

Solidarity with the Past and the Work of Translation: Reflections on Memory Politics and the Post-Secular
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In the notes for his never-completed magnum opus the *Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin quoted a letter from his colleague Max Horkheimer's letter, sent from the United States on March 16, 1937. Horkheimer had written Benjamin complaining of the attempt, in the latter's essays, to develop a theory of historiography that held interruption and shock, rather than scientific explanation, as a methodological first principle. The implication of this theory, for Horkheimer, was a theological view of history in which the past, for the historian, was not yet finished. Its incompleteness – the still-undetermined fate of the dead – exerted both ethical and political demands on the historian, whose work both redeemed the otherwise obliterated memory of historical suffering, and directed that memory to the present with practical political intent. "The determination of incompleteness is idealistic," Horkheimer insisted, unless "completeness is not comprised within it."

Past injustice has occurred and is completed. The slain are really slain...If one takes the lack of closure entirely seriously, one must believe in the Last Judgment...Perhaps, with regard to incompleteness, there is a difference between the positive and the negative, so that only the injustice, the horror, the sufferings of the past are irreparable. The justice practiced, the joys, the works, have a different relation to time, for their positive character is largely negated by the transience of things. This holds first and foremost for individual existence, in which it is not happiness but unhappiness that is sealed by death.

Benjamin's entry continues with his own commentary on Horkheimer's claim:

The corrective to [Horkheimer's] line of thinking may be found in the consideration that history is not simply a science but also and not least a form of remembrance. What science has 'determined,' remembrance can modify. Such mindfulness can make the incomplete (happiness) into something complete, and the complete (suffering) into something incomplete. That is theology; but in remembrance we have an experience that forbids us to conceive of history as fundamentally atheological, little as it may be granted us to try to write it with immediately theological concepts.¹

This response brings us immediately to Jürgen Habermas's view that the features of a post-secular age demand a post-metaphysical form of philosophy, and that this, in turn requires the ongoing work of translation in which philosophy finds ways of recovering the semantic potential of theological concepts, norms, and images without depending on an idealism that the times will no longer allow. In accusing Benjamin of lapsing into idealism, Horkheimer had concluded that the capacity to take a normative perspective on the fate of historical victims of injustice depended on the presupposition that the fate of those victims was somehow – this “somehow” and its relatives being a word we will encounter frequently in what is to follow – not finished, not closed.

Of course, Horkheimer did take Benjamin as ever suggesting that historical remembrance could make the slaughtered any less slaughtered, though this unfortunate and unkind expression has lived on. Benjamin was, strange as it may sound, making a Kantian point. While no retroactive

¹ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 478.

justice may be possible for the dead, the finality of the *significance* of their deaths, and the relation between that significance and the present, could only be modified under the premise of an agency transcending the causal completeness of experienced historical time. The possibility of a transcendent agent – God – can no more be refuted than affirmed through discursive thinking. But for Horkheimer, even the attempt to think beyond discursive categories, as Benjamin did, and refashion a form of interruptive memory [*Eingedenken*] into the medium of historical time requires a transcendent perspective, an idealism that was Horkheimer's scourge in the 1930s.

Horkheimer's allergic response to Benjamin's so-called idealism expresses one of the most basic ambitions of his early thought: revealing that metaphysical philosophy is complicit in the masking and perpetuation of concrete human suffering. Religious consolation, the offering of transcendent ideals that offer illusory alternatives to real historical misery, always depended on irrationality, on taking experienced reality as unreal. But in the wake of secularization and the loss of the convincing power of religious norms and symbols, Horkheimer saw consolation as a mere byproduct of philosophical metaphysics, which appropriated the old religious symbols as part of a claim of reconciling thought to its own material conditions in this world. For Horkheimer, Hegel had already accomplished this dubious goal of superseding religion, claiming that while religious consciousness offers transcendence as consolation, philosophy performs transcendence by transfiguring the very reality it thinks, reconciling lived historical time with spirit, adopting a retrospective that shows the concrete reality of historical happiness as ephemeral and meaningless to spirit; suffering and wickedness as only apparently unjust, or only unjust from the necessarily limited viewpoint of lived time.²

² Horkheimer's thought from the 1930s attempted to develop a consistent materialism that, negatively, would register the active work of repression and forced forgetting necessary to carry out this idealist project. The internal connection between morality and memory would later, in the 1940s, correspond with the connection between reification and the forgetting of suffering that Horkheimer and Adorno would

This exchange, truncated and unfinished, has come in the decades since to stand for a debate, internal to critical theory, that has lived a remarkable afterlife in the works of Habermas and his critics. The entwinement of theological motifs and the condemnation of concrete forms of injustice survives, in altered form, in Habermas's most recent reflections on the processes of translation between religious and secular language, and between theological and post-metaphysical philosophical concepts.³ The first kind of translation characterizes the work of a discursively structured democratic public sphere whose members struggle to come to terms with a conflicted and burdened identity, a shared ethical life. The second refers to the philosophical labor of philosophy as it struggles to gain access to the semantic resources of theological concepts without falling back behind the frontier of post-metaphysical thinking. In the question of the normative status of the dead, of those whose unjust deaths continue to ramify for consociates whose lives both appropriate and necessarily lose touch with the dead, this double act of translation is, as I hope to show, crucial. This essay analyzes Habermas's continuing reference to Benjamin and the possibility of a normative relationship with posthumous persons – a solidarity with the dead—as a way of framing a set of questions about the nature and limits of this translation work. What is it that characterizes the status of the dead as a translation problem in the first place, and what is at stake in the task of finding secular equivalents for the relevance of the past? What would a successful (with the caveats that have to characterize this) translation look like, and what would necessarily have to resist translation? And finally, how would a successful translation play out in the ethical-political debates of a society, usually a national society, struggling to come to terms with a burdened past?

indicate, but not ultimately explore, in Dialectic of Enlightenment See the section “Le Prix du Progres” in the notes and marginalia to Dialectic of Enlightenment: “All reification is forgetting.”

³ On the double nature of translation, see Simone Chambers, “How Religion Speaks to the Agnostic: Habermas on the Persistent Value of Religion,” *Constellations* 14:2, June 2007, 210-223.

Habermas's discourse theory describes collective ethical-political discourse in the public sphere as shared projects at self-understanding. A social group, even a society as a whole, undertakes to interpret its collective identity. From the midst of more or less taken-for-granted sources of collective identity, shared traditions come under critical scrutiny: a society no longer recognizes the power of a tradition to bear shared meanings unproblematically from one generation to the next, and examines, possibly for the first time, the meaning and justification of a tradition in light of new experiences.

In the light of new experiences a collective finds itself compelled to ask 'who we are,' which of our otherwise taken-for-granted ways of understanding ourselves we now must interrogate, justify, and possibly reject. In the 'wild' arena of more or less un-institutionalized public political life, a society forms a new opinion of its own identity, and this deliberation can depend neither on the tried and true bases of its own political culture (for this may be just what is up for debate) nor on the formal institutions and rules of parliamentary procedure (for it is just this structured discourse that ethical-political debates are meant to influence with their opinions).

We should accustom ourselves to picturing the standard case of a society-wide ethical debate as *hard*. When identity is at stake, feelings run strong. The questioning of sources of belonging is not a pleasant experience even in the best of times. Discourse is costly by any measure, and in an important sense highly impractical and inefficient. To launch and sustain a serious and prolonged ethical-political discourse, a society must have undergone some experiences destabilizing enough, maybe even traumatic enough, to *compel* such a debate, often against individuals' and groups accurate sense of their own best interests. Something must be very wrong, in other words, for a society's members to engage voluntarily in a public debate that has the potential to deprive them of

basic forms of orientation, of things that are familiar and meaningful to the conduct of life, to find itself in the midst of a public discourse about ‘who we are, and who we want to be.’”

This last formulation, one familiar from Habermas’s own work, can be misleading regarding the typically destabilizing, disturbing, disorienting, and disruptive aspects of ethical-political debates in the democratic public sphere. The formula tends to downplay the centrality of the *retrospective* dimension of ethical-political debates. By this I mean that uncontroversial instances of such debates – ones that are relatively sustained, largely distributed and visible across a broad spectrum of a national society, widely participatory and not merely passive consumption of high-visibility books, movies, television spectacles and the like – are primarily fights over the interpretation of a proximate collective past, and only secondarily about a society’s future. And to be a source of a hard debate, one that undertakes to hold up shared norms, values and traditions for critical scrutiny and possibly rejection, the recent collective past is, generally, a very bad one, a violent one, and one that has left many, many victims behind. How to deal with that past, how it’s compatible with a society’s image of itself and the normative basis for its continued existence, is memory politics.

Memory politics, in other words, is the quintessential form collective ethical-political discourse. And memory politics arguably has less to do with who or what a society is and who or what it wishes to be, than with what a society has done, or allowed to be in its name or with its tacit consent; what facts about its past it would prefer to forget but finds it cannot; how its unavoidable past compels it to transform or jettison its cherished norms as bankrupt or failed; what, given what has happened, a society wishes no longer to be. While the hopeful-sounding formulation of ‘who we wish to be’ is certainly always present in such debates, those moments in the public life of a society that are able to generate sufficient momentum and duration to qualify fully as ethical-political debates do so largely as a result of a past that will not go away – a past of massive injustices, and

widespread political and moral culpability that so undermine any possibility of naïve trust in the integrating norms of political culture that no recourse to them is possible any longer, absent some public justification of their continuing validity.

