CAN PUBLIC REASON BE SECULAR AND DEMOCRATIC?

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Habermas's recent demand that religious reasons must be translated into secular reasons if they are to play a justificatory role in the political public sphere is a demand that presupposes an under-complex view of translation and metaphysical view of the unity of reason. Eschewing Habermasian assumptions about the "unity of reason" I present an alternative that makes room for multiple and heterogeneous languages of public reason, which places the stress on language learning rather than on language translation.

I

I write not as someone who has an interest in "religion" per se, but as someone with an interest in contemporary debates over secularism and diversity.[1] More specifically, in how democratic societies can make better sense of religious and cultural pluralism, and in how they remake themselves as they respond to (as well as resist) inescapable religious and cultural pluralization.

As a graduate student I was much impressed by Hegel's lectures on religion and Weber's sociology of religion. A few decades on, the perspectives they offer, and accounts they give are far too historically and culturally "provincial" to make sense of contemporary issues of deep diversity that are global and local at the same time. As recent scholarship on secularism has shown, above all, Charles Taylor's monumental *A Secular Age*, as well as the rich body of complementary scholarship that has emerged concurrently and in response to Taylor's *magnum opus*[2], our times require us to rethink some of our most fundamental assumptions about how we are to live together,

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[1] This article was originally written for the conference "Varieties of Continental Thought and Religion," Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada, June 16, 2012. But for a few elaborations and emendations, this published version retains the spirit of the occasion for which it was originally written.

[2] *E.g.*, the work of Jose Casanova, Rajeev Bhargava, and Akeel Bilgrami, among others.

justly, without fear of oppression or humiliation. No easy task, at the best times, given so much profound and deep disagreement about what that would mean, and what it would demand of us. In a post-9/11 world, it is all that much harder to make room for nuanced and reflective public debate in the face of politically manipulative and hypocritical calls to drop more bombs or to close more borders.

John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas have thought as hard as anyone about how to publicly negotiate the terms of a just and democratic form of life. At the heart of their proposals for how this is to be achieved is an idea of "public reason" that enables citizens of democracies to publicly justify their political claims consistent with normative principles of equality, liberty, and reciprocity. Public reason is supposed to be the primary *problem-solving* medium of democratic conflict and contestation, which is itself an apprenticeship in democratic citizenship, through which citizens become capable of testing and at the same time justifying the legitimacy of the democratic state.

Their views of public reason were developed under historical conditions of considerable scepticism towards reason in any of its forms, and have been contested and criticized from the outset from a variety of critical standpoints. But nothing challenged their conceptions of public reason as much as the resurgence of religion in politics, and not just in its fundamentalist forms. Like most of us in the educated classes of the West, they assumed that religion was a shape of life that had grown old, which modernity had already *aufgehoben*, successfully completing the historical process of secularization.

Anyone familiar with the work of Rawls and Habermas will know that their respective views of public reason had already been severely challenged by what Rawls came to call the "fact of pluralism." First, this unavoidable "fact of pluralism" became visible in public debates about the political claims of culture, and then, more recently, in the public debates about the political claims of religion. This obdurate and often unpredictable "fact" eventually forced them both to revise their unduly restrictive and normatively ascetic conceptions of public reason. The unexpected resurgence of religion in the political public sphere precipitated the most extensive change in their conceptions, which, in actuality, was not so much a change in conception, as a relaxation of the restrictions they imposed on what can count as "public reason" and how it is to be exercised in accordance with its normative rules.

