From Joint Attention to Communicative Action. Some Remarks on Critical Theory, Social Ontology, and Cognitive Science

Abstract:	In this paper I consider the relevance of Tomasello's work on social cognition to the theory of communicative action. I argue that some revisions are needed to cope with Tomasello's results, but they do not affect the core of the theory. Moreover, they arguably reinforce both its explanatory power and the plausibility of its normative claims. I proceed in three steps. First, I compare and contrast Tomasello's views on the ontogeny of human social cognition with the main tenets of Habermas' theory of communicative action. Second, I suggest how to reframe the role of language in the theory of communicative rationality in order to integrate the two theories. Third, I show how this affects social ontology, supporting the view that the construction of social reality is normatively constrained by the bounds of reason.

From Joint Attention to Communicative Action

Some Remarks on Critical theory, Social Ontology, and Cognitive Science

1. *Introduction*

Habermas has recently devoted considerable attention to Michael Tomasello's work on social cognition, cooperation, and on the origins of human communication.[1] Although embedded in contemporary cognitive science, Tomasello's views are indeed not alien to the spirit of Habermas' critical theory.[2] No systematic work has been done, however, to assess their impact on the theory of communicative action. In this paper I take the theory of communicative action as a research program and consider how it deals with Tomasello's "mentalistic" approach.[3] I will argue that some revisions are needed in order to cope with Tomasello's results, but that they do not affect the theoretical core of the program, and will eventually reinforce both its explanatory power and the plausibility of its normative claims. I will also claim that in this respect the theory of communicative action is seen to be progressive in Lakatos' sense. It accounts

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for some facts that cognitive science, as it stands, does not explain, and it predicts new facts about the architecture of rationality and the role of normativity in social cognition.

I thus maintain that critical theory can broadly cohere with cognitive science. In fact, a great deal of the work done in cognitive science is consistent with the language of social science, as it is couched in the folk psychological vocabulary of action and meaning.[4] And it is fully consonant with the role allocated by critical theory to the so-called 'reconstructive social sciences', as they are designed to make explicit the structural features of human capacities like the language faculty and social cognition, by whose performances social reality is shaped.[5] In this vein, I will try to articulate the demand for a more precise theory that surfaces in Habermas' recent work.[6] In the next section I compare and contrast Tomasello's views with the main tenets of Habermas' theory of communicative action, locating where I think the latter may need to be revised. I will then sketch some actual piece of the work to be done in order to integrate the two theories, focusing on the role of language in social cognition. In the final section I will consider how this affects our understanding of social ontology, as it suggests that the constructions of social reality is normatively constrained by the boundaries reasons impose on what we can accept.

The background idea is that critical theory can benefit from cognitive science, just as it benefited in the past from psychoanalysis, sociology and other social sciences. Critical theory has always been calling for an interdisciplinary approach in which economists, sociologists, psychologists – and of course philosophers – work in partnership 'without losing sight of the larger context'.[7] On one hand, philosophical problems can receive a more accurate formulation and get a grip on empirical research

by being translated into the idioms of contemporary science. On the other hand, empirical research may be enlightened by confronting the broader tasks of philosophical reflection and critique.

The discovery of mirror neurons is an interesting example. Their discovery ruled out the hypothesis that our basic understanding of actions depends on the possession of specific linguistic or conceptual skills[8]. Yet, recent works in social cognition suggest that their role might be limited. Pierre Jacob has stressed that mirroring does not explain understanding prior intentions, as opposed to intentions-in-action.[9] Alvin Goldman has challenged the view that the mirroring processes *constitute* mindreading and claimed that some simulation-based mindreading ("high-level" mindreading in particular) does not even *involve* mirroring.[10] This suggests that neuroscientific findings can constrain philosophical accounts of action understanding, but they do not by themselves settle the issue and their role cannot be assessed without a broader theory of action and action understanding.

Another example is Tomasello's contrast between human cooperation and the chimpanzees' group activities. According to Tomasello, apes do not cooperate because, while endowed with a capacity for mindreading that allows them to engage in strategic behavior, they lack the capacity for sharing intentions which is required to act jointly. In this case the conceptual framework provided by current philosophical theories of joint action supplies the theoretical vocabulary to differentiate two ways in which individuals can participate in group activities, namely the I-mode and the we-mode, each connected with a different set of normative assumptions.[11] The conjecture that great apes do not cooperate thus depends on a theoretical distinction which allows for a very specific

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interpretation of behavioral findings: what may look like a case of cooperation – group hunting, for instance – turns out to be read as a purely strategic interaction. [12] Tomasello's view of cooperation, in turn, has made the philosophical issue of collective intentionality empirically articulate and testable.

2. *Joint attention and communicative action*

Tomasello's work seems at first to clash with the central tenets of the theory of communicative action. First, non-linguistic understanding and communication are taken to be pervasive both in human and in non-human animals: in this sense intersubjectivity does not rest on linguistic practice. Second, both joint intentionality and joint agency are taken to predate the acquisition of language and provide the cognitive basis for the development of linguistic conventions. Third, linguistic communication is taken to rest on more basic capacities for mindreading and joint attention, and thus to be explained according to Gricean intention-based semantics. [13] This seems to imply that the capacities required for making the social world largely depends on pre-linguistic factors. Insofar as linguistic communication is itself a case of cooperation, and joint attention is taken to be the cognitive basis of cooperation and cultural learning, the construction of social reality seems to rest ultimately on socio-cognitive skills which children possess well before they learn a language. [14] Habermas points out that this is at best only part of the story. [15] In what follows, I will try to articulate the issue at stake, to

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suggest how it affects the theory of communicative action, and to draw some general conclusions about the contribution of cognitive science to critical theory.

