Jürgen Habermas has reconstructed in a most interesting and convincing way the crucial part that Hegel played in the deconstruction of the epistemological picture.

Habermas sees the basic ‘mentalist’ epistemology in terms of three basic ideas (to rephrase it somewhat): a) knowledge resides first and foremost in individual minds; b) knowledge is mediational: in the classic formulation, we know about things outside us through the representations that occur in the mind (‘nous avons connaissance des choses hors de nous par l’intermédiaire des idées en nous’ – Descartes to Gibieuf). In the later Kantian formulation the mediational role is played by categories or forms which experience has to conform to; c) as a consequence, we can know the mediations with a certainty which we cannot immediately attain regarding the reality ‘outside’. So the path to reliable knowledge starts by identifying and focusing on the mediations ‘in the mind’.

We have been slowly climbing out of this erroneous view over the last century; but its hold is so strong that we are not all entirely out of it now. Even those who think they’ve escaped it often are still held in its thrall. We escape it when we see that this division between inner and outer, mind and world, is fundamentally false. The thinking agent is already deeply involved in the world as an acting body (Merleau-Ponty), and thinks only through the forms (language, social practices, etc.) which he/she shares with others. Mind is always in the world, and social. All this Hegel brilliantly pioneered.

But this realization of our social/bodily/practical embeddedness raises another challenge for reason. The problem is no longer the ‘reality of the external world’, or of ‘other minds’. But now it is: how do we know that our local standards of reason, truth, right, are not just local concoctions, with no more justification than any other different set which we might come across in contact with another culture? Or perhaps there is one right set of standards, but ours isn’t it; how will we ever know this? The problem is that what seems to us the right grasp of things is taken by us to be truth, what seems just is taken as the right, what seems cogent is taken by us as following the demands of reason. But how can we be confident of this, if all such standards must arise within a historical society?

There is a threat of mere historicism, relativism, non-cognitivism, which postmodern philosophers might advise us to relax and enjoy, but which certainly didn’t satisfy Hegel, and perhaps shouldn’t satisfy us.

But how do we get from mere ‘objective spirit’ to something absolute? Hegel’s way (to use my jargon) was to recapture the upshot of his hermeneutical dialectics,
tracing our development in history, by what claimed to be an ontic dialectic, unfolding the necessary connections in being. The most central of these latter in his system were set out in the *Logic*. If the development of Reason in history turns out not to be just the way things happened to fall out, but is in fact the necessary unfolding of the stages of Geist and Reason itself, then we have an unchallengeable grounding in reality and truth itself.

But I don’t suppose anyone can accept this today. If not, what can take its place in the way of a more secure grounding for our standards?

This is one problem which seems to arise in the wake of Hegel’s work, more generally in the aftermath of the whole historicizing turn of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Once we cut loose from seeing our moral-political ethos as grounded in the order of things, in an ontic logos, and see it as arising in historical evolution, then this question comes on the agenda.

Habermas’ paper, incomplete as it was in the version I saw, leaves us with this question unanswered. Not only that, at the very end it raises another question: how does a society assure the historical transition to a liberal society (let us call it), that is, one in which the highest standards of the political morality that our civilization has evolved will be in force?

Both these questions remain unanswered. Indeed, at the end of this paper, rather like at the end of an episode in one of the serialized adventure stories of my youth, the hero is left hanging over a cliff, about to plunge into the abyss, to the mocking laughter of the post-modernist fiends. The question is, how to rescue him, both normatively and in historical fact?

Of course, we already have some idea of how Jürgen Habermas will answer at least the normative question. And this is the one I would like to discuss. This may seem perverse, because I will be replying to what is not, at least not yet, in the paper. But I find what is there so well argued and expounded, and I am in such agreement with it, that all I could do would be to embroider with applause. It is probably more interesting to raise the issues where there is still substantial disagreement.

What has emerged out of the historical process of genesis of Western civilization from, say, 1600 to our century, and then been in part generalized and adopted elsewhere in our world? Lots of things, of course, but a salient component is the package encompassing democracy and human rights. We can think of this as a new notion of a moral order between human beings, replacing the hierarchic ones based on an ontic logos which preceded it. Paradigm early statements come in the Natural Law theories of Grotius and Locke. It has the following features: a) the order holds between human beings taken as individuals, that is disembedded from any larger hierarchical order; b) it takes these individuals as fundamentally equal (this in a sense follows from (a)); c) each strives on his own, that is, in freedom, to maintain himself, using the resources which the world puts at his disposal; and d) the relation normatively prescribed between these individuals is one of mutual benefit; that is, each ‘as long as his own preservation cometh not in competition’ ought to strive to preserve mankind.

