Introduction: Tertium Datur

The history of philosophy is probably nothing but a growing awareness of the difficulty of thinking.

In the meantime, we tread a no-man's land, an in-between that is uncertain even of the uncertainties that flicker everywhere. Suspension of truths! Unusual times!

— PN 55 / 81–82

In the modern age thought increasingly must do without a substantial and fundamentally onto-theological determination of philosophical reason and rationality. No longer can modern thinkers reconcile the concept of theoretical reason with the idea of an all-encompassing speculation on metaphysical grounds, establishing a “mirror of nature,” as Richard Rorty succinctly puts it, a reflection on (and of) being, including, ultimately, the highest Being, the One and All, traditionally called “God.” Similarly, modern thought has ceaselessly stripped practical reason of its basis and its confidence in concrete communal conceptions of the forms in which the good life (das gute Leben) might be available, whether historically or in the present. The texts that will interest us here explore and avoid—or, more carefully, bracket—such possibilities for life as one of their central themes. Finally, modern thinking has relentlessly severed the making of aesthetic judgments from the imitation (mimesis) or figural representation of the natural object, from the expression of moral imperatives and the dictates of political engagement, as well as from preestablished identities and fixed determinations of the self. Kant’s Copernican turn effected a reversal of perspective which located knowledge, action, and judgment squarely within the constructive and synthetic faculty of the individual human intellect and its freedom. But the erosion of metaphysics didn’t stop there.

As the tradition of Frankfurt School Critical Theory from Theodor W. Adorno to Jürgen Habermas reminds us, it would nevertheless be overhasty to reduce the concept of reason—in the wake of naturalism and
culturalism, relativism and hermeneutical skepticism— to an exclusively subjective, even instrumentalist disposition, whose generality and ultimate universality is mere illusion, indeed, no more than a fundamentally fictional narrative on a grand scale. As Habermas rightly claims in Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne (The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity): “Reason is valid neither as something ready-made, as an objective teleology that is manifested in nature or history, nor as a mere subjective faculty.” In his intellectual project Habermas attempts to persuade us that, in a modern theory of rationality, although the universal conditions of possibility for reasonable thought and action, like those for aesthetic judgment and expression, are not a given, written in Nature, one can at least reconstruct them in a formal — more precisely, formally pragmatic — way. In marked contrast to the Husserlian and Heideggerian concern with the “transcendental historicity” and “formal indication” of idealizations and all other essential linguistic, practical, and imaginative features of human existence — and still farther from Foucault’s archaeology of the “historical a priori” (to which some critical chapters of The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity are devoted) — Habermas’s inquiries retain a notion of reason and rationality which is at once more emphatic, proleptic, and fragile. In his view a philosophically and empirically informed critical theory that could have relevance for social, legal, and political questions (and be in tune with the sensibility of modern subjects) should not search for transcendental essences, categories, existentials, paradigms, or even epistemes but should limit its ambition to capturing more elusive motifs and motivations. Yet Habermas is convinced that the “reproduction of life forms and life histories leaves behind impressions in the soft medium of history which, under the strained gaze of those seeking traces

1. Jennifer Hornsby notes that the term naturalism “is commonly used nowadays for the position that the mind’s place is in nature, that conscious purposive subjects are simply elements of the natural world. The presumed alternative to naturalism in this sense, branded Cartesian Dualism, holds that minds are unnatural things — that conscious purposive subjects are not through and through a part of the natural world” (Simple Mindedness: In Defense of Naïve Naturalism in the Philosophy of Mind [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997], 2). We will come to the terms culturalism, relativism, and skepticism later.

2. Jürgen Habermas, Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne: Zwölf Vorlesungen (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1985), 69 n. 4 / The philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 392 n. 4. In the following references to this work, as well as to all other cited texts for which a translation is available, page references to the English translation will precede references to the German (or French) original, either parenthetically in the text or in the footnotes.
[Spurensuchern], solidify into sketches [Zeichnungen] and structures,”³ whose minimal traits are far from irrelevant. It is from these, he believes, that the philosophical and empirically oriented discourse of modernity, with its agenda of personal and political emancipation—that is to say, of individual and collective learning processes—should take its lead.

Of course, the formal theory of communicative rationality, as Habermas will come to call it, can always err in its reconstruction of these fundamentally contingent, unstable, and fragile “configurations.”⁴ It can grasp the “encoded [verschlüsselte] indications in the trace of unfinished, interrupted, and misguided processes of self-formation [Bildungsprozesse] that transcend the subjective consciousness of the individual”⁵ only as hypothetical and counterfactual clues to what constitutes reason and reasonableness in their formal (i.e., rational) feature.⁶ It lacks the competence to determine the temporally and culturally—indeed, ethically and politically—variable content (Substanz, Gehalt) which would translate, incarnate, yet also distort these formal features. Hence, it must suspend—or, in phenomenological parlance, bracket—all philosophical judgment concerning concrete and singular matters of fact and value. Its naturalism and cognitivism goes only so far and avoids determining the good life in empirical or conceptual terms. In teasing out merely the structural or formal features of reason, the theory of communicative action (as Habermas will come to say) professes its postmetaphysical, antiontological, and ultimately antiutopian stance. It assumes that there are no further principles or foundations whose substance or essence (origin, idea, or telos) could be theoretically reconstructed, practically justified, or aesthetically validated. Without these traditional ambitions and warrants, the “philosophical discourse of modernity” acknowledges the limited and provisional character of all its intuitions as well as the intrinsic fallibility of each of its individual statements. It thereby relies on purely formal and structural—and, in Habermas’s reading, this means procedural and discursive—criteria alone. By means of these criteria the theory of rationality, after Kant and in the wake of the hermeneutic sociology of Max Weber,

3. Ibid., trans. modified.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. The challenge and difficulty of Habermas’s project is, in my reading, not so much the determination of the “reasonableness of the rational” but of the “rationality of reason and the reasonable.” The latter, I will argue, presupposes a certain limitation of the concept of reason as well as rationality.
becomes an intersubjectively transformed “first philosophy” that is no longer substantialist, objectivist, egological, or monological: this time in the guise of a “de-transcendentalized” and, at best, quasi-transcendental pragmatics.7

Freed from all “substance” and “content,” even from the atemporal and immutable transcendental conditions of possibility for experience as they have been traditionally and, in the Kantian idiom, critically defined, the philosophical discourse of modernity draws from this a remarkable consequence. It places “the sphere of nonbeing and the mutable under the determinations of insight and error; it transports reason into a realm that was held to be simply meaningless and unsusceptible to theory by Greek ontology as well as by the modern philosophy of the subject.”8 This ambition of Habermas, together with his indefatigable reception of the most challenging (and diverse) schools of twentieth-century thought—Freudian psychoanalysis, Western neo-Marxism, American pragmatism, post-analytic philosophy of language, speech-act theory, generative grammar, developmental psychology, ethno-methodology, and systems theory—in addition to a permanent reflection on the classic authors of social thought and anthropology (Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Mead, and Parsons), is sufficient reason to admire the theoretical span of his theory.

One cannot help wondering, however, whether a theory so firmly oriented to systematic integration and, finally, empirical anchoring can adequately reconstruct and interpret the instances (or, as Habermas puts it, “traces”) of a postmetaphysical and emphatic-proleptic concept of reason—that is, an idea of reason in the mode of the counterfactual and the nonexistent. Given its preoccupation with the formal, the procedural, the discursive, the finite, and the fallible, can the theory of rationality and communicative action Habermas proposes convincingly claim to have confronted the “sphere of nonbeing and the mutable,” from which it claims to take its leading, and perhaps most fundamental, inspiration? Won’t, to cite Max Horkheimer’s famous distinction, Critical Theory find this “sphere” (which is neither the ancient topos noëtos nor the modern realm of the noumenal, or intelligible) just as “meaningless and unsusceptible” as did traditional theory, which discarded it as too ephemeral and singular to be worthy of philosophical attention, let alone of being cap-

7. For a more recent restatement of this position, see Jürgen Habermas, Kommunikatives Handeln und detranszendentalisierte Vernunft (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2001).
8. Habermas, Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, 392 n. 4.
tured by scientific reasoning? Does reason not touch here upon a dimension or an element directly opposed to itself, upon an otherness standing at its opposite pole, an “other” of reason, the nonrational par excellence? Should it, then, consider this otherness, this other of reason, to be the fully irrational, that is to say, the mere privation of rationality, the not yet fully rational or the beyond of the rational? Or, rather, is this other dimension or element of otherness, like discursive rationality itself, somehow a constitutive moment in the emphatic, communicative idea of reason, whose concept and multiple features (and, as we shall see, “voices”) form the core of Habermas’s own theory in its most articulate and subtle formulations?

How might one—philosophically, practically, aesthetically, and, if need be, theologically—grasp conceptually or otherwise express such an “other of reason” (ein Anderes der Vernunft, in all the ambiguity of this double genitive, that is, as genitivus objectivus and subjectivus, as the other compared with, indeed, well beyond, reason or as reason’s own other dimension and element)? Can one articulate the diffuse and singular traces and configurations of the good or just life (rather than its “substance” or “content,” origin and telos) in a general framework of discourse? (Even if this discourse has been communicatively transformed and now defines itself—after yet another Copernican, this time linguistic-pragmatic turn—as in principle open, that is to say, endless, if not infinite, without any preconceived opinions or prejudice, indeed, as nonviolent.) Does the diffuse and singular, however formally captured, not do violence to reason; or, conversely, does reason not—inevitably—do violence to it?

To avoid this consequence, should one not return to the age-old idea of the Absolute, now as an “absolute” that, under “postmetaphysical” conditions, must be marked as a nonbeing, that is to say, as a hypothetical, a counterfactual instance, a nonverifiable yet falsifiable hypothesis, a trace, even if nothing more than the always precarious and effaceable “trace of the other,” in Levinas’s words? Such an absolute, which no longer either can or should resemble or represent the highest being—indeed, in a certain sense, which no longer even “is”—might, I would suggest, best be called an ab-solute, in the etymological sense of the word (i.e., from the Latin absolvere, “to set free”). Its “encoded indications,” hinting at the “sphere of nonbeing and the mutable”—that is, at that which, at least for

traditional reason and critique, must remain (almost) meaningless and unsusceptible—would thus stand for that which incessantly breaks away from any solid or definite context of meaning and action, judgment and expression.

Yet did Habermas not aim to reconstruct the solid and definite contexts that would enable the regulative idea of an ideal speech situation, wherein equals converse without coercion—that is to say, with appropriate transparency and, hence, without idiosyncrasy or violence? Can his project allow us to think, reconstruct, and act upon the “absolute” as at once minimally and, I would venture to say, globally conceived?

