

**POSTMETAPHYSICAL VERSUS
POSTMODERN THINKING:
A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF HABERMAS'S
DEBATE WITH POSTMODERNISM**

by

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DECLARATION

I the undersigned hereby declare that the work contained in this dissertation is my own original work and has not previously in its entirety or in part been submitted at any university for a degree.

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ABSTRACT

Philosophy has traditionally been concerned with the question of reason and rationality, as its central focus. From the perspective of the modern metaphysical tradition, this focus has developed around the theme of subjectivity in general, and the assumption of an ahistorical transcendental subject in particular. The idea of reason was thus foundational for the articulation and validation of the notions of truth and freedom. From the perspective of modernity, reason has thus been the condition of the possibility of enlightenment, freedom and moral progress.

The debate between Habermas and the representatives of postmodern thinking represents the latest chapter regarding the question of reason, its limits, and its possibilities. What makes this debate particularly challenging is that Habermas, while he defends the idea of reason against its critique by the postmodernists, is actually in agreement with them in their dismissal of the tradition of metaphysical thinking.

In view of his defense of the idea of reason, however, Habermas has invariably been accused of defending an outmoded and discredited form of philosophical thinking, while his opponents have generally been hailed as progressive thinkers who have succeeded in effecting a radical break with the conceptual legacy of the metaphysical tradition.

In my dissertation I argue that the exact opposite position is the case, namely, that it is Habermas, and not his postmodern opponents, who has effected a radical break with metaphysical thinking. It is his ability to transform the idea of reason, from a transcendental into a postmetaphysical concept, in terms of

which the question of reason and rationality, and the related ideas of truth and knowledge, are recast in fallibilistic terms, that, in my view, represents the overcoming of metaphysics.

The postmodern turn, on the other hand, in view of its reluctance to consider the question of reason from an alternative model of rationality, finds itself still trapped within a form of transcendental thinking in which it seeks to enquire into the (im)possibility of reason, in the absence of a transcendental subject.

In the final analysis, I argue that it is postmetaphysical rather than postmodern thinking, that offers us a practical alternative to the problematic conception of reason, bequeathed by the tradition of metaphysical thinking.

ABSTRAK

Die fenomeen van die rede en die betekenis van rasionaliteit vorm tradisioneel 'n sentrale fokus van die filosofie. Vanuit die perspektief van die moderne metafisiese tradisie het hierdie fokus ontwikkel rondom die tema van subjektiwiteit in die algemeen, en die aanname van 'n a-historiese transendentele subjek in die besonder. Die rede was dus fundamenteel vir die artikulasie en legitimering van die konsepte van waarheid en vryheid. Vanuit die perspektief van moderniteit was die rede dus die voorwaarde vir die moontlikheid van verligting, vryheid, en morele vooruitgang.

Die debat tussen Habermas en die verteenwoordigers van postmoderne denke verteenwoordig die mees onlangse hoofstuk van die verhaal van die vraag na rede en rasionaliteit - die beperkings daarvan, asook die moontlikhede daarvan. Hierdie debat bied besondere uitdagings omdat Habermas, terwyl hy die idee van rede verdedig teen die kritiek van die postmoderniste, eintlik met hulle saamstem vir sover hulle die tradisie van metafisiese denke verwerp.

In die lig van sy verdediging van die idee van rede, is Habermas egter voortdurend daarvan beskuldig dat hy 'n uitgediende en gediskrediteerde vorm van filosofiese denke bly voorstaan, terwyl sy opponente in die algemeen voorgelou is as progressiewe denkers wat suksesvol 'n radikale breuk gemaak het met die konseptuele erfenis van die metafisiese tradisie.

In my dissertasie beweer ek dat die teenoorgestelde inderwaarheid die geval is, naamlik dat dit Habermas, en nie sy postmoderne opponente nie, is wat hierdie radikale breuk met metafisiese denke suksesvol uitgevoer het. Dit is sy vermoë om die idee van die rede te transformeer vanaf 'n transendentale na 'n post-

metafisiese konsep, in terme waarvan die vraag na rede en rasionaliteit, en die verwante idees van waarheid en kennis, omskep is in fallibilistiese begrippe, wat, soos ek aantoon, 'n (die!) suksesvolle transendering van die metafisika bewerkstellig.

Die postmoderne wending, aan die ander kant, in die lig van die traagheid daarvan om 'n alternatiewe en verruimde konsepsie van rasionaliteit te ontwikkel, bly vasgevang in 'n vorm van transendentele denke waarin dit probeer om ondersoek in te stel na die (on)moontlikheid van die rede ten aansien van die afwesigheid van 'n transendentele subjek.

Uiteindelik beweer ek dat dit die post-metafisiese eerder as die postmoderne denke is wat aan ons 'n praktiese alternatief bied vir die problematiese konsep van die rede, soos ons dit geërf het by die tradisie van metafisiese denke.

PREFACE

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 THE DEBATE IN PERSPECTIVE

Over the past two decades, the work of Jürgen Habermas has emerged as one of the most challenging and powerful interpretations of modern society. Habermas's views on the question of modernity have evoked widespread reaction, ranging from critical acclaim to outright condemnation by academics and thinkers from various disciplines and backgrounds. Over the years, Habermas has distinguished himself as one of the most influential and controversial defenders of modernity, which he basically construes as a normative philosophical framework for the evaluation and critique of reason as an historical process, and a "project" worth defending (Habermas 1981).

Since the 1980's, Habermas has been particularly productive in the development of his own vision of modernity, which has found expression not only in the publication of various articles and books, most notably the two-volume *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1984, 1987a), *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1987b), as well as *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays* (1992a), but also in the form of a "debate", the significance of which, I think, will continue to challenge us for years to come.

I must, however, point out at the outset that, although I refer to Habermas's critical engagement with the representatives of postmodern thinking as a "debate", it should be noted that, with the exception of Richard Rorty (1996), no such thing ever transpired, certainly not in a sense similar to any of his previous debates, such as, for example, the "positivist dispute" with Karl Popper (during the early 1960's), or the famous debate with Hans-Georg Gadamer during the late 1960's, following

the publication of the latter's *Truth and Method*.¹ Moreover, on the one occasion when a formal meeting was arranged for Habermas to interact with the leading French theorists, with a view to debating the status of contemporary French and German philosophy, the much anticipated excitement turned into disappointment for representatives and observers on both sides:

From the 20 to the 22nd of February, 1986, several of Germany's most important philosophers met in Paris with a number of their equally renowned French colleagues. Habermas attended the first day's debate, but did not participate, forfeiting his role to Apel and Wellmer. Foucault's death and Lyotard's last minute cancellation left Derrida as the chief spokesman for the French side.

The meeting actually did take place. That, however, was the extent of its success. Expectedly, it ran aground. The hoped-for dialogue between two groups which have been unable to hear each other never materialized. (Rochlitz 1985/86:124-125.)

Another difficulty regarding the notion of a debate arises when one considers that Habermas seems to confront the work of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Jean-Francois Lyotard strictly on his own terms. Unlike Habermas, these thinkers, with the possible exception of Lyotard (1984), have never self-consciously made the question of modernity the central focus of their work. Given the fact that no formal debate has actually taken place, the question arises as to why contemporary philosophers feel themselves almost obliged to take sides between two modes of reflection which seem to have very little common ground, and which seem to be diametrically opposed in terms of their basic orientation and respective concerns; and those who do not take sides, are at least prepared to acknowledge that philosophy, in the traditional sense, has been profoundly affected by the thinking of these theorists.

The idea of philosophy no longer enjoying the same prestige and privileged status as in former times, has recently been radicalized into sloganistic pronouncements of the "end of philosophy", without any clear indication of what exactly the "end" means. It is precisely in view of the lack of clarity and the problematic nature regarding this "end", that Habermas's engagement with the representatives of postmodernity becomes relevant. Not only has he made a considerable contribution towards an understanding of the complex nature of the problems that have accompanied the historical development of the "project of modernity"; equally important is his interpretation of modernity as an expression of reason.

It is the central focus on reason within the modernity problematic which establishes a common philosophical framework, and which makes a "debate" between him and the postmodernists not only possible, but absolutely imperative. It is in view of this consideration that I have found it necessary to construe a debate between Habermas and his postmodern opponents, one which focuses on the central problematic of reason and rationality, and its significance for contemporary philosophical thinking. Although many contemporary thinkers do question the status and legitimacy of "reason" within modern society, they are often at a loss when challenged to suggest meaningful alternatives, that is, alternatives that originate within the normative framework of modernity which, as an historical category, defines itself on the basis of its critical autonomy and independence from all premodern structures of legitimacy and authority.

From the perspective of my dissertation, what makes Habermas's arguments particularly challenging is his central thesis that a critique of modernity necessarily implies a critique of reason, and a critique of reason (especially that which he associates with postmodern thinking) implies a critique of modernity. While it is true that the French theorists such as Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard, and a "post-

Philosophical" thinker such as Rorty (who Habermas [1996] included at a later stage in his philosophical critique of modernity), were not overly concerned with the problem of modernity, there can be little doubt that all share a common interest in the philosophical question of reason.²

While Habermas has often been denounced as an out-and-out rationalist, incapable of appreciating the subtle nuances as well as the radical nature of the postmodern challenge, his opponents have invariably failed to recognize the significance of his attempt to address their challenge from within the philosophical discourse of modernity, in which the question of reason, its scope, its limits, its conditions of possibility, has been the central focus. It is from the perspective of this common theme, that I propose to proceed in my evaluation of the debate.

My main objective is to show that the postmodern challenge on its own provides us with very little guidelines within which to continue the critique of reason in a philosophically meaningful way, that is, one that allows for a more universal approach, and which not only focuses on the problematic nature of the modern conception of reason, defined in terms of a universal ahistorical (rational) subject, but which can also account for the rational basis of its own critique. This does not mean, however, that the postmodern aesthetically inspired challenge must therefore be rejected out of hand for not being concerned with the question of "truth. I am of the opinion that Habermas, in spite of his emphasis on "the rational", is not completely insensitive to the tremendous value of an aestheticist critique that seeks to disclose "the familiar" from a defamiliarized perspective (Habermas 1985:199-203). It is indeed in keeping with the overall vision of his own project that the "distortions of communication" be addressed from all available resources within modernity, including the aesthetic, which has paraded under various banners such as "deconstruction" and "genealogy". As Dews (1999) argues:

But can the types of philosophical activity listed here really be regarded as primarily concerned with evading assessment of their truth? Would it not be more accurate to say they seek to perform the *interpretative* task which Habermas himself goes on to describe as 'an illuminating furtherance of lifeworld processes of achieving self-understanding, processes that are related to totality'. This task, Habermas claims, is vital, because 'the lifeworld must be defended against extreme alienation at the hands of the objectivating, the moralizing, *and* the aestheticizing interventions of expert cultures'.... This dismissal of the currently predominant styles of philosophy becomes even more surprising when we recall that Habermas himself has stressed the 'multilingual' virtues of philosophy...in its role of mediator between the laboratory, the courtroom, the museum and the lifeworld. For what can these multiple languages be, if not precisely the ...genealogical and deconstructive currents of twentieth century thought? What other discourses are available which weave between validity dimensions, reflecting upon the textures of the lifeworld as a whole, and thus simultaneously disrupting and disconfirming them? (Dews 1999:17.) (Emphasis, Dews's.)

What the postmodernist has in common with Habermas is an attempt to contextualize philosophical thinking from the point of view of its embeddedness within the "larger" structures of language and power, which are in turn construed as the *a priori* structural framework(s) for the (im)possibility of Reason. From this perspective, Habermas (1987b:131) speaks of "the debsublimation of the spirit" and the "disempowering of philosophy", a post-Hegelian movement which certainly does anticipate the postmodern critique of reason.³ What is lacking in the latter critique, however, is a comprehensive analysis of the historical faces of reason from a (normative) philosophical perspective, one that allows not only for a meaningful diagnosis, but also for the possibility of resisting and (hopefully) overcoming, in a concrete manner, what Habermas calls "the pathology of modernity" (1992b:98).

It is in terms of the common problematic of reason (and its critique) that the debate, which until recently has been marred by needless misunderstanding and miscommunication should, in my opinion, be revisited. Instead of casting the debate as a battle between two irreconcilable (hostile) camps, I believe it would be more fruitful to approach it in terms of its common scepticism regarding the legacy of metaphysical thinking. I argue further that the aesthetically-inspired approach is almost inevitable, given the narrowness of the postmodern understanding of reason, thus accounting for its exclusive focus on the phenomenon of power within modernity.

Instead of interpreting reason exclusively from the perspective of "power" (as is invariably the case when reason is restricted to a scientific-technical conception), it would be more useful to consider (as Habermas does) a postmetaphysical redefinition of rationality, that is, one that accepts a fallibilistic context as its point of departure, and in which its knowledge claims allow for a process of argumentation aimed at consensus, determined by a discursive procedure, whose rationality is to be determined by a norm of universal acceptability regarding the claims advanced by its participants, engaged in a dialogical exchange of problematic ideas. The underlying objective of this procedure is the possibility of mutual understanding and agreement, based on an exchange of reasons to validate claims that are, in principle, subject to redemption, rejection, revision and confirmation, depending on the critical and rational integrity of the relevant discursive process. In this way our notions of validity and truth are determined by the "force of the better argument", since a postmetaphysical approach, in principle, rules out all recourse to the foundationalist (metaphysical) principles that have served as the universal grounds of legitimation and validation within modern philosophy (Habermas 1985:194).

Habermas's theory of rationality is thus grounded in the rational potential implicit in the communicative process of linguistic interaction, aimed at mutual understanding and agreement. It is in terms of the fundamental assumption of a rational potential implicit in the speech acts of competent communicators, that Habermas proceeds to defend his vision of modernity.

It is my contention that a postmetaphysical approach will contribute to a deeper understanding of the present crisis of philosophy, whose current state seems to render it more and more ineffectual in its efforts to get to grips with a modern world (paradoxically) characterised by a "new obscurity", but whose proudest moment seems to have been its conversion to the "enlightenment" once promised by reason (Habermas 1989:48-70). For the debate to be conducted in a more fruitful manner, it is therefore essential to avoid the hostile climate that has accompanied its development since its inception in the 1980's. Consider, for example, Michael Peters' (1994) comments on the unfortunate difficulties that have characterized this debate, and the equally unfortunate polarisation that has undermined the possibility of meaningful dialogue:

The philosophical debate on the question of modernity as it has been conducted between Jürgen Habermas, the leading representative of the Frankfurt School and the French post-structuralist thinkers - principally Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Jean-Francois Lyotard - is now over a decade old. The debate which was both violent and polemical at the start has passed through several phases, showing all the strains of a strongly polarised opposition. What was considered in the philosophical world as a confrontation between two major schools and positions - irreconcilable and based on genuine philosophical differences - has turned out to be not the clear and unequivocal opposition first thought. (Peters 1994:3.)

It is from the perspective of the move toward an understanding of the philosophical implications of a postmetaphysical form of thinking, rather than a postmodern form of thinking, that I propose to evaluate Habermas's debate with the representatives of postmodernity, Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, and Rorty. Furthermore, given the thematic focus on the critique of reason, from a post-Hegelian perspective, Habermas must surely have a case when he states that our approach to the question of rationality as the normative basis of modernity, should be determined by a prior consciousness that philosophy, in a certain sense, has indeed reached its end. Unlike the representatives of postmodern thinking, however, Habermas does not believe that this "end" necessarily dictates an abandonment of philosophy's traditional concern with the question of reason and rationality. It is for this reason that he resists the dogmatic nature of the postmodern claim that reason is synonymous with a logocentrically defined tradition of philosophy, and that "the end" of this tradition implies the "the end" of reason, conceptualized normatively. I therefore agree with Habermas (1987b) when he claims:

No matter what name it appears under now - whether as fundamental ontology, as critique, as negative dialectics, or genealogy - these pseudonyms are by no means disguises under which the traditional form of philosophy lies hidden; the drapery of philosophical concepts more likely serves as the cloak for a scantily concealed end of philosophy (Habermas 1987b:35).

In the development of his own position on the question of modernity, Habermas has been particularly indebted to the contributions of philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, G.W. Hegel and Karl Marx, whose collective influence has found expression in the work of the Frankfurt School tradition of Critical Theory, with Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer as its principal representatives.⁴ It is especially within the context of Critical Theory, that Habermas has sought, in his

own way, to develop a fundamental idea of Hegel's, namely, 'that reason governs the world, and that world history is therefore a rational process' (Hegel 1975:27). Given this idea as his point of departure, Habermas has also critically appropriated the ideas of Max Weber as well as György Lukács, in an effort to recast the question of modernity from a sociological perspective in order to provide a more positive account of the processes of modernization and rationalization than that of his predecessors, Horkheimer and Adorno, as presented in their joint effort *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (orig. 1944, trans. 1993). Habermas's commitment to the idea of reason as an historical process forms the basis of his approach to modernity. As he once put it:

Reading Adorno had given me the courage to take up systematically what Lukács and Korsch represented historically: the theory of reification as a theory of rationalization, in Max Weber's sense. Already at that time, my problem was a theory of modernity, a theory of the pathology of modernity, from the viewpoint of the realization - the deformed realization - of reason in history. (Habermas 1992:98.)

Habermas's critical assessment of modernity has found its fullest expression in his two-volume *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1984, 1987a). It is on the basis of the arguments advanced in that complex study that Habermas turns his attention to the post-structuralist aesthetically inspired critique of the modern conception of reason (and the attendant processes of rationalisation within modernity). Habermas's engagement with the French representatives of modernity is articulated in his combative and controversial *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1987b). The (political) implications of the debate are further explored in his collection of essays in *The New Conservatism* (1989), and the postmetaphysical angle of his approach can be found in his *Postmetaphysical Thinking* (1992). I will also focus on Habermas's important encounter with Rorty,

as documented in *Debating the state of philosophy* (1996). My evaluation of Habermas's defence of modernity will be based mainly on the relevant arguments developed in these texts since, in my opinion, they provide the most comprehensive account of his current position.

As stated above, my evaluation of the debate will proceed from the point of view of the implications arising from the various attempts to overcome the conception of reason. The debate unfolds around an assumption on Habermas's part, that in spite of the tremendous problems that have beset the development of the modern age, and in spite, furthermore, of the philosophical plausibility of the postmodern scepticism regarding the modern philosophical tradition, it does not necessarily follow that we must rid ourselves of certain basic ideas, ideas such as truth and reason, freedom and justice - ideas which have played such a vital role in the development of the Western philosophical tradition of critical thinking. While Habermas is in agreement with the postmodernists that philosophy can no longer define its status and role within the traditional context of philosophical foundationalism or *a priori* transcendentalism (conceived either in terms of a transcendental subject or dialectical process that unfolds in the world), this does not mean that he is prepared to abandon the discipline of philosophy as "the guardian of reason", that is, a discipline concerned with the critical evaluation of the ideas and ideals which, although originating within the Enlightenment tradition, are still relevant and significant "in a period in which basic irrationalist undercurrents are transmuted once again into a dubious form of politics" (Habermas 1985:195).

Crucial to an understanding of Habermas's philosophical project is to realise that he does not use the term "philosophy" in its traditional sense. In this regard, McCarthy (1984) correctly points out:

[Habermas] does not use the term *philosophy* in its traditional sense as a "philosophy of origins" or "first philosophy". It does not designate a presuppositionless mode of thought that provides its own foundations; nor can the ideals inherent in philosophy - truth and reason, freedom and justice - be realised by philosophy itself. Philosophy belongs to the world on which it reflects and must return to it. (McCarthy 1984:127.)

For Habermas, philosophy ultimately boils down to the possibility of reaching understanding and consensus through a process of debate and argumentation. In this process we can no longer fall back on the metaphysical comforts of transcendent universal truths and principles, whether in "the mind", "reality", "God", or a dialectical (teleological) movement towards "truth" beyond history. According to Habermas, these normative notions of the metaphysical tradition must be transformed in such a manner that they reflect a fallibilistic ethos of critique and self-critique. In Habermas's view, the answer to the critique of metaphysical foundationalism, is a postmetaphysical account of our limits, limitations and possibilities in and through a communicative model of rationality, based on the possibility of mutual understanding through dialogue, as I will show in Chapter 5.

Central to Habermas's defence of modernity is the claim that the total rejection of modernity is based on an acceptance of an illegitimate privileging of a problematic and narrow (positivistic or logocentric) conception of reason, as a result of which reason has been reduced to its scientific-technical dimension, thus giving rise to the notion that "progress" in the modern world must be defined exclusively in terms of scientific and technological advancement. As Habermas (1985:197) puts it, "[l]ogocentrism means neglecting the complexity of reason effectively operating in the life-world, and restricting reason to its cognitive-instrumental dimension (a process, we might add, that has been noticeably privileged and selectively utilized in processes of capitalist modernisation)".

While acknowledging the significance of the scientific-cognitive dimension of rationality, Habermas argues for a more balanced perspective which also recognises two other equally important forms of rationality, the practical and the aesthetic, each with its own distinct region of validity, and each addressing its own distinct problematic:

The project of modernity formulated in the 18th century by the philosophers of the Enlightenment consisted in their efforts to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art, according to their inner logic. At the same time, this project intended to release the cognitive potentials of each of these domains to set them free from their esoteric forms. The Enlightenment philosophers wanted to utilize this accumulation of specialized culture for the enrichment of everyday life, that is to say, for the rational organization of everyday social life. (Habermas 1981:9.)

Probably the most important question that has been raised in this debate is the following: Is modern Western society currently witnessing its demise, that is, an exhaustion of its cultural resources, or is the present crisis simply the result of an inadequate or one-sided understanding of the culture of modernity? Depending on one's point of view, the present crisis of modernity is interpreted either as a transition to a culture of postmodernity; alternatively, there is a school of thought which holds the view that "[r]ather than entering a period of post-modernity, we are moving into one in which the consequences of modernity are becoming more radicalised and universalised than before" (Giddens 1990:3).

The representatives of postmodernity seek to explain the current scepticism regarding the Enlightenment ideals of freedom and progress in terms of a misguided faith in a scientifically (technically) oriented conception of reason, in which the "free will" of "man", defined essentially as a rational being, is allowed

unlimited scope to create new forms of domination and oppression, in the name of an enlightened and enlightening reason. From this perspective, the modern conception of reason is accused of complicity in the unspeakable ways in which the modern world has plunged relentlessly to unprecedented depths of human suffering and ecological destruction. Thus we find postmodern thinkers such as Lyotard (1984) questioning a teleological conception of history that seeks to legitimate itself by means of certain universalist "metanarratives", in the light of which "History" is construed as a progression of events unfolding inevitably towards the improvement of "man" and society in general.

Reacting against a unitary conception of reason, and questioning the ability of the traditional philosophical and political modes of critical reflection to understand and overcome the Western forms of domination so deeply embedded within the modern capitalist industrialised society, the postmodernists evoke a scenario of plural histories, disparate language-games, incommensurable discourses and life-worlds, in the hope of defending "the Other" of reason, variously referred to as "the non-identical and the nonintegrated, the deviant and the heterogeneous, the contradictory and the conflictual, the transitory and the accidental" (Habermas 1992a:115-116).

This debate therefore highlights two radically different approaches to the problem of modernity; for Habermas (ibid.:116), modernity can be defended if reassessed from a postmetaphysical perspective, based on "a concept of reason that is skeptical and postmetaphysical, yet not defeatist ". For the postmodern thinkers, on the other hand, modernity, and the metaphysical philosophical tradition underlying it, has lost its legitimacy, and should consequently be abandoned. On this latter argument, philosophy as a discipline concerned with normative notions of reason and rational action, believed to be capable of grounding and validating

our claims to (scientific) truth, on the one hand, and forging a collective vision of a better society, on the other hand, is dismissed.

It is important to note that, for Habermas, the defence of modernity, is not a matter of abstract theoretical speculation, but a practical commitment to the principle of reason as the normative basis of a modern democratic culture. Habermas's interest in modernity as a potential manifestation of reason can be traced back to his experiences as a teenager, just after the Second World War, trying to comprehend the full significance of the atrocities perpetrated by Adolf Hitler and the supporters of the Nazi regime. In the face of such a political disaster, Habermas has endeavoured to understand how the German cultural tradition, based on principles of freedom, justice, and democracy, had capitulated so easily to the dictatorship of fascism and mass extermination. Habermas recalls these early teenage experiences as follows:

At the age of 15 or 16, I sat before the radio and experienced what was being discussed before the Nuremberg Tribunal; when others, instead of being struck silent by the ghastliness, began to dispute the justice of the trial, procedural questions, and questions of jurisdiction, there was that first rupture, which still gapes. Certainly it was only because I was still sensitive and easily offended that I did not close myself to the fact of a collectively realized inhumanity in the same measure as the majority of my elders. (Habermas 1983:41.)

The deeply "personal" nature of Habermas's response to the horrors of the Nazi regime, as well as his deep sense of shock and bewilderment at the general indifference displayed in post-war Germany to the atrocities of the Nazi era, not only by "ordinary" people, but also by leading historians and academics (for whom political normalisation had taken precedence over all efforts to come to terms with

the past), has had a profound effect on his development.⁵ Richard Wolin's (1989) comments on the general evasiveness regarding the so-called "German question" are indeed illuminating in so far as they provide us with a perspective on the "practical" dimension of Habermas's theoretical work:

For years, the "German question" as perceived by politicians of Western Europe had been "How can German aggressiveness be curbed?" But after 1945, this question took on an entirely different, more sinister meaning. It was rephrased to read, How could the nation of Goethe, Kant, and Schiller become the perpetrator of 'crimes against humanity'?" Or simply, "How was Auschwitz possible?" One could justifiably say that the very "soul" of the nation is at stake in the answer to this question. For the development of a healthy, nonpathological identity would seem contingent on the forthright acknowledgement of those aspects of the German tradition that facilitated the catastrophe of 1933-1945. And that is why recent efforts on the part of certain German historians...to circumvent the problem of "coming to terms with the past" are so disturbing. For what is new about this situation ...is the attempt not simply to provide evasive answers to the "German question", ...but to declare *the very posing of the question itself null and void*. (Wolin 1989: ix.)

For Habermas, the "German question" provides the starting point of a long intellectual journey in which he looks back questioningly to the pre-Nazi German tradition in the hope of finding the vital clues to many disturbing questions, the most important of which has concerned the betrayal of freedom and respect for others, and the subsequent denial of responsibility for such a "monstrous pathology" (Bernstein 1985:2). The desire to understand this pathology has motivated Habermas not only to re-read the German "classics" in philosophy, but to turn his attention abroad to thinkers within the "analytic" and "pragmatist" philosophical traditions, as well as his predecessors of the Frankfurt School of "Critical Theory",

in an attempt to reformulate the question of "reason in history". It is especially in reaction to the work of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (1993), that Habermas has developed his own notion of modernity as an "incomplete project" (Habermas 1981).

It was on the occasion of being awarded the Adorno Prize in 1980, that Habermas fired the first shots at the critics of modernity, blaming their pessimism and neo-conservatism on a certain reception of Nietzsche in which the "dialectic of enlightenment " is replaced by the severance of the traditional association of freedom and reason. In his denunciation of the widespread appeal of postmodern thinking, and his description of its exponents as "young conservatives", Habermas identifies the core issues and major implications implicit in the "new" trend of thought:

The Young Conservatives recapitulate the basic experience of aesthetic modernity. They claim as their own the revelations of a decentred subjectivity, emancipated from the imperatives of work and usefulness, and with this experience they step outside the modern world. On the basis of modernistic attitudes, they justify an irreconcilable anti-modernism. They remove into the sphere of the faraway and the archaic the spontaneous powers of imagination, of self-experience and of emotionality. To instrumental reason, they juxtapose in manichean fashion a principle only accessible through evocation, be it the will to power or sovereignty, Being or the dionysiac force of the poetical. In France this line leads from Bataille via Foucault and Derrida. (Habermas 1981:13.)

Habermas's criticism of the French postmodernists stems from a failure on their part, he believes, to appreciate fully the normative potential within the culture of modernity. As a result, he claims that they confuse the social form of modernization

(that is, the capitalist modernization of processes) with its cultural form (that is, one which, in addition to the cognitive-instrumental form of rationality, also has a moral-political, as well as aesthetic dimension of rationality). It is this more comprehensive interpretation of reason that Habermas brings to bear on his postmodern opponents. This interpretation allows for the possibility of a greater appreciation of an aesthetically oriented perspective, not with a view to contrasting "the aesthetic" with "the political" as two diametrically opposed and mutually exclusive orientations, but to view the two, instead, as complementary processes, contributing (in a different way) to a fuller understanding of the problematic of modernity.

Habermas's defence of modernity as an "incomplete project", as well as his indefatigable commitment to reason, have undoubtedly contributed to a great deal of misunderstanding on the part of his opponents. This misunderstanding has given rise to two major accusations against him. In the first place, his attempt to defend a notion of reason from a universalistic position is incompatible with the "obvious" move towards contextualism, on the grounds that the universalistic pretensions at systematic thinking, associated with a discredited metaphysical tradition, are simply incompatible with "difference" and the pluralism of incommensurable language-games as the authentic expression of the post-modern condition (Lyotard 1984). Secondly, it is claimed that modernity is incapable of being anything more than a phenomenon of power and domination, in view of its privileging of an instrumental-technical form of rationality whose untrammelled advancement undermines the possibility of collective action in the name of freedom and self-determination, thus restricting the possibility of change to the realm of the aesthetic, as the only meaningful source of resistance within the modern world.

Following Stephen K. White's (1991:4-11) analysis, one can define the postmodern problematic in terms of four major trends. Firstly, an incredulity towards metanarratives. In this regard, the position of Lyotard (1984) is exemplary in its questioning of the founding principles of the modern metaphysical tradition, especially the assumption of an ahistorical subject as the legitimating basis of the modernist ideals of freedom, moral progress, and knowledge.

Secondly, a new awareness of the dangers of societal rationalization. In this regard, Foucault's (1977a) perspective on the problem of "normalisation" as a subtle but very effective form of power and domination, is especially illuminating insofar the credentials of the modern welfare state as well as the Marxist alternative are viewed as instruments of oppression whose programmes of social welfare and upliftment only succeed in denying the individual her sense of self-worth and self-determination.

Thirdly, new informational technologies, such as the television are viewed (mainly) as centralizing instruments of propaganda capable of invading the most private and intimate aspects of the individual's life, thus diminishing the possibility of critical disengagement and the development of meaningful alternative perspectives.⁶

Fourthly, new social movements which seek their identity and solidarity in social and political spaces "outside" the prevailing conventions and ideological reach of current political discourse. These new social movements, primarily defensive in character, suffer from experiences of disaffection and marginalization in view of their search for a more authentic identity that is not necessarily tied to economic status and the acquisition of wealth:

The women's movement, antinuclear movement, radical ecologists, ethnic movements, homosexuals and countercultural groups in general all share, at least to some degree, this new status, even if they differ in many substantive ways. They all have a somewhat defensive character, as well as a focus on a struggle to gain the ability to construct socially their own collective identity, characteristics that make them rather anomalous in relation to the standard rules for interest group behaviour in the modern state. (White 1991:10.)

The characterisation of the postmodern problematic outlined above is certainly not exhaustive, but it does give us an indication of the range and complexity of the issues involved in the debate. But since the postmodern form of thinking derives its impetus from an aesthetic orientation, and is also sceptical about the deployment of universal "metanarratives", the question of the appropriate criteria for an assessment of the debate does indeed present us with a serious challenge.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

By defining his own position within the context of the Hegelian- Marxist legacy in general, and the so-called Frankfurt School tradition of "Critical Theory" in particular, Habermas has set himself the task of re-examining the legacy of the European Enlightenment as it has taken shape within the processes of modernization, with a view to developing a theory of modernity aimed at revealing its achievements, its (rational) normative potential, as well as its destructive effects. It should, however, be noted that Habermas's commitment to the "project of modernity" is not of a dogmatic nature; he is not blind to the tremendous problems that have accompanied the process of modernization. With the possible exception of Foucault, there are few thinkers who can match his prodigious analytic skills in evaluating the disabling effects of a modern world wedded to the imperatives of

capitalism, bureaucracy, and technology. At one level it would seem as if Habermas and his postmodern opponents are saying the same things; at a deeper level, however, one detects an element of guarded optimism in Habermas that is lacking in the reflections of his opponents. It is his attempt to overcome the pathologies and imbalances of modernity, while retaining its more positive elements, that sets Habermas apart from those who despair of a political solution to a crisis-ridden modern age in which "the present" does not seem to make any sense at all, and "the future" does not seem to admit of any possibility of redemption from the various forms of power and domination that have come to characterise the modern experiment. In this regard, Habermas (1989) writes:

Today it seems as though utopian energies have been used up, as if they have retreated from historical thought. The horizon of the future has contracted and has changed both the *Zeitgeist* and politics in fundamental ways. The future is negatively cathected; we see outlined on the threshold of the twentieth century the horrifying panorama of a worldwide threat to universal life interest: the spiral of the arms race, the uncontrolled spread of nuclear weapons, the structural impoverishment of developing countries, problems of environmental overload, and the nearly catastrophic operations of high technology are the catchwords that have penetrated public consciousness by way of the mass media. (Habermas 1989: 50-51.)

But in spite of the negative mood informing current analyses of the present situation, Habermas believes that the West cannot turn its back on the Enlightenment ideal of a rationally organised society. The basic problem for Habermas, is that the rationalistic optimism that once inspired the Western Enlightenment thinkers of the 18th century has given way to a regrettable, but understandable, mood of despair and cynicism, which he attributes to the Western world's loss of confidence in the modern age, which in turn is attributable to a

general "obscurity", which has had a crippling effect on our understanding of modernity as a post-traditional phenomenon. As Habermas puts it:

The responses of the intellectual reflect as much bewilderment as those of the politicians. It is by no means only realism when a fortnightly accepted bewilderment increasingly takes the place of attempts at orientation directed towards the future. The situation may be objectively obscure. Obscurity is nonetheless also a function of a society's assessment of its own readiness to take action. What is at stake is Western culture's confidence in itself. (Habermas 1989:51.)

In addressing the problem of "obscurity", Habermas embarks on a project that he shares with the postmodernists: the philosophical critique of the modern conception of reason. In this regard, I will examine the respective positions developed by each of these thinkers and also consider the implications of their various critiques for the question of modernity. The major argument of my dissertation is that Habermas's debate with postmodern thinking can be rendered more meaningful and rewarding if one resists the temptation that necessarily arises when one is compelled to take sides in a debate couched in mutually exclusive terms that support either "modernity", on the one hand, or postmodernity", on the other. It is my contention that instead of approaching this debate in terms of "modernity versus postmodernity", we approach it in terms of the possibility of a postmetaphysical mode of thinking. I argue further that such an approach provides, not only the necessary vantage point for a more useful evaluation of the question of modernity, it also provides us with a framework capable of dealing with Habermas's position in a more nuanced manner than the dismissive and dogmatic stance that have invariably typified the positions of his critics thus far.

It will become apparent that from the perspective of a postmetaphysical mode of thinking, as opposed to the postmodern mode of thinking, certain seemingly intractable aspects of Habermas's position become more plausible. This, in turn, provides us with the possibility of responding in a more constructive manner, for example, to Rorty's allegation that Habermas is essentially a transcendental thinker, still trapped in the metaphysical straitjacket of the Kantian "grid" (Rorty 1980:364).⁷ It is allegations such as Rorty's that have inclined me to consider the possibility that maybe Habermas and his critics are simply talking past one another, and that the present confusion stems from a "paradigm shift" in the Kuhnian sense, on Habermas's part, thus ruling out the possibility of reaching consensus regarding the appropriate criteria for an assessment of the debate. Are we to rest content with the incommensurability of the different positions, with each side resorting to various rhetorical strategies aimed at silencing its adversary, or is there a way of possibly overcoming this dilemma?

As indicated above, these questions strike at the heart of the debate between Habermas and the representatives of postmodern thinking. At its deepest level, Habermas's confrontation with postmodern thinking invokes one of the most important philosophical challenges of our day: the debate on contextualism and objectivism, the outcome of which, ultimately, will have profound implications for our self-understanding as moral agents imbued with a rational sense of accountability and responsibility, and whose scientific practices belie the popular claim to objectivity and neutrality.

In the final analysis, as stated above, my main objective is to show that the concept "postmetaphysical thinking" offers a more plausible description of the commonalities between Habermas's position and that of his critics. Furthermore, it is my contention that if we are prepared to investigate and develop the

implications of a postmetaphysical mode of thinking, I believe it will prove to be more beneficial for future research than the vague (but highly fashionable) claims currently made in the name of postmodern thinking. To this end, I propose to evaluate the debate within a structural framework which examines the details of the individual contributions of Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard and Rorty, only to the extent that they contribute towards my two primary objectives: firstly, to show how this debate can clarify the need for a reconceptualization of our understanding of reason and rationality from a postmetaphysical perspective; and, secondly, to show how we can contribute to a more meaningful understanding of the problem of modernity.

In the light of these objectives, I propose to provide a general overview of the historical and philosophical contexts that inform this debate. This will serve the primary purpose of providing some clarity on the more important terms and relevant concepts that have formed the background for the development of the debate. Special attention will be given to controversial terms such as "modernity", "postmodernity", "rationality", and "pluralism" (Chapter Two).

This is followed by a detailed analysis of the various arguments employed by Habermas and his opponents in their respective critiques of modern reason. In this regard, I consider the major implications of these arguments for the role and status of philosophy as a critical discipline. I examine not only Habermas's direct confrontation with postmodern thinking in his own writings (Habermas 1981, 1985a, 1992), but I also examine actual instances of his debate with thinkers such as Rorty (Bernstein 1985; Niznik and Sander [eds.] 1996), as well as constructed accounts of the debate such as that presented by Robert C. Holub (1991) between Habermas and Lyotard (Chapter Three). I then provide a detailed analysis of Habermas's debate with Derrida and Foucault in Chapter Four.

In Chapter Five I proceed to offer a critical account of the postmetaphysical critique of reason. In this regard, I will consider the significance of his attempt to contextualize the postmodern critique of reason by aligning it with the more general critique of reason that has accompanied the development of modern philosophy, a critique or discourse of modernity which, in the wake of Hegel's idealist conception of rationality, has played such a vital role in the development of modern philosophy as a critical discipline. According to Habermas,

In the discourse of modernity, the accusers raise an objection that has not substantially changed from Hegel and Marx down to Nietzsche and Heidegger, from Bataille and Lacan to Foucault and Derrida. The accusation is aimed against a reason grounded in the principle of subjectivity. And it states that this reason denounces and undermines all unconcealed forms of suppression and exploitation, of degradation and alienation, only to set up in their place the unassailable domination of rationality. Because this regime of a subjectivity puffed up into a false absolute transforms the means of consciousness-raising and emancipation into just so many instruments of objectification and control, it fashions for itself an uncanny immunity in the form of a thoroughly concealed domination. (Habermas 1987b:55.)

