Theory and Rationality: Extending the Foucault/Habermas Debate

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In the twentieth century reason has become an object of interrogation and suspicion. Reason is no longer simply accepted as an infallible authority or as the highest court of appeal, but rather, it has become suspect as a force of domination and oppression, and as a system of distorted communication. If reason is taken to be oppressive rather than emancipatory, what then is the status of theory, and how do we judge or justify any moral or ethical position? Can we justify any appeal to reason at all? These questions constitute the central themes of this issue of *disClosure* and the texts by Bernstein, and Hoy and McCarthy. By reading these authors against each other, we should be able to see what is at stake in the reassessment of theory and reason.

The interrogation of reason in the twentieth century has probably received its greatest momentum from critical theory. The status of reason, theory, and critical theory is debated by Hoy and McCarthy in *Critical Theory*. In Part One McCarthy examines the task of critical theory and both the use and critique of reason. In Part Two Hoy assesses the status of critical theory and attempts to fuse critical theory with a Foucaultian critical history. Hoy and McCarthy provide rejoinders to each other in Part Three.

In Part One McCarthy examines the relation between critical theory and philosophy. Critical theory has its origin in the Kantian critique of reason but unlike

the Kantian critique of reason, critical theory offers "a materialist account of its (reason's) nature, conditions and limits." [p. 9] The task of critical theory is not to overthrow reason nor merely to examine its limits, but rather, to critically reconstruct Enlightenment conceptions of reason and the rational subject while being aware of the socio-cultural forms that reason assumes. Here, conceptions of reason are examined in their embeddedness in historical life. Hence, any 'idea' of reason belongs to a conception of reason which is not purely universal, or ahistorical, but rather, is produced by the flow of history and its relevant social structures.

McCarthy provides a brief assessment of some contemporary critics in the second chapter (such as Derrida, Rorty, and Foucault) and their criticisms of traditional conceptions of reason. Finding each of them inadequate for a variety of reasons, McCarthy direct his attention to the critical theory of Jurgen Habermas. The most salient feature of Habermas' theory of communicative action is that it is not only an attempt to offer an account of the ways in which truth claims are historically situated and culturally conditioned, but it also examines the situation-transcending import of these claims. McCarthy claims that Habermas reconstructs a social-practical analogue to Kant's ideas of reason. That is, real communication is predicated on a form of ideal communication.

According to Habermas, ideal communication or the ideal speech situation is a situation wherein communication is free of coercion, violence, distortion and domination. Although all real communication is historically situated, it aims at something that is not yet historically or culturally bound, but rather, is the condition for historically and culturally bound communication. The very notion in critical theory that communication can be and is distorted presupposes at least the concept of undistorted or ideal communication. In this organizing activity lies the potential for reason.

McCarthy's discussion of ethnomethodology in chapter three inaugurates his attempt to overthrow the belief that human beings are "judgmental dopes" whose actions are simply determined by preestablished behavioral norms provided by a common culture. The insight of ethnomethodology is that the order which the social scientist discovers in society is an order that is given to society by rational social agents, not merely by "judgmental dopes." The ethnomethodologist seeks to examine the rational properties of practical activities. This implies that social order has a cognitive-normative basis rather than a mere normative basis. However, while ethnomethodology does provide us with a notion of rational agency which is still historically situated, it does not account for the situation-transcending power of reason.

McCarthy suggests that this is where Habermas makes a significant contribution. McCarthy claims that received views of socialization have tended to overlook the cognitive component in socialization. In other words, the individual social actor or agent is viewed as merely a "judgmental" or "cultural dope" whose actions are simply determined by the preestablished social order. The actor's own knowledge of social norms is treated as epiphenomenal. For McCarthy, social actors are not only participants, but are also observers within their particular social context, and are capable of oscillating between first, second and third person perspectives. Recognition of this capacity allows people from diverse cultures to participate in a multicultural universal discourse. It is this potential to participate in a multicultural universal discourse, free of coercion, that is the substance of ideas of reason as appropriated by a theory of communicative action.

