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Reflections on Reflective Practice (6a/7)



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Part 6a: Communicative rationality and formal pragmatics –

Habermas 1 Our review of Kant's practical philosophy (Ulrich, 2009b) ended with a powerful message: there exists a deep, inextricable link between ethically tenable action and consistent reasoning. Kant was the first philosopher to work out the link between ethics and rationality systematically. With his principle of moral universalization, he found a methodologically rigorous formula for this link: from a moral point of view we reason properly about a proposed action if we put ourselves in the place of all the people concerned and make sure we can then still want to act in the same way, without thereby becoming entangled in argumentative contradictions.

There can be little doubt that the principle of universalization is a fundamental, indeed indispensable, principle of clear thinking about issues of rational practice. Unfortunately though, the universalizing thrust of Kantian ethics appears to have history against it. Both philosophically and sociologically speaking, claims to moral universalization tend to become ever more problematic.

The 'jagged profile of modernization' Philosophically speaking, it seems doubtful whether Kant's abstract, "transcendental" argumentation still offers a widely acceptable or even universally convincing means for establishing objective principles of rationality and ethics. The arrival of many new strands of theorizing about rationality and ethics based on hermeneutics, philosophy of language, philosophical pragmatism, critical social theory and social science, and so on, is apt to raise some doubts about the universalizability of the universalization principle. Sociologically speaking, the historical process of rationalization has created increasingly differentiated spheres of rationality (e.g., politics, bureaucracy, the market, the juridical system, science, art, etc.) which employ different concepts of

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Note: This introduction to Habermas has grown longer than originally planned. I have therefore divided it into three parts. The present essay offers the first part. The second part will appear in the *Bimonthly* of November-December 2009, and the third part is planned for 2010.

rationality and steering media (e.g., politically legitimated power, bureaucratically established rules, money, law, peer review, etc.) and thereby tend to undermine the unity of reason that Kant could still associate with the dawn of modernity.

Modernity meanwhile is no longer modern, as it were. Whether rightly so or wrongly, it has become almost synonymous with a process of rationalization that appears to create as many problems as it solves, for example, by subjecting all domains of life to an increasingly economic and technical kind of rationality; by exploiting natural resources in an ecologically unsustainable way; by creating excessive discrepancies of welfare among people; by intruding into democratic processes of decision-making as well as into the private lives of citizens with an expert-driven logic of "material constraints" (*Sachzwänge*); and, quite generally, by prioritizing forms of instrumental, managerial, and bureaucratic reasoning that are blind to social, cultural, and spiritual values. This is what led Max Weber (1978, orig. 1922) to describe modernization as a progressing *disenchantment of the world*, and Horkheimer and Adorno (2002, orig. 1947) to see in it a negative *dialectic of enlightenment* – an apparently inherent tendency of modernity to undermine its own foundations, by reducing the rationalization of society to a "one-dimensional" (Marcuse, 1964) triumph of *Zweckrationalität* (purposive-rationality) and technocracy.

As Habermas (1984, p. 241) puts it, the problem consists in a "jagged profile of modernization" that promotes a *selective pattern of rationalization*, namely, by allowing a growing predominance of one cultural value sphere – the sphere of science and technology, including social technologies (and, I would add, economics) – over other spheres that have equally been differentiated out in the process of modernization, among them particularly the spheres of law and morality on the one hand and of art and eroticism on the other hand. These three spheres have come to form three different "rationalization complexes" or *complexes of rationality* (1984, p. 238f), that is, domains of society that are understood and coordinated according to different notions of rationality – cognitive-instrumental rationality in the sphere of science and technology, moral-practical rationality in the sphere of law and morality, and aesthetic-practical rationality in the sphere of art and

eroticism (Habermas, 1984, pp. 237-242).

The central aim: strengthening noninstrumental patterns of reasoning and societal rationalization While Habermas basically agrees with Weber, as well as with Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse, about this current state of the matter, he is not prepared to accept that such a selective pattern of rationalization is an inevitable consequence of modernization; a situation against which we can do nothing except resign and give in to fashionable neoconservative anti- or postmodernism. Rather, as he sees it, the situation calls for efforts to recreate a new and better balance among the different spheres of value and rationality, by *strengthening noninstrumental patterns of reasoning and societal rationalization*; strengthening in the double sense of developing noninstrumental patterns of thought and argumentation (a philosophical project) and of also institutionalizing conforming new arenas for public opinion-forming and decision-making (a sociological and political project). Consequently, Habermas approaches what he calls the "unfinished project of modernity" (Habermas, 1996b) both as a philosopher and as a social and political theorist. What do rationality and ethics mean under contemporary societal and political conditions? Is there still a place for practical reason as Kant conceived it? What does enlightenment mean today? On what grounds can we hope to continue the unfinished project of modernity towards a positive vision of global society? What has philosophy to say on this effort of rethinking modernity, and what is the part democracy has to play in it?

This is the sort of questions that motivate the wide-ranging work of Habermas and also explain its intrinsic difficulty. In an effort to adapt Kant's critical philosophy of reason to the challenges of our epoch without abandoning its philosophical level of differentiation or losing sight of the Kantian vision of an enlightened global society of world citizens, Habermas reviews and mobilizes virtually all contemporary strands of philosophy that one might expect to contribute, from phenomenology (W. Dilthey, E. Husserl, A. Schütz), language analysis (L. Wittgenstein, K. Bühler, N. Chomsky, J.L. Austin and J.R. Searle) and hermeneutics (M. Heidegger, H.G. Gadamer) to American philosophical pragmatism (C.S. Peirce, G.H. Mead, C.W. Morris, R. Rorty, K.H. Apel), to the Frankfurt School of critical

theory (M. Horkheimer, A. Adorno) and to postmodernism (Foucault, Derrida). Moreover he draws on major authors of social theory (E. Durkheim, M. Weber, T. Parsons, G.H. Mead, N. Luhmann) as well as of cognitive and developmental psychology (G.H. Mead, J. Piaget, L. Kohlberg) and other disciplines of empirical science that he finds relevant to his project. There is thus much to learn from reading Habermas; but unfortunately, his scholarly language and level of differentiation in discussing all these sources provide demanding reading for a majority of readers, who find it difficult to handle such an extraordinary spectrum of specialized language and theoretical considerations. It is indispensable, therefore, that we simplify.

A central notion: 'communicative rationality' I propose we focus on a few of Habermas' main ideas that promise to be particularly relevant to our aim of promoting reflective professional practice, and which at the same time are characteristic of the main lines of his theoretical effort. As I understand Habermas, there is indeed a central concern that runs through his work, one that I find equally relevant to theoretical and practical aims, I mean the notion of *communicative rationality* – the idea that there is a rational core in all attempts to achieve mutual understanding. Table 1 tries to summarize Habermas's thinking on communicative rationality in terms of three levels of theorizing that I find useful for grounding reflective practice.