At first, Rawls operated with a very sharp distinction between "public" and "non-public" reasons, advocating at the same time a "method of avoidance" by which contentious political claims and

socially divisive issues would be set aside for the sake of preserving "the basis of social cooperation."[3] With this very restrictive interpretation of public reason, Rawls was put in the embarrassing situation of being unable to explain how legitimate social and political change could take place in and through the exercise of public reason. Under pressure from his critics, Rawls loosened the restrictions on the use of public reason to make room for "new variations," "otherwise the claims of groups or interests arising from social change might be repressed and fail to gain their appropriate political voice."[4]

But in the end, it was not clear how new political claims could be articulated if they were to remain consistent with the rules of public reason and the idea of the reasonable. Thus, Rawlsian public reason could not shake off the image of itself as "a dreary and conservative public discourse, freed of all fundamental challenges," as Veit Bader, devastatingly, put it.[5] Obviously, the decline of public reason into "a dreary and conservative public discourse, freed of all fundamental challenges" not only exacerbates the problem of finding an alternative medium for negotiating fair terms of social cooperation across lines of difference and power, it would also bring to a potentially bitter end the (unacknowledged) romance with reason with which were co-founded our ideas of democracy, justice, and freedom, themselves ideas of reason, in Kant's sense.

Recognizing how much the fate of public reason was at stake in these new debates, Habermas began to rethink public reason in a way that was more receptive to the political claims of religion and the challenges of religious diversity. His considered response showed a surprising and remarkable openness to the new political status of religion, reflecting of course, the emergence of a new, far more religiously and culturally diverse Europe. Habermas proposed the normative perspective of an "ethics of citizenship," through which he could overcome the exposed limitations of Rawls's conception of public reason, notwithstanding Rawls's eventual inclusion of non-public reasons into the political public sphere "*provided* that in due course proper political reasons...are presented that are suffi-

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[3] John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 57.
[4] *Ibid.*, 142–43.
[5] Veit Bader, "Religious pluralism: secularism or priority for democracy?," *Political Theory*, vol. 27, no. 5, (1999), 618.

cient to support whatever the comprehensive doctrines are said to support."[6]

Habermas perceived correctly that this strict proviso placed on unfair burden on "religious citizens," splitting their private and public selves in two, and forcing them into the schizoid position in which they would be forced to endorse "a constitutional regime" under which "their comprehensive doctrines may not prosper…and indeed may decline."[7] This can't be right, and it isn't, democratically speaking. As Habermas points out, the "liberal state cannot expect all citizens… to justify their political positions independently of their religious convictions and worldviews."[8] The state may reasonably expect politicians and those who hold office in state institutions to remain neutral towards competing worldviews and comprehensive doctrines, but to extend the principle of neutrality from the official political sphere to debate in the political public sphere "would constitute an overgeneralisation of secularism. We cannot infer from the secular character of the state a direct personal obligation on all citizens to supplement their publicly expressed religious conviction by equivalents in a generally accessible language."[9]

Rather than placing an "unreasonable mental and psychological burden" on religious citizens, Habermas argues that "the requisite institutional separation of religion and politics" should be conceived differently. Accordingly, he proposes a very different translation proviso from the one proposed by Rawls. Religious citizens must be allowed to express and justify their convictions in religious language in the political public sphere. Translation into the "generally accessible language" of public justification is required only when those convictions are supposed to shape deliberations and decisions on policy and law in the official political sphere—*i.e.*, in law-making bodies such as legislatures and parliaments. Not only is it wrong on normative grounds to expect religious citizens "to abstain" from the political use of "private" reasons, the liberal state also has "functional reasons for not overhastily reducing the polyphonic complexity of public voices."[10] Secular society needs "the free expression of religious voices in the public arena… for it cannot be sure that [it] would

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[6] "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," *University of Chicago Law Review*, vol. 64 (1997), 783, my emphasis.

[7] *Ibid.*, 781.

[8] Jürgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, (tr.) Ciaran Cronin (Oxford: Polity Press, 2008), 128.

[9] *Ibid.*, 129.

