Article

Knowledge, progress and the knowledge of progress

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Abstract

Modern societies, and the modern knowledge that was seen to be both an emblem and a precipitating cause of their modernity, have long been seen as marking a great historical advance. Modernity, we have been assured, by the social sciences in general and sociology in particular, is not only different from premodernity and contemporary nonmodern societies, these differences are also signs of intellectual, moral and material progress. In recent times, however, there have been a chorus of criticisms of the core presumptions that undergird modern knowledge. Such criticisms are sufficiently widespread and intellectually serious that the superiority and universality of modern western Reason, which could previously be taken for granted, now have to be argued for. Such defences of the universality of modern knowledge invariably draw on Kant and/or Hegel, as in the case of the two contemporary defenders of modern western knowledge, Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas, whose arguments this article will outline and evaluate. It argues that neither convincingly shows that there are transhistorical and transcultural standards by which we can uphold the superiority and universality of modern knowledge, and concludes that there are no grounds to cleave to the idea of 'progress'.

The narratives of progress that came to dominate and to shape Europe from about the eighteenth century onwards have a curious character. The claim that progress has occurred is a knowledge claim; but the knowledge through which this claim issues serves not only as the instrument via which 'progress' is detected and affirmed, but also doubles up as a cause and emblem of that progress. This is because modern knowledge is at once seen to mark an advance over the medieval and Renaissance knowledges that it supplanted; and also, and relatedly, as playing a crucial role in enabling the moral, material and techno-logical progress that distinguishes modernity from its historical predecessors. What might

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otherwise appear as a circular argument or even as a conjuring trick 'works', to the degree that it works, because this knowledge – modern, western knowledge as I call it, here as elsewhere (Seth, 2007, 2013a, 2020) – is regarded as having transcended its temporal and geocultural origins in the modern West, such that it is 'universal'. It is necessary that this knowledge be seen as universal rather than as merely the knowledge culture of modern Europeans, else its certification that progress has occurred would simply be modern western culture's affirmation of its modes of social organization, now characterized as both different and 'better' than the forms of social organization of others.

This claim to universality was largely accepted for a long historical period, and served to affirm and underpin narratives of progress. As modern western knowledge travelled to new domains in the wake of gunboats, slaveboats, conquest and trade, for many Europeans the fact that they were the conquerors and colonizers, rather than the conquered and colonized, provided irrefutable proof that 'European modes of thought and social organization corresponded much more closely to the underlying realities of the universe than did those of any other people or society, past or present' (Adas, 1989, p. 7). Asking themselves why European military organization, technology and statecraft was superior to their own, non-western elites frequently concurred. Reformers and nationalists began to urge that the knowledge of the foreigner be adopted and disseminated amongst their own peoples, in order that they may avoid being colonized, or emancipate themselves from colonial rule and join the ranks of sovereign, powerful and prosperous nations. These nationalist elites neither accepted European claims to superiority in all areas, nor did they seek to become mirror images of their rulers. As Partha Chatterjee has powerfully and influentially argued, the anti-colonial nationalist project was one to become modern-yet-different, and 'culture' became an increasingly common term for thinking and designating the difference that was to be 'preserved' even as it was being constituted and defined (Chatterjee, 1986, 1993; see also Seth, 2013b). Thus in nineteenth century China, reformers urging changes that would allow China to resist western depredations made a distinction between 'essence' and 'utility' (*ti-yong)*; Chinese essence was to be preserved, while knowledges and practices from the West needed to be learned and freely borrowed. The elites who led the Meiji Restoration and implemented a state agenda to 'modernize' Japan, so that it could avoid the fate of India or China, adopted the slogan of *wakan yôsai* (Japanese spirit, western technique), a similar endeavour to acquire western knowledges and techniques precisely as a means to preserve that which was deemed to be at the very heart of Japanese identity. In colonial India most nationalists embraced western knowledge and schooling, while urging that this education be a 'national' education, delivered in the Indian vernaculars rather than in English, such that they inculcated Indian culture and patriotism: as one of their number put it, 'We do not want to be English or German or American or Japanese . . . we want to be Indians, but modern, up-to-date, progressive Indians' (Rai, 1920, p. 75).