Table 1: Selected aspects of Habermas' work on communicative rationality

| Theory level | Core concepts | Core issue | Methodological approach |
|--|--|--|--|
| Social theory: theory of the <i>communicative</i> rationalization of society | Communicative action Lifeworld vs system Public sphere Deliberative democracy | How can we understand and improve the on-going process of rationalization? | Theory of communicative action: a model of the communicative rationalization of society |
| Argumentation theory: theory of <i>rational</i> discourse and action | Rational motivation Ideal speech situation Practical discourse Discourse ethics | How can we justify claims to knowledge and rightness? | Formal pragmatics: a model of the discursive validation of disputed claims |
| Language theory: theory of <i>competent</i> speech acts | Telos of mutual understanding Validity claims Communicative competence | What makes speakers competent? | Theory of communicative competence: a model of the structure of competent speech acts |

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Three theory levels A preliminary explanation of how I arrive at the three levels may be useful before we start discussing each of them. My starting point is Habermas' aim of strengthening noninstrumental patterns of reasoning and societal rationalization. With a view to this aim, the Kantian notions of practical reason and of a global society of world citizens (both of which are tied to the principle of moral universalization) are of obvious continuing importance. However, two centuries after Kant we cannot simply return to his project of a self-critique of reason without taking into account the "jagged profile of modernization" that Habermas diagnosed. We need to take seriously the social turn of epistemology that Hegel initiated with his critique of the abstract and ahistorical bent of Kant's philosophy of reason and which led not only to Marx' theory of historical materialism but also to the development of philosophical pragmatism, phenomenology, language analysis, and hermeneutics, along with the other previously mentioned strands of contemporary philosophizing. They have all made us more aware of the deeply intersubjective, because language-mediated and socially constructed, nature of all claims to reason, including claims to knowledge and proper action. Reason is essentially communicative. Habermas therefore takes as his basis the *linguistic turn* of twentieth-century philosophy, rather than Kant's assumption of an abstract, "transcendental" consciousness. To understand the nature of "reasonable" claims – reason's validity claims, that is – we consequently need to analyze first of all the basic conditions that make linguistically mediated communication (henceforth simply referred to as *communication*) succeed or fail – the bottom level in Table 1.

But successful communication, while securing mutual understanding about our claims, does not automatically imply that these claims, and the reasons by which we support them, are justified; much less that we agree about what justification means in the specific case. I may understand and even accept your claim yet disagree (i.e., find it unjustified); or we may agree, but other people might still disagree; or everyone may agree, yet be wrong. Consequently, we need to analyze the basic conditions that would allow us to justify or criticize disputed claims "reasonably," whereby "reasonably" (or "rationally") means basically that we rely on *argumentative* means – advancing good "reasons" or grounds – rather than on non-argumentative

means such as authority, manipulation, deception, or others. It follows that some kind of generic *argumentation theory* (we might also say: theory of rationality) needs to replace Kant's transcendental concept of reason – the middle level of Table 1.

Finally, we need to analyze the ways rational argumentation would translate into non-selective patterns of societal rationalization – the top level of Table 1. Critical social theory thus becomes at heart an effort of rethinking the ways we successfully use – or fail to use – language and communication, along with other mechanisms of social coordination, to establish claims to reason, with the ultimate aim of gaining some theoretically defensible standards for criticizing and improving the historically on-going process of rationalization. A *communicative turn of social theory* is required. Science and expertise alone cannot do the job; for "rationality has less to do with the possession of knowledge than with how speaking and acting subjects *acquire and use knowledge*." (Habermas, 1984, p. 8)

With this aim in mind, Habermas finds it necessary to reconstruct mainstream philosophical concepts at all three levels of theorizing. If the linguistic turn is to supply an adequate framework, we need to extend its original grounding in analytic philosophy so as to bridge the conceptual gap that has opened between the language-analytic mainstream and the Kantian tradition of practical philosophy. To this end, Habermas suggests to conceive of language analysis as a theory of *competent speech acts* (What makes speakers competent?) rather than just the analysis of well-formed linguistic structures (How do we use language correctly?); and further, of argumentation theory as a theory of *rational discourse and action* (How can we justify claims to knowledge and rightness?) rather than just a deductive logic of inferences (What makes inferences logically correct?); and finally, of social theory as a theory of the *communicative rationalization of society* (How can we understand and improve the on-going process of rationalization?) rather than just a description of the mechanisms of social integration and disintegration (How do societies form and perpetuate themselves?).

The idea of a rational core of successful communication matters at all three levels. We can, then, organize our review of Habermas' ideas on

communicative rationality according to these three levels of theorizing.

Following Table 1, we can focus on these three key concepts:

1. The rational core of speech: "mutual understanding"
2. The rational core of argumentation: "discourse"
3. The rational core of social practice: "communicative action"

In the remainder of the present essay, we want to familiarize ourselves with the first two concepts, that is, the two bottom levels of Table 1; the next essay will then turn to the top level. I will take the liberty, though, to deal with discourse ethics (which methodologically belongs to the middle level) in the next essay, so that in effect the present essay is laying the methodological foundation for the "applied" concepts of the subsequent essay.

The rational core of speech: 'mutual understanding' In an interview about the motives and aims of his work, Habermas (1985, p. 173) once remarked that his attempt to ground critical social theory in a *Theory of Communicative Action* (1984 and 1987) elaborates one central intuition: namely, that all reasonable speech has an intrinsic *telos* (finality) of mutual understanding. That is, all communication through speech anticipates that those addressed are willing to listen; and those speaking, to substantiate their claims if challenged to do so. Without this anticipation of a *mutual* will to reach some understanding, communicative rationality is not conceivable and it makes hardly sense to communicate at all. Habermas therefore recognizes in this presupposition an indispensable normative core of all intersubjectivity.

A normative core Similarly to Kant, who found a minimal normative foundation of practical reason in the principle of universalization (see Ulrich, 2009b, pp. 26-28, section "Why a purely formal moral principle?"), Habermas thus finds in the *telos* of mutual understanding a *minimal normative foundation for rational social practice*, and thus also for a concept of societal rationalization that would not from the outset succumb to a merely instrumental pattern of societal rationalization. The next question, then, is this: How should we conceive of the essential conditions for achieving such a fuller, not merely instrumental, rationality?