[10] *Ibid.*, 131.

not otherwise cut itself off from key resources for the creation of meaning and identity."[11]

Habermas is here acknowledging the full force of a thought with which he has been haunted ever since his remarkable essay on Walter Benjamin[12], namely, that modernity, by virtue of the meaning-destroying form of cultural and political life it is, is threatened by the loss of semantic sources without which it cannot even make sense of itself as the form of cultural and political life it has become. Tapping these semantic sources is not within the power of normative political theory. By contrast:

> Religious traditions have a special power to articulate moral intuitions, especially with regard to vulnerable forms of communal life. In corresponding political debates, this potential makes religious speech into a serious vehicle for possible truth contents, which can then be translated from the vocabulary of a particular religious community into a generally accessible language. However the institutional thresholds between the "wild" political public sphere and the formal proceedings with political bodies also function as a filter that allows only secular contributions from the Babel of voices in the informal flows of public communication to pass through... The truth contents of religious contributions can enter into the institutionalised practice of deliberation and decision-making *only* when the necessary translation already occurs in the pre-parliamentarian domain, i.e., in the political public sphere itself."[13]

Does Habermas's accommodation of the semantic sources of religious traditions represent an improvement on the limitations of Rawls's proviso, or is it one more reminder of the internal limits of public reason? Let's leave aside for the moment the striking but troubling contrast between the Babel of voices proliferating in the "wild" political public sphere and the presumably sober and certainly monolingual practice of deliberation and decision-making in the official political sphere. For the time being I want to focus only on the *idea* of translation that Habermas introduces here, an idea whose realization in practice is supposed to provide the requisite "filter"

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[11] *Ibid.*
[12] Jürgen Habermas "Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism: The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin," (tr.) Philip Brewster and Carl Howard Buchner, *New German Critique* No. 17, Special Walter Benjamin Issue (Spring, 1979): 30–59.
[13] Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 131; my emphasis.

through which the semantic/truth contents of religion would pass to take the form of a "generally accessible language." Consistent with the view that the process of translation should not place unfair cognitive and existential burdens on citizens who follow a faith, Habermas suggest that the *process* of translation should also be shouldered by secular citizens who would take on the burdens of translation in a process of complementary learning. The translation of the semantic contents of religion into "generally accessible language" would be the medium through which complementary learning processes would be initiated and public reason semantically enriched.

So what does translation actually involve? Does Habermas have more in mind than what Rawls had in mind in demanding that arguments depending on religious convictions be translated into public arguments stripped of any religious references, and capable of being understood and judged without need of taking into account their religious meanings and origins? Or is there something more involved, along the lines of what ethnographers do on site, translating as participant-observers the languages and practices of non-Western peoples into their home language, the language of Western scholars and socials scientists? Of course there is not just one model of ethnographic translation, and some ethnographers recognize the limits of translation, especially when acknowledging that translation of semantic and cultural contents from one language into another cannot but fail fully to capture the implicit but not fully surveyable background understanding on which the intelligibility of any linguistic and cultural expressions depend.

Upon closer scrutiny, Habermas's idea of the translatability of the semantic/truth contents of religion is more sanguine than it should be. This is partly because his conception of translation and the content of what is to be translated is much too cognitive—almost exclusively so. Indeed, put more critically, I would say his conception of translation is *cognitivistic*, by which I mean that Habermas prioritizes the cognitive dimension of religious contents and at the same time reduces those contents to their cognitive dimension. That is why he believes religious contents can be translated into the language of public justification. One can only be sanguine about the possibilities of translating the semantic (and potential truth) contents of religion if one assumes that those contents are themselves available to a more or less straightforward transposition into the cognitive statements of secular speech—as secular paraphrases of religious insights into questions of human (and non-human) meaning and identity. They can then be rendered propositionally into standard

kinds of truth and rightness claims—redeemable validity claims, to use Habermas's parlance. Once they take this form, they can be admitted into the arena of public justification, staking a claim to the unforced force of the better argument.

Although I very much admire and support the democratic impulse behind Habermas's counter-proposal, it does leave me rather cold. If it were to be a viable, reciprocal, and fully democratic process of translation, it would require not a "thin" cognitivistically reductive process of translation, but a "thick" semantically and culturally rich process of translation, one that is not satisfied merely with the translation of religious contents into "generally accessible language," but a demanding and potentially transformative "fusion of horizons," in Gadamer's sense. A "thin" translation of the semantic contents of religion would be woefully inadequate, for religion as a way of life is not just about beliefs, but the various practices, rituals, and experiences which sustain those beliefs, which give meaning and shape to that way of life. It is not just "Vorstellungen" all the way down, but also "deeds," doings that are not reducible to or translatable into cognitive statements or propositional language.