The tension between imitation and appropriation, on the one hand, and the assertion of national/cultural difference, on the other, was usually navigated by treating the knowledge in question as western and modern only in origin, but as otherwise 'unmarked'. That modern knowledge first emerged in the West was treated as a matter of mere historical contingency, for this knowledge, it was claimed, was not intrinsically or essentially western. Indeed, in proportion as the colonizer sometimes asserted that their knowledge

was intimately tied to uniquely Occidental cultural traits, and was thus intrinsically and not accidentally European, colonized elites insisted all the more stridently that this knowledge belonged to no one and thus to everyone. Embraced and championed by nationalists during the period of colonial rule, once the colonizer was expelled, postcolonial states sought, with varying degrees of success, to disseminate the new knowledge amongst their peoples through schools and universities, and to utilize it to govern their peoples. The globalization of modern western knowledge was thus the joint outcome of the actions of the colonizer, of nationalist elites, and of postcolonial nation-building.

In recent decades, however, both the notion of progress, and the assumed truth and universality of the knowledge that is the measure of progress and one of its causes, have come under sustained challenge from diverse quarters. Today there are many who are deeply sceptical that modern knowledge transcends its time and its place, and its imbrication in power relations; and who suggest instead that far from being universal, it is in fact, and variously, male/patriarchal, heteronormative, or western.[1] Criticism along these lines is sufficiently widespread and influential that the superiority and universality of modern western knowledge, which previously was taken for granted, now has to be argued for and defended. Those who would still defend it, in the words of one of their number, have come to acknowledge 'the intrinsic *impurity* of what we call "reason"' (McCarthy, 1994, p. 8), and to recognize that '"Pure" reason has had to make fundamental and lasting concessions to the impurities of language and culture, temporality and history, practice and interest, body and desire' (McCarthy, 1999, p. 168). That being so, the challenge they face, in the words of Jürgen Habermas, is to acknowledge that 'there is no such thing as a context-transcending reason', whilst at the same time avoiding 'the false conclusion that the criteria of reason themselves change with every new context' (Habermas, 2001a, pp. 148–149).

There is a historical-intellectual precedent to such a refutation of (a different kind of) scepticism; I am referring here to the philosophy of Kant. Kant responded to the scepticism of his time not by 'dogmatically' asserting certain propositions to be true, or by seeking to identify, on empirical grounds, a set of rational principles common to all humans, but by asking instead what sort of conditions had to be satisfied for cognitions and perceptions to occur at all. His answer deduced universal categories of Reason which were not derived from human experience (which was acknowledged to be varied), but were the grounds for our having any experience in the first place. This 'transcendental' move yielded a powerful argument for a Reason that was universal, because notwithstanding the immense variety of human experience, moralities and notions of beauty, it was the precondition for humans having *any* sort of experience, morality or conception of beauty in the first place (Allison, 1983). Modern knowledge, as elaborated and defended by Kant, could now stake a claim to having discovered and defined rational principles which had of necessity to be presupposed, and which were independent of social, cultural and historical particularities. This argument was not without its problems, but it is testimony to the vitality of the line of argument initiated by Kant that many of the most sophisticated contemporary attempts to salvage or retrieve the idea of a singular and universal Reason, while acknowledging that Reason is of this world, do so by returning to Kant. It is usually a Kant stripped of much of the metaphysics, but some version or other of a transcendental argument has been the chief resource for contemporary

defenders of Reason, including John Rawls, Karl-Otto Apel, Hilary Putnam and Rainer Forst, who in different ways seek to show that there are inescapable presuppositions of thought and of argumentation that are, therefore, universal and 'true'.

Recognising that Kantian-derived arguments are insufficient, some of the defenders of modern knowledge and 'progress', such as Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth, additionally draw upon Hegel. Working with the tradition begun by Kant, Hegel's strategy for overcoming Kant's aporia was to acknowledge that there is no knockdown transcendental argument that will establish the truth of certain categories once and for all; there are only the categories through which historical communities know their world and organize their place in it. However, though the standards of modern morality are specific to modernity, modernity is itself an expression, and a higher working out, of a rationality immanent in social institutions, the most basic content of which is autonomy and free self-determination. Collective life always rests upon shared conceptions of what constitutes and legitimates the institutions of society, but these invariably present themselves as 'givens', as norms and conceptions that are a limit upon, rather than products of, human making. Social institutions and ways of life break down because these conceptions come into contradiction with the social forms with which they are associated, and the resolution of this crisis advances to the next logical/historical stage. There is teleology or progress in all this, inasmuch as each breakdown and reconstitution progresses to a 'higher' level, one where the autonomy of subjectivity/spirit is more fully (if still only partially) recognized, and comes to underlie social institutions and practices. Modernity most fully 'realizes' or lives out and instantiates the autonomy which is presupposed by all collective life; modernity's self-understanding is the self-consciousness of this fact, and this is what makes it superior to other forms of knowledge. This argument treats modernity as a privileged historical moment and a privileged site, one where the facts and processes that have always governed human history finally became discernible, and reveal what has always been true but could not be fully grasped till now. Reason and its discovery are here historicized, and Reason, though universal, only becomes available with the advent of the modern (Kolb, 1986; Pippin, 1991, 1997) .

