Jürgen Habermas' Communicative Theory: A Theory Leading to Liberation or Domination?

BY

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A Thesis Presented to
The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Philosophy
in the Division of Humanities

Hong Kong, September 1997

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Abstract  

Jürgen Habermas, as a member of the Frankfurt School which criticizes the modern technical society, shares its concerns with the problem of the domination of technical value over human value. Social interests are decided by ideology, without public participation. However, neither the early Frankfurt School members nor others who criticized modernization provide a clear direction to emancipation.  

By incorporating a linguistic turn into the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, Habermas attempts to find liberation in language and communication. He maintains that it is by communicative action that a human society can develop from an authoritative one to an open one. When human beings communicate, they experience a process of rational argumentation and consensus formation. The negative side of modernity is due only to the asymmetrical development of instrumental action over communicative action. Human beings should pursue fulfillment in the ideal speech situation, where competent speakers are free to speak and to make social decisions by consensus.  

However, a competent speaker, as understood by Habermas, is difficult to find. This is because his communicative theory makes a very strong moral requirements of speakers. Also, Habermas requires a social interpreter to unveil the original meaning of our ideology-distorted language. The questions of who are the eligible speaker and interpreter appear insoluble.  

In addition, Habermas has ignored the important fact about language and communication: people speak differently. Differences are associated with people's speech styles, ethical wants and positions in social power relations. Habermas' ignorance of these differences reveals his over-emphasis on the idea of the rational self as the ultimate foundation of truth. This over-emphasis makes him overlook the dimension of intersubjective relations between speakers in the communication situation.
The author suggests that, though Habermas’ communicative theory is positive in suggesting a way which respects individual rights to speak and aims to settle social disputes in a non-coercive manner, his theory is oblivious to the varieties and particularities of communicative situations and the identities of speakers. Further in-depth hermeneutical understanding of these areas will help to make his communicative theory more comprehensive in explaining liberation and domination, and save his theory from becoming another coercive doctrine.
Jürgen Habermas' Communicative Theory: 
A Theory Leading to Liberation or Domination?

Introduction

This study will look at how modern society is perceived as one in which human values and freedom have been gradually lost due to the process of industrialization. The author's emphasis will be placed on the Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas. It is undeniable that modernization has brought various freedoms to human beings, such as freedom from slavery and serfdom in feudalism, and freedom from the pain of sickness. An individual's rights are guaranteed, respected and enjoyed in the developed world. However, the success of modernization is simultaneously followed with a sense of discontent.

Human history is said to have entered an age of crises since modernization. Loss of human dignity and autonomy, alienation of human relationships and instrumentality as the measure of human value are the symptoms of the modern age. Philosophers and sociologists have attempted to find a way out of this industrial domination and to waken and liberate human beings from these crises of modernization. However, they have failed to do so, and thus some of them project a negative picture of the modern world.

Among these critics, the Frankfurt School discusses these crises with a philosophical approach explaining the rise of modern technical society and the causes of its problems. Positive and negative, optimistic and pessimistic, the School's theorists propound ways to rescue man from tragedy. Habermas, the contemporary School representative, further elaborates the problems of technological rationality. He divides the world into the "technical world" and the "life-world". One of the problems of modern society is the encroachment of the former on the latter, resulting in the absorption of man's subjective consciousness.
Though the modern world is problematic, Habermas insists that the Enlightenment, the original spirit of modernity, should not be abandoned. The Enlightenment and modernity assure the autonomy and reflective ability of human beings. These attributes allow human beings to achieve freedom and liberation. Thus, he calls the current state of enlightened reasoning the incomplete project of modernity. To complete the project, he brings in communication to expand the idea of enlightened reason. It is communication, as a form of democratic interaction among social members that allows society to develop according to the real interests of the people. Communicative ethics is a moral and trustworthy basis for building a rational society.

However, the author finds that Habermas' idea of communication is based on numerous criteria which are difficult to fulfill. His theory is based on the universal idea that man is a rational being and is able to communicate and develop an integrated society. Such notions have allowed Habermas to create a distinct spatial-temporal dimension which transcends the actual-empirical world. But they also create a limitation on the development of the individual, and another grand narrative on human behaviour and social development, rather than liberation.

As a conclusion, the author will elaborate on Habermas' idea of language and communication as universal pragmatics. With the introduction of communication, Habermas has shown a way out of the limitations of early Frankfurt School theory and pointed to a road of emancipation. He has not, however, directly handled the impact of such an introduction. Behind all speakers are diverse cultural backgrounds, speech styles and values of good. We must look into these differences so that more suppressed voices can speak out in order to find out the real picture of the society.

The thesis will be divided into five chapters.

The first chapter will study the problems Habermas' theory is addressing. The modern world is described as vulnerable. Significant problems are: alienation of human
beings, commodification of human values, and a loss of reflective spirit. This chapter will explain how various contemporary philosophers and the predecessors of Habermas describe the problems of the modern world. This chapter will also discuss the limitations of these philosophers’ theories.

The second chapter will look into how Habermas’ theory tackles the limitations by introducing communicative action to traditional Marxist theory. His understanding of language and communication will be elaborated on in this chapter. Based on his faith in the promise of enlightenment and the idea that human beings are rational, Habermas claims that his reconstructed project of modernity can be completed.

The success of Habermas’ communicative theory is, however, based on numerous presuppositions. These presuppositions are essential to create a dimension to reflect on the dominated environment. But they also act as moral disciplines for human beings. Hence, does Habermas’ theory lead to liberation or another way of domination? The third chapter will list the requirements for a qualified speaker in order to share the fruit of liberation in Habermas’ ideal speech situation.

The fourth chapter will investigate what Habermas ignored in his understanding of language and communication. Though he wants to eliminate any force of domination, he is creating another form of power in his ideal speech situation. Critiques of Habermas made by writers such as Jean-Francois Lyotard, Michel Foucault and Charles Taylor will be used to help explain the sense of discipline overlooked by Habermas.

In the conclusion, the author will discuss the possibility of making a universal project of liberation. The shortcomings of Habermas’ theory are good examples to examine the nature of language and liberation in today’s multi-cultural world.
Chapter 1  The Dead-end of the Modern World

In this paper, the author pays attention to Habermas' idea of the modern world and his suggestion for reconstructing a rational society. Communicative action, which will be explained and emphasised hereafter, is what Habermas stresses in the bringing of human beings to liberation. Yet, this is also what the author finds problematic. To start our discussion, we have to understand the reason for Habermas' emphasis on communicative action.

The author would like to say that Habermas' emphasis on communicative action is a response to the limitations of his Frankfurt School predecessors and other contemporary philosophers who criticise modern society. While they worried about the engulfment of human values and the subjective consciousness created by the instrumental values of the capitalist and technical world, most of their theories end here, without substantial suggestions for improvement. Habermas' communicative action, which is an open procedure and a group action among social members in searching for a consensus, projects a new possibility for a rational modern world.

1.1  The Modern World: A Society Where Human Values Are Lost

The domination of human beings and the search for emancipation are Habermas' concerns. They have also been the focus of philosophers since the beginning of modernization. The way they portray the problems and the solutions they offer represent a common perspective on how the Western world understands its history.
With the rapid development of technology and the application of scientific discoveries in everyday life, a new historical epoch began in the seventeenth century. What we call modernity defines this new age, marking a break from traditional society.\(^1\) Mass production of industrialized goods and the power of technology greatly improved the standard of living. Human beings now enjoyed a more comfortable lifestyle, fewer diseases and longer lives. This rosy picture of the modern world suggests that progress is the driving force of modernity.

Nevertheless, more and more negative descriptions of the modern world are emerging. Domination is the paradoxical result of ongoing progress. Writers have addressed these unfortunate results: loneliness due to disorientation by the movement of spatial and temporal dimensions of the technical world is what Jean Chesneaux concluded for modern men;\(^2\) Peter Berger observes the phenomenon of “homelessness” among modern men. He says that since the foundation of religion was been challenged by science and technology, people in the modern world are left with anguish and discontentment, having lost their foundation of morality.\(^3\) Marshall Berman borrows from Karl Marx the words: “all that is solid melts into air” to describe the loss of human dignity and the anxiety of facing the chaos of perpetual change in the modern world.\(^4\)

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All of their discussions have one thing in common: that modernization has greatly disturbed the traditional values and orientation of human beings. These negative descriptions emphasize how human beings are led and controlled by production which is concerned only with efficiency. Modernity, though it represents progress, has its negative side which is the loss of some human values.

Regaining autonomy thus becomes the most important mission for human beings. To save the weakened human world and to balance the impact of the technical world, most of the critics of the modern world believe in restoring human values. These human values should be recovered in order to change the direction of technical progress. It is by reflection upon the present situation that a better tomorrow can be built. For example, Chesneaux believes that human ethics are “perhaps the only social reference that can act as counterweight to the pressures jointly exerted by the state and the market in favour of the new technologies and that can counter them with critical thought.” An individual can realize his human potential by distancing himself from present history. Berman, in his historical analysis of the voices against modernity, put his trust in the critical spirit, which reflects on the ironies and contradictions of the modern world. A tension between domination and emancipation results from these ideas of modernity: the technical world is engulfing human values while self-reflection is the only way for human beings to save themselves.

However, the author finds the suggestions to be mere clichés, vague in both their method and content. For example, Berger calls for new ways of “being at home” in

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6 Ibid., 150.
society, a familial at-home-ness to serve morality in modern days. But if home has already been destroyed in the modern world, what should this new home be? Who can answer Chesneaux’s questions in his final chapter - “is there time for us” and “how to awaken mind”? It is easy to describe the economic and social changes brought on by modernity, yet the ethical content remains obscure.

1.2 The Frankfurt School: A Search for Emancipation

The above concern has become the dominating thought of how the modern world developed, and it is shared by Jürgen Habermas. The conflict between criticising modernity and seeking emancipation is the core of his study. But what influenced his theory most is the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School.

The Frankfurt School’s Critical theory grew from Karl Marx’s analysis of capitalist societies and was further developed by the critique of cultural theory and psychoanalysis. The criticism of instrumental rationality, technological domination, and alienation of human beings in the modern world can be found in the writings of Theodore Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse, and other early Frankfurt School members. They were concerned with seeking possibilities for revolution in a rational society. Besides having their theory founded on Marxism, the way the Frankfurt School members, especially Habermas, perceived the world as problematic was influenced by their understanding of the Enlightenment - the genesis of modern civilization.

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7 Berger, The Homeless Mind, 214.

8 Chesneux, Brave Modern World, 179-180.
1.2.1 The Enlightenment: Origin of Human Rationality

The Enlightenment, for most Western thinkers and also the Frankfurt School members, was the origin of the modern world. It loosely refers to the historical period of the eighteenth century in Western society. According to the *Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, “Enlightenment” and “Age of Reason” are interchangeable.\(^8\) The philosophers of that period such as Voltaire, Diderot and Condorcet began to see the importance of individuality of human beings. Moreover, as influenced by the discoveries of Newton, philosophers tried to explain the universe as having its own laws, that is, the rationale of natural science. What were mysteries of nature in previous periods were gradually unlocked by the growth of science. The human ability to reason was recognized in history for the first time. This led to the rise of the concept of “self.”

