D. POLITICS OF TRUTH:

FOUCAULT AND HABERMAS

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AGONISTIC ETHICS AND HISTORICAL ONTOLOGY:

FOUCAULT

Introduction

In his final interview Foucault describes his philosophical writings as an attempt 'to locate three major types of problems: the problem of truth, the problem of power, and the problem of individual conduct'. In view of the modern humanist impasse in the actualisation of freedom - where 'we have been trapped in our own history' as both the subject and object of a transcendental a priori claim to moral truth - Foucault sets about revaluing these questions. They are addressed with varying intensity in what have become known as his archaeological, genealogical and ethical periods respectively. Broadly speaking the two earlier periods explore how we have been produced through certain historical relations of power. Foucault's archaeological period examines the historically discontinuous, discursive regularities which have created us as sovereign subjects with a capacity for rational truth. His genealogical period examines the historical dispositif of social power that constitutes us as moral subjects capable of self-disciplined thoughts and actions. In his later work on ethics Foucault speaks of freedom as 'the elaboration of one's own life as a personal work of art'. Freedom henceforth no longer finds expression in actions which conform to a rational, moral truth but rather in the ethical discipline of caring for the self and others through aesthetically pleasing modes of conduct. Freedom, in other words, is now portrayed as an autonomous, agonistic regime of self-disciplinary


pleasures. Truth is no longer the prerogative of a universal conceptual *ratio*, but rather, following the Socratic notion of *parrhésia*, occurs through ongoing aesthetic evaluations of self-conduct. With the capacity to strategically adopt different styles of conduct according to particular social situations, the Foucauldian self thereby actualises its own particular freedom. Freedom is here practised as an ethico-aesthetic politics of truth. In contrast, the modern humanist subject, Foucault argues, remains blocked by theoretical ambiguities arising through its transcendental *a priori* claim to truth; ambiguities which undercut its quest for enlightenment and freedom. Critically transgressing the modern normative standard of rational ‘man’ as the foundation of an ethics of freedom, Foucault sets up an alternative politics of truth, that of ethico-aesthetic self-creation.

With this aesthetically developed politics of ethical truth Foucault extends that strand of philosophical modernism referred to here as existential *poiesis*. Moreover, he refers to his reading of Nietzsche and Heidegger as the two ‘fundamental experiences’ guiding his thinking. Nietzsche’s critique of enlightenment morality and its *a priori* rational subject, his genealogical alternative to the traditional historical notions of origin and progress, and his attempt to revalue life as an ongoing work of art, as an agonistic will to power, are all central aspects of Foucault’s philosophical discourse. Nevertheless those humanist, anthropological remainders in Nietzsche’s thought, namely the hierarchical unity of somatic drives and the monological character of the *Übermensch*, are discarded. Foucault thus recasts the agonism of aesthetic self-production in terms of an ethico-political relation both to oneself and to others. Indeed this self-transforming ethics, he argues, has specific social effects on the particular practices or relations of power within which it occurs. As for the body and its drives, these are no longer viewed as the primary constituents of the will to power. Rather the critical drive to an aesthetically lived freedom arises through a cultural affinity or sense of historical belonging to the critical *ethos* of modernity. This historico-cultural foundation for critique undermines, however, the critical force of Foucault’s ethics of freedom. I shall return to this question in the final part of this section entitled ‘Politics and Ethics’.

As for Heidegger, his influence is most apparent in Foucault’s understanding of power as the ontological clearing or space in which our social relations are being

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continually or historically remodelled. For not unlike Heidegger's ontological concept of Being, power, with Foucault -

is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere. And "Power", insofar as it is permanent, repetitious, inert, and self-reproducing, is simply the overall effect that emerges from all these mobilities, the concatenation that rests on each of them and seeks in turn to arrest their movement. One needs to be nominalistic, no doubt: power is not an institution, and not a structure: neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society.

Foucault thereby rejects the modern binarism of subject and object, of mind and body, in favour of a multi-dimensional field of psychological and social relations through which our particular being-in-the-world is historically constituted. Accordingly, Foucault's nominalist analysis of power no longer adheres to the traditionally essentialist notion of sovereignty where power is viewed as the exercise of politically conferred rights. From this hierarchically organised perspective, power is misapprehended merely as an index of oppression and repression. However power, Foucault argues 'is less a confrontation between two adversaries or the linking of one to the other than a question of government'. Hence the terms 'government' and 'power' no longer refer to the political means by which a state exercises control over its population. Rather government, or power, is the omnipresent effect created by people in their social relations with others. Foucault's idea of power refers to individual and group actions that produce and constrain each other.

I intend this concept of 'governmentality' to cover the whole range of practices that constitute, define, organize, and instrumentalize the strategies that individuals in their freedom can use in dealing with each other.

Concerned with elaborating historically strategic situations of government, Foucault also presents this nominalist description of power relations, however, as an historical ontology of power. Foucault thereby rejects Heidegger's more static ontology of Being as the

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5 For a further commentary regarding Heidegger's philosophical influence on Foucault's notion of power see the article by H. Dreyfus on 'Being and Power: Heidegger and Foucault' in the International Journal of Philosophical Studies vol.4, no.2, 1996.


7 M. Foucault, 'The Subject and Power' op. cit., p.221.
forgotten origin of our being-in-the-world. He also spurns the Heideggerian claim to an authentic *Dasein* and its existential implications. While the Foucauldian self is historically and socially produced through these ontological relations of power, there is correlatively, however, a claim to active self-transfiguration both within and beyond those same power relations. Indeed, as already indicated, Foucault invokes a Nietzschean ethics of aesthetic self-creation, a will-to-power to master oneself and become exemplary to others. Hence the social relations of power at once implicate a capacity for resistance; a resistance, however, which is more precisely a disciplined act of self-transfiguration, and which at once alters those relations of power. In other words, contrary to neo-Marxist theories of power and freedom, power, with Foucault, does not negate freedom but rather enables some measure of productive self-creation, indeed the actualisation of freedom, within its otherwise constraining effects.

In confronting Foucault’s claim to freedom with Adorno’s concern for its substantial absence and extremely bleak historical prospects, what stands out are their very different responses to the questions of truth, freedom and universal history. Both are nevertheless similarly concerned with critically addressing our historical production as rationally enlightened and morally free subjects. Foucault splinters this enlightened subject into multiple self-enhancing styles and strategies of an ethico-aesthetic self. In contrast Adorno retains the rational, moral subject, albeit one mediated both affectively and reflectively through art and aesthetic discourse. Furthermore, unlike Foucault, Adorno does not consider critical resistance, whether on the part of an individual or social class, a sufficient index of freedom’s actuality. Similarly, however, both reject the Hegelian claim to a universal history of progress. Yet where Foucault denies any notion of universal history in the name of a discontinuous, non-linear concatenation of divergent and diverging forces, Adorno argues that history remains a universal history of domination. While also emphasising the discontinuities of history, this nonetheless universal history of sacrifice and suffering, ‘must’, according to Adorno, ‘be construed and [critically] denied’. Adorno’s critique of the universal history of domination thus entails a utopian perspective concerning universal social freedom. Foucault, however,

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{translation modified between brackets}
rejects any such utopian hope as a failure to recognise that freedom without the
constraining effects of power is altogether absurd. Foucault’s claim to an already actual
personal freedom would for Adorno, on the other hand, constitute nothing but a
semblance of freedom; a semblance necessary for the contemporary economic
machinations of capital to maintain its administrative and disciplinary control over all
individuals.

Anthropology and Archaeology

In his text *The Order of Things*, Foucault portrays the historical shift from neo-
Classical to Modern culture as an archaeological mutation in anonymously produced
discursive regularities. Furthermore, this change in the formative rules of discourse
carries with it an epistemological shift from the metaphysical postulate of an infinite God
as the world’s foundation to an anthropological postulate, where the finite nature of
‘man’ now assumes that grounding function. Unable to refer all representations back to
an infinite source of truth, and so reliant solely on the capacity for self-reflective reason,
modern ‘man’ takes up the ‘ambiguous position [both] as an object of knowledge and as
a subject that knows’. From this principal ambiguity, and in what Foucault refers to as
the modern analytic of finitude, there arise three further ambiguities. These involve
relations between empirical and transcendental modes of knowing, the cogito and the
unthought, and the retreat and return of the origin. What these distinctions portend, as
Foucault puts it, is an ‘ever-to-be-accomplished unveiling of the Same’ - that is to say, an
always incomplete disclosure of what it is to be ‘man’.

With the distinction between empirical knowledge and its transcendental
conditions of possibility, first enunciated by Kant, there emerge two separate and
seemingly independent forms of philosophical anthropology. While the one limits our
knowledge of human life to the simple positivity of empirical experience, the other sets
out transcendental, *a priori* conditions that make such knowledge possible. Knowledge of
these transcendental conditions nevertheless remains dependent on empirical experience.
This indicates a paradoxical situation in which the transcendental conditions of possible
experience at once constitute an *a posteriori* analytic of empirical experience. In view of

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11 *Ibid.*, p.312. {translation modified between brackets}
this ambiguity, the sovereign cogito recognises that its claim to knowledge has been limited by that which it cannot think, by those conditions of possibility which remain unthought in its claim to knowledge. This duality of thought and its enigmatic other, the cogito and the unthought, is the result of Kant's primary distinction between the phenomenological knowledge of objects in consciousness and their unknowable, noumenal quality of existing in themselves. This always opaque other of thought thereby places the modern subject perpetually at risk of failing to interpret adequately its experience of the world. Attempting to overcome this problem through a definitive search for the historical origins of 'man', there emerges, however, a further ambiguity. For while this origin is sought outside 'man', always beyond the particular historical locality in which he is situated, and so effects an infinite retreat from 'man', at the same time it has an enduring proximity to him in so far as he is himself that origin. Indeed the modern anthropos is at once the origin not only of this search for origins, but also the progenitor of those conditions that will shape his future experience. Here in its very disappearance, then, is the paradoxical return of the temporal origin, which is 'man'.

This quadrilateral analytic of finitude with its paradoxical doubles, Foucault argues, has led modern anthropological reflection into a dialectical logic whose utopian teleology is indicative of the deep epistemological and historical sleep into which modern thought has fallen. For the ambiguities which persist in this analytic of finitude, despite constant attempts to resolve them in a teleological figure of the 'Same', demonstrate a never to be fulfilled articulation of human self-identity; or what is an impossible, never to be actualised promise of human freedom. What is necessary for the sake of freedom, Foucault contends, is the demolition of this anthropological analytic of finitude, of the sovereign subject and its epistemologically deployed mode of 'scientific' understanding.

Foucault's critical analysis of this paradox laden anthropology of scientific truth consists in laying bare the 'historical a priori' of its discursive practices. This means bringing to light those rules of discursive formation to which the modern anthropological episteme adheres, and without which its claim to scientific truth could not be understood. These rules of enunciation are already immanently couched within the propositional relations that characteristically order the anthropological form of knowledge.

12 Ibid., p.340.
connect; and if they are not modified with the least of them, they modify them, and are transformed with them into certain decisive thresholds. The a priori of positivities is not only the system of a temporal dispersion; it is itself a transformable group.13

The thresholds to which Foucault refers indicate the archaeological breaks in the historical systems of discursive rules, which distinguish renaissance, neo-classical, and modern anthropological modes of knowledge. To reveal the archive of discursive rules which characterises a particular historical form of knowledge is to uncover what Foucault also calls the ‘positive unconscious’ of that knowledge.14 The archive of discursive regularities is that field of enunciative possibilities through which we are unconsciously inscribed within a particular culture of knowledge. Foucault sets out the advantages this archaeological disclosure of the unconscious rules of discursive conduct has over modern anthropological claims to knowledge when he says -

the [archaeological] diagnosis does not establish the fact of our identity by the play of distinctions. It establishes that we are difference, that our reason is the difference of discourses, our history the difference of times, ourselves the difference of masks. That difference, far from being the forgotten and recovered origin, is this dispersion that we are and make.15

What remains problematic in Foucault’s archaeological analysis of different epistemic formations is the now ambivalent character of the discursive regularities at work in those archives. For, on the one hand, these rules are phenomenologically constituted by discourse itself, that is, they become evident through an empirically descriptive account of discursive formations. Yet, on the other hand, they also constitute the prescriptive or governing conditions of possibility through which an episteme makes its historically particular claim to truth. As Dreyfus and Rabinow point out -

to pass from an analysis of positivities into elements to an analytic providing the ground of the possibility of its own method and its objects’ reproduces the ambivalent relationship between the empirical and the transcendental which characterises humanist discourse.16

Thus the critique Foucault levels against the anthropological episteme, concerning its inability to unambiguously reveal its conditions of possibility, may be effectively turned back on his own archaeological procedure. Moreover the autonomous character of

14 M. Foucault, The Order of Things op. cit., p.xi
16 H. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow, Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics op. cit., p.92.
archaeological discourse, to which Foucault explicitly adheres, means that Foucault’s critique of anthropological thought ‘is incapable of accounting for its own conditions of possibility’. In other words, the critical capacity of archaeological analysis has no particular basis other than its own differential claim to autonomy with respect to anthropological thought.

**History and Genealogy**

After acknowledging in ‘The Discourse on Language’ that it will be necessary to explicate certain externally situated conditions of possibility or limits for his archaeological mode of critique, Foucault goes on to develop the framework in which the disclosure of those limits can be made possible. He states -

> In seeking in *The Order of Things* to write a history of the *episteme*, I was still caught in an impasse. What I should like to do now is to try and show that what I call an apparatus is a much more general case of the *episteme*; or rather, that the *episteme* is a specifically discursive apparatus, whereas the apparatus in its general form is both discursive and non-discursive, its elements being much more heterogeneous.