In the second part of the book, Hoy discusses the relation between critical theory and critical history. Hoy attempts to show that critical history is the more viable option of the two by exposing certain tensions and contradictions in critical theory. He claims that the conflict between traditional and critical theory as depicted by Horkheimer in "Traditional and Critical Theory" is a meta-theoretical debate between different "theories of theory." Hoy also finds the use of the term "theory" in critical theory to be problematic. To label a theory critical is a contradiction in terms due to the nature of theory itself. Hence, Hoy prefers the use of the term "critical history". Hoy claims that critical theory is not transparent and the use of terms like "inhuman" presupposes a grasp of the social whole. As "theory" critical theory is bound to make general claims about the total social configuration. But, in order to be critical it must be suspicious of all totalizing claims.

Hoy concludes chapter four with an interpretation of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Negative Dialectics*, which anticipate poststructuralism. The most salient feature of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is that it exposes the source of the Enlightenment and provides us with an account of how critical history is possible. Hoy argues that "the enlightenment narrows down the range of the rational to what can be known with specific methods, thereby excluding whatever does not fit into this domain." [p. 125] Thus, the very goal of the Enlightenment is rooted in fear, and the consequence of such thinking is conformism. However, Hoy criticizes Adorno and Horkheimer because their critique of the Enlightenment is parasitic on the Enlightenment itself. Hoy claims that Adorno and Horkheimer merely wanted to lead the Enlightenment to a "truly enlightened" position by releasing it from entanglement in blind domination. Hence, while the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

shows us how a critical history is possible, it never fully achieves the status of a critical history.

Hoy points out that critical history is exemplified in the works of Foucault. In chapter five Hoy claims that French poststructuralism is a way of continuing the tradition of critical theory. He argues that Habermas' attempt to eliminate the tensions and deferrals of the early critical theorists leads him to propose a philosophical project that appears to be more like what Horkheimer calls traditional theory. According to Hoy, Habermas is interested in a theory of reason whereas Foucault is interested in the historicity of reason. A theory of reason merely constructs a theory of what rationality really is. Foucault's genealogy attempts to understand the present by unmasking present forms of rationality. These present forms are not ahistorical but have their origin in history. That is, rationality develops in the course of historical practices. Once we see how a form of rationality develops historically, it loses its status as necessary and universal. Hoy concludes chapter five with a brief discussion of Habermas' project of "rational reconstruction" and offers a critique of this project from the perspective of the genealogists.

If Habermas' critical theory seems to be nothing more than traditional theory, is critical theory still possible? In chapter six Hoy reconstructs critical theory as genealogical hermeneutics. Habermas' project fails to assist in the triumph of critical theory over traditional theory because his "theory of communicative action does not construct an account of what makes an epistemological or ethical claim valid." [p. 173] For this reason Habermas can be seen as offering a ground or foundation for social theory that is symptomatic of traditional theory. Such a project overlooks the contingent character of social formations and thereby overlooks the contingent character of theory. Habermas still seeks a theory that is grounded in some notion of universal necessity. The genealogist does not seek to validate any epistemological or ethical claim but merely seeks to "see as strange what culture takes to be familiar." [p. 174] This can be accomplished only by doing a critical history of the familiar. What is revealed in this critical history is the contingent character of the familiar. The validity that Habermas ascribes to certain epistemological and ethical claims is subject to suspicion when familiar social structures and ideas which have been thought to be necessary are shown to be contingent. Hence, epistemological and ethical claims are merely interpretations which do not represent a single, monolithic, universal truth, but rather, they represent a plurality of perspectives which are historically situated.

