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# To Seek to Salvage an Unconditional Meaning Without God is a Futile Undertaking:

## *Reflections on a Remark of Max Horkheimer*

Max Horkheimer's late philosophy, scattered throughout various notes and essays, takes the form of reflections from a damaged life. Alfred Schmidt has deciphered in them the outline of a systematic intention. His proof is an indirect one, using Horkheimer's tools as a key to unlock the door to Schopenhauer's philosophy of religion.<sup>1</sup> These illuminating reconstructions have impressed upon me the reasons and motives that induced Horkheimer to look to Schopenhauer in his quest for a religion that could satisfy the longing for perfect justice. Horkheimer's interest in the doctrines of Judaism and Christianity was spurred less by a concern with God as such than with the redemptive power of God's will. The injustice that comes to pass in a suffering creature should not be permitted to have the last word. At times it seems as if Horkheimer wanted to put the religious promise of redemption directly at the service of morality. At one point he explained the prohibition of images in terms of the notion that "in the Jewish religion what is important is not how things stand with God, but how they stand with men."<sup>2</sup> Schopenhauer's metaphysics seemed to offer a resolution of an aporia in which Horkheimer had become involved in consequence of two equally strong convictions. For him too, the critical task of philosophy consisted essentially in salvaging the truth in religion in the spirit of the

Enlightenment; nevertheless, it was clear to him that "one cannot secularize religion without giving it up."<sup>3</sup>

This aporia has haunted Greek philosophy like a shadow from the moment of its initial encounter with the Jewish and Christian tradition onward. In Horkheimer's case, it is made even more acute by his profound skepticism concerning reason. What for him is the essential substance of religion – morality – is no longer tied to reason. Horkheimer praises the dark writers of the bourgeoisie for having "trumpeted far and wide the impossibility of deriving from reason any fundamental argument against murder."<sup>4</sup> I have to admit that this remark irritates me now no less than it did almost four decades ago when I first read it. I have never been altogether convinced of the cogency of the skepticism concerning reason underlying Horkheimer's ambivalence toward religion. The idea that it is vain to strive for unconditional meaning without God betrays not just a metaphysical need; the remark is itself an instance of the metaphysics that not only philosophers but even theologians themselves must today get along without.

Before I attempt to back up this objection, I want to clarify the fundamental moral intuition that guided Horkheimer throughout his life; I will then turn to the kinship between religion and philosophy that Horkheimer never lost from sight and, finally, reveal the premises on which he based his appropriation of Schopenhauer's negative metaphysics. In what follows I draw on notes and essays that Alfred Schmidt made available to the public<sup>5</sup> and to whose systematic import he was first to draw attention.<sup>6</sup>

## I

Once the rationality of the remorse experienced by a religiously tutored conscience is rejected by a secularized world, its place is taken by the moral sentiment of compassion. When Horkheimer expressly defines the good tautologically as the attempt to abolish evil, he has in view a solidarity with the suffering of vulnerable and forsaken creatures provoked by outrage against concrete injustices. The reconciling power of compassion does not stand in opposition to the galvanizing power of rebellion against a world devoid of atonement and reparation for injustice. Solidarity and justice are two sides of the same coin; hence, the ethics of compassion does not dispute

the legitimacy of the morality of justice but merely frees it from the rigidity of the ethics of conscience. Otherwise the Kantian pathos expressed in Horkheimer's injunction "to proceed into the desert in spite of everything, even if hope were lost" would be incomprehensible.<sup>7</sup> And under the banner "necessary futility," Horkheimer does not shrink from drawing the almost Protestant conclusion: "It is true that the individual cannot change the course of the world. But if his whole life is not a gesture of wild despair that revolts against it, he will fail to realize that infinitely small, insignificant, futile, nugatory modicum of good of which he is capable as an individual."<sup>8</sup> The shared fate of exposure to the infinitude of an indifferent universe may awaken a feeling of solidarity in human beings, but among the community of the forsaken, the hope of solidarity and pity for one's neighbor must not undermine equal respect for everyone. Moral feelings imbued with a sense of justice are not just spontaneous impulses; they are more intuitions than impulses. In them a correct insight, in an emphatic sense of "correct," comes to expression. The positivists "have not the faintest inkling that hatred of the decent and admiration for the depraved are inverted impulses not just before the tribunal of custom, but of truth, and that they are not merely reprehensible in an ideological sense, but are objectively debased experiences and reactions."<sup>9</sup>

