

# APPLIED NIETZSCHE: THE PROBLEM OF REFLEXIVITY IN HABERMAS, A POSTMODERN CRITIQUE

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I will be concerned here with the issue of the self-referential or reflexive nature of reason that Nietzsche's perspectivism and anti-foundationalism illuminates. I will apply Nietzsche's anti-foundationalism and his insights about language and reason to a contemporary attempt by Jurgen Habermas to once again ground morality in necessary conditions of reason, this time beyond subjectivist epistemology on purported necessary conditions of speech. The chapter will conclude with a similar application of related insights from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and *On Certainty*.

## I. Postmodernism<sup>1</sup> and Reflexivity

One of the most powerful recent attempts to salvage a modernist demand for moral necessity in a postmodern form is in the work of Jurgen Habermas. Habermas sees his work as "postmodern" because he has jettisoned any epistemology based on a philosophy of the subject and moved to communication and language as the appropriate place for grounding any claim and demand of rationality for moral ought.

Habermas's argument against other postmodernists, particularly poststructuralists,<sup>2</sup> rests largely on the self-contradictoriness he finds in

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<sup>1</sup> Ignoring the well known problems of the term "postmodernism," a number of strands have converged, loosely to be sure, which can be included under the rubric "philosophical postmodernism." These include American Pragmatism, Heidegger and post-Husserlain phenomenology, Wittgenstein, Foucault, Derrida, Richard Rorty, and others. Nietzsche does share something in common with this group and it is this commonality with regard to anti-foundationalism that will be the major focus here.

<sup>2</sup> Poststructuralism is a term referring to a movement growing out of the structuralism of Levi-Strauss. Structuralism is largely a critique of subjectivism, the view that language and society are products of conscious, intentional action. Structuralism attempts to show that conscious behavior is largely predetermined by impersonal objective structures governing the selection of words and the patterning of social interaction. Poststructuralism shares the structuralist critique of subjectivism but is suspicious of any such attempt to found the human sciences on universal structures, seeing this kind of rationalism as lending itself to technologies

their radical historicism, relativism, and contextualism. He argues that in attempting to make valid claims about things, poststructuralists and postmodernists must presuppose the possibility of universal assent. Otherwise, their position would not have any power to persuade others who share a different set of cultural assumptions. They commit what he calls a performative contradiction.

Thinkers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, and Foucault, however, are not trying to persuade others of the truth of their views. Rather, they are attempting to overcome a representational view of language and any universalist assumptions about reason in order to open a space for a different way of seeing things, one that is not dominated by such assumptions. There is a double bind, however, that menaces any criticism of rationalism: one cannot escape using the very categories and language one is renouncing. The devices and strategies postmodernists use, turn language and logic in on themselves in order to reverse the hierarchical dichotomies inherent in Western philosophy and social organization, but are thereby self-undermining because they are reflexive or self-referential.

Hegel's dialectic was already a recognition of this basic feature of thought, but Hegel was still a modernist in his absolutist assumptions about reason and subjectivity, and in his attempt at perfect closure in an Absolute Mind. In contrast, the postmodernist recognition of the reflexivity of reason is at the heart of their radical critique of the rationalist assumptions of modernism and is a tool for dislodging such assumptions.<sup>3</sup>

Habermas has recognized the "problem" of self-referentiality or reflexivity in postmodern philosophy, but has failed to see that to criticize postmodern thought for this is to criticize it for one of its most

of domination. Poststructuralists argue that the basic rules, norms, and structures governing linguistic and cultural practices are not rigidly fixed, but undergo constant mutation. They emphasize the contextuality and relativity of all structures, including those governing so-called rational behavior. The leading poststructuralists include Derrida and Foucault. Derrida's approach to literary criticism is called deconstructionism. Foucault's questioning of the power relations that underlie social structure is called genealogy. This overview is taken from David Ingram, *Critical Theory and Philosophy*, (New York: Paragon House, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> In Hegel's dialectical unfolding, any truth, any moment of the self realization of consciousness, can only proceed in its own terms and will eventually manifest its opposite. Anything finite, any "being," issues forth its own negation. Hegel, however, seeks closure to this process in ultimate thought thinking itself. The whole process itself is seen as ultimate truth and reality. The being of the process, the becoming itself, the totality of all becoming is itself absolute. Hence, Hegel's dialectic is a recognition of the reflexivity of reason and at the same time an attempt at closure. This closure along with Hegel's idealism would be denied by postmodernists.

important revelations: that all reason is inescapably self-referential or reflexive. When this is understood, then such a charge can no longer be an argument against postmodern thought, which, since Nietzsche, has intentionally employed tactics that reveal just this feature of any rational system.

The problem of self-reference or of reflexivity in Nietzsche is well known, for example, if Nietzsche's perspectivism is true then it is a counterexample to itself. But Nietzsche's work may only be self-destructive when it is read from a standpoint which aims at, demands, or presumes foundationalism, absolutism, or universalism. This would seem to distinguish it from problems of self-reference found, for example, in certain famous paradoxes such as the liar's paradox, Russell's contradiction that undermined Frege's logicism, or the Logical Positivists' principle of verification which cannot be verified by itself. Such problems of self-reference are devastating when they undermine some kind of foundationalist project, i.e., the attempt to find a bias by which truth, knowledge and reality claims can be legitimated. The problem of reflexivity is also at the heart of one of the most important discoveries in mathematics and logic in the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup>

The problem of self-reference can be found as well in any form of determinism, for example, in Spinoza or Kant, not to mention more recent versions such as Skinner's. If determinism were true, then it would be impossible to know it is true, because anyone holding such a view or its contrary would be determined to do so and any rational decision about it, which, of course, requires the freedom to rationally choose one of the alternatives, would be impossible. Hence, determinism is self-undermining.