The main issue is about how sophisticated socio-cognitive skills involved in constructing the social world differ from those possessed by young children, how they change our capacity for sharing intentions and how precisely they connect with the acquisition of language. Tomasello and Rakoczy maintain that joint attention works both as the precursor and as the cognitive basis of collective intentionality, understood as the conscious and reflective ability to think and act in the 'we-mode' according to a full-fledged belief-desire psychology.[16] Tracing back collective intentionality to such simpler forms of shared intentionality has been taken to account for the irreducible character displayed by the we-mode intentionality, which is crucial to the construction of social reality.[17]

What is important is that the capacity for sharing intentions is taken to be both ontogenetic and cognitive prior to the capacity for meta-representation, which children develop around the age of four. The crucial feature of joint attention is just the capacity to devise both the joint target and the individual roles of participants in a single representational format from a shared point of view: evidence suggests that human children can do that soon after their first birthday. In order to make perspectival differences accessible from the point of view of a shared goal, children must be able to make sense of the self-other equivalence, which involves a capacity for role reversal that young children are shown to possess early, for instance by participating in cooperative games with complementary roles and turn-taking structures.[18] Role reversal is finally traced back to recursive mindreading.[19] Thus, a capacity for role reversal,

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which is based on recursive mindreading, explains the shared intentionality of joint attention. That, in turn, accounts for how humans devise a unique capacity to think and act collectively, which marks off genuine cooperation from the mere strategic participation in a group activity. Cooperation requires both a joint goal and the complementary roles of participants to be represented jointly, so that agents can operate in the we-mode and perform a joint action.[20] To sum up:

1. Cooperation requires a joint goal and the individual roles to be represented in a single format;

2. This is taken to involve a 'bird's eye view' produced by joint attention;

3. Recursive mindreading is the mechanism that generates joint attention.

By contrast:

4. Great apes do not show any ability for recursive mindreading;

5. Therefore, they cannot engage in join attention;

6. Therefore, they do not cooperate.

If we compare this view with the main tenets of the theory of communicative action, we can see a clear point of convergence and an equally clear point of potential conflict. Both theories reject the reduction of the relevant kind of social action – that is, joint action and communicative action respectively – to a set of interlocking individual intentions or action plans. Tomasello posits that we-intentions are to be accounted for

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by joint attention, and joint attention does not result simply from aggregating individual intentions. Similarly, communicative understanding cannot result from the interplay of individual teleological action plans:

> The concept of communicative action is presented in such a way that the acts of reaching understanding, which link the teleologically structured plans of action of different participants and thereby first combine individual acts into an interaction complex, cannot themselves be reduced to teleological actions.[21]

Thus, both approaches sharply contrast communicative with strategic interactions. Social cooperation presupposes understanding as a mechanism to coordinate individual actions and which cannot in turn be generated by strategic rationality. Indeed, Tomasello's considerations about the limits of great apes' social activities support the view that agents endowed with strategic rationality alone cannot engage in cooperation because they lack the capacity to share the representation of goals and to coordinate their individual actions accordingly.

Tomasello, however, takes the mindreading routines that underlie joint attention to explain symbolic communication, rather than relying on our participation in the practices of a linguistic community. As symbolic communication is a case of cognitive cooperation, it enters the theory as an *explananda* rather than as an *explanans*. This is why, in explaining human communication, we cannot begin with language and must focus instead on the 'mostly hidden, highly complex, species-unique, psychological

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infrastructure of shared intentionality'[22]. The basic components of such an infrastructure are indeed the cognitive skills required in order to generate joint intentions – that is, a capacity for recursive mindreading – and the pro-social motives involved even in the most basic forms of cooperation – that is, the social motivation for helping and sharing with others.[23] This runs against the claim that it is *language*, or the intersubjective structure of *linguistic* communication, that provides us with the cognitive resources we need to overcome the egocentric bias of strategic rationality.[24] If Tomasello is right, language is non-fundamental and communicative action builds on previous socio-cognitive skills.

Here is where, I think, some revision is needed. In particular, the foundational role played by Wittgenstein's rule-following considerations in the original formulation of the theory of communicative action cannot be maintained. In the 1980s rule-following was taken to set up the conditions under which individuals come to share identical meanings.[25] More specifically, Habermas took Wittgenstein's analysis 'to elucidate the connection between identical meaning and intersubjective validity'.[26] As long as understanding a symbolic expression requires one to master the rules governing its use, and given that one cannot follow a rule privately, rule following seemed to provide the background required for communicative action, since it sets the condition under which the activity of reaching an understanding can be thought to take place within a framework of public standards as an intersubjective practice of giving and asking for reasons.[27] The upshot was to ground rationality in the theory of language by enabling philosophers to license a weak variety of transcendental arguments 'aimed at demonstrating that the presuppositions of relevant practices are inescapable, that is, that

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they cannot be cast aside'.[28] The weak transcendental force of such arguments was taken to depend ultimately on the fact that we cannot escape our participation in linguistic practices if we are to make sense of our capacity for thinking and acting:

> [the skeptic] cannot extricate himself from the communicative practice of everyday life in which he is continually forced to take a position by responding yes or no. As long as he is still alive *at all,* a Robinson Crusoe existence through which the skeptic demonstrates mutely and impressively that he has dropped out of communicative action is inconceivable, even as a thought experiment. […] No matter how consistent a dropout he may be, he cannot drop out of the communicative practice of everyday life, to the presuppositions of which he remains bound. And these in turn are at least partly identical with the presuppositions of argumentation as such.[29]

If Tomasello is right, however, Wittgenstein's rule-following considerations just reverse the order of explanation: we should not go from rule-following to meaning and agency, but from the latter to the first. Thus, we should not expect transcendental arguments – however weak – to ground the theory of rationality. Instead, we should look for a detailed account of how communicative rationality emerges from more basic cognitive capacities.

3. *The role of language*

In the previous section, we saw that there is some reason to think that we cannot begin with language in explaining human communication. However, some role must be retained for language, as symbolic communication dramatically changes our capacity for social cognition. Even if we accept that language is non-fundamental in creating the cognitive space for overcoming strategic rationality, the acquisition of language can be expected to contribute crucially to the development of a full blown communicative rationality. In what follows I try to sketch how that could possibly work.

The creation of conventional symbols is not *in and of itself* the crucial point. Indeed, Tomasello maintains that the only difference between natural gestures and linguistic conventions is that referential intentions in the latter case are incorporated in the symbol to direct attention.[30] Habermas suggests instead taking joint attention, conventional symbols and mindreading to co-originate. The argument is that (a) gestures are required to coordinate referential intentions and that (b) background common knowledge is required to frame joint attention. Both gestures and common knowledge are public items. Thus, if they are required by joint attention, one can reasonably suppose that the sharing of intentions can only originate together with a public communicative medium.[31]

As for (a), the problem is that we can only make sense of pointing gestures by determining the partner's intention to direct our attention to a specific object.[32] Thus, gestures do not contribute to joint attention. They *presuppose* that we can jointly attend to the target. Similar considerations can be made about (b). Communication certainly requires a shared context to frame joint attention, but Tomasello's typology of 'common

grounds' rests on attentional, perceptual and agential capacities that predate language.[33] This is the case even when it comes to cultural knowledge, which turns out to be ultimately grounded in the socio-cognitive capacities that support cultural learning.[34]

More generally, creating a convention to use a symbol according to a shared understanding just presupposes the capacity to jointly attend to the referent and the mutual knowledge that everyone has a preference for conforming to the convention, if everyone else does so.[35] So we cannot take conventional symbols to be as primitive as the cognitive capacities for joint attention and mind-reading. In fact, language can only be granted a fundamental role in the explanation of thought if it is *not* a matter of convention.

The crucial point, I think, is the dramatic shift occurring in the socio-cognitive capacity of children around the age of four. Around this age, they start to manage the attribution of false beliefs, and this is taken to show that they learn to see other minds as representational in nature. Tomasello may seem, at first, to downplay the shift, as he maintains that it just rewires our native capacity for sharing intentions by virtue of a 'representational redescription'.[36] Yet the way in which our cognitive capacities get rewired is far from trivial. Tomasello himself reads this transition as a shift from children guiding their actions via an 'internalized significant other' to guiding them via a 'generalized other'. [37] This conveys the view that as children develop a representational theory of mind, they learn to generalize the conditions under which intentions can be shared and begin to perform their capacity for sharing intentions in circumstances in which individuals are not bounded by a specific relationship or by their membership in specific groups.

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Two features of a representational theory of mind are crucial in this connection. First, representations are prototypically things that can be said to be true or false, so that acquiring the notion of representation is tantamount to grasping the concept of objectivity. Tomasello indeed recognizes that '[t]he notions of objective reality, subjective beliefs, and intersubjective perspectives […] form a logical net that can only fully be grasped as a whole': this is why developing a representational theory of mind makes children shift from the early, pre-reflective ability to jointly attend to a target, which enables them to track goals in a we-centric perspective, to the reflective triangulation of self, other and object, which involves a de-centered view – a view from which no specific perspective is privileged.[38]

Second, as representations are taken to convey objective truths, they can be detached from the actual context of interaction and can virtually be attributed to any possible agent. This enables individuals to participate in collective intentionality with an indefinite number of 'anonymous' others, representing a broader set of cultural views and norms, so that generalized institutions like money and marriages are brought into being.[39]

Now *this* requires language. First, acquiring a full-blown representational theory of mind amounts to acquiring the capacity to attribute propositional attitudes to others, and that requires children to master the syntax of sentential complements, which provide the representational format to represent beliefs, desires and the like.[40] Second, we clearly need linguistic communication to share intentions and to act jointly with an indefinite number of people, and to let our actions be guided by the generalized other. We can only share social norms and conventions, cooperate over time, and carry a

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cultural tradition as long as we share a language. In other words, what enables us to participate in making the social world is not *just* joint attention, but a broader capacity for collective intentionality exercised in an anonymous setting, which cannot emerge before the acquisition of language. This also helps us to understand the dynamics of reproduction and innovation that shapes cultural history, as it enables children to multiply the points of view under which objects and events can be conceived. These internalized perspectives can then be used not only to cooperate anonymously in reproducing cultural traditions, but also to reflect and plan actions in a way that goes well beyond imitation.[41]