Until relatively recently, the prominence of the past in ethical-political debate was generally understood in functionalist terms: collective memory, shared norms and values, and above all a shared identity based on a common history all implied that the past serves generally as an important source of social solidarity, binding social members in an inclusive we-consciousness. Disturbances to that generally consensual past ought on functional grounds to be resolved either by political or other means, in order to avoid overstressing and possibly undermining the social solidarity necessary for a society's continued existence. But the experiences of the twentieth century have altered this generally functionalist view of the past entirely. The rise of a putatively global regime of universalistic moral and legal discourses in the wake of the Second World War ran in tandem with a growing suspicion of the nationalist projects supported by a functionalist view of memory politics. Control of national memory came to be seen as an integral part in the suppression and marginalization of victimized persons and groups. A far more agonistic view of memory politics, based on negotiation and open political contest, made far more visible what was normatively at stake in struggles over collective memory.

The most dramatic, surely, of this new range of phenomena within memory politics was the claim that the dead, specifically the victims of past political violence, imposed a form of moral obligation on the living, and that in the context of post-conflict struggles over memory, this obligation placed real limits on a present society's ability to bracket off elements of its shared past that were threatening to social solidarity.⁴ In this sense, the 'debt to the past' has often been taken as

⁴ Pablo De Greiff among many others has located perhaps the single definitive use of this concept in the political public sphere: Bundespraesident Richard von Weizsäcker's Speech in the Bundestag during the

a sort of deontic constraint, limiting the free hand societies have to negotiate a consensual view of the shared past that might otherwise be desirable from the perspective of political reconciliation, institutional efficiency, or other pragmatic considerations. But what it is, exactly, that a present can owe a past – whether this formulation is indeed anything more than a bit of dramatic rhetoric intended to strengthen one side or another in an ethical debate – remains far from clear. What is clear, however, is that this claim, central for current debates over collective responsibility, reparations and apology, political forgiveness and reconciliation, is a crucial site for the translation work from religious to secular concepts, as Habermas has described it.

Habermas himself has himself done a great deal of this particular translation work himself. As the single most influential figure in the ethical-political discourse that fundamentally reshaped Germany’s national self-understanding, Habermas was already actively practicing a crucially post-secular philosophical reception and transformation of the ‘semantic potential’ of religious language, a fact that comes out most clearly in his reflections on the Benjaminian idea of a solidarity with the annihilated victims of injustice. While many readers of Habermas have been struck by the special status of this “anamnestic solidarity”⁵ in his work, the more recent writings on religion in the public

Ceremony Commemorating the 40th Anniversary of the End of the War in Europe and of National Socialist Tyranny, May 8, 1985. In *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective*, Geoffrey Hartman, ed.

(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 265, quoted in De Greiff, 5.

⁵ This term, not entirely satisfactory, was coined by Christian Lenhardt: “Anamnestic Solidarity: The Proletariat and its *Manes*,” in *Telos* [000], 133-154, which appropriates Horkheimer’s generational logic, arguing that a future generation that has attained justice, in order to avoid the problem of unredeemable debt to the past generations that Horkheimer described, must redeem its debt to the oppressed past by taking seriously the neo-Paganism that Benjamin’s own time-consciousness implies. Lenhardt tries to illustrate this modern, reflexive ancestor worship with the (ancient Roman) practice of the *Manes*: the dead as a collective, neither individuals nor gods, who tended to meddle constantly in the affairs of the living, who interact with them with a combination of pity and dread. Without much of an argument, Lenhardt suggests that this notion, superimposed on a modern time-consciousness in which subsequent generations may be keenly aware of the happiness and peace they enjoy only at the expense of the suffering of earlier generations, establishes a strong impulse to devise ritual forms of remembrance in the form of thanks, appreciation, honor, and affection for the dead and their sacrifices. Alternatively, the *manes* may be taken as demanding justice in the form of revenge, a theme that Lenhardt already sees in Hegel’s lectures on the philosophy of religion that may have influenced Marx’s own views of revolutionary time. In other words, Marxism demands a form of (secularized) ancestor worship in which the past continually demand via a need for remembrance the status of a just revolution as a continuous act of vengeance.

sphere help us understand the centrality of solidarity with the dead in a more powerful and nuanced way. For here, in the appropriation of this Benjaminian trope, Habermas is performing, rather than simply describing, the doubled translation that his work on the post-secular does not always clarify.

Postwar Germany is the paradigm case of a wrenching and protracted ethical-political debate over the future of national memory, and has served as a constant reference point for subsequent memory-political debates in post-conflict democracies. In fact no other national society has had such a sustained politics of regret, a memory politics that comprised the basis of (West) Germany's political culture.

But as they served as the model for subsequent post-conflict political cultures, Germany's experiences during the postwar half-century were also so distinctive as to be *sui generis*. First and foremost, of course, is the sheer scale and magnitude of the political violence of war and genocide and the corresponding devastation of national traditions that postwar German society had to cope with. Moreover, given the annihilation of its Jewish minority, postwar Germany had little pressure to find the bases for political accommodation and reconciliation amongst former adversaries within one pluralist society. This fact, coupled with widespread collaboration or at least tacit acceptance of violence amongst the population, made victim-perpetrator relationships far more complex and stark than in any other comparable post-conflict society, foregrounding the self-reflexive relationship of a population with its own deeds and victims, rather than the far more pragmatic theme of finding new modes of political stability amongst former enemies. These facts, coupled with the extreme destruction of the physical basis of German society, the intense pressure of international politics in the beginnings of the Cold War, and the overall underdeveloped state of German political culture even in the prewar era, made the lengthy repression of memory and the 'inability to mourn' of German society in the first half-century of Germany's postwar era understandable. And, if at least

the metaphorical language of collective psychology is permissible, it's also understandable how this long period of enforced forgetfulness and repression, once it eroded and finally broke at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, could produce such dramatic results in the culture of memory that took hold in its wake.

In the famous "Historians' Debate" from the second half of the 1980s, Habermas argued against a loose group of 'conservative historians' such as Ernst Nolte, Michael Stürmer, and Andreas Hillgruber that Germany's postwar legacy was simply incompatible, on normative grounds, with the kind of re-appropriation of pre-war traditions of German political culture that could provide relatively robust sources of patriotic, particularistic national identity. His opponents, in particular Stürmer, shared a widespread sense in the 1980s that, with the passing of the wartime generation and the renewal of Germany's place as a "normal" state and a key member of the Western political and military alliance, the near-constant focus on Germany's sins, and the ubiquitous questioning of the validity of the country's national traditions and identity, were producing a sort of national malaise and disaffection, a degree of disorientation and lack of healthy national attachment, that could have potentially disastrous political consequences for a key European state. Perhaps it was time to end, or at least dampen, Germany's apparently insatiable appetite for self-castigation, to draw a quiet close to the nation's pariah status, and begin to lift some of the stigmas of German national self-confidence and self-assertion.

Against the trend toward relativizing the scale and originality of the Holocaust as part of a strategy of diminishing Germany's collective responsibility, Habermas, in a now-famous series of interventions in newspapers and journals, excoriated his conservative opponents for their cynical maneuvers to rehabilitate bankrupt cultural traditions. For Habermas, the legacy of the 'break in civilization' of war and genocide was not – could not possibly be – a wholesale rejection of German

national identity, and like his opponents he understood that many sources of national attachment and cultural tradition would necessarily survive, in altered form, in German political culture.

Not surprisingly, Habermas was making a proceduralist argument. It was the uncritical, non-discursive re-appropriation of sources of national attachment, absent any public, maximally inclusive process of ethical discourse that Habermas opposed. He correctly saw “uncritical” as implying ‘strategic.’ The public championing of sources of national belonging with the express intention of shoring up inadequate levels of national solidarity could only succeed by violating the procedural norms that characterize open debate within a ‘wild’ political public sphere. And even though Germany in the 1980s was hardly the kind of diverse, pluralist multicultural democracy for which strong inclusive norms for the public use of reason had been designed, it nevertheless had a kind of political diversity and a corresponding need for political proceduralism in a different, distinctive sense. Its generational politics were so remarkably demanding and complex; the civilization-break of 1933-1945 placed such extraordinary barriers to the assertion of a ‘normal’ national identity, that a collective process of conscious, critical self-reflection on the content and use of national traditions was vital. For reasons quite different than for ‘normal’ post-conflict democracies, Germany was under a number of normative obligations for self-criticism. And the explanation of this distinctiveness brings him, and us, to the problem of a duty toward, and solidarity with, the victims of the Holocaust, a problem that Habermas pursues in a profoundly non-consequentialist way.

