

Existentially lived truth or communicative reason? Habermas' critique of Kierkegaard

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In *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie* (AGP), Habermas introduces Kierkegaard as a counterpoint to Hegel. Kierkegaard rejects Hegel's sublimation of subjectivity into ever-higher stages of knowledge, culminating in the absolute ego and a corresponding absolute knowledge, and asserts instead the importance of existentially lived truth (Habermas, 2019). Like Hegel, he conceives of reason as finite, operating within history, but unlike Hegel, attributes to it a transcending power that intervenes into the historical process. This power enables human subjects to act autonomously, liberating them to a mode of freedom that consists in 'being-able-to-be-oneseif'. Habermas endorses Kierkegaard's concern to maintain the transcending power of reason as experienced by finite subjects within human history. However, he distances himself from his interpretation of existentially experienced truth as the authenticity [*Wahrhaftigkeit*] of a life of religious faith lived in passionate devotion (Habermas, 2019, pp. 670–671). Rejecting his interpretation of the transcending power as the power of a personal God, Habermas offers a secular reading of it as the power of the anonymous *Logos* of language. On this reading, the ethical individual is offered not redemption but a postmetaphysical way out of its despairing isolation in self-referential inwardness (pp. 695–696).

In the following I reject both Habermas' secular, linguistic interpretation of the transcending power that liberates humans to be-able-to-be-themselves and Kierkegaard's religious one. Habermas' interpretation fails to accommodate the potentially language-transcending aspect of subjective experiences of existential truth, religious or non-religious. However, Kierkegaard's interpretation is also unsatisfactory, allowing for no rational contestation of the truth claims implicit in the subject's liberation to being-able-to-be-oneseif; this renders it unsuitable for the purposes of critically engaged, political and social theorizing.

Kierkegaard considers rational contestation impossible because individual subjects are unable to directly communicate their experiences of truth to their fellow subjects. In order for their experiences of truth to be accessible to other subjects, these subjects would have to undergo a personal conversion. Conversion is a revelatory experience. It reveals that being-able-to-be-oneseif demands a fundamentally new mode of existence: one in which human subjects live in passionate religious devotion, attentive to the everyday conduct of their lives, deeply aware of their own sin and endeavouring to appropriate their life history reflexively (p. 672). In Kierkegaard's view, normal communication cannot convey the life-changing quality of this experience, since it is geared towards mutual comprehensibility within the terms of the prevailing ethical vocabulary (pp. 696–697). Habermas notes an implicit truth reference in Kierkegaard's

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notion of passion; he observes that despite Kierkegaard's insistence that the leap of faith is not an epistemic act, it has a 'certain cognitive quality' (p. 675). However, due to the chasm he posits between faith and knowledge, the converted subjects' implicit claims to the truth of their new worldviews is immune to critical interrogation within everyday communicative practices.

Habermas does not draw out an important implication of the truth dimension in conversion as Kierkegaard understands it. The fundamentally transformative character of the experience means that the subject's conversion results in a fundamentally new understanding of truth. For Kierkegaard, subjects who undergo conversion come to see that truth refers to the validity of an entire life-history; moreover, that truth can be grasped only through the reflexive appropriation of their own life-history in a mode of existence of passionate believing devotion to a personal God, who intervenes into, and operates within, human history (pp. 676–677, p. 695). This new understanding of truth stands in stark contrast to the customary understanding of truth, in which it is a matter of the validity of factual or moral assertions. If the autonomous subject's fundamentally new worldview entails a fundamentally new way of conceiving truth, the challenges for intersubjective communication are even more serious than the obstacles to which Habermas draws attention.