The norm is founded here (with Locke) in God’s Providence. We were made
with these ends in view. But this fundamental notion of order has since been transposed into other theological or metaphysical frameworks, beginning with the Enlightenment idea of a harmonious order of nature, in which each reaches his best happiness in working harmoniously towards the happiness of others. It is now entrenched in the areligious part of our culture in a much less optimistic view than this, but still a powerful one: that human beings can develop through learning and discipline to a point where they come to recognize others as equal claimants, and that having achieved this condition, they recognize its superiority and don’t want to regress to earlier, hierarchical, less-than-universalist views.

The picture of the order itself has also developed. One of the crucial transformations is what we could call the Rousseau Revolution, where the picture of each individual standing on his/her own in an original state of nature is modified by the insight that human identity develops only in society, that is, in exchange with other human beings. Hence the fundamental norms of freedom, equality and mutual benefit have to be captured in the right kind of common political culture, which for Rousseau is that of the General Will. The solitary individual of the State of Nature is now seen to be irrelevant to this issue; he represents if anything the pre-human stage of humanity. In fact, in human society, we are mutually constitutive of each other’s identities, and it is this relation which has to be rendered compatible with freedom, equality and mutual benefit.

This move, in a sense, goes back behind Locke and Grotius, to the earlier view, enshrined by Aristotle, that the human animal is intrinsically social-political. But it does so in a new key, which retains the fundamental normative shape of the modern idea of moral order. Kant is the heir to the Rousseau Revolution, but so is the whole of German Idealism, and more generally the understanding of human life as embedded in society and history which develops in that extraordinary flowering of German thought in the Romantic period, which Habermas mentions (p. 135: Hamann, Herder, Humboldt, etc.) (This had other sources too, my claim is only that Rousseau’s work also marked many of the key writers of this period.)

The modern moral order has not only changed its foundation, and its form; it has also been contested until quite recently. Its atomism (until after the Rousseau Revolution), its insistence on equality (hence tending to democracy) seemed to threaten social cohesion and public order; equality and freedom threatened authority, and therefore seemed to reject religion; the focus on self-maintenance in this world seemed to threaten any sense of the beyond, and so on. And so throughout the 19th century and into the 20th, the order of mutual benefit was opposed by various modes of an order of hierarchical complementarity, which started from the original ‘baroque’ version of the traditional notion of order (this was already somewhat ‘modernized’, as we see with Bossuet) progressively moving more and more in a ‘modern’ direction, stressing the beneficial consequences for public order (de Maistre’s hangman); then stressing hierarchical order as a condition for individual and national greatness (Maurras); then moving altogether outside theology and traditional metaphysics, invoking an ethic of heroism and national greatness in an atheist mode, following Nietzsche (Sorel, Mussolini, Jünger, eventually the Nazis).
We have just recently come to the end of a long struggle in which the order of mutual benefit has finally become unchallenged in our culture. At the same time, over the last two centuries, this order has been transposed from a simple ideal reference point, which it is for Locke, into a key component of the social imaginary in democratic cultures. It is this transition, more or less easily accomplished in different societies, which we would have to look at to explore Habermas’ second question, on the historical conditions for a liberal democratic society.

But to return to the normative issue. We now feel a great sense of assurance about the culture of democracy and human rights; we feel that we have come through a long evolution, full at times of terrible struggle, and have come out on to a higher ethical plateau, as it were. But how do we justify this?

There are two ways which are common in our culture, and which I think are nevertheless wrong. The first has been very popular since the Enlightenment. It starts with our confidence about our science. Here too we share the view that the century of Galileo and Newton put us on a new path in natural science, which has yielded greatly superior results to those followed earlier.

The view I’m talking about here attributes this change to our having sloughed off beliefs which are manifestly wrong on examination, superstitions and unsupported beliefs in Gods, spirits, Great Chains, etc. Following the obvious method of accumulating knowledge, once one has liberated oneself from these disturbing factors, one gets scientific knowledge. These methods, moreover, are seen as valid also in the human domain. So that without the incubus of superstition, we come to see wherein human good consists. Humans are individuals who strive to preserve themselves and satisfy their desires, and for whom things go well if they co-operate appropriately. This is roughly the view of a Helvetius or a Bentham. The modern moral order is captured by a supposedly scientific view of what human beings are like. It therefore becomes, like any other deliverance of science, un-challengeable, unless by more plausible findings. And these are not forthcoming.

The second view rejects the crudity of the first one. It tries to find its foundation on the formal or procedural level. Human beings may desire all sorts of things; their desires may divide them rather than uniting them as the optimistic Aufklärer thought, but certain very general features of the way they proceed, as rational beings, as social beings, impose certain rules and restraints on them. So Kant’s thesis that moral reasoning imposes on us the requirement of being able to universalize the maxims of our will, and Jürgen Habermas’ discourse ethic is seen as binding on us in virtue of our being interlocutors who seek to convince each other.