As those who had participated in mass crimes as adults withdrew from the public life of the country in the 1980s, Habermas pointed out, public ethical discourse over collective identity could not longer plausibly concentrate on the problem of the collective responsibility for criminality by a tacitly involved population – those who did not choose to resist. Collective guilt in Jaspers’ sense was a synchronic problem. But as the wartime generation withdrew from public dominance and was

replaced by a second and then a third postwar generation the diachronic problem of (West) Germany's political culture was now, for Habermas, no longer a matter of guilt. Despite the clear religious tones of the term (Jaspers had after all famously described a 'metaphysical' guilt that everyone is subject to, insofar as injustice in the world goes unanswered) the primary connotation of guilt, in the intellectuals' discourses about extended culpability in Germany in the decades prior to the Historians' Debate, was psychological. Guilt was understood generally as a kind of group affect, associated with self-denigration, numbness, or resentment. It's easy enough to see how collective guilt could ease, perhaps even demand, collective forgetting or, to continue with psychologisms, collective repression of the suffering of Germany's victims, indeed even blaming victims for the suffering from guilt by those in the present. (In contrast to the predominantly psychological cast of the debate amongst the postwar intellectual elite, as Dirk Moses has recently pointed out, a far more widespread vocabulary amongst the general German population was far more markedly religious: the connotation of collective guilt was described in terms of sin and its religious cognates: pollution, the "mark of Cain," stigma, and so on.)⁶

In the Historians' Debate, Habermas deliberately broke with this long tradition of collective psychological (or crypto-religious) language. He replaced it with the language of ethics, morality and law. For those who were born after the civilizational break, it was liability [*Haftung*], rather than guilt, that best captured the continued basis of a collective, social obligation or debt.

As before, there is the simple fact that subsequent generations also grew up within a form of life in which *that* was possible. Our own life is linked to the life context in which Auschwitz was possible not only by contingent circumstances but intrinsically. Our form of life is connected with that of our parents and grandparents through a web of familial, local, political, and intellectual traditions that is difficult to

⁶ A. Dirk Moses, German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past (Cambridge, 2007), chapter 1.

disentangle – that is, through a historical milieu that made us what and who we are today. None of us can escape this milieu, because our identities, both as individuals and as Germans, are indissolubly interwoven with it.⁷

Unlike guilt with its panoply of psycho-religious connotations, liability or *Haftung* refers the thick *ethical* bonds that tie consociates to their collective history and memory, insofar as that society secures the basis and the content of their socialization and individuation without any possibility of their consent. A natural language, the shared norms designating particular belonging, place, habitus, and so on, all crystallize to form a shared set of symbolic meanings and attitudes that socialized members cannot hope to strip off at will.

Though unwilling to spin this version of ethical-political debate into a larger theory in the context of the Historians' debate, Habermas implies that any established group of consociates, any polity with a shared history of mutual socialization, will have its own memory politics and hence its distinctive forms of liability toward the continuity of its identity-sustaining traditions. The paradoxical, dialectical nature of Habermas's memory politics, which return recursively to a specific national past in order to enforce discursive conditions that encourage a post-conventional form of identity that is, by design, also a post-national one. Post-national identity in this sense is generated from within a national discourse – and this implies the ever-present possibility that ethical-political debates of this kind, even when they deal with painful traditions that ought to be rejected, cannot unambiguously point in the direction of the post-national, for they also tend to re-inscribe, reinforce, and restate the terms of national identity and national belonging at the very same time.

“Liability” thus means that Germans of the second and third postwar generations (and by now the young fourth) can reasonably expect their use and embrace of national traditions to be

⁷ Habermas, New Conservatism 233.

subject to demands for justification in ways not the case with members of other societies, at least in regard to the break in civilization of 1933-1945. Their membership as German citizens entails a plausible expectation that they be prepared to offer justificatory reasons to one another why a given national tradition can pass, or has passed, through a self-critical filter. “Liability” is thus a procedural term, and can serve as the basis for a kind of political solidarity (German constitutional patriotism) based less on the content of national traditions themselves, and instead on the procedural expectations about the public use of reason that traditions are liable to, if they’re to be regarded as legitimate. Memory politics therefore links ethical liability with a specific form of memory politics, in which the normative significance of a shared memory comes to the foreground.

In the Historians’ Debate, Habermas justifies his own conception of collective liability for national traditions with two basic kinds of reasoning. In the first instance, the sheer scale and uniqueness of war and genocide, the basic violation of human solidarity of the Holocaust, itself makes a case for a special form of self-critical relation to national identity:

After Auschwitz our national self-consciousness can be derived only from the better traditions in our history, a history that is not unexamined but instead appropriated critically. The context of our national life, which once permitted incomparable injury to the substance of human solidarity, can be continued and further developed only in the light of the traditions that stand up to the scrutiny of a gaze educated by the moral catastrophe, a gaze that is, in a word, suspicious. Otherwise we cannot respect ourselves and we cannot expect it from others.

But this synchronic justification is only half of the story; Habermas has a second form of justification for collective liability, this one diachronic:

There is the obligation [*Verpflichtung*] incumbent upon us in Germany – even if no one else were to feel it any longer – to keep alive, without distortion, and not only in an intellectual form, the memory of the sufferings of those who were murdered by German hands. It is especially these dead who have a claim to the weak anamnestic power of a solidarity that later generations can continue to practice only in the medium of a remembrance that is repeatedly renewed, often desperate, and continually on one's mind. If we were to brush aside this Benjaminian legacy, our fellow Jewish citizens and the sons, daughters and grandchildren of all those who were murdered would feel themselves unable to breathe in our country.

Elsewhere, Habermas leaves no doubt that he views this Benjaminian legacy is an instance of the *secularization* of a theological claim, in sharp contrast to Horkheimer's contemporary reading:

After the breakdown of civilization of National Socialism, Benjamin's concept of 'anamnestic solidarity' with past injustice... – a concept that manifestly tries to fill the gap left by the lost hope in a Last Judgment – recalled a form of collective liability beyond moral obligation. The idea of approaching the kingdom of God, assimilated within the boundaries of mere reason, does not direct our gaze toward the future alone. This idea inspires a general awareness of collective responsibility for failures to offer help and failures to cooperate in averting imminent disaster or even simply to cooperate in improving shameful social conditions.⁸

Where Horkheimer thought Benjamin's claim of the *incompleteness of history* could be justified only with an overt or covert theological principle – belief in the Last Judgment – Habermas sees this legacy as a *solidarity with the victims* of that same history, with the corresponding view that the status of this theological concept has undergone a translation into the (always imperfect, always

⁸ Ibid, 241. It has never been clear to me whether this notion of anamnestic solidarity is actually Benjamin's. See Max Pensky, "The Use and Abuse of Memory: Habermas, "Anamnestic Solidarity," and the Historians' Debate," Philosophy and Social Criticism [---].

unsatisfactory) language of moral philosophy. In the case of anamnestic solidarity, then, the normal relation between justice and solidarity is radically, visibly absent: it is precisely *because* no restitution for their suffering is available for the dead that an injunction to practice solidarity through the medium of memory is so vivid.

In discourse ethics, justice and solidarity are mutually interdependent concepts in the ‘normal’ scope of moral deontology. As Habermas puts it, solidarity is the “reverse side” of justice, insofar as the perspective of the absolute or irreplaceable value of *each* individual person that is obligatory for adopting a moral point of view is codependent with a corresponding insight into the equal value of all persons understood as mutually constituting interaction partners.⁹ In less dry language, moral deontology commands us to adopt simultaneously the view of each other human being as bearing an infinite worth simply by virtue of being a human being, while also being irreplaceable and unique precisely because of her place in an extended, enduring, continuously evolving web of communicatively constructed intersubjective relationships.

Solidarity, in this sense, means that we *include* others in the sphere of all those to whom we acknowledge actual or potential debts and obligations for care, consideration, and respect. As the reverse side of justice, discourse theory’s concept of solidarity is meant as a corrective to the kind of individualism that ignores the centrality of the thesis of that we are individuals only through a process of socialization, and that process itself – the web of intersubjective relationships that constitute and sustain us – is also a basic object of moral attention, even though unlike individuals it does not bear rights or issue moral obligations.¹⁰

⁹ Habermas, “Justice and Solidarity,” [---].

¹⁰ “Every autonomous morality has to serve two purposes at once: it brings to bear the inviolability of socialized individuals by requiring equal treatment and thereby equal respect for the dignity of each one; and it protects intersubjective relationships of mutual recognition requiring solidarity of individual members of a community, in which they have been socialized. Justice concerns the equal freedoms of unique and self-determining individuals, while solidarity concerns the welfare of consociates who are

To practice solidarity is to act in ways that sustain and protect the integrity of a form of life, of the sum total of the relations of mutual recognition that comprises the context in which each and every life history is possible. What then should we make of the claim that we have an obligation to exercise solidarity with the dead – in this case, with those who perished unjustly in the proximate past of one ethical community? Habermas claims that solidarity with the dead ‘recall[s] a form of collective liability beyond moral obligations.’ Taken as an aggregate of individuals, the unjustly dead fail to meet what would appear to be a minimum requirement for making claims of justice. They don’t exist. Put differently, their chronological life spans as a delimited and complete set of all possible morally relevant experiences is finished; therefore it would appear to be simply analytically true that no further justice or injustice can be done to them.