According to Robert Soloman, the Enlightenment expressed the importance of the idea of self with three concepts: humanism, rationality and universalism. Humanism means that the world is no longer dominated by nature but by human aspirations, values and emotions. Rationality is the inborn and innate potential in human beings which enables man to discover the universe through mathematics and science. Universalism ensures the transcendental presence of the same human nature. With this in mind, everybody ought to have the same consciousness.\(^9\) These three concepts together signify the importance of human beings and human reason in the universe. Individuals can now employ science to liberate themselves from the myth of the formation of the world. This process can be understood in Ernst Cassirer’s words. He says that philosophy, since the

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Enlightenment, "is no longer limited to the realm of mere thought; it demands and finds access to that deeper order of things whence all intellectual activity ... must seek its basis." Indeed, in the author’s opinion, what is crucial is not the search for this order, but the proof and understanding of the existence of this order.

Moreover, human power and subjectivity have been confirmed since the Enlightenment. With reason, one can control and reform one's environment, both physical and cultural. One becomes conscious of one's own existence. Consequently, an optimistic attitude regarding the ability of human beings to lead comfortable and happy lives in this world developed. Progress becomes a self-evident truth of the modern age.

The idea of The Enlightenment in Germany was combined with a sense of romanticism. Reason, according to the Germans, should be "Vernunft ... a component of intuition, depth, transcendence, the kind of thinking a real philosopher does" besides mere understanding. Such rich reason is the path to freedom and liberation.

This relationship among enlightenment, rationality and freedom is deeply rooted in the German tradition. The association has been further developed by Immanuel Kant and Max Weber. Kant, in "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?", states that "Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another... "Have the

12 Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, vol.1, 521.
13 Ibid., 524.
courage to use your own understanding!' - that is the motto of enlightenment.""¹⁴ Reason is practical for him since it leads to civil liberty and to the liberation of human beings from barbarism. This idea of autonomy and liberty distinguish the modern world from traditional society. Weber further uses the concept of rationalism to describe the development of law, democracy, capitalism and bureaucratic government in modern European society.

However, the most significant insight made by Weber is his observation of the constraints of rationalization. According to Weber, the spread of rational calculation, the essence of modern capitalistic enterprise and an analogous mechanical calculation of human values have denied the importance of individual creativity and autonomy. The modern state will tend to become an iron cage that imprisons mankind. This paradoxical development of rationality and enlightened reason became the measure which sociologists and philosophers used thereafter in understanding the modern world.

1.2.2 The Dialectical Development of The Enlightenment

Similarly, Horkheimer and Adorno believe that Enlightenment is on the decline. They see a negative future for enlightened reason. Their Dialectic of Enlightenment attempts to explain the implicit meaning of The Enlightenment and its failure in the context of the declining western civilization. They put The Enlightenment in opposition to myth. Myth is for the uncivilized, chaotic, irrational and barbaric. Human beings in ancient times were integrated with nature and their subjectivity was not yet formulated.

It is The Enlightenment that liberated human beings from fear and enabled them to be the masters of nature.\textsuperscript{15}

But instead of bringing liberation and freedom, Horkheimer and Adorno argue, the Enlightenment has become totalitarian and a myth in itself in the twentieth century. "[I]ts irrationality turns it into an instrument of rational administration by the wholly enlightened as they steer society toward barbarism."\textsuperscript{16} In the process of understanding the universe through mathematical procedures, human beings are also subjected to this way of rational calculation. Instrumentality becomes the measure of human dignity.

Continuing with the Marxist analysis of bourgeois society, Horkheimer and Adorno specifically examine the integration of instrumental reason with capitalism and fascism, which leads to the creation of a totalitarian society. In the process of mass production under the bourgeois system, human beings are treated as mere things. Their souls and consciousness are alienated from their bodies. Both writers are troubled to see that "in the end the transcendental subject of cognition is apparently abandoned as the last reminiscence of subjectivity and replaced by the much smoother work of automatic control mechanisms."\textsuperscript{17} The domination of nature has become a social process of making a totally administered and controlled society, making scientific and technological productivity and positivism the only principle of truth. Anything outside this closed rational system is considered irrational and unreal.


\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 20.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 30.
1.2.3 Irrational Development of the Technical World

Rationality and its distortion hence become the focus of the Frankfurt School in their study of modern technological and bourgeois society. To Marcuse “irrationality” is the natural consequence of instrumental reason. Technology, because of its effectiveness in increasing the productivity of labour and producing the comforts of life, becomes the apriori in organizing the world and the entire culture. It is irrational in the sense that it hinders reflection but nurtures domination itself. The ideology of technology, which advocates social affluence and happiness but denies reflection, is the crux of the problem for Marcuse. As he says,

The very concept of technical reason is ideological. Not only the application of technology itself is domination (of nature and men) - methodical, scientific, calculated, calculating control. Specific purposes and interests of domination are not foisted upon technology 'subsequently' and from the outside; they enter the very construction of the technical apparatus.

The abundant supply of materials resulting from the effective performance of machines makes human beings develop a positive attitude towards science and technology. Their needs and mental attitudes are structured according to the ideology of science and technology. Thus, technology does not directly affect and endanger human lives. Rather, it “circumscribes an entire culture; it projects a historical totality - a world.” The rationality of this culture “protects rather than cancels the legitimacy of

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18 Herbert Marcuse, One Dimensional Man (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 152-154.


20 Marcuse, One-Dimensional Man, 154.
domination and the instrumentalist horizon of reason opens on a rationally totalitarian society."21 Thus he describes modern beings as "one-dimensional", which means that their critical spirits have been absorbed into the technological apparatus and replaced by technological rationality.

Criticisms of instrumental reason and the total domination of human beings by irrationalities are therefore the main themes of the early Frankfurt School. They moved away from the Marxist class consciousness tradition because in Marxist theory only the proletariat are dominated. This change is significant as the number of the exploited has enormously increased and now includes all human beings in modern society. This also means that all human beings should participate in the revolution of humanity and rationality as given by the Enlightenment. How do Horkheimer and Adorno elaborate on the revolutionary consciousness of this huge, exploited mass?

It must be stated that the Frankfurt School members are pessimistic in answering the above question because, in their view of the chaotic modern world, it is unlikely that man will find any possibility of transcending the present situation.22 Where can Marcuse find the spiritual dimension in the totally circumscribed world? Absorption of man's radical spirit has totally suffocated all the ways of emancipation. As Richard Bernstein comments,

[T]he very self-understanding of the nature of a theory with a practical intent by critical theorists requires the existence of a group or class of individuals to whom it is primarily addressed, and who will be the agents of revolution. But as critical theory became more

21 Ibid., 158-159.

sophisticated, this central practical demand played less and less of a role. ... To whom is critical theory addressed - fellow intellectuals? Who are the agents of revolution - students who read these esoteric books? If critical theory blurs these hard issues, then what is the difference between a critical theory of society and a liberal bourgeois ideology? Despite the lip service paid to Marx, are not the critical theorists betraying what even they take to be the vital core of Marxism - the development of a theory with genuine practical intent? ²³

A revolutionary agent can occur as an "imaginary witness" of reason and of a vision of a better world in early Critical Theory. ²⁴ The absence of a revolutionary agent becomes a perplexing problem to the credibility of Critical Theory.

1.3 Getting to the Dead End

For philosophers of modernity, the problem is to define the ethical sphere or value in order to rebuild the humanistic world; for the Frankfurter School members, the challenge is to find a way to liberation and to restore a rational society. Yet, none of them can find the answer. Their failure is, from the author's perspective, that their focus has been put on seeking a transcendental sphere, a dimension that is perfectly ethical and is immune to the wrecked modern world, a dimension which, however, is out of the reach of human beings. What morals should be upheld in society? What are human values? What should be Kant's rationality and the interpretation of the Enlightenment for the present world? Their ideas on subjective and individual reason have made the definition of human values ambiguous. Habermas, on the other hand, has turned his focus to find resources within society — man's neighbouring social members. His idea of


²⁴ Horkheimer and Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, 256.
communicative action endeavours to find a rational society and human values in the mutual understanding among social members. The worldviews of one’s neighbours act as a mirror to one’s limited horizon. The author believes that Habermas’ communicative rationality suggests an exit from of the dead-end of modernity.
Chapter 2 Communicative Theory: Recovering the Reflective Self

Like Adorno and Horkheimer, Habermas traces his thought to the Enlightenment, but he does not share their pessimistic attitude. Their total denial of Enlightened reason and the totalitarian development of modern society renounce any possibility of liberation. Habermas criticises their way of conceptualizing the Enlightenment, especially the equal sign they put between myth and enlightenment. Though enlightened reason has turned into destructive instrumental reason, it does not mean, according to Habermas, that Enlightenment has returned to myth. Such a view totally denies and overlooks the value of civilization. For Habermas, modernity has produced three irreplaceable innovations: modern science, universalistic ideas of justice and morality, autonomous art. He claims that:

The Dialectic of Enlightenment does not do justice to the rational content of cultural modernity that was captured by the bourgeoisie (and also instrumentalized along with them). I am thinking here of the specific theoretical dynamic that continually pushes the sciences and even the self-reflection of the sciences, beyond merely engendering technically useful knowledge; I am referring, further to the universalistic foundation of law and morality that have also been incorporated (in however distorted and incomplete a fashion) into the institutions of constitutional government, into the forms of democratic will formation, and into individualistic patterns of identity formulation.

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1 It is common to find that the comments on Adorno and Horkheimer usually emphasize their pessimistic attitude towards modernity. See, for example, David Held, Introduction to Critical Theory and Kellner, Critical Theory, Marxism, and Modernity (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).


3 Ibid., 113.
According to Habermas, Enlightenment is a process of rationalization and demythologization. It serves to provide a legitimate and rational foundation of the modern world, as opposed to the dogmatic formulation of traditional society.

Habermas does not follow the other Frankfurt School members in relying on the subjective power of human rationality. For example, Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse have greatly depended on the negation of existing social inequalities in seeking the suppressed truth. Horkheimer claims that negation functions as a critique of social ideology and revelation of the closed-off possibilities in the capitalistic world.⁴ Adorno in Negative Dialectics recommends thinking dialectically so as to uncover the latent truth and every single non-identical particular in society.⁵ Marcuse sees the “Great Refusal” by marginal groups as uncovering the illusory affluent side of the advanced industrial society.⁶ All of them emphasize a subjective critical spirit. But as Habermas comments, negation will only produce critical theory based on an empty exercise in self-reflection.⁷ In addition, the distancing effect created by negation entails a lack of a social theoretical ground, and therefore an inability to solve social problems. Habermas’ shift to argumentative rationality is to gain a broader social perspective.⁸

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⁵ Theodor Adorno, Negative Dialectics (New York: Continuum Press, 1983), 146.
⁶ Marcuse, One-Dimensional Man, 225ff.
⁸ James Swindal, “Jürgen Habermas and the Philosophy of Reflection” (Ph.D. diss., Boston College, 1993), 1-4.
2.1 Disorientation of the Human World

In his earlier writings, Habermas uses Marcuse’s approach in his own critique of the ideology of technological rationality. He analyzes the political content of technology and bourgeois rationality as irrational and repressive.⁹ In “Dogmatism, Reason, and Decision”, Habermas highlights the function of reason as a reflection upon the false ideology of progress, which has become a dogmatic value of the technological society. He says,

Reason take up a partisan position in the controversy between critique and dogmatism, and with each new stage of emancipation it wins a further victory. In this kind of practical reason, insights and the explicit interest in liberation by means of reflection converge. The higher level of reflection coincides with a step forward of the autonomy of the individual, with the elimination of suffering and the furthering of concrete happiness.¹⁰

Habermas works out the intrinsic relation between instrumental reason and political systems. This relation can be found in the state intervention and bourgeois interest in the process of technical productivity and scientific research.¹¹ This has created a technocratic society in which technical development is done without reflection. The direction of development is decided by a dominant social class which only aims for economic benefit. Obviously Habermas follows the steps of his predecessors in analyzing the relations between the irrationalities of the modern technical world and the suffocation of the critical spirit.