The paradox of Kant's determinism is even more pronounced. Though he is a determinist with regard to the empirical world of appearance, Kant postulates a noumenal realm of freedom and moral agency. The necessary conditions for any possible knowledge, the forms of space and time and the categories of understanding, rule out any possible knowledge with regard to human freedom, since all knowledge is knowledge of phenomena. This makes the world of human freedom and action impossible in a purely deterministic Newtonian realm of phenomena. Hence, it is only through an unknowable practical/moral realm of pure reason that we can meet the demands of justice. This requires a transcendental argument. Such an argument employs the technique of arguing from what is given or what must

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<sup>4</sup> In its earliest form reflexivity as a strategy dates back to Sextus Empiricus and Pyrrhonism whose techniques of refuting dogmatism have been formalized in Goedel's theorems on relative undecidability and relative unprovability of consistency. See John Kadvaný, "Reflections On The Legacy Of Kurt Goedel: Mathematics, Skepticism, Postmodernism," in *The Philosophical Forum*, Vol. XX, No. 3, Spring 1989.

be accepted, back to its necessary conditions, to what must be the case if the given were to be possible. Such arguments have been used in the attempt to achieve universal foundations for truth, knowledge, and justice. As we shall see, Habermas makes recourse to a transcendental argument for the universal conditions of rational discourse. Ironically, this leads to a self-referential contradiction in his own thinking. The irony, of course, is that he repeatedly levels the charge of self-referential contradiction at Nietzsche and other postmodernists, such as Foucault and Derrida. Because these thinkers are anti-foundationalists, however, and use the techniques of turning reason in on itself, the charge of reflexive contradiction is not only hollow but misses one of their most central insights and contributions with regard to the critique of reason.

Postmodern philosophers are sensitive to the problems that are inherent in language and reasoning for any attempt to achieve certainty and foundations through universal truth of any kind. They have attempted to expose the self-undermining assumptions of dichotomous hierarchical ways of grasping the world via binary logic, and thereby make categorical, universalistic, absolutist, rationalistic epistemology and traditional metaphysics outmoded. Postmodern philosophy does not attempt to be, nor does it wind up being a merely anti-modern as Habermas charges. It is not simply a part of Hegel's dialectic, in which modernism gives rise to its negation in postmodernism. This would be to accept the very absolutist and all encompassing kinds of assumptions that rationalists down to Hegel had embraced. Postmodernism does not gain its identity merely from the rejection of modernism. It is a recognition that there are other ways of seeing things. After seeing that rationalist assumptions about reason, language and truth are reflexively self undermining, that is, rationalism fails in terms of its own expectations and demands of certainty, representation and absolutism, it simply changes the subject, as Rorty puts it. It moves to a different perspective, and thus uses reason while avoiding the rationalist assumptions of universality and absolutism. These rationalist assumptions lead to a view in which reflexivity is thought to be a damning but avoidable flaw in reasoning. It is damning, however, only to any thought that fails to penetrate itself sufficiently.

Only in texts of those who do not carry through the logic of their position is reflexivity apparently avoided. In such cases, however, it is simply submerged. The deconstructive technique employed by Derrida indicates that reflexive paradoxes can be found in any text, so long as they are examined closely...While reflexivity cannot be avoided it also cannot be allowed to destroy meaning. The importance of Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida is that they have all faced this dilemma. All have sought to harness reflexivity into a positive force, rather than to

eradicate its destructive paradoxes...Nietzsche advocates anarchic assertion; Heidegger, endless postponement; and Derrida perpetual unravelling. Each of these alternatives proposes a new mode of using language.<sup>5</sup>

The writings of Nietzsche and postmodernists cannot be reduced to the form of theories merely proposing alternative accounts of truth, value and language within the framework of rationalist assumptions. Postmodernism is a kind of gestalt shift that is made possible by a more thoroughgoing critique of rationalist assumptions about truth, language and meaning.

Habermas sees Nietzsche as the beginning of postmodernism and the "totalizing critique of modernism."<sup>6</sup> But he does not as clearly see that Nietzsche is consciously putting reflexivity to a particular use of destabilization. Nietzsche is not merely committing serious errors in thought that lead to incoherence which unwittingly undermine any attempt at fixing limits and foundations. Rather, that one inevitably arrives at such incoherence in any attempt to reason to some absolute truth, is a major, if not utterly transforming, insight. Nietzsche seems intent on pursuing such insight, not arriving at "the truth."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Hilary Lawson, *Reflexivity: The Postmodern Predicament* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1985), p. 125.

<sup>6</sup> "With Nietzsche, the criticism of modernity dispenses for the first time with its retention of an emancipatory content...As a counterauthority to reason, Nietzsche appeals to experiences that are displaced back into the archaic realm...liberated from all constraints of cognition and purposive activity, all imperatives of utility and morality. A breakup of the principle of individuation becomes the escape route from modernity." Jurgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), p. 94.

<sup>7</sup> The notion of "truth" itself has traditionally implied closure. If one has the truth, any further movement could only be a deviation from it. The notion of "insight" avoids this connotation. Any insight does not prevent the movement to further insight. The notion of "truth" seems to suggest correspondence of our thinking and language, insofar as it is correct, with some objective reality outside and independent of ourselves. This correspondence conception of truth has various idealist and realist as well as rationalist and empiricist formulations, such as Plato's Forms and Descartes clear and distinct ideas, as well as Locke's material substratum and primary qualities, and Berkeley's God. Even in Hume, knowledge (and truth) was correspondence to immediate though contingent impressions. It was in Kant that this correspondence view is overthrown in favor of a coherence view in which any necessary truth involves conformance to the conditions of knowledge, as opposed to any claims to specific empirical

We should not confuse Nietzsche's view of truth as one more theory of truth, a kind of relativism. Nor should we draw the conclusion that, given Nietzsche's perspectivism, any "insight," opinion, or point of view is as good as any other. Inherent in any perspective is a valuing, a hierarchy that permits distinctions and judgement. We should therefore not draw the conclusion that any "insight," opinion or point of view is as good as any other. The common superficial and hasty conclusion that if Nietzsche is "right" than anything goes, is unwarranted. This assumption can only arise in the mind of someone already addicted to the assumption and pursuit of absolutes. Such a person commits a fallacy in saying that if there is no absolute then chaos reigns, or that anything is permitted. Divisive and binary modes of thought and conceptions of truth, when seen as foundational or held uncritically, make possible such unwarranted but seemingly inescapable conclusions. There are, however, obvious alternatives that make this dilemma false. Nietzsche provides such alternatives. What Habermas misses here, because he is so threatened by this totalizing critique, is that Nietzsche is not merely one who is throwing out "the philosophic baby with the subjectivist bathwater." Nietzsche is not an irrationalist, but one who no longer sees rationality as a fixed or universal structure.<sup>8</sup> For him reason is a flexible tool an nothing universal can be claimed about it. Distinctions of A and not-A only have

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knowledge, which would only be contingently true. But in neither case is truth a correspondence, as in former philosophy.