What does this imply about the relation between justice and solidarity regarding our relationship to posthumous persons? If ought implies can, then Habermas’s claim that we (“we in Germany”) have an obligation to some mode of solidarity with posthumous persons implies we can practice it. If such persons are not possible subjects of moral obligation (they are ‘beyond’ such obligations), and further if there is an obligation “incumbent on us” Germans to the dead, then it appears that the conceptual interdependence between the concepts of justice and solidarity breaks down at least in this special case. We – and this is an ethical ‘we’ that bears more scrutiny – appear to be under an obligation to practice solidarity with persons who cannot possibly be the subjects of an obligation. How can this conclusion make sense?

I think two very tentative but entirely contradictory conclusions stand before us, which I’d like to explore in turn, as way of framing satisfactorily the larger purpose of identifying the theological and religious translation work implied. One option (1) is that there is an obligation to

intimately linked in an intersubjectively shared form of life – and thus also to the maintenance of the integrity of this form of life itself.” “Justice and Solidarity: On the Discussion Concerning Stage 6,” 231.

practice solidarity with the dead, but that this obligation is not to the dead themselves. It is presumably to the living, perhaps their survivors and descendents, and perhaps to “us,” to ourselves in one and the same ethical community. This reading makes sense insofar as it is taken as an example of the kind of limit-case of the extent of the language of moral deontology in which we try to cope with moral intuitions that command us to extend the scope of moral recognition further than our moral concepts seem to permit. The parallel case would be arguments for the rights of non-human living things, which as non-rights bearers we have “in light of” their sentience, or capacity for suffering, but which we in fact bear to one another or ourselves. One relevant feature of this first option, I will show, is that it can be satisfactorily articulated in entirely non-theological language.

The second option (2) is that we do in fact bear an obligation to the dead, but that it is our own moral language that is lacking – we are (currently) unable, given the moral concepts at our disposal, to render this obligation coherent, since it is a kind of obligation that is stuck, as it were, midway between the language of religion and that of secular philosophy, with the not-surprising result that it generates all manner of odd translation difficulties, of the kind that Benjamin, Horkheimer, and Habermas illustrate. If we have an obligation to *include* the dead in the scope of our solidarity, then how could such an inclusive act be completed? The term ‘anamnestic solidarity’ already indicates that we exercise solidarity with the dead by remembering them – more, by remembering their suffering. But unpacking just what this means is far from clear.

In what follows, I will explore these two options for interpreting the possibility of an obligation to anamnestic solidarity in series. In the first instance (1) I will discuss what I take to be a generally uncontroversially *secular* interpretation of this injunction to remember, and will try to lay out clearly the arguments for why this option fails to satisfy important moral intuitions. This will lead back (2) to a discussion of the possibility of a normative insight that is in the process of

translation between religious and secular language. Here too, two options diverge sharply. In the first, (2a) Johann-Baptist Metz's appropriates Benjamin's reflections as an inspiration for transforming the concepts of Christian theodicy and eschatology in pursuit of a political theology of memory. In the second (2b) Habermas translates those concepts from the language of theology to post-metaphysical philosophy to appropriate the semantic resources required for an ethical-political debate over the role of liability and memory in post-war German political culture. This translation process requires severe losses as well as gains.

(1)

Jeffrey Olick has described the "politics of regret" as a transformation of memory politics over the last decade, in which collectives' formal or informal expressions of remorse or apology for gross political crimes lies at the center of a range of policies intended to reestablish a democratizing state as a member in good standing in the international community.¹¹ One element of the post-Nuremberg era is a tentative, often merely formal normative consensus regarding the proper comportment of states toward their own violent pasts. It's important to remember that the politics of regret, for all its transformation of an earlier and more openly realist form of memory politics, is still *politics*. Forms of collective memory, even those making claims for an obligation to remember the suffering of victims of injustice, cannot simply be dissociated from actions intended to further the interests of a polity. Anamnestic solidarity, too, is part of a larger ethical-political approach in which interventions in the political public sphere serve to promote favored political outcomes.

It's tempting to see this irreducibly political dimension of anamnestic solidarity as evidence that the discourse about debts to the dead is at bottom a mode of rhetoric, designed to express and solidify the official attitude of a democratic state toward its recent past once that state has become

¹¹ Olick, *The Politics of Regret* Chicago 2007. [---].

stable enough to turn to tasks that are less urgent than the consolidation of democratic rule. That we owe to non-existent people an ongoing anamnestic project of continually including them and their suffering in the conception of the bounds of the polity may be little more than well-meaning efforts to signal, both domestically and to the international community, that a post-conflict state has accommodated a kind of language of anti-triumph, of post-nationalist aggrandizement, as part of its readiness to join the respectable international community. Given the national memory politics that the politics of regret breaks from, this is not nothing.

Still, this real-political reading implies that talk about a debt to the past, of an obligation to keep alive the memory of historical suffering, is not really a claim about a specific form of backward-looking justice or solidarity, but a rhetorical strengthening of political solidarity for the present. One troubling implication of this reading of course is that the claim, “we have obligations to the dead, to keep their memory alive,” is in the strict sense false. On this reading we do not in fact have any such obligation. Those making such a claim would therefore best be taken as telling a kind of noble lie, as consequentialists prepared to make use of all the rhetorical tools at their disposal in pursuit of very desirable political outcomes.

Pablo de Greiff’s intriguing account of the duty to the dead in post-conflict justice societies attempts to determine what this duty actually consists of: the conclusions he arrives at are highly relevant for our purposes here.¹² He begins by laying out the possible conditions under which a claim that the present has a duty to remember its own past victims can be rendered coherent. “Future-oriented” arguments for a collective duty to remember entail a simplistic and dubious consequentialist claim, in the form of the hypothetical imperative familiar as a cliché from Santayana: we have a duty to remember past suffering insofar as doing so is the best, or one of the

¹² Pablo De Greiff, “The Duty to Remember: The Dead Weight of the Past, or the Weight of the Dead of the Past?” unpublished. My thanks to Pablo De Greiff, Director of Research at the International Center for Transitional Justice, for making this work-in-progress available to me.

best, available contributions to avoiding the repetition of similar suffering in the future. While not without merits, De Greiff rejects this ‘prophylactic use of memory’ as resting on dubious assumptions about causation, and the more substantial objection that it inevitably instrumentalizes our relationship with past victims. For if we are obliged to remember only on the prudential grounds that we ought to “inoculate” ourselves by these means against future transgressions, both the specificity and the intrinsic value of the memory of the victims appears to be undermined.

Stronger for De Greiff is a “past-oriented argument,” namely that the duty to remember is a duty owed to the dead themselves, their present non-existence notwithstanding. Granting the emotional pull of this claim, De Greiff suspects precisely that this pull is ultimately rhetorical. Even the attempt to argue by analogy from the case of obligations to future generations, with all its Parfit-problems of existence and non-existence, does not help render the claim of a debt to the not-currently-existing coherent, for De Greiff. “The dead are not normally held to be appropriate lien-holders.” Our available moral concepts cannot establish the kind of moral standing that would permit us to recognize them as sources of duty. Moreover, De Greiff rightly worries that such a duty to the past has no internal resources for establishing a statute of limitations. Responsibility to remember “our” victims extends indefinitely into the future – the very problem Habermas addresses with his insistence on a liability, rather than guilt or responsibility, for the past.

A simple claim of duty cannot of itself distinguish amongst a kind of direct responsibility on the part of those now living who shared the same historical space with victims, either as perpetrators, collaborators, or those who remained silent, a kind of temporally proximate duty to remember experienced by those who, while not living at the time of the injustice, nevertheless were the direct inheritors of a national culture or ethical substance in which the crimes were rooted; or indeed those born far later, at a time when “all those involved” whether by action or omission are gone, as will

very soon be the case for the events of the Second World War and the Holocaust. And indeed De Greiff is quite correct to point out that this temporal index, the capacity to make normatively relevant distinctions regarding the degree, kind, and even possibility of moral obligations, is not obviously present in the simple claim of a “debt to the dead.” As many observers have remarked, unless some sort of temporal index of this kind is found, then whatever intuitive appeal of the language of a debt to the dead may have had quickly dissolves into a far older and far less attractive discourse of a cursed people and a stigmatized identity, a stain that cannot be washed away.

Not surprisingly given these alternatives, De Greiff opts for a third option – the duty to the dead is in fact a duty to one another in light of the dead. Assuming that a post-conflict democracy will entail a plurality of social groups, that these groups will include perpetrators and the survivors or descendents of victims, and that the historical fact of injustice will be relevant to the maintenance of the identity of these groups, like it or not, De Greiff’s ‘presentist’ account clarifies the duty to remember with a deceptively simple formula: “*we have an obligation to remember whatever our fellow citizens cannot be expected to forget.*”¹³

There is much of value in this formulation. It returns the ethics and politics of memory to its proper arena: the ongoing discursive work of a public sphere, both the informal track in which groups contest and transform their identities under pressure from interactions with others, and the structured sphere of civil society where, for instance, public policies for restitution and remembrance, apology and official statements of remorse issue from the quasi-institutional structures of citizen initiatives and lobbies, truth commissions, churches, and so on.¹⁴

It is of course in some important respect also a deflationary account. It clarifies the sense of duty to the dead with the explanation that such a duty does not exist, and need not exist, in the rather

¹³ De Greiff, 18. Emphasis in original.

