INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each original is also photographed in one exposure and is included in reduced form at the back of the book.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

ON THE UNIVERSALITY

OF HABERMAS'S DISCOURSE ETHICS

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND
RESEARCH IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE
DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

MIRA JOHRI

DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

McGILL UNIVERSITY
MONTREAL, CANADA

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A number of people have contributed in diverse ways to the realisation of this project. I am very pleased to have this opportunity to acknowledge their assistance. I would like first to thank the members of my Thesis Committee, Professors Charles Taylor, David Davies, and James Tully, with whom I have been uniquely fortunate to study. James Tully provided me with invaluable discussions of Habermas's work as well as of my own. Moreover, his commitment to the importance of cultural diversity in political philosophy served as an ongoing source of inspiration and encouragement in the execution of this project. Whatever degree of argumentative cogency this thesis possesses is largely due to David Davies, whose philosophical standards have long since become those by which I measure my own work. The integrity he brings to academic research is matched only by his dedication to pedagogy.

My debt to Charles Taylor is both more profound, and more difficult to articulate. As a philosopher, his writings have shaped the terms of my engagement with the discipline. His influence upon me is omnipresent in this thesis, and that is perhaps the most sincere form of gratitude a student can express. Yet I find myself wishing most to thank him for his example

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABBREVIATIONS OF HABERMAS'S WORKS

CES　　　　　　　*Communication and the Evolution of Society*, translated by T.McCarthy. Beacon Press, 1979.

J&A　　　　　　　*Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics*, translated by Ciaran P.Cronin. MIT Press, 1990.

KHI　　　　　　　*Knowledge and Human Interests*, translated by J.Shapiro. Beacon Press, 1971.

MCCA　　　　　　*Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. Translated by Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen. MIT Press, 1990.

RECONCILIATION　"Reconciliation Through the Public Use of Reason: Remarks on John Rawls's *Political Liberalism*," in *The Journal of Philosophy*. Vol.XCII, No.3. (1995): 109-131.

REPLY　　　　　　"Reply to My Critics," in J.Thompson and D.Held, eds. *Habermas: Critical Debates*. Macmillan, 1982: 219-283.

TCA1　　　　　　 *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol.1, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*. Translated by T.McCarthy. Beacon Press, 1981.

TCA2　　　　　　 *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol.2, *Lifeworld and System*. Translated by T.McCarthy. Beacon Press, 1987.

v

ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates Habermas's attempt to establish a credible form of universalism in moral and political philosophy by means of the theoretical approach which he terms "discourse ethics." The central question motivating this study is whether Habermas succeeds in this ambition. Discourse ethics specifies a procedure which purports to enable all agents involved in a conflict of interest in which issues of justice are at stake to come to a rational and cooperative resolution. It proposes a position unique among contemporary approaches to justice in the strength and character of its anti-relativist stance: the plurality of human cultures and the situated character of human understanding do not, according to this theory, bar the way to arriving at a minimal form of moral universalism. Although the procedure specified in communicative ethics elucidates only a narrow range of concerns—those pertaining to justice in the strict sense—it aims to do so in a way valid across all human cultures.

Habermas's strategy for the defence of a species-wide moral universalism is, I argue, both the key feature of his position, and the least well understood. Discussion of discourse ethics to date has focussed almost exclusively on the question of its appropriateness to the context of modern, Western pluralism. An important reason for this focus has been the intricacy of Habermas's argumentative strategy, which links the recent work on discourse ethics to his longstanding project of developing a theory of communicative action.

The principle aim of this thesis is to clarify Habermas's position by explicating his programme of justification. In so doing, I draw attention to several problems in his approach as a mechanism for cross-cultural conflict adjudication, and endeavour to provide a more perspicuous account of the relation of Habermas's theory to its main philosophical competitors, especially Rawlsian deontology, and contextualism.

ABRÉGÉ

Cette dissertation examine la tentative de Habermas d'établir une forme plausible de l'universalisme dans la philosophie morale et politique par le moyen d'une méthode théorique qu'il appelle "éthique communicative". Cette étude est motivée par la question de la réussite de cette ambition de Habermas. La théorie de l'éthique communicative spécifie une procédure présentée comme permettant à tous ceux qui sont impliqués dans un conflit d'intérêts entraînant des questions de justice à parvenir à une résolution raisonnable et coopérative. Une position unique parmi les descriptions contemporaines de justice est proposée par cette méthode par la force et le caractère de son anti-relativisme. Selon cette théorie, la pluralité des cultures humaines et le caractère situé de l'entendement humain n'empêchent pas qu'il soit possible d'aboutir à une forme minimale de l'universalisme moral. Bien que la procédure spécifiée dans l'éthique communicative éclaircit seulement une gamme restreinte d'intérêts - ceux regardant la justice dans le sens précis du mot - elle aspire à faire ceci d'une façon valide pour chaque culture humaine.

La stratégie de Habermas pour défendre un universalisme moral valable pour l'entière l'espèce humaine est, selon moi, et ce qui rend sa position particulière, et ce qui a été le moins bien compris. La discussion de l'éthique communicative fût jusqu'ici presque exclusivement concentrée sur la question si elle est convenable dans le contexte d'un pluralisme moderne et occidental. Une raison importante pour cette convergence est la complexité de la stratégie argumentative de Habermas en ce qui concerne le lien entre ses ouvrages récents sur l'éthique communicative et son projet long-terme de développer une théorie d'action communicative.

Le but principal de cette dissertation est de clarifier la position de Habermas en expliquant son programme de justification. Donc, j'attire l'attention sur plusieurs problèmes de sa méthode en tant que mécanisme pour juger les conflits interculturels, et j'essaie de

fournir une explication plus perspicace de la relation de la théorie habermasienne avec ses plus importants concurrents philosophiques, en particulier, la déontologie de Rawls et le contextualisme.

In memory of my Dadi

Chapter One

The greatest problem for the human species, the solution of which nature compels him to seek, is that of attaining a civil society which can administer justice universally.

Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose"

Claims of justice have always been the preferred examples of moral claims that are to be recognized by reason, as founded in the nature of things, as not essentially diverse, and as not contingent upon any sort of social order.

Stuart Hampshire, "Morality and Convention"

...the development of human civilization [should be] conceived not as a linear movement, now rising, now declining, nor as a dialectical movement of clashing opposites always resolved in a higher synthesis, but as the realization that cultures are many and various, each embodying scales of value different from those of other cultures and sometimes incompatible with them, yet capable of being understood, that is, seen by observers endowed with sufficiently acute and sympathetic historical insight, as ways of living which human beings could pursue and remain fully human.

Isaiah Berlin, "Giambattista Vico and Cultural History"

1.1 Introduction

Habermas's discourse ethics delimits a position unique among contemporary moral theories. Although it bears the distinctive features of a moral philosophy in the Kantian tradition, discourse ethics has from the outset been framed through an engagement with Kant's foremost critics. Critiques of agency inspired by the works of Aristotle and Hegel have been pre-eminent in influence. The moral agent pictured by Kant generates unconditional moral demands on the basis of her rational will alone, in virtue of the requirements which recognition of the equal capacity for autonomous agency of all rational agents places upon practical

1

reason. These requirements are expressed in the procedure of the categorical imperative. Its aim is to provide a method for verifying that a proposed course of action is commensurate with what all moral agents could rationally affirm. In contrast, the various forms of communitarianism and contextualism which Habermas refers to under the rubric "neo-Aristotelianism" emphasise the deep sense in which human agency is socially situated. Neo-Aristotelian critics have brought to the fore the manifold consequences of the abstraction which Kantian deontology, in its pursuit of a morality valid in all times and places, imposes on lived ethical experience; consequences which in their view reflect a distorted understanding of the nature of the ties between individual and community. The deliberations and actions of an individual moral agent must of necessity, they argue, draw upon a background of values embodied in concrete communal traditions and forms of life. Many have, as an outgrowth of this view, asked whether the goal of universal rational agency espoused by Kant is not a chimerical one, unsustainable once the metaphysical illusions of Kantian philosophy have been left behind.

Habermas's critical engagement with contextualist opponents has borne fruit in the form of an innovatively revised deontological approach. The power and originality of discourse ethics lies in its ambition to accommodate the legitimate objections of Kant's critics while preserving the fundamental features of moral philosophy in the Kantian tradition.[1] The most crucial of these is the claim to universalism. The aim of communicative ethics is to specify a procedure which will enable all agents affected by a conflict of interest in which issues of justice are at stake to come to a rational and cooperative resolution. Although the procedure elucidates only a narrow range of concerns—those pertaining to justice in the strict sense—it aims to do so in a way valid across all human cultures. Habermas explicitly links the

2

procedure of discourse ethics to the clarification and justification of interests which reflect what all could rationally will; interests which are, in his terminology, "generalisable." Moreover, he views such interests as exemplified in what we commonly refer to as "human rights."

Habermas's strategy for the defence of a species-wide moral universalism is, I shall argue, both the key issue at stake in the debate with his contextualist critics, and the least well understood aspect of his project. This introductory chapter begins with a summary of what Habermas views as the most important of the criticisms raised by neo-Aristotelians, and indicates why it is essential for the cogency of Habermas's project that they be addressed. The following sections give an account of discourse ethics which displays its unique position within the network of contemporary English-language debates in moral philosophy. Section 1.3 introduces the principal features of Habermas's discourse ethics as a response to the problems raised by contextualists, while ∫1.4 examines Habermas's assessment of the strengths of his position vis-a-vis these opponents. In his debate with the neo-Aristotelians, Habermas argues for the superiority of a procedural form of justice such as that advocated by discourse ethics *on the basis of its appropriateness to the context of modern pluralism*. He argues in essence that, since no shared scheme of values exists in contemporary Western societies, no return to an ethics focussed on substantive notions of the good, such as that of Aristotle, is feasible. Notwithstanding the very impressive accomplishments of Habermas's reworked Kantianism, I will argue that neither Habermas nor his expositors has yet directly addressed the key point at issue.

Whatever the merits of discourse ethics as a theory adapted for the context of modern Western pluralism, to focus on this issue seems to me to obscure the boldness of Habermas's

---

[1]This is the stated aim of many of the essays in *Justification and Application*. See, for example, "On the Pragmatic, the Ethical, and the Moral Employments of Practical Reason," in *J&A*: 1. See also,

approach. The limited range of issues it addresses implies that the principal potential use of discourse ethics is as a mechanism for conflict resolution valid for groups who do not share similar cultural horizons. We hence in §1.5 find Habermas distinguishing himself from his chief competitor among proponents of Kantian-style deontology, John Rawls, by defending the appropriateness of a procedural concept of justice universally, and not simply for the specific societies, modern, Western and late-capitalist, from whose traditions these theories stem.

In light of these reflections I would like in §1.6 to refocus the debate between Habermas and his contextualist critics on the issue of Habermas's strategy for defending a strong form of moral universalism. I will ask, in essence, how a theory freed of "metaphysical illusions" can pursue universalist claims. Must such a theory employ substantive conceptions of value drawn from our own societies? If so, does the use of these societally specific notions impair the effectiveness of the procedure as a device for the resolution of issues of justice cross-culturally? In my view, until these questions are drawn from the periphery to the centre of the present debate, we will not fully acknowledge the uniqueness of Habermas's philosophical programme. Only then will we stand in a position to evaluate its merits.

1.2 Neo-Aristotelian Critiques of Kantian Abstract Universalism

The term "neo-Aristotelianism" as employed by Habermas does not denote one philosophical approach, but rather several criss-crossing positions united by a set of shared sympathies.[2] Habermas's relationship to this philosophical tradition is complex. It is perhaps best described as one of productive tension. Because he largely agrees with the neo-Aristotelians in their criticisms of Kantian transcendental philosophy, and yet wishes to resist what he sees as the relativistic implications of their conclusions, Habermas has been impelled

---

"Lawrence Kohlberg and neo-Aristotelianism," in *J&A*: 16.

to develop a novel philosophical approach. The cogency of this alternative depends in large part on Habermas's ability to show that it can adequately address what he regards as the legitimate criticisms raised by neo-Aristotelians. Many of these problems can be phrased as a rejection of the apparent decontextualisation of reason and agency in a Kantian approach to moral philosophy. These objections take both a general and specific form.

Recent critiques in several philosophical disciplines have challenged the paradigm of Kantian epistemology and its accompanying notions of transcendental reason, universal, necessary and historically invariant truths, and atomistic agency. In their place, these critiques have underscored how closely conceptions of knowledge and normativity are connected to the practices of particular communities. Their recurring themes are the socially dependent character of our "conceptual schemes," the historical and cultural variability of our criteria of knowledge and our standards of normative acceptability, and the extent to which these structures are interwoven with the variable patterns through which societies reproduce themselves both socially and materially.[3] These criticisms are often phrased in terms of a rejection of philosophical foundationalism. The aim of Kantian epistemology was to provide a principled method of ascertaining the scope and validity of all claims to knowledge. By providing a means of separating legitimate from illegitimate claims, Kant hoped to clarify the philosophical foundations of the various sciences, and thereby to place them on a firm footing. We might generally describe a foundationalist position as one "which claims that philosophy

---

[2] The lack of a clear separation between the various neo-Aristotelian positions contributes to a lack of clarity in the present debate. I will return to this issue in §1.6.

[3] I have drawn here on the very helpful overview of these critiques of Kantian foundationalism contained in Thomas McCarthy's "General Introduction" to *After Philosophy*, ed., Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman and Thomas McCarthy, (MIT Press, 1987): 1-18.

can, by some method, demonstrate the absolute, universal validity of some conception of knowledge or morality."[4] This view is rejected equally by Habermas and the neo-Aristotelians.

Yet while both positions recognise the character of human agency as socially situated within specific historical forms of life, they have drawn different conclusions from these shared insights. Among contextualists this realisation has usually been taken to point to the inherent specificity of the linguistically acquired value concepts employed by different groups, and hence to support a non-universalist approach to moral theory. Neo-Aristotelians remind us that the interpreter is also an embodied agent, occupying a specific historical, cultural and social position, and that this position forms the horizon from which she attempts to understand the beliefs and practices of others. The understanding achieved by such an agent is, it would appear, ineluctably linked to her initial interpretive situation. This position entails the potentially relativistic consequences eschewed by Habermas, for on it there would seem to be no neutral standpoint from which to assess or to criticise the practices of a particular community, and indeed, no uniquely correct way to assess these practices. Contextualists have generally argued that moral philosophy should proceed by means of a dialogue with others oriented to themes of general human concern, and employing "thick concepts" of value phenomena which are explicitly culturally specific, rather than from the sorts of formal or universalistic claims which characterised Kant's approach.[5]

A number of powerful criticisms of Kantian moral theory have been advanced from this perspective. These criticisms draw closely upon Aristotle's conception of practical reasoning. Aristotle's ethics aims to ascertain the nature of the end or ends at which men

---

[4]This definition is Stephen White's. See Stephen White, *The Recent Work of Jurgen Habermas: Reason, justice & modernity*, (Cambridge, 1988).
[5]I am indebted in the formulation of this point to Thomas McCarthy's presentation of the relationship between Habermas's position and Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics in McCarthy, "Rationality and Relativism: Habermas's "Overcoming" of Hermeneutics," in *Habermas: Critical Debates*, (): 57-78. See especially the description of hermeneutics on pp. 57-58.

ought to aim in living a life, in the hopes that a clearer understanding of this goal may facilitate its realisation. The good for human beings is defined by Aristotle as a life of *eudaimonia*, that is to say, a life lived in accordance with virtue or excellence. He defines the excellences of which human beings are capable into two kinds, intellectual and moral. Aristotle regards theoretical activity or *theoria* as the best activity of which we are capable, as it reflects the excellence of the best part of us, that is, the excellence of rationality in the strict sense. *Theoria* takes as its object the study of the unchanging features of the universe, and its truths are hence viewed by Aristotle as correspondingly eternal, immutable, and not in any way relative to the context of human life and language. The intellectual excellence exhibited in ethics, described as practical wisdom or *phronesis*, is by contrast essentially concerned with change and contingency, as ethics must reflect and be responsive to the changing social situations in which our actions unfold. For Aristotle, practical wisdom must of necessity go beyond a knowledge of the generally accepted rules for morality to encompass an intelligent understanding of the reasons for them. Its concern with particular actions in his view precludes its attaining a high level of certainty or generality. Moreover, the exercise of phronesis requires more than intelligence in the narrow sense of cleverness. Both accurate perception of the relevant features of a situation and correct action require that an agent possess a stable personality exhibiting virtues or excellences of character in the proper proportion. These excellences of character are acquired through induction into the values, beliefs and practices of the polis. The capacity for ethical agency is, in consequence, dependent upon this background of communal traditions.[6]

Kantian moral theories are generally viewed by neo-Aristotelians as suffering from a number of impoverishing abstractions which reflect their misguided theoretial orientation

---

[6]My description is indebted to Ciaran Cronin's "Translator's Introduction," to *J&A*: xxi. His article, which focusses on the debate between Habermas and neo-Aristotelianism, has been very helpful in

toward highly abstract notions of reason and agency. Although Habermas does not affirm the characterisation of Kant's work given by many of his critics as accurate in all instances, he nonetheless regards their criticisms as capturing some important limitations of this position. Three appear to him to be particularly salient.[7] First, Kantian moral theories isolate from the fabric of human ethical experience a narrow set of questions viewed as amenable to rational resolution by all concerned. This set of questions is illuminated by "the moral point of view," which Habermas defines as "...the perspective from which we can decide among controversial normative claims impartially, solely on the basis of reasons."[8] It is articulated through a procedure which enables an individual moral agent to test the permissibility of her proposed plan of action. Because the moral agent recognises that her plan can only be legitimately pursued if such pursuit is commensurate with all other rational agents acting similarly, she adopts the procedure established in the categorical imperative. This imperative, which stipulates that "I should never act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law,"[9] provides a means for generating exceptionless rules of conduct.

The narrow focus of Kantian moral theory reflects the central position it accords the question of what one ought to do. This unavoidably forces a separation between what one ought to do or what is "right," and what one views as good or desirable. Kantian-style moral theories constrain the moral agent to subordinate her pursuit of a particular end or plan of action in light of the limits placed upon action by a procedure for universalisation. This prioritisation of the right reflects a homogeneisation of different goods which is problematic

---

preparing this introduction.
[7]These criticisms are drawn from Habermas, "Neo-Aristotelianism," in *J&A*: 116-126. Cf. Cronin, "Translator's Introduction," in *J&A*: xxi-xxii.
[8]Habermas, "Neo-Aristotelianism," in *J&A*: 118.
[9]Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James Ellington, (Hackett, 1981): 14; Ak. 402.

both in its falsification of our ethical experience and in the problems it gives rise to with respect to moral motivation. As Habermas explains, the prioritisation of the right appears to have the unhappy consequence that "[a]ll goods, including the highest good of my life project or of the form of life to which we collectively aspire, are deprived of their moral status and are lumped together with things designed to satisfy contingent needs and wants; henceforth, goods fulfill only subjective preferences."[10] This approach appears to set obligation against inclination in a way which requires an implausible degree of abstraction from the motives underlying an agent's interest in, and performance of, right or appropriate actions. In Kant's view our reasons for acting morally should reflect our recognition of the claims of practical reason itself if they are to be of moral worth. Moral actions must depend neither upon inclination, nor upon prudential considerations of self-interest. This conception seems to presuppose a moral agent constituted prior to all social interaction who can formulate "coherent practical intentions in isolation from natural desires and a socially conditioned identity."[11] The centrality of questions of moral obligation stands in sharp contrast to the approach taken by classical ethics. As noted earlier, Aristotle's ethical theory revolves around the question of eudaimonia or "living well." He sought to show that living an excellent human life, that is, a life exhibiting the highest virtues and oriented towards the highest goods, is compatible both with our obligations and with our truest self-interest.

Second, Kantian moral theories, through specifying a procedure for determining which actions are right in principle, focus on the issue of normative *justification*. This focus upon the justificatory basis for general rules has often been conjoined with an insensitivity to the relevant features of particular situations, and perhaps especially towards the needs of

---

[10]Habermas, "Neo-Aristotelianism," in *J&A*: 119.
[11]The phrase is Ciaran Cronin's. See Cronin, "Translator's Introduction," in *J&A*: xxii.

individuals.[12] It has moreover allowed problems of the sensitive application of norms to recede into the background. Kantian-style moral theories hence seem to run the twin dangers of formalism and rigorism. Because universal principles cannot presume to capture all of the practically relevant features of any unique situation, it seems likely that such principles may furnish somewhat crude instruments in responding to such situations. This danger may be compounded by the rigid application of principles without regard to relevant contextual features. As Habermas notes, on the Kantian approach "[m]oral justification seems to amount to nothing more than the deductive application of an abstract basic principle to particular cases, with the result that the specific context of the given situation loses its *peculiar* relevance."[13]

Third, the procedure of the categorical imperative represents an attempt to transcend the limitations of particular social institutions and the values, practices and beliefs of a specifc form of life.[14] The categorical imperative requires that moral questions be decided with respect to what could be impartially willed by all moral agents. In this attempt to encounter all human beings as individuals on the same footing, the moral subject is required imaginatively to go beyond her form of life. The individual is conceived as essentially capable of disengagement from the social bonds which invest ethical life with its significance or meaningfulness. This viewpoint coheres with an atomist conception of agency and a contractualist conception of society. These features are often linked to a communitarian critique of modernity that sees the tendencies toward fragmentation and alienation in modern societies as reflections of the loss of a coherent sense of community.[15]

---

[12]This defect of an approach directed towards universal rules has been stressed by the proponents of an ethic of care. See many of the essays by Martha Nussbaum in *Love's Knowledge*, () for a particularly fine presentation of this point.

[13]Habermas, "Neo-Aristotelianism," in *J&A*: 120.

[14]Habermas, "Neo-Aristotelianism," in *J&A*: 121.

[15]Cronin, "Translator's Introduction," in *J&A*: xix.

In Habermas's view these criticisms admit of only two paths of response: we must either pursue a return to Aristotelianism, or adopt a Kantian approach modified in response to legitimate objections. For reasons which I will explore in some detail below, Habermas views a revival of ethical approaches inspired by Aristotle and Hegel as unfeasible in the present context. In lieu of this alternative he opts "to revise the fundamental premises of Kantian moral theory in such a way that neo-Aristotelian objections can be accommodated within a deontological framework."[16]

1.3 A Reinterpretation of Kantianism in Intersubjective Terms

Communicative ethics aims to capture the key features of a Kantian moral philosophy within a framework which explicitly recognises the dialogical character of knowledge and agency stressed by the contextualists. At its centrepoint is a reinterpretation of a Kantian conception of practical reason in intersubjective terms. The need for such a reinterpretation manifests itself in certain deficiencies of the procedure of the categorical imperative.

In Habermas's view, the effectiveness of the categorical imperative is vitiated by its solitary or "monological" nature. The procedure as developed by Kant constitutes a test of moral permissibility able to be performed by each agent in isolation. An individual asking whether she may adopt a plan of action must inquire only whether she herself could will that such a course of action be adopted universally. However Habermas argues that, insofar as we inquire into the legitimacy of norms from individually isolated perspectives, the procedure specified must, in the nature of the case, be insufficient. Two examples may help to illustrate the problem. In the *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant takes up the problem of a man who finds himself forced to borrow money without any hope of being able to repay it.[17]

---

[16]Habermas, "Neo-Aristotelianism," in *J&A*: 116.
[17]Kant (1981): 31, Ak. 422-23.

Such a policy cannot in Kant's view be universalised consistently, as a moral agent contemplating the corresponding maxim would find himself involved in a species of contradiction. The ability to make a false promise relies upon there being a practice of honest promise-making, and the universal practice of false promising could not fail to undermine this. An agent could hence not consistently will that all others adopt the maxim he himself wishes to pursue, and thus finds himself confronted in choosing this course of action with a contradiction of the will.

The problem which Habermas sees with the procedure of the categorical imperative can be illustrated by contrasting the previous case with another also given by Kant. Kant considers the situation of a man who is satisfied with his own life and unconcerned with the needs of others. This man wishes to adopt a maxim of general non-intervention towards others even when in need, and accepts that others would pursue a similar policy. Although his policy is consistent, Kant argues that one could not will the possible world in which a maxim is universalised, essentially because this world would be an undesirable one.[18] Kant explains:

> For a will which resolved in this way would contradict itself, inasmuch as cases might often arise in which one would have need of the love and sympathy of others and in which he would deprive himself, by such a law of nature springing from his own will, of all hope of the aid he wants for himself.[19]

This creates a fundamental problem for Kant in that it appears to make the outcome of the procedure of the categorical imperative contingent upon the agent's actually possessing certain traits of character, or valuing certain things. Were a given agent to have different preferences, dispositions or values, the procedure of the categorical imperative would issue in a different

---

[18]The argument that one is unable to will the adoption of a maxim due to the undesirable nature of the possible world resulting from its universalisation is a highly problematic one for Kant, as his theory attempts to eschew appeal to consequences altogether.

[19]Kant (1981): 32, Ak. 423.

result. Yet the universal validity of a particular set of preferences and values is precisely what cannot be assumed under conditions of social and ideological pluralism.[20]

Acknowledgement of the importance of pluralism leads Habermas to adopt a procedure for universalisation which is explicitly dialogical in its structure. Understanding how dialogue is incorporated into discourse ethics will allow us to see in precisely what sense it constitutes a *minimalist* theory. Habermas argues that his programme of discourse ethics constitutes a minimalist theory in two senses: first, in the modesty of its conception of what moral theory should accomplish, and second, in the restricted range of questions or the object domain to which it is applied. Both points will be taken up in turn.

In Habermas's view, philosophy oversteps its role when it aspires to provide any form of substantive moral guidance. The role of moral theory is rather, "to explain and ground the moral point of view."[21] Moral theory must confine itself to articulating a procedure capable of adjudicating the justness of proposed norms, and to demonstrating its validity. This demonstration will require showing that the claims of justice, as specified by the procedure in question, take priority over other claims. The moral point of view is defined by Habermas as that point of view from which claims involving interpersonal conflicts of interest can be impartially resolved. He regards this point of view as embodied in intersubjective practices of argumentation. The test of universalisation proposed by discourse ethics asks whether a proposed norm is acceptable in actual, as opposed to hypothetical, practices of argumentation involving all individuals potentially affected by the norm. The acceptability of a norm turns on its ability to satisfy the interests of each participant in the dialogue. Philosophy hence cannot itself specify what norms will be just in a given setting in advance of a process of *actual*

---

[20]See, e.g. Habermas's discussion of the monological nature of Kant's categorical imperative in "Remarks on Discourse Ethics," in *J&A*: 51-54.
[21]Habermas, "MEL," in *MCCA*: 211.

argumentation among all those affected.[22] It should also be noted that moral theory as conceived by Habermas focusses solely upon the justification of norms. The question of how they should be applied is treated separately.

The success of this procedure depends in Habermas's view upon two features; first, "the individual's inalienable right to say "yes" or "no", and second, "his overcoming of his egocentric viewpoint."[23] The first feature ensures the protection of the interests of the individual agent. In the context of moral argumentation, each individual is free to express assent or dissent, and is hence able to influence the outcome arrived at. The second point captures the intuitive link between moral agency and the capacity to engage in acts of empathy, or what Habermas following G.H. Mead calls "ideal role-taking." Participants in the dialogue envisioned by Habermas are not abstract Kantian moral subjects, but rather real, socially embodied agents. The goal of entering into such a discussion is to "enjoin those involved to an idealizing *enlargement* of their interpretive perspectives."[24] This enlargement is fostered by the structure of the dialogue itself, which compels each agent to take the perspective of all other participants. The process of reciprocal perspective-taking provides a forum wherein the needs and interests of participants are open to transformation through discussion. Habermas describes the dialogical procedure as follows:

> Under the 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. In the course of

---

[22]Habermas, "MEL," in *MCCA*: 211.
[23]Habermas, "MEL," in *MCCA*: 201-203.
[24]Habermas, *RECONCILATION*: 117-18.

successively undertaken abstractions, the core of generalizable interests can then emerge step by step.[25]

A norm affirmable by all participants in dialogue is one which can be viewed as involving a legitimate ordering of the satisfaction of the competing interests at issue in the debate. Such a norm incorporates a shared or "generalisable" interest.

Yet not all dialogues involving disputes of value issue in generalisable interests. Our aim in entering into processes of moral argumentation is to arrive at a peaceful resolution of a conflict of interest through developing a consensus, where consensus is secured through adhering to a procedure for dialogue in which every individual is compelled to adopt the perspective of every other. According to Habermas, the only normative questions which are structured in such a way that they can be rationally resolvable *tout court* are questions of justice, as these must by definition meet with universal agreement. He therefore believes that moral theories, if they adopt a cognitivist approach, must restrict themselves essentially to a narrow segment of value phenomena. This constitutes the second sense in which discourse ethics is a minimalist theory. Habermas explains:

> If we do not want to settle questions concerning the normative regulation of our everyday coexistence by open or covert force--by coercion, influence, or the power of the stronger interest--but by the unforced conviction of a rationally motivated agreement, then we must concentrate on those questions that are amenable to impartial judgment. We can't expect to find a generally binding answer when we ask what is good for me or for us or for them;

---

[25]Habermas, *RECONCILIATION*: 117-18. In Habermas's view, Rawls attempts to accommodate the plurality of interpretive perspectives held by individuals by using informational constraints to impose a uniform perspective on the participants in the "original position." Habermas contrasts this strategy of "neutralisation" of perspectival difference with his own strategy of "enlargement," and defends the greater adequacy of his own strategy as a response to pluralism. This seems to me to misconstrue the purpose of Rawls's original position, at least as it functions in his recent work on political liberalism. The original position is presented by Rawls as a device of representation, which models what we regard as fair conditions under which the representatives of citizens who are free and equal could specify the terms of social cooperation. Reflection upon the adequacy of how the original position is modelled allows us to focus our considered convictions through a process of public discussion and self-clarification. Ideological pluralism hence poses a challenge which must be met at the level of the construction of the original position, rather than "within" the original position itself. See Rawls (1993): 22-28.

instead, we must ask what is *equally good for all.* This "moral point of view" throws a sharp, but narrow, spotlight that picks out from the mass of evaluative questions practical conflicts that can be *resolved* by appeal to a generalizable interest; in other words, questions of justice.[26]

In articulating the nature of this set of questions Habermas expands innovatively upon the narrow account of practical reason given by Kant. Discourse ethics attempts to compensate for the focus upon deontological obligation taken by Kantian moral philosophy, and to provide a place within the theory for some of the insights of neo-Aristotelian theorists concerning the importance for our moral lives of character, community, and questions of the good life. In so doing he hopes to increase the attractiveness of communicative ethics by showing its sensitivity to the range of phenomena encountered in our experience of agency, without sacrificing the priority of the claims of justice.

The general function of practical reason is to justify choices among alternative courses of action. Habermas views it as amenable to employment in three categorially distinct ways, each of which has an impact upon our experience of moral agency.[27] Practical reason can be employed in a pragmatic, ethical or moral sense depending upon the problem at hand. Pragmatic employments of practical reason aim to identify appropriate technical strategies for satisfying our contingent desires, where the set of value preferences and goals serving as problem-constraints are assumed to be fixed. The resulting imperative is a conditional or relative ought, specifying what one ought to do, when faced with a particular problem, *if* one wants to realise certain goals.

The distinction of interest for us is that between moral and ethical employments of practical reason. Because it permits us to circumscribe a narrow class of questions on which to focus the theory, this distinction forms the crucial axis around which Habermas's attempt to

---

[26]Habermas, "MSE," in *J&A:* 151.
[27]Habermas, "On the Pragmatic, the Ethical and the Moral Employments of Practical Reason," in *J&A:* 1-17.

16

develop a minimalist ethic revolves. Practical reason in its ethical employment focusses on the development of plans of life in light of culturally conditioned self-interpretations and conceptions of the good. In Habermas's view, ethical questions admit of rational resolution only within the horizon of a concrete historical form of life which recognises the "thick" notions of the good under discussion, or within the context of an individual life history. Because they cannot be entirely abstracted from culturally specific notions of identity and the good life, these issues cannot be answered in universally valid terms.

In contrast, moral employments of practical reason focus on which moral rules governing our living together are equally good for all. Habermas maintains that this type of reasoning, because it embodies what is meant by the "impartial standpoint," breaks entirely with the subjectivity of an individual agent's perspective. The impartial regulation of social interaction requires that the moral subject encounter other agents on the same footing as herself. The resulting imperative is unconditional, dependent neither on subjective goals and preferences, nor upon views of the good life. Moral questions, he argues, are so constructed as to admit of rationally binding solutions across differing life histories and traditions.

The contrast between moral and ethical employments of practical reason is sometimes made by Habermas in light of a distinction between "norms," which inform decisions "as to what one ought to do;" and "values," which inform decisions "as to what conduct is most desirable." As this distinction is crucial to Habermas's defence of the priority of claims of justice, it is worth exploring in some detail. According to Habermas, norms differ from values in at least four interlinked respects. The first concerns their respective ties to rule-governed and purposive forms of action. Norms reflect a deontological orientation; they refer to obligatory or prohibited actions binding on all persons absolutely. In Habermas's expression, norms "impose equal and exceptionless obligations on their addressees." In contrast, values seem to have a teleological or purposive orientation. They "express the preferability of goods

17

that are striven for by particular groups." This is reflected in the nature of the imperatives or validity claims raised by each, which forms the second important difference between them. Norms express obligations which raise a "binary validity claim"; they either do, or do not, obtain. Values raise validity claims which signify that certain goods are more attractive than others, and this claim admits of degrees of assent. The contrast concerning the absolute bindingness of norms as opposed to relative bindingness of values constitutes their third point of distinction. Habermas regards the obligatory force of norms as binding absolutely. Such norms have "the absolute meaning of an unconditional and universal duty." In contrast, the attractiveness of values "reflects an evaluation and a transitive ordering of goods that has become established in particular cultures or has been adopted by particular groups." Their binding quality depends upon an individual's in fact sharing the preferences or striving for the goals in question, and this cannot be made mandatory unless we deny the legitimacy of there being a plurality of forms of life. Finally, norms must consitute a coherent system in a way which values need not. Norms must not contradict each other when they claim validity for the same domain of addressees, whereas different values linked to complex forms of life compete for priority. Rather than forming a system, they constitute "shifting configurations fraught with tension."[28]

The general features of Habermas's programme of communicative ethics can be seen as following logically on the heels of the distinction between ethical and moral employments of practical reason. Discourse ethics is explicitly Kantian in spirit: it is deontological, cognitivist, formalist and universalist.[29] A brief overview of these features will provide a convenient way of summarising the essential points of the model.

---

[28]Habermas, *RECONCILIATION*: 117-18.
[29]This material is drawn from "Morality and Ethical Life," in MCCA: 196-98. See also William Rehg, *Insight and Solidarity* (University of California Press, 1994): 31.

18

Discourse ethics is *deontological* in that it regards the basic phenomenon which moral philosophy must explain as the normative validity of imperatives and norms of action. It tries to justify norms of social interaction in terms of intersubjectively binding rational principles, rather than through the identification of desirable ends. It is *formalist* in that it does not issue in substantive moral judgments, but rather furnishes a rule or procedure in terms of which the validity of moral norms can be decided. Because Habermas recognizes the legitimacy of the plurality of life forms held by various people he argues, in distinction to Kant, that substantive moral judgments may issue only from dialogues among the actual persons affected. The procedure developed by Habermas should be understood as a warrant for any conceivable moral agreement that is reached by a process of real dialogue meeting the specified conditions. Because it aspires to be a *cognitivist* ethic, discourse ethics must answer the question of how rationally to justify normative statements. Habermas explicates the force of the moral ought through a theory of argumentation. This theory of argumentation, as we shall see, ties Habermas's communicative ethics in crucial ways to his broader project of developing a theory of communicative action. It should be noted that the version of cognitivism which Habermas upholds is a qualified one, in that it does not view the truth of ethical statements as on the same footing as that of factual statements.[30] In his view, the validity claims raised by factual statements express claims to truth, and concern existing states of affairs. Normative statements, by contrast, express claims to rightness related to legitimately ordered interpersonal relations. This form of validity is analogous to, but not identical with that of a truth claim. Finally, the theory is *universalist* in that it is meant to be valid for all human agents who are competent speakers of a language. The moral principle proposed takes the form of the procedural rule of universalisation "U." Habermas argues that a principle is legitimately universalizable if and only if *"All* affected can accept the consequences and side effects its

---

[30]This issue is taken up in greater detail in Chapter 2.

general observance can be anticipated to have for the satisfaction of *everyone's* interests (and these consequences are preferred to those of known alternative possibilities for regulation)."[31]

1.4 Habermas's Assessment of the Relative Merits of Discourse Ethics

Habermas's strategy for the demonstration of the superiority of discourse ethics over neo-Aristotelianism is twofold. First, he claims that the reinterpretation in intersubjective terms of Kant's conception of practical reason results in a reconfiguration of the main features of a Kantian ethic; it thereby deflects the force of the damaging criticisms of abstract reason and agency levelled against such an approach to moral theory. Second, Habermas argues that a revival of an Aristotelian-style ethic on a postmetaphysical footing must be beset with "insuperable difficulties." His incisive criticisms draw attention to the difficulties of developing a coherent Aristotelianism in the absence of an appeal to Aristotle's now superceded metaphysics. These points will be discussed sequentially.

While maintaining the features of a moral theory in the Kantian tradition, Habermas's communicative ethics is devised so as largely to neutralise the force of the neo-Aristotelian criticisms discussed above. Recall that these criticisms drew attention to the narrow range of value phenomena treated by Kant, the problems of formalism and rigorism which seemed to attend the procedure of the categorical imperative, and, more generally, the radically unencumbered notion of agency which Kant's approach presupposes. Communicative ethics, by contrast, postulates a number of points of tangency between the universality of its principles and the particular situational features of relevance to embodied and socialised agents.

As regards the first criticism, discourse ethics departs from traditional deontological theories in acknowledging the importance of questions of individual and communal self-

---

[31]Habermas, "Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Programme of Philosophical Justification," in *MCCA*: 65.

realisation. Although it maintains a strict priority of obligations of justice over other forms of obligation, it recognises the value of ethical discourses in which such questions are raised. However this prioritisation of the right over the good, as Habermas acknowledges, still leaves open the important question of the motivation which individuals have for pursuing morality. Habermas argues that the issue of moral motivation falls outside the realm of moral theory. In its limited role, moral theory can only articulate and justify a procedure which provides a means for generating a rational agreement on valid norms. Whether the norms developed through this procedure are in fact implemented by individuals depends, in Habermas's view, on whether they have undergone an appropriate psychological development, and this in turn depends upon an agent's being socialised into forms of life in which the requisite sort of moral development is fostered. In Habermas's phrase, "any universalistic morality is dependent on a form of life that meets it *halfway*."[32] An aim of this thesis is to lend a greater clarity to what this condition entails.

Second, because Habermas's procedure for universalisation involves discourse among real actors rather than a hypothetical thought experiment, it avoids many of the problems for which the categorical imperative was rightly faulted. The categorical imperative generates universal norms by detaching formal features of a moral situation from their particular circumstances. A judgement abstracted in this somewhat awkward manner might risk insensitivity to the needs of particular individuals, and to the circumstances of the problem at hand. This problem would seem to be greatly mitigated by Habermas's proposal that norms be agreed upon discursively with all others affected. A principal advantage of a dialogical as against a monological procedure for the adoption of norms is that dialogue provides the moral subject an opportunity to compensate for the limitations in knowledge and understanding of the

---

[32]Habermas, "Morality and Ethical Life: Does Hegel's Critique of Kant Apply to Discourse Ethics?" in *MCCA*: 207. See also "Discourse Ethics: Remarks on a Programme of Philosophical

other agents involved therein, by drawing attention to relevant but previously neglected features of any given situation. Moreover, in contrast to the potential deficiencies in choice of maxim accompanying Kant's decision to view the morality of an action as residing uniquely in the quality of intentions of a given agent, Habermas's formulation of the principle of universalisation explicitly asks that the consequences and side effects which can be expected to follow from the adoption of a norm be considered. Habermas also stresses the need for sensitivity in the application of norms, although discourse ethics does not address itself directly to this problem.[33]

Finally, Habermas draws attention to the complex interdependence which exists between the individual and the collective to which she belongs. According to Habermas, competent subjects become individuals only through growing up in a linguistically articulated lifeworld shared by a group or collective. An individual identity is formed primarily through positioning itself within a field of broader social attachments. Moreover, he holds that the cultural identity of a language community develops and maintains itself through the communicative interaction of its members. This interdependence confers upon all human beings an inherent vulnerability, for which morality is designed to compensate. A morality tailored to the fragility of human beings individuated through socialisation must in Habermas's

Justification," in *MCCA:* 108-9.

[33]Habermas recognises that norms do not contain within themselves rules for their own application. He argues that sensitive application of norms calls for a new procedure, separate from that of justification, and governed by a principle of appropriateness (*Angemessenheit*). This principle aims, through a sensitive reading of situational features, to determine whether a norm should be observed in any particular situation. For details on how such a principle might function Habermas refers the reader to Klaus Günther's *Der Sinn für Angemessenheit. Anwendungsdiskurse in Moral und Recht* (Suhrkamp Verlag, 1988). An English-language summary of this work, entitled "impartial application of moral and legal norms: a contribution to discourse ethics" can be found in *Philosophy and Social Criticism 14.* See also Georgia Warnke's response to Habermas on this issue in "Communicative Rationality and Cultural Values," in *The Cambridge Companion to Habermas,* ed. Stephen K. White (Cambridge, 1995): 120-42. Warnke argues that the influence of cultural values may extend through the way we understand principles of application and judgements of appropriateness themselves, so that the issue of what constitutes "impartial application" cannot be so neatly divorced from the cultural context.

view have a dual aim; it must defend the integrity of each individual agent through according her equal rights and respect, while simultaneously protecting the ties of mutual recognition which bind an agent to a communication community. Habermas terms these two features "justice" and "solidarity" respectively. The exercise of morality in Habermas's sense fosters and reinforces both aspects: the dialogical procedure of discourse ethics allows each individual to participate in defining the general interest, and thereby protects the interests of each, while strengthening the web of intersubjective relations through reinforcing the ties of solidarity which emerge from relations of reciprocal recognition and respect.[34]

Yet Habermas recognises that the persuasiveness of this portrayal does not in itself constitute a sufficient response to the challenges of his critics. As one of his commentators perceptively remarks, "the issue betweeen discourse ethics and neo-Aristotelianism comes down to the internal coherence of their respective accounts of practical reason."[35] Habermas combines this account of the persuasiveness of his own conception of practical reason with a series of fundamental challenges to the coherence of a neo-Aristotelian one. He argues that reembracing an Aristotelian approach could be unproblematic only were its proponents prepared to embrace the metaphysical picture of the cosmos which grounded Aristotle's own ethics. However, contemporary neo-Aristotelians are unprepared to do so. The difficulties

---

[34]See Habermas, "MEL," in *MCCA*: 199-203. One of the aims of Habermas's concept of solidarity is to counter claims by communitarian theorists who argue that political philosophies which focus on the primacy of "justice" have been partly responsible for the "fragmentation" of community in modern society, in that this model of social self-understanding erodes the ties of solidarity which bind together particular ethical communities. Alasdair MacIntyre is probably the philosopher most frequently associated with this view. Habermas's response relies upon an implicit distinction between two forms of solidarity. The first is the sort of solidarity which exists between members of a particular ethical community. It may be based in certain instances on exclusionary or oppressive practices. The second form of solidarity is the one upon which Habermas focusses. This is the solidaristic relation which exists between agents who regard each other morally; that is, through relations of reciprocal recognition and respect. Habermas believes this to be a real bond in modernity, and moreover, one which his opponents have overlooked. Furthermore, this notion of moral solidarity should provide a standpoint from which oppressive forms of community solidarity may be criticised.

[35]Cronin, "Introduction," in *J&A*: xxi.

attending an attempt to develop a practical philosophy in an Aristotelian spirit without such metaphysical underpinnings are, in his view, insurmountable. He describes two such difficulties, both of which make reference to features of modern pluralism.

Habermas draws attention to what Rawls has called "the fact of reasonable pluralism;" that is, the existence of a plurality of equally legitimate views of the good life which coexist in modern Western societies. For Habermas, it is a fact of contemporary social life that we live in a world populated by an irreducible variety of conceptions of the good life whose intersubjective binding force can no longer be grounded in a religious or metaphysical worldview acceptable to all. The Aristotelian approach is viewed by Habermas as requiring a return to a substantivist conception of the good tied to a particular form of life. Such agreement over the good is, in his view, impracticable. In the present context only issues of the right are capable of commanding such agreement.

> Under modern conditions, philosophy can no longer stand in judgement over the multiplicity of individual life projects and collective forms of life, and how one lives one's life becomes the sole responsibility of socialized individuals themselves and must be judged from the participant perspective. Hence, what is capable of commanding universal assent becomes restricted to the procedure of rational will formation.[36]

If we want to resolve arguments non-coercively, he argues, there is no other way to resolve conflicts across varying conceptions of the good than by adopting a procedural approach.

In light of this understanding Habermas questions the feasibility of a neo-Aristotelian approach to practical reason. As we have seen, Aristotle distinguishes the form of knowledge in ethics from that embodied in science or *theoria* in the strict sense. The intellectual skill involved in ethical judgement is that of practical deliberation or *phronesis*. However, modern Aristotelians, Habermas argues, can no longer uncritically appeal to such a faculty. The emergence of the modern natural sciences has compelled us to abandon the claims to

---

[36]Habermas, "MSE," in *J&A*: 150.

24

knowledge of Aristotelian metaphysics, and this has altered the status of the claim to truth in Aristotelian ethics. In Habermas's view, *phronesis* could only provide the individual agent with guidance concerning the nature and conditions of the good life because it drew upon a background picture which understood the end of human life in a certain way, as identified with the virtues of the polis.[37]

The current untenability of this background picture gives rise to two difficulties, both of which make reference to the features of modern pluralism. First, modern societies are characterised by a pluralism of individual life styles and communal ways of life. Habermas argues that individuals are in the present context required to choose between alternatives. We must either abandon the claim of an Aristotelian philosophy to establish one way of life, such as that embodied in the polis, as capturing the proper good for human beings, and hence as capable of serving as a paradigm; or we must abandon the modern attitude of tolerance towards forms of life, according to which a variety of ways of life are equally good, or at least, have an equal right to exist and be recognised.[38] The abandonment of tolerance towards the multiple forms of life present in modern pluralism is clearly indefensible.

Second, if no one form of life is identified as exemplary, that is to say, as that form of life in which all persons (or perhaps, on Aristotle's view, all eligible persons) could realise the goal of a good life, Habermas questions the ability of practical reason interpreted as *phronesis* to provide the agent with rational ethical guidance. He argues in essence that there is no viable substitute in modernity for Aristotle's ethical teleology. Habermas views the modern neo-Aristotelian as faced with a dilemma: "Once its metaphysical underpinning has been removed," he claims, *phronesis* or practical reason "must either be assimilated to everyday

---

[37]Habermas, "neo-Aristotelianism," in *J&A*: 117.
[38]Habermas, "neo-Aristotelianism," in *J&A*: 122-23.

knowledge or elevated to the status of reflective knowledge."[39] Habermas argues that a postmetaphysical concept of practical reason must either fall into common sense and hence serve as a conservative defense of the traditional assumptions of the form of life to which it is tied, or become "emancipated from provincial limitations" by moving in the direction of a procedural philosophy which orients itself to the question of what is equally good for all human beings.[40] In other words, because we cannot return to a substantivist conception of the good tied to a particular form of life, we must adopt an approach which can satisfy our intuitions concerning pluralism, tolerance and fairness in modernity; that is, an approach that gives priority to issues of justice. Not to do so, "to remain faithful to the Aristotelian conviction that moral judgment is bound to the ethos of a particular time and place" is to "renounce the emancipatory potential of moral universalism" and to "deny so much as the possibility of subjecting the structural violence inherent in social conditions characterized by latent exploitation and repression to an unstinting moral critique."[41]

Habermas's discussion of *phronesis* fixes on some very real difficulties concerning the viability of this notion when detached from Aristotle's cosmology. However, his appeal to the fact of modern pluralism in the debate against the neo-Aristotelian seems to me to blur the most interesting points at issue therein. I hope to substantiate this claim by approaching the issue in an indirect fashion via Habermas's debate with his principal neo-Kantian opponent, John Rawls, whose political liberalism takes a universalist and procedural approach explicitly situated within a specific historical and cultural context.

1.5 Excursus: The Rawls-Habermas Debate

---

[39] Habermas, "neo-Aristotelianism," in *J&A*: 123.
[40] Habermas, "neo-Aristotelianism," in *J&A*: 124-25. See also Habermas, "Remarks on Discourse Ethics," in *J&A*: 20-25.
[41] Habermas, "neo-Aristotelianism," in *J&A*: 125.

Acknowledging the common inspiration of both discourse ethics and Rawls's political

liberalism in the work of Immanuel Kant, Habermas regards his debate with Rawls as in the

nature of a familial dispute. My exclusive goal in examining this debate is to identify what

Habermas views as the weak points in Rawls's argument, that is, to ascertain where he locates

the principal points of difference between them. Habermas views Rawls's primary

interlocutors at the present juncture as contextualists who "question the presuppositions of a

reason common to all humans." His main reservation concerning Rawls's work is that Rawls

has in fact given too much over to these opponents; that he "makes concessions to opposed

philosophical positions which impair the cogency of his project."[42]

One such set of concessions interests me particularly; namely, those linked to the

notion that Rawls has failed fully to divest the procedural conception of practical reason

expounded in his work of "substantive connotations," and thereby to develop it in a strictly

procedural manner.[43] This is tantamount to saying that Rawls's theory fails to be minimalist in

the appropriate sense.[44] Recall that Habermas views discourse ethics as minimal both because

it restricts moral theory to the articulation of a procedure, and because of the narrow range of

phenomena it addresses. From this perspective, Habermas argues that there are at least two

ways in which Rawls's theory fails to restrict itself to a procedural approach. First, unlike

discourse ethics, Rawls's political liberalism does far more than articulate a procedure. It uses

this procedure to generate specific proposals for norms of justice, namely the two principles of

justice. The first principle, which takes precedence over the second, guarantees the equality in

---

[42]Habermas, *RECONCILIATION*: 110.
[43]Habermas, *RECONCILIATION*: 116.
[44]Rawls, of course, makes a similar reproach against Habermas, regarding Habermas's theory as a "comprehensive doctrine" and therefore insufficiently minimal when compared with political liberalism, which aims to develop a political conception of justice independent of any comprehensive doctrine. I view this thesis, which investigates the philosophical commitments underlying Habermas's position, as providing support for Rawls's position on this point. See, e.g. Rawls "Reply to Habermas," in *The Journal of Philosophy* Volume XCII, Number 3, March 1995: 135-38.

terms of basic rights and political liberties of each member of society. The second places

restrictions on the sorts of social and economic inequaliities which may exist in a just society.[45]

Rawls's commitment to defending specific proposals is appropriate in Habermas's view to his

role as a citizen taking part in a particular, historically situated debate; however, it oversteps

the bounds of his role as a philosopher.[46] This failure to distinguish philosophical from

political tasks is related to what Habermas perceives as a second, and deeper, problem: the

situatedness of Rawls's approach within a particular form of life.

Rawls's political liberalism takes its point of departure from a question explicitly

addressed to a specific context. He asks: "What is the appropriate conception of justice for

specifying fair terms of social cooperation between citizens regarded as free and equal, and as

fully cooperating members of a society over a complete life, from one generation to the

next?"[47] Rawls's question is addressed to a society with particular historical and social

conditions, and his aim is to develop an appropriate theory of justice.[48] Its salient

characteristic is social and ideological pluralism. Rawls views this pluralism as *reasonable*;

that is, as "the normal result of the exercise of human reason within the framework of the free

institutions of a constitutional democratic regime."[49] In his view, only the oppressive use of

state power could curtail the proliferation of comprehensive religious, political and moral

doctrines. The aim of political liberalism is to develop a theory of justice politically acceptable

---

[45]The two principles as expressed by Rawls in *Political Liberalism* are as follows: "(a) Each person has an equal claim to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic rights and liberties, which scheme is compatible with the same scheme for all; and in this scheme the equal political liberties, and only those liberties, are to be guaranteed their fair value. (b) Social and economic inequalities are to satisfy two conditions: first, they are to be attached to positions and offices open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity; and second, they are to be to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society." See John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (Columbia University Press, 1993): 5-6.

[46]Habermas, *RECONCILIATION*: 131. See also his "MSE," in *J&A*: 175-76.

[47]Rawls (1993): 13.

[48]This is not, of course, to say that it is powerless to address itself to problems of just relations between peoples. Rawls indicates the sorts of response political liberalism might offer to problems of international justice in his "Law of Peoples," (An Oxford Amnesty Lecture in Basic Books 1993.

28

to these various comprehensive positions. Such a theory should aim "to work out a conception of justice for a constitutional democratic regime that the plurality of reasonable doctrines...might endorse."[50] The endorsement of this political conception of justice should not presuppose accepting any particular comprehensive doctrine, nor should the conception of justice be formulated in terms of any such comprehensive view. It should rather be articulated "in terms of certain fundamental ideas viewed as latent in the public political culture of a democratic society."[51] This conception of justice is moreover constructed for a specific kind of subject: it applies to the "basic structure" of a modern constitutional democracy, where by "basic structure" Rawls denotes the system of social cooperation manifested in a society's political, social and economic institutions.[52] This reconstruction of the problem of just social cooperation is hence limited to the political realm, and framed and answered within a specific set of historical traditions and social conditions.