If such Kant-based or Hegel-influenced arguments are persuasive, it would follow that contemporary challenges to a singular and universal Reason, and to the narrative of progress it underwrites, can be refuted – or at least, accommodated and neutralized. Engaging with Apel's Kantian derived defence of modern knowledge and progress, and at greater length, with Habermas's Hegelian inspired and historicist defence of a singular and universal Reason, I argue that their intellectual sophistication notwithstanding, these defences are not persuasive; and that therefore we must dispense with the idea of 'progress' which they underwrite.

Apel and discourse ethics

The work of the eminent philosopher and social theorist Karl-Otto Apel (1922–2017) seeks to show that, even after we recognize that what is regarded as moral or ethical is always shaped by historical and cultural differences, we still find that there is a universal core beneath all the differences. This is to be found not in some area of overlap, as in a Venn diagram, but rather in certain formal conditions that must be present (and actively

or tacitly accepted by all parties) for conversation, including disagreement, to occur at all. Though 'formal' rather than substantive, these unavoidable and shared rules have broader implications that can be shown to derive from the formal requirements. The structure of the argument is indebted to Kant, and Apel describes his efforts at being directed at a 'transcendental-pragmatic transformation of Kantian ethics', designed to take into account (as Kant did not) the historical and cultural 'dependency' of all concrete forms of morality, but 'without giving up the moral universalism of Kantian provenance and falling a victim to historical-relativism' (Apel, 2001, p. 50).[2] Apel additionally seeks to show that these transcendentally derived rules have important real-world implications, providing guidelines for what are and are not morally and politically acceptable positions on a range of important and controversial issues.

It is true, Apel acknowledges, that we always reason out of specific contexts and communities, and thus that our reasoning is always grounded in the historical and cultural presuppositions of determinate lifeworlds. Nonetheless, all public argumentation, because it makes validity/truth/rightness claims for which acceptance is sought from others, also has a transcendental horizon in addition to its historical one; each 'real' communication community presupposes an 'ideal communication community'. Any validity claim, irrespective of its historically and culturally specific content, also has a form that is not historically contingent, because it is a transcendental feature of argument as such. The very performance of moral argumentation thus has certain necessary and inescapable presuppositions built into it, and these provide us with a context-independent standard by which to judge whether a specific claim comes into contradiction with the necessary entailments of making a validity claim. The 'undeniable presuppositions of arguing', as Apel describes them (2000, p. 145), are: any effort to argue and persuade cannot legitimately exercise coercion, or make use of authority; everyone has an equal right to participate in debate and present an argument; and the consensus of everyone who is potentially affected (and not only the active parties in a debate) must be sought. These are the 'a priori' presuppositions that ground all public argument and disagreement, and they cannot be denied without 'performative self-contradiction'. Apel's discourse ethics arrives, in his words, at 'an equivalent to Kant's universalization principle of the "categorical imperative"', providing us with 'an ideal yardstick of a possible examination of all rightness claims,' (Apel, 2001, pp. 59, 72). This can then be drawn upon to provide us with guidelines for arriving at rational and incontrovertible (hence universal) moral judgements on contemporary political issues, including multiculturalism, globalization and international law (see Apel, 1999, 2000, 2007).

According to Apel, what is moral is something that is always the subject of intersubjective argument and agreement, rather than (as for Kant) a question a solitary consciousness poses to itself. This means that moral arguments are always embedded in, and shaped by, historical circumstances and cultural presumptions. But what seems to be a problem for universalist claims also provides the solution to that problem: for in arguing about what is moral, in inevitably particularistic ways, we also and inescapably invoke (now thinking with Kant) the transcendental presuppositions of any and *all* discourse. Reflection upon these allows us to see that whatever the merits or otherwise of the moral issue in question, there are certain parameters, part substantive and part procedural, that we simply cannot deny without 'performative self-contradiction', the knockout phrase at

the heart of his argument, and one that Apel repeats again and again. These inescapable and hence universal presuppositions of argument cannot be rationally denied because 'the very attempt to do so brings them into play' (Apel, 1992, p. 140), thereby unwittingly affirming the universal presuppositions underlying argumentation in general.

