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What is Missing:
Secular Reason Draws a Blank**

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**World Constitution and Parliament Association
India Chapter**

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In his short essay entitled “An Awareness of What is Missing,” published in a volume by that title along with commentary by a number of German Catholic thinkers, Habermas attempts to capture both the strengths of a post-metaphysical secular reason and its limitations. For him, the limitations of secular reason in this essay appear to encompass three dimensions implied in the awareness of what is missing. First, secular reason has nothing to say in the face of death (2010, 15). Second, secular reason cannot recognize the “sacred knowledge” (Heilswissen) that traditional religion recognized in the form of revelation (16-17). Third, the great advance of post-metaphysical secular reason, which has been able to articulate “the universalistic and egalitarian concepts of morality and law,” fails to awaken in its secular adherents a sense of solidarity and commitment to the ethical transformation directed toward the whole of the human situation (18-19).

With regard to death, Habermas was struck by the paradoxical quality of the memorial service of the agnostic Max Frisch in 1991. The service was held, on Frisch’s instructions, in St.

Peter's Church in Zurich but without a priest in attendance and in a ceremony in which "we let our nearest speak, and without an amen." The paradox here indicated to Habermas that our "enlightened modern age" has failed to find a suitable replacement for this rite de passage. He further finds from this that secular reason is "unsettled" by its "opaqueness" in relation to religion in which religion continues to "intrude into this modernity as the most awkward element from its past" (16).

Now Habermas' philosophy is a philosophy of human liberation. And his unique insights into the dynamics and possibilities of human liberation give his thought great significance for our time. His analysis of a "linguistically embodied reason" in communicative dialogue with others within community (our human situation in a post-metaphysical world) includes certain universalizable presuppositions that give rise to an "inner transcendence" that generates a "concept of liberation" for all humanity. These developments regarding the possibility of a human community has become a focal point for philosophy in our time. "The thought of such a community," he writes, "which would intertwine freedom and solidarity within the horizon of an undamaged intersubjectivity, has unfolded its explosive force even within philosophy" (2002,

132).

In this respect, human beings, now dealing with a reasoning power that is "both communicative and historically situated," have discovered the elements of the "inner transcendence" arising from our situation of being linguistically embodied reason. We understand, now, "the concept of subjective freedom and the demand for equal respect for all." We understand one another under the "concept of autonomy, of a self-binding of the will based on moral insight, which depends on relations of mutual recognition." This inner transcendence gives rise to the understanding of humans as "subjects [who] can only lead a life that is genuinely their own through sharing a common life with others." We come here upon a "concept of liberation – both as an emancipation from degrading conditions and as the utopian project of a harmonious form of life." (Ibid. 132-133)

Nevertheless, Habermas continues one page later, the liberating quest of philosophy faces great challenges – "a world flattened out by empiricism and rendered normatively mute" (134). Today's world, he continues, is infected by a relativism of paradigms or world pictures in which one is "worth as much as the next" ignoring the objectively real normative

dimension that philosophy has uncovered in the post-metaphysical world. Here we touch on the theme of “an awareness of what is missing” once again. In its quest for human liberation, how can philosophy deal with a world that is “flattened out and normatively mute”?

Are there depths and dimensions that philosophy is ignoring that might be necessary for an adequate concept of human liberation? My contention in this essay is that the “inner transcendence” revealed by discourse ethics requires an additional recognition of the non-cognitive depths that encompass our lives on every side. Without such recognition, our potential transforming and motivating power towards real human solidarity and planetary liberation can never be sufficiently activated, and human history will continue to drift helplessly toward disaster.

The concept of “inner transcendence” appear intended to exclude what might be called the “external transcendence” associated with traditional religious worldviews. Our liberation was thought to be dependent on this external transcendence thought of as God. However, God always had an immanent aspect in traditional religion, and this immanence was often thought to be directly encountered in

religious experience. Were these experiences all long merely subjective and illusory? Or were they indicators of something overwhelmingly public to our human existential situation that necessarily remained non-cognitive? The three elements of “what is missing” in this essay by Habermas, each point to the need for this additional non-cognitive aspect of the inner transcendence of our human situation.