Habermas views this as a marked shift in strategy from Rawls's position in his earlier work, *A Theory of Justice*. He regards Rawls's intention in that work as that of representing the theory of justice as part of the general theory of choice. The aim of such a strategy would be to provide universal rules of justice valid for all rational agents through limiting the situation of choice in an appropriate fashion, and subsequently letting agents choose from enlightened self-interest.[53] The "serious concession" of political liberalism in Habermas's view is the revision of this initial goal. Rawls, however, disagrees with this reading of his intentions in *A Theory of Justice*. He views the transition to the more recent doctrine of political liberalism as motivated by problems in the earlier narrative concerning how a just society might maintain itself over time. Rawls regards his initial account of the stability of a just

---

[49]Rawls (1993): xvi.
[50]Rawls (1993): xviii.
[51]Rawls (1993): 174-75.
[52]Rawls (1993): 11.

society as unrealistic. Whereas the account of a well-ordered society in *A Theory of Justice* seemed to assume a relative homogeneity in its basic moral beliefs, the central insight underlying the doctrine of political liberalism is that the very freedom of the institutions of such a society tends to foster a plurality of comprehensive positions regarding issues religious, political and moral. The well-ordered society of *Political Liberalism* is hence no longer a society united in its basic moral beliefs, but in its political conception of justice. This concept of justice is regarded by Rawls as affirmable by an overlapping consensus of reasonable comprehensive doctrines.

Rawls remains unmoved by Habermas's objection that the conception of justice as fairness articulated in *Political Liberalism* is substantive and not procedural. He regards Habermas's claim as emanating from a "comprehensive account of the form and structural presuppositions of thought and action;" and identification with a comprehensive doctrine is precisely what political liberalism eschews.[54] Rawls's analysis of the salient point at issue between himself and Habermas is perceptive, and worth quoting in full.

> I conjecture, looking back at Part I where I cited two passages from *Between Facts and Norms*, that by the terms "substantive" and "substantial" he [Habermas] means either elements of religious and metaphysical doctrines, or those incorporated in the thought and culture of particular communities and traditions, or possibly both. His main idea, I surmise, is that once the form and structure of the presuppositions of thought, reason and action, both theoretical and practical, are properly laid out and analyzed by his theory of communicative action, then all the alleged substantial elements of those religious and metaphysical doctrines and the traditions of communities have been absorbed (or sublimated) into the form and structure of those presuppositions. This means that to the extent those elements have validity and force in moral justification in matters of right and justice, their force is fully captured and can be defended by reasoning of that form and structure; for those presuppositions are formal and universal, the conditions of the kinds of reason in all thought and action. *Justice as fairness is substantive,* not in the sense I described (though it is that), but *in the sense that it springs from and belongs to the tradition of liberal thought and the larger community of political culture of democratic societies. It fails then to be properly formal*

---

[53]Habermas, *RECONCILIATION*: 111-12.
[54]Rawls (1995): 179.

and truly universal, and thus to be part of the quasi-transcendental presuppositions (as Habermas sometimes says) established by the theory of communicative action.[55]

Rawls and Habermas hence concur in thinking that the appropriate form of justice for the pluralist societies of Western modernity should be a procedural one. The crucial point of dispute pertains to the *scope* of the claims made by the theory; that is, to whether deontological moral theory should concern itself with articulating a procedure for fair social cooperation in terms which are valid universally. The differing responses to this issue given by Rawls and Habermas reflect different conceptions of the *nature* of procedural moral theory, which in turn reflect differences in how each understands its justificatory basis.[56] I would like to illustrate this claim by looking briefly at Rawls's discussion of how political liberalism conceives the right as prior to the good.

Rawls advocates a priority of the right in that he conceives of justice as circumscribing the limits of the ways of life which can legitimately be pursued in society. The challenge for political liberalism is, as it were, to draw the limit in the right place; to provide "sufficient space" within the society it envisions for worthy ways of life.[57] Prioritisation of the right has been conjoined in liberal thought with the notion that the state, in setting the limits of justice, must remain somehow *neutral* between permissible ways of life. In order to clarify the manner in which political liberalism aspires to this goal Rawls differentiates several senses in which a theory may aim at neutrality. The contrast between "procedural neutrality" and "neutrality of aim" is particularly useful in distinguishing the manner in which Rawls and Habermas conceptualise their respective projects.

---

[55]Rawls, "Reply to Habermas," in *The Journal of Philosophy*, 178-79. Italics my addition.
[56]I am grateful to Tony Laden for bringing several differences in the levels of theoretical justification sought by Rawls and Habermas respectively to my attention.
[57]Rawls, following Isaiah Berlin, explicitly recognises that although a just liberal society may have more "social space" than other social worlds, it may not be capable of accommodating many worthy forms of life. See Rawls (1993): 197-98, fn 32 and 33.

In Rawls's terminology a theory is procedurally neutral if it can be defined "by reference to a procedure that can be legitimated, or justified, without appealing to any moral values at all." Recognising that the notion of justification may in its nature appear to involve an appeal to some values, Rawls amends the above definition to read, "a neutral procedure may be said to be one justified by an appeal to neutral values, that is, to values such as impartiality, consistency in application of general principles to all reasonably related cases (compare to: cases similar in relevant respects are to be treated similarly), and equal opportunity for the contending parties to present their claims."[58] He regards Habermas's moral theory as aiming at neutrality in this sense.[59] Habermas intends his theory to be valid universally for all linguistic agents, on the basis of his reflections upon the mode of language use which he calls "communicative action." As Rawls points out, the only way this could be accomplished neutrally is if the reconstructions of the form and structure of the features of reason and action given by the theory of communicative action succeed in capturing exhaustively the morally relevant features of "substantive doctrines," of concrete historical forms of life.[60]

Rawls does not intend his own theory to be neutral in this sense. He recognises that the principles of justice espoused by political liberalism are substantive and express far more than procedural values, as do the political conceptions of society and person utilised in the original position.[61] He argues for the priority of the right in political liberalism in that the notion of justice it affirms should not be supported by conceptions of the good tied to *particular* comprehensive doctrines. The view of justice affirmed through an overlapping

---

[58]Rawls (1993): 191.
[59]Rawls (1993): 191-92, see esp. Fn. 24. Rawls adds, referring indirectly to Habermas, "[t]he specification of a neutral procedure may also draw on values that underlie the principles of free rational discussion between reasonable persons fully capable of thought and judgment, and concerned to find the truth or to reach reasonable agreement based on the best available information."
[60]Rawls, "Reply," 178-9.

consensus finds its basis of support in ideas of the good which are political and can hence be shared by citizens as free and equal. These ideas are viewed by Rawls as widely held in the public culture of a constitutional democratic society.[62]

1.6 The Claim to Universality

The scope of the claim to validity raised by Habermas's communicative ethics is, as we have seen, the distinguishing feature of the theory with regard to its main neo-Kantian competitor. I want next to argue that this claim also plays a pivotal and as yet unexamined role in the debate between Habermas and his contextualist critics. In order to illustrate its relevance I would like further to specify the sense in which the contextualist position concerns me. The term "neo-Aristotelianism" as used by Habermas describes a number of diverse but interrelated positions sharing a common inspiration in the works of Aristotle.[63] My principal interest is in the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-George Gadamer, and in particular, in the stress laid by Gadamer upon the historically conditioned character of human understanding.[64]

---

[61]Rawls (1993): 192.

[62]Rawls (1993): 176. Rawls emphasises that "neutrality of aim" does not translate into "neutrality of effect" since "it is surely impossible for the basic structure of a just constitutional regime not to have important effects and influences as to which comprehensive doctrines endure and gain adherents over time; and it is futile to try to counteract these effects and influences, or even to ascertain for political purposes how deep and pervasive they are. We must accept the fact of commonsense political sociology." See Rawls (1993): 193.

[63]Seyla Benhabib provides a useful clarification of Habermas's relation to neo-Aristotelianism. Benhabib distinguishes three strands of social analysis and philosophical argumentation to which the term "neo-Aristotelian" is commonly applied: First, and particularly in the German context, neo-Aristotelianism has been identified with a neoconservative social diagnosis of the problems of late-capitalist societies. Second, this term has been used to emphasise the importance of the decline of community in such societies. However, unlike the neoconservatives, this second group also takes a critical stance toward society. The "communitarian" neo-Aristotelians look to communities in part to recover control over, and to build a basis for the critique of, modern capitalism and technology. In so doing, they aim to develop new solutions to the current crises of welfare-state democracies. Finally, neo-Aristotelianism is a position identified with a hermeneutical approach to philosophical ethics, especially as developed by Hans George Gadamer. This last variety is of particular interest to me. See Benhabib, "In the Shadow of Aristotle and Hegel," in *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (Routledge, 1992): 24-26.

[64]The key text written on this theme by Gadamer is *Truth and Method* (Crossroad, 1988). See especially the discussion of hermeneutics and the human sciences in Second Part, Section II. My

Gadamer undertakes an exploration of the conditions of understanding which underscores the importance of the embeddedness of understanding in history. In so doing, his aim is neither simply to emphasise the variety of conceptions of truth which have existed, nor to attend to the limitations which our historical situatedness places upon our knowledge. The culturally and historically situated character of agency does not, in Gadamer's view, function uniquely as a constraint. His intent is to draw forth a sense of the productive insight which such situatedness makes possible, as well as of the limitations which it potentially places upon our claims to knowledge.

In emphasising that there is no neutral vantage point from which to understand, Gadamer challenges a series of oppositions between the critical power of reason and the irrationality of established custom advocated by many figures of the Enlightenment. Enlightenment thinkers frequently regarded reason and method as sources of liberation in the battle against human misery caused by ignorance, oppression, irrationality, and injustice. These phenomena were often seen as finding their source in accepted dogma and custom, in prejudice and the authority of tradition. In the viewpoint of the Enlightenment, prejudices originate in two ways. One may rely upon received opinion first through laxness in the use of one's reason, and second, from a careless, unmethodical use of that reason where it is employed.[65] Yet although some established customs have clearly been pernicious, Gadamer views the thinkers of the Enlightenment as drawing a false opposition between tradition and reason; as being blind in their ardour for liberation to the virtues of what they attack. On a deep level, he argues, prejudice and tradition are essential to understanding.

summary of these aspects of Gadamer's position is indebted to Georgia Warnke's lucid and elegant account in *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason* (Stanford, 1987): 73-100. Many of the points I develop in this thesis were also issues of contention in the debate between Gadamer and Habermas. Warnke's discussion of the main lines of this debate has also been very useful in writing this chapter. See Warnke (1987): 107-138.

On Gadamer's account there is no such thing as a neutral vantage point from which we can come to an understanding of an object or subject matter. One must initially approach an object, text or situation by projecting meanings upon it. These "prejudices" or projected meanings form the point of departure for our processes of understanding. The literal meaning of the term "prejudice" is pre-judgement; that is, a judgement made in advance of an adequate assessment of the evidence. Such pre-judgements may be confirmed or disconfirmed, and are not, in contrast to the portrayal given them by thinkers of the Enlightenment, to be thought of as uniformly misleading. Moreover, pre-judgements or interpretive projections of meaning are rooted in the situation of the interpreting agent. In Gadamer's view, they refer to concerns or assumptions which are part of the historical experience of the community to which the agent belongs. An agent's historical and linguistic situation is hence not a barrier to understanding, but rather the horizon or perspective from which understanding first becomes possible. There is in Gadamer's view no understanding which is not situated in some historical context, and no moral standpoint which is not dependent on a shared ethical understanding of a community.

From the idea that understanding is contextually situated in this sense, the immediate question pertaining to Habermas's discourse ethics is whether the procedure it advocates may not reflect ways of thinking about issues of value tied in important respects to our own culture, and hence be potentially biased in its ability to serve as a device of cross-cultural arbitration. To ask this question is to ask, in a somewhat deeper sense than Habermas has heretofore addressed the issue, the question whether the right is prior to the good.[66] As we saw in §1.4,

---

[65]See Warnke (1987): 75. See also Immanuel Kant, "What is Enlightenment?" in *Kant's Political Writings*, ed., Hans Reiss (Cambridge, 1970): 54-60.

[66]I take the question of whether the right is prior to the good in the sense commonly attributed to it by liberals, which forms the point of departure for this thesis, from discussions with Charles Taylor. Because my interest in this question is motivated somewhat differently from Taylor's I have not drawn directly upon his work in the present chapter. It nonetheless forms the backdrop for my thinking on this issue. See, e.g., "Cross-Purposes: The Liberal-Communitarian Debate," in Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Harvard, 1995): 181-203; "The Nature and Scope of Distributive Justice,"

Habermas understands the question which forms the axis around which his debate with the neo-Aristotelian revolves as that concerning the form of ethic most appropriate to a modern pluralist society. He portrays the neo-Aristotelian as aiming to replace a procedural-style ethic with discussions oriented towards questions of the good life, and offers a number of persuasive reasons not to adopt a substantialist ethic tied to a paradigmatic life history or an exemplary life-form. In the context of modern pluralism, Habermas maintains, discussions bound to the ideals and values of a particular way of life may not be able to garner support. Consensus is far more likely to develop around a narrow set of issues important to all parties. Moreover, in his view, the prioritisation of the right provides a critical standpoint from which to adjudicate the claims of individuals, which makes possible the revision of existing practices. The utility of a procedural approach lies essentially in its distantiation from specific ways of life.

From my perspective, the crucial question concerns whether the distantiation offered by a procedural approach is viewed as relative, or absolute. The form of contextualism in which I am interested prompts us to question whether obligations connected to justice or the right form a category entirely separable from ways of thinking about the good tied to concrete historical life forms, which Habermas calls "ethics." A procedural approach may nonetheless be viewed as advantageous from this perspective. However, the understanding it espouses of the role and authority of the procedure in question would differ substantially from that upheld by Habermas. As we have seen, the recent work of John Rawls combines support of a neo-Kantian position with a recognition of the close ties between this way of thinking about the claims of justice and a particular, historical form of life. Habermas, in contrast, seems to lay great stress on the ability of a procedural or formal ethic, properly conceived, to fully distance

---

and "The Diversity of Goods," both in Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences, Philosophical Papers Volume 2* (Cambridge, 1985): 289-317 & 230-247, respectively.

itself from all specific cultural forms of life.[67] In Rawls's terminology his theory aims to be "procedurally neutral."

Habermas's response to neo-Aristotelianism would seem effectively to require two, interrelated levels of strategy. One line of argument would aim at defending a procedural rather than a substantive approach within a contemporary, pluralist democracy. This has been the almost exclusive focus thus far both of Habermas's discussion, and of that of his commentators.[68] However, as I have argued, the uniqueness of Habermas's theory lies in its claim to be universally applicable to all societies. My guiding interest in this thesis is in reconstructing and critically analysing the various arguments offered by Habermas in defence of this claim.

I regard this issue as the fundamental one for Habermas, and this for two reasons. First, as discussed in $1.2 Habermas, like the contextualist, affirms the situatedness of the knowing subject within a social and historical language group. A principal challenge facing his theory hence concerns its ability to differentiate itself from what Habermas regards as the relativistic dangers of contextualism. He aims to do so by demonstrating that language, which the contextualists see as the source of socialisation into particular ethical communities, is also the means through which we assume membership in a universal moral community. This intuition finds its basis in reflections upon the nature of linguistic communication, and in particular, upon that mode of language use which Habermas calls "communicative action." Habermas argues that both the need for morality or justice and its essential elements are found

---

[67]This point is made by Charles Taylor in "Language and Society," in *Communicative Action*, ed. Axel Honneth and Hans Joas (Polity Press, 1991): 30.

[68]Ciaran Cronin, for example, assesses the burdens of proof borne by Habermas and the neo-Aristotelian respectively as follows: "...he [Habermas] can counter that under conditions of irreducible pluralism, consensus concerning basic values and notions of the good life has permanently receded beyond the horizon of possibility, and hence that neo-Aristotelian appeals to tradition and community as a basis for coordinating social action simply fly in the face of historical reality. Under such circumstances we are left with no alternative except to locate the normative basis for social

species-wide. Morality serves an essential role in ensuring the flourishing of creatures like us who become individuated only through socialisation into specific language groups, and are hence inherently vulnerable in our dependence for identity formation upon networks of reciprocal recognition. He claims moreover that moral intuitions are present, at least in nascent form, in all societies structured linguistically. As Habermas sees it, the structure of reciprocal recognition involved in all communicative action already contains within itself the intuitions extended and rendered explicit in discourse ethics.

> To put it another way, the normative content of the pragmatic presuppositions of argumentation is borrowed from that of communicative action, onto which discourses are superimposed. This is why all moralities coincide in one respect: the same medium, linguistically mediated interaction, is both the reason for the vulnerability of socialized individuals and the key resource they possess to compensate for that vulnerability. Every morality revolves around equality of respect, solidarity, and the common good. Fundamental ideas like these can be reduced to the relations of symmetry and reciprocity presupposed in communicative action.[69]

Second, and more practically, the procedure advocated by Habermas addresses only a narrow range of issues. As, on this account, valid norms can only emerge from a process of real dialogue, it is illegitimate to demand from Habermas a detailed theoretical specification of them. However, his writings provide an indication of the sorts of principles he envisions as forming just norms. Habermas's examples to date of what might constitute a generalisable interest refer exclusively to universal human rights. The adequacy of his procedure must hence be measured in terms of its appropriateness as a mechanism for dealing not only with issues of interpersonal conflict resolution arising within our own culture, broadly speaking, but also with those pertaining to all human societies.[70] The invaluable role such a tool would play in the arena of international justice is apparent, and this, I want to argue, renders the issue of its

---

interaction in the rational structure of communication itself." See Cronin, "Translator's Introduction," in J&A: xx-xxi.
[69]Habermas, "MEL," in MCCA: 201-202.

potential biases correspondingly pressing. In my view, the most compelling question which

emerges from a recognition of the socially and culturally situated character of understanding is

not whether we *should* think from within a tradition, but whether it is not in some sense

inevitable that we do so. If so, the best defence against ethnocentricism might be thought to be

a self-conscious awareness of the presuppositions of our thought. A clear understanding of

Habermas's position is hence essential.

Secondary literature on communicative ethics has focussed to date almost exclusively

on the appropriateness of the theory to a modern pluralist society.[71] Commentators have

followed Habermas's lead in portraying the debates between Habermas and contextualists,[72]

and between Habermas and Rawls[73] as focussed essentially within the context of Western

modernity. This has, in my view, resulted in a somewhat distorted understanding of the issues

at stake in each.[74] A variety of reasons, in addition to a natural preoccupation with our own

---

[70]The adequacy of the procedure specified in Habermas's discourse ethics must hence be
demonstrated in a manner significantly dissimilar to that of the Rawlsian original position.

[71]A notable exception is Alessandro Ferrara's "Universalisms: Procedural, Contextualist and
Prudential," in *Philosophy and Social Criticism 14*, 1988; which briefly but accurately addresses the
programme of justification pursued by Habermas and its burden of proof vis-a-vis other positions
prevalent in contemporary English-language moral and political philosophy. Ferrara's article first
sparked my curiosity in this issue.

[72]Ciaran Cronin's article, for example, compares these two positions exclusively within the context of
Western modernity, and this, as I have pointed out in note #65, leads him to misrepresent the burdens
of proof borne respectively by these approaches.

[73]Kenneth Baynes offers a detailed comparison between Rawls's position and that of Habermas in *The
Normative Grounds of Social Criticism.* (SUNY, 1992) Baynes's discussion, which represents one of
the first attempts to bring these positions into dialogue, is very useful. However, I believe that it
misrepresents some of the salient points at issue between these thinkers due to its exclusive focus on
comparing their adequacy for Western modernity. See also, "The Liberal/ Communitarian
Controversy and Communicative Ethics," in *Philosophy and Social Criticism 14*, 1988: 293-313;
where Baynes argues that discourse ethics offers a mid-point between the claims of liberalism and
communitarianism. Baynes aims generally to show that Rawlsian constructivism could remedy its
defects by taking the direction of Habermas's communicative ethics.

[74]William Rehg's recent book *Insight and Solidarity* (University of California, 1994), is the first full-
length study of Habermas's communicative ethics to appear in English. It addresses a number of
questions pertinent to this thesis, and has been helpful in guiding my thinking on several points.
Rehg's discussion of whether and in what sense the right is prior to the good in discourse ethics has
been particularly useful. However, Rehg's study restricts itself to the context of Western modernity,
and this leads him at times to misrepresent comparisons between Habermas and the other figures,
such as Rawls and Taylor, whom he considers. Rehg defends the "modesty" of Habermas's position

concerns, underlie this focus. Some critics have desired to delimit and discuss a manageable segment of Habermas's project,[75] while others have sought to distance themselves from his species-wide claims to universality.[76] However, perhaps the most significant impediment to a perspicuous discussion of Habermas's claim to universalism has been the intricacy of its

---

and the "unavoidable good of social cooperation" presupposed by discourse ethics by appealing to features of modernity. He writes: "In sum, discourse ethics makes a rather modest claim for its allegedly unavoidable good. It allows one to acknowledge fully the value of self-interest, or of goods and values besides that of rational cooperation, in their respective domains. In addition, it does not deny the possibility of choosing not to pursue the good of cooperation in any given situation; neither does it assume that all social cooperation must be explicitly cooperative. *Rather, it claims that in today's world rational actors cannot in general forego the good of cooperation in contexts marked by conflict potentials.* This is far from inflating such cooperation into a kind of categorical imperative for every particular situation." Rehg draws from his discussion a rather strong claim for the priority of the right in discourse ethics. He explains: "...denying the privileged status of the constitutive good of discourse ethics implicates one in a rather strong counterclaim to the effect that agents can act rationally without *ever* basing their choice on the good of rational cooperation." One of the aims of my thesis is to show how such claims misconstrue the strength of the arguments needed to justify Habermas's position. See Rehg (1994): 161, italics in first quotation my addition.

[75]This is a principal reason given by William Rehg for his exclusive focus upon discourse ethics as it applies to Western modernity. He nonetheless supports Habermas's claim to universalism species-wide, and invokes it as a theoretical strength of Habermas's position in his comparative discussion of Rawls and Habermas. See Rehg's discussion of the priority of the right in discourse ethics in (1994): 91-173.

[76]Seyla Benhabib modifies Habermas's claim to universalism by situating it explicitly within the context of Western modernity. She writes: "...I would like to plead for a 'historically self-conscious universalism.' The principles of universal respect and egalitarian reciprocity are our philosophical clarification of the moral point of view from within the normative hermeneutic horizon of modernity. These principles are neither the only allowable interpretation of the formal constitutents of the competency of postconventional moral actors nor are they unequivocal transcendental presuppositions which every rational agent, upon deep reflection, must concede to. These principles are arrived at by a process of "reflective equilibrium," in Rawlsian terms, whereby one, as a philosopher, analyzes, refines and judges culturally defined moral intuitions in light of articulated philosophical principles. What one arrives at at the end of such a process of reflective equlibrium is a 'thick description' of the cultural horizons of modernity." The moral universalism defended by Benhabib is a *style of thinking*, which fosters conceptual enlargement through its commitment to sensitively including all those affected by a given norm. This is not a claim to universal validity in the sense given it by Habermas. In moving closer to a contextualist position on this point Benhabib must also abandon the strict distinction made by Habermas between morality and ethics, and the emphasis on the goal of consensus as an outcome of dialogue. Her very interesting attempt to develop an approach to moral philosophy which takes the notion of dialogue central to Habermas's work in an original direction is elaborated in *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (Routledge, 1992). The passage cited above is found in this work on page 30.

justificatory strategy, which ties the recent work on discourse ethics to his longstanding project of developing a theory of communicative action.[77]

The systematic articulation of discourse ethics represents the coming to fruition of a project spanning thirty years of intellectual work. Habermas's commitment to this project, whose aim to provide a legitimate normative basis for social criticism has remained unchanged throughout, has impelled him to foray into a number of areas of philosophy and social science. The conclusions of his recent work on discourse ethics, which first appeared in German in 1983 (the earliest English-language translation dates from 1990), are based upon material presented at other points in his career. The historico-materialist arguments, for example, date from the mid-1960s to the end of the 1970s, while the concept of communicative rationality and its relevance to the study of society came to fruition in the 1980s. Moreover, developmental psychology has taken on an increased importance for Habermas since the decade of the 1980s. These various components of the theory of communicative action remain the basis of Habermas's thought, and hold a key to the understanding of his current project of discourse ethics. Much of the work of this thesis has involved constructing a coherent and systematic argument from premises found throughout Habermas's writings.

This thesis takes up the claim to universality made by communicative ethics by studying how this claim is justified. My reconstruction of Habermas's position is relatively linear. Chapter 2 examines Habermas's attempt to justify the procedure of discourse ethics by appealing to facets of linguistic agency. It looks specifically at the argument that a speaker of

---

[77]I have been fortunate in having two excellent points of reference in connecting these branches of Habermas's work. Thomas McCarthy, in "Rationality and Relativism: Habermas's 'Overcoming' of Hermeneutics," in *Habermas: Critical Debates*, ed., J.B. Thompson and D.Held (Macmillan, 1982), examines the success of Habermas's attempt to use rational reconstructions to develop a critical theory of society not susceptible to the relativism of hermeneutics. Stephen White's monograph *The Recent Work of Jürgen Habermas: Reason, Justice & Modernity* (Cambridge, 1988) traces Habermas's attempt to develop a minimal form of moral universalism from the theory of

a language must, on pain of "performative contradiction" recognise the validity of the procedure specified by discourse ethics. The chapter demonstrates that the success of this argument is tied to viewing as paradigmatic a specific form of language use; one which presupposes the capacity of speakers to differentiate and defend validity claims in a way not common to all cultures or historical epochs. In fact, Habermas acknowledges that his account of the rational structure of communication reflects the influence of Western modernity. However, as he correctly points out, the fact that our knowledge is historically conditioned does not mean that its scope of validity is necessarily limited. His hypothesis is that the development of a species-wide communicative competence takes place over time, and that this can be shown through rational reconstructions of their logic of development. These reconstructions aim to show that the form of rationality implicit in the modern worldview is not simply the outgrowth of a specific tradition, by rather reflects a higher stage in a species-wide path of development. Chapters 3 and 4 investigate Habermas's defence of this claim. Chapter 3 examines the rational reconstructions of the processes of individual and societal maturation offered by Habermas as empirical evidence corroborating his theory. It argues that, notwithstanding their persuasiveness in many respects, these reconstructions in effect assume what is to be proven. They trace ordered sequences of development by specifying an endpoint which itself draws upon the concept of rationality which Habermas aims to support, and then interprets the data in terms of stages leading to this endpoint. These reconstructions therefore effectively assume the greater cognitive adequacy of Western modernity in order to support this claim.[78] Chapter 4 then takes up Habermas's attempt to justify this methodological

---

communicative action. Although these works do not focus directly upon discourse ethics they have furnished me an invaluable point of departure.

[78] I am hence less sanguine about the effectiveness of Habermas's appeal to theoretical defeasibility in mitigating the strength of his claims than many commentators. Cronin, for example, writes: "An important feature of Habermas's account of validity claims often overlooked by critics is how it combines a nonrelativistic defense of the objectivity of truth and normative rightness with a

approach by showing that the form of rationality associated with the Western worldview represents a higher level of cognitive adequacy than all others. I examine Habermas's defence of this claim in the debate over cross-cultural judgements of rationality discussed in *The Theory of Communicative Action*. My aim is to demonstrate the specificity of Habermas's position in this debate, and to suggest the viability of other ways of approaching the issue. Chapter 5 offers a brief conclusion, which addresses the difficult question of whether the procedure specified by discourse ethics is itself biased, in light of reflections upon its programme of justification.

The dialogical procedure for conflict resolution specified by Habermas gives powerful expression to some of our most important moral intuitions. The aim of my thesis is not to deny the importance of these moral claims, but to recast our understanding of the provenance of their force. In my view, Habermas's appeal to linguistic agency as the source of our obligation to recognise the legitimacy and priority of this procedure seems dangerously to obscure the complexity of the philosophical position one actually need adopt in order to support it, and the problematic aspects of what this position takes to be the relationship of modern Westerners vis-a-vis other cultures.

---

thoroughgoing fallibilism concerning particular factual and normative claims, however well supported by real argumentation. This applies to his own theoretical claims as well: he explicitly ties the fate of discourse ethics to reconstructions of implicit knowledge and competences that he acknowledges are fallible, and hence contestable, in principle." Cronin, "Translator's Introduction,"in *J&A*: xxix, note 13.

43

Chapter Two

I defend a cognitivist position. In fact, I am defending an outrageously strong claim in the present context of philosophical discussion: namely, that there is a universal core of moral intuition in all times and in all societies. I don't say that this intuition is spelt out in the same way in all societies at all times. What I do say is that these intuitions have the same origin. In the last analysis, they stem from the conditions of symmetry and reciprocal recognition which are unavoidable presuppositions of communicative action.

Jürgen Habermas, "Life-Forms, Morality and the Task of the Philosopher"

An ethics is termed universalist when it alleges that this (or a similar) moral principle, far from reflecting the intuitions of a particular culture or epoch, is valid universally. As long as the moral principle is not justified—and justifying it involves more than simply pointing to Kant's "fact of pure reason"—the ethnocentric fallacy looms large. This is the most difficult part of ethics.

Jürgen Habermas, "Morality and Ethical Life"

2.1 Introduction

For Habermas as for Kant, the goal of moral theory is to develop a principle in terms of which the rightness of norms can be adjudicated. However, Kantian ethics is perceived by Habermas to fall short of this aim in at least three broad respects, two of which were touched upon in the previous chapter.[1] First, discourse ethics criticises the *monologic* character of Kant's moral principle.[2] As we have seen, in Habermas's view the attempt to develop a moral principle adjudicable by an individual agent must necessarily fail. It does not follow from the

---

[1] These criticisms of Kant's position are drawn from Albrecht Wellmer's very interesting discussion of discourse ethics in "Ethics and Dialogue," in Wellmer, *The Persistence of Modernity: Essays on Aesthetics, Ethics and Postmodernism* (MIT, 1991): 115-6.

decision of a single agent to adopt a maxim universally that the maxim in question is *truly* universalisable, and that it actually represents an impartial consideration of the interests of all concerned. Second, discourse ethics criticises the potential insensitivity of the categorical imperative to the needs and vulnerabilities of particular individuals due to problems of *formalism* or *rigorism* which may accompany such an approach toward ethical universalism.[3] Third, communicative ethics remains dissatisfied with Kant's attempts at a philosophical justification of his moral principle.[4]

These criticisms reflect in various ways what Habermas sees as difficulties in the conceptions of reason, truth and agency upheld by Kant, whose theoretical approach he refers to as "the philosophy of consciousness." Habermas proposes to remedy these problems by reconfiguring or 'sublating' Kant's formally *monologic* universalism within a formally *dialogic* universalism.[5] This thesis focusses upon Habermas's attempt to demonstrate that the basic moral intuitions we possess have their source in a universal feature of human life, namely, in the linguistic structure of the communicative interactions present in all societies. Understanding how the dialogic nature of Habermas's theory opens up novel possibilities of philosophical justification is therefore essential. In §2.2 I take up the claim to *cognitivism* of communicative ethics, with a view toward showing how Habermas recasts in intersubjective terms the notions of linguistic meaning, rationality and validity operative in his theory. This discussion provides a point of departure for my examination in §2.3 of Habermas's attempt to elucidate the justificatory basis of his moral principle through recourse to features of linguistic agency. Habermas, like Kant, defends his moral principle through transcendental arguments. Yet as we shall see, Habermas's appeal to "the universal and necessary presuppositions of

---

[2]See §1.2 above.
[3]See §§1.2 and 1.3.
[4]See, for example, Habermas's "Philosophy as Stand-In and Interpreter," in *MCCA*: 1-20.

argumentation" is distinguished from the *a priori* style of deduction taken up by Kant in its explicit fallibilism.[6] In §2.4 I assess the role played by the transcendental-pragmatic argument in establishing Habermas's claim to universalism.

2.2 The Principle of Universalisation and the Defence of Ethical Cognitivism

The characteristics of Habermas's moral principle are dictated largely by his commitment to articulating a defensible cognitivist ethical theory. As we have seen, Habermas's theory takes as its aim the reconstruction of the moral point of view, where this is understood as the perspective from which competing normative claims can be fairly and impartially adjudicated. It replaces Kant's categorical imperative with a procedure of moral argumentation which links the justification of norms to reasoned agreement among those subject to the norm in question. Habermas presents his defence of the moral principle through the device of a debate with an imaginary interlocutor representing value scepticism, or pure ethical noncognitivism. An examination of this argument will complement the discussion of the principle of universalisation begun in Chapter One by enabling us to see its strategic role in Habermas's theoretical programme.

Habermas portrays the non-cognitivist as challenging the notion that one can properly speak of validity claims in ethical discourse. The value sceptic draws attention to some perceived irregularities concerning the rationality of our processes of belief fixation in ethical as opposed to assertoric discourse, from which basis she argues that ethical theories do not admit of truth and that ethical inquiry in the sense of normative theory is meaningless. This

[5]Wellmer, "Ethics and Dialogue," in Wellmer (1991): 115.
[6]The most systematic explanation of these aspects of Habermas's position to date is found in Habermas, "Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Programme of Philosophical Justification," in *MCCA*: This article is the principal source of reference for the present chapter.

position relies principally upon two arguments.[7] (1) The first argument issues from puzzlement over the sense in which norms may be said to be true. The sceptic argues that, because moral discourse lacks some essential features associated with rational discourse in the constative realm, it cannot be viewed as making a validity claim analogous to a truth claim. Specifically, it is a fundamental feature of constative claims to truth that they are *evaluable*. This permits our coming to agreement upon them with adequately informed individuals.

Several features are associated with this notion of evaluability in the constative realm. When making claims to truth we assume that a claim which asserts that something is the case is valid if and only if it is in fact the case. There is some feature independent of that claim, some state of affairs, in virtue of which the claim is justified or unjustified. It is in virtue of this feature that we should be able to bring about agreement under appropriate circumstances as to whether a particular proposition is true.[8] It seems that if validity claims in ethics are rationally redeemable, we should be able to identify a similar characteristic in this case. The problem arises when we ask what justifies a normative claim to validity. As Habermas sees it, previous attempts to explain the truth of ethical norms on the model of factual truths have not been convincing. The traditional objectivist view, which is modelled on the picture of a constative truth claim, posits a "non-natural property of rightness" to play a role analogous to that played in constative discourse by the concept of a state of affairs. Were there such a property, however, considerable agreement should exist on ethical norms. This is not the case. Habermas interprets this objection as a challenge to specify the nature of the validity claim raised in moral discourse. He will argue that a normative claim to validity obtains if and only if there exists a "generalisable interest" among the parties affected.

---

[8]Habermas, "Discourse Ethics," in *MCCA*: 56.

(2)   The second argument draws attention to the fact that normative disputes, unlike disputes over matters of fact, fail frequently to issue in agreement. Moral disagreements are often characterised by a pluralism of ultimate value orientations.[9] However, we generally take it to be a characteristic of rational beliefs that there be some method for verifying them. This can be interpreted as a challenge to specify the procedure for the redemption of the validity claim in question. I will take up Habermas's response to these charges in turn. As we will see, the principle of universalisation or "(U)" is designed precisely as a response to the philosophical worries underlying each.

(1)   A cognitivist ethic is one which holds the view that the validity or invalidity of a norm can be rationally ascertained. Habermas maintains that the sceptic's first query, which questions the cogency of applying notions of truth or falsity to normative propositions, loses its force once we give up the premise that "normative sentences, to the extent that they are connected with validity claims at all, can be valid or invalid only in the sense of propositional truth."[10] In Habermas's view, the notion of propositional validity modelled upon the satisfaction of truth-conditions is appropriate for fact stating rather than normative modes of discourse. Habermas aims to develop an alternative account of the rational redemption of validity claims, which does not assimilate the rationality of claims to normative validity to that of constative truth.

On Habermas's account, an action or practice is *rational* only to the extent that it is based upon reasons which are open to intersubjective criticism through argumentation, and which thereby permit of correction and improvement. The term "argumentation" is reserved by Habermas to refer to that type of speech in which participants render contested validity claims explicit, and attempt to vindicate or criticise them through arguments. An argument

---

[9]Habermas, "Discourse Ethics," in *MCCA*: 56.

contains reasons or grounds which are systematically connected with the validity claim raised in a problematic expression. The "strength" of an argument is measured in a given context by the soundness of the reasons proferred, and this can be estimated in part by whether an argument is able to convince the participants in discourse to accept the validity claim in question.[11] Argumentation in Habermas's sense takes place in what he calls "communicative" as opposed to "strategic" interactions. Strategic actions occur when one actor seeks to influence the behaviour of another by means of the threat of sanctions or the prospect of obtaining a reward, in order to *cause* the occurrence of a desired outcome. Communicative actions, by contrast, take place when an actor attempts *rationally to motivate* another towards a course of action, by raising criticisable validity claims which she guarantees to redeem.[12]

The concept of a validity claim as articulated by Habermas is a *general* one, which can be used to illuminate a number of different domains of discourse in a coherent way. Validity claims may be rationally raised or redeemed in many domains of action, including those regulated by norms, cultural values, and aesthetic criteria, in addition to those regulated by constative speech acts. A validity claim says only that the conditions of validity of an utterance--be it a factual proposition or a moral command--are satisfied. This cannot be done by direct appeal to decisive evidence; validity claims must be discursively redeemed. The appropriate *form* of redemption, as we shall see, varies according to the nature of the claim. What is important to note at present is the way in which this understanding of validity claims allows Habermas to dissociate the notion of rational redemption from what he sees as a mistaken concept of truth, which models truth as correspondence between propositions and reality. It is by and large this association which Habermas holds responsible for the success of

---

[10]Habermas, "Discourse Ethics," in *MCCA*: 56.
[11]Habermas, *TCA 1*: 18.
[12]Habermas, "Discourse Ethics," in *MCCA*: 58.

sceptical arguments concerning the truth-status of normative claims. In his view, the idea that propositional truth can be explicated in terms of the existence of states of affairs represents the specific way in which the validity claim made in the domain of factual discourse is redeemed, rather than the exclusive model for rational redemption of claims in all spheres.

The epistemological understanding of validity claims proposed by Habermas gives an intersubjective account of our practices of reason-giving. This account has the advantage of generality in that it applies equally to all rational domains of human life, and thus does not represent an *ad hoc* adaptation to the normative domain. As Habermas explains: "From physics to morality, from mathematics to art criticism, our cognitive accomplishments form a continuum within the common, though shifting, terrain of argumentation in which validity claims are thematized."[13]

The account of validity claims developed thus far provides a general explanation of how various domains of action can be seen as rational. Habermas next undertakes to explain how the nature of validity claims and the grounds for their redemption vary across different domains. This enables him to meet the sceptic's challenge and to articulate the nature of the claim to validity raised in normative discourse. On Habermas's account, validity claims function primarily as mechanisms for the coordination of social action: in allowing for the rational offer and acceptance of speech acts, such claims make possible the continued interaction between speaker and hearer. However, the two discursively redeemable validity claims upon which Habermas focusses, that is, claims to propositional truth and to normative rightness, play their roles as coordinators of social action differently, and are to be redeemed in analogous rather than identical ways.[14] Validity claims raised by factual statements express

---

[13]Habermas, "Remarks on Discourse Ethics," in *J&A*: 30.
[14]Habermas, "Discourse Ethics," in *MCCA*: 59-62.

50

claims to truth, and concern existing states of affairs. Normative claims, by contrast, express nothing more than a claim to rightness in intersubjective relations. As Habermas explains:

> That a norm is just or in the general interest means nothing more than that it is worthy of recognition or is valid. Justice is not something material, not a determinate "value," but a dimension of validity. Just as descriptive statements can be true, and thus express what is the case, so too normative statements can be right and express what has to be done.[15]

This claim to normative rightness in Habermas's view expresses the idea that the action enjoined is equally in the interest of all affected by it.[16]

As we have seen, Habermas's theory, rather than aiming to develop substantive moral principles, limits itself to a reconstruction of the moral point of view. We can now see why his account of the moral point of view takes the shape of a theory of argumentation: this point of view is defined precisely as the procedure under which the validity claim to normative rightness can be redeemed. To say that something is morally right is to say that it expresses what is equally in the interests of all, and this, in Habermas's view, is simply to say that it would satisfy the conditions stipulated in the procedure established by the principle of universalisation.

(2)   The second argument given by ethical noncognitivists drew attention to the fact that disputes over moral judgements often fail to issue in agreement. Habermas claims that this argument loses its force "if we can name a principle that makes agreement in moral argumentation possible *in principle*."[17] The procedure outlined in the principle of universalisation counters this charge by specifying a method through which a claim to moral validity may be redeemed, and the requisite agreement reached.

---

[15]Habermas, "Morality, Society and Ethics: An Interview with Torben Hviid Nielsen," in *J&A*: 152.
[16]Habermas, "Remarks," in *J&A*: 29.
[17]Habermas, "Discourse Ethics," in *MCCA*: 56.

The principle sought by Habermas must specify a procedure for legitimate generalisations or extrapolations in the moral domain. It serves a function similar to that fulfilled by the principle of induction in theoretical discourse, which bridges the gap between particular observations and general hypotheses. The principle of universalisation functions as a bridging principle in that it aims to provide a means of arriving at or coordinating legitimate moral consensus across various value positions. The legitimacy of moral consensus lies in the ability of the principle to do justice to the notion of moral impartiality. As discussed previously, Kant's categorical imperative, which is designed so as to express the impersonal or general character of valid universal commands, furnishes the starting point for Habermas's search for a bridging principle adequate to the moral domain.[18] However, the categorical imperative suffers in his view from several weaknesses which impair its ability to represent a truly impartial perspective.[19]

The principle of universalisation attempts to compensate for the informational gaps productive of bias inherent in Kant's procedure primarily by shifting the frame of reference for determining moral validity. Whereas Kant's categorical imperative can be applied by a moral agent reflecting in isolation, the process proposed by the principle of universalisation is necessarily intersubjective: it stipulates that norms can only be justified through a process of real dialogue among all affected. This shift aims to compensate for the tendency towards bias produced by the categorical imperative in two ways.

The first concerns the *monological* nature of the categorical imperative. As Habermas emphasises, only if a moral subject could assume as uniquely legitimate her own form of life would she be justified in thinking that actions universalisable from her own perspective are

---

[18]Habermas, "Discourse Ethics," in *MCCA*: 63.
[19]See for example §§ 1.2, 1.3.

truly so universalisable.[20] In fact, combatting pernicious forms of injustice often requires the

questioning of one's antecedent value orientations. However, because each individual lacks the

necessary knowledge of the others' standpoint, moral impartiality requires that we adopt a

procedure which will ensure that the interests of all are taken into account. As we have seen,

moral discourse compels us to think about a given situation from the perspective of the other

discussants, an ability which Habermas sometimes refers to as the skill of "reversibility." At

the same time, our involvement as participants in the process of moral argumentation ensures

that we can check for ourselves whether the solutions proposed meet our interests as we best

understand them.[21] Second, the principle of universalisation also ensures that the often

criticised blindness of the categorical imperative to *consequences* of action is not imported into

discourse ethics. It aims to protect the interests of participants by requiring that the

consequences and side-effects of the general observance of a norm have been taken into

consideration by and for all of the agents affected.[22]

---

[20]Habermas explains this point by reference to the formulation of the categorical imperative
concerning the Kingdom of Ends. He writes: "It is not a foregone conclusion that maxims
generalizable from my point of view must also be acknowledged to be moral obligations from the
perspective of others, let alone all others. Kant could disregard this fact because, as I noted, he
assumed that all subjects in the Kingdom of Ends share the *same* conception of themselves and of the
world." See Habermas, "Remarks on Discourse Ethics," in *J&A*: 64.
[21]See, for example Habermas, "Remarks," in *J&A*: 52.
[22]Habermas, "Lawrence Kohlberg and neo-Aristotelianism," in *J&A*: 129.

2.3 The Transcendental-Pragmatic Justification of the Principle of Universalisation

Recall that the principle of universalisation set out by Habermas requires that every valid norm fulfil the following condition:

> *All* affected can accept the consequences and the side effects its *general* observance can be anticipated to have for the satisfaction of *everyone's* interests (and these consequences are preferred to those of known alternative possibilities for regulation.[23]

This definition of a principle to serve as a rule of argumentation constitutes the first step in Habermas's attempt to justify discourse ethics.[24] The remaining sections of this chapter examine his attempt to demonstrate the universal validity of the procedure, by adopting a transcendental mode of argument. This argument identifies necessary features of linguistic agency. It then aims to show that, in virtue of their tacit acceptance of these presuppositions, speakers of a language must also accept the principle of universalisation. This section introduces the transcendental-pragmatic argument and explicates its structure. The present discussion will enable me in §2.4 to address the question of what this argument establishes.

Habermas acknowledges that anthropological and historical data show clearly that the moral code which his principle of universalisation represents is not characteristic of all cultures and historical epochs. Many other societies, and our own societies in other historical periods, have operated with normative concepts and codes which differ in important ways from those reflected therein.[25] In fact, the intuitions underlying this principle seem to be espoused with significant frequency only in certain strata of modern, Western societies. It hence is evident that the universality of the structures which Habermas singles out cannot be established inductively.

---

[23]Habermas, "Discourse Ethics," in *MCCA*: 65.
[24]Habermas, "Discourse Ethics," in *MCCA*: 97.
[25]Habermas, "Discourse Ethics," in *MCCA*: 78.

Yet the problems attendant upon a deductive approach to justification for this claim are not less striking. It has been argued, notably by Hans Albert, that it is impossible deductively to justify a moral principle as having universal validity. According to Albert, a cognitivist attempting to provide such a justification must inevitably find herself pinned on the horns of a "Münchhausen trilemma." He claims that once we understand the nature of deductive justification and precisely how conclusions are logically entailed by premises, we must recognise the following problem. The attempt to provide ultimate justification forces the cognitivist to search for further justification for any premise, and this process must in its nature be interminable. The cognitivist must necessarily choose between three equally unacceptable alternatives: the attempt to provide ultimate justification terminates either in infinite regress, or, if infinite regress is to be avoided, in a circular argument, or in arbitrarily breaking off the chain of deduction.[26]

The effectiveness of this trilemma lies in the cognitivist's acceptance of the notion of deductive justification it employs, and this is precisely where Habermas takes issue with Albert's strategy. Habermas argues that the notion of deductive justification is too narrowly conceived to be appropriate to the context at hand. The principle of universalisation in ethics, just like the principle of induction in the empirical sciences, is introduced solely as a bridging principle to permit inferences to be made among elements which are *not* deductively related. Such principles are hence not amenable to deductive justification.[27] Habermas thereby evades the Münchhausen trilemma. However, difficulties in inductive and deductive approaches make necessary the development of a new strategy of justification for the moral principle. This strategy draws upon features of intersubjective communication.

---

[26]Habermas, "Discourse Ethics," in *MCCA*: 79.
[27]Habermas, "Discourse Ethics," in *MCCA*: 79.

Habermas's general goal is to provide a theoretical account which does justice to the observed diversity of existing moral codes, while simultaneously demonstrating the universal applicability of its moral principle. Both of these goals are accomplished by recourse to the theory of communicative action. Recall that on Habermas's view, members of our species can only acquire an individual identity through being socialised into particular social groups, which are characterised by relations of reciprocity. The values which form the context within which we are socialised do vary for a variety of reasons across different forms of life, and this is reflected in the diversity of observed moral and social practices. However, Habermas also argues that the process of socialisation must always take place through the medium of communicative action, and that this imposes certain common structures upon it. Specifically, he argues that the relations of reciprocity and mutual recognition, which characterise communicative action, form a necessary part of the successful socialisation of any individual, and hence provide an "abstract core" of moral intuitions which transcend the specific value formulations of any particular group.[28] This concept of an abstract core of moral intuitions plays a pivotal role in the justification of the moral principle.

Habermas's programme of justification follows an approach taken by Karl-Otto Apel, who has revived the transcendental mode of justification through building upon the resources of a pragmatics of language. Apel's innovative style of transcendental argument bases its defence of moral universalism upon identifying the conditions of the possibility of participation in practices of argumentation as such. In order to show how Habermas makes use of this strategy, it will be helpful to start with a simple description of what transcendental arguments

---

[28] This term is borrowed from Thomas McCarthy. See his "Introduction," to Habermas, *MCCA*: x.

are, and how they function to establish their conclusions.[29] I would like to use a description

drawn from Charles Taylor's "The Validity of Transcendental Arguments" as a starting point.

According to Taylor, arguments of the transcendental variety consist of a chain or

series of what he calls "indispensability claims."[30] The argument moves from starting point to

conclusion by showing that the condition stated in the conclusion is indispensable to the feature

identified at the start. However, it is clear that any claim of the sort that C is indispensable for

B, which is in turn indispensable for A, does not in itself provide us with any information

concerning the status of C. What a transcendental argument must show is that feature A

provides us with an unchallengeable starting point, one which cannot coherently be disputed.

As Taylor explains:

> The arguments I want to call 'transcendental' start from some feature of our
> experience which they claim to be indubitable and beyond cavil. They then
> move to a stronger conclusion, one concerning the nature of the subject or his
> position in the world. They make this move by a regressive argument, to the
> effect that this stronger conclusion must be so if the indubitable fact about
> experience is to be possible (and being so, it must be possible).[31]

There are hence two broad stages in any transcendental argument. The first involves the

identification of an indubitable feature of our experience, which will serve as the argument's

point of departure. The second involves the drawing of inferences based upon this insight,

which permit the author to reach a stronger or more interesting conclusion than that reached in

the first stage. Habermas's argument is an ambitious one: He aims to offer a transcendental-

pragmatic demonstration that every actor communicatively competent in a specific sense

already presupposes the validity of the principle of universalisation. An actor can reject this

---

[29]See Charles Taylor, "The Validity of Transcendental Arguments," in Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Harvard, 1995) for a more detailed account.
[30]Taylor, "Validity," in Taylor (1995): 27.
[31]Taylor, "Validity," in Taylor (1995): 20.

principle only on pain of "performative contradiction." I would like to present Habermas's argument in two stages conforming to this broad scheme.[32]

Stage One: Argumentation as an Essential Feature of Experience

Habermas's argument builds in crucial ways upon Apel's work on the pragmatics of language. I begin by sketching some key elements which Habermas draws from Apel's argument against the non-cognitivist or skeptic, who argues by means of the Münchhausen trilemma that moral principles cannot be given an ultimate justification. This should provide a vantage point from which to view the broad outlines of Habermas's strategy.

Apel argues that the sceptic or fallibilist, who denies the possibility of providing an ultimate justification for moral principles by invoking the Münchhausen trilemma, involves himself in what Apel calls a "performative contradiction," and hence that his position is not consistently tenable. This term is defined by Habermas in the following way: "A performative contradiction occurs when a constative speech act k(p) rests on noncontingent presuppositions whose propositional content contradicts the asserted proposition p. "[33] Apel aims in essence to show that the fallibilist must, in advancing her argument, make assumptions inevitable in *any* process of reasoning or argumentation. In taking part in the process of argumentation, the sceptic has already accepted as valid a minimum number of unavoidable rules of criticism, namely the set of rules necessary to understand the sceptic's defence of the principle of fallibilism. These preconditions could then be shown to contradict the principle of fallibilism. This strategy should reach even the sceptic who refuses to enter into the language game of *moral* argumentation in virtue of her belief that moral phenomena require alternative explanations from the metaethical level, because as soon as the sceptic makes any claim in

[32]My presentation of this argument is indebted to Stephen White's extremely helpful account in Stephen K. White, *The Recent Work of Jürgen Habermas* (Cambridge, 1988): 50-58.

favour of her position, such as the claim that moral phenomena cannot be "true," for instance, she must argue for this assertion.

The style of transcendental argument offered by Apel and Habermas hence differs somewhat from the traditional approach. Rather than seeking to establish conditions of the possibility of experience as such, this argument examines the conditions of the possibility of the practice of argumentation. The goal is to show that engaging in any form of argumentation whatsoever will invoke presuppositions which entangle the sceptic in a "performative contradiction." In order to have the practice of argumentation as such serve as an effective anchor for a transcendental argument, it must be shown to meet two conditions: (1) It must be demonstrated that argumentation is a feature of human life so general that it cannot be replaced by a functional equivalent. Let us call this the *irreplaceability* condition. (2) This feature must also be shown to be an *unavoidable* aspect of human life.

(1) Habermas claims that an argument is transcendental only if it identifies what is implicit in a capacity for speech and action, and is "general" in the following sense: "Strictly speaking, arguments cannot be called transcendental unless they deal with discourses, or the corresponding competences, so general that it is impossible to replace them by functional equivalents; they must be constituted in such a way that they can be replaced only with discourses or competences of the same kind."[34] The idea which underlies this condition is that if the practice selected to serve as the basis for a transcendental argument were replaceable by another functionally equivalent practice, the argument would not be compelling. The sceptic would be able to resist it simply by avoiding the practice identified and replacing it with its equivalent.

---

[33]Habermas, "Discourse Ethics," in *MCCA*: 80.
[34]Habermas, "Discourse Ethics," in *MCCA*: 83.

(2)   The transcendental argument that Habermas develops can only work

effectively against the opponent who enters into argumentation with the cognitivist. What of

the opponent who eschews practices of argumentation altogether? If this is a viable option, the

sceptic can simply evade the basis for the transcendental-pragmatic argument from the start.

Such a sceptic may, for example, regard practices of argumentation and justification from the

perspective of an external observer, rather than that of an engaged participant. This would be

for the sceptic to "take the attitude of an ethnologist vis-a-vis his own culture, shaking his head

over philosophical argumentation as though he were witnessing the unintelligible rites of a

strange tribe."[35] Habermas argues that this posture is not consistently tenable for a human

being. In his view, every agent is socialised into a shared sociocultural form of life through a

criss-crossing network of communicative actions, and produces her life in that context. As we

have seen, communicative action involves the raising and redemption of validity claims, and

this in turn depends upon a reciprocal imputation of accountability on the part of the

participants. To eschew argument entirely, to give up on communicative action in favour of

strategic action alone for example, is to separate oneself from the communicative practice of

everyday life. Although there is no *logical* impossibility in such a posture, it does seem to take

us to the limit of our understanding of human agency. The life of such an agent would seem to

lack features which we consider constitutive of such agency.[36] On these grounds Habermas

---

[35]Habermas, "Discourse Ethics," in *MCCA*: 99.
[36]This point was originally and persuasively made by Stephen White, who suggests that we should
think of the concept of practical rationality as incorporating some minimal motivational assumptions.
He maintains that there are two general types of motivation which are constitutive of what we
understand as human action. The absence of one or the other in ongoing behaviour is grounds for
throwing an agent's claim to reason radically into doubt. These are: (1) Motivation of self-interest
or orientation to self which, although rooted in the motive of physical self-preservation, is not limited
to this. The characteristic form of rationality here is means-end reasoning. (2) Intersubjective-
contextual orientation: An agent motivated in this way orients her actions not only towards self but
also toward creating and maintaining institutions and traditions in which are expressed some
conception of right behaviour and a good life with others. This motivational dimension expresses our
character as creatures who seek meaningfulness for our individual lives by creating and maintaining
intersubjectively binding normative structures. See White (1988): 7-24.

argues that the end of argumentation is sufficiently interwoven with the intersubjective form of life to which human agents belong that it can serve as a non-arbitrary starting point for a transcendental argument.