As Habermas recognizes, "Genuine faith is not merely a doctrine, something believed, but is also a source of energy that the person of faith taps into performatively to nurture her whole life."[14] But that so-called energy is *performatively* tapped primarily through rituals and practices not through the repetition of propositional declarations of faith. So how do we—we the secular citizens who must mutually shoulder the burden of translation—translate the semantic contents into "generally accessible speech" without an internal understanding of those contents? And how could we gain such understanding without participating in them, at the very least, in the way that ethnographers do? How could a reliable, dialogically mediated, but also a practice—and ritual—nourished translation be produced, otherwise? Is the principal purpose of "translation" to facilitate the expression of religious contents into the monolingual language of public justification or is it to facilitate another way of living with our non-secular fellow citizens in another mode of ethical and political being, and, therefore, requiring much more than an ethics of citizenship that is governed by the normative rules of public reason? The kind of "translation" Habermas has in mind does not even begin to get at what is involved in and demanded by learning of this kind.

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[14] *Ibid.*, 127.

The more closely we look at the feature of Habermas's translation proviso that made it more attractive than Rawls's—the active participation of secular citizens in the process of translation—the more we are given reasons to doubt its viability and appropriateness. Too little is said and too much is assumed about what participation in the process of translation demands of so-called secular citizens. If, as I have averred, citizens would have to be engaged in such a process in a manner analogous to the translating work of ethnographers, one would minimally expect that they would require or would need to develop the requisite skill-set along with the requisite normative and interpretive attitudes. What kind of activity of citizenship is this? What precedents are there for one group of citizens engaging with their fellow citizens in this highly demanding way, both in terms of commitment of time and commitment to mutual learning? How could it be fostered as a desirable activity of citizenship, rather than as an onerous obligation? It is not clear just how Habermas imagines this "ethos of citizenship" in practice; indeed, it is not clear that he has thought through its implications for the practice of citizenship, itself a practice that would be resisted by many if not the majority of citizens in contemporary democratic societies.

The process of translation that is implied by Habermas's proposal seeks to go beyond existing hermeneutic models of inter-faith dialogue, since the translation process is supposed to enable political agency as well as satisfy the demands of public reason and full democratic participation in determining the laws by which citizens agree to be governed. This would require conditions of public engagement and reflection that could facilitate a process of translation. But what would count as success, in this case? Normally, the accuracy and quality of academic, literary, and religious texts translated from one language into another is assessed by a relevant group of experts. In the case of translating "religious speech" into "generally accessible speech," how would accuracy and quality be assessed? Presumably, since there cannot be (and must not be) external experts to which the "translation" is to be submitted for assessment, in a democratic society religious and secular citizens must together decide whether the translation represents accurately and clearly the intended meaning of "religious speech." To expect that there would not often be intense, perhaps, irresolvable disagreement over the adequacy of the translation would be naive.[15] To expect that the translation would

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[15] Imagine what kind of "translation" we would get from a team of citizen-translators composed of dogmatic and cocky secularists, say, like Daniel Dennett and Richard Dawkins. One would have to seriously doubt that the semantic

adequately capture in propositional form contents that are them-
selves largely non-propositional is not just naive, it represents a
mistranslation of religious ways of life, and indeed, the mistransla-
tion of some of those ways of life (say, Buddhism, Hinduism, indige-
nous cosmologies, and the like) into the category of "religion."

