

Parsing the promise of modernism: Habermas, the avant-garde and the aesthetics of normative order

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1 | INTRODUCTION

In a 2018 interview with Jürgen Habermas by the Spanish newspaper *El País*, visiting journalists noted that Habermas' home, bedecked with modern art, presented "a juxtaposition of Bauhaus modernism and Bavaria's staunch conservatism" (Hermoso, 2018). The shelves were lined with the German Romantics and the walls adorned with icons of European aesthetic modernism, cohering with the style of the house itself. In fleeting autobiographical remarks made in the preface to his essays in *Naturalism and Religion*, Habermas proffers an account of his decorative tastes and the experiences and hopes at which they gesture. He writes of the postwar revelations that disclosed a civilizational rupture after 1945, along with the sense of cultural release brought about by the doors being opened "to Expressionist art, to Kafka, Thomas Mann, and Hermann Hesse, to world literature written in English, to the contemporary philosophy of Sartre and the French left-wing Catholics, to Freud and Marx, as well as to the pragmatism of John Dewey..." (Habermas, 2008, p. 19). He continues to describe how "the liberating, revolutionary spirit of Modernism found compelling visual expression in Mondrian's constructivism, in the cool geometric lines of Bauhaus architecture, and in uncompromising industrial design" (Habermas, 2008, p. 19). Together, these aesthetic movements espoused what Rembert (2015) calls a determination to develop an artistic practice that conveyed a "new world image" (p. 40). According to Habermas, the "cultural opening" instigated by these aesthetic pursuits "went hand in hand with a political opening," which primarily took the form of "the political constructions of social contract theory...combined with the pioneering spirit and the emancipatory promise of Modernism" (Habermas, 2008, p. 19). In this brief sketch Habermas depicts politics and aesthetics working in tandem to drive emancipatory social renewal; the intellectual constructions necessary for political transformation leaned, he suggests, upon the revolutionary social vision framed by modernism's "cool geometry." This article further explores this connection with a view to examining the role of modernism as an imaginative resource for the kind of normative integration developed by Habermas in his pursuit of the neo-Kantian "project of modernity"—that is, the project of integrating pluralistic mass societies via postmetaphysical rational presuppositions and the normative principles to which they give rise. In excavating and critiquing the resources that inform Habermas' normative framework, this article locates an important source of inspiration in 20th

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century European aesthetic modernism, which, I argue, supplies something like an “orienting background metaphor,” and a methodological resource, for the envisioning of a detranscendentalized normativity based upon the dualism of form and content (Blumenberg, 1983, p. 217). The form/content dichotomy is essential to the normative power of formalism in its claim to postmetaphysical lightness and context-transcending openness to various cultural and ethical identities. Yet the modernist aesthetic tradition from which it draws is laced with philosophical commitments of the kind that compromise its peculiar kind of normative ambition—that is, the ambition to entrench normative bearings that, while ethically weightless, possess cognitive power and seamless rational appeal across languages and social contexts. Attending to the ideational connections between aesthetic modernism, linguistic idealism, and a certain kind of “deflationary” neo-Kantianism, helps clarify *how* formalism does its integrative work, as well clarifying the ideological contours of its claim to an immanently resourced context-transcending openness.

There is, of course, important existing literature on the place of aesthetics in Habermas’ thought, particularly Duvenage’s detailed treatment of aesthetics and communicative reason (see Duvenage, 2003). The aim here is not to break pristine exegetical ground but rather to explicate what I take to be an underappreciated connection between a particular aesthetic movement (with its attendant visualization of political and social transformation) and a specific way of framing normative and political order, which endures in the contemporary democratic theory influenced by Habermas’ deflationary neo-Kantianism. An excavation of the sort carried out in this article is apt in view of the persistence, in the recent work of contemporary intellectual historians and philosophers engaged with the Frankfurt School, of secularism as a concept, and secularization as a social process, that “unbinds us from the spell of mythic belonging” (Gordon, 2020, p. 154). According to this view, secularism in its intellectual, legal, and social formations offers the only viable methods of integrating disparate worldviews amid the “complications of multiplicity” (Gordon, 2020, p. 153). For all of the dialectical richness offered by Frankfurt School figures such as Adorno and, very differently, Habermas, we continue to encounter renderings of the contemporary conjuncture as defined by a stark divide between “those who adhere to the claims of secular reason” and those tempted toward theocracy and “the promise of religious certitude” (Gordon, 2020, p. 147). Against the backdrop of this sociological typology we are directed toward the promise of a “culture of formalism,” as one prominent legal scholar affirmingly calls it, as the essential trait of a social order free from impositional cultural self-assertion (Koskenniemi, 2009, p. 504). Modernity must be able, grudgingly, to co-exist with metaphysically laden ethical culture without impeaching its own cognitive credibility and social validity. A modern normative order must, in other words, be receptive to the “complications of multiplicity” without making them the template for its own social imprint.

For those who persist in reading emancipatory promise into the Weberian metanarrative of modernity as social secularization, Habermas stands out for his accommodating stance toward customary ethical or religious culture. Unlike Hans Blumenberg, for whom the legitimacy of the modern age is *sui generis*, Habermas is taken to offer “a dialectical concept of secularization” by which the semantic potentials of metaphysically thick traditions are retained even as their cognitive power recedes. His position is a moderate one, it seems, which refuses the more energetic confidence implicit in the view that “‘mere reason’ already bears within itself an imperative of secularization that points beyond the horizon of religious belief” (Gordon, 2020, p. 149). Yet, as Taylor (2014) highlights, while Habermas’ views on the “discourse of modernity” have changed very significantly throughout his career, he nevertheless maintains the fundamental epistemic distinction by which “enchanted” or ethically embedded worldviews, for all their semantic power, are shorn of the potential to produce cognitively rational argumentative validity claims (p. 329). Instead, Habermas (1987) has held to an iteratively rearticulated formalism, by which “communicative reason finds its criteria in the argumentative procedures for directly or indirectly redeeming claims to propositional truth, normative rightness, subjective truthfulness, and *aesthetic harmony* [*italics mine*]” (p. 314). This article illustrates the manner in which the lingering epistemic distinction between cognitively commanding, culturally weightless, rationality and its others is maintained in concert with the ideal of harmony supplied by European aesthetic modernism, along with its attendant forms and techniques. The coordinates supplied by the European avant-garde, I suggest, contribute to the imaginative production of a model of trans-contextually available normative order reliant upon the Kantian dichotomy of “form as ideally separable from its matter” (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 445). Taking a closer look at the interactions and parallels between