This 'transcendental-pragmatic' reformulation of Kant is ingenious, but the problems with it are also numerous. Apel seeks to preserve the force of Kant's transcendental argument while making it intersubjective, social and historical. But once (self-)consciousness is replaced by discourse – that is, once the point of departure is not an abstract consciousness but intersubjectivity – attempts at finding a 'form' or 'procedure' that is implicit in every context (and is thus context independent or transcending) will in fact always, wittingly or unwittingly, make presumptions that are not 'merely' formal, procedural or minimal. As Alasdair MacIntyre points out, Kant himself addressed a very specific reading public, 'with its own stock of shared assumptions, expectations and focus of attention'; and as with Kant's public, so with others: 'What is regarded as obvious or taken for granted, what is treated as problematic, which considerations have more weight and which less, which rhetorical modes are acceptable and which not, vary from reading public to reading public' (MacIntyre, 1999, p. 248). That is, what counts as an argument, who the legitimate participants in public argumentation are (everyone? only those over 18? only men? only community elders?), what form a valid argument must take, and so on, will vary according to time and place. The claim that truth or validity claims necessarily entail the free, equal and uncoerced participation of all affected is the presupposition of discourse only in liberal communities, not a feature of discourse as such. As Michael Walzer notes of theories that seek to abstract form from content, or procedure from substance, 'The procedural minimum turns out to be rather more than minimal. . . . The [procedural] rules of engagement constitute in fact a way of life . . . the minimal morality prescribed by these theories is simply abstracted from, and not very far from, contemporary democratic culture' (Walzer, 1994, pp. 12–13).

The 'knockdown' character and the polemical force of Apel's argument derives from the claim that the presumptions underlying public argumentation cannot be denied without self-refutation; to dispute these presumptions is unwittingly to affirm them. But it does not take too much imagination to think of communities possessed of conceptual traditions and idioms in which the act of assertion does not posit that all members are party to the debate, and in which the rules by which debate is conducted and resolved are not those of a liberal democratic culture. Such communities exist – that is precisely why debates over universalism occur, else they would be redundant. If the aim is to persuade those who do not already reason out of our conceptual tradition, then smuggling in presuppositions that are necessarily those of historically particular communities, while claiming 'unavoidable' or 'inescapable' status for them, is far from convincing. As Barbara Herrnstein Smith pithily puts it, the 're-grounding of transcendental rationalism centers on the demonstration of the inescapable necessity of (its conception of) reason as validated by the exposure of the inescapable performative contradiction of anyone denying it'; but as the argument depends 'on the prior acceptance of just the system of ideas, claims and definitions at issue . . . the supposed re-grounding is thoroughly circular' (1997, p. 118). A transcendental argument 'works', if at all, with a solitary and abstract consciousness. Once it is made intersubjective and empirical, as in Apel's case,

transcendental arguments become circular, assuming what they are meant to 'ground', and thus cannot 'rescue' the universality of Reason and the belief in progress from contemporary critiques.

If an intellectual strategy indebted to Kant fails to 'rescue' Reason from the now common criticism that what is illegitimately claimed to be 'universal' Reason is in fact always someone's reason – that it is male, or heteronormative or western – then perhaps a strategy that draws upon Hegelian historicism will fare better?

Habermas and 'Occidental rationalism'

Heir to the Frankfurt School of critical theory, and thus to a tradition of thinking in which Kant, Hegel, Weber and Marx loom large, Habermas has been engaged in a project – one pursued with remarkable consistency over many decades – that seeks to show that post-Enlightenment knowledge marks an advance over all knowledges that preceded it, while denying that the dominance of instrumental rationality and a disastrous 'dialectic of Enlightenment' is an inevitable correlate of Reason. Related to this, Habermas grants that there is no context-independent knowledge, while denying that this leads to the conclusion that all knowledges are creatures of their time and place. Habermas agrees that it is necessary to historicize and thus 'detranscendentalize' Reason, but the question, as he poses it, is 'whether the traces of a transcending reason vanish in the sands of historicism and contextualism or whether a reason embodied in historical contexts preserves the power of immanent transcendence' (Habermas, 2008, p. 25). As the rhetorical nature of the question indicates, Habermas thinks that Reason can be historicized and yet transcend its historical contexts, and provide an immanent basis for criticism and emancipation. He seeks to show that modern Occidental knowledge is of this type; that is, it transcends its contexts and is universal, and as such, that it both embodies progress (vis-a-vis earlier knowledges), and that its affirmation that modern times are marked by cognitive and social progress can be taken as objective and authoritative.