This more general apparatus or *dispositif*, Foucault argues, will not only serve to elucidate the manner in which specific non-discursive social practices produce, and so constitute the condition of possibility of particular types of discursive knowledge, but it will also reveal the effects such knowledge has on these non-discursive practices. This double-edged *dispositif*, with its capacity to show the particular historical conjuncture of discursive and non-discursive practices, is just that which Nietzsche had already invoked as a specifically genealogical approach to history. Genealogy thus becomes the limiting condition of possibility of the archaeological method, but without the encumbrance of anthropology’s transcendental categories and their status as *a priori* conditions of rational and moral truth.

In pursuing Nietzsche’s notion of genealogy as an ‘effective’ history of the present, Foucault’s concern is to reveal the strategic relations between specific social

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18 M. Foucault, ‘The Discourse on Language’ [1970] in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* op. cit. Here Foucault states with respect to discourse generally ‘... that we should look for its external conditions of existence, for that which gives rise to the chance series of these events and fixes its limits’, p.229.

practices and those forms of knowledge that sustain and are sustained by these practices. Genealogy is thereby, as Foucault puts it -

an historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying.\(^{20}\)

In contrast to anthropology's transcendental response to history, genealogical investigation now acknowledges its immanently situated historical interest or perspective - a perspective whose historical *dispositif* will not only reveal the contingencies which produce us, but will thereby gesture towards that which we might otherwise become. Genealogy is thus critical history; a history, which examines those discursive and non-discursive practices in which we are today engaged. It does this, however, not in the name of some pre-established metaphysical truth concerning the nature of 'man', but through the *pathos* of reflective distance, which allows for a diagnosis of the healthy or diseased condition of present practices. 'Its task', Foucault contends, 'is to become a curative science'.\(^{21}\) In so doing, the genealogy of contemporary social practices now provides the critical criteria or conditions of possibility for archaeological evaluation.

The specific contemporary practice, which Foucault critically addresses in his elaboration of Nietzsche's 'curative' genealogy, is anthropology's historical pursuit of a pre-historical origin of 'man'. Foucault characterises this historical search as an attempt to identify the primordial perfection of a human nature which has been lost, and whose truth is then teleologically affirmed as that which 'man' must reclaim. However this retreat of the origin from 'man', and its simultaneous return as 'man' in his capacity to create present and future worlds, leads to an unresolvable dilemma. For this origin is construed both as an already historically situated 'man' and as a yet to be discovered, pre-historical condition of 'man'. Moreover, this ambiguity leads to 'the history of an error we call truth'.\(^{22}\) For not only does this search for an origin imply a suprahistorical, metaphysical perspective from which this search may be 'objectively', 'truthfully' conducted, but it also imposes on otherwise dispersed and discontinuous events an historically unified linearity of continuous human progress towards that truth.


Against the ambiguous claim to historical truth arising through the anthropological search for an historical origin, Foucault takes up Nietzsche's understanding of 'social descent' and 'emergence' as effective genealogical perspectives through which this ambiguity may be dissolved. Considering in the first instance Nietzsche's idea of social descent - here we are no longer attempting to identify some ultimately unknowable historical origin, but are involved in uncovering the multiple social and racial origins which intersect in our present self-constitution. In so tracing the various sources of our social descent, we no longer view ourselves as the result of an unbroken line of historical development, but rather as the belonging together of a discontinuous cluster of dispersed historical accidents. Indeed our social descent is always already inscribed in our bodies, in all the diverse biological and temperamental aspects that we have inherited from our forebears. In contrast to what Nietzsche at times intimates, this does not mean that we are in possession of any unified, substantial self. Rather, with Foucault, our social descent indicates that our bodies are 'the locus of a dissociated self ... and a volume in perpetual disintegration'. For the body is that place of constant conflict between certain historical inscriptions which sustain it, and others which prescribe its biological destruction. With this notion of social descent Foucault thereby transfigures the anthropologically designated retreat and return of the origin as the retreat and return of a self-preserving struggle within the historically inscribed body. The ambiguity of the former, where the origin of history is situated both within and beyond 'man', has been dissolved by the total immanence of history within the body's constant struggle for survival.

Judith Butler has raised a serious objection to this cultural merging of the body and history in Foucault's understanding of social descent. She makes the point that -

Although Foucault appears to argue that the body does not exist outside the terms of its cultural inscription, it seems that the very mechanism of 'inscription' implies a power that is necessarily external to the body itself. The critical question that emerges from these considerations is whether the understanding of the process of cultural construction on the model of 'inscription' ... entails that the 'constructed' or 'inscribed' body have an ontological status apart from that inscription, precisely the claim that Foucault wants to refute.  

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23 Ibid., p.83.
In contrast to Nietzsche, Foucault denies altogether any heteronomy of the body and history precisely in order to overcome the anthropological ambiguity of historical origins occasioned by such a determinate, substantial difference. Yet, in so doing, he sets up what appears more like their unmediated identity. Its historical inscriptions wholly determine the life of the body. The body becomes a discursive artefact of history through which the various signifying practices of the latter may be read. Nietzsche’s second genealogical perspective on historical origins, namely that of historical ‘emergence’, is then employed by Foucault, in an unsuccessful attempt to distance himself from this over-bearing determinism.

This idea of historical ‘emergence’ refers neither to a singular beginning nor end of history whose origin is ‘man’, but rather to multiple historical eruptions of different social forces. What emerges historically does so not in a space common to those engaged in struggle but in the uncommon opening between them, in what Nietzsche calls the ‘non-place’ of history. As for what indeed historically emerges, Foucault puts it like this - only a single drama is ever staged in this “non-place”, the endlessly repeated play of dominations. ... Humanity does not gradually progress from combat to combat until it arrives at universal reciprocity, where the rule of law finally replaces warfare; humanity installs each of its violences in a system of rules and thus proceeds from domination to domination.\(^{25}\)

Genealogy is, from this perspective, a series of interpretations of this repeated emergence, through struggle, of different systems of social domination. These interpretations are not to be construed, however, as ‘the successive configurations of an identical meaning’.\(^{26}\) That is to say, they are not to be misconstrued as indicative of some continuous, progressive form of universal history emerging from a singular anthropological origin. Indeed these discontinuous interpretations form part of a tactical manœuvre to upstage the still pre-eminent view of history as universally progressive - or indeed universal in any respect whatsoever. One of these tactics, as Foucault points out, is to parody history as a ‘concerted carnival’ of multiple masks and discontinuities. In so doing genealogy becomes a counternemory to the respectively heroic and linear models of monumental and antiquarian history. Moreover the model of critical history, based on past injustices and its claim to some rational, historical truth, is also parodied in the now


explicit sacrifice of 'man' as a self-determining subject of knowledge. Inherent within that subject's rationalistic claim to a universal historical truth, Foucault argues, is the violence directed at those unwilling to accept it. The outcome of such violence is nothing short of 'man's' ultimate self-destruction. In parodying the violence inherent in this will to an eternal historical truth, genealogy adopts a non-universalist, strategically oriented, perspectival will to truth within what nevertheless remains a recurring, indeed universal history of domination and struggle. In effect Foucault's denial of universal history flies in the face of his simultaneous affirmation of the eternal recurrence of domination and struggle.

Like Foucault, Adorno draws attention to the discontinuities of actual history over and against Hegel's universally progressive idea of history. In contrast to Foucault's outright denial of any universal history, however, Adorno is critical of what he perceives as the universally recurring discontinuities of domination and struggle - just that which Nietzsche and Foucault positively affirm. In short, Adorno construes this universal history not as one -

lead[ing] from savagery to humanitarianism, but ... [as] one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb. It ends in the total menace which organized mankind poses to organized men, in the epítome of discontinuity. It is the horror that verifies Hegel and stands him on his head. If he transfigured the totality of historic suffering into the positivity of the self-realizing absolute, the One and All that keeps rolling on to this day ... would teleologically be the absolute of suffering.27

While Adorno remains critical of this universal, albeit discontinuous history of domination and struggle, Foucault later refers to this perpetual historical relation as an historical ontology of power - that is, an historical relation within which our ontic relations or practices are thoroughly circumscribed. In effect, the relationship between the Foucauldian perspectives of 'emergence' and 'social descent' now discloses an ambiguity altogether similar to that which Dreyfus and Rabinow outlined earlier with respect to Foucault's archaeological method. For, on the one hand, the historical ontology of domination and struggle is said to be a nominalist account of the body's historically inscribed struggle for survival. Yet this historical ontology also constitutes a genealogical condition of possibility through which a body unavoidably engages in its particular struggle for self-preservation. Rather than overcoming the anthropological ambiguity of
historical origins, whether as historical ‘man’ or a pre-historical condition of ‘man’, Foucault effectively transfigures it. Indeed we are now confronted with an historically inscribed corporeal condition which refuses, in nominalist fashion, what is at once its ontological condition of historical possibility - namely the eternal recurrence of domination and struggle.

**Power/Knowledge Relations and the Exercise of Power**

In an attempt to specify more precisely the relations between this genealogical dispositif and actual social practices, Foucault begins to focus on the current historical nexus of what he now refers to as power/knowledge relations. In so doing he also remains concerned with how power may be exercised against and within these currently prevailing relations of power/knowledge. Following Foucault’s lead in ‘The Subject and Power’, I shall discuss this resistant exercise of power, however, only after first elaborating what he understands by the historical ontology of power/knowledge relations. With respect to these relations Foucault states -

> in any society, there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterise and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse. There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operates through and on the basis of this association. We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth.28

Knowledge then is not produced independently of relations of power, that is, by a subject outside those relations, but rather this subject and the forms of knowledge to which it gives expression are themselves the effect of a specific historical emergence of power/knowledge relations. In other words the production of truth, like that of power, occurs anonymously by way of a particular historical conjunction of power/knowledge relations. For this reason, Foucault maintains, it will be necessary to investigate not so much a sovereign subject’s intentional wielding of power, as in the traditional manner,

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but rather the effects or traces of the power/knowledge nexus in its particular historical applications.

The specific historicity of this ontologically conceived relation is made evident through those relatively recent *epistemes* of metaphysical and anthropological knowledge, which respectively accompany what Foucault calls the monarchic and bourgeois structures of power. In both cases knowledge serves to legitimize those relations of power through an articulation of their political necessity or truth, and these relations of power themselves produce such 'true' knowledge, albeit indirectly, as a crucial support in their own maintenance. In view of the production and transmission of knowledge through the relations of power to which it is historically bound, knowledge and its methods, Foucault contends, can no longer be construed as ideological. Nevertheless, what the legitimating discourses pertaining to monarchic and bourgeois relations of power obscure through their concentration on sovereign rights, he argues, are the effects of domination at work in these relations of power. Foucault thus no longer explores the mechanisms of power through what earlier theories portray as their central point of origin, the sovereign nation state, but rather through their more dispersed, regional effects.

We must eschew the model of Leviathan in the study of power. We must escape from the limited field of juridical sovereignty and State institutions, and instead base our analysis of power on the study of the techniques and tactics of domination. In other words, the effects of domination are particularly evident in those local networks of power/knowledge which subjugate the populace through their historically sedimented social structures. Foucault thereby interprets the modern legal culture of freedom and rights as a context equally rich with polymorphous techniques of social domination. The specific techniques at work in these regional forms of domination may nevertheless support or become integrated within a more general historical type of social domination.

With the monarchical regime of sovereignty, an absolute power had been invested directly in the King's body, which was held to represent the entire social body. Any injury to the social body through a refusal of obligations was at once an injury to the body of the monarch. Correlatively punishment was exacted directly on the body of the offender. With the shift to more democratic relations of power during the eighteenth century, an

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extensive system of police and bureaucratic surveillance was established where social defaulters were now subject to the corrective, disciplinary strategy of incarceration. The newly developed legal codes defining the limits of social interaction also maintained the idea of sovereignty albeit now in terms of an individual freedom dependent on the national collective, the rights of the State to which all individuals are contractually tied. This democratisation of sovereignty and its attendant rights, Foucault maintains, nevertheless disguises the coercive, disciplinary techniques of power on which it is founded. Indeed the various discursive forms that support a multiplicity of disciplinary techniques, namely the human sciences, are constructed according to a behaviouristic code of social normalisation. Not surprisingly the disciplinary techniques of normalisation supported by the human sciences often conflict with the juridical code of sovereign right, of an individual freedom inscribed in legal discourse. In order to displace this juridical-disciplinary conflict, which is the moral analogue of the modern epistemological ambiguity of ‘man’ as both the subject and object of knowledge, Foucault advocates the development of a non-coercive, anti-disciplinary system of power relations. This would dispense with the principle of sovereignty and the disguised violence inherent in its juridical claim to contractual rights and obligations.