Horkheimer is so secure in his fundamental moral intuitions that he can qualify them only as "correct insights." This moral cognitivism seems to place him firmly in the Kantian camp. Nevertheless, he is so profoundly influenced by the dialectic of enlightenment that he repeatedly disputes the role Kant still accorded practical reason. What remains is only a "formalistic reason" that is no "more closely allied to morality than to immorality."<sup>10</sup> Material investigations alone could overcome this sterile formalism, though indeed only in a paradoxical manner. Unable to specify the good, a critical theory of society should reveal specific injustices in given cases. Because this theory, in its skepticism toward reason, no longer maintains a positive relation to the normative contents it uncovers step by step in the criticism of unjust conditions, it must borrow its normative orientations from a cultural ethos that has already been superseded – that of a metaphysically grounded theology. The latter preserves the legacy of a *substantive* reason that has since been rendered impotent.

Horkheimer is under no illusions about the vertiginous nature of this theoretical undertaking:

[Social theory] has superseded theology but has no new heaven to which it can point, not even a mundane one. Of course, social theory cannot completely efface [heaven's] traces and hence is repeatedly questioned about how it is to be attained – as though it were not precisely the discovery of social theory that the heaven to which one can point the way is no heaven.<sup>11</sup>

No theory could possibly accommodate itself to this Kafkaesque figure of thought, at least not without embracing an aesthetic mode of expression and becoming literature. Hence, the thoughts of the late Horkheimer circle around the idea of a theology that *must* be "displaced" by the critical and self-critical activity of reason, yet which, in its capacity as justifying morality's claim to unconditionality, *cannot* be replaced by reason. Horkheimer's late philosophy may be understood as wrestling with this dilemma and his interpretation of Schopenhauerian metaphysics as a proposal for resolving it.

In the essay entitled "Theism-Atheism," Horkheimer traces the development of the Hellenistic notion of an interrelation between theology and metaphysics up to the great metaphysical systems in which theology and natural philosophy converged. He is interested above all in the militant atheism of the eighteenth century that "was able to promote rather than to stifle interest in religion."<sup>12</sup> Even the materialistic antithesis to Christianity that substituted "Nature" for "God" and merely readjusted the fundamental concepts accordingly still remained caught up in the metaphysical framework of world-views. Kant's critique of metaphysics opened the door to the mystical and messianic currents that, from Baader and Schelling to Hegel and Marx, found their way into philosophy. Horkheimer was aware of the theological current in Marxist theory from the beginning: with the idea of a just society, the Enlightenment opened up the prospect of a new beyond in the here and now; the spirit of the Gospel was now to reach worldly fulfillment through the march of history.

The secular sublation [*Aufhebung*] of ontotheology by the philosophy of history has profoundly equivocal implications. On the one hand, philosophy becomes disguised theology and salvages the latter's essential content. The very meaning of atheism itself ensures the enduring relevance of theism:

Only those who employed the word in a derogatory sense understood it as the opposite of religion. Those who professed atheism at a time when religion still had power were wont to identify themselves more

sincerely with the theistic precept of devotion to one's neighbor and other creatures as such than most of the adherents and fellow travelers of the various religious confessions.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, philosophy can recover the idea of the unconditioned only in the medium of a reason that has in the interim sacrificed the infinite on the altar of historical contingency and has abjured the unconditioned. A reason that can appeal to no authority higher than that of the sciences is a naturalized faculty that has regressed to intelligence in the service of pure self-affirmation; it measures itself by the yardstick of functional contributions and technical successes, and not by a mode of validity that transcends space and time: "With God dies eternal truth."<sup>14</sup> *In the wake* of the Enlightenment, the truth in religion can be salvaged only in a way that annihilates truth. A critical theory that sees itself as the "successor" to theology finds itself in this unhappy predicament because everything to do with morality ultimately derives from theology.

## II

The rational sublation of theology and its essential contents: how can this still be accomplished in the present day, in the light of the irreversible critique of metaphysics, without destroying the import of religious doctrines or of reason itself? With this question Horkheimer, the pessimistic materialist, appeals to Schopenhauer, the pessimistic idealist. On Horkheimer's surprising interpretation, Schopenhauer's enduring importance lies in the fact that his thoroughgoing negativism salvages the "spirit of the Gospels." According to Horkheimer, Schopenhauer accomplished the improbable feat of providing an atheistic justification of the morality underlying theology, and thus of preserving religion in the absence of God.