European aesthetic modernism, linguistic idealism and normative formalism, I will suggest that in transposing Kant's idealizing anticipations onto a plane of immanence, Habermas' deflation of Kant's transcendental idealism continues to depend upon a scheme-content analytic that deforms our sense of the ethically multifarious social world and of the critical modes it best accommodates. The intended effect of this examination is not to fold Habermas' dialectical system into a normatively adrift historicism. Rather, it is to suggest that Habermas' commitment to discursive differentiation entails a discernibly modernist aestheticizing of normative order, disallowing the more desirably textured engagements with value pluralism that we might otherwise countenance.

Section 2 of this article explicates the connections and convergences between European aesthetic modernism and the Habermasian "project of modernity," exploring the images of order with which this project interacts and the methods of normative integration to which they lend support. I argue that the modernist aesthetics with which Habermas' project engages support a continuation of the Kantian scheme-content analytic, which proves essential to the notion of postmetaphysical, procedurally grounded, integration. I then contrast this with the phenomenologically driven approach to form and content, configuration, and meaning espoused by existentialist and hermeneutically oriented thinkers such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Hans-Georg Gadamer, juxtaposing their epistemological and aesthetic holism with what I take to be Habermas' aesthetic operation of subsumption. Section 3 develops the argument that Habermas' communicatively grounded normativity works to mirror the form/content dichotomy on the linguistic plane, effecting a separation of rational presuppositions from the meanings born by language. I criticize this separation in conversation with Charles Taylor's work in epistemology and philosophy of language and with reference to Shahab Ahmed's hermeneutical sociology. This criticism entails the suggestion that the meanings born by "languages-in-use," which I take to be inescapably implicated in processes of normative reasoning, cause significant problems for the kind of formalism that rests upon a diremption of norms from ethical value articulations.

2 | THE EMANCIPATORY PROMISE OF AESTHETIC MODERNISM: TWO ALTERNATIVES

That the theoretical "discourse of modernity" is constitutively entwined with and articulated through artistic modernism is, for Habermas, not in doubt. Inserting himself into the debate over the temporal parameters of modernism, Habermas (1987) traces its origins to the mid-19th century where the terms "*Moderne* and *Modernität*, *modernité* and *modernity*" emerge and "have until our own day a core aesthetic meaning fashioned by the self-understanding of avant-garde art" (p. 8). Indeed, according to Habermas (1987), the theoretical problematic of modernity—the intellectual and imaginative imperative of grounding modernity out of itself—"first comes to consciousness in the realm of aesthetic criticism" (p. 8). How, then, "in our own day" does this original entwinement continue to frame the intellectual project of modernity? In a famous and critically apprehended essay Clement Greenberg charts the contours of this "modern" consciousness by addressing the relation between "Enlightenment thought" (primarily Kant) and the European aesthetic avant-garde. Greenberg sets out what he takes to be a defining interrelation between aesthetic modernism and Enlightenment self-criticism—namely, art's submission to the imperatives of reflexive re-evaluation and rational justification. Accordingly, he suggests that Enlightenment thought initiates the objectifying perspective of philosophical cognition, from which foundational presuppositions are subject to critique and out of which arises an account of freedom as rational self-authorization. Yet the "self-critical tendency" associated with Kant is, Greenberg argues, both "exacerbated" and amended by aesthetic modernism, which intensifies the reflexive instincts of Kantian moral and political philosophy while refashioning its critical methods. Thus, Greenberg (1965) submits that "the Enlightenment criticized from the outside, the way criticism in its more accepted sense does" while "Modernism criticizes from the inside, through the procedures themselves of that which is being criticized" (p. 5). Expanding upon this distinction, he suggests that "the task of self-criticism [for art] became to eliminate from the specific effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art." Only thus "would each art be rendered 'pure', and in its 'purity' find the guarantee of its standards of quality

as well as of its independence." Crucially, for Greenberg (1982), "'purity' [in the context of aesthetic Modernism] meant self-definition" (pp. 5–6). Thus, painters such as Mondrian and Kandinsky produced work the excitement of which lay "in its pure preoccupation with the invention and arrangement of spaces, surfaces, shapes, colours etc., to the exclusion of whatever is not necessarily implicated in these factors" (Greenberg, 1965, p. 7). What 19th and 20th century modernist painting presents, writes Greenberg (1965), is an aversion to "the subject matter of common experience," such that "nonrepresentational or 'abstract'" modernist forms must, instead, "stem from obedience to some worthy constraint or original" (p. 7). This boundary condition or "constraint," which prior to the emergence of Enlightenment self-criticism might have been located in "the world of common, extroverted experience," can now "only be found in the everyday processes or disciplines by which art and literature have already imitated the former" (Greenberg, 1965, p. 7). The "worthiness" of the constraint depends, in a markedly Kantian manner, upon its abstraction from all subjective ends—on retaining, that is, the distinction "between space as the form of external experience and the things given in that experience" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 253).

