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Citation for this version:

Susen, S.

***The Philosophical Significance of Binary Categories in Habermas's  
Discourse Ethics***

London: Birkbeck ePrints. Available at: <http://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/1274>

Citation for publisher's version:

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# The Philosophical Significance of Binary Categories in Habermas's Discourse Ethics

BY SIMON SUSEN

## Abstract

The philosophical programme associated with the discourse ethics of Jürgen Habermas has been widely discussed in the literature. The fact that Habermas has devoted a considerable part of his work to the elaboration of this philosophical programme indicates that discourse ethics can be regarded as a cornerstone of his communication-theoretic approach to society. In essence, Habermas conceives of discourse ethics as a philosophical framework which derives the coordinative power of social normativity from the discursive power of communicative rationality. Although there is an extensive literature on Habermas's communication-theoretic account of society, almost no attention has been paid to the fact that the theoretical framework which undergirds his discourse ethics is based on a number of binary conceptual divisions. It is the purpose of this paper to shed light on the philosophical significance of these binary categories in Habermas's discourse ethics and thereby demonstrate that their complexity is indicative of the subject's tension-laden immersion in social reality.

## INTRODUCTION

The philosophical programme associated with the discourse ethics of Jürgen Habermas has been widely discussed in the literature.<sup>1</sup> The fact that Habermas has devoted a considerable part of his work to the elaboration of this philosophical programme indicates that discourse ethics can be regarded as a cornerstone of his communi-

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example: Alexy (1998); Apel (1990 [1985]); Apel (1996); Benhabib (1990b); Benhabib & Dall-

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cation-theoretic approach to society.<sup>2</sup> In essence, Habermas conceives of discourse ethics as a philosophical framework which derives the coordinative power of social normativity from the discursive power of communicative rationality. According to this view, our normative ability to regulate the social world is contingent upon our communicative capacity to engage in the discursive problematisation of the world. Put differently, legitimate forms of social regulation depend on communicative processes of collective deliberation.

Habermas's plea for a discourse ethics reflects a systematic attempt to complement a sociological theory of communicative action with a philosophical theory of communicative ethics. The main strength of such an ambitious endeavour is that it allows us—at least in principle—to locate the rational foundations of normativity in the linguistic foundations of society. Thus, rather than reducing the search for the grounds of normativity to a scholastic exercise of metaphysical speculation, discourse ethics situates the grounds of normativity in the linguistic grounds of society: communicative action. Our social ability to coordinate our coexistence through our daily search for mutual comprehensibility is the basis of our moral ability to regulate our coexistence through our daily construction of normativity.

Although there is an extensive literature on Habermas's communication-theoretic account of society, almost no attention has been paid to the fact that the theoretical framework which undergirds his discourse ethics is based on a number of *binary conceptual divisions*. It is the purpose of this paper to shed light on the philosophical significance of these binary categories in Habermas's discourse ethics and thereby demonstrate that their complexity is indicative of the subject's tension-laden immersion in social reality.

## 1. THEORY AND PRACTICE

Discourse ethics is essentially concerned with the enlightenment of the human condition insisting that, as a species, we have a fundamental interest in “the liberation from the objectified self-deception of dogmatic power” (Habermas 1988 [1971]: 15). Social emancipation, in this sense, can be conceived of as de-dogmatisation: de-dogmatisation from implicit, taken-for-granted, and erroneous knowledge claims whose reproduction contributes to the subject's continuous self-deception. In order to pave our way out of self-deception, we need to recognise that our interest in enlightenment is twofold in that it contains both a *theoretical* and a *practical* dimension.

On the one hand, discourse ethics reminds us of “the interest in enlightenment,

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mayr (1990); Benhabib (1990a); Blanke (1991); Finlayson (2000); Gamwell (1997); Garvey (2000); Gilabert (2005); Greig (2004); Honneth (1991 [1986]); Hudson (1993); Hutchings (2005); Kelly (1990); Kemp (1985); Lafont (2005); McNay (2003); Nielsen (1995); O'Neill (2000); Schweppenhäuser (1989); Seemann (2004); Susen (2009); Tassone (2005); Thompson (2000); Ulbert & Risse (2005); Villoro (1997); Wacquant (1992).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example: Habermas (1976, 1990 [1983], 1993 [1990], 1993 [1991a], 1996 [1992a], 2001 [1984a]).

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in the sense of a *relentless discursive validation of claims to validity*" (ibid.; italics added). Thus, a critical ethics of communication aims to uncover our *theoretical interest in the discursive problematisation of the world*. It thereby encourages us to engage in "the discursive dissolution of opinions and norms the validity of which is based on unjustified claims, no matter to what extent it is actually accepted" (ibid.). When unjustified claims to validity turn out to be unjustifiable, the justification of the unjustifiable becomes unjustified. Our interest in enlightenment manifests itself in our *theoretical* capacity to distinguish between justified and unjustified forms of validity which undergird established frameworks of social acceptability.

On the other hand, discourse ethics seeks to explore "the interest in enlightenment, in the sense of *practical change of established condition*" (ibid.; italics added). Hence, a critical ethics of communication seeks to uncover our *practical interest in social transformation*. It thereby allows us to engage in "the realization of goals which demand the risks of taking sides, and thus, precisely, the relinquishment of the neutral role of a participant in discourse" (ibid.). Every linguistic test of discursive acceptability is an attack on the illusory belief in social neutrality; every discursive engagement with society obliges us to position ourselves in relation to established forms of normativity; and every social arrangement which is open to discussion is, at least potentially, open to change. Unjustified forms of society are based on unjustified forms of legitimacy. It is the task of discourse ethics to question the validity of social legitimacy in terms of its rational defensibility. Our interest in enlightenment manifests itself in our *practical* capacity to build a society whose legitimacy is contingent upon its ability to claim acceptability anchored in rational validity.

In short, if—as subjects capable of speech—we have a *theoretical interest* in the *discursive problematisation* of the world and if—as subjects capable of action—we have a *practical interest* in the *social transformation* of the world, discourse ethics is a systematic attempt to cross-fertilise our theoretical interest in critique and our practical interest in change for the pursuit of our common interest in enlightenment. The constant transformation of discursive problematisation and the constant problematisation of social transformation are indicative of the intertwinement of our theoretical and our practical interest in human emancipation.

## 2. MONOLOGUE AND DIALOGUE

In the light of the dialogical interpretation of the world put forward by Habermas's discourse ethics, "a monological reinterpretation...is all but impossible" (Habermas 2001 [1984b]: 118). Subjects capable of *speech and action* are able to engage in *communication and interaction*. Indeed, monological forms of speech are derived from dialogical forms of speech, for we acquire our ability to talk *about* the world on condition that we are exposed to the experience of talking *with* the world. Every speaker needs a speech community. Only insofar as we are immersed in a communicative engagement *with* the world are we capable of developing a linguistic understanding

of the world. Linguisticity is a product of society. We look coexistentiality right in the eye when developing our linguistic capacity through our communicative engagement with society.