Habermas appears to find the paradox in Max Frisch’s ceremony that took place in memory of his life and death in the lack of an appropriate rite de passage at the end of life. But where, in this account, is the sense of the monumental terror and awe of death as possibly the gigantic oblivion of not only life but meaning, reason, love, truth, and every possible intrinsic value that gives human life dignity and value? Where is the in-depth response to the awesome wonder of death created, for example, by D. H. Lawrence in his magnificent “Ship of Death” poems? Does secular reason only lack an appropriate rite de passage at the end of life, or has secular reason made us small and uncomprehending in the face of the monumental dimensions of a cosmos torn apart by an immense struggle of life and death? Or has secular reason reduced us to something like the “last man” of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra?

The earth has become small, and on it hops the last man, who makes everything small. His race is as ineradicable as the flea-beetle; the last man lives longest. 'We have invented happiness,' say the last men, and they blink. (1966, 17)

Something like this may be the consequence of a world "flattened out by empiricism and rendered normatively mute." But is the smallness of contemporary humanity entirely restored through a recognition of the inner transcendence implied by our universal linguistically embodied reason? Do we not need something universally available that has the potential for a much more radical transformative awakening? Do not the deeper existential conditions of human life give us this possibility from the very beginning?

Do we properly respond, when faced with the enormity of death and its mystery which includes within itself the entire gigantic wonder of the cosmos and life, that we lack the appropriate rite de passage? Do we encounter the fact of our own death in the death of others and then simply 'blink' as Nietzsche's last man might blink? At least Habermas does not claim that secular reason has invented happiness. To his credit, he continues to insist that something is missing. But what is missing here is certainly

not simply the theological self-understanding of the major world religions as the "most awkward" element from philosophy's past. What is missing appears to be a capacity for a response of our whole being before the magnificent depths of life, death, and existence. A world flattened out by empiricism and rendered normatively mute is a world in which our capacity for response to the enormity of life and profundity of existence also rendered mute.

One fundamental issue here involves the philosophical understanding of language that Ludwig Wittgenstein developed as his lifetime's gift to humanity. His early attempt to articulate a picture theory of language had already understood that there were dimensions of existence that could not be gotten into language, what he called in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* "the mystical" and "the ethical." However, Wittgenstein's great insight that there is no pictorial relation between language and world as expressed in his later thought involved profound implications for our understanding of religion and related attempts to deal with the depth dimension of human life. In his "Notes on Frazier's Golden Bough" and other writings, Wittgenstein shows that religious statements must be now understood not as metaphysical propositions purporting to correspond to

ultimate realities but as responses to the unsayable depths and mystery of our human situation.

How does secular reason, as articulated by Habermas, deal with the absolute mysteries of life, death, and existence? It cannot. For one cannot raise any “validity claims” in a spirit of communicative discourse concerning these incomprehensible depths penetrating our human existential situation. There are dimensions that confront us, vital to being a responsive, fully alive, and complete human being, that cannot be rendered in propositional form within discourse directed toward mutual understanding.

Unless we can generate a response from the very depths of our being, unless we can turn authentically to poetry, song, art, music, theater, and ritual in a response transcending but not negating secular reason, we will forever simply draw a blank before the absolute incomprehensibility of death. Habermas is aware that something is missing, but he simply appears to draw a blank, unwilling to access the immeasurable depths that lie within us that might confront the mystery and majesty of death in a dignified and convincing manner. By contrast, American philosopher H.G. Bugbee

writes:

Our experience of the world involves us in a mystery which can be intelligible to us only as a mystery. The more we experience things in depth, the more we participate in a mystery intelligible to us only as such; and the more we understand our world to be an unknown world. Our true home is wilderness, even the world of every day. (1961, 154-55)