In Part Three Hoy and McCarthy respond to the arguments set fourth in Parts One and Two. Hoy and McCarthy criticize each other on numerous points. I shall select only a couple of these points for discussion here since they are too numerous to treat in the space of this review. McCarthy states that the disagreement between himself and Hoy comes down to whether there is anything universal to say at all about reason, truth and objectivity. He sums up Hoy's criticisms under four principal themes: (1) pragmatism, (2) genealogy, (3) hermeneutics, and (4) pluralism. McCarthy attempts to show how critical theory does account for or include these four themes. He claims that Hoy's use of them to criticize critical theory is rooted in a misunderstanding of the aims of critical social theory. For example: with respect to pragmatism, McCarthy claims that critical social theory's interest in "grand metanarratives" is practically motivated and seeks to aid in the construction of critical histories of the present. These narratives serve as "interpretive frameworks for historically oriented, critical analyses of contemporary society." [p. 219] Such interpretive frameworks do not provide a "God's-eye" view, but rather, they provide a "reflective participants" view. Further, the metanarrative used in critical social theory does not attempt to account for every detail of every aspect of our society, but rather, they only attempt to see how things hang together and what are our alternatives.

For McCarthy the charge of "totalizing discourse" is a false accusation with respect to critical social theory. Although critical social theory employs "grand metanarratives," these narratives do not aim at any kind of totality or finality, but rather, they are engaged in an ongoing act of "constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing ,"big pictures" of basic structures, processes, and interdependencies," and therefore, have pragmatic value. [p. 221]

McCarthy claims that genealogy is an essential part of critical social theory to the extent that (like Foucault) critical social theory aims at understanding "the ways in which reason and rationality have been socially constructed, as a means of achieving a critical self-understanding with implications for practice." [p. 225] Critical social theory differs from Foucaultian genealogy in its attitude toward the possible emancipatory dimension of enlightenment. McCarthy also claims that the notion of a "pure" genealogy is a myth. That is, that Foucault also made use of general schemes and perspectives.

The hermeneutical problem lies in the question whether or not context-transcending validity claims are possible. While philosophical hermeneutics claims that the understanding is bounded by its context, McCarthy claims that the claims of

general theories broadens the invitation to join the discussion. It is with respect to a broader discussion that the hermeneutical problem overlaps with the problem of pluralism.

The problem of pluralism is similar if not identical to the hermeneutical problem of a multiplicity of interpretations. Hoy takes a Gadamerian position on interpretation. He employs Gadamer's notion of "*Sache*" which is what the dialogue is about. Although for Gadamer (according to Hoy) interpretation should be guided by the "*Sache*," it does not follow that these interpretations may or should formulate an ideal, universal discourse. Not only are interpretations bounded by a particular context, but, the "*Sache*" itself is bound by a context which evolves and changes with the history of interpretation. Therefore, interpretation must always be open-ended. [p. 189-190] For Hoy the attempt to arrive at a consensus or universal agreement prematurely closes the possibility for further interpretation.

McCarthy claims that the critical theory of the Habermasian sort is not opposed to pluralism. [p. 238] Critical theory does not presuppose that "discourse should always lead to rational agreement, but that it should be carried out as if rational agreement about which is the right, or at least, best interpretation were possible." [p. 242] This still requires a multiplicity of interpretations—however, each interpretation must be held accountable for its claims.

Hoy's rejoinder is also centered around four principal themes: (1) rational agents vs. cultural dopes, (2) local solidarities vs. universal audience, (3) pluralism vs. consensus, and (4) identity in difference. Hoy claims that genealogy does not incline one to believe that persons are merely "cultural dopes". Although self-understandings are shaped by social practices, social subjects are often conscious of shaping their self-understanding through these social practices. Therefore, genealogy does not deny agency and we are not simply zombies that are moved about by invisible forces. However, we are affected by social forces and structures in ways that are not fully transparent to us. Hence, we cannot be fully transparent to ourselves and therefore, we are not always able to give reasons for what we do. The self-descriptions that social agents offer are valuable but are not the whole story. Self-description and self-understanding still develop within a particular social context.