The power relations which historically govern both the early modern principle of sovereignty and modern disciplinary power, where the nation state acts ever more efficiently as the primary instrument of power, is generally referred to by Foucault as a system of pastoral power. For not unlike the Christian Church, the modern state is concerned with the welfare of the community and with that of the individuals who make up that community. Indeed the pastoral power exercised by the Church, and later by the public institutions of the modern State, is also referred to as an individualising power; that is, a power which produces us as individuals. Whereas the power of the Church was directed at ensuring the salvation of individuals in a life after death, the power of the State is focused rather on the health and well-being of individuals in this life here and now. With the modern emergence of public institutions concerned with matters such as health, education, and employment, the modern state has gradually usurped the pastoral role previously undertaken by the Church. What continues to strengthen the capacity of the State’s pastoral exercise of power, Foucault argues, is its integrating or totalising effect; an effect which arises precisely through the normalising techniques of
individuation. In other words, in so far as we accept our normalisation as modern individuals, at the same time we acquiesce in the ever more totalising web of power relations set up by the State. Against what he calls this ‘double bind’, Foucault suggests that not only do we have to free ourselves from the State, but also that we need to refuse the form of individualisation that the State requires of us.\textsuperscript{30}

Having presented, albeit briefly, an outline of Foucault’s genealogical \textit{dispositif} of modern power/knowledge relations, and his critical perspective on those relations, there remains the problem of how we are to understand any resistant exercise of power and its implications for the relations of freedom and domination. The exercise of power refers to the immediate dimension of strategic relations through which we attempt to alter specific relations of power to suit our particular requirements. In other words the strategic deployment of power, in this instance, is presented as a subject’s or group’s modification of the relations of power that have socially produced them. Hence, according to Foucault, the individual is not only an effect produced by power, but equally a vehicle of power relations in so far as s/he is able to shift those relations to h/er advantage.

Foucault goes on to distinguish the strategic exercise of power firstly from any somatically generated capacity to finalise a particular activity, and secondly from all forms of communicative relations. While these are implicated in relations of power in so far as they produce effects of power such as violence and consensus, they do not give rise to a de-instrumentalist, non-violent manner of reconducting the conduct of others - what Foucault calls ‘a way in which certain actions modify others’.\textsuperscript{31} In other words the strategic exercise of power, Foucault maintains, does not involve a direct application of force with respect to the body or thoughts of others. It carries more precisely an indirect effect on others through the exemplary influence of a subject’s own self-relating actions. A subject’s exercise of power within a specific field of power relations thus involves an agonistic response to those relations. The exercise of power, according to Foucault -

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\textit{is a total structure of actions brought to bear upon possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; in the extreme it constrains or forbids absolutely; it is nevertheless always a way of acting upon an acting subject or acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action. A set of actions}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{30} M. Foucault, ‘The Subject and Power’ \textit{op. cit.}, p.216.

\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Ibid.}, p.219.
upon other actions.\footnote{Ibid., p.220.}

As evidenced here, a further proviso in Foucault’s understanding of power is that power does not exclude the possibility of resistance. For in a relationship of power, those over whom power is exercised remain capable of acting for themselves in possibly unforeseen, yet socially circumscribed ways. From this perspective, power does not negate the freedom of those over whom it is exercised. Indeed the freedom of others is the very condition of possibility, Foucault argues, for the exercise of power. Hence, like power, freedom no longer signifies an unchanging, essential condition, but rather an ever-changing agonistic relation of provocation and struggle. We are effected continuously by multiple relations of power, which shape the fields of possible action. What characterises this agonistic relation of power and freedom is strategic struggle. Each strategy is designed to test the limits of the relations of power against which it reacts in order to modify those relations.

With this ontic account of how power is exercised, as actions strategically brought to bear on the actions of others who may in turn take action, Foucault is able to indicate an always potential reversal or becoming other of strategies of resistance and the otherwise prevailing relations of power. Foucault thus transfigures the anthropological ambiguity of ‘man’, as the simultaneous subject and object of his own rational reflections, into the historically reversible, and so apparently unambiguous subject and object of power relations. Similarly, from the perspective of Foucault’s historical ontology, just as any historically stable relations of power may develop into a destabilising confrontation of strategies, so too the latter may effectively result in a new set of dominant power relations.

The consequence of this instability is the ability to decipher the same events and the same transformations either from inside the history of struggle or from the standpoint of the power relationships. The interpretations which result will not consist of the same elements of meaning or the same links or the same types of intelligibility, although they refer to the same historical fabric and each of the two analyses must have reference to the other.\footnote{Ibid., p.220.}

What nevertheless remains problematic in this relation of ontic, genealogically mediated strategies of power and the historical ontology of domination and struggle is the manner in which the ontologically designated emergence of power relations is viewed equally as
a nominalist description of the ontic. Not only is power an essential condition of possibility through which these historically reversible relations may be understood, but it is also nothing more than an empirical reading of them. Nevertheless, it is only through this ontologically postulated indeterminacy, this differential ‘non-place’ of history, that the reversibility or becoming other of freedom and power acquires its potentiality. In other words, similarly to Heidegger’s ontological procedure, the historical effects of knowledge/power relations are immediately transformed into ontological conditions of historical possibility through which the ensuing analytic of the ontic strategies of power can then make sense. As Adorno argues against Heidegger, this aporetic reversibility is inherent in all ontological modes of inquiry. What confirms this aporetic situation is that when interpreting itself as a set of power/knowledge relations, Foucault’s historical ontology is unable to elucidate that which performs this very interpretation, apart from referring to an ontologically ordained, yet indeterminate will to truth.

Somewhat surprisingly, Foucault openly acknowledges the circular implications of this historical ontology of power, which he encapsulates in the following words -

there is no escaping from power, … it is always-already present, constituting the very thing which one attempts to counter it with.  

As Foucault then indicates, however, such critique misreads his historical ontology of power as a theory of power conceived under the transcendental principle of a self-constituting rational law. Rather what guides his historical ontology of power is not a further prioritising of the principles of law and sovereignty which lead to ‘a juridical and negative representation of power’, but a more pragmatic concern with the technologies and strategies through which relations of power become evident. Foucault thereby shifts our attention away from the circular implications of his historical ontology to the more pragmatic domain of strategic reversibility in the relations between power and freedom. Here, at this ontic level of practical social relations, strategically accomplished reversals in the always historically changing play between power and freedom seemingly avoid the critique of ontological circularity. The claim to reversibility can rest, however, only on a clearly defined difference in the becoming other of governing power relations and strategies of resistance; a difference which for Foucault remains experientially, not to mention ontologically, indeterminate. For if our strategically developed resistance to an

33 Ibid., p.226.
34 M. Foucault, The History of Sexuality vol.1, op. cit., p.82.
historical set of power relations is, according to Foucault, only an already circumscribed possibility within those relations of power, then we nevertheless remain an historically produced effect of these power relations. In other words, while we are essentially produced and administered by the dominant discourse of self-disciplinary, sovereign relations of power, even to the extent of claiming to be free, it is not clear that our otherwise historically inscribed docility is necessarily extinguished. From this perspective the potential reversibility of freedom and the prevailing relations of power appears more like a merging of both to the point where their difference fades. The aporetic reversibility evident at the ontological level of interpretation now re-appears in the ontically specific relations of resistance and domination.

While Foucault emphasises the technical and strategic aspects of the exercise of power and so differs in this way from traditional theories of power, this does not diminish the quasi-transcendental character of Foucault’s ontological commitments. For within Foucault’s philosophy of history the always potentially reversible relations of domination and struggle at once constitute an ontological or trans-historical law of fate. Furthermore, despite having renounced the transcendental reason of Kant’s anthropological subject, such thought nevertheless survives in the very judgement that postulates an historical ontology of power. In other words, Foucault’s ontological analysis of these relations of power cannot avoid the conceptual metaphysics of a thinking subject despite his nominalist transcription of that metaphysics as an indeterminate ‘non-place’ of power. Just as Structuralism and Positivism claim to evacuate any subjective variable in their methodological apparatus, so too the ontological significance of power relations has been ascertained according to a transcendental ratio which denies its very presence. In his attempt to break away from the reified condition of the empirical subject occasioned by its transcendental double, Foucault, like Heidegger, ironically upholds an ontologically sanctioned history, a reifying mirror, of perpetual domination and struggle. Moreover, having presented all our thoughts and actions, whether compliant or resistant, as the historical effects of contemporary power relations, Foucault’s own thinking remains without any more critical status than that of a particular effect produced by these same relations of power. In his late article ‘What is Enlightenment?’ Foucault attempts to extricate himself from the reifying implications of this historical circularity by claiming

35 Ibid., p.90.
that what is at stake in the question of freedom is its radical decoupling or ‘disconnection’ from the modern relations of power which otherwise produce it.\textsuperscript{36}

**Politics and Ethics**

Just as Foucault rejects philosophical anthropology’s conceptually governed will to truth, so too he turns away from the political anthropology of neo-Marxism with its one-dimensional, economic view of political struggle. Foucault’s notion of political struggle means engagement with a multiplicity of socially instituted relations of power.\textsuperscript{37} Political struggle refers to various practices of social exclusion, particularly those involving madness, crime, and sexual perversity. Foucault describes his work in these domains as ethical problemizations with critical implications for contemporary political relations of power. Indeed Foucault considers his work in these domains precisely as an ethics.\textsuperscript{38} Clearly ethics is no longer disengaged from political relations of power. Nor, with Foucault, is ethics governed by a rationally pre-established or normative notion of moral truth. Rather ethics is interpreted precisely as an ever-changing politics of truth; a politics which, in the first instance, involves a genealogical account of previous cultural modes of ethical life. On the basis of this genealogical investigation, which Foucault carries out in the second and third volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, he develops an historical ontology of individual conduct.\textsuperscript{39} Yet as Foucault further stipulates -

this idea that one must know oneself, i.e., gain ontological knowledge of the soul’s mode of being, is independent of what one could call an exercise of the self upon the self.\textsuperscript{40}

To the extent that the Christian moral ethos and its Romanesque code of rationally ordained moral rules are in decline, what becomes necessary, Foucault argues is an aesthetically evaluated ethics of personal conduct.

From Antiquity to Christianity, we pass from a morality that was essentially the search for a personal ethics to a morality as obedience to a system of rules. And if I was interested in Antiquity it was because, for a whole series of reasons, the idea of a morality as obedience to

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{36} M. Foucault, ‘What is Enlightenment?’ in \textit{op cit.}, p. 48.
  \item \textsuperscript{38} M. Foucault, ‘Politics and Ethics : An Interview’ in \textit{The Foucault Reader} \textit{op. cit.}, p.375.
  \item \textsuperscript{39} See the second and third volumes of \textit{The History of Sexuality}, tr. R. Hurley, respectively entitled \textit{The Use of Pleasure} (New York, Vintage, 1990) and \textit{The Care of the Self} (New York, Vintage, 1988).
  \item \textsuperscript{40} M. Foucault, ‘On the Genealogy of Ethics : An Overview of Work in Progress’ in \textit{The Foucault Reader} \textit{op. cit.}, p.367.
\end{itemize}
a code of rules is now disappearing, has already disappeared. And to this absence of morality corresponds, must correspond, the search for an aesthetics of existence.\textsuperscript{41}

After briefly elaborating Foucault’s historical ontology of individual conduct, I shall turn to his understanding of this agonistic exercise of freedom - or what in this final phase of Foucault’s writing, develops as an ethico-aesthetic politics of truth.

The historical ontology of individual conduct has four principal modes of interrogation.\textsuperscript{42} These four modes concern firstly the ethical substance of individual being, secondly the social mode of subjection, thirdly the techniques of self-conduct or subjectivisation, and fourthly the telos which underwrites those techniques. Whereas the ethical substance of ancient Greek life consisted in acts both of pleasure and desire, for the modern anthropological subject that substance is merely desire. With the Greeks, the mode of subjection through which the self is produced as an ethical agent involved a self-disciplined adherence to a personally formulated aesthetics of beauty. In the modern period, however, the ethical self is constituted through the rational formalities of a moral reason where desire is bound by the self-disciplinary effects of reason’s universal legality. The principal techniques of self-creation, both for the Greeks and the modern subject, thus involve a self-disciplinary and so ascetic attitude. Contrary to the life-denying implications of those techniques for the modern subject, these techniques for the ancient Greeks were altogether life affirming. The import of these techniques ultimately depends on the telos of the self’s ethical relation to itself. With the Greeks this telos involved mastering an aesthetically directed care of the self. In contrast, for the modern subject, the telos of ethical conduct, namely freedom, at once entails the limitation of desire through a universal code of morally reasoned responsibility. Freedom, within these juridically supported relations of power, Foucault argues, is paradoxically a denial of desire. In light of this critique, Foucault goes on to examine how individual conduct may be more fruitfully exercised in the ontic dimension of everyday power relations without falling into the life-denying paralysis which engulfs the modern anthropological subject.

In order to practice freedom without the self-negating constraints of a rationally necessary moral law, Foucault explores an ethics whose telos, similarly to the ancient

\textsuperscript{41} M. Foucault, ‘An Aesthetics of Existence’ \textit{op. cit.}, p.49

\textsuperscript{42} M. Foucault, ‘On the Genealogy of Ethics’ \textit{op. cit.}, p.351. The specific moments of this historical ontology are also set down in the introduction to the second volume of \textit{The History of Sexuality} New York, Vintage, 1990, pp.26-28.
Greeks, is an agonistic, self-caring freedom, and whose ethical substance, again like the Greeks, consists in aesthetically governed acts of pleasure. While Foucault analyses the ontic exercise of self-care practised by the Greeks as a way of contemplating how we might exercise our freedom today, our current mode of subjection may be ascertained only in terms of the contemporary relations of power that govern us. Accordingly, Foucault strategically reinterprets our current mode of social subjection, no longer in terms of any transcendental moral law, but rather through the critical ethos of modernity. Somewhat ironically, the historical inauguration of this critical ethos, this modern mode of subjection, is clearly evident, Foucault maintains, in Kant's essay 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?'