Nevertheless, for Bugbee, this experience of the mystery and unsayability of “the world of every day” is not an extraordinary state of consciousness that may be encountered by rare persons sometimes known as “mystics.” It is part and parcel of ordinary consciousness when that consciousness bridges the subject-object gap and becomes directly aware of its surroundings. This condition is already there in all of us, although some, when confronted by the multiplicity of responses made by directly aware people throughout all cultures and centuries, simply draw a blank. As Carmody and Carmody write in their book, *Mysticism. Holiness East and West*, “we are saying that the core of the experience, what the mystics stresses when describing the moment, is a vivid presence of ultimate reality (however named) that makes any intermediary transparent and secondary” (1996, 12).

Now linguistically embodied reason living in a post-metaphysical age does not wish to speak of “ultimate reality,” and, indeed, there is no necessity to do so. Many who have pointed to this dimension, whether Wittgenstein or Bugbee or Jiddu Krishnamuriti, have left it unnamed, as a pristine awareness that is nevertheless transformative of our lives and our attitudes. The non-cognitive encounter with the “vivid presence” at the heart of everyday experience need not be named. It need not be called “ultimate reality” nor rendered in any terms metaphysical or symbolic. Nevertheless, without recognition of our ultimate home as the astonishing “mystery” of existence, our experience will continue to be dominated by a world flattened out by empiricism and rendered normatively mute.

This reflection on the mystery of ordinary existence leads to the second aspect of what Habermas finds missing once “the synthesis of faith and knowledge forged in the tradition extending from Augustine to Thomas fell apart” (2010, 16): the problem of “sacred knowledge.” Today, he says, “the cleavage between secular knowledge and revealed knowledge cannot be bridged.” However, even in the great age of union between faith and knowledge many thinkers

understood that revealed knowledge could not be reduced to simply propositions of faith as stated in the Christian creeds (often assumed to correlate with metaphysical realities). Unlike modern fundamentalism that Habermas rightly finds so problematic later in his essay, traditional theologians often understood the revealed propositions of scripture and the creeds as a symbolization of aspects of our human situation in relation to God.

For those who experienced what the Church recognized as direct, personal revelation (the mystics), this step to understanding the symbolic nature of the propositions of faith was an easy one. But Habermas appears to see theology as a form of representational thinking attempting to describe reality in the mode of true or false propositions. Like Wittgenstein, he has gone beyond metaphysics, but, unlike Wittgenstein, he fails to reinterpret the religious tradition in the light of our contemporary understanding that language, as intrinsically conventional and unable to mirror any supposed ontological realities, does not and cannot represent the depths that encompass our lives. What the tradition was doing all along in many ways was responding symbolically to the awesome depths of existence. There never was any such thing as “revealed propositional knowledge” apart from

claims generated through naïve, fundamentalist, anthropomorphically conceived conceptions of God and the world.

This is precisely why the great tradition in apophatic theology developed from Dionysios the Areopagite to Meister Eckhart to Nicholas of Cusa. It was understood that language cannot express or describe God or God's relation to the world. Indeed, neither can language describe the world in its unsayable aspect. For Meister Eckhart, the entire scripture constitutes a set of symbolic accounts describing our relation to God and the depths of existence in the here and now, and even the word "God" is merely a name for something nameless (1994, 115). In each case, it is the unsayability of the depths that confront us in the here and now that these thinkers encounter and that illuminates the meaning of "revelation" for them. This is also precisely the *De Docta Ignorantia* of Nicholas of Cusa.

Indeed, any standard concordance of the Bible will reveal that the words for "faith" in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the Christian New Testament do not indicate any sort of "sacred knowledge" or set of propositions that must be believed. The Hebrew word for faith (*emunah*) has the connotations of "firmness" as well as

'security, fidelity, faithfulness, truly, and truth.' Clearly, what is meant by God's demand for faith in the Hebrew scriptures is a relationship on the analogy with a relationship between friends, members of a family, or husband and wife. This notion of faith may or may not correlate with awareness of the nameless "ultimate reality." But it clearly does not indicate a set of metaphysical propositions to be believed.