¹¹ Jürgen Habermas, Toward a Rational Society, 55.
But gradually, Habermas turns to study the very nature of “reflection”. He looks into the foundation and the formation of the human world and also the technical world. Unlike the earlier Frankfurt School theorists, Habermas does not wholly deny instrumental reason, which is the fundamental mechanism of the technical world. Rather he proposes a clear differentiation of the human world and the technical world in order to unmask the origins of the irrationalities of modern society.

2.1.1 System versus Life-World

Firstly, Habermas divides society into two forms of integration - system and life-world. They are guided by different rationales, purposive-rational action and communicative action respectively.

Purposive-rational action is sometimes known as “work” or “labor” in Habermas’ writings. He explains rational-purposive action as “either instrumental action or rational choice or their conjunction. Instrumental action is governed by technical rules based on empirical knowledge”.¹² It involves a means-end relationship with a specific goal of attainment in the material world. The correctness of instrumental action is measured by the growth of productivity.¹³ “Empiricism” and “functionality” are the rationales of this action. Instrumental action, which aims at achieving the technical

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¹² Habermas, Toward a Rational Society, 91-2.

application of empirical knowledge, maintains the operation of the technical system in order to promote innovation and efficiency.

Communicative action, on the other hand, is understood as symbolic interaction. "It is governed by binding consensual norms, which define reciprocal expectations about behavior and must be understood and recognized by at least two acting subjects."\(^{14}\) Communication constitutes an interpersonal and reciprocal relation. The intersubjective and mutual understanding among social members decides the validity of social norms of the human world. Habermas praises this form of interaction as a form of democracy because consensus will be formed under this fair and open condition and hence will satisfy collective public interests.

Communicative action and purposive-rational action have different evaluative criteria, and both are irreplaceable. For Habermas, both rationalities have their own function and "rationalization". Purposive-rational action aims at speeding up the growth of productive forces and the technical control of productivity. Its object is outer nature. Habermas is influenced by the Greek conception of the practice of philosophy as purposive-rational action. The nature of science and technology are originally similar to phronesis and technē in Aristotle's philosophy. They are preconditions of the life in the polis in the pursuit of the contemplative life.\(^{15}\) Marx, another person who affected Habermas, also considers labor and the mode of production as the essence of historical development. Therefore, despite the exploitative development of the modern technical

\(^{14}\) Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society*, 92.

world, Habermas sees the function of purposive-rational action maximized in capitalism and modernization. This institutionalizes innovation and self-sustaining economic growth. This is precisely where Habermas differs from the early Frankfurter School members regarding the success of enlightenment.

But the most noticeable difference is Habermas’ interpretation of communication, which becomes the foundation of his theory thereafter. Communicative action is fundamental to the emancipation of individuals and society from coercion. It represents the rationalization of human society in which its basis of legitimation is transferred from a mythical one to a democratic one. Habermas adopts Weber’s explanation of secularization and disenchantment in historical and social development. Traditional society is characterized by an authoritative source of legitimation power. This power is mythical, religious and metaphysical. It decides and explains the ultimate concerns of human existence such as justice, happiness, freedom, life and death. With the new mode of production, this power is also subject to change. The question of the legitimation of power in traditional society is brought into the public context. Social values are no longer legitimated from above but from below, by the communication and interaction of the general public. “Normatively ascribed consensus” is replaced by “communicatively achieved agreement.” Communicative action lays the foundation of a rational and open society.

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16 Habermas, Toward a Rational Society, 95-6.
17 Ibid., 96-9.
2.1.2: Colonization of Life-World

Problems of the modern world are precisely the result of the asymmetrical development of the two types of actions. Science and technical value becomes dominant and the base of legitimation of the society. Yet science is concerned with only empirical facts, putting aside the validity claims or presuppositions. These validity claims and presuppositions are precisely the field of power and ideology that lead to the irrational development of rationality. Habermas believes that technical and scientific knowledge should not be put into practical use without prior consideration. The use of science should be examined by introspection and tested against the emancipatory interests of philosophy in order to reveal the latent false ideology or dominant interests.

To illustrate this idea, Habermas places scientific knowledge in the context of capitalist countries to unmask the latent class interests. He argues that the process of decision making on science and technology issues occurs without public participation. In such a technocracy, social interests are disregarded and excluded in the consideration of technical progress. As a result,

The direction of technical progress is still largely determined today by social interests that arise autochthonously out of the compulsion of the reproduction of social life without being reflected upon and confronted with the declared political self-understanding of social groups. In consequence, new technical capacities erupt without preparation into existing forms of life-activity and conduct. New potentials for expanded power of technical control make obvious the disproportion between the results of the most organized rationality and unreflected goals, rigidified value systems, and obsolete ideologies.19

19 Habermas, Toward a Rational Society, 60.
Scientific and technological progress is institutionalized and legitimated. This legitimation prevents the ideology and exploitative consequences of science from being noticed by the public.

With the replacement of unrestricted communication by state manipulation and administration in deciding technical progress, man’s will is conditioned in the authoritarian society. The social life-world is being colonized by rational-purposive action. The means-end mechanism of technical reason is then applied to human behavior. People are treated as means, reified and have to adapt to the work of machines. In delineating the consequences of the colonization of the life-world, Habermas explicitly follows Marx’s idea of alienation and the concern for human subjectivity of the Frankfurt School. The denial of human autonomy and subjective consciousness in reflecting and criticizing the use of technical knowledge is what Habermas perceives as problematic. This denial entirely affects the self-understanding of a person in the life-world. Thus, the consequence of purposive-rational action entering the life-world is that technocratic consciousness becomes a veil that hides human beings’ consciousness from the political and exploitative content of the technical world. It “not only justifies a particular class’s interest in domination and represses another class’s partial need for emancipation, but affects the human race’s emancipatory interest as such.”

How can we wake consciousness? As discussed in the previous chapter, Habermas abandons individual consciousness but uses communicative reason as the foundation of reflection. Hence Habermas believes that it is only through critical

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28 Ibid., 111.
discussion and consensus, a democratic social system, that the choice about scientific application will be rational. Communication brings technical knowledge under the guidance of the emancipatory interest of the majority. This results in a linguistic turn in traditional Marxist theory.

2.2 Linguistic Turn

Like the early Frankfurt School, Habermas criticises the false consciousness and ideology behind the technical world in his earlier writings. Yet he attempts to treat these wrecks by searching for the appropriate rationales for different types of action according to their respective natures. Hence he identifies two types of social actions. This way of differentiation is also a confident response to the positive result of the Enlightenment. He is convinced that once instrumental action is overcome, the problem of the totalitarian domination of technical interest in the society will be solved. However, we find that Habermas soon turns to emphasize communicative action as the only way out of the predicament the modern world faces. Emancipation can only be accomplished by communicative rationality with its distinctive nature in interpreting and deciding the direction of human life-world.

Therefore, in his later work Habermas pays attention to the function of language and communication in raising the consciousness of reflection and autonomy of human beings. Habermas borrows the linguistic turn of contemporary philosophy, the notion of speech act in socio-linguistics and the idea of intersubjectivity and life-world in

\[21\text{Ibid., 1-12.}\]
phenomenology to Marx's theory. He notably develops the interactive nature of language and the importance of interpretation in communication in describing a genuine rational and liberated society. Compared with art and negation, language provides a universal and substantial approach to Habermas' reconstruction of a critical theory. Language is used by and comprehended by everybody. It happens at every second in human activities. In addition, Habermas finds the structure of interaction serves as an efficient model to analyze the framework of human activities. Therefore, the way individuals communicate and how this process is distorted will provide an immediate reflection of society's ills. By steering interaction back to normal, Habermas concludes, man can make a rational society.

2.2.1 Elements of Communication

How does and why can language rejuvenate critical theory? Firstly, we have to understand what Habermas emphasizes as the constituents of communication: language, speakers, speech act and meaning. Language is not simply a coherence of grammatical structures for Habermas. Language is the medium for understanding. Learning language is not acquired through linguistic competence but communicative competence: "the ability of a speaker oriented to mutual understanding to embed a well-formed sentence in relation to reality".\(^{22}\) Mutual understanding between speakers is a relationship which is built on "intersubjective mutuality of reciprocal understanding, shared knowledge, mutual trust, and accord with one another."\(^{23}\) This commitment and involvement

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\(^{22}\) Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, 29.

\(^{23}\) Ibid., 3.
between the speaker and the listener support and sustain a successful speech act. The speaker is required to enter the process with a sincere readiness to form an interpersonal bond and to drive the listener to accept the commitments of the speaker.

The most important constituents of language, according to Habermas, are validity claims. A well-formed sentence is constituted by four validity bases of speech: truth, rightness, truthfulness and comprehensibility. These four validity claims create a successful and meaningful communication. In addition, they compose the rational basis of reciprocal bonds in interpersonal relations and every speech act so that the speaker can influence the listener to rely on and accept the commitments of the speaker.

2.2.2 Life-World

In earlier paragraphs, the author has mentioned that Habermas perceives the problem of technocratic society as the colonization of the life-world. With the emphasis of communication action, the role of the life-world is further highlighted in the making of a successful communication. The meaning and content of a communicative utterance depend solely on the life-world, serving as the context in which communication happens. The life-world is the “horizon” upon which communicative action moves. It provides the orientation and contexts of relevance for speakers to interpret and understand every utterance. It is “a reservoir of taken-for-granted, of unshaken convictions that participants in communication draw upon in co-operative processes of interpretation.”

See Habermas, Communication and the Evolution of Society, 24-52.

The life-world acts like a cultural reservoir of knowledge that permits participants within a shared tradition and cultural background to interact each other. Through language and interaction, individuals testify, evaluate and confirm their validity claims. Differences are settled by mutual understanding in communication, and consensus is achieved in the end. Therefore, the life-world is the area where disagreement is settled and agreement is achieved.

The concept of the life-world can be taken as the transformation and elaboration of the early Frankfurt School’s idea of man’s inner reflective dimension. The life-world represents the origin of a person’s rational and ethical being, and the source of a person’s consciousness of his action. Moreover, the life-world pertains to social activity as well as individual consciousness. Habermas states that, from the perspective of the participants, the life-world and communication provide a sense of communalism and personal identities in the process of intersubjective interaction; from the perspective of the culture and community, the life-world and communication serve the function of social integration and the establishment of solidarity.28 This understanding of the intricate relations of language and communication, added to the life-world, prevents Habermas from falling into solipsism of the early Frankfurt School or running into the dead-end of emancipative theory.