Emmanuel Levinas’s philosophy can help us to describe this idea of the absolute in what seems an at once structural and singular, formal and indicative, as opposed to merely demonstrative or indexical, way. The absolute—the idea of the “infinite” or “in-finite,” in his idiom—is a signification or sense without (fixed) context, without (given) horizon, without (ultimate) referent. Nonetheless, this motif—presented in philosophical terms but not without important biblical, talmudic, and literary antecedents—will help us to pair a certain operation of abstraction with a no less interesting procedure of phenomenological concretization. The absolute and the infinite are not mere ideas; they are equally intelligible in their embodied (if not, strictly speaking, corporeal, material, or incarnate) forms. Their paradoxical phenomenality escapes the grasp of the empirical categories with which the different naturalisms (whether biological, psychological, or cultural) by definition operate. By contrast, the absolute—and in Levinas’s reading this means the ethical, the saintly—can emerge only where all such categories, concepts, or forms of perception, experience, language, and life have, as it were, not yet appeared and dictated their rule or, conversely, where they are already too late to register what has passed them by: the trace of the other/Other, which never enters our horizon but comes to us, as Levinas says, from a dimension of height.11


11. A different question concerns whether or to what extent Levinas’s conception of the infinite—the infinity of being or the infinity beyond being and beings (fundamentally, the difference between the two alternatives matters little here)—resembles the later Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “the flesh [la chair].” See Agata Zielinski, Lecture de Merleau-Ponty et Levinas: Le Corps, le monde, l’autre (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002).
The central features of this Levinasian motif of the absolute and the infinite, I claim, can also be distilled from a careful reinterpretation of Adorno's central texts. His negative dialectics is premised on a similar oscillation between formalization and abstraction, on the one hand, and materialization qua singularization, on the other. The two central parts of my study will be devoted to these authors. As we shall see, their procedures do not involve a hermeneutically understood process of interpretation, translation, transposition, and application of the absolute and infinite in determinable and finite ethical, political, cultural, and juridical contexts, whose meanings would somehow be given with human existence, history, and sociality as such. Rather, each of these determinants (the ethical, the political, the cultural, the juridical, etc.) is put under erasure and reconfigured from the ground up with the help both of newly coined concepts and of traditional—religious, theological, and metaphysical—ideas, which have been radically recast, in a manner (and often, in both authors, with a certain textual mannerism and monomania) which exceeds the alternative between orthodoxy and heterodoxy and which is at once infinitely close to and at an infinite remove from the dogmas, rhetorical strategies, and imagery of Judeo-Christian religion, including the mystical, negative, affirmative, and superlative modes of its discourse (apophatic and kataphatic theology, via eminentiae, etc.). Interestingly, such an intermediary position—a position beyond known and mutually exclusive alternatives, a tertium datur—can also be discerned in some, albeit largely implicit, elements of Habermas's later writings.

It might seem exaggerated to suggest that the motivation for Habermas's major work lies in what he once attributed to Michael Theunissen, the author not only of numerous studies on Hegel's Logic, Kierkegaard, and Adorno but also of Der Andere (The Other) and essays collected under the title Negative Theologie der Zeit (Negative Theology of Time), namely: "seizing at least a tip of the absolute—even if in concepts of inter-

12. Adorno's thinking in these matters is continually entwined with the quasi-messianic and quasi-theological thought of Kierkegaard and Walter Benjamin (whose writings I shall discuss only indirectly). By the same token Levinas, in his "confessional" and talmudic writings, repeatedly draws on the tradition of rabbinical thought, its hermeneutics, conception of the relationship between Israel and the nations, and understanding of the politics of everyday life. For a more extensive treatment, see my book Religion and Violence: Philosophical Perspectives from Kant to Derrida (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), chaps. 3-4. For the motif of "everyday life," found in Freud, Wittgenstein, and Cavell as well as in Levinas, see Eric L. Santer, On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), esp. 14 n. 3.
subjectivity — after a long journey through the ruins [Trümmer] of negative theology.”

References to the theological heritage, in particular, to the mystical tradition, are not absent from Habermas’s writing. Indeed, they remind us of his early concern — in his dissertation, “Das Absolute in der Geschichte” (“The Absolute in History”) — with the philosophy of the Weltalter (The Ages of the World) of the later Schelling, which also deeply influenced Franz Rosenzweig and, via him, Levinas. The difficulty is to determine the exact role they play in Habermas’s overall argumentation. Do they indicate a religious legacy that forms part and parcel of his intellectual biography and thus constitutes a central element in the genealogy and general orientation of his work? Are they a merely a point of departure which was subsequently left behind, reduced to invisibility, inaudibility, or near insignificance? Are they metaphors and tropes that have gradually become concepts, or are they original motifs and motivations reinforced by fundamental philosophical intuitions, based on concerns of a more existential nature that, under modern conditions, could not be expressed or articulated without recourse to the realm of intersubjectivity — that is to say, interaction, discourse, and communicative action? Some of Habermas’s statements, which claim a dual source of inspiration in religion and in the quotidian experience of conversing with others, made explicit by rational reconstruction, seem to point in that direction:

I have a conceptual motive [Gedankenmotiv] and a fundamental intuition. This, by the way, refers back to religious traditions such as those of the Protestant or Jewish mystics, also to Schelling. The motivating [motivbildende] thought concerns the reconciliation of a modernity which has fallen apart, the idea that without surrendering the differentiation that modernity has made possible in the cultural, the social and economic spheres, one can find forms


of living together in which autonomy and dependency can truly enter into a non-antagonistic [better, a peaceful, befriedetes] relation, that one can walk tall [aufrecht gehen] in a collectivity that does not have the dubious quality of backward-looking substantial forms of community [Gemeinschaftlichkeiten].

The intuition springs from the sphere of relations with others; it aims at experiences of undisturbed intersubjectivity. These are more fragile than anything that history has up till now brought forth in the way of structures of communication—an ever more dense and finely woven web of intersubjective relations that nevertheless make possible a relation between freedom and dependency that can only be imagined with interactive models. Wherever these ideals appear, whether in Adorno, when he quotes Eichendorff, in Schelling’s Weltalter, in the young Hegel, or in Jakob Böhme, they are always ideas of felicitous interaction, of reciprocity and distance, of separation and of successful, unspoiled nearness, of vulnerability and complimentary caution. All of these images of protection, openness, and compassion, of submission and resistance, rise out of a horizon of experience, of what Brecht would have termed “friendly living together.” This kind of friendliness does not exclude conflict, rather it implies those human forms through which one can survive conflicts.15

These structures of communication are “fragile” because they are the ever-contested product of a long process of differentiation, which de-centers all worldviews and can no longer be warranted by (or gathered into) some original (or ultimate) meaningful whole or substance—the absolute in history, the totality of all forms of life.

Habermas leaves no doubt that the contexts in which this intuition first made itself known—tradition and the everyday, the theological legacy and ordinary language—do not (or do no longer) by themselves provide a necessary, let alone sufficient, context of justification: “Once religion had been the unbreakable seal upon this totality; it is not by chance that this seal has been broken.”16 Conversely, the experience of the ordinary, of the small and grand narratives whose succession delimits human practices and life forms, cannot be reconstructed on its own terms. Although they do not demand full justification per se, the central intuition’s original contexts (the everyday and tradition) point beyond themselves. Their

16. Habermas, Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, 83–84 / 104.
inevitable particularisms contain—or at least presuppose, rely on, and enable—an equally irreducible universality, whose structural and formal-pragmatic features can be reconstructed with some success and whose “necessary idealizations” (to borrow a term from Hilary Putnam) cannot be easily dismissed. Hence come Habermas’s strong reservations about skeptical and fundamentally historicist or culturalist forms of hermeneutics, pragmatism, deconstructionism, and so on—reservations that form the flip side of his critique of religio-mythic or theologico-metaphysical totalities, that is to say, all the postulated absolutes whose progressive corrosion throughout history is, in his eyes, inevitable as well as irreversible and the very price of not only our “self-determination,” “freedom,” and “autonomy” (as he will say with Kant and Adorno) but also our “separation” and “interiority” (as Levinas will add).

Let me begin to clarify this point, before turning, in the next chapter, to Habermas’s critical engagement with the modern conceptions of historicism, culturalism, hermeneutics, pragmatism (a critique he shares with some of the very “neo-” and “poststructuralists”—“young conservatives,” in his idiom—from whom he sets himself apart in the polemical lectures of The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity). Habermas sees the transition to modernity, for all its agonistic tendencies—and, at times, near agony—as being an irreversible, if not directly linear, development: a metaphysically contingent unfolding of linguistic, practical, and expressive potentialities with inevitable, even necessary effects—in other words, as an unforgettable learning process “in which there remains out of the universalistic religions [Universalreligionen], the more so the purer their structures stood out, not much beyond the core of a universalistic morality [in der von den Universalreligionen, je reiner ihre Strukturen hervortreten, nicht viel mehr als der Kernbestand einer universalistischen Moral übrigbleibt].”

Habermas leaves no doubt that the material substance and content of the historical, “positive,” monotheistic religions has evaporated, almost without remainder, leaving merely the formal framing—in his words, the core, or Kernbestand—of our moral intuitions as its sole legacy, to be salvaged under modern conditions of intellectual and social differentiation, that is to say, of modernization, rationalization, privatization, and secularization. Nothing more of “religion” remains, but also nothing less

18. Jose Casanova convincingly argues in Public Religions in the Modern World (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) that this version of the “secularization thesis” is vulnerable
than a genealogy of the modern and secular is thus—and increasingly—affirmed. The minimal (and ever changing) dissymmetry between this “nothing more” and “nothing less” is the main source of our interest in these and other revealing passages in Habermas’s writings.

The reasoning behind Habermas’s view seems clear. He locates the medium of cognition—and, hence, of a decidedly cognitivist morality or “discursive ethics [Diskursethik]”—in a language oriented toward mutual understanding (Verständigung), a language that, in the wake of the linguistico-pragmatic turn, comes to replace the paradigmatic status of the cosmos, nature, the subject, history, and spirit, as mirrored in the traditional metaphysical thinking that culminated in Hegel. Not only does the medium of language, in Habermas’s view, offer, methodologically speaking, a more tangible and solid basis for reconstructing universalistic, especially moral, intuitions (whose formalization strips them of unnecessary ambiguity and potential violence), but in genealogical and comparative perspective the linguistico-pragmatic turn also expresses an outspoken modern insight: namely, that finitude and contingency—a certain non-naturalness, if not necessarily arbitrariness (as Saussure would say), let alone undecidability (as Derrida would add)—forms the very condition of possibility for human cognition, action, judgment, and expression. Nevertheless, Habermas insists on the formal, if not, strictly speaking, logical, “impossibility of circumventing the symmetrical structure of perspectives built into every speech situation, a structure that makes possible the intersubjectivity that permits reaching understanding in language.”

Distancing himself from Karl-Otto Apel’s foundationalist project of the reflective “transformation of philosophy” and its ambition to provide a rationally grounded “first philosophy” based on the possibility of ultimate justification (Letztbegründung), Habermas affirms that a “weak and transitory unity of reason, which does not fall under the idealistic spell of a universality that triumphs over the particular and the singular, asserts itself in the medium of language.” One of the major presuppositions of the linguistic turn thus remains “the conviction that language forms the medium for the historical and cultural embodiments of the human mind, and that a methodologically reliable analysis of mental activity must therefore begin with the linguistic expressions of intentional phenomena, instead of im-

20. Ibid., my emph.
mediately with the latter.” But on what grounds can the linguistic—or, for that matter, pragmatic—turn be taken to be a more reliable point of departure for the philosophical and, fundamentally, reconstructive analysis than cosmos, nature, the subject, history, or even spirit ever were? In order to answer that question, we need to look more closely at the premises of Habermas’s argument.