Habermas rejects Kierkegaard's detachment of autonomous agency from the critical power of reason. He maintains that communicative reason, whose context-transcending power can be explained in purely secular terms, is the sole postmetaphysically defensible rational means for emancipating the self-reflecting subject to a condition of being-able-to-be-oneself. However, despite this significant divergence from Kierkegaard, he tacitly shares his conviction that religious experiences have a rationally impenetrable core, which cannot be communicated intersubjectively in validity-oriented exchanges. As he puts it:

By dint of their if necessary rationally justified reference to the dogmatic authority of an inviolable core of infallible revealed truths, [religiously rooted existential convictions] evade that kind of unreserved discursive examination to which other ethical orientations and worldviews, i.e. secular 'conceptions of the good', are exposed (Habermas, 2008, p. 129).

There is a sense in which Habermas is correct to say that existential convictions have a rationally impenetrable core. If one holds, as I do, that existential (ethical) truth always transcends its particular articulations, discursive critical reasoning will never be able fully to capture its meaning. Habermas goes a step further, however, drawing the conclusion that postmetaphysical thinking must abstain from *evaluating* the truth of religious convictions. This adds a second dimension to the ethical abstinence he identifies as a key component of postmetaphysical thinking in his earlier writings (Habermas, 1992). Ethical abstinence means, to begin with, that postmetaphysical philosophy does not offer substantive guidance for the existentially most important questions of human life (Habermas, 2003, pp. 12–17). In addition, it means that it should abstain from evaluating existentially rooted truth claims; these include religious ones, where it must adopt a stance of methodological atheism (Habermas, 1991, pp. 127–156; 2008, pp. 209–247). Put differently, he advocates critical restraint on the part of a reason that draws boundaries between moral knowledge and existential convictions on the grounds that 'we do not associate with value-orientations that have existential significance for us...the claim that they merit universal recognition' (Habermas, 2008, pp. 239). His position in AGP remains unchanged: existential values, in contrast to moral norms and principles, cannot be justified with reasons that claim universal validity (Habermas, 2019, pp. 787–788, p. 791).

The second key component of postmetaphysical thinking is 'transcendence from within': an 'innerworldly', linguistic interpretation of the transcending power of truth claims in the domain of practical reason. Habermas calls this a deflationary account of the 'wholly other' or 'absolute'. It is deflationary because the emancipatory power of the absolute, which is deemed to be antecedent to, and foundational for, the subjectivity of speakers, is built into everyday intersubjective communication itself (Habermas, 2003, pp. 10–11; 2008, p. 242). In tacit agreement with Kierkegaard he holds that the idea of a transcendent power that breaks into the world from outside evades human understanding (Habermas, 2008, pp. 251–252). In contrast to Kierkegaard, however, for whom emancipation is enabled by the passionately experienced truth of existentially rooted religious faith, for Habermas it is enabled by the binding and

bonding power of the validity claims that human subjects mutually raise in communicating with one another, while accepting their rational responsibility to justify them if challenged (Habermas, 2003, pp. 10–11). In his deflationary account, this communicative power is the medium for a kind of transcendence that is generated by humans in their linguistic interactions and is, in this sense, ‘innerworldly.’ At the same time, it is truth-analogous, retaining the connotation of ‘unconditionality’ that we attach to the concept of truth (Habermas, 2019, p. 788, p. 789 n. 10). Accordingly, truth has a double aspect: it is at once unconditional and dependent on intersubjective justification. In the domain of morality Habermas makes truth (moral rightness) dependent on intersubjective justification in a generative sense: it is *produced* in (idealised) justificatory processes that culminate in rational agreement: only those norms and principles are morally valid that are the result of a universal agreement as to their universalizability, arrived at through the intersubjective exchange of reasons under ideal communicative conditions (Habermas, 2005, pp. 256–75). As he puts it: ‘An agreement about norms or actions that is reached discursively under ideal conditions ... warrants [verbürgt] the rightness of moral judgments. Ideal warranted assertibility is what we mean by moral validity...it exhausts the meaning of normative rightness’ (Habermas, 2005, p. 258, emphasis in original). In short, in the domain of practical reason, Habermas holds an epistemic-constructivist conception of truth (Cooke, 2016).

