

1

Recovering the Individual in Critical Theory

The critical theory of Jürgen Habermas is often criticized for its failure to connect adequately with practice. It suffers from this problem, say the critics, despite Habermas's self-declared aim of linking theory with practical intentions. From within the tradition of critical theory, such an evaluation usually proceeds in one of two different ways. On the one hand, it may question elements of Habermas's philosophy of "discourse ethics."¹ Here, the formal, procedural and abstract features of Habermas's communicative conception of reason are questioned. These features, it is argued, render his theory incapable of providing a practical orientation for individuals or groups. In particular, the separation of the "right" from the "good" is held to pose insurmountable epistemological and ethical problems. On the other hand, the critique may focus on Habermas's social theory, and on the application of systems theory in particular.² The objection, in this respect, concerns Habermas's willingness to accept that his own idea of communicative rationality is denied access from large domains of social and political life. It suggests that insofar as theory and practice are still related, their combination offers little or no resistance to the "colonization of the lifeworld."

Axel Honneth's work has followed these lines of critique simultaneously, leading to a substantial reconstruction of Habermas's work from the inside.³ In brief, first, Honneth replaces Habermas's focus on "validity claims" with an emphasis on "identity claims" as the key structures underlying social interaction.⁴ This complements and modifies the weight given to rational discourse in Habermas by incorporating systematically into critical theory the dynamics of social struggle. Second, Honneth's emphasis on struggle dislodges the

explanatory importance of systems theory found in Habermas and leads to an insistence that the structures of the lifeworld have primacy as the motors of historical development. This reshaping of the Habermasian version of critical theory strengthens considerably the connection between theory and practice.

This chapter develops, at first, a critique similar to Honneth's. It takes issue with the role functionalism plays in Habermas's social theory. It calls for a stronger connection between the individual and society in the form of a social psychology. In doing so, however, the chapter questions rather than endorses Honneth's attempt to renovate the practical intentions of critical theory. It claims that he inherits too much of the Habermasian framework to solve the basic problems. The argument is that theory and practice can be linked satisfactorily only when the communications-theoretic foundations of critical theory are displaced by a renewed emphasis on a philosophy of subjectivity or, to put it differently, by a recovery of the individual.

The body of the chapter is divided into four sections. The first section establishes a broad context and perspective for the subsequent inquiry into contemporary critical theory. It outlines basic elements of the ancient or classical approach to questions of freedom, morality and politics. From there, the second section moves to an examination of Habermas's reasons for relativizing the practical and individualistic orientations of classical philosophy with a modern, scientific conception of social theory. It considers, in particular, the consequences of his employment of a functionalist method of theory construction. The third section explores an alternative approach to social theory evident within Habermas's corpus and drawn out explicitly by Honneth. It is argued the "causality of fate" is a better framework for a theory of society that remains connected with practical orientations. The fourth section then examines whether this more intimate relationship between theory and practice can be suitably conceptualized within the philosophical horizon of communications theory. It points to problems in both Habermas's and Honneth's diagnosis and critique of modernity that derive from this horizon and claims that a shift to a philosophy of subjectivity is required.

BACK TO BASICS? PLEASURE AND PAIN

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues "the whole concern of both morality and political science must be with pleasures and pains."⁵ For Aristotle, "pleasure and pain permeate the whole of life" and "since people choose what is pleasant and avoid what is painful," it is important that individuals be taught "to like and dislike the right things."⁶ It is important to note that while the feelings of pleasure and pain themselves cannot be denied or overcome, the individual's approach to them can be a subject of instruction and modification.⁷ Genuine education teaches individuals to regulate their lives accord-

ing to appropriate conceptions of pleasure and pain. It results in a virtuous disposition toward oneself and others, an understanding of how to act that is consistent across various situations and circumstances. For Aristotle, a sincere effort to live in this fashion is necessary for the highest form of happiness—contemplation—and, therefore, self-knowledge.⁸

Plato expresses a similar view through a clarification of right fear.⁹ Individuals are motivated to live virtuously, he says, when they learn what should be feared. On the one hand, education through fear, properly understood, induces in students an attitude of modesty and moderation in relation to both pleasure and pain. It allows for a certain freedom and autonomy from “these emotions in us, which act like cords or strings and tug us about.”¹⁰ An incorrect approach to fear, on the other hand, entails an underlying anxiety about missing out on worldly goods such as money, recognition, and sensual pleasures. It exacerbates the push and pull of pleasure and pain because these forces are tied, through wrong fear, to external circumstances and other people. The individual is left without any form of autonomy because his or her well-being is made dependent on things outside of his control. From this point of view, lack of morality and virtue are the root causes of conformity and unfreedom.