As Table 1 suggests, Habermas' answer is complex in that it touches on the meaning of rationality at three different levels of communicative rationality – the linguistic level of "rational" speech, the discourse-theoretic level of "rational" argumentation, and the sociological level of "rational" social practice. However, the answer he gives at the linguistic level is basically (although not in its details) simple: we must consider as essential for "rationality" those conditions of speech which are required to bring to life its built-in *telos* of achieving mutual understanding.

Mutual understanding: linguistic vs. communicative competence But this leads us into a first difficulty: what exactly does it mean to reach "mutual understanding" with others? In a basic sense it means that as a competent speaker I manage to make myself clear to others, and *vice-versa*. Whether we mutually agree does not matter for this notion of understanding, only whether we comprehend each other's intentions. In this limited sense the term has traditionally been used in language analysis. Accordingly, *linguistic competence* has been defined as a speaker's ideal ability to use the phonetics, morphology, syntax, and semantics of a language correctly, so as to make herself understood. This may not always work perfectly in practice, so that we need to distinguish between linguistic competence and actual *linguistic performance* in a specific situation (Chomsky, 1965).

In a fuller sense, reaching understanding involves not only the idea of mutual comprehension (i.e., clarity of meaning) but also the idea of mutual agreement (i.e., acceptance of validity). Thus understood, a competent speaker knows not only to make herself comprehensible to others but also to motivate them to agree with her intent. Beyond linguistic competence, *communicative competence* then requires a speaker's ability to argumentatively *convince* the hearers that what is said *deserves* to be accepted; which implies that the judgments involved (both judgments of fact and of value) are valid and moreover that the speaker's intent is sincere (cf. Habermas, 1979a, pp. 26-33, and 1984, pp. 115f, 276f, 297, and 307f).

Mutual understanding: meaning vs. validity With this kind of consideration, a *pragmatic link between meaning and validity* enters the analysis of speech acts: "We understand a speech act when we know what

makes it acceptable." (1984, p. 297) This link causes Habermas some difficulties, as it bursts the scope of conventional language analysis yet is constitutive for communicative competence as Habermas understands it. In essence, when it comes to the pragmatics of speech, the crucial concept that we need to understand is the idea of *validity claims*. As it is fundamental, I would like to introduce it in some detail, although still very much in a summary form as compared to Habermas' (1971a; 1971c; 1973a,b,c; 1979a; 1984; 2009, vols. 1 & 2) lengthy and complex accounts.

Mutual understanding: the double structure of speech To better understand what it means to reach understanding in view of this link, Habermas turns to the *theory of speech acts* of John L. Austin (1962) and John R. Searle (1969). The term "speech acts" (Searle, 1969, p. 16) stands for the idea that we use language not only to provide information but also to establish or clarify interpersonal relations. For example, we offer advice, warn others, convince them to do something, and so on. Thus understood, speech embodies a kind of intersubjective action – "by saying something, we *do* something" (Austin, 1962, p. 94, cf. p. 5). As speakers, we are at the same time acting social subjects, or agents. In a well-known formulation, Habermas (1971c, p. 104; 1979a, p. 41f) refers to these two aspects or levels of communication – its propositional content and its relational aspects – as a characteristic *double structure of speech*.¹⁾ Unlike conventional linguistics, speech-act theory therefore does not analyze language abstracting from its use in speech by acting subjects (Habermas, 1979a, p. 6).

Speech-act theory Systematically speaking, speech acts convey a speaker's intent in three respects: they assert some proposition about the world ("the" world of external phenomena and events), and/or about the speaker's expectations towards the hearers ("our" interpersonal relationship), and/or about the speaker her- or himself ("my" inner world). According to this *three-world model*,²⁾ Habermas (1979a, pp. 53-68, esp. p. 68; 1984, p. 309) distinguishes three different, though interdependent, "idealized or pure cases" or "basic modes" of speech acts, which I prefer to reformulate slightly here in terms of *three basic functions of speech*:

1. The *constative* function of speech consists in stating the speaker's views about states and events of "the" world of external nature; that is,

it *asserts* relevant opinions and knowledge.

2. The *regulative* function of speech consists in conveying the speaker's intention with respect to "our" social world of interpersonal relations; it *stipulates* criteria of proper action or evaluation.
3. The *expressive* function of speech, finally, consists in disclosing the speaker's subjective world of "my" wishes, attitudes, and emotions; together with actual behavior, it *reveals* the speaker's motives.³⁾

As a simple example, let's imagine a couple's conversation during a mountain hike. "It's clouding over, we are sure to get rain soon." (constative) – "We better hurry." (regulative) – "I hate getting wet!" (expressive). These are three different speech acts, but the first one might very well perform the function of expressing all three intentions in one and the same utterance, especially in a conversation among partners who know each other well. Some of the functions of speech will thus often be implicit (speech-act immanent) rather than explicit (articulated as separate speech acts). Speaking of "speech functions" rather than "speech acts" has the advantage of leaving it open whether we are effectively dealing with separate utterances (explicit "speech acts") or rather with speech-act immanent functions of one and the same utterance. When they remain speech-act immanent rather than being made explicit, it matters the more for a competent speaker to be aware of their being at play; for only thus can we grasp the full meaning of an utterance and are able to question its validity in all respects.

The crucial point in distinguishing the three functions of speech is indeed that they are always at play *together* yet appeal to *different* sources of credibility. The husband who tells his wife "we're in for some rain" obviously expects her to find his observation of imminent rain accurate, as she *must* know he is an experienced mountaineer (source of credibility: experience). Given the dangers of mountain hiking in bad weather, he also anticipates his wife *must* agree they had better hurry (source of credibility: a basic principle of precaution in mountaineering). The more as she *must* know he hates getting wet – how often has she experienced his foul mood when bad weather caught them in the mountains! (source of credibility: the husband's record of behavior)

Generally speaking, in uttering a statement we expect others to accept:

1. that its propositional content (i.e., what it states about the world) is *true* (factual and accurate);
2. that its normative content (i.e., its effect upon others and their relationship with us) is *right* (acceptable and legitimate); and
1. that its subjective content (i.e., what we thereby disclose about ourselves and our motives) is *truthful* (i.e., authentic and sincere).