In AGP Habermas offers a reconstruction of the historical emergence of postmetaphysical thinking that is significantly more differentiated than his earlier account; nonetheless, his conception itself remains substantively unchanged. As before, Habermas insists on postmetaphysical thinking’s ethical abstinence and on the ‘innerworldly’ character of its transcending power.

His understanding of both components leads to difficulties that endanger his project of a critical social theory (Cooke, 2013, 2016, 2019c). It impoverishes it by closing postmetaphysical thinking to religiously grounded and other ethical insights, for which in the given sociocultural context no generally acceptable reasons are available; these may nonetheless have illuminating power for humans concerned to live an ethically good life (Jaspers, 1967). In addition, it impacts negatively on its motivational force. If we assume that human agency is ethically inflected, permeated and shaped by more or less implicit orientations towards ideas of the good, then a theory calling for social and political change for the better must speak to humans as ethical, not just as moral and political agents. In a legal-political context, this would require it to make political legitimacy dependent on public discussion and contestation of ethical validity claims, irrespective of whether the reasons supporting them prove to be generally acceptable. Habermas’ position here is ambivalent. On the one hand, he proposes a principle of democracy, according to which legitimacy is defined in terms of the assent of all citizens, discursively reached in a legally constituted process (Habermas, 1996, p. 110). In the secular, value-pluralist, societies of Western modernity, arriving at such agreement requires citizens to co-operate with their fellow citizens to translate the semantic contents of their metaphysically grounded religious worldviews into a generally acceptable language (Habermas, 2008). On the other hand, he acknowledges the need for citizens to work together to *construct* shared ideas of the good life and corresponding modes of behaviour and practices. Thus, in his Postscript to AGP, he draws attention to the need for socio-cultural learning processes that take place in the domain of ethical life as well as in the moral domain. He observes that in contemporary democratic contexts, in which there is an influx of immigrants with alien ways of thinking and unfamiliar life-practices, social integration calls not only for commitment to universal basic rights but also for the *construction* of intersubjectively shared value-orientations (Habermas, 2019, pp. 795–796). While the final sentence of the Postscript recalls his argument for co-operative efforts at translation, I read his emphasis on constructing new meanings as a recognition that embracing metaphysically grounded or otherwise alien worldviews may require not just translation but fundamental identity-changes on the side of both secular and religious citizens. I suggest that critical social theory needs to probe the question of what such construction entails. In the following, I take some steps in this direction.

I share Habermas’ view that contemporary philosophy requires an appropriately re-articulated conception of autonomy; furthermore, that in contrast to Kierkegaard’s idea of being-able-to-be-oneself, this cannot be based on the subject’s recognition of its own dependency on an absolute power that escapes rational understanding. Habermas rightly ties autonomy to rational insight dependent on critical evaluation of validity claims in intersubjective processes of exchange and contestation. Building on Habermas’ discourse-ethical approach, I construe autonomy as ethically self-determining agency: as a mode of freedom that is constituted in significant measure by way of the

intersubjective exchange of reasons (Cooke, 2019b). In my account, however, the reasons exchanged are not just moral but also ethical ones, which relate to the validity of particular existential convictions. This leads me to sever the conceptual link Habermas posits between autonomy and discursively *produced* rational insight: For Habermas, moral autonomy is generated in discourses in which participants are concerned to reach a universally binding, rationally justified agreement about the universalizability of norms and principles (Cooke, 2020). Moral insight, as mentioned, is defined in epistemic-constructivist terms: agreement *warrants* the moral validity of norms and principles in a truth-analogous sense.