Thus, it is not a “monological consciousness possessed by atomized interacting subjects” (Ray 2004: 314), but a dialogical consciousness developed by socialised interacting subjects which lies at the heart of the coexistential determinacy of a maturing humanity. “[D]ialogue of mature, autonomous human beings can take place” (Habermas 1988 [1963]: 281) to question the self-referential legitimacy which inhabits the monologue of immature, heteronymous human beings. Dialogue is potentially empowering because it obliges the subject to accept that the power of social acceptability cannot be divorced from the power of communicative rationality: every form of social normativity can either persist or perish in the light of its rational defensibility. In fact, those forms of normativity which are *monologically imposed upon* society can hardly claim to enjoy genuine legitimacy. By contrast, those forms of normativity which are *dialogically negotiated by* society are likely to be imbued with a healthy degree of legitimacy.

Given that discourse ethics locates the emancipatory potential of communicative rationality in the intersubjective nature of ordinary social life, it “grounds the hermeneutic utopia of universal and unlimited dialogue in a commonly inhabited lifeworld” (Habermas 1987 [1981b]: 134). In this sense, discourse ethics does not represent a philosophical conglomerate of scholastic language games *removed* from the quotidian context of social reality; on the contrary, discourse ethics constitutes a philosophical programme of critical language use *embedded* in the everyday world of intersubjectivity. The ultimate source of communicative discourse is the ultimate resource of the communicative universe: communicative action. Our discursive capacity to convert the world into an object of contemplation cannot be divorced from our communicative capacity to attribute meaning to the world through our quotidian search for mutual comprehension. Our ability to enter into debate with one another is inconceivable without our ability to understand one another. Hence, as a philosophical framework that emphasises the coexistential significance of dialogue, discourse ethics relies not on “the withdrawing of communication into the inwardness of a solitary subject” (Habermas 1988 [1971]: 28); italics added), but on the realisation of communication based on *the outwardness of the sociable subject*. In other words, discourse ethics derives its enlightening force from the dialogical nature of communicational encounters.

A discourse which is monologically constructed is essentially non-discursive; an ethics which is monologically constructed is effectively non-ethical; and a discourse ethics which is monologically oriented is both non-discursive and non-ethical. By contrast, a discourse which is dialogically constructed is genuinely discursive; an ethics which is dialogically constructed is truly ethical; and a discourse ethics which is dialogically oriented is both discursive and ethical. The commitment to the normative force of dialogical encounters not only gives discursive value to our ethical

engagement with reality, but it also attributes ethical value to our discursive engagement with society. Indeed, as a communicative programme based on *dialogical rationality*, discourse ethics is a normative framework oriented towards *reciprocal responsibility*. Our purposive relation to reality is mediated by our communicative relation to society. Thus, it is not in the *monological* relationship of recognising *oneself in oneself*, but “in the *dialogical* relationship of recognizing *oneself in the other*” (Habermas 1988 [1968]: 148)<sup>3</sup> that humans “experience the common basis of their existence” (*ibid.*). We become aware of our commonality when exposed to the coexistential experience of communicative reciprocity.

### 3. PRIVACY AND PUBLICITY

The relationship between “the private” and “the public” is a key issue of contention in modern social and political theory.<sup>4</sup> Habermas’s writings on the transformation of the public sphere in the modern world have had a tremendous influence on the ways in which the relationship between “the private” and “the public” has been conceptualised in recent social and political thought.<sup>5</sup> From a communication-theoretic perspective, it is essential to recognise the preponderance of the latter over the former: there is no private person without a public persona; there is no private reasoning which is not influenced by public reasoning; and there is no private life which is not shaped by the nature of public life. In short, *private* individuals are *public* individuals because they are *social* individuals.

If, following Habermas, “[t]he bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public” (Habermas 1989 [1962]: 27), then public discourse can be regarded first and foremost as a discourse of private people come together as public carriers of communicative reason. Discourse ethics affirms the *public* nature of its own endeavour in that it insists on the *social* nature of *communicative* reasoning. Both discourse and ethics are public affairs in that they are socially produced and negotiated. A discourse which fails to become public is a discourse which fails to have an impact on the *symbolic constitution* of the world, and an ethics which fails to become public is an ethics which fails to shape the *moral constitution* of the world. Subjects capable of speech and action are able to shape the normativity of societies capable of change and transformation.

Discourse ethics is a *public* ethics in that it relies on the *intersubjective* nature of *communicative* rationality for the *collective* scrutiny of *social* reality. Put differently,

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<sup>3</sup> Italics added; “dialogic” replaced with “dialogical”.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example: Geuss (2001); Rabinovitch (1997); Rabinovitch (1998); Robbins (1993); Steinberger (1999); Weintraub and Kumar (1997).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example: Calhoun (1992); Crossley and Roberts (2004); Fraser (1992); Goodnight (1992); Habermas (1989 [1962]); Habermas (1992a); Holub (1991); Kögler (2005); Ku (2000); Rochlitz (2002); Viroli (2003).

our discursive search for truth and normativity is a coexistential exercise based on the public use of communicative rationality. "Truth is public. No determination that holds only privately for an individual subject can refer to what is real" (Habermas 1987 [1968a]: 100; cf. Mitchell 2003: 6). For what manifests itself in the discursive determination of reality is the communicative mediation of society. We have no direct access to the world because our sensual perception of the world is mediated by our communicative interpretation of the world. Every seemingly private access to reality is impregnated with the public determinacy of rationality. To accept that we cannot escape society when making sense of reality requires acknowledging that we cannot escape the public determinacy of communicative rationality.

Just as "[w]ith the linguistic turn epistemic authority passes over from the private experiences of a subject to the public practices of a linguistic community" (Habermas 2000b: 324), with discourse ethics normative authority passes over from the private contemplations of a solitary subject to the public interpretations of a discursive society. To be sure, in a rational society, the ultimate source of *social coordination* is the forceless force of *linguistic argumentation*, and the ultimate guarantee of *legitimate authority* is the forceless force of *communicative rationality*. Legitimate forms of political and epistemic authority are constantly exposed to public forms of discursive scrutiny. "The persuasiveness of an argument stems not from private insight but from the opinions which, in the search for rationally motivated agreement, form part of the public practice of the exchange of reasons."<sup>6</sup> And the legitimacy of political and epistemic authority is rooted not in private sympathy but in the public recognition of discursive defensibility. The "public realm of reasons"<sup>7</sup> is a sphere of "responsible subjects"<sup>8</sup> who develop a sense of solidarity through the communicative search for collective forms of validity. In brief, from a discourse-ethical perspective, the social legitimacy of every private claim to validity depends on its public defensibility.

#### 4. VIOLENCE AND DISCOURSE

Violence and discourse are antithetical in that the use of the former excludes the use of the latter just as the use of the latter excludes the use of the former. As Ricoeur (1979: 226) reminds us, "*violence is the opposite of discourse...*Violence is always the interruption of discourse: discourse is always the interruption of violence" (italics in original). Violence cannot be a source of justification, for violence can never justify itself through itself. To be sure, violence can *impose* a specific—for example, politi-

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<sup>6</sup> Habermas (2001a: 44; my translation). Original text in German: "Darüber, welches Argument überzeugt, entscheidet nicht private Einsicht, sondern die im rational motivierten Einverständnis gebündelten Stellungnahmen aller, die an der öffentlichen Praxis des Austauschs von Gründen teilnehmen."

<sup>7</sup> Habermas (2004a: 890; my translation). Original text in German: "in den öffentlichen Raum der Gründe."

