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# Jürgen Habermas on Corona: "Never before has so much been known about what we do not know"

*Interview with Markus Schwering<sup>1</sup>*



"Every adolescent who's ever been prone to literature will have declaimed his Nietzsche aloud at some point, and so did I," says Jürgen Habermas.

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Philosopher Jürgen Habermas on the current pressure to have to make decisions and to have to live under conditions of uncertainty - and on his early vaccination against the lure of Nietzsche's prose.

- Jürgen Habermas comments on the Corona crisis in an interview
- He is widely regarded as one of the most important philosophers of modern times
- Social consequences of the Corona pandemic are not yet clear, he says

1 *Frankfurter Rundschau* 10th April, 2020.  
<https://www.fr.de/kultur/gesellschaft/juergen-habermas-coronavirus-krise-covid19-interview-13642491.html>

*Schwering: Professor Habermas, how are you personally coping with the Corona crisis, how are you experiencing this?*

I can only state what is going through my mind these days. Our complex societies are constantly confronted with great uncertainties, but these occur locally and unevenly and are more or less unobtrusively dealt with in one or the other subsystem of society by the responsible experts. In contrast, existential insecurity is now spreading globally and simultaneously, in the minds of the media-linked people themselves.

## **Jürgen Habermas on Corona: Social consequences not foreseeable**

Everyone is being made aware of the risks, because the most important single variable in combating the pandemic is the self-isolation of the individual in the face of overburdened health systems. Moreover, the uncertainty pertains not only to the management of the epidemic risks themselves, but just as much to the completely unforeseeable economic and social consequences. In this regard - this much we can know - unlike with the virus itself, for the time being there are no experts who are able to assess these consequences with any certainty. The economic and social science experts should be cautious about making ill-considered forecasts. One thing can be said: there has never been so much awareness of our ignorance and of the necessity to have to act and to have to live under conditions of uncertainty.

*Your new book **Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie** [One more History of Philosophy] is already in its third print run. Your topic - the relationship between faith and knowledge in the Western tradition of thought - is by no means an easy one. Had you counted on this success?*

That's not something you think about when you write a book like this. You're just afraid of making mistakes - with every chapter you're thinking about possible objections from the experts, who after all know more about the specifics.

*Personally I noticed a didactic streak - repetitions, flash-backs, detached summaries structuring the work as a whole and providing breathing space. It would seem that they are meant to make it easier for the interested lay-person to get to grips with it.*

Up to now, the readers of my books were probably mostly among academic colleagues and students of various subjects, also and especially among teachers, some of whom teach ethics and social studies. But this time, during these first few months since I published the book, I got to know a very different audience of readers - namely those who are interested in the subject of faith and knowledge altogether, but also people who are generally thoughtful and looking for orientation, including physicians, managers, lawyers etc. It seems that they still have some faith in philosophy. This I find gratifying, since a certain over-specialization, which is particularly detrimental for the way philosophers think and for the subject as a whole, was one of my reasons for embarking on this venture.

## **Jürgen Habermas: What we can learn from the discourse on faith and knowledge**

*In the title of your work - which goes back to Herder - the word "also" irritates me.*

The “also” in the title makes the reader aware that this is only one, albeit a new, interpretation of the history of philosophy - among other possible interpretations. This gesture of moderation alerts the reader to the misconception that this is an exhaustive or even definitive history of philosophy that they have before them. I myself follow the line of interpretation which holds that history can be understood as a learning process, from the perspective of a particular conception of post-metaphysical thought. No author can avoid adopting a specific perspective, and this, of course, always reflects something of their theoretical convictions. But this is only an expression of a fallibilistic consciousness and is by no means meant to relativize the truth claim contained in what I write.

The “also” in the title raises the question of the relationship between the history of philosophy and the topic of faith/knowledge. I have the impression that this relationship is not exactly tension-free.