However, if Habermas is willing to align the postmodernists with the tradition of criticism that has unfolded within the "discourse of modernity", this does not mean that they interpret their own work from this perspective. Indeed, it is the failure of the postmodern thinkers to appreciate fully the tradition within which they are functioning that leads to Habermas's (1987b:53) interpretation of their work as a misguided attempt to overcome reason by calling into question the tradition of philosophy in its entirety, while paradoxically and implicitly relying on the very conceptual tools that have formed the cornerstone of the philosophical tradition in question.

CHAPTER TWO: MODERNITY IN PERSPECTIVE

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter One, I indicated that Habermas's debate with the representatives of postmodern thinking concerns two fundamental inseparable themes; firstly, the theme of reason and rationality; secondly, modernity, conceptualized as the normative framework for the assessment of reason. I also stated in the previous chapter that if the debate is to yield more positive results, it should be assessed from a postmetaphysical rather than a postmodern perspective. It should be noted, however, that the value and success of such an approach will ultimately depend on demonstrating two points; firstly, that Habermas and the postmodernists are essentially concerned with a common problematic, namely, the modern conception of reason as it finds expression within a philosophical framework of a universal subject, the *a priori* foundation of philosophical truth and knowledge. Secondly, that their opposing conceptions of modernity (explicit in Habermas's case, implicit in the case of the postmodernists) are determined by the different conception(s) of reason underlying their respective arguments. A fair assessment of the debate therefore requires a preliminary clarification, not only of the terms that constitute its frame of reference ("reason" and "rationality"), but also of "modernity" as an historical as well as philosophical category. My account of these rather complex and controversial terms will necessarily be limited to their relevance to my general objective, namely, to demonstrate that the critique of reason is very much a part of the modern philosophical tradition, and that Habermas as well as the postmodernists, in their respective critiques, are trying to establish new ways of thinking, based on their common acceptance that the rationalist legacy of the modern metaphysical tradition has reached its end.

The purpose of this chapter is therefore to clarify the relevant philosophical terms within the context of modernity, understood firstly as a historical category, and secondly, as a philosophical category. Although a conceptual distinction has been made between these two categories, I must point out that they form part of a common problematic: reason as it manifests itself in history. In the final analysis, postmodern and postmetaphysical thinking have one thing in common, namely, what Habermas (1987b:131) refers to as "the desublimation of the spirit" and the "disempowering of philosophy", conceptualized as a special discourse with a privileged insight into the nature of rationality and truth.

In the modern metaphysical tradition the privileged status of philosophy has found expression in an ahistorical (*a priori*) conception of reason, assumed to have its origin in the "mind" of a universal ahistorical subject, defined as the universal foundational context for the modernist quest for certainty, with philosophy functioning as a privileged discourse of validation and legitimation. But before this aspect of the debate can be discussed, we need to reach clarity on the "subjective turn" as the defining moment in the modern philosophical tradition.

2.2 MODERNITY AS AN HISTORICAL CATEGORY: A NEW CONSCIOUSNESS OF TIME

As an historical category, modernity is a complex phenomenon. Its origin is closely connected with the impact of Christianity in Europe in general, and the Christian eschatological consciousness of time in particular. According to Robert Pippin (1991:17), although the concept of modernity is today indissolubly associated with the sixteenth- and seventeenth centuries of Western Europe, the term "modern" actually goes back to the late fifth and early sixth centuries, when Roman historians of the day grappled with the problem of how to integrate the wisdom of antiquity into a world that had changed on a dramatic scale. Pippin (*ibid.*) explains:

The very idea of the modern ...is, it is safe to say, very much a product of the Western European, Christian tradition, perhaps its most representative or typical product, even though the term itself is literally of Roman origin and predates by some time the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century formulations of an explicit revolutionary project. It is widely conceived that the term came into existence in the late fifth or early sixth century (derived from the adverb *modo*, "recently" or "of this time") and that a significant, even problematic distinction between *moderni* and *antiqui* can first be noted in the speculations of the Roman historian Cassiodorus about the virtues and practices of the "old" Rome in this "new" time, so much under the influence of the East and the Germans. In that context, the original problem was not, as it was to become, a kind of opposition between ancients and moderns, but a way of "translating" ancient wisdom and practices into a new context. (Pippin 1991:17.)

The epochal consciousness of modernity as a consciousness of a "now" in opposition to a "then" was a gradual process which became more and more decisive to the extent that the early Christian notion of the temporary status of a secular life within a fallen world began to be challenged. In the face of this challenge, the Christian faith in an imminent "Second Coming" began to lose its appeal. In its place a new notion of time, linked to a future destiny beyond the natural and historical life of humankind began to take root in the Christian consciousness. Given this change of time-consciousness, the historical consciousness of "the present" also shifted dramatically; "the present" was no longer conceived of in terms of a future in historical time, but an "eternal future" after death. This shift in the Christian understanding of time meant not only that "the present" becomes a constant series of moments in anticipation of eternal bliss, but it also inaugurated a new historical consciousness of "the present" as a vehicle of transition, and a medium of social and political involvement.

When it became more and more unlikely that one's chief historical stance should simply be a preparation for the apocalypse, the problem of temporality became more and more complex and numerous issues involving the proper Christian reconciliation with the actual world, human historical institutions, and the past, became much more prominent. So Christianity, it is said, with its linear, eschatological, progressive and revolutionary concept of time, prepared the ground for a later, much different sort of revolution and *eschaton*. (Pippin 1991:18.)

As the sense of connection with the past became more fragile, the sense of incompatibility with the past became increasingly more pronounced. This new historical consciousness reached its climax with the impact of the (European) Renaissance, the Reformation, the Scientific and French revolutions. Thus the "Age of Reason" was born.

The historical phenomenon of modernity was interpreted as a momentous triumph over the institutions, the superstitions, and the ignorance of the past (Bauman 1987:283). Generally committed to the Enlightenment ideals of reason and autonomy, the modern age embraced the principle of individual and collective emancipation through the progressive achievements of modern science. The methodology of science as inaugurated by Galilean astronomy and Newtonian physics, combined with the principles of mathematical reasoning, were to become the basic "tools" for the rational reorganization of modern social and political life. The future was immanent in "a present" which proceeds in linear fashion (progressively) towards a life of enlightened (democratic) freedom, moral self-determination and responsibility. Central to the project of the Enlightenment was the idea of progress, based on rational insight, within a world characterized by change, and amenable to enlightened interventions based on such rational insight.⁸ As David Harvey (1989) put it:

Enlightenment thought... embraced the idea of progress, and actively sought that break with history and tradition which modernity espouses. It was, above all, a secular movement that sought the demystification and desecralization of knowledge and social organization in order to liberate human beings from their chains...To the degree that it lauded human creativity, scientific discovery, and the pursuit of individual excellence in the name of human progress, Enlightenment thinkers welcomed the maelstrom of change, and saw the transitoriness, the fleeting and the fragmentary as a necessary condition through which the modernizing project could be achieved. Doctrines of equality, liberty, faith in human intelligence (once allowed the benefits of education) and universal reason abounded. (Harvey 1989:12-13.)

As an essentially European phenomenon, modernity as an historical project, received and sustained its self-awareness against the background of the profound changes that had accompanied the institutional transformations in Europe, following its industrialization, on the one hand, and its social reorganization in terms of the economic principles of capitalism, on the other hand. Given the dynamic nature of these processes of modernization, the oppositional status of modernity in relation to antiquity became even more pronounced, as the modern mind became more focused on the economic and administrative processes of modernization. Today modernity is invariably linked with the social processes of state administration, the imperatives of a capitalist economy, and the role of science and technology in preserving and consolidating these processes (Giddens 1990).

Given the dynamic and expansionist nature of the imperatives governing the development of its capitalist economy and industrial systems, the concept of modernity was eventually uprooted from the particularity of its historical context and origins to assume a much greater significance. The significance of modernity would ultimately, and controversially, be determined in universal terms. As John W. Tate (1997) points out:

The claims of at least sections of entire cultures and societies to such a 'modern' identity or status seems, at least originally, to have been a distinctively European phenomenon, originating in the eighteenth century and eventually proselytized throughout the world, by political, economic and military means. It had its philosophical roots in the Enlightenment, and its sociological roots in the broad social, economic and political changes associated with the immense upheavals of the industrial and French revolutions. (Tate 1997:281.)

To the extent that modernity represented an historical epoch irreconcilably opposed to the past, and irrevocably committed to the future, the historical self-consciousness of the Enlightenment as a new beginning ultimately translated into one central question: How was the newfound modern consciousness to define the moral-political dimension of its social existence in a world, irretrievably cut off from the past, and whose legitimacy was no longer tied to the values that had characterized the traditions of the past? All attempts to answer this question would henceforth proceed from the perspective of a self-definition of reason, defined as critical progressive faculty, and attesting to the essential nature of "man" as a rational being. The historical self-consciousness of a modern age committed to the progressiveness of reason was justified, it was generally thought, by the dynamic potential of a scientific-technical rationality capable of dominating and controlling nature - nonhuman as well as human. Zygmunt Bauman's (1987) comments on the nature of the modern self-consciousness of a new age, imbued with a progressivist

vision of history which, in turn, found expression in a progressivist conception of reason, conceptualized primarily from an instrumentalist perspective, are particularly relevant:

...the vision of history as the unstoppable march of *les luminares*; a difficult but eventually victorious struggle of Reason against emotions or animal instincts, science against religion and magic, truth against prejudice, correct knowledge against superstition, reflection against uncritical existence, rationality against affectivity and the rule of custom. Within such a conceptualization, the modern age defined itself as, above all, the kingdom of Reason and rationality; the other forms of life were seen, accordingly as wanting in both respects. This was the first and most basic of the conceptualizations providing modernity with its self-definition. (Bauman 1987:111.)

Central to the self-definition of the historical consciousness of modernity is an image of a social form of life believed to be progressively more advanced. According to this self-understanding of modernity, the modern age as the age of "the new", conceived from the perspective of a time-consciousness immersed in the dynamics of the contingent and transitory nature of the present, defines its status in terms of a constant overcoming of the past, and thus seeking its redemption in the present only to the extent that it can guarantee modernity's faith in the future. As Habermas (1987b) puts it:

Because the new, the modern is distinguished from the old by the fact that it opens itself to the future, the epochal new beginning is rendered constant with each moment that gives birth to the new. Thus it is characteristic of the historical consciousness of modernity to set off 'the most recent (*neuesten*) period' from the modern (*neu*) age: Within the horizon of the modern age, the present enjoys a prominent position as contemporary history. (Habermas 1987b:6.)

The radicalized historical consciousness of time emanating from modernity, conceptualized as a radical break from the past, consequently gave rise to the notion of modern culture as a progressively advanced phenomenon, laying claim to a status of universality. Underlying this claim was a general belief that the very nature of modernity required a rational justification for its radical break with the past, a justification based on general principles and a conceptual framework originating within the structures of modern consciousness itself. In this regard, Habermas (ibid.7), points out, "Modernity can and will no longer borrow the criteria by which it takes its orientation from models supplied by another epoch; *it has to create its normativity out of itself*. Modernity sees itself cast back upon itself without any possibility of escape." (Emphasis, Habermas's.)

In contrast to modernity's preoccupation with a "new beginning" reflectively focused on the future, traditional culture is generally viewed as one reflectively focused on the past, with a view to preserving the values and collective experience of past generations, as the normative source and orientation of social life. Modernity, on the other hand, is characterized by an historical consciousness of a radical break and separation from past traditions. Thus, in traditional or pre-modern culture, the present social structures and values are preserved by honoring the past, thus ensuring the historical possibility of continuity with the past as the means of achieving stability and social harmony in the present. Given the dynamic nature of modernity, traditional culture is generally viewed by the modernist as a form of social life resistant to change, and therefore "stuck" in the anachronistic habits and conventions of the past. This is, of course, an oversimplification because, in traditional culture, the preservation of the past paradoxically takes the reflective form of a critical appropriation of traditional values, thus reinterpreting and reinventing the past.

At the root of the difference between the traditional and the modern outlook, are two mutually exclusive interpretations of time. Commenting on the consciousness of time within a traditional culture, Giddens (1990:37-38) correctly point out, "in pre-modern civilizations reflexivity is still largely limited to the reinterpretation and clarification of tradition, such that in the scales of time the side of the 'past' is much more heavily weighed down than that of the 'future' ".

Although the concept of modernity was originally defined in terms of its oppositional status to antiquity, it is important to note that current conceptions of modernity have taken a "sociological turn" as the normative conceptual framework for an assessment of the Enlightenment legacy. From this perspective, the humanist principles of rationalism have been seriously questioned. According to Mike Featherstone:

From the point of view of late nineteenth- and early twentieth century German sociological theory from which we derive much of our current sense of the term, modernity is contrasted to the traditional order and implies the progressive economic and administrative rationalization and differentiation of the social world...processes which brought into being the modern capitalist-industrial state and which were often viewed from a distinctly anti-modern perspective (Featherstone 1988:197-198).

If modernity is to be defined primarily in sociological terms, that is, in term of the modernization processes aimed at promoting and consolidating the imperatives of a capitalist-industrialized world, with reason being identified with a scientific-technical process of thinking, one can understand the moral-political protests of the postmodernists who criticize and dismiss modernity and its Enlightenment legacy of rationalism which, it is claimed, has privileged the discourse of scientific and technical reasoning, thus contributing in no uncertain terms to the political disasters

of the twentieth century (Giddens 1990). This is an argument which Habermas first encountered in the *Dialectic of The Enlightenment* (1993, German original 1944), written jointly by Adorno and Horkheimer, in which they question the legitimacy of the Enlightenment's optimistic credo of rationalism and progress. Harvey (1989) summarizes the significance of Adorno and Horkheimer's negative position on modernity as follows:

The twentieth century - with its death camps and death squads, its militarism and two world wars, its threat of nuclear annihilation and its experience of Hiroshima and Nagasaki - has shattered this (Enlightenment) optimism. Worse still, the suspicion lurks that the Enlightenment project was doomed to turn against itself and transform the quest for human emancipation into a system of universal oppression in the name of human liberation. This was the daring thesis advanced by Adorno and Horkheimer...Writing in the shadow of Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia, they argued that the logic that hides behind Enlightenment rationality is a logic of domination and oppression. (Harvey 1989:13.)

The arguments put forward by Adorno and Horkheimer anticipate significantly the basic themes of the postmodernist critique of modernity. Lyotard (1984), for example, bases his justification for a postmodern condition on an argument designed to demonstrate that the processes of modernization have consisted predominantly in a scientific/technocratic transformation of Western society, in which normative notions such as "truth" and "justice" have lost their legitimacy. For Lyotard, the "delegitimation" of modernity implies a need to break radically with the modern philosophical discourse, which is rooted in the assumption of a universal subject. It is in this sense that we have to understand the "post" (in postmodern as well as postmetaphysical thinking) as implying a need to overcome the modern metaphysical tradition.

Although the term "postmodernity" is highly controversial and elusive, it does carry a basic connotation of something "new", something radically different from the past, a sense of rupture based on the general assumption that modernity has ended. In this regard, Douglas Kellner (1990) explains the postmodern sense of rupture as follows:

[M]ost theorists of postmodernity deploy the term - as it was introduced by Toynbee - to characterize a dramatic rupture or break in Western history. What all these conceptions of the "postmodern" have in common...is the assumption of a radical break or rupture with the past. The discourse of the postmodern therefore presupposes a sense of an ending, the sense of something new, and the sense that we must develop new categories, theories and methods to explore and conceptualize this novum, this novel social and cultural situation. (Kellner 1990:258.)

In keeping with the postmodern sense of rupture, Lyotard (1984) evokes images of a "postmodern" consciousness, having rid itself of the "metanarratives" that have been used to legitimate modernity, trying to readjust to a world characterized by constant change, incommensurable discourses or language games, none of which can legitimately lay claim to a status of privilege. With Friedrich Nietzsche as their primary source of inspiration, the defenders of postmodernity have attempted to challenge the rationalist tradition of the Enlightenment which, with its normative principles of progress and freedom in the name of "man" or "humanity" as a rational being, has only succeeded in accentuating the hopeless plight the "other of reason" (Habermas 1987b:337). Given the postmodernists' deliberate eschewal of the conceptual framework of the Enlightenment legacy of rationalism, the postmodernist defense of "the other of reason" is couched in a language that deliberately seeks to avoid the totalizing effects of the metaphysical assumptions of the Enlightenment tradition of universalism, in the hope of releasing the concrete

and historical reality of the individual (the "other of reason") from the paralyzing grip of societal modernization. In this regard, Harvey (1989) observes:

By the beginning of the twentieth century, and particularly after Nietzsche's intervention, it was no longer possible to accord Enlightenment a privileged status in the definition of the eternal and immutable essence of human nature. To the degree that Nietzsche has led the way in placing aesthetics above science, rationality, and politics, so the exploration of aesthetic experience - 'beyond good and evil' - became a powerful means to establish a new mythology as to what the eternal and the immutable might be about in the midst of all the ephemerality, fragmentation, and patent chaos of modern life. (Harvey 1989:18.)

It is the perception of an epochal shift beyond the conceptual horizons of modernity, based on an ahistorical construal of the societal processes of modernization, and the privileging of an aestheticist critique of modernity, that Habermas singles out as the primary reason for the illegitimate claim by postmodern thinkers that modernity has been eclipsed by a new and radically different postmodern order. According to Habermas (1992:28), it is not so much a shift in epochal consciousness, but a restricted and problematic conception of reason that is to blame for the current debates concerning the "end of philosophy", debates which derive their justification from the hope of "encircling that which metaphysics had always intended and had always failed to achieve". Habermas (1987b) therefore argues:

The theory of modernization...dissociates "modernity" from its modern European origins and stylizes it into a spatio-temporal neutral model for processes for social development in general. Furthermore, it breaks the internal connections between modernity and the historical context of

Western rationalism, so that the processes of modernization can no longer be conceived of as a rationalization, as the historical objectification of rational structures. (Habermas 1987bb:2-3.)

The claim in support of a postmodern age is further reinforced by a radicalized sense of time in which the "present" is endorsed as a moment of rupture, and as such, it constitutes a radical break with modernity and tradition. This radicalized sense of time is experienced as a sense of discontinuity in which the transient and the ephemeral, the fragmentary and the physical, are given pride of place. From this perspective, the articulatability, if not the intelligibility, of the postmodern age becomes linked to an aestheticist critique of modernity in which the (postmodern) present, as a constant source of flux, is celebrated. This aesthetically inspired critique and celebration takes its cue from the French conception of *modernité*, a concept the significance of which Featherstone (1988) explains as follows:

The French use of *modernité* points to the experience of modernity in which modernity is viewed as a quality of modern life inducing a sense of the discontinuity of time, the break with tradition, the feeling of novelty and sensitivity to the ephemeral, fleeting and contingent nature of the present (Featherstone 1988:199).

The centrality of the concept of *modernité* within the postmodern critique of reason, constitutes the overarching context for postmodern critique of reason, defined from a metaphysical perspective of closure and finality, and anchored in the assumption of a universal ahistorical subject of reason and rationality.

2.3 MODERNITY AS A PHILOSOPHICAL CATEGORY: THE SUBJECTIVE TURN

As stated above, the emergence of modern society coincided with a radical shift in historical self-consciousness. The new age, as the age of Enlightenment, was seen as a progressive advance and an irreversible triumph over the values and principles that had characterized all premodern forms of society. Given this radical self-understanding of modernity, the major thinkers of the Enlightenment movement interpreted their task primarily in terms of the general assumption that modernity represents a radical break from the past; the task of philosophy was to validate modernity's cultural independence and autonomy. This assumption generally implied that philosophy was faced with the challenge of justifying the Enlightenment's faith in reason, as the only appropriate form of authority in the modern world. In trying to meet this challenge, it was generally accepted that reason would have to be shown to be critical, independent and autonomous, in a manner as radical as that which had accompanied the modern sense of historical self-consciousness.

Modernity was not to be conceived of only from a chronological perspective; it was seen to be a more progressively advanced political and social formation. For this reason it could not, in principle, "look back" to the traditional values and principles of the past for moral-political guidance. Indeed, what with the tremendous impact of the Scientific Revolution, the Reformation, and the French Revolution, there was great optimism regarding the possibility of a rational society in which its citizens would display a moral responsibility and enjoy a political freedom unimaginable in any other society.

With the theme of autonomy and independence constituting the general context of modern philosophy, the primary focus has been an investigation of "man" as the subject and foundation of reason, from an epistemological as well as moral point of view. In this regard, modern philosophy interpreted its role on the basis of a specific interpretation of rationality aimed at the achievement of freedom and autonomy for the individual, as a citizen of a modern democratic culture, on the one hand, and a "private" moral agent, on the other hand.

In order to achieve these goals, philosophy had to demonstrate modern man's capacity for "enlightenment", that is, moral-political maturity, as the cornerstone of modern culture. Modern philosophy thus initiated a process of self-reflective and self-validating reasoning, aimed at ruling out the possibility of all forms of dependence on unfounded assumptions and knowledge claims incapable of meeting the "universal" standards reason. In this regard, Descartes' model of methodological doubt as means of arriving at certainty serves a classical example. On this approach, Descartes believes he has discovered a universal truth insofar as no rational person would deny that he or she exists. The "universality" of this truth accordingly becomes the basis of rationality for Cartesian thinking.

The Kantian approach, as I will show in this chapter, also looks for the foundations of certainty; in terms of this approach. however, it is the assumption of universal *a priori* categories of understanding, and the intuitions of space and time, which provide the basis for certainty. The implicit assumption underlying the Cartesian and Kantian positions is that the possession of reason presupposes the possibility of self-emancipation from ignorance and all forms of dogmatism, through a process of rational self-reflection. This assumption is also central to political theory as it has found expression in the Hegelian-Marxist tradition, insofar as oppression and exploitation are equated with ignorance of the true rational potential of bourgeois society, as represented in the proletarian promise of a universal classless society.

Given the general orientation and self-interpretation of modern philosophy as a radical break with the preconceptions and preoccupations of its classical and medieval predecessors, the collective efforts of modern philosophical reflection was focused on overcoming the insecurity and anxiety that had inevitably resulted from its endorsement of modernity as a radical new beginning. Eschewing the metaphysical speculations of premodern philosophical enquiry, modern philosophy could no longer concern itself with speculations regarding the status and position of "man" in a cosmos or universe whose interrelated structure was thought to display the harmonious workings of a mysterious Creator. The emergence and impact of modern science seriously challenged the legitimacy of traditional metaphysics, oriented towards a contemplation of a reality (permanent, necessary, constant, unchanging) "behind" the flux of everyday experience. Given the persuasive authority of the empirical methods of modern science, the abstract speculations and doctrines of traditional metaphysics thus lost their legitimacy as methods of enquiry.

From a philosophical perspective, the possibility and significance of modern science had to be accounted for; the justification of the knowledge claims of science had to be undertaken in such a way so as to prove the legitimacy of modernity's self-definition and status as a progressive cultural phenomenon whose superiority was attested to by its sole reliance on reason. The search for certainty in a metaphysical realm "beyond " the field of sense experience, was now replaced by a search for certainty "within " the *a priori* conceptual structures of a universal thinking subject. Hence the "subjective turn".

If the central challenge of modern philosophy is to demonstrate that the question of reason and rationality is of universal concern, then, closely related to this challenge is an undertaking of a more radical nature: to demonstrate that the

validity of all scientific knowledge claims is dependent on an *a priori*, more fundamental, philosophical form of certainty whose essential nature consists in the universal categories and principles of reason. From this perspective, the modern approach to rationality does not concern itself only with a demonstration of such universal categories and principles of reason; it also seeks to defend its status as an autonomous discipline capable of grounding and validating such knowledge claims. Within this context, modern philosophy, with its focus on "man" as the universal subject and possessor of reason, has progressively advanced its cause as an epistemological discipline intent on defending a subjectivist conception of rationality. The "subjective turn" at the root of the modern approach to rationality, presupposes the existence of a universal and permanent conceptual framework at work in the thinking process, defined as rational.

In order to gain more clarity on the implications of this "subjective turn" for the postmodern and postmetaphysical critiques of reason, it will be necessary briefly to consider two of the most important representatives of the modern philosophical tradition: René Descartes (1596-1650), and Immanuel Kant (1724-1804).

2.3.1 René Descartes

Modern philosophy is generally regarded to have originated with Descartes, whose reflections initiated a process of philosophical enquiry which would subsequently be critically appropriated and redefined to accommodate the thoughts of a distinguished lineage of thinkers, culminating in the writings of Immanuel Kant, and beyond. For both Descartes and Kant, the Enlightenment legacy of subjective rationalism represented the point of departure for modern philosophy. Although Kant's transcendental approach differed radically from Descartes' "first philosophy" of foundationalism, both philosophers were committed to the same ideal: to place

philosophy within a universal context whence to determine the grounds of rationality in order to adjudicate and ground all knowledge claims. In order to achieve this goal, Descartes, in his *Meditations*, embarked on a journey of radical doubt with a view to establishing the permanent foundations of knowledge within the *cogito* (or mind) of the thinking subject. Introducing a method of systematic doubt, leading to "clear and distinct" ideas that serve as the rational foundation for the attainment of true knowledge, Descartes introduced a dilemma that would become the central focus of modern epistemology: demonstrating the legitimacy of a method that is claimed to originate within the *a priori* conceptual structures of the thinking subject, but whose objective validity transcends the "inner" representations of the thinking subject.

Descartes' epistemological program, which proceeded by means of a method that was to be applied in strict accordance with clear and distinct ideas, was ultimately to haunt modern philosophical enquiry for a long time to come. Doubts concerning the Cartesian legacy of a presuppositionless beginning and an absolute foundation of certainty, as the *conditio sine qua non* of all rational enquiry, have given rise to serious questions regarding the feasibility of such a program. This skepticism has ultimately culminated in the postmodernist critique and rejection of reason as a normative principle. Richard Rorty, for example, raises serious doubts not only about the foundational status of the modern epistemological program; he also questions the very possibility of any theory of rationality that seeks to justify its status in the light of ahistorical *a priori* (universal) standards and principles of reason. Rorty (1980:315-316) is therefore critical of "[the] notion that there is a permanent neutral framework whose 'structure' philosophy can display.... (or) rules which constrain enquiry".

In Descartes' epistemological program, the problematic nature of his dogmatic insistence on an absolute foundation of certainty as the precondition of all knowledge claims, ultimately leads him to invoke the hypothesis of "God" as the originator of the *cogito's* clear and distinct ideas, thus causing him to violate the Leitmotif of modern philosophy by illegitimately acknowledging an authority "outside" the parameters of the validating principles of subjective reason. In the third and fourth "Meditations", Descartes (1980), for example, seeks to validate the "clear and distinct" ideas in his mind by invoking the authority of "God" as a non-deceiver, ultimately responsible for the existence of these ideas in his mind. This move clearly runs contrary to the self-understanding of modernity, which prides itself on the self-sufficiency of reason. This self-understanding is reflected, for example, by Habermas (1987b:7) when he asserts that modernity must "create its normativity out of itself".

In the light of the above outline of the Cartesian programmatic orientation, the question that presents itself is the following: What was the true significance of the Cartesian quest for certainty? It is important to deal with this crucial question first, before prematurely dismissing the Cartesian legacy as an impossible exercise which can no longer be defended with any plausibility.

It is important to understand that for a philosopher such as Descartes, the modern historical and cultural condition was experienced as something radically disconcerting and disorienting, in spite of an acceptance, on his part, of the Enlightenment project of reason. Pippin (1991), for example, vividly describes the disorienting effect of the natural sciences on the reflections of Descartes:

Given what Descartes himself was discovering about optics, what astronomy had discovered about the apparent motions of heavenly bodies, what the new physics was telling us about matter and motion, and the great sense of natural contingency created by late Medieval notions of divine omnipotence, the common-sense, trusted world of appearances might indeed be thought of as a kind of dream, perhaps a show staged by an evil genius. Things, it was turning out, were not at all, as they had seemed, comfortably for countless generations. (Pippin 1991:23.)

Given Pippin's comments above, one can argue that the modern philosopher's preoccupation with discovering the ultimate foundations of rationality within the consciousness of the thinking subject, is a reflection of modernity's historical sense of self-consciousness of an age which had to come to terms with a natural world which had lost its familiarity in the face of the tremendous advances of the natural sciences. If the scientific achievements of the day were construed as a cause for concern regarding one's orientation within the context of everyday life, then Descartes, in spite of his obvious admiration for the scientific and mathematical modes of reasoning, felt obliged to subject the question of rationality to a radical examination. In the process of carrying out this radical examination of reason, Descartes set himself a task, the import of which has far outweighed the more conventional interpretations which his work has generally received; interpretations which have focused primarily on the metaphysical and epistemological aspects of his thinking. Descartes' philosophical quest for certainty was rooted in a profound fear of failure regarding the complex nature of his task of providing the self-referential and self-validating grounds of rationality. Descartes feared that if he failed in his undertaking, the cultural condition of modernity could lead to a cultural condition of "madness". Descartes (1980) explains the underlying intent and possible implications of his project of methodical doubt aimed at foundational certainty, as follows:

Yesterday's meditation filled my mind with so many doubts that I can no longer forget about them - nor yet do I see how they are to be resolved. But, as if I had suddenly fallen into a deep whirlpool, I am so disturbed that I can neither touch my foot to the bottom, nor swim up to the top. Nevertheless I will work my way up, and I will follow the same path I took yesterday, putting aside everything which admits of the least doubt, as if I had discovered it to be absolutely false. I will go forward until I know something certain - or, if nothing else, until I at least know for certain that nothing is certain. Archimedes sought only a firm and immovable point in order to move the entire earth from one place to another. Surely great things are to be hoped for if I am lucky enough to find at least one thing that is certain and indubitable. (Descartes 1980:61.)

Because for Descartes, epistemic certainty can only prevail in a situation purged entirely of the possibility of doubt, it has generally been accepted that the modern quest for certainty can only succeed if the mind is capable of divorcing itself from all ties with the "real world". With this objective before him, Descartes initiates a process of solitary self-reflection in which the "inner voice" of the philosopher becomes the only authentic (independent) voice of reason and truth, and which, as such, is deemed capable of judging and dismissing the cultural and historical contexts which necessarily inform the process in which all knowledge claims are made. In the opening pages of the *Meditations* Descartes (ibid:) writes:

Several years have now passed since I first realized how many were the false opinions that in my youth I took to be true, and thus how doubtful were all the things that I subsequently built upon these opinions. From the time I became aware of this, I realized that for once I had to raze everything in my life, down to the very bottom, so as to begin again from the first foundations, if I wanted to establish anything firm and lasting in the sciences. (ibid.:57.)

On the Cartesian model, the general assumption of an absolute foundation of certainty as a necessary condition and starting point within the rational process of evaluating the validity of knowledge claims, has two important implications: firstly, that the modern philosophical enterprise can only function successfully to the extent that it overcomes its dependence on principles and assumptions that originate within the philosophical traditions of the past; secondly, the quest for the universal conditions of rationality and truth can only proceed within the consciousness of a thinking subject, despite the fact that its "rational nature" is something that it is supposed to have in common with all other rational subjects. By dismissing the option of a shared commitment to the guiding assumption of truth, within an intersubjective context of hypothetically advanced knowledge claims, modern philosophy not only seeks to provide the invariant context for evaluating the knowledge claims advanced in the scientific disciplines; it also seeks to defend its status as an authoritative discipline on the question of rationality, thus casting the philosopher in the role of a "master thinker" in relation to all disciplines of knowledge, in the natural as well as social sciences (Habermas 1990:1-20).

As indicated above, for Descartes, the path to epistemic certainty, as the precondition of knowledge and truth, can only produce one of two results: the rational foundations of knowledge or, an inescapable descent into "madness". This dilemma is at the root of the modern philosophical condition, and is aptly described by Richard Bernstein (1983) as "Cartesian Anxiety":

The specter that hovers in the background of this (Cartesian) journey is not just radical epistemological skepticism but the dread of madness and chaos where nothing is fixed, where we can neither touch bottom nor support ourselves on the surface. Descartes leads us with an apparent and ineluctable necessity to a grand and seductive Either/Or. *Either* there is some support for our being, a fixed foundation for our knowledge, *or* we

cannot escape the forces of darkness that envelop us with madness, with intellectual and moral chaos. ...despite the many attempts to discredit the foundation metaphor that so deeply affects modern philosophy, this underlying Cartesian Anxiety still haunts us... (Bernstein 1983:18.)

In the philosophical search for certainty, Descartes endorses the Enlightenment notion of a new beginning. Implicit in his position is the basic assumption that the discipline of philosophy is essentially to be characterized by an autonomous *a priori* self-reflective process of reasoning. In his *Discourse on Method*, Descartes (1988), proceeds from a normative position of foundationalism, and explains his approach as follows:

[N]ever to accept anything as true that I did not know evidently to be so; that is, carefully to avoid precipitous judgement and prejudice; and to include nothing more in my judgements than what presented itself to my mind with such clarity and distinction that I would have no occasion to put it in doubt (Descartes 1980:10).

The truth that presents itself with a sense of clarity and distinctness to Descartes, is the seeming self-evident and immediate certainty of his own existence as a thinking being. Descartes (ibid) asserts:

And noticing that this truth - *I think, therefore I am* - was so firm and so certain that the extravagant suppositions of the sceptics were unable to shake it, I judged that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking (Descartes (ibid.:17). (Emphasis, Descartes'.)

By placing the subject at the centre of the philosophical search for the foundations of certainty, Descartes lays the cornerstone of the modern philosophical enterprise of subjective rationalism. From this perspective, the foundation of certainty turns out to be the self-certifying truth of a self-conscious awareness of the *cogito* as the source not only of doubt, but, more importantly, of a truth whose validity is derived from the immediate presence to the mind of the overwhelming certainty of one's own existence. The *cogito* is accordingly given a unique status in modern philosophy: it provides the normative grounds for validating the ideational contents of the mind. The thinking subject is thus given a privileged status and a central role in the process of attaining knowledge of "the object".

From the perspective of the Cartesian epistemological model, the process of rationality is determined within the general context of a metaphysical distinction between a subject that thinks (*res cogitans*), standing over and against the object that it seeks to know (*res extensa*). In terms of this distinction, the subjective *a priori* conditions of the possibility of knowledge are taken to be the fundamental concern of philosophical enquiry. From the perspective of Descartes' metaphysical distinction between "man" as a "thinking thing" (*res cogitans*), on the one hand, and "the world" as object (*res extensa*), on the other hand, modern philosophy has developed its distinctive hierarchical pattern of binary oppositions which have their roots in the mind-body dualistic problematic of the Cartesian model.

The implication of Descartes' methodological mind-body distinction, with its emphasis on clear and distinct ideas as the only valid basis for one's knowledge, is that, in the final analysis, the world is construed merely as the contingent context for the application of the formal concepts and *a priori* principles of reasoning of the thinking subject. On this approach, the dominance of the subject is sharply contrasted with the passivity and receptivity of the object. The possibility of

dogmatism therefore continues to pose a threat insofar as the modern philosopher insists on the application of a "method", the legitimacy of which is based on subjective judgements assumed to be capable of identifying and distinguishing clear and distinct ideas. In this regard, philosophical solipsism is a distinct possibility; as Pippin (1991) points out:

Given the self-understanding of an extreme break in the tradition, of a need for a new beginning not indebted to old assumptions, and so wholly self-grounding, the modern philosophic enterprise appears to be locked in a kind of self-created vacuum, determining by arguments or reason a method for making claims about the world, but unable to argue convincingly that what results is anything other than what the method tells us about the world, be the "real" world as it may (Pippin 1991:25-26).

On the Cartesian model, the question of knowledge becomes extremely problematic when one considers that it presupposes a normative conception of reason whose effectiveness is tied to a faculty of judgement capable of validating the truth and falsity of statements. The will has the unimpeded capacity for either granting or withholding its assent from the knowledge claims presented to the faculty of judgement. According to Descartes, the validity of such judgements ultimately depends on the rational subject's choice to allow its free (infinite) will to be guided by the true and distinct ideas implanted in the imperfect cogito by a perfect "God", assumed to be incapable of deception. Descartes (1980) states:

Next I observe that there is in me a certain faculty of judgement that I undoubtedly received from God, as is the case with all other things that are in me. Since he has not wished to deceive me, he certainly has not given me this a faculty such that, when I use it properly, I could ever make a mistake. (Descartes 1980:79.)

In view of the importance accorded by Descartes to the hypothesis of "God", one can understand why, in the final analysis, his approach to the question of rationality fails to meet the requirements of a modern self-consciousness whose evaluative and critical capacity can only be derived from "within" the modern context of norms and criteria. Given the parameters of the Enlightenment legacy of rationalism, modern philosophy cannot invoke "external" sources of authority; its validation and legitimation can only be derived from the "internal" authority of reason itself. It is from the perspective of validating the role of reason as the only legitimate normative authority of modernity, that the transcendental philosophy of Kant assumes its distinctive significance.

2.3.2 Kant and the transcendental turn

Kant's contribution to modern philosophy has taken the form of a critique of reason, defined as a critical self-examination of the limits and powers of reason. For Kant, the term "critique" or "criticism" has a very specific meaning: it is a form of reasoning that seeks to identify and uproot all forms of dogmatism in the light of reason's authority to produce its own critical standards and principles. In order to overcome the problem of dogmatism, Kant embarks on a critical program aimed at establishing "by what right reason has come into possession of (its) concepts" (1965:B xxxvi). He believes that progress in philosophy can only occur once the philosopher has reached clarity on the nature and limits of reason. This clarity, for Kant, involves a transcendental process of critical self-examination:

It is a call to reason to undertake anew the most difficult of all its tasks, namely that of self-knowledge, and to institute a tribunal which will assure reason its lawful claims, and dismiss all groundless pretensions, not by despotic decrees, but in accordance with its own eternal and unalterable laws. This tribunal is no other than *the critique of pure reason*. (1965:A xii.) (Emphasis, Kant's.)

If the philosophical task of self-knowledge goes back, at least, to Socrates' injunction to "know thyself", the task of reason's self-reassurance as a legitimate and autonomous normative authority, is certainly central to modern philosophy's self-understanding. Although Kant has correctly identified the major concern of modern philosophy as being that of reason's self-reassurance, it is Hegel, according to Habermas (1987b:16), who first recognized the full import of the problem of self-reassurance as the central problem of modernity. The success of the project of modernity ultimately depends, according to Habermas, on reason's ability not only to be critical, but also to provide the normative constraints for moral-political action in the post-traditional and post-conventional ethos of modernity. Habermas claims:

Hegel was the first to raise to the level of a philosophical problem the process of detaching modernity from suggestions of norms lying outside of itself in the past...only at the end of the eighteenth century did the problem of modernity's *self-reassurance* (*Selbstvergewisserung*) come to a head in such a way that Hegel could grasp this question as a philosophical problem, and indeed as *the fundamental problem* of his own philosophy. The anxiety caused by the fact that a modernity without models had to stabilize itself on the basis of the very diremptions (or divisions: *Eintzweiungen*) it had wrought is seen by Hegel as "the source of the need for philosophy". (1987b:16.) (Emphasis, Habermas's.)