Habermas co-produced, with Apel, the claim that discourse necessarily and inescapably involves context-transcending presumptions that cannot be denied without self-contradiction, and he continues to advance this claim in subsequent works. However he also came to recognize that it is not possible to extrapolate from discourse theory to 'ground' or legitimate institutions and practices (Habermas, 1990a, pp. 85–86; 1990b), and thus that 'discourse ethics' cannot, by itself, provide a compelling justification for the truth and universality of modern knowledge. He further acknowledges that since discourse is always embedded in institutions and practices, any Kantian defence of Reason must also be a defence of the modernity within which it is enmeshed (Habermas, 1996). Habermas's defence of modern knowledge and of progress is thus indebted to Kant, but he additionally draws upon Hegel. In McCarthy's characterization of his project, Habermas wants to deploy 'Kant's claim that there are universal and unavoidable presuppositions of theoretical and practical reason', but 'he also wants, thinking now more with Hegel, to present a reconstructed conception of the Bildungsprozesse, the self-formative process of the individual and the species that have rational autonomy as their telos – a kind of systematic history of reason' (McCarthy, 1982, p. 59). Habermas seeks a defence of modern knowledge that is also a defence of modernity, and one that very

explicitly and unapologetically seeks, in his words, to connect 'a claim to *universality* with our *Occidental understanding of the world*' (Habermas, 1984, p. 44). Such an Occidental understanding is not merely one of many traditions of reasoning, as is suggested by 'contextualists', who 'maintain that the transition to post-metaphysical concepts of nature, to post-traditional ideas of law and morality [i.e. to what I have been calling modern, western knowledge], only characterizes one tradition amongst others'; against this, Habermas declares in an interview, 'I don't see how this thesis can be seriously defended. I think that Max Weber was right . . . [about] the general cultural significance of Western rationalism' (Habermas, 1992, p. 254). Whereas Apel's work seeks to show that modern knowledge is true and universal *even* though it first arose in the West, Habermas argues that this knowledge is rational and universal *because*, not despite the fact that, it is modern and western.

Why should we privilege modern western knowledge? Habermas suggests that it is possible to 'reconstruct the empirical succession of worldviews as a series of steps in learning', and that such a history displays 'an internally reconstructible growth of knowledge' (Habermas, 1984, pp. 67, 66). Habermas provides such a reconstruction, by means of a contrast between the mythical worldview of non-moderns (specifically, the 'savages' studied by anthropologists) and modern knowledge, and concludes that the most striking feature of savage, mythological thought is that it is 'totalizing', relating everything to everything else; and that as a consequence it is marked by a 'confusion between nature and culture', and between 'culture and internal nature or the subjective world' (Habermas, 1984, p. 51). Because culture and nature have not been separated out from one another, the mythological worldview is not even aware that it is a worldview; that, for instance, animism and magic are superimpositons or projections of culture onto nature. For this reason, as well as the fact that intellectual traditions are accepted on authority, savage thought is not open to questioning or to revision.

With the transition from 'archaic' to 'developed civilizations' – in later works Habermas will borrow Jasper's concept of an 'Axial Age' to characterize this allegedly world-historical shift – mythological thought is replaced by argument and reflection, though the first and highest principles, the foundations of this worldview, 'are themselves removed from argumentation and immunized against objections' (Habermas, 1979, p. 105). With the advent of modern thought, even the highest principles or foundations of the modern worldview lost their unquestioned character, and 'a growing decentration of interpretive systems . . . [led] to an ever-clearer categorical demarcation of the subjectivity of internal nature from the objectivity of external nature, as well as from the normativity of social reality and the intersubjectivity of linguistic reality' (Habermas, 1979, p. 106). That is, modern thought came to recognize that the objective, social and subjective worlds fundamentally differ from one another, and that propositional truth, normative rightness and subjective expressiveness belong to different domains and require different attitudes and protocols of reasoning. This allowed for development within each of these spheres – for example, natural scientific enquiries were no longer constrained by religious requirements, and art become an exploration of subjectivity, rather than being subordinated to exiguous concerns. Borrowing a distinction from Karl Popper and Robin Horton, Habermas concludes that mythological and premodern worldviews are 'closed'; that is, are not capable of reflecting upon and correcting (rather than

taking as pre-given) their own presuppositions, whereas modern thought is reflexive and 'open'.

This is a rather standard whiggish account of why we moderns are right whereas our historical predecessors were wrong, and why modern western societies are reflexive whereas other, 'savage' and 'traditional' societies immunize their deepest beliefs from criticism. It is, moreover, drawn from a highly selective reading of the anthropological literature of the 1960s and 1970s (principally Robin Horton, Ernest Gellner, Maurice Godelier, Malinowski, and the debate in Wilson [1970]), containing presumptions and arguments that would be repudiated by many, perhaps even most, anthropologists today. What, in any case, are the *arguments* behind the reiteration of these by now rather shopworn and self-congratulatory Enlightenment distinctions?

