

# Habermas on Liberalism: Towards an Intersubjective Paradigm

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### Habermas is Right in Arguing that Liberalism Needs to Move From a Subjective to an Intersubjective Paradigm

#### Introduction

It is not easy to question every aspect of a society in which one has been brought up. It is almost automatic for one to consider this to be normal. How do we know what we know? And how do we know that our reality is the right one? At a young age, Jürgen Habermas had to undergo this very thought. Growing up within the Nazi regime which he considered to be normal, the Nuremberg trials completely shifted his views. He began to question why we consider certain abominations to be the norm. He also began to question just *how* much of our society we consider to be normal, when in reality it is simply constructed. Through his theory of communicative reason, Habermas attempted to “tailor a... philosophy of language to the project of modernity” (Rasmussen 1990, 20), and he sought to reach a stage of emancipation.

In this essay I will argue that in spite of several criticisms that can be made of Habermas’ theory, he is indeed right in arguing that liberalism needs to move from a subjective to an intersubjective paradigm. He is right in arguing that the subjective paradigm has potential for coercion and totalitarianism (a prime example of which is the Nazi regime). By exploring the intersubjective in the sense of communication between individuals, we are much more likely to reach a consensus that is advantageous to all those who might be affected by specific norms.

In the first part of the essay I will analyse the background and influences which Habermas came from, as they are very important to understanding his position. I will then proceed to reconstruct his intersubjective theory, and in the third and last part of the essay I will provide a critique of Habermas’ theory.

In the liberal tradition there have been numerous contributions, which have not been satisfactory enough in justifying the normative bases of liberalism. John Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice* (1971) provided an account which was later criticised, among other things, for being atomistic. Michael Sandel and Charles Taylor instead preferred a communitarian approach that would take into account the culture which is embedded in every individual. Sandel claimed we should see ourselves as ‘encumbered’ (1984), while Taylor claimed that an individual is what he is, only by virtue of the society and culture which he has grown into (1985). Jürgen Habermas, however, created a different approach. In all the aforementioned scholars, there is a notion of principles of justice being decided, upon which a social contract is later agreed upon by the individuals in society. Importantly, there is a notion of separate individuals thinking by themselves and for themselves. This is not satisfactory as it allows for coercion to take place and by extension it may eventually lead to totalitarianism. Something was being overlooked. Habermas therefore proposed a complete paradigm shift and decided to introduce an intersubjective approach. In a defence of Enlightenment ideals, Habermas sought to show the possibility of emancipation through the use of reason (O’Neill 1997).

#### Background and Influences

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If Habermas undertook such a different route to solve the question of liberalism, it is because he came from a different set of influences. Habermas' work is best situated with two currents. Firstly with the Frankfurt school, from which he took critical theory and a return to the humanism in Marxist thought, as opposed to the dogmatism which it was increasingly growing closer to. Secondly, with the ideals of Enlightenment – especially the importance of human reason, which he sought to revive and defend. It then follows that Habermas was very much involved in a critique of Kant as well, as Kant was

The Frankfurt School was guided by critical theory, a neo-Marxist social theory which sought to critique the foundations of modern society, as well as revive Marxism by taking it away from its Soviet-like dogmatic framework and back to the critical humanism of the 'early Marx' (How 2003). The Frankfurt School (this is especially relevant for Habermas) also focused on a critique of the Enlightenment. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in 1947 published one of the core texts of critical theory, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. They argue that the strong focus on reason, or the desire to rationalise the outer and inner world, is precisely what led to totalitarianism (Nazism) and thus the demise of this very reason (Adorno & Horkheimer 1947).

The Age of Enlightenment arose as a response to previous popular ideas that supported superstition, the power of 'the divine' and religious tyranny. It is also widely known as the 'Age of Reason' because its guiding principle was a belief in the strength of human reason. With the Enlightenment there was a growing belief that rationality and human reason, if well developed, could lead to great advancements that would enable us to influence and control both the outside world and our inner nature (Wilson & Reill 2004). This appears good in theory, but it is evident that somewhere along the way these laudable principles became corrupted. Indeed there were some good advances in civilisation; the rise of science resulted in us being able to understand the world and tame it, and we increasingly managed to understand our 'inner worlds' (for example, through psychology). However, human reason also led to the creation of weapons of mass destruction, pollution, and dictatorships (most relevant to this essay is the Nazi regime).