Following the historical schema of Karl Löwith’s classic *Von Hegel bis Nietzsche (From Hegel to Nietzsche)*, which greatly impressed him in his formative years, Habermas assumes that, with Hegel’s death and the breakup of his system, the *Philosophie des Geistes (Philosophy of Spirit)*, into the many *Geisteswissenschaften* (the “human” or, as John Stuart Mill would have said, “moral” sciences), the philosophical discourse of modernity could begin its flight into the dusk of traditional, substantialist metaphysics. For Hegel, he writes,

> the synthetic labor of spirit is supposed to be performed through the medium of history and assimilated to the progressive form of the latter. Along with history, however, contingencies and uncertainties break into the circular, closed-off structure of unifying reason, and in the end these contingencies and uncertainties cannot be absorbed, even by a supple dialectic of reconciliation. With historical consciousness Hegel brought a force [*ein Instanz*] into play whose subversive power also set his own construction teetering. A history that takes the self-formative processes [*Bildungsprozess*] of nature and spirit up into itself, and that has to obey the logical forms of the self-explication of this spirit, sublimates [*sublimiert*] itself into the opposite of history. To bring it to a simple point that had already irritated Hegel’s contemporaries: a history with an established past, a predecided future, and a condemned present, is no longer *history*.22

It is, of course, not hard to see how this critique could be leveled at the Hegelian legacy of orthodox Marxism, since the supposed dialectics of history (and, in some cases, also of nature) relies on the same conceptual schema, reverting idealistic referents to materialist (or even mechanistic and social Darwinist) terms. Indeed, the studies collected in Habermas’s *Theorie und Praxis: Sozialphilosophische Studien* and *Zur Rekonstruktion des historischen Materialismus (Theory and Practice: Studies in Social Philosophy* and “Reconstructing Historical Materialism”) demon-

22. Ibid., 130 / 169.
strate to what extent this reversal (altogether an “abstract negation,” in Adorno’s terminology) rendered the paradigm of orthodox Marxism—or at least its material substance, its ontological and scientific claims, if not its most profound impetus, inspiration, or even “spirit”—obsolete, unable to cope with the new realities of postindustrial societies and their corresponding theoretical and technological matrices. The grounds Habermas provides for this analysis are in part similar to those given by the earliest generation of the Frankfurt School. But, whereas both Horkheimer and Adorno remained deeply steeped in some of Marxism’s most questionable economic assumptions and, like the Lukács of Geschichte und Klassebewusstsein (History and Class Consciousness), continued to share some of its most tenacious metaphysical presuppositions—not least that of the isomorphism, the “elective affinity” if not the mono-causal link, between social and intellectual trends—Habermas moves a step farther. An additional criticism of the paradigm of historical and dialectical materialism in his texts concerns the “production paradigm” and “model of societal control [Verfügungsmodell]” which he addresses in The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity and Faktizität und Geltung (Between Facts and Norms) and of which he finds fatal reminiscences throughout the writings of Adorno and Horkheimer.

Habermas’s reassessment of historical and dialectical materialism should be distinguished from those in Jean-François Lyotard’s Le Differend (The Differend) and Derrida’s Spectres de Marx (Specters of Marx). Both these authors likewise distinguish between the “differend” (Lyotard) or the “spirit” (Derrida) of Marxism, on the one hand, and its positive—indeed, positivistic, scientistic, empirical, and ontological—doctrines, on the other. But their premises and arguments differ from those guiding Habermas. These differences have to do with two alternative conceptions of the strategic (rather than methodological) privilege of language, in the wake of Saussure, Wittgenstein, and Austin. In Habermas’s discussion Humboldt, Chomsky, Davidson, and Searle lead the way. By contrast, Derrida and the early Lyotard work out a radicalized and radically transformed semiotics, which Lyotard later presents as an ontology of “language games.”

Unlike Habermas, Derrida and Lyotard—despite fundamental differences in point of departure, argumentative strategy, and overall philosophical aims (which in both thinkers intersect at crucial moments with the thought of Adorno and Levinas)—draw a further consequence from the self-undermining, indeed, the auto-deconstruction, of the Hegelian system. This is the fundamental instability of language. Habermas attempts to develop a concept of language oriented toward the “weak and transitory unity of reason,” one that “does not fall under the idealistic spell of a universality that triumphs over the particular and the singular” but, rather, is conceived as a “medium” for communicative understanding, identifiable ascription (as Habermas will say, “meaning-identity” or “unequivocal meaning [Eindeutigkeit]”), “linguistic competence,” “sincerity,” and “accountability”—in short, a language with formal features that could in principle be adequately reconstructed in the theoretical framework of a formal, universal pragmatics, that is, a theory of communicative action and its implied procedural discourse ethics. But in the view of Derrida and Lyotard such a “language” hardly seems language in the quotidian, theoretical and practical, not to mention rhetorical or poetic, uses of the word. A “language” with a structurally established or formally determinable past, anticipated future, and known present is, they claim, no longer language as a living, innovative reality, premised on the possibility, perhaps the necessity, of misunderstanding, misdirection, limited translatability, polysemy, dissemination, difference, and differend. This dramatic consequence—the instability of the very idea of language’s conceptual schemes and, hence, of linguistic interaction and communicative understanding—betrays itself on numerous occasions throughout Habermas’s own texts, above all in his use of striking metaphors, whose theological overtones are hardly accidental and are difficult to ignore.

References to religion or theologemes appear in the overall theoretical formulation of Habermas’s project in yet another way. They are cited, time and again, not just as witnesses to the particular intellectual historical (or autobiographical) origin or motivational resource for intuiting a morality and concept or representation of justice (Gerechtigkeit) which could in principle be adequately, if not fully, formalized and universalized but as tropes for the very mode in which the differentiated and decentered forms and pragmatic structures of cognition, action, judgment, and expression are said to inter-act, that is to say, interrelate and resonate with one another. In the first chapter of this book I spell out this transposition of the religious and the theological onto some of the nodal points and
most suggestive insights of Habermas's theory. These motifs, I will argue, are not mere ornaments, not pedagogic or rhetorical devices, aesthetic modes of presentation or parerga (as Kant would say), which one could in principle do without. On the contrary, they reveal an internal, systematic lacuna and hence indicate the need for some conceptual and figural supplements. In order to be consistent and coherent, Habermas's theory must, paradoxically, at once acknowledge and seek to deny this lack. In a word these motifs contaminate his theory's formal, finite, and even discursive features, from within and without. These motifs and motivations—from which a certain reference to tradition (if not necessarily to myth, archaism, dogmatics, or onto-theology, though often to tradition in its most heterodox and even antinomian theological varieties) cannot be effaced—challenge the very construction and reconstruction of the philosophical discourse of modernity as Habermas envisions it. They gently force it in the direction of an alternative modernity, whose contours have not yet fully been sketched out, let alone thoroughly assessed. To essay such a sketch is the task I have set myself in this study. I suspect that Habermas's theory of rationality only reluctantly, and often unexpectedly, encounters such nodal points and the neuralgic issues they imply: questions of autonomy and heteronomy, self- and, if we can say so, other-determination, modernity and religion, secularism and the postsecular, and so forth. For the sake of its theoretical integrity and consequence, it must extricate itself from them, but it cannot actually do so at each step or with full rigor.

In his “Open Letter to Max Horkheimer” of 1965 Adorno praises his longtime friend and colleague for having “absorbed the utopian impulse without compromise into the spirit of critique, without affirmative consolation, even without the consolation of trust in a future that could not redress past suffering.” Benjamin contrasts to this view his concept of “anamnesis [Eingedenken],” a notion that is decidedly and deeply paradoxical. But Adorno’s praise for and Benjamin’s corrective of Horkheimer’s view also have implications for the presuppositions and possible

24. For a more sustained analysis of the question of the parerga in Kant’s moral philosophy and his philosophy of history and religion, see my book Philosophy and the Turn to Religion (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), chap. 6; and Religion and Violence, chap. 1.


reception of Habermas’s work. Indeed, Adorno acknowledges having “never been able to oppose [Horkheimer’s pessimistic position] with anything other than the question of whether the inexorability [Unerbittlichkeit] that carries . . . in such a direction does not receive its content from what it excludes.”\footnote{Adorno, GS 20.1:161.} This question, he added, had no definitive answer: having “absorbed the utopian impulse without compromise into the spirit of critique, without affirmative consolation, even without the consolation of trust in a future that could not redress past suffering” does not preclude the possibility, perhaps even the necessity, of drawing on sources, motivations, and inspirations whose empirical reality and practical validity—in short, whose “content”—one must nonetheless “exclude.” Perhaps the “inexorability” of having to think, act, judge, and express oneself under modern conditions carried “critique” in this paradoxical, indeed, aporetic “direction.” But this impasse, I will argue, was typical not only of Horkheimer’s later work and of the somewhat enigmatic reading Adorno gives it in his “Open Letter.” Nor can the hesitant and contradictory—indeed, minimal—religious consequences that Benjamin drew from his “correction [Korrektiv]” of Horkheimer’s course of thinking be avoided, as if we were dealing with the idiosyncrasies of one thinker.

We touch on a similar motif and, perhaps, motivation in analyzing the intrinsic limit (and, I will argue, the inevitable paradox and aporia) of the conceptual scheme and argumentative layout of the theory of communicative action (indeed, of any theory, any practice, any judgment, any expression), which cannot easily be cast aside and for which even the linguistic and pragmatic turn—away from the limited conceptual apparatus and vocabulary of the philosophy of the subject and of consciousness as well as from the instrumentalist, monological understanding of rationality on which it relies—has, for all its intellectual span and subtlety, no ready interpretation. Hence, despite the transformation or paradigm shift proposed by the philosophical discourse of modernity as reconstructed by Habermas (needless to say, alternative readings of this discourse, as of “modernity” and “modernism,” remain possible, even necessary),\footnote{I am thinking of the writings of Albrecht Wellmer, Seyla Benhabib, Nancy Fraser, Axel Honneth, Martin Seel, Christoph Menke, Alessandro Ferrara, and others.} certain tantalizing questions, together with their deeply paradoxical—to be precise, aporetic—responses reappear at every step. If the psychoanalytic schema were not vulnerable to the same logic, we could say that the re-
emergence of the theological argument, vocabulary, and imaginary—in other words, of an at least minimal theology, whose “global religion” extends virtually everywhere—resembles nothing less than a “return of the repressed” at the very heart of Enlightenment rationality, in one of its fullest and most differentiated articulations: the theory of communicative action.

The central thesis of my first chapter is, therefore, that the modern theory of rationality and formal pragmatics must always already, however provisionally and unwittingly (surreptitiously, as Kant would say), have taken into account such theological motifs and their consequence. Where it represses, glosses over, or renders secondary these motifs and motivations (that is to say, secularizes, translates, and transforms them), it indirectly acknowledges them, e silentio and ex negativo, as it were. The theory remains essentially incomplete for the simple reason that it must bring into play concerns (tropes and metaphors) which it ultimately neither can thematize, as such or on their own terms, nor reduce to mere accidentals and ornaments. To rationalize, formalize, and thereby bring into language “a tip of the absolute”—albeit it a “transcendence from within,” a “transcendence in immanence”29—goes only that far.