Interpretations of social reality are rooted in our self-understanding, which is bound by a particular social context. Is this the basis for ethical and social relativism? Not according to Hoy. Hoy claims that he and McCarthy agree that warrant-

ing and contesting reasons are essential to social discussion and criticism. He disagrees with McCarthy that the validity of these reasons must be agreed to by everyone. He believes that McCarthy's notion of "context transcendence" goes too far. Hoy finds McCarthy's idea of a "universal audience" quite problematic. For Hoy, insofar as this "universal audience" must agree on a single, ideal interpretation of social reality, McCarthy's position may be characterized as "critical monism". Hoy claims that "critical monism" does not take seriously enough the way in which interpretations are bounded by contexts. That is, the critical monist seeks an interpretation of social reality that is detached enough from any particular social context to warrant agreement by everyone.

If interpretations are bounded by a particular context, how does Hoy avoid relativism? Hoy adopts the hermeneutic notion of "solidarity" as a more realistic and realizable goal than McCarthy's notion a "universal audience". "Solidarity" is the "social glue" or perhaps the common interests, backgrounds, etc..., that holds groups together. One criticism of the notion of "solidarity" is that it is exclusive. However, Hoy argues that the Gadamerian notion of "solidarity" is inclusive. Not only does it play a role in community formation, but it also plays a role in the expansion of communities. Hoy states that Foucault viewed the "we" that is formed through solidarity as a forward-looking "we". The tendency of this forward-looking "we" is to form a community of action. [p. 259]

For Hoy, the "we" that is presupposed in McCarthy's "universal audience" looks too far forward. That is, McCarthy's "universal audience" is final. The notion of solidarity does not entail the notion of finality because although it starts locally, it expands and widens its interpretations "through forward-looking encounters with others." [p. 262] However, there is no single solidarity at the end of the process.

The value of pluralism for Hoy is that it allows us to constantly expand our interpretations. He states that: "On the pluralistic hermeneutic account as I reconstruct it, what one aims at is an understanding of the subject matter and not agreement as such." [p. 266] Consensus is not the primary goal of social discourse because it may preclude our arriving at an understanding of social reality. Since social reality or social contexts are always changing, it is necessary that we continue to strive for new interpretations.

Hoy concludes his rejoinder with a brief assessment of the similarities between his and McCarthy's positions. Hoy claims that both positions are pragmatic, how-

ever, McCarthy maintains certain unnecessary assumptions that must be purged. The claims made by Hoy may be summed up in the following propositions: 1. All validity claims are interpretations and are bounded by a context, and must be checked against other interpretations. Therefore, the ideal of competent judges is "pragmatically unnecessary". [p. 268] 2. McCarthy claims that the ideal of unconditional truth aids in the discovery of "hidden conditions" while still allowing for some indeterminacy in the background of argumentation. This indeterminacy suggest that there are always hidden factors which lead to a plurality of interpretations. [p. 269] 3.Both Hoy and McCarthy seek to avoid complacency and parochialism, while respecting the plurality of social differences, but they disagree on which philosophical perspective makes this possible.

In *Recovering Ethical Life: Jurgen Habermas and the Future of Critical Theory*, Bernstein lays out what he considers to be the essential problems addressed by critical theory, and then provides an analyses of the way in which Habermas has tried to come to terms with these issues. In Chapter One Bernstein claims that critical theory is not merely concerned with the problem of domination but also with the problem of meaning. Nihilism may be understood as the problem of reason, and with the problem of domination constitute the two sources of critical theory. The problem of the way in which nihilism and justice are intertwined and resolved is the source of critical theory's return to traditional theory. The problem of nihilism is rooted in the Weberian problem of "cultural rationalization." Through "cultural rationalization" traditional norms, values and meanings lose their cultural place and critical force. There is a correlation between "cultural rationalization" and the establishment of institutions (or systems of domination) over persons. Critical theory develops "through its diagnosis of the meaning and consequences of rationalization." [p. 26]

Bernstein claims that for Habermas the rationalization of the lifeworld is in itself progressive but becomes nihilistic due to its deformation. Habermas attempts to remedy this problem with his theory of communicative action or communicative reason. Bernstein's examination of Habermas' project is an attempt to see whether or not Habermas adequately treats the problem of justice and meaning without falling into the pitfalls of traditional theory.