<sup>8</sup> It should be obvious that neither Nietzsche's view nor postmodernism generally is irrationalism or anti-rationalism, nor is it a variant of romantic holism. It is not a rejection of reason but a rejection of the idea that reason provides a foundation, and that it can tell us what we ought to reason about. Consistency and order is crucially important. Operating by and complying with laws of an ordered society, the rules of language, etc., are a sine qua non for human life, without which we would not be able to do what we want to do or even be in a position to generate or experience our wants. But there is nothing in a consistent system of language or society that requires *by reason* in any foundational sense that its assumptions and its particular order be accepted as "true" or "right." They are just uncontroversial or desired to be so. They are just uncontroversial or desired to be so. They are pragmatic and at least tolerated until some other system of order replaces them. Order and consistency are not avoidable. Order is omnipresent. As Bergson says even so-called "disorder is simply the order we are not looking for." "Disorder" is an ordering, otherwise it would not be recognizable at all. (See Henri Bergson, "The Possible and the Real," in *The Creative Mind* (New York: Greenwood Press Reprint, 1975), p. 116. For Nietzsche, the awareness of ordering is always from some perspective, and a perspective is a valuing. Such valuing or "esteeming" precedes and makes possible a desire for order and "truth."

perspectival fixity, no universal fixity. With Nietzsche, the dichotomies presented by reason as foundational or essential are undermined. They are no longer necessary conditions. Imagination and creativity come to replace the rationalist categorical thinking about reality, essences, right and wrong, and objective certainty. The dichotomies of subject versus object, relative versus absolute, etc., are left only as misleading relics of an either/or, true/false, binary logic that is no longer reified as the structure of reality and thought itself. The law of non-contradiction is itself part of a way of seeing things. Not something prior to and governing of that seeing. A way of seeing things is what is primary and is the context in which arguments and reasoning have their life.<sup>9</sup>

Nietzsche's "truth" cannot be judged by logic alone because his thinking destroys the barrier between psychology and logic. Motives and desires give to logic its status.<sup>10</sup> The desire for exactness and universal

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<sup>9</sup> "There is a point in every philosophy when the philosopher's 'conviction' appears on the stage..." F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good And Evil*, and *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. by Walter Kaufman (New York: Modern Library, 1968), p. 205. It is instructive to turn to Wittgenstein in this regard as well. For Wittgenstein certainty is a matter of one's convictions. "Not that I could describe the system of these convictions. Yet my convictions do form a system, a structure. L. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. by G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright (New York: Harper, 1972), Section 102...And this system is not a more or less arbitrary and doubtful point of departure for all our arguments: no, it belongs to the essence of what we call an argument. The system is not so much the point of departure, as the element in which arguments have their life." (Sec. 105) "Our talk gets its meaning from the rest of our proceedings." (Sec. 229) "Only the accustomed context allows what is meant to come through clearly." (Sec. 253) "At the foundation of well-founded belief lies belief that is not founded." (Sec. 253) "What is a telling ground for something is not something I decide. I know = I am familiar with it as a certainty." (Sec. 271-272) In both Nietzsche and Wittgenstein conviction is at the base of any argument, not the truths of reason which only facilitate and defend these convictions.

<sup>10</sup> "Behind all logic and its seemingly sovereignty of movement, too, there stand valuations or, more clearly, physiological demands for the preservation of a certain type of life. For example, that the definite should be worth more than the indefinite, and mere appearance worth less than 'truth'—such estimates might be, in spite of their regulative importance for us, nevertheless mere foreground estimates, a certain kind of *niaiserie* [folly, stupidity, silliness] which may be necessary for the preservation of just such beings as we are. Supposing, that is, that not just man is the 'measure of things'—" F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good And Evil*, in

absolute truths so prevalent among philosophers is so intense that it is assumed that this desire must have an objective basis, an object that is independent of the desire for this object, and which is independent of the creativity that generates or "discovers" it.

Habermas recognizes Nietzsche's criticism of the idea that thinking extends to the deepest abysses of being but misunderstands its aim and significance. Habermas still sees reason as fundamental, albeit as communicative reason. Nietzsche's view of art or aesthetic awareness and style as distinct from reason, and as providing an alternative to its categories, is taken by Habermas as merely a mistaken and premature assessment of the nature of reason. Habermas tenaciously follows Kant in seeing the aesthetic as a moment of reason rather than reason as a moment of aesthetic creativity, as Nietzsche does.<sup>11</sup> He therefore misses what Nietzsche has opened up for us in removing the shackles and tyranny of the assumption of the absolute sovereignty and primacy of reason.

Nietzsche's purposefully destabilizing writing forces the reader into an *aporia* that, if it does not result in a rejection and a turning away from Nietzsche's work is merely self-refuting and incoherent, leads to an opening, the possibility of a creative shift in perspective.<sup>12</sup> His work seems decidedly aimed at undoing the apparent fixity of any thinking and is an attempt to move us to a much greater reverence for the particular, the moment, the individual, and away from the general, the universal, in order to make room for genuine individuality.

*Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. by W. Kaufman (New York: Modern Library, 1968), p. 201. See also pp. 202-204.