As Adorno remarked in his essay “Fortschritt” (“Progress”), to which I will return in the fifth chapter, recourse to conceptions of the “immanent-transcendent” (or “transcendent-immanent”), which seek to avoid (or mask) this circumstance—for example, by introducing some middle ground (tertium datur once again, though this time with a bent toward harmonization, the cardinal sin of dialectics in its modern idealist and materialist varieties)—“pass sentence on themselves by their very nomenclature.”30 They betray a paradox, an aporia, which ought to be not obscured but addressed and, if possible, formalized—indeed, universalized, even exacerbated and dramatized—in the most straightforward and rigorous


30. “Expedient expositions [Hilfskonstruktionen] of an immanent-transcendent concept of progress pass sentence on themselves by their very nomenclature” (P 147 / 621).
fashion. I take this to be the task undertaken in Adorno’s dialectical critique of dialectics and Levinas’s phenomenological critique of phenomenology, two exemplary philosophical modes (though not the only and, perhaps, not even most tenable or promising ones) of analyzing and, as it were, enacting the performative contradiction Habermas thinks one can and ought to avoid.\textsuperscript{31}

Habermas approvingly cites Hilary Putnam, who, in “Why Reasons Can’t Be Naturalized,” states that reason is “both immanent (not to be found outside of concrete language games and institutions) and transcendent (a regulative idea that we use to criticize the conduct of all activities and institutions).”\textsuperscript{32} Although these words—“both immanent . . . and transcendent”—would at first glance seem to reiterate the appeals to the immanent-transcendent whose “nomenclature,” as Adorno succinctly puts it, condemns itself, upon closer scrutiny it becomes clear that, in Putnam’s reconstruction of Habermas’s thought, they underline the Kantian duality of these (inside and outside) perspectives while affirming their mutual implication and, as it were, co-originariness. As Putnam argues in greater detail in \textit{Renewing Philosophy}, this double focus enables one to steer clear of the false alternative between scientistically oriented versions of “analytic metaphysics,” on the one hand, and a host of philosophical skepticisms and relativisms, on the other.\textsuperscript{33} Habermas, in turn, reformulates the double focus of the Kantian conception of reason in his “own words” by stating that “the validity claimed for propositions and norms transcends spaces and times, but in each actual case the claim is raised here and now, in a specific context, and accepted or rejected with real implications for social interaction.”\textsuperscript{34} Leaving both Hegel’s philosophy of spirit and orthodox dialectical materialism—and their functional equivalents—behind, he offers the following statement of the “necessary idealization” given with any claim: “The transcendental gap [\textit{Gefälle}] between the intelligible and the empirical worlds no longer has to be over-


\textsuperscript{34} Habermas, \textit{Postmetaphysical Thinking}, 139 / 179.
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come through the philosophy of nature and the philosophy of history. It has instead been reduced to a tension [Spannung] between the unconditional character of context-bursting, transcendent validity claims, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the factual character [Faktizität] of the context-dependent “yes” and “no” positions that create social facts in situ.”

What would seem a radical duality — an elliptical figure with two foci, mutually excluding yet constantly referring to each other, in endless oscillation — is thus mitigated, harmonized, and reduced to a productive tension whose creative force, as it traverses “everyday practice” and opens up the very possibility of “social facts,” is that of a minimal “mark,” a “ heuristic idea”: “everyday practice becomes permeated with idealizations that nevertheless set the stage for social facts. The ideas of meaning-identity [or unequivocal meaning, Eindeutigkeit], truth, justice, sincerity, and accountability leave their mark [or, rather, traces, Spuren]. Yet they retain world-constituting power only as heuristic ideas of reason; they lend unity and organization [or, rather, coherence, Zusammenhang] to the situation interpretations that participants negotiate [aushandeln] with each other.”

But how, exactly, can the “tension” between the unconditional and the conditional — or, put otherwise, the immanent transcendence of the “traces,” that is to say, the situated and local incarnations of the ideas of reason — ever lend “unity” and “coherence” to interpretation and negotiation? How, moreover, can counterfactual, idealized presuppositions hope to acquire factual (i.e., empirical) force without betraying themselves on every count?

35. Ibid., 142 / 182.
36. I analyze the contours and implications of such a figure in the concluding chapter of Philosophy and the Turn to Religion.
37. Habermas, Postmetaphysical Thinking, 143 / 183.
Surely the recourse to modifiers such as *regulative* and *heuristic* does not suffice to spell out the modes in which ideas—in post-Kantian parlance, “idealizations” or “idealized presuppositions”—are normally (and normatively) put to work. Does not the very concept of “negotiation,” as Derrida has taught us, presuppose an element of the nonnegotiable which no constructive or reconstructive analysis, however differentiated, and no pragmatics, however formal, hence no communicative action and understanding—albeit under the most ideal speech conditions—could ignore or smooth out? Is this not, precisely, what critique and fallibilism, finitude and anti-utopianism, not least in Habermas’s own definition of these terms, amount to?

At times Habermas seems to acknowledge as much and to concede that the theory of communicative action presupposes at once too much and not enough, but also that this noncoincidence of the theory with itself is unavoidable, the necessary tension, if not contradiction, in which (and from which) it lives. Interestingly, also by his own admission (expressed mostly in anecdotal and dispersed statements concerning his intellectual biography, of which we have seen an example here), it would seem that no better terms for this circumstance could be found than in the religious tradition of mystical theology, Protestantism, messianism, and antinomianism from which the theory of rationality departs, without (apparently) ever being able to step completely out of its shadow. A longer passage confirms this suspicion:

The concept of communicative reason is still accompanied by the shadow of a transcendental illusion. Because the idealizing presuppositions of communicative action must not be hypostatized into the ideal of a future condition in which a definitive understanding has been reached, this concept must be approached in a sufficiently skeptical manner. A theory that leads us to believe in the attainability of a rational ideal would fall back behind the level of argumentation reached by Kant. It would also abandon the materialistic legacy of the critique of metaphysics. The moment of unconditionality that is preserved in the discursive concepts of a fallibilistic truth and morality is not an absolute, or it is at most an absolute that has become fluid as a critical procedure [*ein zum kritischen Verfahren verflüssigtes Absolutes*]. Only with this residue of metaphysics can we do battle against the transfiguration of the world through metaphysical truths—the last trace of “Nihil contra Deum nisi

"Deus ipse." Communicative reason is of course a rocking hull [schwankende Schaale]—but it does not go under in the sea of contingencies, even if shuddering [Erzittern] in high seas is the only mode in which it "copes" [bewältigt] with these contingencies.40

The formula Nihil contra Deum nisi Deus ipse (nothing can stand against God but God Himself) should, of course, give one pause (as should the interpretation that its use is "not to appeal to some sort of deified reason, but on the contrary to say that it is only through reason that we can determine the limits of our own rationality. This is the fundamental figure of Kantian thought that was definitive for modernity").41 So should reference to the Kierkegaardian motif of "shuddering," the fear and trembling, indeed, the horror religiosus that would seem to characterize the existential—and, however de-dramatized, individual—"mode [Modus]" with which human agency must engage its frailty, that is to say, the provisional nature and fallibility of all its projects, constructs, and reconstructions. Precisely because the idea of an absolute is linguistically liquefied, if not liquidated, into a critical procedure (ein zum kritischen Verfahren verflüssigtes Absolutes) whose outcome (and, I should add, formal schema) is always hypothetical, by invoking it we cannot retheologize a pragmatically and intersubjectively transformed—and thus no longer "first"—philosophy. Nor does its cautious ("sufficiently skeptical," that is to say, provisional, hypothetical, fallible, and materialist) reformulation take the form of a "negative metaphysics," in the definition Adorno gives to this term. Significantly, Habermas demarcates his project from Adorno’s negative metaphysics (as formulated in “Meditations on Metaphysics,” at the end of Negative Dialectics) even more sharply than he distinguishes between his central intuitions and those animating the historical, that is to say, the positive and revealed religions. Indeed, although he retains the central Hegelian-Adornian motif of “determinate negation” (which he reduces to determinate negations of “discursive language”), Habermas hastens to add that the formally and pragmatically revised concept of reason is not even stable enough for a negative metaphysics [in Adorno’s sense]. The latter after all continues to offer an equivalent for the extramundane perspective of a God’s-eye view: a perspective radically different from the lines of sight

40. Habermas, Postmetaphysical Thinking, 144 / 184–85.
belonging to innerworldly participants and observers. That is, negative metaphysics uses the perspective of a radical outsider, in which one who is mad, existentially isolated, or aesthetically enraptured distances himself from the world, and indeed from the life-world as a whole. These outsiders no longer have a language, at least no speech based on reasons, for spreading the message of that which they have seen. Their speechlessness finds words only in the empty negation of everything that metaphysics once affirmed with the concept of the universal One. In contrast, communicative reason cannot withdraw from the determinate negations in language [bestimmten Negationen der Sprache], discursive as linguistic communication in fact is. It must therefore refrain from the paradoxical statements of negative metaphysics: that the whole is the false [das Ganze das Unwahre], that everything is contingent, that there is no consolation whatsoever. Communicative reason does not stage [inszeniert] itself in an aestheticized theory as the colorless negation of a religion that provides consolation. It neither announces the absence of consolation in a world forsaken by God, nor does it take upon itself to provide any consolation. It does without [verzichtet auf] exclusivity as well. As long as no better words for what religion can say are found in the medium of rational discourse, it will even coexist abstemiously [enthaltsam koexistieren] with the former, neither supporting it nor combating it.42

These words draw a fine but unmistakable line between the critical perspective of formal pragmatics and its concept of communicative reason, on the one hand, and the one implied by Adorno—for example, in the concluding aphorism of Minima Moralia (which claims that the “only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in the face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption . . . as it will appear one day in the messianic light” [MM 247 / 283])—on the other. Habermas similarly wishes to distinguish his position from that of the later Horkheimer, most provocatively expressed in “Die Sehnsucht nach dem ganz Anderen” (“The Desire for the Totally Other”),43 just as no less decisive reservation is expressed with respect to Benjamin’s notion of anamnestic solidarity and its concept of redemptive critique. All these positions and reservations should,

42. Ibid., 144–45 / 185, trans. modified.

of course, be carefully differentiated and cannot be reduced to a single stance, whether to be advocated or refuted.