¹⁴ Amongst the rapidly growing literature on the significance of symbolic acts of apology, as opposed to material reparations policies see especially John Arthur, Racism and Repair, Cambridge 2008.

dramatic terms often ascribed to it. Given the relevance of the past of injustice for a democratic polity, and given the enormous potential for dissent, conflict and the destruction of political solidarity in conflicts over the legacies of injustice, the rhetoric of a debt to the dead describes a set of civic virtues that responsible members of pluralist societies must adopt, if they are to live in decent political solidarity and trust with one another. It also nominates a predominantly consequentialist form of normative justification for a range of official or quasi-official policies of remembrance with the task of defusing potential conflicts and sensitizing consociates with the relevant historical memories of social groups with whom they live. And even though De Greiff's presentist account entails certain clear "Goldilock" style difficulties – it may well overburden members of some societies with more memories than they can reasonably be expected to handle, while other societies can avoid the duty to remember in cases, such as Tasmania, where the victim groups have been entirely annihilated – still, it seems a decent and pragmatic unmasking of an obscure form of political rhetoric.

De Greiff's argument is wholly post-metaphysical and also wholly secular. I take it to be the strongest possible case for a consequentialist reading of the duty to remembrance. His argument is shaped by pressing problems of post-conflict reconciliation in fragile democracies, where reconciliation is largely stripped of the religious connotations that it might bear in other contexts, and has the entirely secular meaning of finding at the very minimum a reasonably stable *modus Vivendi* for very recently warring social factions, and maximally a set of pragmatic, procedural norms that a young democracy can find helpful for the longer-term project of developing a democratic political culture where social members can, in Rawls' terms, approve of their own political institutions and bring about political stability for the right reasons.

What objections could we plausibly raise about an argument that lays to rest, as it were, what appears to be a vexingly incoherent tangle of intuitions regarding a purported obligation to remember the dead? Just this: the strength and specificity of the intuitions themselves. Moral intuitions signal, but do not necessarily clarify, elements in our normative vision of the world that demand our attention.¹⁵ While we can certainly argue our way to a better or worse philosophical account of what these intuitions are, moral theories can neither give us moral intuitions that we did not have, nor take away those intuitions that we do have.

The claim here is that a presentist account of the debt to the dead fails to quell what appears to me at least to be a quite robust moral intuition, namely that our relationships with the dead cannot be interpreted as synchronic forms of obligation that we have either misinterpreted under the weight of religious-metaphysical baggage of various kinds, or consciously embellished with rhetoric designed to strengthen them, or make them more inspiring. A core feature of the kind of moral intuitions one would describe as deontic is the visibility of a form of vulnerability demanding our recognition, attention, and care.

Deontic intuitions of this sort pick out subjects liable to specific forms of harm, that issue demands or pleas for specific forms of protection. And one of the fascinating features of the discourse about the moral status of the posthumous is the clear ambivalence, even the antinomic structure, of the status of the dead as being *both* beyond any possible harm – the dear are truly dead – *and* their status as being still significantly involved in the moral concerns of the living, simply insofar as the relationships of recognition that obtained between persons when they were living do not simply cease at the moment of that person's physical death. Claiming otherwise is not mere callousness or tough-mindedness, but seems to be a sort of error. While the intuition that the dead

¹⁵ See Habermas, "Morality and Ethical Life: Does Hegel's Critique of Kant Apply to Discourse Ethics?" MCCA 199ff.

are not entirely beyond the scope of our moral recognition may not rise to the dramatic heights of Benjamin's rhetoric, in which "even the dead are not safe from the enemy if he is victorious," nevertheless it is not difficult to imagine a number of ways of making the idea of posthumous harm vivid to the mind.

In contemporary analytic moral philosophy and normative ethics and contemporary philosophy of law, most secular efforts to develop a theory of posthumous rights are obliged to distinguish between an "agent-based account" and an "interest-based account" of moral subjects, depending on the latter for an argument for the survival of interests and therefore the possibility of harm to those interests after death.¹⁶

On discourse-theoretical terms, on the other hand, which for evident reasons will favor an agent-based account, the inability of the posthumous to participate in a here-and-now discourse appears to rule out anything other than virtual, symbolic, or as-if claims for the status of posthumous persons bearers of significant rights claims, as De Greiff argues.¹⁷

In sum, the most compelling consequentialist account that can be made for a debt to the dead has the paradoxical effect of proving that we do not have just this debt. Rather than rest content with

¹⁶ In the philosophy of law see the classic account by Joel Feinberg, "Death and Posthumous Harm," in Harm to Others: The Moral Limits of Criminal Law Vol. I (Oxford, 1984), 83ff, where Feinberg cites the legal will, insurance, and other familiar legal devices that would be rendered incoherent on the assumption of the dead as beyond harm. Interests survive death, such that the posthumous person, at the moment when his interests are frustrated after his death, "is, of course, at the moment dead, but that does not prevent us from referring now, in the present tense, to his interests, if they are still capable of being blocked and fulfilled, just as we refer to his outstanding debts or claims, if they are still capable of being paid. The final tally book on a person's life is not closed until some time after his death." For a more comprehensive legal account of the "interest based" theory of posthumous harm see Matthew Kramer, Rights, Wrongs, and Responsibilities (Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), and Daniel Sperling, Posthumous Interests (Cambridge, 2008). In contemporary moral philosophy's take on the interest-based account of posthumous rights see some representative works: Tim Mulgan, "The Place of the Dead in Liberal Political Philosophy," The Journal of Political Philosophy Volume 7, Number 1, 1999, pp 52-70; J. Jeremy Wisniewski, "What We Owe the Dead," Journal of Applied Philosophy, Vol. 26, No. 1, 2009, pp 54-70; Barbara Baum Levenbook, "Harming Someone After his Death," Ethics 94 (1984), 407-19; Bob Brecher, "Our Obligation to the Dead," Journal of Applied Philosophy 19:2, (2002), 109-119.

¹⁷ For an excellent version of the symbolic or virtual ascription of posthumous rights on discourse-theoretical premises see Lutz Wingert, "Haben wir moralische Pflichten gegenüber früheren Generationen? Moralischer Universalismus und erinnernde Solidarität," in Babylon. Beiträge zur jüdischen Gegenwart no. 9, 1991. For reasons of space I cannot do justice to this very rich article.

this (not unreasonable) outcome, specific moral intuitions regarding the unfinished nature of normatively meaningful relationships with persons after their deaths, both individual and collective, suggest that we examine the peculiar status of anamnestic solidarity from another angle. In this second approach, I will hypothesize that this peculiar status itself arises from the distinctive combination of religious and secular concepts, images, and vocabularies that come into a more or less unmediated collision in the construction of the problem. This in turn suggests that the best way to think through the problem of anamnestic solidarity is to pay particular attention to the precise site of transition between theological and philosophical concepts, and see whether, and if so how, a ‘successful’ translation from one to the other occurs. As a sort of guiding thread for what follows, I intend to pay special attention to what I take as the most interesting result of the reading of Habermas’s account of such solidarity in the Historians’ Debate – the asymmetry of justice and solidarity; the liability to practice solidarity with the dead in the face of the impossibility of retroactive justice.

2.

I’ve just mentioned what at least appear to be strong though ambiguous moral intuitions regarding the normative status of the dead. Here it’s important to note that if we take a retrospective, genealogical view of the problem at hand, it’s the ambiguity and not the strength of these intuitions that is quite recent and an artifact of the “axial age” that Habermas, borrowing from Jaspers, describes as the origins of metaphysical worldviews. The “pre-axial” or mythic worldview characteristic of the great majority of human spiritual history seems to have had very little doubt concerning the status of a community’s dead. Not only were the dead not “gone” in the sense of

having no normatively relevant relationships with that community at the point of their deaths, but if anything the frequent problem is the reverse.

Death imposes a change in membership status that, in the absence of metaphysical language, is more akin to a change in location relative to the sum total of all other community members.¹⁸ The construction of a worldview linking living and dead in a single spatially conceived net of relations is a classic example of what Habermas, again citing Jaspers, terms a narratively linked surface phenomenon.¹⁹ Without a metaphysical Beyond denoting an essential transformation of the dead, and without the corresponding metaphysical account of a corruptible body and a soul that stands outside of perceptible reality and lived time, the relation between living and dead is rendered in terms of (what for us is) a radical immanence. The dead *remain*, under changed membership terms. The causality of their wills is undiminished even if the objects of their wills changes. Social time is isomorphic with the (actually relatively few) generations capable of being incorporated via ritual remembrance in the self-image of the collective. The dead must be constantly appeased, propitiated, consulted, and honored through a suite of ritual practices all of which take literally the etymology of *Erinnerung* – the dead are not outside of anything but dispersed through the physical collective interiority of the ethical community.²⁰

On these terms the advent of metaphysical worldviews solves a problem of contingency by introducing a Hereafter where the dead remain well and truly dead – even if this Hereafter is deferred according to an eschatology in which physical death is a temporary status in anticipation of a mode of living, immortality, with no precise correlative experience in the world of appearances. Metaphysically-inspired monotheism, in the case of Christianity, acts to establish robust essential

¹⁸ [FN]

¹⁹ Habermas, “From Worldviews to the Lifeworld: On the Genealogy of a Concept,” unpublished, 9.