This is what led critical theorists such as Adorno and Horkheimer to criticise the Enlightenment and its focus on reason, by stating that they are inherently oppressive. By following the ideals of the 'Age of Reason', we allow for ever more efficient ways of social control to be established (Adorno & Horkheimer 1947). Habermas, a second-generation critical theorist, instead adopted a different approach. For him, the Enlightenment is good in principle and is worth defending. Reason can indeed be repressive and it is the cause of modern maladies in the world. However, it does not necessarily have to lead to negative outcomes. It can also be liberating, and it is the only instrument through which we can critique our modern lives. Habermas solves this apparent paradox by differentiating between two types of reason which we will discuss in part two of the essay: instrumental and communicative (Habermas 1984).

Because Habermas' theory stems from a defence of the Enlightenment and reason, it is useful to first examine Kant's ideas. Immanuel Kant is one of the main contributors to the philosophy of consciousness, of which Habermas is critical. The main idea that contributes to Habermas' philosophy is the categorical imperative; of the three formulations, the first two are the ones which concern us most. The first is that one should "act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law" (Kant 1993, 30), and the second formulation states that one should "act in such a way that you treat humanity... never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end" (*Ibid*). A basis for Habermas' work is thus evident – the principle of universalisation stems directly from Kant, as well as the idea that individuals have the ability to determine what should become a universal law. In Habermas' words, "we ought to do what is equally good for all persons" (1995, 109). A second point in Kant's philosophy that is important for Habermas is the notion that individuals, separately and individually, can reason with themselves and come to the same conclusions on what is moral and universalisable. It will become evident in the next section of the essay that Habermas is highly critical of this notion – he instead claims that indeed all individuals are capable of reasoning on ideas that should be made universal, but they cannot do this subjectively; they must do this *intersubjectively*, or communicatively.

We can therefore begin to look at Habermas through his critique of the philosophy of consciousness. As aforementioned, Habermas is critical of Kant's subjectivity. It presupposes that individuals can come to rational, moral conclusions in isolation, without having to communicate (Habermas 1974, 50). The philosophy of consciousness does not consider the *intersubjective* realm which is very much present in society. In the liberal

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tradition there have been several currents of thought which fail to consider intersubjectivity. Atomistic theories (such as Rawls' Theory of Justice) assume that the analysis of social interactions can be done purely through looking at individuals (Edgar 2006, 28). Communitarian theories do take into account the existence of communities, but still focus on the subjective and not what lies in between persons (namely communication). On a different note, Neo-Marxist theories condense society into the 'macrosubject', whereby society as a whole is looked at, without individuals being considered at all (*Ibid*). Habermas' approach is completely different; in his *Theory of Communicative Action*, which I will examine in the coming section, he explores and promotes this intersubjective paradigm.

## Jürgen Habermas' Theory

To understand Habermas' theory, I will look at specific concepts in the following order: communicative action, communicative and instrumental reason, critical theory, universal pragmatics, and discourse ethics.

Communicative action "entails the establishing or maintaining of a social relationship between two or more individuals" (Edgar 2006, 21). Importantly, it includes "action orientated to reaching an understanding" (Habermas 1979, 209). It has three functions; to convey information, to establish relationships, and to express one's opinions. Through communicative action, individuals may have an influence upon their state. They discuss their ideas amongst each other, and then channel their conclusions through institutions such as universities. To understand communicative action, however, we must also examine the ideas of communicative and instrumental reason, which communicative action is built upon.

As aforementioned, reason for Habermas can be both instrumental and communicative. In the first instance, reason is viewed as an instrument for control. Here individuals are viewed not as ends in themselves, but as means to an end[1]. The instrumental use of reason is what has caused the destruction of the originally 'admirable' Enlightenment project. By viewing reason as having no intrinsic value, individuals have instead used it as a means to advance their own ends in opposition to other individuals (Habermas 1984). This has resulted in a separation from our true communicative nature. Communicative reason, on the other hand, is a rational understanding of reason and it is the critical ideal that should be adopted at all times. Through communicative reason, individuals can exercise their basic ability to discern morality in contact with each other. This means that it advances the interests of all members of society, and not just some individuals who are able to instrumentalise reason (*Ibid*). Importantly (especially for critical theory), communicative reason can be used to critique and change the norms and rules that guide modern society (Edgar 2006). It is a source of reflection. It is also important to emphasise that for Habermas both types of reason do already exist and they can be seen in every day speech acts between people. However, he argues that instrumental reason has been prioritised, and that it has been parasitic upon communicative reason. It is important that communicative reason should be prioritised again.