What is significant in our connection is that the system of equivalence between Self and the Other is likely to generalize as well. This can be plausibly thought to result in a general assumption of symmetry or reciprocity that correlates with the system of idealizing presupposition predicted by formal pragmatics.[42] As children move from joint attention to linguistic communication they can be expected to learn to operate under the idealized assumption that the validity claims raised by speech acts can only be vindicated in a condition of non-coerced communication. One can speculate that the role reversal routines supporting joint action set up the frame in which such idealization can emerge, but they undergo a structural transformation as full communicative competence develops and enables children to generalize the system of equivalence between self and the other. In this sense, the view that the idea of an ideal speech situation is presupposed in actual linguistic practice seems corroborated by Tomasello's work and leads to the prediction that the relevant normative intuitions can be extracted from the intuitive judgments of competent speakers.

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As a consequence, a parallel change is likely to affect moral reasoning. As the system of equivalence generalizes into a universal assumption of reciprocity, it becomes possible to internalize *generalized* norms, so that the pro-social motivations for helping and sharing involved in cooperation can develop into a system of universal norms of fairness and equal respect. Children's capacity for framing interactions in the we-mode and the early presence of pro-social motives can certainly shed new light on moral development. In particular, they strongly support the view that children are less egocentric than they were supposed to be by Kohlberg, and that some expectation of reciprocation and fairness emerges as soon as early cooperative activities appear.[43] Insofar as even the simplest, pre-linguistic forms of cooperation involve some kind of commitment of reciprocation and fairness, children seem to be introduced very early to the game of giving and asking for reasons. Yet, all that will be reshaped entirely by the development of full-blown communicative competence. At the basic level, reasons are bound to actual interactions and relative to a specific partner or group – they are we-centric reasons. Only when the socio-cognitive skills of children undergo the transformation mentioned above can we expect them to acquire the reflective capacity to de-center and access objective, agent-neutral reasons.[44]

It is at this joint, I think, that communicative rationality unfolds its explanatory and normative potential. The critique raised by Habermas in this connection hits the target because Tomasello cannot manage to account for what happens at this level and therefore cannot vindicate the 'strong' normative claims that follow. As a matter of fact, Tomasello recognizes that participating in communicative interactions triggers 'not just expectations of cooperation but actual social norms, whose violation is unacceptable'.[45]

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Yet he cannot say why it is so. The point is that the inclination to cooperate and the pro-social motives it involves cannot ground obligations: the unconditional normativity of objective reasons and the conditional pro-social motives displayed in early infancy point to two different dimensions, namely that of inclinations and duties, respectively.[46] If my reconstruction is correct, the first can only be explained by the transition from joint attention to the generalized structure of communicative action that comes into effect with the acquisition of language.

The interesting point here is that this can be explained without appealing to the metaphysics of Kant's practical reason, as the motivating force of obligations is not traced back to the transmundane causality of freedom, but to the motivating force of arguments. On the one hand, agents are confronted *frontally* by the force of reasons: in the performative attitude of a speaker who seeks to reach an understanding with a second person about something, they cannot avoid being moved by arguments. On the other hand, it puts them under a commitment to justification they cannot reject on pain of *irrationality*.[47]

On closer look, linguistic communication forces participants to a rational, that is, autonomous yes- or no- position-taking. Insofar as linguistic communication runs on reciprocally contestable validity claims, participants are exposed to the critiques of their speech partners and may *sensibly* correct their own concepts under the pressure of negative experiences.[48]

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The binding force of reasons can therefore be explained by reconstructing the pragmatic competence of empirical agents and the intersubjective structure of linguistic communication. Here, there is more than just the inclination to cooperate, but definitely less than transcendental freedom. Insofar as reasons are mundane entities encountered *within* the life-world, the source of normativity can be traced back to the development of the cognitive infrastructures that shape our capacity to participate in the construction of social reality.

4. *Critical theory, social ontology and cognitive science*

In the introductory section above I suggested that the theory of communicative action is progressive in Lakatos' sense, although some revision is needed in order to integrate the recent results of cognitive science into the theory. If the analysis sketched in the preceding sections is broadly correct, this shows in the following respects.

As for its explanatory power, the theory (a) accounts for both the intersubjective structure of mature communication and the idealizing presuppositions involved – this is something Tomasello's theory, as it stands, cannot manage – and (b) provides a precise and systematic account of the moral implication of our capacities for social cognition and communication; in this respect it advances the understanding of moral development and moral reasoning well beyond the vague hints we find in Tomasello's theory.

As for the prediction of new facts, the theory (a) predicts that the development of our capacity for moral judgment and moral reasoning should parallel the acquisition

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of a full pragmatic competence and (b) that the construction of social reality should be found to involve more than cognitive-instrumental rationality (plus a basic capacity for sharing intentions); we should find the construction and the reproduction of the social world to be internally connected with a specific form of communicative *rationality* which goes far beyond our pre-linguistic capacity for joint attention and is governed by normative standards that provide the potential for social criticism.