One argument is that the development of worldviews parallels the cognitive and moral development of individual humans from childhood to adulthood: the ways in which peoples understand and engage with their world display 'developmental-logical correlations with ontogenesis', because 'the reproduction of society and the socialization of its members are two aspects of the same process', 'dependent on the same structures' (Habermas, 1979, pp. 104, 99). In *The Theory of Communicative Action* and the earlier *Communication and the Evolution of Society* Habermas draws upon the work of Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg on the cognitive and moral development of children in order to establish such homologies. At the centre of a child's development is not this or that content of knowledge, but rather 'the decentration of an egocentric understanding of the world' (Habermas, 1984, p. 69). A baby cannot distinguish between itself and the world; there are no boundaries between its corporeal body and the world. Later the child learns to differentiate itself from nature, and from society, and then as a youth, learns that social principles and norms are humanly created, and thus criticizable and revisable. Later still, the 'competent adult' now distinguishes between the external world of nature, the social world and their subjective world, and recognizes that statements or 'validity claims' in each of these has its own protocols. All this, Habermas asserts – albeit with qualifications – roughly corresponds to the progression of mythical, axial and modern worldviews. And just as once we are adult we cannot go 'backwards' to a child's point of view, so too with worldviews: 'With the transition to a new stage the interpretations of the superseded stage are . . . *categorially devalued*. It is not this or that reason, but the *kind* of reason, which is no longer convincing. . . . These devaluative shifts appear to be connected with socio-evolutionary transitions to new levels of learning' (Habermas, 1984, p. 68).

This argument can be dispensed with fairly briefly, for it is a very poor one. There is no reason to believe that individual learning and growth can be correlated with social phenomena (or even what would count as empirical evidence for such a claim), and indeed, every reason to believe that the analogy is a bad one, as are most attempts to map individual, semi-biological processes onto social and historical ones. This analogy certainly has antecedents, but they are not ones that inspire confidence – the claim that there are 'childlike' peoples and mature ones long served as one of the justifications for slavery, colonialism and the dispossession of First Peoples. And because this argument begins with the premise that some societies are rational and mature, and then seeks correlations with ontogenesis, its conclusions are already present in its premise. Those sympathetic to and sharing in Habermas's project have been unwilling to fully endorse his

argument (see for example McCarthy, 1982, pp. 69ff.) and in later writings Habermas has ceased to invoke it, although the claim that modern worldviews are the culmination of a 'learning process' remains central to his theory.

Habermas's second and stronger argument is one that ascribes intellectual and cognitive advances to material and sociological developments; progress in the cognitive realm is 'a historical result' that 'arose . . . in the midst of a specific society that possessed corresponding features' (Habermas, 1990b, p. 208). This 'specific society' is a modern society, a form of social organization and collective life that comes about as result of capitalism and industrialization. In this second argument the emphasis is placed on sociological factors; here, the distinctions between the external world (the domain of theoretical reason), the moral and political world (the domain of morality, law and politics) and subjective inwardness (the domain of the arts) only become possible in their fully developed form with modernity, when each of these becomes systemically differentiated from the others, such that they appear as distinct 'subsystems' of the modern lifeworld: it is the advent of modern society that '*objectively* affords contemporaries a privileged access to the general structures of the lifeworld' (Habermas, 1987, p. 403). In premodern societies these distinctions are not institutionalized, and cannot be; modernity lies at the end of a long process of historical development, one that makes it possible to now see that making such distinctions represents a cognitive advance; indeed, marks the culmination of the process of the rationalization of worldviews. In this argument, the superiority of modern western knowledge is connected to the superiority of modernity as a social phenomenon. More so than in the case of Apel, Habermas's thought is conducted not only in a 'social' but more specifically in a 'sociological' register, for his account of what is distinctive about modern society is deeply indebted to a discipline that conceives of itself as the self-consciousness of modern society, as 'emerg[ing] out of the conditions of modern society as well as being a distinctively modern form of explanation of that society' (Bhambra, 2007, p. 47). The philosophical architecture of Habermas's account and defence of modernity is accompanied by sociological cladding.