It is in the reflection on 'today' as difference in history and as motive for a particular philosophical task that the novelty of [Kant's] text appears to me to lie.

While acknowledging the pivotal significance of this historical reflection, this perpetual questioning of the present, which propels us towards new modes of being, Foucault nevertheless proceeds to reshape its contemporary significance. Whereas Kant identifies critical reflection with a moral disposition in humanity towards historical progress, Foucault re-interprets it as a strategic response to the eternal recurrence of domination and struggle. From this latter perspective, critique can no longer be practised according to Kant's rationally universal, normative moral standard, a conceptual ratio through which knowledge claims and moral actions may be deemed true and legitimate. Rather, critique is carried out with a view to establishing a strategically advantageous position for an individual or group within a current set of power relations. Hence, Foucault states -

criticism is no longer going to be practiced in the search for formal structures with universal value, but rather as a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, and saying.

These investigations are not designed to outline a metaphysics of comfort or self-assurance, but, in so far as they allow us to distinguish between what we are and what we may become, they 'give new impetus, as far and as wide as possible, to the undefined

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44 M. Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?' op. cit., p.38.
45 Ibid., p.46.
work of freedom'. The contemporary techniques of ethical self-creation or subjectivisation, which become possible within Foucault's distinctly Nietzschean mode of historical questioning, are now also decisively altered. They are no longer elucidated on the basis of a unified rational, anthropological subject, but rather according to the multiple perspectives of a modernist aesthetic. Baudelaire had first articulated that aesthetic, and did so, according to Foucault, as the ironic heroism of the dandy. For Foucault, the critical ethos of modernity, is a merging of Kant's historical reflection on the present and the ironic heroism of a modernist aesthetic. This aesthetic, Foucault argues, has the capacity to dissolve the negatively valenced character of power and the utopian character of freedom sustained by the anthropological discourse of Idealists and Materialists alike.

Avoiding the metaphysical implications of a freedom with utopian overtones, Foucault indicates that the process of ethical self-creation, or what amounts to a critical transgression of the limits of the contemporary relations of power, remains altogether experimental; an experiment with freedom. He considers this experiment as a testing of our genealogical findings against our practical experience within particular social institutions. Foucault acknowledges, however, that such localised experiments are in constant danger of falling foul of more encompassing relations of power which escape our critical perspective. As a result he admits that no decisive account of our historical limits and their possible transgression is ever attainable. We are thus continually at risk of having to recommence the difficult task of self-creation in the face of ever recurrent failure. In order to survive, a certain attitude is necessary, a certain mode of relating to oneself within the contemporary relations of power that produce us.

By 'attitude', I mean a mode of relating to contemporary reality; a voluntary choice made by certain people; in the end, a way of thinking and feeling; a way, too, of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task.

Foucault goes on to illustrate this attitude in terms of a distinction drawn by the French poet Baudelaire between the nineteenth century characters of the dandy and the flâneur. Unlike the flâneur whose attitude is merely one of disinterested curiosity, who strolls idly through time recording no more than fleeting passages of circumstantial pleasure,
Dandysme involves a certain heroisation of the present, albeit with a pronounced sense of irony. For while the dandy seeks the heroic glow of eternity, these emanate only from the most fleeting, evanescent moments of passion and beauty. These ever-changing, discontinuous moments effectively undercut and yet sustain the heroic illusion of historical permanence. This is the irony that comes to light through the aesthetic parody of the hero as dandy. In effect the dandy’s ironic heroisation of the present is an aesthetic relation of the self to itself; a beautiful relation in which the self becomes its own ephemeral object with the ontological, aesthetic task of re-shaping life as though it were a work of art. This ironic production of the self by itself as art at once involves what Foucault calls an ‘indispensable asceticism’ or self-disciplinary control of the techniques employed in this production. Techniques for living, the ascetic, self-disciplinary strategies, which constitute the exercise of an agonistic freedom, are analogous to those multiple creative techniques employed by an artist. Here the relationship of life to art and art to life is one of indeterminate difference; an indeterminacy, however, which enables an anarchistic pleasure, an ethico-political freedom of the self, through the capacity to adopt a multiplicity of styles and perspectives. Hence the dandy is not so much confronted with uncovering an essential truth to moral life, but rather engages the world with a view to ever freely re-inventing h/erself through an aesthetic process of self-critical, strategic heroics.

Foucault, as indicated earlier, acknowledges the circular implications in his analysis of the relationship between the effects of power/knowledge and a self-generated exercise of power. Hence what is at stake in our contemporary historical context, he now argues, is the radical decoupling of individual freedom from the power relations that nevertheless create it. The ironic heroisation of the dandy, the transfiguration of life as a work of art, is said to achieve just that decoupling.

This ironic heroization of the present, this transfiguring play of freedom with reality, this ascetic elaboration of the self... does not... have any place in society itself, or in the body politic. They can only be produced in another, a different place, which Baudelaire calls art.48

While Foucault’s writings may be viewed as an ethico-aesthetic elaboration of his own life as art, an aesthetics which steps beyond the totalising effects of contemporary power relations, he nevertheless acknowledges the capacity of those power relations to
disorganise or make contingent all attempts at self-creation. Similarly, knowledge articulated through the genealogical perspectives of an ethico-aesthetic subject, Foucault argues, is never complete or total. Hence the project of ethical self-creation always remains experimental. From this perspective, Foucault’s earlier claim to dissolve the anthropological ambiguity of the *cogito* and the unthought breaks down, for the latter here re-appears as an ever-recurring, and so unavoidable limit of our will to freedom. In rebutting this objection, however, Foucault simultaneously works against any radical decoupling of freedom and power. Indeed contrary to any decoupling of freedom and power, Foucault states elsewhere that -

if I am now interested in how the subject constitutes itself in an active fashion through practices of the self, these practices are nevertheless not something invented by the individual himself. They are models that he finds in his culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society, and his social group.49

Here the purported decoupling of power/knowledge relations and the agonistic exercise of freedom appears more like an indeterminate merging of both. The modern *ethos* of freedom, in Foucault’s philosophy, still faces the ambiguity of a self-articulated freedom that is at once distinct from and yet indistinguishable from the relations of power producing it.

What underwrites this indeterminate difference of power and freedom, or what enables the constant reversibility of domination and resistance, is the historical ground on which Foucault establishes the very possibility of critique. Unlike Nietzsche and Adorno, for whom critique arises, at least initially, through an affective repulsion from the relations of power in which they are situated, with Foucault the motivation for critical resistance arises primarily by way of an historical belonging to the modern cultural *ethos* of freedom. Foucault, as cited earlier, speaks of a ‘mode of relating to contemporary reality ... that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task’.50 In effect this critical task of self-transfiguration becomes necessary in so far as we are unavoidable participants in the modern *ethos* of freedom. The heroic irony of the dandy, that exemplary attitude of critical parody guiding Foucault’s own modernist

critique of the present, is articulated precisely according to this cultural imperative. In other words, critical resistance to modern power relations is nothing short of an already circumscribed necessity within those same relations of power. Freedom is thus no longer a liberation from what had been construed as the negative effects of power, but rather a positive act of ethical self-invention according to self-articulated, yet historically prescribed ethical and aesthetic values. Accordingly, the notions of critique and power no longer form a negatively determined, oppositional relation to each other, but manifest a decidedly self-supporting, if not indeterminate similitude in the historically prescribed agonism of modern self-creation. To argue equally that resistance is not complicit with the power relations that produce it, exploits the indeterminacy of that relation and creates the aporia of a utopian path to freedom.

While Foucault, as noted earlier, does not eliminate the possible formation of a negative, critical resistance to relations of power, the ironic heroism of a modern agonistic aesthetics emphatically precludes such oppositional posturing. The dandy's going beyond the relations of power otherwise producing him does not negate those relations but ironically re-affirms them. This means that when Foucault argues against the repressive hypothesis postulated by classical psychoanalysis, claiming that modern sexual relations are produced by the proliferation of discourses concerning it, he undercuts his own critical hypothesis of the need to free the body and its pleasures from the discursively produced normativity of sexual desires. Here, and more obviously in his political activism, Foucault appears unable to shake off the negative implications of critique. Rebecca Comay draws attention to this when speaking of Foucault's -

rhetorical ... appeal to the terms of traditional activism. He speaks of *seizing the rules*, wresting them from their guardians and converting them from instruments of oppression into instruments of release. He wants to turn power against its keepers. He speaks in emancipatory terms: revolt and rebellion, human rights and dignity, as when talking about his visit to Attica, or commenting on the Iranian revolution - the very terms he otherwise renders problematic and disturbed.51

In these instances the experimental exercise of agonistic power falls back into those negative, repressive relations of power which it otherwise seeks to disband. The parties in question become subject to that negative structuring of power and freedom which both

51 R. Comay 'Excavating the Repressive Hypothesis: Aporias of Liberation in Foucault' in *Telos* no.67, 1986, p.115. (Comay's italics)
may have previously sought to dissolve. Hence what surreptitiously reappears in Foucault’s discourse on sexual relations of power, as both Comay and Butler indicate, is nothing less than an affective, critical response to modern sexual power/knowledge relations; a response whose humanist, anthropological implications Foucault sought strenuously to disband. Without this capacity for unconditioned affective response, Foucault’s only ground for critical resistance is that sense of historical belonging to the critical ethos of freedom. Horowitz describes the weakness in Foucault’s response to the repressive hypothesis as a failure to distinguish between what Herbert Marcuse, in *Eros and Civilisation*, had articulated as basic and surplus repression.\(^{52}\) While the power relations pertaining to the former effectively produce us as subjects with a capacity for freedom and responsibility, surplus repression negates that capacity for critical response. From this perspective the possibility of an agonistic politics of freedom involves a theoretical denial of surplus repression, while simultaneously criticising its historically actual, negative effects.

When Foucault discounts the negative effects of oppression and repression with his anti-Marxist and anti-Freudian positioning, and when he rejects any utopian idea of freedom, on the grounds that freedom is always already produced through those relations of power, he cuts off the possibility of radical social critique. The ontologically prescribed indeterminacy of freedom’s relation to power results in a critically impotent aporia. Resistance wilts as nothing more than heroic parody, a homoeopathic remedy, as Vincent Pecora describes it,\(^{53}\) and which disguises the extent to which our lives remain repressed by the global economic and political relations of power. The self-disciplinary, ascetic character of caring for the self masks the surplus repression evident in the racial, gender, and economic suppression of large numbers of human beings. While Foucault chose to speak out against such practices, his theoretical articulation of modern political resistance points principally to exemplary, aesthetic strategies of self-invention. Foucault’s politics of truth thus deploys ironic masks of freedom while leaving intact just those global relations of economic and cultural power that inscribe in us this illusory claim to freedom.


D2) COMMUNICATIVE MORALITY AND CRITICAL HERMENEUTICS: HABERMAS

Introduction

In stark contrast to Foucault’s strategic, agonistic politics of ethico-aesthetic truth, Habermas develops a communicative, intersubjective politics of moral-rational truth. Despite the strong aesthetic/rational, ethical/moral divides in their respective politics of truth, the primary medium of their politics is no longer a philosophy of consciousness but one of language. With Foucault language operates as a strategic form of ethical action upon the self, whereas Habermas views language as an intersubjective medium of communicative moral action leading to social consensus. Despite these differences both defend the inseparability of language and social practices with respect to the possible actualisation of freedom. Foucault articulates this relation mainly in terms of the self-transforming practice of writing (parrhësia). That is to say, Foucault considers the agonistic freedom of ethical self-identity as the politically pragmatic manifestation of a self-constructed aesthetic truth; one unconstrained, moreover, by any transcendental moral laws. Habermas, on the other hand, speaks of the relation between language and freedom in terms of a universal-pragmatics of formal, communicative speech. That is to say, Habermas grounds the possibility of freedom in the transcendental moral constraints of communicative action; a freedom unhampered by what he considers the sceptical relativism of a merely self-grounded, strategically oriented ethics.

Habermas’ concept of communicative action claims to renew the project of Enlightenment as presented by Kant, and by Hegel in the latter’s early writings. In particular Habermas is concerned with revitalising the Enlightenment notion of a self-critical public sphere; albeit now in terms of a philosophy of language rather than what he considers the aporia ridden philosophy of consciousness. Accordingly, in the context of intense public protest during the late sixties, Habermas states -

The basis of enlightenment [is] tied to the principle of discussion free from domination, and solely to this principle.¹

Yet in light of the ever more dominant systems media of money and power, the intersubjective world of public discussion, he argues, has become distorted and
impoverished. For the systems media of money and power have effectively colonised, to its detriment, the modern life-world of communicative interaction. Dependent on these media for its material survival, the communicative lifeworld, is invaded by a strategic, instrumental rationality through which these media operate. This fateful distortion of communicative action has meant that the Enlightenment ideal of free and unconstrained public discussion remains unactualised. In order to substantiate these critical claims, Habermas reconstructs an anthropological history of the developing relations between the life and systems worlds against the background of an ideal speech situation of undistorted communicative action. In other words, through this counterfactual ideal, Habermas sets up a normative model of public discussion against which actual social practices may be critically evaluated.

Although the idea of free and enlightened public discussion is taken from Kant, Habermas' idea of moral truth is no longer grounded in the autonomy of Kant's solitary, self-reflecting subject, but rather in the universal character of uncoerced communicative consensus. Indeed with Kant, moral autonomy is achieved according to a monological process of self-reflection concerning the potential universalisability of an otherwise personal maxim. For this reason the moral laws formed through Kant's categorical imperative are, as Habermas puts it, 'abstractly universal in the sense that, as they are valid as universal for me, \textit{eo ipso} they must also be considered as valid for all rational beings'.