Three kinds of validity claims Whether consciously or not, we thus raise with every speech act *three basic kinds of validity claims*: claims to truth, rightness, and truthfulness (cf., e.g., Habermas, 1979a, pp. 3 and 63-68; 1984, pp. 23f, 38, 99, 278, 307f, and 329). This multidimensional structure of speech has important consequences for the concepts of "competent" speech and "rational" communication. Unlike what is often assumed popularly as well as in science theory and practice,

The validity claim contained in constative speech acts (truth/falsity) represents only a special case among the validity claims that speakers, in speech acts, raise and offer for vindication vis-à-vis hearers. (Habermas, 1979a, p. 51)

To be sure, we tend to take most of the claims raised in communicative practice for granted or in any case discuss one or two at a time only, as it is not practical to question them all at once. Nevertheless, the three claims are implicitly raised with every utterance and each may become thematic at all times, if we choose so. As Habermas explains in somewhat different terms:

Of course, individual [read: each kind of] validity claims can be thematically stressed, whereby the truth of the propositional content comes to the fore in the cognitive use of language, the rightness (or appropriateness) of the interpersonal relation in the interactive, and the truthfulness of the speaker in the expressive. But in every instance of communicative action [read: search for mutual understanding] the system of all validity claims comes into play; *they must always be raised simultaneously, although they cannot all be thematic at the same time.* (Habermas, 1979a, p. 66, my italics)

As already suggested, each kind of validity claim requires its specific form of vindication. Claims to truth imply an *obligation to provide evidence of relevant facts*; claims to rightness an *obligation to justify underlying norms* (or principles of action); and claims to truthfulness an *obligation to prove trustworthy*. All three claims need to be redeemed argumentatively; truthfulness, in addition, calls for consistency of the speaker's subsequent behavior. The three claims are to some extent interdependent; I can hardly expect others to accept the truth and rightness of what I say without giving them reason to believe in my sincerity, nor will others be inclined to

assume that my value judgments or action proposals are right if I get my facts wrong. Despite this interdependence, however, evidence for one kind of claim cannot replace missing evidence of another kind. It is thus clear that *communicative action* – "the type of action aimed at reaching understanding" (1979a, p. 1) – requires our willingness to supply all three forms of evidence when asked to do so. Table 2 gives an overview.

Table 2: Speech functions and related validity claims

(adapted from Habermas, 1979a, pp. 58 and 68; 1984, p. 329; and Ulrich, 1983, p. 136)

| Function | Content | Validity claim | Vindication |
|------------|---|----------------|---|
| Constative | Propositional: asserting "facts" about the world | Truth | Supplying evidence of relevant facts |
| Regulative | Normative: stipulating "norms" for our interpersonal relations | Rightness | Supplying good grounds (or reasons) |
| Expressive | Subjective: revealing speaker's "motives" | Truthfulness | Consistency of behavior |

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The universal validity basis of speech Together, the three kinds of validity claims, and the specific forms of vindication they require, constitute for Habermas (e.g., 1979a, pp. 2 and 5; 1984, pp. 99 and 137f) the *universal validity basis of speech*. It is universal because whoever engages in genuine communication cannot help but to raise such claims, and thus also to imply that one is willing and able to substantiate them. At the same time, whenever we engage in communication, we cannot help but *anticipate* that all others involved are equally willing to redeem all three kinds of claims. Without this reciprocal assumption of accountability, it would be clear from the outset that mutual understanding cannot be reached, which would mean that the *telos* of speech is missed. In this universal validity basis, Habermas consequently also locates the *rational core* of the "communicative model of action" (1984, p. 101), that is, the idea that we can coordinate our individually goal-directed actions through communication – the effort to reach understanding – rather than through the use of force.

Cooperation and argumentation The relevance of this conception of a rational core in competent speech and cooperative action can hardly be

overestimated, for two basic reasons. First, the fact that validity claims entail an obligation of vindication means they are *rationally criticizable*; consequently there exists, as a matter of principle, a rational basis for securing mutual understanding and peaceful cooperation among people; and the principle in question is the *argumentative principle*. Second, because not only claims to truth (assertion of facts) and to truthfulness (expression of motives) but also claims to rightness (stipulation of norms) admit of argumentative vindication and challenge, there also exists a rational basis for Habermas' vision of *strengthening noninstrumental patterns of reasoning and societal rationalization*. Tapping this double rationality potential is what the guiding idea of *communicative rationality* is all about.

'Formal pragmatics' It is accordingly important to Habermas to clarify the conditions that make communicative rationality possible. If we want to tap the mentioned rationality potential systematically, what is required is a language-analytically informed theory of argumentation that would supply a "rational reconstruction of the double structure of speech" (1979a, p. 44). To this theoretical effort of elucidating the deep structures of rational communication, and of translating them into a framework for rational discourse, he gives the name *formal pragmatics*.⁴⁾

The rational core of argumentation: 'discourse' We have thus far familiarized ourselves with the overall aims of Habermas' practical philosophy and have considered in some detail the language-analytical and speech-act-theoretical foundation he proposes for it – the bottom level of communicative rationality in Table 1. Let us now move to the second level in Table 1, the level of discourse, and consider how Habermas uses formal pragmatics to help us understand the nature and role of discourse. This is crucial for his enterprise, as discourse is the main vehicle for breathing life into the vision of a communicative rationalization of social practice and society.

"Discourse" represents a *radicalization of communicative action* – or of the orientation towards mutual understanding that motivates it – in the following sense. In everyday communicative practice, we do not and cannot usually make all the validity claims involved thematic. Most claims remain implicit

and we simply suppose we (or those raising them) can support them if asked to do so. What matters in the first place is not that we actually do challenge and examine all validity claims but only, that *as a matter of principle* they are *criticizable*; that is, if for any reason they should become problematic, they *can* be examined in a rational and cooperative way. Therein resides the basic *rationality potential* of a communicative model of action coordination (Habermas, 1984, pp. 99 and 101).

What makes a good argument? To harvest this potential, we must be clear about what it means to rationally assess or examine (defend and criticize) a validity claim that has become problematic. That is, what conditions need to be fulfilled for such an examination to be possible and successful? What kind of "logic" of argumentation can help us in this task? It is the task of the second, argumentation-theoretic level of Habermas' conception of communicative rationality to analyze these rationality conditions. I would like to discuss them along the lines of Table 3.*

**Table 3: Rationality aspects of discourse, or:
What makes a "good" argument?**

(abstracted from Habermas, 1984, pp. 8-42, and Wenzel, 1992, pp. 124-136)

| Perspective | Aim | Key requirement | Crucial step |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---|---|
| Rhetoric, or "process" perspective | Effective communication | "Rational motivation" (communicative competence guided by cooperative attitude) | Step from strategic to communicative action |
| Dialectic, or "procedure" perspective | Critical interchange | "Ideal speech situation" (uncoerced and undistorted discourse) | Step from communicative action to discourse |
| Logical, or "product" perspective | Sound argumentation | "Cogent argumentation" (pragmatic logic of argumentation) | Step from a deductive to a pragmatic logic of argumentation |
| (All of the above) | Self-reflecting discourse practice | "Meta-levels of discourse" (radicalization of discourse) | Step from initial to higher levels of reflection |