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. (my translation). Original text in German: "verantwortliche Autoren."

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cal, territorial, or ideological—form of legitimacy; yet, no matter how forceful and effective the imposition of power may be, violence cannot *justify* a specific form of legitimacy.

A *communicative ethics of discourse*, then, is diametrically opposed to an *instrumental ethics of violence*: whereas the former is based on the intersubjective force of consensual action, the latter is founded on the purposive force of strategic action. “Agreement can indeed be objectively obtained by force; but what comes to pass manifestly through outside influence or the use of violence cannot count subjectively as agreement” (Habermas 1987 [1981]: 287). Hence, whereas *genuine agreement* can only rest on the forceless force of communicative discourse, *false agreement* can be imposed through the forceful force of purposive violence. If we agree on something because we have *good reasons* to do so, the consensus we reach can be considered to be authentic and worthwhile. If, however, we agree on something because we are *forced* to do so, the consensus we seem to reach is actually a consensus that we fail to reach because it is not dialogically achieved *by*, but monologically imposed *upon*, us.

In other words, it is communicative, rather than purposive, rationality which is essential to the construction of a consensus-oriented, rather than utility-driven, society. “A communicatively achieved agreement has a rational basis; it cannot be imposed by either party, whether instrumentally through intervention in the situation directly or strategically through influencing the decisions of opponents” (ibid.). Both instrumental action—as a non-social form of teleological action—and strategic action—as a social form of teleological action<sup>9</sup>—do not qualify as motivational cornerstones of consensual action, for it is not by acting *upon* the world but by acting *with* the world that the normative potentiality of mutual comprehensibility is converted into the coexistential reality of a common humanity.

A “validity claim that is in principle *criticisable*”<sup>10</sup> can contribute to the construction of a society whose legitimacy is potentially *emancipatory*. By contrast, a violence claim that is in principle *non-criticisable* contributes to the construction of a society whose legitimacy is relatively *arbitrary*. Our engagement in discourse allows for the commitment to the *normative accountability* of our actions; our engagement in violence, on the other hand, aims at the pursuit of the *non-normative utility* of our actions.

The evolutionary significance of our ability to determine the course of history not by the forceful force of violence but by the forceless force of discourse can hardly be exaggerated: the legitimacy of a discourse-guided normativity has the power to shape the history of a purpose-laden society. The communicative engagement in discourse has become such a constitutive component of maturing societies that the employment of violence is only conceivable as the refusal to rely on the coordinative power of our communicative competence. “To be a potential participant in discourse

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<sup>9</sup> On Habermas's conceptions of instrumental action and strategic action, see, for example, Habermas (1971 [1968]: 92), and Habermas (1987 [1981c]: 285).

<sup>10</sup> Habermas (1987 [1981c]: 287; italics added; translation modified). On the *criticisability* of validity claims, see also, for example, Susen (2007: 76-77, 244, 266), and Susen (2009: 106).



means to be human. The decision not to communicate, not to have any authority in discourse or to inflict violence upon others, all depends, then, on this prior competence" (Matustik 1989: 164). Every time we decide to let violence decide, we decide to let discourse hide. Every time we decide to let discourse decide, we decide to put violence aside. The maturity of the human species derives from its capacity to determine its own historicity through the accountability of discursive responsibility.

## 5. AUTONOMY AND HETERONOMY

Discourse ethics is concerned with affirming and defending the autonomy of the human subject. Every subject capable of *speech and action* is capable of *contemplation and reflection* and therefore, at least in principle, also capable of *deliberation and decision*. The fact that both our short-term and our long-term decisions can be subject to discursive reflection implies that we are able to determine the course of history through the power of communicative rationality. If the "free will is the rational will that allows itself to be determined by good reasons" (Habermas 2000b: 328), our existential autonomy emanates from our discursive capacity to be guided by critical rationality.

Since we are a linguistic species, our search for liberty is given meaning through our search for reasonability. We learn to be free only insofar as we learn to be free in relation to one another, and we learn to reason only insofar as we learn to reason with and against one another. Thus, autonomy based on reasonability cannot do without a coexistential orientation towards mutual intelligibility. Since discourse ethics ascribes paradigmatic status to the sociological significance of the communicative exchange of reasons, it assumes that the construction of personal autonomy is inconceivable without the reproduction of social heteronomy. Put differently, the human aspiration to *individual independence* is embedded in human relations of *collective interdependence*. Indeed, we cannot reach a state of relative autonomy without presupposing the omnipresence of our relative heteronomy. Every human fellow depends on other human fellows; the formation of the "I" is inconceivable without its relation to the "You." Discourse ethics reminds us of the *intersubjective determinacy of human subjectivity*. It is through the continuous interplay between their relative autonomy and their relative heteronomy that human subjects determine the contingency of their own historicity.

The possibility of relative autonomy is such a precious privilege of humanity that moral and juridical arrangements are put in place to preserve and promote the burden of both individual and collective responsibility: "morality and law both serve to regulate interpersonal conflicts; and both are supposed to protect the autonomy of all participants and affected persons equally" (Habermas 1994: 138). The existential value of autonomy is recognised by postconventional forms of morality<sup>11</sup>: our capacity to situate ourselves outside the material and symbolic constraints imposed upon

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<sup>11</sup> See Habermas (1990 [1983]), esp. pp. 160-170.

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us by society stems from our rational ability to provide reasons either to endorse or to disavow the validity of a given form of legitimacy. "Like morality, so also legitimate law protects the equal autonomy of each person: no individual is free so long as persons do not enjoy an equal freedom" (Habermas 2001b: 779). In short, the freedom of the individual depends on the freedom of society.

To suggest that "the individual liberties of the subjects of private law and the public autonomy of enfranchised citizens reciprocally make each other possible" (Habermas 1994: 141) means to accept that the *freedom of the individual* and the *freedom of society* presuppose each other. Put differently, just as the freedom of the individual is contingent upon the existence of a free society, the freedom of society is dependent upon the existence of free individuals. Discourse ethics is a philosophical attempt to recognise that the interdependence of individual and society manifests itself in the communicative construction of normative rules oriented towards universal acceptability, which are indicative of the "complementary relationship between private and civic autonomy" (Habermas 2001b: 780).

Viewed in this light, our capacity "to act autonomously"<sup>12</sup> is not a scholastic fantasy; on the contrary, its existential significance is captured in the conviction that "the idea of freedom gives us the certainty that autonomous action (and the realisation of the kingdom of ends) is possible—and that it is not just counterfactually desired"<sup>13</sup>. In other words, if we are prepared to recognise that "the destruction of metaphysics should also contribute to the release of an autonomous morality based on merely practical reason,"<sup>14</sup> then we are conceptually equipped to do justice to the empowering potential of rational self-government. Discourse ethics insists on the possibility of determining the course of history by virtue of the rational self-government of humanity. To be sure, rational self-government allows us to immerse ourselves in, and realise the potentials of, the realms of both *pure and practical reason*: in the realm of pure reason, our *Verstand* enables us to control and shape the constitution of the objective world according to our *physical needs*; and, in the realm of practical reason, our *Vernunft* permits us to regulate and shape the constitution of the normative world according to our *social needs*. In short, our species-constitutive autonomy emanates from our evolutionary capacity to challenge our natural and social determinacy through the reflective power of communicative rationality. Discourse ethics reminds us of the fact that only insofar as we translate our *Erkenntnisvermögen* (cognitive faculty) into *Erkenntnistätigkeit* (cognitive action) are we able to convert our *Vernunftpotentialität* (potentiality of reason) into a *Vernunftrealität* (reality of reason).