 I would argue that the model of "translation" is not the best
way to think about "complementary processes of learning" aiming
for a deeper understanding among citizens with diverse conceptions
of the good, and commitments to diverse ways of life. For "learning"
of this kind involves much more than merely cognitive or discursive-
ly mediated learning; it implies some transformation of the person
implicated in the process, a change in oneself, a reordering of one's
values, disclosing different experiences of the world, disclosing a
different understanding of others. This takes us well beyond the
domain of "public reason" narrowly understood, and well beyond the
domain of public argument and practices of justification, procedural-
ly understood.[16]

So why construe public reason as narrowly as Habermas and
Rawls do, as though it can function only as a procedural form of
reason, as primarily a practice of normative justification? Why iden-
tify public reason exclusively with secular reason? Indeed, how can
one do so when one allows "untranslated" religious reasons into the
domain of the public sphere? Is that not implicitly to concede that
public reason cannot be exclusively secular? I cannot argue this fully,
here, but it is a central claim of this article that public reason cannot
be secular in Habermas's and Rawls's sense if it is to be both *public
and democratic*. If we say that that "secular" and "religious" reasons
ought to engage one another in the public sphere, then we are im-
plicitly recognizing that both "kinds" of reasons are *public* reasons.

In the essay on "Religion and the Public Sphere: Cognitive Pre-
suppositions for the 'Public Use of Reason' by Secular and Religious
Citizens," Habermas seems to take a step away—a surprising and
unexpected step away—from an exclusively secularist understand-
ing of reason, acknowledging that the very ideas of freedom and
emancipation were developed in religious discourses, and that
religion belongs to the genealogy of reason. He forcefully rejects "a
scientistically truncated conception of reason and the exclusion of

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contents of religion would be rescued for "key resources for the creation of
meaning and identity."

[16] See Nikolas Kompridis, *Critique and Disclosure: Critical Theory between Past
and Future* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006) and, *Critique and Receptivity* (New
York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming).

religious doctrines from the genealogy of reason,"[17] and is committed to "tracing the genealogy of the 'shared reason' of people of faith, unbelievers, and members of different religions."[18] Unfortunately, if such a genealogy is going to be traced is from the standpoint of the "modern self-understanding of secular reason"[19] it is going to be question-begging and circular in a vicious sense—a case of one step forward, two steps back. Once again, Habermas's position becomes perplexing, since he proposes promisingly a philosophical reconstruction of the history of reason that would embrace the religions of the world and modern science in a "multidimensional" conception of reason—but, sadly, it is not multidimensional enough. If it is to be multi-dimensional, it has also to be multi-perspectival. The genealogy of reason cannot and should not be reconstructed only from the perspective of the "modern self-understanding of reason," not only because that perspective will be unavoidably limited, as well as selective, but also because the possibility of real learning, mutual learning from and between the multiple forms of historical reason, both religious and secular, requires a multi-perspectival genealogy of reason. Such a genealogy would not already *presuppose* the correct standpoint from which this genealogy is to be traced, but would arrive at an *enlarged* standpoint from which our "shared reason" can be made outlined *only* at the end of inquiry.

For all of his welcome openness to a broader conception of reason that would include what secularist conceptions of reasons have previously excluded, Habermas remains captive to a proceduralist view of reason whose shortcomings are compounded by a narrow, equally proceduralist conception of philosophy:

> At best, philosophy *circumscribes* the opaque core of religious experience when it reflects on the specific character of religious language and on the intrinsic meaning of faith. This core remains as profoundly alien to discursive thought as the hermetic core of aesthetic experience, which likewise can be at best circumscribed, but not penetrated, by philosophical reflection.[20]

With this remark, Habermas arrives again, or rather, returns to, a view of reason whose limitations I have exposed and criticized at

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[17] Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 140.
[18] Jürgen Habermas, *An Awareness of What Matters. Faith and Reason in a Postsecular Age*
(Oxford: Polity Press, 2010), 23.
[19] *Ibid*.
[20] Habermas, *Religion and the Public Sphere*, 143.

length in *Critique and Disclosure: Critical Theory Between Past and Future*. This is the not the place to restate those criticisms; however, I do wish to point out that what appears to be the "opaque" and "hermetic" cores of religion and art are a function of Habermas's epistemology and proceduralist understanding of reason rather than of their intrinsically "hermetic" and "opaque" properties. There is something egregiously mistaken and not a little repelling in the thought that philosophical reflection is an activity of "penetration." That is not the appropriate way, neither hermeneutically nor ethically, to think about how to make sense of the otherness of the other, and it is inconsistent with the "ethics of citizenship" Habermas proposes.

