressed by saying that in Religion 'belief' (or as I would rather say: faith, trust) plays a more important role than it does in Science. We have to trust our parents and our teachers in the beginnings of our lives, and only gradually and with hesitation can we try to check whether what they have taught us fits to our own experience of what it means to live as a human being. We all know that this includes the possibility of severe crises and a complete break-up with the tradition that we were born into. But I hesitate to describe this kind of trust as a case of relying on the authority of revelation, as Habermas sometime illustrates it, or a person with a special status in a religious organization. This illustration suggests that it could be a rational alternative (instead of trusting your *parents* about matters of the human situation) to ask your *science teacher* to provide a proof for their teachings. But this again would be to stay on just *one* level.

A second consequence of the two-level model is that the discussions we will have when the adequacy or inadequacy of a description of the human situation is at stake are more

like discussions of works of art than discussions about scientific theories. I had mentioned that for the case of art Habermas acknowledges that there are limits to capturing a purported 'whole' of their content in a propositional language. So again, it is not a translation what we need when we try to understand the second-level meaning of religious teachings, but (as in art criticism) what we need are helpful comments concerning the 'aboutness' of these stories. They should help us to understand the relevance (or irrelevance) of these teachings for our own lives: In what respects is it also *my* situation that is described?

Do we want to say that such discussions are inside the domain of what Habermas calls 'rational discourse'? What he has to say about reference, predication, and propositional knowledge sometimes sounds as if his answer here would be a clear 'no': If the subject matter is the human situation and if this subject cannot be captured by propositionally formulated sentences (but rather, say, by stories, poems, works of art), then such formulations do not belong to rational discourse, to the domain of truth and falsehood. Some of the religious and artistic formulations Habermas certainly considers as valuable, but I am not sure that he would include an attempt to evaluate them in what he calls rational discourse.

On the other hand, certain of Habermas' formulations seem to point into the opposite direction. These formulations have to do with the very general (or 'formal') interpretation he gives to the phrase 'thing in the world'. I have mentioned that he says of a ritual dance that the thing it is about, the state of affairs that Bühler's content arrow points to, we would find in the "...evolutionarily new dimension of the socially shared life itself which has first been generated by symbolically mediated communication." So is a certain view of the human situation that is expressed in religious teachings and traditions not something in this dimension, something "generated by symbolically mediated communication"? But if this were so, are not understandings of the human situation as expressed by religious teachings 'things in the world', after all, that can be made the subject of a rational discourse, like works of art? In both cases we would have to accept that their 'content' cannot be translated into a scientific language, but this would prevent neither 'what art is about' nor 'what religion is about' to become the subject of a rational discourse.

When in his answer to my Vienna paper Habermas characterizes the language into which he wants to translate religious utterances by saying that the simple requirement that the language must be public is enough, I have no objections to make. A 'rational discourse' about what art and Religion both have to teach us should take place in the public space of giving and accepting reasons, all questions concerning the meaning of single words or larger units of communication should be admitted, although I think that the answers to be given in many cases will not be translations. No secret language should be allowed and no truth claim should be decided by just saying 'our teacher said so'. So I myself would plead for a wide understanding of 'rational discourse' that would include exchanges about the meanings of artworks and religious stories. To be sure, the difference between a poem (first person perspective) and a discourse about the poem (third person perspective) remains as intact as the difference between a prayer and a discussion about the meaning of prayers. But the participants of the discourse about the poem or the prayer must be able to understand what it would mean to see their own situation in the light of the poem or the prayer. But for this understanding a translation of the poem into the idiom of daily life is not necessary.

I would like to close my lecture by answering three more questions. The first one is this: Is it possible for a person subscribing to my understanding of Religion to be a religious person herself? And secondly: What does this understanding of Religion mean for the interreligious dialogue and for intercultural communication? My answer to the first question is yes. A fully rational person can evaluate the picture that for example the Christian Religion is painting of the human condition and she could form the judgement that it is very good indeed, or even the best one available in the history of human cultures. Saying something like this is a judgement on what I have called the second level of content. I see no reason that a person should not be competent on both the first level (the level of the stories told) and on the second level (of judging the adequacy of the story as a helpful picture for coping with life as it really is). A person can also be an excellent artist and be *also* competent in talking *about* art and supplying helpful comments that enable us to understand works of art that have been produced by other artists, not by himself.

And this brings me to the second question: Is it (according to my interpretation of Religion) possible to understand one's own life in terms of one particular Religion and also to understand what it means for someone else to understand *her* life in terms of another tradition? Again my answer is yes, and this goes also for whole cultures. Since in my view the religious person will again and again go through periods in which she might not see clearly how her religious tradition fits her life's episodes, she has to make judgements about the adequacy also in her own context. But then it should also be possible to understand the outlook of another culture and another religion, and to discuss questions of adequacy in an interreligious and intercultural discourse. This can be difficult, of course, but there are no principal ("philosophical") hindrances. Indeed, Charles Taylor, a Roman-Catholic, has expressed in a recent discussion that he feels *obliged* by his Christian religion to make serious attempts to understand followers of Religions different from his own.

And this is the last question, the one that concerns Habermas the most, I think, when he thinks that Religion is important: Where can the binding powers of strong evaluations come from in a modern enlightened society? I think they can still come from Religion. If it is true that the 'content-side' of Religion is the adequacy of its teachings as a picture of our human situation (in the three catchwords of Buddhism: confronting sickness, old age and death), then a sharing of a view of life, together with a practice of encouraging each other to cling to this view also in times of crisis, will create a strong binding power. But in order that this can work, two conditions must be given: It must be clear that many pronouncements of the tradition should not be interpreted in a literal sense. And secondly it must be clear that the human predicament should be a subject of serious discussion. Such a discussion should not be neglected in favor of false promises as produced by the consumer-society. In both these respects it is not irrational to think that improvements might be possible.