As for the revisions needed to integrate Tomasello's results, the grounding role played by Wittgenstein's rule-following considerations and by transcendental or quasi-transcendental arguments can hardly be maintained. Instead, the role of reconstructive science should be expanded to incorporate recent results in the cognitive science and to investigate the specific role the acquisition of language plays in the development of social cognition and more generally of communicative competence.

I this last section, I will briefly elaborate upon the point about social ontology, and draw a general conclusion about the relationship between critical theory and cognitive science.

Suppose, at least for the sake of argument, that Searle is more or less right about the way we make up social reality – things can be more complex, but let us assume that something like that can be broadly taken as 'the standard model of social ontology'.[49] Institutional facts here require participants to accept a constitutive rule according to which a status function gets attributed to a specific kind of object or event – e.g., the rule that this sheet of paper counts as a five-euro banknote in the context of currency systems.[50] According to Searle, we need to represent the rule linguistically in order to recognize the rule, converge over it, and keep acceptance stable over time.[51] This entails

something close to the requirement of communicative action: we need to reach a common understanding about something, and in order to do that we cannot avoid engaging in discourses. Of course, the reasons we have for accepting social norms and institutions are for the most part embodied in a culture and play their motivating role in the background. In this sense, constitutive rules need only to be tacitly recognized to be in force.[52] Yet, reasons can be mobilized by critical reflection or come to the forefront as the world taken for granted in everyday life breaks down – in part or totally (Habermas 2012: 71 ss.; cf. Schutz 1964: 231).[53] As this happens, acceptance itself gets implicitly or explicitly contested. Not only can we occasionally reject the claim that an accepted rule applies in particular cases – e.g., we can discuss whether x is an act of war or a terrorist attack. We can also contest constitutive rules themselves by providing an argument to the effect that they are irrational in some respect; that is to say, that acceptance is ungrounded and/or ideologically distorted. Both pragmatic and moral reasons can come into play in this connection. This suggests that reasons work not only as cognitive tools in deliberations, but play both a metaphysical role in actually *grounding* social facts and a normative role in *justifying* the acceptance of constitutive rules; in this sense, social ontology is governed by the binding force of arguments.

This points to a neglected issue in current debates in social ontology. Although concerned with acceptance and recognition, mainstream theories are almost exclusively directed to dig out the mechanisms at work in the construction of social reality. They barely hint at the rationality of constructions and ignore the normative issues at stake when it comes to *assessing* social institutions – or they take them to belong to a *separate* domain of evaluative questions, which is external to the mechanisms and

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processes by which social institutions are brought into being[54]. This seems to be wrong. If we take seriously Tomasello's view, it is reasonable to expect that some norms of fairness and reciprocity turn out to be structural features of social reality, as a sense of fairness and a general expectation of reciprocity are part of the psychological infrastructure of human cooperation.[55] Of course, We-intentions can be parochial and so can social institutions and norms. But there is a clear connection between Tomasello's view that communication and cooperation involve a sense of fairness, and Habermas' idea that some universal moral principles are intrinsic to the communicative interactions by which the social world is reproduced. As individuals learn to consider a situation and the parties involved in the perspective of a 'generalized other', the task of identifying the conditions under which cooperation works is lifted to the level of moral discourses:[56] in this generalized context, the motivational pressure to find agreement on fair terms of cooperation, which each participant can be expected to accept, can only be taken to work under the assumption that some specific rationality governs communicative interactions, for instance that a universalization principle works in this context as a rule of argumentation that makes agreement in practical discourses possible.[57] This sets the stage for discourse ethics, as participants are forced to take a de-centered stance on the social institutions they share.[58] In this sense one may consider that, as there are physical and cognitive limits to the rules we can manage to endorse, there are normative constraints to what we can accept. Some rules are physically impossible to implement, some are psychologically impossible to handle. In the same vein, we can expect that individuals would not abide by the rules of institutions they

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regard as unjustified, or at least that their compliance with the rules would not stand over time.

In fact, there is a traditional argument in moral theory to the effect that the constitution of society is impossible under certain conditions because in such conditions individuals would not accept cooperation – they would not enter the society or not comply with the social contract. In short, unless some conditions are satisfied, defection is the best strategy. Adam Smith for instance claimed that justice is enforced by nature through the 'consciousness of ill-desert, those terrors of merited punishment which attend upon its violation' because the rules of justice lay out the conditions for a society to exist:

> Society […] cannot subsist among those who are at all times ready to hurt and injure one another. The moment that injury begins, the moment that mutual resentment and animosity take place, all the bands of it are broke asunder, and the different members of which it consisted are, as it were, dissipated and scattered abroad by the violence and opposition of their discordant affections. If there is any society among robbers and murderers, they must at least, according to the trite observation, abstain from robbing and murdering one another. Beneficence, therefore, is less essential to the existence of society than justice. Society may subsist, though not in the most confortable state, without benevolence; but the prevalence of injustice must utterly destroy it.[59]

In this section, Smith is trying to explain the sense of justice, and his point is that no one would accept to join a group in which basic norms of reciprocity and fairness are

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not respected. According to this reading, unjust societies are bound to collapse because their members will not feel committed to abide by their rules. Of course, Smith was a minimalist about the rules of justice, as he took them to guard life, property, and the respect of contracts.[60] The argument leaves open, however, whether or not they might be extended to also include some principles of distributive justice. For instance, a suggestion can be drawn from Rawls to the effect that only fair systems of cooperation are stable over time. That would impose broader constraints to what individuals can be expected to accept. In any case, it seems clear that the sense of justice does not make for an external standard, as it emerges in the process of making the social world as a byproduct of our motivation to cooperate.