<sup>11</sup> It is no coincidence that philosophies of imagination and creativity have been relegated to a secondary role, if dealt with at all, in the history of Western thought. Imagination has been seen as the faculty by which sensation is either taken in by way of memory or by which we rearrange these sensations into fictions, always assuming the primacy of rationality as the central function whether on an empiricist or rationalist account. On this see Edward S. Casey, *Imagining: A Phenomenological Study* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1976).

<sup>12</sup> Nietzsche is questioning the motives and presuppositions which lie behind any writing or interpretation. Reading and writing are never innocent, never escape projections of value onto the world and onto language. In fact, far from being a neutral medium of conveying points of view which reveal such motives and presuppositions, language is itself implicated. Language determines the parameters of what kind of philosophy a culture will produce and how they will see themselves and the world. Nietzsche exposes this more clearly than anyone before him. See, for example, F. Nietzsche, *Twilight Of The Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. by Walter Kaufman (New York: Viking Press, 1954), p. 482-3.



Nietzsche certainly is hostile not only to the Western tradition of metaphysics, but to any such attempt at going beyond, at fixing, or grounding. Still, he is in the Western intellectual tradition and is imbued with its language, and uses its conceptualization to move in his thinking. Yet Nietzsche's writing has the potential for constantly breaking and renewing limits, and is not an attempt at fixing them. He does not aim at the truth. He does not struggle, as his near contemporaries Frege and Husserl do, to find a foundation for certainty. Rather, he undermines any such attempt, particularly with the use of seemingly problematic terms and points of view that continually seem to undermine themselves.<sup>13</sup> This is not a flaw as Habermas would have it. What Habermas misses is that self-referentiality is inescapable. It lurks in his own thinking.

## II. The Reflexive Paradox in Habermas

We find the self-referential paradox of Habermas's communicative rationality just where one would expect to: in the central feature of his discourse ethic, i.e., the possibility of rational consensus. This refers to the acceptance of a norm by all speakers without compulsion as being in their interest, based on an ideal speech situation of complete fairness and impartiality. The support for the objectivity of this ideal speech moment is in the form of a transcendental argument. Habermas's discourse ethic depends not on what persons might happen to agree were basic rights and duties, but on what everyone *must* recognize as a basic right or duty simply in order to engage in discourse at all. To engage in discourse without granting these rights and duties would constitute a "performative contradiction." These rights and duties, as the necessary rules for the possibility of conversing, dictate that only the force of the better argument—not prejudice, coercion, or special advantage—prevails.

It may seem at first glance that none of this presents a problem for Habermas. He is a pragmatist. His ideal consensus is a procedural guide, not a stipulation of content. There is nothing people have to agree on

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<sup>13</sup> Nietzsche's own central notions of will to power, the *ubermensch*, eternal return of the same, and nihilism, though related, are not mutually implicative in a "system" that replaces older metaphysical accounts. Nietzsche is hostile to "systems" that overlook the plurality and particularity of the world.

Metaphysics from Plato to Kant had been the attempt to fix limits to know things with certainty. Even Hegel, whose historicism nearly moves beyond this, still ends in an absolute limit or fixity. Kant and Frege showed us that limits in the form of logical and transcendental requirements for knowledge and communication may well be absolutely necessary, but we now realize that no such limit is absolute. This realization begins in Nietzsche.

ahead of time in terms of content except the guidelines on what would make this a just consensus community. The appeal is to the stronger argument. And whenever a stronger argument is made we are compelled by reason, not some fixed truth, to accept the force of argument. The content can vary and the conclusions as to what to believe and what to do can vary so long as it is warranted by force of the better argument. But this must all be in compliance with procedural rules that Habermas is trying to show as the necessary conditions for the communicative process in arriving at consensus.

Here is where we find the terms/rules that require fixity, but are required by themselves to be open to debate and hence, subject to change. His procedural rules would dictate how those same procedural rules themselves are or can be argued about and changed; hence, self-referentiality or reflexivity. These rules would turn out to be neither universal nor fixed, nor necessary, because they are open to change on the same basis as any of the content that they govern in the process of argumentation. Once Habermas is forced to subject these rules to their own scrutiny and self-maintenance, we introduce something evolutionary, not fixed. This, one may say, is just what we want and is perfectly consistent with pragmatism. Pragmatism, yes, universalism, no.

The paradox is that if these rules apply to themselves then and require themselves to change, then what rule would govern this change? The old ones? The new ones? For a pragmatist this would not be a problem as long as the change meets the pragmatic demands of new circumstances. But to a true universalist, the rules must govern all speakers regardless of time and place, otherwise, the rules are not truly universal, and former and future speakers operating according to different rules would, by definition, be acting irrationally and therefore immorally.

Any rule that has to justify itself is never a candidate for the objectivity that Habermas is after. If he denies that he is after objectivity, then he is deceived about his own pursuit and contradicts what he himself says when he argues that morality requires universality. If some kind of objective based on some universal feature that we all share in common (interests, entitlement, obligation, necessary conditions of discourse, etc.) is not at issue, then we could only appeal to a democratic majority, rather than appeal to the objectivity of reason. This of course opens the undesirable possibility of the abuses and potential tyranny of a majority. Habermas wants both the solidarity of democracy and the protection of individuality which he assumes must be grounded in some universal.

The idea of uncoerced consent to the force of the better argument in the ideal speech situation implies, for Habermas, that everyone under these ideal conditions, would consent to the better argument. This ideal objectivity grounded in communicative reason goes beyond pragmatism as we saw. It tries to fix fixity. The rules must be fixed to ensure objectivity,

but this assumption about standards of reason, albeit a communicative reason dictating the speech acts of the lived world, is a reversal of order.