The conceptual connection between autonomy and discursively generated rational insight means that Habermas cannot consistently hold a concept of ethical autonomy. For, in his discourse theory, participants in ethical discourses do not seek to arrive at a generally binding, rationally justified agreement that determines the validity of the judgment reached. Rather, they are concerned to gain clarity and a better understanding of their particular ideas of the good life (Habermas, 1993, pp. 1–18). The intersubjective exchange of reasons contributes to the hermeneutic process, providing help to participants in their concern to lead ethically good lives. Importantly, however, the validity of judgments reached is not *determined* by the intersubjective exchange of reasons. Thus, ethical discourses do not *generate* rational insight in a context-transcending, truth-analogous sense. Accordingly, Habermas could not offer a discourse-theoretical account of ethical autonomy without significant modification of his theory. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that he pays little attention to this form of freedom in his writings. That makes it all the more noteworthy that his dispute with Kierkegaard centres on a mode of ethical existence for which the term ‘ethical autonomy’ seems entirely appropriate. Recall that Habermas makes the case for the anonymous *Logos* of language as the transcending power that releases the individual subject from its self-referential inwardness, liberating it to a condition of being-able-to-be-oneself. Evidently this is a form of freedom, but one that is distinct from moral autonomy as Habermas construes it. The discursive processes that contribute to the constitution of freedom as being-able-to-be-oneself are concerned with ethical-existential questions such as ‘How should I conduct my life in the right way?’ This is why ‘being-able-to-be-oneself’ is well captured by the term ‘ethical autonomy’.

I also share what I call the non-authoritarian impulse of Habermas’ postmetaphysical thinking. I read his advocacy of ethical abstinence primarily as a rejection of ethical authoritarianism. This is my term for a mode of authority in which a view of the ethically good life is imposed on individual subjects as indisputably valid (Cooke, 2006, pp. 16–17). The subjects are denied the freedom to question the ethical validity of the form of life to which they are (perhaps willingly) subjected. Ethical authoritarianism is closely connected with epistemological authoritarianism: an exercise of authority that asserts the indisputable truth of assertions, denying those subjected to it the freedom to interrogate the validity of these assertions (Cooke, 2006, pp. 16–17). I read Habermas’ critique of Kierkegaard’s conception of truth from this perspective. Admittedly, as it stands Kierkegaard’s position is not epistemologically and ethically authoritarian: self-reflective, passionate religious believers do not seek to *impose* their view of truth, and the form of life appropriate to it, on those who have not progressed to the religious stage; rather, they retreat into silence. However, his position has authoritarian tendencies. It places such believers in a position of epistemological and ethical superiority vis-à-vis others who have not made the leap of faith and relieves them of rational accountability. As Habermas observes, being-able-to-be-oneself calls for responsibility not towards one’s fellow humans but towards God and the order of things in which one lives – and we may add, ourselves (Habermas, 2003, p. 7). The implicit truth reference in Kierkegaard’s notion of passion means, furthermore, that religious believers make implicit claims to the truth of their lived experience in their relationship with God – claims that cannot rationally be called into question by other subjects. However, so long as they maintain silence, they avoid the objection of epistemological and ethical authoritarianism. Modern political theory has facilitated this avoidance by favouring privatization of citizens’ religious beliefs, distinguishing sharply between the private and public realms. However, the hard-hitting critiques by feminist political theorists and others of this private/public division, whose force Habermas acknowledges (Habermas, 1996, pp. 307–313), makes it difficult to justify a strict privatization approach. In addition, a privatization approach means that the epistemic and ethical insights of religious believers would remain forever inaccessible to their fellow citizens, impeding

the processes of semantic renewal that Habermas considers indispensable for contemporary democracies (Habermas, 2008).

In light of these two points of convergence between Habermas' postmetaphysical thinking and my own approach, why do I reject his secular interpretation of Kierkegaard's transcending power? This is due to an implication of my conception of autonomy as ethically self-determining agency.