²⁰ For an account of the commonalities of “pre-axial” or archaic burial practices see [DISCOVERY OF DEATH]

barriers to keep the dead and the living from interaction, and eliminates the troubling liminal zone between the dead and the living in which shades, ghosts, spirits and other sorts of emanations are in constant motion as emissaries between the dead and the living. As a metaphysician, Jesus was never more clear and trenchant than his command [Matthew 8:18-20] to “let the dead bury the dead,” which in this context seems less an unfeeling order to abandon a former life with all its attachments, than a metaphysical doctrine of the highest order.

Religions of the axial age, most clearly in Christianity, encoded this rejection of the mythic entwinement of living and dead, elevating the category of death into a metaphysical event of the first order while simultaneously insisting on the denial of death’s reality. Death taboos are transformed into commentaries on the fixity of the difference of essential realms; in both Judaism and Christianity, the resulting ambivalence about the status of the dead tends to repeat the older, mythic ritual practice in which ritualized memory both submits to the wills and interests of the dead while simultaneously controlling and mastering the dead through the very institutionalizing of a ritual practice of submission – in a word, the dialectic of enlightenment.

(2a)

This “Hellenization” of the diachrony of relations of the generations of the dead to the living is what Johann-Baptist Metz objects to in his own project, a political theology meant to draw strength less from the eschatological promise of future justice than a renewed appropriation of what he terms “anamnestic reason.” a reason derived from the Jewish tradition of memory of suffering and oppression, in which the long succession of generations of the oppressed, held fast in ritual memory, have not given way to a Greek (Platonic) imperative for forgetting and temporal presence.

Metz' reflections are crucial here in this exploration of the point of contact between theology and philosophy in the question of the status of the dead. He rejects the intellectual history that distinguishes between Greek rationality and Judaic memory, arguing instead that memory itself constitutes a form of rationality just as foundational and as rich as the Greek *logos*. Against this *logos*, anamnestic reason is the primary mode in which a political theology, for Metz, can reject the quietism and satisfaction with the existent that Christianity buys with its logocentrism; anamnestic reason is a form of thinking that proceeds in narrative rather than discursive form;²¹ constantly negotiates the presence of the past, between present and past, insisting on the contemporaneity of past injustices, the unfinished character of historical oppression, and the openness or unfinished character of the narrative construction of this tradition of oppression.²²

Metz's work has centered on a reinterpretation of Church history that brackets the intellectual synthesis of the early Church fathers with various forms of Platonism and insists on returning the focus to Christianity's status as a transformation of Judaism, with deep continuities in the two faiths' visions of historical time, community, and the religious requirement for social justice. Metz thus argues for a post-European, post-Hellenic, and post-bourgeois Christianity where elements of doctrinal teaching serve as inspirational models for the Church's global missionary project of addressing root causes of injustice and suffering, a radical politics that Metz has consistently championed against what he dismisses as the bourgeois theology that wields metaphysical categories largely as a conservative ideological exercise.²³

²¹ Johann-Baptist Metz, "Erinnerung," in *Handbuch philosophischer Grundbegriffe*, edited by H. Krings, H.M. Baumgartner, and C. Wild (Munich: Koesel Verlag, 1973), 388.

²² See Metz, "Anamnestic Vernunft: Anmerkungen eines Theologen zur Krise der Geisteswissenschaften," in Honneth, ua, []. 733-8.

²³ Metz, "The Concept of a Political Theology as a Practical Fundamental Theology," in *Faith in History and Society* (NY: Seabury Press, 1980), 49ff.

For Metz, the two tasks of recovering Christianity's Judaic, anamnestic core, and embracing its global mission of social justice over its metaphysical concerns both should nourish themselves from the scandal and shock of Christianity's (in particular Roman Catholicism's) silence – at best – in the face of the Holocaust. Above all the German Catholic Church, for Metz, has no other choice but to find its own self-understanding in light of, or as he says “in the face of” Jews, an expression he does not mean metaphorically. Theodicy is not an abstract intellectual exercise but can only take the form of the kind of ongoing, vigorous and courageous dialogic process of self-criticism and encounter with others that Habermas would almost certainly accept as a cognate meaning of the liability of a national society for a mass crime.

Only by a vigorous, honest and relentless process of self-confrontation and interfaith dialogue with Jews, Metz insists, can German Catholicism win the chance – and earn the right – to claim the moral authority to work toward a post-national, post-metaphysical, genuinely ecumenical Christianity – a polycentric world Church – based on the struggle against social inequity and injustice.²⁴ And Metz observes that even the resurgence of German theology in the wake of the Second World War, in figures such as Bonhoeffer, Rahner, and Barth, have done little to confront the significance of Auschwitz directly in theological terms.

The significance of anamnestic reason for this practical, post-theodicy engagement is what Metz refers to elsewhere as the ‘productive non-contemporaneity’ that the faithful must confront, a loosely Blochean term signifying the impossibility, under the terms of anamnestic reason, to continue to ascribe to the progressivist, meliorist and ultimately conservative-bourgeois view of historical time that modern capitalism had superimposed upon the Christian vision of eschatological time. Recovering anamnestic reason implies confronting the time of faith as Benjamin had seen the messianic temporality that arise from the most minute and ignored features of bourgeois material

²⁴ Metz, dialogue on Auschwitz, full reference.

culture: unexpectedly interruptive, discontinuous, unstable, jagged, filled with strange gaps and lags, rifts and recapitulations, memory for the “materialist critic” or for the political theologian appears as a field seeded with bits of uncontrollable and unexpected, suddenly contemporary elements from a collectively shared past of suffering and injustice, of demands for justice that refuse to sit quietly in their assigned historical niche but intrude into the social present in a myriad of destabilizing ways.

This non-contemporaneity is productive in the sense that it renders complacency and acceptance in the wake of the Holocaust and the ongoing injustice of an oppressive global regime impossible. At the same time, Metz describes the anamnestic structure of a living faith as a series of ‘dangerous memories.’ For German Christians to come face to face with Jews in post-Holocaust Germany at any rate is to abandon a specific kind of metaphysics, to renounce even virtually and counterfactually the advantage that history has bestowed on those born after, who owe their postwar survival to contingencies that they could not possibly morally approve, and thus also to reject a form of memory as recollection, as narrative reconstruction of a settled past in its relation to a stable present. Memory is ‘dangerous’ precisely in its capacity to unsettle the cognitively comfortable but morally intolerable relation between a past of injustice and a present of underserved survival.

What Metz has in mind with a concept of a dangerous anamnestic reason is then specifically the deliberate and continuous effort to resist the imperative to construe past suffering as inhabiting a temporally safe and secure relationship with the present. The point, very like (and indeed derived from) Benjamin’s in the latter’s evocation of the enraging image of enslaved ancestors, is to derive from anamnestic reason a form of political motivation for resisting *ongoing* injustices that presumably would not have been possible while clinging to a self-exculpatory ideal of undangerous historical transmission and reception.

“Dangerous memories,’ Metz writes are those ‘...in which earlier experiences break through to the center point of our lives and reveal new and dangerous insights for the present. They illuminate for a few moments and with a harsh steady light the questionable nature of things we have apparently come to terms with, and show up the banality of our supposed ‘realism.’²⁵ They are thus ‘memories with future content.’ “Every rebellion against suffering is fed by the subversive power of remembered suffering. In this sense, suffering is in no way a purely passive, inactive ‘virtue.’ It is, or can be, the source of socially emancipatory action. Thus, in this sense, the memory of accumulated suffering continues to resist the cynics of modern political power.”

Memory works in opposition to ‘a purely historical relationship with the past that not only presupposes that the past is past; it also works actively to strengthen the fact that what has been is not present.’²⁶ Remembrance is transformative, not in the existential sense of reforming ourselves, but going out to transform the world. This is what issues from solidarity with the dead. We are made responsive to that suffering by the imitation of Christ, the suffering God. Christianity is the tradition and religion of the sufferer, the loser, the victim, the oppressed.²⁷

Metz’s conception of anamnestic reason clarifies in what sense a “debt to the past” is compelling as a rationally justifiable commitment yet not entirely capable of clarification given the language of moral reasoning that has been handed down to us through a long tradition of

²⁵ Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 8.

²⁶ *Faith in History and Society*, 190.