In the world as will and representation, Horkheimer discerns, first, the sterile Darwinian operation of instrumental reason degraded to a tool of self-preservation, which – up to and including a globally objectifying scientific intellect – is dominated by a blind and indefatigable will to life that pits one subject against another. On the other hand, precisely this reflection on the abysmally negative ground of being is supposed to awaken in subjects who seek remorselessly to

dominate one another some inkling of their *common* fate and an awareness that all manifestations of life are pervaded by an *identical* will:

If the realm of appearances, sensible reality, is not the work of positive divine power, an expression of inherently good, eternal Being, but of a will that affirms itself in everything finite, that is mirrored in a distorted fashion in multiplicity, and yet that remains at a profound level identical, then everyone has reason to view himself as one with all others, not with their specific motives, but with their entanglement in delusion and guilt, their drivenness, joy and decline. The life and fate of the founder of Christianity becomes a model, no longer based on commands but on insight into the inner constitution of the world.<sup>15</sup>

What fascinated Horkheimer in Schopenhauer is the prospect of a metaphysical justification of morality through insight into the constitution of the world as a whole, yet in such a way that this insight is at the same time directed against central assumptions of metaphysics and coheres with postmetaphysical skepticism concerning reason. Negative metaphysics upholds the distinction between essence and appearance only with an inversion of the order of priority between them – inverted Platonism. This in turn grounds the expectation that insight into the "pitiless structure of infinitude" could produce "a community of the forsaken." However, Horkheimer is aware of the shadow of performative self-contradiction that has haunted all negative metaphysics since Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Even if we prescind from epistemological misgivings about intuitive, bodily access to the thing-in-itself, it remains mysterious how the turning of the irrational world-will against itself that constrains it to continual reflection will come about: "The metaphysics of the irrational will as the essence of the world must lead to reflection on the problematic of truth."<sup>16</sup> In Schmidt's formulation of the dilemma, "If the essence of the world is irrational, then that cannot remain incidental to the truth claim of precisely this thesis."<sup>17</sup> In the light of this result, the statement that it is futile to seek to salvage unconditional meaning without God can also be understood as a criticism of Schopenhauer, as a critique of the "last great philosophical attempt to rescue the essential core of Christianity."<sup>18</sup>

In the final analysis, Horkheimer's ambiguous formulations vacillate between Schopenhauer's negative-metaphysical justification of morality and a return to the faith of his forefathers. This unresolved

argumentative impasse leads me to reexamine the premise from which Horkheimer's late philosophy begins: that "formalistic" reason, or the procedural reason that remains under conditions of post-metaphysical thought, is equally indifferent to morality and immorality. As far as I can discern, Horkheimer's skeptical assertion rests primarily on the contemporary experience of Stalinism and on a conceptual argument that presupposes the ontological concept of truth.

### III

Horkheimer's thought is influenced even more than Adorno's by the harrowing historical fact that the ideals of freedom, solidarity, and justice deriving from practical reason, which inspired the French Revolution and were reappropriated in Marx's critique of society, led not to socialism but to barbarism under the guise of socialism:

The vision of instituting justice and freedom in the world which underlay Kant's thought has been transformed into the mobilization of nations. With each revolt that followed in the wake of the great revolution in France, it seems, the humanistic elements atrophied while nationalism thrived. In this century it was socialism itself that orchestrated the supreme farce of perverting the pledge to humanity into an intransigent cult of the state. . . . What Lenin and the majority of his comrades aspired to before assuming power was a free and just society. In reality they prepared the way for a totalitarian bureaucracy under whose sway there was no more freedom than in the tsarist empire. That the new China is entering on a phase of barbarism is plain to see.<sup>19</sup>

From this experience Horkheimer drew consequences for the reconstruction of the architectonic of reason announced in the concept of "instrumental reason." There is no longer any difference between the operation of the understanding in the service of subjective self-assertion, which imposes its categories on everything and transforms it into an object, and reason as the faculty of ideas whose place understanding has usurped. Indeed, the ideas themselves have been caught up in the dynamic of reification; elevated to absolute ends, they retain merely a functional significance for *other* ends. But by exhausting the

supply of ideas in this way, every claim that points beyond instrumental rationality loses its transcending power; truth and morality forfeit their unconditional meaning.