As a philosopher, I am interested in the question of what we can learn from the discourse on belief and knowledge. The problem of the relationship between morality and ethics - that's been pending ever since Kant and Hegel - occupies a large space precisely for this reason; for this problem has emerged from the at once secularizing and radicalizing appropriation of the universalistic core of the Christian ethics of love. The process of the conceptual translation of central contents of religious tradition is my theme - in this case, therefore, the post-metaphysical appropriation of the idea that all believers form a universal and yet fraternal community and that every single member deserves to be treated justly, taking into account his or her unique and unmistakable individuality. This equality of each person is not a trivial issue, as we see today also in the Corona crisis.

## **Jürgen Habermas on the Corona Crisis: The differing approaches of governments to the crisis**

*How so?*

In the course of the crisis so far, one could and can observe politicians in some countries who are hesitant to base their strategy on the principle that the efforts of the state to save every single human life must have absolute priority over a utilitarian offsetting of the undesirable economic costs that this goal may entail. If the state gave free rein to the epidemic in order to achieve rapidly a sufficient immunity in the entire population, it would be forced to accept the avoidable risk of an imminent collapse of the health system and thus a relatively higher proportion of deaths. My "History" also throws light on the moral-philosophical background to current strategies for dealing with such crises.

*The developmental path of Western philosophy seems to be a relatively consistent one for you, regardless of all breaks and new departures. But isn't there a down-side to this consistency?*

A conventional history of philosophy without the irritating "also" strives for a completeness which, as I said, an individual author cannot even attempt.

Though it must be admitted that the ambition to seek out "learning processes", almost as if this were a history of the sciences, betrays a quite un-

conventional perspective. On the one hand, this goes against the Platonist conviction that all great philosophers always think the same thing in different ways, but on the other hand, it also goes against the prevailing, supposedly historically enlightened scepticism concerning any notion of progress. I, too, am far from holding to a historical-philosophical concept of progress. If one chooses “learning” in the sense of something that is path-dependent - i.e. from the perspective of continuity in problem solving -, this does not mean that one is imputing a teleology to the history of philosophy. There’s no telos that is discernable from some “view from nowhere”, but only “our” view, looking back on the path of more or less good grounds, from which the provisional and then historically always challenged solutions of a certain type of problems follow on from each other.

## **Jürgen Habermas: The old philosophers still have something to tell us**

*But does your book not imply that there is “progress” in philosophical thought? Putting it a bit colloquially: Is Kant “better” than Aristotle?*

Of course not - no more than Einstein was “better” than Newton. I don’t want to blur the considerable differences between philosophical and scientific thinking, and I don’t want to speak of “progress” in the same sense. In each case, theoretical approaches and paradigms “become obsolete” in a very different way. But the above-mentioned authors became pioneers on the basis of the problems they solved, based on the issues at hand and on the information and reasoning available at the time. They overturned previously valid views. And have become classical thinkers - where “classical” here means: they still have something to tell us. The contemporary theory of science still draws on insights from Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics*, and modern ethics on Kant’s concepts of autonomy and justice - albeit within the framework of changed theoretical languages.

*I notice a strong sympathy with the philosophical achievements of medieval Christian thought - which I did not suspect at first. Is this sympathy perhaps the result of a learning process that surprises even you yourself?*

In my last lecture before my retirement, a long time ago, I had already dealt with Thomas. At that time I was already fascinated by the constructive power and inner consistency of this great system. Now, reading Dun Scotus and William of Ockham has impressed me in a similar way. Yes, these are backlogged learning processes, but, if I'm not mistaken, they lead me into an already longstanding research trend that consists in the reevaluation of the high Middle Ages, a period that is drawing closer to us, to the modern age.

*Still, if I were asked the question as to which figure in the history of philosophy in your presentation would be the one that holds the greatest potential for identification for you personally I would answer: Spinoza. There are sections in the Spinoza chapter of which I would spontaneously say: here Habermas is describing himself.*

That surprises me a bit. But then the interpreter understands an author better than the author understands himself. There is something I have only understood now while reading Spinoza. Against the background of the history of the Marranos - those persecuted Spanish Jews who outwardly converted to the Catholic faith under the pressure of the Spanish king - I understood why Spinoza enjoyed almost even greater veneration than Kant in the bourgeois German-Jewish parental homes of so many 20th century intellectuals. Leo Strauß has reported on this in the introduction to the English translation of his Spinoza book: Spinoza was not the apostate and simple atheist for which he was persecuted in his time, but the honest Enlightenment scholar, by no means disavowing the substance of his religious origins - as long as there were good reasons for it -, but instead "sublates" it, in the Hegelian sense. I do indeed have sympathies for that. From the point of view of the history of ideas Spinoza's thinking, above all through the natural philosophy of the young Schelling, very much laid the basis for the great speculative movement of German idealism.