Greenberg's influential account enunciates what Josipovici (2010) calls a "purist view of modernism," which casts art as tending, almost teleologically, toward abstraction in its pursuit of "that which is only art and nothing else" (p. 179). For critics of this view, such as Josipovici, Greenberg's account of modernism rests upon selective emphases and overdrawn distinctions between abstraction and representation (Josipovici, 2010, p. 179). The purism of Greenberg's account, its construal of modernism in terms of a temporally linear abandonment of representation and its affiliation with an immanently resourced form of Kantian self-criticism, might indeed be cast as insufficiently appreciative of modernism's dialectical subtlety, of what Clark (2001) calls its "continual two-facedness—its inward-turning and outward-reaching, its purism and opportunism, its centripetal and centrifugal force" (p. 407). Yet even in Clark's (2001) less "purist" account, European modernism closely resembles a detranscendentalized Kantianism that construes contingency as "a fate to be suffered, and partly to be taken advantage of, but only in order to conjure back out of it... a new pictorial unity" (p. 11). That new unity is established aesthetically via readily available modernist forms such as the grid, characterized by one of Greenberg's most notable critics, Krauss (1980), as "a structure that has remained emblematic of the modernist ambition within the visual arts" (p. 50). For Krauss (1980) the grid, employed and developed by Mondrian—in whom Habermas takes express interest—"announces, among other things, modern art's will to silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse" (p. 50). Following Krauss' characterization, the will to silence performed by abstract forms amounts to a rejection of antecedence and postcedence, as well as any relationship of dependence upon ethically or socially embedded forms and traditions. In so doing, an abstraction such as the grid functions in a nondiscursive manner, declaring its autonomy from the social or natural worlds from which aesthetic ideals might conventionally be drawn. It does so, argues Krauss (1980), through enacting a regularizing and leveling function upon the artwork, "crowding out the dimensions of the real" (akin to Greenberg's "subject matter of common experience") and "replacing them with the lateral spread of a single surface" (p. 50). By means of its organized regularity the grid enacts an "aesthetic decree" rather than a mimetic movement marking an entry into discourse and evoking objects external to the artwork in its technical dimension. The "lateral spread" of the grid offers a visual explication of an internally disaggregated but formally unified whole that both encompasses and controls the irregularities of customary discourse or narrative. It visually quarantines what O'Neill (2015) calls "variable characteristics," associating closely with the neo-Kantian notion that "if reason has *any* authority, it must be *its own*, rather than *derivative*" (p. 276).

The search for a novel unitary form that enables a controlled accommodation of contingency without compromising its own integrative power concords with Habermas' (2008) construal of the "emancipatory promise of Modernism" (p. 19). The "project of modernity," as Habermas casts it, has spatial and temporal dimensions. Temporally, it must secure the distinctiveness of modernity against the sort of mimetic dependence that would leave us enthralled to the philosophy of the subject and the emancipatory ideals it has sponsored. This relies upon the discernment of "an intrinsic ideal form...constructed from the spirit of modernity," which "neither just imitates the historical forms of modernity nor is imposed upon them from the outside" (Habermas, 1987, p. 20). Spatially the purpose of this intrinsic ideal form is "to unite disparate elements without eliminating the differences between them" (Habermas, 2008, p. 21). Such an ideal will service the formation of a political totalities that systematically reproduce social relations conge-

nial to the “super-ego formation” of rational, reflexive, autonomy. In other words, it aims to ensure the development of individuated moral autonomy, with its cognitive and reflective dimensions, via the collective agency institutionalized in a given political and normative order and through the “abstract, legally mediated form of solidarity among citizens” (Habermas, 2008, p. 22). In Habermas’ own presentation the social structure underpinning this abstract form of solidarity is made intelligible with reference to images. Thus, “the discourse theory of democracy *corresponds to the image of a decentered society* [italics mine]” in which “the political public sphere has been differentiated as an arena for the perception, identification, and treatment of problems affecting the whole of society” (Habermas, 1996, p. 301). The political dynamic of discursive differentiation supplied by Habermas’ communicative theory is rendered here with reference to an *image* of the social world as integrated by procedural forms and faculties that are substantively discontinuous but formally concordant with its multiple, separate, centers of ethical meaning-making. These loci of ethical life are marked by an “always already *functioning* knowledge” of the indispensable presuppositions of rational communication, which play the “same grammatical role” across communicative contexts, allowing for a reconstructively driven normative convergence in the “political public sphere” (Habermas, 1996, p. 311).

The Habermasian image of the decentered society—thinly unified through remnant “abstract basic values”—might plausibly be said to retain and continue key Kantian aesthetic preoccupations restated in the deflationary terms supplied by modernism. As Habermas (1987) puts it, under the conditions of modernity, “there arise structural pressures toward the critical dissolution of guaranteed knowledge, the establishment of generalized values and norms, and self-directed individuation,” all of which Habermas casts, in overarching terms, as demanding the “separation of form and content” (p. 345). This diagnosis arguably produces, by way of modernist aesthetics, a coincident normative reconstruction that is significantly interactive with Kant’s scheme-content analytic as developed in the First Critique. Kant (1998) argues that the principle of space is at once a formal condition for the appearance of specific phenomena as well as an ideal principle available through cognition in contact with the material world: “space is not a discursive or...general concept of relations in general, but a pure intuition” (p. 175). According to Kant (1998) in the Transcendental Aesthetic, space is “to be regarded as the condition of the possibility of appearances, not as a determination dependent on them, and is an a priori representation that necessarily grounds outer appearances” (p. 175). The concept of space, for Kant (1998), “represents no property at all of any things in themselves nor any relation of them to each other, i.e., no determination of them that attaches to objects themselves” (p. 176). We can only speak of “space” from the point of view of materially extended, perspectively delimited, human beings who “acquire outer intuition” through things “only insofar as they appear to us” (Kant, 1998, p. 177). Our reception of phenomena, via the sensibilities of sight, hearing and touch, afford no possibility of cognition a priori, given the subject-relative nature of appearances (e.g., of color). If we abstract away from particular objects or phenomena and their relations, then we are left with a pure intuition, “which bears the name of space.” Space, so intuited, is the condition of the possibility of all experience rather than an element that grounds the “things in themselves.” In other words, space eludes empirical cognition and characterization in terms of its own specificity or content. Kant’s idealist rendering of Cartesian homogenous space sets a boundary condition to our encounters with specific phenomena, but one that remains a function of our receptive limitations and that we can never know “in itself” (Taylor & Dreyfus, 2015, p. 140). In Kantian terms, the “original representation” of space is “essentially single; the manifold in it, thus also the general concept of spaces in general, rests merely on limitations” (Taylor & Dreyfus, 2015, p. 175). The concept of space, therefore, is unitary rather than variegated, intuitive rather than empirically verifiable and knowable only as a “transcendental concept of appearances in space,” rather than an object that we might know in and of itself through experience (Taylor & Dreyfus, 2015, p. 178). This idealist interpretation is accompanied by a redrawing of the “representational or mediational” picture of our epistemological condition, which broadly depicts a Cartesian dualism by which sense data (ideas) lodged in the mind apprehend an external, extended, world. In Kant’s reworking, as Taylor and Dreyfus (2015) suggest, this dualism takes new shape: “instead of being defined in terms of original and copy, it is seen on the model of form and content, mould and filling” (p. 46).