Something quite similar is true of the Greek word for faith in the New Testament (*pistos* and its variations). In the tradition initiated by Plato, *pistos* implied mere belief in certain propositions as opposed to *episteme* or genuine knowledge that could justify its beliefs before the court of reason. But its use by Jesus and others as rendered in the Greek New Testament, the Concordance reveals, implied meanings such as 'trustworthiness, faithfulness, surety, and true.' Again, faith is not belief in certain unverifiable propositions, but a living relationship to the ground of being, God: being true to a relationship or an awareness. The direct awareness of Jesus as expressed within the Gospel texts appears transparent to those, like Meister Eckhart or Nicholas Berdyaev, who themselves live from this direct awareness. They understand faith as being true to the depths revealed within our everyday lives, depths that can be called "God"

but need not be named at all.

Habermas claims the cleavage between secular knowledge (using post-metaphysical reason and the methods of the sciences) and revealed knowledge is unbridgeable, but he appears to mean by this that we cannot accept the propositions found in scripture or Church creeds as genuine knowledge because they cannot be falsified or rationally established by the methods of secular reasoning. He opposes the propositions of faith to the verified and critically examined propositions of secular knowledge. However, this is a category mistake, even though some classical theologians may have made the same mistake. If the propositions of faith were most fundamentally theological expressions of a response of our whole being to the pristine depths and mystery of our existence (God), then what theology was doing does not properly fit into the model of propositions claiming to objectively assess the structures of existence. Clearly, such apophatic thinkers as Dionysios the Areopagite, Meister Eckhart, and Nicholas of Cusa saw beyond this mistake.

There is indeed an unbridgeable cleavage, but one that does not involve the category mistake of placing classical theological discourse on the same conceptual plane as secular knowledge.

This is the cleavage between the sayable (the province of science and secular reason) and the unsayable (the depths of existence encountered on every side and that can be revealed to us, for example, through an authentic awareness of death). Habermas, who has read Karl Jaspers, as well as Wittgenstein and Emmanuel Levinas, simply appears to draw a blank with passages in all three of these thinkers similar to this statement by Jaspers:

The world and everything that occurs in it is a mystery. The crudeness of finding everything to be self-evident through force of habit and the mania for mystery to the point of the sensational and the superstitious must disappear where genuine astonishment begins. Philosophy illuminates the mystery and brings it completely into consciousness. It begins with astonishment and increases the astonishment.... Then the world as a whole and in every individual feature shows infinite depth. This mystery is quiet; in flaring up it becomes revealed in an unfoldment. And this mystery is essential; in it Being Itself speaks. (1959, 37)

Yet this is precisely the key to the concept of revelation and the reframing of religion from a pre-secular attempt to provide knowledge of the metaphysical structure of things to a

human phenomena enlivened and informed by a deep and fundamental response to the depths and mystery of our human situation. It is the mystics of all religions that have been the life-blood and creative inspiration of the theological activity, from Jesus to Buddha to Sri Aurobindo. But just as Habermas is concerned about the “violations of solidarity” throughout the world in a progressive barbarization submerging the potential of secular reason, so Berdyaev shares a similar concern. Yet Berdyaev sees that mysticism is the essence of religion and that it creatively opens us to the depths of the world beyond reason in such a way that points to our potential for real transformation, for establishing the Kingdom of God on Earth:

We hope that every creative, transfiguring attitude toward life will pass from the world into the church. Only in the church can the image of the human being and his freedom be preserved and revealed; both his image and his freedom are being annihilated by processes taking place in the world. In a godless civilization the image of the human being and the freedom of the spirit will perish and creativity will dry up; already a barbarization is beginning. (1981, 133)

For Berdyaev, our human creativity draws upon energies that flow out of the depths of our

being. It encompasses the mysterious origins of philosophical thought, of love, of the awareness of being, mysticism, and of the experience of union with the ground of being.