Is an epistemology and hermeneutics of "penetration" the only available option for philosophy? And if the core of religious experience (setting aside the "hermetic" core of aesthetic experience) is as opaque, as profoundly alien to discursive thought, as Habermas claims, then on what possible basis could there ever be a suitable translation of the semantic contents of religion? On what basis could we reassure ourselves that the "translation" is right, correct, or even close, given how wildly indeterminate and also contestable any translation would necessarily be? Just *what*, exactly, would we be translating? How could something so "profoundly alien" be translated into a "generally accessible" political or ethical claim, and if not translated, how could it be remotely intelligible to fellow citizens when expressed in the public sphere?

We have more options than penetrating or circumscribing what appears to us as "profoundly alien, opaque and hermetic." One such option is an epistemology and ethics of receptivity that I have been developing for some time, and which I now elaborate in relation to answerability. Receptivity in my sense entails a particular way of responding to normative challenges to our current self-understanding, to our current way of going on with things. We become aware of new normative demands, new claims laid upon us by something or someone, calling us to respond, not just with any kind of response, but, rather, with one that requires, manifests, a freer relation to ourselves. The freedom I am referring to comes into play when we spontaneously and accountably make room for the call of an other, rendering intelligible what may have been previously unintelligible. Becoming receptive to such a call means facilitating its voicing, letting it become a voice that we did not allow ourselves to hear before, and responding to it in a way that demands something of us that we could not have recognized before. In responding freely to such a call, which means, becoming answerable to it, we allow

ourselves to be unsettled, decentered, thereby making it possible to occupy a potentially self-critical and illuminating stance. From such a stance it may become necessary to confront the possibility that we cannot go on as before, that some change is demanded of us, a change we may envision only in an indeterminate and inchoate way, but to which we feel nonetheless obligated to be receptive, answerable.[21]

Now this ideal of receptivity has to be, I have argued, internal to a truly multi-dimensional reason, one capacious enough to meet the normative and political demands of inescapably pluralistic and pluralizing societies. I cannot say any more about this ideal here, since I want to round out this article with another proposal I have made about how we need and should rethink our idea of public reason, and that involves giving up the idea of the unity of reason. In the remainder of this article, I want to make the case for the disunity of reason in the belief that beginning from the presumption of disunity is far more advantageous to democratic politics conducted under conditions of acknowledged pluralism and deep diversity than is beginning from the presumption of unity.

II

Neo-Kantian political philosophers like Habermas and Rawls presume the unity of reason and develop their normative theories of practical reason on the basis of this presumption. This is especially true of Habermas, who has written at length about the "unity of reason," not as something that can be grasped as a totality but as something that is reflected "in the plurality of its voices." Its unity becomes perceptible as "the possibility in principle of passing from one language into another.... This possibility of mutual understanding, which is now *guaranteed only procedurally* and is realized only transitorily, forms the *background* for the existing diversity of those who encounter one another—even when they fail to understand each other."[22]

As Habermas avers, the unity of reason has only a procedural not a substantive existence. The unity in question is "regulative" not

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[21] For detailed and systematic statement of my theory of receptivity, and its implications

for the practice of critique and for democratic politics, see my *Critique and Receptivity*.

[22] Jürgen Habermas, "The Unity of Reason in the Diversity of its Voices," in *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 117; my emphasis.

"constitutive"—in other words, it is construed as a necessary pre-supposition or idealization, guiding our practices of sense making and reasoning rather than taking shape as a substantive reality accessible to confirmation by non-controversial empirical evidence. The regulative unity of reason comes into existence in and by the rationality of its procedures, procedures which guarantee the intelligibility of reason across its diverse employments: regardless of whether we are employing reason strategically, morally, aesthetically, or theoretically, we are always employing one and the same reason. These procedures are the ones used in trying to solve problems of the kind with which the sciences deal, or normative questions of the kind with which citizens of democratic societies grapple. To understand the unity of reason in this way is to understand that "what counts *as rational* is solving problems successfully through procedurally suitable dealings with reality."[23]