Both Plato and Aristotle believe knowledge of the dynamics of pleasure and pain is essential for the statesman or -woman. Indeed, they think it is important for anyone interested in constructing a peaceful social order. They emphasize, in particular, the far-reaching implications of habits formed in childhood and the consequent need for education in pleasure and pain at this early stage.¹¹ The rationale is that each individual has a right to grow up in an environment conducive to the full realization of her potential. Self-realization depends on a mind relatively free of the violence and distractions entailed in an unsublimated pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain. Order depends on the ethical conduct of the individual; it is destroyed when the voice of reason, effective only when feelings no longer dominate life, is too weak. Aristotle gives the impression, evident in Plato as well, that proper education usually fights a losing battle.

For it is the nature of the many to be ruled by fear rather than by shame, and to refrain from evil not because of the disgrace but because of the punishments. Living under the sway of their feelings, they pursue their own pleasures and the means of attaining them, and shun the pains that are their opposite; but of that which is fine and truly pleasurable they have not even a conception, since they have never had a taste of it. What discourse could ever reform people like that? To dislodge by argument habits long embedded in the character is a difficult if not impossible task.¹²

Contradictory feelings, which grow stronger without the regulation of education, are not simply opposed to reason. They also enlist reason in their

service by invoking “rational” justifications and defenses. Entire worldviews develop on the basis of particular economies of pleasure and pain in which good and evil are contrasted with one another. This process cultivates a limiting form of consciousness in which the individual becomes absorbed in efforts of self-justification, thus distorting systematically the potential for discussion and discourse. The task of political philosophy is to identify and clarify this process and guard against it. It should aim to distinguish between two basic ways of living, the moral and the immoral. The immoral approach, on the one hand, encourages the pursuit of superficial needs such as material comfort, social recognition and self-seeking generally. Its consequence is the disintegration of the individual and society. The moral point of view, on the other hand, encourages individuals to resist peer pressure and worldly rewards, take care of their soul, and build, thereby, the foundations of a peaceful social order.

Plato and Aristotle are not alone in the ancient world in emphasizing such an approach to individual conduct and social order. They express a framework of thinking about ethics that, despite important differences, is shared across the spectrum of classical philosophical traditions.¹³ Thus, while the reconsideration of themes such as the role of character and the emotions in morality and politics has often been inspired by an interest in Aristotle, the resources available extend beyond Aristotelianism. A *general* contrast between the ancient and modern theoretical perspectives proves useful in questioning what may often seem to be the incontestable assumptions and conclusions of the latter. This is particularly so with regard to the relationship between theory and practice, since theorists like Plato and Aristotle confront individuals with a clear, practical choice about how to live along with an analysis of the implications of that choice. Habermas believes this kind of direct relationship can no longer be upheld. The remainder of this chapter sets out and questions the various reasons he puts forward for this view. It looks, first, at the category of social-theoretical reasons before examining the more strictly philosophical rationale.

WEAKENING THE LINK BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE

Habermas argues the structure of classical political philosophy must be modified substantially under present conditions, even though its moral and practical aspirations should be retained.¹⁴ His reasoning focuses on the historical changes in both the make-up of society and the methods for analyzing them. In terms of social theory, the explanatory power of the social sciences, particularly since the end of the eighteenth century, has displaced the ethical priorities of classical studies. “Political science” has been established, maintains Habermas, on the model of the experimental sciences, a paradigm whose ground was prepared by thinkers such as Machiavelli and Hobbes. This shift

has altered the *raison d'être* of theory away from a focus on individual moral behavior, and how the community should be arranged accordingly, to an emphasis on society as a whole and how its institutional structures can be organized to achieve certain aims and goals. Hobbes, for example, hoped to develop a universal social and political model that would guarantee peace. Likewise, other modern theories with different normative orientations employ scientific methods to justify their arguments. Habermas spells out the potential implications of this shift in approach as follows:

With a knowledge of the general conditions for a correct order of the state and of society, practical prudent action of human beings toward each other is no longer required, but what is required instead is the correctly calculated generation of rules, relationships, and institutions. . . . The engineers of the correct order can disregard the categories of ethical social intercourse and confine themselves to the construction of conditions under which human beings, just like objects within nature, will necessarily behave in a calculable manner.¹⁵