Creativity is a spiritual action in which a person forgets about himself, moves outside of himself in the creative act, absorbed by his task. In creativity the human being experiences a state of extraordinary ascent of his whole being. Creativity is always a shock in which the ordinary egoism of human life is overcome. (Ibid. 131)

As liberating as the great discoveries of Habermas have been, as important as his discovery of the presuppositions of ordinary discourse have been, Habermas appears to have gotten himself into a dilemma due to his reductionist conception of a human being and human life. Through us flows a creative aspect of the depths of being, and human life, to be full and complete, needs to express that creative impulse in mysticism, prayer, song, and praise. Contemporary science (not religion but science) is beginning to discover these perennial truths. Contemporary physicist and philosophical interpreter of science, Henry Stapp, explains it thus:

This classical view of man and nature is still promulgated in the name of science. Thus, science is seen as demanding a perception of man as nothing more than a local cog in a mechanical universe, unconnected to any creative aspect of nature. For, according to the classical picture, every creative aspect of nature exhausted itself during the first instant....

In the Heisenberg ontology, the real world of classical physics is transformed into a world of potentialities, which condition, but do not control, the world of actual events. These events or acts create the actual form of the evolving universe by deciding between the possibilities created by the evolving potentialities. These creative acts stand outside space-time and presumably create all space-time relationships. Human mental acts belong to this world of creative acts, but do not exhaust it. (1988, 56-57)

Science is beginning to discover the depths of existence insofar as these can be pointed to through discursive language. Human mental acts may well tap into the ground of being itself. The hidden, metaphysically tainted “naturalism” of Habermas’ thought that the present writer critiqued in Chapter Eight of *Ascent to Freedom* (2008) remains an impediment to addressing the “awareness of what is missing.”

In this respect, Habermas appears as a thinker inheriting, to a certain extent, the outmoded intellectual baggage of the early-modern scientific paradigm that is now in the process of being superseded. For Christian thinker Paul Tillich, this intellectual baggage involves “the concentration of man’s activities upon methodological investigation and technical transformation of his world, including himself, and the consequent loss of the dimension of depth in his encounter with reality” (1987, 104). It is a world “flattened out by empiricism and rendered normatively mute.”

For not only has Habermas generated a radical disjunction between secular reason and “sacred knowledge,” he has inadvertently generated a naturalistic reduction of the world into a secularized universe. What he calls his “methodological atheism” (2010, 129) should be rephrased as a “methodological agnosticism.” The atheistic denial of something may cut off an openness to the non-cognitive depths that are often experienced as sacred. Secular reason is encompassed on every side by the illimitable depths of the mystery that, when encountered in its existential depths, may well be experienced as divine.

The secular, as Tillich points out, is a sub-

category within the sacred (Ibid. 102). There is no dualism, only a whole encompassing us within its depths. As Indian born sage Jiddu Krishnamurti points out, direct awareness of the unsayable depths of things is the most ordinary of everyday experiences if we allow it to happen:

This knowing is beyond the word for the word is not the thing. The freedom from the known, every minute, is the essence of intelligence. It is this intelligence that is in operation in the universe if you leave it alone. You are destroying the sacredness of order through ignorance of yourself. (1982, 81-82)

The problem is not with secular reason in itself, to be sure. The problem is that secular reason refuses to recognize the depths and dimensions of the life within which it is embedded. Reducing knowledge to what can be discursively examined is one thing. Suggesting that reality is reducible to what can be discursively examined is quite another. The latter constitutes a tremendous mistake that diminishes our potential for human liberation.

From Habermas' point of view, secular reason demands that religion justify its claims to sacred knowledge before the pluralist,

dialogically founded, court of secular reason. He fails to recognize that the deepest heart of religion never involved claims to metaphysical knowledge of ontological realities. The heart of religion always involved the responsiveness of its great prophets and mystics to the depths of existence, a responsiveness expressed not only in putative cognitive propositions but in story, prayer, song, music, pilgrimages, poetry, art, drama, ritual, celebration, and praise.