Habermas' theory of communicative action takes as its model the classical understanding of politics as normative, which concerns itself with the "good life". This is contrasted with the scientization of politics wherein politics is no longer ethical or synonymous with the public sphere, but instead, it becomes the domain of expertise,

manipulation, and technical control. It is here that "cultural rationalization" and communication are distorted. With the scientization of politics and the loss of the public sphere comes a loss of liberty. Chapter two is an examination of Habermas' conception of the ideal speech situation which Bernstein claims is a rewriting of the Kantian "Kingdom of Ends." The ideal speech situation is a model of autonomy and uncoerced agreement which is implicit in every communicative act.

In chapter three Bernstein discusses Habermas' use of Freudian psychoanalysis as a means of reflection whereby the acquisition of self-knowledge makes possible the emancipation from distorted communicative relations. What is of particular interest to Bernstein is Habermas' Hegelian reading of Freud. According to Bernstein, Habermas "interprets repression and its overcoming in terms of the causality of fate and the dialectic of moral life." [p. 82] That is, the Freudian notion of transference is viewed as a dialectical encounter between analyst and analysand, whereby: "the analyst can only have knowledge of the object (the analysand) if the analysand transforms himself into a subject; and the analysand can only do this if he recognizes in the analyst his suppressed life." [p. 82] The subject recognizes himself as subject only to the extent that he recognizes himself in the "other". Recognition of oneself in the "other" is the ground for emancipation and ethical life.

In his appropriation of Freud, Habermas attempts to examine the role that self-reflection and self-knowledge plays in emancipation. However, the self that is disclosed is not simply an autonomous, self-conscious individual self or subject, but rather, a self that is embedded in a web of intersubjective relations. For this reason Habermas chooses the Hegelian notion of the causality of fate (wherein recognition of oneself in the other constitutes a dialectical relationship between subjects who are engaged in a struggle between love, hate, and recognition) over the Kantian moral theory which stresses autonomy and law. The key question raised by Bernstein is whether or not Habermas' "subject of an undistorted communication community" is a logical fiction like Kant's "logical subject". [p. 86] Like Hoy, Bernstein challenges Habermas' idealization of communicative rationality.

The aim of Bernstein's critique of Habermas from chapters four through six is to see whether or not the theory of communicative reason can be intelligibly perceived as a reconstruction of the causality of fate doctrine. He claims that with Habermas' linguistic turn, the reconstruction of the causality of fate doctrine becomes problematic. Bernstein opens chapter four with a discussion of Rousseau's consideration of the formative conflict between the self as preference maximizer and the self as citizen. This conflict leads to the formation of "double men," that is, these two

conflicting sources of our education cancel each other out, thereby, resulting in nihilism. Bernstein claims that Habermas' division of moral discourse from ethical discourse sanctions the lives of modern double men, thereby sanctioning the very nihilism that it strives to overcome. Bernstein demonstrates this by examining Habermas' critique of Durkheim and his appropriation of Mead.

In chapter five Bernstein surveys Seyla Benhabib's critique of Habermas in her *Critique, Norm, and Utopia*. Benhabib claims that Habermas' theory of communicative action is too formalistic and empty. Following Mead, Habermas bases his theory on a conception of the "generalized other" which stresses the way in which human beings are the same and are thereby entitled to certain rights. Benhabib thinks that this notion of the "generalized other" is symptomatic of the liberal tradition and falls into the pitfalls of what Adorno calls "identity thinking." In contrast to the notion of the "generalized other" Benhabib proposes the notion of the "concrete other." If moral discourse is restricted to norms which are derived from the concept of the "generalized other," then moral discourse is incomplete insofar as it overlooks concrete ethical identities. It is only through local reason as opposed to universal reason that we are able to interpret the needs and desires of others in such a way that they can become active, emancipated participants in moral and ethical discourse.