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<sup>12</sup> Habermas (2001a: 28; my translation). Original text in German: "autonom zu handeln."

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 28; italics in original, my translation. Original text in German: "...wonach uns die Idee der Freiheit die Gewissheit gibt, dass autonomes Handeln (und die Verwirklichung des Reichs der Zwecke) möglich ist – und uns nicht nur kontrafaktisch angesonnen wird."

<sup>14</sup> Habermas (2004b: 461; my translation). Original text in German: "Die Destruktion der Metaphysik soll auch der Freisetzung einer autonomen, auf reine praktische Vernunft gegründeten Moral dienen...."

## 6. REASON AND INCLINATION

Firmly situated in the Kantian tradition, discourse ethics regards reason, as opposed to inclination, as the normative basis of moral behaviour and moral judgments. According to Kant's deontological position, it is erroneous "to conceive of morality as a matter of feeling."<sup>15</sup> In essence, what manifests itself in the Kantian distrust in the normative authority of emotional propensities is the deontological scepticism towards empirical contingencies:

Kant thought that sensations were too weak to do the whole job, because they were produced through empirical contingencies – the kind of contingencies which can either bind ethnic and religious communities together or separate them from one another. Kant was of the view that one would need something stronger and less contingent than feelings to strive for a cosmopolitan society capable of transcending ethnicity and all other contingent moments of separation created by empirical relations.<sup>16</sup>

In other words, whereas the realm of *sensations and inclinations* is impregnated with the *contingency* of socio-cultural specificity, the realm of *reason and duty* is oriented towards the *universality* of transcendental validity. From the Kantian perspective, then, reason and inclination are diametrically opposed to one another. Reason can provide us with *context-transcending* grounds on which to justify our actions; inclinations, by contrast, endow us only with *context-dependent* motives which induce us to undertake our actions. Reasons *rise above* context; inclinations *depend upon* context. Whereas reason allows us to use our *Mund* (mouth) for the sake of *Mündigkeit* (responsibility), inclinations compel us to follow our *Triebe* (drives) for the sake of *Triebhaftigkeit* (drivenness). The existential ambivalence of the interplay between reason and inclination stems from the fact that we are both rational and inclinational beings: as subjects capable of *speech* and action, we are capable of reasoning and action; as subjects capable of *desire* and action, we are capable of projection and action.

Given that we are torn between the sober faculty of reason and the troublesome faculty of inclination, we constantly have to choose between what we *should* do and what we *want* to do, between the normative imperatives dictated by reason and the purposive desires based on inclination. "The (pathological) interest of the senses in what is pleasant or useful arises from need; the (practical) interest of reason in the

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<sup>15</sup> Rorty (1994: 975; my translation). Original text in German: "Moral als eine Sache des Empfindens zu begreifen."

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.; my translation. Original text in German: "Empfinden erschien Kant als zu schwach, um ganze Arbeit zu leisten, da es durch empirische Kontingenzen produziert wurde – jene Art Kontingenzen, die ethnische und religiöse Gemeinschaften einerseits zusammenhalten, sie aber andererseits von anderen Gemeinschaften absondern. Kant war der Ansicht, daß man etwas stärkeres, weniger Kontingentes als Empfinden brauche, wenn man eine kosmopolitische Gesellschaft haben wolle, die Ethnizität und alle anderen kontingenten, durch empirische Verhältnisse geschaffene Trennungsmomente transzendiere."

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good awakens a need. In the former case the faculty of desire is stimulated by inclination; in the latter it is determined by principles of reason" (Habermas 1987 [1968b]: 198-199). The validity of *substantive rationality* allows for the construction of an ethical grammar oriented towards universal defensibility; the validity of *instrumental proclivity*, on the other hand, remains caught up in the reproduction of a situational grammar oriented towards contingent opportunity. Following the Kantian tradition, discourse ethics makes a case for the *context-transcending force of reason* derived from the communicative force of discourse: only a discourse which transcends the limited eye-perspective of a particular community can claim validity in relation to the unlimited mouth-perspective of humanity. The analysis of the relationship between reason and inclination inevitably raises the question of the foundations of human freedom:

Kant asks the question, how is freedom possible? The task of explaining freedom of the will is paradoxical, because freedom is defined as independence of empirical motives.... Freedom could be explained only by our designating an interest that men take in obeying moral laws. On the other hand, obeying these laws would not be moral action, and thus free action, if it were based on a sensual motive. (Ibid.: 199.)

Hence, according to the Kantian perspective, human freedom is to be conceived of as *independence from the realm of contingent constraints and empirical motives* as well as a *commitment to the realm of universal laws and categorical imperatives*. In essence, *deontology* is the attempt to convert the ontology of morality into the ontology of humanity: as reason-giving beings, we are moral beings, for it is the reflective potential of reason which allows us to distinguish what we consider to be right from what we consider to be wrong. As rational entities, we have an interest in morality; and, as moral beings, we have an interest "in the realization of the 'glorious idea of a universal realm of ends in themselves (of rational beings), to which we belong as members only if we carefully behave according to maxims of freedom as though they were laws of nature'."<sup>17</sup> If we treat maxims of freedom as maxims of life, we can live a free life based on maxims of freedom. Whereas *proclivity* remains trapped in a horizon of spatiotemporally defined *contingency*, *rationality* derives its currency from its search for horizons of morally constituted *universality*. In other words, it is not "a sensual interest" (ibid.: 200) driven by "the natural faculty of desire" (ibid.) but "a pure interest" (ibid.) governed by "the law of reason" (ibid.) which permits us to give meaning and force to the idea of cosmopolitan universality, instead of seeking refuge in cultural provinciality. It is not as members of an ethnic community but as members of a common humanity that we have risen above the immediate determinacy of natural history. It is through the moral anatomy of practical rationality that we have learned to identify with the cause of humanity. There are good reasons to rely on reason. When we are inclined to reason we have a reason to decline to be inclined.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 199-200 (Habermas quotes Kant from: Kant, "Metaphysik der Sitten," *Werke*, 4:101).

## 7. UNIVERSALITY AND CONTINGENCY

The relationship between universality and contingency is of fundamental importance to the theoretical programme of discourse ethics, for every critical discourse which is concerned with the constitution of morality needs to grapple with the question of the normative scope of its own validity. To be sure, the validity of discursively negotiated morality is impregnated with existential ambiguity: even when we think in terms of a common humanity we belong to a particular society, and even when we think in terms of a particular society we belong to a common humanity. For analytical purposes, we can distinguish three different levels on which to examine the relationship between universality and contingency in terms of a discourse-theoretic conception of normativity: first, the *anthropological* level; second, the *moral* level; and, third, the *politico-normative* level.