The "diremptions" referred to above are reflected separately in each of Kant's three major works, *Critique of Pure Reason*, *Critique of Practical Reason*, and *Critique of Judgement*, where the focus is, respectively, on an examination of "theoretical" reason, "practical" reason, and aesthetic judgement. In each of these investigations, Kant's primary concern is to establish the existence of the *a priori* conditions within the conceptual structures of the thinking subject. It is in terms of

the philosopher's investigation and alleged understanding of these *a priori* conditions, that modern philosophy receives justification for its specific undertaking: the demonstration of reason's autonomy and normative authority as a (self-) critical agency.

Regardless of the specific focus of his investigations, however, whether it is a critique of the rationalist or empiricist orientation of modern philosophy, aimed at establishing the foundation of theoretical reason, whether it is a critique of speculative metaphysics with a view to establishing the basis of practical reason, or whether he is concerned with establishing a cognitive basis for aesthetic enquiry, the central question underlying Kant's research has essentially remained the same: How can modern philosophy demonstrate the autonomy or independence of reason from all hidden forms of dependency and all irrational or non-rational forms of legitimation? More specifically, what are the universal and necessary conditions of the possibility of knowledge insofar as these conditions are assumed to originate within the *a priori* conceptual framework of the thinking subject?

The execution of this enquiry takes the form of a transcendental investigation of the rules and principles that are necessarily presupposed in the search for knowledge. If modern philosophy is to be defined as an epistemological discipline, then the question of reason and rationality is inseparably linked to a process of cognition concerning the alleged universal principles and rules which are necessarily presupposed in all cognitive disciplines. The task of the philosopher is to investigate the nature of these rules and principles, and thus establish the *a priori* context for the validation of all knowledge claims, a context whose legitimacy will depend on its independence of all sense experience (Kant 1965:A xii). Kant is therefore specifically motivated by the following question: "what and how much can

the understanding and reason know apart from all experience?" (1965:A xvii.) The investigation of this specific question proceeds by way of "transcendental" approach:

I entitle "transcendental" all knowledge which is occupied not so much with objects as with the mode of our knowledge of objects insofar as this mode of knowledge is to be possible *a priori* (Kant 1965:A 12).

In the development of his program, Kant links the question of reason's legitimacy and normative status to a procedural conception of rationality, in which he argues for the validity of a "different" logic at work in each of the three domains of enquiry: theoretical reason, practical reason, and aesthetic judgement. Although Kant has presented each of his *Critiques* as an integral part of a more comprehensive concern aimed at demonstrating the normative basis of reason's critical independence and autonomy in the age of enlightenment, his *Critique of Pure Reason*, however, has had a greater impact than the other two *Critiques*.

The significance of the success his first Critique is to be found in the fact that modern philosophy has always seen itself as inextricably linked to the natural sciences. Modern philosophy, defined as an epistemological discipline, has sought its justification as a foundational discipline, equipped to legitimate and validate the knowledge claims advanced in the natural sciences. Given the privileged status that science has enjoyed in the advancement of the modernity project, it comes as no surprise that modern philosophy has given pride of place to the cognitive status of modern science, while at the same time questioning whether philosophy can provide the normative principles for establishing a cognitive basis for the "practical" and "aesthetic" dimensions of human existence within the parameters of modernity. Max Weber, for example, sees the progress of science as being incompatible with

the respective types of rationality relating to the practical and aesthetic "value spheres" of modernity:

'Scientific' pleading is meaningless in principle because the various value spheres of the world stand in irreconcilable conflict with each other.
(Quoted in Tate 1997:298.)

From the perspective of Kant's epistemological program, the modern philosopher has been greatly influenced by Kant's denial that human understanding is capable of knowing reality. This Kantian assumption has been translated into modern philosophy by way of a radical shift from an object-centered approach, aimed at defining the essential nature of reality, to a subject-centered approach, aimed at defining the necessary epistemic conditions and presuppositions that are transcendently, that is, unavoidably, involved in the process of knowledge. In this regard, the subject-as-knower has been privileged as the ground of reason and rationality. Modern philosophy, as epistemology, has accordingly set itself the goal of explaining that which the scientist allegedly has taken for granted, namely, the rational grounds for the possibility of knowledge. On Kant's view, the human mind is limited to a knowledge of phenomena only, since reality is the effect of a mediated interaction between the *a priori* concepts or categories of the understanding, and the material of sense experience, mediated through the *a priori* forms of space and time.

By placing the thinking subject at the centre of the epistemological project of modern philosophy, Kant is, in fact, reinforcing the authority of the humanist or subjectivist orientation of the Enlightenment tradition. It is, however, important to note the nature of Kant's "subjectivism". According to Lewis White Beck (1960):

Both the forms of intuition and the categories may be called "subjective" in the sense that they are forms of our experience, not of metaphysical realities. But they are "objective" in the sense that they are not personal, psychological features, of this or that mind, but are the rules for the conduct of experience from the reception of data to the establishment of knowledge of public objects in one space and time, the same for all observers. They are thus the foundations for the kind of objectivity that characterizes knowledge and distinguishes it from mere fancy and error, to wit, objectivity as universality and necessity, producing a standard for all knowing minds and underlying agreement among various observers about their common objects. (Beck 1960:22.)

According to Kant, knowledge of the "subjective" dimension of human knowledge constitutes a radical departure from the kind of arguments that have characterized the work of his predecessors, the empiricists as well as the rationalists. His primary concern is to establish what the mind can know independently of sense experience, while fully accepting that the validity of such knowledge ultimately relates only to the way in which we necessarily experience the phenomena of the world. As Kant puts it:

Without sensibility no object would be given to us, without understanding no objects would be thought. Thoughts without concepts are empty, intuition without concepts are blind. (Kant 1965:B 75, A 51.)

For Kant, the only way of establishing reason's independence is to show that all human knowledge stems from the same sources, and that it is governed by the same principles. Kant compares the significance of his transcendental approach to a "Copernican Revolution" in philosophy:

Hitherto, it has been assumed that all our knowledge must conform to objects. But all our attempts to extend our knowledge of objects by establishing something in regard to them *a priori*, by means of concepts, have on this assumption, ended in failure. We must therefore make trial whether we may have more success in the task of metaphysics, if we suppose that objects must conform to our knowledge. This would agree better with what is desired, namely that it should be possible to have knowledge of objects *a priori*, determining something in regard to them prior to their being given. We should then be proceeding precisely on the lines of Copernicus' primary hypothesis. (Kant 1965:B xvi.)

From the perspective of the Enlightenment principle of reason's autonomy and independence from all forms of illegitimate authority, except the authority of reason itself, Kant has sought to define the main principle of modern philosophy, not only in terms of the possibility of the "subjective", that is *a priori* forms of knowledge, but also in terms of the significance of these "subjective" conditions. In this regard, the possibility of *a priori* forms of knowledge bears testimony to the autonomy of modern reason, and therefore the freedom of the modern subject. In his famous essay, *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?*, Kant (1996) reveals the nature of his commitment to the Enlightenment principle of autonomy when he states:

Enlightenment is mankind's exit from its self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to make use of one's own understanding without the guidance of another. Self-incurred is this inability if its cause lies not in the lack of understanding but rather in the lack of resolution and the courage to use it without the guidance of another. Sapere aude! Have the courage to use your own understanding is thus the motto of enlightenment. (Kant 1996:58.) (Emphases, Kant's.)

Kant's defense of the autonomy of reason reveals an implicit assumption that knowledge is essentially "human" in character; it cannot but reflect its own underlying "human" principles; it cannot lay claim to knowledge of anything beyond the parameters of human understanding. As Kant puts it, "such knowledge has only to do with appearances, and must leave the thing in itself as indeed real *per se*, but as not known by us" (Kant 1965:B xx).

Kant's restriction of human knowledge to the realm of appearances is not, however, a cause for despair, but a celebration of the moral freedom of "man". In this regard, Kant asserts, "I have therefore found it necessary to deny *knowledge*, in order to make room for *faith*" (1965:B xxx). For Kant, the autonomy of human reason as the central category of modern philosophy, means that "reason has insight only into that which is produced after its own plan...it must not allow itself to be kept, as it were, in nature's leading strings, but must itself show the way with principles of judgment based upon fixed laws, constraining nature to give answer to questions of reason's own determining" (1965:B xiii).

Kant argues furthermore that reason is, however, not concerned only with the *a priori* categories governing our understanding of nature; it is also concerned with the question of conceptual coherence or unity. Kant claims:

The law of reason which requires us to seek for this unity, is a necessary law, since without it we should have no reason at all, and without reason, no coherent employment of the understanding, and in the absence of this no sufficient criterion of empirical truth (Kant 1965:A 651, B 679).

Given the inseparable link between reason and the understanding, Kant challenges the validity of the cognitive status of metaphysics, whilst acknowledging the regulative status of its transcendental Ideas, not as source of knowledge, but as

a means of ordering the diversity of sense experience into a meaningful and coherent conceptual pattern (Kant 1965: A 644/B 672). Kant therefore accuses the metaphysician of conceptual confusion when reason uses the categories of the understanding to pronounce on metaphysical matters such as the existence of God, and the moral freedom of the human subject, or the fundamental assumption of an objectively existing world, common to us all. On Kant's view, however, human knowledge is confined to the realm of sense experience; the categories of the understanding are valid only insofar as they apply to the realm of sense experience. These categories are incapable of providing knowledge of anything that falls outside or beyond the realm of sense experience. Metaphysics, therefore, is not concerned with theoretical reason, or the domain of science; its primary focus is the moral-political conduct of the modern subject within the context of practical reason.

Beck's (1960) comments on the significance of the transcendental Ideas within Kant's system are particularly useful:

Our thinking of them is not...idle fancy. These categories themselves and the demand for systematic unity determine what concepts of objects must be used in order to complete, or attempt to complete, the search for ultimate principles which will explain everything ...The categories, freed of their anchorage in experience, become Ideas of reason. Ideas are concepts to which no object in the senses can ever be adequate; but they are not useless. They regulate the orderly pursuit of the whole. But if it is erroneously thought that Ideas refer to objects as they really are, as the categories refer to the objects of the senses, there arise various kinds of illusions which it is the business of critique to expose. (Beck 1960:24.)

Kant locates the origin of the idea of unity within the realm of pure consciousness:

There can be in us no modes of knowledge, no connection or unity of one mode of knowledge with another, without the unity of consciousness which precedes all data of intuitions, and by relation to which representation of objects is alone possible. This pure original unchangeable consciousness I shall name transcendental apperception. (Kant 1965:A 107.)

Kant's critique of metaphysics ultimately reinforces the autonomy of reason which seeks to advance the legitimate demands for coherence and unity from a "this worldly" perspective. The radical implication of Kant's critique of metaphysics does not so much concern his restriction of knowledge to the realm of sense experience; it has more to do with the critical dimension imparted to reason as a normative authority in relation to the condition of modernity. The full import of Kant's critique of metaphysics takes its orientation from the position that "pure reason is occupied with nothing but itself. It can have no other vocation" (Kant 1965:A 680, B 708). This ultimately translates into an appropriation of the critical aspects of the metaphysical tradition, the significance of which is appropriately captured by Beck (1960:24) when he refers to Kant's project as a form of "immanent metaphysics", i.e. the systematic exposition of the a priori principles within experience and of the regulative Ideas."

The critical aspects of Kant's project of "immanent metaphysics" have a decidedly political dimension in so far as reason assumes a predominantly "public" role, as the only legitimate authority within modernity capable of pronouncing on the question of freedom. Kant asserts:

Our age is, in especial degree, the age of criticism, and to criticism everything must submit. Religion through its sanctity, and law-giving through its majesty, may seek to exempt themselves from it. But they then just awaken suspicion, and cannot claim the sincere respect which reason accords only to that which has been able to sustain the test of free and open examination. (1965:A xii.)

For Kant, a crucial relationship exists between reason, as a critical power, and its employment in the public domain of unconstrained dialogue and debate, the very possibility of which relies on the political and moral freedom of the modern subject. Reason is therefore the normative and critical authority of freedom, and as such, it cannot be separated from the struggle against domination. Kant proclaims:

Reason depends on this freedom for its very existence. For reason has no dictatorial authority; its verdict is always simply the agreement of free citizens, of whom each must be permitted to express, without let or hindrance, his objections or even his veto. (1965:A 739/B 767.)

In contemporary social and political philosophy, serious doubts have been raised about the possibility of reason functioning as a normative authority within the political and social existence of the modern subject. These doubts have become more profound as the question of reason and rationality, traditionally associated with the noble aspirations of a metaphysical tradition, focused on the "higher" calling and dignity of "man" as a rational being, has increasingly fallen into disrepute. The critics of the metaphysical tradition invariably cite, in justification of their stand, the untold suffering (human as well as non-human) witnessed in the modern world, and promoted in the name of truth, progress and human civilization. This metaphysical legacy of the Enlightenment has, in the meantime, been surpassed by a more practical form of reasoning, aimed at the strategic pursuit of

ends, valorized in a capitalist-technologically driven social order, given the centrality of these ends to the preservation of the human species. Within this scenario, the rationality of technical-scientific knowledge has become the paradigmatic expression of reason. The challenge of Kant's differentiated approach to the question of rationality, together with its radical implications for the moral-political dimension of modern life, have largely gone unheeded. The critics of reason have thus proceeded to challenge the Kantian defense of enlightenment in the light of modernity's inability to make good on its promises of a better life.

At first, this challenge took the form of what Habermas (1987b) has referred to as a "dialectic of enlightenment", the purpose of which has been the transformation of the modern conception of reason, from an *a priori* philosophical enquiry into the alleged eternal laws of human understanding, into a practical pursuit of reason within the political and social structures of history, the institutionalization of which would henceforth be construed as the concrete manifestation of rationality in the modern world. This challenge, however, has become more serious as the question of human freedom has increasingly been conceptually separated from the realm of "the rational". To the extent that the legitimacy of the social and political institutions of modern life has been questioned, the enlightenment legacy of modern philosophy has equally been challenged as a legitimate normative authority. In this regard, the "post" in the postmodern challenge does not so much represent the announcement of a "post-new or post-modern" age; more accurately, it is an official announcement that the conceptual framework of modern philosophy, with its exaggerated emphasis on the powers of the rational subject, has been used and abused by "the System" to unleash its own programmes of power and domination on an increasingly incredulous, but disempowered modern subject.

It is against the background of the modern world's failure to live up to modernity's potential for a better life that Habermas undertakes his critical defense of modernity as an "unfinished project" of the Enlightenment. In this regard, Habermas has found himself swimming against the tide of contemporary conventional wisdom, which draws its inspiration from the litany of catastrophes that have accompanied the modern experience. In order to appreciate Habermas's critical reaction to the postmodern challenge of reason, it will be necessary to understand his conceptualization of reason within the context of modernity.

2.4 CONCLUSION

The theme of subjectivity is the cornerstone of modern philosophy. The modern metaphysical tradition has essentially been characterized by the privileging of an autonomous subject, conceptualized from a universalist perspective, as a rational subject of knowledge and moral action. This subjective turn within the modern metaphysical tradition has meant that the question of being or reality could no longer be investigated independently of a reflection and understanding of the role played by the *a priori* conceptual and linguistic structures that are necessarily and unavoidably presupposed in the rational process of thinking. From the modern philosophical perspective, knowledge of reality (the object) goes hand in hand with knowledge of a subject who "thinks" that reality, given its central constitutive role in the modern epistemological tradition.

In view of the privileging of the subject, the modern approach has radically reinterpreted the major themes of traditional metaphysics. Thus we find that the central theme of "the unity of Being", as conceived within Greek metaphysical thinking, and accordingly construed as a quest for harmony within the cosmos (the hallmark of perfection for the Greeks), has been recast from the perspective of the

modern conception of subjectivity, thus giving rise to the distinctive Cartesian-Kantian emphasis on the foundational role of a rational subject, as the universal condition of the possibility of knowledge as well as moral action.

In the modern metaphysical tradition, the theme of unity is reproduced from the perspective of the subject, with a process of critical self-reflection serving as the medium for establishing the legitimate limits and scope of reason. This process of critical self-reflection, specifically aimed at establishing universal criteria of reason and rationality, and anchored in the assumption of a universal subject, reflects modernity's self-understanding of its freedom and autonomy from all non-modern normative structures. Within the context of modernity, "man" (as a rational being) assumes a central and superior role in a world where the rationality of scientific knowledge has been interpreted as the paradigmatic expression of reason in the world.

It is this humanistic orientation within the modern metaphysical tradition that has become the main target and central challenge of postmodern as well as postmetaphysical thinking. As McCarthy (1987b) puts it:

The strong conceptions of reason and of the autonomous rational subject developed from Descartes to Kant, despite the constant pounding given to them in the last one hundred and fifty years, continued to exercise a broad and deep - and often subterranean - influence. The conception of "man" they define is, according to the critics of enlightenment, at the core of Western humanism, which accounts in their view for its long complicity with terror. In proclaiming the end of philosophy - whether in the name of negative dialectics or genealogy, the destruction of metaphysics or deconstruction - they are in fact targeting the self-assertive and self-aggrandizing notion of reason that underlies Western "logocentrism". (McCarthy 1987b:viii.)

In the following three chapters, we will examine in detail the various critiques of reason, as presented from the postmodern perspective, on the one hand, and the postmetaphysical perspective, on the other, within the broader context of Habermas's debate with postmodern thinking.

CHAPTER THREE: THE DEBATE WITH LYOTARD AND RORTY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter Two we looked at the conception of reason at the root of the modern philosophical tradition. In this regard, we acknowledged the principle of subjectivity as the cornerstone of the modern philosophical tradition, and as the *conditio sine qua non* of the modern model of rationality. We considered this model of rationality from the philosophical perspective of the Cartesian-Kantian assumption of a transcendental subject, defined as the *a priori* foundation of knowledge.

According to Descartes, the ultimate foundation of knowledge is to be found in the indubitable existence of "the mind" (the *res cogitans*) which, as the foundational *a priori* precondition of absolute certainty, justifies the validity of our knowledge claims not only of an "external world", but also of all other objects and subjects within it.

For Kant, on the other hand, the ultimate foundation and justification of our knowledge has a transcendental basis insofar as the question of the truth of our knowledge claims can only be determined once the universal and necessary conceptual structures of the (rational) thinking process have been identified. Kant's "Copernican revolution" thus constitutes a radical departure from claims to knowledge of "the thing in itself", since our knowledge is necessarily determined by (and restricted to) the way in which we, as (rational) thinking subjects, necessarily think. On Kant's approach, all knowledge claims are necessarily mediated through the *a priori* categories of the understanding (the conceptual apparatus responsible for the way in which we arrange the "stuff" of our sensory

experience of the world), on the one hand, and the *a priori* intuitions of space and time (which determine the way in which we necessarily receive, or are affected by the "stuff" of our sensory experience), on the other hand.

Even though the Cartesian and Kantian approaches are marked by profound differences, with the former engaged in a quest for certainty as the condition of the possibility of knowledge, and the latter engaged in establishing the conceptual structures necessarily assumed to be involved in the thinking process, what they both have in common is the assumption of an *a priori* universal basis for knowledge, a basis that is assumed to be common to all thinking subjects. Within this context, the assumption of a transcendental subject as the foundational context of philosophical enquiry is the primary focus. From this perspective, the modern epistemological tradition is primarily concerned with legitimating and validating the knowledge claims of science, given its prior assumption that for knowledge to be valid it must originate "within" the subjective rational thinking processes of a universal transcendental subject which inheres within, but somehow transcends the scope and limits of all specific cultural and historical contexts. The question of reason and rationality, and the related problematic of knowledge (its conditions of possibility), finds its locus in the monological "inner" space of a disembodied, acontextual, ahistorical transcendental subject.

What happens when the assumption of a transcendental subject as the universal foundation of knowledge is questioned? If the thesis of "the universal" as conceived within the Cartesian-Kantian tradition is discarded, what are the implications for the modern philosophical tradition in which the question of truth and knowledge has been inextricably linked to the question of reason and rationality? Does the questioning, and subsequent abandonment, of the assumption of a transcendental subject necessarily lead to a position of contextualism which, in principle, denies

the possibility of a coherent unity of perspectives? Does the acknowledgment of a pluralistically defined world of multiple discourses, with philosophy being one of them, necessarily lead to the disappearance of the assumption of "the universal" as a regulative idea (in the Kantian sense), not only for providing coherence, but also for imparting a critical dimension to philosophical thinking? Does philosophy have the resources to deal with these challenges, and redefine its traditional role as the "guardian of reason", or has it finally depleted its resources as the defender of reason and rationality in the face of these challenges? Can the question of reason and rationality still be linked to that of knowledge?

These are just a few of the questions that inform "the postmodern challenge", and although they can be addressed from a number of perspectives, I am of the opinion that the one that takes us to the heart of the debate around the postmodern challenge concerns the problem of rationality and relativism as arguably the most important challenge the discipline of philosophy is currently faced with. Habermas (1992a) sets the tone of the debate with the postmodern thinkers when he asserts:

[C]ontextualism has become a manifestation of the spirit of the times. Transcendental thinking once concerned itself with a stable stock of forms for which there was no recognizable alternatives. Today, in contrast, the experience of contingency is a whirlpool into which everything is pulled: everything could also be otherwise, the categories of the understanding, the principles of socialization and of morals, the constitution of subjectivity, the foundations of rationality itself. (Habermas 1992a:139.)

In this chapter and the next, we will evaluate the debate between Habermas and his opponents in the light of the implications that arise when the question of reason and rationality is pursued from the perspective of contextualism. Our assessment of Habermas's critical engagement with each of the postmodernists will concentrate

on those aspects of their thought that relate to the central question of rationality as it impacts on their respective interpretations of modernity. In this regard, we will also examine the nature and implications of Lyotard's (1984:xxiv) claim regarding a "postmodern condition", free of the "metanarratives", and thus of philosophy as a privileged discourse for validating the knowledge claims of science. We will also examine Rorty's position in the wake of his rejection of the epistemological legacy of foundationalism.

In the next chapter, we will continue our assessment of the debate by focusing our attention on Derrida and Foucault's respective attempts to overcome the modern metaphysical tradition. We will examine the implications of the deconstructive form of critique in the case of Derrida, and the genealogical form of critique in the case of Foucault.

Before we assess the respective arguments of the postmodernists proper, it is necessary first of all to present in broad outline an overview of the radical critique of reason, its conditions of possibility or impossibility with regard to the question of knowledge and truth.

3.2 THE CRITIQUE OF REASON

The debate between Habermas and his postmodern opponents centres around the question of reason as a normative force within modernity. Even though the postmodernists are not explicitly concerned with the question of modernity, it is presupposed in their questioning and critique of reason. Although the question of the condition of the possibility of reason (and the related notions of truth, knowledge, objectivity) remains a legitimate one, this question is now approached by the postmodernists from the perspective of modernity's historical self-

consciousness, and mediated by a post-structuralist deconstruction of received notions of knowledge and truth. The consequence of this (historicist) approach is a collective attempt at decentering the subject as the privileged source and foundation of truth, certainty and meaning, as exemplified in the foundationalist assumptions of the modern philosophical tradition.

At the root of the postmodern critique of reason, is a determination to acknowledge the historical nature of reason, which as such, cannot be separated from a pre-defined linguistic network of social meanings and practices, nor does it allow for a privileged ahistorical neutral point of reference, whence to determine permanent, fixed and final criteria of rationality. On this approach, knowledge is essentially an historically, socially determined process, and the knower is seen as a practically engaged, socially embedded and embodied agent, in stark contrast to the Cartesian-Kantian metaphysical notions of a disengaged, ahistorical, neutral, prejudice-free subject. It is against this background, that Habermas has set the overall context for his critical engagement with postmodern thinking.

In a debate held recently between him and Richard Rorty (1996), Habermas underlines the broader hermeneutic (historical) focus which, up to a point, he shares with his postmodern opponents; he also outlines the nature of his fundamental differences with them. The common framework is the hermeneutical idea of an historically and linguistically mediated interpretation of truth and knowledge: his disagreement is voiced against a naturalized notion of truth and knowledge, defined and justified solely with reference to their acceptance by a particular community occupying a particular (social) space at a particular (historical) time. As Habermas (1996) puts it:

According to this idea, a linguistically disclosed world *a priori* fixes the rules of what counts as true or false and rational or irrational for "us" - members of the corresponding speech community - who are locked into this particular world as long as the ontogrammatical regime of the language happens to last. This radical contextualism relies on the proposition that meaning determines validity but not vice versa. I would propose, instead, that the interaction between world disclosure and innerwordly learning processes works in a symmetrical way. Linguistic knowledge and world-knowledge interpenetrate. While one enables the acquisition of the other, world-knowledge may in turn, correct linguistic knowledge. (Habermas 1996:24.)

The turn towards historical practices as the condition of the possibility of knowledge and truth is a direct consequence of what Habermas and the postmodernists refer to as the anti-Platonist movement that has accompanied Western philosophy virtually from its inception. This movement reached its climax in the nineteenth century, and found expression in the post-Hegelian orientation towards, what Habermas (1987b:131) has called, "the desublimation of the spirit" and the "disempowering of philosophy".

According to Habermas, the contemporary crisis of reason coincides with the historical self-consciousness of modernity in the wake of the disintegration of substantive traditional world-views. Habermas (1987b) interprets this historical self-consciousness in the light of a general awareness that:

Modernity can and will no longer borrow the criteria by which it takes its orientation from the models supplied by another epoch; *it has to create its normativity out of itself*. Modernity sees itself cast back upon itself without any possibility of escape. (Habermas 1987b:7.) (Emphasis, Habermas's.)

The problem of modernity's normativity or self-grounding was, according to Habermas, first recognized by Hegel who, in response to Kant's differentiation of reason into the three dimensions of theoretical reason, practical reason, and aesthetic judgment, implicitly acknowledged the internal divisions brought about by the reason of the Enlightenment insofar as it had effectively invalidated the traditional values and practices, without being able to bring about the unity and coherence once provided by traditional (religious) and metaphysical world-views. Habermas's description of Hegel's critique of Kant underlines the need for unity and the normative self-grounding of modernity:

Hegel can understand Kant's philosophy as the standard or (authoritative) self-interpretation of modernity; he thinks he sees what *also* remains unconceptualized in this most highly reflected expression of the age: Kant does not perceive as diremptions the differentiations within reason, the formal divisions within culture, and in general the fissures among all these spheres. Hence he ignores the need for unification that emerges with the separations evoked by the principle of subjectivity. (Habermas 1987b:19.) (Emphasis, Habermas's.)

The need for unity of the three domains of rationality, as outlined by Kant, is seen by Hegel as the most fundamental challenge facing modernity, and the task of philosophy is accordingly interpreted as having to provide the relevant rational criteria for stabilizing a destabilized epoch. As Habermas puts it:

[O]nly at the end of the eighteenth century did the problem of modernity's *self-reassurance* (*Selbstvergewisserung*) come to a head in such a way that Hegel could grasp this question as a philosophical problem, and indeed as *the fundamental problem* of his own philosophy. The anxiety caused by the fact that a modernity without models had to stabilize itself on the basis of

the very diremptions (or divisions: *Entweiungen*) it had wrought is seen by Hegel as "the source of the need of philosophy". (Habermas 1987b:16.) (Emphasis, Hegel's.)

It does not fall within the scope of the present enquiry to follow the details of Hegel's attempt to stabilize modernity, apart from mentioning that for him the principle of subjectivity was seen as a divisive and authoritarian force within history, whose achievements are, at best, one-sided and limited insofar as it operates in terms of conceptual oppositions, thus inevitably marginalizing or excluding "difference". In this context, Hegel sets philosophy the task of striving for absolute knowledge of "the Whole", that is, identity in difference. In trying to address this problem, Hegel turns his back on history in favour of a metaphysically orchestrated dialectical process in which the specificity and uniqueness of historical events are sacrificed on the altar of a false harmony between reason and history. The search for the Absolute, defined as the absolute knowledge of reason, is seen by Hegel as the solution for the disruption caused by the dynamic historical processes of modernity set loose from the authority of past traditions. Habermas describes Hegel's failure to reassure modernity as follows:

[A]s absolute knowledge, reason assumes a form so overwhelming that it not only solves the initial problem of a self-reassurance of modernity, but solves it *too well*. The question of the genuine self-understanding of modernity gets lost in reason's ironic laughter. For reason has now taken over the place of fate and knows that every event of essential significance has *already* been decided. Thus, Hegel's philosophy satisfies the need of modernity for self-grounding only at the cost of devaluing present-day reality and blunting critique. In the end, philosophy removes all significance from its own present age, destroys interest in it, and deprives it of the calling to self-critical renewal. (Habermas 1987b:42.) Emphasis, Habermas's.)

The reaction against Hegelian idealism thus takes the form of a greater concern with the question of history. The ahistorical epistemological foundationalism of traditional philosophy is rejected in favour of an historical view of knowledge. This historical orientation has in contemporary philosophy manifested itself in the writings of Heidegger (1962) and Gadamer (1975), whose combined influence cannot be overestimated within the post- Hegelian movement.

For our purposes, their most important contribution to the "desublimation of reason" and the "disempowering of philosophy" is without a doubt the focus in their work on the centrality of the notions of understanding and interpretation in the process of knowledge. While Heidegger introduces the notion of Dasein's being-in-the-world as co-extensive with a primordial pre-reflective understanding of a pre-existing historical horizon as the enabling condition of knowledge, Gadamer radicalizes this notion in terms of the inescapability of prejudice as the ontological interpretative framework of knowledge. For Gadamer, the notion of prejudice is an acknowledgment of the authority of our cultural traditions; not to acknowledge this prejudice either lands us in an untenable position of ahistorical foundationalism, or it leads us to an equally unacceptable alternative, namely, historicism, which represents historical periods and events in terms of their absolute uniqueness and complete independence of all other historical periods. According to Gadamer,

This recognition that all understanding inevitably involves some prejudice gives the hermeneutic problem its real thrust...and there is one prejudice of the enlightenment that is essential to it: the fundamental prejudice of the enlightenment is the prejudice against prejudice itself, which deprives tradition of its power (Gadamer 1975:239-240).

It is to Habermas's credit that he accepts "the hermeneutic circle" as his point of departure, but this does not mean, however, that he falls prey to its relativistic

implications; nor does he accept its inherent conservatism. In his critique of Gadamer, Habermas (1977) remarks:

Gadamer's prejudice for the rights of prejudices certified by tradition denies the power of reflection. The latter proves itself, however, in being able to reject the claim of tradition. Reflection dissolves substantiality because it not only confirms, but also breaks up, dogmatic forces. Authority and knowledge do not converge. To be sure, knowledge is rooted in actual tradition; it remains bound to contingent conditions. But reflection does not wrestle with the facticity of transmitted norms without leaving a trace. It is condemned to be after the fact, but in glancing back it develops a retroactive power. We can turn back upon internalized norms only after we have first learned, under externally imposed force, to follow them blindly. Reflection recalls that path of authority along which the grammars of language games were dogmatically inculcated as rules for interpreting the world and for action. In this process the element of authority that was simply domination can be stripped away and dissolved into the less coercive constraint of insight and rational decision. (Habermas 1977:358.)

As Habermas's critique of Gadamer shows, he accepts the "hermeneutic circle" of cultural tradition and prejudice, as the condition of the possibility of knowledge; this does not mean that normative elements implicit in the notion of truth should be submerged in our attempt to come to terms with history. For Habermas, the idea of history is inseparable from the idea of reason as a regulative, critical, context-transcending force. Habermas (1987b:50, 53) claims that to the extent that philosophers are still engaged in the problematic of history, they remain contemporaries of the Young Hegelians, which means essentially that philosophers are still concerned with the self-critical reassurance of modernity, in search of its own criteria and norms. On this view, although modernity is characterized by

contingency and uncertainty, which is still susceptible to the normative ideas of reason and truth. Indeed, as Peter Dews (1999) points out, for Habermas the idea of reason-in-history is the major legacy of the Young Hegelians.

The Young Hegelians drew the conclusion that Hegel was in one sense right about the relation between reason and history - there was indeed a historically accumulated rational potential which his thought made visible. But this potential still needed to be *realized*. Reason alone was impotent. It had to be retrieved from the abstruse, abstract world of metaphysical concepts, and made concrete in the lives of finite embodied beings. In other words, the inner relation of reason and history, had to be preserved, without transfiguring history into the already completed *expression* of reason, as Hegel tended to do. (Dews 1999:3.) (Emphasis, Dews.)

Habermas accepts the situation described above as the context for the development of his own project. The accumulated potential of reason is interpreted by him from the perspective of modernity as an "incomplete project" (Habermas 1981). The context for the investigation of reason in history is the postmetaphysical account of reason as it finds expression in the concrete "communicative" context of the modern world, where the "pluralization of diverging universes of discourse belongs to a specifically modern experience; (and) the shattering of naive consensus is the impetus for what Hegel calls 'the experience of reflection' (Habermas 1985:192).

For Habermas, the "linguistic turn", and the concomitant "desublimation of reason", are representative of modernity's historical self-consciousness. Habermas's debate with the representatives of postmodern thinking revolves around their respective reactions to the contingencies that have accompanied the emergence of modernity's historical self-consciousness. The most challenging question to be

faced in this regard is whether the phenomenon of a plurality of world-disclosing languages, discourses, vocabularies, power regimes, traditions, each with its own specific social space and historical time, necessarily reduces us to the role of passive cultural dopes, incapable of achieving a critical perspective, whence to evaluate and challenge our inherited beliefs and values. Given this context, we will now focus our attention on Lyotard, followed by Rorty.

3.3 LYOTARD: THE PROBLEM OF LEGITIMATION

Of all the postmodern thinkers included in this study, Lyotard is undoubtedly the most accepting of the term "postmodern". Indeed his most influential work bears the title, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984, French original, 1979). This book reflects in varying degrees an awareness of Habermas as a defender of the Enlightenment legacy of freedom and reason, concepts which for Lyotard are synonymous with the typically modernist attempts to justify the modern condition in terms of "metanarratives", with philosophy operating as an elitist discipline as it proceeds (firstly) to validate and legitimate the knowledge claims of scientific as well as moral-political discourses, and (secondly) to provide an overall unitary structure for indicating the "correct" status and "place" of such knowledge claims within the larger scheme of things.

It is important to note that for Lyotard the "meta" part of the term "metanarrative" denotes a sense of absolute independence from the realm of "the narrative". As Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson (1989) point out:

We should not be misled by Lyotard's focus on narrative philosophies of history. In his conception of legitimating narrative, the stress properly belongs on the "meta" and not the "narrative". For what most interests him about the Enlightenment, Hegelian and Marxists stories is what they share

with other, nonnarrative forms of philosophy. Like ahistorical epistemological and moral theories, they aim to show that specific first-order discursive practices are well-formed and capable of yielding true and just results. "True" and "just" here mean something more than results reached by adhering scrupulously to the constitutive rules of some given scientific and political games. They mean, rather, results which correspond to Truth and Justice, as they really are in themselves independently of contingent, historical social practices. Thus, in Lyotard's view, a metanarrative is meta in a very strong sense. It purports to be a privileged discourse capable of situating, characterizing and evaluating all other discourses, but not itself infected by the historicity and contingency which rendered first-order discourse potentially distorted and in need of legitimation. (Fraser and Nicholson 1989:286.)

Given the above explication of the term "meta", if one seriously doubts the possibility or legitimacy of metanarratives, then the metaphysical conceptual structure that once performed the legitimating function is also rendered doubtful, and this is the path Lyotard invites us to follow.

With the focus now falling on the role of scientific knowledge in a post-industrialized technocratic age, the normative questions relating to knowledge and truth, invariably acquire a technical sense in which the relevant criteria of rationality are now aimed at evaluating the efficiency, the "performativity" and the "operativity" of certain (knowledge) skills that are deemed necessary for the smooth running of a scientific-technological, capitalist age (Lyotard 1984:xxiv-xxv). With philosophy's privileged status as a foundational discipline regarding first-order epistemological and moral-political truth claims now called into question, Lyotard feels justified in his reference to the (post)modern condition as one of incredulity regarding the legitimacy of a higher level of (philosophical) thinking, aimed at revealing the

conditions of the possibility of (scientific) knowledge and moral-political freedom and progress (ibid:xxiv).

Lyotard's critique of the modern epistemological and moral-political tradition is indissolubly linked to his interpretation of modernity in general. In this regard, Lyotard is primarily concerned with the role and status of scientific knowledge (the discourse of "truth") in relation to moral-political knowledge (the discourse of "justice"). Lyotard proceeds to compare and contrast scientific knowledge (the paradigmatic expression of the modern conception of rationality) with the narrative form of knowledge characteristic of pre-modern societies. In typically Nietzschean-Freudian fashion, Lyotard challenges the positivist characterization of science as a self-validating, self-referential, autonomous discipline. According to Lyotard, modern science has forgotten its pre-scientific (narrative) roots, in view of its self-definition as a discipline dealing with a type of knowledge, the acquisition of which requires (ideally) a framework of absolute objectivity and neutrality, and has accordingly sought to define its own status in opposition to narrative knowledge. It is in this sense that philosophy, conceptualized as a foundational (narrative) discipline has come into its own:

Science has always been in conflict with narratives. Judged by the yardstick of science, the majority of them prove to be fables. But to the extent that science does not restrict itself to stating useful regularities and seeks the truth, it is obliged to legitimate the rules of its own game. It then produces a discourse of legitimation with respect to its own status, a discourse called philosophy. I will use the term *modern* to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth. (Lyotard 1984:xxiii.)

Lyotard's critique of the modern condition is aimed at one fundamental concern: the phenomenon of legitimacy as a source of (universal) consensus. As indicated above, he contends that the modern condition has depended on two fundamental metanarratives for its legitimation: the progressive advancement of "humanity" based on the achievements of modern science; secondly, the progressive emancipation and moral development of "humanity" towards a more advanced condition. In this regard, philosophy fulfills two primary functions; firstly, accounting for knowledge (and reason) in terms of the progressive emancipation of a "humanity"; and secondly, that of "speculation" with a view to providing an account of reality as whole by interpreting the various knowledge claims from a metaphysical perspective of universal coherence:

The subject of the first of these versions is humanity as the hero of liberty. All peoples have the right to science. If the social subject is not already the subject of scientific knowledge, it is because this has been forbidden by priests and tyrants. The right to science must be reconquered...(the second)..."Speculation" is here the name given to the discourse on the legitimation of scientific discourse...Philosophy must restore unity to learning, which has been scattered into separate sciences in laboratories and in pre-university education; it can only achieve this in a language-game that links the sciences together as moments in the becoming of spirit, in other words, which links them in a rational narration, or rather metanarration. (Lyotard 1985: 33.)

But what happens when the metanarratives are found to be unacceptable? How will the loss of legitimation (or the "delegitimation") of the metanarratives governing the modern condition, affect our understanding of the modern condition, on the one hand, and the claim to rationality and truth regarding the role of knowledge and the progressive advancement of moral-freedom, on the other hand?