28 Ibid., 131, 136-7.
2.2.3 Ideal Speech Situation

According to Habermas, the final goal of communicative action is an ideal speech situation. He describes this situation as follows:

It is in this sense that in rational discourse, where the speaker seeks to convince his audience through the force of the better argument, we presuppose a dialogical situation that satisfies ideal conditions in a number of respects, including, as we have seen, freedom of access, equal rights to participate, truthfulness on the part of participants, absence of coercion in taking positions, and so forth.\textsuperscript{27}

Habermas equates the attainment of democracy, freedom and liberty with the ideal speech situation. Had it come true, it would have been the utopia that the early Frankfurt School members had been seeking for a long time. The semantic and linguistic structure of language makes Habermas believe in the inevitability of reaching the ideal speech situation. In this speech situation, human beings restore their autonomy. Consensus replaces distorted interests in guiding the development of society. In addition, an intersubjective and reciprocal commitment among speakers forces human beings to recover their reflective minds as they have the responsibility to raise validity claims in every speech act. The concept of enlightened rationality is restored in the procedure of the ideal speech situation as argumentation and consensus formation. The ideal speech situation will be the manifestation of rhetoric, the original idea of talking. Rhetoric

has traditionally been seen as the art of producing a consensus on questions which cannot be decided on the basis of compelling proof... It is a matter of questions which can be reduced to decisions about the acceptance or rejection of standards, of criteria of evaluation and norms of behavior. When such decisions are made rationally, they are arrived at by means which are neither theoretically compelling nor merely arbitrary; instead, they are motivated by convincing speech.\textsuperscript{28}


Discourse is reflective and contemplative in nature. A man exercises his communicative competence with the use of his reflective mind. Thus, what Habermas wants to recapture is not only the idea of rationality from the Frankfurt School but also the tradition of Western philosophy.

Though the role of the proletariat as a revolutionary agent has changed, Habermas introduces the idea of emancipation for every individual with the definition of human beings as language users. The conception of rational society is also supported with the introduction of a linguistic turn. With the above stated positive significance of language and communication, John Alway describes the change in Habermas’ theory as a “‘paradigm shift’ - a shift from Marx’s paradigm of production to a theory of language.” Nevertheless, according to Richard Rorty, Habermas’ linguistic turn is indeed a shift in the discipline of philosophy. The paradigm of Critical Theory involves mainly a subjective “mirror-like” grasps of objects in the world and a dialectical revelation of truth. Now Habermas turns to find reflection on the concrete social foundation.

This shift of paradigm, as Habermas believes, may provide a more comprehensive approach than that of the early Frankfurt School members in searching for the individual emancipation, if the universality of language and communication is really established. In the next chapter the author will examine the alleged universality of

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this situation. To be able to participate in the Habermasian ideal speech situation and
achieve emancipation is not a natural and necessary act for every human being. The idea
of mutual relations and reciprocity among speakers and the rules of the speech act are
also not necessarily found in real life situations.
Chapter 3  Requirements for the Fulfillment of the Ideal Speech Situation

At the beginning of the paper, the author places Habermas' theories in the dual context of the impact of technology on Western society and the thinkers of the Frankfurt School. Habermas sees the loss of human autonomy in the modern capitalistic world as a result of the colonization of the life-world by instrumental reason. Modern people's inability to interact the cause of their loneliness and disorientation. Therefore, unlike the early critical theorists who rely on negation to find the truth, Habermas believes that communication is the only way to break through the ever growing state control and bureaucracy.

3.1  Humans as Articulate Speakers

3.1.1 Requirements for a Competent Speaker

"What raises us out of nature is the only thing whose nature we can know: language." This is what Habermas claims about man's natural ability. According to Habermas, the ability to speak is an apriori ability and talent of human beings. Human beings have used language for interaction since the very beginning of human civilization. The ability to talk seems to be an innate talent of every person.

Why then has a rational society not yet developed? In reading Habermas' communicative theory, it is observed that several presuppositions and requirements about an individual stand as premises in creating the ideal speech situation. While

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1 Habermas, Knowledge and Human Interest, 314.
Habermas is describing the ideal speech situation and the universal pragmatic nature of language, he is limiting the idea of what a competent speaker is and what he should say. However, these requirements make it difficult to say that the ability to speak properly is natural to human beings. Moreover, Habermas' requirements on a competent speaker are not easy to fulfill.

For example, concerning the content of speech Habermas assumes that the four validity claims are necessarily raised. However, John Thompson questions a person’s ability and need to raise the four validity claims and to distinguish the validity and falsity of these claims. He cites jokes and poems as examples of forms of communication which are not supposed to contain any ideas of truth. The definition of communication in terms of raising validity claims restricts communication solely to understanding and the exchange of information. It hence limits the analysis of speech act.\textsuperscript{2} Thompson therefore claims that it is “implausible and misleading to contend, as Habermas does, that all four validity-claims are necessarily raised with the utterance of every speech-act.”\textsuperscript{3}

Besides, a speaker who articulates a grammatically well-formed sentence has to follow some “dialogue-constitutive universals”. These universals include the intersubjective semantic rules, the expressions of space and time, forms of address, forms of social contract, and the ability to differentiate between appearances and essences.\textsuperscript{4} A person should use these various types of expressive features in order to speak clearly and


\textsuperscript{3} Ibid., 126.

correctly. They are fundamental to generate mutual understanding. In viewing these
universals, White elaborates on the rules that constitute a symmetrical speech situation.
The summary is as follows:

1. Each subject who is capable of speech and action is allowed to participate in
discourses.
2a. Each is allowed to call into question any proposal.
2b. Each is allowed to introduce any proposal into the discourse.
2c. Each is allowed to express his attitudes, wishes and needs.
3. No speaker ought to be hindered by compulsion - whether arising from inside the
discourse or outside of it - from making use of the rights secure under [1 and 2].

White's summary indicates that speakers are not mere talking. Any speaker, before
entering a speech situation, has to be conscious of the rules of communication. The rules
are intended to protect speakers from coercion, ideology and authority so as to
guarantee reaching a consensus. In White's interpretation, communicative rules have
turned into ethical and normative requirements between speakers. The fulfillment of the
conditions of the ideal speech situation confines a speech context with congruent
normative qualities that "do not undermine the autonomy of each as a source of claims
which have equal initial plausibility and of demands for justification to which others are
obliged to respond."

It is shown that the "naturalness" of Habermas' idea of language and the
competence of speakers is far from natural. Rather, language and communication include
norms and obligations which speakers have consciously to follow and perform in order
to maintain the ideal speech situation. Habermas claims that "competent speakers must

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6 Ibid., 56.
[emphasis added] reciprocally maintain [these communicative requirements] with each of the speech acts.” The word “must” implies a strong moral obligation, not just communicative requirements. In this chapter, the author will look into what constitutes “naturalness” and “must”.

3.1.2 Communicative Rules as Ethical Requirements

One of the concerns of this chapter is why Habermas lays down these requirements for the raising of validity claims in every speech act. Why does he propose the regulated manner and attitudes of speaking? Why does he have to transform communicative rules into normative requirements of speakers? Both Thompson and White closely investigate the presuppositions from which he draws these criteria for a valid speech act. From the author’s perspective, Habermas’ delimitation is fundamental to the success of his project of emancipation. To emphasize the role of speaker, Habermas has already transferred and transformed the rules of communication into a code of ethics of the life-world in order to recover the possibility of emancipation. The right to speak, the obligation to include validity claims in speech, the obligation to be challenged, and reciprocity in argumentation are indeed self-disciplinary in the life-world. Such self-disciplinary acts include rational argumentation, freedom to speak and a respect for openness. Finally, these acts also pertain to the problems of modernity.

The main problems of the modernity project, starting from the early critical theorists to Habermas, are the alienation of human individuals and their domination by the interest of a social class. The only way to eliminate class barriers is to re-discover the

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suppressed interest. Communication has the most distinctive structure of including at least two speakers. It is indeed an act of involvement and an invitation for the voices of the Others to be heard. The difference and tension between speakers creates an introspective space for one to reflect on his own limitations. This space forces one to break out from one’s own limited interest and listen to the voices of the Others. These voices then balance the subjectivity of one’s own interests and prevent one from falling into authoritative and false consciousness. For the problem of alienation, language acts as a tie among human beings, expelling the sense of “loneliness” and “homelessness”. Communication pulls individuals into social relations with others.

3.2 Strengthening of the Interpersonal Tie: Moral Consciousness in the Process of Interaction

The maintenance of interpersonal relations is, therefore, an important issue for Habermas. The making and delimitation of communication reveal that Habermas’ communicative action is the reconciliation of a rational relation between social members. If this is the case, language and communication will not, however, be able to sustain this strong ethical side of Habermas’ project. Though communicative rules have become guidelines for speakers to talk appropriately, intersubjectively and rationally, it is unlikely that an ideal speech situation can occur without a sense of sharing and participation. But how will one introduce others into his life-world and share their interests? Rational and reciprocal communication and arguments will happen only with the foundation of at least some interpersonal relations. Therefore, Habermas must add other normative attributes to language.
Solidarity is Habermas' supplement to communicative ethics. Solidarity serves to regulate the actions that a person should take in a concrete social context. For Habermas, the final telos for communication is consensus. This consensus may take a long time to achieve and is doomed to be irrational. Solidarity demands a cooperative, serious and enduring attitude which is fundamental to achieving consensus. According to Habermas, solidarity is the requirement that "each person must take responsibility for the other because as consociates all must have an interest in the integrity of their shared life context in the same way." Communication is a network which allows different interests and concerns to circulate while solidarity serves as a pragmatic presupposition in guiding the correct attitude towards others. The latter reminds speakers of a shared form of life and hence they should have empathy for others. Only this empathy can lead to an understanding and consensus.  

Habermas progressively constructs the ethical side of the ideal speech situation. Communication holds the potential for emancipation when consensus arrives, as in a good reciprocal conversation. Habermas focuses on this potential found in others by emphasizing the importance of solidarity. Solidarity ensures that all speakers will be equal and free if they are positioned in symmetrical way. It also acts as an ethical assurance to make people communicate. Only then can communication be successful in emancipating an individual. A person is spatio-temporally limited but can finally

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9 Ibid., 100.
transcend his limitation. Therefore, compared with the early Frankfurt School members who attempt to reconcile the non-identity by negation, Habermas finds that his communicative rationality works better to unify and adjudicate different interests in a decentered society. It is also a superior tool for achieving emancipation.

With such an important mission, a speaker in Habermas’ ideal speech situation is therefore not somebody who merely speaks, but an articulate speaker and a moral being. A human being as a speaker takes part in a disciplinary process that helps fulfill Habermas’ ideal of reconstructing the dialogical progress of emancipation. He turns from the subject-centered and a prioristic Kantian ethics to the communicative dialogical reason. The latter “develops a stubbornly transcendental power, because it is renewed with each act of unconstrained understanding, with each moment of living together in solidarity, of successful individuation, and of saving emancipation.”