First, on the *anthropological* level, the relationship between universality and contingency refers to the link between context-transcending interests and context-embedded interests, or – put differently – between human interests and social interests. *Human* interests are *universal* in that they are, at least in principle, shared by *all* subjects and *all* societies. Thus, the universal significance of human interests derives from the fact that they *transcend* the socio-historical specificity of spatiotemporally situated actors. *Social* interests, by contrast, are *contingent* in that they are, at least in practice, shared by *some* subjects and by *some* societies, but not by all of them. Hence, the contingent significance of social interests derives from the fact that they *depend* on the socio-historical specificity of spatiotemporally situated actors. The anthropological condition of universality emanates from our human interest in context-transcendence. The anthropological condition of contingency, on the other hand, stems from our social interest in context-immanence. The species-constitutive quest for emancipation can only be conceived of in terms of human universality if one seeks to rise above the provincial nature of social contingency. “Even if one admits that inherent within reason is also partisanship in favor of reason, still the claim to *universality*, which reflection as knowledge must take, is not to be reconciled with the *particularity* which must adhere to every interest, even that which aims at self-liberation” (Habermas 1988 [1971]: 15; italics added). As an *idiosyncratic* force which is *unique* to the human condition, reason is a *species-distinctive* feature. As an *omnipresent* force which is *fundamental* to the human condition, reason is a *species-constitutive* feature. And, as a *historical* force which is *conducive* to the human condition, reason is a *species-generative* feature. In short, as reason-giving entities we are caught up in the species-unifying universality of human rationality.

Second, on the *moral* level, the relationship between universality and contingency concerns the link between context-transcending ethics and context-embedded ethics. As elucidated above, it is not moral *feeling* but moral *reasoning* which allows us to ground our judgements in a global perspective as members of humanity, rather than in a local perspective as members of a particular society. Thus, the “basis of universal

duties" (Rorty 1994: 976) is to be found not in the realm of empirical contingency but in the realm of rational universality. For in order to transcend the constraints imposed upon us by our spatiotemporal determinacy we need to seize the freedom obtainable through the empowering resource of our rational sovereignty. According to Habermas's discourse ethics, the moral point of view is an ethical perspective which strives for the universality, rather than the contingency, of norms and values. "Discourse ethics intends to situate ethical subjects in a strictly moral point of view, so that they are able to address issues that can be judged by criterion of justice, as opposed to issues that can be evaluated on the basis of subjective, small group or cultural preferences" (Milley 2002: 57). The normative strength of a discourse-theoretic "conception of justice (moral validity) with *context-transcending power*" (Cooke 2005: 395; italics added) is that it permits us "to avoid epistemological and ethical authoritarianism" (ibid.) *from above* and instead make a case for epistemological and ethical universalism *from below*: our orientation towards ethical universality emanates from our orientation towards linguistic intelligibility. We have learned to attribute social value to morality by engaging in the coexistential exercise of mutual comprehensibility.

Third, on the *politico-normative* level, the relationship between universality and contingency is about the link between context-transcending norms and context-embedded norms. The discourse-ethical ideal of the communicative search for normative universality manifests itself in the U-principle, i.e. the principle of universalisability. "Discourse ethics rests on the intuition that the application of the *principle of universalization*, properly understood, calls for a joint *process of 'ideal role taking'*" (Habermas 1995: 117; italics added).<sup>18</sup> In fact, our engagement in ideal role taking reflects our capacity to immerse ourselves in the coexistential exercise of projecting ourselves into the situation of others:

Under the pragmatic presuppositions of an inclusive and noncoercive rational discourse among free and equal participants, *everyone* is required to take the *perspective of everyone else*, and thus *project herself* into the understandings of self and world of all others; from this *interlocking of perspectives* there emerges an ideally extended we-perspective from which all can test in common whether they wish to make a controversial norm the basis of their shared practice; and this should include mutual criticism of the appropriateness of the languages in terms of which situations and needs are interpreted. (Ibid.; italics added.)

Hence, the normative exercise of perspective-taking is paradoxical in that it reflects the centrality of both contingency and universality: the centrality of *contingency* because the perspective of every individual actor is marked by its own spatiotemporal determinacy, and the centrality of *universality* because the perspective of every individual actor can transcend itself through its own projectability. In brief,

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<sup>18</sup> See also ibid.: "Discourse ethics...views the moral point of view as embodied in an intersubjective practice of argumentation which enjoys those involved to an idealizing *enlargement* of their interpretive perspectives." (Italics in original.)

discourse ethics is not a contextualist ethics but a universalist ethics. As such, it reminds us of the fact that “accountability...*generally* consists in the actor’s capacity to orient his or her actions in terms of validity claims.”<sup>19</sup> Our constant exposure to the linguistic search for validity is indicative of our existential enclosure in an ethical search for universality.

## 8. IDEAL SPEECH AND DISTORTED SPEECH

The relationship between the “ideal speech situation”<sup>20</sup> and “systematically distorted communication” (Habermas 2001 [1984c]) describes another key binary distinction in Habermas’s discourse ethics. Whereas the former concept reflects Habermas’s belief in the necessity and possibility of *social emancipation*, the latter lies at the centre of Habermas’s concern with the reality and complexity of *social domination*. Both concepts have been extensively discussed in the literature.<sup>21</sup> The various forms of examination of these two concepts illustrate their far-reaching significance for Habermas’s communication-theoretic approach to the social. Indeed, any approach that claims to stand in the tradition of critical theory needs to provide conceptual tools which allow us to distinguish between emancipatory and repressive forms of social life. Just as the ideal speech situation epitomises the construction of an *empowering* life form whose existence allows for the *realisation* of our communicative potentials, systematically distorted communication is indicative of the consolidation of a *disempowering* life form whose existence depends on the *instrumentalisation* of our communicative potentials.

It would be pointless to imagine the possibility of an ideal speech situation if we did not have to confront the ubiquity of the real speech situation. The whole point of identifying the empowering conditions of ideal speech oriented towards mutual comprehension is to criticise the disempowering effects of real speech founded on surreptitious distortion. In the ideal speech situation, “communication is impeded

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<sup>19</sup> Habermas (2001a: 27; italics added; my translation). Original text in German: “Zurechnungsfähigkeit...besteht allgemein in der Fähigkeit eines Aktors, sein Handeln an Geltungsansprüchen zu orientieren.”

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Habermas (2001 [1984a]: 85-86, 93, 97-99 and 102-103).