In my account, the subject's self-determining agency is constituted in significant measure in agonistic processes of rational deliberation and contestation with other human subjects, in which existential questions of the good life are at stake (Cooke, 2019a, 2019b). The agonistic processes have an in-built reference to truth, in the sense that those engaging in them share a common concern critically to explore and interrogate their particular existential convictions from the point of view of their universal validity. The agonistic exchange of reasons contributes to these exploratory, interrogative and evaluative processes. The concern critically to assess the universal validity of their particular existential convictions is shared by everyone. It underlies the particular ethical questions thematised in intersubjective exchanges in particular contexts. Evidently, the answers to such particular questions are valid only for particular subjects in particular situations. At any point in the critical exchange, however, the question of the universal validity of the underlying ideas of the good life may rise to the surface, becoming a focus of discussion and contestation.

Truth has a transcending, emancipatory power for ethically self-determining agency as I conceive of it. It is transcending because it surpasses every agreement reached concerning the validity of existential convictions. It is emancipatory because it potentially releases human subjects from the wrong value orientations, be these their own or the socially prevailing ones. Thus, Kierkegaard and Habermas are right to speak of truth's power to emancipate the subject to a condition of being-able-to-be-oneself. However, I diverge both from Kierkegaard's view that liberation is enabled by a religious faith that eludes rational evaluation and Habermas' view that it is determined by the anonymous *Logos* of language.

In common with Habermas and Kierkegaard I hold that freedom as ethically self-determining agency requires individual subjects to adopt a reflexive attitude to the existential convictions orienting their everyday conduct of life. In addition, I share their view that such convictions are not purely subjective but rather have a context-transcending reference point: they refer to ideas of the good for which subjects raise universal validity claims. This gives them a truth-orientation. In the domain of practical reason, truth as I construe it has a double aspect: it is at once context-transcending and context-dependent. Unlike Habermas, I conceive of it as context-transcending in the sense that it forever surpasses human understanding: we must assume that we can never finally know the truth (nor, indeed, whether this assumption itself is true). Truth's context-transcending character leads me to posit ethical reflection as an intersubjective undertaking. Since the truth of ideas of the good life is a concern shared by all human subjects, their evaluation calls on particular subjects to engage critically with other human subjects, placing no limits in principle on those with whom they are willing to engage. While the intersubjective step in my account does not follow *necessarily* from the context-transcending aspect of ethical truth, there are strong arguments based on non-authoritarianism and autonomy for making this move (Cooke, 2005).

Its second aspect is context-dependence: ethical truth as I construe it is inescapably mediated by language, culture and individual psychology: there is no unmediated access. Nonetheless we must assume that ethical reflection can lead to answers to questions that bring us closer to truth – otherwise rational deliberation on truth-related matters would be pointless (Cooke, 2006, pp. 147–149). I argue, furthermore, that the assessment of ethical truth claims requires processes of intersubjective deliberation and contestation, in which all involved seek to find the ethically right answers in a context-transcending sense (Cooke, 2006, pp. 132–133).

In the societies of democratic modernity ideas of the good life are very different and often conflicting. In consequence, when all other subjects are included in principle as interlocutors in ethical reflections on life-orienting ethical evaluations, such reflections become on-going agonistic processes. The interacting subjects engage critically with their own ethical evaluations in relation to others they encounter, with no guarantee of mutual understanding.

There is an obvious objection to my proposed model of ethical reflection: it passes too lightly over the difficulties involved in interacting critically with others who hold fundamentally different existential convictions. In the

value-pluralist societies of democratic modernity, particular ethical evaluations are frequently rationally inaccessible or unintelligible to others (Cooke, 2017). The problem is compounded under conditions of globally widespread migration, in which individuals and groups with fundamentally diverging worldviews and life-practices increasingly come into contact with one another. It is for reasons such as these that Habermas praises one way in which Kierkegaard's ethics is postmetaphysical: it is ethically abstinent when judging specific orientations, particular life-projects and particular forms of life (Habermas, 2003, p. 111).