3.3 *The Importance of Communicative Competence in the Cognitive Development of a Speaker*

3.3.1 *Cognitive Requirements of a Speaker*

For Habermas, communication is useful not only in providing a dialogical model to reconstruct interpersonal relationships but also as a paradigm to understand the cognitive development of human beings. Habermas is not satisfied with the structure of language as the explanation for the structure of a society. He also wants to explain the

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development of an individual from the perspective of language acquisition. Why are people inclined to talk reciprocally with mutual respect? Why are they willing to open themselves? Habermas says that it is a psychological inclination of human beings. The sense of reciprocity develops when a child learns to use language to communicate with his surrounding environment. Habermas draws upon the insight of cognitive developmental psychology from Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg to elaborate on his idea of reciprocity.

Piaget, while studying the cognitive psychology of children, observed that a child’s language develops from an egocentric way to a more communicable one as the child grows up. This mode of discourse will be internalized as the person’s schemata of thought. This idea of language acquisition as a process of socialization is further developed in Kohlberg’s scheme of the development of moral consciousness.

The scheme has six stages which are generally categorized into three levels: preconventional level, conventional level and postconventional, autonomous, or principled level. Through these stages of ego development, an individual develops his sense of moral consciousness from a dogmatic or authoritative implementation to a state of self-consciousness and personal initiative. From mere obedience to authority, personal expectation, and peer group pressure to avoid punishment, an individual eventually realizes the definition of moral values and principles “by the decision of conscience in accord with self-chosen ethical principles appealing to logical comprehensiveness,

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universality and consistency.” Most importantly, these ethical principles are, according to Habermas, “universal principles of justice, of the reciprocity and equality of human rights, and of respect for the dignity of human beings as individual persons.” Kohlberg suggests that this model of ego development is culturally universal, though the stages of progress may vary in different societies and cultures.

Kohlberg’s idea of the directional growth of moral consciousness and reciprocity is significant for Habermas. Firstly, as White summarizes, Kohlberg’s psychology can be explained as the increased “‘integration’ and ‘differentiation’ of moral consciousness at each higher stage.” “Differentiation” is the mental ability to recognize the nature of different moral judgements; “integration” is the degree to which an individual integrates and resolves conflicts by making use of his moral understanding. In short, Kohlberg’s theory emphasizes that there is a non-reversible growth of moral understanding in human beings. This conclusion provides concrete evidence to support Habermas’ assumptions about the rationality of human beings and their ability to raise validity claims.

Secondly, from a philosophical standpoint, Kohlberg’s theory is, to a certain extent, congruent with Habermas’ idea of rationalization. At the postconventional level, social norms are no longer decided by authority or explained by mythical sources but by human consensus through logical reflection. Similarly, the ultimate goal of the modernity

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14 Ibid.

project, which Habermas wants to complete, is to awaken and rejuvenate the ideal of rational truth by the enlightened reflection of human beings.

Thirdly, Kohlberg’s model of interaction between individuals and moral norms corresponds with Habermas’ concept of reciprocity at the postconventional level. At the preconventional and conventional stages, a child as an ethical subject tries to be “good” because of his fear of punishment. There is only an incomplete reciprocity between actors, objects and social norms. Only at the postconventional level does he fully understand ethical principles and act with full reciprocity. This understanding not only represents the growth of moral consciousness but also a mature development of reciprocity. This is because only at the postconventional level will the two speakers, who are morally mature and fully understand the ethical norms of the society, treat each other with respect, not a domineering attitude. Habermas explains that:

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). \(^{16}\)

The interactive knowledge of speakers is constituted by the maturity of moral consciousness and the use of consensus in solving conflict at the postconventional stage. To be moral is the natural inclination of human development, as is the idea of reciprocity.

The introduction of cognitive psychology to communicative ethics serves to illustrate the reason for a person becoming a moral and considerate being. It also reveals a latent requirement of a speaker competent to engage in Habermas’ ideal speech

\(^{16}\) Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, 88.
situation. Only the grown-up person in the final stage of Kohlberg’s model will possess and consciously make use of the interactive competence derived from moral consciousness to handle conflicts.

3.3.2 Communication as the Creation of Introspective Dimension

As the author has mentioned before, defining human beings as speaking subjects allows Habermas to seek introspective possibilities to finish the modernity project. The adjacent speaker serves as one’s intersubjective mirror to break from one’s subjectivity; their consensus achieved through communication is the tool against bureaucracy and domination. The borrowing of Kohlberg’s cognitive psychology has indeed created another space of introspection: an internal space for an individual to reflect on his irrationalities.

In Kohlberg’s cognitive development model, the three levels are not found simultaneously. Their differentiation is a progressive linear process from immaturity and childhood to maturity and rationality. The growth of moral consciousness and reciprocity is completed by reflection. Habermas says:

the three levels are distinguished by degrees of reflectivity: the simple behavioral expectation of the first level becomes reflexive at the next level - expectations can be reciprocally expected; and the reflexive behavioral expectation of the second level again becomes reflexive at the third level - norms can be formed.17

By evolving to a higher level of cognitive development, a person comes to reflect on his present situatedness, cultural and social context and ideological tendency. He can transcend his situatedness by his gradual manipulation of communication as a “medium

17 Ibid., 86.
of value-forming and norm-forming." At every higher level, a person consciously interprets the tradition and culture that shape his moral codes and needs, and finally achieves freedom and autonomy. The progression along the three-dimensional temporal development of ego, that is, past, present and future, creates a temporal space for the emancipation of human beings.

Kohlberg’s theory supports Habermas’ belief in the teleological development of human civilization. Modern beings have been presently emancipated from a past where justice and truth were explained by authority and human beings blindly obeyed authority. The modernity project, however, has not been fully accomplished because human beings still obey instrumental reason today. Habermas is confident that man can achieve a better future through communication and that future will arrive when a complete consciousness of rationality is achieved. From this stance, Habermas integrates Kohlberg’s model of ego development with his theory of communicative action to project a future, thereby healing the present irrationalities.

While early critical theorists are pessimistic about human civilization, Habermas’ attempts to reconstruct the map of development. He seeks the standpoint from which human beings can reflect on their present predicament of being one-dimensional beings. Communicative action perfectly contains the synchronic and diachronic dimensions which can fulfill Habermas’ requirements as Richard Bernstein suggests.18

Bernstein claims that Habermas indeed attempts to solve the normative conflicts among speakers in an uncoercive and nonmanipulative manner and to make social

actions come to full rationalization by communicative action. Communication, synchronic and diachronic, is significant in creating a tension among and within speakers. Synchronically, communication opens a person’s life-world to a non-identical other which is “always already”. Speakers exchange their views and values and finally come to a consensus under the assertion of validity claims in the interpersonal relations. Diachronically speaking, an individual breaks from his monological childhood at the preconventional stage and is socialized in the process of language acquisition at the postconventional stage. Rationality and reason increase at every stage of reflection. Communication therefore has an important function: self-alienation. Yet this alienation is constructive and rational for the project of modernity. It is an introspection into each person’s context and situatedness. What Habermas wants to provide with communicative action is a tension which allows people to progress towards the rational society.

Therefore, though Habermas is delimiting the ideas of communication and rational speakers, the limits are essential for the success of the ideal speech situation. Only when speakers obey and perform dialogue-constitutive universals in a speech act can understanding and reciprocity be produced. A symmetrical relation and rational consensus will be achieved only by mature and moral speakers. Without these limitations Habermas cannot succeed. That his critical theory demands a dialogical and mutual participating nature is indeed a discovery of the dialectical potential in interpersonal and intrapersonal tensions created in communication. Therefore, language and communication cannot be jokes or poems, as White supposed, but ought to be
argumentative. A prominent speaker is a rational speaker who earnestly seeks for consensus and positively strives for emancipation. He is a grown-up person with endurance and consciousness.

3.4 The Necessity of a Rational Interpreter in the Ideal Speech Situation

So far the author has discussed the intricate relations between communication and moral development. Habermas has given a vivid description of the ideal speech situation. It is ideal in the sense that all speakers are rational and moral human beings, and are not disturbed or limited by their tradition and culture. Yet it is also true that the project can only be fulfilled in the future, making it ideal. As Rüdiger Bubner says: "Only the future can promise one the ‘fulfilled life’ which echoes the ancient ideal of political eudemonia, whereas the history known to us must be reconstructed as a process of the suppression of dialogue."\(^{11}\) This temporal dimension is especially important for Habermas’ project which posits a strong teleology towards emancipation.

Yet the time in which Habermas and modern beings are situated is the present. In this “present,” human beings are led by false consciousness and are dominated by instrumental reason. According to Habermas, we are at present communicating in a systematically distorted way: there are no validity claims in speech and no reciprocal relations among speakers. A clear rupture is thus found between the present and the future. Who tells a person that he is presently situated at a preconventional stage and his

moral view is not conscious enough? A person may strive towards moral consciousness and be a rational speaker one day. But, most important of all, who could tell him at present that he is not perfect enough?

To solve the problem, Habermas makes a very controversial suggestion: distorted communication can be healed by the mediation of a psychotherapist. Though Habermas attempts to separate himself from other Critical Theorists, he is influenced by Marxism and the Frankfurt School's tradition of eliminating of ideology. Distorted communication is the result of tradition and authority acting as ideology behind language which then results in distorted communication. The dominant ruling class in the society makes use of mass media or propaganda to control the minds of social members and create false consciousness among them. This false consciousness is handed down by social members as tradition. Distorted communication does not allow public participation. Listeners cannot participate in such communication. The relations of speakers are not intersubjective but repressive and dogmatic. Hence any consensus is false consensus. This distorted communication is a pseudo-communication. It cannot bring real understanding but accelerates domination. In the modern world, it is the false consciousness of scientific-technical progress that indirectly exerts an influence on the "linguistic schemata of world-comprehension." Therefore Habermas says,

Language is also a medium of domination and social power; it serves to legitimate relations of organized force. Insofar as the legitimations do not articulate relations whose institutionalization they make possible, insofar as these relations merely manifest themselves in the legitimations, language is also ideological.  

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21 Ibid.
3.4.1 *Psychotherapist and Philosopher as the Rational Interpreters*

Habermas, by drawing upon investigations from Freudian psychotherapy in decoding neurotically distorted communication, works out a way of scenic understanding to solve the problems encountered in distorted communication. Scenic understanding is the way a doctor communicates with a neurotic patient. It is the key to deciphering the *original* lexicon and language used by the patient with the doctor acting as a reflective support actor. “Scenic understanding ... is based on the discovery that the patient conducts himself in his symptomatic scenes as he does in certain well-defined transference ones; its goal is the reconstruction of the original scene, authenticated by an act of self-reflective insight on the part of the patient.”

Similarly, deviations in systematically distorted communication also need a “reference system,” such as sociology, to prevent interaction from falling into the manipulation of technical mastery and social power relations. “Such a reference system can no longer leave tradition undetermined as the all-encompassing; instead it comprehends tradition as such and in its relation to other aspects of the complex of social life, thereby enabling us to designate the conditions outside of tradition under which transcendental rules of world-comprehension and of action empirically change.”