If this is approximately right, there is not a deep conflict between Tomasello's work on joint attention and the theory of communicative action. On the contrary, there seems to be some chance that they can be integrated into a single theory. One can accept that communicative action is ontogenetically grounded in a more basic capacity for social cognition, and that further work needs to be done to provide a full account of communicative rationality – including some revisionary work. Yet, that does not really contradict the main tenets of the theory. Rather, it refines the understanding of the reconstructive science we need in order to analyze the structural features of the life-world, to account for the emergence of culture, and to explain how we construct social reality. Moreover, it seems to provide some support to the general idea that a specific form of communicative rationality is involved in social ontology and therefore to corroborate the view that explanatory work in social science cannot be normatively disengaged. As one recognizes the grounding role of reasons in social ontology, one is

forced to take a stance on rationality, and this vindicates the strongest claim of critical theory: social science displays an *internal* connection between explanatory force and normative commitment. We cannot account for social reality without taking a stance on its rationality.

In this context, the argument for universal pragmatics can be maintained even if we dispense with Wittgenstein's rule-following considerations and move to connect its theoretical foundation to empirical psychology.[61] This may look threatening at first, as it seems to undermine the argument we find in theory of communicative action to the effect of grounding rationality in the theory of language. Yet, one can consistently maintain that language is a condition for thought independently. It is generally accepted that thought is productive in Humboldt's sense, and therefore compositional. This entails, however, that it must be endowed with a syntactic structure; and only symbolic representations display a syntactic structure. Hence, the working of minds must be conveyed in a linguistic format after all, be it a mental language of thought or a public language. Thus, even if one rejects rule-following as the basis of meaning and takes a general capacity for mindreading to be fundamental in language understanding, as Tomasello suggests, the patterns we are supposed to read in minds are very likely to be language-like.

The parallelism between intentional psychology and speech act theory is striking indeed, as speech acts mirror the propositional attitudes intentional psychology posits as the basic units of inferential and deliberative processes: their illocutive force mirrors the psychological attitudes individuals entertain towards propositions; their semantic content amounts to the propositions to which such attitudes relate.[62] The taxonomy of

speech acts proposed by Habermas' formal pragmatics, and the resulting differentiation

of rationality according to the validity claims associated with each speech act type, can

therefore be extended to the cognitive architecture of mental states and processes: as

descriptive speech acts mirror beliefs, regulative speech acts may be thought to mirror

promises and commitments, as well as expressive speech acts may be thought to mirror

first person experiences. Of course, more work needs to be done to see exactly how the

cognitive operations of mindreading connect to the pragmatic competence of speakers.

Yet, the theory looks strengthened under this reading and may contribute to the

cognitive science both in advancing the understanding of rationality and in clarifying

the role normativity plays in cognitive pragmatics.

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[1] Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, (Oxford: Polity Press, 2008), pp. 170-172; Jürgen Habermas, *Nachmetaphysisches Denken II*, (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2012), pp. 10 ff., 61 ff., Jürgen Habermas, *Im Sog der Technokratie. Kleine politische Schriften XII*, (Frankfurt a. M., Suhrkamp, 2013), pp. 166-173. Further evidence is provided by Habermas' review of Tomasello's book *Origins of Human Communication*, in *Die Zeit* (December 10, 2009).

[2] Tomasello shares with Habermas the view that social norms are rooted in our capacity to participate in a specific kind of communicative interactions, and explicitly quotes Habermas in this connection: cf. Michael Tomasello, *Origins of Human Communication*, (Cambridge (MA): MIT Press, 2008): pp. 91-92.

[3] This is Habermas' label for Tomasello's intentionalistic account of symbolic communication: see Habermas, *Nachmetaphysisches Denken II*, p. 63.

[4] Cognitive science, in fact, is routinely taken to be a special science dealing with *ceteris paribus* laws, which cannot be reduced to fundamental physics: see for instance Jerry Fodor, 'Special Sciences (or the Disunity of Science as a Working Hypothesis)', *Synthese*, 28 (2) (1974), pp. 97-115 and Jerry Fodor, *Psycosemantics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 1-16.

[5] See Jürgen Habermas, *Vorstudien und Ergänzungen zur Theorie des Kommunikativen Handels*, (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1984), pp. 363, and Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), pp. 31-32.

[6] Habermas, *Nachmetaphysisches Denken II*, p. 53.

[7] Max Horkheimer, 'The Present Situation of Social Philosophy and the Tasks of an Institute for Social Research,' in *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings*, (Cambridge (MA): MIT Press, 1993), pp. 9-10. Contemporary varieties of critical theory have stuck to this attitude.

[8] Giacomo Rizzolati, Corrado Sinigaglia, *Mirrors in the Brain: How Our Minds Share Actions, Emotions, and Experience*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[9] Pierre Jacob, 'What Do Mirror Neurons Contributes to Social Cognition', *Mind & Language,* 23 (2) (2008): 190–223.

[10] Alvin Goldman, 'Mirroring, Mindreading, and Simulation', in J. A. Pineda (ed.), *Mirror Neuron Systems. The Role of Mirroring Processes in Social Cognition* (New York, Springer, 2009), pp. 311-330 (314).