## **Jürgen Habermas: The Churches are losing their ability to bond in the western world**

*Of all people, Nietzsche, who, especially in the context of the "God is dead" theology, would have fitted perfectly to the central theme of "faith and knowledge", is omitted. Why?*

Every adolescent susceptible to literature will once have declaimed his Nietzsche aloud, and that holds for me too. But after the war, Nietzsche, who had been celebrated as a state philosopher during the Nazi era with his Social-Darwinist interpretation of “Will for Power”, was still too close. It was for this political reason that I was immune to the ongoing lure of this prose. Even after I had become better acquainted with his more urbane sides from the French perspective, I kept my distance from this author - except for his epistemological-anthropological thinking. Also, from the factual objective point of view, the “Genealogy of Christianity” doesn’t convince me, not even as food for thought - Nietzsche reveals therein a relationship to his subject that is far from being free. I am actually only interested in a certain aspect of the impact of his work - which, however, would not have fitted into the time-frame of my project - namely, the fatal tendency of some philosophers to somehow sublimate repressed religious experiences into the realm of the aesthetic.

*You use the expression “mass atheism”, relating to modern Western societies, quite often. This sounds disparaging and could fit in with your general inclination to take a stand that is at cross-purposes to the zeitgeist - i.e. you were decidedly “worldly” when this was not particularly popular, and you are as just as resolute in your criticism when it is the “worldly” that has become the unreflected mainstream.*

I find myself misunderstood by this. With the sociological term “mass atheism” I want to refer only to the quantitative aspect of the churches’ diminishing binding power, which we observe today particularly in Western and Central European societies, and which is dealt with in the first chapter. But you are skewering an attitude which I myself would describe with the expression “secularist”, used critically.

### *Biography*

Jürgen Habermas, born on June 18th, 1929 in Düsseldorf, grew up in Gummersbach, taught at the University of Frankfurt and now lives in Starnberg. Widely influential has been his discourse-theoretical continuation of the critical theory of Marxism, which has led to a highly discerning justification of the constitutional state based on democratic principles.



Jürgen Habermas' work "Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie" was published last autumn (*Frankfurter Rundschau* of November 12th, 2019). In two volumes, Habermas describes the history of Western philosophy as a path from faith to knowledge: Volume 1: The occidental constellation of faith and knowledge, Volume 2: Reasonable freedom. Traces of the discourse on faith and knowledge.

[trans. Frederik van Gelder - April 13th, 2020]<sup>2</sup>

- 2 Translator's note. There are a couple of aspects to this interview that make it necessary for me to make a few personal comments. Re: 'Marranos'. I translated this, under conditions of self-isolation imposed by the Corona pandemic, in the old Jewish quarter of Amsterdam - called 'Mokum' in the now extinct 'Western Jiddish' dialect of the Marranos. A tradition from which I myself come. I first met Jürgen Habermas in 1977, studied under him, did my Ph.D. under him, did a project for him ("Primate Communication") in the old Starnberg years. The synagoge from which Spinoza was expelled around about 1630 is almost visible when I look out the window. This article was published on my birthday, 10th April. That was exactly 75 years ago, at the end of the war that is also being commemorated this year. I was born into a hiding place not very different from that of Anne Frank, at a time when Jürgen Habermas was in the Hitler Jugend. I have never been able to speak to him about this - it seemed not all that important at the time. I once learnt German, long ago, because the direction he represented seemed to me to offer the only hope for reconciliation and a more peaceful future. I still believe that, even if the suffering today, and what it is that threatens us today, seems to be coming from an entirely different direction, namely from something in the natural world itself.