Exploration and translation of the original meaning of the distorted communication is therefore the function of this reference system.

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Habermas is anxious to protect the process of communication from the invasion of ideology. Though Habermas also adopts a linguistic turn in his philosophy, he has reservations about the adequacy of language as being universally pragmatic, which he has vividly described before. Language, as a tool of revelation of truth and reality, has to ultimately rely on a source which is found somewhere outside language. Most important of all, "scenic understanding is based on hypotheses which are in no way to be derived from the natural competence of a native speaker."24 We, as general speakers, have to depend on a psychotherapist who prepares and guides the ideal environment, which is free from the disturbance of ideology, in order to retrieve our communicative competence. Truth and reality are only understood and known by the psychotherapist of the society who can reveal the true meaning of language behind the ideology.

The psychotherapist can perform the role of doctor of society due to his rationality. From a philosophical perspective, he is the guardian of reason. Though faced with the challenges of postmodernists, especially the idea of overriding rationality, Habermas insists that the role of philosophy should be of a "stand-in and interpreter."25 Philosophy then mediates among three separate sectors of the modern world: science, art and morality. Habermas believes that communication bridges these different rationalities. Yet this bridge should lay its foundation on philosophy in order to perform well. Habermas says,

24 Habermas, "On Systematically Distorted Communication," 209.

Reaching understanding in the lifeworld requires a cultural tradition that ranges across the whole spectrum, not just the fruits of science and technology. As far as philosophy is concerned, it might do well to refurbish its link with the totality by taking on the role of interpreter on behalf of the lifeworld.\textsuperscript{26}

It is reason as philosophy that is qualified to interpret the appropriate meaning of all human activities for the human lifeworld.

Transcendental validity claims in language are what Habermas attempts to find. "The validity claims that we raise in conversation - that is, when we say something with conviction - transcend this specific conversational context, pointing to something beyond the spatio-temporal ambit of the occasion."\textsuperscript{27} Therefore, he needs philosophy as "guardian of rationality" to justify and guard the rational ground of communication. Similarly, the society needs a psychotherapist to make distorted communication rational.

In Habermas’ ideal speech situation, he designs all individuals as speakers. Communication as universal pragmatics allows them to come to a rational ground of reasoning. Speakers leave their present situatedness and proceed to mutual reciprocal relations. Their consensus is the most powerful defense against irrational domination.

Yet before this situation can be reached, a third person has to be present among the present-situatedness of human beings. His rational mind will guide the others to transcend any kind of predicament. He serves to link the present self, which is not rational and reciprocal enough, to the future self. This future rational self will mutually cooperate with one another to work for the modernity project and a civilized society.

Thus the possibility of creating a tension between the self and the Others, among the

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 313.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 314.
past, present and future, depends on the guidance of this "guardian of rationality." Habermas does not further explain who is eligible for this position. Is he a language user himself? If false ideology is ubiquitous in the modern world, who can be the psychotherapist and the guardian of rationality? Who rescues us from domination?

From the author's perspective, the effort necessary to make one a competent speaker has allowed Habermas to disregard the fact that his theory leads to a forceful obligation, not genuine communication. Therefore, the author wonders if Habermas' requirements and definitions can really lead to liberation, or do they limit the participation of individuals in communication? Moreover, are all individual willing to participate in the ideal speech situation? I will analyze the coercive side of Habermas' communicative theory, a side which he may have overlooked.
Chapter 4  Emancipation or Domination in Habermas’ Communicative Theory?

4.1 Confusion of Tongues

The author will begin this chapter with a Bible story. This story serves as an allegory of the Habermasian ideal speech situation. The story is “The Tower of Babel” in the Book of Genesis:

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And the LORD said, “Look, they are one people, and they all have one language; this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.” So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore it was called Babel, because here the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.1

According to the commentary of the New Revised Standard Version Bible, Babel sounds like “mixed up” in Hebrew. Some consider this episode to be about language and discourses.2 The differences in language are understood as the origins of postmodernism. This story, however, suggests to the author the idea of “one language,” the power of monolinguistics and the identity of “the people” in the story. Habermas’

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idea of mutual understanding and the rational result of the ideal speech situation share some similarities with the Babel tower.

This story shows two opposing ideas. On the one hand, the failure of the Tower of Babel demonstrates the impossibility of noise-free communication. When people cannot speak the same language, gross misunderstandings occur. It is difficult to find a valid claim among the variety of languages and discourses. The power of man has been greatly decreased with the loss of a common ground of understanding.

On the other hand, the story reveals the omnipotence of language. A common language allows the people to "do anything they want to do" and "not be scattered all over the earth." Sharing the same language implies thinking and behaving in unity. How powerful language must be when we consider that God creates the universe solely by naming. A common language between human beings gives them the divine power. They can be emancipated from the dusty plain and look back down at the world, as the highest God can do.

4.1.2 Confusion of Tongues as Habermas' Idea of Miscommunication

Compared with Habermas' ideal speech situation, similar implications of language are found. The confusion of tongues represents miscommunication or the incapacity to communicate in the modern world. It further implies that the confusion of human values is mixed up with instrumentality in the society. Though Habermas does not suggest reducing the world's languages to one, his idea of mutual and reciprocal understanding is similar to the original scene of free communication before the failure of
the Tower of Babel. The mutual cooperation found in monolinguistics correspond to Habermas' ideal of modernity. The Tower, which is raised above the plain, symbolize the transcendence of the present world towards the gate of rational reason, and joining with God, as almighty and omnipotent.

However, the present problem is how people should deal with the Incomplete Tower: should they continue this grand project towards omnipotence, or study the lessons of history and examine the implication of the failure? As Rose asks, "Is the confusion of tongues a punishment - as both Rabbinical and Christian sources seem to imply? Is it a loss or might it be some kind of gain in power or is it perhaps both?" If it is treated as a punishment, should human beings attempt to reconcile with God? On the other hand, does the failure of the Tower reveal the limitation or even the destructive side of human effort? The author thinks Habermas would probably encourage us to complete the Tower of Babel.

Habermas views the trajectory of Enlightened rationality as a tragic failure. Confusion is found not only in human tongues, but in all human activities. Therefore, Habermas tries to restore man's unity and order. In his early writings, he endeavors to disentangle the mingling of the boundaries of human actions. Hence there is a distinction between purposive-rational action and communicative action. The detour of the Enlightenment towards domination is due to the colonization of the life-world with instrumental reason. Habermas attempts to bring human actions back to normal. Later he is concerned with how miscommunication results in the deficiencies of the modern

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2 Rose, "The Postmodern Complicity," 358.
world. It is the confusion of private and public language that leads to the impossibility of argumentation and discussion, and therefore consensus. An irrational person therefore needs a psychotherapist to relieve the problem of communicating with the outside world; an immature person needs to grow up and acquire communicative competence in order to achieve mutual reciprocity with other social members and with social norms.

The ideal speech situation is hence similar to the mutual cooperation and understanding in building the Tower of Babel. Just as a common language can lead to communion with God, mutual communication can serve as a road towards a rational world and the fulfillment of the modernity project. Reconciliation with the totality is the ultimate result of both the Babel Tower and the modernity project. Modernity is the disenchanted vision of the Babel Tower.

Nevertheless, different opinions are held regarding this human endeavor. In the previous chapter, the author discussed the numerous requirements that are needed to complete the ideal speech situation. These requirements of language and communication are far from natural and inevitable. To seek reconciliation and the restoration of totality will rather lead to subjugation of human nature. The idea of the rational self not only predetermines the idea of the subject, but also defines the way people should behave, which leads not to mutual understanding but to the widening of fissures between them. Moreover, the prominence of enlightened reason has been criticized for promoting a grand myth of human history, as Jean-François Lyotard commented about Habermas. This grand narrative is shared not only by Habermas but by most of the critics of

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4 Derrida precisely wants to indicate the impossibility of finishing, of totalizing, of completely translating of the meaning of different languages. See Derrida, "Des Tours de Babel," 165.
modernity who try to retrieve human autonomy, believing in the power of human reason and humanism. If the construction of the Tower of Babel had continued, would the result be reconciliation with the totality and the restoration of human autonomy, or a further misunderstanding and miscommunication among human beings? The author thinks that the answer is the latter.

4.2 Misunderstanding of the Others

The confusion of tongues creates a sense of otherness and difference. Neighbours are no longer familiar with one another as there is no longer a shared language. The others now have their own values, life-styles, behaviors and thought patterns. These differences show up in the ways people speak.

When Habermas designs the structure and the normative substances of universal pragmatics, though his theory is inspired by the practical side of human activities, he has overlooked the variety of life-worlds brought along with these different discourses and languages. Habermas on the one hand attempts to base his critical theory on a concrete social background, avoiding the errors of the Frankfurt School which isolated knowledge from human practice. On the other hand, he provides a universal structure of human communication. This quasi-transcendental approach has made his theory inapplicable to concrete situations. His belief in the growth of reciprocity and rationales of actions has neglected the identities and concrete life experiences of speakers who come from different social sectors and classes. What limitations has Habermas posed on the identity of the others and what are the results of these limitations?
4.2.1 Denial of the Gender Role of the Others

One obvious oversight is the gender role of speakers, which has been criticized by Seyla Benhabib and Nancy Fraser from feminist perspectives. Habermas has neglected to look at the domination of men in the economic system, in ethical norms and in conversation. This domination decides the rational and symbolic reproduction of society. For example, Fraser says that when Habermas characterizes the capitalist society, he has denied the economic significance of the housewife and the interaction between mothers and children in child-rearing. The latter is fundamental to the formation of character and the way the child will use language in the future. Moreover, men and women have different patterns of taking turns in communication in which the former tends to control conversation. The power relations between men and women in constructing normative consensus have resulted in the exploitation of women in male-dominated society. Repression thus happens not only between classes but also between genders.

Fraser is also struggling for autonomy and emancipation in Habermas’ lexicon. Yet this is precisely an attempt to point out the limitations of Habermas’ lexicon. She reveals the impossibility of the participation of women in the public language. Women’s autonomy according to her will be a “measure of collective control over the means of interpretation and communication sufficient to permit us to participate on a par with men

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5 Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 119-120.
6 Ibid., 135.
in all types of social interaction, including political deliberation and decision making.” However, a different understanding of system and life-world have decided the pattern and power of gender communication. The difference in power makes a symmetrical and equal relations impossible. Habermas’s gender blindness has made his communicative theory too broad and not detailed enough and ill-equipped to deal with some social realities.

4.2.2 Ignorance of Power Relations with Others

The problem of gender blindness reflects Habermas' ignorance of the presence of power relations between social members in the real-life communication situation. From a socio-linguistic perspective, “power” and “distance” regulate the relations and therefore the ways people speak in a dialogue.¹ For example, the communicative pattern among Chinese, such as that between father and children or husband and wife is a hierarchical one. The former one in the pattern holds more power. This creates subordinate and superordinate positions in communication, and in turn affects turn taking and focus in conversation.² This is similar to Benhabib’s description of the power relations between men and women. Ron Scollon claims that the one who has power will modify the focus in the communicative event, limit the topics to be discussed and limit who can contribute to

¹ Ibid..