Reason and the logic of consensus arise out of the lived world, out of the desire for justice, not vice versa. If we are truly pragmatic then we would be willing in some circumstance to bend or give up the procedural rules, depending on our goals. but the rules require consent from everyone in order to ensure a minimal solidarity. There are serious problems here; for example, what if not everyone is able to see the force of the better argument about these rules themselves? Another problem is the gap between real individuals and the abstract notion of an ideal moment of communication, in which any participant in discourse would rationally agree to the same procedural rules. This suffers from the same kind of problems as ideal observer ethics and its variant in Rawls's "veil of ignorance" and "original position," in which the rational agent has general knowledge but no specific information. This is literally a view from nowhere.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Belknap Harvard Univ. Press, 1971). Whatever the appeal of Rawls's theory, there seems to be no solid basis for justifying his assumptions about human beings upon which he bases the principles of justice. His theory starts with the assumptions of the contract tradition of the sovereignty of the individual (especially Rousseau and Kant), and the ideal of the rational moral agent. So his theory is based on individual rational choice, what we might call the Socratic/Kantian bias. The theory has an internal coherence, but can it justify itself by recourse to something external to the assumptions it begins with? He begins with an account of the relation of natural and moral sentiments and the explanation of the three laws of moral psychology. Natural sentiments, such as reciprocity, are psychological facts which tend to foster moral sentiments. The progressive stages of moral development outlined in the three laws of moral psychology seem to be supported by facts of human experience. We cannot deny these facts. Nor can we deny our propensity to promote our own good and to use reason in the achievement of that good. All of this points to the necessity of morality for the survival of society and therefore the individual. But here Rawls moves from the facts of what we think we need to the necessity and universality of morality. If we already share certain general biases about what is good and right, Rawls's way of seeing the world and his subsequent arguments go a long way toward giving us "reasons" with which we can support and justify our shared desire and bias for fairness, respect, love and concern and other commonly held concepts of good. The original position, veil of ignorance and difference principle are very effective and useful devices for ensuring the degree of fairness we want. But there are nonetheless, unsupported assumptions or convictions with which Rawls initiates his theory: what we hold to be good for us and the Socratic/Kantian bias of an

The overall paradox of Habermas's work is that the more he generalizes about an ideal consensus, a transcendental unconditioned moment of communication, the less he is talking about the referents of his discourse, i.e., feeling, thinking individuals. From a Nietzschean standpoint, however, he is creating discourse that indicates his own desires and aspirations and hopes, not something universal upon which to ground moral obligation.<sup>15</sup> The existence of moral agreement or any agreement about the conditions of morality and consensus remains contingent. The attempt to search for the grounds for justice and morality in facts or for proof in a logic of preconditions, "reflects an exaggerated fear of disagreement...Such proof is no more available in ethics than elsewhere. Even in those areas where we do have proofs [e.g., Euclidean geometry,] the proofs are not presuppositionless but function within a particular context, within a particular game."<sup>16</sup>

Habermas's demand for the objectivity of an ideal reciprocity is based on the standpoint of the generalized other. Moral dignity and

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objective reason that, when seen clearly, will provide an unambiguous "choice" of the good and principles of justice.

To adjust the requirements of the original position in terms of generality, finality and publicity so everyone is highly and equally rational and therefore, would choose something like Rawls's two principles of justice, is equivalent to using the notion of an ideal observer who chooses without regard to specific biases and information but in accordance with egalitarianism and fairness in determining any inequalities. Of course this is a vantage point from literally nowhere. It suffers from the same gap as Kant's enigmatic connection between the abstract moral law and the particularity of an individual agent. The circularity produced is that the two principles are necessary and justified, since they are automatically the most rational choice anyone *would* make, because they are the most rational choice one *could* make in the original position. But the use of the original position is justified because it produces the most rational and egalitarian choice. If we accept Rawls's initial convictions or biases toward rationality and the good, then we are likely also to accept his special conditions of choice and the two principles that would *necessarily* result. Without the "thin theory of the good" no rational choice would even be possible in the original position. but even this "thin theory" indicates a way of seeing the world that presupposes and even makes such theorizing seem plausible.

<sup>15</sup> According to Nietzsche, philosophy is really only "the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir." *Beyond Good and Evil*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. by Walter Kaufman (New York: Modern Library, 1968), section 6, p. 201.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Johnston, *Wittgenstein And Moral Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 85-86.

consideration then is derived not from the concrete individuality of the other, but abstracts from this to what we have in common, something universal and objective. Postmodernists tend to look to the concrete history and identity of the individual in seeking to understand their needs, motivations, desires and goals. They seek to recognize and confirm the other through individuality rather than objective universality.

The failure to see the implications of one of the central insights of postmodernism, about the self-referentiality of discourse and reason, can be seen clearly in Habermas's debate with Foucault. "The force of Habermas's basic objection, that Foucault is incapable of avoiding self-refutation so long as he is caught in his brand of historicism, is valid only on the assumption that Foucault is committed to a universalistic ideal of communicative transparency (or at least consensus) by the very fact of proffering his analyses to us."<sup>17</sup> But of course Foucault has no such commitment. To the contrary, Foucault is attempting to expose the external relations of power that constitute the practices and discourses of the human sciences.<sup>18</sup>

In his lecture on Kant, "Was Ist Aufklärung," Foucault assures us that the Aufklärung is an event or process whose spirit we should keep alive, not a set of principles to be preserved at all costs: "Let us leave to their piety those who wish to keep the heritage of the Aufklärung intact. This piety is the most touching of treasons."<sup>19</sup> "That any of the claims of the Enlightenment thinkers should be held beyond questioning . . . is contrary to the critical spirit of that great event itself, a violation of its guiding ethos."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Thomas Flynn in "Foucault and the Politics of Postmodernity," in *Nous* 23, April 1989, pp. 191-92.

<sup>18</sup> Foucault continues the kind of genealogical criticism inspired by Nietzsche and traces the rationalist ideas of individuality, liberty, justice, truth, and logic back to systems of thought serving the interests of social and political domination. He rejects the humanist ideal of self-determining subjectivity as a meaningless contradiction because it sees the individual as cause of itself. The subject and what counts as true meaningful statements is a function of the intersection of objective patterns of speech and behavior governed by impersonal rules which impose order by excluding certain types of statements from the realm of permissible discourse. These rules are themselves governed by power relations which are a function of arbitrary violence perpetrated for maintaining a system of domination. Foucault eschews global analyses of economic and class domination in favor of empirical functionalist analyses.