Stage Two: Justification of the Principle of Universalisation

The practice of argumentation provides Habermas with a plausible feature of human experience on the basis of which to begin a transcendental argument. He now attempts to draw implications from this practice which will allow him to refute the relativist. Ethical relativism is defined by Habermas as that position "...which holds that the validity of moral judgments is measured solely by the standards of rationality or value proper to a specific culture or form of life."[37] Habermas attempts to refute this position by pointing out that the sceptic must, in making any such claim, rely upon a specific notion of argumentation. He attempts to show that this practice of argumentation requires us to make use of certain rules or presuppositions, and that the principle of universalisation is logically implied by these. Habermas sometimes expresses his position by saying that any linguistically competent agent who fails to recognise the validity of the principle of universalisation finds herself in a situation of "performative contradiction."[38] As I hope to show in this section and the next, this claim overstates what can actually be demonstrated through this form of argument.

Before turning to Habermas's discussion of the presuppositions of argumentation, it may be useful to look more closely at his notion of "performative contradiction." We can get a

[37]Habermas, "Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action," in *MCCA*: 121. Habermas defines relativism as a position which holds that moral judgements are valid solely relative to a specific culture. By showing that this position is not tenable, Habermas hopes to defend his universalist approach. I will argue in Chapter 4 that Habermas argues for his own position in part by presenting the reader with a false disjunction.

[38]In "Discourse Ethics," he describes his justificatory strategy in the following terms: "Every person who accepts the universal and necessary communicative presuppositions of argumentative speech and who knows what it means to justify a norm of action implicitly presupposes as valid the principle of

better idea of what Habermas sees as taking place in such a situation by rephrasing his argument in terms of the concept of communicative action. In ongoing communicative action, subjects coordinate their behaviour through a mutual recognition of validity claims. This mutual recognition rests on the hearer's supposition that the speaker can be held accountable for redeeming or justifying her claims should the need arise. This applies equally to the claims which are continually raised in action oriented towards reaching understanding. According to Habermas, this obligation to justify one's claims is one which every actor has "implicitly recognized" simply by virtue of having engaged in communicative action. Moreover, imputations of equality and mutual recognition between actors must also be part of this process, as such assumptions are required for the non-coercive justification of norms.[39] Any communicatively competent actor hence tacitly makes use of certain notions which have a moral dimension. To deny the legitimacy of the principle of universalisation is, in Habermas's view, to deny what is logically entailed by the presuppositions of one's own practices. These presuppositions form the "abstract core" of our moral intuitions.

Habermas follows Aristotle in distinguishing three levels of presuppositions of argumentation. The first arise at the logical level of *products*, the second at the dialectical level of *procedures*, and the third at the rhetorical level of *processes*. He examines each in order to ascertain whether it can furnish suitable premises for a transcendental-pragmatic argument. I discuss each in sequence.

Reasoning or argumentation is designed to *produce* logically cogent arguments which allow us to justify or vitiate claims to validity. The presuppositions of argumentation at this

---

universalization, whether in the form I gave it above, or in an equivalent form." See Habermas, "Discourse Ethics," in *MCCA*: 86.
[39] I am indebted here to Stephen White's account of Habermas's argument. See White (1988): 50-55 for a very enlightening analysis of Habermas's argument against the rationality of a radically strategic actor.

level are logical and semantic rules. These rules have no ethical import, and hence do not constitute suitable bases from which to construct the transcendental-pragmatic argument. In *procedural* terms, arguments are processes of reaching understanding in which validity claims offered by speakers and hearers are made explicit, and in which the participants involved attempt to vindicate or criticize such claims. Habermas argues that participants in discourse at this level must assume a reciprocal obligation to justify the claims which they make, and to be truthful in their defence of these claims. These assumptions, which Habermas believes to be "implicitly recognized" by every actor who engages in action oriented towards reaching understanding, do have ethical import. Habermas maintains that the obligation to provide justification in the search for better arguments is "irreconciliable with traditional ethical philosophies that have to protect a dogmatic core of fundamental convictions from all criticisms."[40] I shall argue that the success of this claim turns upon a particular use of the notion of argumentation. In essence, Habermas claims that one can only defend a traditional ethics by removing it from the sphere of argumentation *as practiced by us*[41].

For Habermas, a "traditional ethics" is one which keeps a core of basic convictions away from the demand for justification which argumentation imposes upon us. The precise meaning of his "demand for justification" must be clarified, as it can be interpreted in both a broad and a narrow sense. If the demand for justification associated with communicative action is truly to be universal, and found in the widely varying cultural and social circumstances in which communicative actions are present, the notion of justification involved must be interpreted in a broad sense. The requirement that the demand for justification be met at this level does seem to establish that participants in argumentation are obliged to provide

---

[40]Habermas, "Discourse Ethics," in *MCCA*: 88.
[41]The distinction between argumentation "as practiced by us," and argumentation in the broad sense is central in Chapter 3.

reasons for the claims they make, and that the inability or unwillingness to do so may be interpreted as a form of irrationality. However, a proponent of a traditional ethics is fully capable of providing reasons at this level. What such a person may not be willing to do (on Habermas's definition of traditional ethics) is to satisfy the demand for justification in a more narrow and specifically modern sense; she may be unwilling to provide justification for claims which call into question the most basic tenets of her ethical framework. This does not seem to be irrational, per se.[42] However, the sceptic who makes use of a narrow or modern notion of argumentation in advancing her own claims and yet refuses to apply this notion to traditional ethics would be inconsistent in her practice. The specific nature of this inconsistency receives clarification at the next level of argumentation.

Habermas also regards argumentation as a *process* of communication aimed at reaching rationally motivated agreement. The success of this process turns upon its ability to present itself as a form of communication which approximates, to a satisfactory degree, certain ideal conditions. As Habermas explains, "[p]articipants in argumentation cannot avoid the presupposition that, owing to certain characteristics that require formal description, the structure of their communication rules out all external or internal coercion other than the force of the better argument and thereby also neutralizes all motives other than that of the cooperative search for truth."[43] Using the method of performative contradictions to test the intuitions of subjects competent in speech and action[44] as to what constitutes a valid argument,

---

[42]As Steven White notes, provided that the agent in question is consistent in the judgments she makes (i.e. willing to apply a norm of action equally to herself and others) the proponent of traditional ethics does not seem to be "irrational" in the strong sense needed to establish performative contradiction, in that the agent is not involved in behavior which is unintelligible to us, or which takes us to the limits of our understanding of human agency. See White (1988): 54. However, I believe that White misses the force of Habermas's point here. The "performative contradiction" is imputed to the sceptic, who allegedly makes use of a narrow, more demanding form of argumentation in making his own point, while failing to apply this to traditional ethics.

[43]Habermas, "Moral Consciousness," in *MCCA*: 89.

[44]As we shall see, "competent" for Habermas means competent modern, Western speakers.

Habermas attempts to specify certain rules of argumentation essential to discourse. He accepts

the rules set down by R. Alexy as a tentative reconstruction of these intuitions. These rules are

as follows:

(3.1) Every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in a
   discourse.

(3.2)   a. Everyone is allowed to question any assertion whatever.

   b. Everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatever into the discourse.

   c. Everyone is allowed to express his attitudes, desires and needs.

(3.3) No speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising his rights
   as laid down in (3.1) and (3.2).[45]

Habermas maintains that any agent who engages in argumentation must presuppose the

validity of the discourse rules. These rules, which represent the explicit statement of the

normative content of the pragmatic presuppositions of argumentation, form the first premise

for the derivation of the principle of universalisation. The second premise captures our general

intuitions concerning what it means "to discuss hypothetically whether norms of action ought

to be adopted." Disputes over norms can be understood as those where alternative orderings

for the satisfaction of interests are at issue. In Habermas's view, participants in discourse

must recognise that the only way in which a particular scheme for the ordering of interests

would be considered legitimate by all is by recourse to a rule of universalisation. Habermas

argues that the principle of universalisation follows by "material implication" from the

conjunction of these two premises.[46]

---

[45]Habermas, "Moral Consciousness," in *MCCA*: 89.
[46]The specifics of this "derivation" are complex, and lie outside my concerns in this chapter. I refer
the interested reader to two sources: William Rehg, *Insight and Solidarity* (University of California,
1994): 57-83; and Seyla Benhabib, "Liberal Dialogue versus a Critical Theory of Discursive
Legitimation," in *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, Nancy Rosenblum ed., (Harvard, 1989): 143-156.

2.4 Assessment of the Success of the Transcendental-Pragmatic Argument

Traditional transcendental arguments are constituted by a series of indispensability claims anchored in some universally shared experience or activity. Such arguments aim to establish a conclusion which is strong relative to the argument's starting point, by arguing that the conclusion must obtain in virtue of its serving as a condition of the possibility of the (indubitable) first premise. Transcendental arguments have usually aimed to provide an "ultimate justification" of their conclusions. This form of justification aims to create an absolutely secure epistemological basis for theory, and one immune to the fallibilism of all knowledge deriving from experience.

Habermas's style of transcendental-pragmatic argument differs from the traditional model in several respects. In the first place, it provides an analysis of the conditions of the possibility of there being a particular practice, that of argumentation, rather than of experience itself. However, the most salient difference between Habermas's approach and the traditional one is the rejection of the ambition to provide "ultimate foundations." This largely reflects Habermas's dissatisfaction with the approach to philosophy underlying such arguments in their classical form. As we shall see in Chapter 3, Habermas's abandonment of the search for "ultimate foundations" is intimately tied up with his attempt to develop a new paradigm for philosophy, and one which would bring it into a more fruitful relationship with research programmes in the social and natural sciences.

Habermas's strategy is in essence to uncouple the aspiration for theoretical *universality* from that for necessity or certainty. As he himself describes it: "I have tried to take up the universalistic line of questioning of transcendental philosophy, while at the same

time detranscendentalising the mode of procedure and the conception of what is to be shown."[47] The form of philosophy Habermas proposes would be self-consciously fallibilist, and yet would offer a universalist account of rationality and rationalisation. It would accomplish this by entering into a working relationship with promising empirical research programmes, and most especially with the "reconstructive sciences." Habermas believes there to be cross-cultural universals of cognition, speech and action, which can be captured in fallible, but nevertheless general reconstructions of species-wide competences, such as those pertaining to the presuppositions of argumentation.

With these concepts in mind, I would now like to evaluate the success of Habermas's argument against the relativist, and in particular, to identify which components of his argument bear the burden of proof. These brief concluding remarks set the stage for the discussion undertaken in Chapter Three, and will be explored more extensively at that point. It will be useful to consider the two stages of the transcendental-pragmatic argument individually. The first stage, which uses the technique of "performative contradiction" to demonstrate the indispensibility of argumentation to ongoing social action, appears relatively successful. In showing that argumentation is a central feature of human agency, Habermas also draws out certain implications for the tenability of the value sceptic's position: he persuasively shows that it is not possible to eschew argumentation entirely without calling into question one's own rationality. When we consider what would be involved in such an attempt, we are brought to a limit of our conception of what it means to be human.

The second stage of the argument aims to draw implications from the indispensability claim established in the first. As we have seen, its critical significance is limited. The ubiquity of the practice of argumentation does provide grounds for thinking it a feature of agency that

---

[47]Habermas, *REPLY*: 238.

the validity claims raised in argumentation should be redeemed by providing good reasons. Nonetheless, the claim that our participation in a practice of argumentation requires us to recognize the validity of a moral principle resembling the principle of universalisation is directed towards (and can hence be successful only against) a moral sceptic, who relies implicitly upon this modern or narrow notion of argumentation in advancing his view. Recall that the sceptic regards moral claims as failing to advance claims to validity in a sense analogous to assertoric claims. Habermas interprets the sceptic as saying, in essence, that we could give up a particular view of moral argumentation without giving up anything central to our practices of rationality. The force of Habermas's response is to say that our moral claims are equally well or badly grounded as anything established through argumentation. Our conception of ethics is not optional for us, so long as we have the conception of discourse which we do have.

However, the intuitions which Habermas uses as a basis for developing the reconstruction of the presuppositions of argumentation ("discourse rules") are not empirically to be met with universally. For example, not every speaker of every language need have the same understandings of how to justify a norm, or of what are the underlying rules of discourse. The method of probing for linguistic intuitions through performative contradiction may not elicit the same response in each case. In fact, it seems that these intuitions correspond most closely to those of modern language speakers. Hence to the extent that these relatively thick intuitions concerning argumentation are required by Habermas's transcendental argument, they cannot be assumed to be inescapable features of human agency. Even if Habermas's reconstruction of the linguistic intuitions of modern language speakers is accurate in its entirety, we must ask what force his argument has against agents who do not share this specifically modern conception of argumentation. Someone who argues from what Habermas

calls a "traditional" ethical position would still satisfy the demand for rational accountability inherent in the practice of argumentation in its most general sense, the sense established by Stage I of the transcendental argument. The transcendental-pragmatic argument appears at most to show that speakers with certain (modern, Western) intuitions about the nature of argumentation may find themselves in a species of "performative contradiction" if they do not recognize the validity of the principle of universalisation.[48] However, it offers no grounds in itself for persuading those who do not intiallly share these intuitions of their general validity. Justification of the principle of universalisation in the strong sense needed to defeat the relativist hence cannot unequivocally be established on the basis of a transcendental-pragmatic argument. This reflects the modesty of what Habermas, in contrast to Kant, regards philosophy as capable of establishing.

Habermas calls the style of transcendental justification which he offers "weak", rather than "ultimate." Let us investigate this claim. What the transcendental argument so far has shown is *not* that the rules necessary for argumentation (the presuppositions of argument) are true, or justified. Rather, it allows one to infer that if the practice of argumentation is to proceed, there are *no alternatives* to these rules of argumentation, as these rules form the conditions for the possibility of the practice itself.[49] However, if we interpret the term "argumentation" in its specifically modern sense, the transcendental argument by itself cannot establish that modern notions of what it means to argue and to justify a norm are of universal "significance" and hence form a suitable point of reference for all linguistic agents. The *universal import* of these experiences must be established by *other* means if the argument is to

---

[48]This conclusion follows if one grants Habermas the truth of his premises. I abstain from taking a position on the accuracy of Habermas's characterisation of the presuppositions of argumentation necessary to Western modernity, as this issue falls outside the immediate scope of my thesis.
[49]Habermas, "Discourse Ethics," in *MCCA*: 95.

persuade those who do not initially share modern conceptions of argumentation or of the justification of norms.

Some of the reasons which Habermas offers for the validity of his transcendental-pragmatic argument are drawn from lines of empirical research, and especially from rational reconstructions of our competences in various fields. He hopes that these various theoretical perspectives may overlap in ways which corroborate his findings. Thomas McCarthy describes the burden of proof assumed by Habermas in arguing against the relativist as follows:

> To put it succinctly, Habermas has to show that the ability to act communicatively (in his strong sense) and to reason argumentatively and reflectively about disputed validity claims is a developmental-logically advanced stage of species-wide competences, the realisation and completion of potentialities that are universal to humankind.[50]

The plausibility of Habermas's defence of the claim that there are universal-pragmatic features of communication as such therefore turns on the success of his attempt to view these features *in a developmental perspective*. This will be the subject of Chapters 3 and 4. Habermas must show by means of such accounts that the emergence of the rationality he associates with language use in Western modernity represents a demonstrable advance upon other structures. The weight of the argument against the relativist is contained in these developmental reconstructions, rather than in the transcendental-pragmatic argument itself.

---

[50]Thomas McCarthy, "Rationality and Relativism: Habermas's "Overcoming" of Hermeneutics," in *Habermas: Critical Debates*, ed. J. B. Thompson and David Held (Macmillan, 1982): 66. McCarthy's article has been invaluable in clarifying Habermas's approach to establishing his theoretical claim to universalism. My understanding in this chapter is very much indebted to his account.

Chapter Three

What raises us out of nature is the only thing whose nature we can know: language. Through its structure autonomy and responsibility are posited for us. Our first sentence expresses unequivocally the intention of universal and unconstrained consensus. Autonomy and responsibility together comprise the only idea that we possess a priori in the sense of the philosophical tradition.

Jürgen Habermas, 1965[1]

...the presuppositions of communicative action already carry within themselves the germ of morality.

Jürgen Habermas, 1991[2]

3.1. Introduction

The intuition underlying Habermas's programme of discourse ethics is that all human beings, in virtue of their being speakers of a language, should recognise the validity of several moral concepts, and that these concepts find their fullest articulation in the procedure outlined by the principle of universalisation. His attempted justification of this idea is complex and proceeds on several levels. In the last chapter we examined the structure of the transcendental-pragmatic argument, which aims to show that every communicatively competent actor who engages in the practice of argumentation presupposes the validity of the principle of universalisation. During the first stage of the argument Habermas introduced the notion of

---

[1] Jürgen Habermas, Inaugural Lecture, June 1965 at Frankfurt University. Reprinted as an appendix in Habermas, *KHI*.

communicative action in order to demonstrate its inescapability as a practice for all human agents. Recall that communicative action is defined by Habermas as a form of interaction in which the participants coordinate their plans of action consensually. Such action is initiated by a speaker's making a speech act, which implicitly raises a validity claim. The hearer can then respond to this claim with either a "yes" or a "no". In making a speech act, a speaker offers a hearer an implicit guarantee that she will redeem her claim by providing reasons should she then be challenged to do so. In Habermas's account, the raising of such a validity claim involves both speaker and hearer in a relationship of mutual obligation. The hearer assumes the corresponding obligation to accept the claim in question unless she can cite reasons against this course of action. The coordinating power of the interaction hence lies in this assumption of mutual responsibility to provide reasons for the claims in question.

This obligation to evaluate the validity claims raised in speech acts through recourse to "good reasons" establishes an internal link between the concepts of communicative action and argumentation, a link which is essential to the success of the transcendental-pragmatic argument. However, as we saw in the last chapter, the two stages of this argument rely upon quite different forms of argumentation. In a different context, Maeve Cooke has distinguished two senses in which the term "argumentation" is employed by Habermas. I would like to adapt her terminology to clarify the present issue. I thus distinguish a general or "conventional" form of communicative action from a "postconventional" mode of communicative action associated with Western modernity, which I think essential for the derivation of the principle of universalisation. The first stage of the transcendental-pragmatic argument relies upon a conventional form of communicative action to establish its claim to generality: it draws attention to the need of human agents to engage in practices of argumentation in a very weak

---

[2]Jürgen Habermas, "Lawrence Kohlberg and Neo-Aristotelianism" in Habermas, *J&A*: 132.

sense, which requires only that agents engaged in communicative action be accountable for

providing "good reasons" for their plans of action. These reasons may take a variety of forms:

practices of reason-giving based upon the traditions of any particular society can fully satisfy

the demand for justification at this level. As Cooke explains:

> ...this way of characterizing communicative action points to an internal
> connection between such action and processes of argumentation, [however]
> these processes may be very rudimentary ones. What counts as a good reason
> may be fixed and given by the traditions of a particular society, for instance,
> and the validity of these reasons may be regarded as beyond dispute. This
> suggests that it is useful to distinguish between conventional and post-
> conventional modes of communicative action. Only the latter are connected
> with forms of argumentation that are open-ended and critical.[3]

The distinction between the two forms of argumentation hence turns upon the nature of the

demand for justification associated with each. The demand for justification associated with

conventional forms of argumentation can be fully satisfied by appealing to established

practices of reason-giving in a particular tradition. The very basic tenets undergirding a

tradition may well be conceived to lie beyond dispute. In contrast, postconventional forms of

argumentation are characterised by a more radical demand for justification, which stipulates

that no validity claim may be exempt in principle from the critical evaluation of participants.

In this chapter I will argue that the form of argumentation associated with communicative

action in the conventional sense (I will henceforth use this term interchangeably with

"Argumentation₁ ") does possess characteristics which have ethical import; however, it is the

postconventional sense of argumentation ("Argumentation₂ ") which embodies the

preunderstandings required for the derivation of (U).

The reciprocal obligations involved in conventional practices of argumentation are of

some relevance for ethics. Since communicative interactions are by definition non-coercive, the

success of the interaction is contingent upon relations of mutual recognition and respect upheld

by both speaker and hearer. Each must regard the other both as an autonomous source of claims, and as an equal participant in the process of justification. This means that, in addition to using words consistently, participants in Argumentation$_1$ must ensure that no relevant argument is suppressed or excluded, that the situation is sufficiently free of force so that only the force of the better argument prevails, and that all participants are motivated only by concern for the better argument.[4] However, these relations of mutual recognition and respect may be seen to apply only to a certain segment of society, with the result that the set of individuals who may be encountered by a given agent as potential partners in communicative action may be less than universal. The normative judgments developed from this form of argumentation must consequently be general only in the limited sense of being applied consistently by an agent to herself and to others. The norms themselves may be radically inegalitarian. For example, an agent who believes that there exists a class of persons who naturally possess the character traits of slaves could consistently support a norm endorsing the existence of slavery. It could plausibly be argued on these grounds that this practice is of general benefit in that it meets the needs of both master and slave.[5] In Argumentation$_2$ the preconditions for the practice of argumentation are similar; yet, due to the characteristics of such modes of argumentation, they take a more universal form. The postconventional mode of argumentation opens all validity claims to critical evaluation by all. It thereby makes it incumbent upon participants reciprocally to recognise one another as autonomous sources of claims having equal initial plausibility, and of demands which must be addressed.[6] These forms of argumentation can thus be seen to rely upon the concepts of what Seyla Benhabib has

---

[3]Maeve Cooke, *Language and Reason* (MIT Press, 1994): 12-13; cf. p.30.
[4]Habermas, *MCCA*: 86-9. See also Cooke (1994): 30-31.
[5]Cf. Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Ernest Barker (Oxford University Press, 1958): 9-18, especially *S*8. Habermas's insistence on the need for norms to be justified through a process of real dialogue reflects a desire to preempt precisely these sorts of arguments, in which one agent pretends an ability to represent the needs and interests of another who has not herself been consulted.

termed "universal moral respect," which specifies that every person capable of speech and action has an equal right to take part in the process of argumentation, and "egalitarian reciprocity," which stipulates that within the moral conversation each individual has symmetrical rights.[7] These include the rights of the each participant to question any assertion, to introduce new topics into the discourse, and to express her attitudes, desires and needs.[8]

The first stage of the transcendental-pragmatic argument demonstrated with plausibility that the practice of argumentation associated with communicative action in the conventional sense is an inescapable feature of human life. It is both central to our understanding of human agency, and irreplaceable by another, equivalent practice. It follows that insofar as this practice of argumentation has moral import, it will be of universal relevance for all human beings. However, as Habermas recognises, the moral presuppositions associated with Argumentation₁ can be accomodated within a wide variety of normative practices, and thus do not themselves establish any interesting form of moral universalism. Since the overall aim of the transcendental-pragmatic argument is to support Habermas's claim that discourse ethics is of validity for all human agents, the second stage of the argument endeavours to show the close links between postconventional forms of argumentation and the derivation of the principle of universalisation, or "(U)". However, the success of this argument remains to be established, in that the necessity of making the transition from the communicative practices associated with the first stage of the argument to those associated with the second stage has not yet been demonstrated. It simply does not seem to be a requirement of human agency as such that one practise argumentation in the specifically modern sense. The demand for justification

[6]Stephen K. White, *The Recent Work of Jürgen Habermas* (Cambridge University Press, 1988): 56.
[7]Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self* (Routledge, 1992): 29-52. See also Cooke (1994): 30-31.
[8]Jürgen Habermas, "Remarks on Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Philosophical Justification" in Habermas, *MCCA* : 89.

or for the provision of good reasons embodied in the *universal* practice of communicative action is satisfied by conventional forms of argumentation.[9]

The next challenge facing Habermas is thus to provide a link between conventional and postconventional forms of argumentation which will enable him to argue that all speakers of Argumentation₁ *should* recognise the validity of Argumentation₂.[10] The implicit target of the argument is the relativist: what must be shown is that these practices are not simply different modes of argumentation. Habermas maintains that these forms of argumentation stand in a hierarchical relationship to one another, in that the postconventional practice of argumentation constitutes a demonstrable cognitive gain over conventional forms of argumentation. This claim in turn serves as a basis for the argument that the moral intuitions associated with Argumentation₂ represent a more advanced form of intuitions available to all speakers of a language, and hence that the conception of ethics associated with modern modes of argumentation represents the ultimate flowering of a seed universally present for all linguistic agents.

Habermas attempts to traverse this gap between the two stages of the transcendental argument by appealing to rational reconstructions of the development, along specific axes, of both individuals and societies. These reconstructions associate the apex of development with the characteristics of postconventional forms of argumentation, in the hopes of demonstrating that mastery of these characteristics represents the developmentally most advanced stage of species-wide competencies. I would like to describe the formal features of the postconventional mode of argumentation in somewhat greater detail before turning to study Habermas's developmental accounts.

---

[9] White (1988): 56.
[10] Cf. Thomas McCarthy, "Rationality and Relativism: Habermas's "Overcoming" of Hermeneutics," in *Habermas: Critical Debates*, ed. J.B. Thompson and David Held (Macmillan, 1982): 68.

3.2 The Concept of Communicative Rationality

3.21 Characteristics of Communicative Rationality

In this section I would like to give a brief account of the concepts of validity and rationality, which play a central role in Habermas's defence of the idea that the ethical practices associated with postconventional forms of argumentation are of universal significance for all human agents.[11] Habermas develops these ideas through an analysis of the structural characteristics of postconventional forms of communicative action. Through conceptual investigations into the pragmatic structure of everyday language use in modern Western societies Habermas aims to show that an agent's ability to communicate depends upon her mastering a set of structural properties and implicit rules, and that this mastery is intimately tied to what we mean by "rationality."

The fundamental features of this approach are introduced in the essay, "What is Universal Pragmatics?" Habermas describes his aim in this paper as follows:

> The task of universal pragmatics is to identify and reconstruct universal conditions of possible understanding. In other contexts one also speaks of "general presuppositions of communication," but I prefer to speak of general presuppositions of communicative action because I take the type of action aimed at reaching understanding to be fundamental.[12]

This work extends to the features of language in use the guiding idea of the Chomskian research programme to develop a general science of language through the rational reconstruction of linguistic competence, or the competence to produce grammatically well-

---

[11]My understanding of these notions is indebted to Maeve Cooke's excellent account in Cooke (1994), which offers a detailed analysis and evaluation of the concept of communicative rationality.

[12]Jürgen Habermas, "What Is Universal Pragmatics?" in Habermas, *CES*:1.

formed sentences. Habermas's intuition is that not only *linguistic* competence, but also *communicative* competence can be reconstructed in universal terms.[13] Moreover, this reconstruction must proceed by analysing the form of language use in which communicative competence is most fully demonstrated. Habermas argues that speech oriented towards the non-coercive resolution of conflict forms the primary mode of language use, in that the condition of the possibility of there being other modes of language use, such as the strategic, rests upon the prior existence of this practice of communicative action.[14] Hence the analysis of communicative competence must take place by examining (postconventional) forms of communicative action.

The process of action oriented to reaching understanding requires actors to develop and compare plans of action through a communicative exchange. When we focus on the pragmatic dimensions of speech, we see that in speaking we relate to one of three categories: the world around us, the social world we share with other persons, and our own inner world of needs, feelings and wishes. We make claims in each of these dimensions concerning the validity of what we are saying. In order to function successfully in coordinating plans of action, linguistic utterances must make explicit reference to the items of extralinguistic experience such as facts, norms and intentions. Successful consensual coordination of interaction relies upon the ability of agents to relate their speech acts to a shared reality in such a way that reasoned assessment of them becomes possible. In Habermas's view, the precondition of our ability to carry out successful communicative interactions is the existence of a formal-pragmatic infrastructure of speech, which consists of general rules for arranging

---

[13]Thomas McCarthy, "Translator's Introduction" in Jürgen Habermas, *CES*: xviii.

[14]Habermas also characterises the relationship between strategic and communicative forms of action as one of asymmetry of complexity. In strategic action an actor approaches a situation through assuming an "objectivating attitude" to all elements of the social world. Communicative actions, as Habermas shall argue, offer agents a more complex and adequate array of attitudes with which to approach social interaction.

the elements of speech situations within a coordinate system or matrix of three relations to reality. To put the point in Habermas's terminology, the utterance of a speech act situates a given sentence simultaneously in relation to three extralinguistic "worlds." As he explains, "for every successful communicative action there exists a threefold relation between the utterance and (a) 'the external world' as the totality of existing states of affairs, (b) 'our social world' as the totality of all normatively regulated interpersonal relations that count as legitimate in a given society, and (c) 'a particular inner world' (of the speaker) as the totality of his intentional experiences."[15] The link between grammatical sentences and the three worlds of extralinguistic reality is enacted through the raising and redeeming of "validity claims." In making an utterance every speaker asserts, even if only implicitly, that what she says is true, that her intentions are sincere, and that the utterance is right in relation to a recognised normative context.

That actors seek the reasoned recognition of others for the validity claims they raise is a feature common to all forms of communicative action. However, postconventional communicative action is characterised by the feature that no validity claim raised in such a context can in principle be immune to challenge or dispute. The raising of validity claims in this context must hence be, Habermas believes, self-conscious or reflective to a high degree:

> In raising a validity claim, the speaker relativizes her utterance against the possibility that it will be contested by other agents. The possibility of rejecting, on the basis of reasons, the validity of a given claim is the defining characteristic of this mode of communication. The very notion of a validity claim thus seems to imply a reflective relation to the world, for in order to recognize a given utterance as a validity *claim* a participant in communication must recognize that other participants may have reasons for challenging the utterance's validity.[16]

---

[15] Jürgen Habermas, "What is Universal Pragmatics?" in Habermas, *CES*: 67.
[16] Cooke (1994): 11-12.

Actors who raise validity claims in speech acts must be aware that their validity claims are in principle contestable, and this is precisely to be aware of the status of these claims as *claims*, rather than as evident truths. To put the point differently, the ability to carry out postconventional forms of communicative action requires that agents have acquired what Habermas, following Piaget, refers to as a "decentered view of the world."

Cultural modernity is characterised by Habermas as a period marked by a decentering of consciousness at the societal level. Following Weber, he argues that cosmological worldviews, which have traditionally conferred meaning and unity upon human endeavours, progressively lose their power to serve as ultimate foundations for the traditions and practices of modern societies. This process can be described as a decentering of worldviews in the sense that all worldviews are now seen as standing in need of justification. For both Habermas and Weber, the modern era witnesses the disintegration of the substantive forms of reason expressed in religious and metaphysical worldviews, into the autonomous cultural value spheres of science, morality and art.

> Modernity is characterized by a rejection of the substantive rationality typical of religious and metaphysical worldviews and by a belief in procedural rationality and its ability to give credence to our views in the three areas of objective knowledge, moral-practical insight, and aesthetic judgment.[17]

The decentering of consciousness in the modern age makes it incumbent upon participants in postconventional forms of communicative action to recognise that the validation of truth-claims in each of the three "worlds" or specialised value spheres requires *different* methods and procedures; methods and procedures which cosmological worldviews had previously assimilated. Whereas Aristotle could reason from (purported) facts about the nature of the cosmos or universe to the virtues or excellences of humans,[18] moderns recognise that the

---

[17]Jürgen Habermas, "Philosophy as Stand-In and Interpreter," in Habermas, *MCCA*: 4.

[18]See e.g. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*

80

validation of an empirical truth claim such as "all swans are white" should proceed differently from that for a normative claims such as "the production and distribution of pornography is wrong."[19] As we saw, the principle of universalisation is precisely an attempt to define what is meant when such a normative validity claim is raised. The ability to distinguish these three "worlds" can hence be viewed as equivalent to an ability to distinguish between types of validity claim.[20]

The formal features of the modern, decentered understanding of the world account for its superior rationality. According to Habermas, a belief is rational to the extent to which it can be justified through the provision of good reasons.[21] A decentered understanding of the world facilitates this task in two ways: First, Habermas believes that the understanding of validity claims demonstrated in postconventional modes of communicative action reflects a more accurate understanding of reality, and is thereby superior to other modes of construing validity claims. Because the validity claims in these modes of argumentation have been separated out into three domains of validity, there is more possibility of providing appropriate justifications for the claims raised in argumentation. As Cooke explains:

> What Habermas seems to be saying is that the modern--decentered-- understanding of the world has opened up different dimensions of validity; to the extent that each dimension of validity has its own standards of truth and falsity and its own modes of justification for determining these, one may say that what has been opened up are dimensions of rationality.[22]

Second, in postconventional communicative action no validity claim can be in principle immune to criticism: every actor recognises the obligation to provide justification for any

---

[19]In the next chapter we will give detailed consideration to Habermas's claim that this separation of validity spheres represents an advance over other conceptions.

[20]Participants in communicative action also learn to take up different *attitudes* (objectivating, norm-conformative and expressive) towards these worlds. In the first instance, when we adopt e.g. an expressive attitude, we relate to our "own" world of inner experience. However, it is possible in a secondary sense to take up different attitudes towards worlds. For example, one might, for poetic reasons, take up an expressive attitude towards the world of external experience. Cooke (1994): 10.

[21]Jürgen Habermas, *TCA 1*: 22.

81

validity claim raised. As we shall see in Chapter 4, Habermas argues that this openness to critique renders the modern, decentered understanding of the world "logically superior in learning potential."[23]

3.22 The Role Played by the Concept of Communicative Rationality

The concept of communicative rationality plays a pivotal role in Habermas's general philosophical project, which aims ultimately to develop a critical theory of modern Western late-capitalist society based upon the study of communicative interactions. In the Preface to the *Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas offers a succinct description of the purpose of his inquiry: "[T]he theory of communicative action," he writes, "is intended to make possible a conceptualization of the social life-context that is tailored to the paradoxes of modernity."[24] The critical theory of society which Habermas aims to develop must be sufficiently general that it permit us to understand the development of society as a whole in its full complexity. It must enable us to analyse and account for the pathologies of modernity, such as loss of meaning and anomie, in a way which opens up the possibility for their constructive transformation. The programme of discourse ethics forms one important axis of such a theory. The concept of communicative rationality plays a large role in the attempt to articulate a critical theory of society, precisely because it is through this construal of rationality that Habermas hopes to develop the requisite critical standpoint. As Cooke explains: "Habermas attempts to develop a nonrepressive conception of reason which will

---

[22]Cooke (1994): 11.
[23]The phrase is David Ingram's. See Ingram, *Habermas and the Dialectic of Reason* (Yale University Press, 1987): 26.
[24]Habermas, *TCA I*: xlii.

provide a standard from which to critique irrational or unjust forms of individual and social life while avoiding possibly repressive metaphysical conceptions."[25]

Habermas's notion of communicative rationality must hence negotiate two dangers. First, it must avoid making strong claims characteristic of philosophy in the Kantian mode, for several related reasons. Substantive conceptions of truth or rationality, particularly in the moral domain, have repeatedly shown themselves to be hypostatisations of the value concepts of a particular society, or more typically, a particular segment of a given society, which tend to portray those not belonging to the group as deficient in these qualities or values. Such a concept is potentially repressive, as Habermas recognises. Habermas can be seen here as giving partial recognition to Nietzsche's point in the *Genealogy of Morals* that the value concepts of a particular group represent an attempt at self-affirmation on the part of that group, and concomitantly, a domination over others. He acknowledges that the voice of the other has frequently been repressed in the name of moral universalism, resulting in a circumstance in which human dignity is violated, through a refusal either to recognise the interests of the agents in question or to respect their differences.[26] Feminist literature provides numerous examples of precisely such domination: it has extensively documented the tendency of philosophers to portray women as possessing qualities which are the inferior complement of the virtues associated with men, particularly the virtue of reason.[27] This is another manner of reiterating the criticisms of the epistemological paradigm raised in Chapter 1, namely by drawing attention to the intimate links between specific conceptions of truth, reason and agency, and the network of social interactions, including the power hierarchies which structure

---

[25]Cooke (1994): 1.
[26]Jürgen Habermas, "On the Employments of Practical Reason," in Habermas, *J&A.:* 14-15.
[27]See e.g. Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?* (Cornell University Press, 1991); Susan Moller Okin, *Women in Western Political Thought* (Princeton, 1979); and for an anthology documenting the concept of woman in the history of philosophy, see Mary Briody Mahowald , ed., *The Philosophy of Woman* (Hackett, 1978).

such interactions, characteristic of a particular form of life. Habermas hopes to avoid this error by substituting a procedural approach to rationality and the justification of moral norms for a substantivist one.

Second, although "postmetaphysical" and hence (hopefully) non-repressive, this conception must prove itself sufficiently strong to serve as a point of critical evaluation. As we have seen, Habermas holds that philosophy can retain its claim to reason while accommodating the legitimate recent criticisms of the conceptions of reason, knowledge and agency embodied in traditional philosophy. These criticisms were previously presented in connection with the themes of the Kantian epistemological paradigm in philosophy. For Kant, the question of how to assess the validity of knowledge claims lies at the heart of the philosophical enterprise. Through offering a series of transcendental arguments, he attempts to define once and for all both the possibility and limits of knowledge. Habermas calls the philosophical paradigm which Kantian epistemology exemplifies "the philosophy of consciousness." It takes as its point of departure the question of how an autonomous rational subject can acquire reliable knowledge of a world of objects existing independently of it. However, critiques from a number of sources have called into question the presuppositions of this model, pointing out both the impossibility of conceiving reason as standing abstractly above history and the complexities of social life, and the deep sense in which agency can develop only in the context of close ties to particular communities.

The concept of communicative rationality hence reflects an attempt to reassess and get beyond the impasses of the "philosophy of consciousness." In contrast to the focus on individual structures of consciousness found in the subject-object model of cognition and action, Habermas defines rationality through reflection on the intersubjective practices of

84

linguistic communication and interpersonal interactions.[28] Although defined through reference to modern practices of argumentation, this form of rationality, Habermas believes, represents the fulfilment of a potential for rationality present in the communicative practices of all societies. Finally, unlike Kantian transcendental analysis of the conditions of rationality, Habermas divorces his proposals for universalist reconstructions of basic human competences from claims to necessity and certainty.

Habermas argues that philosophy should not seek to establish ultimate foundations for knowledge, as Kant did, but should rather enter into a cooperative relationship with various branches of the sciences, in particular, those tied closely to programs of rational reconstruction. Rational reconstructions aim to make theoretically explicit the pretheoretical implicit knowledge and competencies of subjects who speak and act. The universalistic hypotheses tested in such theories may originate in philosophical arguments, particularly arguments of the weak transcendental kind appealed to by Habermas. However, although such sciences aim to establish universal claims, the status of these claims is relatively weak: reconstructive sciences do not claim to establish their conclusions with ultimate validity. Instead they regard these claims as inherently fallible in that such claims must be construed as infinitely open to revision in the light of new evidence and insight.[29] The universalistic claims embodied in the reconstructive sciences must, as other claims in empirical science, be open to empirical testing, and hence differ from the universalistic approaches typical of traditional philosophy in being hypothetical rather than necessary, and fallible rather than certain.[30] The relationship between philosophy and the empirical sciences should be seen as one of mutual

---

[28]In TCA Habermas writes: "One could even say that philosophical thought originates in reflection on the reason embodied in cognition, speech and action; and reason remains its basic theme." See Habermas, TCA1: 1.
[29]Jürgen Habermas, "Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action," in Habermas, MCCA: 116.
[30]Jürgen Habermas, "Philosophy as Stand-In and Interpreter," in Habermas, MCCA: 15-16.

support rather than as one of direct confirmation. Habermas recognises that theories in moral philosophy are not open to direct confirmation through empirical studies; however, they can gain greater plausibility by demonstrating their coherence and co-ordination with theories which enjoy substantial empirical support.[31]

Our present interest in the notion of communicative rationality is limited to its importance for the programme of discourse ethics. The concept of communicative rationality plays a key role in Habermas's proposed resolution of the problem set out at the beginning of the chapter, that is, the problem of how to justify the claim to universal validity of the understanding of reality implicit in modern practices of argumentation. Habermas presents reconstructive accounts of both individual development and of social evolution to demonstrate the plausibility of the claim that postmodern forms of argumentation represent an advance over conventional ones. Both theories aim to show that the structures of rationality identified by Habermas as being characteristic of modern thought represent advances in problem solving ability over other forms of reasoning, and hence that these structures lie at the apex of a sequential path of development. If successful, this should in turn provide a reference point for the social critique of modernity which the theory of communicative action was developed to handle precisely by showing that "the moral point of view" and its associated procedure is of relevance to all.

3.3 The Development of Moral Consciousness

---

[31] Jürgen Habermas, "Moral Consciousness," in Habermas, *MCCA*: 117.

Habermas views the work issuing from the cognitive-developmental tradition in psychology as complementary to his own attempts to defend a universalist position in ethics. This tradition shares with him an interest in developing theoretical reconstructions of the acquisition of universal human competences in the areas of cognition, speech and social interaction. Piaget's studies in the development of the capacity for formal reasoning and Lawrence Kohlberg's work in the development of moral consciousness can be seen as attempts to support reconstructive hypotheses of a universalist or species-wide nature through empirical research. Kohlberg's theory describes the acquisition of moral consciousness in terms of a sequence of stages of moral judgement which are claimed to be both culturally universal and sequentially invariant. Moreover, the highest stage of moral judgment is characterized in terms of formal properties, such as generality and reversibility, similar to those embodied in the procedure for the resolution of moral conflicts endorsed by discourse ethics. Thus the results of Kohlberg's research cohere with the basic tenets of Habermas's philosophical programme, and thereby provide an empirical basis for its defence.[32] The relationship which Habermas envisions between these two theories is nuanced and complex. Rather than viewing Kohlberg's theory as a potential "proof" of his philosophical claims, Habermas sees the potential coherence between these two theories as lending some measure of indirect confirmation to each: while drawing upon the results of Kohlberg's empirical research to support his own claims in discourse ethics, Habermas aims to show that the theoretical resources of discursive ethics can contribute to improving the conceptual clarity, and hence the plausibility, of Kohlberg's research. This mutual interweaving of support exemplifies Habermas's vision of how philosophy should cooperate with the empirical sciences. I would like to begin by presenting a brief summary of the results of Kohlberg's research into the genesis of the

---

[32]This coherence is, as Habermas recognises, not independent of the fact that both theories have common roots in Kantian moral philosophy. We will return to this issue below.

capacity for moral judgement in individuals, before turning to Habermas's analysis and reinterpretation of this theory in terms of the concepts of a discursive ethics.

3.31 Lawrence Kohlberg & the Acquisition of the Individual's Capacity for Moral Judgement

Kohlberg's theory begins with a commitment to what he terms "methodological nonrelativism." While recognizing the fact that, historically, different societies have conceived of both norms and their appropriate modes of justification in a variety of ways, Kohlberg shares with Habermas the belief that it is possible to isolate certain formal criteria which are universally relevant. He explains: "Methodological nonrelativism is the doctrine that certain criteria (importantly, reversibility or universalizability) of moral reasoning or principles are universally relevant. It means that, even if there are observed cultural divergences of moral standards, there are rational principles and methods that can reconcile these divergences or lead to agreement."[33] Kohlberg turns to Western moral philosophy, and in particular, the formalist tradition stemming from Kant, for the key descriptions of the abstract criteria in question.[34] The question of whether these criteria can perform the role assigned them will be a matter of ongoing concern.

---

[33]Lawrence Kohlberg, "From Is to Ought: How to Commit the Naturalistic Fallacy and Get away with It in the Study of Moral Development," in his *Essays on Moral Development*, vol. 1., *The Philosophy of Moral Development* (San Francisco, 1981): 97.

[34]Kohlberg is quick to acknowledge that his theory does not begin from a "neutral" starting point, either culturally or philosophically. However, he does not believe that this compromises the validity of his theory. He argues that all theories must start from some assumptions and that the goal of adopting a purely neutral stance is hence chimerical. Like Habermas, he believes that moral philosophy and moral psychology can work together cooperatively, in what he describes as a "spiral or bootstrapping process." It may not seem surprising, Kohlberg acknowledges, that a theory which begins from the insights of Kantian moral philosophy issues in results which are consonant which such philosophy. However, it would be wrong to view the results of Kohlberg's theory as simply arbitrary: empirical data on the one hand and the challenge of competing theoretical paradigms on the other should serve as a corrective for the biases adopted in the process of theory construction. See Kohlberg, "From Is to Ought," in Kohlberg (1981): 97-114.

The central attraction for Habermas of Kohlberg's theory is its defence of the notion that there is a unique path of moral development recognisable species-wide. Kohlberg claims that empirical data demonstrate that those who attain the highest levels of moral development in any culture attempt to formulate universalisable principles, and that these basic principles are recognisably similar even across very different cultures. Any adequate social science theory must therefore take account of this similarity in some fashion.[35] Kohlberg attempts to do justice to this phenomenon by adopting an explanatory framework comprising a cognitive-developmental theory of moral stages. He writes:

> We claim that there is a universally valid form of rational moral thought process which all persons could articulate, assuming social and cultural conditions suitable to cognitive-moral stage development. We claim that the ontogenesis toward this form of rational moral thinking occurs in the same stepwise, invariant stage sequence.[36]

According to Kohlberg, this series of stages can be represented as interlinked points of equilibrium. Each successive stage represents a greater degree of adequacy in the maturation of moral consciousness than the preceding one, in that the individual acquires a more sophisticated problem-solving ability.

The cognitive-developmental approach to studying individual maturation in the sphere of moral consciousness is of particular interest to Habermas in its manner of dealing with the phenomenon of normative diversity. Opponents of universalist theories of ethical development generally point to the large variety of norms which have been, or are currently, regarded as valid across different social groups or societies in order to cast doubt on the plausibility of advancing a universalist claim. Kohlberg's theory of moral development attempts to render the fact of ethical diversity consonant with a universalist approach to moral maturation by several

---

[35]Kohlberg, "From Is to Ought," in Kohlberg (1981): 97.

means. First, and in a manner generally agreeable with all Kantian moral philosophies, Kohlberg isolates a narrow range of questions which he associates with "morality" from the broad range of normative concerns. A "moral conflict" is defined by Kohlberg as "a conflict between the competing claims of people."[37] So moral judgements are those concerned with solving conflicts of interest. Kohlberg believes that judgements involving conflicts of interest are rational in that they represent strategies for conflict resolution which may be objectively judged as being more or less adequate. This makes their acquisition different in character from that of other "cultural values" which Kohlberg along with Habermas views as inculcated non-rationally or arbitrarily.[38]

The innovation of the cognitive-developmental approach and its specific interest for Habermas as an anti-relativist strategy lies in its adoption of a twofold methodology pioneered in Piaget's studies of cognitive development: (1) First, Kohlberg focuses on the "form" rather than the "content" of concrete moral judgements. The apparent diversity of moral judgements may be substantially reduced by drawing attention to commonalities in the structures of these judgements, rather than the specific content of what they recommend as good. (2) Second, Kohlberg places these moral judgments into a sequence of stages developing through an internal logic from lowest to highest forms of moral judgment. An internal logic, as we shall see below, claims to represent a cumulative advance in moral consciousness from less adequate to more adequate forms. The remaining differences between forms of moral judgement cross-culturally may then be explained as differences in the level of development of

---

[36]Lawrence Kohlberg. "The Current Formulation of the Theory," in Kohlberg, *Psychology of Moral Development* (San Francisco, 1984): 286. As quoted in Jürgen Habermas's "Lawrence Kohlberg and Neo-Aristotelianism," in Habermas, *J&A:* 114.
[37]Kohlberg, "From Is to Ought," in Kohlberg (1981): 143.
[38]Kohlberg, "From Is to Ought," in Kohlberg (1981): 105.

90

the capacity of moral judgement.[39] I would like to discuss in greater detail how these two features play out in Kohlberg's account.

The range of variation in moral concepts held by individuals and cultures is significantly less, Kohlberg believes, than is often thought. He claims his empirical studies show that the same basic formulations of moral principles are found in every culture. As we shall see, it is Kohlberg's focus on the distinctive *forms* rather than the particular *contents* of moral judgements which allows him to persuasively defend the idea that there exist universal moral concepts, values and principles.[40] Kohlberg's method of studying moral development relies upon asking test subjects how they would resolve a series of hypothetical dilemmas involving interpersonal conflicts of interest. Examination of the strategies employed for dilemma-resolution suggests not only that such strategies are finite in number, but that they follow one another in an invariant order. Kohlberg's studies were conducted initially on a group of 75 boys in the United States over a 15 year period from early adolescence through young manhood. His hypotheses concerning both the basic principles and their order of development were formulated in this context.[41] However, the initial studies have now been supplemented by a series of studies concerning the development of moral judgement in other cultures. I would like to examine in greater detail how Kohlberg employs the form/content distinction in his cross-cultural studies to support the notion that the number of basic moral principles is finite.

---

[39]Habermas, "Moral Consciousness," in Habermas, *MCCA*: 117.
[40]Kohlberg, "From Is to Ought," in Kohlberg (1981): 116.
[41]Although Kohlberg claims universality for his stage sequence, groups not included in his original sample rarely reach his higher stages. Initial results of Kohlberg's empirical studies place women's average level of moral development behind that of men, at Stage 3. The question whether the original formulation of the theory is non-neutral in that it depicts the path of moral development predominantly in terms drawn from men's experience of moral conflict and choice, in such a way as to occlude the understanding of women's moral experience and of their place within that development, is taken up by Carol Gilligan in her insightful and pathbreaking study, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, (Harvard University Press, 1982).

The famous Heinz dilemma is used by Kohlberg to present test subjects with a situation of interpersonal conflict in which the value of property ownership is pitted against that of preservation of life. In the Heinz dilemma a husband, having ascertained that there are no legitimate means open to him to acquire a certain drug essential to his wife's survival, steals it. Test subjects are asked to evaluate whether this action was right. The first difficulty in generating comparable data cross-culturally concerns the translation of this dilemma into similar concepts in the language of the culture in question. Here is the dilemma as presented in concepts deemed suitable for inhabitants of two villages investigated, one Atayal (Malaysian aboriginal), and one Taiwanese:

> A man and his wife had just migrated from the high mountains. They started to farm, but there was no rain, and no crops grew. No one had enough food. The wife got sick, and finally she was close to dying from having no food. There was only one grocery store in the village, and the storekeeper charged a very high price for the food. The husband asked the storekeeper for some food for his wife, and said he would pay for it later. The storekeeper said, `No, I won't give you any food unless you pay first.' The husband went to all the people in the village to ask for food, but no one had any food to spare. So he got desperate, and broke into the store to steal food for his wife. Should the husband have done that? Why?[42]

The studies Kohlberg has conducted cross-culturally support the idea that one can identify a number of common forms or methods of resolving a given dilemma, even though the specific reasoning might differ according to cultural norms. Kohlberg defends this claim by showing the similarities between the varieties of response obtained in the two villages studied. In the Taiwanese village, a boy whom Kohlberg evaluated at being morally at Stage 2 would respond to the dilemma by saying "He should steal the food for his wife, because if she dies he'll have to pay for her funeral and that costs a lot." In the Atayal village the importance of funerals was not the predominant concern. Stage 2 boys in this village would say, "He should steal the food because he needs his wife to cook for him." Although the boys agree that the act of

stealing was right on the part of the husband, they justify this claim by reference to the instrumental use of the wife to her husband, either as a domestic servant or as a means of avoiding incurring expense. In both cultures, the form of the reasoning used to resolve the dilemma operates by thinking through the concepts of what is right in terms of the notion of instrumental exchange, which Kohlberg identifies with Stage 2 moral thinking. Such a consistent method of evaluating moral dilemmas is what Kohlberg calls a "moral principle."

Kohlberg claims not only that the basic principles used to resolve moral dilemmas are finite in number and present across different societies and cultural groups, but also that these principles can be organized sequentially into a set of stages. A "stage" concept implies that individual development should manifest a universality of sequence under varying cultural conditions. As Kohlberg explains: "All individuals in all cultures go through the same order or sequences of gross stages of development, though varying in rate and terminal point of development."[43] The results of Kohlberg's empirical research show that an individual's moral stage cannot be derived directly from the most frequent or "modal" stage of the society in which she lives. Nonetheless, there are differences in the observed frequency with which the highest moral stages appear across various cultural groups, and these differences in stage are, according to Kohlberg, related to the cognitive and social complexity of the group. Empirical results confirmed that stages 5 and 6 were entirely absent in the isolated villages studied; that the rate of development was slower in Mexico and Taiwan than in the United States; and that Stage 5 is more salient in the United States than in other countries studied.[44] We will return to this theme in 3.4 below. At present, we can summarise by saying that, for Kohlberg, moral judgements are those concerned with resolving conflicts of interest. The ways in which such

---

[42]Kohlberg, "From Is to Ought," in Kohlberg (1981): 115.
[43]Kohlberg, "From Is to Ought," in Kohlberg (1981): 126.
[44]Kohlberg, "From Is to Ought," in Kohlberg (1981): 123.

conflicts are resolved admit of formal analysis, and such analysis reveals that the strategies for conflict resolution are finite in number, universal, and move in stages.