Habermas wishes to avoid this technocratic extreme through a combination of the modern and classical perspectives. On the one hand, he insists on incorporating the scientific method into political and social theory because only such a method can be adequate to the complexity of modern society. It is desirable, first, for the Hobbesian rationale: a degree of social engineering is essential to achieve some moral aspirations. Second, and more generally, a scientific theory of social evolution can ascertain the appropriate level of complexity required by a given stage of development and thereby justify the restriction of demands for human freedom and control over social processes.¹⁶ On the other hand, Habermas is aware that the conditions of realization of technological potentials are outside the scope of science itself. The benevolent application of mechanical knowledge is dependent on moral and practical capacities: “the scientific control of natural and social processes . . . does not release men from action. Just as before, conflicts must be decided, interests realized, interpretations found—through both action and transaction structured by ordinary language.”¹⁷ Similarly, identification of an “appropriate” level of complexity cannot be reduced completely to scientific investigation. The underlying intentions of the classical approach, for these reasons, remain indispensable.

The aim of reconciling theory and practice in this way has always underlain Habermas's work. At one point, he expresses this intention in terms of the following questions:

how can the promise of practical politics—namely, of providing practical orientation about what is right and just in a given situation—be redeemed without relinquishing, on the one hand, the rigor of scientific

knowledge, which modern social philosophy demands in contrast to the practical philosophy of classicism? And on the other, how can the promise of social philosophy, to furnish an analysis of the interrelationships of social life, be redeemed without relinquishing the practical orientation of classical politics?¹⁸

Habermas fails, in my view, to respond to these questions satisfactorily. The remainder of this section develops the first stage of this argument in terms of a critique of his social theory.

Habermas has most favored a “functionalist” form of inquiry in his construction of social theory. This methodology is suited, as stated above, to addressing the question of social order. The key concepts are “system” and “lifeworld” that identify two frameworks of action coordination. They explain the conditions of societal integration by pointing out the “unconscious” dimensions of stability. On the one hand, there are intersubjective structures of the lifeworld, divided into the realms of “culture,” “society” and “personality.” Here, action is coordinated on the basis of an interlocking of intentions, a process supported by a “sprawling, deeply set, and unshakeable rock of background assumptions, loyalties, and skills.”¹⁹ On the other hand, the media of money and power structure the systemic domains of economy and state, neutralize lifeworld contexts and circumscribe action in a methodical way. In the case of the lifeworld, “participants remain intuitively aware of orders established by social integration even if this takes the form of a prereflexive, by no means readily available or recallable background knowledge.” But in the case of systems, order is “as a rule counterintuitive in nature.”²⁰ Individual *actions* of various types occur within the environments of both system and lifeworld but are subject to the constraints of an overarching framework. While ordinary language provides an infrastructure of support that allows individuals to cooperate freely, systemic media constrain and condition thought and action within narrow opportunities for choice.

This functionalist mode of analysis is, as noted earlier, a means via which a conception of practical conduct can be complemented with a scientific understanding of society. More important, it is essential, in Habermas’s view, so as to avoid the heavy reliance on action theory characteristic of the critical theory tradition.²¹ It represents a way of transcending the problems invoked by a social theory relying on the philosophy of the subject. One manifestation of these problems, for Habermas, occurs in Marx’s formulation of socialist and radical democratic ideals. Marx had conceived social evolution in terms of the movement of an ethical totality or macrolevel subject that divides itself against itself (capitalism) only to then reabsorb the fragmented elements within a higher-level synthesis (socialism). In Habermas’s view, this conception of diremption followed by dialectical integration cannot and should not be sustained: “Systems theory and action theory can be viewed as the *dissecta membra* of th[e]

Hegelian-Marxist heritage.”²² He insists a conception of modern history in terms of system and lifeworld makes clear there is an “intrinsic evolutionary value” to the development of “media-steered subsystems.” Marx’s approach, however, “excludes from the start the question of whether” these developments “represent a higher and evolutionarily advantageous level of integration by comparison to traditional societies.”²³ Habermas wishes to theoretically guard against desires for large-scale revolutionary change. The unintended consequences of such interference are unforeseeable and should be approached with great caution. He believes this “must make the *juste milieu* appear more and more worth preserving, even in the eyes of those who have not given up the expectation of a long-term revolutionary transformation.”²⁴ The system-social integration dichotomy makes this clear and allows Habermas to recommend the more modest goal of “erect[ing] a democratic dam against the colonializing *encroachment* of system imperatives on areas of the lifeworld.”²⁵

A number of criticisms of this application of systems theory have already been developed in the literature. These criticisms generally focus on Habermas’s suggestion of an ontological dichotomy between system and lifeworld.²⁶ He had, for example, described systems as a “norm-free sociality,” implying the administrative-bureaucratic and economic spheres are immune to democratic and communicative reform. To a certain degree, this problem has been addressed by Habermas’s subsequent clarifications, clarifications used in the above characterization of his functionalist approach: the concept of system refers not to action types but to the *framework* of action and interaction.²⁷ The ideas developed in *Between Facts and Norms* make it more explicit that systemic realms are not closed completely to communicative intervention, either from without or within. Habermas’s idea that internal to law is a discursive democratic structure, in particular, indicates how democratic impulses can penetrate systemically integrated domains.