<sup>19</sup> From Foucault's "Was Ist Aufklärung?." Quoted by Thomas Flynn in "Foucault and the Politics of Postmodernity," in *Nous* 23, April 1989, p. 187.

<sup>20</sup> Flynn, p. 193.

The fact that Habermas is surprised at Foucault's interest in emancipation and the very idea of enlightenment, and that Foucault sees himself as being in the train of development from Kant's notion of enlightenment, indicates that Habermas has not understood the "postmodernists" well enough.<sup>21</sup> For one thing, he lumps them together as presenting a denial, an escape from the consequences of modernity, a totalizing critique of modernity. He sees the dedifferentiation of the spheres of rationality as a regression to something premodern. The postmodernists are instead offering criticism, true to the spirit of modernity, that also questions the very foundations of its own legitimacy. "Criticism indeed consists of analyzing and reflecting upon limits. . . The point, in brief, is to transform the critique conducted in the form of necessary limitation into a practical critique that takes the form of a possible transgression."<sup>22</sup>

Derrida's "transgression" and critique expose internal inconsistencies of meaning by reversing and destabilizing traditional hierarchical dichotomies. He attempts to show that even though we can't escape the categories of our thinking and language, we can expose them in such a way that produces a "trembling," i.e., their fixity is called into question, is shown to be unstable. But we have no other way than our language and its categories to do this. To be firmly entrenched in a language, as each of us is, is to be positioned, so to speak, so that such trembling is rarely obvious. Boundaries and fixity are prerequisites to a form of language and life. Kant's basic insight about imposing order is helpful here. We impose order and "truth" unaware, and it is only in the work of a Hume or a Kant that we feel a trembling, especially in areas like theology and philosophy where, as Wittgenstein puts it, language has "gone on holiday." But we always return to the life-world, and the mundane and its comforting order. The assumption of universals and absolutes is common, but the attempt to ground and justify them has been a theological and philosophical enterprise.

### III. Beyond Universalism and the Quest for Foundations and Certainty

Living with uncertainty, and flourishing, is not characteristic of this transition period, the postmodern period. Our expectations of certainty in the face of its loss elicits many different responses. Nietzsche's is one of elation. This may be horrifying to those who seek certainty.

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<sup>21</sup> See J. Habermas, "Taking Aim at the Heart of the Present: On Foucault's Lecture on Kant's 'What is Enlightenment?'" in *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians Debate*, trans. and ed. by Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), pp. 173-179.

<sup>22</sup> Michel Foucault, "Was Ist Aufklärung?" p. 45, in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. by Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984).

One reason many philosophers have been so hostile to Nietzsche, and other postmodern philosophers, and I would include Wittgenstein here as well (note Russell's rejection of Wittgenstein's later work), is that they were not playing the game properly and were simply ruled out of order. The "game" was taken as speaking properly about "the way things are" or at least the game is getting us closer to "the way things are."

When subject-centered rationality and the standards of logic are decentered and seen as creative fictions in the larger context of imagination and creativity, or as useful in the pragmatism of the everyday, there is a radical "gestalt" shift, a different way of seeing things. Old problems about "the way things are," in any foundationalist universal sense, are not solved but dissolved, rendered impotent to exercise any influence on us. They have no control over a thinker who has shed the use of language that led to the problems from the beginning. These problems and ways of using language that gave rise to them, become relics that may linger in our language, but do not exercise any power over us. But this is terribly traumatic to those who do not make the shift, e.g., Frege, or who do make it but still wish to address old problems without the old tools or language, e.g., Habermas. This is not to say we do not think anymore or can not draw inferences, or that the world "truth" has no use. Rather, how all this is understood has radically changed. The language of transcendental metaphysics and traditional empiricist epistemology lingers only as a manner of speaking.

The claim Russell makes in his introduction to *The Tractatus*, ("the essential business of language is to assert or deny facts"), is no longer true or false, just no longer an issue. Claims are still "true" or "false" but only in the context in which they are made. One no longer thinks of "independent" facts to which statements correspond. "Facts" are now context dependent. The "context" is itself a variable which has enough fixity to render claims true or false and meaning possible. Literal discourse is no longer that which either does or does not conform to the "real," to the facts, but is that part of our language which is for the moment providing the fixity any discourse and way of life requires in order to function. As Wittgenstein says of truth and language,

it might be imagined that some propositions, of the form of empirical propositions, were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid; and that this relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. by G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright (New York: Harper, 1972), Section 96.

If the true is what is grounded, then the ground is not true, nor yet false.<sup>24</sup>

One of Wittgenstein's central purposes was to expose the widespread transcendental conception of necessary conditions, rules and fixity and dissolve the philosophical problems that led to such thinking. Wittgenstein's method of description<sup>25</sup> offers an alternative nontranscendental view in which the meaning of names and rules can fluctuate with circumstances, yet retains enough fixity for our purposes. Wittgenstein is not skeptical about the connection between rule and application. Rather, he is skeptical about a certain kind of explanation we give to ourselves in understanding such connection, i.e., empirical and essentialist explanations.<sup>26</sup> The implications of this for any attempt to

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<sup>24</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), Section 205.

<sup>25</sup> For Wittgenstein, description of how we actually do things within language is the proper course for philosophy. "The connection between rule and its application, intentional act and its object is grounded on a pre-philosophical 'trust' or 'bedrock' of action. It is the job of the philosopher to describe and elucidate the language games and forms of life that made this trust and action possible, not to question the validity of that trust or action, nor try to justify or ground it. "It is our language games and forms of life that determine the nature of our "logic"—a logic that is necessarily impure because its wellsprings are use and practice. The standard of logic or an ideal reason is not the measure of correct use and practice." (Quoted from Henry McDonald, "Crossroads of Skepticism: Wittgenstein, Derrida, and Ostensive Definition" in *The Philosophical Forum*, Vol. XXI, No. 3, Spring, 1990.) Rather, the standard must be altered so as to conform to use and practice. "No course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action could be made out to accord with the rule" L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Sec. 201). A rule is not prior to its application.