Lyotard contends that the present crisis of modernity, and the accompanying incredulity regarding the legitimacy of its metanarratives, has its origins in a discredited metaphysical tradition, which has primarily been characterized by an orientation towards a meaningful and coherent system. But this (metaphysical) system of unity and meaning, Lyotard argues, has translated itself into a political-economic (bureaucratic) system which radically undermines the possibility of moral-political independence and autonomy. Fraser and Nicholson (1989) are quite correct when they accuse postmodern thinkers such as Lyotard of identifying a metaphysical crisis in philosophy as the basis of their social-political critique of modernity, thus depriving themselves of the benefits of a critique anchored in the actual and potential possibilities and achievements of the modern historical processes and institutions:

Thus in the postmodern reflection on the relationship between philosophy and social criticism, the term "philosophy" undergoes an explicit devaluation; it is cut down to size, if not eliminated altogether. Yet, even as this devaluation is argued explicitly, the term "philosophy" retains an implicit structural privilege. It is the changed condition of philosophy which determines the changed character of social criticism and of engaged intellectual practice. In the new postmodern equation, then, philosophy is the independent variable while social criticism and political practice are dependent variables. The view of theory which emerges is not determined by considering the needs of contemporary criticism and engagement. It is determined rather by considering the contemporary status of philosophy. (Fraser and Nicholson 1989:285.)

If one pursues the line of argument set out above, then one could argue further that the crisis of modernity is a logical consequence of the recognition of the failure in practical terms to produce an age of freedom and meaning consonant with the

metaphysical demand for order and coherence. This demand is essentially in conflict with the demand for freedom in a world that has been rationalized primarily in instrumental terms.

Given the devaluation of philosophy, as indicated above, the question of the universal is abandoned completely in favour of a pluralist understanding of the (post) modern condition, characterized by an epistemological and moral-political field of heterogeneous language-games. The implications of this analysis are that philosophy can no longer function as a transcendent privileged discourse situated "above" or "beyond" the actual domains of moral-political activity; science can no longer be interpreted as a discipline of conceptual purity, functioning on an abstract level "above" the interests and concerns of "ordinary people". Robert Koch's (1999) comments on Lyotard's reconceptualization of philosophy in relation to science are particularly significant:

Philosophy is and always has been a secondary discourse, an offspring, a narrative produced by science to do battle with other narratives. Science is therefore granted an absolute priority: for philosophy, at least, *there is "always already" science*. At the same time, of course, the very production of philosophy is an admission of a certain inadequacy on the part of science. Science is absolutely different from narrative; but to do battle with narrative, it is forced to provide evidence *in narrative form*...Conceptual knowledge condemns narrative knowledge as fable, but it can do so only by producing yet another narrative, yet another fable, just as Plato condemns writing in the form of written dialogues. From here one could proceed to deconstruct the presumed conceptual purity of science. (Koch 1999:128.) (Emphasis, Koch's.)

For Lyotard, the problem of legitimation is a direct consequence of a rejection of the metanarratives that have been used by modern philosophers to justify and validate the modern legacy of the Enlightenment. This crisis of legitimation following the general incredulity towards the modern themes of universality and freedom inaugurates what Lyotard refers to as "the postmodern condition":

Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity towards metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences; but that progress in turn presupposes it. To the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds, most notably, the crisis of metaphysical philosophy...(Lyotard 1984:xxiv.)

It should be noted that when Lyotard refers to a "postmodern condition", he is not so much thinking in terms of an historical periodization but rather a "mood....or a state of mind" (Lyotard 1986-7:209). This recourse to a "mood or state of mind" coincides with the postmodernists' refusal to engage in any "theoretical" analysis or to project future historical possibilities based on "theory". On this approach, to theorize is to perpetuate a metaphysical craving for order which, when it imposes itself on history can only bring about domination and destruction, thus betraying the democratic ideals of modernity. Recalling his personal experiences of the Algerian War, Lyotard's comments are quite interesting:

[P]eople of my generation in France were confronted with the problem of the Algerian War. After a simple enough analysis of the situation, it was easy to see that the development of the Algerian struggle and the gaining of independence would lead to the constitution of a bureaucratic-military regime that would not exactly be democratic (Lyotard 1986-7:213).

Lyotard argues furthermore that the condition of knowledge in contemporary Western post-industrial and advanced capitalists societies, is no longer the same as that of earlier societies. Knowledge in contemporary Western societies is no longer concerned with "reality", or an identifiable universal rational subject as the foundational basis of its claims to knowledge. On Lyotard's account, knowledge in a post-industrialized postmodern age (of computers and the globalization of information) is a matter of technology. The normative notions of reason and truth are now confined to the technical sphere of "performativity", "efficiency" or "operativity" (ibid.:xxiv-xxv).

Given this account of the condition of knowledge within the postmodern age, Lyotard seeks to address the crisis of legitimation in the wake of the incredulity regarding the privileged status of philosophy, defined as a metaphysical discipline. He (1984) writes:

Wherein, after the metanarratives, can legitimacy reside? The operativity criterion is technological; it has no relevance for judging what is true or just. Is legitimacy to be found in consensus obtained through discussion as Jürgen Habermas thinks? Such consensus does violence to the heterogeneity of language-games. And invention is always born of dissension. Postmodern knowledge is not simply the tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable. Its principle is not the expert's homology, but the inventor's paralogy. (Lyotard 1984:xxiv-xxv.)

The quotation above reflects the essential elements of Lyotard's "solution" to the current legitimation crisis. His strategy is to reverse the dominant theme of consensus; his solution is to valorize "the other" opposite terms, with a view to subverting the metaphysical legacy of the modern philosophical tradition. In his

critique and advocacy of a postmodern turn, the notions of "dissensus" or "paralogy" replace the idea of "consensus". In this regard, Lyotard seeks to promote an understanding of language based on the elements of paradox, undecidability, discontinuities of speech acts, as a direct challenge to the Habermasian understanding of language, which emphasizes the elements of consensus and mutual understanding, as the ultimate goal of communication:

The theory of communicative action is based on an analysis of the use of language oriented to reaching understanding. With the concept of communicative action, the action-coordinating, binding effect of the offers made in speech-acts move to the centre. Through these offers, participants in communication establish interpersonal relations through intersubjective recognition of criticisable validity-claims. (Habermas 1982:269.)

The notions of "dissensus" and "paralogy" are the central elements of Lyotard's "agonistic" conception of language, in which the process of communication is conceptualized as a fight, a competition, "a struggle for advantage over an adversary" (Holub 1991:141).

This reversal of the traditional conceptual order is made possible by a certain (aestheticist) appropriation of the linguistic turn in philosophy. It is important to note that Lyotard's linguistic turn is inspired by a moral-political intuition aimed at challenging a modern condition in which knowledge has been equated with power: He claims that "knowledge and power are simply two sides of the same question: who decides what knowledge is, and who knows what needs to be decided? In the computer age, the question of knowledge is now more than ever a question of government (ibid.:8-9).

Lyotard's assessment of modernity is based on a loss of confidence in philosophy's ability to provide a coherent and plausible framework of meaning in place of the traditional narratives of harmony and consensus:

My working hypotheses is that these narratives have lost their credibility for the bulk of contemporary societies, and are no longer sufficient to ensure a political, social and cultural bond, as they once claimed to do. Our situation is that we have little confidence in them anymore. We must confront the problem of meaning without any possibility of responding with hopes for the emancipation of humanity (as did the Enlightenment school) or for that of the Spirit (as did the German idealist school), or with the practice of the Proletariat to achieve the constitution of a transparent state. Even capitalism, the liberal or neo-liberal discourse, seems to have little credibility in the present situation: that does not mean that capitalism is finished, quite the contrary. But it does mean that it can no longer legitimate itself. The old legitimation, "everyone will prosper," has lost its credibility. (Lyotard 1986-87:210.)

With a view to justifying his critique of modernity, as well as his position regarding the need to embrace the postmodern condition, Lyotard critically appropriates the language theory of the later Wittgenstein. In terms of this appropriation, Lyotard proceeds to challenge the notion that language is a transparent medium of truth and reality. Instead of speaking of language, Lyotard now speaks of "language games" in support of his argument that the postmodern society is not a unified whole, but a confluence of irreconcilable fields of "difference", incapable of mediation or reconciliation at a meta-linguistic level. From the perspective of his linguistic turn, Lyotard proceeds to develop an aestheticized conception of language, in which "difference" is to be privileged in a universe characterized by a plurality of incommensurable language games. Lyotard employs the argument

for the incommensurability of language games in order to reinforce his basic conviction regarding the nature of social-political interaction, namely that it is primarily an arena of conflict and dissension. Lyotard accordingly views language not so much as a means of communication aimed at reaching agreement or consensus, as Habermas does, but as a site of struggle and conflict, which ultimately results in dissension because "truth" is now simply viewed as a victory of a particular (dominant) language game.

Robert C. Holub (1991) underlines the significance of Lyotard's conception of language, and its attendant notion of incommensurable language games, in the light of three basic considerations:

First, the rules by which they are played are not inherent in them, but rather agreed upon among the players by contract. Second, the rules and the game are mutually dependent. If a rule is changed, the nature of the game or a correct move in the game is altered; if an incorrect move is played, then it does not belong to the game. Third, there is no utterance that escapes one or another language game. (Holub 1991:140-141.)

In the light of the above, Lyotard wants to argue that communication is essentially reducible to the application and adherence to a set of rules, and the communication partners are essentially involved in a mutual process of outwitting and outmaneuvering one another. He writes: "to speak is to fight, in the sense of playing, and speech acts fall within the domain of a general agonistics" (Lyotard 1984:10). Implicit in this understanding of language is the claim that the validity of truth and knowledge claims are reducible to the specific context where they are raised, and that their truth ultimately depends on those who literally "win" the argument, and whose victory depends on considerations of power, strategy, rhetoric. In this regard, validity claims and language claims are collapsed into one,

a position which is unsatisfactory in view of the fact that Lyotard is unable to account for the status and validity of his own claim regarding an "agonistic" theory of language, since he wants us to agree with him in at least one important respect, namely, that dissension is the primary motivation of language. As Holub (1991) puts it:

If we assume that Lyotard is correct and that dissension is the *telos* of speech, then we are unable to account for the status of his own statement. We cannot agree with the propositional content of his statement without simultaneously denying the validity of the statement. In short, Lyotard cannot consistently maintain an argument that seeks to convince us that universally arguments do not aim at our consent. (Holub 1991:143.)

Given his conception of language as a medium of incommensurable language games, none of which can lay claim to a special or privileged status, in view of the absence of a metanarrative in which to ground the various language games, it is interesting to note that Lyotard is unable to consider the possibility of a narrative of legitimation from "within" those language games. What is even more interesting is that he does recognize more than one form of rationality within the (post) modern condition, but for him therein lies the crisis, because without an overarching context of legitimation, the different forms of rationality are, in principle, autonomous, and should not collapse into one another for fear of the possibility of a "totalitarianism of reason". Nor does he wish to consider the possibility of linking "the other" of reason with narrative knowledge:

As we think through this side of Kant's thought...it is easy to show that it is never a question of one massive and unique reason - that is nothing but an ideology. On the contrary, it is a question of *plural* rationalities, which are, at the least, respectively, theoretical, practical, aesthetic. They are

profoundly heterogeneous, "autonomous", as Kant says. The inability to think this is the hallmark of the great idealist rationalism of nineteenth-century German thought, which presupposes without any explication that reason is the same in all cases. It is a sort of identitarianism which forms a pair with a totalitarianism of reason, and which, I think, is simultaneously erroneous and dangerous. (Lyotard 1988:279.) (Emphasis, Lyotard's.)

Lyotard's unwillingness to investigate the possibility of consensus in a postmetaphysical sense, together with his inability to reflect on the possibility of linking these forms of rationality with a practical source within "the real" world, are responsible for his views on a "crisis of reason", which for him is the inevitable consequence of a "crisis of the foundations" of reason (ibid.:280). Lyotard thus encourages his reader to challenge all forms of consensus by way of waging "a war on totality" (Lyotard 1984:82).

What is particularly significant about his stance regarding the question of consensus is that he looks to scientific practice for the possibility or impossibility of consensus, which then serves as an analogy for the justification of a more basic thesis: that non-scientific or pre-scientific (narrative) forms of consensus are equally impossible to achieve in the (post) modern condition:

What has been called "the crisis of the foundations" is not something that can be neglected today to the pretended advantage of a consensus of argument, when the consensus is precisely what is missing from the interior of the, let us say physical, sciences. And far from suppressing the possibility, contrary to what might be thought, this absence of consensus has, on the contrary, only worked to allow a more rapid and a more impressive development of the sciences...What conclusions can we draw...I would say one thing, which is that the crisis of reason has been precisely

the bath in which scientific reason has been immersed for a century, and this crisis, this continued interrogation of reason, is certainly the most rational thing around. (Lyotard 1988:280.)

At the root of Lyotard's position is a rejection of a correspondence theory of truth, in which rationality is determined by our knowledge of an independent reality "out there". The anti-realist position, adopted by Lyotard, severs the cognitive link between rationality and "reality", and seeks instead to defend "truth" on pragmatic grounds, as it finds expression within the particular contexts of particular communities who happen to "speak the same language". Lyotard accordingly advances a nonrealist or anti-realist conception of language, which presupposes a non-representational model of rationality, and which thus rejects the subject-object model of the modern philosophical tradition. For Lyotard, if language is not to be conceived from a representational perspective, it is essentially to be conceived of as a creative medium for the subversion of existing forms of consensus in search of the "unpresentable" and "the sublime" (Lyotard 1984:71-82).

If the question of knowledge is no longer to be determined on a representational model of truth, then "consensus is only a particular state of discussion (in the sciences), not its end. Its end, on the contrary, is paralogy" (Lyotard 1984:65-66). The most significant implication of Lyotard's privileging of paralogy (as opposed to consensus) is the possibility of resisting and overcoming metaphysical and universalistic theories of rationality within the various fields of incommensurable language games; there is no room for a privileged discourse. From the (post) modern perspective, all we can do is to compare and contrast the scientific and the narrative forms of knowledge. This argument allows Lyotard to place us, his reader, before the (theoretical) possibility or a choice or preference between two seemingly

irreconcilable, mutually exclusive types of knowledge: the scientific and the narrative. Holub (1991:144) summarizes Lyotard's comparative analysis as follows:

1. Narrative knowledge permits a great variety of language-games; scientific knowledge is only concerned with the truth claims of denotative statements.
2. Narrative language presupposes a shared social bond; scientific knowledge does not.
3. In scientific discourse knowledge is restricted to the competence of an expert; in narrative knowledge competence resides within the structures of the community (the sender and the recipient have an equal claim to competence with regard to knowledge claims).
4. Statements of scientific knowledge are potentially falsifiable, and thus tentative; narrative knowledge cannot be falsified.
5. Scientific knowledge is concerned with cumulative knowledge and progress. Narrative knowledge is "circular" and is constantly reclaimed and revalidated.

In the light of the differences indicated above, Lyotard questions the privileged status of modern science, because, as he sees it, neither scientific nor narrative knowledge has a claim to cognitive superiority. With the loss of a metanarrative in which to ground the plurality of discourses rooted in their respective language games, Lyotard claims that the discourse of science must legitimate itself in terms of rules internal to itself. Given his position in this regard, Lyotard dismisses the possibility of a more comprehensive notion of reason, inclusive of narrative knowledge. For him scientific and narrative knowledge are discontinuous, mutually exclusive:

It is therefore impossible to judge the existence or validity of narrative knowledge on the basis of scientific knowledge and vice versa. All we can do is to gaze in wonderment at the diversity of discursive species, just as we do at the diversity of plant or animal species. Lamenting the "loss of meaning" in postmodernity boils down to mourning that knowledge is no longer principally narrative. (Lyotard 1984:26.)

As can be seen in the above, Lyotard's main point regarding a postmodern condition is that the principles and criteria of knowledge are not self-validating. All knowledge claims arise within the pre-theoretical "narrative" realm. Although scientific knowledge seems to have achieved a certain degree of autonomy in the modern world (whence the illusion of science as a self-validating discourse), the truth of the matter is simply that the narrative forms of justification have a socio-political origin (the narrative of the freedom of a universal subject or class). But this is exactly where Lyotard identifies a serious problem, because, for him, the language game of scientific discourse is radically incommensurable with the language game of moral-political discourse. Lyotard (ibid.:40) asserts, " [t]here is nothing to prove that if a statement is true, it follows that a prescriptive statement based upon it ...will be just". In view of this differentiation or "splintering" of reality Lyotard (ibid.:41) concludes:

We may form a pessimistic impression of this splintering of reality: nobody speaks all of those languages, they have no universal metalanguage, the project of the system-subject is a failure, the goal of emancipation has nothing to do with science, we are stuck in the positivism of this or that discipline of learning....Speculative or humanistic philosophy is forced to relinquish its legitimization duties, which explains why philosophy is facing a crisis whenever it persists in arrogating to itself such functions and is reduced to the study of systems of logic or the history of ideas where it has been realistic enough to surrender them. (Lyotard 1984:41.)

When philosophy surrenders its legitimation duties, Lyotard, in keeping with his aestheticist conception of language, feels "free" to challenge all forms of consensus within the scientific and moral-political fields of discourse. This aesthetically inspired subversion of prevailing scientific criteria as well as moral-political codes and conventions do not, however, require any legitimation on the grounds that it is articulated in the form of a "narrative", and narratives do not require the kind of proofs and argumentation (so it is argued) that we have come to associate with scientific knowledge. Lyotard may simply appeal to the authority of empirical evidence to support his thesis that social reality (as well as scientific reality), mediated in and through language, are fields of discourse marked by irreconcilable "dissensus" and "paralogy".

On the postmodern approach, the question of "reality" as something to be represented (and the corresponding idea of truth based on consensus) is replaced with the focus now on "the unrepresentable" and "the sublime" as regulative ideas aimed at ruling out the possibility of metaphysical closure (1984:82). By promoting an aesthetic orientation towards "the sublime", Lyotard wishes his reader to be fully aware that all forms of conceptual representation are, at best, merely contingent and tentative, given his central argument that knowledge claims within the postmodern condition are characterized by the absence of the "metanarratives" of the philosophical discourse which, in the modern tradition, has served as the means of validating and grounding the knowledge claims of science. Lyotard accordingly advocates an attitude aimed at an acceptance of the tentative nature of our knowledge claims:

The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste that would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for the

new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable (Lyotard 1984:81).

Behind Lyotard's rejection of the assumption of a universal context of legitimation for scientific knowledge, however, is a moral-political imperative to resist all forms of "terror", which for him is synonymous with all forms of consensus and legitimation. As Lyotard (1984) asserts:

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience. Under the general demand for slackening and for appeasement, we can hear the muttering of the desire for a return of terror, for the realization of the fantasy to seize reality. The answer is: Let us wage a war on totality; let us to be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name (Lyotard 1984:82.)

In the light of Lyotard's commitment to the "unrepresentable" beyond the rationalistic trappings of modern epistemological foundationalism and metanarratives, a question that presents itself is the following: Does the postmodern critique of the epistemology with its founding principle and assumption of a universal subject necessarily lead to the abandonment of the universal? If it does, are we then condemned to a plurality of different incommensurable discourses without the possibility of transcending the specificity of our contingent horizons? If truth is now to be determined relativistically, does it mean that we are permanently "stuck" in our little corners, jealously guarding the integrity of limited positions in space, without the possibility of transcendence? Is transcendence or the universal necessarily synonymous with the "terror" of the conceptual? Is the aesthetic of "the

sublime", that is, the permanent creation of "the new" (new languages or vocabularies), our only hope of avoiding the false universalism that necessarily accompanies the privileging a particular discourse - scientific, religious, moral-political, or aesthetic? We will now consider Habermas's response to these questions.

3.4 HABERMAS'S RESPONSE TO LYOTARD

Lyotard undoubtedly sees Habermas as a representative of an outmoded metaphysical tradition, insofar as he still feels justified in seeking unity and coherence in a world marked by the pluralism and diversity of incommensurable languages games. Implicit in the charge of metaphysical unity and totality is an attempt on Habermas's part, to justify the Enlightenment metanarrative of the emancipation of humankind. In the debate between these two thinkers we witness a serious clash between two radically different conceptions of language, invoked to validate two radically different interpretations of the modern condition. Lyotard's criticism of Habermas, is the direct consequence of his rejection of the two distinctive metadiscourses of modernity: the narrative of freedom and the narrative of speculation. In this scenario, philosophy has enjoyed a privileged status, insofar as it has had to legitimate the scientific discourse of modernity from the perspective of an ahistorical (non-narrative) perspective. But Lyotard does not accept the neutrality and objectivity of science; he believes like Habermas, that modern science has been misrepresented, as having originated "in heaven" as it were.

Given the modernist assumption that scientific knowledge is the precondition of moral progress and freedom, if the credibility of the narrative of speculation is questioned, then the narrative of freedom is also questioned. On this account, scientific discourse is demoted by Lyotard from its privileged status, and separated

from all connection with the moral-political domain of discourse. For Lyotard, the realm of science and the moral-political realm of narrative knowledge, constitute two incompatible language-games. On this view, the consensus reached in the world of science has no bearing on the realm of narrative knowledge. Lyotard's argument, in this regard, is based on his rejection of a correspondence theory of truth, where the latter provides a moral imperative which, as in the metaphysical tradition, dictates a vision of "the good life" based on our position in the world. It is from this perspective that he proceeds to accuse Habermas of an ontological fallacy, that is, a position in which a true state of affairs in the world (of science) becomes the basis for the formulation of prescriptive rules of justice (Lyotard, 1984: 40).

But, as Holub (1991:147) points out, Habermas clearly distinguishes between the sphere of scientific truth and that of moral rightness. Indeed, Habermas's understanding of modernity is based on a differentiation of three autonomous spheres, science, morality, and art, each with its own particular question and domain: truth is ascribed to natural science; normative rightness, in the form of justice, is ascribed to morality; authenticity or beauty (through judgements of taste) is ascribed to art (Holub 1991:135, Habermas 1981:9). Habermas identifies a specific rationality or "inner logic" with each of these spheres; cognitive-rational for science, moral-practical for ethics, and aesthetic-expressive for art. Lyotard's accusation, therefore, that Habermas has collapsed these distinctions is clearly without substance, because Habermas does not subscribe to a correspondence theory of truth, but a consensus theory which presupposes the possibility of agreement based on a process of rational deliberation.

Lyotard furthermore accuses Habermas of failing to appreciate the proliferation of language games within the scientific world, in view of which a postmodern account

of science is needed, given the absence of a metalinguistic principle in which to ground these different discourses. According to Lyotard (1984:41), "nobody speaks all of those languages, they have no universal metalanguage".

It is quite clear that Lyotard is referring to an empirical situation within science, whereas Habermas is talking about a formal possibility inherent in the very process of communicative action. The possibility of mutual understanding does not depend for Habermas on the existence of a metaphysical principle, but rather on the validity of the arguments that are raised in the process of intersubjective communication. On this view, the process of debate and argumentation presupposes the possibility of consensus.

The distinction that Lyotard makes between scientific and narrative knowledge lies at the basis of his understanding of modernity. What is particularly interesting is that he views the two forms of knowledge as being essentially incompatible. Here we find a typical trait of modern thinking: the social world is contrasted with the scientific world, with the former being regarded as devoid of reason, while the latter is associated with a technical-strategic form of rationality. In view of his identification of scientific knowledge as the paradigmatic model of rationality in the modern age, Lyotard associates narrative knowledge with pre-modern times, with no connection whatsoever with scientific discourse, so as to consolidate his vision of a plurality of incommensurable language-games.

In his article, *Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity* (1985), Richard Rorty tries to mediate between these two thinkers. In the course of his discussion, he describes the respective positions as follows:

...the French writers whom Habermas criticizes are willing to drop the opposition between "true consensus" and "false consensus" or between "validity" and "power" in order not to have to tell a metanarrative in order to explicate "true" or "valid". But Habermas thinks that if we drop the idea of "the better argument" as opposed to "the argument which convinces a given audience at a given time", we shall only have a "context-dependent" sort of social criticism. (Rorty: 1985:162.)

For Lyotard the giving up of metanarratives should imply that scientific knowledge is on a par with narrative knowledge. According to Seyla Benhabib (1985), this is not the case, however, because Lyotard seems to equivocate with regard to the relationship between scientific knowledge and narrative knowledge. Whereas for Rorty there is a link between the scientific knowledge and the social world, and for Habermas (1992:48-51) there is a connection between the pre-reflective practical concerns of ordinary people within the life-world, that serves as a normative basis for the world of science, Lyotard does not establish a link between the (practical) realm of narrative and the (theoretical) realm of scientific knowledge. He therefore condemns the social world to a status of ahistoricity, with no internal mechanism for self-criticism, self-reflection and self-correction in the light of new learning experiences. The social world seems to exist in a "non-rational" or "pre-rational void".

It ...implies that all change in this episteme comes from without, through violence. Such an episteme has no self-propelling or self-correcting mechanism. But, in fact, this is to condemn the subjects of this episteme to ahistoricity, to deny that they inhabit the same space with us. We do not interact with them as equals, we inhabit a space in which we observe them as ethnologists and anthropologists, we treat them with distance and indifference. (Benhabib 1985:119.)

Benhabib then proceeds to state the Habermasian alternative:

...if indeed narrative knowledge is the "other" of *our* mode of knowledge, then Lyotard must admit that narrative and scientific knowledge are not merely incommensurable, but they can and do clash, and that sometimes the outcome is less than certain. To admit this possibility would amount to the admission that "narrative" and "discursive" practices occupy the same epistemic space, and that both raise claims to validity, and that an argumentative exchange between them is not only possible but desirable. (Benhabib 1985:119-120.)

Lyotard, however, cannot entertain the possibility of harmony and consensus, in view of his uncritical acceptance of the language-game theory. Lyotard's account of incommensurable language-games is supported by an agonistic theory of language, which he opposes to Habermas's notion of consensus in order to show that "consensus is only a particular state of discussion, not its end. Its end, on the contrary, is paralogy" (Lyotard 1984:65-66). This position, as indicated earlier, leads Lyotard into "a performative contradiction" in the sense that Lyotard want us to agree with the truth of his statement, but the propositional content of his statement contradicts what he wants us "in the end" to do: to agree with him.

It is the formal aspects of language, the unavoidable pragmatic assumptions inherent in the communicative mode of language that point beyond the radical contextualism of Lyotard. At the root of his agonistic language theory of moves and counter-moves, in which the power of strategic manipulation is privileged at the expense of the co-ordinating function of language by way of rational discussion and consensus, Lyotard clearly reveals an inability to distinguish between systematic thought, which he associates with "terror", and the universalistic notion of communicative reason that finds expression in communicative efforts of mutual

understanding within the structures of conversations of ordinary people, across the spectrum of differences that intersect their lives.

The main consequence of Lyotard's failure to grasp the significance of the universal is that the very real possibility of communication beyond the horizons of our particular contexts, is rendered impossible. When the possibility of learning from others whose "truth" seems to undermine or invalidate our own conceptions is ruled out, the very notion of truth itself, as "true for us" is rendered nonsensical. We do not accept something because others who speak our own language say so. We accept something as true because we believe we have reason(s) to accept its truth. So the question of truth cannot be separated from the reasons that we offer in its defense, and these reasons can only be vindicated in a form of communication that will persuade others to accept them as universally valid and therefore true. On Habermas' account, rational persuasion takes the place of metaphysical principles or metanarratives, but the question of the universal remains a live option. Axel Honneth's (1985) comments regarding Lyotard's failure to appreciate the significance of the universal as an unavoidable assumption within the process of communication and argumentation are particularly important:

...because he is not able to just ignore the problem of the universal without remainder, Lyotard must in the end become ensnared in the premises of his own thought: the antipathy towards the universal forbids a solution to the very problem he came up against with his demand for an unforced pluralism of social language-games. For, if recourse to universal norms is in principle blocked in the interest of a critique of ideology, then a meaningful argument in support of the equal rights to co-existence of all everyday cultures can not be constructed. This excludes the possibility of formulating a rule, let alone of institutionalizing a form of law, which, beyond the internal moral perspective of language-games, could take responsibility

for the universal recognition of the equal rights of culture. For how could the equal rights of all language-games be grounded as a moral principle, if at the same time every regulation of social intercourse which goes beyond the norms of specific cultures is to be dispensed with? (Honneth 1985:155.)

We will now consider the views of another anti-universalist, Richard Rorty.

3.5 RORTY: THE CRITIQUE OF FOUNDATIONALISM

Rorty has been a leading voice in the call for the abandonment of the modern philosophical conception of reason as anchored in the epistemological tradition. In this regard, he has questioned the cognitive status and legitimacy of modern philosophy, as a metaphysically defined discipline, capable of grounding the knowledge claims of science within a normative framework aimed at giving a universal account of reason and truth. In his influential and controversial work, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1980), Rorty offers his reader a penetrating and challenging critique of the central assumption at the heart of the modern epistemological tradition: the subject (defined as "a mind") oriented towards an independent object (reality), expressed in a correspondence theory of truth, as the condition of knowledge and rationality.

Rorty's major concern is not, however, with the epistemological problematic; his critique is based on the central conviction that reason, and its related notion of truth, as a transcendent universal presupposition, is no longer valid. Rorty consequently recommends that we desist from further attempts to salvage the metaphysical legacy of epistemology, with its Platonic distinctions of truth-falsity, reality-appearance, subject-object, and so forth, on the grounds that philosophy has "outlived its usefulness" (Rorty 1982:xiv). As a consequence, Rorty advocates hermeneutics not as a "successor subject" to epistemology, but "as an expression

of hope that the cultural space left by the demise of epistemology will not be filled" (Rorty 1980:315).

For Rorty, a rejection of the metaphysical legacy of the modern epistemological tradition leads unavoidably to a position of radical contextualism (historicism), mediated by an appropriation of "the linguistic turn" which, for him, becomes the condition for the impossibility of reason and truth, understood as context-transcendent ideas. This appropriation of "the linguistic turn", following the presumed demise of epistemology, sets the stage for a programme of "epistemological behaviorism" in which language is no longer seen as a transparent medium, used by an autonomous subject, to discover and accurately describe an independent reality "out there". On Rorty's pragmatic account, language is viewed, "not as a *tertium quid* between Subject and Object, nor as a medium in which we try to form pictures of reality, but as part of the behavior of human beings. On this view, the activity of uttering sentences is one of the things people do to cope with the environment" (Rorty 1982:xvii).

This turn to the social environment as the condition of the possibility of knowledge, brings Rorty in line with the central thrust of philosophical hermeneutics, but he rejects all attempts to salvage the normative notions of truth and knowledge. A.T. Nuyen (1992) describes the significance of Rorty's hermeneutic turn as follows:

[T]o abandon the notion of the mind as the mirror of nature is also to abandon the epistemological project of polishing the mirror so as to reflect nature more "truly". What is left is the notion of truth as a matter of agreement reached in the course of conversation. The latter, for Rorty, is the hermeneutical message. Instead of the epistemological project, what we need is a process that yields agreements. Once we have agreements, we can also allow truth to drop out of the picture; from the "hermeneutical

point of view...the acquisition of truth dwindles in importance"...It matters little whether agreements amount to knowledge: "The word *knowledge* would not seem worth fighting over". (Nuyen 1992:70.)

For Rorty, the adoption of a programme of "epistemological behaviorism", means that the justificatory process of knowledge claims is no longer linked to universalistic theories of rationality and truth, but are rooted instead in the social practices and conventions of a particular speech community who just happen to share the same cultural tradition. In terms of this approach, Rorty (1980:390) exhorts his audience to resist "the urge to see social practices of justification as more than just such practices". For Rorty, the inescapable nature of social practices, rooted in particular cultural linguistic communities, implies that an acceptance of contingency and pluralism, the distinguishing hallmarks of the modern condition, is incompatible with universalistic notions of truth and knowledge. Rorty's idea of a speech community resembles Lyotard's notion of local narratives, as a reaction against the modernist search for a metalinguistic (metaphysical) dimension of Truth and Reality, beyond the reach of language. He claims., "if we understand the rules of a language-game, we understand all that there is to understand about why moves in that language-game are made at all" (Rorty 1980:174).

On the surface, there is nothing radically different in Rorty's hermeneutic turn as an alternative to philosophy's traditional quest for absolute standards of certainty and truth, viewed from an ahistorical vantage point of a presuppositionless foundation. Rorty, however, does not stop here; he wants to argue that it is impossible to reflect critically on our inherited social practices and beliefs from a transcendent, universalistic perspective, and that we are "stuck" as it were in the traditional heritage of our predecessors, and that the only possibility of "getting out"

is the invention of new vocabularies expressing "the best idea we currently have about how to explain what is going on" (Rorty 1980:385).

Rorty therefore rejects the notion that justification has anything to do with transcendent notions of truth and knowledge; he rules out the possibility of a learning process based on a reflective evaluation and revision of our inherited ideas and practices: We do not change our ideas because they were wrong, we change them to coincide with the prevailing linguistic consensus at a given time and place. As Thomas McCarthy (1991) explains, Rorty's critique of traditional foundationalism is quite impressive; it is the conclusions, however, that he draws from this that are problematic:

As an expression of opposition to the traditional quest for foundations, this is all to the good. But Rorty goes beyond that to a radically contextualist account - he denies that it is a theory - of reason, truth, objectivity, knowledge and related notions. (McCarthy 1991:14.)

It is from the perspective of radical contextualism that Rorty suggests that we "drop the notion of the philosopher as knowing something about knowing which nobody else knows so well...(and abandon the claim)...that philosophers have a special kind of knowledge about knowledge" (Rorty *ibid.*:392-393). Critical of a universalistic account of rationality and truth, Rorty (1991:24) asserts that "'knowledge' is, like 'truth', simply a compliment paid to the beliefs which we think so well justified, that, for the moment, further justification is not needed". Rorty bases his contextualist position on the argument that it is impossible to "step outside our skins - the traditions, linguistic and other, within which we do our thinking and self-criticism - and compare ourselves with something absolute" (Rorty 1982:xix). All attempts to "step outside" constitute a denial of "the finitude of one's time and place, the 'merely conventional' and contingent aspects of one's life (*ibid.*).

Rorty further underlines the relativistic and pragmatic implications of his position by asserting:

[T]he only criterion for applying the word 'true' is justification, and justification is always relative to an audience. So it is also relative to that audience's lights - the purposes that such an audience wants served and the situation in which it finds itself. (Rorty 1998:4.)

In a recent debate, Rorty (1996) has attempted to defend his ethnocentric theory of epistemological behaviorism against the universalistic theory of reason and rationality, as defended by Habermas. In the course of this confrontation, Habermas gives a detailed account of the historicist background of Rorty's contextualism. In his account, Habermas focuses on various versions of the Platonic and anti-Platonic movements within the tradition of Western philosophy. The main point arising from this account is that these two antagonistic tendencies within philosophy must not be seen as mutually exclusive, but as co-implicative. They give rise to a philosophical process in which the philosopher, depending on his or her position, would privilege one term of the conception structure, and thereby devalue its opposite term. This has resulted in the familiar pattern of the postulation of "the universal", followed by its rejection, in the name of something that has been excluded or marginalized, leading in turn to a reversal of the original position. In this dialectical exchange, Habermas is torn between his support for the Platonist (as a defender of a universalistic account of reason), on the one hand, and his political sympathy with the anti-Platonist (as a defender of the "Other" of reason). As Habermas (1996) puts it:

While I am in political sympathy with the anti-Platonist iconoclasts, my political sympathy is on the side of the custodians of reason in those periods when a justified critique of reason loses the implications of its inevitable self-referentiality (Habermas 1996:6).

It is the lack of historical self-consciousness within the metaphysical tradition, Habermas claims, that accounts for a justified critique of reason being dismissed and eventually submerged in the various historicist movements of thought, collectively aimed at retrieving the elements of contingency and uncertainty within the realm of the modern historical experience:

It is no surprise that this historical consciousness gave birth to an evermore intense awareness of evermore widely spreading contingencies. This explains the need to cope with a kind of contingency which no longer emerged from the core of outer or inner nature but arose from the surface of fluid human affairs, interpersonal relations, and social networks. (Habermas 1996:7.)

The latest version of this historicist movement, according to Habermas, is "the linguistic turn", as a critique of the metaphysical legacy with its underlying assumption of an ahistorical transcendent subject. The linguistic turn is an effective means of demonstrating the historical priority of pre-established social practices and beliefs as constituting the enabling conditions for the possibility of knowledge. With this turn to language, reason, however, has been downgraded and traced back to its socio-cultural origins, and stripped of the transcendent dimensions that has always sustained traditional metaphysical accounts of reason. For the anti-Platonist reaction against the hypostatizations of absolutist accounts of truth and knowledge to be successful, it has to validate (indirectly) the very conceptual structure that it seeks to overcome. It is for this reason that Rorty urges his reader:

[T]o opt out of the whole game of Platonist and anti-Platonist moves. In coping with their self-generated contingencies and risks, modern societies would fare better without any philosophy. We are admonished to get rid of the dualism we owe to the Platonist heritage, and to give up metaphysical

distinctions between knowledge and opinion, between what is and what appears as real or legitimate. We are told to emancipate our culture from the philosophical vocabulary clustering around reason, truth, and knowledge. (Habermas 1996:18.)

As far as language is concerned, it is simply a means or a tool for coping with the environment; its creative dimension allows for the possibility of creating new and better vocabularies, new and better tools for coping with an ever-changing environment. This biologicistic account of the human being as a user of word-tools is supplemented by an account of knowledge aimed at utility, rather than a representation of reality.

In the light of Rorty's ethnocentric epistemological behaviorism, he accuses Habermas of being a metaphysical thinker, still trapped in the Kantian grid of transcendental thinking, and of thus failing to appreciate the contingent nature of the so-called "inevitable subjective conditions" of knowledge:

[T]he only truth in Habermas's claim that scientific enquiry is made possible, and limited, by 'inevitable subjective conditions' is that such enquiry is made possible by the adoption of practices of justification, and that such practices have possible alternatives. But these 'subjective conditions' are in no sense 'inevitable' ones discoverable by 'reflection on the nature of enquiry'. They are just the facts about what a given society, or profession, or other group, takes to be good ground for assertions of a certain sort. Such disciplinary matrices are studied by the usual empirical-cum-hermeneutic methods of 'cultural anthropology'. (Rorty 1980:385.)

Rorty accounts for the concept of rational agreement or truth simply in terms of the justification of social conventions, or of giving as coherent an account as possible

of the current trends and patterns of discourse which happen to prevail in any given society at any given time, since "assessment of truth and assessment of justification are, when the question is about what I should believe now, the same activity" (Rorty 1998:19).