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Three perspectives of argumentation theory Habermas (1984, pp. 25-42, esp. p. 26) finds it useful to discuss the requirements of rational argumentation from three perspectives: we may look at arguments as *process*, as *procedure*, and as *product*. He treats these three perspectives as

roughly equivalent to Aristotle's well-known distinction between *rhetoric*, *dialectic*, and *logic*. But in relating the "process," "procedure," and "product" perspectives to the aims of these three classical disciplines of argumentation, he at the same time redefines these aims. The link he establishes between his three perspectives and the three classical disciplines of argumentation serves him to highlight what is new and different in his approach to argumentation theory:

- *Process*: replaces the classical "rhetorical" aim of persuasion with the aim of convincing others by communicative, rather than strategic, means – that is, through communicative competence guided by a cooperative attitude or, as Habermas calls it, by *rational motivation*;
- *Procedure*: replaces the classical "dialectical" aim of convincing or challenging others through debate with the aim of achieving rationally motivated, rather than merely factual, agreement – through *undistorted discourse*; and
- *Product*: replaces the classical "logical" aim of achieving rationality through syllogistic reasoning with the aim of deciding on disputed validity claims through a pragmatic logic of substantial argumentation – that is, through clear rules and models of what it means to criticize and redeem validity claims, or agreements reached in discourse, with a view to securing *sound arguments*.

I would also like to refer readers to Wenzel's (1992, orig. 1979) somewhat different account of the three perspectives; the way he sums them up has equally helped me in abstracting Table 3 from Habermas' discussion:

Just as the term "argument" may be construed differently, so the question "What is a *good* argument?" may elicit at least three responses.... From the standpoint of rhetoric, a good argument is an *effective* one; from the standpoint of logic, it is a *sound* one; and from the standpoint of dialectic, it is a *candid* and *critical* interchange. (Wenzel, 1992, p. 136)

Argument as *process*, then, is about the effectiveness of communication in achieving the telos of mutual understanding; as *procedure*, about the provisions for securing rationally defensible agreement; and as *product*, about the assessment of the strength of validity claims.

A fourth perspective: radicalization of discourse In addition, Habermas discusses the requirements of discourse from a fourth perspective, at which all three previous aspects come into play. He refers to it in terms of "radicalization of discourse." Remember we characterized discourse as a radicalization of communicative action in the first place; discourse has as its

subject the way we exchange information and "reasons" (grounds, motives, arguments) in ordinary everyday communication. Just as discourse represents a self-reflective level of ordinary communication, we may thus understand this fourth perspective as aiming at a self-reflective level of discourse; that is, by "radicalizing" the idea of discourse, Habermas means in essence that discourse may and should become its own subject, in ways that we will discuss later, towards the end of the present essay.

Let us see, then, how Habermas employs these four perspectives to reconstruct the methodological basis of good argumentation. The task is difficult, as it wages war on two fronts: formal pragmatics should overcome the limitations of traditional logic on the one hand, and those of conventional linguistic analysis of "competent" speech and argumentation on the other hand.

Reconstructing Habermas' constructive effort It should be clear that this double reconstructive effort is bound to raise many difficult and crucial issues of argumentation theory. With all due attempts on my part to simplify and structure this discussion, it is still likely to demand a considerable effort of study and patience from my readers, whom I mean to address as professionals but not as professional philosophers. In any case, it will at times be difficult to keep a good sense of overview and orientation as to where exactly we stand, at each moment of the discussion, with our quest for developing the idea of communicative rationality. Not only Habermas will be our guide but also two other (as I see it) major *argumentation theorists*, I mean Aristotle (whom we know from an earlier essay in this series) and Stephen E. Toulmin (whom we have yet to meet). For this much is clear: we are just about to engage with the second, middle level of Table 1, the level of argumentation theory (as distinguished from the previously discussed level of language theory). Our aim at this level is to unfold the idea of discourse, whereas before it was to unfold the basic idea of communication that we described as "mutual understanding." As a further tool of orientation, I propose to structure our effort of unfolding the idea of discourse by aligning the four mentioned perspectives of argumentation theory with these four key requirements that Habermas, throughout his writings, associates with good argumentation: "rational motivation," the "ideal speech situation," "cogent

argumentation," and "metalevels of discourse," as suggested in Table 3. Readers may find it helpful later on to return to this table from time to time, to remind themselves of the basic ideas.

Unfolding the idea of discourse: four crucial steps Habermas (1984, p. 26) makes it clear that in a proper analysis of the requirements of argumentation, the analytical distinction of these four perspectives and corresponding requirements cannot ultimately be maintained, and I agree. Even so, I find it helpful to associate the four perspectives with four crucial steps that lead us from ordinary everyday communication to increasingly reflective discourse practice: I mean the four steps (1) from strategic to communicative action; (2) from communicative action to discourse; (3) from a deductive to a pragmatic logic of argumentation; and finally, (4) from initial to higher levels of reflection. Let us, then, introduce Habermas' understanding of discourse by taking with him these four steps.

***1. 'Rational motivation': the step
from strategic to communicative action***

The most basic condition of any search for mutual understanding is that those involved are sincerely interested in securing cooperative action, rather than just pursuing their own ends (i.e., using speech as a form of merely purposive-rational action). In the first case, Habermas speaks of *communicative action*; in the second, of *strategic action*. When we act communicatively rather than strategically, we try to coordinate our actions with those of others on the basis of mutual understanding and agreement, rather than achieving our goals through the use of force, deception, or other non-communicative means. This is not to say that the idea of communicative action requires us to renounce the pursuit of *individual goals*, as little as it means to replace action by communication. Rather, the point is that when we act in pursuit of our individual goals, we try to coordinate our actions communicatively, namely, inasmuch as they are not of a purely private nature but through their consequences may affect or concern others. There are two elementary traps to be avoided, then: we must not equate rational practice with rational communication – communication is a means and constituent of rational practice but cannot replace it – and we must not equate a cooperative stance with altruism. As Habermas (1984, p. 101)

makes clear, "communicative action designates a type of interaction that is coordinated through speech acts and does *not coincide with* them."

Renouncing a merely strategic attitude, but not individual goals To avoid such possible confusions, we may think and speak of communicative vs. strategic action as the alternative of *acting either with a communicative or a strategic attitude (or orientation)*, whereby a "communicative attitude" means that we try to avoid or resolve conflicts of interests based on mutual understanding, whereas a "strategic attitude" means that we pursue our individual advantage without concern for mutual understanding but rather rely on authority and power, or withhold information and use it tactically, do not disclose our true motives, or employ other means suitable to impose our goals or at least to give us a competitive advantage (note the managerial and military origin of the concept of "strategic" action).