I consider the jump to ethical abstinence too hasty, however. I readily acknowledge that in contexts of value pluralism, ethical evaluations are often mutually inaccessible, complicating the reciprocal exchange of reasons and diminishing the prospect of reaching understanding. Furthermore, as we shall see, in the case of religious conversion experiences, fundamental shifts in thinking and behaviour may be necessary before other subjects can comprehend the religious believer's fundamentally transformed worldview. In the face of this obstacle, Kierkegaard sees the possibility only of retreat into silence. However, that this is not the appropriate path for a non-authoritarian critical theory, which must endeavour rationally to convince its addressees of the rightness of its assertions. In order to find an alternative path, we must probe the supposed non-communicability of certain kinds of existentially rooted religious convictions.

As noted, Habermas shares with Kierkegaard a view of existentially rooted religious convictions as ultimately resistant to thoroughgoing discursive examination and, consequently, his view that postmetaphysical thinking must abstain from evaluating the *truth* of such convictions. I contend that Habermas draws this conclusion only because he construes truth in the domain of practical reason in epistemic-constructivist term. If, as I propose, truth in this domain is construed not as the *product* of a discursively achieved rational consensus under ideal justificatory conditions, but as transcendent even of such a consensus, intersubjective deliberation may be seen as truth-conducive even in contexts where there is no prospect of reaching agreement. For one thing, as Habermas emphasises, intersubjective deliberation facilitates hermeneutic processes that help to make reasons mutually more accessible. For another, the possibility can never be discounted that conversion – a fundamental shift in perspective – may come about through engagement in intersubjective deliberation. Furthermore, though the prospects for reaching mutual agreement may be poor in contexts in which there is a plurality of competing value-orientations, this is a practical rather than epistemic problem. Ethical dissonance does not have serious epistemic consequences for a theory in which rationally justified agreement is not the final determinant of truth. Certainly, it often has serious practical consequences for intersubjective relations and social life in general, urgently calling for a resolution to the conflict. If agreement is impossible in the circumstances, other ways of addressing the conflict must be found. In situations such as these, toleration has its rightful place (Forst, 2013).

Nonetheless, I do not deny that the mutual inaccessibility of ethical evaluations is a considerable obstacle for intersubjective deliberation when the truth of existentially based religious convictions is at stake. In many cases, no amount of hermeneutic sensibility will suffice to ensure the mutual intelligibility of ethical validity claims. Sometimes, the main reason for the mutually unintelligibility of ethical evaluations is that they express ethical orientations interwoven with perspectives and practices based in traditions of social minorities that are deeply alien to the social majority. Alternatively, the main reason is that they seek to articulate profound experiences that cannot be articulated within the language of the prevailing socio-cultural vocabulary. Often, the subjects themselves do not understand them, because they are fundamentally different to what they hitherto regarded as experience (Emcke, 2013, p. 15). Such experiences are my focus in the following. In these cases, subjects are confronted with their own or others' attempts to express linguistically an experience that has fundamentally changed their lives and identities. The liberation to being-able-to-be-oneself described by Kierkegaard entails this kind of fundamental change. The transition he charts from the ethical to the religious worldview amounts to a radical transformation of the subject's identity, in consequence of which the subject relates to itself, to God and to its fellow subjects in a fundamentally new way. Jürgen Moltmann speaks of 'fundamental experiences' that change one's entire life and place it in a new perspective (Moltmann, 1975, pp. 307–309). We can infer from this that the subject's thinking, too, is transformed: the conversion experience gives rise to a new conception of truth, and the kind of rationality appropriate in order to gain access to it. Accordingly, the subject's new self-understanding is accompanied by new standards of rational evaluation, which call into question its previous

ones and make it difficult for other subjects to understand its new ethical evaluations – indeed, difficult for the subject itself to understand them. To be sure, Kierkegaard describes an extreme case. But even if relatively rare, such transformations do happen. Moreover, they are not specific to religious believers. For example, Jean Améry discusses the complexities of the fundamental experiences undergone by subjects who survive a suicide attempt (Améry, 2014).