Thinking that is sensitive to historical changes, even down to its fundamental concepts, submits itself to the tribunal of new experience. Thus, it is not inappropriate to ask whether the bankruptcy of state socialism that has in the interim become apparent does not offer *other* lessons, for this bankruptcy is partly the doing of ideas that the regime, while distancing itself from them ever further, misused for the purposes of its own legitimation because – which is more important – it *had* to appeal to them. A system that collapsed despite its brutal Orwellian apparatus of oppression because social conditions eloquently contradicted everything prefigured by its legitimating ideas, manifestly cannot *dispose of the inner logic of these ideas as it wishes*. In the ideas of the constitutionally embodied republican tradition, however egregiously abused, there persists the element of existing reason that resisted the "dialectic of enlightenment" by eluding the leveling gaze of the negative philosophy of history.

The controversy surrounding this thesis could be resolved only by recourse to material analyses. As a consequence, I will limit myself to the conceptual argument that Horkheimer develops from the critique of instrumental reason.

Horkheimer's assertion that the difference between reason and understanding has *become obsolete* in the course of the world-historical process still presupposed, in contrast to contemporary post-structuralism, that we can *recall* the emphatic concept of reason. The critical import of "instrumental reason" is first thrown into relief by this act of recollection. And through anamnestic retrieval of the substantive reason of religious and metaphysical worldviews, we can reassure ourselves of the unconditionality that concepts such as truth and morality once carried with them before they succumbed to positivistic and functionalistic disintegration. An Absolute or Unconditional becomes accessible to philosophy only together with justification of the world as a whole, and hence only as metaphysics. But philosophy remains true to its metaphysical beginnings only as long as it attempts "to imitate positive theology" and proceeds on the assumption that cognizing reason rediscovers itself in the rationally structured world or itself actually confers a rational structure on nature and history. As soon as the world "in its essence, by contrast, does *not* of necessity cohere with the spirit, philosophical confidence in the being of truth dissipates completely. Then truth is henceforth

sublated only in transient human beings themselves and becomes as transient as they are."<sup>20</sup>

It never occurred to Horkheimer that there might be a difference between "instrumental" and "formal" reason. Moreover, he unceremoniously assimilated procedural reason – which no longer makes the validity of its results dependent on the rational organization of the world but on the rationality of procedures through which it solves its problems – to instrumental reason. Horkheimer assumes that there cannot be truth without an Absolute, without a world-transcending power "in which truth is sublated." Without ontological anchoring, the concept of truth is exposed to the inner-worldly contingencies of mortal men and their changing situations; without it, truth is no longer an idea but merely a weapon in the struggle of life. Human knowledge, including moral insight, can lay claim to truth, he believes, only if it judges itself in terms of relations between it and what is as these relations are manifested to the divine intelligence alone. In contrast to this strangely traditional conception, in the final section I will argue for a modern alternative – a concept of communicative reason that enables us to recover the meaning of the unconditioned without recourse to metaphysics. But first we must clarify the true motive that causes Horkheimer to hold fast to the classical concept of truth as *adaequatio intellectus ad rem*.

Decisive for Horkheimer's persistence in maintaining an ontological anchoring of truth are the ethical reflections he attributes to Schopenhauer: only insight into the identity of all life, into a unitary ground of being, even if it be irrational, in which all individual appearances are brought into harmony with one another, "can ground solidarity with all creatures long before death."<sup>21</sup> The unified thought of metaphysics renders plausible why it should be that the effort to overcome egoism would find a sympathetic response in the constitution of the world. For this reason alone, unity takes precedence over multiplicity for philosophers, the unconditional occurs only in the singular, and the one God has greater importance for Jews and Christians than the multiple deities of antiquity. It is the peculiar fate of bourgeois culture that individuals entrench themselves in their particularity and thereby reduce individualism to a falsehood. Horkheimer so emphatically regards this societal state of nature of competitive society as the fundamental problem of morality that for him justice and solidarity become synonymous with "renouncing the self-assertion of the isolated ego." Egoism has congealed to such an extent into an inverted condition of things that the transition from

self-love to devotion to others is unthinkable without metaphysical assurance of the prior unity of an unfathomable world-will that provokes us to insight into a possible solidarity of the destitute:

Schopenhauer drew the necessary consequences: the insight into the baseness of one's own life which cannot be separated from the suffering of other creatures is correct; the identification with those who suffer, with man and animal, is correct, the renunciation of self-love, of the drive to individual well-being as the ultimate goal; and the induction after death into the general, the non-personal, the nothing is desirable.<sup>22</sup>

The individuated will is base only when it turns itself against others; it becomes good when, through compassion, it recognizes its true identity with all other beings.