The cooperative, but not altruistic, core of rational practice But why exactly is a communicative rather than strategic attitude required for rational discourse? It is not because we are expected to act altruistically but rather, to respect the universal validity basis of speech. As long as we communicate with an openly or latently strategic orientation, we do not reciprocally recognize the minimal normative core of rational practice that we have earlier described as the *telos* of mutual understanding. In Kantian terms, our communication risks being ethically inconsistent: the fact that we do communicate means we expect others to hear and accept what we say, yet at the same time we are not prepared to take seriously what *they* may have to say on our claims, except when it suits our purposes. In this precise sense, we refuse the cooperative attitude that constitutes the very core of communicative rationality. In the terms of Habermas, when we disregard the *telos* of mutual understanding that is built into the universal structure of rational speech, we thereby undermine the minimal normative foundation of rational social practice. In one word, a strategic attitude renders the search for genuine mutual understanding inoperative:

In communicative action, the validity basis of speech is presupposed. The universal validity claims (truth, rightness, truthfulness), which participants at least implicitly raise and reciprocally recognize, make possible *the consensus that carries action in common*. In strategic action, this background consensus is lacking. (Habermas, 1979c, p. 118, my italics; cf. similarly 1979a, p. 209n)

Rational motivation, then, means that we are willing to renounce a merely strategic attitude in favor of a genuinely cooperative attitude; or, with the short labels used by Habermas, that whenever we enter into dialogue, we engage in communicative rather than strategic action.

2. 'Ideal speech situation': the step from communicative action to discourse

There are basically two grounds on which we may want to see validity claims examined: either because their consequences concern us in ways that we find unacceptable or else, because we want to make sure an understanding we reach is adequate. In the first case, examining the validity claims in question is important because we *disagree*; in the second, because we *agree* and wish to make sure the agreement we have reached represents a rationally defensible rather than just a factual consensus, so that we may rightly expect others to agree, too.

Rationality, or the quest for 'reasons' The crucial point is the same, though: any understanding we reach must be based *in the end* on reasons that we are willing and able to defend (cf. Habermas, 1984, p. 17). To put it differently: the option of moving from the tacit consensus that carries communicative action to explicit discourse must remain open. On this option depends the rationality potential of communicative action. The "ideal speech situation" is Habermas' original, though somewhat controversial, attempt to explain the conditions that would make sure the discursive option indeed remains open and can be relied upon.

Before we consider these conditions, let us make sure we understand why the quest for "reasons" – the step from communicative action to discourse which these conditions are to secure – is crucial to Habermas' practical philosophy and its project of a communicative rationalization of practice. Obviously, the tacit consensus that constitutes the validity basis of communicative action is fragile; it holds as long as we are prepared to assume that those with whom we try to reach understanding are willing and able to back their claims with sound reasons. The situation can change swiftly when the validity claims some participants raise, and the way they defend them, become, for whatever reason, doubtful. When "the consensus that carries action in common" (as

quoted above from Habermas, 1979c, p. 118) breaks up, communicative action risks breaking down. People may be tempted to switch back to a strategic (i.e., competitive rather than cooperative) mode of thinking and acting. It is then essential that we are able to maintain or regain a basis for communicative action. This is the moment to mobilize the mentioned rationality potential:

The rationality proper to the communicative practice of everyday life points to the practice of *argumentation as a court of appeal* that makes it possible to *continue communicative action with other means* when disagreements can no longer be repaired with everyday routines and yet are not to be settled by the direct or strategic use of force. For this reason I believe that the concept of communicative rationality, which refers to an unclarified systematic interconnection of universal validity claims, can be adequately explicated only in terms of a theory of argumentation. (Habermas, 1984, p. 17f, my italics)

The argumentative principle In everyday communicative practice, discourse in the strict sense in which Habermas understands it will usually play a minor role. Even so, the power of a communicative model of the rationalization of society – of everyday problem solving and decision making in all domains of society, that is – hinges upon the *principle of argumentation*. The rationality potential that interests us depends on it. If we want to resolve our human differences with reason rather than with force, we need to find ways to employ "*argumentation as a court of appeal*" (1984, p. 17) whenever communicatively coordinated practice risks breaking down. *Arguments*, says Habermas (1996a, p. 225f), are "reasons proffered in discourse that redeem a validity claim." The trick, as it were, is to take communicative practice a crucial step further – from communicatively secured *coordination* of action, which relies on the mentioned tacit consensus, to communicatively secured *reflection* about what endangers this consensus. This move to a self-reflective metalevel of communicative action is what we mean with the step from communicative action to *discourse*. It offers us an opportunity to maintain a basic cooperative orientation even though the shared validity basis on which it depends has become problematic – a cooperative alternative to taking a merely strategic attitude.

In communicative action it is naively supposed that implicitly raised validity claims can be vindicated (or made immediately plausible by way of question and answer). In discourse, by contrast, the validity claims raised for statements and norms are hypothetically bracketed and thematically examined. As in communicative action, the participants in discourse retain a cooperative attitude. (Habermas, 1979a, p. 209n; similarly 1971c, pp. 115-117, 1973a, p. 18, and 1975, p. 107f)

When we enter into discourse, we switch to a form of communication that focuses on exchanging *arguments* rather than information, opinions, valuations, and expressions of subjectivity. That is, we "render inoperative all motives except solely that of a cooperative readiness to arrive at an understanding" as to how we want to handle a contested claim (1973a, p. 18f; similarly 1971c, pp. 115-117 and 1973c, p. 214f; 2009, Vol. 2, p. 212). We therefore suspend (or "bracket," as Habermas likes to say with Husserl) all issues other than those tied to the critique and vindication of that claim, with the aim of regaining the unanimity that previously existed but which has become problematic. In this way we can try to recover a shared validity basis for communicative action, whereby that shared validity basis is now located at the metalevel of a shared *procedure* for deciding rationally and cooperatively for or against disputed validity claims, rather than at the level of a "naively supposed" assertability of the claims themselves. "Discourse" is the specific form of communication that embodies this procedure.

'Ideal speech situation' The suspension of all motives except a cooperative search for the better argument is also what Habermas (1971c, pp. 136-141; 1973c, pp. 252-260; 2009, pp. 259-269) had in mind when he originally associated the discursive procedure with an anticipated *ideal speech situation*:

I call a speech situation ideal where communications are not only not hindered by external, contingent influences but also not hindered by constraints originating in the structure of communication itself. The ideal speech situation excludes systematic distortion of communication. More precisely, the structure of communication produces no constraints if and only if there is a symmetrical distribution of the chances of all participants in the discourse to select and perform speech acts. From this general requirement of symmetry we can then derive specific requirements [of symmetry] for the different classes of speech acts. (Habermas, 1973c, p. 255, and 2009, Vol. 2, p. 262, my transl.)