Cognitive-developmental models comprise a series of stages which are regarded as forming a conceptual hierarchy, each of which represents a higher or more adequate level of problem-solving in the moral domain. Kohlberg shares with Piaget a constructivist concept of learning according to which knowledge is seen as a continuous construction which emerges through the individual's interaction with her environment. The transition to higher levels of cognitive structures is viewed as a creative reorganisation on the part of the individual who, in the face of persistent difficulties, reorganises the existing cognitive inventory in a more adequate manner. This transition should be a seen as a form of learning. It must be possible for the individual herself to explain why the transition from one stage to another enables her to solve the problem in question more adequately, thereby revealing the deficiencies of her original mode of thinking.

The stages of moral development outlined by Kohlberg represent a process of learning, where each stage is defined "as a relative equilibrium of operations that become increasingly complex, abstract, general, and reversible."[45] They hence constitute a hierarchy of cognitive difficulty, where the lower stages are available to, but not used by, those at higher stages. Kohlberg conceives the relationship between the development of formal cognitive operations such as those studied by Piaget and the development of the stages of moral judgment as one of parallelism, in that the acquisition of new moral structures is made possible by the acquisition of new abilities in logical reasoning. However, mastery of formal logical structures constitutes a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the acquisition of a new moral stage, since the acquisition of higher moral equilibria involves two processes absent in the logical domain or in

94

the cognition of physical objects.[46] In the first place, moral judgements involve the ability to take the viewpoint or role of another person conceived as a subject, and to coordinate interactions through reference to these viewpoints. As Kohlberg explains:

> The primary meaning of the word social is the distinctively human structuring of action and thought by role taking, by the tendency to react to others as like self and to react to the self's behavior from the other's point of view. The centrality of role taking for moral judgment is recognized in the notion that moral judgment is based on sympathy for others, as well as in the notion that the moral judge must adopt the perspective of the "impartial spectator" or the "generalized other," a notion central to moral philosophy from Adam Smith to Roderick Firth.[47]

The precondition for having a moral conflict is precisely this role-taking ability. Moral conflicts, or conflicts between the competing claims of people, arise when there are discrepancies between the role-taking expectations of one person and another.

Second, moral situations in disequilibrium are resolved by appealing to principles of justice or fairness. As we have seen, moral stages represent the interaction of the child's structuring tendencies and the features of the environment, which, in the face of certain unresolved difficulties, lead to successive forms of equilibria. The movement from stage to stage is brought about by situations of moral disequilibrium, where such a situation is defined as one "in which there are unresolved conflicting claims."[48] A situation of disequilibrium is resolved when each party involved is "given his due." The interpretation of what fairness means in this case is specified in Kohlberg's scheme by the particular principle of justice embodied in each stage. Examples of such interpretations of fairness are the ideas that what is just is that which instrumentally satisfies one's own needs while accommodating the needs of

[45]Habermas, "Reconstruction and Interpretation in the Social Sciences," in Habermas, MCCA: 34.
[46]Kohlberg, "Justice as Reversibility," in Kohlberg (1981): 194.
[47]Kohlberg, "From Is to Ought," in Kohlberg (1981): 141.
[48]Kohlberg, "Justice as Reversibility: The Claim to Moral Adequacy of a Highest Stage of Moral Judgment," in Kohlberg (1981): 194.

others (Stage 2); or that what is just is that which upholds the laws and regulations of an intrinsically valuable social order (Stage 4).

Kohlberg outlines the development of moral consciousness on a three-level model, where each level is subdivided into two stages. The salient distinctions for our purposes are those between the three levels, denoting preconventional, conventional and postconventional stages of moral consciousness. At the *preconventional* stage of moral consciousness the developing child understands and responds to the cultural use of the terms "good" and "bad", "right" and "wrong." However, both what is right and the reasons it is viewed to be right are defined principally in a vocabulary which depicts human relations as relations of exchange. The rightness of actions is assessed either in terms of the hedonistic consequences of action (reward, exchange of favours), or in terms of the directives and sanctions issuing from authority figures. At this phase the concept of a specifically moral obligation has not yet been differentiated from other reasons for action; moreover, the strategies available for the resolution of conflict are relatively limited. At the *conventional* level, conformity to social roles and meeting one's obligations as a member of the social order come to be seen as valuable in their own right. Conventional moralities do have notions of general norms; however, such norms tend to specify the nature of right action for people in a particular social role, and are hence tied to the structures of a particular form of life. At the *postconventional* level there is an attempt to define moral values and principles whose validity is not contingent on the authority of the groups or persons holding these principles, nor on the individual's identification with these groups. Kohlberg identifies two stages at this level. The fifth stage is entitled the stage of "social contract or legalistic orientation," and is closely connected with the philosophical theory of utilitarianism. Agents at this stage turn towards procedural rules for designing laws and standards for the good of all members of society as a whole. These laws

96

and duties are often based on the rational calculation of consequences, or, "the greatest good for the greatest number." The highest stage of moral judgement, Stage 6, is identified with the philosophical theory of deontology, where the understanding of what is right is seen as based upon the validity of abstract principles which hold for all of humanity. Kohlberg's schema is presented in Appendix 1.

Kohlberg must next address the question of the sense in which the stages outlined constitute a *hierarchy*. This requires the specification of formal, universally relevant criteria which demonstrate that the equilibria reached in the higher stages of moral judgement constitute "more adequate" solutions to moral conflicts.[49] Although Kohlberg does hold that more mature stages of moral consciousness embody more complex cognitive structures, he argues that the higher stages of moral judgement should be regarded as "objectively" preferable to earlier stages of moral consciousness on the basis of certain *moral* criteria. Higher stages are more moral than lower ones in the sense that they more closely approach the formal criteria separating moral from non-moral judgements.[50] Kohlberg adopts general standards of adequacy from the writings of moral philosophers in the Kantian school, which see the adequacy of moral judgements as a function of formal characteristics such as universalisability, impersonality and ideality, rather than of content. The logic inherent in the sequence of stages of moral consciousness is explicated by Kohlberg in terms of the increases in "differentiation" and "integration" present at each successive stage, where these criteria are said to be isomorphic with the formal criteria that philosophers in the Kantian school have established to characterise genuine moral judgements.

---

[49]The successful specification of such criteria is central to Kohlberg's "methodological non-relativism."

[50]Kohlberg, "Justice as Reversibility," in Kohlberg (1981): 190-1.

97

According to Kohlberg, the process of "differentiation" describes the degree to which individuals at a given stage are able to separate out the sphere of moral issues from the general field of practical reason. At the first stage, moral and non-moral motives are fully conjoined: a child does not differentiate between performing an action because of fear of punishment, and performing an action because it is right. At the middle levels of moral judgement, the notion of a binding norm is recognised. However, the motives for performing right actions and the conception of what such actions consist in are, to use Kantian terminology, heteronomous, blending as they do motives of self-interest and inclination with adherence to principle. At the highest level of moral development principled morality as articulated in the categorical "ought" becomes clearly separated from the sphere of practical reason as an autonomous domain. Furthermore, moral obligations are viewed as taking precedence over all others. "Integration" refers to the sophistication or comprehensiveness with which a structure of thought allows an individual to accommodate the conflicting claims of individuals present in a moral dispute. This structure of thought is associated with the criteria of consistency and universality, which play an essential role in the claim of postconventional morality to establish in principle what is right for anyone in any situation. The more points of view which an individual can imaginatively assume, the more powerfully this form of moral consciousness can serve as a tool for bringing conflicting points of view into equilibrium. A child's ability to see herself as interchangeable with other parties in a moral conflict increases as she ascends the ladder of moral judgement. Kohlberg thus concludes: "These combined criteria, differentiation and integration, are considered by developmental theory to entail a better equilibrium of the structure in question. A more differentiated and integrated moral structure handles more moral problems, conflicts, or points of view in a more stable or self-consistent way."[51]

---

[51]Kohlberg, "From Is to Ought," in Kohlberg (1981): 134. My understanding of these points has

It is worthwhile considering the properties of Stage 6 moral judgements in somewhat greater detail. Kohlberg argues that judgements made at the highest stage are not only more just or "morally right," but also that people using Stage 6 thinking will *reach agreement* about the resolution of specific dilemmas. "Not only are Stage 6 principles designed to be acceptable to all rational people, but all those who were using Stage 6 methods and principles will eventually agree on the "right" solution in concrete situations, our empirical data suggest."[52] The general claim advanced in this passage is that the stability of moral solutions increases with the stage of moral consciousness, because the content of the judgement made at each successive phase is determined less by situational or cultural particularities and more by the structure of the moral principles. At the highest level, Kohlberg envisions test subjects analysing moral dilemmas by means of a universal principle similar to Kant's Categorical Imperative. The second formulation of this imperative, which reads, "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means"[53] brings out the features of universality and respect for persons as "ends in themselves" most relevant for "appropriate" dilemma-resolution.[54]   Consistent use of such a general moral principle results in a higher degree of agreement among people on the proper resolutions to dilemmas posed. This idea is of crucial significance for Habermas's discourse ethics: if Kohlberg's intuition is correct, the procedure of discourse ethics, which is explicitly designed to capture the structure of Stage 6 moral judgements, *should* end in consensus, just as Habermas asserts.

---

been facilitated by Stephen White's very clear analysis in White (1988): 59.

[52]Kohlberg, "Justice as Reversibility," in Kohlberg (1981): 193.

[53]Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James Ellington (Hackett. 1981): 36

[54]The question is, of course, whether the definition of what an "appropriate" solution might be is specifiable in a neutral manner, or whether it reflects to some significant degree Kohlberg's own philosophical commitments.

However, both the description and the existence of this sixth stage are hotly contested matters. Kohlberg, as we have seen, draws explicitly upon the concepts of Kantian moral philosophy to define the features of Stage 6, as there is at present insufficient empirical evidence to do so. As Kohlberg admits, although longitudinal studies carried out in the United States, Turkey and Israel support the existence of a fifth stage, none of the subjects studied has yet reached the highest stage of moral development. "Our examples of Stage 6," he writes, "come either from historical figures or from interviews with people who have had extensive philosophic training....Stage 6 is perhaps less a statement of an attained psychological reality than the specification of a direction in which, our theory claims, ethical development is moving."[55]

3.32 The Discourse-Ethical Reinterpretation of Kohlberg's Theory

Both the definition of the moral sphere, and the features (such as impartiality, universalisability, reversibility and prescriptivity) which Kohlberg uses to characterise the apex of moral reasoning, are compatible with the general contours of Habermas's discourse ethics. This, as Habermas acknowledges, is less than surprising given the common inspiration of these two theories in Kantian deontology. While acknowledging the difficulties occasioned by this philosophical proximity in assessing the degree to which the coherence between these theories is significant, Habermas believes that discourse ethics can complement the scheme which Kohlberg has set out in two general respects, thereby enhancing the plausibility of each. (1) Habermas is dissatisfied with the account Kohlberg provides concerning why the stages should be seen to form a logical sequence of development. If discourse ethics can manage to give a more satisfactory account of the conceptual interrelation of these stages, the argument for the superiority of a postconventional form of moral reasoning closely allied to (U) and

---

[55]Kohlberg, "From Is to Ought," in Kohlberg (1981): 100.

affiliated with Kohlberg's Stage 6 will have been strengthened. This should render Kohlberg's argument more attractive, by improving its internal coherence. (2) If successful, this should provide some reason for thinking that discourse ethics offers the most philosophically adequate account of moral reasoning among the varieties of neo-Kantianism, which in turn should strengthen its claim to provide the most suitable description of Stage 6.[56] As Habermas notes: "The discursive procedure, in fact, reflects the very operations Kohlberg postulates for moral judgments at the postconventional level: complete *reversibility* of the perspectives from which the participants produce their arguments; *universality*, understood as the inclusion of all concerned; and the *reciprocity* of equal recognition of the claims of each participant by all others."[57] Because our overall interest is in Habermas's claim to advance a universalist ethic we will give particular attention to the first line of argument. It aims to justify the superiority of postconventional structures of moral judgement over the other forms of moral judgement relegated to levels I and II in Kohlberg's stage sequence.

Although Habermas finds the general scheme of stages of moral consciousness set out by Kohlberg very plausible, he believes that Kohlberg has failed to fulfil his obligation to demonstrate the interrelation of these stages in terms adequate for a cognitive-developmental model. In order to advance a stage model of the development of a specific competence, in this case, the competence for moral judgement, Kohlberg must show that these hierarchically ordered stages form a path of development which has an internal logic, and which fulfills the

---

[56]In an earlier essay Habermas attempted to show that the dialogical form of conflict resolution described by discourse ethics, in which the need interpretations advanced by individuals can themselves become an object of practical discourse, actually represents a seventh stage of moral development. At this juncture Habermas, following Kohlberg, associated Stage 6 with approaches such as that of John Rawls. Rawls' theory conceives of justice deontologically and procedurally; however, because it tests the generalisability of norms monologically it does not require an individual to challenge his or her need interpretations directly, as would a real discourse of the sort Habermas recommends. Habermas has since abandoned this idea and now interprets the battle between the various forms of deontology as disagreements over what constitutes the most adequate description of Stage 6. See Habermas, "Moral Development and Ego Identity," in Habermas, *CES*: 90.

criteria of a learning process. The stages must be capable of being portrayed as successively more adequate equilibria which are constructed by the individual in the face of certain persistent moral problems.[58]

It will be useful to look more closely at the features of a developmental model in order to gain a sense of the precise nature of Habermas's criticism of Kohlberg, as well as to understand the standards he himself must fulfill if he is to make good this deficiency. My description of the features of a developmental logic is drawn principally from Michael Schmid's incisive analysis of Habermas's use of developmental logics in the theory of social evolution.[59] According to Schmid, the term "developmental logic" describes a sequence of stages or steps in which processes can be seen as both *cumulative* and *exhibiting a certain direction*. A developmental model can be characterized in terms of the following three hypotheses:

(1) The stages of a developmental logical account should be "discretely definable": each stage should be amenable to definition in a logically independent fashion.

(2) The stages or phases described must form a hierarchy which exhibits an intrinsic structure: "...The cognitive structures of a higher stage dialectically sublate those of a lower one, that is, the lower stage is replaced and at the same time preserved in a reorganized, more differentiated form."[60]

(3) The stages outlined must be capable of being ordered into an invariant, irreversible and consecutive sequence. In other words, there is only one viable path towards the apex, and no higher stage can be reached without traversing all preceding stages. Once an equilibrium at a higher stage has been reached, regression is impossible.

---

[57]Habermas, "Moral Consciousness," in Habermas, *MCA*: 122.

[58]It is important to note that cognitive-developmental models distinguish the *logic* of a process of development from the *dynamics* of that development. No claim is being made about the actual process of transition between the stages, as this depends upon situational particularities which can vary without limit from case to case.

[59]See Michael Schmid, "Habermas's Theory of Social Evolution," in *Habermas: Critical Debates*, ed. J.B. Thomson and D. Held (Macmillan, 1982): 164. My appreciation of the significance of developmental-logical accounts in supporting the universality thesis of discourse ethics is due in large part to Schmid's penetrating discussion in this article.

[60]Habermas, "Moral Consciousness," in Habermas, *MCCA*: 127.

As Habermas recognises, the key component of this model is the second hypothesis. He claims that "the notion of a path of development which can be described in terms of a *hierarchically ordered sequence of structures* is absolutely crucial to Kohlberg's model of developmental stages."[61] It is the presentation of the forms of moral consciousness as a hierarchical order which allows Kohlberg to take a strong anti-relativist stance, as it permits him to organize the variety of "basic principles" identified in empirical investigation into an ascending sequence. This in turn enables him to portray these basic principles as successively more adequate approximations towards one *universal* ideal form of moral consciousness, rather than as rival or competing versions of moral judgment. While supporting Kohlberg's viewpoint, Habermas does not believe that Kohlberg has as yet met the burden of proof necessary to demonstrate it. He regards Kohlberg's six stage, three-level analysis as intuitively plausible; however, he also views its theoretical defence of the internal logic of these stages in terms of the concepts of "differentiation" and "integration" as ultimately question-begging. According to Habermas, this theoretical account is possessed of neither sufficient analytical rigour to describe the various components of the theory independently of one another, nor sufficient clarity to demonstrate why they should form an unequivocal sequence.[62]

The demonstration that Kohlberg's descriptions of moral stages do indeed form a logic of development is viewed by Habermas partly as a problem of conceptual analysis. It is on this level that he believes that discourse ethics, by bringing a distinct theoretical viewpoint to bear on the problem, may be able to contribute to the advancement of Kohlberg's theory. Habermas wants to use the framework of the theory of communicative action, and in particular the concept of a "decentered world view" associated with postconventional forms of argumentation, to define a developmental-logical ordering of types of interaction. The internal

---

[61]Habermas, "Moral Consciousness," in Habermas, *MCCA*: 128.

logic of this progression, it will be argued, consists in the way in which the phases outlined progressively approximate features associated with this decentered view of the world. The ultimate aim is to show that each stage of interaction makes available a particular "form of reciprocity," and that this form of reciprocity is precisely what is captured in the notions of justice available at Kohlberg's stages of moral consciousness. If Habermas is successful in advancing this series of arguments he will have provided a non-circular account of the logic of development of Kohlberg's moral stages in terms of the appeal to interactive or role competence.[63] Moreover, he will have come a long way towards accomplishing the goal set out at the beginning of this chapter. Because developmental logics describe processes which are cumulative and directed, a persuasive narrative demonstrating that individual maturation progresses species-wide in an invariant sequence towards forms of interaction and moral consciousness associated with *postconventional* forms of argumentation (Argumentation$_2$) will greatly increase the plausibility of arguing that such *postconventional* forms of argumentation are of universal significance to practitioners of *all* forms of argumentation. I will next delineate the principal features of this argument.

Habermas describes interactive competence or "role competence" as a mastery of the implicit rules which govern our ability to take part in increasingly complex forms of social interaction.[64] Higher stages of interactive competence can be analogously seen as those which provide an agent with more sophisticated mechanisms for the coordination of interpersonal actions. Habermas's goal is to develop a developmental-logical reconstruction of this form of universal competence which portrays the unfolding of the sequence of stages as a progressive acquisition of the features necessary to carry out communicative action at the highest or

---

[62]Habermas, "Moral Consciousness," in Habermas, *MCCA*: 129.
[63]My comprehension of Habermas's strategy for strengthening Kohlberg's argument has been greatly improved by Stephen White's elegant and accurate presentation in White (1988): 60-65.

"postconventional" level. Following Piaget, Habermas conceives of ego development as a process of cognitive and moral decentration, in which the child learns progressively to adapt to an external world of objects and to a social world constituted by norms and relationships to others. This process of decentration results in an understanding of the world which Habermas terms "decentered." The decentered perspective demands in turn that agents have acquired a certain set of abilities. As Habermas explains:

> The decentered understanding of the world is thus characterised by a complex structure of perspectives. It combines two things: first, perspectives that are grounded in the formal three-world reference system and *linked with the different attitudes toward the world,* and second, perspectives that are built into the speech situation itself and *linked to the communicative roles.*[65]

As we saw in 3 above, the capacity for postconventional communicative action turns upon an agent's having mastered the use of a tripartite system of relations to the external, social and subjective worlds, along with their corresponding validity claims. In this passage Habermas also draws attention to the demands which the process of advancing and assessing such validity claims places upon the agent herself. A mature actor, Habermas argues, must have available to her not only a system of "world perspectives," but also a system of "speaker perspectives" or communication roles. These together comprise what it means to have acquired a fully "decentered understanding of the world." It is through reconstructing the child's acquisition of this complex perspective structure that Habermas hopes to provide us with the key to the justification of Kohlberg's moral stages in terms of a logic of development.

Habermas argues that the acquisition of the decentered understanding of the world has its genesis in two basic processes: (1) The acquisition of the system of "world perspectives" is closely bound to the child's interactions with the physical environment. It is through such interactions that she acquires what Habermas terms "the observer perspective," which

---

[64]White (1988): 29.

eventually becomes consolidated as the "objectivating" attitude towards external nature and integrated into the tripartite system of validity claims. (2) The more important process for our purposes is the development of a system of "fully reversible" speaker perspectives. Habermas will argue that the system of speaker perspectives embodies certain "forms of reciprocity" among persons, which play a key role in making the connection to Kohlberg's stages of moral judgement.

As is recognised by both Kohlberg and Habermas, the development of mature structures of social thought and action is centrally related to the actor's capacity to take the role of others. Habermas hence turns to R. Selman's studies of social perspective-taking to furnish the starting point for his account of the development of a system of speaker perspectives.[66] Selman identifies three basic levels of perspective taking, each of which describes a stable pattern of thought on the basis of which the self interprets her own circumstances and actions vis-a-vis those of another individual. These levels denote frameworks which can be arranged hierarchically by virtue of their capacity to confer on actors a progressively increasing power to coordinate individual participants' plans of action on the basis of a shared definition of the situation. I will very briefly sketch Selman's stages with a particular emphasis upon the reciprocity structures which each embodies. At the first level of perspective-taking (ages 5-9) the child is clearly able to distinguish the perspectives of self and other, and recognises that they may potentially differ from one another. Habermas describes this phenomenon by saying that the child has developed a concept of speaker-hearer relations at the level of *communication*, in that the child understands what the other ("alter") means when she makes a statement, demand or announcement, and is also aware of how her

---

[65]Habermas, "Moral Consciousness," in Habermas, *MCCA*: 139.
[66]Habermas, "Moral Consciousness," in Habermas, *MCCA*: 141-46. See also R. L. Selman, *The Growth of Interpersonal Understanding* (New York, 1980).

own ("ego's") statements will be comprehended by the other. However, the child has not yet learned to extend the reciprocity present in the basic speaker-hearer relation to the formation and coordination of plans of *action*. In judging the actions of others, children at this stage find themselves unable to simultaneously maintain their own points of view while imaginatively placing themselves in the position of the other. This results in the child's inability to effectively judge her own actions from the standpoint of others, which forms a barrier to negotiating shared understandings of the situation. In other words, this stage is characterised by an incomplete form of reciprocity at the level of interpersonal interactions. During the second phase of perspective-taking (ages 7-12), which is identified by Selman with the second-person perspective, the child learns to make a reversible connection between the perspectives of speaker and hearer. Ego and alter can take each other's attitudes towards their own plans of action and can hence coordinate their plans of action on this basis. This stage is therefore characterised by a two-way form of reciprocity. The third phase of perspective-taking (ages 10-15) marks the introduction of the third-person perspective into the field of interpersonal interactions. It permits an actor to interpret her circumstances by means which go beyond simply taking alter's perspective on the self. Instead, this stage enables actors to see the interrelation between self and other from the third person or "generalized other" perspective. To express this in Habermas's terminology, the third level of perspective-taking couples the "performative attitude" of the involved agents of the second level with the "neutral attitude" of someone who witnesses the interaction while remaining uninvolved. The skills mastered at the second level are now restructured into a more complex set of speaker perspectives which are "fully reversible." As Habermas explains:

> The new structure consists of the ability to view the reciprocal interlocking of action orientations in the first and second persons from the perspective of the third person. Once interaction has been restructured in this way, participants can not only take one another's action perspectives but also exchange the

participant perspective for the observer perspective and transform the one into the other.[67]

This makes it possible to take a detached stance towards the forms of reciprocity developed at Level II, and hence to become aware of them in a more reflective fashion.

The insights generated by Selman's studies of perspective-taking form a key component in Habermas's "stages of interaction." Habermas outlines three stages of interaction which specify the resources available to agents at a given phase to coordinate individual plans of action. These stages ascend in the degree of complexity and power of the resources they offer agents to solve interpersonal problems, terminating in the complex structure of perspectives essential to competence at the postconventional form of communicative action. In outlining these stages I will focus upon the description Habermas gives of the transition between conventional and postconventional forms of action, as this will be crucial in understanding how he views the transition from the traditionalist mode of understanding norms to the modern one. These stages can, once again, be distinguished by the forms of reciprocity they embody.

Stage 1: Preconventional Action: The preconventional stage of action incorporates the perspective-structure of Selman's Level II into roughly two types of interaction: Although both ego and alter have learned to coordinate actions by placing themselves in the position of the other, human relations tend to be viewed as relations of exchange. Moreover, in considering what is exchanged, participants in interaction focus primarily upon the consequences of action. When authority is unequal, as in the family, a non-symmetrical form of reciprocity obtains, where the child may expect for example security and guidance in exchange for obedience. When relationships are egalitarian, as in friendships, actions are coordinated on the basis of the satisfaction of mutual interests. The possibility of interacting

---

[67]Habermas, "Moral Consciousness," in Habermas, *MCCA*: 146.

competitively or cooperatively arises in both forms of relationship; however, the possibility of strategic or competitive behaviour arises with particular force when relationships are egalitarian, and the situation is defined as one of conflict.

Stage 2: Conventional Action: This stage embodies the form of reciprocity available in Selman's Level III of perspective-taking. Recall that this stage of perspective-taking is seen by Habermas as joining the first and second person perspectives embodied in the relations of speaker and hearer, to the third person or "observer" perspective. Mastery of this system of speaker perspectives allows agents to coordinate actions on the basis of a more radical form of reciprocity than that available at Level II, in that the system of speaker perspectives at this level permits agents "full reversibility" in the exchange of speaker, hearer, and observer roles.

According to Habermas, the conventional stage of interaction comes into being when the observer perspective, which emerges from a child's manipulation of the physical environment,[68] is joined to the participant perspective characteristic of preconventional forms of interaction.[69] At this juncture the forms of interaction nascent at the preconventional stage of development evolve and acquire definition along two important lines: the notion of normatively regulated social action emerges and defines itself through contrast with the notion of strategic action, which began to develop at the preconventional stage. I would like to look at Habermas's description of the emergence of conventional norms of interaction in greater detail.

The focal point in the development of norms of action is the growing child's transference of concepts of authority and legitimacy away from concrete authority figures to recognise a supra-personal authority. Drawing both upon empirical accounts of the

---

[68]Habermas, "Moral Consciousness," in Habermas, *MCCA:* 139.
[69]Habermas, "Moral Consciousness," in Habermas, *MCCA:* 158.

109

development of concepts such as friendship, group and authority during middle childhood,[70] as well as the theories of Sigmund Freud and G.H. Mead, Habermas outlines a general process wherein the prototypes of consensual problem-solving witnessed in the preconventional stage of interaction are transformed into normative actions in the proper sense.

Initially, the child views interpersonal relationships primarily as relationships of exchange. She sees the legitimacy behind particular behavioural expectations as residing in the sanctioning power of an individual authority figure. The transition to the conventional stage of interaction consists in the child's learning to detach the notion of legitimate authority from specific persons and to recognise the authority of a suprapersonal will. As Habermas explains:

> At this point the child's view of social bonds, authority and loyalty become dissociated from specific reference persons and contexts. They are transformed into the normative concepts of moral obligation, the legitimacy of rules, the normative validity of authoritative commands, and so on.[71]

Following Freud and Mead, Habermas views this process as one of *internalisation* of the sanctions associated with legitimate authority. These sanctions are originally viewed as attached to the authority of concrete reference persons; however, to the extent that they become incorporated into the personality structure of the growing child, their authority becomes divorced from attachment to specific individuals. The child realises that what she at first saw as an expectation applicable in relation to herself and her mother, for example, is in fact a behavioural norm governing interrelations between mothers and children in general. This process requires the child to place herself in the position of other individuals, to take a third personal perspective with respect to the situation confronting herself and the other, and to learn to see the positions of the actors as interchangeable. She thereby learns to detach concrete

---

[70] Habermas refers to studies conducted by R.L. Selman in *The Growth of Interpersonal Understanding* (New York, 1980), and by W. Damon in *The Social World of the Child* (San Francisco, 1977).

[71] Habermas, "Moral Consciousness," in Habermas, *MCCA*: 153.

behavioural expectations from specific persons and to see these as applicable to all group members under specific circumstances.

From this process arises the notion of a "social role" around which conventional moralities develop. The perceived legitimacy of behavioural expectations underlying social roles is based upon the recognition by group members that the way of life of a specific group is legitimate, and upon a form of loyalty intimately linked to the group's power to punish and reward those actions which conform or fail to conform to its social norms. Socially recognised norms hence represent an admixture of rational consent and a capacity for repression based upon the power of the group. This is what Habermas terms a "traditionalist" understanding of norms.

> Gaining acceptance on the part of a norm is encoded in a twofold fashion because our motives for recognizing normative claims to validity are rooted both in convictions and in sanctions, that is, they derive from a complex mixture of rational insight and force. Typically, rationally motivated assent will be combined with empirical acquiescence, effected by weapons or goods, to form a belief in legitimacy whose component parts are difficult to isolate.[72]

So is clear that social roles and norms at the conventional stage of interaction are still embedded in, and presuppose the validity of, the taken-for-granted background of traditions, practices and institutions which Habermas calls "the lifeworld." At this stage, morality in the strict or narrow sense of justice has not yet become autonomous from those aspects of practical reason falling under the classification of "ethics." Although the behavioural expectations attached to social roles may be extended beyond the boundaries of particular social groups and transformed into a generalised system of norms, they are still linked to the ethical outlook or worldview of a particular community. As Kohlberg says, "conventional morality defines good behavior for a Democrat but not for a Republican, for an American but

---

[72]Habermas, "Discourse Ethics," in Habermas, *MCCA*: 61-62.

not for a Vietnamese, for a father but not for a son."[73] Norms embody conceptions of what is

right by attaching expectations of behaviour to particular roles within a form of life seen to be

good in itself. However, the recognition of social norms requires an individual to make use of

a symmetrical form of reciprocity, whose radical extension makes transition to a third stage of

interaction possible.

> When the persons concerned play their social roles knowing that as members
> of a social group they are *entitled* to expect certain actions from others in
> given situations and at the same time obliged to fulfill the justified behavioral
> expectations of others, they are basing themselves on a symmetrical form of
> reciprocity even though the *contents* of the roles are still distributed in a
> complementary fashion among the different group participants.[74]

Stage 3: Discourse: The third stage of interaction focuses on the testing through

argumentation of implicit validity claims embodied in social norms. Habermas describes this

stage as characterised by the "hypothetical attitude," which allows agents to suspend belief in

the validity of existing norms. The validity claims embodied in social norms must now be

redeemed through processes of postconventional argumentation or discourse. The successful

practice of discourse turns upon the agent's having acquired a decentered understanding of the

world. It depends on her ability to coordinate the system of world perspectives or validity

claims and the system of speaker-hearer perspectives, which provide the framework within

which speakers act as opponents and proponents who criticize and defend validity claims. This

stage requires that agents practise an idealised form of reciprocity, in that it depends for its

success upon actors seeing their relations as fully reversible. In discourse actors rely "on the

complete reversibility of their relations with other participants in the argumentation and *at the*

---

[73]Kohlberg, "From Is to Ought," in Kohlberg (1981): 135.
[74]Habermas, "Moral Consciousness," in Habermas, *MCCA*: 155.

112

same time attribute the position they take to the persuasive force of the better argument, no matter how their consensus was reached in actual fact."[75]

The transition between conventional and postconventional stages of interaction is associated by Habermas with the transition from adolescence to adulthood. It also marks the transition from a moral consciousness associated with "ethics" to one which distinguishes and prioritises "morality" in the narrow sense specified by discourse ethics. It will hence repay us to examine this transition in greater detail. As we have seen, the practice of advancing and assessing validity claims in the natural, social and subjective spheres can only take place when claims are advanced in what Habermas calls a "self-reflective" manner, which requires agents to recognise that all such claims are in principle contestable. This recognition is what Habermas calls the "hypothetical attitude." Introduction of the hypothetical attitude alters the subject's relation to the world of existing states of affairs, and problematises the relationship of an agent to her lifeworld.

> In light of hypothetical claims to validity the world of existing affairs is theoretized, that is, becomes a matter of theory, and the world of legitimately ordered relations is moralized, that is, becomes a matter of morality. This moralization of society...undermines the normative power of the factual: from the isolated viewpoint of deontological validity, institutions that have lost their quasi-natural character can be turned into so many instances of problematic justice.[76]

The hypothetical attitude is an unavoidable component of a fully decentered understanding of the world. Its adoption demands of an agent that she call into question the validity of the social institutions and norms she currently accepts. These norms become subject to radical questioning, thereby undermining the naive acceptance of lifeworld practices which previously underlay the perceived legitimacy of norms. The norms themselves now require a different and more far-reaching sort of justification.

---

[75]Habermas, "Moral Consciousness," in Habermas, *MCCA*: 159.

The autonomous justification of morality hence becomes an inescapable problem for anyone who has acquired a decentered understanding of the world. Nonetheless, Habermas believes that this very same decentered understanding of the world provides the key to the problem's dissolution, in that it specifies a procedure of argumentation wherein one can assess current social norms in the light of higher levels norms. As traditions and lifeworld practices are problematised and lose their unquestioned validity, the need to arrive at a means of conflict resolution which proceeds consensually demands that actors adopt the moral point of view in the strict sense.

> Only at the postconventional stage is the social world uncoupled from a stream of cultural givens. This shift makes the autonomous justification of morality an unavoidable problem. The very perspectives that make consensus possible are now at issue. Independently of contingent commonalities of social background, political affiliation, cultural heritage, traditional forms of life, and so on, competent actors can now take a moral point of view, *a point of view distanced from the controversy,* only if they cannot avoid accepting that point of view even when their value orientations diverge. Consequently, this moral reference point must be derived from the structure in which all participants in interaction *always already* find themselves insofar as they act communicatively.[77]

Habermas equates the moral point of view with a point of view that agents cannot help but accept, regardless of whatever particular views of the good and just life they may happen to hold. He believes that such a point of view is found in the notion of reciprocity contained in the pragmatic presuppositions of all forms of argumentation.

The structures of reciprocity play an essential role in meeting the objectives pertaining to the reinterpretation of Kohlberg's model which Habermas has set for himself. Recall that, in Habermas's view, the hierarchical interrelation of Kohlberg's stages has not yet been satisfactorily demonstrated. Habermas's goal has been to remedy this difficulty from within the framework of a discursive ethics. The structures of reciprocity play a twofold role in

---

[76]Habermas, "Moral Consciousness," in Habermas, *MCCA*: 161.

114

Habermas's response. First, these structures are essential in linking up the stages of interaction, themselves developed from the theory of communicative action, with Kohlberg's stages of moral development. Second, Habermas will argue that the structures of reciprocity embodied in the stages of interaction provide the key to demonstrating that these stages form a logic of development. Being conversant with Habermas's reasoning on this point will place us in a favourable position to understand his solution to the problem posed at the beginning of the chapter. I will begin by tracing the connection to Kohlberg's work.

Recall that Kohlberg's principles of moral judgement are organized into a three-level, six-stage structure. Habermas must show that the three stages of interaction outlined can be logically correlated with the three levels of Kohlberg's model. I will follow Stephen White in depicting this interconnection by distinguishing the general stages of interaction along two axes. First, these stages differ in regard to the structure of behavioural expectations employed by the actors therein.[78] The transition between these forms of behavioural expectation is portrayed by Habermas as a logical progression taking place through increasing self-application or "reflexivity." The preconventional stage is transformed into the conventional only when the simple expectations concerning particular actions and their consequences characteristic of the preconventional level can be *mutually* expected. This operation creates the roles and norms characteristic of the conventional level. The conventional level is transformed into the postconventional when the norms of the conventional level are themselves assessed according to higher-level norms.[79]

The stages of interaction may also be differentiated along the axis of reciprocity structures embodied in a given form of action. As White explains: "When the two

[77]Habermas, "Moral Consciousness," in Habermas, *MCCA*: 162-63.
[78]White (1988): 61.

dimensions—structures of behavioral expectations and reciprocity—are integrated, one can see

how the forms in which reciprocity appears in interaction structure the different conceptions

of rightness which inform Kohlberg's stages of moral judgements."[79] Let us examine how this

relationship unfolds. At the preconventional level of interaction, only concrete actions and

consequences of action understood in terms of gratification or punishment are assessed by the

child as morally relevant. When the form of reciprocity employed is nonsymmetrical, as in the

parent-child relationship, we obtain Kohlberg's Stage 1 ("punishment-obedience orientation")

of moral judgement. The justice-concept at this stage defines right action as that which

maximises reward through obedience to authority. If a symmetrical form of reciprocity is

employed, as among peers, we obtain Kohlberg's Stage 2 ("instrumental-hedonism

orientation"), in which justice is conceived as that which maximises reward through

symmetrical exchange of equivalents. At the conventional stages of interaction, agents employ

notions of social roles and norms in assessing what is morally relevant. The form of

reciprocity is symmetrical, in that a fully reversible set of speaker perspectives is employed at

this stage. Focussing upon social roles yields Kohlberg's Stage 3, in which justice is seen as

role-conformity; whereas focussing upon norms yields Stage 4, in which justice is equated with

norm-conformity. At the postconventional stages of interaction, the introduction of the

hypothetical attitude associated with a decentered understanding of the world makes it

necessary that principles become the moral theme. A decentered understanding of the world

requires that agents be able to participate in fully open-ended or postconventional forms of

argumentation. Such processes of argumentation provide a forum wherein norms related to

particular forms of life can be evaluated in the light of higher-order principles. Moreover,

participants in argumentation must employ an *idealised* form of reciprocity, in which all

---

[79] White (1988): 61-62; and Habermas, "Toward a Reconstruction of Historical Materialism," in
Habermas, *CES*: 156.

agents are conceived as equal participants in dialogue. Stages 5 and 6[81] on Kohlberg's scheme represent such universalist modes of thinking.[82] I have schematised this relationship in Table 1.[83]

[80]White (1988): 62.

[81]Following a suggestion by Thomas McCarthy, Habermas has in recent work become wary of the notion of *stages* of postconventional forms of moral consciousness in the strict sense. McCarthy argues that it is questionable whether the highest forms of moral consciousness can be investigated and established with the same methods as the lowest, precisely because higher forms of moral consciousness are *reflective*. This feature puts the subject's moral thought on a par epistemically with that of the moral psychologist. See McCarthy, "Rationality and Relativism," in Thompson and Held (1982): 72-75.

[82]My analysis of the interconnection between the stages of interaction and Kohlberg's forms of moral consciousness deviates from White's in several respects. This is due only to the fact that White relies principally upon the account given by Habermas in "Moral Development and Ego-Identity," in Habermas, *CES;* whereas I focus upon the revised account in "Moral Consciousness," in Habermas, *MCCA.*

[83]My examination of the stages of interaction has focussed on the acquisition of "speaker perspectives", as these embody the forms of reciprocity necessary for the derivation of Kohlberg's stages. However, it is important to note that the *transitions* between the stages of interaction are brought about through "world perspectives" which manifest a particular understanding of reality. The transition from preconventional to conventional stages of interaction takes place when the observer perspective, which is acquired through the child's manipulation of the physical environment, is introduced into the speaker-hearer relationship. This is the precondition for the constitution of a world of socially recognised roles and norms essential to this stage. The transition from conventional to postconventional forms of interaction is, once again, brought about by a mechanism related to world-perspectives. The differentiation of validity spheres into the three domains of natural, social and inner reality allows agents to raise claims to validity in processes of open-ended argumentation. The introduction of the "hypothetical attitude" or recognition that claims to validity are in principle contestable is necessary for the principled morality associated with postconventional stages of interaction. A particular form of cognitive decentration can therefore be seen as a necessary precondition of the moral decentration exemplified in the highest stages of moral judgement. See Habermas, "Moral Consciousness," in Habermas, *MCCA* 139, 141 & 159.

Table 1. Reinterpretation of Kohlberg's Stages Using DE

Stage of Interaction	Speaker Perspective-structure	Phase of life	Reciprocity Concept	Justice Concept	Kohlberg's Stage
Pre-conventional: interaction controlled by authority or cooperation based on self-interest	reciprocal interconnection of action perspectives	mid-childhood to early adolescence	non-symmetrical reciprocity (authority-governed) or symmetrical reciprocity (interest-governed)	complementarity of order and obedience; symmetry of compensation	1 2
Conventional: Role behaviour; or norm behaviour (social generalisation of roles into system of norms)	coordination of observer and participant perspectives (Selman's level 3)	adolescence	symmetrical reciprocity associated with social roles and norms	conformity to roles conformity to existing system of norms	3 4
Discourse	coordination of system of speaker perspectives and world perspectives	adulthood	idealized reciprocity	orientation towards universal principles of justice and procedures for justifying norms	5 & 6

Adapted from Habermas, "Moral Consciousness," in Habermas (1990).

The notion of reciprocity also provides the key to Habermas's claim that his stages of interaction, and thus Kohlberg's stages of moral consciousness, meet the conditions placed upon a logic of development. Recall that a stage model organised as a developmental-logical account must satisfy several requirements. The most important of these stipulates that the

stages be demonstrated to form a hierarchy which unfolds with an internal logic towards an end point representing a cumulative gain. This is equivalent to showing that the cognitive structures embodied in the higher stages can replace those in the lower stages while preserving the skills acquired therein in reorganised form.

The stages of interaction, according to Habermas, represent precisely such a development. The performative perspectives of speaker and hearer present at the preconventional stage form the building blocks for an increasingly complex set of communication roles which culminates at the postconventional stage in a decentered understanding of the world displayed by subjects who have mastered the art of discourse. As Habermas explains: "Viewed in terms of a *progressively decentered understanding of the world*, the stages of interaction express a development that is directed and cumulative."[84]

A good deal turns on Habermas's success in demonstrating this point. What is at issue is the claim that Kohlberg's moral stages represent an unambiguous ordering from lower to higher forms of moral consciousness, in other words, the claim that postconventional structures of moral consciousness are distinct from and superior to both conventional and preconventional forms. This would provide an evidentiary basis to support Habermas's conception of the moral point of view as embodied in the principle of universalisation. First, it provides a justification for the possibility and legitimacy of making the separation between morality and ethics necessary for the successful functioning of (U). Second, it shows why Habermas is right in thinking that (U) should lead to consensus. The features of Stage 6 moral judgements imply that solutions at this level are more stable.

The key to the substantiation of this claim lies in the way in which the structures of reciprocity are transformed in the progression from stage to stage. Habermas argues that

actors at the postconventional stage of interaction have mastered a practice of reciprocity which constitutes a cumulative advance over the form of reciprocity in the other two stages, as judged by the formal criteria of increasing generality, abstraction, complexity, and most especially, reflexivity, which Habermas sees as universally relevant. Habermas argues that any competent speaker of a language must have mastered at least an incomplete form of reciprocity, as this is a minimal requirement of the speaker-hearer relationship. The distinction between incomplete and complete forms of reciprocity is defined by Habermas as follows: "In communicative action a relationship of at least incomplete reciprocity is established with the interpersonal relation between the involved parties. Two persons stand in an incompletely reciprocal relation insofar as one may do or expect x only to the extent that the other may do or expect y (e.g. teacher/pupil, parent/child). Their relationship is completely reciprocal if both may do or expect the same thing in comparable situations (x=y) (e.g. the norms of civil law)."[85] Because reciprocity structures are acquired naturally in the acquisition of communicative competence in any context, Habermas calls reciprocity the "naturalistic kernel" of moral consciousness. In Habermas's view, therefore, reciprocity is common to all linguistic forms of life, and as such serves as a footing for the moral point of view. As we have seen, Habermas equates the moral point of view with a point of view that agents cannot help but accept regardless of the particular views of the good and just life they may hold. To put the point in terms of the problem raised at the beginning of the chapter, reciprocity is a structure available to all practitioners of conventional forms of argumentation (Argumentation₁). All linguistic agents must have mastered at least the incomplete reciprocity structure contained in the preconventional form of interaction. A symmetrical form of reciprocity making use of a more complex set of communication structures makes the development of roles and norms

---

[84]Habermas, "Moral Consciousness," in Habermas, MCCA: 168.
[85]Habermas, "Moral Development and Ego-Identity," in Habermas, CES: 88.

possible at the conventional stage. At the postconventional stage the form of reciprocity is idealised in postconventional practices of argumentation (Argumentation$_2$), making possible the "norming of norms." As Habermas sees it, this form of reciprocity represents a cumulative advance over the other forms in terms of the abstract criteria indicated.[86]

However, as Steven White observes, the argument for the universal validity of postconventional moral judgements cannot be conclusively established by these means. If correct, Habermas has thus far shown that the "viewpoint of reciprocity" is available to all speaking agents and that it can hence serve as a point of reference for resolving conflicts of interests consensually. However, *that the form of reciprocity embodied in postconventional structures of moral judgement must be taken as the standard* is less than clear. The developmental logic presented by Habermas makes it clear why conventional forms of moral consciousness constitute an advance over preconventional forms. The reasons are roughly twofold: (1) Conventional forms of moral consciousness permit the agent a clearer grasp of the domain of the normative as against for example the coercive. (2) In contrast to the preconventional level, a fully developed set of speaker perspectives embodying a symmetrical form of reciprocity is present at the conventional level of moral consciousness. Actors at this stage are fully *capable* of adopting a standpoint of reciprocity to decide moral questions. However, this does not show that reciprocity in its idealized form *must* be accepted as the appropriate standard in resolving moral disputes. Others may be available to the discussants. White puts the point as follows:

> Clearly this makes reciprocity a viewpoint *available* to mature individuals in all societies; but just as clearly there is no natural necessity for this viewpoint being *consciously accepted as the standard* for resolving moral conflicts. The reflexive use of the viewpoint of reciprocity as a requirement in moral deliberation can only be conclusively justified when one has assumed the

---

[86]The question of whether these criteria are appropriate will be touched on in the next chapter.

superiority of the moral point of view associated with a decentered, postconventional consciousness.[87]

The advance of postconventional forms of moral consciousness over conventional ones is held by Habermas to be established on a threefold basis: (a) because it is more decentered; (b) because this extracts the kernel of duty as against (self- or group) interest (Kant); (c) because the differentiation of validity spheres in modernity undercuts the tenability of other value-positions. Reciprocity becomes accepted as the sole standard for resolving moral disputes only when others are devalued, as they are in modernity. The next section will briefly outline Habermas's theory of social evolution, in which this claim to the superiority of the modern worldview is articulated. We can conclude our discussion of the development of moral consciousness at the individual level by saying that Habermas has succeeded in clarifying the conceptual framework set out by Kohlberg through discourse ethics, and that this provides some measure of indirect support for each. However, as Habermas is well aware, it does not in itself demonstrate the adequacy of either Kohlberg's or his own guiding assumptions concerning the nature of the moral point of view.

3.4 Habermas's Theory of Social Evolution

We have so far been considering Kohlberg's and Habermas's accounts of individual maturation in the domain of moral judgement primarily from the standpoint of the modern, Western societies in which they were developed. As we have seen, Kohlberg's theory takes its starting point from certain Western liberal ideas of justice and morality embodied most especially in Kantian philosophy in conjunction with tests on a group of 75 American boys. The crucial question from our point of view is whether Kohlberg's theory describes a path of

---

[87]White (1988): 64.

development valid universally across the species, or a path specific to our own culture, perhaps even a particular segment of that culture.[88] The support derived from empirical data generated by cross-cultural studies is ambiguous in that these studies have not yielded results identical with the American ones. Recall that the most commonly observed stage of moral judgement among adults in all societies is Stage 4; however, the higher stages have not been observed in illiterate or semiliterate village cultures.[89] Furthermore, Stage 5 has been observed with more frequency in the United States than elsewhere, whereas Stage 6 has not been observed at all among the test subjects in any studies conducted.[90] Kohlberg summarizes the results of his research as follows:

> My data indicate that, although cultures differ in most frequent or modal stage, a culture cannot be located at a single stage, and the individual's moral stage cannot be derived directly from his or her culture's stage. There are, however, differences in the frequences of the higher stages in various cultural groups, related to the cognitive and social complexity of the group. It is easier to develop to Stage 6 in modern America than in fifth-century Athens or first-century Jerusalem....Furthermore, there is a historical "horizontal decalage" or an easier extension of principles of Stage 6 thought; Socrates was more accepting of slavery than was Lincoln, who was more accepting of it than King.[91]

Although Kohlberg does not want to draw a simple equivalency between the modal stage of moral judgement in a given culture and that of an individual in that culture, he does believe that these results suggest a "mild doctrine of social evolutionism."[92] Because the stages of moral consciousness represent transformations in concepts of self, society and the other, progression

---

[88]A provocative challenge to the adequacy of Kohlberg's model was initiated by Carol Gilligan, who contrasts the Kantian focus on universal rules, rights, fairness, and autonomy with an ethic anchored in the ideas of responsibility and care for others, context-sensitivity and interdependence, which she argues come to the fore in the moral experiences of women. As Gilligan sees it, these are two aspects or complementary visions of moral maturity, *both* of which must be accommodated in an adequate account of human moral development. See Gilligan (1982): 151-174.

[89]Kohlberg (1981): 151. Note that from a functionalist perspective the prevalence of Stage 4 moral judgements seems very plausible. It seems reasonable that a healthy society be one whose members believe that right action consists in upholding that society's laws and governing principles.

[90]Kohlberg (1981): 100.

[91]Kohlberg (1981): 129.

through the stages depends upon the social environment and the opportunities for taking the role of the other which it provides. "Social environments or institutions not only facilitate moral development by providing role-taking opportunities, but their justice structure is also an important determinant of role-taking opportunities and consequent moral development. The formation of a mature sense of justice requires participation in just institutions."[93]

Habermas's studies of the evolution of worldviews provide a systematic account of social development which corroborates Kohlberg's intuitions concerning the social preconditions of the development of moral consciousness. The term "worldview" is used by Habermas to describe the intermeshing cognitive, linguistic and normative structures of consciousness available to a given culture or form of life. Societies as entities "learn" only in a derivative sense: worldviews should be viewed as repositories of the insights of individual learning abilities which have become "embedded in culture."[94] However, there is a circular relation between individual maturation and species development, in that individuals learn only "under social boundary conditions."[95] To put the point differently, the learning of individuals is facilitated or constrained by the store of rationality structures available to them in the societal worldview in which they are raised. Social and personality systems are hence complementary in that the development of cognitive and normative structures at the individual level turns upon corresponding processes of learning at the societal level. Nonetheless, the correspondence in level of development between individual and society should not, according to Habermas, be seen as absolute. He, like Kohlberg, recognises that "[n]ot all individuals are equally representative of the developmental stage of their society. Thus in modern societies,

---

[92]The next chapter will consider whether there might not be alternative ways of viewing this data.
[93]Kohlberg (1981): 144. This phrase is echoed by Habermas in several articles. Compare e.g.
"Discourse Ethics," in Habermas, *MCCA*: 98-109, where Habermas argues that discourse ethics depends upon a form of life which "meets it halfway."
[94]The phrase is David Ingram's. See Ingram (1987): 27.
[95]See Habermas, "The Development of Normative Structures," in Habermas, *CES*: 121.

124

law has a universalistic structure, although many members are not in a position to judge according to principles. Conversely, in archaic societies there were individuals who had mastered formal operations of thought, although the collectively shared mythological world-view corresponded to a lower stage of cognitive development."[96]

Although cautious about making global comparisons between processes of individual and species maturation, Habermas claims that it is possible to specify "abstract points of reference" which will make such a comparison possible. He speculates that there "might be a process of decentration of world views that corresponds to ego development...."[97] Specifically, Habermas believes that there are homologies between the development of individuals and that of worldviews in three areas: the development of normative structures, the demarcation of object domains, and the formation of personal and group identities. In each case, the process of evolution is reflected in and explained through advances in the structure of linguistic competence, or communicative action. The theory of social evolution attempts to organize the development of society along these three parallel dimensions, of which two—the development of normative structures and the demarcation of object domains—are of particular interest to us. Advances in normative development, as we have seen, reflect improvements in the ability of agents to "regulate action conflicts consensually and thus to maintain an endangered subjectivity of understanding among speaking and acting subjects"; while advances in the demarcation of object domains "makes possible the differentiation (and if necessary thematization) of those validity claims (truth, rightness, truthfulness) that we implicitly tie to all speech actions."[98]

---

[96]Habermas, "Normative Structures," in Habermas, *CES*: 102.
[97]Habermas, "Normative Structures," in Habermas, *CES*: 103.
[98]Habermas, "Normative Structures," in Habermas, CES: 116.

The theory of social evolution hence has the familiar characteristics of a cognitive-developmental model: first, it involves comparison of worldviews at the level of *formal structures of thought*, rather than at the level of cultural contents. Second, variations across social groups in the rationality structures they possess are to be explained as differences in the level of development. The process of social maturation is, like the process of individual maturation, meant to meet the conditions of a developmental logic. Once again, Habermas associates the apex of development with characteristics of a decentered understanding of the world associated with postconventional forms of argumentation. He envisages the mechanism of transition between the stages as one of learning in response to disequilibria: when confronted with evolutionary challenges, the problem-solving capacities stored in a society's worldviews are challenged. If they are not adequate to the challenge, the society must attempt to survive by advancing these capacities to a new and higher stage, thereby altering its worldview structures. Habermas's aim is to demonstrate by these means that the features of a decentered understanding of the world associated with Western modernity form an advance over other structures in the two axes designated, which Habermas views as crucial components of rationality.

The theory of social evolution emerges from Habermas's early attempts to rethink marxist theories of historical materialism. Orthodox marxism has traditionally regarded normative structures as secondary phenomena, which depend for their emergence upon economic modes of production. Although Habermas recognises the complex interdependency between culture, morality and social identity on the one hand, and the economic system on the other, he advances the thesis that normative processes follow their own path of evolution. As Habermas writes "[t]he rules of communicative action do develop in reaction to changes in the

domain of instrumental and strategic action; but in so doing they *follow their own logic.*[99]

Moreover, he believes that the development of these normative structures is "the pacemaker" of social evolution as a whole, since new principles of social organisation open the way to new methods of generating and implementing productive forces.[100] Societies move to higher levels of social evolution when they are confronted with either internal or external challenges to survival or legitimacy. Habermas holds that more internally differentiated and complex societies have a greater capacity for dealing with both internal and external challenges to the status quo than do societies organised around a "mechanical solidarity," that is, a solidarity based upon kinship relations.