According to Wittgenstein, ostensive definition can be variously interpreted in every case. What constitutes correctness in any given case "will depend on the circumstances under which it is given, and on the person I give it to." (PI Sec. 29) "The ostensive definition explains the use—the meaning—of the word when the overall form of the word in language is clear." (PI Sec. 30)

<sup>26</sup> We do not have to posit some fixed a priori basis by which language is connected to reality. Rather, we can and need only look and see the ways in which we act and speak, just see how we do things. There is no need for an explanation of how it is possible. Rules are read out of human activity. They are only secondarily distilled and then applied to such activity. "There is a way of grasping a rule which is not an interpretation, but which is exhibited in what we call 'obeying a rule' and 'going against it' in actual



show an ideal standpoint which provides the necessary preconditions for rational discourse, such as habermas's, is that no such standpoint is fixed or ideal, and that it is not needed at all. it is language "gone on holiday," doing no work.

The real value of transcendental arguments is not what they have proven but what they have shown us. They have not revealed the absolute limits of thought or communication as Kant, Frege, Husserl, and now Habermas have tried to show. They have shown something about the nature of thought and language when it tries to reflect on itself. The orderliness of any system of language and thought can be distilled and tuned back upon that system to show that orderliness can be expressed by rules that are necessary to that system. Any system of knowledge and meaning can be shown to presuppose some set of categories, some conception of truth and consistency that would make that system of knowledge or meaning possible in its own terms in order to achieve its aim of providing fixity and coherence. It seems the notion of self-reference is the key to the process of justification in any transcendental arguments about necessary conditions and is unavoidable. Kant and Frege were looking for the fixed absolute limits, the necessary conditions of language and knowledge. But the limits of language and knowledge they sought to expose, depended upon those very limits themselves.

What the failure of Kant and Frege have shown is that no limit is absolute, but that limits are absolutely necessary. Their philosophies have helped us the latter much more clearly, if not also the former by the problems their philosophies encountered.

Kant and Frege showed us that some set of limits or rules, which can be conceived of in the form of logical and transcendental requirements for thought, knowledge, and communication, are "necessary" to order and coherence in the sense that they can be "read off" or distilled from that order as "preconditions." But in a post Nietzschean world we now realize that no such limit is absolute/universal. Habermas has not caught up with this yet. He is still pursuing the goal of emancipation through rational grounding to solve the problems of late capitalism in the context of a postmodern world. But this new context changes everything. In a post-

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cases." (L. Wittgenstein, PI, Sec. 201) "we ought to restrict the term 'interpretation' to the substitution of one expression of the rule for another." "Say what you choose, so long as it does not prevent you from seeing the facts" (PI, Sec. 79) The facts are revealed in our behavior.

Prediction, hypothesis, explanation, causality are characteristic of an empirical and scientific method that is inappropriate for philosophy. (PI Sec. 109) Philosophy is concerned with description of phenomena as shown through use, practice, behavior, doing. (See Henry McDonald, "Crossroads of Skepticism: Wittgenstein, Derrida, and Ostensive Definition," in *The Philosophical Forum*, Vol. XXI, No. 3, Spring 1990, p. 268.

Nietzschean world God is dead and any transcendental universalist approach to grounding truth is just another metanarrative. Given the conditions of postmodernism, until Habermas rids himself of the Kantian/Hegelian features of his view, he will less likely be successful in combatting the usurpation of one area of cultural activity (the life world/communicative reason) by another (economic/instrumental reason).

Lawrence Cahoon<sup>27</sup> believes that if the most valuable components of Habermas's theory are to be preserved, the categories associated with the philosophy of consciousness dating back to Hegel and Kant which are still present in Habermas must be isolated and eliminated. The rationalist assumptions he still carries are not only unnecessary to account for the conditions of late modernity but unwarranted in the face of postmodern insights.

The notion of an ideal or unconditioned moment of communication is very Kantian and the distinction between life-world and system seems to be very similar to the Kantian dichotomy of reason and nature, the dichotomy of inside and outside, the realm of freedom and value versus necessity and fact. Parallel to Kant's scheme of reason, rationality divides into the spheres of cognitive-instrumental, moral-practical, and aesthetic-practical. But we can think of the division of rationality in another way using a quite different model to interpret our experience.

Cahoon, using Justus Buchler as a guide, points out that the intrusion of instrumental reason into the life world is not the intrusion of one realm into another as Habermas sees it, but the splitting off of one social order that has become dominant, insulated and unresponsive to the others. There is not a lifeworld but lifeworlds, not a communication community, but communities, and the individual is a crossroads of many communities. Freedom then is the availability of different perspectives. "A decrease in plurality of perspective would tend to rigidify community, shrink individuality toward uniformity and unity and diminish or undercut query, social and even reflexive communication, and the possibility of rationality," i.e., freedom of choice.<sup>28</sup>

Habermas's failure to grasp adequately the significance of Nietzsche, as indicated in his chapter on Nietzsche in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, as well as of later "postmodernists" such as Derrida and Foucault, has prevented him from seeing that his own philosophy, in its struggle to ground a normative ethics in a theory of communicative action, still trades unnecessarily on the universalistic dichotomous categories inherent in modernism. Unrealistic and misguided expectation with regard to certainty and the hoped for discovery of some absolute and universal grounding of our moral judgments can itself be much more dangerous than not

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<sup>27</sup> Lawrence Cahoon, "Buchler on Habermas on Modernity," in *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. XXVII, No. 4 (1989).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 468.

having such a grounding. The lack of an absolute does not carry the same risk of nihilism that the failure of an absolute does. Habermas finds relativism dangerous and unacceptable. But if one gives up hope of universalism then one can give up the idea of relativism as well. There is no point trying to find shadings between the poles of relative and absolute. The distinction is a relic of a rationalist conception of truth that only serves to obscure, rather than clarify. Relativism only makes sense in relation to absolutism and implies a point of reference to which or from which it has its limited legitimacy. From a postmodern perspective, there is neither a unified subject nor object to provide such a point of reference. These have been dissolved along with anything absolute. The notion of truth has been jettisoned altogether, relative or absolute. The notion of "truth" itself has traditionally implied closure. If one has the truth, any further movement could only be a deviation from it. The notion of "insight" might be a good substitute because it avoids this connotation. Any insight does not prevent the movement to further insight. It would, however, make little sense to speak of relative or absolute insights.