This being said, the whole difficulty, for Habermas, lies in articulating and analyzing “transcendence” (“transcendence from within” or “transcendence in immanence”) without succumbing to classical-metaphysical thinking—or, what amounts to the same, the “ethnocentrism” of a particular language-game or form of life—which does not live up to the rational potential and formal criteria of the philosophical discourse of modernity delineated by the theory of communicative action. But many postmythical yet, in Habermas’s own terms, nonetheless traditional systems of thought—the historical religions, to name just the most prominent example—preempt, more precisely anticipate, this theory’s most basic intuitions, in particular its moral universalism, which they interpret and present in all too concrete and substantialist (as Rawls would

44. At times the difference between these two complementary yet mutually dependent extremes of classical-metaphysical thinking and the singular will seem almost imperceptible: “the nuanced debate surrounding the one and the many cannot be reduced to a simple for or against. The picture is even made more complex by latent elective affinities. The protest against the overpowering argument made today in the name of an oppressed plurality allows at least a sympathetic detachment vis-à-vis the appearance of unitary thinking in renewed metaphysical form. In fact, radical contextualism thrives on a negative metaphysics, which ceaselessly circles around that which metaphysical idealism had always intended by the unconditioned but which it had always failed to achieve” (Habermas, Texte und Kontexte, 116 / 154). Yet Habermas contrasts to these two extremes—which are mutually exclusive but nonetheless touch upon (or revert to) each other and which seem to exhaust all possible options for philosophical thought—an alternative, a tertium datur, which cannot be formulated in their terms. Presenting it as “a skeptical and postmetaphysical yet not defeatist” humanism of Kantian origin, Habermas agrees that it cannot but be perceived as either too “weak” (in the eyes of transcendental[ist] philosophers) or too “strong” (in the eyes of radical skeptics):

As seen by the unitary thinking of metaphysics, the procedural concept of communicative reason is too weak because it discharges everything that has to do with content into the realm of the contingent and even allows one to think of reason itself as having contingently arisen. Yet, as seen by contextualism, this concept is too strong because even the borders of allegedly incommensurable worlds prove to be penetrable in the empirical medium of mutual understanding. The metaphysical priority of unity above plurality and the contextualistic priority of plurality above unity are secret accomplices. My reflections point toward the thesis that the unity of reason only remains perceptible in the plurality of its voices—as the possibility in principle of passing from one language into another—a passage that, no matter how occasional, is still comprehensible. This possibility of mutual understanding, which is now guaranteed only procedurally and is realized only transitiorily, forms the background for the actual diversity of what encounters each other—even where understanding fails [die aktuelle Vielheit des einander—auch verständnislos—Begegnenden]. (Habermas, Texte und Kontexte, 116–17 / 154–55, trans. modified)
say, “comprehensive”) terms.\textsuperscript{45} Nor should one overly formalize—indeed, empty out—transcendence, reducing it to a mere idea, a mere trace, leaving nothing but how (or so Habermas thinks) a metaphysics turned negative abstractly negates itself in a performative self-contradiction that leaves no claim (concerning objective truth, social validity, sincerity, or expressiveness) intact.

The question, therefore—after Habermas—is not to rehabilitate the substantial concept of theoretical reason, however constructed (as in monism and dualism; idealism and materialism; realism, naturalism, and irrealism), nor is it to inflate the formal core of the age-old epistemological claims of classical theology or the all too affirmative conceptions of the ethically good life, the aesthetically beautiful, and their supposed ultimate unity and harmony. There can be no metaphysics, no onto-theology, ethics, or aesthetics in the no-man’s-land between modernity and “postmodernity” except \textit{in pianissimo}: that is to say, in the infinitely small—and infinitely distanced, couched in language, liquefied, and nearly liquidated—dimension of the absolute (more precisely, the ab-solute) and the infinite (as Levinas says, in-finite), whose minimal theology nonetheless steers clear of the (supposed) total negativism and inverted absolutism that Habermas (as we shall see, wrongly) ascribes to the first generation of the Frankfurt School in general and to Adorno in particular.

In this investigation I will attempt systematically to clarify this idea of a minimal theology and to demonstrate that its central features are anticipated—and, I would add, rigorously systematized and formalized—in the writings of Adorno, notably in his departure from a certain eschatologico-apocalyptic messianism suspected in Benjamin and Ernst Bloch as well as from the Schopenhauerian metaphysical and cultural pessimism of Horkheimer. I also claim that these traits find an even more consequential expression in Levinas’s philosophy of the trace of the absolutely other, especially as systematized—formalized, and, as it were, generalized, even radicalized and dramatized—in the studies Derrida has devoted to this author, from his 1963 “Violence and Metaphysics” on. His discussion forms both a watershed in the reception of Levinas’s work and

a matrix for my interpretation, even though I seek to tease out some con-
sequences and to establish some connections that might seem to diverge
from the philosophy of deconstruction, at least in some of its influential
receptions.

I believe that Habermas’s reconstruction of historical materialism
can only measure up to its ambitions and, to cite Benjamin, “easily be a
match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which today is wiz-
ened [klein und hässlich] and has to keep out of sight.”46 Such an alliance
differs from the fundamentally ascetic relationship and mutual indiffer-
ence of theory and the theological, “neither supporting it nor combat-
ing it,” at least so long as “no better words for what religion can say are
found in the medium of rational discourse.” This ascesis, Habermas sug-
gests, is the logical consequence of the procedure of determinate negation,
Adorno’s most cherished Hegelian terminus technicus, which for Haber-
mas can only indicate a determinate negation in and of language, not of
the materiality of (external) nature or the contingent, transient empiricity
of history, let alone their tangential encounter in the concept of “natural
history” (Naturgeschichte), from which Adorno’s thinking takes its point
of departure. I will argue that if one focuses on the latter motifs—without
denying the importance of language, including the “language of philos-
ophers” for Adorno’s own account—a more compelling reading of the
motif of determinate negation results: one whose “method” is no longer
(or not yet or in any case not primarily) procedural, in the sense Habermas
himself gives to the term.47

In lieu of any ecumenical cohabitation of theory and religion or any
reduction of one to the other (whether deductively, analytically, causally,
genealogically, hermeneutically, or structurally) my alternative reading
will demonstrate (and, as does Adorno himself, dramatize or exaggerate)
their mutual contamination and undecidability, especially at the system-
atic and nodal points that matter most.

A further consideration will make that clear. In Die Einbeziehung des
Anderen (The Inclusion of the Other) Habermas reiterates his position with
formulations that seem to echo the terminology and arguments that we

46. Walter Benjamin, “Über den Begriff der Geschichte,” Gesammelte Schriften (Frankfurt
will find in Adorno and Levinas without, however, endorsing the full consequences that these views entail. Habermas insists here on the “relational structure of alterity [Andersheit] and difference [Differenz]” which would be realized, validated, or expressed by any universalism worthy of the name. This “universalism that is highly sensitive to differences,” he suggests, finds its articulation only in a moral and legal theory—a Kantian cognitivism and republicanism, of sorts—based on the following premises:

Equal respect for everyone is not limited to those who are like us; it extends to the person of the other in his or her otherness. And solidarity with the other as one of us refers to the flexible “we” of a community that resists all substantive determinations and extends its permeable boundaries ever further. This moral community constitutes itself solely by way of the negative idea of abolishing discrimination and harm and of extending relations of mutual recognition to include marginalized men and women. . . . Here inclusion does not imply locking members into a community that closes itself off from others. The “inclusion of the other” means rather that the boundaries of the community are open for all, also and most especially for those who are strangers to one another and want to remain strangers.48

Paradoxically, such distancing and, simultaneously, formalization, guided by a counter-factual and quasi-transcendental idea, a “glimmer [Vorschein]” of sorts,49 allow communicative understanding to operate without force, independent of any utopian—read messianic or redemptive—aspirations toward concrete forms of the good life. Or at least this is what a formally and universally oriented theory of rationality under modern conditions would make us believe. As a matter of fact, Habermas writes:

No prospect of such forms of life can be given to us, this side of prophetic teachings, not even in the abstract [in abstracto]. All we know of them is that if they could be realized at all, they would have to be produced through our own combined effort and be marked by solidarity, though they need not necessarily be free of conflict. Of course, “producing” does not mean manufacturing according to the model of realizing intended ends. Rather, it signifies a type of emergence that cannot be intended, an emergence out of a cooperative

48. Habermas, Inclusion of the Other, xxxv–xxxvi / 7–8.
49. Habermas, Postmetaphysical Thinking, 145 / 185.
endeavor to moderate, abolish, or prevent the suffering of vulnerable creatures. This endeavor is fallible, and it does fail over and over again. This type of producing or self-bringing-forth places the responsibility on our shoulders without making us less dependent upon “the luck of the moment [Gunst der Stunde].” Connected with this is the modern meaning of humanism, long expressed in the ideas of a self-conscious life, of authentic self-realization, and of autonomy—a humanism that is not bent [versteift] on self-assertion [Selbstbehauptung]. This project, like the communicative reason that inspires it, is historically situated. It has not been made, it has formed itself [es hat sich gebildet]—and it can be pursued further, or be abandoned out of discouragement. Above all, the project is not the property of philosophy. Philosophy, working together with the reconstructive sciences, can only throw light on the situations in which we already find ourselves [vorfinden]. It can contribute to our learning to understand the ambivalences [Ambivalenzen] that we come up against as just so many appeals [Appelle] to increasing responsibilities within a diminishing range of options.50

This being said, Habermas does not carry the “ambivalences”—and hence the “appeals to increasing responsibilities”—to their logical and axiological, let alone rhetorical or aesthetic, extreme. Far from seeing them as impediments—that is to say, unintelligible antinomies, irrevocable paradoxes, and hence aporias—he views these ambivalences as the relatively unproblematic, indeed simple, conditions of possibility for any conceptual determination, identifying ascription, intersubjective agreement, or subjective expression in general.

I will argue that Adorno and Levinas, in parallel formalizations and concretizations of the performative contradiction inherent in all thought and in every single action or judgment, demonstrate this assumption to be false, irresponsible, and insufficiently expressive. False consciousness and reification, idolatry and blasphemy, the good conscience that is the bad conscience, stupidity and insincerity—all have the same basis: namely, securing grounds where this is, in principle, impossible and indeed undesirable epistemologically, linguistically, morally, politically, and aesthetically speaking. In Habermas’s reading, which chooses to ignore the logic of extremes, excess, and exaggeration which my own—as it were, rhetori-

interpretation of these authors will emphasize, such a view merely dramatizes things in a way that is unnecessary, dangerous, and stereotypical:

Repulsion [Perhorreszierung] towards the One and veneration of difference and the Other obscures the dialectical connection between them [but what, precisely, would dialectical mean here?]. For the transitory unity that is generated in the porous and refracted intersubjectivity of a linguistically mediated consensus not only supports but furthers and accelerates the pluralization of forms of life and the individualization of lifestyles. More discourse means more contradiction and difference. The more abstract agreements become, the more diverse the disagreements with which we can nonviolently live. And yet in public consciousness the idea of unity is still linked to the consequence of a forced integration of the many. Moral universalism is still treated as the enemy of individualism, not as what makes it possible. The attribution of identical meanings is still treated as the injury of metaphorical multivalence, not as its necessary condition. The unity of reason is still treated as repression, not as the source of the diversity of its voices.51

Following several of Habermas’s more subtle critics, I will begin by addressing the question of the traces (of the other) of reason, including the conditions of possibility for formal rationality, by analyzing the concept of negative metaphysics. This concept, I suggest, finds its most powerful articulation in Adorno and must be carefully distinguished not only from the positive, substantialist grand designs in the philosophical tradition but also from the classical-dogmatic and modern-scientific conceptions of theology, that is to say, from onto-theology, philosophical theology, the study of divinity, and the scholarly study of religion. Negative metaphysics is, so to speak, the theoretical component of a well-tempered, indeed minimal, theology that steers clear of all confessional forms and commitments of biblical or practical theology as well as from their secularist—and necessarily reductionist—counterparts. One can understand the practical-institutional and aesthetic connotations (broadly defined) of negative metaphysics by returning to the Kantian terminus technicus of “judgment [Urteilskraft]”52 (reflective and other) as well as by refer-

51. Habermas, Postmetaphysical Thinking, 140 / 180, trans. modified.
52. A minimal theology (metaphysics, ethics, or aesthetics) which operates in pianissimo appeals not least to the “matured judgment [Urteilskraft] of the age, which refuses to be any longer put off with illusory knowledge [Scheinwissen]” (Immanuel Kant, Kritik der reinen Vernunft, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel [Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1983], 3:13 /
ring to the significance of comparative cultural analysis in contemporary religious studies. Following the critique of classical and modern theology elaborated in the opening chapter, I will address the speculative question of negative metaphysics in its theoretical and more abstract guises, then pause to elaborate this practical-aesthetic or hermeneutical-rhetorical problem of judgment and comparative analysis in the chapters that make up part 1. All these qualifications ("theoretical," "speculative," "practical," "aesthetic," and "hermeneutical-rhetorical") will, I trust, become clearer as we proceed.