The abstract categories used to describe individual structures of consciousness can be applied to the level of the collective structures of consciousness found in worldviews. Habermas outlines several phases in the evolution of society, which I will divide into three levels for the purpose of expositional clarity.[101]

Level 1: Primitive or Neolithic Society The first stage of social formation describes societies organised around a kinship system, which sets out roles based upon familial, sex and age differentiations. At this stage of social evolution worldviews embody "structures of consciousness" based upon the recounting of myths. The analogical or narrative accounts provided in myths serve several functions: they legitimate or justify the authority of this mode of social organisation, while unifying the various spheres of reality (what Habermas calls "domains of validity") into a whole. The domains of nature and culture have not yet been clearly differentiated at this stage. Habermas explains:

---

[99]Habermas, "Historical Materialism," in Habermas, *CES*: 148.
[100]Habermas, "Normative Structures," in Habermas, *CES*: 20.
[101]This material is drawn from Habermas, "Historical Materialism," in Habermas, *CES*: 56-58; and also Michael Pusey's *Habermas*: 41-46.

127

> From this reciprocal assimilation of nature to culture and conversely culture to nature, there results, on the one hand, a nature that is outfitted with anthropomorphic features, drawn into the communicative network of social subjects, and in this sense humanized, and on the other hand, a culture that is to a certain extent naturalized and reified and absorbed into the objective nexus of operations of anonymous powers.[102]

The interweaving of the domains of nature and culture results in difficulties for neolithic societies on two levels: first, Habermas argues that neolithic societies fail to make a number of distinctions necessary to more sophisticated forms of moral judgement, such as that between action and intention. He hence attributes to such societies a conventionally structured system of interaction with conventional models for the solution of normative conflicts. Second, such societies typically have little power to exercise control over their environments. Habermas argues that such societies are typically challenged to change their methods of organisation by external crises which threaten their survival by overloading the problem-solving capacities of their social structure.[103]

Level II: Traditional Societies Traditional societies are, roughly speaking, those in which the authority of the system of societal organisation is legitimated through cultural traditions. We can distinguish two phases of traditional society, based upon the degree to which the tradition in question has been systematised. (1) *Early civilized cultures* such as those of ancient Greece, India, China and Rome generally move away from familial forms of organisation towards forms of societal organisation based upon the ownership of the means of production. The kinship system thus surrenders control to the State. This state form of organisation has a more complex array of problem solving tools at its disposal, which allow it better to cope with external threats, such as the contingencies of the environment and threats from other societies, which threatened the survival of primitive societies. However, according to Habermas, the price of this greater internal complexity is a more articulated structure of power and class

---

[102]Habermas, *TCA 1*: 47.

128

domination based upon a state system. The state apparatus hence stands in a greater need of legitimation than the organisational structure of neolithic societies. To put the point in Habermasian terminology, the "level of justification" required to legitimate the social organisation of these societies is higher. In early civilisations mythological worldviews still take on legitimating functions for the occupants of positions of authority; however, the object domains of nature and culture are more clearly separated than they are at the neolithic stage. The traditions used to justify societal organisation are now increasingly organised around a systematised body of unifying principles which introduce what Habermas calls "an element of counterfactuality" into society, in that they permit one to challenge existing social practices. Although Habermas believes social interactions at this stage to be conventionally structured, he believes that the worldviews of such civilisations now contain some postconventional features for problem-solving.

(2) Developed Civilisations, such as those of post-Renaissance to eighteenth or nineteenth-century Western Europe, are those organized around a sophisticated State apparatus which involves an institutionalised system of class domination. Normative structures and cultural forms are articulated in an increasingly systematic fashion. However, this systematicity is still constrained through ontologically grounded representations of the world: structures of authority still depend for their legitimacy upon cosmological worldviews invoking metaphysical conceptions of God, Being or Nature. However, advances in scientific and normative development render these cosmological worldviews increasingly subject to challenge, and more difficult to render plausible. This marks the transition to the final stage of worldview development.

---

[103]Habermas, TCA 1: 47.

Level III: Modern Societies In modern societies the cosmological justification of norms of action is no longer viable. The level of justification required to legitimate social organisation is thus raised once again. The validity of even the highest principles can now be called into question, and must be justified by argument. Habermas argues that at a formal level, procedural strategies for justification invoking the principles of discursive reason become the method for justification. Action systems now acquire postconventional features, the three validity spheres separate out fully, and worldviews propagate universalistic forms of moral thinking.

The evolution of worldviews forms a theory complementary to that of individual psychological development, and isomorphic to it in certain respects. The mythic worldview ellides objective and subjective reality in much the same way as the young child fails to adequately distinguish physical from social reality. Moreover, there is a failure to disassociate what it is right to do from existing structures of authority, as reflected in the preconventional stages of moral consciousness. With the transition from archaic societies to traditional civilizations, narrative accounts are increasingly replaced by explanation which can be justified through argument. The drive towards the rationalisation of tradition is particularly strong in the cultures dominated by monotheistic religions. These religions attempt to unify reality under a single principle, and thereby exhibit a strong impulse toward logical consistency. Although such worldviews contain many features which are modern, they retain a dependence on religious or metaphysical conceptions tied to a particular form of life. This is reminiscent of the conventional stages of moral consciousness associated with "ethics."

The transition from developed to modern worldviews is similar in structure to the transition from conventional to postconventional forms of moral judgement. In the modern era normative principles are justified universally, a feature reminiscent of moral judgement at

130

Stages 5 and 6 on Kohlberg's scale. According to Habermas, this transition is reminiscent of the passage from adolescence to adulthood in the sphere of individual maturation.

> If by way of a thought experiment we compress the adolescent phase of growth into a single critical instant in which the individual for the first time assumes a hypothetical attitude toward the normative context of his lifeworld, we can see the nature of the problem that every person must deal with in passing from the conventional to the postconventional level of moral judgment. The social world of legitimately regulated interpersonal relations, a world to which one was naively habituated and which was unproblematically accepted, is abruptly deprived of its quasi-natural validity.

> If the adolescent cannot and does not want to go back to the traditionalism and unquestioned identity of his past world, he must, on penalty of utter disorientation, reconstruct...the normative orders that his hypothetical gaze has destroyed by removing the veil of illusions from them. Using the rubble of devalued traditions, traditions that have been recognized to be merely conventional and in need of justification, he erects a new normative structure that must be solid enough to withstand critical inspection....Ultimately all that remains is a procedure for rationally motivated choice among principles that have been recognized in turn as in need of justification. [This transition] *is like an echo of the developmental catastrophe that historically once devalued the world of traditions and thereby provoked efforts to rebuilt it at a higher level.*[104]

I have schematised the interrelationships between the theory of the acquisition of moral judgement in the individual and the account of worldview development in Table 2.

---

[104]Habermas, "Moral Consciousness," in Habermas (1990): 126-27. My emphasis. Note the resemblance to the Enlightenment conception expressed by Kant in "What is Enlightenment?" where Kant offers an apology for the value of rational autonomy as contrasted with a dependence upon traditions: "Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. *Immaturity* is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another....The motto of the enlightenment is therefore: *Sapere Aude!* Have courage to use your *own* understanding!" Reliance upon tradition is characterised by Kant as the source of an individual's self-incurred immaturity: "Dogmas and formulas, those mechanical instruments for rational use (or rather misuse) of his natural endowments, are the ball and chain of his permanent immaturity." In Immanuel Kant, *Kant's Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss (Cambridge University Press, 1970): 54-55. I am indebted to Nigel Desouza for this reference.

Table 2. Parallels Between Ontogenesis & Phylogenesis

Stage of Social Evolution	Organisation Principle	Level of Justification	Validity Spheres	Stage of Life	Kohlberg's Justice Stage
Primitive, Neolithic or Archaic Civilisaions	kinship system	low:myths perform justificatory role	undifferentiated: natural and social phenomena interwoven through myth	childhood	pre-conventional stages 1 & 2
Developed Civilisations	state apparatus: becoming increasingly sophisticated	higher: authority legitimated through traditions which are increasingly rationalised	Somewhat differentiated: nature and culture seen as separate; but linked through power of a unifying worldview.	adolescence	conventional stages 3 & 4
Modernity (Western)	State apparatus: sophisticated	high: formal conditions of justice themselves obtain legitimating force	differentiated: three validity spheres	adulthood	post-conventional stages 5 & 6

3.5 Conclusion:

In the last chapter it was demonstrated that the practice of some variety of communicative action is inescapable for all human agents. This practice, insofar as it imposes obligations of mutual responsibility upon the participants involved to provide good reasons for claims raised in argumentation, appears to have some normative implications. However, it was

132

argued that proof of the claim that Habermas's discursive ethics applies universally could not be seen to follow directly from this: the proposition that communicative action is practised universally by all agents depends for its plausibility upon the identification of a relatively undemanding sense of communicative action, whose associated practice of argumentation we have called "conventional." The claims of discourse ethics, however, are supported only by the postconventional form of argumentation associated with the modern, Western practice of communicative action. Habermas's strategy in supporting the claim that discourse ethics should be seen to apply universally to all human agents has hence been to argue that the ethical implications of *postconventional* forms of communicative action should hold for practitioners of *all* forms of communicative action, for the form of rationality associated with postconventional argumentation constitutes a demonstrable cognitive gain over that associated with conventional modes of argumentation.

Although Habermas advances his universality claims through transcendental-style arguments, he rejects the a prioristic approach of traditional Kantian philosophy toward the demonstration of their validity. As he explains: "I have tried to take up the universalistic line of questioning of transcendental philosophy, while at the same time detranscendentalising the mode of procedure and the conception of what is to be shown."[105] Habermas's strategy, as we have seen, is to support the claim to universality of a discursive ethics developed through the transcendental-pragmatic argument by showing its coherence with various lines of empirical research. He makes particular use of reconstructive approaches which attempt to set out or "reconstruct" the implicit knowledge contained in basic competences such as speech, cognition or moral judgement into a set of explicit rules. In the sphere of individual maturation, Habermas relies considerably on Piaget's reconstruction of the development of formal

---

[105]Habermas, *REPLY*: 239.

cognitive operations and on Kohlberg's account of the acquisition of moral judgements to support his position. As we have seen, Kohlberg's theory of moral stages dovetails with Habermasian discourse ethics in two crucial ways: first, it supports the claim that modern forms of moral judgement represent an advance over other forms and are hence of universal significance; and second, it validates the procedure of discourse described by Habermas for the resolution of moral dilemmas, by showing the close links between the structure of this procedure and that of Stage 6 moral judgements. However, in order to show that the paths of development set out by Kohlberg and Piaget are more than culturally specific, Habermas must supplement these theories with an account of species maturation demonstrating the cognitive gains realised in modernity. As Habermas recognises, defending a universalist hypothesis by showing its links with empirical research programmes does not constitute rigorous or necessary proof in the sense aspired to by traditional philosophy. Rather, the strategy is to offer multiple and overlapping sources of support for its central ideas, which work in concert to provide compelling reasons for their acceptance. It is to a consideration of these reasons which I now turn.

As we have seen, the cognitive-developmental theories employed by Habermas defend the claim that there are universal competences in various areas by appealing to the notion of a developmental logic. A developmental logic depicts the acquisition of the competence in question through a sequence of steps which can be unambiguously ordered according to a scale of development. As Michael Schmid explains in another context:

> All of these...developmental logics share one common formal characteristic, namely that if a change does occur in response to such a logic, then it is possible to bring the various phases of this development into an unequivocal sequence and to order the different content of each phase according to a criterion of higher value (Höherwertigkeit).[106]

---

[106]Schmid, "Social Evolution," in Thompson and Held (1982): 165.

Habermas's strategy in his accounts of both ontogenesis and phylogenesis has been, as we have seen, to identify this criterion of higher value with the features of a decentered understanding of the world. The general structure of the accounts is always to show that all actors, in virtue of necessarily being linguistic agents in the sense of conventional forms of argumentation, find themselves on a scale or ladder ascending towards the highest stages of competence mastery, which are in turn identified with characteristics of postconventional forms of argumentation associated with modernity.

Assessing the success of these arguments is a delicate matter. Although Habermas wants to prove that his theory of discourse ethics applies universally across the human race, he begins by defining the highest stages of development using visions of maturity drawn from our culture in order eventually to portray development as universally headed in this direction. Let us reconsider the problems which this poses for Kohlberg's theory. Kohlberg's stage sequence was developed from concepts drawn from Western moral philosophy and culture, on the basis of studies conducted principally on (male) children in Western cultures. From Piaget onwards, the legitimacy of extrapolating universal generalisations from studies of a small group taken as exemplary has been regarded with some degree of scepticism. Moreover, this approach seems rather more dubious in the moral realm than in the logical, where culture plays a less profound role in shaping the process studied. The developmental accounts which Habermas sets out do seem intuitively persuasive in many respects, articulating as they do the central values of modernity; they are at times illuminating, and certainly provocative. However, in a formal sense, the theoretical component of this defence of the values of modernity is frankly circular.

One might argue that what Habermas has done is set out a series of "conjectures" which now awaits indirect confirmation or refutation through comparison with the empirical data. However, the question of how the empirical and conceptual branches of a theory

interrelate is a complex one, as Habermas recognises.[107] An indication of the degree of

complexity involved, which points up the difficulties of challenging a scale of measurement

such as a developmental logic, can be gauged from the progress of the debate concerning

gender bias in Kohlberg's theory. Initial studies indicated that Kohlberg's scoring method

placed the average level of women's moral development in the United States behind that of

men, at Stage 3. This fact prompted Carol Gilligan and several colleagues to undertake a

series of alternative studies, which eventually led her to challenge the adequacy of the path of

development which Kohlberg had set out. Gilligan argued that Kohlberg's scale was biased in

its design in that it was constructed to reflect the moral experiences principally of men.

Although the women studied could certainly respond to the questions asked by Kohlberg, the

terms of these questions were set in such a way that the moral experience of women was not

recognised, Gilligan argued, resulting in systematic distortion of their responses. When she

allowed women to discuss moral conflict in their own voices, she found that they consistently

defined these conflicts in a way at odds with Kohlberg's. Whereas Kohlberg conceived of

moral maturity on the Kantian model of rights, universality, justice, and autonomy, Gilligan

argued that women tend to speak of morality in terms of responsibility, care, sensitivity to

context, and interdependence. On these grounds, Gilligan emphasised the need for a

redefinition of moral maturity capable of encompassing both of these perspectives. However,

she recognised that this would require a substantial restructuring of Kohlberg's theory. A

developmental theory, she argued, is not built like a pyramid from its base. Rather, "a

conception of development...hangs from its vertex of maturity, the point toward which progress

is traced. Thus, a change in the definition of maturity does not simply alter the description of

---

[107]In recognition of this complexity Stephen White suggests very plausibly that Habermas be read as
contributing to a research programme in the Lakatosian sense. See White (1988): 5-7.

the highest stage but recasts the understanding of development, changing the entire account."[108]

A complex series of responses to Gilligan's claims has ensued. Attempts have been made to reconsider Kohlberg's data, to challenge Gilligan's data, to accommodate Gilligan's vision within the general framework of the theory, and so on.[109] My interest is less in the twists and turns taken by this debate than in pointing out that analogous and in some respects graver difficulties emerge for the assessment of data derived from other cultures.

If all children tested in all societies scored exactly the same on Kohlberg's scale, strong evidence confirming the universality of the process of moral development as he conceives it would have been obtained, although such a result would tend to disconfirm the links between this theory and the theory of social evolution. However, this outcome seems entirely unlikely. The starting point for both Kohlberg's and Habermas's work is the recognition that there is no existing species-wide consensus on what morality is at its highest level, or what it requires of us. Two other possibilities seem more likely. If Kohlberg's theory is correct, it must be possible to translate the moral dilemmas posed in Western contexts for non-Western subjects, in ways which are not only comprehensible to those subjects, but which do not involve substantial impositions of Western concepts onto the problem-definitions. Habermas recognises that this issue cannot be disregarded. He explains:

---

[108]Gilligan (1982): 18-19.

[109]Habermas attempts to show that Gilligan's concerns can be largely accommodated within the structure of a Kantian-style ethic formulated discursively. He offers several interrelated responses to her work. First, according to Habermas, the discursive conception of morality requires for its functioning the qualities of empathy and sensitivity to context discussed by Gilligan. These are essential to understanding and discussing the needs and interests of others, and have largely been ignored by traditional Kantian theories. Such qualities also become paramount when the problem of *application* of moral principles is raised, as the application of norms is not a matter of mechanics, but requires great sensitivity to context and to the others involved. Finally, Habermas believes that a number of the issues identified by Gilligan should, properly speaking, be identified as ethical rather than moral. They hence do not constitute a direct challenge to the theory. See Habermas, "Moral Consciousness," in Habermas, *MCCA*: 175-82. An outstanding assessment of this debate is offered in Seyla Benhabib's "The Debate Over Women and Moral Theory Revisited," in Benhabib (1992): 178-202.

If and only if the theory is correct are we in a position to find context-sensitive equivalents for the Heinz dilemmas in all cultures so that we get Taiwanese responses that can be compared with American responses with respect to important dimensions of the theory. It follows from the theory itself that stories relevant to it can be translated from one context to another. What is more, the theory gives us an indication of how this is to be accomplished. If it cannot be done without violence and distortion, this very failure of hermeneutic application is an indication that the dimensions postulated are being externally imposed and are not the result of a reconstruction from within.[110]

However, judging whether such "violence and distortion" has occurred is a difficult task. (1) If the scale proposed by the theory is ethnocentric (i.e. Kohlberg's theory is false) in that it imposes alien ways of thinking about moral issues and moral dilemmas upon individuals in other societies, the likely outcome would be that these individuals would score systematically lower than their counterparts in the West. What we would be measuring is their ability to perform "our tricks" rather than their own, and it seems unlikely that they could outdo us at this. This is analogous to the problem which Gilligan raises for the assessment of the data concerning women's performance on Kohlberg's scale. It is important to note that the lower scores of women relative to men in the United States were an anomaly unpredicted by the theory. (2) Systematically lower scores for members of other cultures are not, however, to be seen as anomalous. Because the theory has been built from and designed to accommodate the observation that individuals in culturally distant societies develop less rapidly and progress less far on average on Kohlberg's scale than do those in the modern West, the assessment of empirical data is deeply ambiguous. The same data, indicating systematically lower scores on the part of other cultures, could therefore be legitimately interpreted as both a confirmation and

---

[110]Habermas, "Reconstruction and Interpretation in the Social Sciences," in Habermas, *MCCA*: 41.

a disconfirmation of the theory. Data assessment requires subtlety and sensitivity when what is at issue are competing visions of moral maturity, of the sort described by Gilligan.[111]

Although discrepant data should become more obvious over time as a research programme evolves, the difficulties in deriving empirical confirmation for these claims species-wide are both evident and unlikely to be resolved in advance of further conceptual clarification.[112] I would hence like to focus more closely upon the conceptual aspects of Habermas's argument against the relativist, and in particular on the defence of the claim-- essential to both the theory of moral development and that of social evolution-- that the modern Western understanding of the world represents that understanding of the world "in which knowledge can be most effectively accumulated."[113] A key component of all cognitive-developmental accounts is the concept of a logic of development. With respect to the development of worldviews Habermas argues first, that such worldviews can be viewed as attempts to solve similar problems; and second, that these problem-solutions can be ranked in terms of non-relativistic criteria which demonstrate the superiority of the modern, decentered understanding of the world. The issue of whether worldviews can be seen as commensurable in this sense is precisely the subject of Habermas's discussion with Winch, to which we now turn.

---

[111]A challenge of this sort in the field of personality development is advanced by Sudhir Kakar in *The Inner World*. Kakar argues that although it touches on matters of universal human concern, Erikson's account of the human life cycle represents a distinctively Western reading of it. Indian Hindu society, in his opinion, stresses the acquisition of qualities of interdependency to a far greater degree than those of strong individualism. Because the apex of individual maturation is defined differently by traditonal Indian society than by Western, the picture presented by Erikson tends to portray the development of personality in Indians as somewhat "delayed." A more perspicuous understanding of personality development in Hindu society is achieved when this phenomenon is understood, at least initially, from within the images of maturity held by members of the society themselves. See Sudhir Kakar, *The Inner World* (Oxford University Press, 1978).

[112]The theory of social evolution is even more difficult to assess empirically, as experimental data are not available. Michael Schmid gives a thoughtful evaluation of both the conceptual and empirical plausibility of Habermas's account in Schmid, "Social Evolution," in Thompson and Held (1982).

[113]The phrase is Stephen White's. See White (1988): 128.

139

APPENDIX 1: KOHLBERG'S MORAL STAGES

I. Preconventional level

At this level the child is responsive to cultural rules and labels of good and bad, right or wrong, but interprets these labels in terms of either the physical or the hedonistic consequences of action (punishment, reward, exchange of favors), or in terms of the physical power of those who enunciate the rules and labels. The level is divided into the following two stages:

Stage 1: The punishment and obedience orientation. The physical consequences of action determine its goodness or badness regardless of the human meaning or value of these consequences. Avoidance of punishment and unquestioning deference to power are valued in their own right, not in terms of respect for an underlying moral order supported by punishment and authority (the latter being stage 4).

Stage 2: The instrumental relativist orientation. Right action consists of that which instrumentally satisfies one's own needs and occasionally the needs of others. Human relations are viewed in terms like those of the market place. Elements of fairness, of reciprocity and of equal sharing are present, but they are always interpreted in a physical, pragmatic way. Reciprocity is a matter of "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours," not of loyalty, gratitude, or justice.

II. Conventional level

At this level, maintaining the expectations of the individual's family, group or nation is perceived as valuable in its own right, regardless of immediate and obvious consequences. The attitude is not only one of *conformity* to personal expectations and social order, but of loyalty to it, of actively *maintaining*, supporting and justifying the order, and of identifying with the persons or group involved in it. At this level, there are the following two stages:

Stage 3: The interpersonal concordance or "good boy-nice girl" orientation. Good behavior is that which pleases or helps others and is approved by them. There is much conformity to stereotypical images of what is majority or "natural" behavior. Behavior is judged frequently by intention— "he means well" becomes important for the first time. One earns approval by being "nice."

Stage 4: The "law and order" orientation. There is orientation toward authority, fixed rules and the maintenance of the social order. Right behavior consists of doing one's duty, showing respect for authority and maintaining the given social order for its own sake.

III. Postconventional, autonomous or principled level

At this level, there is a clear effort to define moral values and principles which have validity and application apart from the individual's own identification with these groups. This level again has two stages:

Stage 5: The social-contract legalistic orientation, generally utilitarian overtones. Right action tends to be defined in terms of general individual rights, and standards which have been critically examined and agreed upon by the whole society. There is a clear awareness of the relativism of personal values and opinions and a corresponding emphasis upon procedural rules for reaching consensus. Aside from what is constitutionally and democratically agreed upon, the right is a matter of personal "values" and "opinion." The result is an emphasis upon the "legal point of view," but with an emphasis upon the possibility of changing law in terms of rational considerations of social utility (rather than freezing it in terms of stage 4 "law and order"). Outside the legal realm, free agreement and contract is the binding element of obligation. This is the "official" morality of the American government and constitution.

Stage 6: The universal ethical principle orientation. Right is defined by the decision of conscience in accord with self-chosen *ethical principles* appealing to logical comprehensiveness, universality, and consistency. These principles are abstract and ethical (the Golden Rule, the categorical imperative); they are not concrete moral rules like the Ten Commandments. At heart these are universal principles of *justice,* of the *reciprocity* and *equality* of human *rights,* and of respect for the dignity of human beings as *individual persons.*

Source: Lawrence Kohlberg, "From Is to Ought," in Theodore Mischel, (ed.), *Cognitive Development and Epistemology* (Academic Press, 1971).

141

THIS PAGE DELIBERATELY LEFT BLANK

Chapter Four

The historical explanation, the explanation as an hypothesis of development, is only <u>one</u> way of assembling the data—of their synopsis. It is just as possible to see the data in their relation to one another and to embrace them in a general picture without putting it in the form of an hypothesis about temporal development.

...perspicuous representation brings about the understanding which consists precisely in the fact that we "see the connections." Hence the importance of finding <u>connecting links</u>.

But an hypothetical connecting link should in this case do nothing but direct the attention to the similarity, the relatedness of the <u>facts</u>. As one might illustrate an internal relation of a circle to an ellipse by gradually converting an ellipse into a circle; <u>but not in order to assert that a certain ellipse actually, historically, had originated from a circle</u> (evolutionary hypothesis), but only in order to sharpen our eye for a formal connection.

But I can also see the evolutionary hypothesis as nothing more, as the clothing of a formal connection.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer's "<u>Golden Bough</u>"*

4.1. Introduction

We have thus far been engaged in tracing the complexly interwoven series of arguments offered by Habermas in support of the claim that discourse ethics defines a procedure for the evaluation of moral norms valid for all competent human agents. Although this thesis is itself quite bold, the status Habermas claims for it is, as we have seen, somewhat weaker.[1] The specifically philosophical contribution to the advancement of this universalist claim is found in the transcendental-pragmatic argument, which aims to demonstrate that every communicatively competent actor engaging in argumentation necessarily presupposes the

validity of the principle of universalisation. This argument is set out in two stages. The first points to the centrality, indeed inescapability, of a very general or "conventional" form of argumentation to human agency itself. The second draws a link between a "postconventional" mode of communicative action associated by Habermas with the argumentative practices of Western modernity, and the derivation of the principle of universalisation. Habermas's approach to advancing universalist philosophical theses differentiates itself from others precisely by acknowledging the inherent fallibility of such theses, and their dependence upon the success of empirical research programmes. The previous chapter examined Habermas's efforts to use empirical research to bridge the gap between the two stages of his argument, thereby strengthening the claim to universal validity of discourse ethics. As we saw, Habermas uses empirical reconstructions of competence acquisition to support the thesis that mastery of the formal characteristics of "postconventional" modes of argumentation represents a demonstrable cognitive gain over those associated with "conventional" forms, thereby showing the argumentative practices of modernity to be of universal significance for all agents engaging in communicative action.

The reconstructions make crucial use of the notion of an "internal" or "developmental logic." It is this concept which permits Habermas to portray individual and societal development as following an ordered sequence of stages which represents a *cumulative* path of learning in a particular dimension. However, as Wittgenstein notes in the passage cited above, there are many possible ways of viewing the data in question, of which the hypothesis of evolutionary development is but one. In this chapter I would like to give closer consideration to the cogency and implications of the notion of a developmental logic as used by Habermas to

---

[1]Jürgen Habermas, "Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action," in Habermas, *MCCA:* 116.

rank worldviews, in order both to clarify more precisely its role in his work, and to open the way for an exploration of alternative ways of viewing the matters at hand.

The accounts presented by Habermas of the genesis of the capacity for moral judgement in individuals and of the evolution of worldviews at the societal level are cognitive-developmental in form. I should like briefly to recapitulate the salient features of such models. Cognitive-developmental models are composed of a series of stages viewed as forming a conceptual hierarchy, where each stage represents a higher or more adequate level of problem-solving in the sphere under investigation. The stages in question can be portrayed as an ascending sequence just in case the cognitive structures of the higher stages replace those of the lower stages in a manner which incorporates the structures of the lower stages in a reorganised or more comprehensive form. This is what Habermas means when he claims that the stages in question are conceptually interlinked through an "internal logic." Because the stages are interrelated in this fashion, transitions between stages can be regarded as a form of learning, in which the subject acquires progressively more adequate techniques for problem-solving.

Developmental accounts of competence acquisition thus present an array of problem-solutions in the form of an ascending sequence, as a series of successively more adequate approximations toward an apex or optimum. The definition of the apex is hence of crucial importance in defining the path of development as a whole.[2] However, as was noted in the previous chapter, the evolutionary stories set forth by Habermas at both the individual and societal level draw their images of the highest or most mature form of development from a particular reading of what is essential to the form of rationality implicit in Western modernity that is, the form of rationality associated with what Habermas terms "the decentered understanding of the world." Habermas's recounting of the development of moral

.

145

consciousness portrays Kohlberg's moral stages as parallel to the sequence of "stages of interaction," where this sequence traces how an individual in a modern, Western society acquires mastery of the world and speaker perspectives essential to such an understanding. His narrative of worldview evolution defines the apex of development directly in terms of this decentered understanding of the world.

Habermas must next defend the crucial use he makes of the modern Western worldview as against others in order to define the terminal point of his developmental sequences. His defence, as we have seen, cannot rely uniquely upon empirical data, as the data themselves are gathered and interpreted in the light of this framework. He must therefore present a conceptual argument showing that worldviews can be unambiguously ordered according to some set of non-relative criteria. This is one of the principal aims of *The Theory of Communicative Action*. As Stephen White explains:

> What [Habermas tries to accomplish in *The Theory of Communicative Action*] is a demonstration of why modernity, with its clear manifestation of structures of communicative rationality, should be seen as a *progressive* development; that is, a demonstration of why modernity represents a universally significant achievement in human learning, rather than a way of organizing social and cultural life which is *simply* different from or incommensurable with pre-modernity.[3]

Habermas defends a universalist position by arguing that different cultural worldviews represent solutions to *similar* problems, which can be placed in a sequence according to their adequacy as measured by criteria connected with the concept of learning. He claims that the most rational worldview is that associated with the decentered understanding of the world, precisely because this represents the understanding of reality which permits the greatest degree of learning to take place. These points are developed through Habermas's analysis of the

---

[2]Cf. Chapter 3.5; also Thomas McCarthy, "Rationality and Relativism," in *Habermas: Critical Debates*, ed. J.B. Thomson and D. Held (Macmillan, 1982): 70-71.
[3]Stephen K. White, *The Recent Work of Jürgen Habermas* (Cambridge University Press, 1988): 90.

"rationality debate" among philosophers, notably Peter Winch, and anthropologists, on the issue of how we are to understand a foreign culture. I would like next to trace Habermas's position in this debate more closely, in order eventually to depict some alternative ways of envisioning the process of cross-cultural understanding. My analysis will focus upon whether the dichotomy which Habermas constructs, between seeing cultures as entirely equal in that they are all literally non-comparable, or arguing for the universal significance of the modern worldview, is an appropriate or tenable one.

4.2 The Rationality Debate I: Preliminaries

4.21 Rationality and Relativism in Cross-Cultural Understanding

Acquaintance with other cultures presses us ineluctably towards the question of how, or indeed whether, we can understand the beliefs and practices of individuals in cultures which differ significantly from our own. What initially strikes the observer of other cultures is the sheer variety of systems of belief and interpretation, of practices and of moral codes; in brief, the multiplicity of ways of imagining and living a life which is nonetheless recognisably human in its shape. An historically common response to this observation of diversity, often associated with the thinkers of the Enlightenment, has been to read the wide gamut of cultural phenomena in light of a notion of "progress," distinguishing what is "backwards" or "unenlightened" from what is "enlightened" or "modern."[4] The temptation has been to view practices differing sharply from our own as indicative of a society's deficiencies in rationality or in culture, and to

---

[4]An excellent analysis of the Enlightenment position on cultural difference and various German philosophical responses to it is found in Patrick Gardiner, "German Philosophy and the Rise of Relativism," in Monist 64 (1981): 138-154.

view human history as a process of evolution which represents our own views as being closer to the truth than those which conflict with them.[5]

Any facile adoption of this position has been decisively undercut in the present context. The multifaceted controversy among philosophers, anthropologists and sociologists which has become known as "the rationality debate" begins with the insight that other cultures, languages and systems of belief require understanding "from within." When we move beyond the initial experience of an overwhelming diversity, one of the most compelling features which emerges from the study of other cultures is the recognition that different groups plausibly order their experience by means of quite different concepts; that experience underdetermines what it is rational to believe about the world.[6] The proper study of cultures seems to require that we take account in some significant sense of such alternative systems of interpretation. However, taking seriously the notion that standards of rationality and intelligibility vary, at least apparently, according to one's intellectual framework, places modern scientists in an awkward position with respect to the status of their own endeavours to study other cultures. Whether and in what domains of experience the criteria of rationality developed in Western society, and in particular those connected with the development of natural science, can be applied beyond the boundaries of Western cultures is a recurring theme among participants in the rationality debate.

The debate focusses specifically on how we, as members of societies heavily influenced by scientific procedures, are to understand the beliefs held or actions and rituals practised by members of primitive societies, whose understanding of reality is significantly

---

[5]Michael Krausz and Jack W. Meiland, "Introduction," in *Relativism: Cognitive and Moral,* ed. M. Krausz and J. Meiland, (University of Notre Dame Press, 1982): 1.
[6]See Martin Holis, however, for the argument that we can never derive such conclusions from anthropology. See e.g. Holis, "The Limits of Rationality," and "Reason and Ritual," in Wilson (1970).

different from ours, and who engage in some forms of ritual activity—especially those connected with magic and witchcraft—which seem by our standards to be paradigmatically irrational. The task of the social-scientific investigator is a perplexing one: her role is somehow to make sense of these ritual practices, where this can only mean to show the plausibility or reasonability *by our standards* of practices which strike us, at least initially, as unreasonable.

All authors we are considering are united in their rejection of an influential line of response to this problem pioneered by Lévy-Bruhl in his theory of "participation." Lévy-Bruhl in effect abandoned the goal of making sense of many puzzling ritual practices, arguing that primitive cultures differ from our own precisely in that they are "pre-logical." Members of traditional societies seem frequently to assert that a thing is both itself, and quite different from itself. To claim, for example, that trees are spirits, or spirits, trees, is to practise what Lévy-Bruhl terms "participation." He accounts for this phenomenon in terms of a contrast between "mystical" and "empirical" modes of thought. Whereas on his account the "mystically oriented" observer sees many features of her reality as at once themselves and as things quite different from how they appear visually, the "empirical" orientation of the Western observer enables her to see most objects as distinct and clearly defined.[7]

By contrast, philosophers and social scientists participating in the rationality debate agree that our point of departure must be that the members of primitive societies are, like ourselves, both intelligent and logical. A second line of response, and one in keeping with the

---

[7]Subsequent fieldwork by Evans-Pritchard has cast doubt on the validity of this thesis of the omnipresence of participations in primitive worldviews. In his study of the Nuer tribe, Evans-Pritchard shows that the sense of identity appealed to in such claims as "twins are birds" should not be understood as substantial and symmetrical. It is hence not best understood as a violation of the rules of logic. The main lines of Evans-Pritchard's account are narrated by Ruth Finnegan and Robin Horton in their "Introduction" to *Modes of Thought: Essays on Thinking in Western and Non-Western Societies*, ed., Ruth Finnegan and Robin Horton, (Faber and Faber, 1973): 42-43.

simple explanation of cultural diversity in terms of a narrative of "progress," is to view the practices in question as erroneous or illogical, but to offer supplementary psychological, sociological or economic accounts of how such erroneous practices emerged and took hold in societies whose members are intelligent and logical. Although persuasive in certain respects, this form of explanation of ritual acts has seemed to many to be intellectually unsatisfactory in that it disregards the meaning such acts have for members of the culture in question. In two very influential publications, *The Idea of a Social Science* and "Understanding a Primitive Society," Peter Winch gave important articulation to the idea that in order to advance adequate interpretations and explanations of another culture, social scientists must take account of the standards of rationality and intelligibility used by members of that culture to explain their own practices. Winch argues that not to do so, to unreflectively judge another culture as deficient in light of the standards of rationality prevalent in our culture, is not just a form of intellectual arrogance, but in an important sense a mistake: blindness to our own ethnocentricism precludes our ability to fully understand these practices, and thereby to learn from them.[8]

However, acceptance of the notion that another culture must be understood, at least initially, from within its own categorial system or "conceptual scheme" may seem to vitiate the aim of making cross-cultural comparisons. Our efforts at cross-cultural understanding may be viewed as consisting largely, or in their entirety, of imposing the interpretive categories of one culture upon another. Indeed, it may seem impossible to do otherwise. To take the extreme case, if there are alternative methods of classification which provide different, but equally valid, ways of interpreting and organising elements of our experience, amongst which no rational method of choice exists, then our efforts at cross-cultural understanding may seem inevitably to rely upon categories and criteria which are arbitrary. Relativism--the doctrine

---

[8]Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958); and Peter Winch,

150

that what is true or right is true or right only *relative to* or *for* a particular unit of reference[9]--becomes a viable theoretical position. It should be noted that what is at issue in the rationality debate is the possibility of relativism about knowledge or *cognitive* relativism. Ernest Gellner offers the following very general definition of cognitive relativism:

> Relativism is basically a doctrine in the theory of knowledge: it asserts that there is no unique truth, no unique objective reality. What we naively suppose to be such is but the product--exclusively or in some proportion, which varies with the particular form the relativism takes--of the cognitive apparatus of the individual, community, age, or whatever.[10]

The form of cognitive relativism of interest to us concerns the possibility of relativism on a cultural level. This is, loosely put, the doctrine that truth is relative to our intellectual framework or what Habermas calls "worldview," and that it may vary from one worldview to another. Habermas, as we shall see, takes a universalist position on this issue, defending the cognitive superiority of the form of rationality inherent in the Western worldview. Although Habermas's central concern in advancing discourse ethics is to argue against *moral* relativism--the doctrine that an action can be judged as morally right only relative to a particular set of moral beliefs or principles[11]-- conceptual links exist between one's stance on the issues of cognitive and moral relativism. His excursus into the debate over cognitive relativism plays a pivotal role in justifying the universalist claims of discourse ethics, for reasons which will emerge in the course of this chapter.

4.22 Some Contrasts Between Mythical and Modern Worldviews

The discussion of rationality found in Volume 1 of *The Theory of Communicative Action* juxtaposes descriptions of the "mythical" and "modern" views of the world.

"Understanding a Primitive Society," in *Rationality*, ed. Bryan R. Wilson, (Basil Blackwell, 1970).

[9]Krausz and Meiland, "Introduction," in Krausz and Meiland (1982): 4.

[10]Ernest Gellner, "Relativism and Universals," in *Rationality and Relativism*, ed. M. Hollis and S. Lukes (MIT Press, 1982): 183.

[11]Krausz and Meiland, "Introduction," in Krausz and Meiland (1982): 8.

Habermas's comparison of mythical and modern worldviews takes as its point of departure the question of which circumstances and preconditions render it possible for individuals to lead a rational life. By a "rational conduct of life" Habermas means a life in which appropriate forms of reasonableness are exhibited across *all* dimensions of validity. This notion, he emphasises, should not be restricted to the cognitive sphere of knowledge about the physical world.

> Even when we are judging the rationality of individual persons, it is not sufficient to resort to this or that expression. The question is, rather, whether A or B or a group of individuals behaves rationally *in general;* whether one may systematically expect that they have good reasons for their expressions and that these expressions are correct or successful in the cognitive dimension, reliable or insightful in the moral-practical dimension, discerning or illuminating in the evaluative dimension, or candid and self-critical in the expressive dimension; that they exhibit understanding in the hermeneutic dimension; or indeed whether they are "reasonable" in all these dimensions. When there appears a systematic effect in these respects, across various domains of interaction and over long periods (perhaps even over the space of a lifetime), we also speak of the rationality of a *conduct of life.*[12]

The discussion of worldviews is intended to take up the question of which sociocultural conditions facilitate the conduct of a life for both individuals and groups which is rational in this encompassing sense.

Habermas's discussion of worldviews in *The Theory of Communicative Action* complements the account of social evolution developed in his earlier writings on historical materialism, which we took up in Chapter 3.4. As we saw in that section, Habermas envisages a mutual influence between worldview structures and the development of individual personality. Worldviews are interpretive systems which vary from culture to culture, and which reflect the background knowledge accumulated by the collective. They systematise or provide unity to the actions in which its members engage; they offer images about possible life paths, from which individuals seeking to shape their lives take inspiration. The development of individuals hence takes place within a space of possibilities opened up by the interpretive

152

structures embedded in their cultural worldviews. The relationship between individual development and worldview structure is nonetheless not a strict one, in that there are individuals who surpass the rationality level of their collectively shared worldviews.[13] However, Habermas conceives there to be a general correlation between worldview structures and individual development, and sets out to investigate what form a worldview must take if a rational conduct of life is to be possible for the individuals who share it.[14] As he notes, we cannot simply assume that it is the modern worldview as against others which makes a rational conduct of life possible. The intuition, clearly supported by Habermas, that the mode of thought associated with cognitive modernity represents an advance in rationality over that associated with cognitive traditionalism requires clarification and defence.[15] The contrast drawn between mythical and modern views of the world enables Habermas to use the mythical understanding of the world as a backcloth against which the features of our modern understanding of the world stand out more sharply. This sets the stage for his argument for the superior rationality of these features, which we will take up in the next section.

Habermas begins his account by clarifying what he means by the "rationality" of a worldview. Following the anthropologist Evans-Pritchard, he rejects the explanation that what varies between individuals who develop in societies enframed by mythical worldviews and those who mature in societies circumscribed by modern ones is a capacity for performing logical operations.[16] Habermas explains: "Our point of departure has to be that adult members of primitive tribal societies can acquire basically the same formal operations as the members of modern societies, even though the higher-level competences appear less frequently

---

[12]Habermas, *TCA 1*: 43.
[13]Habermas, "Normative Structures," in Habermas, *CES*: 102.
[14]Habermas, *TCA 1*: 44.
[15]I've borrowed the terms "cognitive modernity" and "cognitive traditionalism" from Ruth Finnegan and Robin Horton, "Introduction," in Finnegan and Horton (1973). They will be elaborated more fully below.

and more selectively in them; that is, they are applied in more restricted spheres of life."[17] Since individual capacity for cognitive operations is not, in his view, what varies across worldviews, Habermas must provide alternative grounds to justify his intuition for the greater rationality of the modern worldview. He argues that the rationality of worldviews can be assessed in terms of the adequacy of the "formal-pragmatic basic concepts" or techniques for interpreting reality which each worldview makes available to individuals.[18] The basic concepts should not be construed uniquely in relation to physical nature, as a rational conduct of life is exhibited across the diverse dimensions of human experience.[19] The account presented here complements the account of the superiority of the decentered mode of understanding the world taken up in Chapter 3.2.

Habermas next sketches the techniques for interpreting reality which he believes are made available by mythical and modern worldviews. He paints the general features of mythical worldviews in broad strokes evoking Levi-Strauss's structuralist anthropology, and in particular those aspects of Levi-Strauss's work stressed by Maurice Godelier.[20] It should be noted that this description coheres with the more sociological description of primitive or neolithic society given in the theory of social evolution. Recall that primitive societies are stipulated by Habermas to be those organised around kinship systems. Due to their lack of technological advancement, they are radically vulnerable to external threats from the

---

[16]See footnote #6 above.

[17]Habermas, *TCA 1*: 44.

[18]As we shall see below in 4.23, this account shares some of the intuitions articulated in Evans-Pritchard's study of the Azande.

[19]Habermas, *TCA 1*: 45.

[20]Habermas, *TCA 1*: 45. The principal texts referred to by Habermas are the following: Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, vols. 1 and 2 (New York, 1963, 1976) and *The Savage Mind* (Chicago, 1966); and Maurice Godelier, "Myth and History: Reflections on the Foundations of the Primitive Mind," in *Perspectives in Marxist Anthropology* (Cambridge, Eng., 1977).

environment and from other groups.[21] Moreover, the interpretive schema evinced in the mythical understanding of the world serves Habermas as a sort of counterpoint, from which the conceptual contours of the modern understanding of the world emerge with greater definition. He argues that the features of the modern worldview which thus come into focus are those which correspond to what he calls "communicative rationality," or the form of rationality embodied in the decentered understanding of the world. This contrast between worldviews is drawn primarily by showing the disadvantages or lack of rationality in the mythical way of thinking, which foreshadows his anti-relativist position in the ensuing rationality debate.

In Habermas's view, the mythical understanding of the world presents us with examples of paradigmatically irrational conduct. He writes: "The deeper one penetrates into the network of a mythical interpretation of the world, the more strongly the totalizing power of the 'savage mind' stands out."[22] He adds, moreover, that such worldviews "are far from making possible rational orientations of action in our sense."[23] What Habermas describes as the "totalizing power" of mythical worldviews is the complex interweaving of a skein of interpretations into a unified whole. In contrast with our modern worldview, wherein the various domains of nature, culture, and self are sharply differentiated from one another, the striking feature of the mythical worldview is its holistic interpretive framework. Extensive and accurate information about the social and natural environments--technical knowledge about the production of implements and artifacts, medicinal practices, plant and animal species, geographical terrain, climactic patterns, religious rites, kinship relations, and so on--is organised into a whole in which each element echoes and refers to every other. This complex of information, he explains, "is organized in such a way that every individual appearance in the

---

[21]See Chapter 3.4 for a more detailed account of the stages and path of social evolution proposed by Habermas.
[22]Habermas, *TCA 1*: 45.

155

world, in its typical aspects, resembles or contrasts with every other appearance."[24] The system of information interpretation embodied in mythical worldviews is not, he will later argue, an optimal one. His present concern is to trace its aetiology.

Habermas views the "totalizing power" of the mythical worldview as attributable to two features: first, the form of thought embodied in such worldviews is "concretistic and analogical." Analogical thinking facilitates the creation of a holistic interpretive framework, in that it permits a wide variety of data to be synthesised and explained through the construction of a network of correspondences. However, these interpretations remain bound to a perceptual or tactile understanding of the world. Habermas, following the structural anthropologists, explains the unifying quality of mythical worldviews partly "...through the fact that the 'savage mind' fastens in a *concretistic* way upon the perceptual surface of the world and orders these perceptions by drawing analogies and contrasts. Domains of phenomena are interrelated and classified from the vantage points of *homology* and *heterogeneity,* equivalence and inequality, identity and contrariety."[25] Second, the basic concepts in terms of which analogies are drawn derive from the kinship system. The structures of the kinship systems, the intricate relations between families, sexes and generations, provide an interpretive schema which can be deployed in a variety of contexts to explain phenomena in both the social and natural worlds.[26]

The mythical interpretations of the world characteristic of archaic societies reflect what Habermas regards as their fundamental experience: the experience of vulnerability in the face of the contingencies of an unmastered environment. The categories of action prevalent in myths, typically those of success and failure, active and passive, attack and defence, reflect this central experience. Because archaic societies have not yet acquired the degree of

---

[23]Habermas, *TCA 1*: 44.
[24]Habermas, *TCA 1*: 45-46.
[25]Habermas, *TCA 1*: 46.

technological sophistication which would offer them an appreciable measure of control over the vicissitudes of the physical environment or the incursions of external groups, such societies rely upon myths to render the invisible causes and forces governing events in the universe comprehensible. The narrative explanations of the world contained in myth allow members of neolithic societies to gain an imaginary control over the cosmos.[27]

The aspect of the mythical worldview which stands out from the perspective of members of modern cultures is the blending of two categories which we sharply distinguish, those of physical nature and of culture. Habermas sometimes describes this sort of interpretive schema as involving a "levelling" of the domains of reality, in that it projects nature and culture onto the same plane. This categorial blending accounts, in Habermas's view, for the feelings of disorientation and frustration which initially strike the modern Western individual who comes into contact with mythical worldviews. He writes: "What irritates us members of a modern lifeworld is that in a mythically interpreted world we cannot, or cannot with sufficient precision, make certain differentiations that are fundamental to our understanding of the world."[28] This "confusion" between nature and culture lies at the root of two important contrasts between the mythical and modern worldviews.

First, Habermas argues that the confusion between nature and culture can be seen as a conceptual blending of two *object domains*, those of physical nature and the sociocultural environment. Because these object domains are not clearly separated, the differentiations which we take as fundamental, for example between things and persons, or between objects and agents, are not made clearly. The existence of magical practices is a correlate of this categorial blending. Because primitive societies do not recognise a clear distinction between

---

[26]Habermas, *TCA 1*: 46.
[27]Habermas, *TCA 1*: 47.
[28]Habermas, *TCA 1*: 48.

teleological and communicative action, between instrumental actions taken to influence objectively given states of affairs, and the establishment of various forms of interpersonal relationships, their magical practices attempt to exert influence over spheres through methods which strike us as irrational or misguided.[29] The "demythologization" of worldviews, which forms an integral part of the transition towards modernity in the process of social evolution described by Habermas, leads towards a sharp distinction between the object domains of nature and culture. The process, in which the object domains of nature, culture, and subjectivity are progressively differentiated, can best be described in terms of the acquisition of the appropriate *basic attitudes towards worlds*. He explains:

> ...as soon as we are to specify explicitly wherein things are distinct from persons, causes from motives, happenings from actions, and so forth, we have to go beyond differentiating object domains to differentiating a basic attitude toward the objective world of what is the case and a basic attitude toward the social world of what can legitimately be expected, what is commanded or ought to be. We make the correct conceptual separations between causal connections of nature and normative orders of society to the extent that we become conscious of the changes in perspective and attitude that we effect when we pass from observing or manipulating to following or violating legitimate expectations.[30]

The acquisition of these basic attitudes towards different object domains necessitates that we differentiate such domains. Habermas believes that this differentiation of domains represents a conceptual advance, in that it provides a more accurate understanding of reality than the undifferentiated interpretive scheme typical of mythical worldviews.

Second, Habermas maintains that the confusion of nature and culture represents a failure to differentiate between language and world. Primitive myths and magical practices often systematically confuse the "internal relations" which hold between the meanings of words, and the "external relations" which hold between elements of non-linguistic reality. As

---

[29]We shall return to this theme in the discussion of Azande witchcraft below.
[30]Habermas, *TCA 1*, 49.

Habermas explains, "[m]ythical interpretation of the world and magical control of the world can intermesh smoothly because internal and external relations are still conceptually integrated."[31] This lack of differentiation impedes members of archaic worldviews from taking a reflexive stance towards their worldviews, that is, from learning to see these worldviews *as* worldviews. This in turn is due to a lack of precision in the concept of validity. In his view, archaic worldviews fail not only to separate clearly the three validity claims to propositional truth, normative rightness and expressive sincerity, but also to distill even very general concepts of validity such as truth and morality from the admixture of empirical factors, such as causality and health.[32] As Habermas explains, "...a linguistically constituted worldview can be identified with the world-order itself to such an extent that it cannot be perceived *as* an interpretation of the world that is subject to error and open to criticism. In this respect the confusion of nature and culture takes on the significance of a reification of worldview."[33]

In contrast, Habermas regards the modern understanding of reality, in which the three formal world-concepts and their associated validity claims are clearly distinguished, as facilitating a critical relation to the corresponding worldview. He argues that the development of the concept of an external world of states of affairs identical for all observers, or of a social

---

[31]Habermas, *TCA 1*, 49-50.

[32]Habermas, *TCA 1*, 50. Habermas's account of the "confusion" among members of primitive societies between what is healthy and what is good bears a strong resemblance to Nietzsche's perceptive and provocative description of the "aristocratic savages" in Part 1 of *On the Genealogy of Morals*. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (Vintage, 1967).

[33]Habermas, *TCA 1*, 50. It is crucial to note the similarities between the descriptions of the "closed" character of mythical worldviews offered by Habermas and Robin Horton. On the relation of language to reality Horton writes: "no man can escape the tendency to see a unique and intimate link between words and things. For the traditional thinker this tendency has an overwhelming power. Since he can imagine no alternatives to his established system of concepts and words, the latter appear bound to reality in an absolute fashion. There is no way at all in which they can be seen as varying independently of the segments of reality they stand for." He later adds: "A vision of alternative possibilities forces men to the faith that ideas somehow vary whilst reality remains constant....Furthermore, such a vision, by giving the thinker an opportunity to 'get outside' his own system, offers him a possibility of his coming to see it *as a system*." See Robin Horton, "African

world of norms shared intersubjectively, requires a detachment of language from reality, and hence of the interpretation of reality articulated in a cultural worldview from the assumed world-order. This opens up the possibility for individuals to take a critical distance to their cultural tradition. It is only through reflective awareness of the variety of interpretations of natural and social reality which are possible that we are able to form the concept of a cultural tradition in the proper sense. In sum, "...mythical worldviews prevent us from categorically uncoupling nature and culture, not only through conceptually mixing the objective and social worlds but also through reifying the linguistic worldview. As a result, the concept of the world is dogmatically invested with a specific content that is withdrawn from rational discussion and thus from criticism."[34]

In contrast to the "closedness" of the mythical worldview, the decentered, modern worldview is presented as an "open" one. Recall that the modern or decentered manner of understanding the world has two general characteristics which account for its superior rationality. First, the decentered conception of the world understands reality as divided into external, social and subjective dimensions, each with its own standards of truth and falsity, as well as its own mode of justification for their assessment. This is what Habermas means when he says that the modern understanding of the world differentiates three "domains of validity." Second, this way of understanding validity claims essentially involves a recognition that no such claim can in principle be immune to criticism through argumentation. The decentered understanding of the world hence expresses in Habermas's view both a more accurate understanding of reality and a radical openness to critique, which together account for its cognitive advantages. Note that the characterisation of mythical and modern worldviews in

---

Thought and Western Science," in Wilson (1970): 156, 159. As we shall see in §4.52, Horton's work is used by Habermas to corroborate his own position; however, Horton later revises this acount.
[34]Habermas, TCA 1: 51.

terms of the concepts "closed" and "open" is not a neutral one: it plays a crucial role in Habermas's argument for the universal relevance of the form of rationality embodied in the modern worldview.

It may be helpful to summarise the results of our discussion up to this point. In Habermas's view, mythical and modern ways of understanding the world involve different "conceptual frameworks", different ways of ordering and organising our understanding of reality. This does not yet show that the modern way of conceiving reality represents an *advance* over the mythical. Whether and in what sense the modern understanding of the world can claim universality is the subject of the next section. It is worthwhile recalling the importance for Habermas of taking a universalist stance on this issue: only if the modern Western worldview can claim to represent a decisive advance in rationality can it be presented as the outcome of a Piagetian learning process or developmental logic. Furthermore, support for the claim to universality of the procedure of discourse ethics hinges on the notion that the Western worldview can be portrayed in precisely this way, as the apex of a species-wide path of development.