An understanding of the core ideas of critical theory is also necessary to gain a stronger grasp of Habermas' theory. Critical theory challenges the constructions which are considered to be the everyday norm for individuals in society. It analyzes that which appears natural, and it does so through interpretation (How 2003; Edgar 2006, 34). By doing so, the critical theorist realises that many (if not most) of the aspects of society which are considered normal, are, in reality, social constructions which are designed to subjugate the individual. Habermas claims that after the analysis of the ways in which the justification for rules and for power is made, critical theory should guide political action (Powell 2003). For him the aim of critical theory is *political emancipation*.

Habermas' theory is a reconstructive science: it reconstructs the rules that individuals should follow so as to successfully communicate with each other (Edgar 2006, 163). The study of these rules is what Habermas calls *universal pragmatics*. If individuals want to come to an understanding, they must let go of conflictual and instrumental methods of action. Instead, four conditions must be present if communication is to be successful (these are also called validity claims); truth, rightness, truthfulness, and meaning. Firstly, everyone must be able to share a certain understanding of the world; secondly, everyone must recognise the other's right to communication; thirdly, it must be understood that sincerity is not always present in communication; fourthly, there must be meaning behind what is being said (*Ibid*). According to universal pragmatics, an able communicator will be able to defend all four of these

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validity claims, which will result in constructive communication ending in understanding between individuals. This in turn will result in the mutual trust and consensus between individuals that is necessary for the establishment of social norms (Habermas 1979).

Having outlined Habermas' theory, it is now appropriate to introduce a moral dimension – discourse ethics. Habermas argues that there is a 'strong moral dimension' to the rules that have been outlined for people to communicate successfully (1990). Andrew Edgar (2006) explains that if individuals are to communicate in order to create and maintain social relationships, it follows that their right to express themselves might have to be defended. This is where discourse ethics emerges. In essence, Habermas is providing an ethical framework – a minimalist one. It is appropriate, for clearer understanding, to view this *vis-a-vis* Rawls. Rawls' main starting point is the 'original position', a hypothetical scenario where individuals will step behind a veil of ignorance: ignorant of whom they are within society, in order to agree on how to construct a just society (1971, 18). It is evident that Rawls was influenced by Kant, and Habermas' critique lies in this very point. The individuals who participate in the original position are separated from the reality of their society, separated from their personas (through the veil of ignorance), and are assumed to reach conclusions introspectively rather than communicatively. Habermas argues that "whereas this rule calls for a universalisation test from the viewpoint of a given individual, the categorical imperative requires that all those possibly affected be able to will a just maxim as a general rule. But as long as we apply this more exacting test in a monological fashion, it still remains individually isolated perspectives from which each of us considers privately what all could will" (1995, 117). What Habermas is critiquing is the notion (adopted by Kant and Rawls) that isolated individuals will be able to come to conclusions which are similar in nature to each other and which are universalisable. Dialogue, he argues, is essential. In addition, the topics for discussion and the individuals involved are always changing, so the product can only be dealt with in a real setting with a real discussion, and it cannot be abstracted by philosophers like Kant or Rawls have done (Habermas 1990, 121). In discourse ethics, it is not the *product* that is important, but the *process*. By this I mean that it must be ensured that the *process* by which individuals reach an understanding must be ensured as fair and just, but the *product* of this is not of interest here.[2] There are two principles to discourse ethics: universalisation and discourse.

The principle of universalisation, as previously discussed, is of a Kantian basis (a moral principle is only acceptable if it is agreed that it should become a universal law). Habermas therefore argues that moral decisions must be agreed to/consented to by all the individuals which might be affected by them. The second principle of discourse is based on a criticism of Kant. The Kantian method is introspective in that individuals can reason by themselves and then universalise their moral conclusions. In contrast, Habermas argues that norms can only be accepted as valid if they have been agreed upon through discourse (Habermas 1990).