Rorty (1982:166) urges his reader to renounce the 'metaphysical comfort' of fixed horizons and universal foundations, and to embrace instead, a more modest sense of human solidarity, based on an acceptance of the contingent nature of all our inquiries as they find expression within a context-bound hermeneutic framework of ongoing and open conversation:

To accept the contingency of starting-points is to accept our inheritance from and our conversation with, our fellow-humans as our only source of guidance...Since Kant, philosophers have hoped (to find) the a priori structure of any possible enquiry, or language or form of social life. If we give up this hope, we lose what Nietzsche called "metaphysical comfort", but we gain a renewed sense of community. Our identification with our community - our society, our political tradition, our intellectual heritage - is heightened when we see this community as *ours* rather than *nature's*, *shaped* rather than *found*, one among many which men might have made. In the end, the pragmatist tells us, what matters is our loyalty to other human beings clinging together against the dark, not our hope of getting things right. (Rorty 1982:16.) (Emphases, Rorty's.)

In the final analysis, Rorty's critique of epistemological foundationalism is based on a moral commitment in which the possibility of ongoing conversation is preserved from the threat of closure. For Rorty, the transcendental mode of reflection is the definitive expression of closure within the modern philosophical tradition, with Habermas, according to Rorty, as one of its leading representatives. Rorty (1988)

is therefore critical of Habermas's theory of communicative action, aimed at revealing a normative rational potential, based on the central argument of universalistic presuppositions, that accompany the validity claims within ordinary everyday communication.

Although Habermas says that his "communicative-theoretic concepts" of the lifeworld has been freed from the mortgages of transcendental philosophy, and that "the purism of reason is not resurrected again in communicative reason, he has no intention of freeing "communicative reason" from the ideal of "universal validity". He still wants an Archimedean point...[h]e still wants to say that "the validity claimed for propositions and norms transcends spaces and times, *'blots out' space and time*". (Rorty 1998:317-318.)

In the following section we will see how Habermas responds to Rorty's position.

3.6 HABERMAS'S RESPONSE TO RORTY

According to Habermas (1985:197), Rorty's neo-pragmatist position stems from a central prejudice that he shares with postmodern thinking, namely, that reason is essentially of a logocentric nature, that is, it is to be interpreted on the basis of our dealings with objects "in the world". For Habermas, this notion of reason is too narrow. He (ibid.) defines logocentrism as a form of thinking that is confined to "the *ontological* privileging of the world of beings, the *epistemological* privileging of contacts with objects or existing states of affairs, and the *semantic* privileging of assertoric sentences and propositional truth".

The most significant implication of the logocentric conception of rationality is that it is blind to another equally important form of rationality, that is, communicative

rationality that has its origins in the intersubjective structures of communication oriented towards the reaching of mutual understanding and agreement. Habermas (ibid.:197) therefore claims that the postmodernists' fixation on logocentrism means that they neglect "the complexity of reason operating in the life-world, and (restrict) reason to its cognitive-instrumental dimension". It is this narrow focus of the logocentric account of rationality that Habermas challenges, because it means effectively that even though the postmodern thinkers share his determination to overcome metaphysics, they are unable to move beyond the conceptual framework of the metaphysical tradition. Their characteristic reversal of the hierarchical distinctions of metaphysics simply means that they are still operating with the "subject-object" model of modern metaphysics.

In a modern world dominated by science and technology, as the paradigmatic expression of reason, knowledge and truth, one can understand the "non-rational" nature of postmodern thinking. As Habermas (1985) puts it:

Rorty takes Western logocentrism as an indication of the exhaustion of our philosophical tradition and a reason to bid adieu to philosophy as such. This way of reading the tradition can not be maintained if philosophy can be transformed so as to enable it to cope with the entire spectrum of rationality...[s]uch a transformation is possible only if Rorty does not remain fixated on the natural sciences. Had Rorty not shared this fixation, he might have entertained a more flexible and accepting relationship to the philosophical tradition. Fortunately, not all philosophizing can be subsumed under the paradigm of the philosophy of consciousness. (Habermas 1985:197.)

In contrast to Rorty, Habermas claims that the Idea of "truth" takes us beyond the boundaries of a particular cultural context. When we say something is true, we do

not mean "true only" within this particular context: we mean it is true unconditionally. This is an unavoidable assumption or idealization that we make from the "first person perspective". Communicative action depends, in the final analysis, on the validity of the reasons that are offered to support one's claims. Sometimes the reasons are readily available within a given normative context, in which case the speaker can convince her interlocutors of the validity of her claims without much difficulty. But sometimes the validity claims are challenged and problematized. In this case the communicative process either breaks down or it moves to a "higher" level of discourse. Bernstein (1983) explains the significance of Habermas's notion of discourse as follows:

Discourse consists of the type of elucidation and argumentation in which we suspend immediate action and in which participants seek to redeem the validity claims that have been challenged (Bernstein, 1983: 186).

The notion of discourse is crucial to Habermas' theory of communicative action; it is raised in conjunction with the concept of an "ideal speech situation" as the normative (practical) implication underlying the communicative process of mutual understanding and agreement. For Habermas (1982:235), the notion of discourse presupposes an "ideal speech situation", indicating a formal possibility, based on the presuppositions implicit in the validity claims of everyday communicative action, aimed at mutual understanding and agreement. In short, Habermas contends that every rational person would accept that a true consensus presupposes the absence of force or manipulation, equal access to the relevant information, the full acknowledgment of every interlocutor as an equal partner in dialogue. Implicit in the notions of "discourse" and the "ideal speech situation", is the idea of truth based on a consensus reached in a dialogical form of interaction, free from all forms of distorting influences (McCarthy 1984:308).

Although Habermas is aware that he is advancing an ideal, it must not be understood in the metaphysical sense of a metalinguistic ideal; he is referring to the assumptions that we implicitly make when trying to reach agreement with others. The ideal situation serves therefore, to a certain extent, as a regulative idea, in the Kantian sense; but Habermas wants to make a stronger claim than this:

The speech situation is neither an empirical phenomenon nor a mere construct, but rather an unavoidable supposition reciprocally made in discourse. This supposition can, but need not be counterfactual; but even if it is made counterfactually, it is a fiction that is operatively effective in the process of communication. Therefore, I prefer to speak of an anticipation of an ideal speech situation...The normative foundation of agreement in language is thus both anticipated and - as an anticipated foundation - also effective...To this extent the concept of the ideal speech situation is not merely a regulative principle in Kant's sense; with the first step towards agreement in language we must always in fact make this supposition. (Quoted in McCarthy, 1984:310.)

Habermas claims that for communicative action to be successful, it must take place against the background of a consensual framework that is acceptable to the relevant partners in dialogue. But what happens when the consensual framework is threatened to break down when one or more validity claim is seriously challenged? This question takes us to the heart of Habermas's theory of language, since it points to counterfactual possibility of transcending the specific context in which the communication actually occurs. As Bernstein (1985) explains:

All communicative action takes place against a background consensus. But this consensus can break down or be challenged by one of the participants in the communicative context. Habermas argues that anyone acting

communicatively *must*, in performing speech action, raise universal validity claims and suppose that such claims can be vindicated or redeemed...These (validity claims) are not always thematic, but they are implicit in every speech act. In most empirical situations we resolve our conflicts and disagreements by a variety of strategies and techniques. But to resolve a breakdown in communication, we can move to a level of *discourse* and argumentation where we explicitly seek to warrant the validity claims that have been called into question. Ideally, the only force that should prevail in such a discourse is the "force of the better argument". (Bernstein 1985:19.) (Emphasis, Bernstein's.)

When Bernstein refers to the notion of discourse in conjunction with the "force of the better argument", he is in fact referring to what Habermas (1990:88) calls an "ideal speech situation", in which "...we see the structures of a speech situation immune to repression and inequality in a particular way".

The "ideal speech situation" should not, however, be interpreted as an ideal of linguistic transparency to which we strive, and which teleologically awaits us at the end of the communicative process. For Habermas, a situation free of language is inconceivable; when Habermas speaks of "ideal speech situation", he is merely pointing to the formal conditions underlying the actual (empirical) communicative process of mutual understanding and agreement. These conditions or presuppositions are not to be found in some metalinguistic (metaphysical) dimension; they originate within the structures of ordinary everyday conversation. Habermas explains further:

The rationality inherent in (the communicative practice) is seen in the fact that a communicatively achieved agreement must be based *in the end* on reasons. And the rationality of those who participate in this communicative

practice is determined by whether, if necessary, they could, *under suitable circumstances*, provide reasons for their expressions. Thus the rationality proper to the communicative practice of everyday life points to the practice of argumentation as a court of appeal that makes it possible to continue communicative action with other means when disagreements can no longer be repaired with everyday routines and yet are not to be settled by the direct or strategic use of force. For this reason I believe that the concept of communicative rationality, which refers to an unclarified systemic interconnection of universal validity claims, can be adequately explicated only in terms of a theory of argumentation. (Habermas 1984:17-18.) (Emphases, Habermas's.)

At the root of Habermas's debate with Rorty is the latter's failure to distinguish between the validity claims and the social practices of particular language. It is the failure to make this distinction that separates Habermas's local speech community from that of Rorty's. Habermas (1996) maintains:

We must stretch the referent of the idea that a proposition is rationally acceptable "for us" beyond the limits and the standards of any local community. We must expand the universe of 'all of us' beyond the social and intellectual boundaries of an accidental bunch of people who just happen to gather under our skies. 'True' would otherwise merge with 'justified in the present context'. (Habermas 1996:21.)

3.7 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have looked at the postmodern attempt to overcome the legacy of modern metaphysics from the respective positions of Lyotard and Rorty. We have tried to show that even though Habermas is concerned with the same problematic, the possibility of reason, this question can only be answered

meaningfully if we take the broader context of modernity into consideration. For Habermas, modernity is the expression of three fundamental modes of rationality, the scientific, the moral, and the aesthetic, as specialized spheres of expertise within modernity. The primary question for him is how can reason be recast from a postmetaphysical perspective of modernity, condemned to establish its own normative frame of reference in the face an historical-self-consciousness, rooted in the contingencies and vicissitudes of modern history.

In the following chapter we will examine Habermas's response to the attempts by Foucault and Derrida to overcome the metaphysical legacy of the modern philosophical tradition.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE DEBATE WITH DERRIDA AND FOUCAULT

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In his delineation of postmodern thinking, Thomas McCarthy (1987b:ix-x) asserts that the Nietzschean model of an aesthetically inspired critique of metaphysical thinking represents one of the most important aspects of the postmodern critique of reason. Unlike other critiques, which proceed by way of philosophical arguments and debate, in order to overcome a (problematic) conception of reason in favour of a more plausible alternative, the postmodern critique seeks to establish the grounds of its own possibility, but without the use of reason, and in this way it tries to break away from the conceptual resources of modern philosophy. In their critique of reason, the postmodern thinkers, given their rejection of the model of instrumental or logocentric rationality, thus feel justified in their rejection of the normative notions of truth and knowledge as well, since these notions cannot, from the postmodern perspective, be separated from an instrumental or logocentric context, nor can they be reflected upon independently of language as the condition of their possibility. On the postmodern approach, the condition of the possibility of postmodern thinking simultaneously implies the condition of the impossibility, not only of metaphysical thinking, but also all forms of critique that presuppose a normative foundation for a conceptual distinction between language and truth.

While Habermas (1992a:144-145) interprets the postmodern critique as a form of "negative" metaphysics, in which a reversal of the dominant concepts of the metaphysical tradition has been effected, thus resulting in a radical critique from the "outside", that is, beyond the language of reason, I would rather see the postmodern critique as another form of transcendental thinking. On my

interpretation, the postmodern thinker is still guided by the "possibility question" that once motivated Kant's transcendental philosophy. Unlike Kant, however, who postulated a transcendental subject as the condition of the possibility of knowledge, in order to restrict the scope of metaphysical speculation, the postmodernist looks for the condition of the impossibility of the metaphysical legacy of reason, by postulating the realm of *différance*, in the case of Derrida, and "power" in the case of Foucault, and in this way they try to undermine the normative foundations of the notions of truth and freedom, as originating within the realm of reason.

Postmodern transcendental thinking, aimed at demonstrating the conditions for the impossibility of reason, is made possible by an aestheticist interpretation of language, that seeks to deny and subvert philosophy's traditional role as the custodian of reason, based on the impossibility of its traditional claim to independence from the "impure" realm of language, the playground of metaphor, paradox, and rhetoric. As McCarthy (1987b) puts it:

[An] important strand in the radical critique of reason can be traced back to Nietzsche's emphasis on the rhetorical and aesthetic dimensions of language. Thus, a number of critics seek to undercut philosophy's traditional self-delimitation from rhetoric and poetics as reflected in the standard oppositions between logos and mythos, logic and rhetoric, literal and figurative, concept and metaphor, argument and narrative, and the like. Pursuing Nietzsche's idea that philosophical texts are rhetorical constructs, they take aim at philosophy's self-understanding of its discourse in purely logical, literal - that is to say - non-rhetorical terms. They argue that this is achieved only at the cost of ignoring or suppressing the rhetorical strategies and elements of metaphor and figurative devices that are nevertheless always at work in its discourse. And they seek actively to dispel the illusion of pure reason by applying modes of literary analysis to philosophical texts, explaining the tensions between reason and rhetoric within them so as to undermine their logocentric understanding. (McCarthy 1987b:ix-x.)

McCarthy's account of the aesthetic basis of the postmodern critique of reason is especially relevant to Habermas's debate with Derrida who, more than any of the other postmodern thinkers, has sought to subvert the legacy of metaphysical thinking by drawing attention to the inescapable presence of "language as writing"(grammatology) as its precondition, in order to challenge the logocentric tradition of Western philosophy, with its orientation towards a "metaphysics of presence", based on the privileging of "language as speech" (Derrida 1976).

Like Richard Rorty, Derrida tries to find a way out of the conceptual distinctions that have accompanied the metaphysical tradition, but unlike Rorty who seeks to opt out of this tradition completely, Derrida does not believe that this is possible. He therefore chooses a different route: one that seeks to undermine the logocentric tradition of Western thinking in order to show its condition of possibility in the realm of writing as the medium for the articulation of *différance*. In this regard, Derrida focuses on the aesthetic possibilities of language with a view to subverting the conceptual distinctions central to the critical ethos of philosophical thinking. In this way he explores the possibility of overcoming metaphysical thinking by means of a radical critique of the notion of a transcendental subject. This critique, which proceeds from a linguistic perspective, in the form of deconstructive analysis, ultimately turns against the major ideas and ideals that have characterized the tradition of philosophical thinking; the ideas of truth and knowledge, on the one hand, and the ideal of reason and universality, on the other hand. From this perspective, Derrida and Foucault share the scepticism of Lyotard and Rorty with regard to the normative potential of reason.

The aim of deconstruction is therefore to demonstrate the impossibility of epistemic certainty, and hence to undermine philosophy's self-definition as a discipline concerned with questions of truth and knowledge. Given Derrida's scepticism

regarding the category of reason as a normative basis for critique (the traditional concern of philosophy), the project of deconstructive analysis proceeds by shifting the focus to the aesthetic dimensions of language, which provides it with the "creative space" for its critique.

Foucault also looks to the aesthetics of language for the possibility of his genealogical project. Like Derrida, he is also concerned with the problem of the subject, but unlike Derrida, he does not look for the condition of its possibility in a transcendental realm of *différance*, beyond the logocentric aspects of metaphysical thinking, but rather in the transcendental realm of power, as the condition for the impossibility of the rational transcendental subject of modern metaphysical-humanist tradition. Pursuing a path of genealogical analysis, Foucault seeks to show how the subject is constituted within the domain of power which produces truth, which in turn fabricates the construct of an independent and autonomous subject. The genealogical project of Foucault is thus a form of critique in which we are made aware of the contingent "power" relations underlying the construction of the modern subject. On the Foucauldian approach, the normative notions of truth and reason, derive their "validity" from the dominant discourses that happen to prevail in a particular context, at a particular time.

The point of departure for Foucault and Derrida is a critique of reason as it finds expression in the assumption of a context-transcendent perspective of certainty and truth. Within the context of the modern metaphysical tradition, this means that the notion of a transcendental subject is untenable, and the ensuing critique of the modern philosophical tradition of subjectivistic rationalism thus brings them in line with a wider group of thinkers for whom the "end of the subject" is synonymous with "the end of metaphysics", and the "end of metaphysics" implies the "end of philosophy", as the "guardian of rationality" (Habermas 1990:20).

We will now proceed to an analysis of the critique by Derrida and Foucault of the metaphysical tradition of rationalistic subjectivity and see whether it necessarily has to lead to the bankruptcy of the notions of reason and truth. Our analysis will be confined to those aspects and implications of their critiques that have an overall bearing on Habermas's debate with postmodern thinking on the question of reason.

4.2 DERRIDA: THE CRITIQUE OF LOGOCENTRICISM

The critique of metaphysical thinking lies at the heart of Derrida's deconstructive project. Taking the phenomenological tradition, initiated by Edmund Husserl, as his point of departure, Derrida focuses his critique on the foundationalist assumption of a fully self-grounding and self-transparent subject as the transcendental core of philosophical reason, the pivotal point of modern metaphysics. From this perspective, he seeks to overcome the notion of a constitutive (permanent, stable, self-identical) centre or foundation of knowledge and truth by showing the impossibility of reason from a transcendental perspective of absolute certainty, the modern expression of logocentrism.

For Derrida, the most significant consequence of a philosophy of the subject is a "metaphysics of presence" in which the "interior voice" of the subject or consciousness is privileged by being present to the "truth" that it speaks. As Derrida puts (1982) it:

But what is consciousness? What does "consciousness" mean? Most often, in the very form of meaning, in all its modifications, consciousness offers itself to thought only as self-presence, as the perception of self in presence. And what holds for consciousness holds for so-called subjective existence. Just as the category of the subject cannot be, and never has been, thought without the reference to the present ...so the subject has never manifested

itself except as self-presence. The privilege granted to consciousness therefore signifies the privilege granted to the present...[t]his privilege is the ether of metaphysics...(Derrida 1982:16.)

Derrida's deconstructivist project is developed to overcome the philosophy of the subject (the philosophy of consciousness), by subverting the notion of self-presence, and by extension, problematizing the notions of truth and knowledge, as articulated in the logocentric tradition of speech, as the centre of reason.

In his critique of Western logocentrism, Derrida takes his cue from the anti-phenomenological movement in France, a movement which at different times (during the 1960's and 70's) associated itself with the structuralist and post-structuralist schools of thought. The primary objective of this movement was to overcome a metaphysically defined notion of reason, by locating its source within the realm of "the social" and "the symbolic". The human sciences thus became the medium for the exploration of the question of reason and rationality. By prioritizing the order of the "the social" and "the symbolic", the anti-phenomenological movement believed that they had finally escaped from "a critique of introspection as a mode of knowledge, and (the) belief that philosophical speculation depends upon unwarranted extrapolation from the experience of the individual" (Dews 1987:3).

Derrida, however, has challenged structuralist theory, and the human sciences associated with it, on the grounds that it is a concealed form of metaphysics insofar as the assumption of an *a priori* order is construed in terms of an unproblematic (social-symbolic) structure that now "speaks" the "language of truth" in much the same way that the transcendental subject had done within the metaphysical tradition. And all the structuralist has to do is to demonstrate the underlying

structure once "occupied" by the transcendental subject. Structuralism therefore relinquishes the possibility of moving beyond that which it seeks to demonstrate, thus becoming an apologist for the prevailing "system" (Dews 1987:4).

The structuralist movement, initiated by Ferdinand de Saussure has had a radical effect on philosophy's self-understanding as an autonomous and self-validating epistemological discipline. At the root of structuralism is a profound scepticism of a link between "the mind" and "reality", in view of its fundamental claim that knowledge and meaning are mediated in and through the prior structures of language. On this view, knowledge and meaning are constituted within the symbolic network of differential signs or signifiers. Christopher Norris (1982) explains the significance of this point as follows:

[Saussure has] argued that our knowledge of the world is inextricably shaped and conditioned by the language that serves to represent it. Saussure's insistence on the 'arbitrary' nature of the sign has led to his undoing of the natural link that common sense assumes to exist between word and thing. Meanings are bound up, according to Saussure, in a system of relationship and difference that effectively determines our habits of thought and perception. Far from providing a 'window' on reality or (to vary the metaphor) a faithfully reflecting mirror, language brings along with it a whole intricate network of established significations. In his view, our knowledge of things is insensibly structured by the systems of code and conventions which alone enable us to classify and organize the chaotic flow of experience. There is simply no way to access knowledge except by way of language....Reality is carved up in various ways according to the manifold patterns of sameness and difference which various languages provide...This basic *relativity* of thought and meaning....is the starting-point of structuralist theory. (Norris 1982:4-5.) (Emphasis, Norris'.)

The structuralist view of language provides Derrida with the context for his own project: the deconstruction of metaphysical thinking. However, in spite of his debt to structuralist theory in this regard, Derrida is not convinced that its representatives, such as Claude Lévi-Strauss and Jacques Lacan, despite their avowed claim, have moved beyond the reach of metaphysics. As Dews (1987) points out:

From the beginning [Derrida] insisted that the structuralist human sciences, far from being capable of supplanting philosophy, were based on philosophical, indeed metaphysical, assumptions which demanded interrogation, and in doing so he restored the rights of philosophical thought - or at least of some successor to philosophy - to challenge the role and status of the sciences, rather than being obliged to approximate to this status. (Dews 1987:4.)

The successor to philosophy for Derrida is deconstructive thinking, the major objective of which is to undermine and subvert the conceptual distinctions that have established themselves within the metaphysical tradition, not with a view to reversing the conceptual terms, but in order to demonstrate the "grounds" of their origin and possibility in the realm of *différance*, a term used by Derrida to convey a sense of two verbs ("to differ" and "to defer") collapsed into one. The realm of *différance*, as conceptualized by Derrida, is associated with the activity of "writing" as its primary medium of expression. From this perspective, Derrida challenges structuralist theory on the grounds that it reinforces the conceptual biases of the logocentric-metaphysical tradition, by preserving the conceptual distinctions or binary oppositions so central to metaphysical thinking. Structuralist theory thus does not only belie the arbitrary nature of the conceptual hierarchical structures of the metaphysical tradition, it also betrays the primary objective of the structuralist movement, which is to overcome metaphysics altogether.

In Western, and notably French thought, the dominant discourse - let us call it "structuralism" - remains caught, by an entire layer, sometimes the most fecund, of its stratification, within the metaphysics - logocentrism - which at the same time one claims rather precipitately to have "gone beyond". (Derrida 1976:99.)

For Derrida, the overcoming of metaphysics means moving beyond the language of truth as it has found expression in the logocentric tradition. To this end, he develops a conception of language in which the "non-concept" of *différance* is postulated as the destabilizing grounds of the "metaphysics of presence". Implicit in the Derridean conception of language is a radical critique of philosophical reason as the highest and final court of appeal in the service of logocentrism. For Derrida, the binary oppositions of metaphysical thinking do not originate within the a logic of identity and non-identity, but within the realm of *différance* itself which, for him, becomes the condition of the possibility of metaphysical thinking:

What is written as *différance* then, will be the playing movement that produces - by means of something that is not simply an activity - these differences, these effects of difference. This does not mean that the *différance* that produces differences is somehow before them, in a simple unmodified in-different present. *Différance* is the non-full, non-simple, structured and differentiating origin of differences. Thus the name "origin" no longer suits it. (Derrida 1982:11.)

In his attempt to overcome the metaphysics of presence, Derrida challenges the phonocentric prejudice of the logocentric tradition. Derrida maintains that since philosophy, like every other discipline, is mediated through language, this means that the subject is at best a symbolic construct, and given this argument, it cannot simultaneously be the centre and foundation of knowledge and truth. From this

perspective, Derrida seeks to dismiss the logocentric prejudice of metaphysical thinking which privileges the voice of an ahistorical (solitary) thinker, engaged in an internal monologue, and situated beyond the reach of language. In the confrontation between speech (*parole*) and language (*langue*), Derrida wants to show that the triumph of speech is a consequence of a metaphysics of presence. The medium of writing is conceptualized as a realm of radical disruption and subversion, and as the contingent "text" underlying all contexts, it challenges all forms of hypostatization in the name of "truth". Norris (1982) explains the significance of the prejudice of "the voice" in Western metaphysics as follows:

Derrida sees a whole metaphysics at work behind the privilege granted to speech...Voice becomes a metaphor of truth and authenticity, a source of self-present "living" speech as opposed to the secondary lifeless emanations of writing. In speaking one is able to experience (supposedly) an intimate link between sound and sense, an inward and immediate realization of meaning which yields itself up without reserve to perfect transparent understanding. Writing, on the contrary, destroys this ideal of perfect self-presence. It obtrudes an alien, depersonalized medium, a deceiving shadow which falls between intent and meaning, between utterance and understanding. It occupies a promiscuous public realm where authority is sacrificed to the vagaries and whims of textual 'dissemination'. Writing, in short, is a threat to the deeply traditional view that associates truth with self-presence and the 'natural' language wherein it finds expression. (Norris 1982:28.)

Derrida's model of writing therefore plays a double role: on the one hand, it is the "transcendental" condition of the possibility of logocentrism; on the other hand, it is the condition of the impossibility of metaphysical closure. Derrida's challenge to the logocentric tradition of metaphysics thus takes the form of a critique as

"deconstruction", which seeks to criticize and expose the metaphysical prejudice and circularity of the argument that we can give "reasons" to justify "reason", and thus establish the final (universal) formal basis of knowledge and truth in our dealings with "reality". In this regard, Derrida seeks to establish the conditions of the possibility of metaphysics with a view to destabilizing and subverting its claim to closure in the name of "truth". Derrida employs the "method" of deconstructive analysis to demonstrate the metaphorical "impurity" at the root of the supposed conceptual purity of the modern epistemological paradigm, not in order to reduce knowledge- and truth-claims to the level of metaphor, but in order to invoke the dynamic and disruptive "absence" of *différance* that haunts "the language of presence", the metaphysical language of "truth", as the transcendental condition of its possibility. For Derrida, the realm of *différance* is a metaphor for the non-conceptual origins of our knowledge and truth claims. Brendan Sweetman's (1999) comments on this point are quite useful:

[A]ccording to Derrida, although the realm of *différance* is non-cognitive, it never occurs without cognitive knowledge (the realm of presence). This is because our contact with it in human experience, our involvement with it through language, always takes place by means of concepts and predication. And this is simply to say that all knowledge is contextual in the sense that the relations of an object in any system of objects or meanings are always changing (differing), hence meaning (i.e. identity) is continually being postponed (i.e. deferred). The realm of *différance* is appropriately conveyed or expressed in philosophical work by means of metaphor because it is the nature of metaphor to signify without signifying, and this illustrates nicely Derrida's point that identity is what it is not and is not what it is. Derrida skillfully employs many different and often striking metaphors to make the same point repeatedly: margins, trace, flow, arche-writing, tain of the mirror, alterity, supplement, etc. (Sweetman 1999:7.)

The above passage is indicative of arguably the most controversial aspect of Derrida's thinking, because it clearly shows a submission to the mystical non-cognitive authority of *différance* as the source of reason and knowledge.

It is clear that Derrida has identified the problematic nature of logocentric thinking with its subjective orientation towards the realm of objects, where the subject exercises its control and domination. But when Derrida tries to overcome this logocentric orientation, he turns his back on history, and goes transcendental in order to establish the non-rational condition for the possibility of reason within the realm of *différance*. Rudolphe Gasché (1988), for example, explains the transcendental aspect of Derrida's thinking in the following way:

As Derrida argues in *Of Grammatology*, the origin of reason is something that adds itself to reason; it is a supplement of reason, something exterior, nonnecessary to reason, but also that without which reason could not be what it is. These nonrational origins of reason are of the order of unheard-of trivialities. (Gasché 1988:535.)

The characterization above clearly reveals a restricted notion of rationality, the major implication of which is that the knowledge and truth claims of reason will inevitably be trivialized in the light of Derrida's transcendental turn, which Dews (1987:19) rightly describes as "a move upstream", aimed at establishing the transcendental possibility of reason and truth as they occur within the tradition of logocentrism. To this move "upstream", Dews (*ibid*) counterposes a move "downstream", in the wake of the collapse of metaphysical and epistemological subject-centered foundationalism, "towards an account of subjectivity as emerging from and entwined with the natural and historical world".

Derrida's privileging of philosophical thinking, albeit in the form of deconstructive analysis, leads not only to an attempt to overcome the discredited tradition of metaphysical thinking, but by failing to distinguish between a logocentric orientation aimed at achieving a foundation of absolute certainty on the one hand, and a possible alternative model of rationality, on the other hand, the normative notions of truth and knowledge (as the condition of independent critique), also fall by the wayside.

All deconstructive analysis can therefore hope to achieve is to undermine all attempts at metaphysical closure by invoking the non-conceptual, non-rational realm of *différance*, in the (subversive) medium of "writing", and in this way unsettle the deep assumptions of metaphysical thinking. McCarthy's (1991) comments on the significance of the attempts at metaphysical closure are indeed to the point:

But such closure is impossible; philosophy cannot transcend its medium. The claim to have done so always relies on ignoring, excluding, or assimilating whatever escapes the grids of intelligibility it imposes on the movement of *différance*. And this repression of what doesn't fit, inevitably has its effects, in the form of paradoxes, incoherencies, which it is the task of deconstructive analysis to bring to light. Its aim in doing so is not to produce a new improved unified theory of the whole but ceaselessly to undermine the pretense to theoretical mastery, the illusion of a "pure" reason that can gain control over its own conditions, and the dream of a definitive grasp of basic meanings and truth. (McCarthy 1991:100-101.)

Derrida is quite aware of the paradoxical nature of his deconstructive project insofar as he accepts that he cannot "stand outside" the very discourse that he seeks to destabilize, even though there have been times in his career when he has entertained this idea:

My central question is: from what site or non-site...can philosophy as such appear to itself, so that it can interrogate and reflect upon itself in an original manner. Such a non-site or alterity would be irreducible to philosophy. But the problem is that such a non-site cannot be defined or situated by means of philosophical language. (Quoted in Bernstein 1991:210.)

It should be noted, however, that Derrida is skeptical of the possibility of taking up a position beyond the conceptual reach of metaphysical thinking; he is opposed to the idea of a complete "rupture". As McCarthy (1991) duly points out:

Thus in an interview with Julia Kristeva, Derrida professed his disbelief in "decisive ruptures": "Breaks are always, and fatally, reinscribed in the old cloth that must continually, interminably be undone." Deconstruction, then, cannot aim to rid us, once and for all, of the concepts fundamental to Western rationalism, but only, again and again, "to transform (them), to displace them, to turn them against their own presuppositions, to reinscribe them in other chains, and little by little to modify the terrain of our work, and thereby to produce new configurations." By these means it "organizes a structure of resistance" to the dominant conceptuality. (McCarthy 1991:99.)

The deconstructive project is thus inseparably linked with the phenomenon of logocentrism. As indicated above, Derrida accepts that there is no getting beyond metaphysics, except paradoxically by challenging it from inside. Deconstruction thus becomes a form of vigilantism, a permanent critique that implicitly raises the possibility (the regulative idea) of moving beyond metaphysical thinking, while acknowledging at the time that the very language of its critique is complicit with the language that it seeks to overcome.

The "concept" of *différance* seeks to subvert all metaphysical oppositions (signifier/signified; sensible/intelligible; writing/speech; passivity/activity), while hinting at the possibility of functioning in a realm "outside" or "beyond" the tradition of metaphysics. Given the complexity of the "concept" of *différance*, Derrida (1976) can only describe it in negative terms, while simultaneously insisting that it is not a metaphysical concept. In his book, *Of Grammatology*, we read:

[It is] origin of all repetition, origin of ideality... [it is] not more ideal than real, not more intelligible than sensible, not more transparent signification than an opaque energy, and no concept of metaphysics can describe it (Derrida 1976:65). (Emphasis, Derrida's.)

For Derrida (ibid.:61), a philosophy of *différance* is one that acknowledges the "ultra-transcendental text" that serves as the "transcendental condition" of all signification and identify.

Given his critique of any position aimed at finality and closure, Derrida finds himself in an awkward dilemma on the question of "the subject". On Derrida's view, we are forced to choose between two mutually exclusive alternatives: the subject is either an immobile centre, a core of self-identity, or (alternatively) there is no subject at all, except by default, as it were, that is, as the effect of the play of the text, an ephemeral fiction. On this approach, the subject always comes after the play of *différance*, and as such, its claim to identity is a denial of the disruptive effects of language or "the text" that precedes the identity of selfhood. As Dews (1987:34) puts it, "for Derrida, the collapse of the transcendently signified entails the 'absence of a centre or an origin', allowing no thought of a subject which is no longer an origin, but a *focus* which is never fully present to itself".

If Derrida's argument is correct (insofar as we cannot conceive of "the subject", except in terms of its negativity or its "absence of origins"), what are the moral-political implications of this argument? How does the project of deconstruction link up with the institutional and historical processes in which "the subject" is invariably the plaything of domination and power? It is precisely at this point that Habermas challenges the arguments of Derrida in view of the latter's implicit rejection of modernity's search for reassurance on its own terms, and in keeping with the Enlightenment legacy of rationality as the condition of critical independence and autonomy. Habermas is especially critical of Derrida when the latter asserts:

The "rationality" - but perhaps this word should be abandoned for reasons that will appear at the end of this sentence - which governs a writing thus enlarged and thus radicalized, no longer issues from a logos. Further, it inaugurates the destruction, not the demolition but the de-sedimentation, the de-construction of all the significations that have their source in that of the logos. Particularly the signification of *truth*. All the metaphysical determinations of truth...are more or less immediately inseparable from the instance of the logos, or of reason thought within the lineage of the logos, in whatever sense it is understood... . (Derrida 1976:10.)

In the following section, we will examine Habermas's response to Derrida's critique of logocentrism.

4.3 HABERMAS'S RESPONSE TO DERRIDA

In his *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Habermas levels two fundamental accusations against Derrida. In the first instance, he accuses Derrida of a form of foundationalism that remains trapped within the conceptual framework of "the philosophy of the subject". For Habermas, Derrida's postulation of a realm of

différance which finds expression in "writing", testifies to a variation on a very familiar theme of metaphysical thinking: that of "first principles". Habermas claims:

... Derrida by no means breaks with the foundationalist tenacity of the philosophy of the subject; he only makes what it had regarded as fundamental dependent on the still profounder - though now vacillating or oscillating - basis of an originary power set temporally aflow. Unabashedly, and in the style of *Ursprungsphilosophie*, Derrida falls back on this Urschrift, which leaves its trace anonymously, without any subject... . (Habermas 1987b:178-179.)

The second accusation is that Derrida's deconstructive project has as its ultimate aim the establishing of the primacy of "rhetoric" over "logic":

The rebellious labor of deconstruction aims indeed at dismantling the smuggled-in basic conceptual hierarchies, at overthrowing foundational relationships and conceptual relations of domination, such as those between speech and writing, the intelligible and the sensible, nature and culture, inner and outer, mind and matter, male and female. Logic and rhetoric constitutes one of these conceptual pairs. Derrida is particularly interested in standing the primacy of logic over rhetoric, canonized since Aristotle, on its head. (Habermas 1987b:187.)

We will now proceed, in the light of the two arguments above, to a more detailed assessment of Habermas's debate with Derrida, under the following headings:

The deconstruction of metaphysics (4.3.1)

The epistemic status of philosophy (4.3.2)

4.3.1 The deconstruction of metaphysics

In defense of the first accusation above, Habermas makes many controversial points, the most striking of which is his *ad hominem* argument in which he tries to equate Derrida's conception of writing with the Jewish tradition of mysticism, in order to prove Derrida's anti-modernist stance. On Habermas's reading, Derrida's radicalism is not an end in itself, but rather a means of reaffirming a commitment to the Jewish idea of a complete rupture with the continuum of history, based on the expectation of a violent irruption which announces the birth of a radically new consciousness of time. This stand on the part of Derrida is reminiscent of Heidegger whose conceptual distinction between the ontological realm of Being and the ontic realm of beings (the social-political dimensions of human interaction) is reenacted in Derrida's distinction between the ontological realm of *différance* (as archewriting), on the one hand, and a metaphysical legacy based on the dubious authority of the truth- and knowledge claims of science and philosophy.

Given Derrida's anti-phenomenological stance, which is directed primarily against the assumption of a transcendental subject, history seems to be devoid of the possibility of a rationality capable of redeeming the Enlightenment ideal of moral-political emancipation and autonomy.

Derrida develops the history of Being - which is encoded in writing in another variation from Heidegger. He too degrades politics and contemporary history to the status of the ontic, so as to romp all the more freely, and with a greater wealth of associations, in the sphere of the ontological and the archewriting. But the rhetoric that serves Heidegger for the initiation into the fate of Being, in Derrida comes to the aid of a different, rather more subversive orientation. Derrida stands closer to the anarchist who wishes to explode the continuum of history than to the authoritarian admonition to bend before destiny. (Habermas 1987b:181-182.)

Whether one accepts Habermas's controversial reading of Derrida as a modern exponent of Jewish mysticism or not, one thing is clear; Habermas's interpretation of his opponent's position seems to be a heuristic device aimed at demonstrating his initial argument regarding modernity's need for self-reassurance on the basis of its own norms and criteria. Thus, one must acknowledge the "personal" element in Habermas's critique of Derrida, but not so much in order to accuse the latter of a nostalgia for a premodern (re-enlightenment) condition of mysticism, but more simply to identify yet another ill-conceived dismissal of the rational potential of modernity, when the latter is reduced to the level of instrumental rationality. I therefore regard the following interpretation by David Couzens Hoy (1998) of Habermas's motive regarding Derrida's work as an oversimplification:

Derrida's desire to transcend the aspirations of modern reason is in reality a frustrated desire for a return to the premodern traditions where reason has not yet undermined the mystery of hidden religious authority. Since the quarrel is between the Enlightenment's faith in reason and the counter-enlightenment against reason, what Habermas is objecting to is the vestige of Jewish mysticism (not because it is Jewish of course, but because it is mystical to the point of being not only mysterious but also unintelligible). (Hoy 1998:127.)

The above reading of Habermas's reading of Derrida flies in the face of a more urgent undertaking on the part of the former, and that is to show that Derrida's lack of an alternative model of rationality, a post-metaphysical alternative, not only keeps him entangled in the *aporias* of metaphysical thinking; it also mystifies the historical self-consciousness of modernity in view of an inability to find a rational potential within the culture of modernity:

As a participant in the philosophical discourse of modernity, Derrida inherits the weakness of a critique of metaphysics that does not shake loose the intentions of first philosophy. Despite his transformed gestures, in the end, he too, promotes only a mystification of palpable social pathologies; he too, disconnects essential (namely, deconstructive) thinking from scientific analysis; and he, too, lands at an empty, formula-like avowal of some indeterminate authority. (Habermas 1987b:181.)

As can be seen in the passage above, Habermas is more concerned about the reactionary effects that follow when the radical rational potential of cultural modernity is misrecognized or interpreted from an "alien" perspective. It is for this reason that he interprets the fixation on logocentrism as indicative, not so much of "an excess of reason but as a deficit of rationality" (Habermas 1987b:310). According to Habermas, the "deficit of rationality is a direct consequence of reason being restricted to its technical-scientific use, thus perpetuating the subject-object model of rationality, as the medium of logocentric thinking".