<sup>21</sup> On the concept of the *ideal speech situation*, see, for example: Apel (1990 [1985]: 24-25, 33-35 and 42-51); Benhabib (1990a: 330-331, 343-345); Bernstein (1995: 47-57); Böhler (1990 [1982]: 114, 132-133, 136); Cooke (1993: 253; Cooke 1994: 31, 172n.8 and 172-173n.9; Cooke 1997: 9-13; Cooke 2004); Davey (1985: 113-114, 120); Factor & Turner (1977: 194, 196, 201-201); Ferrara (1987: 44-45); Fultner (2001: xv-xvi); Gamwell (1997: 37); Geuss (1981: 65-75); Günther (1998: 235-236); Jay Kilby (2004: 308); Koczanowicz (1999: 57); Matustik (1989: 159, 166-167); McCarthy (1973: 145-148); Mendelson (1979: 71-73); Milley (2002: 58); Mitchell (2003: 7); Ray (2004: 309, 315-317); Susen (2009: 81-82, 93-99); Trautsch (2004: 183). On the concept of *systematically distorted communication*, see, for example: Abbas & McLean (2003: 71); Bernstein (1995: 44-47); Bohman (1986: 332-333, 336-344; Bohman 2000); Borradori (2003: 35); Crossley (2004: 89-89, 109); eEdgar (2005: 153-157); Fultner (2001: xx-xxi); Grant (2003: 14); Hesse (1980: 215); Jay Kilby (2004: 308); Mitchell (2003: 8); Müller-Doohm (2000: 88, 92-94); Poupeau (2000: 73); Pusey (1987: 69-75); Sintomer (1999); Steinhoff (2001: 333-343); Susen (2009: 81-82, 99-105); Thompson (1981: 94-95).

neither by external contingent forces nor, more importantly, by constraints arising from the structure of communication itself. The ideal speech situation excludes systematic distortion of communication" (Habermas 2001 [1984a]: 97). In systematically distorted communication, by contrast, communication is hindered by constraints either exogenous or endogenous to language. Systematically distorted communication, therefore, excludes genuine realisation of communication.

To be sure, the importance of the ideal speech situation is due to its significance for the challenge of social emancipation. According to Habermas's communication-theoretic account of society, the utopian character of human existence is not a wishful fantasy, but it is built into the very structure of language. If "in every discourse we are mutually required to presuppose an ideal speech situation" (ibid.: 97), then in every linguistic effort to reach an understanding we are mutually required to presuppose an ideal communication. Put differently, as long as the communicative core of language is with us, the discursive heart of the ideal speech situation will be part of our existence. The presupposition that the ideal speech situation reveals the empowering nature of a linguistically coordinated form of coexistence is based on the following assumptions:

- (i) our communicative orientation towards mutual *understanding* anticipates our discursive orientation towards mutual *agreement*;
- (ii) just as we can distinguish between *genuine* and *deceptive* forms of understanding, we can differentiate between *genuine* and *deceptive* forms of agreement;
- (iii) whereas deceptive forms of agreement are brought about by constraints exogenous or endogenous to language, genuine forms of agreement derive solely from the *unforced force of the better argument*;
- (iv) communication that is genuinely free from endogenous and exogenous constraints presupposes the *symmetrical distribution of chances* to choose and use constative, regulative, expressive, and communicative speech acts; and
- (v) only a situation in which the symmetrical distribution of chances is guaranteed can be legitimately characterised as an *ideal speech situation* (cf. Thompson 1982: 128).<sup>22</sup>

In brief, the ideal speech situation can be described as a communicative condition which permits the speakers to reach a genuine agreement by virtue of the force of the better argument based on a symmetrical distribution of opportunities to choose and

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<sup>22</sup> On Habermas's concept of the *ideal speech situation*, see also, for example: Habermas (1988 [1963]: 279, 281); Habermas (1970: 367, 371-374); Habermas (1988 [1971]: 17); Habermas (1987 [1981a]: 42); Habermas (1990 [1983]: 86-94); Habermas (2001 [1984a]: 85-86, 93, 97-99, 102-103); Habermas (1987 [1985b]: 323); Habermas (1993 [1990: 163-165]); Habermas (1993 [1991b]: 54-57); Habermas (1996 [1992b]: 322-323); Habermas (1995: 117); Habermas (2001a: 7-8, 10-13, 23, 29, 37, 42, 45-47, 52, 83-84); Habermas (2004a: 875).



utter speech acts. Habermas's concept of the ideal speech situation is crucial in that it serves as a normative yardstick for assessing the constitution of communicative relations: indeed, only if we succeed in identifying the necessary conditions of the *counterfactual non-distortion* of language can we uncover the constitutive conditions of the *factual distortion* of language. In essence, systematically distorted communication is a form of systematically disrupted speech:

Communication can be systematically distorted only if the internal organization of speech is disrupted. This happens if the validity basis of linguistic communication is curtailed *surreptitiously*; that is, without leading to a break in communication or to the transition to openly declared and permissible strategic action. The validity basis of speech is curtailed surreptitiously if at least one of the three universal validity claims...is violated and communication nonetheless continues on the presumption of *communicative* (not strategic) action oriented toward reaching mutual understanding (Habermas (2001 [1984]: 154-155; italics in original).<sup>23</sup>

The importance of systematically distorted communication is due to its significance for the challenge of social domination. Following Habermas's communication-theoretic account of society, the repressive potential of human existence is not a fatalistic fantasy of immeasurable scope, but it is a substantive reality whose damaging power manifests itself in the dysfunctional use of language: if "communication pathologies can be conceived of as the result of a *confusion* between actions oriented to reaching understanding and actions oriented to success" (Habermas 1987 [1981c]: 332, italics added), then in every linguistic effort to engage in communicative action whilst actually engaging in strategic action we are fully immersed in the production of systematically distorted communication. Put differently, as long as the strategic use of language will be with us, the disruptive nature of systematically distorted communication will be part of our existence. The presupposition that systematically distorted communication epitomises the disempowering nature of strategically coordinated forms of interaction is based on the following assumptions:

- (i) our strategic orientation towards *success* anticipates our distortive orientation towards mutual *deception*;
- (ii) just as we can distinguish between *open* and *surreptitious* forms of strategic action, we can differentiate between *open* and *surreptitious* forms of strategic language use;
- (iii) whereas open forms of strategic language use presuppose that every speech partner involved in the communication process is *aware* of the strategic nature of language use, surreptitious forms of strategic language use

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<sup>23</sup> On Habermas's concept of *systematically distorted communication*, see also, for example: Habermas (1970: 374); Habermas (1988 [1971]: 16, 24); Habermas (1987 [1981c]: 332-333); Habermas (1987 [1981d]: 134, 141-143, 148); Habermas (2001 [1984a]: 99); Habermas (2001 [1984c]: 129-170); Habermas (2000<sup>a</sup>: 15-18).

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presuppose that at least one speech partner involved in the communication process is *unaware* of the strategic nature of language use;

- (iv) communication that is genuinely deformed by the surreptitious endorsement of strategic action presupposes the *asymmetrical distribution of chances* to choose and use constative, regulative, expressive, and communicative speech acts; and
- (v) a situation in which the asymmetrical distribution of chances impinges upon the communicative nature of a conversational encounter can be legitimately characterised as *systematically distorted communication*.

In short, systematically distorted communication can be described as an interactional condition which permits the speakers to reach a deceptive agreement by virtue of the force of strategic action based on an asymmetrical distribution of opportunities to choose and utter speech acts. Habermas's concept of systematically distorted communication is central in that it serves as a normative yardstick for criticising the deformation of communicative relations: in fact, only if we succeed in uncovering the detrimental effects of the *factual distortion* of language can we appreciate the normative value of the *counterfactual non-distortion* of language.