#### IV

Already in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* Horkheimer credits de Sade and Nietzsche with the recognition that "after the formalization of reason, compassion still remained, so to speak, as the sensual consciousness of the identity of the general and the particular, as naturalized mediation."<sup>23</sup> On the Schopenhauerian interpretation, of course, compassion cannot assume the role of dialectical *mediation* between individual and society, between equal respect for all and the solidarity of each with all. Here it is solely a matter of the abstract self-overcoming of individuality, of the dissolution of the individual in an all-encompassing oneness. But with this the very idea in which the moral substance of Christianity consists is abrogated. Those who at the Last Judgment come, one after the other, before the eyes of God as unrepresentable individuals stripped of the mantle of worldly goods and honors – and hence as equals – in the expectation of receiving a fair judgment, experience themselves as *fully individuated beings* who must give an account of their life histories in full responsibility for their actions. Together with this idea, however, the profound intuition that the bond between solidarity and justice must not be severed must also be given up.

Admittedly, in this respect Horkheimer does not follow Schopenhauer without misgivings. His interpretation of the Ninety-first Psalm

reveals his struggle to overcome a certain dissonance. The doctrine of the individual soul, he writes, has an additional significance in Judaism, one unadulterated by the expectation of an afterlife:

The idea of continued existence signifies in the first instance, not the after-life, but the identification with the nation so crassly distorted by modern nationalism, which has its prehistory in the Bible. By conducting his life in accordance with the Torah, by spending days, months, years in obedience to the Law, the individual becomes so much one with others despite personal differences that after his death he continues to exist through those who survive him, in their observance of tradition, of love for the family and the tribe, in the expectation that at some time things may still become better in the world. . . . Not unlike the figure of Jesus in Christianity, Judaism as a whole bore witness to redemption.<sup>24</sup>

Horkheimer tries to circumvent the problem of superseding the individual, of repudiating inalienable individuality, by changing the question. The issue is not whether the kingdom of the Messiah is of this world but whether the fundamental moral intuition of Judaism and Christianity to which Horkheimer unwaveringly adheres can ultimately be adequately explained without reference to the unrestricted *individuation* possible in a *universal* confederation.

The moral impulse of unwillingness to resign oneself to the force of circumstances that have the effect of isolating the individual and to secure the happiness and power of one person only at the cost of the misfortune and powerlessness of another – this impulse confirms Horkheimer in the view that the reconciling potential of solidarity with those who suffer can be realized only if individuals renounce themselves as individuals. He fails to see that the danger of a nationalistic distortion of the identificatory bond with the nation arises precisely at the moment when false solidarity permits individuals to be subsumed into the collectivity. Unified metaphysical thought – however negatively accented – transposes solidarity, which has its proper place in linguistic intersubjectivity, communication, and individuating socialization, into the identity of an underlying essence, the undifferentiated negativity of the world-will.

Quite a different, dialectical unity is produced in communication in which the structure of language inscribes the gap between I and Thou. The structure of linguistic intersubjectivity makes harmony between the integration of autonomy and devotion to others pos-

sible for us – in other words, a reconciliation that does not efface differences. Horkheimer is by no means deaf to this promise of reconciliation inherent in language itself. At one point he puts it trenchantly: "Language, whether it wants to or not, must lay claim to truth."<sup>25</sup> He also recognizes that we have to take into account the pragmatic dimension of language use, for the context-transcending truth-claim of speech cannot be grasped from the blinkered perspective of a semantics that reduces utterances to propositions: "Truth in speech is not properly predicated of detached, naked judgments, as though printed on a piece of paper, but of the conduct of the speaker toward the world that is expressed in the judgment and concentrates itself in this place."<sup>26</sup> What Horkheimer has in mind is clearly the theological tradition, extending from Augustine through logos mysticism to radical Protestantism, that appeals to the original character of the divine Word and to language as the medium of the divine message to man: "But theological metaphysics is in the right against positivism, because no proposition can avoid raising the impossible claim, not merely to an anticipated result, to success, as positivism, maintains, but to truth in the proper sense, regardless of whether the speaker reflects on it or not."<sup>27</sup> Prayer, in which the believer seeks contact with God, would lose its categorial difference from incantation and regress to the level of magic if we confused the illocutionary force of our assertions with their perlocutionary effects, as does the unrealizable program of linguistic nominalism.