4.3 The Rationality Debate II: Peter Winch on Understanding a Primitive Society

Habermas's comparison of mythical and modern worldviews began with the intuition that it is the modern worldview that best allows a "rational conduct of life." However, the possibility that different worldviews may have alternative conceptions of what counts as a rational act must make us suspicious of this intuition. It seems to be precisely what we should expect when assessing the situation by our own criteria of intelligibility. Members of other worldviews, assessing the situation by their own standards, could foreseeably reach a parallel

conclusion concerning the preferability of their own worldview. If a situation of complete cognitive relativism obtains, in which each cultural worldview or intellectual framework embodies standards of rationality which are literally non-comparable, there will be no non-circular way to assess the rationality of worldviews. In order to justify the claim that the modern worldview represents a gain in rationality of universal significance, Habermas argues that there are non-worldview-specific criteria by which the rationality of worldviews can be assessed. He must, in other words, provide grounds for the claim that "the supposed rationality expressed in our understanding of the world is more than a reflection of the particular features of a culture stamped by science...."[35] He attempts this through discussion of the debate concerning the rationality of Azande magical practices initiated by Peter Winch. I would like to present Winch's position in some detail. This should enable me subsequently to show with greater clarity the salient points of disagreement between Habermas's position and others in the debate.

In "Understanding a Primitive Society," Peter Winch takes up the question of how we can understand the beliefs and practices of a "primitive society" such as that of the African Azande.[36] Several Zande cultural phenomena present us with particular difficulties of comprehension due to their intimate connection with magical practices. Like many other primitive peoples, the Azande "...believe that certain of their members are witches, exercising a malignant occult influence on the lives of their fellows. They engage in rites to counteract witchcraft; they consult oracles and use magic medicines to protect themselves from harm."[37] Because our scientific worldview impels us to view them as irrational, understanding what is

---

[35]Habermas, *TCA 1*: 53.
[36]The term "Azande" is a collective noun, while "Zande" can be used either as a singular noun or adjectivally.
[37]Winch, "Primitive Society," in Wilson (1970): 78. In an attempt to minimise confusion I have decided to conform to the practice of using the term "primitive" to denote the sorts of societies under

involved in the comprehension of magical rites requires that we problematise the process of understanding itself. An anthropologist studying a primitive society is faced with the difficult task of presenting an account of magical beliefs and practices, of rendering them comprehensible *to us*, which can only mean that they be comprehensible as measured against the standards of our scientific worldview. This places the anthropologist in the maladroit position of attempting to render intelligible belief in the efficacy of magical rituals, where these rituals seem to invoke relations of cause and effect decisively disconfirmed by the natural sciences. Winch is particularly interested in looking at the strategy for the solution to this problem adopted by the anthropologist Evans-Pritchard in his study of witchcraft, oracles and magic among the Azande. Evans-Pritchard's fieldwork has been groundbreaking in this regard. It emphasises the need for sociological study of an alien culture to proceed by way of understanding the *meanings* which cultural phenomena have for the actors involved.[38] The critical analysis of Evans-Pritchard's position developed in "Understanding a Primitive Society" carries forward this focus upon meaning. Through advancing detailed criticisms of Evans-Pritchard's position Winch hopes to bring certain incoherencies to the fore, and thereby to set the stage for his own suggestions on how we might approach this problem.

Like Winch and Habermas, Evans-Pritchard rejects the notion that the differences between modern and mythical worldviews should be explained in virtue of the superior intelligence of moderns. Rather, he believes that differences in the beliefs and practices of members of mythical and modern societies can best be accounted for by reference to their reasoning from different socially acquired categories and patterns of thought. What varies between primitive and modern worldviews is thus essentially the store of interpretive concepts

discussion. Nonetheless, in my view the pejorative nature of this term and the connotations of linear progress which surround it render it a very unfortunate choice.
[38]See Finnegan and Horton, "Introduction," in Finnegan and Horton (1973): 31-32.

which the worldview makes available to us. This point is developed through a discussion of the significance of various explanations of rainfall. Although Evans-Pritchard himself explains rainfall through meteorological causes, whereas members of archaic societies often appeal to narratives of interventions by deities or magic, both approaches are, he argues, culturally acquired.

> It is no sign of superior intelligence on my part that I attribute rain to physical causes. I did not come to this conclusion myself by observation and inference and have, in fact, little knowledge of the meteorological process that leads to rain, I merely accept what everybody else in my society accepts, namely that rain is due to natural causes. This particular idea formed part of my culture long before I was born into it and little more was required of me than sufficient linguistic ability to learn it. Likewise a savage who believes that under suitable natural and ritual conditions the rainfall can be influenced by the use of appropriate magic is not on account of this belief to be considered of inferior intelligence....He and I are both thinking patterns of thought provided for us by the societies in which we live.

The explanation given by Evans-Pritchard for the major differences in beliefs and practices in mythical and modern societies is hence similar to that of Habermas. Like Habermas, Evans-Pritchard argues not only that the interpretive structures provided by mythical worldviews are different from those furnished by modern ones, but that the categories of the mythical worldview do not accord with the truths of science or "objective reality." The passage quoted continues:

> It would be absurd to say that the savage is thinking mystically and that we are thinking scientifically about rainfall. In either case like mental processes are involved and, moreover, the content of thought is similarly derived. But we can say that *the social content of our thought about rainfall is scientific, is in accord with objective facts*, whereas *the social content of savage thought about rainfall is unscientific since it is not in accord with reality* and may also be mystical where it assumes the existence of supra-sensible forces."[39]

---

[39]E.E. Evans-Pritchard, "Lévy-Bruhl's Theory of Primitive Mentality," *Bulletin of the Faculty of Arts* (University of Egypt, 1934). As quoted in Winch, "Primitive Society," in Wilson (1970): 80. Emphasis added.

A specific conception of the nature of anthropology seems to follow from this view. It seems that the task of the anthropologist is appropriately conceived as that of explaining how intelligent people could develop and maintain a shared system of beliefs that is mistaken, and a shared system of practices that is inefficacious.[40] I should like to examine this idea more closely.

Habermas understands Evans-Pritchard as advancing a twofold conception of the task of the anthropologist, according to which the expressions of natives must first be related to one another, and second to elements of the world.[41] In fulfilling the first task the anthropologist relies upon "intuitively mastered rules of formal logic" which hold for members of both worldviews. The goal is to exhibit a high degree of hermeneutic charity towards the natives, showing the coherence of their worldview to a large extent as it appears to them from within their own categories and standards of intelligibility. As we shall see below, in following this practice Evans-Pritchard shows the Azande worldview, including their magical beliefs, to be relatively consistent. Both Habermas and Winch agree that Evans-Pritchard's work achieves considerable sensitivity in this regard.[42] The second task is, in Habermas's view, substantially more complex. Members of primitive worldviews may categorise the world in ways quite different from our own, and this renders the question of how to relate their expressions to reality considerably more involved. The anthropologist must assume that the natives start from more or less the same concept of a world of entities as we do, from more or less the same perceptual experiences, and that they interpret a given situation in ways similar to our own. However, the interpretations of a situation may not necessarily be shared in a determinate

---

[40]Winch describes Evans-Pritchard's view of anthropology as follows: "All we can do then is to show how such a system of mistaken beliefs and inefficacious practices can maintain itself in the face of objections that seem to us so obvious." See Winch, "Primitive Society," in Wilson (1970): 79.
[41]Habermas, *TCA 1*: 56. Habermas presents a summary of the "rationality debate" in a six-round argument and counterargument format. I have attempted to structure this chapter to take account of his very helpful reading of the debate to the greatest extent possible.

165

fashion by both worldviews. When there is a disagreement between the interpretations of a particular situation offered by a primitive culture and those offered by a modern culture, the methods of the sciences should determine which set prevails. As Habermas interprets him, Evans-Pritchard's aim is to develop charitable interpretations of the expressions of natives; yet, "...as an anthropologist, *he holds fast to the standards of scientific rationality when it is a question of objectively assessing the views and techniques of this tribe.* Evans-Pritchard distinguishes between the requirements of consistency, which the Zande belief in witches largely satisfy, and the methodological requirements that (in our view) empirical knowledge about material processes and technical intervention into them are supposed to satisfy. *In this latter respect mythical thought is obviously inferior to modern.*"[43]

Winch bases his objections to Evans-Pritchard on considerations arising from a Wittgensteinian conception of language. In Winch's view, Evans-Pritchard's account, although subtle and persuasive on many levels, goes crucially wrong in its attempt to characterise the scientific as that which is "in accord with objective reality."[44] Evans-Pritchard seems to assume that "reality" is a concept intelligible and applicable outside the context of particular discourses which furnishes an independent standard against which their adequacy can be measured.

> Evans-Pritchard, although he emphasizes that a member of scientific culture has a different conception of reality from that of a Zande believer in magic, wants to go beyond merely registering this fact and making the differences explicit, and to say, finally, that the scientific conception agrees with what reality actually is like, whereas the magical conception does not.[45]

It is the cogency of precisely this assumption—that there is a concept of reality as something outside our schemes of descriptions which can serve as a measure of adequacy for various

---

[42]Habermas, *TCA 1*: 55; and Winch, "Primitive Society," in Wilson (1970): 79.
[43]Habermas, *TCA 1*: 56. Emphasis added.
[44]Winch, "Primitive Society," in Wilson (1970): 80.

ways of reasoning—that Winch wishes to question. It should be noted from the outset that Winch's intent is not to jettison the idea that our beliefs are checkable against an "independent reality." The notion that ideas and beliefs can be verified by reference to something external to them is a crucial one, and must be retained, he argues, if we are to avoid a form of relativism both extreme and paradoxical.[46] However, Winch does believe that we stand to benefit from clarifying the role which this conception of the "independently real" plays in human discourses. Briefly put, he will argue that one's notion of agreement with reality makes sense only within the context of an established discourse which sets out criteria for what counts as reasonable.

The question of what we mean in referring to a practice as "rational" is obviously central to the issues at hand. Following upon Wittgenstein, Winch points to the close connection between language, rationality and specific social practices. In answering the question of what it means to view a practice as rational, he finds it useful conceptually to distinguish a formal from a substantive sense of this term.[47] We ascertain the rationality of behaviour in the formal sense by testing it for a high degree of internal coherence or non-contradiction. Behaviour can be seen as rational in the formal sense just in case it involves conformity to norms. Rationality in the substantive sense defines *what is to count as consistency* in a particular context: it denotes a reading or interpretation, circumscribed by established use, of what is to count as conformity to norms in a given context or society, and what is not.

Rationality manifests itself through language. Any language in order to be a language, Winch argues, must lay down features which establish what is legitimate to say. But this is to say that the concept of "reality" also belongs to language. The distinction between what is

---

[45]Winch, "Primitive Society," in Wilson (1970): 81.
[46]Winch, "Primitive Society," in Wilson (1970): 81.
[47]Winch, "Primitive Society," in Wilson (1970): 100.

"real" and "unreal," as well as the notion of a belief's corresponding to reality, acquires sense only from within a given linguistic practice. In saying this, Winch does not mean to imply that they are concepts like any others. Although we could easily imagine languages lacking the concept of snow, for example, or of wetness, we cannot imagine a language which does not establish a way of distinguishing the real from the unreal. These concepts are formal features inherent in all languages. However, each discourse that plays an assertion role draws this distinction in a specific way. Zande language systems set out these categorial distinctions in a manner different from modern ones. Discourses hence articulate an understanding of reality. They establish the framework of basic categories within which we interpret everything that appears in the world in a specific way *as* something, thus constituting the condition of the possibility of our inquiries into the world. Although worldviews can be revised, we cannot fully step outside them so as to assess them wholesale against an uninterpreted reality. Hence, if truth or falsity is a matter of agreement with reality, then worldviews cannot be appraised as true or false in themselves.[48]

Evans-Pritchard, in attempting to judge Zande magical practices by the standards of scientific rationality, tacitly assumes a concept of a reality existing outside our schemes of descriptions against which such descriptions can be appraised. This reality would, it is assumed, demonstrate the preferability of the natural scientific descriptive scheme. In Winch's view this is an incoherent demand to place upon any form of discourse. To ask whether a particular scientific hypothesis "agrees with reality" is to ask whether it satisfies criteria *internal* to the practice of science. We may ask whether a particular scientific hypothesis agrees with reality, and test this proposition through experimental methods. When we do so,

---

[48]Winch, "Primitive Society," in Wilson (1970): 82; cf Habermas, *TCA I*: 57-58. Habermas seems to equate Winch's discussion of reality-defining discourses with his own notion of worldview.

"...[g]iven the experimental methods, and the established use of the theoretical terms entering into the hypothesis, then the question whether it holds or not is settled by reference to something independent of what I, or anybody else, care to think."[49] But this can only be assessed in light of criteria set out by the tradition and practice of the methods of experiment. There is hence in Winch's view no identifiable external standard which can serve as a measure of adequacy for these two ways of reasoning. In light of these reflections, Winch asks whether we can in fact see a primitive system of magic, like that of the Azande, as constituting a "coherent universe of discourse like science" which specifies an intelligible conception of "agreement with reality" and clear ways of determining which beliefs are or are not in accord with this. If this is in fact the case we will need to reconsider the strategy for understanding a primitive society adopted by Evans-Pritchard, and to develop some alternatives.[50]

In asking whether we can regard Zande magical practices as constituting a "coherent universe of discourse" which functions in order to define a specific notion of "agreement with reality," we are, in the first instance, asking whether the practices set out by the Azande can be seen to be rational or consistent when viewed in their own terms. Winch insists that answering this question requires us to distinguish a system of magical beliefs and practices like that held by the Azande, which serves as a pillar of their whole social life, from magical beliefs or rites which might be practised by members of our culture. Practices of witchcraft and magic in our culture are, he argues, defined with reference to our other practices, and gain their sense from this relationship. To take an example, a Black Mass draws its meaning from its complementarity to the conduct of a proper Mass, and thus from the complex of religious ideas

---

However, it is crucially important to note that what Habermas calls a "worldview" represents for Winch a number of interlocking and complexly related discourses, rather than a single structure.
[49]Winch, "Primitive Society," in Wilson (1970): 82.
[50]Winch, "Primitive Society," in Wilson (1970): 83.

from which the Mass draws its significance.[51] The concepts used in the Black Mass hence

have an essential reference to other practices in our culture. The judgement that magical

practices are "irrational" or "superstitious" is based upon the meaning that they have in our

culture, in relation to its other elements. In contrast to us, the Azande experience magic and

witchcraft as a commonplace occurence. If we want to understand their practices of magic we

must not equate the two, but rather seek a foothold elsewhere.

Winch's discussion gets underway with a general description, condensed from Evans-

Pritchard's field researches, of the beliefs and practices in question. "Witchcraft," as the

Azande understand this term, is a power to harm others by mystical means. Rather than

requiring special rituals or medicinal preparations, Zande witches are witches only in virtue of

an inherited organic condition or "witchcraft substance." The Azande make regular appeal to

explanations in terms of witchcraft to account for events in their daily lives. It is important to

see, however, that such explanations do not serve as substitutes for explanations in terms of

natural causes. The Zande has a considerable knowledge of natural events which enables him

to successfully trace the physical causes of particular misfortunes; the collapse of the wooden

supports of a granary due to a termite infestation, for example, or the burning of a hut due to

lightning striking its thatch.[52] The role of witchcraft is to supplement such explanations.

Witchcraft is used to explain *why* a particular misfortune occurred; to offer reasons which

allow the Azande to make sense of its occurrence, and thereby to come to terms with it.

---

[51]Winch, "Primitive Society," in Wilson (1970): 84. Winch also emphasises the internal relation
between idea and context in his discussion of purification rituals in *Idea of a Social Science*. In the
context of a criticism of Pareto's approach to social science, Winch writes: "It is nonsensical to take
several systems of ideas, find an element in each which can be expressed in the same verbal form, and
then claim to have discovered an idea which is common to all the systems." Winch, *The Idea of a
Social Science* (Routledge, 1958): 107.
[52]I refer to the Azande in the masculine so as to respect the integrity of Evans-Pritchard's study. His
research seems to have focussed upon male members of the tribe.

The most important way of discerning whether witchcraft has been at play in a particular event is to consult an oracle. The most powerful among these is the "poison oracle," which is a pervasive force in Zande life. All life decisions of importance are made in consultation with it. Consultation of the oracle takes place in a ceremony which involves the administration of a toxic substance known as "benge" to a fowl, while a question is asked in a form permitting a "yes" or "no" answer. A particular outcome, the survival or death of the fowl, is specified in advance as representing an "affirmative" response. A verification of the result of the oracle is then conducted by administering "benge" to another fowl and asking the question inversely, specifying the opposite outcome as an affirmation or as a negation.

Irrespective of what we may view as the strangeness or irrationality of this practice, Winch, following Evans-Pritchard, emphasises that by following it the Azande do in fact conduct their affairs to their own satisfaction.[53] However, the question which occupies us is whether Zande magical practices make sense, and this is a distinct issue from that of whether the Azande are themselves satisfied with such practices. What criteria can we propose for something's making, or indeed failing to make, sense? As Winch explains, "[a] partial answer is that a set of beliefs and practices cannot make sense insofar as they involve contradictions."[54] In other words, in asking whether Zande magical practices are intelligible we are inquiring into their rationality, and it seems an obvious necessary feature of a rational practice that it not be self-contradictory. This is, to draw upon Winch's terminology, a formal constraint upon a practice's being rational. Consideration of whether Zande magical practices involve their practitioners in acceptance of contradictions is hence crucial.

---

[53]Evans-Pritchard ran his own household in this manner when conducting his field researches. He comments, "I found this as satisfactory a way of running my home and affairs as any other I know of." Cited in Winch, "Primitive Society," in Wilson (1970): 87.
[54]Winch, "Primitive Society," in Wilson (1970): 87.

There seem to be two general ways in which the process of oracular consultation is disposed to issue in contradictions. First, we might expect that predictions of the poison-oracle would on occasion contradict one another, providing answers of "yes" and "no" to the same question. However, such an occurrence does not tend to undermine the Zande's confidence in oracular revelations. The Azande have available to them strategies for the explanation of such aberrations. These strategies often point to evidence that the process of oracular consultation has been undermined in some way, through the administration of bad "benge," for example, or because the consultation of the oracle was itself influenced by witchcraft. Alternatively, the ambiguous result may be interpreted as pointing to the inappropriateness of posing the question in the manner stated; that is, to the fact that it is not a question admitting of a straightforward "yes" or "no" answer.

Second, we might expect contradictions to present themselves through future events contradicting the predictions of a self-consistent oracle. Winch points out, however, that because of the role played by oracular practices in Zande life such contradictions tend not to emerge. Rather than treating oracular pronouncements as hypotheses to be tested in the manner of scientific experimentation, the Azande treat the recommendations of the oracle as *guides for action*. If the oracle reveals that a proposed course of action is fraught with dangers stemming from witchcraft or sorcery, this programme of action simply will not be carried out. In this event the pronouncements of the oracle will not admit of refutation. Moreover, if a particular course of action is recommended by the oracle it will be acted upon. But in this case there is no control situation against which it can be verified to have been the superior option. The practice of oracular consultation as a source of guidance for actions

hence tends to shield itself from obvious contradiction by experience.[55] It should be emphasised that the Azande do entertain suspicion about specific claims of the oracle, about certain rites, or certain witchdoctors. A critical distance can be gained by individual Azande to one element of magical practice or another; however, the system of mystical thought which lies at the foundation of Zande ways of thinking, cannot be rejected wholesale.[56] Evans-Pritchard offers the following assessment of the Zande's ability to develop a critical distance vis-a-vis the poison oracle:

> Let the reader consider any argument that would utterly demolish all Zande claims for the power of the oracle. If it were translated into Zande modes of thought it would serve to support their entire structure of belief. For their mystical notions are eminently coherent, being interrelated by a network of logical ties, and are so ordered that they never too crudely contradict sensory experience but, instead, experience seems to justify them. The Zande is immersed in a sea of mystical notions, and if he speaks about his poison oracle he must speak in a mystical idiom.[57]

In light of the foregoing reflections, Winch judges Zande magical practices to form a coherent system of beliefs, or what Habermas would call a "worldview." These beliefs are, to a large extent, mutually reinforcing and self-justifying.[58] However, Winch provocatively emphasises

---

[55]This aspect of the Zande worldview forms the basis for an important objection to it. We will take up Horton and Habermas's attempts to characterise the style of thinking embodied in the mythical worldview as "closed" in §4.52 below.

[56]Winch, "Primitive Society," in Wilson (1970): 90.

[57]Evans-Pritchard, as quoted in Winch, "Primitive Society," in Wilson (1970): 89.

[58]As Winch notes, he and Evans-Pritchard might have no dispute on this point. The crucial distinction between them, in Winch's view, is that Evans-Pritchard would have also wished to add "...and the European is right and the Zande wrong." It is this move which Winch resists. The intuition underlying Evans-Pritchard's stance can be viewed in the following way: worldviews, although neither true nor false in themselves, make it possible to develop true propositions about the external world. One might therefore argue that worldviews can be assessed in terms of their indirect relation to truth or their "cognitive adequacy." My understanding of this point is due to Habermas, who explains it thus:

> ...it can be objected against the thesis developed by Winch that worldviews can be compared with one another not only from the quasiaesthetic and truth-indifferent standpoints of coherence, depth, economy, completeness, and the like, but also from the standpoint of *cognitive adequacy*. The adequacy of a linguistically articulated worldview is a function of the true statements that are possible in this language system.

173

the possibility that our scientific worldview may also, and in a parallel fashion, perpetuate its own standards and criteria.[59] This opens the door to the possibility of cultural relativism.

Yet an alternative suggests itself. One might argue that the irrationality of the Zande worldview can be discerned not in terms of the tendency of elements of this worldview to reinforce one another, thereby *avoiding the emergence* of contradictions, but on a different level altogether. It might be maintained that this irrationality manifests itself in the willingness of the Azande to *disregard* certain contradictions, even when these contradictions are made explicit to them. In certain cases, Winch explains, "...what appear to us as obvious contradictions are left where they are, apparently unresolved."[60] He has in mind the following situation, encountered by Evans-Pritchard during his field research.

An apparent contradiction in Zande magical beliefs should be generated by the conjunction of certain of the beliefs about witchcraft with various empirical outcomes. The

---

Habermas believes that Winch would regard this as a "cognitivistic misunderstanding" of the function of worldviews. Winch could argue against this that linguistically articulated worldviews are interwoven with forms of life so as to be irreducible to the functions of knowing and mastering external nature. This corresponds to "Round Three" of the six-round summary of the rationality debate presented by Habermas in *The Theory of Communicative Action*. I think Habermas may misconstrue the nature of Winch's claim. All Winch need say at this point in the debate is that the notion of "truth" utilised in measuring the "cognitive adequacy" of different worldviews is parasitic on the dubious notion of "reality" as an external standard against which worldviews can be assessed. Cf. Winch, "Primitive Society," in Wilson (1970): 89; Habermas, *TCA 1*, 58-9.

[59]It is interesting to compare on this point Thomas Kuhn's reflections on the role which different research paradigms within the scientific worldview play in scientific practice. Kuhn describes paradigms as having a dual function. In the first instance they play a cognitive role, in which they act as the vehicle for scientific theory. In this role paradigms function by supplying the scientist's ontology, or conceptual network. They describe the sorts of entities the world can and cannot contain, and delimit the sorts of behaviour these entities can exhibit. Yet paradigms also have a second role, which is inseparable from the first. They provide scientists with normative standards. Paradigms are, in effect, the source which guides what constitutes acceptable methods, and which demarcates the relevant problem-field for a community of scientists. Periods of scientific revolution are hence marked by disagreements among scientists in the criteria determining the legitimacy of both acceptable scientific problems and solutions. These periods are characterised by Kuhn as non-cumulative developmental episodes during which an older paradigm is replaced, in whole or in part, by an incompatible or "incommensurable" new one. See e.g. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (University of Chicago, 1970): 109.

[60]Winch, "Primitive Society," in Wilson (1970): 91.

174

Azande believe it possible to ascertain whether a man is a witch through postmortem examination of his intestines. The goal of such an examination is to verify the presence of what is known as "witchcraft substance." A family may arrange for this procedure in the event of an individual's death in order to clear the family name of the imputation of witchcraft. It seems to us that this practice should engender contradictions which threaten the coherency of the Zande notion of witchcraft. Contradictions should presumably arise due to the rules for inheritance of powers of witchcraft. Because the Zande clan is a group of persons related to one another biologically through the male line, a few positive examination results scattered among the clans should prove conclusively that everyone is a witch, whereas a few negative results should prove the converse, that is, that no-one is a witch.

Although the Azande do acknowledge the logic of this argument they seem unmoved by it: they do not press it to its conclusions. As Evans-Pritchard explains, "Azande do not perceive the contradiction as we perceive it because they have no theoretical interest in the subject, and those situations in which they express their belief in witchcraft do not force the problem upon them."[61] This phenomenon might be thought to offer us a foothold from which to assess the "correctness" of worldviews. It seems, as Winch explains, to offer clear grounds for judging European thought superior to Zande thought, in that Zande thought fails to acknowledge or to mandate the removal of a contradiction visible from the perspective of European ways of thinking. This seems to provide support for the judgement that Zande magical practices are irrational. One may wish to say that the irrationality of the magical belief-system of the Azande shows itself in the fact that they do not press their system of thought far enough to draw the pertinent logical inferences. Suppression of this contradiction

---

[61]Evans-Pritchard, as quoted in Winch, "Primitive Society," in Wilson (1970): 92.

forms an apparent precondition of the continuation of these practices, and hence of the Zande way of life.[62]

Is the lack of theoretical interest in pressing this contradiction demonstrated by the Azande a sign of lesser rationality? In order to appraise this issue we must consider whether someone who does press this conclusion is necessarily more rational than the Azande, who do not. Winch does not believe this is so. What he takes this result to suggest is that the *point* of the system of Zande thought in which beliefs about witchcraft operate may be significantly different from the *point* of scientific beliefs and practices. As Winch sees it, the function of a worldview is not exhausted by the aim of acquiring knowledge and mastery of external nature. He instead draws attention to the role played by worldviews in conferring meaning upon human life: worldviews open up possibilities of making sense of existential themes which recur in all cultures, such as those of birth and death, of sexual relations, and of one's relation to the cosmos and to one's fellows. They chart particular resolutions to common human problems whose boundaries are set by the limits of human existence. Once we recognise this, it is possible to see Zande magical practices not as constituting a rudimentary form of science, but rather as attempts to grapple with and to resolve quite different problems, those of social relations, for example, or of individual vulnerability before the vicissitudes of fate.[63] Winch speculates that Zande magical practices might fruitfully be considered as a means of coming to terms with such contingencies, in a manner similar to our practice of prayer. To put the issue differently, a belief in witchcraft, oracles and magic may not be well-construed as a competing theoretical system operating on the same level and with the same goals as scientific theory. It may hence be inappropriate to assess them by the same criteria.

---

[62]Cf. Habermas, *TCA I*: 60.
[63]Winch, "Primitive Society," in Wilson (1970): 104-11; and Habermas, *TCA I*: 60.

Winch concludes that in order truly to understand Zande magical rituals, or the practices of any other alien culture, we must grasp their *point*. This requires in turn that we grasp the criteria embodied in a society's own self-description rather than imposing criteria drawn from our practices upon them. If we do so successfully what we can hope to learn from a primitive society are, among other things, new possibilities of making sense of human life as a whole.[64]

It must be emphasised that Winch does not deny that it is *possible* for us to evaluate Zande magical rites using the criteria and standards of science and technology, nor does he deny that by these standards Zande practices seem seriously deficient.[65] Yet it must be emphasised as a point of logic that *any* standards, however spurious, can be used to evaluate any object studied. One could, for example, evaluate the intelligence of Canadians by their heights, or perhaps only slightly less ludicrously, by their average yearly incomes. Our ability to carry out this evaluation does not show that the standards used capture the phenomenon being investigated in an appropriate way, and this is surely the relevant issue. Winch questions the appropriateness of Evans-Pritchard's desire to evaluate the Zande worldview according to the criteria of modern natural science in a parallel fashion.

> Zande notions of witchcraft do not constitute a theoretical system in terms of which the Azande try to gain a quasi-scientific understanding of the world. This in turn suggests that it is the European, obsessed with pressing Zande thought where it would not naturally go--to a contradiction--who is guilty of misunderstanding, not the Zande. The European is in fact committing a category mistake.[66]

Does this suggest a satisfactory resolution to the problem of whether the lack of theoretical interest in contradictions evinced in Zande magical practices, and in the Zande worldview as a whole, is a sign of its lesser rationality? This is, for our purposes, the crucial

[64]Winch, "Primitive Society," in Wilson (1970): 106.
[65]Winch, "Primitive Society," in Wilson (1970): 102-3.

question, and there is considerable disagreement on the nature of Winch's own reply to it. The remaining sections of this chapter set out a number of alternative solutions to this problem, Habermas's among them. My aim is to illuminate the philosophical terrain, as it were, by clarifying the range of theoretical options available. In so doing, I hope to throw the contours of Habermas's own response into relief. Before taking up these alternatives it will prove useful to recall how this issue bears upon Habermas's programme of discourse ethics.

4.4 The Notion of Optimisation in Developmental-Logical Accounts

My guiding interest in this chapter is in the employment by Habermas of developmental-logical accounts to support the claim that discourse ethics defines a procedure for the evaluation of moral norms which is universally valid.[67] As we saw previously, demonstration of the universal validity of discourse ethics requires that a link be shown between conventional and postconventional forms of argumentation, such that it be possible to argue that all practitioners of "conventional" forms of argumentation *should* recognise the validity of "postconventional" forms of argumentation. The strategy adopted by Habermas is to argue that these forms of argumentation stand in a *hierarchical* relationship to one another, in that the postconventional practice of argumentation constitutes a *demonstrable cognitive gain* over conventional forms of argumentation. This thesis draws support from empirical reconstructions of individual and societal processes of maturation.

The notion of an "internal" or "developmental" logic is vital to these reconstructions. The stages of a developmental model can be portrayed as a conceptual hierarchy just in case the cognitive structures of the higher stages replace those of the lower so as to incorporate the structures of the lower stages in a reorganised or more comprehensive form. In other words,

---

[66]Winch, "Primitive Society," in Wilson (1970): 93.
[67]See Chapter 3 §§3.3,3.4,&3.5; and Chapter 4 §4.1.

178

the concept of a developmental logic allows Habermas to represent a process of maturation as an ascending sequence of stages or phases in which learning processes can be seen both as cumulative, and as exhibiting a certain direction. It provides the conceptual resources which enable Habermas to represent a process of development *as if it were the optimal fulfillment of a specific criterion.*[68]

I would like to look more closely at the theoretical underpinnings of these models. In his study of Habermas's account of social evolution, Michael Schmid raises the issue of what conditions a developmental-logical account must meet in order to be amenable to empirical verification. He observes that the feasibility of advancing hypotheses of optimisation is contingent upon our ability to "factually measure" the augmented value of the variable under investigation.[69] If it is not possible to do so, such an hypothesis will clearly be superfluous to an empirical theory. The developmental models employed by Habermas propose to represent a ranking of formal problem-solutions for a given domain. There is indeed no difficulty in principle in measuring increases in problem-solving capacities in this way. We can, for example, measure the speed or efficiency with which a rat travels through a particular sort of maze to acquire foodstuff offered as incentive, or the efficiency of the approach taken by a chess player in extricating herself from a certain move made by her opponent. It should in such cases be possible to identify strategies which solve the problem with greater or less sophistication. The adoption by an individual of strategies or problem-solutions which resolve

---

[68]See Chapter 3 §§3.1, 3.32, 3.4, and Chapter 4 §4.1. My interest in Habermas's use of the concept of optimisation was spurred by Michael Schmid's outstanding analysis of the use of developmental logics in Habermas's theory of social evolution. Schmid argues that the use made by Habermas of developmental logics in the theory of social evolution reflects a confusion of explanatory and evaluative viewpoints. This is, he argues, explanatorily redundant at best and obfuscating at worst. Schmid recommends that Habermas abandon their use entirely in the field of social evolution. See Michael Schmid, "Habermas's Theory of Social Evolution," in *Habermas: Critical Debates* ed. J.B.Thompson and D. Held, (Macmillan, 1982): 172-80.

[69]Schmid, "Social Evolution," in Thompson and Held (1982): 177-78.

179

the puzzle more efficiently can then be identified as "progressive," while the adoption of strategies which are less efficient may be labelled "regressive."

However, as Schmid emphasises, "this insight can be used meaningfully only as long as we know *which problems* are being better or worse solved."[70] This is, for our purposes, the crucial point. A developmental model records augmentations in a particular variable in response to changes, *for a given problem*. We say that a solution is "progressive" if it represents a better solution to this problem. If the empirical data gathered represent responses to different problems, they can neither be assessed against each other, nor evaluated on the same scale of measurement. To take an example, Kohlberg's stages of moral consciousness represent solutions, arranged in ascending order, to a particular sort of problem: the resolution of interpersonal conflicts of interest. Although the success of Kohlberg's model of optimisation in the domain of moral judgement is open to doubt, it offers a relatively clear theoretical specification of the problem under study.[71]

The challenge posed by the rationality debate is a more fundamental one. I began this chapter by noting that the developmental processes of social evolution and of the growth of moral consciousness described by Habermas stand in need of further defence. Both sets of reconstructions lay out a sequence of stages which purport to represent successively more adequate approximations toward an apex or optimum. However, I argued that in each case the

---

[70]Schmid, "Social Evolution," in Thompson and Held (1982): 178. My italics.

[71]As we saw in §§ 3.32 and 3.5, Kohlberg's use of the notion of optimisation appeared problematic in at least two major respects. First, it seemed questionable whether the problem selected for study is an appropriate candidate for investigation cross-culturally, or indeed, across the various strata of our own society. The problem of how nonviolently to resolve interpersonal conflicts is undoubtedly of great importance in all human communities. However, Kohlberg's manner of conceiving this domain, as well as his prioritisation of it over all others in the normative sphere, seems clearly tied to ways of thinking about ethics drawn from our tradition. The question of how we should interpret data indicating the relative backwardness of specific groups in this domain hence emerged as a serious one. A second, related set of issues concerned the definition of what constituted a "better" or

optimum reflects Habermas's reading of what is essential to the form of rationality implicit in the postconventional practices of argumentation found in Western modernity, namely the "decentered understanding of the world."[72] His account of moral maturation depicts the development of moral consiousness as parallel to the development of interactive competence, while the stages of interaction trace how an individual in the modern West might acquire mastery of the skills essential to a decentered understanding of the world. His account defines the highest level of worldview development explicitly in terms of the characteristics of the decentered understanding. The justification of the superiority of postconventional over conventional practices of argumentation is hence as yet incomplete, since it is carried out through criteria borrowed precisely from the understanding of the world associated with those practices of argumentation.

In light of this, I maintained that Habermas be required to provide a conceptual defence of the use he makes of the modern Western worldview as against others to define the terminal point of his developmental sequence, and thereby to establish the criteria used to interpret and assess empirical data. It remains for him to show that worldviews can be ordered unambiguously according to some set of non-relative criteria, and that these criteria establish the ascendancy of the form of rationality implicit in the Western worldview. The "rationality debate" poses a crucial challenge to this agenda. In asking whether there might not be principled differences in the modes of thought used in various societies, it raises the possibility of relativism at the level of worldviews. Evidently, if each worldview establishes standards of

---

"progressive" solution. Kohlberg's specification of the apex of moral maturity is drawn not just from our cultural tradition, but from a specific philosophical school within that tradition.

[72]Recall that the decentred understanding of the world has two defining features: First, this conception of the world differentiates three "domains of validity" corresponding to the external, social and subjective dimensions of reality. Each has its own standards of truth and falsity, as well as its own method of establishing legitimate claims. Second, this way of understanding validity claims requires that we recognise that no such claim can in principle be immune to criticism through

181

rationality valid only for that worldview, Habermas's attempt to demonstrate the universal significance of the form of rationality implicit in the Western worldview must fail. But the converse is not true. It is not the case that, if cultural relativism is false, then Habermas's position must be true. Or so I would like to argue.

In order to appreciate the significance of the challenge raised by the rationality debate for Habermas's programme of justification, we must clearly grasp the conditions requisite for a developmental model. For the use of a developmental model to rank worldviews to be conceptually coherent, *it must be the case that the worldviews represent solutions to the same—or perhaps, sufficiently similar—problems*. If worldviews delineate solutions to different problems, these solutions clearly cannot be assessed or represented on the same scale. Winch's claim that Evans-Pritchard's attempt to evaluate Zande magical practices by the criteria of science and technology exemplifies a "category mistake," furnishes a challenge on precisely this level. If the Zande worldview addresses different problems from the Western one, they should not be assessed by the same criteria. It is methodologically wrong to attempt to rank them linearly.

Using the account of the Zande response to contradiction as a touchstone, the following section takes up three responses to the problem raised by Winch. My aim is to consider the range of options available, so as more clearly to illustrate the specificity of the stance taken by Habermas. I will, however, try to assess the implications for the feasibility of constructing a developmental account which emerge correlative to each position outlined. The debate between these positions centres around two issues: first, whether and in what sense one should speak of a plurality of standards of rationality; and second, what implications arise

---

argumentation. It hence prompts us to adopt an attitude of radical openness to critique. See §§ 3.21, 3.5 & 4.1.

182

from the resolution of the first point regarding how we should go about making cross-cultural comparisons.

The first option I consider is a reading of Winch favoured by Habermas, which regards Winch's position as one of strong relativism. Since, for the strong relativist, the interpretive structures of worldviews are non-comparable with respect to rationality, they clearly cannot be placed in a linear ordering of the sort required by Habermas. The second option discussed is Habermas's own strong universalism, constructed from the writings of Robin Horton, Ernest Gellner and Jean Piaget. This position defends the idea that there are formal criteria of rationality which are non-worldview-specific, and which enable worldviews to be ranked in a manner satisfying the requirements of a developmental logic. Finally, I take up a non-relativist position neglected by Habermas. This account is drawn from my reading of Winch and from work by Charles Taylor. Although it argues that principled comparisons can be made between worldviews, this account is not suitable for the construction of a model of developmental stages.

4.5 Three Perspectives on the Debate Concerning the Rationality of Zande Magical Practices

4.51 Strong Relativism

This section sketches the main lines of an influential interpretation of Winch, which views his position on the possibility of making cross-cultural judgements as one of strong cultural relativism. I have previously described cultural relativism as the doctrine that truth is relative to our conceptual framework or "worldview," and that it may vary from one worldview to another.[73] This reading represents one way of reconstructing the theoretical

---

[73]See §4.21.

background to Winch's claim that the assessment of Zande magical practices by criteria derived from modern natural scientific practices constitutes a "category mistake." The essence of the position can be distilled into two claims. It sees Winch as maintaining (a) that there are a plurality of standards of rationality; and (b) that these standards of rationality cannot be applied beyond the boundaries of the cultural worldview in which they originate and are expressed. Because each cultural worldview should be seen as embodying standards of rationality which are literally non-comparable, the possibility of making cross-cultural comparisons with respect to truth is undercut.

This interpretation, which I shall henceforth refer to as "Winch$_R$", is particularly important for us because it corresponds to Habermas's perception of Winch's position. Although for reasons which I will clarify below I do not find it persuasive as a reading of Winch, my first concern is not with the plausibility of this interpretation, but rather with the position it represents. I will next narrate its salient elements before considering how it relates to Habermas's project.

Let us recall how this interpretation of Winch's position arose. Our concern with the magical practices of the Azande stems from our interest in the broader questions of whether there might not be principled differences in the modes of thought used in various societies, and what significance these differences might have. One way of distinguishing modern and primitive patterns of thought is to regard modern forms of thought as "rational" where this term is equated with "the scientific," while viewing mythical thought as "non-rational" or "pre-scientific." Winch questions the cogency of this response, and in so doing, urges us to attend more closely to what it means to characterise something as rational. An important aspect of our attributions of rationality appears to invoke the notion of consistency. It seems to be a necessary condition of a practice's being rational that it not be self-contradictory. In the first

instance this seems to amount to asking whether a given practice can be seen as logically consistent when viewed in its own terms. Winch follows Evans-Pritchard in viewing Zande magical practices as forming a coherent system of beliefs which are, to a large extent, mutually reinforcing.

Habermas does not dispute this conclusion. The point of division between our authors comes in assessing the significance of contradictions potentially arising on another level. Evans-Pritchard's report suggests that the Azande are uninterested in eradicating certain contradictions inherent in the conjunction of various elements of their worldview, even when these contradictions are pointed out to them. In view of this observation the question arises: is it the case that this worldview is tenable only if one is uninterested in eliminating contradictions? If so, the lack of theoretical interest in increasing the cohesiveness or systematicity of their worldview manifested by the Azande would seem to indicate its irrationality.

Winch argues that the assessment of Zande magical rituals as less than fully rational made by reference to criteria derived from the practices of natural science constitutes a "category mistake." In advancing this claim he asks us to consider whether we may not as yet have failed to grasp the point of Zande magical rituals. Rather than seeing these rituals simply as "a (misguided) technique for producing consumer goods," he suggests that Zande magical rites be viewed as constituting a "form of expression" in which the possibilities and dangers of living a life may be "contemplated and reflected on--and perhaps also thereby transformed and deepened."[74] Precisely what is meant by this claim is one of the crucial questions separating

---

[74]Winch, "Primitive Society," in Wilson (1970): 106.

185

the two readings of Winch which I take up.[75] However, it is clear that Winch wishes to resist the facile propensity to see Zande magic only as a primitive attempt to control nature, as a sort of proto-technology, as it were. Those who read Winch as a strong relativist view him as arguing that the religious rituals of the Azande are a pure form of symbolic activity entirely unrelated to furthering the end of consumption. Furthermore, because the goals of the practices of Zande magic and Western science are entirely distinct, the judgement that magical rituals are somehow deficient in rationality—a judgement which can only be arrived at on the basis of comparison with practices playing a parallel role in our own culture—cannot be made.

This account conforms to Habermas's reading of Winch. Habermas interprets Winch as upholding the existence of a plurality of discrete and non-comparable standards of rationality. On his description Winch claims that "inherent to every linguistically articulated worldview and to every cultural form of life there is an incommensurable form of rationality...."[76] Because worldviews may employ different concepts, invoke different norms of rationality, and aim at solving different problems, the construction of a sequential ranking of the kind required for a developmental logic is simply not possible. These interpretive systems admit of comparison only on aesthetic grounds. Habermas explains: "Worldviews are comparable only in respect to their potency for conferring meaning. They throw light on existential themes recurrent in every culture—birth and death, sickness and need, guilt, love, solidarity and loneliness. They open equally primordial possibilities of "making sense of human life." They thereby structure forms of life that are *incommensurable in their value*.

---

[75]My appreciation of the importance of this claim has been greatly enhanced by Charles Taylor's discussion in his article on rationality. See Charles Taylor, "Rationality," in Hollis and Lukes (1982): 92-93 especially.

[76]Habermas, *TCA 1:* 66. The use of the term "incommensurable" in this debate is somewhat confusing. It is used here by Habermas to indicate that these positions are truly non-comparable.

The rationality of forms of life cannot be reduced to the cognitive adequacy of the worldviews underlying them."[77]

Habermas regards this extreme relativist position as a highly implausible one; however, he does find it valuable in at least two respects. First, Habermas concurs with Winch in the notion that an approach to cross-cultural analysis which attempts to bypass agent's meaning cannot be successful. He follows Winch in criticising the ethnocentricity of Victorian anthropologists such as Frazer and Tyler, who tended to impose the purportedly universal standards of rationality found in their own culture upon alien cultures.[78] It is in opposition to this sort of error that Winch claims that "the concepts used by primitive peoples can only be interpreted in the context of the way of life of those peoples."[79] In his discussion of Winch's essay, Charles Taylor expresses this intuition in the following manner.

> The very nature of human action requires that we understand it, at least initially, in its own terms; that means that we understand the descriptions that it bears for the agents. It is only because we have failed to do this that we can fall into the fatal error of assimilating foreign practices to our own familiar ones.[80]

In spite of their agreement on this point, Habermas believes that Winch draws the wrong conclusion from it. What Habermas sees as mistaken in Winch$_R$'s thesis is the view that we cannot bring critical standards to bear upon a society's practices by going beyond its own description of them. Second, Habermas agrees with Winch that it is not possible to measure the rationality of a worldview solely in terms of the extent to which it makes possible true statements in the cognitive-instrumental domain.[81] This point will be of central importance in the following section.

---

[77]Habermas, *TCA I*: 59.
[78]Habermas, *TCA I*: 55.
[79]Winch, "Primitive Society," in Wilson (1970): 95.
[80]Taylor, "Rationality," in Hollis and Lukes (1982): 93.
[81]Habermas, *TCA I*: 59.

4.52 Habermasian Universalism

Habermas acknowledges that the Azande use concepts substantially different from our own, and that these concepts form a worldview whose elements are generally consistent and mutually reinforcing. However, he resists the relativistic resolution of the "category mistake" problem upheld by Winch_R. This resistance is largely a reflection of a different understanding of the nature of rationality. I would like to paraphrase Hilary Putnam in describing this conception of reason as one which is both "immanent" and "transcendent." Reason must be viewed as immanent because our standards of rationality are never entirely divorced from concrete languages, institutions and social practices. However, reason also transcends this concrete context, thereby permitting us to criticise the specific traditions in which it is embodied. Putnam elaborates this view of rationality in the following passage.

> I have already said that, in my view, truth and rational acceptability—a claim's being right and someone's being in a position to make it—are relative to the sort of language we are using and the sort of context we are in....This does not mean that a claim is right whenever those who employ the language in question would accept it as right in its context, however. There are two points that must be balanced, both points that have been made by philosophers of many different kinds: (1) talk of what is "right" and "wrong" in any area only makes sense against the background of an inherited tradition; but (2) traditions themselves can be criticized.[82]

This general intuition about the nature of rationality as both embodied in and transcending specific social practices, although rendered concrete in different ways, is shared by Habermas and by the position described in §4.53.

Rather than viewing Zande magical practices as entirely different language games governed by different standards of rationality from Western practices of science, Habermas asks whether the lack of theoretical interest in contradiction manifested by the Azande cannot

be traced to another source. He speculates that the Zande conception of the world may employ less exacting standards of rationality and be in this sense less rational than the modern one.[83] Habermas attempts to show that the rationality of worldviews can be assessed on the extent to which they facilitate learning. The basis of his account is taken from Robin Horton's anthropological studies of "closed" and "open" mentalities corresponding to traditional and modern forms of life. Horton assesses the cognitive merits of worldviews "by the degree to which they hinder or promote cognitive-instrumental learning processes."[84] However, superior rationality in the cognitive-instrumental domain alone is insufficient to establish that a form of life is "rational" in the sense in which Habermas is interested. Habermas consequently modifies Horton's approach through appeal to the work of Ernest Gellner and Jean Piaget to encompass dimensions of rationality other than the cognitive-instrumental.

Horton, like Habermas, reads Winch as a strong relativist. As we have seen, Winch$_R$ argues that magical practices serve a function utterly unlike that served by scientific practices, and in fact represent an attempt "to come to terms with contingencies" akin to our practices of prayer. The assessment of these practices by the same criteria is hence not viable. Horton defines the fideist as one who likes "to think of all religious life as the expression of an autonomous commitment to communion with Spiritual Being, and again as something totally different from thought and action directed by the ends of explanation, prediction and control."[85]

Horton's work offers a comparative analysis of the styles of thought in traditional and in modern scientific societies. He makes a strong stance in opposition to the fideist. Horton

---

[82]Putnam, "Why Reason Can't Be Naturalized," in *After Philosophy,* Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman and Thomas McCarthy eds., (MIT Press, 1987): 227-28. My attention was drawn to the importance of this conception of reason by McCarthy's "General Introduction" to this volume.
[83]Habermas, *TCA I*: 61.
[84]Habermas, *TCA I*: 61. Horton later repudiates this way of casting the isue.
[85]Robin Horton, "African Traditional Thought and Western Science," in Brian Wilson ed., *Rationality* (Basil Blackwell, 1970): 208.

believes not only that we can appraise and compare different modes of thought, he is prepared to speak of the superior cognitive powers of scientific modes of thought as against traditional or pre-scientific ones. Focussing on the similarities in the formal goals of these theories rather than on the differences in the substance of what they assert, he argues that strong continuities exist between scientific and traditional African thought. Both sets of theories attempt to explain our experience; moreover, both give a central place to the goals of explanation, prediction and control. Horton emphasises that these goals are of equal relevance for traditional Africans and for moderns, citing as evidence for the fact that the most common reason for initiating a search for causes in traditional Africa is the diagnosis of disease.[86] Discussion of these continuities in modes of thought serves Horton as an essential prelude to understanding where the differences between them actually lie. He explains:

> My approach is also guided by the conviction that an exhaustive exploration of features common to modern Western and traditional African thought should come before the enumeration of differences. By taking things in this order, we shall be less likely to mistake differences of idiom for differences of substance, and more likely to end up identifying those features which really do distinguish one kind of thought from the other."[87]

Although my principal interest lies in Horton's conception of the differences between these two modes of thought, I would like briefly to outline what he sees as the continuities between them.

On Horton's account the most important continuity existing between African traditionalism and Western modernity is the presence of two distinct and yet complementary levels of thought and discourse, which function in a parallel manner in each.[88] What he terms

---

[86]Horton, "African and Western," in Wilson (1970): 135.
[87]Horton, "African and Western," in Wilson (1970): 131.
[88]The terminology used by Horton in advancing the "continuity thesis" has changed. The distinction originally deployed, viz., that between common-sense observations or discourse versus theoretical discourse, seemed to imply a false antithesis in the relationship between them. Horton now acknowledges that to conceive of observational or everyday discourse as somehow non-theoretical constitutes a misconstrual. He follows Mary Hesse in criticising the idea that there can be a theory-neutral observation-language in this sense. As against logical positivist philosophers of science, Hesse argues that "everyday" concepts such as "earth," "sky," "tree," "fish," and "man" are described

190

"primary theory" is tied relatively closely to empirical observations, and does not vary greatly from community to community. This is not to deny that cultures may vary in the degree to which they focus upon certain dimensions of experience: some areas may be covered in great detail, while others remain relatively undeveloped. Nonetheless, primary theory remains relatively invariant across places and times.[89] Moreover, he argues that the structure of primary theory is intimately interwoven with specific human aims, and with the apparatus available to human beings for achieving these aims. It is well-tailored to human hand-eye coordination, to the manual technology on which the survival of the human species has always depended, and to the type of social cooperation mediated by verbal communication essential to this manual technology.[90] In light of these reflections, Horton characterizes primary theory as follows:

> Primary theory gives the world a foreground filled with middle-sized (say between a hundred times as large and a hundred times as small as human beings), enduring, solid objects. These objects are interrelated, indeed interdefined in terms of a "push-pull" conception of causality, in which spatial and temporal contiguity are seen as crucial to the transmission of change. They are related spatially in terms of five dichotomies: "left"/ "right"; "above"/ "below"; "in front of"/ "behind"; "inside"/ "outside"; "contiguous"/ "separate." And temporally in terms of one trichotomy: "before"/ "at the same time"/ "after." Finally, primary theory makes two major distinctions among its objects: first, that between human beings and other objects; and second, among human beings, that between self and others.[91]

In contrast, secondary theory may vary in a startling manner between communities and cultures. It is in fact difficult to make generalizations about the nature of secondary theory

---

in terms which reflect the theories one holds, and are hence no more or less theoretical than concepts such as "proton," "atom," or "electric current." Horton reformulates his distinction in the 1982 article to take account of this objection, replacing the previous terms with those of "primary theory" and "secondary theory." As an undoubtedly anachronistic simplification, I have decided to use the terms "primary theory" and "secondary theory" in referring to both papers. This should not affect any issues of substance. See Horton, "Tradition and Modernity Revisited," in Hollis and Lukes (1982): 216, 228-9.

[89]Horton, "Tradition and Modernity," in Hollis and Lukes (1982): 228.
[90]Horton, "Tradition and Modernity," in Hollis and Lukes (1982): 232.
[91]Horton, "Tradition and Modernity," in Hollis and Lukes (1982): 228.

other than by making comparisons between it and primary theory. It will hence be helpful to turn to the relationship between these two.

The goal of secondary theory is "to transcend the limited vision of natural causes provided by common sense" or primary theory.[92] Secondary theory attempts to place objects and occurrences in an enlarged causal context, by interpreting the diversity of everyday experience in terms of a few *kinds* of forces. "The quest for explanatory theory," Horton writes, "is basically the quest for unity underlying apparent diversity; for simplicity underlying apparent complexity; for order underlying apparent disorder; for regularity underlying apparent anomaly."[93] Secondary theory fulfills this aim by postulating a "hidden" or "underlying" realm of entities and processes. The events of everyday experience can then be seen as surface manifestations of these interacting forces.[94] Secondary theory hence arises from the lacunae of primary theory. The success of primary theory in explaining, predicting and controlling occurrences in so many areas of human experience might have served, Horton speculates, to highlight its deficiencies in a few, and thereby to impel the construction of secondary theory. Nonetheless, although secondary theory aims to transcend the limited causal vision of primary theory, it remains inevitably and in complex ways dependent upon it.[95]

Viewing African mysticism in terms of the complementary coexistence and functioning of these two languages allows Horton to make sense of a number of its puzzling features. However, there are in his view important differences between Western scientific and traditional African religious thought. Horton's identifies one key difference, and attempts to show how other points of difference between these modes of thought can be seen as following from it. In

---

[92]Horton, "African and Western," in Wilson (1970): 136.
[93]Horton, "African and Western," in Wilson (1970): 132.
[94]Horton, "Tradition and Modernity," in Hollis and Lukes (1982): 230.

his 1967 article, "African Traditional Thought and Western Science," this difference is expressed in terms of a contrast between the "closed" character of the mythical worldview and the "open" character of the modern worldview. This distinction is later taken up by Habermas.

Horton, like Winch, takes Evans-Pritchard's account of the Azande as his starting point. Evans-Pritchard, as we have seen, argues that Zande beliefs hang together in a cohesive fashion which makes their disconfirmation extremely difficult. He explains:

> All their beliefs hang together, and were a Zande to give up faith in witch-doctorhood, he would have to surrender equally his faith in witchcraft and oracles....In this web of belief every strand depends upon every other strand, and a Zande cannot get out of its meshes because it is the only world he knows. The web is not an external structure in which he is enclosed. It is the texture of his thought and he cannot think that his thought is wrong.[96]

Winch's position was derivevd in part from one reading of the significance of this point. However Horton, unlike Winch, does not view this predicament as applying equally to every worldview. Rather, he holds this passage to point out the particularly limited or "closed" character of the mythical worldview.