Systematically distorted communication can be considered as the *antithesis* of the ideal speech situation, because the constitutive conditions of the former violate the normative presuppositions of the latter. The differentiation between these two scenarios represents another binary conceptual distinction at the heart of Habermas's discourse ethics: *empowering* discourses are guided by the collective search for validity established through the engagement in *communicative* action; *disempowering* discourses, on the other hand, are guided by the collective search for validity established through the engagement in *deceptive* action. If social legitimacy depends on *communicative* validity, society succeeds in making the course of its history contingent upon the empowering force of linguistically achieved *maturity*. If, by contrast, social legitimacy depends on *deceptive* validity, society ends up making the course of its destiny parasitical upon the disempowering force of strategically oriented *instrumentality*. Just as every subject capable of speech and action is not only a *subject capable of speech and reflection* but also a *subject capable of speech and deception*, every society capable of development and direction is not only a *society capable of development and emancipation* but also a *society capable of development and domination*. The gulf between communicatively and strategically motivated forms of linguisticity anticipates the normative gap between empowering and disempowering forms of society.

## 9. SECULARITY AND RELIGIOSITY

Another crucial binary division in Habermas's discourse ethics is the conceptual distinction between secular and religious types of discourse. Following Habermas, *secular* discourses are fundamentally different from *religious* discourses in that the

latter remain trapped in metaphysical parameters of validity based on *faith and imagination* whereas the former are subject to postmetaphysical parameters of validity founded on *reason and argumentation*. In other words, whilst religious discourses ground their claims to validity in the *transcendental grammar of sacred spirituality*, secular discourses ground their claims to validity in the *quasi-transcendental pragmatics of communicative rationality*.

To be sure, the distinction between the metaphysical defence of faith and the postmetaphysical defence of reason is not always clear-cut: just as religious discourses can express a faith in reason, secular discourses can provide reasons for faith. It is one of the major challenges of the philosophical discourse of modernity (Habermas 1987 [1985a]) to explore both the emancipatory and the repressive potentials of the historical intertwinement of faith and reason. If the truthfulness of truth is entangled with the faithfulness of faith, then the reasonability of reason is entwined with the believability of belief. The secular subject has come to believe in the defence of reason just as the religious subject has come to reason in defence of faith. Believing reason and reasoning faith are two mutually inclusive elements of the modern condition. Indeed, religious spirituality and secular rationality are two coexisting cornerstones of the modern condition. The philosophical task of discourse ethics is to make sense of the normative challenges which arise from the interplay between faith and reason.

The relationship between reason and faith is far from straightforward. As mutually *opposing* forces, they can *contradict* each other; as mutually *balancing* forces, they can *complement* each other. Put differently, although reason and faith do not necessarily contradict each other, they are not always reconcilable, and although reason and faith can be reconciled with one another, they are often contradictory. Given its commitment to the forceless force of reason and given its suspicion towards the arbitrary force of faith, discourse ethics seeks to rely on the falsifiable validity of communicative rationality, rather than on the non-falsifiable legitimacy of religious spirituality. Religiously motivated claims to validity might be utterly sincere, but this does not make them true or right. Religiously inspired claims to sincerity are no guarantee of rationally justifiable claims to validity: in order to claim universal validity, our linguistic orientation towards truth, rightness, sincerity, and comprehensibility must strive for rational justifiability, rather than for wishful spirituality. In the realm of discourse ethics, it is not the gullibility of a religious imaginary but the authority of critical rationality which decides over the defensibility of linguistically evoked claims to validity.

If “churches in modern societies” (Habermas 1992b: 229) can be regarded as “communities of interpretation” (*ibid.*), rational discourses in modern societies can be considered as linguistic provinces of critical reflection. Surely, neither religious nor secular discourses can claim to transcend the contingency of their own socio-historical determinacy. Notwithstanding whether they conceive of themselves as religious or secular, *all* subjects capable of speech and action can only draw upon prov-

inces of linguistic signification insofar as they are socialised into communities of interpretation. A socialising subject needs a socialising community, a speaker needs a speech community, and an interpreter needs a community of interpretation.

Discourse ethics takes issue with religious forms of interpretation in that their ritualised claim to spirituality give the impression that they rise above the critical force of communicative rationality. Yet, given that “[r]eligious discourse is closely joined to a ritual praxis that, in comparison with profane everyday praxis, is limited in the degree of its freedom of communication..., it could be said that faith is protected against a radical problematisation by its being rooted in cult” (Habermas 1992b: 233). Hence, whereas in secular discourses the radical problematisation of validity claims constitutes a civilisational *objective*, in religious discourses the radical problematisation of validity claims represents an uncomfortable *obstacle*. The whole point of secular discourses is to measure the contingency of their own legitimacy against the rationality of discursive validity. The mission of religious discourses, by contrast, is to assert the universality of their own legitimacy through the rituality of ceremonial validity. Just as, under the conditions of secular discourse, it is not acceptable to hide behind the concept of the Unconditional, “under the conditions of postmetaphysical thinking, it is not enough to take shelter behind a concept of the Absolute” (ibid.: 227). Under conditions of radical critique, critique becomes a radical condition.

It is the task of discourse ethics to convert critique into the normative cornerstone of our discursive problematisation of the world. Within Habermas's tripartite conception of language, “[t]his problematisation unavoidably occurs when the ontic, normative, and expressive aspects of validity, which must remain fused together in the conceptions of the creator and redeemer God, of theodicy, and of the event of salvation, are separated analytically from one another” (ibid.: 233). The *postmetaphysical problematisation* of the world is founded on the analytical *differentiation* between the constative, normative, and expressive dimensions of language; by contrast, the *religious problematisation* of the world is based on their *fusion*. If the rationalisation of the lifeworld is to take precedence over the mystification of the lifeworld, then the critical negotiation of linguistic validity needs to take priority over the arbitrary imposition of social legitimacy. Under postmetaphysical conditions, discourse needs to distrust religious belief if it seeks to provide rational, rather than metaphysical, grounds for the validity of its own legitimacy. The power of discourse depends on its capacity to make the conditions of its own possibility the subject of critical scrutiny.

## 10. INTUITIVENESS AND REFLEXIVENESS

Another crucial binary division in Habermas's discourse ethics is the conceptual distinction between intuition and reflection. Subjects capable of speech and action are able to draw on both intuitive and reflective knowledge. If we recognise that we

are both *world-intuitive* and *world-reflective* actors, then we need to acknowledge that our communicative engagement with the world is a deeply *paradoxical* affair: on the one hand, linguistic actors are able to raise validity claims *intuitively and unreflectively*; on the other hand, linguistic actors are able to raise validity claims *discursively and reflectively*. In the former case, we engage in communicative action; in the latter case, we engage in discursive action. In the former scenario, the “pretheoretical knowledge of competent speakers” (Habermas 1987 [1981c]: 286) permits us to interact on the basis of taken-for-granted and non-problematised background assumptions; in the latter scenario, the “potential for critique built into communicative action itself” (Habermas 1987 [1981b]: 121) enables us to bring the taken-for-granted assumptions of the unreflexive background to the reflexive foreground.

To be sure, the empowering nature of our communicative competence manifests itself both in our intuitive competence and in our reflexive competence: as an *interactive* competence, our communicative competence allows us to engage in linguistic interaction with our human fellows by raising and exchanging validity claims intuitively; as a *reflexive* competence, our communicative competence permits us to problematise the validity claims raised and exchanged in linguistic interactions with our human fellows by scrutinising and questioning validity claims critically.