But these insights remain sporadic. Horkheimer fails to treat them as clues to a language-pragmatical explanation of the *unconditional* meaning associated with *unavoidable* truth claims. His skepticism toward reason is so thoroughgoing that he can no longer see room for communicative action in the world as it is now constituted: "Today talk has become stale and those who do not want to listen are not altogether wrong. . . . Speaking has had its day. Indeed so has action, at least insofar as it was once related to speech."<sup>28</sup>

## V

His pessimistic diagnosis of the times is not the only reason that Horkheimer refrains from seriously entertaining the question of how something we accomplish on a daily basis – orienting our action to context-transcending validity claims – is possible. In fact, a profane

answer to this question, such as the one proposed by Peirce, for instance, could not have sufficiently satisfied Horkheimer's metaphysical need for religion.

Horkheimer equated Kant's formalistic reason with instrumental reason. But Peirce reinterprets Kantian formalism in the direction of a pragmatics of language and construes reason in procedural terms. The process of sign interpretation achieves self-awareness at the level of argumentation. Peirce now shows how this nonquotidian form of communication is commensurate with the "unconditional meaning" of truth and of context-transcending validity claims in general. He conceives of truth as the redeemability of a truth claim under the communicative conditions of an ideal community of interpreters – that is, one extended ideally in social space and historical time. The counterfactual appeal to an *unlimited* communication community of this kind replaces the moment of infinitude or the supratemporal character of "unconditionality" with the idea of an open yet goal-directed process of interpretation that transcends the boundaries of social space *from within* from the perspective of an existence situated *in the world*. *In time*, learning processes are to form an arch bridging all temporal distance; *in the world*, the conditions we assume are at least sufficiently fulfilled in every argument are to be realized. We are intuitively aware that we cannot rationally *convince* anyone, not even ourselves, of something if we do not accept as our common point of departure that all voices that are at all relevant should be heard, that the best arguments available given the current state of our knowledge should be expressed, and that only the unforced force of the better argument should determine the "yes" and "no" responses of participants.

The tension between the intelligible realm and the realm of phenomena is thereby shifted to general presuppositions of communication, which – despite their ideal and only approximately realizable content – participants must in every case actually accept if they wish to thematize a controversial truth claim. The idealizing force of these transcending anticipations penetrates into the very heart of everyday communicative praxis, for even the most fleeting speech-act-offer, the most conventional "yes" or "no," *point* to potential reasons, and hence to the ideally extended audience they must convince if they are valid. The ideal moment of unconditionality is deeply rooted in factual processes of communication because validity claims are Janus faced: as universal, they outstrip every given context; at the same time, they must be raised and gain acceptance here and now if they

are to sustain an agreement capable of coordinating action. In communicative action, we orient ourselves to validity claims that we can raise only as a matter of fact in the context of *our* language, of *our* form of life, whereas the redeemability implicitly co-positing points beyond the provinciality of the given historical context. Whoever employs a language with a view to reaching understanding lays himself open to a transcendence from within. He is left without any choice because he masters the structure of language through the intentionality of the spoken word. Linguistic intentionality outstrips subjects but without *subjugating* them.

Postmetaphysical thought differs from religion in that it recovers the meaning of the unconditional without recourse to God or an Absolute. Horkheimer's dictum would have been justified only if by "unconditional meaning" he had meant something different from the notion of unconditionality that also belongs to the meaning of truth as one of its moments. The significance of unconditionality is not to be confused with an unconditional meaning that offers consolation. On the premises of postmetaphysical thought, philosophy cannot provide a substitute for the consolation whereby religion invests unavoidable suffering and unrecompensed injustice, the contingencies of need, loneliness, sickness, and death, with new significance and teaches us to bear them. But even today philosophy can explicate the moral point of view from which we can judge something impartially as just or unjust; to this extent, communicative reason is by no means equally indifferent to morality and immorality. However, it is altogether a different matter to provide a motivating response to the question of why we should follow our moral insights or why we should be moral at all. *In this* respect, it may perhaps be said that to seek to salvage an unconditional meaning without God is a futile undertaking, for it belongs to the peculiar dignity of philosophy to maintain adamantly that no validity claim can have cognitive import unless it is vindicated before the tribunal of justificatory discourse.