Now this too doesn’t seem to me to work. It may seem to leave us without any way of backing our feeling, that we have come to an ethically superior position in relation to our ancestors of 400 years ago, with reasons. But I don’t believe this is so. There is a way of proceeding, by what I have tried to call ‘supersession arguments’, where we show that there is a rational path from A to B, but not in the reverse direction. But we have to see this path not only as a line of argument, and not only as an actual transition, but as both together.
Take gender equality. It is astonishing how recently the franchise was extended to women. In the 19th century, a great majority of both sexes concurred in the idea that this was against the order of things. Today, these arguments are virtually unrecoverable. Just as an argument held in some timeless empyrean, we can imagine people going either way, being convinced that women were different in some way which justified denying them the vote, or else being convinced to abandon this view. Again, as a movement in history, we can imagine a reversal; should the Taliban offensive ever reach Chicago, you’ll see.

Or we could imagine a change which was irreversible which had nothing to do with argument, as when I take drugs which addict me, or severely impair my capacity to understand my predicament.

But in the case I’m talking about it is the combined transition of outlook and social condition which is not rationally reversible. Beforehand, arguments about women’s lesser capacities for citizenship, for instance, were not decisively refutable, but rather created conditions (i.e., women’s exclusion) where they could appear right; these arguments just seem weird and bizarre in a culture where women have been citizens with men for several decades. The situation is not just de facto irreversible (if we keep the Taliban out); the rational argument is unwinnable by any partisans of reversal.

This is far from applying to all (de facto) irreversible transitions. One can imagine arguing that the industrial revolution, or the rise of capitalism, was a calamity for humankind. In certain conditions of ecological disaster, we could imagine all signing on to this thesis in the dying moments when we can still gasp for breath. The jury could be out on this for centuries. Not so with gender equality.

What emerges here is the central role in this kind of argument of the introduction of new forms of life. In a Platonic heaven, lots of questions would be moot which are not so on the ground in history. This applies to democracy itself. Most people couldn’t imagine a couple of centuries ago how public order could be made consistent with democracy. Now it’s almost hard to imagine how to ensure political stability outside a democratic régime. Of course, the word has changed its meaning in the intervening period. But that’s part of my point. People didn’t really have a grasp of what it all meant until (one form of) it was worked out on the ground.

We still don’t understand how these things happen; but obviously, the conceiving of this modern idea of moral–social order; its seizing the imagination of élites; its transposition subsequently into the social imaginary of ruling electorates (as we see in the American Revolution, for instance); this whole development has been very fateful for us. It has opened the possibility of rationally convincing ourselves of certain ethical propositions which would have been quite beyond our capacities without it. The Owl of Minerva in this sense does take wing at dusk.

Hegel in a sense taught us this point, but only in a sense. Because the underlying reason is different. It’s not that at the end the fully rational pattern in history is now visible to speculative philosophy. This way of underpinning our hermeneutics of history with an ontic dialectic is utterly unconvincing. We have
no such total confidence, nor can we have. But there are certain issues where our sense of having made a positive step can be rationally grounded, and that is no small mercy.

But of course, it follows from this less favourable epistemic predicament, that it may easily be that the road taken has excluded other roads which would also have conferred great benefit. This is what all those suspect who sense that modernity has come at great cost – be it proponents of an ethic of heroism (Tocqueville, Nietzsche), of a fuller and more intense community (Rousseau, Marx), of a greater communion with nature (the Wordsworthian tradition), of a sense of transcendence (Hopkins, Chateaubriand). Each of these lines of criticism may be right, as well as others. I believe that there is some truth in all the ones I have just mentioned.

If we take these intimations seriously, our ethical outlook will be full of tensions and unresolved conflicts between goods we don’t know yet how to combine. But that is not the same as saying that the modern moral order is not an ethical gain. On the contrary, it is only because it is that there can be these painful conflicts. Otherwise, we would happily endorse a reactionary view that proposed to undo the work of modernity. However unrealizable in practice, this would give us an untroubled consistency of outlook.

But our actual predicament is one of struggle and conflict; between goods which seem uncombinable, we are struggling to find a way, at least to make the conflict less severe. What we know, however, and which gives some grounds for hope, is that the final word on combinability can’t be said now, even as our forebears in 1800 didn’t have the definitive take on the compatibility of democracy and public order. The limits of rational argument are yet to be drawn. In this sense, ist die Vernunft in der Geschichte.

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NOTES

* All page references, unless stated otherwise, are to Habermas’ paper in this issue, pp. 129–157.