A critique of the subject-object model of rationality will necessarily incline towards mysticism if it cannot account for the epistemic nature of its own status. For Habermas, the knowledge- and truth claims of philosophy must avoid the trap of self-referentiality and self-validation if they are not to fall back into the fold of metaphysical thinking, and this is why Habermas questions the validity of Derrida's deconstructive project, because the epistemic status of *différance* is problematic, to say the least.

Habermas is of the view that if philosophy is to remain relevant to the challenges of modernity, then it has to move in the direction of post-metaphysical thinking, in which the ideas of reason and truth can still be validated, albeit within a context of epistemic fallibilism. In this regard, Habermas defends philosophy's traditional

concern with the question of reason from a universalistic perspective while, at the same time, acknowledging its dependence on other disciplines, such as social and reconstructive science, with regard to its central objective: the reformulation of reason in post-metaphysical terms:

[P]hilosophy shares with the sciences a fallibilistic consciousness, in that its strong universalistic suppositions require confirmation in an interplay with empirical theories of competence. This revisionary self-understanding of the role of philosophy marks a break with the aspirations of first philosophy (*Ursprungsphilosophie*) in any form, but it does not mean that philosophy abandons its role as the guardian of rationality. (Habermas 1985:196.)

If the imperative of modernity's self-reassurance is not adequately addressed, it can lead to an historical obscurity and a general moral-political paralysis in the face of modernity's main challenge: the establishment of a rational society (Habermas 1987b:16, 1989:48-70). Habermas consequently states that Derrida, like his fellow postmodern thinkers, instead of engaging concretely with the problems of the day, looks beyond the rational potential implicit in the normative structures of modernity. For Habermas, the concrete effect of the postmodern challenge is that it leaves everything "as it is", and because of its inability or refusal to look for alternatives "within", the repressive power of a scientific-instrumental rationality goes unchallenged.

Unlike Habermas (1984), who makes a clear distinction between the instrumental and communicative forms of rationality, thus enabling him to find another "more authentic" voice(s) of reason within the democratic movements of solidarity and resistance to the unbalanced and harmful expansion of instrumental rationality, the postmodernist's protest is as a solitary one that finds expression in the esoteric

language of a different non-rational form of critical thinking. This point confirms Habermas's thesis regarding the "new obscurity" that has overtaken Western industrialized societies (Habermas 1989:48-69). It indicates a lack of rational resources to deal with a modern world that has been overrationalized in terms of science and technology. Postmodern thinking therefore seeks "metaphysical comfort" in the non-rational realms of "play" and "mystery". Habermas (1989) maintains:

It is no wonder, then, that the theories gaining influence today are primarily those that try to show how the very forces that make for increasing power, the forces from which modernity once derived its self-consciousness and its utopian expectations, are in actuality turning autonomy into dependence, emancipation into oppression, and reason into irrationality. Derrida concludes from Heidegger's critique of modern subjectivity that we can escape the treadmill of logocentrism only through aimless provocation. Instead of trying to master foreground contingencies in the world, he says, we should surrender to the mysteriously encoded contingencies through which the world discloses itself. (Habermas 1989:51-52.)

Instead of dealing with the problems in the "real world", by way of an analysis that identifies and diagnoses the nature and extent of the problems that confronts us in an overrationalized society, and thus make us learn from our mistakes and hopefully advance beyond them, the postmodernist surrenders the critical (normative) dimension of philosophical thinking, to the authoritarian and mystical and "playful" power of language.

In the following section, we will examine Habermas's response to Derrida's critique of philosophy in general, and the implications of the latter's reduction of the truth claims of philosophy to the realm of the aesthetic, in particular.

4.3.2 The epistemic status of philosophy

According to Christopher Norris (1992:170-171), contemporary reactions to Derrida's project of deconstruction can be divided into two main rival interpretations: on the one hand, there is Rodolphe Gasché, who views Derrida's work as a continuation of the Kantian transcendental project, albeit in order to establish the conditions for "the impossibility of reason"; and there is Rorty, for whom Derrida is best understood as a thinker who has turned his back on "enlightenment" notions and the metaphysical tradition, on the other. Rorty sees Derrida as having adopted a postmodern-pragmatist stance whence to create new vocabularies for the "private" purpose of writing.

Adding his voice to this particular debate Rick Roderick, as I show below, sides with Rorty's appropriation of Derrida, in which the epistemic status of philosophy is completely denied. This denial is part of a more general plot to overcome the conceptual distinction between philosophy and literature. On this approach, philosophy loses its status as an autonomous discipline, dealing with questions of knowledge and truth, and is defined instead as a "kind of writing" whose primary purpose is that of a radical interpretation and reinterpretation of various texts, "free" of the truth claims that have characterized traditional philosophy. In this regard, Rorty (1992) challenges Norris when the latter seeks to place Derrida in the tradition of rational thinking:

Norris thinks that Derrida should be read as a transcendental philosopher in the Kantian tradition - somebody who digs out hitherto unsuspected presuppositions. 'Derrida', he says, 'is broaching something like a Kantian transcendental deduction, an argument to demonstrate ("perversely" enough) that *a priori* notions of logical truth are *a priori* ruled out of court by rigorous reflection on the powers and limits of textual critique'. By contrast,

my view of Derrida is that he nudges us into a world in which 'rigorous reflection on the powers and limits...' has as little place as do *a priori* notions of logical truth'. This world has as little room for transcendental deduction, or for rigour, as for self-authentic moments of immediate presence to consciousness. (Rorty 1992:236.)

Roderick (1987) credits Rorty with having presented us with a "truer" account of the intent informing Derrida's project of deconstruction. He reflects on the implications of the Rortyan-Derridean rejection of the conceptual distinction between philosophy and literature as follows:

In terms of this distinction, Rorty has located one, if not the, central feature of the realignment of our thought called for by Derrida. The central claims associated with his work involves a recognition of the "textuality" of all human enterprises; science, religion, morality, art, philosophy. Thus Derrida's famous comment: "there is nothing outside the text". Rorty glosses this remark by saying that texts do not refer to non-texts because any specification of a referent will be in some "vocabulary," which means that one is really comparing two descriptions of a thing and not a description with an independent thing. (Roderick 1987:442.)

Norris, who is sympathetic to the Kantian reading of Derrida, thus feels it incumbent upon himself to set the record straight by first confronting Habermas who, in spite of having given us one of the most compelling accounts of the historical and philosophical antecedents of present-day postmodern thinking, in Norris' view, has sadly misread Derrida, and thus wrongly placed him in the camp of Nietzschean irrationalism:

It seems to me that (Habermas) has misread Derrida's work, and done so moreover in a way that fits in too readily with commonplace ideas about deconstruction as a species of latter-day Nietzschean irrationalism, one that rejects the whole legacy of post-Kantian enlightened thought. In short, Habermas goes along with the widely held view that deconstruction is a matter of collapsing all genre-distinctions, especially those between philosophy and literature, reason and rhetoric, language in its constative and performative aspects. (Norris 1992:167.)

In my view, depending on one's perspective, both of the approaches referred to above can be reconciled with certain aspects of Derrida's thought, and, what is more, as Norris points out, Derrida's project in certain respects is indeed compatible with Habermas's own project of enlightened critique. In this regard, his essays, *The principle of reason: the university in the eyes of its pupils* (1983), and *Of an apocalyptic tone recently adopted in philosophy* (1984), both bear testimony to the rational-critical dimension of Derrida's thought, reinforcing my own view that Derrida is essentially concerned with trying to come to grips with what Habermas himself has referred to as the "desublimation of reason" and the "disempowering of philosophy" (Habermas 1987b:131). In this regard, White (1991) tries to show that ultimately the two forms of critique stem from two different conceptions of language: the one (Habermas's) is oriented towards action-coordination and problem-solving. Derrida's, on the other hand, is aimed at disclosing the conditions that make the truth claims of philosophy and science problematic, by revealing the "power" lurking behind these claims.

If Norris is correct in his assessment of Derrida as a participant in the "philosophical discourse of modernity" (and this is certainly evident in Derrida's (1978:54) critique of Foucault where he asserts that "logos is reason and, indeed, a historical reason"), then the debate around the epistemic status of philosophy-in-language

has to be conducted within the larger context of the "project of modernity", in relation to which the principle of human freedom and autonomy is to be gauged. Central to the problem of freedom and autonomy is a clash between two models of language: an aestheticist model, as envisaged by Derrida (rhetorical, poetic, "world disclosing") aimed at revealing the oppressive effects of metaphysical-logocentric reason, on the one hand, and a communicative model (based on normal or everyday language), aimed at problem-solving, consensus, the coordination of action, on the other hand.

Habermas is of the view that Derrida's failure to differentiate between the "normal" and "poetic" aspects of language has dire implications for modernity's project of moral-political self-determination and autonomy. Moreover, it robs philosophy of its critical capacity for a practical assessment of modernity's rational potential for bringing about change. Habermas accordingly accuses Derrida of ignoring the illocutionary binding force of ordinary speech within communicative action, which acts as "a mechanism for coordinating action that places normal speech, as part of everyday practice, under constraints different from those of fictional discourse, simulation and interior monologue" (Habermas 1987b:196).

It should be noted that Habermas is not totally insensitive to the liberating and illuminating power of aesthetic expression. He explains the aesthetic expression in terms of an autonomy that has resulted from the decentering of subjectivity, the major consequence of which is a release from constraints to act or take responsibility for one's actions in the world; the aesthetic mode of expression is there to defamiliarize the face of the familiar:

At the same time, this decentering indicates an increased sensitivity to what remains unassimilated in the interpretative achievements of pragmatic, epistemic, and moral mastery of the demands and challenges of everyday situations; it effects oneness to the expurgated of the unconscious, the fantastic, and the mad, the material and the bodily - thus to everything in our speechless contact with reality which is so fleeting, so contingent, so immediate, so individualized, simultaneously so far and so near that it escapes categorical grasp (Habermas 1985:201).

For Habermas, however the aesthetic aspect of language does not lead to the coordination of actions, nor can it account for the possibility of learning processes in the world, both of which are dependent on the capacity of language to be critical, to facilitate learning, and to solve problems. According to Habermas, the source of these activities is to be found in the social practice of normal everyday conversation.

Derrida's aesthetically inspired model of language is unable to account for the acquisition of knowledge or the mastering of problems in the world, the major consequence of which is an aesthetic contextualism which belies the context-transcendent dimensions of ordinary language:

An aesthetic contextualism blinds him to the fact that everyday communicative practice makes learning processes possible (thanks to built-in idealizations) in relation to which the world-disclosive force of interpreting language has in turn to prove its worth. These learning processes unfold an independent logic that transcends all local constraints, because experiences and judgements are formed only in the light of criticizable validity claims. Derrida neglects the potential for negation inherent in the validity basis of action oriented toward reaching understanding: he permits the capacity to solve problems to disappear behind the world-creating capacity of language... (Habermas 1987b:205.)

Habermas's account of the problem-solving and learning-enhancing capacity of linguistic interaction presupposes the possibility of consensus and action coordination. If the modernity project is to reach its potential, then philosophy has a definite role to play with regard to the problematic of rationality, reason and truth. Although it can no longer function on its own as a self-validating discipline, this does not necessarily have to result in a complete disengagement from the problem of knowledge. For Habermas, philosophy's concern with the question of reason, and the related questions of knowledge and truth, do indeed arise in the realm of ordinary situations of linguistic interaction where metaphor, rhetoric, mysticism, manipulation, and domination are the order of the day. But the role of philosophy is to look for the historically rooted possibility for translating the universalizing ideals of communicative action into concrete social practice. Habermas's clinging to philosophy as the "guardian of rationality" is in direct contrast to the postmodernist inability to acknowledge the transformative potential of modernity - hence the equation of knowledge- and truth-claims with power-claims. This last point sets the stage for a consideration of Habermas's debate with Foucault.

4.4 THE DEBATE WITH FOUCAULT

Of all the postmodern thinkers, Foucault openly reveals the extent to which he shares Habermas's concern with the problem of modernity, from the perspective of "reason in history". Foucault, like Habermas, is particularly concerned with the Enlightenment legacy of rationalism, with a view to determining its impact on modernity. Using Kant's essay, *What is Enlightenment?*, as his point of departure for exploring the question of modernity, Foucault clearly situates his own project within a philosophical tradition of critique, initiated by Kant and later taken up by Hegel, and reaching its climax in the writings that have come out of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. From this perspective, he is very much aware of the philosophical tradition that he shares with Habermas:

In any event...in November 1784 a German periodical, *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, published a response to the question: *Was ist Aufklärung?* And the respondent was Kant.

A minor text perhaps. But it seems to me that it marks the discreet entry into the history of thought of a question that modern philosophy has not been capable of answering, but that it has never been able to get rid of either. And one that has been repeated in various forms for two centuries now. From Hegel through Nietzsche or Max Weber to Horkheimer or Habermas, hardly any philosophy has failed to confront this same question, directly or indirectly. What, then, is this event that is called the *Aufklärung* and that has determined, at least in part, what we are, what we think, and what we do today? ...What is modern philosophy? ...modern philosophy is the philosophy that is attempting to answer the question raised so impudently two centuries ago: *Was ist Aufklärung?* (Foucault 1984:32.)

Foucault furthermore shares Habermas's desire to overcome the modern legacy of a metaphysically defined subject, but his central focus is to show how "the subject" has been constructed in the various disciplines that comprise the human sciences. It is in this sense that Foucault makes modernity his central focus, because overcoming the subject means first of all understanding the history in which it has emerged. For Foucault the subject is a construct of the modern metaphysical tradition. From this perspective, Kant provides the impetus for Foucault's own critical reflection and engagement with the nature and significance of modernity:

[It] seems to me that it is the first time that a philosopher has connected in this way, closely and from the inside, the significance of his work with respect to knowledge, a reflection on history, and a particular analysis of the specific moment at which he is writing and because of which he is

writing. It is in the reflection on "today" as difference in history and as motive for a particular philosophical task that the novelty of this text appears to me to lie.

And by looking at it in this way, it seems to me that we may recognize a point of departure; the outline of what one might call the attitude of modernity. (Foucault 1984:38.)

What Foucault defines as the "attitude of modernity" underlines his critical engagement with the problematic of knowledge and truth, from the perspective of power. Thus Foucault shares with Habermas a rejection of the modern legacy of metaphysical thinking insofar as they both reject accounts of rationality that are based on substantive theories about "man" and "reality"; but their respective emphases are different. Foucault seeks to overcome the legacy of metaphysical thinking by means of an aesthetic form of self-transformation, aimed at overcoming the limits imposed on "the subject" within the humanist tradition (Foucault 1984:50). For Habermas, on the other hand, the privileging of the aesthetic dimension is the consequence of a one-sided or one-dimensional interpretation of modernity, in view of the restriction of the question of reason to that of logocentric, or, as in Foucault's case, "power" thinking.

While Habermas is in sympathy with Foucault on the question of power, he believes that the normative notions of truth and knowledge can and should be reformulated from a model of communicative rationality, and articulated from a post-metaphysical perspective of mutual understanding, if the Enlightenment ideal of freedom from domination is to make any practical sense at all. But before we examine Habermas's response, we must first consider Foucault's construal of modernity in relation to the Enlightenment legacy of reason and freedom.

4.4.1 Modernity, from the perspective of truth as a product of power

There can be little doubt that the question of reason is of central importance to Foucault's understanding of modernity. He writes:

I think that the central issue of philosophy and critical thought since the eighteenth century has always been, still is, and will, I hope, remain the question: *What is this Reason that we use? What are its historical effects? What are its limits, and what are its dangers?* (1984:249.)

In the light of the above, a question that immediately comes to mind is the following: What exactly does Foucault mean when he speaks of reason within the context of modernity?

Foucault's account of reason is a reaction against the humanist orientation that has been the cornerstone of modern philosophy. In this regard, he draws a clear distinction between the Enlightenment and the various forms of humanism within modernity. Foucault clearly accepts the Enlightenment as his frame of reference for the self-understanding of modernity. Moreover, it is in terms of the Enlightenment that Foucault poses the question of autonomy:

We must try to proceed with the analysis of ourselves as beings who are historically determined, to a certain extent, by the Enlightenment. Such an analysis implies a series of historical inquiries that are as precise as possible; and these inquiries will not be oriented retrospectively towards the "essential kernel of rationality" that can be found in the Enlightenment and that would have to be preserved in any event; they will be oriented towards the "contemporary limits of the necessary", that is, what is not or is no longer indispensable for the constitution of ourselves as autonomous subjects. (Foucault 1984:43.)

In the pursuit of the "constitution of ourselves as autonomous subjects", Foucault rejects all forms of humanism, ranging from the assumption of a transcendental ego, and various notions of "man" borrowed from science and religion, to the notion of a universal subject or class in history, such as the proletariat:

And it is a fact that, at least since the seventeenth century, what is called humanism has always been obliged to lean on certain conceptions of man, borrowed from religion, science, or politics. Humanism serves to colour and to justify the conceptions of man to which it is, after all, obliged to take recourse...I believe that this thematic, which so often recurs and which always depends on humanism, can be opposed by the principle of a critique and a permanent creation of ourselves in our autonomy: that is, a principle that is at the heart of the historical consciousness that the Enlightenment has of itself. From this standpoint, I am inclined to see the Enlightenment and humanism in a state of tension rather than identity. (Foucault 1984:44.)

According to Foucault, once the humanistic orientation within modern philosophy has been overcome, and our understanding of rationality is no longer linked to universalistic theories of truth and knowledge, then we will hopefully be in a position to understand the nature of modernity much better. This implies that reason should not be construed in terms of metaphysical theories of truth, as the privileged domain of the subject of knowledge, but rather as an investigation of rationality as a social practice, hence Foucault's commitment to reason in history. This investigation, whether it takes the form of an archaeological analysis, that is, one aimed at investigating rational practices within various specific social and cultural contexts, or whether it takes the form of a genealogical method of enquiry, that is, one seeking to investigate the possibility of resistance to various forms of domination (as the "limits of reason"), has one common denominator: the phenomenon of power.

The concept of archeology, as explained in his *Archeology of Knowledge* (1972), presupposes a method whereby the rules governing the discursive practices within the human sciences are investigated. Foucault's archeological project is motivated by the central question: how are the human sciences possible? It should be noted that Foucault is not so much interested in establishing the validity of the truth claims of the various disciplines of the human sciences; he seeks to remain "neutral" on the question of truth. His primary objective is to show how the modern subject was "invented". Dreyfus and Rabinow (1982) explain the significance of Foucault's archeological method as follows:

[Foucault] argues that what can roughly be referred to as the sciences of man can be treated as autonomous systems of discourse...In the *Archeology* he[tries] to show that the human sciences could be analyzed as having an internal self-regulation and autonomy. Moreover, he proposes to treat the discourses of the human sciences archaeologically, that is, to avoid becoming involved in arguments about whether what they say is true, or even whether their statements make sense. Rather he proposes to treat all that is said in the human sciences as a "discourse object". Foucault makes it clear that his archeological method, since it must remain neutral as to the truth and meaning of the discursive systems it studies, is not another theory about the relation of words and things. He does hold, however, that it is a theory about discourse - orthogonal to all disciplines with their accepted concepts, legitimated subjects, taken-for-granted objects, and preferred strategies, which yield justified claims. (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982:xx.)

With the publication of his *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault moves beyond the archeological method of his earlier work in favour of a genealogical method of enquiry. In this respect, Nietzsche's "theory" of power becomes the central focus for Foucault. From the genealogical perspective, the main questions are: How are

the discourses of the human sciences possible? What are their role in modern society? (Dreyfus and Rabinow:xxi). For Foucault, the focus on the centrality of power now becomes the medium in which the question of truth is approached and interpreted:

The important thing here, I believe, is that truth isn't outside power, or lacking in power: contrary to a myth whose history and functions would repay further study, truth isn't the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. (Foucault 1980:131.)

According to Foucault, all attempts to universalize or essentialize the "nature of man", belies the contingent nature of his emergence as a historical creature limited to the contours of his specific social-cultural horizons. Foucault therefore relativizes the question of reason and truth:

Each society has its own régime of truth, its general politics of truth: that is, the type of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true: the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which it is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with the saying of what counts as true (ibid.).

On Foucault's view, when the Enlightenment ideas of freedom and autonomy are held up against the actual rational practices of modernity, then it would seem that the path of reason as conceptualized in terms of knowledge and truth, does not inspire much hope of ever overcoming power, since within the framework of

modernity, there is no possibility of separating truth from power. Truth is a political matter, and each new truth is accompanied by another (incommensurable) regime of power.

This argument is remarkably similar to that of Lyotard for whom, as we have seen in the previous chapter, truth is a function of an agonistic conception of language that belies the possibility of consensus. The similarity is even more striking when one considers the following argument by Foucault:

The history which bears and determines us has the form of a war rather than that of a language: relations of power, not relations of meaning. History has no "meaning", though this is not to say that it is absurd or incoherent. On the contrary, it is intelligible and should be susceptible of analysis down to the smallest detail - but this is in accordance with the intelligibility of struggles, of strategies, and tactics. (Foucault 1980:114.)

Foucault bases this argument on a hermeneutic conception of reason in terms of which the possibility of a neutral, objective, transcendent perspective is, in principle, ruled out of court, on the grounds that the knowledge and the subject of knowledge are part of a complex process of interpretation and reinterpretation, without the possibility of grounding its knowledge claims in first principles of absolute truth and certainly. Taking his cue from a scientific-instrumental conception of rationality, based on a subject-object epistemological model, Foucault despairs of the possibility of defending the Enlightenment notions of freedom and autonomy from a perspective either of a subjectivist or objectivist orientation, on the grounds that the one orientation presupposes the other, and more importantly, the subject-object cannot be its own ground or foundation of possibility: modern philosophy is therefore condemned to think the "unthought" as the condition of its own possibility (Foucault 1970:303-343).

From the perspective of modernity, knowledge and rationality are for Foucault synonymous with science and technology, and given his inability or reluctance to conceive of an alternative "theory of rationality", Foucault chooses instead to focus on the implications of power that have accompanied the development of the normative ideals of truth and knowledge, as conceived from the perspective of a subject-object model of rationality. From this perspective, a defence of rationality presupposes a defence of "man" as a power-seeker in the name of knowledge. As Nancy Fraser (1985) explains:

Humanism, claims Foucault...is a political and scientific praxis oriented to a distinctive object known as "Man". Man only comes into existence in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century with the emergence of a new power/knowledge regime. Within and by means of the social practices that regime comprises, Man was and is constituted as the epistemic object of the new "human sciences" and also instituted as the subject who is the target and instrument of a new kind of normalizing power. Both as epistemic object and as subject of power, Man is a strange, unstable, two-sided entity or "doublet". He consists in an impossible symbiosis of two opposing poles, one objective, the other subjective. Each of these poles seeks to exclude the other, but in so doing only manages to solicit and enhance it, since each in fact requires the other. Humanism, then, is the contradictory, ceaseless, self-defeating project of resolving this Man problem. (Fraser 1985:169.)

Given Foucault's rejection of the notions of reason, truth and knowledge as constituting the normative basis of critique, the question that now arises is the following: What is the nature of Foucault's critique in view of his equation of knowledge and truth with power? The question is especially crucial when one considers that Foucault is not prepared to speculate on the possibility of resistance

or critique from a position of justification (epistemic or normative) of truth (actual or potential) or knowledge "outside" the structures and relations of power.

Nancy Fraser (1981:275) suggests that Foucault's "neutrality" may be interpreted as a kind of bracketing or suspension of standard criteria and procedures as is found in the phenomenological tradition. This would explain why, for example, "Foucault...does not take up the question of whether the various regimes he studies provide knowledge that is in any sense true or warranted or adequate or undistorted" (ibid.).

As regards the problem of power and knowledge, it is important to note that Foucault's approach to the question of power is not a form of "ideology critique", since the latter presupposes the possibility of opposing truth or knowledge (from a transcendent position of truth) to power - an argument which he clearly rejects. Foucault would therefore have us believe that he is not trying to provide us with another "theory" of power in the tradition of political philosophy, but instead with a "grid of analysis", the significance of which he explains as follows:

If one tries to erect a theory of power one will always be obliged to view it as emerging at a given place and time and hence to deduce it, to reconstruct its genesis. But if power is in reality an open, more-or-less coordinated (in the event, no doubt, ill-coordinated) cluster of relations, then the only problem is to provide oneself with a grid of analysis which makes possible an analytic of relations of power. (Foucault 1980:199.)

David R. Hiley's (1984:200) comments on the significance of Foucault's "grid of analysis" are quite instructive insofar as he unwittingly underlines the transcendental nature of Foucault's approach to the question of knowledge-power:

Knowledge cannot exist except through relations of power, and power makes possible and produces "regimes of truth". Power structures a domain of knowledge at the same time that enquiry isolates areas as objects of knowledge, making them targets for the deployment of strategies of power. (Hiley 1984:200.)

Hiley's "transcendental" argument is certainly borne out by Foucault himself, when the latter remarks:

We should admit rather that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power, or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time knowledge. These "power-knowledge relations" are to be analyzed, therefore, not on the basis of a subject of knowledge who is or is not free in relation to the power system, but, on the contrary, the subject who knows, the objects to be known and, the modalities of knowledge must be regarded as so many effects of these fundamental implications of power-knowledge and their historical transformations. (Foucault 1977a:27-28.)

When Foucault looks at modernity through his "grid of analysis", he discerns two distinct patterns of power: the one juridical power (the legal mechanisms of the modern state) and the other "bio-power", which has its basis in the biological-material needs of the individual. Within the modern state, the needs that relate to bio-power are interpreted and dictated within the framework of capitalism (Foucault 1978:140-141). As regards the significance of bio-power, Foucault remarks:

Western man was gradually learning what it meant to be a living species in a living world, to have a body, conditions of existence, probabilities of life, an individual and collective welfare...For the first time in history, no doubt, biological existence was reflected in political existence...one would have to speak of *bio-power* to designate what brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and made knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life. (Foucault 1978:142-143.)

The significance of Foucault's differentiation of juridical power, as the power exercised from "the top down" in the forms of rules and prohibitions (the negative conception of power), and bio-power, in the form of mediation and active internalization or invasion of the political and economic imperatives of modern life into the most "private" aspects of the individual's life (the body, the "mind", the "soul"), is that the question of autonomy and freedom, depending on one's perspective, becomes all the more urgent, or all the more meaningless. From Foucault's point of view, it is difficult to see how and why the question of critique can be explored in a meaningful way, given his transcendental framework of power-knowledge as the condition for the possibility of truth. In order to appreciate this aspect of Foucault's thinking, it is necessary to reflect briefly on the significance of his genealogical project.

4.4.2 Foucault's genealogical project: writing the history of the present

In his essay, *What is Enlightenment*, Foucault describes the main thrust of his genealogical project as:

... [emphasizing] the extent to which a type of philosophical interrogation - one that simultaneously problematizes man's relation to the present, man's historical mode of being, and the constitution of the self as an autonomous

subject - is rooted in the Enlightenment. On the other hand, I have been seeking to stress that the thread that may connect us with the Enlightenment is not faithfulness to doctrinal elements, but rather the permanent reactivation of an attitude - that is, a philosophical ethos that could be described as a permanent critique of our historical era. (Foucault 1984:42.)

Foucault's genealogical critique is closely tied to his critical appropriation of the Kantian project, within the broader context of the Enlightenment. In this regard, Foucault is impressed by Kant's attempt to establish a link between the conditions of the possibility of knowledge, and the Enlightenment ideal of maturity, that is, intellectual independence and moral autonomy. This independence and autonomy are in turn articulated from the perspective of a critical interrogation of the conditions, the scope and the limits of reason.

Foucault's rejection of the humanistic orientation of the Enlightenment tradition, is based on the notion that for modernity to come into its own, what is required are not universalistic theories of knowledge or normative accounts of moral action. Foucault argues that there is no "turning back", but also no possibility of speculating about the future either, as for example, in the Marxist vision of a classless society. This implies that modernity has to be assessed not in terms of what it can potentially become, but rather in terms of what it has in fact become. This accounts for Foucault's refusal to look at history as a struggle towards something "better"; it is more important to recognize the dangers implicit in modernity, and to resist the "limits" imposed by its power-knowledge regimes. Rorty's (1985) comments, in this regard, are particularly relevant:

Foucault once said that he would like to write "so as to have no face". He forbids himself the tone of the liberal sort of thinker who says to his fellow-citizens: "We know that there must be a better way to do things than this; let us look for it together". There is no "we" to be found in Foucault's writing...It is this remoteness which reminds one of the conservative who pours cold water on hopes for reforms, who affects to look at the problems of his fellow-citizens with the eye of the future historian. Writing "the history of the present", rather than suggestions about how our children might inhabit a better world in the future, gives up not just on the notion of a common human nature, and on that of "the subject", but on our untheoretical sense of solidarity. (Rorty 1985:172.)

Foucault, it seems, is in agreement with Rorty, especially in view of the fact that he (Foucault) is rather skeptical about "theories" seeking to explain or diagnose the ills of modern society from a universalistic perspective, aimed at reflecting society as a whole:

To speak of the "whole of society" apart from the only form it has ever taken is to transform the past into a dream. We readily believe that the least we can expect of experiences, actions and strategies is that they take into account the "whole of society"...But I believe that this is asking a great deal, that it means imposing impossible conditions on our actions because this notions functions in a manner that prohibits the actualization, success, and perpetuation of these projects. "The whole of society", we can only hope that it never exists again. (Foucault 1977b:233.)

It would, however, be wrong to interpret Foucault's attitude as one of total indifference, born of a desire for dispassionate neutrality. There is indeed a moral-political context underlying his critique of modernity's regimes of truth, but this does not mean that he is prepared to consider any historical alternative. His genealogical

project of "writing the history of the present" forbids any speculation about the future, but this does not deter Foucault, however, from engaging with the present. For Foucault, it is more important, and more relevant, to engage with the present, not in terms of future possibilities, but rather in terms of its present dangers. As he himself put it in one of his interviews:

No. I am not looking for an alternative; you can't find the solution of a problem in the solution of another problem, raised at another moment by other people. You see, what I want to do is not the history of *solutions*, and that's the reason why I don't accept the word "alternative". I would like to do the genealogy of *problems*, of *problematiques*. My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is *dangerous*, then we have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism. I think the ethical-political choice we have to make every day is to determine which is the main danger (Foucault 1984:343.) (Emphasis, Foucault's.)

According to Foucault, a commitment to the present and its dangers, should not encourage the tendency to see our present age any "better" or "worse" than any other age on the grounds that we do not have the normative yardsticks for making such claims. Nor should we interpret the present on the basis of rupture, an ending, a new beginning; in fact, there is nothing special or unique about the present; it is "not of total perdition, in the abyss of darkness, or a triumphant daybreak...It is a time like any other, or rather a time which is never quite like any other" (Foucault, quoted in David Couzins Hoy 1998:23-24).

A final question to consider with regard to Foucault's genealogical project is the following: How does Foucault propose to justify his recommendation for a

philosophical ethos of permanent critique, in view of his own refusal to provide the normative criteria for such an undertaking? (Fraser 1981; Taylor 1984.)

In response to this question, David R Hiley (1984) makes a rather interesting comment in which he tries to avoid placing Foucault in one of two equally untenable categories: rationality or irrationality. Hiley suggests that we consider a third "nonarbitrary" option:

I want to make the claim that the realization that interpretation is ungrounded does not mean that the genealogical interpretation of power is arbitrary...the alternative of "either grounded or arbitrary" makes sense only within the framework Foucault's work has set aside. The fear that unless knowledge is grounded, irrationality will reign supreme is a particularly modern worry. Within the modern problematic, "grounded" and "arbitrary" are made for each other. Outside that framework, they are not. There is clearly another sense of "nonarbitrary" that is not tied to the project of grounding. That is, to be nonarbitrary is to be open to examination and dispute. Foucault has always referred to his views with caution, phrasing them in terms of 'perhaps' or 'maybe' or calling them hypotheses. The charge that his method aids and abets arbitrariness and irrationality is, as he has said in a recent paper, "Enlightenment blackmail". (Hiley 1984:198-199.)

The above quotation clearly points in the direction of a basis of rational consensus and understanding that goes beyond the limits that Foucault imposes on his method of genealogical critique. The words "perhaps" and "maybe", as well as "hypotheses", do not only underline the tentative and fallibilistic nature of our knowledge and truth claims; they also suggest the possibility of intersubjective agreement based on arguments whose validity transcend the specific "regimes of

truth" in which they are raised. This is exactly what Habermas has in mind when he advances his theory of communicative action and rationality, as a "nonarbitrary" alternative to the modern philosophical project of grounding. For Foucault, however, the question of truth has been suspended, and this undermines the epistemic status of his arguments regarding the nature of modern forms of power.

It should be noted that Foucault's privileging of power resembles, in very significant respects, the arguments of the Frankfurt School tradition of Critical theory, most notably Horkheimer and Adorno, whose primary focus in their collaborative critique, as formulated in their *Dialect of Enlightenment* (1993), has been the scientific-technical- capitalist dimension of rationalization, as the distinctive and all-encompassing horizon of modern reason and "progress". As Peter Dews (1987) correctly points out

Foucault's thought is rooted in a highly individual historical vision, which centres on the transition from traditional to modern, industrial societies, and is specifically concerned with the forms of knowledge and modes of social organization characteristic of capitalist modernity; his theoretical formulations can only be fully comprehended when set in the context of this vision (Dews 1987:145).

Foucault's concern with the phenomenon of power must be understood from the perspective of the ascendancy of scientific-technical knowledge, which for him is not so much informed by a concern with truth as a regulative idea, but is rather a manifestation of a (will-to) power that enslaves and traps the modern subject within its "regimes of truth".

Foucault does indeed consider the possibility of resistance and insurrection against the scientific-technical rationalization of modernity, but in view of his reluctance to

separate the question of knowledge and truth from that of power, he can only speak of a battle waged by subjugated forms of knowledge (and their regimes of truth) against the dominant discourses of power-knowledge and their regimes of truth. This possibility of resistance to the dominant discourses of scientific-technical knowledge is the grounds for hope in Foucault's genealogical project, and, in my view, it points to the possibility of consensus and understanding within an intersubjective context of truth and knowledge, whose validity transcends the local contexts of power-claims which masquerade as truth.

Foucault accordingly describes his genealogical project as specifically aimed at destroying the illusion of unity and coherence created by a metaphysically sanctioned approach to science- technology and history:

What it really does is to entertain the claims to attention of local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate knowledges against the claim of a unitary body of theory which would filter, hierarchise and order them in the name of some true knowledge and some arbitrary idea of what constitutes a science and its objects. Genealogies are therefore not positivistic returns to a more careful or exact form of science. They are precisely anti-sciences...We are concerned...with the insurrection of knowledges that are opposed primarily not to the contents, methods or concepts of a science, but to the effects of the centralising powers which are linked to the institution and functioning of an organized scientific discourse within a society such as ours. (Foucault 1980:83-84.)

Foucault's argument above, which resembles Lyotard's argument with regard to narrative versus scientific knowledge, as discussed in Chapter Three, implicitly presupposes the possibility of an expanded conception of rationality, one which can provide a normative basis for a critique of scientific knowledge from a more

comprehensive non-foundational model of rationality. Habermas's philosophical project is an attempt to provide such a model as an alternative approach to the understanding and analysis of the modern forms of power, as delineated by Foucault. We will consider Habermas's response to Foucault's (transcendental) account of power. In our discussion we consider the significance of Habermas's distinction between instrumental reason, on the one hand, and communicative reason, on the other.

4.5 HABERMAS'S RESPONSE TO FOUCAULT

Habermas's defense of his vision of modernity, as well as his overall objective of providing a "theory of the pathology of modernity from the viewpoint of the realization - the deformed realization - of reason in history", is most clearly reflected in his debate with Foucault (Habermas1992b:98). In Foucault, Habermas has a strong opponent whose account of power in the modern world provides an alternative to his own vision of modernity as an incomplete project whose potential ultimately depends on a more comprehensive conception of rationality, the success of which will depend on the cogency of Habermas's distinction between a technical and a practical norm of rationality.

4.5.1 The distinction between technical and practical reason

If one accepts as a point of departure the process of modernization in terms of the impact of science and technology, within the broader context of the emergence of capitalism and its devastating effects on the lives of ordinary people, then Foucault's account of the modern forms of power is certainly one of the most challenging and controversial. Stephen K. White's (1988) comments on the challenging aspects of Foucault's account of power, especially in relation to

Habermas's appropriation of the emancipatory potential of modernity are quite significant:

What makes Foucault's work so challenging to critical theory? At bottom, it is the fact that his genealogies, like Nietzsche's, discover power operating in structures of thinking and behavior which previously seemed to be devoid of power relations. In effect, Foucault provides us with an incisive way of interrogating the structures of culture. His specific target are the cognitive and institutional structures of modern life. He wants to show us that structures that we take to be thoroughly *enabling* are always simultaneously *constraining*. This orienting intention of all of Foucault's work is clearly expressed in the following: "it seems to me that the critical question today [is:] in what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent and the product of arbitrary constraints?" (White 1988:144.) (Emphasis, White's.)

Foucault, as we saw above, seeks to explain the problematic of reason, knowledge and truth from a transcendental perspective of power. Given his refusal to distinguish between truth claims and power claims, Foucault's only meaningful response to the various forms of "subjugated knowledge" is to speculate on the possibility of resistance from the transcendental perspective of power clashing with power. Foucault's non-committal attitude towards the question of collective moral-political action, resistance, solidarity and coordination in the face of "Power", reflects a misunderstanding of what Habermas refers to as the "project of modernity". At a deeper level, Foucault fails to realize that modernity's instrumental rationality is not its defining moment.

Habermas accounts for Foucault's generalization of scientific-technical knowledge-power on the basis of a failure on his part to differentiate between a practical, that is, moral-political conception of reason, and a technical conception of reason, as we find in writings of Plato and Aristotle, for example. From the perspective of modernity, Habermas believes that it is more important to focus on the practical dimension of rationality in order to correct the imbalances of a technocratic age:

Therefore, it is more appropriate to attempt a historical explanation of the problem: how is knowledge of the social interrelationships of life with a view to political action possible? How, within a political situation, can we obtain clarification of what is practically necessary and at the same time objectively possible? This question can be translated back into our historical context: how can the promise of practical politics - namely of providing practical orientation about what is right and just in a given situation be redeemed without relinquishing, on the one hand, the rigor of scientific knowledge, which modern social philosophy demands in contrast to the practical philosophy of classicism? And on the other, how can the promise of social philosophy, to furnish an analysis of the interrelationships of social life be redeemed without relinquishing the practical orientation of classical politics? (Habermas 1974:44.)

If we compare and contrast the modern understanding of social knowledge with what Habermas has in mind, then the significance of his position becomes apparent. Habermas is arguing that in view of its overemphasis on science and technology, reason has not fulfilled its full potential, given the general failure to acknowledge its importance within the realm of the practical. It is the failure to distinguish between reason in a practical and in a technical sense, that is mainly responsible for the dismissal of modernity as a project in history whose completion depends on criteria emanating from the rational potential within modernity.