Translated by Ciaran P. Cronin

#### Notes

- 1 Alfred Schmidt, *Die Wahrheit im Gewande der Lüge* (Munich, 1986); "Religion as Trug und als metaphysisches Bedürfnis," *Quatuor Coronati* (1988), pp. 87ff.; "Aufklärung und Mythos im Werk Max Horkheimers,"



- in A. Schmidt and N. Altwicker (eds.), *Max Horkheimer heute* (Frankfurt, 1986), pp. 180ff.
- 2 Max Horkheimer, "Gespräch mit Helmut Gumnior," *Gesammelte Schriften* [henceforth cited as GS] (Frankfurt, 1985–91), 7: 387.
  - 3 GS, 7: 393.
  - 4 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. J. Cumming (New York, 1972), p. 118.
  - 5 Max Horkheimer, *Notizen 1950 bis 1969* (Frankfurt, 1974).
  - 6 This holds above all for the philosophical articles that Alfred Schmidt already included in the appendix to the German edition of *The Critique of Instrumental Reason (Zur Kritik der instrumentellen Vernunft)* [Frankfurt, 1967], pp. 177ff.).
  - 7 Horkheimer, *Notizen*, p. 93.
  - 8 Horkheimer, *Notizen*, p. 184.
  - 9 Horkheimer, *Notizen*, p. 102.
  - 10 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic*, p. 118.
  - 11 Horkheimer, *Notizen*, p. 61.
  - 12 GS, 7: 178.
  - 13 "Theismus-Atheismus," GS, 7: 185ff.
  - 14 GS, 7: 184.
  - 15 "Religion und Philosophie," GS, 7: 193.
  - 16 "Die Aktualität Schopenhauers," GS, 7: 136.
  - 17 Schmidt, *Die Wahrheit im Gewande der Lüge*, p. 121.
  - 18 "Religion und Philosophie," GS, 7: 191.
  - 19 "Die Aktualität Schopenhauers," GS, 7: 138f.
  - 20 GS, 7: 135f.
  - 21 "Schopenhauers Denken," GS, 7: 252.
  - 22 "Pessimismus Heute," GS, 7: 227f.
  - 23 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic*, p. 101.
  - 24 "Psalm 91," GS, 7: 210.
  - 25 Horkheimer, *Notizen*, p. 26.
  - 26 Horkheimer, *Notizen*, p. 172.
  - 27 "Die Aktualität Schopenhauers," GS, 7: 138.
  - 28 Horkheimer, *Notizen*, p. 26.

## 5

## Communicative Freedom and Negative Theology

### Questions for Michael Theunissen

The quiet radicality of Michael Theunissen's thought derives from his simultaneous openness to Kierkegaard and to Marx. Theunissen responds to the two creative minds who – more radically than all others – were marked by their engagement with the speculative thought of Hegel. This is why he has paid special attention to the two styles of thought which have brought Kierkegaard and Marx back to philosophical life in our century: existential ontology and Hegelian Marxism. He engages with both traditions by returning to their original points of inspiration: in his view, the insights of the authentic Kierkegaard and a critically appropriated Marx are superior to those of Heidegger and Sartre, or Horkheimer and Adorno.<sup>1</sup> In this project Theunissen is aided by a turn towards the theory of communication which he made early on in his career. He emphasizes the relevance of the second person – the other in the role of 'Thou' – in contrast to a subject-object relation defined by the attitudes of first and third person.

The dialogical encounter with an other whom I address, and whose answer lies beyond my control, first opens the intersubjective space in which the individual can become an authentic self. Theunissen developed his philosophy of dialogue through a critical engagement with the transcendental theory of intersubjectivity, as developed from Husserl to Sartre. It is inspired not just by Buber's 'theology of the between', but also draws directly on theological motifs. Indeed, Theunissen understands that 'middle' of the intersubjective space which the dialogical encounter discloses, and which in turn enables