Of course, Habermas is explicitly committed to overcoming the Kantian transcendental philosophy of “pure, merely speculative reason” or, indeed, the “pure intuition” of space entailed in Kant’s (1998, pp. 151–157) transcendental aes-

thetic. From the outset, in the early articulations of his normative system, one of Habermas' (1987) overriding aims has been to ensure "that the purism of pure reason is not resurrected again in communicative reason" (p. 301). Habermas (1987) is, moreover, dedicated to overcoming subject-centered reason—the "product of division and usurpation"—with a communicative rationality that "integrates the moral-practical as well as the aesthetic-expressive domains" (p. 315). He does so, however, by rendering the aesthetic-expressive domain in distinctively modernist terms heavily marked by the scheme-content analytic. Hence, "the validity claimed for propositions and norms transcends spaces and times, *blots out space and time*" even while "the claim is always raised *here and now*, in specific contexts" (Habermas, 1987, p. 323). As per Krauss' discussion of Mondrian's grid, which "crowds out the dimensions of the real" in order to secure the autotelic integrity of the work, Habermasian normativity requires the suspension of space and time insofar as they present practically meaningful contingencies; it requires a moment of focused atemporality that "breaks with the concretism of a worldview in which the particular is immediately enmeshed with the particular" and in which, in markedly pictorial terms, "everything forms an extensive flat weave of oppositions and similarities" (Habermas, 1992, p. 119). Reflection, in Habermas' system, must tug at this "flat weave," to extract from its fabric of particulars the pattern of a "weak and transitory unity of reason, which does not fall under the idealistic spell of universality" (p. 117). This is not the work of an extra-mundane transcendental perspective, but of an intramundane viewpoint able to distinguish between rationally stable form and spatiotemporally contingent content. To "blot out space and time" while making a context-bound claim is to reorient oneself toward the "human milieu" in which one stands in such a way as to suspend the primordially and socially "motivated" position one occupies, placing in abeyance the "equivocal adhesion of the subject to pre-objective phenomena" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 352). It is to rely upon the Kantian distinction between form and content and in Merleau-Ponty's (1964) terms, to work within an immanent frame to separate "configuration" from "meaning" (p. 77).

The intellectual partiality of this operation becomes clearer with reference to contrasting alternatives that take a phenomenological approach to space beginning, as in Merleau-Ponty's account, with the embodied, nonobjective, character of human perception. Once we transition away from conceptualizing space as an interaction between form and content defined by the "rationalising operation of subsumption" we are led, says Merleau-Ponty (2012), to acknowledge that spatial perception is always already "motivated" by the subject's position within a perceptual field that "proposes" to the subject anchorage points set out by their context and their past, by their engagement in a human and a physical milieu (p. 292). Even if we could wrest perception away from a human world full of extant meanings and ways of seeing, we would still be enmeshed at a primordial level in a physical world that ensures we remain engaged rather than detached for the sake of objectification—when the eye crosses a given object it cannot avoid focusing its gaze. We do not, in other words, encounter at the level of perception the representation of space as an unpunctuated pure intuition with which we are, at least potentially, free from involvement with concrete particulars. Space, insists Merleau-Ponty (2012, pp. 262–263), "is always already constituted," such that "we will never understand space by withdrawing into a worldless perception."

Understanding space from the perspective of experience requires, according to this phenomenologically inclined line of thought, precisely the equivocal adhesion to phenomena shed by the Kantian operation of subsumption. So, in critiquing the abstraction inherent in Kantian aesthetic judgment, Gadamer replaces "perception" with the broadly Heideggerian term "dwelling," to suggest the essential relational dimension between object and perceiving subject. "Dwelling" with a work of art, or upon the aesthetic dimension of any given object, entails an effort at understanding that reaches beyond strictly aesthetic properties—thus, "lingering vision and assimilation is not a simple perception of what is there, but is itself understanding-as" (Gadamer, 2013, p. 82). "Understanding-as" functions in a manner diametrically opposed to "worldless perception" insofar as it evokes entanglement within a preconstituted world of engagements and meanings. This, in turn, suggests, in place of the operation of subsumption, a mode of apprehension "characterized by not hurrying to relate what one sees to a universal" (Gadamer, 2013, p. 82). Instead, "understanding-as" dwells with the distinctiveness of particular aesthetic experiences, intertwined as they are with narrative culture (Wittgenstein, 1970, p. 8). This distinctiveness is taken seriously on its own terms, without extracting its semantic or aesthetic "potentials" in obedience to a merely negative, conceptually universalizable, form. An aesthetic vision freed