[11] Tomasello, *Why We Cooperate?*, pp. 59 ff.; to act in the we-mode amounts to taking part in a joint action, so that the individuals' intention to perform their part is derived from the collective intention to act jointly; by contrast, to act in the I-mode amounts to acting according to one's own 'private' reasons – that is, individually intending to achieve a 'personal' goal (Raimo Toumela, 'Joint Intention, We-Mode and I-Mode', *Midwest Studies of Philosophy* (30) (2006): 35-58 (39-41). A similar distinction can be found in John Searle, 'Collective Intentions and Actions', in P. Cohen, J. Morgan, and M.E. Pollack (eds.), *Intentions in Communication*, (Cambridge (MA): MIT Press, 1990), pp. 401-415, as well as in Michael

Bratman, 'Shared Co-operative Activity', *Philosophical Review*, 101 (2) (1992): 327–341, and in

Margaret Gilbert, *On Social Facts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

[12] Tomasello, *Why We Cooperate*, pp. 62-63.

[13] Tomasello, *Origins of Human Communication*, pp. 41 ff., 175 ff. 82-83.

[14] Tomasello, *Why We Cooperate*, pp. 39 ff.

[15] Habermas, *Nachmetaphysisches Denken II*, pp. 39 ff.

[16] Michael Tomasello, Hannes Rakoczy, 'What Makes Human Cognition Unique? From Individual to

Shared to Collective Intentionality', *Mind & Language*, 18 (2) (2003): 121-147.

[17] Mattia Gallotti, 'A Naturalistic Argument for the Irreducibility of Collective Intentionality', *Philosophy

of the Social Sciences*, (1) (2012): 3-30 (15 ff.); Hannes Rakoczy, 'Pretense as Individual and Collective

Intentionality', *Mind & Language*, 23 (5) (2008): 499-517 (508 ff.).

[18] Cf. Tomasello, Rakoczy, 'What makes Human Cognition Unique?: 123-126, Tomasello, *Why We

Cooperate?*, pp. 67 ff., Rakoczy, 'Pretense as Individual and Collective Intentionality': 507.

[19] Tomasello, Why We Cooperate, pp. 71-72.

[20] Tomasello, *Why We Cooperate?*, pp. 62-63.

[21] Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), vol. I, p. 288.

[22] Tomasello, *Origins of Human Communication*, pp. 59-60.

[23] Ibid., p. 73.

[24] Jürgen Habermas, *Post-metaphysical Thinking*, (Cambridge (MA): MIT Press, 1992), pp. 63, 73 ff.

[25] Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. II, pp. 15-22.

[26] Ibid., p. 16.

[27] Ibid., pp. 17-18; Haberms, *Nachmetaphysisches Denkens*, pp. 43, 68 ff.

[28] Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, pp. 32, cf. 95 ff

[29] Ibid., p. 100.

[30] Tomasello, *Origins of Human Communication*, pp. 101-102.

[31] Habermas, *Nachmetaphysisches Denkens II*, pp. 62-64.

[32] Tomasello, *Origins of Human Communication*, p. 4.

[33] Ibid., pp. 78 ff.

[34] See Tomasello, *The cultural Origins of Human Cognition*, (Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 56 ff. In this context, I cannot deal in detail with whether intention-based explanations of symbolic communication require a capacity for meta-representation (Habermas, *Nachmetaphysisches Denken II*, p. 65). I think, however, that the traditional objection raised to intentional accounts of linguistic communication, namely that they end up in a regress, does not apply here. Tomasello's point is precisely that a pre-linguistic capacity to share intentions comes *before* the capacity for meta-representation, which develops around the age of four. Mindreading needs not to be meta-representational (although it may be): simulation theory, for instance, suggests that it is not, at least in basic cases. See for instance Goldman, *Simulating Minds. The Philosophy, Psychology, and Neuroscience of Mindreading,* (Oxford, Oxford University Press 2006), pp. 113 ff., and Robetrt Gordon, 'Simulation Without Introspection or Inference From Me to You' in M. Davies, T. Stone (eds.), *Mental Simulation: Evaluations and Applications*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 53-67. This seems to stop the regress affecting Gricean accounts by making shared knowledge intentional and intersubjective from the start, so that no appeal to natural meaning is needed (see Habermas, *Nachmetaphysisches Denken II*, pp. 64-65; Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, pp. 65-66; Habermas, *Vorstudien*, pp. 339 ff.).

[35] David Lewis, *Convention*, (Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 76.

[36] Tomasello, Rakoczy, 'What Makes Human Cognition Unique': 139.

[37] Ibid.: 139.

[38] Tomasello, Rakoczy, 'What Makes Human Cognition Unique': 134.

[39] Ibid.: 139.

[40] Ibid.: 136 ff.; cf. Tomasello, *Origins of Human Communication*, pp. 244 ff. and Heidemarie Lohmann, Michael Tomasello, 'The Role of Language in the Understanding of False Belief Task', *Child Development*, 74 (4) (2003): 1130-1144.

[41] Tomasello, *The Cultural Origin of Human Communication*, pp. 9-10, 191 ff., 202.

[42] Habermas, *Vorstudien*, pp. 174 ff.; see also Jürgen Habermas, *Truth and Justification*, (Cambridge (MA): MIT Press, 2003), pp. 106 ff.