²⁷ “For me, Christianity deals with the foundation capable of supporting a universal solidarity and unconditional justice, i.e., a solidarity and justice even in the face of the victims and victors of history, for those burdened ones for whom we live and build our paradise but whose fate no passionate struggle of the living can raise a finger to change. The Christian belief in a God, before whom past suffering does not disappear subjectless into the abyss of an anonymous evolution, in my estimate vouches for the fixed standard of a universal liberation, of the ability to be a subject of all humanity, in the midst of unceasing conflict. [...] All dialectics of the emancipation of humanity in the end proves itself to be a trick of an indifferent evolution if there does not exist a God who interrupts the graceless, apathy-producing continuity of nature, and before whom even the past is not fixed. This God is, for me, the trustworthy foundation of any universal solidarity and justice – not just now, by decree of ‘the spirit of the age,’ but throughout the history of humanity.” In Colombo 176.

logocentrism. Conceiving of memory as a mode of reasoning rather than a mere adjunct at best to the rationality proper for philosophy highlights the both the liberating and morally encumbering relationship to historical time that Metz regards as the true situation of Christian faith in the wake of Auschwitz. The eschatological horizon of hope in God's justice is not replaced by anamnesis but rather the two, the hope for the advent of absolute justice in a Last Judgment and the obligation to keep alive the memory of unjust suffering, are brought together in the single event that for Metz is suffering. For this reason the *memoria passionis* acts as a kind of Rosetta Stone for the translation project that ever-present, in the sense of standing as the Archimedean point (the Greek reference being less than ideal) around which all history, however non-contemporaneous it may otherwise be, must be ordered. This event is the passion of Christ, the exemplar and archetype of all historical renders the theological vocabulary of political theology into the general vocabulary of political action, spurred by remembrance, but striving toward present-day emancipation from oppression and injustice.²⁸

Dangerous memory provides the inspiration for a new chapter in the Church's struggle for identity. While Metz's theology does not shrink from the risks of appropriation of the victim, the exemplary status of the passion of Christ, an interpretive standard established by doctrine, rules out in advance the possibility of the memory of meaningless suffering. This reveals both the kernel and also the profound limitations of Metz's theological response to a problem that, as I am arguing, must be suspended precisely at the tipping point between theology and philosophy.

In a critical aside against Habermas, Metz dismisses the very idea of a post-metaphysical philosophy, by which he means, in essence, a philosophy that will resign itself to refraining from all transcendent concepts that might possibly offer a resource for consolation in the face of an unjust

²⁸ See Metz, *Memoria Passionis. Ein provozierendes Gedächtnis in pluralistischer Gesellschaft* (Freiberg, Herder 2006).

world. The *memoria passionis*, while for Metz the ultimate ‘dangerous memory,’ also transforms the thought of historical suffering, mobilizing a compassionate community of the faithful but also relieving the thought of historical suffering from its most genuinely dangerous dimension – not so much the prospect that suffering will never be redeemed through a Last Judgment, but that there exists no exemplary normative instance in that tradition of suffering by which it can be recognized as meaningful, as interpretable according to a narrative construction of the span of human history. As the sacrificial moment of historical time, Christ’s suffering galvanizes the Church by offering a familiarly non-negotiable, metaphysical moment of preestablished meaning, a very vivid and in this case almost literal example of what Richard Rorty would have called a “skyhook.”

Absent this metaphysics, Metz fully acknowledges that he cannot quite see the point of an emancipatory promise made good in the medium of reason. This is why the ‘transcendence from within’ that Habermas ascribes to the procedural dimension of a universal pragmatics of speech holds such little appeal for him:

For me memories are not just the objects of a testing discourse, but rather the ground of discourse, without which they would collapse into a vacuum. They can not only launch discourse or illustrate it, but also interrupt and halt it. I know of really only one absolutely universal category: it is the *memoria passionis*. And I know of only one authority which cannot be revoked by any Enlightenment or emancipation: the authority of those who suffer.²⁹

²⁹ Metz, Wiesel book, 24. Unfortunately Metz expands this observation, weighty and controversial enough, with what I take as a profoundly unfortunate claim to the Jewishness of Critical Theory. Commenting on the lack of theological interest in Habermas’s work (though I doubt now he could make the same comment) Metz writes, “I will risk this conjecture here: perhaps what makes Habermas appear less theological than Benjamin and the early Frankfurt School, but also in my view always more of an idealist, is the Jewish background, which is missing or only dimly illuminated in him.”

(2b)

In his own response to Metz, the short essay “Israel or Athens: To Whom Does Anamnestic Reason Belong?” Habermas also points to the limits of translation between religious and philosophical language that Metz’s project illuminates. For Habermas, however attractive Metz’s appeal to the category of historical memory as a corrective to a theology that has been so overly Platonized, theology itself is ultimately in no position to determine unilaterally the borderline between the religious and the philosophical dimensions of the concept of reason. Not surprisingly, Habermas bristles at Metz’s suggestion that communicative reason still exhibits the loss of memory and the uncritical championing of the present so typical of metaphysical philosophy.

For Habermas, the history of reason itself already contains all the content and resources it needs to recast its historical genealogy in a way that would recover, under post-metaphysical terms, the subterranean memory of suffering and loss, a corrective for its own overweening self-confidence in its explanatory powers, and its own tendencies to collude with social domination. He is clearly more comfortable with the notion of religious traditions *making available* to philosophy those of its concepts that would likely contain the ‘semantic contents’ that philosophy finds indispensable but inaccessible, and that a self-critical philosophy can attempt to extract relatively intact, rather than the idea that religion can take on this kind of translation work on its own.

In the present case, the religious notion of the guarantee against the meaninglessness of historical suffering – the divine assurance that anamnestic reason will find its material in historical suffering that will at least in principle yield an outcome of solidarity, peace, and social justice if only the Church can appropriate it under the correct conditions – works only on the pre-established exemplary status of the *memoria passionis*, which, while not in itself yet an overtly metaphysical claim as Christ’s resurrection would be, nevertheless provides something akin to a translation guide

that a properly post-metaphysical philosophy cannot allow itself. Christ's sacrifice is both transcendent and unconditional. Post-metaphysical thought may have moved to a post-secular position. But one injunction from Adorno still appears, fortunately, to stand firm for Habermas: whatever else we may make of the tendency of theological concepts to emigrate into the secular, we cannot tolerate sacrifice as the schematism for a moral point of view.

Habermas rightly refuses Metz's theological claim of ownership over anamnestic reason, even if he does not entirely respond to the (largely undefended) claim that anamnesis can be regarded as a (primordial) form of reason in its own right. Philosophy, Habermas maintains, has already worked through the tension between the supposed anamnesis of Hellenic metaphysics and the diachrony of the Jewish tradition of the oppressed, even if this work happened largely in the long development of a burdened moral philosophy that Metz chooses to ignore.

[T]he idea of a covenant which promises justice to the people of God, and to everyone who belongs to this people, a justice which extends through and beyond a history of suffering, has been taken up in the idea of a community tied by a special bond. The thought of such a community, which would entwine freedom and solidarity within the horizon of an undamaged intersubjectivity, has unfolded its explosive force even within philosophy. Argumentative reason has become receptive to the practical experiences of threatened identity suffered by those who exist historically.³⁰

Post-metaphysical philosophy, unencumbered by even the most well-intentioned political theology, will pull this rope on its own and take on the translation work that Habermas has in mind.

Translation is a process of analogical thinking. It searches for imperfect equivalents. The religious vision of a past, present and future unified in an all-embracing historical solidarity,

³⁰ Israel or Athens, 132.

grounded through the single unique moment of Christ's sacrifice, finds its equivalent for Habermas only in the claim of a trans-historical solidarity in suffering that can be distilled from the inclusionary dynamic of speaking and hearing subjects, a thin foundation for a community and one that must take suffering in proceduralist terms.

Philosophy, too, pits the force of anamnesis against a historicist forgetting of forgetting. But now it is argumentative reason itself which reveals, in the deeper layers of its own pragmatic presuppositions, the conditions for laying claim to an unconditional meaning. It thereby holds open the dimension of validity claims which transcend social space and historical time. In this way it makes a breach in the normality of mundane events, which are devoid of any promissory note. Without this, normality would close itself hermetically against any experience of a solidarity and justice which is *lacking*.³¹

The 'methodological atheism' that Habermas first proposed for philosophy in response to the challenge by Metz and Peukert³² insists on appropriating theological concepts while holding aloof from the context of ritual and religious experience in which those concepts were living. Philosophy

³¹ Habermas, "Israel or Athens: Where does Anamnestic Reason Belong?" in Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity, edited by Eduardo Mendieta (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), 134.

³² Those familiar with the debates I am discussing here will have remarked the absence of Helmut Peukert's voice. For reasons of space I choose instead to focus on Metz, whose potential for a truly productive debate with Habermas on the relation between religious and secular normativity is for me at least far greater. Where Metz struggles to find a new mode of thinking and speaking to describe the specific challenges of Christian faith after Auschwitz, his student Peukert seems to me to be engaging in an essentially conservative project – finding ways of generating new versions of theistic proofs appropriate to modern forms of consciousness. But these proofs generally reduce to the unimpressive argument that universal justice as offered by all modern deontic moral theories, discourse ethics among them, are aporetic unless they take on board the ontological reality of God as the thought of the ground of unity of a history of suffering and the sum total of our peremptory moral interests. But this argument simply retreats back behind the prohibitions on the constitutive use of pure practical reason for purposes of cognition that Kant had established. For this reason Peukert's arguments seem quaint. For a good reconstruction of Peukert's writings, and Habermas's responses to them, see Thomas McCarthy, "Philosophical Foundations of Political Theology: Kant, Peukert and the Frankfurt School," in Ideals and Illusions (MIT DATE). More recently see Nicholas Adams, Habermas and Theology (Cambridge 2006) for a very thorough criticism of the premodern character of Peukert's "aporias" argument.

has access only to ‘the universe of argumentative discourse that is uncoupled from the event of revelation.’³³ This translation work presupposes that the relation between philosophy and theology is emphatically not one of symmetry and equivalence, as translation between two natural languages, since philosophy proceeds on the assumption that theological concepts can surrender their semantic meanings even once stripped away from their living contexts, and that those meanings still capture aspects of the human experience without any dependence on the transcendence of ritual, or religious or metaphysical language.