The positive relation of the will to the will of others is withdrawn from possible communication, and a transcendentally necessary correspondence of isolated goal directed activities under abstract universal laws is substituted. Kant's categorical imperative, Habermas continues, presupposes the moral autonomy of individual agents. It thereby abstracts from the concrete universality of intersubjectively established communicative consensus. For this reason, according to Habermas, 'Kant expels moral action from the very domain of morality itself'. In this shift to the social normativity of consensual accord, to the validity of moral values established through intersubjective, communicative agreement, Habermas relies heavily on Hegel's later abandoned, intersubjective dialectics of love, fate, and recognition. Here Kant's notion of

\footnotesize{1 J. Habermas, \textit{Protestbewegung und Hochschulreform} Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1969, p.245. (tr. C.H.)
3 \textit{Ibid.}, p.151.
4 \textit{Ibid.}, p.150.
individual autonomy is no longer simply assumed, but takes shape through an interactive struggle for mutual respect and understanding.

Hegel’s later rejection of this intersubjective, communicative morality, Habermas suggests, lay in his inability to reconcile the depoliticised individualism of modern civil society with an ideal ethical totality, evident for him in the popular religions of ancient Greek and early Christian communities. When, in his later *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel proceeds to sublate the antagonistic, depoliticised individualism of civil society within the ethical totality of the then contemporary constitutional monarchy, he now subjects the individual will to the moral values inherent in the laws of that sovereign state. Habermas argues, however, that these laws are no more than the manifestation of a self-legitimating state power; a power which distorts the communicative capacities of the life-world. In so rejecting Hegel’s late conception of moral normativity, Habermas reverts to a Kantian styled, transcendental analytic of moral normativity. This transcendental analytic transfigures the abstract universality of Kant’s categorical imperative, however, through the more concrete universality of Hegel’s early notions of mutual recognition and intersubjective agreement. For, in Habermas’ view, the critical perspective he wishes to maintain against the modern systems media of money and power can be justified only by way of a transcendental, ideal model of universal communicative interaction. In contrast to the later Hegel, Habermas offers an outline of this transcendental, communicative model when he states that -

A different model for the mediation of the universal and the individual is provided by the *higher-level intersubjectivity of an uncoerced formation of the will* within a communication community existing under constraints toward cooperation: In the universality of an uncoerced consensus arrived at among free and equal persons, individuals retain a court of appeal that can be called upon even against particular forms of institutional concretization of the common will.

Whereas Hegel regarded the individual as morally bound, without question, to the laws of state, Habermas argues that, under the communicative principle of consensus, already institutionalised moral norms remain open to criticism. Similarly to Kant’s categorical imperative, the communicative principle of unconstrained consensus thereby acts as a regulatory principle, against which current moral values may be critically tested.

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7 J. Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* op. cit., p.40. (Habermas’ italics)
Communicative and Instrumental Action

Habermas distinguishes communicative action from three other modes of action, namely strategic, instrumental action, normatively regulated action, and dramaturgical action. Language, he continues, has a precise function within each of these forms of action. The function of language in strategic, instrumental action is to reveal objective states of affairs. In normatively regulated action the function of language is to generate and maintain interpersonal relations according to already established moral values. With dramaturgical action language functions as an expressive medium for subjective experience. These three models of action, interpreted through their particular linguistic functions, retain a certain one-dimensional quality, Habermas maintains, since they each exclude the others with their fixation on a particular mode of relating to the world. In contrast, communicative action entails the critical coordination of all these modes of world-relation in so far as it ‘takes all the functions of language equally into consideration’. Indeed, according to Habermas -

Only the communicative model of action presupposes language as a medium of uncurtailed communication whereby speakers and hearers ... refer simultaneously to things in the objective, social, and subjective worlds in order to negotiate common definitions of the situation.

Simultaneously evident in the one utterance, the linguistic functions that reflect these three world-relations are said to form an interpretive framework for reaching intersubjective agreement. The linguistic function peculiar to communicative action is thereby presented as that of reaching unconstrained consensus with respect to these three world relations.

Furthermore, each of these functions of language, Habermas continues, involves a claim to moral validity with respect to their specific mode of world-relation. The validity claim inherent in language oriented to instrumental success, Habermas states, is one of objective truth. Where the function of language is to establish interpersonal relations, there is a claim to moral normativity. Finally, the validity claim present in the language of subjective expression has to do with the truthfulness or sincerity of its speaker. In the ideal speech situation, each of these claims is open to critical contestation through the discursive process of moral argument. Here speakers have an opportunity to rationally

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motivate others to come to a mutual understanding concerning the most appropriate moral values for coordinating social action.

Reaching an understanding functions ... only through the participants in interaction coming to an agreement concerning the claimed validity of their utterances, that is, through inter-subjectively recognizing the validity claims they reciprocally raise.\(^{10}\)

While the criterion for reaching agreement is stipulated as the force of better argument, the validity of these claims is ultimately dependent on the unforced nature of that agreement. Habermas now goes on to outline certain formal, procedural principles that will ensure the possibility of unconstrained consensus. These principles are not to be confused, he insists, with purely logical principles that are also said to determine the truth of objective states of affairs. For the latter specifically underwrite the possibility of strategic, instrumental actions oriented to objective success. While Habermas here accentuates the difference between strategic, instrumental and communicative action, the principles that underwrite the latter will nevertheless need to be constructed in a manner analogous to those governing the former.\(^{11}\) For similarly to the non-contradictory, logical principles conditioning claims to a universal objective truth, the formal, procedural principles that allow for the validation of communicative claims must support the expression of those claims as universal laws of moral conduct.

Analogous to an inductive principle which cognitively bridges the gap between observations and hypotheses, a principle of moral justification will need to bridge the gap between validity claims and those for whom they may become socially binding. Habermas thus requires a cognitive, moral principle that will ensure equal respect and care for the interests of all those entering this process of moral argumentation. He refers to this principle as the universalisation or U principle. It states, as a condition of justification for any moral claim, that -

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\text{All affected can accept the consequences and the side effects its general observance can be anticipated to have for the satisfaction of everyone's interests (and these consequences are preferred to those of known alternative possibilities).}^{12}
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Since this principle appears utopian in its universalism, and is thus, Habermas concedes, open to question, it too needs some form of justification. For obvious reasons this cannot

\(^{10}\) Ibid., p.99. (Habermas' italics)


\(^{12}\) Ibid., p.65. (Habermas' italics)
occur by way of deductive argument, but must be gleaned from the very pragmatics of moral debate. Accordingly, Habermas goes on to indicate that the validity of this principle is assured in so far as the moral intuitions of universal respect and concern for the welfare of others, contained within it, are inescapably presupposed by anyone entering into moral argument. Stated otherwise, these moral intuitions are those of autonomy, responsibility, justice and solidarity. A categorical denial of these intuited values, since they are unavoidably presupposed in communicative interaction, would at once involve the speaker in a performative contradiction. Having thus grounded the universalisation principle in the performatively non-contradictory practice of moral argument, Habermas is now in a position to stipulate an intersubjective, discursive principle against which validity claims to normative rightness may be tested. He states -

Only those norms can claim to be valid that meet (or could meet) with the approval of all affected in their capacity as participants in a practical discourse.  

The validity of a moral norm is thus determined according to the criterion of consensus. Once achieved, that consensus is morally binding. This discursive, deontological principle for testing the validity of moral norms could not stand alone, however, without the risk of being unable to distinguish between an unconstrained or forced consensus. For this reason it remains tied inextricably to the regulative principle of universalisation, which, since it reverberates with the values of mutual care and respect, ensures the unconstrained character of consensus. Along with the pragmatic presuppositions of moral argument, these deontological and cognitive principles form the core of Habermas’ ethics of discourse. Together they constitute the formal, pragmatic conditions of possibility for communicative action oriented to mutual understanding.

In view of the analogous construction of these principles of moral justification to those of objective truth, it may appear that communicative action is as much teleologically geared as strategic, instrumental action. Indeed Habermas states that ‘Reaching understanding is the inherent telos of human speech’. He nevertheless insists that we are not dealing here with any means-end rationality, with causally produced effects, as is the case, however, in all strategic, instrumental actions. For communicative action oriented to reaching mutual understanding does not seek to intervene directly in states of affairs or situations in the world. Rather it seeks merely to come to an unconstrained consensus concerning those moral values through which social interactions

\[13 \text{Ibid., p.66.} \text{ (Habermas' italics)}\]
may be coordinated in the interests of all. Yet speech acts are not always aimed at reaching mutual understanding, for speech can indeed be used as an instrumental means for strategically manipulating the behaviour of others. Now this would seem to undermine Habermas' claim that language is fundamentally oriented toward mutual understanding. Confronting this difficulty, Habermas argues that while certain strategically deceptive speech acts may appear to dispense altogether with any orientation to mutual understanding, they nevertheless depend on that orientation as 'the original mode of language use'. Habermas defends this claim by way of reference to Austin's distinction between the illocutionary force and the perlocutionary effects at work in any speech act. Habermas goes on to argue that the perlocutionary effects designed to persuade an interlocutor remain embedded in the illocutionary force that aims at mutual understanding. Accordingly, he states:

speech acts can serve this nonillocutionary aim of influencing hearers only if they are suited to achieve illocutionary aims. If the hearer failed to understand what the speaker was saying, a strategically acting speaker would not be able to bring the hearer, by means of communicative acts, to behave in the desired way. To this extent, what we initially designated as the "use of language with an orientation to consequences" is not an original use of language but the subsumption of speech acts that serve illocutionary aims under conditions of action oriented to success.  

in other words, any speech act, while not necessarily pursuing illocutionary aims, nevertheless depends on a background context of pre-understanding achieved through the illocutionary force at work in that same act of speech. Habermas points out, however, that not all expressions with specifically illocutionary aims, (for example those expressed as commands), form part of an action oriented to reaching mutual understanding. In the context of intersubjective moral argument only those involving criticisable validity claims create a situation that promises the possibility of undistorted communicative interaction.

What is troubling in Habermas' account of the difference between strategic, teleological and communicative forms of action is his claim to divorce absolutely the one from the other, and so too the linguistic functions peculiar to each. This exclusion becomes evident when Habermas transfers, without explanation, the linguistic function of revealing objective states of affairs, first attributed to strategic, instrumental action, to a constative mode of speech. This constative function of language is attributed to what

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15 Ibid., p. 288.
16 Ibid., p. 293 (Habermas' italics).
Habermas now suddenly designates as conversational action. This re-alignment comes about, it would seem, as a result of his reference to Austin's distinctions between the locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary dimensions of speech. For certainly the locutionary function of speech, to make a constative or assertive claim concerning an objective state of affairs, does so more appropriately than the perlocutionary effects previously fulfilling that function. Indeed the perlocutionary effects within communicative action oriented to mutual understanding are now limited to claims concerning subjective truthfulness or sincerity. Yet here too Habermas engages in a process of substitution - the term 'expressive' takes the place of 'perlocutionary' when referring to speech acts oriented to mutual understanding. Perlocutionary effects are now solely aligned with language oriented to instrumental, strategic success. In this somewhat disingenuous fashion perlocutionary effects are thus altogether extirpated from any communicative process of reaching mutual understanding. This exclusion is emphatically underscored when Habermas states 'I count as communicative action those linguistically mediated interactions in which all participants pursue illocutionary aims, and only illocutionary aims, with their mediating acts of communication'. Moreover, as previously indicated, Habermas defends the exclusion of strategic, perlocutionary effects from the process of reaching mutual understanding on the basis that, unlike its counterpart, communicative action with illocutionary intent has no instrumental designs for: altering the world. The mutual understanding achieved through illocutionary aims, Habermas argues, is directed merely toward an agreement about something in the world, or more precisely an agreement concerning the validity of some moral value. Yet as Dreyfus and Rabinow point out, this exclusion of perlocutionary effects 'reduces language from its communicative to only its intellectualist function'.

In view of the singular illocutionary intent of communicative action and the pragmatic presuppositions of moral argument, it is difficult to concede, furthermore, that any claim to normative rightness could be criticised in some fashion other than if its propositional content were demonstrably false. In other words, with illocutionary intent as the sole constitutive force of communicative action, any grounds for criticising

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17 Ibid., cf. p.87 where Habermas states 'At the semantic level such states of affairs are represented as propositional contents of sentences expressing beliefs or intentions ... These relations between actor and world allow then for expressions that can be judged according to the criteria of truth and efficacy', and the table on p.329 where the representation of states of affairs along with its truth claim has been attributed to the newly introduced category of conversational action.

18 Ibid., p.295. {Habermas' italics}

another's claim to normative rightness suddenly evaporate. Under these conditions, the ‘inherent telos’ of communicative action, mutual understanding, now ambiguously appears as an already achieved end. For what makes a normative claim criticisable are just those strategic differences in individual perspectives concerning the possible social consequences arising from a particular moral value. Now while Habermas acknowledges the necessity of negotiating consequences in his formulation of the universalisation principle, he nevertheless passes over such considerations when discussing the coordination of social actions brought about through ideal communicative discourse. This not only becomes the source of a later difficulty concerning the absence of power relations in the lifeworld, as Honneth argues, but, in the present context, it also defuses the very possibility of criticisable validity claims. Hence it would now appear that communicative action is indistinguishable from normatively regulated action, serving merely to renew interpersonal relations on the basis of already accepted moral conventions.