Among the postmodern thinkers, Foucault is especially guilty of collapsing the technical and the practical categories of reason, and this leads him to "give up" on the possibility of freedom from the perspective of reason. In Foucault's project reason has degenerated to its "worst" form of domination and control, and is thus stripped of the emancipatory potential at the heart of the "project of modernity" (Habermas 1981). In this regard, Albrecht Wellmer (1991) gives a rather instructive account of the gradual degeneration of reason into an instrument of domination and control:

The project of enlightenment as Kant conceived it was concerned with the emergence of humanity from its 'self-imposed condition of dependency', but by the time that Max Weber was writing, little remained of that project except a continual process of rationalization, bureaucratization, technical progress, and the relentless encroachment of science into social existence. The capitalist economy, modern bureaucracy, technical progress and finally those ways of 'disciplining' the body which are analyzed by Foucault have assumed the proportions of a gargantuan process of destruction - destruction of traditions, destruction of the ecological environment, finally the destruction of 'meaning-systems' and of that unitary self which had been the product as well as the driving force of the enlightenment process....In the context of the modernization processes, the practice of politics becomes reduced to the technique of retaining power, of manipulation and organization; democracy becomes merely an efficient form of organizing government control. (Wellmer 1991:86-87.)

In view of the seeming inability to provide the relevant moral-political resources to deal with technical-scientific-capitalist processes of modernization, the structures of modern consciousness seem to have succumbed to a "technocratic consciousness" in the modern world (Habermas 1971:111).

Habermas maintains that technocratic consciousness testifies, not so much to a disintegration of traditional ethical and moral criteria; it reflects rather a complete repression of ethics, as a category of life. This repression is the consequence of the leveling of practical and technical criteria in modern society. The failure to maintain a distinction between a technical and practical form of knowledge, accounts for the inability among postmodern thinkers such as Foucault, to account for the possibility of freedom not in terms of solidarity, but rather in terms of an individualistic aesthetic re-creation of the self. Habermas explains the categorial distinction between the practical and the technical sense of rationality as follows:

But, of course, the real difficulty in the relation of theory to praxis does not arise from this new function of science as a technological force, but rather with the fact that we are no longer able to distinguish between practical and technical power. Yet even a civilization that has been rendered scientific is not granted dispensation from practical questions; therefore a peculiar danger arises when the process of scientification transgresses the limit of technical questions, without however departing from the level of reflection confined to the technological horizon. For then no attempt at all is made to attain a rational consensus on the part of citizens concerning the practical control of their destiny. Its place is taken by the attempt to attain technical control over history by perfecting the administration of society, an attempt that is just as impractical as it is unhistorical. (Habermas 1974:255.)

One cannot overemphasize the importance of the categorial distinction between practical and the technical knowledge in the thinking of Habermas. It is especially important within the context of his debate with Foucault in particular, and the postmodern thinkers in general. The elimination of practical knowledge from an assessment of modernity cannot address the possibility of freedom in a meaningful way, and as a result, the critique of power (without a practical normative context

whence to evaluate the effects of domination and control) can only result, whether we like it or not, in the legitimation of power, on the one hand, and the depoliticization of the general public, on the other hand. As Richard Bernstein (1976) puts it:

When practical discourse is eliminated or suppressed, the public realm loses...its political function. The problem has become urgent in our time not only because science and technology are the most important productive forces in advanced industrial societies, but because a technological consciousness increasingly affects all domains of human life, and serves as a background ideology that has legitimating power. (Bernstein 1976:188.)

Given the general inability to distinguish practical and technical knowledge, Habermas warns against the false reputation for radicality enjoyed by (postmodern) thinkers, who seek to approach and dismiss modernity and its progressive status purely on aesthetic grounds, in the name of a freedom that has no rational concrete links to practical lives of ordinary people. Habermas (1983:155) develops a critique that is "subtle and relentless enough not to let itself be blinded by the mere illusion of emancipation....and to contradict the thesis that emancipation itself mystifies".

Foucault's insistence on approaching the question of knowledge from the perspective of power, in consequence of which the question of truth is restricted to the realm of its technical application, dictated by a specific regime of truth, leads in the direction of relativism, the direct consequence of his failure to distinguish between meaning and validity.

This problem, as we have seen in our discussion of Lyotard in Chapter Three, leads to a performative contradiction, since Foucault cannot account for the

epistemic status of the general claim that power produces knowledge and knowledge produces truth. This is an accusation that is central to Habermas's debate with the postmodern thinkers in general. In his encounter with Foucault the question of validity is especially crucial insofar as it is squarely in contrast to the primacy of the assumption of truth (or validity claims) as the precondition of consensus, as developed in Habermas's theory of communicative action and rationality. Habermas (1987b) accordingly criticizes Foucault's position as follows:

The criteria of validity according to which what is true gets discriminated from what is false within a discourse abides in a unique transparency and appearance of having no origin whatsoever - validity has to strip away every element of the sheer genetic, even its derivation from the basic rules constitutive of the discourse, which the archeologist lays bare. So little can the structures that make truth possible themselves be true or false that one can only inquire about the function of the will that attains expression in them, and about the genealogy of this will from some network of the practices of power. (Habermas 1987b:248.)

Whereas Foucault looks for the condition of the possibility of truth within the structures of power, Habermas looks for the condition of truth within the structures of communicative action aimed at reaching understanding with others. As we shall see in the following chapter, the so-called linguistic turn in Habermas's thinking provides the normative basis for his diagnosis of the pathology of modernity, its structural imbalances, as well as its asymmetrical relations of power, on the basis of a theory of communicative action and rationality. In the present context, suffice it to say, that unlike Foucault who links power with anonymous forces within modernity, for Habermas, power is manifested in the distortions of communication.

In his linguistic turn, Habermas makes a clear distinction between the communicative and the strategic or instrumental mode of communication. It is on the basis of this distinction, which is a later version of his former distinction between the practical and technical dimensions of rationality, as discussed above, that Habermas brings home his interpretation of modernity, as a phenomenon structured around these two fundamental modes of communication. On this interpretation, the "pathology of modernity" is the result of a one-sided process of modernization, in which the various manifestations of power as discussed by Foucault may be interpreted as an invasion of the instrumental mode of rationality, emanating from the power-structures of the modern state, into the realm of the communicative mode of interaction where the logic of mutual understanding and discourse is supposed to prevail.

In contrast to the one-dimensional account of modernity as given by Foucault, Habermas adds the second dimension of communicative rationality as the condition of the possibility of systemic rationalization of modern society. While both forms of rationality are essential to the survival of modernity, the process of rationalization and modernization has been dominated by the instrumental form of rationalization, the domain of science and technology, together with the economic imperatives of capitalism. The privileging of instrumental rationality has led to imbalances and pathologies within the modern world, as the sphere of communicative rationality is increasingly threatened and undermined by instrumental rationality. This colonization of the life-world has two significant effects: firstly, a loss of freedom, (which would validate Foucault's theory of power), and secondly, a general loss of meaning, save in terms of a victory of power over Power (the second of Foucault's theses). But for the differentiation that he makes between the instrumental and the communicative modes of rationality, Habermas's account of the modern forms of power resembles that of Foucault's in many significant respects:

In the end, systemic mechanisms suppress forms of social integration even in those areas where a consensus-dependent coordination of action cannot be replaced, that is, where the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld is at stake. In these areas, the *mediatization* of the lifeworld assumes the form of a *colonization*. (Habermas 1987a:196.) (Emphasis, Habermas's.)

4.6 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we looked at the critiques of metaphysical thinking from the postmodern perspective. In the case of Derrida the primary emphasis was on his attempt, if not to overcome, then at least to resist as far as possible the power of metaphysical closure, by subverting its hypostatization on the strength of his transcendental account of *différance*, as the possibility of all metaphysical conceptual distinctions. With *différance* as the inexhaustible and unfathomable (creative) non-conceptual basis of our truth and knowledge claims, philosophical reflection is reduced to uncovering the aesthetic conditions of the possibility of truth and knowledge claims.

In the case of Foucault, we witnessed the privileging of power as the transcendental condition of the possibility of truth. On the basis of his genealogical project, Foucault proceeds to establish an inseparable link between knowledge and power. On this approach, the question of truth can only be addressed from within a particular regime of power-knowledge, thus ruling out the possibility of a context-transcendent perspective of critique and truth. When applied to the social-political realm, Foucault is guilty of confusing a technical with a practical form of reason, thus reducing social reality to an endless battle between the dominant discourse of scientific-technical-capitalist Power and the anti-scientific discourses of subjugated knowledge-powers.

In his response to both Derrida and Foucault, Habermas points in the direction of a more comprehensive understanding of rationality based on communicative action, that is everyday language that is aimed at the reaching of mutual understanding and agreement. Habermas finds in the structures of communication a rational potential, capable of salvaging the project of modernity, as well as its promise of freedom based on reason. His alternative to the postmodern critique is a postmetaphysical reconstruction of the rational content of the metaphysical tradition. We will examine the significance of his postmetaphysical alternative in Chapter Five.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF POST-METAPHYSICAL THINKING

As we have seen in Chapter Two, the assumption of a transcendental subject forms the cornerstone of the modern metaphysical tradition. Habermas's debate with the representatives of postmodern thinking revolves around the question of whether reason, as a (self-)critical and normative activity, can still be redeemed in the wake of the rejection of a metaphysical conception of reason that is based on the assumption of an ahistorical transcendental subject. For Habermas, given the anti-metaphysical stance of the postmodern thinkers, this question is specifically concerned with whether we can still legitimately establish a rational (universalistic) basis for our knowledge and truth claims, or whether (as his postmodern opponents would have it) we have to abandon the question of reason completely, and in the process also abandon the central challenge of modernity: the realization of autonomy and freedom in a rational society. The purpose of this chapter is to investigate the possibility of this central challenge from the perspective of postmetaphysical thinking as an alternative to the postmodern challenge.

5.1 OVERCOMING THE METAPHYSICAL TRADITION

From the perspective of the modern philosophical tradition, the possibility of autonomy and freedom is rooted in the notion of rationality, and any account of autonomy and freedom, necessarily presupposes (either explicitly or implicitly) a particular (practical) conception of rationality. In this regard, contemporary social scientists usually distinguish between two types of practical rationality: strategic rationality, on the one hand, and contextual rationality, on the other. Strategic rationality is a means-ends conception, where rationality is determined and evaluated by the efficiency of an action ("the means") to attain a particular goal

("the end") - it ultimately boils down to the self-preservation of the individual. Contextual rationality, in contrast, is a norm-guided approach in which the rationality of one's actions is determined and evaluated in the light of their conformity to a particular set of beliefs, social norms and practices as they occur in a particular context - it ultimately boils down to the possibility of overriding the interests of self-preservation for the sake of a collective good.

Both of these conceptions presuppose a particular model of subjectivity. The advocate of strategic rationality views the subject in strictly individualistic terms. The subject is accordingly projected as a self-interested agent whose relations with others are based primarily on considerations of "*what's in it for me?*". The social world is thus a place of domination and manipulation, and the rationality of the subject is consequently based on how well or successful he or she can be in dominating or strategically manipulating others for the sake of his or her own goals. This view of the subject is especially reminiscent of Lyotard and Foucault, for whom, as we have seen in Chapters Three and Four, language is a medium of strategic manipulation of others (Lyotard), and domination based on power (Foucault). Although both thinkers deny any explicit interest in a notion of subjectivity, given their shared commitment to overcoming the subject as rooted in the metaphysical tradition, this does not mean that they completely abandon "the subject". A notion of subjectivity based on a strategic conception of rationality is therefore implicitly presupposed by them.

While one can accept the argument for the complexity of the economic and administrative (bureaucratic) structures that have characterized the process of modernization, often interpreted as anonymous intractable structures of control and domination, it is "people" who manipulate and dominate other "people". It is only in a social context where rationality is restricted to a strategic model that one

despairs of the possibility of resistance and transformation, since for this to become possible, we need to develop a more comprehensive understanding of rationality, one based on the possibility of cooperation and the recognition of others as one's equal.

The respective projects of Lyotard and Foucault clearly do not allow for such a possibility, since they are focused primarily on the conflictual aspects of social behavior. In order to demonstrate the inadequacy of a strategically based notion of rationality, Stephen K. White (1988) quotes the following example by Isaiah Berlin:

He asks us to imagine an individual who possesses the capacity to reason only in the strategic manner and who obtains his most intense satisfaction from sticking pins into surfaces with a particular resiliency. It makes no difference to him whether these surfaces are tennis balls or human skin. And he goes about satisfying his desire in a perfectly systematic (means-ends rational) way. If questioned about his activity, he readily asserts that he would not like others to stick pins in his own skin, but simply cannot understand why he should refrain from sticking them in others as often as circumstances permit. Berlin's concern here is to suggest, on the one hand, that such an individual falls within the bounds of strategic reason, but to question, on the other hand, whether we would feel entirely comfortable calling this man rational. The source of our questioning here is the total absence of any interest in or even understanding of what it means to participate in interaction governed by intersubjectively valid norms. (White 1998:16-17.)

The contextualist approach to rationality, which Rorty clearly identifies with, does indeed allow for the possibility of cooperation based on the recognition of intersubjectively valid norms, thus overcoming the shortcomings within the strategic

conception of rationality, but on Rorty's account of contextualism, conformity to the prevailing norms and social practices can prove to be a shortsighted and limited expression of ethnocentric prejudice. This becomes evident when a particular cultural context encounters other contexts, and the need arises for a universalistic basis for mediating and adjudicating the perceived incompatibility of different cultural contexts.

From the contextualist perspective in general, and Rorty's in particular, the abandonment of "some permanent neutral framework" of all possible enquiry, leads to an abandonment of all critical discourse and enquiry that is context-transcendent (Rorty 1980:315). On the contextual model of rationality, therefore, truth claims are interpreted as a function of social practices of justification; they do not refer to a normative basis of critique that "point beyond the practices of justification that are contingently established among us, one that would distance us from these practices" (Habermas 1992:136). It is from this perspective that Habermas, in spite of his sympathy with Rorty in trying to overcome the *aporias* of a metaphysically based conception of rationality, is critical of the dogmatic implications of a contextual model of rationality in which "history" or "historicism" becomes synonymous with cultural imperialism. The "irrationality" within this position stems from an identification of reason with totalitarianism; the opposite of reason is "freedom", which in Rorty's thinking becomes a "private" matter of edification and the creation of "new vocabularies", and philosophy, traditionally the domain of rational discourse and argumentation regarding matters of truth, consequently relinquishes its cognitive status.

In place of the "traditional" philosopher, Rorty recommends the edifying philosopher:

Edifying philosophers want to keep space open for the sense of wonder which poets can sometimes cause - wonder that there is something new under the sun, something which is not an accurate representation of what was already there, something which (at least for the moment) cannot be explained and can barely be described (Rorty 1980:370).

For postmodernists such as Rorty, the question of reason and rationality is separated from that of freedom and autonomy, and if the processes of rationalization and modernization are interpreted from a purely instrumental perspective, then the Enlightenment legacy of freedom and autonomy as the basis of a rational society, is certainly in danger of losing all credibility.

Given the fact that the particular history of modernity has coincided with the emergence of capitalism as the overall horizon for the development of scientific-technical knowledge, one can understand why a scientific-technical rationality has been privileged as the fundamental expression of rationality.

Given the centrality of reason and rationality within the context of modernity, the success of modernity will ultimately depend on the availability of an alternative model of rationality; one that addresses the *aporias* of a metaphysically determined concept of rationality from a perspective that takes into account the objections raised by the postmodern critique of reason, but which also seeks to expand the basis of our understanding of rationality.

In my view, Habermas offers us such a rational alternative based on a more comprehensive notion of rationality that goes beyond the logocentric notion, the central target of the postmodern critique. From the perspective of Habermas's debate with the postmodernists, the question that we must ultimately consider is whether modernity can still be defended on rational grounds, and if so, what would

be the nature of such a defense, given the argument that philosophy can no longer function as a special discourse with a privileged access to truth.

In trying to overcome the legacy of metaphysical thinking, we have seen in the previous chapters a general tendency among the representatives of postmodern thinking to confront modernity as the exclusive expression of an instrumentalist or logocentric form of rationality, that is, a form of rationality rooted in power and domination. Regardless of whether we read Foucault or Derrida, Lyotard or Rorty, the common thread running through their respective arguments is that reason cannot be reconciled with the promise of freedom and autonomy, and philosophy as the medium for the theoretical articulation of reason is adjudged "guilty by association". This has given rise to the search, among postmodernists, for various alternative forms of critique, the principal objective of which has been to divest philosophical thinking of its metaphysical trappings, not in order to consider a rational alternative, but rather to break away completely from the idea of reason, as it has found expression in the modern metaphysical tradition. I am therefore in agreement with Habermas when he asserts:

No matter what name it appears under now - whether as fundamental ontology, as critique, as negative dialectics, deconstruction, or genealogy - these pseudonyms are by no means disguises under which the traditional form of philosophy lies hidden; the drapery of philosophical concepts most likely serves as the cloak for a scantily concealed end of philosophy (Habermas 1987b:53).

In this chapter I will show that the postmodern challenge does indeed have its merits, and Habermas is certainly willing to acknowledge them. Implicit in this acknowledgment, however, is also a warning not to "throw the baby out with bathwater" (Habermas 1985:196). According to Habermas, there is a rational

alternative to the modern legacy of metaphysical thinking; one that does not necessarily lead to a radical rejection of the rational content of the metaphysical tradition, nor to a dogmatic dismissal of the rational potential rooted in the structures of modernity.

I will also show that, in his critique of subject-centered reason, Habermas's thinking overlaps with certain aspects of the postmodern critique; this must not blind us, however, to the tremendous differences separating them. Within the general context of the debate, one cannot overstate the importance of this point, which, in my opinion, finally forces the issue regarding postmetaphysical, as opposed to a postmodern form of critical thinking. In this regard, I am in agreement with Anton van Niekerk (1995:173) when he states, "[w]hile all postmodernists are postmetaphysicians, all postmetaphysicians are certainly not post-modernists".

In the final analysis, what essentially separates the postmetaphysical critique of reason from its postmodern counterpart, is the notion of communicative rationality, based on an idea of truth whose normative potential is assumed to originate in the communicative practices of everyday linguistic interaction. In the place of the transcendental subject Habermas, unlike his postmodern counterparts who look "beyond" reason in order to overcome its metaphysical legacy, turns to the life-world of everyday communicative action for his reorientation of the question of rationality. Habermas's notion of communicative rationality therefore informs his commitment to postmetaphysical thinking.

5.2 RECASTING THE QUESTION OF REASON: THE POSTMETAPHYSICAL PERSPECTIVE

Postmetaphysical as opposed to postmodern thinking, such as Foucault's genealogical analysis or Derrida's deconstructive project, takes as its point of departure the possibility of reformulating the question of reason and rationality, without, however, falling back on the foundational assumptions of metaphysical thinking. In this regard, the most important of these assumptions concerns the possibility of developing a notion of rationality around a central idea or set of principles, which are then advanced as the incontestable, permanent, universal foundation of knowledge and truth. Implicit in this assumption is the notion of a philosophical process of reasoning that can provide the validating context for differentiating between true knowledge and the mere appearance of it, true freedom and mere ideological representations of it.

Within the tradition of modern philosophy, as we have seen in our discussion of Descartes and Kant, the assumption of a transcendental subject takes centre stage. With the turn to the subject, modern philosophy has inaugurated a mode of philosophical reflection which is aimed at establishing the foundation of truth and certainty within the "mind" or "consciousness" of a transcendental subject capable of reflecting the truth of reality "out there". The subject and its transcendental accomplishments are assumed to provide us with knowledge of that which is identical and permanent in a world characterized otherwise by an unstoppable and dynamic process of change. Modern philosophy is thus paradoxically characterized by an "inward movement", as the precondition of the possibility of knowledge of reality "out there". This "inward movement" or subjective turn has accordingly produced a philosophy of consciousness or subjectivism as the defining moment of modern metaphysics. The reason of "the subject" becomes the grounds for

establishing the progress of knowledge, truth and reason in the world, and the discourse of philosophy must accordingly produce the theories of rationality aimed at discovering the universal grounds for the possibility of knowledge.

Given this universalistic focus, the subjective turn in modern philosophy has coincided with a strong conception of "theory", the major implication of which is a theoretical detachment or disengagement from the everyday world of change and uncertainty. On this approach, the source of truth is "the subject", and the process of confirmation of the truths of metaphysical thinking becomes a self-referential process of philosophical reflection, which demands that "the theoretical thinker should keep his /her distance from the everyday network of experience and interests, or from local prejudices" (Van Niekerk 1995:175).

As we have seen in previous chapters, the postmodern challenge revolves around the central argument that the metaphysical tradition of rationalism rooted in the assumption of a transcendental subject, is no longer valid. Consequently, so it is claimed, the idea of rationality as a normative, context-transcendent and critical force cannot be justified, especially in a world where rationalization has become synonymous with domination. The metaphysical notion of the "One" as the constitutive ground of "the many" is reformulated in postmodern thinking to capture the totalitarian character of the modern process of (instrumental) rationalization, which belies the legitimacy of the notion of the subject as an autonomous agent.

For Habermas, however, the privileging of instrumental rationality is not the whole story. He simply views the problem of instrumental rationality as symptomatic of the degree to which the structural changes brought about by the capitalist system of modernization have overwhelmed and invaded the domain of the life-world where communicative action (the proper medium of socialization and individualization)

has been distorted by the language of economic imperatives and the programmes of public administration:

That is, to the extent that the objectifying descriptions of society migrate into the lifeworld, we become alienated from ourselves as communicatively acting subjects. It is this self-objectification that transforms the perception of heightened societal complexity into the experience of being delivered over to sheer contingencies. All referents for coping with these contingencies have been lost - both the societal subject and transcendental consciousness have long since slipped away from us, the anxious members of high-risk society. (Habermas 1992a:141.)

In his bid to offer a model of rationality based on a postmetaphysical alternative, Habermas sets out to challenge and reverse the reactionary implications of the postmodern challenge. We will now consider in broad outline the salient themes of his postmetaphysical alternative. In my presentation of the postmetaphysical alternative, I will roughly follow the thematic structure as outlined in Van Niekerk's (1995) article, *Postmetaphysical versus Postmodern Thinking*.

5.2.1 A procedural model of rationality

Metaphysics has traditionally been concerned with identifying a basic, rationally structured, reality behind the contingent realm of our everyday experience. Whether, as in the Platonic tradition, it takes the form of eternal Ideas or Forms; or whether, as in the Cartesian-Kantian tradition, it takes the form of a transcendental subject, the underlying fundamental idea is more or less the same: philosophy must provide the (universal) rational basis for our knowledge and truth claims. Within the modern tradition of metaphysics, "reality" has invariably been mediated in terms of *a priori* structures or principles as the condition for the possibility of

knowledge. In the final analysis, knowledge of reality has had to proceed by way of a prior knowledge of the conditions for the possibility of knowledge, and the rationality of the world "out there" has thus depended on the rationality of a thinking process, aimed at giving structure and form to the contingent realm of everyday experience.

Metaphysical thinking therefore seeks to provide a general framework that will provide a coherent and exhaustive explanation and interpretation of reality. The metaphysical conception of rationality is aimed at discovering reality as a "whole", in the light of which it subsequently proceeds to explain the nature of its constituent "parts". At the root of metaphysical thinking is the basic assumption of the possibility of universal criteria of rationality, independent of all historically concrete practices.

Postmetaphysical thinking, on the other hand, accepts a procedural concept of rationality as its point of departure, that is, one whose rationality is determined by the appropriate procedures for solving various problems. For Habermas, a procedural approach to rationality is linked to a particular understanding of modernity, one that distinguishes and differentiates three distinct cultural spheres of science, morality, and art. In this respect, Habermas is clearly following the examples of Weber and Kant, each of whom identifies and differentiates these three basic cultural spheres: science, morality and art. Each of these spheres is accorded its own autonomous internal rationality and validity. For science it is a question of truth; for morality, it is the question of normative rightness; and for art it is the question of beauty.

Holub (1991) explains the theory of modernity underlying Habermas's postmetaphysical stance as follows:

With the disintegration of a unified religious or metaphysical worldview, each sphere achieves autonomy and is assigned a particular question and domain: truth, conceived as an epistemological matter is ascribed to natural science; normative rightness, formulated in terms of justice, is relegated to morality; and the determination of authenticity and beauty is determined through judgements of taste in the realm of art (Holub 1991:135).

The specific rationality attached to each of the three cultural spheres of validity is as follows: cognitive-instrumental applies to science; moral-practical applies to ethics; and aesthetic-expressive applies to art. As Holub (*ibid*) points out:

Only with the advent of modernity do we witness an immanent history for each of these three realms; only in the modern era do these spheres begin to operate under internally developed laws and imperatives (Holub 1991:135).

Habermas thus distances himself from the metaphysical foundationalist assumption of an overarching universal context for grounding and validating knowledge claims. In defense of his interpretation of rationality, Habermas (1990) argues furthermore that, from a modernist perspective, a procedural approach is a cultural given, and philosophy would do well to adopt a differentiated approach to the question of reason:

Reason has split into three moments - modern science, positive law and post-traditional ethics, and autonomous art and institutionalized art criticism - but philosophy had precious little to do with this disjunction. These eminent trends towards compartmentalization constituting as they do the hallmark of modernity, can do very well without philosophical justification. (Habermas 1990:17.)

In the light of his acceptance of a procedural conception of rationality, Habermas clearly distances himself from the kind of unitary approach that has characterized metaphysical thinking, and of which he is accused by postmodern thinkers such as Lyotard (1984:40) for example, when he associates Habermas with the metaphysical tendency of reducing the significance of the moral "ought" to that of the epistemological "is". As the following statement clearly shows, Lyotard's claim is based on a misunderstanding of Habermas's position.

Only at the cost of Occidental rationalism itself could we rescind the differentiation of reason into those rationality complexes to which Kant's three critiques of reason refer. Nothing is further from my intention than to make myself an advocate of such a regression, to conjure up the substantial unity of reason. (Habermas 1982:235.)

The general significance for Habermas of a procedural conception of rationality lies in the cognitive status of philosophy, insofar as the latter is characterized by a hypothetical (fallibilistic) self-understanding, which calls for a rational process of critical intersubjective argumentation and debate, aimed at reaching consensus. In this regard, Habermas once again distances himself from a metaphysically determined conception of rationality, based on a knowledge of first principles of absolute certainty.

Habermas believes that philosophical theories of rationality are no different from scientific theories insofar as their point of departure falls within the realm of the hypothetical. In contrast to the self-referential nature of metaphysical thinking, postmetaphysical thinking has to justify its hypotheses through arguments. In redefining the role of philosophy, Habermas sounds remarkably like Rorty (1980:392) when he denies it the status of a privileged discourse. Unlike Rorty, however, Habermas does not believe that the overcoming of metaphysical thinking

leads to a denial of philosophy's concern with truth, knowledge or the question of rationality. Habermas (1992a) argues instead that:

Philosophy has to implicate itself in the fallibilistic self-understanding and procedural rationality of the empirical sciences; it may not lay claim to a privileged access to truth, or to a method, an object realm, or even just a style of intuition that is specifically its own (Habermas 1992a:38).

It is the reluctance on the part of the postmodern thinkers to offer a theoretical basis for their critique, for fear of entrenching metaphysical closure, together with their restriction of reason to the realm of scientific knowledge, that accounts for their general tendency to refrain from defending the cognitive status of their "arguments", a major consequence of which has been the negativistic character of postmodern thinking that ultimately denies that its various positions are based on argumentatively advanced knowledge claims. As Habermas (1992a) puts it:

Philosophy has appeared ...as the mystical thinking of Being (Heidegger), as the therapeutic treatment of language (Wittgenstein), as deconstructive activity (Derrida), or as negative dialectics (Adorno). The antiscientism of these delimitations permit them only to say what philosophy is not and what it does not want to be; as a non-science, however, philosophy must leave its own status undetermined. Positive determinations have become impossible because cognitive accomplishments can now prove themselves only through procedural rationality, ultimately through its procedure of argumentation. (Habermas 1992a:37-38.)

According to Habermas, philosophy must not abandon its concern with "the whole". For him, "the whole" is now conceived of as the pre-reflective or pre-theoretical linguistically mediated context of the "life-world", characterized by communicative

actions and social practices that reflect the basic conditions for the possibility of communicative reason. He argues further that the range of linguistic interaction aimed at reaching agreement and understanding with others, forms a background of knowledge which serves to validate the intersubjective practices and linguistic utterances of the socialized individual. Within the modern context, communicative action ranges across a spectrum of three specifiable types of rationality and validity claims (of truth, normative rightness, and aesthetic beauty), and the task of philosophy is to mediate between the communicative reason operative in the life-world, and those specialized cultures of expertise that have found expression in the abstract discourses of science, technology, law and morality, the various forms of art and their specialized discourses of criticism. Habermas (1992a: 38) explains philosophy's mediating role as follows:

But the lifeworld is always already intrusively present to all of us as a totality that is unproblematized, nonobjectified, and pretheoretical - as the sphere of that which is daily taken for granted, the sphere of common sense. In an awkward way, philosophy has always been closely affiliated with the latter. Like it, philosophy moves within the vicinity of the lifeworld; its relation to the totality of this receding horizon of everyday knowledge is similar to that of common sense. And yet, through the subversive power of reflection and of illuminating, critical, and dissecting analysis, philosophy is completely opposed to common sense. By virtue of this intimate yet fractured relation to the lifeworld, philosophy is also well suited for a role on *this side* of the scientific system - for the role of an interpreter mediating between the expert cultures of science, technology, law, and morality, on the one hand, and everyday communicative practices, on the other hand... (Habermas 1992a:38-39.) (Emphasis, Habermas's.)

For Habermas, the abandonment of the assumption of a transcendental subject implies the abandonment of a metaphysically oriented conception of reason; it does not imply a wholesale rejection of the notion of rationality. The vacuum left by the rejection of a transcendental subject is now "filled" by the inescapable historical horizon of a linguistically transmitted network of cultural practices. According to Habermas, overcoming a metaphysically based notion of reason underlines the need to investigate the possibility of reason, not from a transcendental, but rather from an historical perspective. The investigation into the possibility of reason as a critical and normative force in history thus becomes the postmetaphysical answer to the demise of the Kantian tradition of transcendental philosophy.

5.2.2 Reason in history

There can be no doubt that Habermas is in sympathy with a general tendency in postmodern thinking towards establishing an historical basis as a point of departure for an investigation of the possibility and limits of reason. He would, for example, undoubtedly appreciate Foucault's (1980:131) remark that "[t]ruth is a thing of this world". Virtually from the beginning of his career, Habermas has been focused on establishing a connection between reason and history, with a view to overcoming various ahistorical accounts of reason in order to defend a basic intuition that the emergence of reason is no accidental contingent fact of history, with no deeper significance apart from being an instrument of survival and manipulation in the world. For Habermas, reason testifies to a moral and intellectual process of progressive development.

To a certain extent, Habermas identifies with the Hegelian-Marxist legacy of an enlightened and enlightening reason, capable of engaging critically with the historical distortions and truncation of reason, in the name of a "higher"

emancipatory notion of reason that actualizes itself within the actual processes of history. He therefore rejects the notion of a metaphysically defined reason operating "behind" or "above" history, calling all the shots, as it were. Reason is therefore viewed as a normative force of critique capable of engaging critically with the institutionalization of reason within modern society. In this regard, Habermas subscribes to the Hegelian idea of reason as *Vernunft*, whose significance within the tradition of Critical Theory, Bernstein (1985) explains as follows:

It was characteristic of the older generation of Frankfurt thinkers to oppose instrumental rationality with the idea of a dynamic emancipatory Reason that Hegel called *Vernunft* (even when they ...were deconstructing this concept of Reason). But the appeal to *Vernunft*, to Reason actualizing itself though history, became less and less convincing in light of the catastrophic events of the twentieth century. (Bernstein 1985:6.)

The general scepticism regarding reason as a force of emancipatory enlightenment is certainly shared by the postmodernists who, in view of their identification of reason with the processes of scientific-technical rationalization in a modern world dictated to by the economic imperatives of capitalism and the regulatory principles of bureaucratic administration, fail to develop an appreciation for the more positive achievements of reason, as a radical force of democratic resistance to the domination of instrumental rationality. It is the failure on the part of the postmodern thinkers to link history with anything progressive that accounts for their critical disengagement from the cultural resources of modernity, thus leading to a general tendency to associate freedom with the "private" world of fantasy, play, sexual abandon, "madness", the creation of "the new" for the sake of the new.

Habermas (1981) is, however, of the opinion that the postmodern challenge, whilst it draws upon the aesthetic resources of modernity for the decentering of the

subject, cannot do justice to the emancipatory potential of communicative reason in view of its failure to recognize a rational potential embedded within the communicative structures of modernity. As Dews (1999) puts it:

[W]e should not allow the concept of reason to be commandeered by those who equate rationalization with uniformity and regimentation. To do so is to imply that opposition to the oppressive advance of reason can come only from the domain of the non-rational. Powerful and moving as it may sometimes be to unleash the forces of the body, sensuality, mysticism and derangement against the cold calculation of the modern world, such efforts are always likely to be dismissed as the expression of a hopeless, evanescent romanticism, which can provide no basis for alternative social arrangements. The situation looks different, however, if it can be shown that the equation of rationalization with increased technical control tells only half the story. (Dews 1999:2.)

It is certainly to Habermas's credit that he has endeavored to tell the other half of the story. Habermas sees the postmodernists' insistence on the cultural situatedness of the agent of knowledge and moral action as part of a larger attempt by post-Hegelian thinkers, (the "Young Hegelians"), such as Feuerbach, Marx, to detranscendentalize or "desubliminate" the metaphysical conception of reason. Habermas (1992) asserts:

The Young Hegelians were strong enough to convince (their audience) - in the name of the objectivity, finitude, and facticity - of the desideratum of a reason produced in natural history, incarnated bodily, situated socially, and contextualized historically. But they could not redeem this desideratum at the level marked out by Kant and Hegel. They thus opened the gates to Nietzsche's more radical critique of reason which, through inversion, ends up totalizing itself. (Habermas 1992:39-40.)

It is in this context, that Habermas places himself and the postmodern thinkers within the tradition of post-Hegelian critique:

Today the situation of consciousness still remains the one brought about by the Young Hegelians when they distanced themselves from Hegel and philosophy in general. And the triumphant gestures of mutually surpassing one another, in which we gladly overlook the fact that we remain contemporaries of the Young Hegelians, have also been in currency since then. Hegel inaugurated the discourse of modernity; the Young Hegelians permanently established it, that is, they freed the idea of a critique nourished on the spirit of modernity, from the burden of the Hegelian concept of reason.

We have seen how Hegel, with his emphatic concept of reality as the unity of essence and existence, shoved aside just that element which had to matter most to the modern consciousness - the transitory aspect of the moment, pregnant with meaning, in which the problems of an onrushing future are tangled in knots. (Habermas 1987b:53.)

The significance of placing the postmodernists within the context of post-Hegelian thinking clearly lies in the attempt that they share with Habermas to establish a link between reason and history. The postmodernists' attempt to establish this link, however, is simultaneously a rejection of modernity, since the latter is evaluated by them exclusively in terms of instrumental rationality. Habermas, in contrast, reads the history of modern culture differently. Given his distinction between instrumental and communicative rationality, he argues that the pragmatic presuppositions accompanying the validity claims of the speech acts within communicative action, suggest the possibility of responding critically to the pre-established context of values and norms which originate within our inherited traditions.

For Habermas, the postmodern attempts to de-transcendentalize philosophy merely end up engaging in metaphysics of a negative sort, as their historicist accounts of reason only succeed in denying the possibility of overcoming the very problem that they correctly identify, namely an ahistorical account of reason. On the postmodern account, history is a negative expression of reason: it is deplete of all meaning in a coherent unifying sense, and it denies the possibility of freedom in a rational sense. As McCarthy (1991) puts it:

A common feature of these negative metaphysics is an abstract negation of the conceptual apparatus of rationalist individualism; the individual is represented as thoroughly submerged in some whole and the historical movement of the whole is viewed as governed by sub- or suprapersonal forces beyond the reach of reason. The idea of rationality influencing the shape of social life comes to appear as naive, dépassé, and in short, hopelessly modern. Trading in grand narratives of progress for equally one-sided *Verfallsgeschichten* of Nietzschean or Heideggerean provenance only adds to the problem. The fixation on technocratization, informatization, bureaucratization, normalization, and so forth tends to make invisible the hard-won gains in civil, political, social, and human rights - not to mention the positive fruits of science and technology, democratic politics and social-welfare arrangements. (McCarthy 1991:3.)

For Habermas, in contrast, the lesson of reason in history yields negative as well as positive results. According to him, the possibility of a more accurate account of the progressive advancement of reason in history, calls for a model of communicative rationality, which for him represents a "new paradigm...of mutual understanding" (Habermas, 1992:43).

It is in terms of his model of communicative rationality (his so-called linguistic turn) that Habermas seeks to reformulate the question of reason and rationality in postmetaphysical terms. The idea of reason is therefore not abandoned; it is simply transformed to capture its rootedness in history from a perspective that retains its normative (critical) dimension. The significance of this point is duly illustrated by Van Niekerk (1995) when he argues:

Although the idea of rationality cannot be abandoned, postmetaphysical thinking does abandon an unsituated reason, as well as the idea of transcendentalism, in the sense that reason remains of necessity what it is, irrespective of historical influences and developments. Postmetaphysical thinking understands that reason is a product of history...that it regularly becomes threatened by irrational ruptures in the tradition, and that that which is worthwhile in the tradition of Western rationality ought therefore to be cherished and protected, rather than abandoned. (Van Niekerk 1995:177.)

Habermas argues therefore that reason, because it arises within the social practices of our specific cultural contexts, imparts an "epistemological significance" to the life-world of everyday social practices (Habermas, 1992a:46). The potential for reason located within the structures of communication creates the possibility of transcending the horizons of our specific cultural contexts, through a self-critical process of learning. As he (1992a) puts it:

Natural languages do more than open the horizons in which socialized subjects find themselves. They also force these subjects to their *own* independent accomplishments - namely, to an innerwordly practice in which projected world-disclosing meanings are subjected to an *ongoing* test in which they can prove their worth. (Habermas 1992:43.) (Emphasis, Habermas's.)

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In the following section we will examine Habermas's model of communicative rationality as an alternative to the postmodern critique of reason. In order to appreciate the dimension of self-transcendence through the medium of language, we will have to consider Habermas's communicative model of rationality, based on his appropriation of the linguistic turn in philosophy.