Modernity is moreover a product of Occidental history, which is why Habermas concurs with Weber on 'the general cultural significance of Western rationalism'. Once this historical process has occurred, it must constitute the 'horizon' for all thinking; no one is exempt, and there is no 'going back'. Non-western societies may continue to be different in some cultural ways, but the social and institutional changes that characterize modernity, and the modern western knowledge which accompanies it – with its divisions between science, law and morality, and aesthetics – are inescapable, and furthermore, mark progress. Or as Habermas puts it, in the form of a rhetorical question to which he provides an answer, 'Are or are not the structures of scientific thought, posttraditional legal and moral representations, and autonomous art, as they have developed in the framework of Western culture, the possession of that "community of civilized men" that is present as a regulative idea? The universalist position does not have to deny the pluralism and the incompatibility of historical versions of "civilized humanity"; but it regards this multiplicity of forms of life as limited to *cultural contents*, and it asserts that every culture must share certain *formal properties* of the modern understanding of the world. . . . Thus the universalist assumption refers to a few necessary structural properties of modern life forms as such' (Habermas, 1984, p. 180).

This second argument, one where the emphasis is now on historical-social changes rather than on cognitive advances, is however subject to the same objection as the first, namely that it assumes what needs to be shown, this time in the context of social evolution rather than 'learning'. Even a sympathetic interlocutor like Apel wonders whether seeking to ground the claims for Reason in such an empirical and historical manner runs the risk of 'giving the impression of a dogmatically posited teleological philosophy of history' (Apel, 1992, p. 147). And Habermas's project is indeed underpinned by a notion of 'progress' that is asserted rather than convincingly argued, and one that is highly contestable. Moreover it *has* been contested, by legions of anti-colonial and indigenous thinkers and activists, and by the many scholars who have drawn attention to the ways in which 'modernity' was not something that developed autochthonously in the West, but was from the beginning a global process, and one that was heavily dependent on the conquest, colonization and exploitation of the non-western world. As Amy Allen puts it, parsing the arguments of scores of anti-colonial thinkers, past and present, 'the notion of historical progress as a "fact" is bound up with complex relations of domination, exclusion and silencing of colonized and racialized subjects' (Allen, 2016, p. 19), and there is every reason to doubt the claim that there has been progress in history. Centuries of slavery and colonialism, two world wars and a Holocaust, surely call into question the presumption that the modern age has been marked by learning and progress in social, moral and political matters? If they do not, it is hard to imagine what would do so!

Habermas's two arguments – namely, that modern knowledge represents a cognitive advance, and that modernity represents historical evolution and progress – are clearly meant to reinforce each other. The division of reason into three autonomous spheres (corresponding exactly, we may note, with Kant's three critiques) marks progress, and therefore also shows that modernity, the historical 'stage' in which these divisions become possible and then institutionalized, is a more advanced socio-historical form. Conversely, modernity is a historically advanced form of social organization, and since it is characterized by a division of knowledge into three spheres, such an organization of knowledge is also an advance, and also a marker of progress. The two arguments certainly imply each other, but they do not ground each other: rather, each presupposes the validity of the other. The entire edifice of his argument, as some others have also noted (Allen, 2016; Warnke, 1987, pp. 133–134), is circular.

In later works, Habermas acknowledges that 'The suspicion that mechanisms of exclusion are often embedded within the hidden presumptions of universalistic discourses is well-founded – up to a point' (Habermas, 2001a, p. 147). He even concedes that this well-founded suspicion means that the West 'must be only one voice amongst many, in the hermeneutical conversation between cultures' (Habermas, 2002, p. 154). The Olympian insouciance with which he previously affirmed the superiority of modern western knowledge has come to be supplemented, though not replaced, by the (very different) claim that as modernity has come to encompass the entire world, so that no premodern societies are left, the knowledges and institutions that accompany and characterize modernity are *unavoidable* (Habermas, 2001b). But even in the 'conversation between cultures' to which Habermas passingly refers, it is clear that modern western knowledge will be a privileged interlocutor. Since one of the greatest cultural achievements of 'Occidental rationalism' lies in 'the capacity for decentring

one's own perspectives, self-reflection, and a self-critical distancing from one's own traditions', even 'overcoming Eurocentrism demands that the West make proper use of its own cognitive resources' (Habermas, 2002, p. 154).[3] Moreover, adds Habermas – without the slightest sense of irony – the critics of Occidental rationalism inadvertently confirm this, for the distance from their own tradition that is the condition of their critique is 'one of the advantages of occidental rationalism' (Habermas, 2001b, p. 119)!

Habermas's minor 'concessions' to critics do not mark any substantial departure from his argumentative strategy, which remains unchanged in essentials – and remains unpersuasive. Claims to truth and universality, whether on the grounds of a cognitive learning process or on the grounds that modernity enabled progress in knowledge, presuppose what they are meant to establish; and in concert they are circular, rather than mutually validating.