As far as I am aware, Habermas has not really outlined these specific requirements systematically; nor is such a specification indispensable to grasp the essential idea of a free and undistorted exchange of arguments. In *The Inclusion of the Other*, I find this helpful characterization of the ideal conditions of such an exchange:

The practice of argumentation sets in motion a *cooperative* competition for the better argument, where the orientation to the goal of a communicatively reached agreement unites the participants from the outset. The assumption that the

competition can lead to "rationally acceptable," hence "convincing," results is based on the rational force of arguments. Of course, what counts as a good or a bad argument can itself become a topic for discussion. Thus the rational acceptability of a statement ultimately rests on reasons in conjunction with specific features of the process of argumentation itself. The four most important features are: (i) that nobody who could make a relevant contribution may be excluded; (ii) that all participants are granted an equal opportunity to make contributions; (iii) that all participants must mean what they say; and (iv) that communication must be freed from external and internal coercion so that the "yes" or "no" stances that participants adopt on criticizable validity claims are motivated solely by the rational force of the better reasons. (Habermas, 1998, p. 44)

There can be little doubt that this is an ideal account of argumentation – the intent is not to give a "realistic" description but rather, to provide methodological orientation. The four features that Habermas mentions define the essential intent he associates with the "ideal speech situation." We may sum them up in terms of four key concerns towards which argumentative practice is to work, even if it cannot fully meet them:

- i. *open access* to everyone concerned,
- ii. *equal argumentative chances* for everyone participating,
- iii. *sincerity* of all participants, and
- iv. *absence of external and internal coercion* or other sources of distortion (authority, manipulation, etc.).

Practice can always do better with regard to these four concerns; at least in this sense they are not hopelessly idealistic. And of course, Habermas' point is that when we enter into an argument, we have "always already" accepted the four concerns; for otherwise, argumentation cannot improve mutual understanding and thus is pointless. Still, the question remains: In what way can an exchange of arguments under such anticipated conditions be assumed to produce arguments that are not only "better" (i.e., better acceptable to the participants) but also more "rational" (justified) than others? Isn't "better" a hopelessly normative category? As if to respond to such doubts, Habermas continues:

If everyone who engages in argumentation must make at least these pragmatic presuppositions, then in virtue of the (i) public character of practical discourses and the inclusion of all concerned and (ii) the equal communicative rights of all participants, only reasons that give equal weight to the interests and evaluative orientations of everybody can influence the outcome of practical discourses; and because of the absence of (iii) deception and (iv) coercion, nothing but reasons can tip the balance in favor of the acceptance of a controversial norm." (Habermas, 1998, p. 44)

That is, a proper argumentative process must give "equal weight" to all

concerns – be "fair" – and in this procedural sense may be called "rational" (or more precisely, "rationally motivated") whatever the outcome. If such an understanding of the intent of the ideal speech situation is not entirely mistaken, we may define it as follows.

Definition: The *ideal speech situation* stands for the sum-total of all those conditions of discourse which in principle would allow people to meet as equals, so that the only force at work would be the more or less compelling nature of their arguments.

Ideal, yet real To the extent a discourse situation comes close to such conditions, we can have faith in the outcome of a discourse, as we have reasons to assume that the validity basis of speech (as explained earlier) is given and that the participants are indeed rationally motivated (cf. 1971c, pp. 122 and 136f; 1973b, p. 386; 1973c, pp. 252-260; 1984, p. 25f; 2009, Vol. 2, pp. 259-269). However, more important is another implication of the concept, one that does not depend on the extent to which real-world discourse situations are ideal. The point is, as Habermas argues, that discourse participants *cannot help but* anticipate an ideal speech situation – otherwise it would be pointless for them to enter into a discourse, as we have said above. However counter-factual the idea may remain, it is nevertheless effective. The conditions of the ideal speech situation are in this sense *ideal and real at once* (cf. 1971c, pp. 120, 122, and 137; 1973c, p. 258; 2009, Vol. 2, p. 266f).

Working towards more symmetry To avoid a one-sidedly ideal reading of his intentions, Habermas now prefers to speak of *general* or *formal* (rather than ideal) *pragmatic presuppositions* of argumentation (e.g., 1984, pp. 25 and 34; 1998, p. 44) or simply of "the presuppositions of argumentation" (e.g., 2009, Vol. 2, p. 266, a passage that has been slightly reformulated as compared to 1973c, p. 258).⁵⁾ Unfortunately, this newer formulation lacks the clout of the original term and may not be particularly helpful to readers not familiar with Habermas' theoretical framework. It might be more helpful for them to think and speak of *general symmetry conditions* of rational speech, a formulation that Habermas uses less often (1984, p. 25). It seems to me this latter term nicely sums up the core idea that should matter to us practically with a view to promoting discursive practice, I mean the idea of

allowing people to meet as equals, or in other words, enabling them to voice and argue their concerns at eye-level – the core idea of the definition suggested above. To be sure, such symmetry remains no less an ideal than "ideal speech," but again: it nevertheless provides orientation, for we can always do better. It is largely in our power to make such progress; we can actually *do* quite a lot to create *more* (though imperfect) symmetry, here and now, wherever and whenever we have a chance to settle our differences discursively. Working towards argumentative symmetry makes sense regardless of how unrealistic an ideal it may be; for the only alternative is to accept that implicitly or explicitly, differences are handled through a strategic rather than communicative mode of interaction.

In the next, second part of this three-part review of the practical philosophy of Habermas, we will consider the methodological *piece de résistance* of the formal-pragmatic approach, the theory of argumentation. What does formal pragmatics teach us about the nature of a sound (compelling, "rational") argument, and how can we practice it with a view to fostering communicative rationality?