Chapters six and seven are correctives to the problematic areas in Habermas' thought. Bernstein contends that the separation of moral and ethical discourses (as discussed in chapter four) leads Habermas to see the conditioned and the unconditioned as lying at different levels. This is problematic because the kind of self-knowledge required for emancipation cannot be detached from the conditions which make it possible. In affirming self-knowledge we also affirm its conditions (negativity). This is absolute or unconditioned knowledge in the Hegelian sense. Hence, the universality of moral discourse or the validity of universal moral claims must be grounded in the particular. Here, Bernstein argues for the employment of reflective judgment. Bernstein relies on the distinction made between determinate and reflective judgment by Kant in the *Critique of Judgment*. In reflective judgment particular ethical identities are not subsumed under universals, but rather, it makes possible the creating of universals under which we do our subsuming. Hence, Bernstein defends Castoriadis against Habermas' criticisms in chapter seven.

While Habermas believes that it is intersubjectivity and communicative rationality that have been suppressed by traditional theory, Castoriadis claims that it is the creative dimension of human action that has been suppressed. Castoriadis employs

the Kantian notion of reflective judgment wherein we create universals under which particulars are subsumed. [p. 200] Hence, new horizons of meaning are created, which inform social actions. Theoretical activity for Castoriadis is nothing more than elucidation from within history of what being in history means. This emphasis on meaning places Castoriadis within the hermeneutic tradition. Bernstein uses Castoriadis' theory of elucidation as a means for critiquing Habermas' prising apart of meaning and validity, which for Bernstein is detrimental to critical theory.

In *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Habermas criticizes Castoriadis and others (e.g., Foucault, Derrida, Heidegger etc...,) for taking "subject centered reason" as the whole of reason. Hence, the recent interrogation of reason is only the interrogation of "subject-centered reason." "Subject-centered reason is the reason and rationality of the transcendental subject." [p. 197] According to Habermas it is "subject-centered reason" that is responsible for totalizing discourse and domination. However, for Bernstein it is Habermas' rejection of the subject and prising apart of meaning and validity which is problematic and ultimately destroys meaning and culminates in nihilism. Bernstein claims that: "The unconditionality of validity claims does require us to discount our subjectivity, which is to make whatever is agreed to as a consequence meaningless for us. Communicative rationality drives out subjectivity." [p. 220]

Bernstein seeks to recover subjectivity and the unity of validity and meaning. He raises some of the same issues that are raised by Hoy and McCarthy, but, with a slightly different emphasis. The debate between Hoy and McCarthy is largely a debate about the status of theory or what type of theory must a critical theory of society be. In this debate, there is a prising apart of meaning and validity, with Hoy defending a theory of interpretation or meaning, and McCarthy defending a theory of validity. The issue of subjectivity is not raised directly by Hoy and McCarthy (unless one takes their discussion of social agents to be one about social subjects, which in that case it is McCarthy who defends the subject). I take Bernstein's book to be an extension of the debate between Hoy and McCarthy, although the two texts seem to go in very different directions on certain points. Nevertheless, they both examine very similar and at times the same issues. It would be appropriate to situate Bernstein somewhere between Hoy and McCarthy in the debate about the status of theory and rationality. It seems that while Bernstein would probably offer some interesting criticisms of Hoy and McCarthy, it also seems that he holds an uneasy alliance with both of them.

Critical Theory and *Recovering Ethical Life* are two very remarkable books. These books are written for an academic audience whose interests lie in the present status of theory and rationality whether in philosophy or the social sciences in general. The authors of both books have shown extreme sensitivity in their examination of the way in which the debate has unfolded and also to the intricate details in the arguments of those involved in the debate. While neither book offers a complete and satisfactory answer to questions about the status of reason in contemporary theoretical discoures, they do elucidate quite well the problems with traditional conceptions of reason and the way in which these conceptions have been responded to. The authors have at least made more visible the many tensions involved in any discussion of rational discourse, such as the problematic relationship between interpretation and validity claims, and have presented to us the more salient possibilities for the continuation of rational discourses. Through my own reading of these texts I have been forced to think about rationality from a variety of perspectives. Each book represents an important moment in contemporary debates on rationality and stands as an invitation to all who are interested in and are willing to participate in the debate.