This claim gains further substance in view of Habermas' shift from his earlier theory of knowledge-constitutive interests to that outlined above concerning the universal pragmatics of language or discourse ethics. The emancipatory interest at work in Habermas' earlier social theory has now been emasculated since it concerns a strategic, teleological end. In his exclusion of any strategic, rhetorical effects from communicative understanding, the function of the ideal speech situation has been decisively altered.

In 1971 [Habermas] characterized the ideal speech situation as the prefiguration of a liberated form of life. The same formulation was used in his paper "Wahrheitstheorien". Most of Habermas's later remarks on the status of the ideal speech situation are devoted to retracing this infelicitous early formulation and to stressing an alternative conception, according to which the ideal speech situation is only an "unavoidable presupposition of argumentation".21

Without an emancipatory interest, Habermas' ideal speech community moves precisely within the confines of what he earlier designated as the practical interest of the historical-

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20 Honneth notes - 'To be sure, in the section of his work on speech act theory Habermas attempts to demarcate forms of strategic action from forms of action oriented to understanding, but the former do not systematically appear in his argument as ways for coordinating action. The conceptual gap that thus emerges in the system of basic action-theoretic concepts finally has a repressive effect in the construction of his social theory. Habermas is no longer able to introduce the concept of power from an action-theoretic perspective; he can now introduce it only from a systems-theoretic perspective.' *The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory* [1985] tr. K. Baynes, Cambridge Mass., MIT, 1993, pp.287-288.

hermeneutic sciences. As Habermas then argued, 'hermeneutic inquiry discloses reality subject to a constitutive interest in the preservation and expansion of the intersubjectivity of possible action-orienting mutual understanding'. In effect the technical interest of the empirical-analytic sciences and the emancipatory interest of critical social theory are now absorbed in the comprehensive, universal pragmatics of the historical-hermeneutic science of communicative action.

Rationalisation of the Lifeworld and Systemic Integration

Habermas' concept of the lifeworld is said to complement that of communicative action in so far as it contextualises the latter within an already normative, taken-for-granted socio-cultural background. This communicatively established lifeworld background at once forms the interpretive horizon or limit of any communicative action oriented to mutual understanding.

Subjects acting communicatively always come to an understanding in the horizon of a lifeworld. Their lifeworld is formed from more or less diffuse, always unproblematic, background convictions. This lifeworld background serves as a source of situation definitions that are presupposed by participants as unproblematic. ... The lifeworld also stores the interpretive work of preceding generations. It is the conservative counterweight to the risk of disagreement that arises with every actual process of reaching understanding.

Habermas' concept of the lifeworld thus involves the historical genesis of communicative understandings; or what he also refers to as the rational development of communicative learning processes. Correlatively, communicative action constitutes the very medium through which these lifeworld relations are symbolically reproduced or reinterpreted. Indeed the three differentiated, yet interconnected validity claims at work in communicative action form the structural framework within which any social lifeworld is reproduced. The locutionary or constative function of speech reproduces cultural knowledge through a claim to objective truth. The illocutionary function of speech achieves social integration through a claim to mutual understanding. The expressive function of speech establishes personal identity through a claim to truthfulness. These functional aspects of communicative action thereby disclose the structural components through which any lifeworld is reproduced.

Earlier communicative lifeworld concepts privileged one or other of these structural components and its social reproduction, and so failed to articulate their mutual interdependence. Schutz's phenomenological analysis of the lifeworld, for example, concentrates exclusively on the reproduction of cultural knowledge. In Durkheim's sociological studies the constant renewal or maintenance of a social community through social integration predominates. With Mead self-formative interaction processes leading to the establishment of personal identities constitute the dominant form of lifeworld reproduction. Habermas argues that only once the concept of communicative action is rooted in the simultaneous locutionary, illocutionary, and expressive aspects of speech could the functional interdependence of these symbolically reproductive components be made cogent from a communication-theoretic perspective.

A communicative lifeworld does not simply reiterate what is already known, however, but also develops that cultural knowledge in ways that will assist the historically changing demands for social integration and personal identity formation. Hence the lifeworld concept, if it is to remain socially relevant, would need to bring within its referential boundary the developmental logic of a collective learning process that is intimately tied to the 'directional variation of lifeworld structures'. In reconstructing this developmental logic, Habermas takes Piaget's developmental child psychology as an ontogenetic model. The structural genesis of a child's progressively decentered cognitive, moral, and aesthetic relations to the world, empirically evident in their developing linguistic competency, forms the framework through which Habermas explains the increasing differentiation of lifeworld components into independent systems of meaning through the phylogenetic learning processes of the communicative lifeworld. Habermas supports this procedure by drawing on the anthropological studies of Mead and Durkheim, where the increasing differentiation of lifeworld components had been identified in the historical development from archaic, tribal societies to traditional, state governed, and thence to modern democratic societies. These historical, anthropological shifts, Habermas argues, arise through the constant need to assimilate knowledge emanating from sources outside the otherwise dominant socio-cultural framework. This means in effect that cultural worldviews become less reliant on already instituted social values; that interpersonal relations are generated independently of otherwise normative social practices; and that individuals become more critical and innovative with respect to

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cultural traditions. Cooperative processes of reaching mutual understanding then become necessary for the renewal of social integration through the reformation of universally accepted moral values. These processes of reaching consensual affirmation, Habermas argues, 'signal a release of the rationality potential inherent in communicative action'. This rationalisation process reveals an increasing reflexivity toward lifeworld assumptions evident in the increasingly autonomous modern cultures of scientific, legal, and pedagogical expertise. Characteristic of this reflexivity is a detachment of formal, procedural principles and structural relations from each of these domains of modern lifeworld experience.

As a result of the historical rationalisation of communicative lifeworld relations, or what Habermas also refers to as a 'linguistification of the sacred', social integration in the modern world occurs principally through communicative agreements as to the best possible coordination of social action.

Habermas defends this claim on the basis that the undifferentiated lifeworld structures in archaic, tribal societies do not require a communicatively achieved understanding on the part of participants. For their lifeworld is already normatively ascribed through ritualised, sacred practices to which they unquestioningly adhere. With the gradual differentiation of lifeworld components, however, the normative reproduction of these spheres, as noted above, becomes more dependent on a rationally motivated and cooperatively achieved consensus. Accordingly, as Habermas puts it -

The socially integrative force of mythical and religious forms of normatively ascribed authority has necessarily given way, in view of communicative learning processes, to the

\[25\] Ibid., p. 146.
\[26\] Ibid., p. 145. {Habermas' italics}
\[27\] Ibid. {Habermas' italics}
socially integrative demand for rationally achieved consensus across each of the now differentiated lifeworld contexts.

When the concept of society refers solely to the self-interpretive performances of a group oriented to unconstrained consensus, however, any rupture in this communicatively sustained lifeworld can only be attributed to those same notionally unconstrained communicative relations. Habermas articulates this paradoxical circularity both from the perspective of participants in communicative action and from that of a cultural anthropologist attempting to interpret a particular lifeworld situation according to the communicative interactions of lifeworld participants. In the first instance, actors in a lifeworld are unable to distinguish between what might be self-generated action and what otherwise remains the effect of socialisation processes. In the second instance, a lifeworld is said to be accessible via the communicated knowledge of its members, yet the lifeworld conditions shaping that knowledge remain inaccessible when anthropological investigations revolve solely around expressed communicative interactions. The hermeneutic idealism generating these paradoxes, as Habermas indicates, is sustained by three unsustainable presuppositions – that actors have a total control over their actions, that cultural meaning or the lifeworld horizon is independent of any external constraints, and that lifeworld relations can be made altogether transparent. These paradoxes may be overcome, Habermas argues, once the communicative lifeworld is no longer interpreted directly through the communicative expressions of its participants, but rather as a `boundary-maintaining system'. For only through this systemic perspective concerning the structural characteristics of historically different communicative lifeworlds, Habermas contends, can the counterintuitive aspect of systemic integration through the anonymous media of money and power become conceptually viable for participants engaged in communicative action. It then becomes possible, Habermas continues, to develop a critical or depth hermeneutics that can identify pathological disturbances in the communicative lifeworld without paradoxically attributing the source of these disturbances to the communicative rationalisation process itself.

Habermas' concept of society refers then not only to the communicative lifeworld and its cultural reproduction, but also to its economic and political reproduction through the systemic media of money and power. With Marx's analysis of commodity exchange in mind, Habermas now states that for participants in a lifeworld -

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28 Ibid., pp.148-149 and p.164.
29 Ibid., p.233.
their goal-directed actions are coordinated not only through processes of reaching understanding, but also through functional interconnections that are not intended by them and are usually not even perceived within the horizon of everyday practice. In capitalist societies the market ... is one of those systemic mechanisms that stabilize nonintended interconnections of action by way of functionally intermeshing action consequences, whereas the mechanism of mutual understanding harmonizes the action orientations of participants.30

When Habermas speaks of the ‘functional intermeshing of action consequences’ he is referring to the manner in which the systems media of economic exchange and administrative, bureaucratic power integrate the multiplicity of instrumental, purposive actions which materially reproduce the lifeworld. Distinct from the symbolic, communicative reproduction of the lifeworld, referred to as social integration, systemic integration, while governing the consciously projected renewal of the material lifeworld, is itself ‘a nonnormative regulation of individual decisions [extending] beyond the actors’ consciousnesses’31

Similarly to Weber’s theory of societal rationalisation, albeit where the reproduction of the lifeworld is now interpreted through a communicative rather than instrumental form of action, Habermas goes on to outline a gradual decoupling of the life and systems worlds through the course of socio-cultural evolution. In effect this amounts to a growing differentiation in the communicative, symbolic and instrumental, material processes of lifeworld reproduction. What drives this socio-cultural decoupling, Habermas maintains, is the rationalisation of lifeworld components along with an interdependent increase in systemic complexity. As Habermas puts it –

system and lifeworld are differentiated in the sense that the complexity of the one and the rationality of the other grow.
But it is not only qua system and qua lifeworld that they are differentiated; they get differentiated from one another at the same time.32

Habermas reconstructs the socio-cultural evolution that leads to the modern decoupling of the life and systems worlds firstly in terms of a growing division of labour occasioned by functional, systemic requirements in the material reproduction of the lifeworld. For the material reproduction of the lifeworld requires both the coordination of various instrumental, purposive actions and a regulated exchange of the objects produced through

30 Ibid., p.150. (Habermas’ italics)
31 Ibid., p.117.
32 Ibid., p.153.
those actions. In archaic, tribal societies the systemic mechanisms of exchange and power remained closely embedded in the kinship relations that sustain social integration. For while the exchange of women and symbolic objects indicates a segmental differentiation of tribal groups, and the delegation of authority for coordinating instrumental actions indicates a stratification of society through descent groups, these processes of material reproduction operate strictly within the kinship system delimited by sex, generation, and descent. Once the role of authority is detached from the prestige of ancestry or descent, however, and is assumed through a political control of institutionalised legal procedures, the systemic mechanism of power takes form as a state administration that increasingly dominates communicative processes of action orientation. In societies organised around state power, the exchange mechanism develops according to a market-oriented distribution of goods. Money becomes the symbolic medium of exchange. This economic subsystem of exchange does not seriously impinge on the communicative lifeworld, however, until its systemic imperatives render it functionally independent of the state political order. In modern times the systemic necessities of economic exchange have become so great that they effect a structural devaluation of the political role of the state and its administrative powers. The administrative power of the modern state thus becomes a mere function of sustained profitability and capital growth.

The evolutionary development of these mechanisms of systemic differentiation indicates an increasing complexity in forms of social interaction. The former nevertheless remain rooted, Habermas argues, in the already institutionalised legal and moral consciousness of the particular lifeworld in which they appear. In other words, the mechanisms of systemic integration draw on and remain limited by the communicative capacities of the lifeworld in which they occur.

[T]he systems-theoretical perspective is relativized by the fact that the rationalization of the lifeworld leads to a directional variation of the structural patterns defining the maintenance of the system.33

As Habermas puts it in more socially specific terms -

Every new leading mechanism of system differentiation must ... be anchored in the lifeworld; it must be institutionalized there via family status, the authority of office, or bourgeois private law. ... These basic institutions form a series of evolutionary innovations that can come about only if the lifeworld is sufficiently rationalized, above all only if law and morality have reached a corresponding stage of development.34

33 Ibid., p.148.
In setting out, in the second instance, the development of moral and legal conditions through which systemic differentiation itself evolves, and through which the life and systems worlds are ultimately uncoupled, Habermas adopts Kohlberg's distinction between preconventional, conventional, and postconventional levels of moral consciousness. These are then transposed, following Eder, onto the anthropological distinctions between archaic, traditional, and modern societies. With the preconventional moral consciousness peculiar to archaic societies, tribal sanctions, unlike those exercised in traditional and modern legal contexts, require an atonement for the violation of norms that is not compulsorily enforced. Moreover, the responsibility for atonement is assumed collectively by the relations of kin. At this preconventional level of moral consciousness there is evidently no room for any distinction between processes of social and systemic integration. In the shift to a conventional or traditional, religious moral consciousness, however, those who deviate from accepted norms become singularly accountable to an external judicial authority. Here the judge is concerned with maintaining the legitimacy of the legal order by delivering an enforceable sentence commensurate with the crime. The systemic development of a state organised political power, Habermas contends, can only occur within the conventional moral consciousness of a society requiring this independent judicial figure. Here communicative processes of lifeworld orientation are partially taken over by the political power of the state. Then with the development of a postconventional moral consciousness, characteristic of modern bourgeois society, a split develops between what Habermas calls private and public law. While the latter refers to the constitutionally embedded laws of state that enable democratic sovereignty, the former refers to civil laws concerning individual rights and entitlements. More precisely, these civil laws institutionalise the procedural mechanisms of economic exchange on the basis of an individual's sovereign capacity for a self-principled ethics of conviction and responsibility. Here the systemic function of state political power is confined to formal administrative, bureaucratic procedures that support the systemic function of social integration achieved through bourgeois economic exchange. Together these systemic media, and the instrumental, strategic rationality they advance, relieve the lifeworld of its communicative capacity to orient social action.