from Kantian abstraction, suggests Gadamer (2013, p. 82), is characterized by dwelling on what one sees as “something aesthetic,” rather than a particular in search of a universal. “Something aesthetic,” however, is inseparable from the knowledge that it embodies and expresses; it cannot be taken in or “understood” under conditions of radical subjectivization, as Gadamer puts it. “Understanding” the object of aesthetic judgment is conditional upon the meanings that constitute its aesthetic nature; it entails drawing close to the life of a language—to the language games that shape aesthetic values such as “taste” or “exemplarity” within a particular form of life. Thus, we draw close to the argument set out by Wittgenstein (1970) for the interdependence of aesthetics and culture, which registers that “the words we call expressions of aesthetic judgment play a very complicated role, but a very definite role, in what we call a culture of a period. To describe their use or to describe what you mean by a cultured taste, you have to describe a culture” (p. 8). Describing a culture, in this case, involves the mundane details of social life that constitute the “taste” of any given period, and with it the values expressed in aesthetic judgments—hence “in describing musical taste you have to describe whether children give concerts, whether women do or whether men only give them,” along with the value articulations that stand behind these arrangements (Wittgenstein, 1970, p. 83). With this imbrication in mind, aesthetic judgment moves beyond a process of cognition through which we discern an object and relate it to an available concept; it remains in an important sense existential. Beyond the primordial faculty of bare perception, by which we pre-conceptually intuit our way toward optimizing perspective, aesthetic judgment engages us in relating to taste, and hence to “a whole culture.” It therefore takes on the phenomenological conditions of our being-in-the-world, which for Gadamer involves a hermeneutical situation in which our self-understanding is engaged whenever we attempt to understand an alien tradition or, in this case, object. Thus, as Gadamer (2013) insists, “pure seeing and pure hearing are dogmatic abstractions that artificially reduce phenomena. Perception always includes meaning” (p. 84). This integration of perception and meaning avoids the extraction of visual forms from the sedimentation of customary inheritance, or from the varied historical experiences conducive to a “modern” narrative self-understanding, rather working to acknowledge “the symbolic pregnancy of form in content as prior to the subsumption of content under form” (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 304).

3 | MODERNISM AND LINGUISTIC IDEALISM

The aesthetic ideals of autonomous form, “worldless perception” and the “lateral spread of a single surface” that “crowds out dimensions of the real” consort closely with the ideal of immanently resourced but functionally self-sufficient reason (Taylor, 2014, p. 346). Collectively, they reinforce what Michael Warner calls “a tendency in the liberal tradition to identify critical reason with something that cannot be given content, that is not a cultural form in itself, but that is conceived as mere negative potential, a kind of perpetual openness to further criticism” (Warner, 2004, p. 35). In the particular Habermasian articulation of liberal tradition in focus here, they work to secure a moral topography upon which language users might, within the experience of communicative intersubjectivity, isolate rules from meanings, thus delivering foundational norms that, in their cultural indeterminacy, are suitably diminutive amid the value pluralism of mass societies. This is, in Habermas’ (1982) view, the instrument by which we are most likely to overcome the “radical critique of reason,” by which “the critical ability to take a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ stand, to be able to distinguish between what is valid and invalid, is undercut by the unfortunate fusion of power and validity claims” (p. 18). It must, therefore, be possible to envision and articulate a cognitively commanding model of social order without that depending only on finite, power-laden, languages-in-use. Hence, for Habermas (1992), “understanding a thematically uttered propositional content presupposes understanding the associated illocutionary act, whose meaning ‘comes along’ unthematically in the performance of the complete speech act” (p. 143). For meaning to “come along unthematically” is an observably modernist idea reliant, as in the aesthetic domain, upon a lingering form-content dichotomy.

Habermas’ “inter-subjective continuation of Kantianism” famously brings into play an explanatory account of language “as a species endowment” open to assessment in terms of formal (and hence universal) grammatical functions (Joas, 2013, p. 37). This is central to Habermas’ “pragmatic deflation of the Kantian approach,” which locates foun-

dational presuppositions in “practices for which we cannot find functional equivalents,” including language itself considered as a “species endowment” rather than in terms of “natural languages” in use (Habermas, 2008, p. 27). As with the “lateral spread” of the grid that supplies defining contours while eschewing culturally specific content, Habermas proposes an account of human language competence as reducible, for the purposes of normative discernment, to a core of axiomatic presuppositions—his effort to develop an immanent (or empirically grounded) Kantianism of his own depends on the thesis that we can locate “grammatical” structures from which to derive norms that organizationally enclose, but do not set out to reorder ethical values. As it features in Habermas’ theory, a formal account of language supplies the means of grounding Kantian normativity within the texture of social experience, while making this texture into a field of detail the most salient elements of which are the universally stable grammatical conventions (pragmatics) that stand as presuppositions of linguistic intersubjectivity. The Habermasian reconstruction of communicative pragmatics “holds that the rational structure of action oriented toward reaching understanding is reflected in the presuppositions that actors *must* make if they are to engage in this practice at all” (Habermas, 2008, p. 27). For Habermas, this “must” is inflected by a Wittgensteinian rather than strictly Kantian sensibility, which is to say that it does not “have the transcendental meaning of universal, necessary, and noumenal” but rather “the grammatical meaning of ‘unavoidability’” within a “system of learned—but for us inescapable—rule governed behaviour” (Habermas, 2008, p. 27).

Certainly, Habermas does not seek to establish normatively generative argumentation upon the model of the natural sciences by identifying a “simple true-or-false polarity,” but rather as a *pattern* of communicative behavior that produces universal validity claims. Hence, “though truth claims cannot be definitively redeemed in discourses, it is through arguments alone that we let ourselves be *convinced* of the truth” (Habermas, 2001, p. 29). A procedure in which we make “arguments alone,” along purely cognitive and nonstrategic lines, enacts an “open-ended” pattern that, in its methodological formality, avoids the compromising features of ordinary language-use even while claiming social immanence in its connection with the “pragmatic presuppositions” of “language as a species endowment.” This communicative idealization, premised upon the “grammatical unavoidability” of formal presuppositions, underpins Habermas’ (2001) claim that “Kant’s idealizing anticipation of the whole is carried over from the *objective* to the *social world*” (p. 29). Yet this very move, made under the banner of a detranscendentalizing pragmatism, drives Habermas toward a form of immanent abstraction that avoids the contingency and irregularity of social detail. As with aesthetic modernism’s commitment to forms independent of discursively developed truth claims or value statements, Habermas seeks out a methodological form that, depending on how one reads it, either claims independence from a specific lineage of customarily developed meanings, or remains capable of transcending its parochial lineage in virtue of its formalism. That is, its authority is premised upon insulation from the nonassertoric traits of ordinary discourse—narrative, metaphor, analogy, and affect. Habermas is explicit in his commitment to a form of moral argumentation that excludes both “motivational and emotional” coloring. Accordingly, “the theory of discourse need not concern itself with feelings and attitudes that may accompany the cognitive operations” (Habermas, 1992, p. 194). For Habermas (1992), “moral attitudes and feelings certainly have a propositional content” and yet, where a process of argumentation is concerned they are irrelevant; all that “counts in practical discourses is the cognitive task, as is generally the case when it comes to solving problems” (p. 194). With this, Habermas (1992) stands ready to accept the role of emotional dispositions such as “empathy” for cognitive reasons, but resists their expression out of noncognitive “irrationality” or a collapse in impartial judgment and the “concessions” to one’s interlocutor that follow (p. 194). Irrational concessions and partial judgment would erode the basis for rational argumentation and, hence, the robustness and validity-generating power of a deliberative process. Indeed, such concessions would compromise the critical distinction between “heteronomous” and “autonomous” actions, a distinction which, in his words, has “revolutionized our normative consciousness” by producing a need for justification that, “under conditions of postmetaphysical thinking,” can be satisfied “only by *moral discourses* of a secularized and discursively rationalized nature” (Habermas, 1996, p. 97).