² See Ron Scollon and Suzie Wong Scollon, *Discourse in Intercultural Professional Communication* (Hong Kong: City Polytechnic, 1993), 41.

³ Ibid., 44.
that communicative act. Power is what Habermas wants to eliminate from the ideal speech situation. Yet it is precisely power relations that decide how communication works. In a society, the difference in power relations determines domination, suppression, the possibility of reflection, and the prospect of emancipation.

4.2.3 Limitation of the Moral Content of Communication

Habermas' ignorance about others is also due to his limiting on the topic of communication. Habermas suggests argumentation and the achievement of socially accepted consensus to be the mode and goal of communication. He is only concerned about a reciprocal, fair, open procedure of reaching consensus. But what has to be understood and argued for in the process of understanding and argumentation? The side effects of this limitation can be revealed in the criticisms from the communitarians who labeled Habermas as a liberalist, equal to John Rawls. Rawls places justice as the first principle of moral judgment. Under the priority of justice, equality and human rights are the most fundamental social virtues. Provided with fair relations among self and other, disputes are to be settled in the process of argumentation. Communitarians argue that this procedural ethics has denied and overlooked the very essence of ethics: searching for the good life, which should be the ultimate concern and aim of ethics. For example, Alasdair MacIntyre comments,

the central doctrine of modern liberalism is the thesis that the questions about the good life for man or the ends of human life are to be regarded from the public standpoint as systematically unsettled. On these individuals are free to agree or to disagree. The rules of morality and law hence are not to be derived from or justified in terms of some fundamental conception of the good for man.... Rules become the primary conception of

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18 Ibid., 118.
the moral life. Qualities of character then generally come to be prized only because they will lead us to follow the right set of rules.\textsuperscript{11}

Habermas undoubtedly agrees with the priority of justice as a moral question while regarding the concern for the good life as an evaluative question. No doubt justice serves as a decontextualized principle for the judgment of the good life in the concrete life-world.\textsuperscript{12} From Habermas’ stance, his emphasis on justice and rights can be understood. Modernity for Habermas, as the author has mentioned before, is the domination of interests by certain social classes, alienation between human beings and the loss of the reflective spirit. Justice and rights guarantee equal access to social resources, regardless of gender, race, class and age. Consensus reached by communicative acts prevents ethical norms from becoming false ideology. The restoration of human autonomy in interaction allows people to recognize the bonds that unify their neighborhoods. Thus it is essential to emphasize justice in the process of consensus formation which brings all to a sense of social belonging.

However, the indispensable priority of procedural ethics limits not only the moral domains but also the cognition and behavior of others. The making of the rational self simultaneously implies that others are rational too. It is only under the condition that both speakers, the subject self and the other, are rational that the process of argumentation can be supported and continued. Moreover, procedural ethics implies an

\textsuperscript{11} Alasdair MacIntyre, \textit{After Virtue} (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press), 112.

ideal of radical democracy in politics to solve problems of repression. It demands an active participation in the allocation of public interests and lets consensus decide the development of society. The promotion of justice therefore creates another problem of power and compulsion. Agnes Heller criticizes communicative action because it "creates situations in which the other party is forced to listen to argument and has to accept the reciprocity of the situation. This can happen, however, only in situations of momentary equality of power, which can be achieved by force." What is the necessity for a person to participate in the public sphere of discussion? Heller indicates that the consensus searched for by Habermas is not a consensus about human values but theory. The universality of emancipatory interest such as rights, justice and democracy is hidden in this agreement. Others are just instrumental others, serving in the completion of communicative action and the ideal of the theory. The ideas of good and ethics, which are the goal of and concern of procedural ethics, are put aside.

4.2.4 Limitation of the Cognitive Development Pattern of the Others

Habermas' theory has borrowed and relied on Kohlberg's model in explaining the cognitive development of individuals. It assumes that all people would agree to the morale and telos of modernity, and develop and mature along the stages that Kohlberg has observed. But such a notion of the universality of development and the manner of communication overlooks the particularities of the Other. The first obvious problem is the development stages of Kohlberg's model.

11 Agnes Heller, "Habermas and Marxism," 27.
Habermas stresses the importance of this model because it is congruent with the process of rationalization. Also it is a positive model showing that Enlightenment will not return to myth, a stage of chaos before Enlightenment. Nevertheless, the model is to a certain extent western culture oriented. Thomas McCarthy in "Reason and Rationalization" describes in detail the cultural limitation of Piaget’s and Kohlberg’s developmental theories. For example, "The Piagetian model was developed on the basis of studies carried out with urban, middle-class schoolchildren in Switzerland and subsequently, in several other advanced Western societies." The progress towards formal abstraction is likely a Western ideal. Any defect in following the model is understood as "deficit" or "retardation." Moreover, it has been pointed out that the number of cultures studied by Kohlbergian research is relatively small. As an empirical model, its universality of the "different developmental end points and alternative cognitive structures, about disentangling competence from performance, and about the influence of environmental factors" are problematic.

In addition, and the most important fact is, there is still an argument about what the final or highest stage of moral development should be. There is a metaphysical disagreement in the Western philosophical tradition about the most appropriate style of moral reasoning. Why should the postconventional stage be the ultimate stage of moral reasoning?

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15 Ibid., 141.

16 Ibid., 142.
development? What measures are used to evaluate the final stage? As White precisely points out:

To say that one “stage” is “superior” to another at the postconventional level represents nothing more than a claim that, through philosophical argument and reflection, such superiority can be recognized by the subject. In this process theorist and subject are both participants and neither has any inherently privileged position.  

To accept Kohlberg’s and therefore Habermas’ idea of reciprocity and reflection will require another prolonged philosophical debate on the assumptions of human consciousness and ethical norms.

These criticisms show that while Habermas is drawing the guidelines of communicative action from infinite unknown variables, he has generalized human thought and behaviour. The others serve as instrumental parts for the completion of the procedural ethics and moral principles, rather than act as the subject of theory and principle. Benhabib calls this the “generalized other”. Though it is impossible to consider all particularities of communicative patterns, the generalization has led to hegemony of the other’s way of interaction, consciousness and orientation of action. As Benhabib comments, “the standpoint of the generalized other requires us to view each and every individual as a rational being entitled to the same rights and duties we would want to ascribe to ourselves.”  

The others are understood in the way I understand myself. The other is not a “concrete other” who has a concrete history, identity and affective-emotional constitution. Rather, he is a “generalized other.” Though reciprocity is

11 White, The Recent Work of Jürgen Habermas, 63

18 Seyla Benhabib, Situating the Self (New York: Routledge, 1992), 151.
admitted in both ways of treating the other, "the generalized other is treated with
reciprocity originated from the perspective of I: he is entitled to expect and to assume
from us what we can expect and assume from him or her." Benhabib claims that this act
has totally denied the needs and capacities of the other.

The above criticisms reveal Habermas' incomplete understanding of the nature of
otherness and the inter-relations between subject self and others. The assumption of
others as being as rational as oneself overlooks the many reasons of their not being so, of
why they cannot be rational, and moreover of how their life-worlds differ from one's
own. As a result, the others are not liberated in communicative action, but rather have
been limited to the "correct" and "rational" way of articulation and existence. Seeking
for consensus has overlooked the difference between self and other. Thus the author
believes that consensus can be positively perceived as mutual agreement; but negatively
it is an act of conformity. What should be the purposes of the completed modernity
project? Is it liberation in a limited sense?

4.3 Limitation of the Self

4.3.1 Self-Critique and Transparency of the Self

So far the author has discussed what Habermas has ignored concerning the
nature of the Others. The author will point out that this ignorance is due to Habermas'
over-emphasis on the rational self, an emphasis that ignores the importance of the Other.
While Habermas emphasizes the importance of procedural ethics and the restoration of

\[ ^{19} \text{Ibid., 154.} \]
social norms, he holds the conviction that interaction with public language is essential to individual emancipation. However, when Habermas introduces Freudian psychoanalysis, we find that self-normalizing from one’s past distorted experiences and childhood is fundamental to rational interpersonal communication; self-consciousness is what Habermas appreciates in Kohlberg’s cognitive development theory. The critical hermeneutic self-understanding and self-critique serve both the overcoming of self-misunderstanding and the irrational social formation process. To make this intrapersonal and psychological dimension explicit for comprehension he attaches causal explanations and conditioned prognoses not only to empirical but also to intentional patterns of behavior.\footnote{James Swindal, “Jürgen Habermas and the Philosophy of Reflection” (Ph.D. diss., Boston College, 1993), 142.}

Habermas perceives self-critique as the essential task of all human beings. Self-critique and self-transparency are fundamental to answer the criticisms concerning the final justification of rationality and the meta-meaning of communication in his theory. In the literature on Habermas’ communicative theory, writers usually question the likelihood and foundation of the transparency of self, which is transcendental and ahistorical. They are all interested to know how Habermas can claim the correct interpretation of language. For example, Paul Ricoeur says: “... unfortunately, Habermas tells us nothing about the way in which the explanatory and meta-psychology and meta-hermeneutical scheme of psychoanalysis could be transposed onto the plane of ideology.”\footnote{Paul Ricoeur, Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 84.} Anthony Giddens also questions who can become reflexively aware of the
condition of domination and the reconstruction of rational action. The well-known
debate about reason and consensus as grand narratives between Lyotard and Habermas
also focuses on the justification of progress, meaning, and emancipation of the rational
subject.

The question of the ahistorical and unencumbered conscious and autonomous
person is undoubtedly the key problem in Habermas’ communicative theory. The author
believes that Habermas would not acknowledge that the emancipation of human beings
relies on a transcendental Reason or a conscious cultural therapist. This is only a
conventional stage of human development in which human subjects obey moral
principles without having full reciprocity with and understanding of them. Indeed, the
author thinks that we should focus on how Habermas describes the awareness of self and
its importance in the situation of modernity in order to understand why he makes such a
suggestion. Habermas does not want to rely on any external sources of truth and reason.

To respond to these queries, Habermas’ answer would be simple: the self is the
ultimate foundation of emancipation. This is also the reason why modernity is important
to him. Modernity is the climax of confidence in the self and its rationality. It is also why
self-critique is essential in the process of communication. If we criticize Habermas for
searching for a transcendental truth, we may overlook the significance of modernity,
which is what Charles Taylor describes as “inwardness.” The author proposes that
Habermas’ delimitation of a rational speaker is the strategy for satisfying a conscious and


and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiii.
reflective self, an idea held in modernity and Western philosophy in order to complete the project of modernity with human rationality only.