Améry's account of the suicide survivor's experience casts light on certain aspects of fundamental experiences that are helpful for present purposes. He observes, first, that the experience is profound. The 'core of things' is at stake (Améry, 2014, p. 206). Second, suicide is above all activity: it *actively* gives expression to something mysterious and logically contradictory (p. 195). Third, the act expresses something that can only be understood and judged by those who have undergone a similarly life-changing experience (p. 192). Fourth, it enacts a fundamental break with normal everyday life. In the act of leaping into darkness, suicidal persons transgress 'the field of [normal] life's logic' (p. 200, cf. p. 196). From the darkness into which they descend they will be able to bring back nothing that looks useful in the light of normal, everyday life (p. 194). In consequence, suicide survivors become 'persons of nonsense'. They place themselves in opposition to reason (p. 212). Fifth, the reason against which they infringe is reason as it socially prevails. However, this does not exhaust the meaning of reason: 'reason is not reason if it is not more than reason' (p. 210). In other words, reason transcends the norms of rationality prevailing in any particular context. This, presumably, is why suicide survivors, though persons of 'nonsense', are not 'persons of madness' (p. 212). Sixth, the experience can be expressed linguistically only with great difficulty; nonetheless, it remains 'a matter for speech' (p. 207), albeit a speech that moves forward uncertainly, attempting to speak of something of which can no longer be spoken (p. 198); for this it may require help from the intuitive powers of creative writers.

Améry shares Habermas' and Kierkegaard's emphasis on the transcending power of reason. However, his discussion calls into question their respective interpretations of this transcending power in relation to individual autonomy. The first four features highlighted by Améry invite us to look critically at Habermas' linguistic interpretation of this power, the sixth to look critically at Kierkegaard's religious interpretation.

The first four features cast doubt on the viability of Habermas' linguistic approach when it comes to the truth-dimension of fundamental experiences. Améry is not explicitly concerned with this. Nonetheless, his account suggests that suicide-survivors will encounter considerable difficulties of mutual intelligibility if they assume rational responsibility for the validity of their new worldviews when interacting with other subjects. Even under ideal justificatory conditions, with a high degree of hermeneutic sensitivity and openness on the part of all participants, they may remain unintelligible to their interlocutors. This means that if truth is at stake in such interactions, it cannot be defined in epistemic-constructivist terms as an argumentatively achieved, rationally grounded, universal agreement. In justificatory contexts, subjects who undergo a suicide attempt claim a validity for their new worldviews that break radically with the prevailing norms of truth and rationality; thus, in order for their validity claims to be intelligible, all others participating in the argumentative exchange would have to undergo a similarly fundamental experience, with a corresponding fundamental epistemic transformation. It is implausible to assume that all participants in the exchange will have done so *prior* to entering into the communicative exchange – especially if we bear in mind that the circle of those participating is unlimited in principle – and equally implausible to assume that the requisite fundamental experience will be brought about through the exchange of reasons *within* argumentation. An ideal communication situation as defined by Habermas would not solve this problem. Intelligibility is not guaranteed either by the inclusivity of the communication community, by its fair distribution of 'voice' within the argumentative exchange, by its open-endedness, by its orientation to truth or by the participants' hermeneutic sensitivity. But, without mutual intelligibility, the suicide survivor will remain a 'person of nonsense'.

From this we can conclude that, on its own, the transcending power of the anonymous *Logos* of language in the form of a discursively achieved rational agreement is not sufficient for the purposes of freeing the individual subject to being-able-to-be-oneself. The reason is that fundamental experiences of the kind described lead to a radically new understanding of truth and rationality, which is intelligible only for those who undergo sufficiently similarly fundamental experiences and concomitant epistemic transformations. However, the lack of intelligibility is not inevitable but temporal and contextual; innovative changes in the existing socio-cultural vocabulary may remedy it.