Ibid., p.173. {Habermas' italics}
In modern societies this decoupling of the life and systems worlds has developed to such an extent that the systemic mechanisms of economic exchange and bureaucratic, administrative power attain a quasi-autonomous steering capacity over the lifeworld. Media such as money and power ... encode a purposive-rational attitude toward calculable amounts of value and make it possible to exert generalized, strategic influence on the decisions of other participants while bypassing processes of consensus-oriented communication. Inasmuch as they do not merely simplify linguistic communication, but replace it with a symbolic generalization of rewards and punishments, the lifeworld contexts in which processes of reaching understanding are always embedded are devalued in favor of media-steered interactions; the lifeworld is no longer needed for the coordination of action.35

While nevertheless anchored institutionally in the laws of the communicative lifeworld, the functional subsystems of money and power now operate independently of the moral values from which those laws were first derived. The intersubjective, communicative formation of moral values and personal identities gives way to the necessities of instrumental, strategic action stipulated by these anonymous, instrumental subsystems of economic exchange and administrative power. Lifeworld participants are thereby relieved of any need to come to a communicatively achieved agreement concerning moral norms. Having effectively usurped the role of consensus-oriented communicative action, these functionalist subsystems act as ‘delinguistified media of communication ... [that] are consolidated and objectified into norm-free structures’.36 Dominated by these functional subsystems of money and power, ‘society congeals into a second nature’.37 While the modern systems world of money and power supports the lifeworld through its material reproduction, the former’s relentless, self-regulating, self-preserving mechanisms also overrun the lifeworld’s communicative capacity for social integration through mutual understanding and consensus. At this point in social development, Habermas maintains -

the irresistible irony of the world-historical process of enlightenment becomes evident: the rationalization of the lifeworld makes possible a heightening of systemic complexity, which becomes so hypertrophied that it unleashes system imperatives that burst the capacity of the lifeworld they instrumentalize.38

The systems world’s mediation of the lifeworld, Habermas argues, is nothing short of an economic and administrative colonisation of the communicative capacities of that

35 Ibid., p.183. (Habermas’ italics)
36 Ibid., p.154.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid., p.155.
lifeworld. The now differentiated components of the lifeworld are subject to economic and bureaucratic imperatives that block any concrete, communicative possibilities of socio-cultural renewal. This, Habermas maintains, results in various social pathologies ranging from distorted self-identities to cultural impoverishment and social anomie.

The historical uncoupling of life and systems worlds, of social and systemic integration, does not result in the obliteration of the former, Habermas maintains, nor in any hierarchical prioritising of systemic over social integration. What has occurred in modern societies through this evolutionary development, Habermas insists, is a situation where both forms of societal integration stand in opposition to the other as autonomous spheres of action. This mutual exclusion of lifeworld practices, which reverberates with the formal distinction between communicative and instrumental action, throws up, however, what Axel Honneth refers to as 'two complementary fictions'.

The first concerns the absence of communicatively agreed orientations to normative action within organisations serving systemic needs. For the bureaucratic institutions and corporate bodies through which the systems world exercises its influence, Honneth argues, are not simply embodiments of an instrumental, strategic rationality devoid of communicative procedures. Management decisions regarding the action orientations of an organisation are arrived at, in part at least, through a continual process of communication whose goal is unconstrained consensus. The second fiction emerging from Habermas' mutual exclusion of life and systems worlds concerns the absence of power relations, of strategically oriented political and economic claims, within the communicative sphere of consensual rationalisation. For the communicative process of social integration cannot simply dispense with strategically oriented validity claims without undermining that which renders them criticisable or indeed different in any substantial fashion. Moreover, Habermas' power-free context of communicative action would enable the substitution of individuals for one another and their apparently 'competing' validity claims without in any way effecting the outcome of communicative understanding. Individual differences are absorbed in what Seyla Benhabib refers to as the symmetrical reciprocity of rights and entitlements, in the abstract universality of Habermas' 'generalised other' devoid of strategic interests.

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40 S. Benhabib, 'The Utopian Dimension in Communicative Ethics' in *New German Critique* no.35, 1985, p.93.
The Habermasian dualism of the modern life and systems worlds, underwritten by the formal exclusion of instrumental from communicative action, has the further unintended consequence of turning back against the communicative paradigm through which Habermas attempts to re-establish the possibility of intersubjectively shaped, lifeworld meaning. Here I am following in part an argument developed by Jay Bernstein.\(^{41}\) As noted previously, the integration of meaning and social practices evident in Habermas’ communicative rationalisation of the lifeworld is overrun by the procedural functionalism of a systemically induced instrumental rationality. That is to say, intersubjectively formed values, which constitute the meaning of lifeworld practices, are effectively neutralised through the overwhelming necessity to adhere to the modern procedural legalities of economic competition and to the formal guidelines of socially administering bureaucratic institutions. Detached from the value-forming, communicative processes of mutual understanding, these economic and administrative mechanisms begin to operate similarly, Bernstein argues, to the topic-neutral connectives that determine the validity of logical argument. Just as these connectives and their claim to validity override the empirical content on which they are premised, so too the systemic media of money and power ‘syntactically trump’, as Bernstein puts it, any communicative process of achieving intersubjectively shared lifeworld meanings. In maintaining, however, that the delinguistified functions of these media simply ‘bypass’ or ‘replace’ any communicatively generated lifeworld meaning, Habermas fails to articulate how these media actually intervene in communicative processes geared to mutual understanding. Honneth too has indicated that power relations, whether economic or political, do not pertain solely to the systems world, but occur precisely within communicative, lifeworld practices. In other words, delinguistified media do not simply take the place of communicative interaction. Rather, as Bernstein points out, they distort the very language enacted in communicative, lifeworld practices.

Methodologically this keeps issues of action determination, empirical motivation and participants’ calculations fully bound up with the processes in which steering media are employed. More to the point … it explains the distortions of money and power as logical-procedural, subsumption and trumping, rather than as simply marking a shift from one orientation (communication) to another (strategic and purposive).\(^{42}\)


What underlies Habermas' failure to articulate the systems world's mediation of the lifeworld in this way is his overly rigid dichotomy of communicative and instrumental forms of action. Insisting on their mutual exclusivity, Habermas fails to perceive how his presentation of communicative action is itself distorted by the instrumental rationality of the systems world. Indeed the irresistible irony of Habermas' concept of communicative action is its re-enactment of just that procedural functionalism to which it otherwise objects. For when Habermas explicates the communicative procedures for achieving unconstrained consensus against the functionality of an instrumental, success oriented rationality, he merely repeats the decontextualised, topic-neutral formalism that characterises the latter. What amounts to the dissolution of substantial social content in abstract formal rules, or to the substitution of ends for means, corresponds, in communicative reason, to the dissolution of meaning in the validating procedures of a communicatively achieved consensus. 'Communicative rationality thus appears [itself] to be an example of syntactical trumping'. The horizon of possible lifeworld meaning evaporates in a collective learning process whose only telos is to establish the consensual validity of unconstrained moral argument. In this respect Habermas' theory of communicative action reinforces the cultural nihilism it was otherwise designed to overcome.

A further irony appears with Habermas' insistence that, despite the modern decoupling of life and systems worlds, systemic imperatives arise through the communicative rationalisation of the lifeworld itself. He thereby acknowledges that the impoverishment of communicatively shaped meaning is also partly attributable to the communicative rationalisation of the lifeworld itself. Indeed the growing reflexivity of moral consciousness, which has led to the differentiation of lifeworld components, has also brought with it corresponding cultures of expert knowledge (viz. science, morality, and art) divorced from everyday communicative practices. Under these conditions, Habermas argues, everyday consciousness becomes fragmented, and is thereby less able to withstand the reifying encroachments of systemic demands. Hence while Habermas regards the reflexive differentiation of lifeworld components as rationally progressive, he also views it as the very condition that allows the functional subsystems of money and power to invade and mutilate the lifeworld's communicative capacities.

In place of 'false consciousness' we today have 'fragmented consciousness' that blocks enlightenment by the mechanism of

\[\text{Ibid.}, \ p.172.\]
reification. It is only with this that the conditions for a colonization of the lifeworld are met.44

From this perspective, Habermas' own theory of communicative action, with its specialised anthropological complexities concerning the evolutionary relations of the life and systems worlds, and its formal, procedural requirements for the validation of moral claims, would seem to be just such a condition for the further colonisation of the lifeworld. As Bernstein comments, '[Habermas'] trisection of reason underlines and reifies the very fragmentation against which he is protesting'.45

Adorno made just a few indirect and scattered references to Habermas' idea of communicative reason. One of them has this to say -

Whoever puts forward proposals makes himself into an accomplice. Talk of a "we" one identifies with already implies complicity with what is wrong and the illusion that goodwill and a readiness to engage in communal action can achieve something where every will is powerless and where the identification with hommes de bonne volonté is a disguised form of evil.46

Critical Hermeneutics and Dialectical Models

Despite the evident dualism of instrumental and communicative action, of the contemporary life and systems worlds, upon which the preceding critiques are predicated, Habermas nevertheless declares that a dialectical relation of reciprocal causality exists between these forms of action.

[T]he lifeworld is materially reproduced by way of the results and consequences of the goal-directed actions with which its members intervene in the world. But these instrumental actions are interlaced with communicative ones insofar as they represent the execution of plans that are linked to the plans of other interaction participants by way of common definitions of situations and processes of mutual understanding. ... The theory of communicative action takes into account the fact that the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld and its material reproduction are internally interdependent.47

Indeed, as our earlier discussion shows, Habermas does present a complex analysis of the evolutionary development of society understood as the mutual mediation of life and systems worlds. This dialectical evolution leads, however, to the radical decoupling of

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47 J. Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* op. cit., pp.321-322
these worlds, at which point their dialectical or mutually mediating relations evaporate. For the systems world overruns or effectively displaces the communicative lifeworld to such an extent that the latter is relegated to a transcendental, ideal precinct altogether divorced from the interfering machinations of systemic integration.

Habermas insists, however, that this apparent transcendental/empirical divide between the ideal speech situation and the modern, systemically colonised lifeworld is precisely a dialectical relation no different from that defended by Piaget as the framework of his genetic structuralism. Piaget claims that the genesis and structural function of ideas within a particular science, and logic, are dialectically implicated the one in the other.48 So too, Habermas contends, the genetic rationalisation and functional, reproductive structures of the lifeworld, and the procedural logic of communicative action, are dialectically entwined.

[D]espite its purely procedural character ... communicative reason is directly implicated in social-life processes insofar as acts of mutual understanding take on the role of a mechanism for coordinating action. The network of communicative relations is nourished by resources of the lifeworld and is at the same time the medium by which concrete forms of life are reproduced.49

What undercuts this dialectical structuralist claim, at least as regards the modern lifeworld, is the systemically induced disappearance of communicative action oriented to mutual understanding from that same lifeworld. While communicative action is implicated in the modern lifeworld insofar as it constitutes the outcome of an ongoing process of lifeworld rationalisation, it nevertheless remains excluded from that systemically colonised lifeworld except through its appearance as a counter-factual, transcendental ideal. In other words, the actualisation of this logic of communicative action, learnt through the cumulative rationalisation of the lifeworld, remains blocked by the instrumentally governed media of money and power. It remains divorced from modern lifeworld practices insofar as it has not yet become a universal mechanism for coordinating social action. Habermas' analysis of modern lifeworld relations thus resembles an historical dialectic stopped dead in its tracks.

Despite what thus re-appears as the dualism of communicative reason and a systemically colonised lifeworld, Habermas continues to emphasize his theory's dialectical method. He does this on account of the critical implications for modern

49 J. Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* op. cit., p.316. [Habermas' italics]
lifeworld practices that arise, he argues, through his depth hermeneutical reconstruction of lifeworld rationalisation. Unlike the circular implications of traditional hermeneutics, resulting from its inability to go beyond the perspective of lifeworld participants themselves, critical or depth hermeneutics seeks to reveal underlying social structures that explain both the possibility and limitations of contemporary communicative actions. Critical hermeneutics thereby claims to be able to identify through structural analysis any distorting intrusions in the reproduction of the modern lifeworld and to present the communicative conditions through which the pathological effects of those distortions may be overcome. While resembling Marx's historical materialism through this critical hermeneutic reconstruction, Habermas nevertheless transforms the production paradigm of instrumental action and its incumbent teleological philosophy of history into an intersubjective communicative practice whose only telos is unconstrained consensus. With these conceptual changes, Habermas' historical materialism claims to present a dialectical analysis of the relationship between the lifeworld as a pre-reflexive background of already established meanings and beliefs, and the consensual validity or truth of communicative action made possible through the process of lifeworld rationalisation. While distancing this re-articulated version of historical materialism from the already established identity of truth and meaning at work in Heidegger's linguistic historicism, Habermas states -

Contrary to linguistic historicism, which hypostatizes the world-disclosing force of language, historical materialism takes into account (as do, later on, pragmatism and genetic structuralism) a dialectical relationship between the world-view structures that make intramundane practice possible by means of a prior understanding of meaning, on the one hand, and, on the other, learning processes deposited in the transformation of world-view structures.  