“Worldless perception” is essential to this operation as a guiding ideal for the work of reflection. All knowledge is rooted in tradition, accepts Habermas, but “reflection” nevertheless performs a function the power of which derives from the cognitive (which is to say nonaffective) exercise of “philosophical reason.” The “power of reflection” lies in its capacity to distance the subject from affective, and therefore imperfectly reflexive, ties to certain lifeforms, practices,

or commitments; it acts upon those commitments in virtue of its cognitive autonomy from empirical entanglements, rather than its imbrication with value articulations and the affective attachments, memories, and future hopes that they incorporate. Indeed, on Habermas' rendering, the latter, in the guise of "conventional" commitments, make the specter of emotivism, decisionism, and irrationalism loom large, and certainly fail to generate validity claims of sufficient justificatory strength to effect normative integration of a lifeworld composed of multiple ethical traditions. Once we introduce affective or value-laden ties to our conception of reason, or once "reason" is tied into "tradition" in such a way as to suggest tradition's lexical priority to "reflection," we run the risk of arbitrary and unjustified validity claims remaining unaccountable to reflexive cognition (understood in the "philosophical" sense). Against this prospect, Habermas allots an arbitrating role to reason and the knowledge it produces, confident in their power to drive "substantiality" to disintegration under the lens of reflection. While reflective knowledge may be rooted semantically in antecedent practices and vocabularies, it strives in its postmetaphysical state toward a "principled" or autonomous basis and is therefore bluntly at odds with "authority" of the sort that stifles "autonomy." "Knowledge" thus comes to be a kind of perception that guarantees autonomy—it facilitates the appropriation of substantial sources on terms that fit with a conception of individual subjectivity as fulfilled through the establishment of rational autonomy. This fits closely with Habermas' historical narrative of postmetaphysical modernity, suggesting that, on either reading of Habermas' envisioned relation between knowledge and authority, we are faced with a process of progressive historical completion. As Habermas establishes it, the dialectic between these two elements is arguably, with all its intermediate nuances, an interaction by which "dogmatic" authority is brought to convergence with the demands of universalizability. This is cast in terms that suggest the expansion of individual agency vis-à-vis their own ethical material, rather than the enforcement of a particular view of tradition. Hence "the reflective appropriation of tradition breaks the quasi-natural substance of tradition and alters the positions of subjects within it."¹ Subjects cannot, by an act of will, sever altogether their epistemological ties to tradition, just as they cannot suspend their extension in space, but they can reorient themselves within the topography of the social world to gain a practically "worldless" view upon it. This entails a "distancing view" that is "able to differentiate between the totality of what is and individual entities, between the world and what occurs within it" (Habermas, 1992, p. 118).

Moral discourse depends, therefore, on a normative consciousness attuned to the diremption of form and content to which European modernism alludes, by which irrationality and ethical parochialism is contained by finely drawn structuring characterizations of the social world and of the nature of critical cognition. Habermas' normative framework, particularly as articulated in his later essays on postmetaphysical thought, tethers the modern normative conscience to the cognitive enterprise typical of Western social theory, aiming, in Taylor and Dreyfus' words, to "make what is merely taken as granted explicit" (Taylor, 2013, p. 102). Making things "explicit," as Habermas seeks to, requires certain further distinctions, between unreflexive "content" and rationally developed "forms" and between "our take on things" and "the way they really are" (Taylor, 2013, p. 102). As part of the drive toward making things explicit and bracketing contingency in his social theory of normative order, Habermas demarcates the social world as a realm defined by unreflexive habitus. Thus, he writes that "as we engage in communicative action, the lifeworld embraces us as an unmediated certainty, out of whose immediate proximity we live and speak" (Habermas, 1996, p. 22). The lifeworld is an "all-penetrating, yet latent and unnoticed presence of the background of communicative action," which Habermas describes as "a more intense yet deficient form of knowledge and ability" (Habermas, 1996, p. 22). It offers a form of knowledge that we use "involuntarily, without reflectively knowing *that* we possess it at all" (Habermas, 1996, p. 22). Background knowledge, the "content" of our social and ethical personalities, is on this account laced with affectively driven certainty, which militates against awareness that it *could* be false (Habermas, 1996, p. 22). It is therefore neither made "explicit" nor subject to challenge by the operation of critical cognition; indeed, "what lends it its peculiar stability and first immunizes it against the pressure of contingency-generating experiences is its unique *levelling of the tension between facticity and validity*" (Habermas, 1996, p. 22). Only by prizing open the dense braid of facticity and validity by means of normative forms that eschew unreflexive attachment to "content" may critical light be cast upon our social, ethical and political dispensations.