Thus, we can accept Kierkegaard's claim that liberating individual subjects to being-able-to-be-themselves may require conversion on the part of the subjects concerned. I have claimed that his interpretation of the emancipatory process is nonetheless unsatisfactory for the purposes of a non-authoritarian, critically engaged political or social theory because it allows only for a retreat into silence. We can now add a related objection: Kierkegaard fails to acknowledge the linguistic dimension of existentially lived truth. Thus, his position fails to take account of Améry's observations on the communicability of even fundamental experiences. As mentioned, Améry observes not only that suicide survivors often have a need to articulate their experiences linguistically; he points out that they often find a means of doing so, even if inadequately and even if it requires the creative gifts of another person. Carolin Emcke draws attention to the same phenomenon (Emcke, 2013). Based in part on her own experiences as a war journalist and in part on written narratives, she tells the stories of people deeply traumatised by historical periods and events, such as the victims of terror regimes, war crimes and Nazi concentration camps, emphasizing how the linguistic articulation of their traumatizing experiences constituted an important step in recovering (what I call) their ethically self-determining agency. In addition, like Améry she underscores the re-vitalizing role played by poetic language. Neither she nor Améry pursue this thought further, however. The direction in which it could fruitfully be pursued, I suggest, is towards a dynamic view of language and of socio-cultural vocabularies, in which the poetic use of language contributes to semantic renewal. Individual and group vocabularies change over time. Drawing on Ludwig Wittgenstein's famous 'riverbed' metaphor, we could say that core convictions constitute what he calls the riverbed of thoughts (and experiences); the riverbed changes over time, sometimes almost imperceptibly, sometimes more obviously (Wittgenstein, 1969, §99). Furthermore, the creative, innovative use of language by writers, poets, song writers – and philosophers – has an important role to play in the process of semantic enrichment and renewal (Cooke, 2014).

This opens a different perspective on the mutual unintelligibility of existential convictions. At any given time, and in any given socio-cultural context, participants in the communicative exchange of reasons may not share the same evaluative vocabulary. In consequence, particular subjects may be unable to provide the kinds of reasons that would make their utterances intelligible, and hence potentially justifiable, to those they address. However, it is a mistake to see this as a shortcoming either of language in general or of a specific ethical vocabulary, religious or non-religious. Rather, it is a difficulty that may arise at any time and in any context. Moreover, due to the continuous movement of language and its vocabularies, aided by poetic creativity, it is not a difficulty that is in principle unsurmountable (Cooke, 2013, p. 252). Indeed, we should view it positively, since a lack of such difficulties would be a sign of semantic stagnation – that the streams feeding into the socio-cultural reservoir of reasons have dried up (Cooke, 2006, p. 158).

The respective inadequacies of Habermas' and Kierkegaard's interpretations of the autonomy-enabling, emancipatory power of reason, as experienced existentially by finite subjects in history, are instructive. We can learn negatively from both. From Habermas we can learn that the transcending power of intersubjective dialogue is insufficient to liberate the subject to a condition of being-able-to-be-oneself, because this form of autonomy may depend on fundamental experiences, which the prevailing socio-cultural vocabulary lacks the resources to articulate and thus cannot be communicated linguistically in the given context. From Kierkegaard we can learn that even the truth experienced in conversion is not *in principle* non-communicable to other subjects. Their respective strengths are complementary. Vis-à-vis Kierkegaard Habermas is right to say that the truth of ethical questions and thus being-able-to-be-oneself is ultimately dependent on the advice, clarification and confirmation of other subjects in dialogue (Habermas, 2019, p. 698). Vis-à-vis Habermas Kierkegaard is right to say that being-able-to-be-oneself may call for conversion, in consequence of which the subject's ethical orientations and beliefs are unintelligible for other subjects *at that time in the given socio-cultural context*.

Our discussion has implications for a postmetaphysical perspective on the context-transcending aspect of ethical truth. It shows that this must be construed as language-transcending in a certain sense: truth surpasses any linguistically achieved agreement as to the truth of ethical worldviews, even agreements reached under ideal justificatory conditions. This implies that Habermas' thesis of 'transcendence from within' can be defended only in modified form.

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