By construing procedurally "the possibility in principle of passing from one language into another," Habermas fails to see that the possibility of passing from one language to another cannot be guaranteed by *any* procedure. From the perspective of the speaker who is trying to pass from one language to another, the passage is from an old and familiar language to a new and strange one, which she cannot yet understand, let alone speak. There is no procedurally suitable way to deal either with the recognition that the language we currently speak is not all the language we need or with the problem of how to negotiate the passage from an old and familiar language to a new and strange one. If there were such procedures or rules there could not *in principle* be anything new or strange to make sense of, to challenge us, to transform us. If that were indeed the case then we would have to concede that all the talk of cultural difference and deep pluralism is just that: talk. But if that is all that it is, then why do we continually fail to understand one another, fail to find non-violent or non-resentment begetting means for settling our differences? Why do some of us feel misunderstood? Not listened to? Why do some of us feel that others have not made an effort to speak to us in our language, rather than expecting us always to speak in theirs? These are the standard things we hear from minorities of various kinds, when they repeatedly find that in order to engage in public claims-making discourse they must state their claims in *our* claims-making language, and when they do that they find that there is something missing from their claims, and that they themselves have somehow gone missing, for they are not able to underwrite these

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[23] *Ibid.*, 35; my emphasis.

claims as their own. What they need and want to say seems to be unintelligible when expressed in the dominant claims-making language.

As I put it in my critical exchange with Nancy Fraser, we cannot simply take for granted the language in which democratic politics is conducted, as though there is one and one only legitimate language of public contestation. We cannot state *our* claims in a claim-making language if that language is not one in which our experiences of injustice can be appropriately voiced *as* our own. It is not just that dominant political language does not provide us with the right words with which to voice our experience of injustice; it is also that in speaking this language we risk rendering ourselves "speechless."[24]

There are many today who prefer to think of culture, language, religion, gender, and so many other markers of identity and difference as mere "superstructure" to the "base" of justice or political economy. Adherents of this view, whether they realize it or not, also presuppose the unity of reason, such that all intelligible and valid reasons have to be inter-translatable within one public language of reason. If on the other hand we take seriously the idea that to understand the other we must sometimes learn a new language, a new way of reasoning, a new way of living, then we have to give up the presumption of reason's inherent unity. Once we see that there can be no procedures that guarantee successful passage from one language to another, we may also see that we will sometimes be enjoined to learn the language of others if we are to learn *of* and *from* others, and, thereby, learn to live in peace with others even when, and especially when, we fundamentally disagree, and disagree in ways that remind us of the depth of human plurality and the irreducibility of reasonable disagreement.

Such language learning cannot take for granted that passageways already exist between the familiar language we already speak and the strange one we must learn, as though all we have to do is discover them. Rather, these passageways are created through the back and forth movement between the familiar and the strange, the old and the new. What does the work of opening up the passageways between languages is, on the one hand, certain practical abilities of

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[24] Nikolas Kompridis, "Struggling Over the Meaning of Recognition: A Matter of Identity, Justice, or Freedom," *European Journal of Political Theory*, vol. 6, no. 3 (2007). For a more recent account of this issue, in connection with J.M. Coetzee's fictional character, Elisabeth Costello, see Nikolas Kompridis, "Recognition and Receptivity: Forms of Normative Response in the Lives of the Animals We Are," *New Literary History*, vol. 144, no. 1, (2013): 1–24.

agents—not least important of which is a receptivity and openness
to the new and strange, and, on the other, the fact that no human
language is a closed semantic system (excluding formal and axiomat-
ic languages). Yes, we can pass from one language to another, now
and then, but that possibility does not underwrite the unity of rea-
son; rather, it points to the fact that under certain favourable and
often highly contingent conditions, we can learn from others—not
only something about them, but also about ourselves. There is noth-
ing, however, that can guarantee this kind of learning, and certainly
not any normative procedures. Since this kind of learning may chal-
lenge our very self-understanding and demand more of us than we
are typically inclined to give, it can be and often is, resisted or avoid-
ed.