[43] Tomasello, *Why We Cooperate*?, p. 34.

[44] Actually, this is a point Tomasello seems to misunderstand, as he takes the we-centric view displayed as young children jointly attending a target to provide already a third-person, agent neutral view (Ibid., pp. 41, 68). It is unclear how this can possibly be the case, however. On one hand, a third person 'view from nowhere' just does not overlap with the *we*-centric (plural) first personal stance displayed by joint attention. On the other hand, Nagel views agent neutral reasons as being objective in the sense of not being relative to a specific perspective: see Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 152-153. We-intentions, however, are relative to specific groups or dyadic relationships in the minimal setting accessible to young children: from a moral point of view there is not much change in going from a egocentric to a we-centric bias. Thus, it seems reasonable to conjecture that children cannot grasp general, agent neutral reason before they learn to generalize the capacity for sharing intentions to any possible partner of interaction.

[45] Tomasello, *Origins of Human Communication*, 92.

[46] Habermas, *Nachmetaphysisches Denken II*, pp. 11, 66.

[47] Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, p. 105; Habermas, 1992, *Post-metaphysical Thinking*, pp. 76 ff.,; Habermas, *Truth and Justification*, pp. 64-65.

[48] Habermas, *Nachmetaphysisches Denken II*, p. 45: 'Bei licht betrachtet nötigt die sprachlicher Kommunikation die Beteiligten vielmehr zu vernünftigen, und das heisst autonomen Ja- oder Nein-Stellungnahmen. Weil die sprachliche Kommunikation über wechselseitig erhobene und auf Kritik angelegte Geltungsansprüche läuft, sind die Beteiligten dem Wiederspruch von Gesprächspartnern ausgesetzt und können auch ihre Begriffe unter dem Ueberraschungsdruck negativer Erfahrungen *aus Einsicht* Korrigieren.'

[49] Francesco Guala, 'The Philosophy of Social Science. Metaphysical and Empirical', *Philosophy Compass* 2 (6) (2007):.954-980 (956).

[50]John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*, (New York: Penguin, 1995), pp. 43 ff.: the general form of such constitutive rules is 'X counts as Y in context C'.

[51] Ibid., pp. 69 ff.

[52] Ibid., pp. 127 ff.; cf. Habermas, *Nachmetaphysisches Denken II*, p. 56.

[53] Schutz's definition of crisis is as follows: '[w]e call such a situation crisis – a partial one if it makes only some elements of the world taken for granted questionable, a total one if it invalidates the whole system of reference, the scheme of interpretation itself' (Alfred Schutz, *Collected Papers II. Studies in Social Theory* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1964), p. 231.

[54] Margarte Gilbert, for instance, explicitly maintains that the normative commitments involved by joint actions are different in kind from moral commitments; Searle suggests that institutions can be accepted or recognized even when they are not approved; see Gilbert, *A Theory of Political Obligation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 22-24, John Searle, *Making the Social World*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 8. Leo Zailbert and Barry Smith have drawn the conclusion that talks of normativity involved in the theory of joint action and in the construction of social reality have nothing in common with the moral and rational standards by which social institution are taken to be assessed by social contract theory (Leo Zailbert, Barry Smity, 'Varieties of Normativity. An Essay on Social Ontology', in S. L. Tsohatzidis (ed.), *Intentional Acts and Institutional Facts: Essays on John Searle's Social Ontology*, (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008), pp. 157-173 (167-169).

[55] Tomasello, *Why We Cooperate*, pp. 28 ff.

[56] Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, pp. 143-144; cf. Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. II, pp. 37 ff.

[57] Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, p. 66.

[58] Ibid., pp.106 ff.

[59] Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Prometheus: New York, 2000), p. 211.

[60] Ibid., p. 121.

[61] There are independent reasons for concern about rule-following. The *crux* is that Wittgenstein takes rule-following to be *basically* a practice. That is, it does not result from habitualizing a judgment. As a

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consequence, judgments do not count as the cognitive grounds for the practice we undergo. Rather, the ability to judge depends on undergoing the relevant practice. Literally, one cannot think a thought unless one submits to a custom that is practical in nature, as that provides us with the conceptual resources to think. As a consequence, rationality turns out to be constrained by the social practice of rule-following, rather than providing the normative standards to assess social practices: as undergoing a practice is a condition for making sense of thoughts, there is no sensible way to take a stance on the practice we undergo (Matteo Bianchin, 'Bildung, Meaning, and Reasons', *Verifiche* LVI (1-3) (2012): 73-102 (97). Indeed rule-following is 'FUNDAMENTAL to our language game' (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the foundations of mathematics*: Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), § VI-28. This is why being initiated into a custom is being educated in a way of acting, rather than in a way of arguing. We are at Wittgenstein's bedrock indeed, where we have 'exhausted the justifications' (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, (Blackwell: Oxford, 1969) § 217). Note that Wittgenstein here recasts in his own terms Aristotle's foundational argument that justification must come to an end, if we are to avoid regress (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, IV, 1006a 5-10): the difference between Aristotle and Wittgenstein in this respect is that, according to Wittgenstein, 'the end is not certain propositions striking us immediately as true', but certain practices being displayed by 'our acting' (Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, § 204).

[62] See Jerry Fodor, 'Fodor's Guide to Mental Representations', *Mind*, 94 (373) (1985): 76-100 (90).