5.2.3 The linguistic turn

The linguistic turn is arguably the most revolutionary event in late twentieth century thinking. In England the linguistic turn was pioneered by thinkers such as Wittgenstein at Cambridge, and J. L. Austin and Gilbert Ryle at Oxford University.⁹ The common thread running through the work of these thinkers is a rejection of a representational theory of language in favour of a more pragmatic approach, in which the primacy of speech as it occurs in ordinary language becomes the focal point of investigation. From this perspective, the performative as well as descriptive uses of language, within specific social contexts, provide the common starting point of linguistic analysis. This approach was a direct challenge to the more traditional approach in which the philosopher of language was primarily interested in an ideal metalanguage aimed at explicating the universal essence of language. For these thinkers, language is therefore conceived of primarily as a form of social practice. As Martin Jay (1982) points out:

Language was first of all speech, which was a central component of what Wittgenstein called a form of life. Accordingly, the philosopher's task was not to construct an ideal metalanguage neutralizing the concrete mediation of the speaker, but rather to examine and clarify ordinary language within specific social contexts. (Jay 1982:87.)

In France, linguistic philosophy was revolutionized by Ferdinand de Saussure, who focused on the structural regularities of language in order to demonstrate the arbitrary nature of the system of signs, as the condition of the possibility of ordinary linguistic interaction. Given the emphasis on the synchronic relations of a linguistic system, rather than on its diachronic (that is, its historical) development, the language movements which drew their inspiration from de Saussure (semiotics, structuralism and post-structuralism), all proceeded from a common perspective: a rejection of a transcendental ego or a common (transcendent) historical consciousness. These "metanarratives", to echo Lyotard's argument (1984), were now interpreted as the fictional constructs of a particular discourse, namely, modern philosophy.

Taking the linguistic revolution one step further, Derrida as we have seen in Chapter Four, emphasized the primacy of writing as the medium for the expression of *différance*, the destabilizing and subversive force operating "behind" all fixed identities and metaphysical closures. For Derrida, the autonomous nature of language supercedes all other claims to autonomy, especially truth claims based on independent theories of rationality. Derrida has accordingly privileged intertextuality rather than intersubjectivity, with a view to deconstructing our received notions of an autonomous rational subject, on the basis of his view of language as the destroyer of potentially anything it creates, since language cannot reach beyond or represent anything "outside" the boundaries of its own aesthetic possibilities, a position shared by Rorty.

Foucault embraces a similar anti-subjectivist view of language. On his approach, language is an all-powerful medium of impersonal, self-referential regimes of truth whose power extends beyond the reach of subjective mastery. Concentrating on discontinuities and ruptures, and rejecting teleological or causal accounts of

history, Foucault has displayed a hostility to the Enlightenment notion of humanism.

According to Habermas (1987b:296), the major significance of the linguistic turn lies in the possibility of a paradigm shift from the philosophy of the subject to a paradigm in which the question of rationality can be approached from the perspective of communicative action, that is, linguistic interaction based on the possibility of mutual understanding. The most significant implication of this paradigm shift is that the philosophical problem of foundationalism can be overcome, to be replaced by a postmetaphysical communicative account of rationality (Habermas, 1992a: 44-45). Within the context of his postmetaphysical account of rationality, Habermas (1987b:314) claims, "'Rationality' refers in the first instance to the disposition of the speaking and acting subjects to acquire and use fallible knowledge".

It is the disposition to acquire and use fallible knowledge, based on universal validity claims, in and through the medium of language, that constitutes the basis of Habermas's linguistic turn. Bernstein's comments (1985: 18) on the significance of Habermas's linguistic turn are particularly useful:

One primary reason - perhaps *the* primary reason - for the "linguistic turn" is that it no longer entraps us in the *monological* perspective of the philosophy of the subject. Communicative action is intrinsically *dialogical*. The starting point for an analysis of the pragmatics of speech is the situation of a speaker *and* a hearer who are oriented to *mutual* reciprocal understanding; a speaker and a hearer who have the capacity to take an affirmative or negative stance when a validity claim is challenged. (Emphases, Bernstein's)

Habermas's attempt to overcome the metaphysical legacy of Cartesian-Kantian notions of subjectivity is not the only thing he has in common with postmodernists; he also goes along with their rejection of a representational view of language (1992:45). Where he parts company with them, however, is in his pragmatic view of language which clearly represents a major challenge to their anti-subjectivist views. For Habermas, the significance of the linguistic turn is that it rules out the possibility of a God's-eye perspective, that is, one that claims to speak "from above" or "beyond" the horizons of our specific cultural context. This does not mean that Habermas embraces a position of relativism. While he (1985:192) does acknowledge the phenomenon of pluralism as the salient characteristic of modern culture, Habermas clearly defends an element of universality within the process of communicative action. This element of universality is evident when a speaker, from a first-person perspective engages in communication with another person/s. The element of universality is present when the person asserts his or her views as being true, not within a particular context only, but true in a universal sense:

From the perspective of the participant, a moment of *unconditionedness* is built into the *conditions* of action oriented towards reaching understanding. From the perspective of the first person, the question of which beliefs are justified is a question of which beliefs are based on good reasons; it is not a function of life-habits that enjoy social currency in some places and not in others. (Habermas 1985:195.) (Emphases, Habermas's.)

In his attempt to reformulate the question of rationality, Habermas's model of communicative rationality is based on a central idea of Kant; rationality is based on the justification of the principles in the light of which we justify our knowledge claims. But even though he shares Kant's commitment to a normative conception of rationality, he does not share his predecessor's transcendental-foundationalist assumptions. With his linguistic turn, Habermas clearly steps outside the Kantian

tradition when he expresses his support for the Wittgensteinian view that language and understanding are "equally original, mutually elucidating concepts" (Habermas, 1982: 233). When he raises the question regarding the conditions of the possibility of mutual understanding as the starting point of a new approach to the question of rationality, Habermas acknowledges his debt to Kant:

If, in a certain analogy to Kant's critique of reason, we seek to answer the question concerning how a use of language oriented to reaching understanding is possible, we come across an intuitive knowledge possessed by subjects capable of speech and action, a knowledge which the growing child has to learn in order to be able to use it in communicative action as an adult. The rational reconstruction of this pre-theoretical knowledge can be carried on from a universalistic perspective, whether the investigations are directed to hypothetically assumed competencies of a grammatical or of a pragmatic sort. (Habermas 1982:233-234.)

According to Habermas, the "intuitive knowledge possessed by subjects capable of speech and action" is informed by certain principles whose necessity can only be called into question by the very same principles that make such a doubting process possible, in the first place. In this regard, as we have seen in our discussion of Lyotard, Habermas warns against the danger of falling into the trap of a "performative contradiction", that is, the propositional content of a statement cannot contradict its formal presuppositions. This is why he does not take the postmodernists at their word when they deny the validity of the process of argumentation when putting forward their own "arguments" for the demise of the modern metaphysical tradition, and in consequence seek to redefine the question of reason from a non-rational (transcendental) context. Habermas therefore cannot accept a non-rational basis as the condition for the possibility of reason in any form; for him it makes more sense to account for the pathological process of

rationalization in terms of a conception of reason that encompasses more than instrumental rationality.

According to Habermas, the possibility of a more comprehensive and critical notion of rationality is embedded within the structures of (ordinary) linguistic interaction aimed at mutual understanding, given the universal presuppositions that necessarily accompany such interaction:

A peculiarity exhibited by these pragmatic presuppositions of consensus formation is that they contain strong idealizations. For example, the supposition that all participants in dialogue use the same linguistic expressions with identical meanings is unavoidable but often counterfactual. The validity claims that a speaker raises for the content of his assertoric, normative, or expressive sentences are also bound to similar idealizations: what the speaker here and now in a given context, asserts as valid transcends, *according to the sense of his claim*, all context-dependent, merely local standards of validity. These and similar idealizing yet unavoidable presuppositions for actual communicative processes possess a normative content that carries the tension between the intelligible and the empirical into the sphere of appearance itself. Counterfactual presuppositions become social facts. This critical thorn sticks in the flesh of any social reality that has to reproduce itself via action oriented towards reaching understanding. (Habermas 1992a:47.) (Emphasis, Habermas's.)

For Habermas the linguistic process of mutual understanding is the primary aspect of communication; it is also the condition for the possibility of the learning process. Given the universalistic nature of the pragmatic presuppositions that accompany communicative action, the learning process is something that occurs in a context simultaneously within and (formally) beyond the specific context within in which it

occurs. In this regard, Habermas rejects the relativistic implications of postmodern thinking, and adopts the Gadamerian notion of a merger or fusion of interpretative horizons when different cultural communities encounter one another. In such an encounter, what we learn from "the Other", and what "the Other" learns from us, is primarily the result of a mutual exchange of a rational (reason-based) process of communication, in which the difference of "the Other" is the condition of the possibility of the learning process:

For learning itself belongs to neither us nor them ; both sides are caught in it in the same way. Even in the most difficult processes of reaching understanding, all parties appeal to the common reference point of a possible consensus, even if this reference is projected in each case from within their own context. For, although they may be interpreted in various ways and applied to different criteria, concepts like truth, rationality, or justification play the *same* grammatical role in *every* linguistic community. (Habermas 1992a:138.) (Emphasis, Habermas's.)

Thus for Habermas, a communicative model of rationality, based on the pragmatic idealizations implicitly involved in the process of mutual understanding, is the answer to the abandonment of reason by his postmodern opponents. Whilst he may accept the disclosive function of language, as the revealer of radically different (incommensurable) life-worlds, he does not believe that the postmodern model of language can account for the self-critical process of learning which, by its very nature, suggests the possibility of revising or rejecting our former positions. He therefore maintains:

From the possibility of reaching understanding linguistically, we can read off a concept of situated reason that is given voice in validity claims that are both context-dependent and transcendent...the validity claimed for

propositions and norms transcends spaces and times, but in each actual case the claim is raised here and now, in a specific context, and accepted or rejected with real implications for social interaction (Habermas 1992a:139).

By linking his theory of language with the possibility of a critique of social reality, Habermas provides us with a normative basis for a critical engagement with modernity. Unlike his postmodern opponents, Habermas's appropriation of the linguistic turn does not result in a mystical submission of the principles of autonomy and freedom to non-rational sources, in a bid to overcome a discredited subject-centred tradition of metaphysics; on the contrary, his linguistic turn leads to the possibility of reclaiming these principles within a postmetaphysical sense. In the final analysis, Habermas's linguistic turn is a critical appropriation of the Hegelian notion of *Vernunft*:

The human interest in autonomy and responsibility is not mere fancy, for it can be apprehended a priori. What raises us out of nature is the only thing whose nature we can know: language. Through its structure, autonomy and responsibility are posited for us. Our first sentence expresses unequivocally the intention of universal and unconstrained consensus. Taken together, autonomy and responsibility constitute the only Idea that we possess a priori in the philosophical tradition. (Habermas 1971:314.)

For Habermas, the linguistic turn is based on a process of communicative action that has its origins in the practical concerns of everyday life. This brings us to the last theme in our discussion of postmetaphysical thinking: the relation of theory to practice.

5.2.4 Practice as the precondition of theory

Given his position of the situatedness of reason within our social-linguistic practices, Habermas tries to show that our theoretical discourses have their normative foundations within the linguistic practices of communication. From his earliest writings, Habermas has been preoccupied with establishing the pre-theoretical context as the normative foundation of theoretical enquiry. With the publication of *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1972), we find his first full-fledged effort to formulate a theory of rationality along the lines of a "quasi-transcendental" analysis aimed at demonstrating the general role and status of three distinct "cognitive" interests or orientations: the technical, the practical, and the emancipatory. In this early work, Habermas develops a theory of rationality that sets out to account for the scientific and social disciplines by tracing them back to certain anthropologically-based activities, considered to be essential to the material and cultural reproduction of the human species. In this regard, Habermas points to the activities of labour and the interactive aspects of language as constituting the fundamental activities to which the rational pursuit of knowledge within the scientific-technical and the moral-practical fields of enquiry, are ultimately traceable. Although certain arguments presented in this work have justifiably been subjected to severe criticism, given that its immediate objective was to attack the positivistic/scientistic conception of rationality, the philosophical significance of its central investigation of the pre-theoretical origins of reason has often been overlooked.¹⁰ Habermas (1972) explains his programmatic intent as follows

I am undertaking a historically oriented attempt to reconstruct the prehistory of modern positivism with the systematic intention of analyzing connections of knowledge and human interests. In following the process of the dissolution of epistemology which has left the philosophy of science in its place, one makes one's way over abandoned stages of reflection.

Retreading this path from a perspective that looks back towards the point of departure may help to recover the forgotten experience of reflection. To disavow reflection *is* positivism. (Habermas 1972:vii.) (Emphasis, Habermas's.)

The philosophical significance of this work lies in the rejection of the assumption of a transcendently defined concept of reason which privileges philosophical (*a priori*) insights into universal ahistorical conceptual structures and categories. In his rejection of a positivistic or scientistic understanding of rationality, Habermas reveals his underlying objective of establishing a pre-theoretical normative basis for the critique of science, one that avoids a new form of transcendentalism, on the one hand, and epistemological relativism, on the other hand.

In Habermas's view, it is the failure to account for scientific theory in terms other than that of a scientific language of self-validation, that is mainly responsible for the loss of a (self-)critical process of reflection. In this respect, Habermas seems to be echoing the view of Lyotard who, as we have seen in Chapter Three, maintains a conceptual distinction between narrative knowledge, on the one hand, and scientific knowledge, on the other. Unlike Lyotard, however, Habermas does not see these two forms of knowledge as mutually exclusive "language-games". He argues instead for the primacy of narratological knowledge as the condition of the possibility of scientific knowledge. On his approach, the two forms of knowledge are therefore not necessarily mutually incompatible, as Lyotard would have us believe.

According to Habermas, what needs to be done is to establish a new approach to the question of rationality, one that preserves the normative intent of the modern philosophical tradition, but as stated above, without having recourse to either a new form of transcendentalism, on the one hand, or relativism, on the other. Habermas

therefore accounts for the prevalence of positivism, that is, the loss of critical reflection, in the light of a failure by philosophers to come to terms with the collapse of the epistemological tradition of foundationalism:

Philosophy's position with regard to science, which at one time could be designated with the name "theory of knowledge", has been undermined by the movement of philosophical thought itself. Philosophy was dislodged from this position by philosophy. From then on, the theory of knowledge had to be replaced by a methodology emptied of philosophical thought. For the philosophy of science that has emerged since the mid-nineteenth century as the heir to the theory of knowledge, is methodology pursued with a scientistic understanding of the sciences. "Scientism" means science's belief in itself: that is, the conviction that we can no longer understand science as one form of possible knowledge, but rather must identify knowledge with science. (Habermas 1972:4.)

Habermas's pursuit of a normative basis for critique was initially conducted within an epistemological framework, a position he eventually abandoned in view of the foundational-transcendental nature of the cognitive interest. (Habermas 1971:301-380). The abandonment of the epistemological framework did not, however, lead to an abandonment of his overall objective: a normative foundation of theoretical enquiry. It was the linguistic turn, however, as noted above, that provided him with the means of overcoming the problem of philosophical foundationalism. As Bernstein (1985) explains:

Habermas no longer speaks of "quasi-transcendental" cognitive interests. This has led some to think that he has simply abandoned the major systematic theses of *Knowledge and Human Interests*. It is true that he sought to purge his thinking of the vestiges of the philosophy of consciousness and the philosophy of the subject. But the insights contained

in his original trichotomy of human interests are conceptually transformed in a new register within the context of his theory of communicative action. The distinction between the technical interest, on the one hand, and the practical and emancipatory interests, on the other hand, is itself based on a categorial distinction of purposive-rational action and communicative (symbolic) action. This distinction is not abandoned in Habermas's universal pragmatics. On the contrary, it is refined and developed in far more detail than in his earlier work. Furthermore, from the perspective of the theory of communicative action, we gain a clearer understanding of the conceptual space and foundations for what Habermas called the practical and emancipatory cognitive interests. (Bernstein 1985:17.)

The linguistic turn, as we have seen above, does not lead Habermas in the direction of the pre-rational, but rather in the direction of a more comprehensive conception of rationality, in which the scientific-cognitive aspect of rationality, is placed in the larger context of the moral-practical and the aesthetic aspects of rationality.

It is the phenomenological concept of the life-world, as developed in the work of Husserl, for example, together with the concept of philosophical hermeneutics, as developed by thinkers such as Dilthey and Gadamer, that provides Habermas with the conceptual resources for developing the pre-theoretical normative foundation of theoretical knowledge. According to Habermas,

[P]hilosophy still maintains a certain relation to pretheoretical knowledge and to the nonobjective totality of the lifeworld. From *there*, philosophical thinking can *turn back* towards science as a whole and undertake a self-reflection of the sciences that goes beyond the limits of methodology and the theory of science and that - in a reversal of the ultimate grounding of all knowledge in metaphysics - exposes the meaning-foundation of scientific

theory-formation in prescientific practice (Habermas 1992:48-49.)
(Emphases, Habermas's.)

Given philosophy's concern with the impact of science on the communicative realm of our life-world experiences, it is only at our peril that we choose to ignore the practical pre-theoretical normative foundations of scientific theory that arise within the larger context of the life-world, where we experience a richly textured network of linguistic practices based on a combination of validity claims to propositional truth, normative rightness, and subjective truthfulness (sincerity - the feeding elements of scientific discourse).

It is the general tendency among the postmodern thinkers to dismiss the linguistic practices within the life-world as devoid of rational content, that is largely responsible for their inability to provide a normative (rational) basis for the critique of logocentrism, thus giving rise to the different types of contextualism that we have encountered in the previous two chapters. As Habermas (1992a) argues:

The insight into the fundamental primacy of practice over theory...leads to a radical skepticism about reason only if the gaze of philosophy is *restricted* to questions of truth that can be dealt with by science. Ironically, philosophy has itself fostered this kind of cognitivistic reduction and has pinned reason down to only one of its dimensions, at first ontologically, later epistemologically, and then even in linguistic analysis... The occidental deference towards logos reduces reason towards something that language performs in only one of its functions, in representing states of affairs. Ultimately, pursuing questions of truth ... then appears to be irrational as such. Contextualism is only the flipside of logocentrism. (Habermas 1992a:49-50.) (Emphasis, Habermas's.)

It is precisely in terms of the primacy of reason as it occurs in the practical world of communicative action, that Habermas feels justified in defending his vision of modernity against his postmodern critics. For Habermas, the Enlightenment legacy of freedom and autonomy is based on an emancipatory potential of reason, made available by the cultural resources of modernity.

5.3 THE UNFINISHED PROJECT OF MODERNITY: THE QUESTION OF FREEDOM AND AUTONOMY

The crux of the debate between Habermas and the postmodern thinkers ultimately comes down to the question of the possibility of (political) freedom and (moral) autonomy, the cornerstones of the Enlightenment legacy. As indicated above, these moral-political principles were originally defended on the basis of a rationally ordered society. The common objective which Habermas shares with his postmodern opponents is that of overcoming the metaphysical conception of rationality, based on the assumption of a transcendental subject. But whereas for Habermas, the current debate regarding the end of philosophy is merely an indication of the exhaustion of the paradigm of the subject, and not necessarily the normative concepts of truth and reason that have accompanied it, for the postmodernists, however, it means a total rejection of the critical idea of reason, thus restricting the role of critique to that of exposing the authoritarian nature of reason. As Habermas (1987b) puts it:

In the discourse of modernity, the accusers raise an objection that has not substantially changed from Hegel and Marx down to Nietzsche and Heidegger, from Bataille and Lacan to Foucault and Derrida. The accusation is aimed against a reason grounded in the principle of subjectivity. And it states that this reason denounces and undermines all unconcealed forms of suppression and exploitation, of degradation and

alienation, only to set up in their place the unassailable domination of rationality. Because this regime of a subjectivity puffed up into a false absolute transforms the means of conscious-raising and emancipation into just so many instances of objectification and control, it fashions for itself an uncanny immunity in the form of a thoroughly concealed domination. The opacity of an iron cage of a reason that has become positive disappears as if in the glittering brightness of a completely transparent crystal palace. All parties are united on this point: *These glassy facades have to shatter. They are, to be sure, distinguished by the strategies they elect for overcoming the positivism of reason* (Habermas 1987b:55-56.) (Emphasis, Habermas's.)

By identifying reason with its instrumental form of expression, the postmodernists' position is very similar to that of Weber who, "in his analysis of societal rationalization as it makes its way in the modern period...allows himself to be guided by the restricted idea of purposive rationality [*Zweckrationalität*]" (Habermas 1984:143). For Weber the transition to the modern condition can only be explained in terms of the processes of rationalization.¹¹ In this regard, Habermas supports him. It is only when the former equates reason with the rationalization of modernity in an instrumental sense that Habermas objects. Albrecht Wellmer (1985) explains the significance of the Weberian concept of *Zweckrationalität* within the context of modernity in the following manner:

[T]hrough his analysis of the institutional correlates of progressive rationalization - capitalist economy, bureaucracy, and professionalized empirical science - he shows at the same time that the "rationalization" of society does not carry any utopian perspective, but is rather likely to lead to an increasing imprisonment of modern man in dehumanized systems of a new kind - to an increasing "reification" as Weber's disciple Lukács later on would call it (Wellmer 1985:41).

In contrast to the one-dimensional account of modernity as given by Weber and his followers, Habermas adds the second dimension of communicative rationality as the condition of the possibility of systemic rationalization of modern society. While both forms of rationality are essential to the survival of modernity, the process of modernization has been dominated by the cognitive-instrumental dimension of purposive rationality, the domain of science and technology.

According to Habermas, the privileging of cognitive-instrumental rationality has led to imbalances within the modern world, as the sphere of communicative rationality has increasingly been threatened and undermined by the cognitive-instrumental dimension of rationality, thus leading to a colonization of the life-world, which manifests itself as a loss of freedom, on the one hand, and a general cultural impoverishment leading to sense of apathy and a general loss of meaning, on the other hand. (Habermas 1984:346:355). From this perspective, Habermas's analysis comes remarkably close to the "iron cage" analysis of Weber.

When one compares Weber's one-dimensional analysis of modernity with that of Habermas, the picture changes dramatically. On Habermas's interpretation, the rationalization of modern society should not only be understood in terms of the cognitive-instrumental form of rationality; it should reflect the communicative form of rationality as it has emerged within the life-world. This two-dimensional account of the rationalization of modernity allows for the possibility of addressing modernity from the perspective of the rational potential implicit in the communicative structures of modern consciousness. Habermas therefore disagrees with Weber when the latter interprets the progressive rationalization of modernity in terms of an unresolvable paradox, since the project of modernity which, for Habermas, implies a differentiation of the scientific-cognitive, the moral-practical, and the aesthetic-expressive modes of rationality, must not be reduced to the level of *Zweckrationalität*. Habermas (1984) therefore maintains:

Only with the conceptual framework of communicative action do we gain a perspective from which the process of societal rationalization appears as contradictory from the start. The contradiction arises between, on the one hand, a rationalization of everyday communication that is tied to the structures of intersubjectivity of the lifeworld, in which language counts as the genuine and irreplaceable medium of reaching understanding, and on the other hand, the growing complexity of sub-systems of purposive-rational action, in which actions are coordinated through steering media such as money and power. Thus there is competition *not between the types of action* oriented to understanding and to success, *but between principles of societal integration* - between the mechanisms of linguistic communication that is oriented towards validity claims - a mechanism that emerges in increasing purity from the rationalization of the lifeworld - and those de-linguistified steering media through which systems of success-oriented action are differentiated out. The paradox of rationalization of which Weber spoke can then be abstractly conceived as follows: The rationalization of the lifeworld makes possible a kind of systemic integration that enters into competition with the integrating principle of reaching understanding and, under certain conditions, has a disintegrative effect on the lifeworld. (Habermas, 1984:342-343.) (Emphasis, Habermas's.)

It is to the extent that the various fields of professional expertise have become independent of the lives of ordinary people, that the project of modernity has been viewed with scepticism. Yet if the project of modernity is to succeed, the answer to this complex problem lies in the possibility of a balanced interaction between instrumental rationality, on the one hand, and communicative rationality, on the other. Within the context of modernity, each of these spheres of rationality are responsible for the performance of two equally important functions: the material preservation of human life, and, the normative guidance of social interaction and cooperation. The problem with modernity, however, has been the failure to nurture these two (different) forms of rationality with equal respect:

The occasions for protests and discontent originate exactly when spheres of communicative action, centered on the reproduction and transmission of values and norms, are penetrated by a form of modernization guided by standards of economic and administrative rationality; however, those very spheres are dependent on quite different standards of rationalization - on the standards of what I call communicative rationality (Habermas 1981:7-8).

It is on the basis of his distinction between systemic rationality as a type of purposive rationality, on the one hand, and communicative action and rationality, geared towards mutual understanding, on the other hand, that Habermas is in a good position to address the imbalances and pathologies of the modern condition. In this regard, the "iron cage" account of modernity, as represented by the postmodern position is less persuasive when the "the project of modernity" is addressed from the perspective of communicative rationality, since the possibility of resistance and transformation is based on the moral-practical rational potential for solidarity and cooperation, based on the possibility of communication.

Habermas therefore questions the effectiveness of the postmodern challenge in view of its "blind" opposition to modernity as a cultural and rational force, making it difficult to conceive of an historical alternative to the modern condition; hence the overindulgence in negative metaphysics, the salient characteristic of postmodern thinking.

The project of modernity is therefore incomplete, not only because of the selective processes of rationalization (in and through the capitalist form of modernization), but also as a democratic ideal of communication free of domination. It serves as a regulative idea in the Kantian sense, to ensure that the different life-worlds within modernity can reach consensus (from time to time) through the concrete

recognition of the "permanence" of difference, mediated through the linguistic practices of communicative rationality. For Habermas (1992) the project of modernity holds out the promise of "peace" in a world of difference:

For the transitory unity that is generated in the porous and refracted intersubjectivity of a linguistically mediated consensus not only supports but furthers and accelerates the pluralization of forms of life and the individualization of lifestyles. More discourse means more contradiction and difference. The more abstract the agreements become, the more diverse the disagreements with which we *nonviolently* live. (Habermas 1992:140.) (Emphasis, Habermas's.)

5.4 CONCLUSION

The significance of postmetaphysical thinking (as opposed to the postmodern alternative) lies in the possibility of overcoming the *aporias* that have accompanied the development of the modern metaphysical tradition, whilst retaining the normative notions of reason and truth within a (self-) critical ethos of cognitive fallibilism. The possibility of critique presupposes the possibility of an ongoing learning process within the general context of a more balanced approach to the rationalization of modern society. Postmetaphysical thinking accepts that all our knowledge and truth claims are, in principle, criticizable and testable within a rational forum of ongoing debate motivated by the idea of truth, as the projected outcome of all our critical and self-critical encounters. It is this commitment to truth as context-transcendent ideal that is implicitly presupposed by the validity claims that necessarily accompany the communicative process of intersubjective understanding and agreement, that clearly demonstrates the significance of postmetaphysical thinking.

As I have shown in this chapter, Habermas is certainly sensitive to the dangers of an oppressive and totalitarian conception of reason. But this does not mean that the practice of reason as such is problematic; it is rather indicative of the dogmatic application of criteria of rationality which shut out the possibility of truth through consensus. Within the context of postmetaphysical thinking, power is opposed by the force of the better argument.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

The confrontation between Habermas and the representatives of postmodernity is an important one. It raises many disturbing questions about the nature, the status, and the value of modernity in general, and is especially concerned about the role of reason in advancing the cause of human freedom and enlightenment in a world which, in the wake of the collapse of traditional worldviews, needs self-reassurance and guidance in the light of criteria, norms and values that are not metaphysically postulated, but that are justified in terms of procedures and arguments that enjoy intersubjective validity. The seeming circularity that emerges when reason is called upon to justify itself exclusively in the light of principles deriving their legitimacy solely from reason, and thus to provide the normative basis for our knowledge and actions within modernity, provides the strongest challenge. Given the exacting nature of this challenge, one can understand why philosophy has always been haunted by the problem of self-referentiality, as so brilliantly illustrated by Rorty in his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.

In response to modernity's need for self-reassurance, modern philosophy initially proposed a model of rationality based on the assumption of a transcendental subject as the Archimedean point in a world characterized by a historical self-consciousness of change and progress, in view of its perceived critical independence of the authority of the past, and its confidence in shaping its own future.

In the debate between Habermas and the postmodernists, the legacy of the modern metaphysical tradition is subjected to serious criticism as each thinker tries to come to terms with the question of reason and rationality. For the

postmodernist, reason represents a betrayal of the ideals of political freedom and moral autonomy. This conviction is based on an interpretation of modernity, in which the human subject is portrayed as a helpless plaything of various autonomous indeterminate sources of power. Hence the metaphor of the modern subject as a prisoner in the "iron cage" of reason.

For a postmetaphysical thinker such as Habermas, however, the "iron cage" account of modernity represents a betrayal of reason, since it fails to take into account the democratic and moral advances of modernity when compared with the more traditional forms of social life. Habermas is of the opinion that, once the lessons of democratic freedom and moral autonomy are learned, they can only be unlearned by way of moral-political regression. This is his greatest fear; it is also the fundamental source of his motivation for "taking on" the postmodernists who, in his view, propose a false programme of freedom, which they seek to defend in defiance of the lessons of history. The lessons of solidarity in the face of human suffering and domination are discarded in favour of the "freedom" of a (politically and morally) decentered and disengaged (non-) subject, who revels in his or her aesthetic capacity to say "No" to modernity, in view of the ignominious complicity of reason, they claim, in the suffering of "the Other".

On the postmodern approach, the status and condition of philosophy are reflective of the current status and condition of modernity. Following the example of thinkers such as Heidegger and Adorno, the postmodern thinker interprets modernity as a social phenomenon devoid of all prospects of ever redeeming the Enlightenment promise of a rational society. Adorno and Horkheimer declare:

We are wholly convinced - and therein lies our *petitio principii* - that social freedom is inseparable from enlightened thought. Nevertheless, we believe that we have just as clearly recognized that the notion of this very way of thinking, no less than the actual historic forms - the social institutions - with which it is interwoven, already contains the seed of the reversal universally apparent today (1993:xiii).

Heidegger, who also equates modern reason with an inescapable form of technical rationality, despairs of the possibility of a rational means of overcoming the modern legacy of metaphysics, writes:

Philosophy will be unable to effect any immediate change in the current state of the world. This is true not only of philosophy but of all purely human reflection and endeavor. Only a god can save us. The only possibility available to us is that by thinking and poeticizing we prepare a readiness for the appearance of a god or for the absence of a god in (our) decline, insofar as in view of the absent god we are in a state of decline. (Quoted in Bernstein 1991:45.)

The general tendency among postmodern thinkers is to look at modernity through "the lens" of a metaphysical understanding of reason, and consequently to reject it, without ever considering that maybe (just maybe) "the lens" is defective. It is at this point that postmodern thinking invokes the authority of Nietzsche to conduct an aesthetically inspired revolt against the most fundamental principle of modernity: the justification of reason, truth, justice and freedom, in the light of universalistic criteria of rationality. As Axel Honneth (1985) puts it:

Poststructuralism does not shy away from extending Nietzsche's diagnosis of culture and Heidegger's critique of metaphysics directly to social reality, thereby turning all social achievements of the modern period into

documents of a single principle of thought, be it the will to power or rational self-assertion. Thus like Adorno and Horkheimer's earlier theory of civilization, so today must the historical constructions of poststructuralism produce the appearance that the various separate ways of life, systems of institutions and cultural forms of developed society as a whole only represent the objectification of an all-excluding principle of rationality... (the postmodernist thinker) limits the institutional and cultural givens of the modern period to those phenomena which are the result of a thought anchored in the principle of subjectivity. (Honneth 1985:149.)

Postmodern thinkers thus deploy an aestheticist form of critique in which they challenge the instrumental form of rationality, which has become so predominant in the process of modernization. The privileging of the aesthetic dimension of language thus becomes the (non-rational) condition for the possibility of the postmodern critique of reason. In this regard, one can develop an argument in support of two rather different, diametrically opposed forms of critique, based on two radically different conceptions of language, as White (1991) proposes.

In terms of this proposal, we are required to accept an aestheticist conception of language as envisaged by the postmodernists, aimed at disclosing various problematic aspects of modernity, on the one hand, or a communicative conception of language, as developed by Habermas, envisaged as a problem-oriented approach based on a dialogical procedure of consensus formation, on the other hand.

While I accept the argument for a differentiation between these two conceptions of language, as two radically different forms of communication, with radically different objectives, one should guard against the danger of seeing them as mutually exclusive. I would rather view them as two complementary aspects of modernity, emanating from a common social and cultural process.

It is because the postmodernists show no inclination to move beyond the theoretical constructs of post-structuralism, that they fail to recognize the culture of modernity "in the background", as it were, as the enabling condition of the possibility of their own critique. Thus even though they take their cue from the poststructuralist orientation towards the "decentering of the subject", with a view to undermining the modernist assumption of a transcendent (self-present, self-transparent) autonomous subject, they fail to acknowledge that the very possibility of their own critique (its independence and validity) presupposes an autonomy and critical independence, which they deny in their critique of reason.

But if the question of reason cannot be formulated from a more comprehensive normative perspective of rationality, as the postmodernist position implies, then how will the postmodern critique of reason proceed? If reason, truth and power are interpreted as inseparable elements of the same process of rationalization, with the prospect of a (formal) second-order level of reflection ruled out, as a matter of principle, what would be the nature of this critique, and how would one reconcile it with, for example, Foucault's (1984) argument, as advanced in his essay, *What is Enlightenment?*, that his critique of the Enlightenment legacy of humanist rationalism should not be seen as a defense of "the irrational", when for him power belongs to the same regime as truth?

It is this predicament that forces the postmodernist to look in the direction of "the aesthetic" (as opposed to "the political") for a solution in defense of "the Other" of reason. This aesthetically oriented critique, undertaken without due consideration for "the political", rules out the possibility of encountering "the Other" as an equal participant in the culture of modernity, because the postmodern orientation towards "the Other", in spite of the concerted attempt to overcome the subject, is still trapped within the monological framework of an isolated consciousness similar to

that of the Cartesian subject. But whereas Descartes was concerned with establishing the condition of the possibility of reason and truth from the perspective of a transcendental subject, the postmodern thinker sets out to establish the impossibility of reason (and the associated normative ideas of truth and knowledge), based on the "non-subjective" and the "non-rational" authority of the aesthetic.

It is the failure to reconcile a positive interaction between the aesthetic and the moral-political from a more comprehensive notion of rationality that in the end undermines the postmodern project. It is from this perspective that the radical critique of reason as articulated on the authority of Nietzsche becomes problematic for a thinker such as Habermas. As David Rasmussen (1990) puts it:

Nietzsche's endorsement of the aesthetic puts him with the avant-garde program of aesthetic modernity. But Nietzsche gives up on the idea of emancipation. Identity, individuation, uniqueness, ideas at the very heart of the program of emancipation, are abandoned in his return to the Dionysian. Nietzsche is no longer interested in the idea of truth. Beyond truth and falsity, beyond good and evil, lies taste, "the yes and the no of the palate". This is the Habermasian characterization. It appears that Nietzsche has exempted himself from the curse of enlightenment by over-coming the Western theory of rationalization, by returning to the archaic. (Rasmussen 1990:13.)

But if the aesthetic is viewed as part of the larger "project of modernity" it can (potentially) be seen as part of the solution to the problems posed by a one-sided interpretation of modernity's rational potential (Habermas 1981). If a critical perspective on reason in history can be developed, based on a more comprehensive notion of rationality, then we will be in a position where we can

distinguish between a mere narrative of modernity and one which is able to distinguish between its achievements, its future possibilities, as well as its failures and dangers. We would then avoid the trap of confusing a mere litany of disasters with an adequate replacement for a rational process of philosophical thinking, guided by an informed historical analysis. The following argument by Lyotard, for example, illustrates my point regarding the postmodern approach to the political dimension and its implications for philosophy:

Following Theodor Adorno, I have used the name "Auschwitz" to signify just how impoverished recent Western history seems from the point of view of the "modern" project of the enlightenment of humanity. What kind of thought is capable of "relieving" Auschwitz - relieving (*relever*) in the sense of *aufheben* - capable of situating it in a general, empirical or even speculative process directed towards universal emancipation? There is a sort of grief in the *Zeitgeist*. It can find expression in reactive, even in reactionary, attitudes or in utopias - but not in a positive orientation that would open up a new perspective. (Lyotard 1992:78.)

As can be seen in these words, the postmodern critique of reason is infused with an overwhelming sense of moral-political impotence and rage. Given the postmodernists' reluctance to consider a "political solution", they undermine the effectiveness of their critique. The most disturbing consequence of this failure on the part of postmodern thinking is that "the Other", as the subject of its underlying moral concern, also becomes a fictional construct instead of a "real" person. It is this implication of postmodern thinking that I find most disturbing.

At the moment, philosophy stands before a dilemma. The question that it is faced with is whether it can still defend itself as the "guardian of reason", in the wake of the contemporary onslaught against its most cherished ideas of reason and truth.

If we follow the path set out by postmodern thinking, then the answer is clearly "no".

It is to the credit of the postmetaphysical thinking, as practiced by Habermas, however, that one begins to realize the possibility of an alternative to the conclusions reached by the postmodern thinkers in their respective critiques of reason. In place of the postmodern dogmatic dismissal of the question of reason and rationality, postmetaphysical thinking brings us to recognize our limitations as well as our strengths. In this regard, the demise of the metaphysical tradition of philosophical thinking does not lead to a total abandonment of reason; it merely emphasizes that when the idea of rationality is brought in line with our fallibility as users of reason, the lesson to be learned is to recast our received notions of reason in the light of our self-understanding as finite and fallible agents of knowledge.

This implies that philosophy's transition to the realm of hypothetical knowledge, based on claims that are at best tentative, is not to be viewed as a sign of "weakness", but as a sign of its strength, because it keeps us from falling into the trap of intellectual dogmatism and cultural imperialism. As far as I am concerned, this is the most important lesson to be learned from Habermas's debate with the representatives of postmodern thinking. In the final analysis, we do want to know whether what we say and believe is "true", and we want to distinguish between what is right and wrong. If philosophy continues to pursue these question within an intersubjective communicative process aimed at mutual understanding and agreement, and if it continues, furthermore, to be guided by the search for the better argument as the only legitimate expression of "force", then philosophy, and its central concern with the question of reason, is far from over.

It in this respect, we are contemporaries not only of Hegel, as Habermas would have us believe, but also of Socrates for whom the medium of dialogue is the moral and political precondition of human freedom and truth.

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ENDNOTES

1. See Robert C. Holub (1991) for an excellent account of the various debates that Habermas has been involved in over the years.
2. David R. Rasmussen (1990) belabours the point that the postmodernists are not overly concerned with the problem of modernity. I feel his argument misses the central point of the debate, namely the problem of reason.
3. See Peter Dews (1999:1-25).
4. See Habermas (1992b:97-104).
5. See Habermas (1989:209-269).
6. See J.B. Thompson (1990).
7. See my *Is Habermas a transcendental thinker* (2000).
8. See Toulmin (1990).
9. See Austin (1962), Ryle (1949), and Wittgenstein (1968).
10. See Mary Hesse's critique of Habermas in this respect in Thompson & Held (1982:98-115).
11. See Weber (1930).