One might admire Habermas's sustained attempt to carry forward the enterprise of always binding their and practice together in the pursuit of human emancipation. But Habermas has certain assumptions about the fundamental status of politics and theorizing that leads him to conclusions that are critical of those who do not share these assumptions and he begs the question of the legitimacy of such assumptions in his criticism of postmodernists for committing a "performative contradiction." Likewise, his assumptions about the fundamental nature of politics lead him to question begging criticisms of postmodernists for being "apolitical."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> See James Ogilvy, *Many Dimensional Man: Decentralizing Self, Society, and the Sacred* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1979). If the question being raised by postmodernism is about the very fundamentality of politics as well as the political/apolitical dichotomy, among other, then Habermas is begging the question by faulting postmodernists for being apolitical. His efforts to show that politics is grounded in a fundamental drive toward emancipation presupposes the centrality of political life, especially a Western form of political life. According to Ogilvy, the notion of "political: is an invention, a theoretical device that may well have outlived its usefulness and is now counterproductive. It is a linguistic tool that grew out of a way of life. It is not foundational. Even if emancipation is very basic, "politics" is not thereby implicated in this way as well.

Ogilvy makes a very strong case against monism in favor of pluralism and multidimensionality. The old battle of man against nature has been essentially won by man thanks to the tools of politics and technology. Now our battle is with the uncontrolled wilderness of politics and technology, a battle to be fought with tools yet to be invented, tools postmodernists are attempting to develop and experiment with. The one dimensionality of our

The issue of legitimacy and justification cannot be settled in advance and then be used to attack those who do not conform. Postmodernism is a movement which questions these very notions of legitimacy and justification even though they must use the language and conceptual framework that "presuppose" them in order to carry out their critique of reason and language. To attack postmodernists for "violating" these conditions and committing "performative contradictions" begs the question of whether such assumptions about reason and communication can every be fundamental and necessary conditions. Any notion that requires itself as "unavoidable" is suspicious to postmodernists. This tyranny of reason is only possible if one makes an initial leap of faith with regard to reason. In Nietzschean terms, it makes a perspective into the perspective necessary to all perspectives. Such a move is to presuppose what is at issue. The fact that such notions appear unavoidable is at the center of self-reference. One either sees the circularity and gains an insight into the nature of reason or one does not and continues to push for the necessity of some rules. But if Nietzsche and Wittgenstein are our guides here, such "necessity" is only contingent.

To speak generally of necessity and contingency, of absolute and relative, is to already have bought into dichotomous thinking that has gone beyond the bounds of its contextual utility. What is the context of such claims and divisions? We cannot achieve an absolute orientation to everything else. We create the orientation. Accepting rules of reason and the notion of universality is an orientation that attempts to step outside itself and proclaim itself "objective." But we can never outrun our orientation, our perspective, and can never achieve the objectivity of a view from everywhere, (which is nowhere). The attempt to prove this results in a regress of proofs of consistency and completeness exposed in contemporary philosophy of logical and in postmodernists' exposure of the reflexive nature of any attempt at justification by appeal to a universal or generalized perspective. Any attempt at "closure" on this issue would itself be self-refuting in requiring an unsupported assumption at some point.

To universalize any rule is to ignore the context of particularity that gives rise to the desire to universalize in the first place. There is in fact always already a context of meaning in which we are operating. That context is inescapable if we are to be discussing anything at all. It is this obvious fact that is overlooked in the rush toward the fixity of universals arrived at by "pure reason."

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old monotheistic theology, the singular self, power politics, etc., is being replaced by the relational thought of pluralism. Even though communicative ethics makes an advance over many earlier attempts at ethics in some important respects, it fails because of its Kantian monistic apriori universalism.

The notions of emancipation, individuality, community, harm, and consensus all fail to have sufficient fixity that would allow any universal rational truth being asserted about them independently of the linguistic context in which they do their work. Habermas's discourse ethics is a requirement for all discourse under any conditions whatsoever. It imposes standards of rationality by which any discourse would be deemed acceptable and to which it must conform. But if these "rules" of discourse are truly universal, they must apply to any discourse about themselves and must themselves be arrived at by rational discourse. This, in turn, must be governed by these same rules which must already be operating in order to even have any rational discourse at all about the rules, ad infinitum. If we attempt to impose this universal requirement then the problem of self-referentiality, which is a feature of all our language and reason, is made into a problem. Self-referentiality is only a problem for one who tries to out run it and arrive at some independent standpoint which excludes itself in taking things into account, in providing THE way of seeing or judging things.

We cannot live a coherent meaningful existence without "truth" or fixity in some sense. It is never the case that anything goes. A coherent meaningful life requires imposing some order upon the flux of existence. What postmodernists have seen is the self-deception of universal requirements of reason, but equally, the necessity of fixity and structure. They believe we can have the latter without the former. Habermas, who is still short of this insight, attempts to do what, in light of postmodernism, is not feasible or desirable. Habermas can be the Deweyian democratic pragmatist he wants to be without resorting to the foundation of an ideal moment of communicative consensus.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> See J. Habermas "Questions and Counterquestions," in Richard Bernstein, *Habermas and Modernity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), p. 198. "Like Rorty, I have long identified myself with that radical democratic mentality which is present in the best American traditions and articulated in American pragmatism." But unlike Rorty who appeals to the maturity of "we" and can only recommend it, Habermas attempts to ground and justify it.