These concepts, in other words, are not just translatable: they are *in need* of translating, even as a sensitive philosopher will proceed with a clear conception of the severe limits that she operates under. In any effort to transfer the semantic meaning of a concept from a religious to a secular mode, philosophy must remain exquisitely sensitive to the desire to wrest meaning from concepts regardless of the kind and degree of violence required. The sensitivity of philosophical translation also requires a finely-honed sense of when to desist.³⁴

Religious language is, as Habermas has recently put it, still capable of articulating “an awareness of what is absent or lacking. It keeps alive a sensitivity to failure and suffering. It rescues from oblivion the dimensions of our social and personal relations in which advances in cultural and social rationalization have caused utter devastation.”³⁵ While religious language is in need of translation, translation of course always betrays, and always fails.

³³ Habermas, *Transcendence*, 233.

³⁴ “Philosophy, even after assimilating utopian impulses from the Judeo-Christian tradition, has not been capable of mastering by means of consolation and trust the de facto meaninglessness of death in its contingency, that of individual suffering, or that of the private loss of happiness – in general, the meaninglessness of the negativity of the risks built into life – in a way that had been possible for the religious hope in salvation. In the industrially advanced societies we see for the first time as a mass phenomenon the loss of hope in redemption and the expectation of grace, which, even if no longer supported within an ecclesiastical framework, are still supported by interiorized faith traditions.” 17-18

³⁵ Habermas, Introduction, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 6.

Another way of making this point about the *untranslatable* dimension of religious language, this time derived from Habermas's reading of Kant's rational religion, is that religious language – redemption, sacrifice, last judgment – give us semantic resources for what is at bottom a deeply non-rational act: the passionate cry of protest at a world in which individual persons exhibit such remarkable vulnerability and suffering appears in no discernable relationship to our most cherished views of justice. Kant's conception of the constitutive use of postulates of pure practical reason, Habermas observes, was meant in large part to acknowledge, rather than to compensate for the semantic lack that opens before us once the imagery-rich semantics of religious traditions are replaced by the abstract concepts of moral universalism.³⁶

But this means that the need for translation has to confront translation's inevitable failure. Translations from religion to philosophy *always fail*, in an important sense: the affirmation of articles of religious faith is metaphysics pure and simple, and it is precisely in this affirmation that religion, unencumbered by secular criteria for validity, can offer forms of consolation that philosophy cannot and should not. In fact, Habermas's arguments about religious language generally make a direct connection between the capacity to make non-falsifiable metaphysical assertions and the capacity to offer various modes of consolation for the generally bad news of human existence: bodily and psychic fragility, the consignment to dumb chance and contingency, our remarkable capacity for cruelty, the susceptibility to suffering, failure to find a meaningful mode of living, loss, and death. Translation work into secular terms is therefore just as important for the blank spaces and

³⁶ “Pure practical reason can no longer be so confident in its ability to counteract a modernization spinning out of control armed solely with the insights of a theory of justice. The latter lacks the creativity of linguistic world-disclosure that a normative consciousness afflicted with accelerating decline requires in order to regenerate itself.” Habermas, “The Boundary between Faith and Knowledge: On the Reception and Contemporary Importance of Kant's Philosophy of Religion,” in *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 211.

discontinuities that registered in the ‘target language.’ This is the post-secular equivalent of negative theology, and has to be borne in mind in any assessment of a “successful’ translation project.³⁷

Solidarity with the perished victims of injustice offers no consolation unless we can affirm some possibility of past suffering and past injustice as having a mode of redress. This mode of redress doesn’t extend to the full-blown claim that a divinely ordered global history of salvation will render individuals’ physical death less than absolute and that each individual has at least the possibility of resurrection. In a more modest mode, not consolation but the means for strengthening one’s political commitments, perhaps, is available via the claim that those who suffered and died unjustly in the history of our society did not die *meaningless* deaths. Here – in the very close relationship between the denial of death and the denial of a meaningless death – is the force field between a religious claim regarding our relation to our dead, on one side, and a non-consequentialist philosophical affirmation of a positive duty toward our dead on the other.

The asymmetry of justice and solidarity offers at least a means for describing this. Given the impossibility of retroactive justice, given the intolerability of this fact, those who continue to live within the ethical substance of a way of life in which the justice happened also are directed to reflect on the many forms of continuity of their lives. On the level of content, their liability conducts them

³⁷ “Secular languages which only eliminate the substance once intended leave irritations. When sin was converted to culpability, and the breaking of divine commands to an offense against human laws, something was lost. The wish for forgiveness is still bound up with the unsentimental wish to undo the harm inflicted on others. What is even more disconcerting is the irreversibility of *past* sufferings – the injustice inflicted on innocent people who were abused, debased, and murdered, reaching far beyond any extent of reparation within human power. The lost hope for resurrection is keenly felt as a void. Horkheimer’s justified skepticism – ‘the slaughtered are really slaughtered’ – with which he countered Benjamin’s emphatic, or rather excessive, hope for the anamnestic power of reparation inherent in human remembrance, is far from denying the helpless impulse to change what cannot be changed anymore. The exchange of letters between Benjamin and Horkheimer dates from Spring 1937. Both, the true impulse and its impotence, were prolonged after the holocaust by the practice, as necessary as it was hopeless, of ‘coming to terms with the past’ [‘Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit’] (Adorno). They are manifest as well in the rising lament over the inappropriateness of this practice. In moments like these, the unbelieving sons and daughters of modernity seem to believe that they owe more to one another, and need more for themselves, than what is accessible to them, in translation, of religious tradition – as if the semantic potential of the latter was still not exhausted.” Habermas, “Faith and Knowledge,” 111.

toward an ongoing reflective relationship to their own traditions. But all members of modern societies, regardless of what the contents of their traditions are, have undergone roughly equivalent socialization processes, in which the efficacy of tradition as a source of normative integration has ebbed, and the work of individuation via socialization has increasingly shifted to the shoulders of social members themselves. This redirects our attention to the formal dimensions of intersubjectivity by which modern societies are functionally maintained, and to the less substantive, more procedural dimensions of modern solidarity, which subsist less and less on settled normative consenses and more on the integrative powers of intersubjective communication itself.³⁸

The awareness of one's own inclusion in an overarching intersubjectivity that both sustains and constrains the boundaries of one's own selfhood is characteristic for a mode of solidarity beyond "thick" ascriptive ties of family, tribe, or nation.³⁹ It's easy (and normal) to assume that this modern form of solidarity is so constitutionally weak, and so chronically devoid of content, that in order to operate as a source of normative motivation and orientation it has to be supplemented, whether by recourse to thick forms of ascriptive ties that have been deliberately rejuvenated on functionalist grounds, or by various metaphysical (religious) skyhooks that offset existential contingencies with consolation, orientation, and in general with the provision of significance.

Habermas's translation of the anamensic solidarity question recognizes that, once both of these supplemental forms of solidarity are rejected, then solidarity *in general* for modern subjects takes on a particularly rationalistic, indeed a Kantian tinge that, for most of us, will prove less than

³⁸ Habermas has in fact written movingly, and in the familiar cadences of the sermon, regarding just this aspect of discourse-based solidarity: "It is the experience of an equality that does not level out difference and of a togetherness that individualizes. It is the experience of a closeness across distance to an other acknowledged in his or her difference. It is the experience of a combination of autonomy and self-surrender, a reconciliation which does not extinguish the differences, a future-oriented justice that is in solidarity with the unreconciled suffering of past generations. It is the experience of the reciprocity of freely granted acknowledgement, of a relationship in which a subject is associated to another without being subjected to the degrading violence of exchange." Habermas, *Transcendence*, in Mendieta 232.

³⁹ Max Pensky, *The Ends of Solidarity: Discourse Theory in Ethics and Politics* (SUNY 2008), chapter 1.

attractive. A plausible model for a modern, post-metaphysical and post-conventional solidarity has to refrain from any effort to sugar-coat or window-dress. And in this sense, philosophy can in fact benefit from what it has haltingly and perhaps ineloquently translated from the old religious view of a solidarity that transcends social space and historical time to reach to the dead themselves.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ “The idea of God is transformed into a concept of a *logos* that determines the community of believers, and the real-life context of a self-emancipating society. “God” becomes the name for a communicative structure that forces men, on pain of the loss of their humanity, to go beyond their accidental, empirical nature to encounter one another *indirectly*, that is, across an objective something that they themselves are not.” Habermas, Legitimation Crisis 121.