4.3.2 Self-Inwardness

Taylor says that the inwardness of modernity is mainly connected to the thinking of oneself as self, which began in Greek philosophy. Two significant themes of this consciousness are “self-control” and “self-exploration.”24 The former is represented by Plato’s calling for a correct vision of the Ideas and the control of passions and the body. Without the control of passions and the activity of contemplation, human beings are unlikely to grasp the cosmic order. Descartes, who represented a new age of discovery, however, developed a new vision of the modern self as disengagement in order to find the truth. Truth is hidden in oneself, waiting to be explored. It leads to a new ideal of the human agent “who is able to remake himself by methodical and disciplined action.”25 This ideal is fundamental to the development of Western philosophy thereafter. Self-consciousness, the malleability of man, the Freudian ego, and reflection become the lexicons of the modern self. What Taylor describes as the significance of disengagement is similar to the ideal of reflection by reason held by Habermas and indeed his predecessors of the Frankfurt School. Taylor says, “disengagement demands that we stop simply living in the body or within our traditions or habits and, by making them


25 Ibid., 99.
objects for us, subject them to radical scrutiny and remaking." Self-inwardness requires a person to search the self, an identity which is believed to be of human excellence. Similarly, Habermas believes that human beings are living in false consciousness led by instrumental reason. They have the duty to search for the original face of the inner self. It is only by finding this self that humans can be saved from the domination of ideology.

Compared with his predecessors, Habermas shows a deeper understanding of the self-sustaining tradition of Western philosophy and the Enlightenment in describing the nature of the self: the self has the capability of reflection and introspection in order to understand him/herself. To be rational and to be mature are the significant revelations of this idea of self-inwardness. There is always a truth in our reasoning, waiting to be understood though it is hidden by our illusions.

In this sense, a normative foundation for the intersubjective relation between subjects is essential for the guidance of self-understanding in the process of communication. It serves as a measure to judge the validity of the speech of others. Interactions with others are helped by reflection and the self-understanding of one's situatedness. Norms are hence an imperative for the perfection of truth, value and rationality.

Self-inwardness becomes self-sustaining and self-sufficient for Habermas. He has never questioned the validity of the power of reasoning in oneself. Self-understanding is the moral duty and practice of every individual, including the self and others who also think of themselves as selves. Thus the author thinks that critics of Habermas may of

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28 Ibid., 101.
fruitless to question the justification of reason, why people should proceed according to rationality, or why they cannot violate the logic of discourse. These questions will only result in infinite regression and circularity. The question is not why but how rationality and self have become the most important issue of moral beings. We should look into what strategy Habermas is using to define the rational self, how the individual is compelled to organize and decipher himself as a rational person in sustaining the modern world and a democratic society.

4.3.3 Subjugation of Self

In the previous chapter, the author has explained how Habermas defines and delimits a competent speaker in the ideal speech situation: communicative competence, solidarity, reciprocity and maturity. These delimitations are guides and strategies that help define a subject as a rational speaker. This training of subjectivity is similar to Michel Foucault’s “mode of subjection, that is, the way in which people are invited or incited to recognize their moral obligation.” This invitation includes knowing how and when to act morally, how others should be treated, how to develop oneself and what the goal of acting is. Habermas’ communicative theory is precisely a list of requirements for developing the self as a subject of history, an emancipatory agent, and of having an inner dimension. In Habermas’ communicative theory, he describes how intersubjective relations should rationally happen, what the telos of cognitive development is, what truth is and how we should treat our false consciousness. Habermas’ discourse has subjugated

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a person to be defined in a certain ethical identity and to internalize him/herself by self-consciousness and rationality. Foucault therefore claims that an individual subject has two meanings in the word subject: “subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to.”

Habermas tells us that we are dominated by instrumentality and living in a false consciousness. We have to liberate and know ourselves. Nevertheless, the ideas of self and how the self should behave in communication are defined in a limited way. When communication is believed to be the way of letting voices speak out, there are rules for the traffic of messages. The author does not intend to support radical democracy, arguing that individual rights should override one’s responsibility towards others. Yet the author shares the worries of Foucault about the connection between rationality and power. He is concerned that “the promise of Aufklärung (Enlightenment) of attaining freedom through the exercise of reason, has been, on the contrary, overturned within the domain of Reason itself ... taking more and more space away from freedom.” Foucault agrees with Kant’s formulation of the Enlightenment as reflection. Yet it is to reflect and “free ourselves from the intellectual blackmail of “being for or against the

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28 Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” afterword to Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics, by Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1982), 212.

Enlightenment," a historical consciousness of the Enlightenment from a humanistic perspective.30

If ignorance is demanded from the people of Babel, putting aside any ambitions of appropriating the wisdom of God so that they can forever live with God, to be the chosen people of Habermas' scheme of emancipation would need technologies of self, seeking for self transparency and rationality. Self-consciousness, self-critique and the ceaseless seeking for truth lay the ground work for the success of the project of modernity, without depending on any transcendental presence of truth. However, the result, in turn, is the subjugation of the self to the definition of human beings as merely rational.

Agnes Heller comments that "Habermasian man, has ... no body, no feelings; the structure of personality is identified with cognition, language and interaction."31 This failure to depict the identities of social members is due to Habermas' incomplete understanding of otherness, which is a significant component of communication. As a result of his generalized interpretation of this otherness, he ignores the particularities of others and the power relations in intersubjective relations. This limitation of the identity of others, from the author's perspective, is due to his apriori ideas of self as being full of perpetual self-understanding and being aware of the self-substantial of truth and reasoning. These are the beliefs of Western philosophy, modernity and indeed those who want to restore the mastery of human beings and the fundamental values of the modern


world. Although Habermas adopts a linguistic turn in introducing the life-world of others to accomplish reflection upon one’s own subjective perspective, he overlooks the important factors of the ethical orientations and needs of different social members. His construction of the self and others as articulate speakers is based on the limited definition of truth and on ethical responsibility. Habermas has not guaranteed liberation and freedom in his communicative theory. It is, rather, a further refinement and way of self-technology to be a rational self.
Conclusion

The paper aims to show how Habermas provides a road towards emancipation. Rather than relying on subjective consciousness to reflect upon the domination of human interest, Habermas points to communicative action. He believes that through mutual communication and shared agreement among social members, society will develop in rationality. If man's speech includes the four validity claims of truth, rightness, truthfulness and comprehensibility, false ideology will be unable to dominate and distort the real needs of social members.

Habermas claims that human beings are born to use language and communicate with their neighbours. Thus he believes that the interactive nature of language will allow human beings to develop reciprocal and intersubjective relations with one another. In such a relation, a person can testify and reflect upon his own intrinsic values and culture. The modernity project, whose object is to let human beings live by rationality and be liberated from authority, will hence be completed.

However, the success of Habermas' ideal speech situation is founded on numerous presuppositions about a competent speaker. His requirements of solidarity, reciprocity and ego development can only be found in a perfectly well-developed rational person who is unlikely to be found in the present world which is dominated by false consciousness.

One of the problems of Habermas' theory is his refusal to allow any obscurity in projecting a clear future. He therefore claims that a philosopher is needed to act as a guardian of rationality, just as a psychologist is needed to translate any incomprehensible
private language to a public one in order to maintain open communication. The addition of these roles ironically shows that Habermas does not have a complete confidence in communicative rationality. Indeed the need for these additional roles denies the power of communication among social members. Habermas' incomplete understanding and recognition of language is fully revealed in the debate with Hans-Gorg Gadamer. This debate shows how the problem of false consciousness and situatedness should be treated, and how language shapes the self-understanding of human beings.

Language acts as the dimension of understanding and interpretation for both Habermas and Gadamer. Gadamer recognizes the power of language in developing a person's situatedness towards infinite possibilities and probabilities. The dialogical nature of language which moves to and fro between speakers allows speakers to exchange their experiences. The infinite and unpredictable encounters of different speakers lets man supersede his one-sidedness and partial experience. Therefore, Gadamer does not need Habermas' interpreter or psychotherapist.

It is not the objective of this paper to make a judgment on the Habermas-Gadamer debate. But Gadamer's understanding of language provides an alternative method in treating man's predicament. Would it be too abstract, as Gadamer comments on Habermas' perception of language, to seek an ultimate and transcendental truth in language and communication without understanding human beings' traditions? Gadamer says:

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It would be a false abstraction to say that it was not through and in the concrete experiences of our human existence which are gained in domination and work, and only here, that our human understanding of ourselves, our evaluations, our conversation with ourselves, find their concrete fulfillment and critical function.  

If Habermas accepts the distinct ability of human beings to communicate, he should understand that is impossible to find a truth from language-in-itself. Rather, truths are revealed in the events of communication, when speakers come across and reflect upon their own limitations and finite world-views.

Though Habermas recognizes the significance of the intersubjectivity of communication, he has not truly understood the meaning of this intersubjectivity. In the opening of oneself to others, different styles of speakers will be met. Different cultures are introduced to one’s limited world. However, Habermas’ idea of a rational speaker limits speech to only one way of speaking and one way of thinking. This limitation denies the needs, situation, ability and willingness of the different speakers who will meet in the process of communication. A rational speaker can behave in one single style only. Should this be the world of language? Is it possible to find two identical language users amongst the innumerable languages and speech styles? The limitation of only one meaning of a rational speaker will surely deny and overlook the particular needs of speakers. It even leads to the self-subjugation of human nature if each person attempts to follow the model of a rational person.

Habermas’ communicative theory has thus failed to recognize individual speakers, a recognition which should be the most fundamental idea of communication.

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3 Gadamer, Truth and Method, 546.
and of the theory of liberation. Instead of understanding himself and voicing his needs to society through communication, the dominated person and his language are perceived as distorted by ideology and therefore his situation has to be interpreted by another rational person. Has he genuinely expressed and articulated his needs? Should communicative theory aim at the normative requirements of a competent speaker, or should it look for a just forum for the participation of the dominated group in the discussion of their needs?

The author would like to say that if we adopt the linguistic turn in philosophy, we should carefully look into the impact of this turn. Of course, there are uncountable speech styles in real life situations. These speech styles will convey different world-views. Therefore it would be more meaningful to look into the differences of speakers when we adopt the linguistic turn. It is positive to suggest finding a consensus, but it is more practical to think of why a consensus cannot be achieved. Habermas’ attempt to use communicative action to complete the modernity project will only blind him to the moral demands and ethical orientation of the subjective self, making his theory fall into subjectivism.

If we follow the above arguments, a new area of discussion will open. Recently, philosophical debates emphasize how multicultural and subaltern interests can be voiced in society and how power relations decide truth. For example, Linda Alcoff, from a post-colonialist perspective, has made us conscious to the pitfalls of speaking for others. While Habermas is seeking a rational mediator in the society, Alcoff asks us to consider the social and historical situation of this mediator and the people he has spoken for. She says:
But it seems to me that the importance of the source of a view, and the importance of doing a genealogy, should be subsumed within an overall analysis of effects, making the central question what the effects are of the view on material and discursive practices through which it traverses and the particular configuration of power relations emergent from these.¹

Her suggestions serve to develop further the nature of language and communication and hence lead to a more mature scheme of liberation, serving as many human beings as possible.

The author would say that Habermas' communicative theory is correct to consider communication as a fair and open medium to let the public participate in society, to unmask the dominant interest behind the veil of ideology. Yet we have to understand that there are no two identical speakers in the world. So too are cognitive styles, ethical aspirations and social status not the same. These differences however decide the languages used. In response to the defeat of modernity, the author would suggest that it is time to think about why the Tower of Babel cannot be finished. We should consider the consequences of the failure to complete the Tower. It is also time to understand different voices in society, and the reasons why these voices are distorted and repressed, rather than to settle for an incomplete consensus founded on the limited, inadequate definition of the competent speaker.

Bibliography

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