Lastly, and importantly, Habermas reaches an idea of 'post-conventional morality' which is essentially extracted from critical theory (Edgar 2006, 109). It is important to distinguish between the simple recognition that certain rules and norms exist, and whether these rules and norms *should* exist. It is by questioning the already existing moral conventions, through discourse and communicative reason in a real setting between real people, that we can break the appearance of 'normality' and reach political emancipation.

## Appraisal

The main issue in Habermas that I have not managed to resolve is whether communication can ever really be undistorted by power (among other things). Can imbalances really be removed? Is this not similar in a way to Rawls' veil of ignorance? It is very likely that 'understandings' might be reached with the winner not being the best argument, but rather the *best at arguing*. How can we ensure that this will not occur? Habermas would say that this can be avoided because the very idea of communicative reason is that individuals are ends in themselves. But how do we ensure that all those who participate in discourse are acting communicatively and not instrumentally? Habermas does not seem to be clear enough on this point. From this follows a connected question, does intersubjectivity as understood by Habermas really shift from monologue to dialogue?

Michel Foucault also provides a good basis of critique. He holds a fundamentally different understanding of reason from Habermas. Whereas Habermas strongly distinguishes between truth and untruth, Foucault states that such a

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dichotomy constitutes an “intellectual blackmail” (Dalton 2008). The claim which I find most important is that the ‘truth’ will always be dominated by relations of power. Habermas seems to believe that through discourse these power relations can be identified and then removed, but I find that he is unclear in how exactly this is possible. Foucault argues for “a rationality that has owned up to the fact that truth is always inhabited by untruth” (*Ibid*, 8). There is the risk that the Habermasian rational agents might retain their underlying power relations, and that the conclusions achieved through discourse between such agents might not necessarily be the best ones. According to Foucault, the rational subject “becomes all too easily an accomplice in those modern networks of power which subjugate” (White 2003, 145). It is also worth noting, however, that while Foucault raises a good point, he still does not necessarily provide a better alternative. He does not have a proper notion of the subject, because for him everything is dominated by underlying power relations (Foucault 1982). So I find that he is most valuable for raising issues rather than providing the solution.

In spite of these critiques, I maintain that Habermas indeed is right in arguing that liberalism needs to move from a subjective to an intersubjective paradigm. He certainly has raised great critiques of all the subjective theories. After reading Habermas, it seems almost too clear that it is in the intersubjective realm that the best answers can be found. One cannot reason introspectively and expect to reach conclusions that are fair and universalisable. Surely it seems plausible that communication (especially not removed from the context, but placed *in* context), if power relations can indeed be overcome, is the most reasonable and most constructive form of reaching conclusions and norms.

## Conclusion

Habermas indeed is right in arguing for a shift to intersubjectivity. I have looked at the limitations of subjectivist theories in the liberal tradition, and it appears that Habermas is more likely to awaken individuals and avoid the blind and submissive following of social constructions. His theory aims to help humankind examine the norms that might lead to oppression in present-day society. Previous theorists such as Kant or Rawls have neglected the importance of dialogue and intersubjectivity. By doing so, they have neglected a fundamental aspect of human relations. What Habermas is questioning is first, how can individuals come to a fixed conclusion applicable to all, if situations in society are always changing? Second, how can individuals reach universalisable conclusions in isolation and in separation from their context? Habermas’ discourse ethics can overcome numerous limitations and it provides a way to ensure that the road to reaching moral norms is a just one. As I have explained in this essay, he makes good and sound alternative arguments. Habermas claims that it is the process and not the outcome which is most important, precisely because situations and individuals are always changing. Moreover, individuals cannot reach agreements introspectively but must involve themselves in dialogue which deconstructs the accepted norms in society and which seeks to achieve political emancipation. What is important is that the process be fair, communicative and intersubjective. However, one must still be wary of Habermas’ limitations. Most importantly, how can we ever be sure that individuals will be acting communicatively and not instrumentally? And can power relations truly ever be overcome? In spite of these unanswered questions, Habermas is still valuable because the shift to intersubjectivity is indeed necessary.

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[1] Recall the Kantian idea, adopted by Habermas, that individuals should be both means and ends in themselves.

[2] I do not mean it is not important – I mean that it will be determined later on by the process which is undertaken

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