Horton builds here upon an intuition of Evans-Pritchard's. In his *Theories of Primitive Religion* Evans-Pritchard explains:

> Everyone has the same sort of religious beliefs and practices, and their generality, or collectivity, gives them an objectivity which places them over and above the psychological experience of any individual, or indeed of all individuals...*Apart from positive and negative sanctions, the mere fact that religion is general means, again in a closed society, that it is obligatory, for even if there is no coercion, a man has no option but to accept what everybody gives assent to, because he has no choice, any more than of what language he speaks.* Even were he to be a sceptic, he could express his doubts only in terms of the beliefs held by all around him. And had he been born into a different society, he would have had a different language. It may

---

[95]See Horton, "Tradition and Modernity," in Hollis and Lukes (1982): 230-31, for a detailed account of how secondary theory takes its point of departure from the deficiencies of primary theory and yet is constrained by the resources it offers.
[96]E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, (Oxford, 1936): 194. As quoted in Horton, "African and Western," in Wilson (1970): 154.

here be noted that the interest shown by Durkheim and his colleagues in primitive societies may well have derived from the fact that they are, or were, closed communities. *Open societies, in which beliefs may not be transmitted and in which they are diversified, and therefore less obligatory*, are less amenable to sociological interpretations on the lines pursued by them.[97]

The distinction between "closed" and "open" societies gestured at here is taken up and refined by Horton. Horton contrasts traditional and modern societies in terms of the cognitive predicaments facing their respective members. He characterises traditional societies in terms of their intellectual closure, which he sees as due principally to the absence of an awareness of viable theoretical alternatives. Unawareness of alternatives, he explains, "makes for an absolute acceptance of established tenets" and, moreover, "removes any possibility of questioning them." Because any challenge to established tenets seems to threaten to bring chaos, Horton argues that it "evokes intense anxiety." The closed predicament hence acts as a brake upon cognitive change.[98] In contrast, thinkers in a society shaped by a scientific outlook face a situation of intellectual openness. Because an awareness of theoretical alternatives is present, established theoretical tenets "seem less absolute in their validity" and "lose something of their sacredness."[99] The open predicament thus facilitates cognitive change, adaptation and learning. The mechanism of transition between these two predicaments postulated by Horton is the cultivation of an awareness of conceptual alternatives. He sees this as the key factor in changing how people respond when the existing theoretical framework is challenged in some manner or another, and thereby in promoting the positive attitude towards challenging established beliefs necessary to the development of a scientific outlook.

---

[97]E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion* (Clarendon, 1965): 55, as quoted in Finnegan and Horton, "Introduction," in Finnegan and Horton (1973): 39. Emphasis mine.
[98]Horton, "African and Western," in Wilson (1970): 154.
[99]Horton, "African and Western," in Wilson (1970): 155.

194

Horton maintains that all the major differences between cognitive traditionalism and cognitive modernism can be understood by reference to these two predicaments.[100] Two differences articulated by Horton are particularly important in illuminating the Zande response to contradiction which forms the touchstone for the various accounts we are taking up. The first prominent difference concerns the theoretical response to predictive failures manifested by members of traditional African and modern Western societies. The reluctance of individuals in pre-scientific cultures to register repeated failures of prediction, and to respond to such failures by attacking the theoretical tenets underlying them, was documented by Evans-Pritchard. Rather than engaging in modification or abandonment of the theory, "other current beliefs are utilized in such a way as to 'excuse' each failure as it occurs, and hence to protect the major theoretical assumptions on which prediction is based."[101] This tendency to provide ad hoc excuses was described by Evans-Pritchard in his fieldwork on the Azande, and has been designated "secondary elaboration." As Evans-Pritchard narrates, the Azande consult diviners and oracles to discern the spiritual forces underlying the occurrence of troublesome or noteworthy events in the physical world. If the course of action recommended by the diviner fails to remedy the original event or situation, adherents of a pre-scientific worldview may lose faith in the capacities or integrity of the original diviner. They may accordingly decide to consult another expert. However, according to Evans-Pritchard's observations, members of such cultures do not tend to take this as evidence against the existence of the spiritual beings in question, nor do they abandon the belief that it is possible to make contact with such beings in the way suggested by the diviners. As Horton explains:

> In these traditional cultures, questioning of the beliefs on which divining is based and weighing up of successes against failures are just not among the paths that thought can take. They are blocked paths because the thinkers

---

[100]Horton, "African and Western," in Wilson (1970): 155.
[101]Horton, "African and Western," in Wilson (1970): 162.

involved are victims of the closed predicament. For them, established beliefs have an absolute validity, and any threat to such beliefs is a horrific threat of chaos.[102]

By contrast, the awareness of alternatives conjoined to the scientific outlook brings with it a reduced anxiety about threats to the established body of theory, and a correspondingly greater readiness to demote or discard theories and beliefs.

The second difference concerns the apparent absence of a practice of exclusively explanatory discourse in mythical societies. Horton notes that although traditional thought has an essentially rational character, second-order intellectual activities, which represent reflections on the nature or rules involved in primary activities of explanation, appear to be virtually absent from such cultures.[103] Primitive societies have their own body of interpretive constructs which may take the form of myths, proverbs, or other forms of narrative. However, these constructs rarely have explanation as their sole aim. The practice of explanation for its own sake does not appear to be a focus of concern in primitive societies. In Horton's considered view, the theoretical entities of traditional thought play a role in ordering the chaos of everyday experience, in solidifying social bonds, and in working out emotional and aesthetic motives. However, he claims that despite the elaborate and often penetrating theoretical speculations advanced in traditional cosmologies, it has tended to focus upon the task of explanation, rather than reflecting upon the nature of this task.

Why should such second-order intellectual activities be virtually absent from traditional cultures?[104] Horton accounts for this by drawing attention to certain implications of

---

[102]Horton, "African and Western," in Wilson (1970): 163.
[103]This contrast between modern Western and Zande thought plays an important role in Charles Taylor's, "Rationality," in Hollis and Lukes (1982).
[104]The distinction between *secondary theory* (i.e., theory developed to explain primary theoretical phenomena), and *second-order concepts* (i.e., those concepts which allow us to think about our theoretical constructs and categories), must be borne in mind. Not all forms of secondary theory need include second-order concepts.

the lack of awareness of theoretical alternatives which he sees as characteristic of the "closed" predicament. He claims that because the traditional thinker is unable to imagine possible alternatives to her established theories and classifications, she is unable to commence the formulation of generalized norms of reasoning and knowing. "For only where there are alternatives can there be choice," he explains, "and only when there is choice can there by norms governing it."[105] In the open predicament such second-order activities arise naturally since one must, of necessity, make choices between systems of belief. The development or study of principled rules governing such choices arises spontaneously in this context.

In developing his own position, Habermas makes pivotal use of Horton's distinction between "open" and "closed" cognitive predicaments. Recall that Habermas wishes to argue, against the relativist position exemplified by Winch, that the modern form of rationality has universal validity. His argument for this appeals to the intuition that the Zande worldview imposes less exacting standards of rationality and is hence less rational than the modern understanding of the world. In Habermas's view, Horton's study of the Azande demonstrates the incompatibility of mythical thought with the "reflective basic attitude" essential to the development of a scientific outlook. He adopts Horton's characterization of traditional societies as "closed," drawing from Horton's work the conclusion that "the belief in witches exhibits a structure that binds the Zande consciousness more or less blindly to inherited interpretations and does not permit consciousness of the possibility of alternative interpretations to arise."[106] The "identity-securing" character of mythical worldviews is linked to an immunization against alternative interpretive structures, which stands in sharp opposition to the "readiness to learn" and "openness to criticism" which are the hallmark of the scientific spirit. This contrast is not based upon understanding Zande magical practices as forms of

[105]Horton, "African and Western," in Wilson (1970): 160.

protoscience, and hence does not fall into the error gestured at by Winch in advancing his charge of "category mistake." This is, rather, a comparison of the formal features of two modes of thinking, which seems to establish the advantages of one. Habermas concludes: "This dimension of 'closed' *versus* 'open' seems to provide a *context-independent standard for the rationality of worldviews.*"[107]

This distinction between "closed" and "open" modes of thought lays the foundation of the defense provided by Habermas of the universal validity of the modern understanding of the world. It is hence important to examine its use more closely. Two issues suggest themselves as critical: first, it will be important to inquire as to the tenability of this distinction in light of the anthropological data. I shall consider this by way of examining Horton's own response to this question, given in a later article. Second, it is essential to give closer examination to the precise nature of what Horton's research establishes, so as to assess the use which Habermas makes of it. To foreshadow the central issue, even if we grant the truth of Horton's research, it substantiates the superiority of Western modes of thought *only in the cognitive-instrumental domain.* Further proof will be required to demonstrate the superiority of the modern worldview across the remaining formal-pragmatic dimensions.

In his 1982 essay entitled "Tradition and Modernity Revisited," Robin Horton reconsiders his earlier scheme of continuities and contrasts in light of its reception by his peers. I am particularly interested in his reconsideration of the appropriateness of employing the "closed"/ "open" dichotomy to characterise the differences between traditionalist and modernist modes of thought. A number of important criticisms of this dichotomy have been advanced; however, the line of criticism in which I am most interested focusses upon the implicit contrast made therein between static and dynamic forms of thinking. Many critics have argued, on the

---

[106]Habermas, *TCA 1*: 61.

basis of examples drawn from both traditional and modern contexts, that the typical traditional worldview is more open to change and more responsive to external influence than Horton had originally portrayed, while the scientific worldview is somewhat less open to innovation than Horton had credited. In his 1982 paper Horton acknowledges the aptness of these criticisms, agreeing that "[t]he Popperian contrast between 'closed' and 'open' *did* carry implications of a contrast between static and dynamic thinking, static and dynamic worldviews," and affirming that "such a contrast *does not* do justice either to the African or to the Western subject-matter."[108] There are nonetheless in his view several important differences between the modes of thought in question, and this suggests that the distinction between them requires reformulation rather than abandonment.

Anthropological research sheds doubt on the claim that there are necessarily no possibilities of choice between alternatives in traditional societies. A "traditionalistic" mode of legitimation of belief is described by Horton as a mode of thought which "treats a belief as valid when it can be shown to be part of the legacy of the ancients." Although this type of legitimation favours cognitive conservatism to some degree, Horton maintains that, in contrast to his portrayal of the mythical worldview as "closed," anthropological research has demonstrated that traditional worldviews permit "a high degree of adaptability and responsiveness to change."[109] He now agrees with many of his critics on the need to distinguish the conservative tendencies which result from the emphasis on traditionalistic modes of legitimation, from the idea that such worldviews are necessarily "static" or "closed." Field research supports the claim that the desire to develop adequate responses to experiential challenges presses individuals in traditionalist societies toward cognitive innovation. This

---

[107]Habermas, *TCA I*: 62.
[108]Horton, "Tradition and Modernity," in Hollis and Lukes (1982): 211.
[109]Horton, "Tradition and Modernity," in Hollis and Lukes (1982): 218-19.

innovation is at times purely endogenous, and at others involves the rethinking and adaptation of ideas which are originally alien.[110]

Horton nonetheless holds there to be a significant difference in the *mode* of change in traditionalist versus modern societies. He argues that secondary theory in traditionalist settings tends to be articulated in a manner which inhibits the development of a plurality of competing theoretical frameworks. Instead it appears to be one in which a single theoretical framework is continually embroidered in response to novel experiences and challenges. Alien concepts and innovations tend to be reworked and integrated into the dominant framework, and often in a syncretistic fashion, rather than splitting off into confronting frameworks. Horton sums up his revised view of traditionalist thinking by stressing two points: "First, despite its conservatism, such thinking has an essentially 'open' character. Second, it tends to produce and sustain a single over-arching theoretical framework rather than a multiplicity of such frameworks."[111]

Horton's view of intellectual modernity and of scientific thinking has also been revised. In "Tradition and Modernity Revisited," he stresses the importance which faith in the idea of cognitive progress has as a motive force in the development of science and the scientific outlook. Horton now holds that this was something which antedated and formed an essential prerequisite for the development of modern science. The importance to the scientific outlook of developing an "awareness of alternatives" continues to be stressed. Although Horton now recognizes that "not all plural situations are modern or scientific,"[112] he nonetheless maintains the importance of this factor in describing the differences between traditionalist and cognitivist modes of thought. He offers two general reasons why inter-theoretic competition should be viewed as a necessary, if not a sufficient, condition for the flourishing of science. First, he

---

[110]Horton, "Tradition and Modernity," in Hollis and Lukes (1982): 222.
[111]Horton, "Tradition and Modernity," in Hollis and Lukes (1982): 224.

points out that some if not all judgements of theoretical merit depend upon criteria which are relative rather than absolute in nature. A context of competition between alternatives is hence necessary if criteria such as economy, predictive power, and coverage are to be effectively deployed. Second, he notes that supporters of a theoretical paradigm in competition with a rival are motivated to search out new configurations of experience in the hope that rival theories will be unable to cope with them as successfully as the supporter's own theory does. This serves as a stimulus to theoretical advancement. This defence of the importance of theoretical alternatives will be an important theme in the remaining portions of this chapter.

In light of these reflections Horton abandons the closed/open dichotomy. This does not alter the fundamental claim in which Habermas is interested, viz., that one mode of thought is superior to the other. I have nonetheless chosen to draw attention to Horton's reformulation so as to point up the limitations of Habermas's conception of the mythical, and to stress the desirability of his developing a more nuanced understanding of it.

Horton now differentiates cognitive "traditionalism" from cognitive "modernism" in terms of two contrasts which he takes to be basic. These should in turn establish a foundation for explanation of the salient differences between these modes of thought. The first pair of contrasts is between a "traditionalistic" and a "progressivist" concept of knowledge. Whereas a "traditionalistic" concept of knowledge sees the main outlines of its interpretive structures as having been handed down "from the ancients," a "progressivistic" concept of knowledge is one which sees its body of theoretical knowledge as in the process of undergoing gradual but steady improvement.

---

[112]The phrase is Ernest Gellner's. See Gellner, "Savage and Modern," in Finnegan and Horton (1973): 167.

201

The second pair of contrasts is that between "consensual" and "competitive" modes of theorizing. A "consensual" mode of theorizing is defined by Horton as one in which all members of a community "share a single over-arching framework of secondary-theoretical assumptions, and carry out intellectual innovation within that framework." In contrast, a "competitive" mode of theorizing essentially involves competition between members of rivals schools of thought promoting frameworks of secondary-theoretical assumptions which are mutually incompatible. The "open"/ "closed" dichotomy is replaced with contrasts between two pairs of key factors. Horton defines cognitive "traditionalism" in terms of a traditionalist concept of knowledge closely linked to a consensual mode of theorizing. Cognitive "modernism" is defined in terms of the opposing pair of contrasts; that is, in terms of a "progressivistic" concept of knowledge conjoined with a "competitive" mode of theorizing.[113]

It is of great relevance to consider how Horton appraises the claim of cognitive "modernism" to possess some form of superiority over "traditionalism," and precisely where he believes this superiority to lie. Horton's own assessment of what his work has demonstrated is encapsulated in the following passage:

> On the question of cognitive superiority, then, our answer must be: it depends on the domain in which the theorizing is being carried out. · *"Yes" in the domain of non-living things.* "No" in the domain of human social life. "Perhaps" in the middle.[114]

To paraphrase his response, Horton believes that the superiority of the form of rationality implicit in scientific practice can be defended against relativist critics in the domain of physical nature. He is more guarded in his assessment of analogous claims in the social sciences. However, in the domain of human social life Horton's considered judgement is that such superiority cannot be claimed. He points out that we have much of psychological and social

---

[113]Horton, "Tradition and Modernity," in Hollis and Lukes (1982): 239.
[114]Horton, "Tradition and Modernity," in Hollis and Lukes (1982): 249. My emphasis.

value to learn from traditional African systems of belief, and much to esteem in the rich quality of experience in such societies.[115]

Let us attempt to place Horton's evaluation in perspective by examining what conditions an account must satisfy if it is to meet the conditions required by Habermas to construct a developmental logic. As we discussed above, the construction of a sequential ranking of problem-solutions only makes sense if the elements ranked can plausibly be construed as solving sufficiently similar problems. A ranking of worldviews along the lines proposed by Habermas can hence only be constructed if it can be shown first, that worldviews represent a variety of solutions to the same general problems, and second, that the decentered understanding of the world delineates the formal structures of rationality which allow these problems to best be solved. The relativist position advanced by Winch$_R$ constituted an objection to the first feature: although it described the goal of the scientific enterprise as that of explanation, prediction and control, in likening Zande magical practices to prayer, it postulated that the goals of these practices might differ, and hence that the practices themselves be non-comparable.

Horton criticised this approach for flouting the actor's perspective. He claims that Winch$_R$'s position ignores the traditional actor's essential interest in developing theories which advance the goals of technological and environmental manipulation. He argues that the

---

[115]Horton writes: "As a scientist, it is perhaps inevitable that I should at certain points give the impression that African thought is a poor, shackled thing when compared with the thought of the sciences." However, he recognises that he has chosen to spend his life in still-heavily-traditional Africa rather than in the scientifically-oriented Western subculture in which he was raised. He explains his choice thusly: "...one certain reason [for this choice] is the discovery of things lost at home. An immensely poetic quality in everyday life and thought, and a vivid enjoyment of the passing moment—both driven out of sophisticated Western life by the quest for purity of motive and the faith in progress. How necessary these are for the advance of science; but what a disaster they are when they run wild beyond their appropriate bounds!" See Horton, "African and Western," in Wilson (1970): 170. I will discuss a potential response by Habermas to this sort of point in the conclusion to this chapter.

"traditionalist" himself might be brought to accept the cognitive superiority of Western science in the domain of non-living things, because the defence of this superiority "appeals to criteria of efficacy in relation to goals which have a high priority in his own approach to the world: explanation, prediction and control."[116] Hence in spite of the fact that Horton argues from the perspective of cognitive modernism, he believes that a traditionalist might accept his response.

However, even if we accept Horton's argument as it stands, there is no sense in which the defense of the universal applicability of scientific rationality in the realm of physical nature leads us to any conclusions about the superiority or lack of superiority of this form of understanding in the two other formal-pragmatic dimensions.[117] Recall that the defence of the universality of the modern understanding of the world is based upon the idea that "the three specialized forms of argumentation (empirical-theoretical, moral and aesthetic) and their corresponding cultural value spheres represent that organization of consciousness within which knowledge can be most effectively accumulated."[118] It has not yet been shown what contribution the "closed"/ "open" dichotomy makes to these domains. As Habermas acknowledges, "the structures of worldviews determine a life-practice that is by no means exhausted in cognitive instrumental interaction with external reality. Rather, worldviews are constitutive *across the whole breadth* of processes of understanding and socialization, in

---

[116]Horton, "Tradition and Modernity," in Hollis and Lukes (1982): 249.

[117]One might plausibly add, in a fashion parallel to Horton's, that finding effective ways of living together is also of central concern to all humans. Although the domain of social interaction dealing with interpersonal resolutions of conflict identified by Habermas through the term "morality" must play an important role in all human societies, this argument does not as yet show that this domain must be divided from other elements in the ethical sphere as Habermas does, nor that it should be given the priority he assigns it.

[118]The description is Stephen White's. See White (1988): 128.

204

which participants relate as much to the orders of their common social world and to the experiences of their respective subjective worlds as to happenings in one objective world."[119]

Habermas defends universalism in the remaining two formal-pragmatic dimensions by supplementing Horton's account. He offers us two lines of support. The first draws upon a series of criticisms by Ernest Gellner of Horton's manner of framing the "closed"/ "open" dichotomy in terms of an awareness of alternatives. The second is drawn from studies in the cognitive development of children conducted by Jean Piaget. Before turning to a direct examination of these accounts I should like to emphasise that this is the crucial step in Habermas's argument. Not even the strong relativist has seriously disagreed that, if a culture's goals are to seek explanation, prediction and control of the physical environment, the methods of the natural sciences are superior to those found in mythical worldviews. The debate between Horton and Winch$_R$ turned largely upon the question of whether all worldviews could plausibly be seen as having this goal. If we answer with Horton in the affirmative, what we obtain is a means for the evaluation of modes of thought *in this dimension alone*. I now turn to an examination of the supporting evidence offered by Habermas.

Habermas claims that the anthropological studies carried out by Horton and Gellner "fit easily" into the formal-pragmatic viewpoints by means of which he characterised the "closedness" of mythical worldviews and the "openness" of the modern understanding of the world.[120] As I hope to show, this construal of the data, although certainly conceivable, seems more a matter of shaping the data to fit the theory than the reverse. Recall that Habermas characterises the mythical worldview as closed on two grounds: first, he argues that mythical worldviews fail to differentiate validity spheres in an appropriate manner, and that they hence

---

[119]Habermas, *TCA 1*: 62. This corresponds to "round five" of the six-round debate presented by Habermas.
[120]Habermas, *TCA 1*: 63-64.

do not promote the acquisition of the appropriate fundamental attitudes towards objective, social and subjective worlds. Second, he argues that mythical worldviews demonstrate a lack of reflexivity in their self-understanding in that they cannot see themselves *as* cultural traditions. In his opinion, archaic worldviews "are not understood by members as interpretive systems that are attached to cultural traditions constituted by internal interrelations of meaning, symbolically related to reality, and connected to validity claims—and thus exposed to criticism and open to revision."[121]

For Habermas's purposes the first claim, namely that the "open" mode of thought requires the differentiation of *three* formal world concepts, is the one crucially in need of defence. Two pieces of evidence are provided in its support. The first comes from the criticisms of Horton's characterisation of the differences between open and closed modes of thought advanced by Ernest Gellner. Habermas summarises the import of Gellner's stance as follows: "In his critique of Horton, Ernest Gellner warns that to view the "closedness" and "openness" of worldviews in terms of a 'sense for theoretical alternatives' is to conceive the matter too narrowly. (1) *The phenomena that Horton adduces in this regard cannot be pressed into this single dimension;* (2) *they call instead for a more complex system of reference that can grasp the simultaneous differentiation of three formal world concepts.*"[122] Clause (1) does indeed express the thesis of Gellner's paper; (2), what conclusions Habermas draws from it. I would like to examine the extent to which Gellner's paper substantiates this conclusion.

---

[121]Habermas, *TCA 1:* 52-53. If we align ourselves with Horton's reflective reassessment of the character of mythical worldviews it should be clear that such worldviews are *not* hermetically sealed conceptual schemes, but are, rather, open to criticism and revision. However, on Horton's revised account, members of mythical worldviews do not approach the *process* of revision in a manner optimal for the explanation, prediction and control of physical nature.

[122]Habermas, TCA 1: 63. Italics and numbers my addition. I should note that Gellner's work played an important role in prompting Horton to revise his distinctions.

Gellner believes there to be important differences between traditional and modern modes of thought. However, he does not believe that Horton's key differentia, the presence or absence of a developed awareness of alternatives, separates these two modes of thought from one another in an acceptable manner. He doubts whether "conceptual loyalty without option" can be a reasonable way of conceiving the nature of traditional mentality. Gellner points out that the adoption of this criterion would compel us to accept that in traditional societies there can be "no syncretism, no doctrinal pluralism, no deep treason, no dramatic conversion or doctrinal oscillation, no holding of alternative belief-systems up one's sleeve, ready for the opportune moment of betrayal." He argues that this notion of the nonexistence of plurality in the primitive worldview is implausible, and this forces us to the conclusion that not all plural situations are of necessity scientific. In spite of the existence of theoretical alternatives, members of traditional societies do not transcend their worldviews by developing a scientific mentality, but rather by syncretistic blending of incompatible belief-systems.[123] Conversely, members of a scientific worldview may also experience great difficulty in conceiving an alternative to their own favoured world-vision, and this conceptual narrowing may even be an essential feature of some aspects of the scientific enterprise.

Gellner nonetheless believes that the conceptual predicaments identified by Horton contain important elements of truth. He attempts to characterise these predicaments not in terms of one key trait, but in terms of a number of interrelated characterstics which are attached to each syndrome. He argues that to draw forth only one trait as the key differentia is arbitrary and misleading, and that what we need is to gain an understanding of all of these.[124] Because our present interest is in the question of whether the transition to an "open" syndrome of thought requires a differentiation of validity spheres along the lines which Habermas

---

[123]Gellner, "The Savage and the Modern Mind," in Finnegan and Horton (1973): 166.

suggests, I will focus on the aspects of Gellner's paper which might support this thesis.[125]

Gellner argues that the traditional thinker simultaneously displays "a low cognitive division of labour" and "a proliferation of roles."[126] He submits that there is a direct link between increasing role-specialisation and the development of scientifically oriented thought. Gellner explains: "It is of the essence of the savage mind, as of savage institutions, that there is a lower degree of functional specificity....The enchanted vision works through the systematic conflation of descriptive, evaluative, identificatory, status-conferring etc. roles of language. A sense of the separability and fundamental distinctness of the various functions is the surest way to the disenchantment of the world." In his view, as particular roles and institutions become identified with particular ends, the idea gains ascendancy that activity devoted to one end, if it is to achieve its purposes with efficiency, must not be diverted to the service of other ends. This facilitates acceptance of the idea that activity devoted to the end of explanation must be insulated from other ends and desires if it is to be maximally successful, which ultimately fosters the growth of the autonomous practice of theory.

I would now like to relate these points back to Habermas's argument. Gellner does indeed argue that the development of the "open" mode of thought cannot be adequately

---

[124]Gellner, "Savage and Modern," in Finnegan and Horton (1973): 169.

[125]Gellner contrasts the features of the "Savage Mind" with those of the "Scientific Mind" on precisely four points: (1) "The use of idiosyncratic norms." In contrast to the practices of modern science, Gellner argues that a traditional belief system tends to establish one class of entities and occurrences as "normal" and another as "abnormal." Only the members of the latter class are viewed as requiring explanation. (2) "The division of labour," which is discussed at greater length in my text. (3) "The pervasiveness of entrenched clauses." Gellner divides the stock of ideas and convictions held by any individuals or groups into those which "can be denied or replaced without significantly disturbing my total picture and composure" and "those which can only be budged at the cost of a wide dislocation and disturbance." The term "entrenched clauses" refers to the latter group. Gellner argues that the sacred or crucial is more extensive, more pervasive, and less neatly dispersed in traditional than in modern societies. (4) "The diplomatic immunity of cognition." This refers whether intellectual endeavours are subject to the same kinds of social and moral obligations and sanctions as are other kinds of conduct. Gellner argues that modern societies demonstrate increasing immunity for cognition from these sorts of constraints. See Ernest Gellner, "Savage and Modern," in Finnegan and Horton (1973).

[126]Gellner, "Savage and Modern," in Finnegan and Horton (1973): 169.

understood solely as an evolution along the cognitive-instrumental axis. The advantages of the open predicament in cognitive-instrumental thought must, he believes, be accompanied by increasing specialisation in other spheres. Gellner argues that increasing specificity of function, or what he calls increasing cognitive "division of labour," is more efficient; hence that the transition to the open syndrome manifests increasing specialisation of thought in different validity spheres. Moreover, he points out that the advantages of specialisation are general: specialisation heightens the efficiency with which any ends may be realised, and not simply the two special ends of explanation and prediction singled out by Horton.[127] To this extent his work supports Habermas's position.

However, he does not describe this increasing specialisation as Habermas does. Gellner does not postulate the existence of the three validity domains required by Habermas's theory. In fact, the only theoretical account of specificity of function alluded to by Gellner is positivist in orientation, and does not allow the existence of a validity domain corresponding to a cognitivist ethics. Gellner explains:

> Thus in one of the best-known forms of this kind of theory [a theoretical account of specificity of function], propositions are classified into those which stand or fall in virtue of factual checking, those which stand or fall in virtue of formal calculation, those which stand or fall in virtue of consonance with the speaker's feelings, and those which have no basis or anchorage at all.[128]

On this account, moral statements might find their place as true in virtue of the utterer's feelings, or be viewed as statements not admitting of truth whatsoever. Hence, although there is some agreement between Gellner and Habermas on the nature of the open predicament and the process of transition toward it, this agreement is far from complete. Gellner's work certainly does not establish that the transition to the open predicament follows a differentiation

---

[127]Gellner, "Savage and Modern," in Finnegan and Horton (1973): 169.
[128]Gellner, "Savage and Modern," in Finnegan and Horton (1973): 173.

into precisely the three validity spheres of objectivating thought, moral-practical insight, and aesthetic-expressive capacity proposed by Habermas.

Habermas also uses the work of Jean Piaget to support the idea that the transition to advanced levels of cognitive development requires this differentiation of three validity spheres. Cognitive development as studied by Piaget "refers to structures of thought and action that the growing child acquires constructively in active confrontation with external reality, with processes in the objective world."[129] However, Habermas notes that for Piaget, cognitive development in this narrow or cognitive-instrumental sense forces the child to differentiate external and internal worlds (i.e., the worlds of the child herself versus what lies outside her) and within the category of the external world, to distinguish actions between subjects and objects from actions between a subject and another subject. Habermas argues on this basis that the higher levels of cognitive development cannot take place in individuals without being accompanied by a pronounced discrimination of various spheres of validity, and hypothesises that a similar thing may perhaps be true with respect to worldviews. He writes:

> Thus for Piaget there is cognitive development in a wider sense, which is not understood solely as the construction of an external universe but also as the construction of a reference system for the *simultaneous* demarcation of the objective and social worlds from the subjective world. Cognitive development signifies in general *the decentration of an egocentric understanding of the world.*[130]

Although this speculation may indeed be a fruitful one, it should be obvious that the burden of proof for its substantiation lies with Habermas. Not only must he show that Piaget's undoubtedly impressive studies of cognitive development, initially conducted on middle-class Swiss schoolboys, are of significance to the evolution of societal worldviews, he must also

---

[129]Habermas, *TCA 1*: 68.
[130]Habermas, *TCA 1*: 69.

show that the increased differentiation it requires parallels precisely the three validity spheres and world-concepts he has identified.

I should like to end this section by offering a critical summary of the results of the discussion so far. Habermas seeks to defend the universal validity of the form of rationality embodied in the modern understanding of the world. The claim to superiority in the cognitive-instrumental sphere is defended through appeal to Horton's use of the "closed"/ "open" dichotomy. Horton argues that an "open" style of thought is superior in the domain of explanation, prediction and control; and moreover, that these goals are of relevance for traditional as well as modern societies. His formulation of this claim is by no means uncontested. As we saw above, Horton himself has altered his portrayal of mythical modes of thought. It is likely that as our understanding of traditional societies deepens, further evolution will take place. Nonetheless, if we accept this claim as it stands, what we obtain is a justification of the superiority of scientific modes of thinking in the dimension of cognitive-instrumental dealings with physical nature.

Horton explicitly distances himself from the idea that the superiority claimed for the "open" worldview applies to the sphere of human social life. However, the position Habermas seeks to uphold requires that an advance be shown to take place in three formal-pragmatic dimensions simultaneously. The claim to cognitive-instrumental superiority serves Habermas as a form of "motor" onto which the arguments of Gellner and Piaget are attached. Both Gellner and Piaget suggest, in different ways, that advances in the cognitive-instrumental sphere cannot take place without some advances in other spheres as well. However, even if we grant Habermas this point, these articles do not themselves suggest that more sophisticated forms of reasoning must take the specific form outlined by Habermas. To conclude, even if we grant Habermas the truth of all the articles upon which he relies, these articles do not

substantiate his conclusion in any specific way. They can indeed be read in terms of the schema Habermas sets out, but that is quite a different thing from saying that they themselves suggest this schema.

Habermas offers us an account of worldview development which satisfies the requirements of a developmental ranking. Worldviews can on this account be placed in an ordered sequence, where higher stages reflect increases in the differentiation and elaboration of three, and precisely three, validity spheres corresponding to the domains of the cognitive-instrumental, moral-practical and aesthetic-expressive. An increase in problem-solving abilities in the cognitive-instrumental sphere must be accompanied by a parallel increase in the others. Transitions between stages are viewed by Habermas as alterations in the form of reason-giving considered acceptable. As Habermas explains:

> With the transition to a new stage the interpretations of the superseded stage are, no matter what their content, categorially devalued. It is not this or that reason, but the kind of reason, which is no longer convincing. A devaluation of the explanatory and justificatory potentials of entire traditions took place in the great civilizations with the dissolution of the mythological-narrative figures of thought, in the modern age with the dissolution of religious, cosmological, and metaphysical figures of thought. These devaluative shifts appear to be connected with socio-evolutionary transitions to new levels of learning, with which the conditions of possible learning processes in the dimensions of objectivating thought, moral-practical insight, and aesthetic-expressive capacity are altered.[131]

This image of worldview development enables Habermas to order worldviews in a linear fashion, with the highest stage specified in terms of the formal features of the decentered understanding of the world.

Yet Habermas does not wish to deny that the transition to modernity has been accompanied by losses. He believes each movement to a higher level of worldview development, although a formal advance in terms of rationality, gives rise to unprecedented

problems at the level of "cultural contents." It is in the diagnosis of such problems that he sees

the value of Winch's viewpoint. Habermas argues that the pull or "pathos" of Winch's article

stems from the ability of comparisons with postmodern forms of life to illuminate the losses in

the path of development taken by the modern West. In Habermas's view the problems of

modernity reflect our one-sided focus upon cognitive-instrumental—as distinct from

communicative or aesthetic-expressive—dimensions of rationality. Reflection on an alien

society may help us to become aware of this, and to combat it. Habermas asks:

> Can't we who belong to modern societies learn something from understanding
> alternative, particularly premodern forms of life? Shouldn't we, beyond all
> romanticizing of superseded stages of development, beyond exotic stimulation
> from the contents of alien cultures, recall the losses required by our own path
> to the modern world?[132]

What seems problematic, he maintains, is not scientific rationality itself, but its

hypostatisation.

Habermas's own assessment of the results of the rationality debate is twofold. He

concludes (a) that "the rationality debate suggests that the modern understanding of the world

is indeed based on general structures of rationality" but (b) "that modern Western societies

promote a distorted understanding of rationality that is fixed on cognitive-instrumental aspects

and is to that extent particularistic."[133] I have some general remarks to make concerning these

conclusions.

The conclusion that the rationality debate demonstrates the universal validity of the

form of rationality embodied in the decentered understanding of the world is indeed a *possible*

one. I would nonetheless like to draw attention to its specificity. First, it rests upon a

confluence of positions drawn from a particular subset of arguments which have usually been

---

[131]Habermas, *TCA 1*: 68.
[132]Habermas, *TCA 1*: 66.

213

interdefined from the start. These arguments support a universalist stance, by no means uncontested, concerning the general applicability of "our" standards of rationality in the cognitive domain. Second, this conclusion extracts from the articles studied certain elements which *could* be construed as supporting Habermas's position. However, they certainly need not be construed as so doing, and were not in fact so construed by their authors.

The arguments Habermas offers seem particularly weak at the crucial place; that is, at the point of demonstrating the universal validity of (his conception of) modern, Western rationality structures other than the cognitive-instrumental. But this very lacuna is interesting. I believe that light is shed upon Habermas's manner of reasoning in a passage from a recent interview, where he discusses the significance of the rationality debate.

> I think the crucial point in this debate is whether we must take account of an asymmetry that arises between the interpretive capacities of different cultures in virtue of the fact that some have introduced "second-order concepts" whereas others have not. These second-order concepts fulfill necessary cognitive conditions for a culture's becoming self-reflective, that is, for its members' adopting a hypothetical stance toward their own traditions and on this basis grasping their own cultural relativity. This kind of decentered understanding of the world is characteristic of modern societies. *What the argument is about, therefore, is whether such cognitive structures represent a threshhold that demands similar processes of learning and adaptation of any culture that crosses it.*
>
> *According to the contextualists, the transition to postmetaphysical concepts of culture and posttraditional conceptions of law and morality is characteristic of just one tradition among others* and by no means signifies that tradition as such becomes reflexive. *I don't see how this thesis could be seriously defended.* I think that Max Weber was fundamentally right, especially in the careful universalistic interpretation that Schluchter has given his thesis of the universal cultural significance of Occidental rationalism.[134]

The term "second-order concept" is used to describe those concepts introduced in order to allow one to think about the interpretive categories of one's worldview.[135] Habermas argues

---

[133]Habermas, *TCA 1:* 66.
[134]Habermas, "Morality, Society and Ethics," in Habermas, *J&A:* 157-58. My italics.
[135]Although the existence of alternative interpretive possibilities may be a necessary factor in the development of second-order concepts, many have argued, in opposition to Horton's view in his 1967

that the introduction of such concepts propels us to advance along the lines set out by his developmental model. He offers us a choice of seeing the move towards reflexivity in Western modernity as of no significance beyond the confines of our cultural worldview, or as the endpoint of a path of development which all cultures must eventually follow if they acquire second-order concepts.

I believe that Habermas, through neglecting a range of viable positions different from his own, has constructed a false dichotomy. Moreover, I would suggest that it is because he cannot see how the opposing thesis of the dilemma he constructs "could be seriously defended" that he is somewhat precipitate in concluding in favour of his own view. I shall next look at one such alternative.

4.53 Contextualist Non-Relativism

We have so far examined two lines of response to the question of whether the magical practices of the Azande should be regarded as rational. The phenomenon which serves as the focal point of this discussion is the apparent disinterest manifested by the Azande in certain potential contradictions inherent in their system of beliefs, as documented by Evans-Pritchard in his field researches. Their disinterest seems to violate our sense of the importance of acknowledging such contradictions: it seems intuitively to call into question the rationality of

---

article, that such possibilities do exist even in primitive societies. Moreover, both alternative interpretive possibilities and second-order concepts have previously existed and do presently exist in world civilizations other than our own. To say this is not to deny that there may be significant differences between the modes of thought of these cultures and our own, or to deny the extent to which our culture is a theoretical one. This point will be taken up in §4.6. See Gellner "Savage and Modern," in Finnegan and Horton (1973) for the view that there are alternative interpretive

this worldview. Notwithstanding this perception, Peter Winch argues that to assess the rationality of these practices by the standards of Western science constitutes a "category mistake." According to Winch, Zande notions of witchcraft "do not constitute a theoretical system in terms of which Azande try to gain a quasi-scientific understanding of the world."[136] The lack of interest shown by the Azande in pressing contradictions which seem central *to us* should hence be seen not as a sign of lesser rationality on their part, but rather as an indication that they are engaged in a different language game from our own. It would hence be a mistake, he argues, to assess them in the same way.

But wherein does the error lie? Horton and Habermas offer us a clear response to this query. They interpret Winch as a strong relativist who views Zande magical rituals as a pure form of expressive activity akin to our practices of prayer, and thus as entirely distinct in aim and form from our scientific practices. Because these practices do not share the same goals they cannot, Winch$_R$ argues, be assessed by the same criteria. They hence cannot be ranked relative to one another in terms of rationality. Nonetheless, as Horton and Habermas point out, this stance seems somewhat implausible. It is clear that the flourishing of crops is of central importance to the Azande, for it is closely tied to their well-being. [137] Horton emphasises the role attributed by the Azande to magical rituals in fostering crop growth. As against the position taken by Winch$_R$ he stresses the continuities in aim between magical and scientific modes of thought. By demonstrating the saliency of the goals of explanation, prediction and control for each, he paves the way for the defence of the superiority of the scientific.

It may seem that a deep understanding of the phenomena associated with Zande magical practices still eludes us. In his essay entitled "Rationality," Charles Taylor suggests

---

possibilities even in primitive cultures, and Horton's response to this claim in Horton, "Traditional and Modern," in Hollis and Lukes (1982).
[136]Winch, "Primitive Society," in Wilson (1970): 93.

that to argue in terms of this sort of contrast, that is, to understand primitive religion as fully

analogous either to our practices of science, or to our practices of prayer, is to be insufficiently

radical in our critique of ethnocentricity.[138] Zande magical practices do not fit easily into either

of these classifications, Taylor argues, precisely because the Azande do not make these

distinctions as we do. Recognising and coming to terms with this fact is the central challenge

of cross-cultural understanding.

> The real challenge is to see the incommensurability, to come to understand
> how their range of possible activities, that is, the way in which they identify
> and distinguish activities, differs from ours. As Winch says, "we do not
> initially have a category that looks at all like the Zande category of magic";
> but *this is not because their magic is concerned with ends quite foreign to*
> *our society, but rather because the ends defined in it cut across ours in*
> *disconcerting ways. Really overcoming ethnocentricity is being able to*
> *understand two incommensurable classifications.*[139]

I next consider a response to the controversy raised by Winch's charge of "category mistake"

which takes as central the phenomenon of "incommensurable classification" described by

Taylor. Although I do find this approach to cross-cultural understanding more illuminating

than the previous two, I should emphasise that my primary aim in this section is to demonstrate

the existence of a plausible alternative or "middle-ground" ignored by Habermas.

I will develop an account of this third position in two parts. I first draw from Winch's

article an alternative reading of what is involved in the process of cross-cultural understanding,

which stresses the challenge involved in understanding a society whose mode of classification

does not map simply onto our own. Although I do believe this to be a more accurate rendering

of Winch's position, nothing hangs on the resolution of this textual issue. I then argue,

drawing principally upon Taylor's article, that this position does not preclude our making

---

[137]This point is made by Winch in "Primitive Society," in Wilson (1970): 103.

[138]Taylor, "Rationality," in Hollis and Lukes (1982): 94. See also I. C. Jarvie and Joseph Agassi,
"The Problem of the Rationality of Magic," in Wilson (1970): 172-193 for a discussion of the form of
explanation appropriate to magical acts.

defensible judgements of superiority across worldviews, and that the superiority of Western natural science in the realms of explanation, prediction and control of physical nature may constitute such a judgement. Nonetheless, the conditions involved in making such judgements of superiority do not fulfil the criteria required for the construction of a developmental logic.

I should like to initiate the discussion by reconsidering Winch's reasons for viewing Evans-Pritchard's approach to the assessment of Zande magical practices as framing a "category mistake." Winch sometimes describes the error in question as one of mistaking "the point" of our activity of science for "the point" of their magical rituals. This seems to me crucial.[140] One way of understanding this claim is to view these activities as having "points" or goals entirely unrelated to one another, and hence not as susceptible of evaluation by the same criteria. This is the sense emphasised in the relativist reading of Winch which we considered in §4.51. However, I believe that Winch views the aims of these activities as rather more intricately interrelated. In Taylor's phrase, the ends defined in the Zande practice of magic may "cut across ours in disconcerting ways."[141]

The intuition Winch is pursuing is that any judgement of whether a particular actor is rational in a given context depends crucially upon what one is trying to achieve in that context. An example may help to clarify his point.[142] Many Britons enjoy solving crossword puzzles, and expend considerable time and effort in the attempt. Yet the solutions could often be much more expeditiously acquired, simply by turning to another section of the newspaper, or by looking for the solution key in the back of the book. It may seem that the tremendous exertion demonstrated by the crossword solver is highly irrational, or at least gravely misplaced.

---

[139]Taylor, "Rationality," in Hollis and Lukes (1982): 94. My emphasis.
[140]I owe my appreciation of the importance for Winch of "seeing the point of the activity" to David Davies.
[141]Taylor, "Rationality," in Hollis and Lukes (1982): 94.
[142]I owe this example to David Davies. His delivery is, regrettably, inimitable.

However, to make this judgement would be to misapprehend the point of solving crossword puzzles. It represents the goal of the game as finding solutions rather than, perhaps, testing one's knowledge, whiling away time in the daily commute free of the obligation to discuss with one's neighbour, or matching wits with a friend who also does the puzzle. This is not to say that finding solutions is not a goal of the game in question, only that it is not the exclusive goal in terms of which the game should be understood.

It seems to Winch that our attempts to evaluate Zande magical rituals in terms of criteria drawn from the practice of natural science may reflect our having as yet failed to grasp the point of these rituals. This is particularly likely because the Azande do not appear to possess categories corresponding to our categories of science and non-science. Moreover, we do not at present have a category resembling that of Zande magic. "Since is we who want to understand the Zande category," Winch argues, "it appears that the onus is on us to extend our understanding so as to make room for the Zande category, rather than to insist on seeing it in terms of our own ready-made distinctions between science and non-science."[143] The magical rituals of the Azande cannot be comprehended in terms of our preexisting categories, but instead require us to extend these categories in novel ways. What needs to be clarified is how such an extension of understanding can be possible. To do so will require that we explore Winch's conception of rationality more fully.

The connection between rationality and "seeing the point of the activity" is an essential one for Winch. In ʃ4.3 we saw that Winch defines rational behaviour as behaviour involving conformity to rules or norms. Moreover, he distinguishes two senses of the term "rationality," the "formal" and the "substantive." In our quest to determine whether Zande magical practices are rational we appeal in the first instance to the formal requirement that rational behaviour

219

have something to do with acting uniformly or consistently; that is, with acting in the same way in similar circumstances.

Yet the difficulty arises that all circumstances can be viewed as similar to one another in some respect. One might view two randomly chosen events, a car crash and a concert, for example, as similar to one another in that both took place on a Tuesday, or in that both commence with the letter "c". What we require, then, is a principled way of determining which similarities are relevant and which are not. Judgements of sameness or identity are hence necessarily relative to some rule which specifies substantive criteria for determining what is to count in judging two events to be qualitatively similar, what is to count as "conformity to a norm" in this case. In sum, we ascertain that the formal condition of rationality is met by testing whether the behaviour in question manifests a high degree of internal coherence or non-contradiction. However, in order to adduce whether the condition of conformity to a norm has been met, one must have access to the substantive specification of the rule used in this context as well.[144]

Furthermore, rules governing specific practices, such as the rules for consultation of the poison oracle, "rest upon a social context of common activity."[145] In order for an individual to follow a rule, she must be able to apply the rule correctly to new cases. However, her ability to "go on" appropriately requires that she have some sense of the point of the activity governed by this rule. This in turn suggests that rules cannot be understood in isolation from one another.[146] To understand a rule, Winch claims, is to understand the social

---

[143]Winch, "Primitive Society," in Wilson (1970): 102.
[144]Winch, "Primitive Society," in Wilson (1970): 93.
[145]Winch, "The Idea of a Social Science," in Wilson (1970): 2.
[146]This point reflects the central place which Wittgenstein's reflections on the logical grammar of rules occupy in Winch's thought. In the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein argues that any rule can be interpreted in an infinite number of ways. In §185, he gives the example of someone who extends a numerical series beyond 1000 wrongly, through misapplying the rule 'Add 2.'

intercourse into which it enters. What we require is an understanding of the place of the activity under investigation in the overlapping nexus of practices which together constitute the life form. This will ultimately require us to see how this particular activity draws its sense from conceptions of what is valuable, important or worth striving for in human life. Understanding the ritual activities surrounding the Zande poison oracle will in the end necessitate our acquiring a sense of what the Azande hold to be important in human life.

Now we get the pupil to continue a series (say +2) beyond 1000—and he writes 1000, 1004, 1008, 1012.

We say to him: "Look what you've done!"—He doesn't understand. We say: "You were meant to add *two*: look how you began the series!"—He answers: "Yes, isn't it right?" I thought that was how I was *meant* to do it."—Or suppose he pointed to the series and said: "But I went on in the same way." It would now be no use to say: "But can't you see....?"—and repeat the old examples and explanations.—In such a case we might say, perhaps: It comes natural to this person to understand our order with our explanations as *we* should understand the order: "Add 2 up to 1000, 4 up to 2000, 6 up to 3000 and so on."

A rule is often viewed as a guarantor of truth, a way of ruling out such misapplications. However, as Wittgenstein demonstrates, even very aberrant modes of continuing the series can be made out to accord with some rule. Moreover, past applications of a rule can never determine which of the possible interpretations is correct. These reflections are encapsulated in the "sceptical paradox" presented in *5201 of the *Investigations,* where Wittgenstein writes: "This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with a rule."

The issue of how Wittgenstein resolves this paradox is itself highly controversial, which adds additional difficulties to the interpretation of Winch. In *5202 of the *Investigations,* Wittgenstein emphasises that "obeying a rule is a practice." Although it is clear that this is meant to undercut the Platonist or metaphysical reading of how one follows a rule, it is less clear what alternative view Wittgenstein himself supports. There are two important currents I would like to mention, both of which take seriously the idea that misapplications of rules committed by the individual rule-follower can be identified by appeal to the standards of the community in which the individual rule-follower is situated. The first, given by Saul Kripke in *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language,* sees Wittgenstein as arguing that deviant or incorrect applications of rules can be identified based on the agreement of a community. It makes no claim that the community as a whole is either right or wrong, for, it argues, there is no sensible way in which this can be judged. This reading seems to me generally to support the position identified with Winch₁ in *54.51. However, cf. Winch's account of rule-following in chapter one of *The Idea of a Social Science* (Humanities Press, 1958). I favour an alternative reading of Wittgenstein, which gives a more nuanced, and less radically relativistic, account of his constructivism. See e.g. the works on Wittgenstein by G.P. Baker and P.M.S. Hacker, especially *Scepticism, Rules and Language.* See also S.G. Shanker, *Wittgenstein and the Turning Point in the Philosophy of Mathematics* (Croom Helm, 1987). A number of outstanding papers on the issue of rule-following are collected in *Wittgenstein: To Follow a Rule,* ed., Steven H. Holtzman and Christopher M. Leich (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981).

We can summarise by saying that rational behaviour is behaviour involving conformity to norms. However, we regard what is consist differently from the Azande: we adopt different rules specifying different criteria of what makes sense. This is another way of saying that the standards of rationality in different societies do not always coincide. The problem of understanding the institutions of an alien society can hence be viewed as that of bringing into alignment with one another two different rule-governed systems initially having different standards of rationality. Winch describes this as the task of bringing the Zande conception of intelligibility into relation with our own. This process requires us to extend our way of looking at things.

> ...we have to create a new unity for the concept of intelligibility, having a certain relation to our old one and perhaps requiring a considerable realignment of our categories. We are not seeking a state in which things will appear to us just as they do to members of [a society] S, and perhaps such a state is unattainable anyway. But we are seeking a way of looking at things which goes beyond our previous way in that it has in some way taken account of and incorporated the other way that members of S have of looking at things. Seriously to study another way of life is necessarily to seek to extend our own- -not simply to bring the other way within the already existing boundaries of our own, because the point about the latter in their present form is that they *ex hypothesi* exclude that other.[147]

I would like to make two points about the notion of extension Winch proposes. First, Winch's position presupposes that reason, although always embodied in specific practices, is never exhaustively defined by them. As Putnam emphasises, reason transcends the limitations of its employment within given practices. Rule-following is, therefore, never blind "application"; it has an open quality which makes possible reasoned extensions of existing categories.[148] In seeking to understand an alien practice we hence need not, and in fact must not, simply apply to this practice criteria drawn from our existing categories.[149]

---

[147]Winch, "Primitive Society," in Wilson (1970): 99.
[148]Winch, "Primitive Society," in Wilson (1970): 96.
[149]Winch, "Primitive Society," in Wilson (1970): 99.

Second, although any attempt to understand an alien practice must begin from our categories, it is not obvious which furnishes the best point of departure for such an endeavour. Winch proposes that we regard the practice of Zande magic as analogous to our practice of prayer in that they both express an "attitude towards contingencies," a way of coming to terms with and moving beyond different aspects of human vulnerability and misfortune. This analogy may not be satisfactory in all respects. Specifically, if the Zande categories are truly different from our own it may (and indeed should) fail to exhaust the goals of this practice. However, the analogy illuminates features of Zande magic, such as its links to individual processes of reflection or to social relations, which may be neglected when the relation of magical rites to consumption is the primary point of reference.[150]

Making sense of the practices of an alien culture requires that we come to understand the point of these practices in the life of that society as a whole, and this can only be done by learning how they view the significance of human life.

> What we may learn by studying other cultures are not merely possibilities of
> different ways of doing things, other techniques. More importantly we may
> learn different possibilities of making sense of human life, different ideas
> about the possible importance that the carrying out of certain activities may
> take on for a man, trying to contemplate the sense of his life as a whole.[151]

What we can learn from the study of an alien culture, beyond new "techniques," are "new possibilities of good and evil" in relation to which human beings may come to terms with their lives. That is why learning from an alien society is, for Winch, connected with the acquisition of wisdom.

One might ask how it is possible to grasp such possibilities; that is, how we are to relate our conceptions of good and evil to those found in the other society if, by hypothesis,

---

[150]Winch, "Primitive Society," in Wilson (1970): 106.
[151]Winch, "Primitive Society," in Wilson (1970): 106.

they do not initially coincide. Winch responds to this query by stressing that the conception of

human life involves certain limiting notions which have an ethical dimension, and which

determine the "ethical space" in which the possibilities of good and evil can be exercised.