Although negative metaphysics is just as incapable of constructing, reconstructing, analyzing, and incorporating the traces of reason (and its other) as is Habermas’s theory of rationality, it more decidedly—indeed, unapologetically—assumes the form of a paradoxical or even aporetic figure of speculative thought. Its consequences, as Benjamin wrote Adorno in 1937, after having read the manuscript of the final part of Zur Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie (Against Epistemology), lead it into and through a virtual desert and force it to “cross the frozen waste of abstraction to arrive at concise, concrete philosophizing [man müsse durch die Eiswüste der Abstraktion hindurch, um zu konkretem Philosophieren bündig zu gelangen]” (ND xix / 9). This is not to imply that the abstractions of negative metaphysics do not entail a formal pragmatics and moral philosophy—a negative aesthetics and even negative political theology—of their own. The concrete philosophical thinking in question is, on the contrary, directed toward an absolute, infinite, and infinitizing idea (of reason, justice, and aesthetic expression), which can be circumscribed only in endlessly expanded and condensed concentric circles, constellations, epicycles, ellipses, and similar figures and configurations of thought—Denkfiguren—whose linguistic expression (including rhetorical hyperbole, parataxis, condensation, etc.) is never accidental but leads into the very materiality and singularity of the “concrete,” which Adorno strips of all the organico-idealistic and totalizing connotations implied by Latin crescere in Hegelian dialectics. What is more, here performative contradiction is taken to be not an avoidable and corrigeable flaw in reasoning but

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53. On the qualifier comparative, see my introduction to de Vries and Weber, Religion and Media, 29 ff.
a matter of principle, the very modus operandi of any principle, concept, argument, judgment, or expression, rather than an alibi for its irrelevance or demise.

Adorno’s *negative dialectics*, both in solidarity with and opposed to the legacy of idealist and materialist dialectics (to which pt. 2 of this book is devoted), and Levinas’s idea of an *alternating reflection* within and opposed to the more recent tradition of Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology (which forms the central subject of pt. 3) serve as instructive models of such a negative metaphysics, whose peculiar modernity, contemporary relevance, or (what comes down to same thing) both timelessness and untimeliness interests me most. As we shall see, the “actuality” of this philosophy resides not least in the fact that it escapes the vague characterizations and genealogies of present-day thought in terms of traditional and posttraditional, metaphysical and postmetaphysical, modern and postmodern. But Adorno’s and Levinas’s negative metaphysical, that is to say, *theoretical*, models and motifs do not stand on their own; I will further ask how these authors’ descriptive and conceptual strategies connect with the model and motif of *judgment*—in particular, of reflective judgment—as well as with those of comparison and nonsynonymous substitution, stemming from traditions of practical wisdom, rhetoric, hermeneutics, and deconstruction.

Negative dialectics reveals a figure of thought whose categories, models, and examples correspond to the demands of an “inverse theology [*inverse Theologie*].” Adorno once described it, in the wake of Benjamin’s dispersed allusions to “profane illumination” and the theological, though with greater rigor and consequence, as “the position against natural and supra-natural interpretation” at once.55 Neither affirmative (kataphatic or dogmatic) nor simply negative (apophatic or mystical), this alternative theology—more precisely, “the other theology [*die andere Theologie*]” (as if other options were not available)—in his view consists in the paradoxical endeavor to circle around natural history’s “secret” in as rational as possible a way. As he wrote in a letter to Max Horkheimer in 1941:

I have a weak, infinitely weak, feeling that that is possible and in which way, but I am honestly not yet in a position today to formulate it. The premise that *theology is shrinking and becoming invisible* is one motif, while another is the conviction that, from the most central point of view, there is no difference

between theology’s relation to the negative and its relation to the positive [or that “the difference between the negative and the positive doesn’t matter to theology”; der Unterschied des Negativen und des Positiven zur Theologie nichts besagt]. . . . But above all I think that everything we experience as true—not blindly, but as in the movement of the concept [in der Bewegung des Begriffs]—and what presents itself to us really to be read as the index sui et falsi, only conveys this light as a reflection of that other light.  

By the same token Adorno is concerned with a “theology in parentheses [in Klammern],” whose methodological bracketing of the original, canonized, and dogmatic presupposition of historical belief, as well as its ultimate Referent, resembles the Husserlian procedure of phenomenological epoché and leaves uncertain—in suspension, indeed undecided—the speculative or neuralgic point from which thought and experience were once thought to gain their meaning and intensity. And yet, for all its indeterminacy, abstraction, and minimalism, the figure or trace of the other—like the figure-beyond-figure of the other of (every) other and the other of “this” other (but which “one,” exactly?), the best and the worst—remains a moment (as Adorno would say, a “truth-moment [Wahrheitsmoment]”) whose theological overtones (or, in psychoanalytic parlance, overdetermination), like a riddle, remain discernible or, rather, legible, decipherable. 

In roughly this sense Adorno would probably agree with Derrida’s programmatic statement, in the opening section of De la grammatologie (Of Grammatology), that “the ‘theological’ is a determined moment in the total movement of the trace.” This statement could very well serve as the epigraph of my study, and it will help me explain what it means when Adorno, in a lecture entitled “Vernunft und Offenbarung” (“Reason and Revelation”), refusing the alternative between theism and atheism, claims to see “no other possibility than an extreme ascesis toward any type of revealed faith, an extreme loyalty to the prohibition of images [äußerste Treue zum Bilderverbot], far beyond what this once originally meant.”

57. I borrow this expression from Wiggershaus, Frankfurt School, 504; cf. 507 / 562; cf. 565.
59. Theodor W. Adorno, “Vernunft und Offenbarung,” GS 10.2:616 / “Reason and Reve-
In his later work, in the spirit of a radically enlightened critique of Enlightenment, Adorno no longer explicitly speaks of a transformed concept of theology (“inverse theology,” “the other theology”) but replaces it with a figure of metaphysical and even spiritual (geistige) experience. Such experience is an instance of a “thinking [Denken]” — beyond classical and modern metaphysics, without being thereby postmetaphysical but, rather, “solidary [solidarisch] with metaphysics in the moment [Augenblick] of its downfall” (ND 408 / 400, trans. modified) — which Adorno will come to call the “secularization” of the theological in the concept. It exemplifies an experiential mode of the practice of thought, an examined life, whose parallels with the tradition of “spiritual exercises,” from antiquity up to Wittgenstein and Foucault, would require a more detailed study than I can undertake in these pages, which I reserve for a different context.

The models that Adorno adopts in his later work, I will demonstrate, are not fundamentally different in their intellectual genesis, argumentative structure, rhetorical contours, and overall aim from those he employs earlier. They indicate the same phenomenon — the same limit of phenomenality, the trace of the other, the absolute, the infinite, but also the nonidentical, nature, natural history (Naturgeschichte) — in virtually the same formal and figural way. What is more, both approaches, the “inverted” and “parenthetical” theological approach as well as the negative metaphysical and “experiential” one, touch upon a certain materialism whose nonnaturalistic (and, hence, nonsociologic, antipsychologic, indeed antireductionist) features will become clear as we proceed.

Especially in his earliest and late work, Levinas presents the essential ambiguity of the absolute and the infinite as the other (aspect, element, dimension, or horizon) of reason, that is to say, of its very concept, but also as reason’s “life” and “spirituality”; simultaneously, he introduces it as the beyond (au-delà or, on this side, en-deça) of reason, in an equally
exemplary manner. Like Adorno, he does not strive to overcome the lan­
guage of classical metaphysics and onto-theology from an extraterritorial,
Archimedean point, since that would merely lead to abstractly negating
all that has ever been said, done, or expressed in the past and present and
anything that could still be said, done, or expressed in the future. On the
contrary, he shows how, often with the most traditional means, that very
tradition (just like the present and future) can be radically opened up in
an alternating, oscillating, and almost dialectical movement of thought,
whose metaphysical and experiential features betray a remarkable simi­
larity to the thrust of Adorno’s lifelong project—which, as we have seen,
was partly phenomenological. This last observation may sound surprising
and will need some clarification, not least because Levinas, like so many
other postwar French thinkers (including Derrida), indefatigably repudi­
ated the concept of “dialectics,” which he consistently associated with the
speculative idealism and objectivism of Hegelian logic.61

Infinity and transcendence, exteriority and the other (l’Autre, Autrui),
of which Totalité et Infini (Totality and Infinity), in particular, speaks with
such fervor, are not only reason’s immemorial “origin” or unattainable
“beyond” but also its very condition, albeit it one that is integral to reason.
In the words of Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence (Otherwise than
Being or beyond Essence), these motifs are not determinable, let alone fixed
referents, but relational terms that hint at “a movement going from said
to unsaid in which the meaning shows itself, eclipses and shows itself.” In
this “navigation,” Levinas continues suggestively, “the element that bears
the embarkation is also the element that submerges it and threatens to
sink it. Philosophy is perhaps but this exaltation of language in which the
words, after the event, find for themselves a condition in which religions,
sciences and technologies owe their equilibrium of meaning” (OB 181 /
228).

Like Adorno, Habermas, and Derrida, Levinas engages in an almost
transcendental—one might say quasi-, ultra-, or simili-transcendental—
mode of thinking, in which the hypothetical condition of possibility as­
sumed for all thought, agency, judgment, and expression simultaneously
threatens the possibility of this very thinking (and thus of autonomous
action, appropriate judgment, and even sincere expression). Following a
classic deconstructive formula: the condition of possibility for reason in
its threefold faculty is at the same time the condition of its impossibility.

61. See studies by Vincent Descombes, Manfred Frank, and esp. Judith Butler.
It must presuppose what it cannot account for, justify, and convey in any adequate, that is to say, intelligible, appropriate, or authentic manner. But the “logic of presupposition” (to cite Derrida’s formula, relentlessly analyzed in *Apories* [Aporias]) and its contemporary modifications remain of limited value for understanding the projects—and, indeed, performative contradictions—which interest us here.