Notes

1) As Habermas explains: "In filling out the double structure of speech participants in dialogue communicate on two levels simultaneously. They combine communication of a content with communication about the role in which the communicated content is used.... Thus the peculiar reflexivity of natural language rests in the first instance on the combination of a communication of content – effected in an objectivating attitude – with a communication concerning the relational aspect in which the content is to be understood – effected in a performative attitude." (1979a, p. 42f) The term "performative" refers to the fact that we use language to perform actions. [\[BACK\]](#)

2) The three viewpoints from which we can relate to the world and communicate about it – Habermas' (1984, p. 100) "three worlds" – are not really parallel to Popper's (1968; 1972, pp. 106-152) well-known "three-world model," with which they are often associated; in Popper's model, the interactive or social dimension of "our" world has no place. I find it more helpful to associate Habermas' three viewpoints with the earlier-mentioned "rationalization complexes" worked out in the *Theory of Communicative Action* through a discussion of the work of Max Weber (Habermas, 1984, pp. 234-240, esp. 238f). [\[BACK\]](#)

3) The descriptions after the semicolons do not follow Habermas' terms; the descriptions before the semicolons use his more recent among several terminologies he has used. With Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), Habermas occasionally (e.g., 1973, p. 220; 1979a, pp. 29, 33f; 1984, p. 288f) also refers to the constative function as the "propositional" or "locutionary" use of language and then distinguishes from it the "performative" or the "illocutionary" and "perlocutionary" uses. With Austin, the illocutionary function of speech consists in what one does in saying something, whereas the perlocutionary function consists in the effect this may have on the hearer; for example, in saying to my wife "I'll help you to do the shopping tomorrow" (locutionary act) I offer a promise to her (illocutionary act) that may catch her by surprise and make her happy (perlocutionary act). Further, particularly in his early writings on the subject, Habermas (1971c, p. 111f; 1973c, p. 228; 1979a, p. 53-58) sometimes aligns constative speech acts with a "cognitive" attitude

(or use of language, or mode of communication) while aligning regulative speech acts with an "interactive," and expressive speech acts with a "representative," mode. As these different terminologies are not entirely stable and congruent, I have taken the liberty of employing a selection of Habermas' more recent terminology along with my own formulations. [\[BACK\]](#)

4) With reference to the universal nature of the validity claims, Habermas (e.g., 1979a, pp. 1, 5, 21, 25f, and 44; 1984, pp. 95 and 277) originally suggested the name "*universal pragmatics*" for the discipline concerned with the analysis of the validity basis of speech. He now (e.g., 1984, pp. 95, 138f, 276f) prefers to speak of "*formal pragmatics*," so as to make it clear that the pragmatic aspects of speech in question do not merely call for, and allow of, *empirical* analysis, as conventional linguistics holds. Rather, Habermas argues and also proves by his work, they are as accessible to *formal-reconstructive* analysis (i.e., to methodological elaboration)) as are the phonetic, morphological, syntactic, and semantic aspects of language. [\[BACK\]](#)

5) Even where Habermas does not employ qualifications such as "general," "general pragmatic" or "formal-pragmatic" explicitly, it should be clear that he is referring to formal (i.e. structural) properties of communication which are built into the pragmatics of all competent speech (its universal validity basis, that is). This is why the conditions in question can and need to be "reconstructed" through general linguistic (or more accurately, "language-pragmatic") analysis rather than merely empirically, as linguists conventionally assumed (compare note 4). [\[BACK\]](#)

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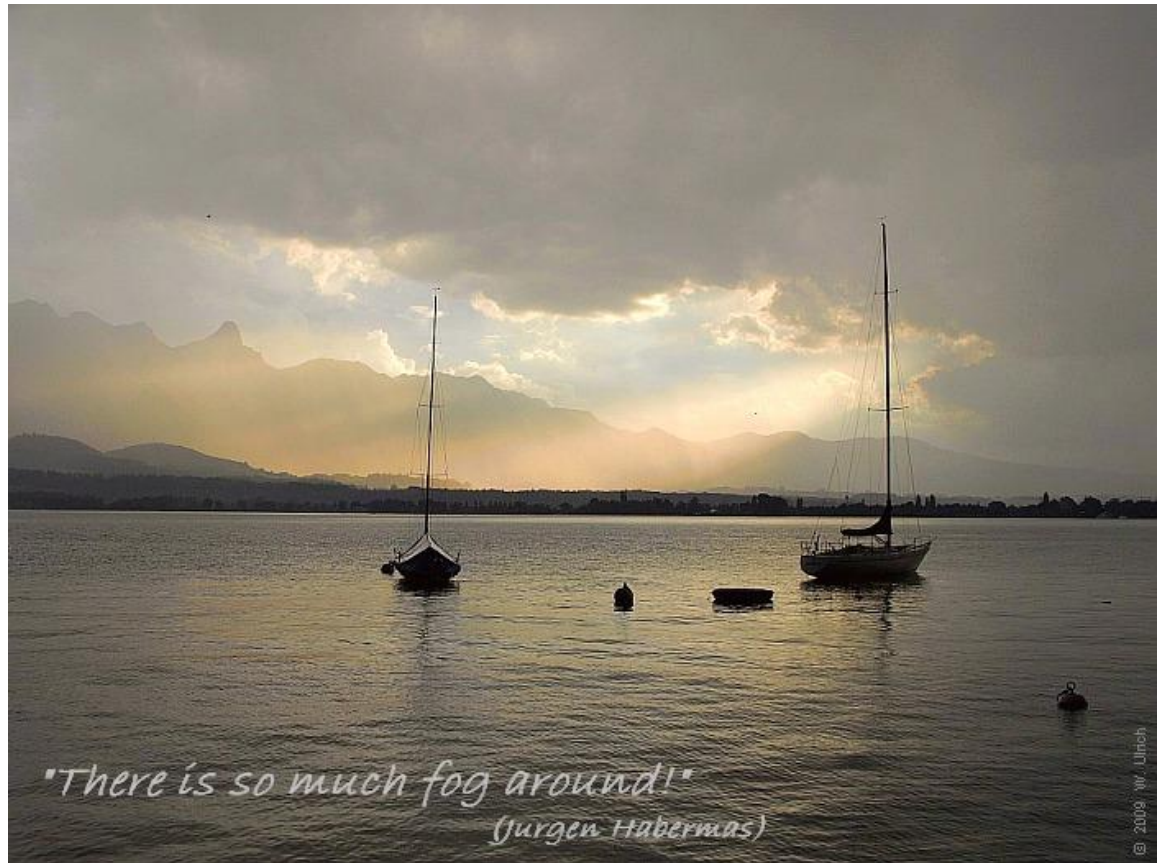
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Picture data Digital photograph taken on 26 July 2008, around 8:30 p.m., at Lake Thun, Switzerland. ISO 100, exposure mode aperture priority, exposure time 1/250 seconds, aperture f/5.6, exposure bias -0.30, focal length 40 mm (equivalent to 80 mm with a conventional 35 mm camera). Original resolution 3648 x 2736 pixels; current resolution 700 x 525 pixels, compressed to 104 KB.

September-October, 2009



Commitment for the uncompleted project of modernity: Jurgen Habermas

„There is so much fog around today, everywhere.
I don't give up the hope it can get thinner.”

(Jurgen Habermas, in an interview of 1981, my transl. from 1985, p. 208)

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