Yet the project of undoing this dense braid is, on the existentialist, phenomenologically focused, line of thought, stymied by the imbrication of rules and meanings and of reflection and prejudgments. In the same way that bodily motricity amongst localized objects is a prerequisite for the experience of space, the social world with its resident meanings is always already there actively soliciting and, as it were, coproducing our moral and political personalities. The dimension of meaning problematizes the crystalline purity of rules, including those that, in their minimalism, are taken to be capable of “lateral spread” across political and social contexts. As Taylor (2016) writes, in a vein that properly prioritizes semantic contingency and contextual inflection, “a theory of meaning, in the intended sense of an account of the competence which a speaker of language possesses, cannot simply consist of an account of how to derive truth conditions of depictive combinations from axioms defining arbitrary, ‘unmotivated’ meanings” (p. 171). Rather, a practically sensitive theory of meaning ought to grapple with both the stylistic variations with which meanings are constituted, along with the reality that argumentation is in practice inextricably tied to motivated meanings beyond the “purely” illocutionary form valorized by Habermas. In this manner, Taylor, mobilizing an approach to language colored by philosophical hermeneutics and the later Wittgenstein, offers a critical appraisal of theories of “well-regimented language use” that bracket the features of everyday communicative practice, or that reduce our account of them to a model of semantically “rational” interlocution. For Taylor, “regimented” theories of language competence fail at an explanatory level, which for the pragmatist impairs their normative potential. They fall short at an *explanatory* level insofar as they cannot offer a satisfactory account of our learning of linguistic meanings (social and cultural meanings) and because they are unable to cope with “the inventivity of real human language” (Taylor, 2016, p. 172). While a formalized language of reason-giving (argumentation) may offer the prospect of an exchange stripped of compromising rhetorical elements such as metaphor, narrative, or symbolism, the practical possibility of such formal purity is minimal in the course of ordinary speech. Methodologically formal registers of speech have of course proven essential within specific fields of activity such as the natural sciences. Indeed, what Taylor calls a “truly objectivist semantics” that supplies a means of mapping the natural, or social, worlds, continues to exercise appeal, offering the possibility of “truth conditions” by which the referential integrity of linguistic meanings might be ascertained. However, as Taylor (2016) puts it, “the attempt to liberate a unified territory...grouping natural science, common sense and logical inference, must founder” when faced with the recognition that “ordinary common-sense speech is irremediably addicted to tropes, metaphors, symbols and templates” (p. 172). Being a competent language user means exercising competencies beyond the development of propositions; the capacity to “move forward” in an intelligible exchange with interlocutors requires receptivity to the dynamics of ordinary speech, or to what Wittgenstein calls the “rough ground” of “actual language” (Wittgenstein, 1991, p. 51).

Of course, wedded to the simple “designative” account of language given short shrift by Wittgenstein, we might reduce our account of competent language use to the requirement of ensuring that one’s interlocutor understands the referents of particular terms. However, this constrained “designative” view of language, which reflects the search for an objectivist semantics, expels the constitutive dimension from our purview, along with many of the stylistic and structuring features that frame linguistic communication through “actual language.” Consider, for example, the role of what Taylor calls “framing metaphors” and their place in most recognizable forms of moral or ethical discourse. An instance of the imbrication of metaphor and ethical language relates to the spatial allusions commonly employed to depict moral character or moral wrong. We frequently define moral character and forms of morally relevant action as either “high” or “low”, just as we evoke the image of “depth” and of “internal” reflective movements to describe processes of reflection. These framing metaphors are not, of course, “universal”—quite the opposite, they depend on traceable intellectual lineages and moral anthropologies. But, in agreement with Taylor, their role in structuring the discursive possibilities within certain cultures is hard to overstate. In concert with the semantic resources that tie the expression of moral personality and reflection to spatial metaphor, we move within what Taylor calls “structural templates,” which are embedded deeply within particular cultural imaginaries. Thus, for example, the understanding of temporality invoked in ordinary speech is heavily structured by notions of linearity and movement—of “years flowing by like a river”—that, though they are philosophically open to question, provide a model by which speech configures time in relation to human experience (Taylor, 2016, p. 159). At an empirical level, therefore, we find the pervasiveness of metaphor, spatial imagination and poetics, synecdoche, and other devices, all of which are consti-

tutive of the meanings words bear and of the language games it is possible to play with them. In the field of actual language, such structuring templates are central to the enactment of linguistic competence. This bears implications even for the process of argumentation at a “moral” register that seeks to take interlocutors into account as moral contemporaries; it suggests, in Williams’ (2014) words, that “there are ‘normative’ dimensions to sentences which go well beyond a simple true-or-false polarity: the same words may be spoken as literal, as metaphor, as trite metaphor or fresh metaphor, as significant or banal, as appropriate or inappropriate” (p. 123). Gauging the normative bearing of a sentence engages multiple competencies, therefore, and with them meanings that require sensitivity to the contextual (rather than formal) pragmatics of the specific language game being played.

This is particularly the case when it comes to the traditions of meaning-making that we call “ethical” or “religious,” which are deeply interwoven with “culture,” to the extent that, contra Kompridis (2005), the categorial boundaries are difficult to determine (pp. 318–343). As Shahab Ahmed suggests in relation to Islam and Islamicate culture, the composition of its constitutive meanings works in large part through “meaning-making” linguistic practices that communicate in a manner more multilayered than a “correspondence” account of meaning would allow (an account by which “meanings” correspond to objects that they represent). Metaphor stands out here as an example of the multifaceted mode of meaning-making by which adherents to religious and ethical traditions develop self-understanding and relate this self-understanding to their developing metaphysical and political imaginations. As Ahmed (2016) puts it, the:

capacity of metaphor to create complex meaning beyond and behind the plain meaning which is visible at the surface is precisely what renders metaphor so crucial to the process of meaning-making and communication amongst people for whom Truth is multi-dimensional and multi-valent—as meaning-making and communication necessarily is for Muslims engaging with the spatiality of Revelation. In the structural hierarchy and internality-externality of Revelation, metaphor thus functions as a means by which Muslims reach upwards, inwards, and outwards beyond the form of the word. It allows precisely for the multi-dimensional exploration of meaning(s). (p. 391)