This brings us to the third aspect of "an awareness of what is missing" according to Habermas. Secular reason, although able to articulate the fundamental procedural principles of equality and justice in human civilization, appears unable to generate a collective, species-wide motivation to actualize these principles. Reason can recognize that violating another's procedural equality and right to speak constitutes a "performative contradiction." But such recognition does not supply sufficient motivation to transform oneself or society on the principles of justice and human well-being.

Habermas recognizes that this situation "cries out to heaven" for a solution that hearkens back to the kind of motivating power and collective solidarity that traditional religions were able to generate around religious visions, and to which

today's contemporary religious revivals continue to point (19). However, instead of considering the energy arising from the depths of our being that authentic religion has traditionally been able to call upon, his essay launches into a critique of contemporary fundamentalism and the ways in which this excludes secular reason and, with it, the very legitimation of constitutional democracy (20).

As serious as this concern with fundamentalism may be, Habermas fails to recognize that the cosmic and human solidarity arising from authentic religious experience comes from the responsiveness of the whole human being to the depths and mystery of existence. The wholeness of our human life appears truncated in his thought and human beings become bifurcated between a limited secular reasoning power and a collective irrational dimension that includes everything else—including our relation to the mystery and depths of existence, to death, to the fullness of life, to creativity, and to God.

Secular reason does indeed need to stick to its guns in the sense of its insight into the universal structures of language from which emerge the foundations of constitutional democracy, freedom, recognition of human rights, and the elements of procedural justice for all human

beings. It must never abandon this insight. But to reduce what is great, deep, and mysterious about a human being to secular reason, and its “inner transcendence,” to demand that the authentic mystical and religious awareness attempt to turn the unsayable depths into propositions that can be debated with secular reason, is to abandon the tremendous hope for transformation and fulfillment around which the great religions have always revolved.

This great hope is not necessarily tied to what Habermas refers to as “religious worldviews.” It has been translated into secular philosophical language by profound modern thinkers such as Ernst Bloch (1970; 2002) and Japanese thinker Nishida Kitaro. Kitaro writes:

Religion is often called mystical. But when I speak of religion, I do not refer to a special kind of consciousness. “There is no mysterious power in the true Dharma” – the mystical has no use at all in our practical lives. Were religion some special consciousness of privileged persons it would merely be a matter of idle men. “The true Way cannot exist apart even for an instant; what can do so is not the true Way.” Again, “When we run, we are on the true Way; when we stumble and fall, we are still on it.” Religion is not apart from common experience. (1987, 115)

Our common experience includes ever so much more than reason. And reason is not limited to the dialogical discourse mode articulated by Habermas. Reason must enlarge its self-conception to embrace the depths of existence, not by giving up its dialogical core, but by expanding to include, in dialectical tension, the depths of existence and of human life. This is what is done, for example, in the work of Nicholas of Cusa.

There can be no fulfillment of our human destiny, no kingdom of God on Earth, and no Kantian kingdom of ends in themselves, until those transformative creative energies flow into our lives from the unsayable depths. Habermas' tremendous insight into the linguistically embodied structures of communicative reason is necessary but not sufficient for human liberation. It refuses recognition of the non-cognitive depths of our existential situation, which are not in the slightest "irrational" but rather simply transcendent of our limited, finite rationality (non-rational).

This is what is missing in our modern "post-secular" age. It is missing in both apparently religious people and within so-called "methodological atheists." This awareness does

not require that human beings embrace the "worldview" of any religion. If we are looking for the source of human solidarity that will bring a kingdom of peace with justice to the Earth, we can find it within our everyday awareness as soon as we drop our egoistic opposition to the depths in which we are immersed. Only in this way will human beings be capable of truly transforming their lives, while simultaneously binding the human community together in unbreakable solidarity.

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