After progress

In a contemporary intellectual, political and ethical scene where the truth and universality of a knowledge born in Europe can no longer be blithely assumed and celebrated, defenders of that knowledge and of the narrative of progress that it underpins have frequently returned to Kant for inspiration. A historically and socially grounded version of the transcendental argument is used by Apel to argue that public argumentation has necessary and inescapable presuppositions, and that these provide standards – independent of historical context and cultural and other variation – that are universal, and that ground/ prove that some fundamental liberal values are binding on all rational beings. Ingenious as this argument is, I have sought to show that it is circular and thus unconvincing. Some other Kantians engaged in a similar project have come to a similar conclusion – in his later work Rawls came to abandon his highly influential attempt, in *A Theory of Justice*, to draw upon Kant to arrive at a quasi-transcendental grounding and defence of a liberal conception of justice (see Seth, 2020, pp. 60–67).

Recognizing some of the insufficiencies and problems of Kantian-derived arguments, Habermas defends modern knowledge and 'progress' by additionally drawing upon Hegel. Hegel produced the first and the most important version of an argument/ narrative, which, however, has many different versions, and has been at the heart of modern understandings of modernity and its knowledge. In all versions of this historicizing and teleological narrative, premodern or 'traditional' cultures (including those of the West) are presented as being in thrall to enchantments and cosmologies, whereas we moderns are regarded as having grasped (or having been forced to grasp) the bedrock truths that underpinned these misperceptions all along. This is an account, as Charles Taylor describes it, according to which 'modernity involves our "coming to see" certain kernel truths about the human condition' (Taylor, 1999, p. 170); or as David Kolb puts it, it is one in which modern knowledge is 'not just another in a sequence of historic constructions', but rather 'the unveiling of what has been at the root of these constructions' (Kolb, 1986, pp. 9–10). In all versions of this account – Weberian, Hegelian, Marxist, Habermasian and other – the core presumptions of modern knowledge are not yet another set of parochial assumptions claiming

universal validity, like a proselytizing religion, but rather embedded in a narrative that purports to explain both why we humans were once bound to get things wrong, and how it became possible to get them right. This is what I have elsewhere called the 'once was blind, but now can see' account and defence of modern knowledge (Seth, 2013a).

However, once knowledges are acknowledged to be historical, as they are in the above narrative – that is, once the transcendental argument is not the sole or chief argument – assertions of the superiority of modern knowledge rest upon the claim that transitions between worldviews mark some sort of progress. Such privileging of the modern and of modern knowledge – and thus of the modern West, which until recently was regarded as the site and source of modernity and its self-knowledge – may have once seemed self-evident, but it has ceased to be so. Feminist, postmodern, postcolonial, decolonial and other critiques signal a changed intellectual scene. It is precisely in this new context of growing criticism and challenges, that defences of modern knowledge, and of its universality, became necessary. If these defences 'work', then our belief in progress, and in modern knowledge as that which assures us of it and continually delivers it, can be salvaged. An acknowledgement of the socially and historically embedded character of Reason, and a few concessions to feminist, postcolonial and decolonial and 'postmodern' critiques of modern knowledge, will suffice; and even if modern knowledge is conceded to be part of the problem that has led to a grotesquely unequal world and looming environmental catastrophe, we can and must treat it as a necessary part of the solution.

This essay has shown, however, that these defences are not persuasive; and moreover, that once we acknowledge the Hegelian-historicist point that the presuppositions of thought are fundamentally related to time and culture, but can no longer plausibly claim that there is a teleology at work in transitions between worldviews, then 'the legacy of Hegel's historical radicalisation of Kantian modernism' (Pippin, 1997, p. 172) can only be a recognition of the historical specificity of *all* forms of reasoning, including 'Occidental rationalism'. This, I suggest, best characterizes the contemporary intellectual scene: we are possessed of an acute consciousness of the historicity of our knowledge, but now without any compelling argument for its superiority to other knowledges. Since this knowledge has served at once the measure of progress, and one of the foremost evidences of it, it is now possible, and indeed pressingly necessary, to ask what can be thought – and what is to be done – after we have dispensed with the idea of progress.

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Notes

1. The literature is too vast to list, but for critiques of the innate maleness of 'Reason' see Lloyd (1984), Irigary (1985) and Keller (1985); on the heteronormalizing presumptions of our knowledge see Sedgwick (1990); and on the parochial and western nature of modern knowledge, see de Sousa Santos (2014, 2018) and Seth (2020).
2. Here as in subsequent quotes from Apel, I eliminate the frequent italicizations/emphases that occur in the original text.
3. Quoting this passage, Amy Allen observes – with great understatement – that 'There's a certain irony involved in saying that the way to avoid Eurocentrism is for the West to celebrate its own cultural achievements, to be even more like itself: even more reflexive and self-critical than it already is' (Allen, 2013, p. 152).

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