Habermas thereby reinterprets historical materialism as the explication of 'an intrinsic connection between meaning and validity'. With Marx this relation had been governed by the paradigm of labour and production, where the question of validity was confined to issues of instrumental truth and efficiency. Now, with the shift to the paradigm of communicative interaction, Habermas maintains, the scope of possible lifeworld meaning expands. For moral and aesthetic meanings are also made possible through the intersubjective relations leading to communicative consensus. In his discussion of...

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50 Ibid., p.320.
51 Ibid.
lifeworld meaning, however, these questions gain no more substantiality than that of a
growing differentiation between the structural components of the lifeworld – namely,
culture, society, and personality. Similarly, in the ideal speech situation the question of
meaning disappears in the procedural logic of unconstrained consensual validity. While
Habermas, like Piaget, claims to assimilate empirical experience within reflexively
abstract structural formations in order to identify the specific function or dysfunction of
that experience within its particular lifeworld environment, the meaning of that
experience emerges at best only in terms of its functional positioning within those
structures. In effect, Habermas’ notion of meaning abstracts from the experiential aspect
of Marx’s historical materialism – namely the suffering occasioned through alienating
work practices.52 Meaning, for Habermas, does not arise through the self-conscious,
conceptual mediation of sensuous experience. Rather meaning dissolves in the formal
exclusion of that experience from the validating function of unconstrained consensus.
Sensuous particularity disappears in the structural function of yes/no responses to moral
claims seeking consensual validity. Moreover, Habermas’ rejection of the Freudian
dialectic of transference in favour of Piaget’s genetic epistemology again indicates his
unwillingness to engage with the affective dimension of individual experience as a
mediating force in meaningful world-disclosure.53

Habermas’ shift from a subject-centered dialectic to an intersubjective,
communicative dialectic of action is particularly evident in his key notion of performative
contradiction. Nevertheless, as Bernstein indicates, Habermas’ concept of performative
contradiction is modeled precisely on Hegel’s concept of the causality of fate.54 This
concept refers to what Hegel elaborates as the dialectic of ethical life, or what is,
effectively, a struggle for mutual recognition. Hegel’s famous illustration of this struggle
is that of the master/slave relation.55 Here the master’s failure to recognise the ethical
autonomy of the slave at once becomes a failure to achieve the slave’s uncoerced
recognition of h/er moral responsibility towards the master. In other words, with the
master’s denial of the slave’s autonomy, the community of labour and respect desired by
the master is severely undermined. Hegel refers to this unintended consequence of the
master’s actions as the causality of fate. This dialectic of ethical life had been elucidated

52 A. Heller, ‘Habermas and Marxism’ in Habermas: Critical Debates eds. J. Thompson and D. Field,
53 J. Bernstein, Recovering Ethical Life op. cit., p.58.
54 Ibid., p.180ff.
in Hegel's earlier work in terms of a broken relation between lovers and also in terms of a murderous denial of the life of another. In both cases, the reciprocal recognition or community of understanding through which their self-identities had been shaped is now severely ruptured. The freedom sought through these diremptive actions turns back against those agents in an ever-deepening experience of self-alienation. With Habermas this dialectic of ethical life is couched in terms of a performative contradiction, or what amounts to a denial of those pragmatically unavoidable moral intuitions underlying all attempts to reach mutual understanding. That is to say, a denial of these intuitions - of autonomy, responsibility, justice and solidarity - performatively contradicts any attempt at uncoerced mutual understanding. Such a denial is as much a refusal to recognise the ethical autonomy of the one to whom it is addressed as it is a betrayal of the speaker's implicit claim to be recognised as a morally responsible being by that other. Hegel's causality of fate here translates as that speaker's unintended self-exclusion from the moral community to which they previously belonged.

When Habermas claims to make the paradigm shift from a previously dominant philosophy of consciousness to a philosophy of communicative language, the key element of this move is Habermas' substitution of the performative constraints of intersubjective moral argument for those at work in Hegel's dialectic of ethical life. What is disturbing in this transfer of the dialectical logic of ethical life to the communicative context of moral argument, however, is that Habermas dissolves the ethical substance of Hegel's dialectic - despair, love, forced labour and domination - in the procedural formalities of consensual validity. Habermas extracts the performative rationality at work in Hegel's causality of fate and installs it as the transcendental ground of intersubjective moral argument. In so doing, however, he excludes those existentially concrete life relations that give this fateful dialectic its compelling force. As Bernstein puts it -

abstracting [performative contradiction] as a procedure to a merely formal or logical use involves a suppression of the ground which makes it function; the existential concretion of ethical life cannot be distilled to its logical underpinning without bypassing the subjects who carry it out. Habermas' use of our 'socio-cultural form of life' in setting up his transcendental argument operates precisely this acknowledgment and suppression of ethical substantiality.56

56 J. Bernstein, Recovering Ethical Life op. cit., p.186.

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This suppression of ethical substance occurs in the first instance with Habermas' claim that our moral relations to others are validated only through the communicative practice of reaching moral consensus. Here the inner dialogue of self-conscious reflection on sensuous ethical experience disappears in the formal, procedural grounds for achieving moral agreement. This means that Habermas' -

\[ \text{definition of morality is functional: ... he integrates a wholly externalist perspective into his account of what participating in communicative perspective implies.}^{57} \]

In the second instance, ethical substance is suppressed in Habermas' refusal of any telos other than that of consensual validity. In contrast to the early Hegel's phenomenological dialectic from which the logic of performative contradiction is abstracted, Habermas' communicative dialectic lacks any ethically substantial \( \text{telos} \), and so too the tragic sensibility of Hegel's causality of fate. For Hegel, the unintentionally thwarted goals of happiness, love, and recognition are what drive the dialectic of ethical life. The performative contradiction at work in Hegel's causality of fate becomes apparent only in view of these tragically distorted ends. With Habermas, however, these ethically substantial goals remain squarely on the instrumental side of the ledger, and are thereby excluded from the formal, rational telos of intersubjective agreement. In effect, Habermas' notion of performative contradiction loses any existentially self-defeating implications.

Habermas' communicative reason further fails to consider other, just as valid, non-coercive, ethical actions, which have the advantage of not excluding strategic from communicative action. These actions are more ethically sound in their self-reflective mediation of affective experience than the formalised, procedural rationality of communicative interaction.

\[ \text{Where fundamental moral values are at issue, it could be claimed that expressive, symbolic and aesthetic presentations (e.g. draft card and bra burning, war photographs, etc.) ... are more rational forms of interaction than rational argumentation itself.}^{58} \]

Intersubjective contexts of moral argument are not the only sites of lifeworld communication in which moral validity claims can find expression and response. When measured against these other forms of symbolic and substantially filled out communicative action, what Habermas calls communicative action shrinks to a disembodied difference between abstract claims to moral validity. Moreover, that

\[^{57} \text{Ibid., pp.189-190. \{Bernstein's italics\}} \]

\[^{58} \text{Ibid., pp.189-190. \{Bernstein's italics\}} \]
intersubjective contexts of moral argument occur and are necessary does not of itself legitimise any ensuing resolutions as Habermas infers. When Foucault states, in a seemingly Habermasian fashion, that 'the rights of each person are in some sense immanent in the discussion', 59 and that 'one must be against nonconsensuality', 60 he rejects the idea that moral claims are validated and made rational by way of communicative consensus. Indeed Foucault’s point, Bernstein explains, is that ‘ethical life can be acknowledged as de facto necessary without that giving it any de jure validity’. 61

**Modernity and Art**

In line with Weber's understanding of the eighteenth century project of Enlightenment, Habermas characterises the cultural shift to Modernity -

as the separation of the substantive reason expressed in religion and metaphysics into three autonomous spheres. They are: science, morality and art. These came to be differentiated because the unified world conceptions of religion and metaphysics fell apart. Since the 18th century, the problems inherited from these older world views could be re-arranged so as to fall under specific aspects of validity: truth, normative rightness, authenticity and beauty. They could then be handled as questions of knowledge, or of justice and morality, or of taste. 62

With the institutionalisation of these autonomous cultural domains through their growing rationalisation as specialist, professional discourses, Habermas argues that an ever-increasing distance arises between these expert cultures and the everyday communicative actions of contemporary lifeworld participants. While not wishing to negate the autonomy of these domains, whose institutionalised differentiation he defends as an irreversible achievement of the modern lifeworld, Habermas nevertheless argues that ‘the project of modernity has not yet been fulfilled’. 63 The developmental logic of communicative lifeworld rationalisation, according to Habermas, now calls for a differential, albeit collective association of these domains; an association adumbrated in the simultaneous cognitive, moral and aesthetic claims expressed in any communicative speech act. This link between the claims of communicative speech and the trisectional form of modern

culture does not of itself, however, give everyday communicative action effective access to the specialised knowledge and rationality of these still autonomous cultural domains. Accordingly, Habermas maintains that '[t]his new connection ... can only be established under the conditions that societal modernisation will also be steered in a different direction'.\(^{64}\) This means that the project of modernity would no longer be distorted by the systemically induced dominance of a strategic, cognitive-instrumental reason, but would become complete with the actualisation of Habermas' ideal speech situation. This would consist in the governing rationality of an always-inherent communicative consensus where the values of autonomy and solidity, responsibility and justice are institutionalised throughout a now universally democratic public sphere. If the coordination of social action were to occur under these conditions, philosophy would not only maintain its specialised, reflective relation to the expert cultures of science, morality and art, but Habermas argues, it would also represent the interests of the communicative lifeworld. Philosophy would act as their common mediator - interpreting specialised systems of knowledge on behalf of the lifeworld while representing its intersubjective interests within these autonomous cultures of expertise.\(^{65}\)

Despite the cognitive domain of scientific truth coming under the direction of the moral domain of communicative consensus, the former nevertheless retains its autonomy; and this, since the inner logic of both is procedural and universal in scope. In contrast, lacking any procedural techniques with which to gauge the validity of possible universal aesthetic claims, art loses its autonomy. For Habermas confines the truth potential of the expressive domain of art and aesthetic sensibility to the measure of authenticity or truthfulness invoked through discursive speech.\(^{66}\) As Claude Piche critically remarks -

The pragmatics of language here determines a priori if not the content of art, at least the standard of measure by which it will be judged. Does not the primacy of communication interfere here with the inner logic of art? Habermas formally maintains his respect for the autonomy of art but, in fact, he subjects art to the logic of communication.\(^{67}\)

Not only is art deprived of any capacity to make sound cognitive and moral claims beyond those concerning its own authenticity, but, contrary to Habermas' express

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\(^{63}\) Ibid., p.12.  
\(^{64}\) Ibid., p.13.  
\(^{65}\) J. Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* op. cit., p.208. See also Habermas' 'Philosophy as Stand-In and Interpreter' in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* op. cit.  
intention, the expressive-aesthetic domain thereby also loses its autonomy. In view of this difficulty Habermas later takes up Wellmer's point that, at best, the truth potential of art, whether cognitive, moral or aesthetic, can be expressed only metaphorically. Despite the ambiguity of this claim, its consequence, as Piché points out, is made clear in The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, where Habermas makes no further attempt to ground aesthetic critique in the philosophy of communicative action. Indeed, while defending the genre distinction between literary criticism and philosophy, Habermas now insists on the radical exclusion of questions of aesthetic taste from those of truth. This exclusion is manifest in Habermas' surreptitious replacement of aesthetic critique with the more normatively oriented claims of art criticism. Paradoxically, Habermas thereby recognises, at least implicitly, the autonomy of art and aesthetic critique, albeit an autonomy already undermined through an unnecessary overburdening of Habermas' critical hermeneutics with speech act theory.

The inclusion of art and aesthetic critique within the specifically modern trisection of cultural knowledge at once works towards its very exclusion from the otherwise dominant procedural rationality of universal cognition and moral normativity. While this exclusion is effectively a silencing of art's cognitive and moral claims, it thereby entails, Bernstein argues, a distortion of cognitive and moral reason. With Habermas this distortion occurs most evidently in his exclusion of individual need interpretations and questions of ethical self-identity from the universal communicative procedures for reaching mutual understanding. What this distortion amounts to in more affective terms is the exclusion of 'the claims of local reason and its objects, the others of universalist reason: nature, the human body, desire, the feelings, sensuous particularity'. These claims find their most articulate expression in art. Yet with the exclusion of art and aesthetic critique from the bounds of communicative reason, these claims need no longer be considered claims at all.

The cognitive boundaries between science, morality and art, which Habermas applauds as the irreversible achievement of modern lifeworld rationalisation, are

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69 C. Piche, 'Art and Democracy in Habermas' op. cit., p.271.
71 J. Bernstein, Recovering Ethical Life op. cit., p.175.
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid., p.174.
nevertheless paradoxically undercut when he assigns to philosophy the stand-in role of interpreter of each of these modern domains. In claiming to act as mediator between this lifeworld and the specialised fields of science, morality and art, Habermas’ philosophy of communicative action takes up the role of a comprehensive reason otherwise contradicted by its simultaneous defence of these boundaries.74

74 J. Bernstein, *Recovering Ethical Life* op. cit., p. 177.