Access to the characteristic figures of thought in Adorno and Levinas—the dialectical critique of dialectics and the phenomenological critique of phenomenology—and their manner of concrete unfolding are quite different, of course. So far as we know, these two authors never met or exchanged their views in writing. Yet a *lectio difficilior* and imagined confrontation of their work reveals how their respective procedures can be brought to a “point of indifference” where—as in a chiasmus (PN 62 / 89)—they momentarily connect, intersect, and then part ways again. Such a comparative analysis yields the following dilemma: either Adorno’s negative dialectics is, in the strict (i.e., idealist-Hegelian or materialist-Marxist) sense, not dialectical at all (and how, exactly, could we ever determine this?), or the work of the apparent anti-dialectician Levinas might just as well be read as thoroughly “dialectical” (in the alternative, consequent, and immanently critical—that is to say, the negative—meaning Adorno gives to this term). But also either the method of phenomenological concretion developed by Levinas is, in the strict (i.e., Husserlian and Heideggerian) sense, not phenomenological at all (and, again, how could we ever be sure that this is the case?), or the work of the apparent antiphenomenologist Adorno can be understood as “phenomenological” through and through (or at least phenomenological in the meaning Levinas has given to this term, a meaning that could also be said to be alternative, immanently critical, and consequent). The radical formalism and singular concreteness of their respective analyses, the paradoxical and aporetic relationship of their writings to the philosophical tradition as a whole, the interchangeability of certain motifs, argumentative procedures, and rhetorical strategies—all epitomized by the proliferation and exaggeration of performative contradiction as a challenge, task, and style of modern philosophizing—permit one, in principle, to translate the thought of the one into the terms of the other, and vice versa.

This is not a trivial observation. From this perspective the structural insights derived from the work of these authors—to the extent that such insights can be distinguished or separated from the particular idiom of each—can be analyzed more distinctly, more freely, and in terms other
than those possible within the boundaries of their respective (equally consistent and heterodox) dialectical or phenomenological approaches. I believe such a formal translation, transformation, and (as Derrida would say) nonsynonymous substitution of their concerns (if not necessarily vocabularies) should begin by exploring the at times orthodox, at times unorthodox hermeneutics of the trace of the other of reason as variously intoned, though often pianissimo and hence almost inaudibly, in their work.

The figure of the trace hovers between a fractured, paradoxical, or aporetic idea (in all the emphatic Platonic, Cartesian, and Kantian connotations of this term) and a practical-aesthetic motif or figure (in all the post-Romantic and, in Levinas’s case, biblical-hermeneutical or exegetical overdeterminations of these words). This ambiguity is no sign of these authors’ lack of conceptual precision. On the contrary, in this structural indeterminacy, I suggest, lies their greatest analytical, moral, imaginative, and expressive strength. It has repercussions for religious and existential questions concerning the good life which have concerned all previous ages (and which, in light of the horrors of the twentieth century, have crystallized in the Adornian maxim “to try to live so that one may believe oneself to have been a good animal [versuchen, so zu leben, dass man glauben darf, ein gutes Tier gewesen zu sein]” (ND 299 / 294, trans. modified); in other words, in the “new categorical imperative . . . imposed by Hitler upon humans in the state of unfreedom: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen” [365 / 358, trans. modified]).

Indeterminacy on the conceptual level (and between the conceptual and the practical or aesthetic) leads us to the very heart of the political—more precisely, theologico-political—matters that increasingly concern us: religious violence, nationalism, ethnic strife, genocide, technological warfare, terror, global capitalism, the power of the new media, international relations, and the limits of sovereignty, of the human, of human rights, of the boundaries of life, and of the animal.

If one holds that the content and modality of an unconditional, absolute, and infinite appeal to truthfulness, moral obligation, justice, sincerity, and to “the other”—including the other, the ipseity, in and of me

— must necessarily be kept open, at least so long as one philosophizes (without knowing, acting, or judging in a determinate way or according to fixed and preestablished rules); moreover, if this appeal remains by definition exposed to an, in principle, endlessly variable intonation and dimensionality of meaning and sense; finally, if one does not want surreptitiously to incorporate or reify the trace (whether naturalistically or religiously, by reducing it to a biological, sociological, psychological, or spiritual given, the “myth of the Given” criticized by Wilfrid Sellars, Richard Rorty, and John McDowell, rather than seeing it as the “originary donation” of which phenomenology, from Husserl to Marion, speaks); one must carefully examine how these ideas, motifs, or motivations can be put to work. Adorno (and, more incidentally, Horkheimer, Benjamin, and Habermas) and Levinas (and, more directly, Derrida) are witnesses to another type of thought and to an altogether different version of praxis, action, judgment, and expression, whose central tenet is the indeterminacy of the other, the enigma of signifyingness, the performative contradiction of the Said (le Dit, in Levinas’s words) in its intrinsic relationship with all Saying (le Dire).

This oscillation or alternation between immanence and transcendence — “transcendence in immanence” or “immanence in transcendence,” if we care to insist on this “nomenclature” — like the (more or less consequent) adoption of the figure of the trace in the writings of Adorno and Levinas, suggests a remarkable parallel with Derrida’s strategy of philosophical and rhetorical deconstruction. The rigor of Derrida’s inquiry into the presuppositions of metaphysical language — “our language,” he writes in Of Grammatology — leads to the extreme point of a “strange non-order of the excluded middle, in which the disjunction of the yes and no, the imperious alternative, thanks to which computers decide about the universe, is challenged” (PN 60 / 87). Derrida’s consequentialism or jusqu’au boutisme, to cite an insightful formulation from Levinas’s essay on Derrida, entitled “Tout autrement” (“Wholly Otherwise”), seems to formalize one step further the critiques that Adorno and Levinas put forward with the help of dialectical and phenomenological idioms and methods and to draw out their implications and consequences even more consistently than they dared to do.

Admittedly, Derrida attempts to transform the philosophy of dialectical, ontological, and ethical difference into what seems an altogether different philosophy of the trace of the other, namely, that of “general dif-
ference,” “Difference,” or, as he will come to name it, *différence*. He thus seems to remove himself from the singular—read sensualist, materialist, and utopian—stances taken by Adorno, for whom the nonidentical stands for “nature” and the transience (*Vergänglichkeit*) of “natural history.” By the same token he seems to distance himself from the ethical and religious sensibility of Levinas, for whom the other (*l’Autre*) evokes above all the “idea of the Infinite” and the other human being (*Aufrui*), in whose face God leaves his trace, thereby signaling being par excellence or, as Levinas will come to say, the otherwise than being, beyond all essence. Although, as I will show, Derrida desubstantializes, deformalizes, and phenomenologically—or is it dialectically?—analyzes these notions in a different and ever-expanding idiom, the “theoretical matrix” of his general difference or *différence* allows us to reinscribe such central motifs and their accompanying movement of thought in a more consistent and consequential logic of the same and the other: via a seriality (*sériature*) for which the early *terminus technicus* “nonsynonymous substitution,” borrowed from the essay “La Différence” (“Difference”), still forms one of the most compelling descriptions.63

In place of the formal determination of the symmetrical conditions of rational thought and action with which Habermas works in his discursive model of a theory of rationality, the deconstructive analysis—here apparently still captive to the metaphysics of a “temporalized philosophy of origins,” as *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* suspects—would seem to consider the formal yet asymmetrical structures of every constitution of meaning, for any decision, judgment, or expression. If one must, with Habermas, attribute a quasi-, ultra-, or simili-transcendental mode of inquiry to such deconstructive thought, does this inquiry not then secretly assume much more than it may think or imagine? Does Derrida’s writing about these matters not betray (i.e., intentionally ignore and unwittingly signal) an all too easily unheard minimal tonality—*in pianissimo*, as it were, and irretrievable by formalizations, whether oriented symmetrically or asymmetrically, pragmatically or pragrammatologically, semiotically or semiologically, or, some would say, neostructurally and “textually”? Does not deconstruction entail more than it claims (or is willing to acknowledge)? And are not the philosophies of Adorno and Levinas, pace Habermas and Derrida, at least in part correct in their more explicit, performative, yet also contradictory presentation of ethical-metaphysical,

utopian-messianic, and religious premises and aims (i.e., motifs and motivations), which are at once immemorial and unforgettable? Or is this impression simply based on a limited reception of Habermas’s and Derrida’s more recent writings, which have increasingly sought to address the legacies of Adorno and Levinas, respectively, while engaging in an increasingly polite intellectual dialogue both with these teachers and with each other? Finally, do we have at our disposal the necessary conceptual tools to decide this matter unambiguously, given that the confrontation between the different methodologies, implications, and overall ambitions of these thinkers has only just begun to emerge?

However one responds to these questions, it seems clear that the minimal theology I suspect at the heart of their philosophical endeavors must be located in the seemingly irresolvable tension and intersection—once again, the chiasmic crossing—between the (modern) theory of rationality and the (supposedly postmodern, post- or neostructuralist) philosophical strategy of deconstruction. If I am not mistaken, it can be rigorously articulated with most profit in a systematic reconstruction and analysis of the no less tense proximity of—and distance between—Adorno’s and Levinas’s philosophies of the nonidentical and the other, that is to say, of the trace, the strange, and the stranger. Although these philosophers stem from different intellectual backgrounds and draw on different traditions, Adorno’s figures of thought—his models, indeed, micrologies, of a dialectics turned negative yet no less consequential, though it is often mistakenly depicted as neo-Hegelian—are in surprising accord with the concretizations of intentional analysis by the phenomenologically trained Levinas, whose relationship to the Husserlian legacy, dialectics, and dialogue is hardly less complicated than that of his counterpart with the Hegelian. Both indulge in argumentative procedures and rhetorical exaggerations, allowing paradoxes, performative contradictions,


65. I will seek to justify my dissatisfaction with these ascriptions (post-this and post-that) as we proceed.

aporias, oscillations, and alternations that have to do not with the idio-
 syncrasies of their respective idioms or the pitfalls of their respective itin-
eraries but with a more general — and, I would claim, continuing — task, 
 challenge, and, as it were, spiritual exercise, of contemporary philosophical 
 thinking.

Again, these two thinkers never met, and neither mentions nor ap-
pears ever to have taken notice of the other’s work. Yet, from the very 
beginning of their careers, both independently made an “idea of the other” 
— in forms that are figuratively comparable and structurally indistinguish-
able, if in part incommunicable — an integral part of their intellectual 
 projects. This idea, sufficiently analyzed, systematized, and formalized, 
will prove essential to what I term a “minimal theology,” that is to say, 
a theology stripped its lofty pretensions and attuned to singular aspira-
tions that, in modernity (as Max Weber knew), only resonate — and con-
trast — in pianissimo. Both see a “noetical” ferment (or, again, idea) of 
the ab-solute or the infinite, together with “dia-noetical-discursive” ratio-
nality and judgment, as being necessary for the constitution and regula-
tion of reasoned and responsible thought, action, and “spiritual experi-
ence [geistige Erfahrung],” of expressiveness and passivity, without which 
no human life (or, indeed, life as such) would seem worth living.

The idea of “transcendence” continues to play a key role in the strik-
ing passages in which Adorno displays a qualified “solidarity with meta-
physics in its downfall” (ND 408 / 400, trans. modified); indeed, with-
out this idea, he says, “truth would be unthinkable” (ND 246 / 244). For 
Levinas the historical idea of the infinite, as held by Plato, Plotinus, or 
Descartes, remains no less pertinent. Beginning with his first indepen-
dent philosophical texts, published after (and, in part, parallel to) his early 
commentaries on Husserl and Heidegger in the 1930s and 1940s — in ex-
plicit solidarity with their respective Abbau and Destruktion of the natur-
alisms, psychologisms, and ontologisms of metaphysics, its logic, and its 
humanism — he interprets the idea of the infinite as the inexhaustible yet

67. As I indicate in the preface, Levinas was familiar with Adorno’s Jargon der Eigentlic-
heit (Jargon of Authenticity), a book he did not admire. Adorno for his part knew of Levi-
nas’s translation of Husserl’s Cartesianische Meditationen and refers to it in Zur Metakritik der 
Erkenntnistheorie (cf. GS 5:25). In a letter to Horkheimer, written in October 1936, he further 
once mentions the name of Levinas as a possible — but, in his view, unsuitable — contributor 
(suggested to him by Raymond Aron) to the projects of the Institute for Social Research (see 
don’t know” (ibid., 193).
forgotten source of the *philosophia perennis*, and thus of the “essentially hypocritical civilization” of the West, in its double allegiance to philosophers and prophets, Athens and Jerusalem, “attached both to the True and to the Good, henceforth antagonistic” (*TI* 24 / xii). That this “hypocrisy” is not an individual moral flaw to be perfected in human nature but a condition of culture as such, that the painful awareness of its presence is the sure sign of a learning process of sorts, contributes to Levinas’s understanding of the drama, the divine comedy, of existence.