Notions of birth, death and sexual relations occupy a central position in all human societies,

although their significance and the practices surrounding them may vary considerably. A

society's ethical notions develop around these concerns, among others, and its institutions give

expression to them. Winch suggests that we attend to the role played by these concepts in

investigating an alien society. They serve to provide "a basis on which understanding may be

built."[152]

Winch's article focusses on the difficulties of making rational comparative judgements

of superiority across groups. As a result, many have viewed him as denying that such

judgements are possible. This is clearly a *non sequitur*. Yet because Winch does not address

himself directly to this issue, his position is difficult to determine. I suspect that his emphasis

on the difficulties of making cross-cultural judgements is set rather more by his choice of

opponent than by the desire to develop a positive programme of cross-cultural understanding in

which such judgements are, in principle, absent. This choice of opponent may in turn reflect

where he perceives the greatest--as opposed to the only--risk of error to lie. But these are

points of textual dispute, and engaging them is not my primary interest. As my goal is to

sketch a plausible philosophical position ignored by Habermas, I would like to supplement the

account of cross-cultural understanding developed in the reading of Winch with a compatible

account describing how rational judgements of superiority may be made cross-culturally.[153]

---

[152]Winch, "Primitive Society," in Wilson (1970): 107-11.
[153]My understanding of Wittgenstein-influenced "theories of the middle ground" as a concept in
political philosophy has been greatly enhanced by the work of James Tully. Tully applies
Wittgensteinian notions directly to the study of Habermas in "Wittgenstein and Political Philosophy,"
in *Political Theory*, 17,2 (1989): 172-204. My present way of thinking about these issues reflects his

In the article "Rationality," Charles Taylor takes up the question of whether the disinterest in resolving potential theoretical contradictions in their system of beliefs manifested by the Azande is a sign of this system's lesser rationality. The picture of cross-cultural understanding which he presents closely resembles the one sketched in the discussion of Winch above; however, Taylor's account departs from Winch's in stressing that the existence of a plurality of standards of rationality does not undermine our ability to make cross-cultural judgements of superiority. In fact, Taylor claims, "I believe the kind of plurality we have here, between the incommensurable, precisely opens the door to such judgements."[154] I would like to trace the main contours of Taylor's position by unpacking this somewhat enigmatic claim.

As we saw above, Taylor regards the central challenge of cross-cultural understanding as that of seeing and doing justice to the phenomenon of "incommensurability." This term is used in a confusing number of ways in the rationality debate; hence, I would like to underscore its role in this article as a term of art.[155] The term "incommensurability" is drawn from ancient

---

approach. Much of Tully's work focusses on showing the merits of a Wittgensteinian approach in thinking about cultural diversity. Of especial interest in this regard are "Diversity's Gambit Declined," in *Constitutional Predicament: Canada after the Referendum of 1992*, ed. Curtis Cook (McGill-Queens University Press, 1994): 149-98; and *Strange Multiplicity: Constitutionalism in an age of diversity* (Cambridge, 1995).

[154]Taylor, "Rationality," in Hollis and Lukes (1982): 105.

[155]Due to the controversies surrounding the use of the term "incommensurability" in various fields of philosophy, I would like to emphasise that Taylor does not use the term "incommensurability" to describe a situation of complete non-comparability between the entities in question. The term "incommensurability" was used by Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* to call into question the prevalent conception of science as an enterprise of cumulative progress. By drawing upon various historical examples of theory change, Kuhn focussed attention upon the "lack of fit" between the categories of one paradigm and those of another. An example derived from the dispute between Aristotelianism and Copernicanism will help to clarify Kuhn's meaning.

The Aristotelian astronomer referred to the sun as a planet, whereas the convert to Copernicanism denies that this is so. What Kuhn wants to bring out in his description of the phenomenon of "incommensurability" is the fact that this situation is misunderstood if viewed only as a disagreement about how the term "planet" should be applied. Rather, it marks a shift in basic conceptual beliefs about the cosmos, in the following sense. In antiquity, observers recognised just two sorts of celestial bodies, planet and stars. Planets were distinguished from stars by several features: "They tended to be brighter than stars, to appear only in the zodiacal region of the heavens, and to shine more steadily than the twinkling stars. More salient still, though stars and planets moved steadily together in westward circles around the celestial pole, planets possessed an additional

---

225

Greek mathematics, where it was used to specify the relationship between two quantities which possessed no common measure. For example, the relation between the radius and circumference of a circle is one of incommensurability, since there is no unit which each contains some integral number of times. What we who embark on the project of cross-cultural understanding wish to do is to come to see how "the way in which they identify and distinguish activities differs from ours."[156] The phenomenon of "lack of fit" between the categories of different cultures or worldviews appears to present an analogous barrier to comparison: we seem, at least initially, to lack recourse to a common basis which would allow us to fully and precisely state all components of both theories.

The term "incommensurability" points to the fact that the activities in question are not simply different, but rather "incompatible in principle." Taylor distinguishes activities which are incompatible in principle from those which are incompatible in practice. Activities which are incompatible in practice are those which, as a matter of fact, could not both be carried out at the same time. He gives as an example of this the attempt simultaneously to play football and chess. Our inability to do both seems to reflect only our physical and mental limitations. The nature of the incompatibility is different in the case of activities whose defining rules are in

---

much slower eastward motion through or among the stars." T.F. Kuhn, "The Presence of Past Science," delivered as the *Shearman Memorial Lectures*, University College, London, 1987, 44. Relying jointly upon these features, the Greeks determined the sun to be a planet. Nor were they wrong to do so. In order to demonstrate the superiority of the Copernican position, the Copernican must show that her conceptual scheme marks an epistemic gain over the Aristotelian's, and this issue, Kuhn claims, cannot be resolved internally to the Aristotelian paradigm, nor solely in the terminology of the Copernican.

Philosophers have found it notoriously difficult to gain a clear theoretical conception of the phenomenon described by Kuhn. Putnam, for example, interprets Kuhn as advancing a radical and self-refuting form of relativism. According to Putnam, "The incommensurability thesis is the thesis that terms used in another culture, say, the term "temperature" as used by a seventeenth-century scientist, cannot be equated in meaning or reference with any terms or expressions *we* possess." For Putnam, what Kuhn has failed to see is that "[t]o tell us that Galileo had "incommensurable" notions *and then to go on to describe them at length* is totally incoherent." Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, (Cambridge University Press, 1981), 114-15 Although this seems to me a rather forced reading of Kuhn's position, the controversies surrounding the use of this term make it important to attend to Taylor's own description of it.

tension. As Taylor explains, "...when we come to soccer and rugby football, we have two activities which are incompatible in principle. For the rules which partly define these games prescribe actions in contradiction to each other. Picking up the ball and running with it is against the rules of soccer." Incommensurable activities can hence be defined as those whose constitutive rules "prescribe in contradiction to one another."[157]

Taylor argues that activities governed by constitutive rules which prescribe in contradiction to one another are rivals. These activities overlap in complex ways; they may share some of the same goals, and yet advocate different courses of action. The difficulty in comprehending how magical rituals and beliefs in a traditional society such as that of the Azande may relate to some of our own practices derives from precisely this quality; they are neither identical to our practices, nor are they simply different from them. We can imagine Azande practices which might be simply different from our own, for example, their games or passtimes. However, magical practices seem to pose a different sort of challenge. Zande magic is neither purely expressive activity like prayer, nor does it fall exclusively into the category of science and technology. It shares aims bearing a resemblance to each, and likely others unique to itself. One cannot simultaneously be a practitioner of Zande magic and of Western science. As Taylor puts the point, "they are different, yet they somehow occupy the same space."[158]

The most noteworthy difference which Taylor sees between Zande society and our own is that we have an activity of exclusively theoretical understanding. This form of activity, which aims to develop explanations for their own sake, has no counterpart among the Azande—

---

[156]Taylor, "Rationality," in Hollis and Lukes (1982): 94.
[157]Taylor, "Rationality," in Hollis and Lukes (1982): 98.
[158]Taylor, "Rationality," in Hollis and Lukes (1982): 99.

it does not appear to be a focus of concern among them.[159] According to Taylor, theoretical understanding aims at developing an understanding of reality independent of our quotidian concerns. When we engage in theorising, "[w]e are not trying to understand things merely as they impinge on us, or are relevant to the purposes we are pursuing, but rather grasp them as they are, outside the immediate perspectives of our goals and desires and activities." Taylor calls the perspective we take on in this sort of theorising "disengaged." The irony is, of course, that this disengaged perspective has had a tremendous technological pay-off. Entering into such an explanatory discourse requires that we learn to distinguish the disengaged perspective from our ordinary mode of engagement, and that we see it as offering a view of reality which is in some sense superior. These beliefs are not found in every culture and this, Taylor argues, "makes for an immense difference in the things we think and say."[160] What Winch appears to be asking is whether we can, with legitimacy, judge an atheoretical culture by the standards of a theoretical one. Taylor recognises that the complex relationship between the practices in question renders such a judgement difficult. However, because these practices are incommensurable we are, he believes, irresistibly drawn to compare them.

But how is such comparison possible? Since the two groups do not initially share the same standards of rationality and the practices in question do not share identical goals, there is no way to establish the terms of the comparison in advance. To do so, it is argued, would in the nature of things be to judge in terms acceptable to only one culture. We must hence eschew the view "that there is some common criterion by which one is proved inferior to the other, if that implies some criterion already accepted by both sides."[161] What we need to do is rather to construct criteria acceptable to serve as the basis of such a judgement. The criteria

---

[159]Robin Horton also insists on the importance of this contrast. See §4.52 above, and also Horton, "African and Western," in Wilson (1970): 159-60 especially.
[160]Taylor, "Rationality," in Hollis and Lukes (1982): 89.

228

will necessarily be specific to the case at hand. However, Taylor does illustrate how a comparative assessment of the virtues of one particular theoretical culture--our own--against that of the Azande might run.[162] He argues that the spectacular technological successes achieved in modern scientific culture can serve as the basis for generating mutually recognised criteria because they "command attention and demand explanation." These successes are difficult to ignore, Taylor argues, even if such technological control were not at the outset a highly valued goal of the other culture. The presence of an obtrusive success challenges both parties to account for it. This process resembles how the superior explanatory ability of a scientific theory in one area challenges its rivals, on pain of losing credibility, to develop their own persuasive explanations of it.

> What we have here is not an antecedently accepted common criterion, but a facet of our activity--here the connection between scientific advance and technological pay-off--which remains implicit or unrecognized in earlier views, but which cannot be ignored once realized in practice. The very existence of the technological advance forces the issue. In this way, one set of practices can pose a challenge for an incommensurable interlocutor, not indeed in the language of this interlocutor, but in terms the interlocutor cannot ignore.[163]

The account for this success given by modern natural science has the virtue of simplicity; with respect to physical nature, it has greatly advanced our understanding. It is not clear what sort of account the Azande could provide in lieu of such explanations.

I would like to complete this very brief sketch by making a few points about the programme for developing cross-cultural judgements proposed by Taylor. First, unlike Habermas's approach, which sets out formal criteria for making judgements of superiority

---

[161]Taylor, "Rationality," in Hollis and Lukes (1982): 103.
[162]Taylor's paper does not focus exclusively on the case of the Azande. He gives a detailed and subtle argument showing the superiority for understanding nature of the "disengaged" stance of modern natural science which eschews human "projections" onto the cosmos, as contrasted with the "engaged" approach to understanding reality, found in an earlier phase of our European culture,

drawn from the decentered understanding of the world in advance of the case, on Taylor's account, criteria for making judgements of superiority must emerge a posteriori. The establishment of these criteria is likely to be both difficult and controversial, as it requires the bringing into alignment of two outlooks initially incommensurable. Yet because reason is viewed as capable of extending itself beyond its original context, the establishment of such criteria is theoretically possible, although its feasibility and success in any given case are not guaranteed.

Second, the sorts of judgements of superiority will always be comparative. As Robin Horton argued in his discussion of mythical and modern modes of thought, much of the importance of developing theoretical alternatives resides in the fact that many judgements of theoretical merit are relative rather than absolute in nature.[164] Criteria successfully established and brought to bear would issue in judgements of the form "'view 'b' is better than 'view a'," in a specified dimension. It would not, by contrast, license any claim to have established that 'view b' is the best, *simpliciter*.

Finally, judgements of superiority need not all fall together. Whereas Habermas presents a picture on which advances in rationality should be seen as taking place simultaneously in three domains, Taylor explicitly allows for the possibility that there may be judgements telling in the other direction as well.[165] One might imagine judging a traditional form of life to be superior to our own in its harmony with the lived environment, for instance, or in the domains of aesthetic development, psychological or social integration, ethical

---

which views the world as meaningfully ordered. See Taylor, "Rationality," in Hollis and Lukes (1982).

[163] Taylor, "Rationality," in Hollis and Lukes (1982): 104.

[164] In order to substantiate this point, Horton refers to work in the history and philosophy of science by Larry Laudan, Imre Lakatos and Paul Feyerabend. See Horton "Tradition and Modernity," in Hollis and Lukes (1982): 225-26.

[165] Taylor, "Rationality," in Hollis and Lukes (1982): 107.

development, or some other aspect entirely. I will consider a possible rejoinder by Habermas to this point in the conclusion to this chapter. At this juncture I would like to note that the manner of conceiving cross-cultural comparison proposed here does not conform to the requirements of a developmental logic. Judgements of superiority can indeed be made; however, the terms of the contrast cannot be set in advance. Because the establishment of these terms will require an expansion of our way of thinking, and because the judgements may not tell all in one direction, they are unsuitable for the sort of linear ranking required by a developmental model.

4.6 Conclusion

My primary object in this chapter has been to exhibit Habermas's method for ranking the rationality of worldviews, and to elucidate its philosophical underpinnings. I have attended particularly to the role played by the concept of a developmental logic. In so doing I have hoped both to clarify what philosophical commitments its implementation presupposes, and to open the way for a consideration of other ways of viewing differences manifested in the modes of thought characterising different worldviews.

The notion of a developmental logic is an essential one in Habermas's programme to establish a universalist ethic, as it allows Habermas to use empirical reconstructions to support the claim that the rationality structures associated with discourse ethics are the outcome of a cumulative path of learning valid species-wide. However, these reconstructions seemed in a puzzling sense to presuppose the truth of precisely what Habermas wished to demonstrate: the superiority of (Habermas's reading of) the rationality structures of the Western worldview.

Recall that a cognitive-developmental model is composed of a series of stages viewed as forming a conceptual hierarchy, where each stage represents a higher or more adequate level of problem-solving in the sphere under investigation. These stages are arranged in an ascending sequence towards an apex or optimum. The selection of this apex is of crucial importance in defining the path of development as a whole. As Carol Gilligan observes, "a concept of development...hangs from its vertex of maturity, the point to which progress is traced." Rather than building upwards from a base, the construction of a developmental account begins from the top down, and is particularly sensitive to variations in the specification of this optimum. Gilligan argues that "a change in the definition of maturity does not simply alter the description of the highest stage but recasts the understanding of development, changing the entire account."[166]

This observation seemed to point up a difficulty for Habermas. As we noted in Chapter 3, the empirical stage models employed in support of his theory seem invariably to draw their specification of the optimum point from Habermas's understanding of what is essential to the form of rationality implicit in the worldview of Western modernity. I asked whether there might not be alternative images of maturity in various domains such as those of cognition or morality, from which new paths of development might conceivably be sketched. Although this question poses itself in various ways from within our own cultural horizons, I was particularly concerned about this possibility as it relates to other cultures. I maintained that Habermas be required to provide a conceptual defence of his use of the modern Western worldview to define the terminal point of his developmental sequences, and thereby to establish the criteria used to interpret and assess empirical data.

---

[166]Gilligan (1982): 18-19.

The rationality debate seemed to pose a particularly pertinent challenge to Habermas's programme. It raises the possibility that standards of rationality may vary between worldviews; this possibility has the potential to undercut Habermas's attempt to demonstrate the universal significance of the form of rationality implicit in the Western worldview. As I argued in §5.52, Habermas endeavours to surmount this challenge by reading this debate in terms of a dichotomy: he maintains that one should either see worldviews as fully commensurable with respect to rationality structures, or abjure rational comparison entirely. He argues moreover that the latter option is highly implausible. In its place Habermas presents a picture of worldview development which satisfies the requirements placed upon a developmental account. This account places worldviews in a sequence ordered in terms of their approximation to certain formal features of rationality, with mythical worldviews at the base and the modern, Western worldview at the apex. Higher stages reflect increases in the differentiation and elaboration of three, and precisely three, validity spheres corresponding to the domains of the cognitive-instrumental, moral-practical and aesthetic-expressive.

Although Habermas's view represents one possible reaction to the rationality debate, I have attempted to illustrate its specificity by showing that there are other viable alternatives. This seems to me an essential step in clarifying Habermas's proposal for the justification of the validity of discourse ethics universally, an issue to which I will return in Chapter 5. At this juncture I would like simply to point out that our discussion has touched on several proposals for making rational comparisons of worldviews in addition to Habermas's own. Robin Horton advocates cognitive but not moral universalism, while Ernest Gellner argues that cognitive universalism must bring with it a number of changes of sociological import. Taylor argues for the superiority of our theoretical culture over an atheoretical culture such as that of the

233

Azande, at least in the realm of knowledge of physical nature, while leaving open the possibility that there may be judgements of superiority that tell in the opposite direction.

And I would argue that Habermas's conclusion is limited in a further sense. His defence of the superiority of the rationality structures embodied in the modern Western worldview rests on the common assumption that all development must follow the path--roughly, that from magic to science--taken in the transition to modernity in Western Europe. This idea requires further defence. Even if Habermas can show the Western worldview to be superior to the Zande worldview on all scores, it does not follow that the Western worldview is superior in these dimensions to the Chinese, the ancient Greek, or any other worldview as yet unconsidered. Having looked at a comparison between only two groups we cannot legitimately infer that our results hold for all other civilizations, unless we have implicitly assumed that mythical and Western European civilizations represent the endpoints of a spectrum. This seems to beg the question at hand, since whether worldviews can be seen on such a spectrum is precisely the point at issue in this debate. Giving detailed consideration to other civilizations might substantially change the models of development most frequently proferred in the rationality debate.

In one sense, the illustration of the limited and controversial nature of Habermas's conclusion satisfies my purpose in this chapter. However, worries concerning the potential ethnocentricity of Habermas's position have led me to voice a preference for the approach to cross-cultural understanding outlined in *5.53. I should now like to discuss this issue further. What I see as problematic in Habermas's approach is *not* that he advocates making judgements of superiority cross-culturally. I object rather to the way in which these judgements are made, and this in at least two respects. (1) I am suspicious of Habermas's claim that an advance in any one of the three rationality complexes necessarily implies a

parallel advance in both others. I argued in §4.52 that Habermas's position relies rather too heavily for its defence on the plausibility of arguing for the superiority of the West in the cognitive-instrumental sphere. It seemed to me a virtue of Taylor's account that it does not presuppose that all judgements of superiority must fall together in this way. (2) I worry that Habermas's approach sets the terms for making judgements of superiority in advance, using criteria drawn from our civilization. The bias of developmental theory is towards ordering differences in a hierachical mode, such that differences from what has been defined as the apex--in this case, from the decentered form of rationality embodied in our worldview--must be thought of as backwards stages on the route toward it. This would seem to impede our ability to learn from another culture, in that it renders it difficult for alternative visions of maturity to show themselves. These concerns might appear to Habermas only to reflect my failure to take seriously additional features of his position. I would therefore like to consider some possible rejoinders open to him.

(1)   In response to my reluctance to adopt a theoretical model premised on the view that judgements of superiority fall exclusively into one camp, Habermas might point to the ways in which his theory can accommodate many judgements indicating the superiority of another culture in a particular domain. Specifically, he might argue that I have failed to grasp the sense in which the claim to superiority of the rationality structures found in the Western worldview is a *formal* one, which leaves open the possibility of equality at the level of cultural contents. This strategy is exemplified in Habermas's assessment of the significance of some of Robin Horton's conclusions.

Horton observes that daily life in traditional Africa evinces valuable features not present in the modern West, among which "an intensely poetic quality in everyday life and

235

thought," and "a vivid enjoyment of the passing moment" figure prominently.[167] The

persuasiveness of judgements of this sort is thought by Habermas to reside in failures in the

practical realisation of the potential for rationality inherent in the process of decentration

concomitant with modernity. These judgements should be understood, in effect, as judgements

at the level of cultural contents. Recall that the theory of communicative action accounts for

the problems of modernity by viewing these as stemming from the failure to develop and

institutionalise in a balanced way the three dimensions of rationality opened up by the

decentered understanding of the world. Each advance to a higher stage of social evolution is

accompanied by a potential for new problems, and those of modernity in particular stem from

the hegemony of the cognitive-instrumental over the other dimensions of rationality. Habermas

believes that the study of other cultures, particularly primitive cultures, may reveal to us

distortions in our path of modernisation. We may hence have a great deal to learn from

primitive societies, since it is precisely by looking at the superior psychological integration of

such societies, for instance, or their more solidaristic social structures, that we recognise what

is missing in our own. Judgements indicating the superiority of certain features of primitive

society at the level of cultural contents are hence to be understood on Habermas's model as

reflecting the problems incurred by our advancement to a higher stage of rationality. They do

not themselves call into question the occurrence of this advance. In fact, the superiority of a

traditional culture in this domain appears to be precisely an intuition of its not having left the

relative simplicity of its stage of evolution.

The perception of deficiencies in our own way of life is indeed one of the important

motivations behind the study of other civilizations. However, I do not believe it constitutes a

satisfactory answer to the problem I have posed, which questions the appropriateness of the

---

[167]Horton, "African and Western," in Wilson (1970): 170.

particular stage model used by Habermas. My reservation centres on the fact that the distinction between form and content is not an unambiguous one. Habermas's stage models are inspired by Piaget's model of cognitive development, which was developed around the hypothesis that cognitive advance requires of individuals an increasing separation of the *formal* aspects of thought from their contents.

> ...if we consider the development and progressive elaboration of [logical] structures independently of the subject's awareness of them, then it seems that this elaboration consists in the separation of form from content, and in the creation of new forms by reflective abstraction starting from those of a lower level.[168]

However, as Piaget recognises, the distinction between form and content is not absolute. What is designated as form and what as content is, in his view, relative to the stage specified: the structure which serves as form in one stage may serve as content in the next.

> ...the concepts of form and content are essentially relative and...a form or a formal structure is unable to achieve a complete autonomy. This is clear in the developmental field: the sensori-motor structures are forms in relation to the simple movements they coordinate, but content in relation to the interiorized and conceptualized actions of the subsequent level; 'concrete' operations are forms in relation to these latter actions, but content with respect to the already formal operations of eleven to fifteen years; and these again are only content in relation to the operations applying to them at later levels.[169]

This is of consequence in two respects. First, because the distinction between form and content is not an absolute one, it seems that claims to formal superiority for our culture cannot be so easily detached from claims to superiority *tout court*. Second, I would argue that the appeal to the formal character of the model cannot provide an adequate response to the question of whether the optimum has been appropriately specified. If a different optimum conforming to an alternative conception of maturity were to be designated, the model would need to lay out a different series of stages, and these stages would separate form from content

---

[168]Jean Piaget, *Genetic Epistemology* (Columbia University Press, 1970): 63-64.
[169]Piaget (1970): 67-68.

237

differently. What Habermas specifies as a formal advance is hence culturally neutral *only if Habermas is right in the apex he has selected*. Appeal to the formal nature of the superiority claimed by the model cannot demonstrate that this apex has been selected correctly.

I should like to underscore that my objection does not turn on the claim that the apex which Habermas has selected is false. It is possible that Habermas's stage model may be entirely correct. However, the model advocated by Habermas does tend to make his position *unfalsifiable*. If even the problems and deficiencies of modernity are proof of our superior rationality, it is difficult to know what could tell against this claim.

(2)   My second worry focusses on the potential ethnocentricity of an approach which establishes criteria for making judgements of superiority in advance of the case, and in a manner closely tied to that of our own society. However, it should be acknowledged that Habermas views this issue as unproblematic, precisely because he sees these criteria as non culture-specific ones. He argues that any advance in rationality must be an advance along the three dimensions of the cognitive-instrumental, moral-practical and aesthetic-practical which his theory sets out, *because these are the only paths in which cumulative learning is possible.* I should like briefly to sketch the basis for this claim.

In *The Theory of Communicative Action,* Habermas attempts to identify "those relations that are sufficiently productive from the standpoint of *acquiring knowledge* to permit...a development of cultural value spheres with their own inner logics."[170] Through considering the dimensions of reason which the modern understanding of the world has opened up, he isolates three domains in which learning can take place. In Habermas's view, the decentration of consciousness in the modern age has made it possible for actors to adopt three basic attitudes—objectivating, norm-conformative, and expressive, towards three different

world-concepts--objective, social and subjective. This gives a total of nine possible combinations or "formal-pragmatic relations" between actors and their worlds. The question arises as to which of these relations are suitable for the accumulation of knowledge. Habermas argues that only six are potentially fruitful for the production of knowledge, which he terms "rationalisation." The six relations fall into the three complexes of rationality familiar to us, each reflecting one of the basic attitudes. Adoption of the objectivating attitude to the objective and social worlds issues in the "cognitive-instrumental rationality" of science and technology, including social technology. The norm-conformative attitude toward the social and subjective worlds circumscribes the sphere of "moral-practical rationality" of systematic law and morality, and the expressive attitude towards the subjective and objective worlds circumscribes the "aesthetic-practical" sphere, within which the production of knowledge takes the form of "authentic interpretations of needs."[171] Each of these three complexes is believed by Habermas to be tied to a specialised form of argumentation in which a universal validity claim is raised. Habermas presents this schema diagrammatically. Empty boxes indicate structures unsuitable for rationalisation.

---

[170]Habermas, *TCA 1*: 237.
[171]Habermas, *TCA 1*: 237-8.

Table 1: Rationalisation Complexes[172]

Worlds⇒ ⇓Basic Attitudes	1 Objective	2 Social	3 Subjective	1 Objective
3 Expressive	Art			
1 Objectivating	Cognitive-instrumental rationality Science Technology	Cognitive-instrumental rationality Social technologies	X	
2 Norm-Conformative	X	Moral-practical rationality Law	Moral-practical rationality Morality	
3 Expressive		X	Aesthetic-practical rationality Eroticism	Aesthetic-practical rationality Art

If correct, this account would largely vindicate Habermas's choice of criteria for making judgements of superiority, since it would demonstrate that his selection and manner of conceiving these criteria is not culturally idiosyncratic. Habermas would in other words have provided a reason for thinking that some areas in which a traditional culture may appear to have successfully focussed their efforts, such as harmony with the environment, or spiritual

---

[172]Adapted from Habermas, *TCA I*: 238. The table repeats certain categories for ease of visual representation: Habermas wants to emphasise that there are exactly three rationalisation complexes. Boxes with an "x" denote combinations of "words" and "basic attitudes" unsuitable for cumulative learning processes. Empty boxes remain so in order to avoid repeating information given elsewhere in the table.

240

development, are areas in which cumulative learning cannot take place. They hence should not serve to alter any rational judgements of superiority made.

Although Habermas admits that "these three complexes of rationality, derived in formal-pragmatic terms from basic attitudes and world-concepts, point to just those three cultural value spheres that were differentiated out in modern Europe," he maintains that "this is not in itself an objection against the systematic status of the schema."[173] This is certainly true; however, it does prompt the question of how the schema might be justified. A full answer lies beyond the scope of this conclusion. However, I would like briefly to draw attention to some features of the response given by Thomas McCarthy in his article, "Reflections on Rationalization in *The Theory of Communicative Action.*"[174] McCarthy states the crucial question raised by this model as follows: "Is it the case that the six relations (three complexes) singled out by Habermas permit a continuous and cumulative production of knowledge connected to specialized forms of argumentation in ways that the remaining three do not?"[175] He regards Habermas's hypothesis as presenting a number of difficulties. On the one hand there are difficulties in comprehending how learning takes place in the three rationality complexes designated. Although the cumulative and continuous character of changes in theory in the cognitive-instrumental domain has been called into question by postempiricist philosophers of science, McCarthy notes that there seems to be a relatively clear sense in which we can speak of an accumulation of knowledge in this sphere, at least with reference to "phenomenal regularities and instrumental connections." However, the sense in which there is a cumulative and continuous growth of knowledge in the domains of art and morality is less clear. McCarthy observes that advances at the formal level in these domains "do not seem to

---

[173]Habermas, *TCA 1*: 239.
[174]Thomas McCarthy, "Reflections on Rationalization in *The Theory of Communicative Action,*" in Richard Bernstein ed., *Habermas and Modernity* (Polity Press, 1985): 176-191.

entail an accumulation of knowledge at the content level."[176] He attempts to make sense of Habermas's claim that these spheres do permit the development of knowledge; however, in so doing he finds that the distinction between these spheres and the areas left blank is blurred. McCarthy does not conclude from these reflections that Habermas's theory is false; nonetheless, he urges us to be hesitant in our acceptance of it. He explains that the more problematic the systematic status of that schema becomes, "the more the privileging of just those three complexes does appear to reflect 'idiosyncratic traits of Western culture.'"[177]

In my view, legitimate worries concerning the potential ethnocentricity of Habermas's approach have not been allayed. Assuming that Habermas himself is not unaware of these risks, the question arises why he clings so closely to the notion of a developmental logic and its attendant conception of linear progress. A speculation by Michael Schmid in his discussion of Habermas's theory of social evolution may suggest a response. Asking why Habermas finds it valuable to combine explanatory and evaluative viewpoints in his theory of social evolution, Schmid notes that Habermas would like his theory to be applied in discourses where "competing projections of identity are at issue." Moreover, in Habermas's view, the essential function of rational discourse is that it should, under specific conditions, "enable those participating in it to come to a consensual agreement for the rational solution of their problems." As Schmid remarks, "[i]f it were possible to prove the existence of 'invariant structures' in moral and cognitive development, this would increase the chances for a rational critique of, for instance, moralities which do not fulfil the possibilities given at a specific level of learning."[178] Such a theory would provide hope for an unequivocal critique of problems of

[175]McCarthy, "Rationalization," in Bernstein (1985): 179.
[176]McCarthy, "Rationalization," in Bernstein (1985): 179.
[177]McCarthy, "Rationalization," in Bernstein (1985): 191.
[178]Schmid, "Social Evolution," in Thompson and Held (1982): 180.

justice. The notion of a developmental logic is, in other words, essential to the defence of a universally valid ethic.

THIS PAGE DELIBERATELY LEFT BLANK

Chapter Five

A person who imagines that he is free of prejudices, basing his knowledge on the objectivity of his procedures and denying that he is himself influenced by historical circumstances, experiences the power of the prejudices that unconsciously dominate him, as a vis a tergo.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*

Modernity can and will no longer borrow the criteria by which it takes its orientation from the models supplied by another epoch; it has to create its normativity out of itself.

Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*

The procedure for the adjudification of norms articulated by Habermas has an undeniable attraction. So much so, in fact, that the argument that the proposals of discourse ethics follow logically from preconditions of linguistic agency has often been accepted as a sufficient one. The close coherence between Habermas's procedure and many of our most deeply held moral intuitions lends it a certain quality of self-evidence, and it is precisely this quality which I find worrying. My aim in this study has not been to devalue the intuitions concerning the importance and nature of justice which discourse ethics seeks to capture. What I have hoped is rather to change our way of thinking about the source of this attraction: the persuasiveness of the procedure articulated by Habermas seems to me to mask the contestable and sometimes philosophically precarious nature of the claims required to support it.

My primary focus in this thesis has been to elucidate the nature of these claims. My reconstruction of Habermas's position began in Chapter Two, with an investigation of Habermas's attempt to establish the universality of discourse ethics on the grounds that all

linguistically competent human agents must engage in "communicative action." This form of speech is, as we saw, closely tied to practices of argumentation: participants in communicative action coordinate individual plans of action consensually, through raising and redeeming validity claims which must be defended, if necessary, through the provision of "good reasons." Habermas aims to show that all actors who engage in argumentation must thereby accept preconditions from which the principle of universalisation can be derived.

Yet I argued that Habermas's justification of the universality of discourse ethics is rendered complex by its reliance upon two quite distinct *forms* of argumentation. In order to establish its claim to generality, communicative action must be shown to be an inescapable practice for all human agents. The plausibility of this claim rests precisely on the weakness of the conditions placed upon the sorts of reasons it requires. I termed this form of argumentation "conventional" in order to emphasise its connection with a very general sense of communicative action, which requires only that the agents engaged therein be accountable for providing "good reasons" for their plans of action. These reasons may take a wide variety of forms. Accordingly, practices of reason-giving based on the traditions of any particular society should satisfy this requirement. A Zande speaker, for example, might cite as a reason for a proposed plan of action a pronouncement of the poison oracle, and this would presumably be considered adequate by other Azande.

However, the proposals of discourse ethics draw support only from a conception of argumentation which places more stringent conditions upon what forms of reasons are acceptable. The preconditions required by Habermas for the derivation of the principle of universalisation are embodied in the "postconventional" form of argumentation prevalent in Western modernity. The thesis that any speaker of a language undertakes an implicit obligation to recognise the validity of the principle of universalisation thus overstates what can actually be demonstrated through the transcendental-pragmatic form of argument. This

argument can at most show that an agent practicing "postconventional" forms of argumentation tacitly makes use of the presuppositions of argumentation from which the principle of universalisation can be derived. Such an agent may find herself in a species of "performative contradiction" if she fails to recognise the validity of the principle of universalisation. However, it is not able to show why all human agents should recognise the legitimacy of the paradigmatic use which Habermas makes of the "postconventional" form of argumentation.

Chapter Three delineated Habermas's attempt to draw a connection between these two forms of argumentation. It drew together supporting material developed by Habermas through explorations of several fields. I began, via Habermas's philosophy of language, by inquiring into the formal features of the postconventional mode of argumentation in some detail. Habermas aims to show that an agent's ability to communicate in the postconventional sense depends upon her mastering a set of structural properties and implicit rules, which he refers to as the "decentered" understanding of the world. This understanding of the world has two defining features, which account in Habermas's view for its superior rationality. First, the decentered conception of the world differentiates three "domains of validity" corresponding to the external, social and subjective dimensions of reality. Habermas argues that each has its own standards of truth and falsity, as well as its own method of establishing legitimate claims. Second, this way of understanding validity claims requires that we recognise that no such claim can in principle be immune to criticism. The decentered understanding of the world hence prompts us to adopt an attitude of radical openness to critique.

The remaining sections of the chapter made use of this conception of rationality to clarify and, to a degree, subvert Habermas's appeal to scientific reconstructions to link the two forms of argumentation in question. Recall that Habermas aims to demonstrate that they stand in a hierarchical relationship to one another, in that the postconventional practice of

argumentation constitutes a demonstrable cognitive gain over conventional ones. He supports the universality of his claims species-wide by appeal to lines of empirical research, in the hopes that these various theoretical perspectives may overlap in ways which corroborate his findings. My exposition showed that the "overlap" generated by Habermas's appeal to empirical studies is less than surprising.

Reconstructions of individual moral maturation and societal development are used in a variety of ways by Habermas. Kohlberg's work, for instance, can be used to corroborate Habermas's position in virtue of its description of moral maturation. Because it provides a defence of postconventional over other forms of moral reasoning, Kohlberg's empirical studies enable Habermas to defend the procedure specified in discourse ethics by showing that it exemplifies the characteristics of such reasoning. The theory of social evolution portrays the acquisition of the characteristics associated with postconventional forms of reasoning and argumentation in general as the outcome of universal learning-processes.

However, I argued that Habermas's attempt to provide his theory with an evidentiary basis by means of such reconstructions offer empirical corroboration for his theory is less successful than it might at first glance appear. These theories defend the thesis that there are universal competences in various areas by appealing to the notion of a developmental logic. A developmental logic depicts the acquisition of the competence in question by means of a sequence of steps which can be unambiguously ordered according to a scale of development. This concept is vital for Habermas, in that it allows him to represent a process of maturation as an ascending sequence of stages in which learning processes can be seen both as cumulative, and as exhibiting a certain direction. His developmental accounts aim to show that all actors, in virtue of being linguistic agents in the sense of being practitioners of conventional forms of argumentation, find themselves on a ladder ascending towards the highest stages of competence mastery, which are in turn identified with characteristics of the postconventional forms of

argumentation associated with modernity. These accounts, used by Habermas to establish the superiority of the form of reasoning associated with postconventional practices of argumentation, hence in effect begin by identifying the highest stage of development with its features. Moreover, due to the complex relation between data and theory, I argued that empirical evidence alone is unlikely to fracture this theoretical circularity. The defence of this claim therefore requires of Habermas further clarification on a conceptual level.

Chapter Four reconstructed the shape which such conceptual clarification might take, through examining more closely the role played by developmental logics in Habermas's work. Because developmental accounts of competence acquisition present an array of problem-solutions in the form of an ascending sequence, the definition of the apex is of crucial importance in defining the path of development as a whole. The narratives of evolution set forth by Habermas at both the individual and societal level draw their images of the most mature form of development from a particular reading of what is essential to the form of rationality implicit in Western modernity. What Habermas therefore requires is a means of defending his paradigmatic use of the modern Western worldview as against others in order to define the terminal point of his developmental sequences.

I presented Habermas's discussion of the rationality debate among philosophers, sociologists and anthropologists as precisely such an argument. Habermas defends a universalist position in this debate by arguing that different cultural worldviews represent solutions to similar problems, which can be placed in a developmental sequence according to their adequacy as measured by criteria connected with the concept of learning. My intent in clarifying the strength of the claims Habermas needs to make in order to support his universalist stance was twofold. First, the arguments Habermas offers in defence of this claim are very strong ones, and are not in any sense uncontroversial. In fact, Habermas defends a unique position: in arguing that cognitive advance must be accompanied, at least on a formal

level, by advances in the moral and aesthetic spheres, Habermas makes what is by far the strongest claim in the debate. My analysis aimed to bring to the fore how Habermas defends these claims in such a way as to fit his theory, rather than on the basis of a serious engagement with the problems of cross-cultural understanding. A second, related aim was to show that there are other viable alternatives. In my view, the dichotomy which Habermas constructs between seeing cultures as entirely equal and adopting a thoroughgoing relativism, and arguing for the universal significance of the modern worldview across cognitive, moral and aesthetic dimensions, is a false one.

On one level the objective of my thesis has been met if I have succeeded in explicating Habermas's justificatory strategy so as to show that the obligation to recognise the legitimacy of the principle of universalisation does not follow simply from linguistic agency. But my aim has not been simply expository: I have hoped in so doing to bring to the fore elements of Habermas's approach to the justification of discourse ethics which prompt us to question the cogency of its claim to universality, and thereby to reconsider more generally the appropriateness of the theory as it stands.

I have endeavoured throughout this thesis to draw attention to the importance for Habermas of demonstrating the superiority of the form of rationality implicit in the Western worldview. In pursuit of this aim, he is lead consistently to portray stances other than his own (including many, such as religious outlooks, found within modernity itself) as either backwards or false, and in need of transcendence. It is, in my view, highly problematic to have such an approach underlie the attempted resolution of problems across differing conceptions of the good. I fear that it may reflect the ethnocentricity of the accounts given. If we imagine a sort of meta-principle of acceptability, which would stipulate that the justification of the principle of universalisation must itself be amenable to consensus, we can see the improbability of its meeting with approval. Members of many cultures and social groups would be unlikely to

250

accept it, as the programme of justification rests upon their accepting the falsity of their worldviews.

I believe that the approach taken by Habermas towards other cultures reflects the dual, and somewhat incompatible, demands placed upon discourse ethics. Habermas's philosophical work is, in the first instance, motivated by concerns internal to modernity. As he explains, "...the theory of communicative action is intended to make possible a conceptualization of the social-life context that is tailored to the paradoxes of modernity."[1] Habermas's broad aim is to develop a critical theory of modernity which can account for its pathologies in a manner which vindicates the faith of the Enlightenment in the power of reason. The principal theorist with whom Habermas is concerned in this regard is Max Weber. In a number of works, particularly *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber portrays the growth and spread of reason in the modern sense as releasing individuals from the hold of traditions, cosmological worldviews, superstitions and prejudices. Yet ironically, the process of "disenchantment" described by Weber leads to imprisonment rather than liberation: its result is an existence void of meaning, in which instrumental relations to all aspects of the world, including those towards other human beings, become hegemonic. Habermas offers an alternative diagnosis of the problems of modernity which maintains by contrast that the domination of purposive forms of reasoning in modernity is accidental rather than inevitable. It reflects an unbalanced path of rationalisation, which can be corrected precisely through fostering and institutionalising the practice of communicative rationality.

This concern with solving the identity-crisis of modernity, which I see as the primary motivation underlying Habermas's work, leads him to allocate to non-moderns a rather secondary role. A major motive for the drawing of cultural contrasts in Habermas's work is to help us to recognise *ourselves*: the contours of the modern identity emerge more sharply

251

through contrast with members of traditional societies, who constitute our presumed opposites. 'The other' is hence depicted as the mirror image of ourselves. This portrayal, in my view, owes more to the exigencies of theory than to actual inquiry. The problematic nature of this approach becomes evident when we recall the second aim of Habermas's project, which is to provide a mechanism for conflict adjudication valid species-wide. In fact, as I argued in Chapter One, the restricted nature of the questions treated by discourse ethics indicates that the procedure's primary role is to regulate conflicts across groups who do not share concepts of the good life. The justificatory strategy employed by Habermas in defence of his claim to universality reflects, I believe, a lack of true engagement on his part with the problem of cross-cultural understanding. This is not, of course, to say that the procedure itself is biased or invalid. The question of whether and to what extent this may be so will be addressed in future work.

---

[1]Habermas, *TCA1*: xlii.

Bibliography

Works by Habermas Cited in Text

Habermas, Jürgen. *Knowledge and Human Interests*, translated by J. Shapiro. (Beacon Press, 1971).

_____. *Communication and the Evolution of Society*. Translated by T. McCarthy. (Beacon Press, 1979).

_____. *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol.1, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*. Translated by T. McCarthy. (Beacon Press, 1981).

_____. "Reply to my Critics," in J. Thompson and D. Held, eds. *Habermas: Critical Debates*, pp. 219-83. (Macmillan Press, 1982).

_____. *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2, *Lifeworld and System*. Translated by T. McCarthy. (Beacon Press, 1987).

_____. *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. Translated by Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen. (MIT Press, 1990).

_____. *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics*. Translated by Ciaran P. Cronin. (MIT Press, 1993)

_____. "Reconciliation and the Public Use of Reason: Remarks on John Rawls's *Political Liberalism*." Translated by William Rehg. *The Journal of Philosophy*. Vol.XCII, No.3. (1995): 129-131.

Other Works Cited

Aristotle. *Politics*. Trans. Ernest Barker. (Oxford University Press, 1958).

Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics. Trans. David Ross. (Oxford University Press, 1992).

Baynes, K., J. Bohman and T. McCarthy, eds. *After Philosophy*. (MIT Press, 1987).

Baynes, Kenneth. "The Liberal/ Communitarian Controversy and Communicative Ethics." *Philosophy and Social Criticism* Vol. 14 (1988): 293-313.

_____. *The Normative Grounds Of Social Criticism*. (SUNY, 1992).

Benhabib, Seyla. *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in*
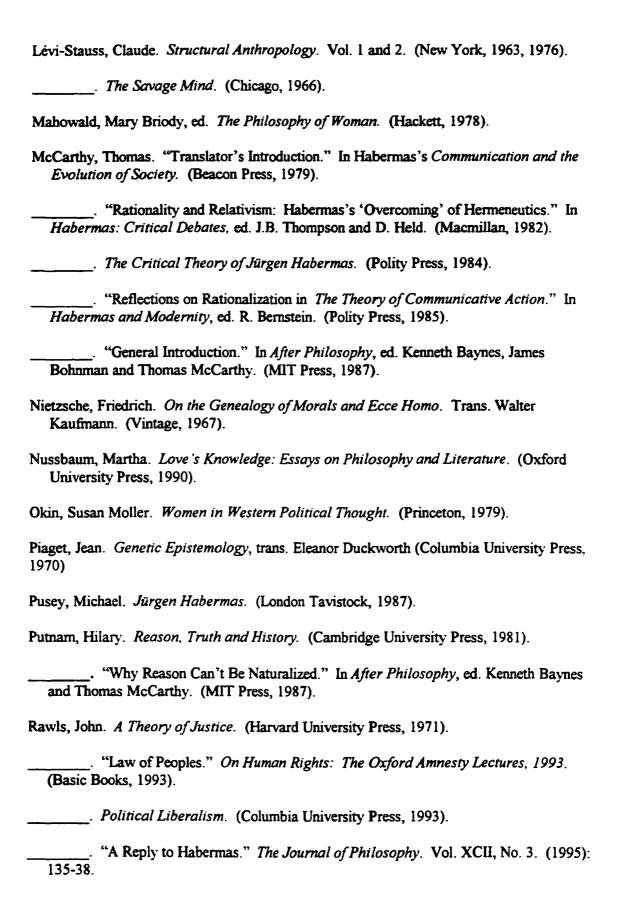
Contemporary Ethics. (Routledge, 1992).

_____. "Liberal Dialogue versus a Critical Theory of Discursive Legitimation," in *Liberalism and the Moral Life*. Nancy Rosenblum, ed. (Harvard, 1989).

Berlin, Isaiah. *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*. (London, 1990).

Cooke, Maeve. *Language and Reason*. (MIT Press, 1994).

Cronin, Ciaran P. "Translator's Introduction." In *Justification and Application*, by Jürgen Habermas. (MIT Press, 1993).

Damon, W. *The Social World of the Child*. (San Francisco, 1977).

Evans-Pritchard. "Lévy-Bruhl's Theory of Primitive Mentality." *Bulletin of the Faculty of Arts*. (University of Egypt, 1934). Quoted in Peter Winch. "Understanding a Primitive Society." *Rationality*, ed. Bryan Wilson. (Basil Blackwell, 1970).

_____. *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*. (Oxford, 1936).

_____. *Theories of Primitive Religion* (Clarendon, 1965). Quoted in *Modes of Thought*, ed. Ruth Finnegan and Robin Horton. (Faber and Faber, 1973).

Ferrara, Alessandro. "Universalisms: Procedural, Contextualist and Prudential." *Philosophy and Social Criticism*. Vol. 14 (1988): 243-269.

Finnegan, Ruth and Robin Horton, eds. *Modes of Thought: Essays on Thinking in Western and Non-Western Societies*. (Faber and Faber, 1973).

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*. Trans. Garrett Barden and John Cumming. (Crosroad, 1988).

Gardiner, Patrick. "German Philosophy and the Rise of Relativism." *Monist 64* (1981): 138-154.

Gellner, Ernest. "The Savage and the Modern." In *Modes of Thought*, ed. Ruth Finnegan and Robin Horton. (Faber and Faber, 1973).

_____. "Relativism and Universals." In *Rationality and Relativism*, ed. Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes. (MIT Press, 1982).

Gilligan, Carol. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. (Harvard University Press, 1982).

Godelier, Maurice. "Myth and History: Reflections on the Foundations of the Primitive Mind." Quoted in Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*. (Beacon Press, 1981).

Gunther, Klaus. "impartial application of moral and legal norms: A Contribution to. Discourse Ethics." *Philosophy and Social Criticism* Vol. 14 (1988): 425-32.
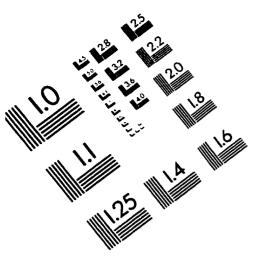
Hacker, P. M. S. and G. P. Baker. *Scepticism, Rules and Language*. (Blackwell, 1984).

Harding, Sandra. *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?* (Cornell University Press, 1991).

Hollis, Martin and Steven Lukes, eds. *Rationality and Relativism*. (MIT Press, 1982).

Holtzman, Steven H. and Christopher M. Leich, eds. *Wittgenstein: To Follow A Rule*. (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981).

Honneth, Axel and H. Joas, eds. *Communicative Action*. (Polity Press, 1991).

Honneth, Axel, Thomas McCarthy, Claus Offe and Albrecht Wellmer. *Philosophical Interventions in the Unfinished Project of Enlightenment*. Trans. William Rehg. (MIT Press, 1992).

Horton, Robin. "African Thought and Western Science." In *Rationality*, ed. Bryan Wilson (Basil Blackwell, 1958).

_____. "Tradition and Modernity Revisited" In *Rationality and Relativism*, ed. Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes. (MIT Press, 1982).

Ingram, David. *Habermas and the Dialectic of Reason*. (Yale University Press, 1987).

Kakar, Sudhir. *The Inner World: A Psycho-Analytic Study of Childhood and Society in India*. (Oxford University Press, 1981).

Kant, Immanuel. "What is Enlightenment?" In *Kant's Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss. Trans. H.B Nisbet. (Cambridge University Press, 1970).

_____. *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Trans. James Ellington. (Hackett, 1981).

Kohlberg, Lawrence. *Cognitive Development and Epistemology*. (Academic Press, 1971).

_____. *Essays in Moral Development*. Vol. 1. (San Francisco, 1981).

_____. *The Psychology of Moral Development*. (San Francisco, 1984).

Kraus, Michael and Jack W. Meiland. *Relativism: Cognitive and Moral*. (University of Notre Dame Press, 1982).

Kripke, Saul. *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*. (Harvard University Press, 1982).

Kuhn, Thomas. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. (University of Chicage, 1970).

_____. "The Presence of Past Science." Delivered as the *Shearman Memorial Lectures*. (University College, London, 1987).

Lévi-Stauss, Claude. *Structural Anthropology*. Vol. 1 and 2. (New York, 1963, 1976).

_____. *The Savage Mind*. (Chicago, 1966).

Mahowald, Mary Briody, ed. *The Philosophy of Woman*. (Hackett, 1978).

McCarthy, Thomas. "Translator's Introduction." In Habermas's *Communication and the Evolution of Society*. (Beacon Press, 1979).

_____. "Rationality and Relativism: Habermas's 'Overcoming' of Hermeneutics." In *Habermas: Critical Debates*, ed. J.B. Thompson and D. Held. (Macmillan, 1982).

_____. *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas*. (Polity Press, 1984).

_____. "Reflections on Rationalization in *The Theory of Communicative Action*." In *Habermas and Modernity*, ed. R. Bernstein. (Polity Press, 1985).

_____. "General Introduction." In *After Philosophy*, ed. Kenneth Baynes, James Bohnman and Thomas McCarthy. (MIT Press, 1987).

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. (Vintage, 1967).

Nussbaum, Martha. *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. (Oxford University Press, 1990).

Okin, Susan Moller. *Women in Western Political Thought*. (Princeton, 1979).

Piaget, Jean. *Genetic Epistemology*, trans. Eleanor Duckworth (Columbia University Press, 1970)

Pusey, Michael. *Jürgen Habermas*. (London Tavistock, 1987).

Putnam, Hilary. *Reason, Truth and History*. (Cambridge University Press, 1981).

_____. "Why Reason Can't Be Naturalized." In *After Philosophy*, ed. Kenneth Baynes and Thomas McCarthy. (MIT Press, 1987).

Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. (Harvard University Press, 1971).

_____. "Law of Peoples." *On Human Rights: The Oxford Amnesty Lectures, 1993*. (Basic Books, 1993).

_____. *Political Liberalism*. (Columbia University Press, 1993).

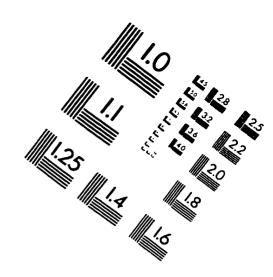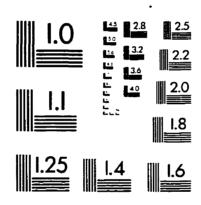_____. "A Reply to Habermas." *The Journal of Philosophy*. Vol. XCII, No. 3. (1995): 135-38.

Rehg, William. *Insight and Solidarity: The Discourse Ethics of Jürgen Habermas* (University of California Press, 1994).

Schmid, Michael. "Habermas's Theory of Social Evolution. " In *Habermas: Critical Debates*, ed. J.B. Thompson and D. Held. (Macmillan, 1982).

Selman, R.L. *The Growth of Interpersonal Understanding*. (New York, 1980).

Shanker, S. G.. *Wittgenstein and the Turning Point in the Philosophy of Mathematics*. (Croom Helm, 1987).

Taylor, Charles. *Philosophical Papers*. In two volumes. (Cambridge University Press, 1985).

_____. "Cross-Purposes: The Liberal-Communitarian Debate." In *Philosophical Arguments*. (Harvard University Press, 1995).

_____. "Language and Society." In *Communicative Action*, ed. A. Honneth and H. Joas. (Polity Press, 1991).

_____. "The Validity of Transcendental Arguments." In *Philosophical Arguments*. (Harvard, 1995).

_____. "Rationality." In *Rationality and Relativism*, ed. Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes. (MIT Press, 1982).

Thomson, J. B. and D. Held, eds. *Habermas: Critical Debates*. (Macmillan, 1982).

Tully, James. "Wittgenstein and Political Philosophy." *Political Theory*. Vol. 17, No. 2. (1989): 172-204.

_____. "Diversity's Gambit Declined." In *Constitutional Predicament: Canada after the Referendum of 1992*, ed. Curtis Cook. (McGill-Queens University Press, 1994).

_____. *Strange Multiplicity: Constitutionalism in an age of diversity*. (Cambridge, 1995).

Warnke, Georgia. *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason*. (Stanford University Press, 1987).

_____. "Communicative Rationality and Cultural Values." In *The Cambridge Companion to Habermas*, ed. S.K. White. (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

Wellmer, Albrecht. "Ethics and Dialogue: Elements of Moral Judgment in Kant and Discourse Ethics." In *The Persistence of Modernity: Essays on Aesthetics, Ethics and Postmodernism*. (MIT Press, 1991).

White, Steven K. *The Recent Work of Jürgen Habermas: Reason, Justice & Modernity*. (Cambridge University Press, 1988).
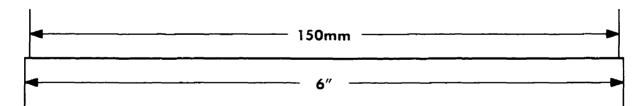
257

_____, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Habermas*. (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

Wilson, Bryan R., ed. *Rationality*. (Basil Blackwell, 1970).

Winch, Peter. *The Idea of a Social Science*. (Humanities Press, 1958).

_____. "Understanding a Primitive Society." In *Rationality*, ed. Bryan Wilson. (Basil Blackwell, 1970).

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. (Basil Blackwell, 1958).

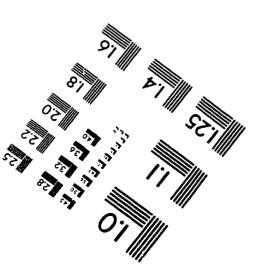_____. Bemerkungen über Frazer's "The Golden Bough." *Synthese*. Vol. 17 (1967): 233 -53.

IMAGE EVALUATION
TEST TARGET (QA-3)

150mm

6"