The ambivalence of this condition is reflected in the fact that Habermasian ethics is generally referred to—by Habermas himself as well as by his hostile and sympathetic critics—both as “communicative ethics”<sup>24</sup> and as “discourse ethics.”<sup>25</sup> The concept of “communicative ethics” suggests that an ethics can be based upon the *communicative* features of social life, just as the concept of “discourse ethics” implies that an ethics can be founded upon the *discursive* features of social life. In the former case, the emphasis is put on our *coordinative* capacity to engage in communicative action: the normativity established in a given society is contingent upon its members’ engagement in the communicative search for *mutual intelligibility*. In the latter case, the accent is put on our *contemplative* capacity to engage in discursive action: the normativity established in a given society is dependent upon its members’ engagement in the discursive search for *rational defensibility*. An ethics which relies on our *communicative* capacity for the construction of normativity constitutes a philosophical framework which locates the practical grounds of morality in the coordinative grounds of linguisticity: *mutual comprehension*. An ethics which draws on our *discursive* capacity for the construction of normativity constitutes a philosophical framework which locates the theoretical grounds of morality in the contemplative grounds of linguisticity: *rational reflection*.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example: Benhabib (1990a, 1990b); Benhabib & Dallmayr (1990); Delruelle (1993: 69); Funiok (1996); Gamwell (1997); Habermas (2001 [1990]: 75); McNay (2003); Prieto Navarro (2003: 221-235); Thompson (2000).

<sup>25</sup> See, for example: Apel (1996); Finlayson (2000); Garvey (2000); Gilabert (2005); Haber (2003); Habermas (1990 [1983]); Habermas (1986 [1990]); Habermas (2001 [1990]); Habermas (1993 [1991]-a); Habermas (1993 [1991b]); Habermas (1996 [1992]-a), pp. 171, 280-281, 283, 285, 319-320, 333-334, and 340; Hutchings (2005); Lafont (2005); Prieto Navarro (2003: 221-235); Schweppenhäuser (1989); White (1994).

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Given its simultaneous emphasis on the communicative and discursive grounds of normativity, discourse ethics stresses the species-constitutive significance of both our background and our foreground knowledge for the very possibility of society. Whereas our background knowledge serves the *integrative* function of maintaining the legitimacy of the social conditions to which we are exposed when we find ourselves immersed in our lifeworlds, our foreground knowledge fulfils the *reflective* function of questioning the legitimacy of these conditions. For “the moment this background knowledge enters communicative expression, where it becomes explicit knowledge and thereby subject to criticism, it loses precisely those characteristics which lifeworld structures always have for those who belong to them: certainty, background character, impossibility of being gone behind” (Habermas 1986 [1981]: 110).<sup>26</sup> The hidden orthodoxy of everyday taken-for-grantedness can be challenged by the open heterodoxy of sporadic discursiveness. The certainty of common sense manifests itself in the commonality of certainty. It is common to believe that what we believe is true because it is certain that we live our life as what we have to live through.

Habermasian ethics – insofar as it is understood as both a communicative ethics and a discourse ethics – reminds us of the deep ambivalence of the knowledgeable self: as knowledgeable selves, we rely on both intuitive and reflexive, practical and theoretical, implicit and explicit, unproblematised and problematised, taken-for-granted and to-be-made-a-case-for knowledge. Both forms of knowledge are species-constitutive illustrating that human forms of action *within* the world cannot be dissociated from human forms of *cognition* about the world. As an active species, we *make* the world; and, as a cognitive species, we *contemplate* the world. To be sure, to recognise that “the actor becomes conscious of his subjectivity at the moment when his habitualized performance of an action is disturbed” (Habermas 1992 [1988]: 173-174) means to acknowledge that the habituality of our actions can become a subject of scrutiny when reflected upon by virtue of our critical rationality. Just as the habitualised patterns of social action can be converted into an object of reflective contemplation, the habitualised validity of social normativity can be questioned through the coexistential exercise of discursive argumentation.

It is through the structure of our language that we have learned to reflect upon the structure of our actions. “From the structure of language comes the explanation of why the human spirit is condemned to an odyssey – why it first finds its way to itself only on a detour via a complete externalization in other things and in other humans. Only at the greatest distance from itself does it become conscious of itself in its irreplaceable singularity as an individuated being (*Wesen*)” (ibid.: 153). Just as our immersion in the world is made possible through our daily reliance on intuitive knowledge, which provides us with a sense of habituality when exploiting the absorbability of reality through the mediating experience of society, our distancing from the world is made possible through our occasional reliance on reflexive

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<sup>26</sup> On this point, see also Myles (2004: 103).

knowledge, which imbues us with a sense of criticality when turning the reality of absorbability into a mediating experience of linguisticity. Discourse ethics demands nothing but our awareness of both the intuitive and the reflexive nature of our cognitive existence. As *intuitive* entities, we are capable of immersion; as *reflexive* entities, we are capable of distanciation; and, as *discourse-ethical* entities, we are capable of distancing ourselves from intuitive immersion by immersing ourselves in reflexive distanciation.

## CONCLUSIONS

The foregoing analysis has sought to shed light on the philosophical significance of binary categories in Habermas's discourse ethics. As demonstrated above, the following binary distinctions are central to the philosophical programme associated with Habermas's discourse ethics: (1) *theory and practice*, (2) *monologue and dialogue*, (3) *privacy and publicity*, (4) *violence and discourse*, (5) *autonomy and heteronomy*, (6) *reason and inclination*, (7) *universality and contingency*, (8) *ideal speech and distorted speech*, (9) *secularity and religiosity*, and (10) *intuitiveness and reflexiveness*. The critical analysis of these binary distinctions is fundamental to a fine-grained understanding of the various conceptual tensions that lie at the heart of Habermas's discourse ethics. Both the theoretical complexity and the empirical relevance of these tensions are symptomatic of the far-reaching philosophical significance of binary categories for the construction of Habermas's discourse ethics. The main insights to be gained from the previous analysis of these binary categories can be synthesised as follows.

1. Just as we have a theoretical interest in the discursive problematisation of the world, we have a practical interest in the social transformation of the world (*theory and practice*).
2. In order to be truly discursive and genuinely ethical, a discourse ethics needs to be oriented towards and constructed through dialogue, rather than monologue (*monologue and dialogue*).
3. The prevalence of the public over the private is due to the preponderance of the social over the individual (*privacy and publicity*).
4. The maturity of humanity depends on its capacity to determine its destiny by virtue of discursive rationality, rather than violent instrumentality (*violence and discourse*).
5. The construction of individual autonomy is unthinkable without the reproduction of social heteronomy (*autonomy and heteronomy*).
6. Reasonable entities are inclined to reason (*reason and inclination*).

## *Binary Categories in Habermas's Discourse Ethics*

7. If as members of a common humanity we are oriented towards moral universality, as members of a particular society we are oriented towards moral contingency (*universality and contingency*).
8. The ideal speech situation is an unavoidable condition of the real speech situation (*ideal speech and distorted speech*).
9. Unlike religious discourses, secular discourses need to provide rational, rather than metaphysical, grounds for the validity of their own legitimacy (*secularity and religiosity*).
10. To the extent that—as intuitive entities—we are capable of immersion and—as reflexive ones—we are capable of distancing, we are—as discourse-ethical entities—capable of both reflexive immersion and immersive distancing (*intuitiveness and reflexiveness*).

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