Ahmed signals the centrality of metaphor to Islamicate imagination, positing it as one of the key conditions of meaning-making within the hermeneutical matrix of Islam. Not only is “truth” multidimensional, layered by different modes of communication and registers of speech, downright contradictory commitments and practices, and an ongoing subjection to interpretive tradition, it evades categorization in terms of “thick” propositional commitments from which Muslims might move to the “secular” side of an “ethical-moral” discursive dichotomy. Rather, communication within this space of cultural meaning-making is necessarily interlaced, even if only implicitly, with a spatiality of revelation that, like the breach in mundane chronology effected by ritually enacted notions of “kairotic” time, opens a dimension of meaning that surpasses the “rationally communicative” model delivered by Habermas. Moreover, its structuring of the space within which meanings are made legible, and from which new meanings are articulated, suggests that such complex and multi-valent meaning-making will be intimately involved even in the “secular” project of developing “discursively rational” traditions of Islamic disputation (see An-Naim, 2008). The degree to which structuring metaphor and the spatialities either of revelation or of the moral topography of “interiority” cited by Taylor, encircle and shape our efforts at normative communication at the very least checks the claim made by Habermas that, considered universally, ethical subjects “with their intuitive understanding of argumentation in general,” might by engaging in cognitively rational moral disputation “force one another into de-centring their interpretive perspectives” (Habermas, 2001, p. 29). Their interpretive perspectives are, after all, metaphorically structured to a degree that resists the notion of an “intuitive” movement toward a discursive space defined by supposedly secularized claims and counterclaims, free from metaphor or the “revelatory” spatiality of truth and ethical meaning. While for Habermas, the “intuitive understanding of argumentation in general,” means that “Kant’s idealizing anticipation of the whole is carried over from the *objective* to the *social* world,” the social world, in which meaning never “comes along unthematically,” offers serious resistance (Habermas, 2001, p. 29).

4 | CONCLUSION

I have suggested in this article that European aesthetic modernism and the separation it presents between form and content, rules and meanings, acts as something like a structural template and metaphor of order through which Habermas thinks about the integrational role of formalism. I have, moreover, retraced some of the more recognizable commonalities between modernist aesthetic ideals and the intersubjective development of Kantianism to which Habermas cleaves as a means of securing, against the threat of contextualism, a stable postmetaphysical normativity beyond the Linguistic Turn. I have argued that while striving to overcome the stricter Kantian dichotomies (immanence vs. transcendence), the dialectical sophistication of Habermasian normativity can function only within the magnetic field established by immanently grounded dichotomous counterpositions (“form” vs. “content”, “formal” vs. “substantive”, “rationality” vs. “affect”). I have suggested that this stance may plausibly be said to accord with the nondiscursive instincts cited by Greenberg and Krauss, behind which stand a conception of formal abstraction as a methodological mode that, in its minimalism, escapes a relationship of dependence on antecedent practices, or conventional forms, thereby also supplying intelligibility without need for interpretation of meanings and the language competencies that generate them. Drawing this connection works, I think, to sharpen our sense of how Habermas’ declared turn to a philosophically pragmatic appreciation of quotidian social detail itself reflects a specific tradition of metaphor-laden reflection upon social life and transformation. While the tradition of philosophical pragmatism aims to resist philosophy’s historical evasion of the social world and its resident phenomena, Habermas, despite his claims upon that tradition, appeals to the quotidian as a stable category of human experience rather than to its variable details. Such an appeal is, in Kompridis’ (2011) words, one that “selectively abstracts from, rather than (re)turns to, the everyday” (p. 113).

To call such a stance into question by presenting it as the outcome of a traceable ideological commitment to the “emancipatory vision” of European modernism, significantly inflected by the form/content dichotomy presented by that movement’s aesthetic vision, is neither to neglect the vital importance of critique within democratic life shared by moral equals, nor to be disabled by the contingency of its foundations. It is possible to characterize reflexively developed critical sensibilities as a great achievement wherever they occur, while also asserting in the Gadamerian vein echoed by Taylor and Dreyfus that they depend on our receiving “the tools of our own critical work from our culture” (Taylor and Dreyfus, 2015, p. 104). Critical reason, including a disposition toward philosophical skepticism, is, on this more hermeneutically driven line of argument, rooted in the resources of culture—including both tradition and narrative—rather than traits identified as salient by a secular formalism, even while we still require the means by which to differentiate between the components of culture that might be amended through novel usages or jettisoned. Consequently, the tools of critique are themselves subject to interrogation, including where normative formalism asserts its independence from genealogy, from the history of stylistic convention and from the ideological specificity of methodological values and the aesthetic ideals with which they converse. Critique becomes subject to the overriding recognition that “the world is not an object whose law of constitution I have in my possession; it is the natural milieu and the field of all my thoughts” (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. xxiv).

Attending to the formative relationships between Habermas’ normative formalism, European modernism and linguistic idealism enables us to reread the sophisticated dialectical synthesis forged in his work as the project of a particular, even parochial, view of modernity. It enables, moreover, a broader critical circumspection regarding formalistic redevelopments of neo-Kantian normative universalism and, I think, sharper alertness to the baggage formalism draws with it as it gets transposed, with ever-increasing sophistication, onto the fields of jurisprudence and democratic theory. A positive consequence of this alertness may be a stronger disposition to critique contemporary inclinations toward normative settlement on the basis of culturally translucent principles of authority, keeping in mind, as this article has intimated, that meaning does not arrive “unthematically” and that “by their very nature, the universal cannot be actual without the particular, nor the formal without the substantive, the abstract without the concrete, structure without content” (McCarthy, 2010, p. 223). We ought, therefore, to qualify our confidence in dialectical syn-

theses of immanence and context-transcendence where they are forged upon the basis of a deeper symmetry—the “new world image” of 20th century European modernism and the ideological strivings to which it gives expression. We might instead redirect our vision of cross-culturally viable normative order away from an image with formal, diminutive and rationally self-sufficient properties, toward a composition drawn from the material of ethical meanings—the history, and the social reality, “cancelled by the form” (Schiavone, 2012, p. 39).

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ENDNOTE

¹Habermas, 1988, p. 168.

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