As we will see, Adorno and Levinas both attempt, within their own idioms and frames of reference, to circumscribe and transcribe the traces of reason’s other or Other (again in the subjective and objective senses of this genitive), whether they proceed dialectically and, in a sense to be determined, negatively or via a series of phenomenological descriptions and intentional analyses. In their view irruptions of the other (*das Andere; l’Autre* or *Autrui*) into the order of the same (*das Identische, das Gleiche,* or *das Immergleiche; le Meme* or *le Neutre*) illumine and reveal a kind of alterity which cannot be said actually to exist anywhere as present (or as presence). In their eyes it would be equally misguided to hold this heterogeneous element—a “curvature of social space,” as Levinas will come to call it—to be devoid of all reality, of all concreteness, as if it concerned a pure nonbeing, an abstract possibility, an empty construct, an actual nothingness, the mere negation and flip side of presence. For these authors the radical nature of the idea of the ab-solute or the infinite does not lie in the need to define it by contrast to the traditional-metaphysical philosophy of origin, with its substantialized (idealized or naturalized) foundations and its teleological and—theologically speaking—eschatological, if not necessarily messianic or apocalyptic, orientation.

Moreover, the notions of the ab-solute and the infinite are incompatible with the logical law of the excluded third (*tertium non datur*, i.e., either *p* or *~p*), which in the Western tradition stands as the Archimedean point of logos, reason, rationality, and discourse, granting coherence and consistency to all philosophical knowledge, indeed, to all meaningful speech that has wrested itself from opinion and confusion or which escapes the essential muteness of a *flatus vocis*. Adorno and Levinas exasperate and confound their interpreters with their tireless attempts to investigate the presuppositions, consequences, and margins of this regime of the excluded middle. They undermine its generally acknowledged centrality in order to create a conceptual (or merely figural, rhetorical?) space for their suggestive idea of the other beyond—or on this side of—being and non-
being, traversing the very distinction between being and nonbeing, affirmation and negation, and, again, \( p \) and \( \sim p \). However differently their philosophical points of departure may appear and however differently their intellectual, sociopolitical, and religious horizons might determine the substance (if we can still call it that) of their thought, their independently articulated ideas of the ab-solute can be viewed formally as figures of thought which, in parallel and complementary ways, provoke both a delimitation and a displacement of the philosophical tradition as a whole, including its modern equivalents and transformations.\(^{68}\) In their common critique of totality they therefore, somewhat paradoxically and ironically, share an almost totalizing depiction of this tradition’s most general and tenacious intellectual traits, ethical implications, political ramifications, and aesthetic limitations. Not all of their assumptions and suggestions are prima facie convincing, unless one reads them, as I will attempt to do, against the grain and interprets them in light of their specific argumentative and rhetorical strategy, that is to say, as deliberate exaggerations and performative contradictions. One notorious example of this strategy would be Adorno’s dictum *Das Ganze ist das Unwahre* (The whole is the untrue), which, for all its paradoxical and aporetic nature, both hides an almost irrefutable conceptual truth, indeed a truism, and conveys an unmistakable moral appeal. Such phrases often reflect a provocative modernist aesthetic sensibility and its predilection for fragment, aphorism, and parataxis.

Adorno and Levinas consider the Western tradition to descend primarily through the works of Kant, Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger, though in part by way of Marx, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard, although references to other thinkers—Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Augustine, Aquinas, and (for Levinas) Descartes—abound in their writings. The pre-Socratics, the Hellenistic schools (Stoicism, Skepticism, Epicureanism, and Cynicism), Scholasticism, and Renaissance thought, let alone empiricist, logical positivist, or contemporary analytical and American pragmatist thought, are largely absent or appear only in brief allusions and schematic or pejorative presentations. In both, the philosophical legacy is thus not eliminated or destructed but, rather, in a subtle way opened up from within and without—displaced and deconstructed, almost in Derrida’s use of

these terms. In their derangement of and disengagement from the Western heritage, Adorno and Levinas legitimate (or should we say justify?) their projects by suggesting that neither traditional metaphysical speculation nor modern subjective, let alone scientific or scientific, models of experience and experiment are capable of grasping and conveying the “experience” — within quotation marks — of extreme negativity and absurdity which marks life “after Auschwitz.” The title “Nach Auschwitz” (“After Auschwitz”) introduces “Meditationen zur Metaphysik” (“Meditations on Metaphysics”), the final section of Negative Dialektik (Negative Dialectics), and that proper name stands for a radical caesura in Levinas’s texts as well, as the dedication of Otherwise than Being testifies.

These thinkers rely on the uncanny appeal with which the rarefied and seemingly obsolete traces of the good and just life which remain — as instances of “spiritual experience” (Adorno) and “the spiritual life” (Levinas) — signal themselves here and now, under the conditions of modernity. The question of the meaning of truth, justice (for Adorno), the beautiful, or (more rarely, in Levinas) the sublime must, in their view, henceforth be thought without any reference to substantial guarantees immanent in some actual — or even possible, that is to say, potential and actualizable — reality, whether material or ideal, phenomenal or noumenal, profane or holy. The universalism of past philosophical systems of thought, they hold, was based on the illusion of being able to navigate stoically between the extremes of an ambivalent “experience” of the horrible and the no less ambivalent “experience” of the good, both of which — precisely because they are extremes (extremes that touch upon each other) — could be successfully forgotten, ignored, or repressed. Moreover, the traditional and modern philosophies of the same (of identity, totality, and the neuter), Adorno and Levinas claim, already founder on the attempt to convey any particular suffering or happiness through concepts of general or universal relevance or meaning. The inevitable deficit of Western philosophy, thus conceived, lies in this lapse — in short, in the space or interval that opens between the singular and the general or universal, that is to say, between the particular and particularity, between what is without concept (das Begriffslose) and the concept, between the nonpropositional Saying (le Dire) and the performative Said (le Dit) — though philosophy, by and large, acknowledges nothing of the sort.

Nevertheless, such singular “experiences” and particulars — before and beyond the categories of empirical or scientific experience as defined by Kant and expressed in concepts, statements, experiential judgments
(Erfahrungsurteile), and the like—must receive some kind of philosophical articulation if they are not to be dismissed as irrational outbursts or the convulsions of a tortured corporeality or a naively desiring spirituality, two contrasting figures of structurally similar manifestations of the ab-solute, the worst and the best, of which we find compelling instances in both Adorno and Levinas. Where these “experiences”—sometimes treated as nonexperiences, as not yet or no longer experienced, or as experiences par excellence, that is, as absolute experiences, experiences of the ab-solute—are forgotten, ignored, or repressed, philosophy is reduced to a kind of shadow play, becoming irresponsible, indeed irrelevant. Where it does not model its categories and concepts on a singular materiality or, rather, matter—evoked by Adorno’s constellations of dialectical concretion no less than by Levinas’s method of phenomenological deformalization—philosophy renders itself obsolete by betraying the very task and “honor of thinking.”

That is where the “substance” of these writings lies, a substance that is quite different from—and often diametrically opposed to—the meaning traditionally granted to this term. Adorno and Levinas broach “experiences” that traverse and exceed the order and history of being as well as the schemes of thought, concepts of normativity, and canons of taste which correspond to it. They hint at the less than heroic and more than tragic “experiences” of recent modernity which have set the negative standard (and, as Adorno says, “categorical imperative”) for all history and responsibilities to come. Living “after Auschwitz,” they suggest, one can no longer assume the presence of a divinity originating and directing the course of the world, though one must at the same time doubt the real or genuine—that is, conceptual or existential—possibility of rigid nihilism, consequent skepticism, lax relativism, and the like. “After Auschwitz” any appeal to a common cause and course of humankind, any eulogy to “culture,” should be regarded with the deepest suspicion. What remains shows itself elsewhere, not in life—pure life—as such but in the minimal traits and instances of the other, whatever its nature.

In this book I attempt to illustrate the paradoxical and aporetic figure of these philosophically diffused differences, which are simultaneously sig-

naled and betrayed within the limits of reason, for good and for ill. In such an ambiguous figure of thought, the contours of a minimal theology can clearly be recognized. This philosophical discipline—a “spiritual exercise” in a new guise—corresponds both to our modern or modernist (some would say postmodern) sensibilities and to a plausible, emphatic, and hyperbolic idea of reason, rationality, agency, and expressiveness. As I have suggested, we can formalize this intuition by examining the conceptual idioms, argumentation, rhetoric, and images employed by Adorno and Levinas throughout their long philosophical careers. Whereas part 1 analyzes the modern critique of, and remaining possibilities for, theology against the background of Habermas’s theory of rationality, parts 2 and 3 of the book describe the intellectual backgrounds, methodological procedures, and conceptual and figurative innovations of Adorno’s and Levinas’s writings while indicating some major systematic problems in interpretation which must be elaborated in an attempt at an immanent critique and lectio difficilior which would be faithful to the most rigorous principles of textual critique as well as of historical and conceptual analysis. I cannot presume to offer a total interpretation (a horrifying contradic­tio in terminis!) or an exhaustive reconstruction that would locate all the challenges and difficulties posed by their work. Still, I attempt a certain philosophical “appropriation from a distance” and would suggest that whoever wants to investigate the possibility or impossibility of a philosophical theology—or, for that matter, any other thought, action, judgment, or expression—“after Auschwitz” must come to terms with the lessons of these formidable teachers. The comparison and confrontation of motifs and turns of thought or phrase which results from this apprenticeship does not consist in a problem-oriented “history of ideas,” however interesting (and necessary) that might be, but, rather, in an attempt to read and analyze a certain “history of theory” with what Habermas rightly calls a “systematic purpose.”

In part 4, chapter 11 sums up the general argument of my comparative analysis and confrontation. It sets out, from yet another perspective, how a critical reception of Adorno’s and Levinas’s most important insights must be differentiated not only from classical, dogmatic, and confessional

70. Habermas’s phrase, in von Friedeburg and Habermas, Adorno-Konferenz 1983, 351.
theology (in addition to being liberated from the modern theory of rationality and the historicist and culturalist conception of the study of religion that accompanies it) but also from the postmodern interpretation of the philosophical strategy and ambition of “deconstruction.” Chapter 12, finally, consists in an exposition of the problem of conceptual idolatry and blasphemy, which enables me to circle back to the questions from which I set out. The appendix clarifies some misinterpretations in the earlier reception of “deconstruction” as “poststructuralism.”