For those such as Habermas who approach the so-called fact of
pluralism from the presumption of reason's procedural unity, it must
be the case that the "public" content of reasons given in one vocabu-
lary (cultural, religious, political, moral, etc.) must in principle be
translatable into another. The passage then is from an alien vocabu-
lary to our mother tongue, a process of translating the foreign into
the domestic, of domesticating the foreign. Thus, on this view, the
normative space of reasons, of public reason, the space in which we
move and negotiate our differences must be a unified and unifying
space—unified, because reasons are inter-translatable from one
language-game of reason-giving to another, and unifying, because of
the very act of translating reasons, incorporating them into the same
normative space of reasons which we purportedly share with every-
one else.

By contrast, when we begin from the presumption of disunity, we
may be more prepared and more inclined to recognize that some-
times translation is not enough. Beginning from this presumption
can make us more attuned and more responsive to the challenges of
living together under conditions of acknowledged pluralism. Let me
state the advantages of this presumption from a pragmatic, herme-
neutic, and an ethical perspective. Since we cannot decide the issue
of the unity or disunity of reason by recourse to logical proofs or
empirical evidence, from both a pragmatic and ethical perspective
we have two options from which to choose: we can choose to en-
counter others as persons whose speech we can eventually translate
into our own, or, as persons whose language we must eventually
learn if we and they are to understand one another. If we proceed
from the presumption of disunity I think it can be safely said that we
are far less likely to misunderstand (and mistranslate) others, and
because we are prepared to learn their language, we are far more

likely to earn their trust, thereby helping to create the conditions necessary for genuine cooperation.

Facing the same two options from a hermeneutic perspective, we should be able to see that proceeding from the presumption of disunity places a greater hermeneutic burden upon us, for we would be proceeding as though the intelligibility of the speech and action of others may depend on our ability to revise our sense-making practices and even our own self-understanding. Of course there is a question here of whether we should bear such a burden, particularly since it seems to be asymmetrical in relation to the other for whom this burden is borne. To answer in the affirmative would require taking an ethical perspective made possible by an unforced acknowledgement that in their encounter with us, others may be at risk from us, that we may be in a position of power which frames our interaction behind our backs, and that in demanding that the other justify his claims to us in a language not her own we may be intensifying existing asymmetries of power, rather than allowing them to be questioned from an unfamiliar and uncontrollable standpoint.

Let me make this point in another way. There are reasons whose intelligibility and cogency depends upon a particular "style of reasoning" (to use Ian Hacking's felicitous term); before we can understand and assess such reasons we have to learn to reason in that "style." "Understanding the sufficiently strange is a matter of recognizing new possibilities for truth-or-falsehood, and of learning how to conduct other styles of reasoning that bear on those new possibilities."[25] Thus we have to learn a new language-game of reason rather than presuming that ours is semantically, epistemically, and ontologically sufficient for making sense of the reasons of others who do not reason like us, who do not reason in our preferred, and already mastered, "styles of reasoning."

But coming to adopt a new way of speaking and acting necessarily involves a learning process that is neither familiar nor controllable: to engage in it means to be willing to relinquish mastery. Proceduralist reason remains captive to the very old belief that rationality is fundamentally connected to and aims at mastery: mastery over our circumstances, over contingency, over what we say and do. But what if we disconnect rationality from mastery? Could other practices of reason arise when we relinquish the desire for mastery? What I'm pointing to, and what it is I am hoping for is the cultivation of practices of reason that are made possible by our willingness to sacrifice

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[25] Ian Hacking, "Language, Truth, and Reason," in *Rationality and Relativism*, (ed.) Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982), 60.

mastery and control in order to learn new ways of speaking and acting through which to foster new ways of living together, particularly since the very possibility of living *together* now and in the future will require finding new ways of doing so. That means that the search for new ways of speaking and acting, and new ways for living together, possesses its own normativity, the normativity of the new.[26]

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[26] For more on this point, see my *Critique and Receptivity*.