To a considerable extent, though, Habermas only *appears* to elude this general criticism by exploiting inconsistencies in his approach that allow him to waver on the exact significance of systems theory. Barbara Herrnstein Smith has analyzed closely such mechanisms of self-defence in contemporary intellectual controversies, as well as in particular aspects of Habermas’s moral theory.²⁸ She points out the way theorists, in defending their position, often simultaneously recognize a substantial problem at the same time as refusing to follow through its implications. The superficial consequence of such a strategy is that one’s position is strengthened. In the case of Habermas’s defence of discourse ethics, she notes how he “repeatedly acknowledges but does not *acknowledge* acknowledging” the cogency of skeptical objections.²⁹ McCarthy makes a similar observation in regard to Habermas’s negotiations with systems theory: “Habermas grants the premises [of significant criticisms of systems theory] but resists the conclusion.”³⁰ Even while Habermas often admits the symbolic nature of social life grates heavily against the tools of systems

theory, his *actual* analyses and diagnoses presume the cogency of a systems-theoretical perspective. He tends, in particular, to work with a dichotomy of system and lifeworld, to characterize a particular domain as *either* socially or systemically integrated. He assumes, in McCarthy's words, if "the objective sense of an action i[s] not intuitively present to the actor" it must be "a matter of latent functionality," that is, a matter for conceptualization in terms of systems theory.³¹

There is no compelling reason to think, however, that the unconscious elements of social life need to be explained by systems theory. Habermas's dichotomous method excludes a possibility that may suit most circumstances most of the time: namely, social life is integrated neither by complete mutual understanding nor systemic interconnection but by a mixture of understandings, misunderstandings, unconscious pressures and strategic force. This general point has been made from the other side as it were, with regard to Habermas's tendency to treat the lifeworld as a rationalized sphere without ideology or pathology.³² As Bohman argues, it would be a significant mistake to think the potential for ideology has disappeared from modern society, as Habermas makes out, and only systemic colonization of an innocent lifeworld is the central problem.³³ The dichotomy between system and lifeworld examines merely an external relationship and prevents an understanding of how the domains are interconnected and interrelated. Systems theory does not at all conceptualize adequately the inner constitution and dynamics of systems but only the external interaction of the system with its environment.³⁴ Yet, the inner dynamics of systems may well be made up of their so-called external environment. Moreover, from a social democratic point of view, there are good reasons for focusing on the contradictions of these inner dynamics.

Justifiably, Habermas has wished to weaken the strong link between theory and practice to be found in some areas of the Marxist tradition. He intends to reconstruct and clarify the conditions of possibility for what, in the end, can only be decided by participants themselves. Habermas's employment of systems theory, nevertheless, contradicts this aim. As Benhabib remarks, Habermas's theory of history is less a reconstructive hypothesis open to empirical verification than a philosophical narrative that tends to "speak in the name of a fictional collective 'we' from whose standpoint the story of history is told."³⁵ In a mirror image of Marx, Habermas "excludes from the start" the question of whether systemic structures are *not* an evolutionary advance that should remain open to criticism and radical modification. In other words, the problems Habermas had hoped to dissolve by abandoning the philosophy of the subject reappear.

If systems theory is neither theoretically nor politically compelling, therefore, it may be appropriate to adopt an alternative approach. In particular, if theory is to remain connected with practice, I would argue it is important that

social theory not be separated from the motivations for thought and action of individuals themselves. Habermas had suggested this at an earlier point in his theoretical development:

A sociology that accepts meaning as a basic concept cannot abstract the social system from structures of personality; it is always also social psychology. The system of institutions must be grasped in terms of the imposed repression of needs and of the scope for possible individualization, just as personality structures must be grasped in determinations of the institutional framework and of role qualifications.³⁶

The next section of the chapter examines an alternative strand of thought in Habermas's work which provides a social-psychological alternative to systems theory. It leads from his reflections on the idea of the "causality of fate."

RECONNECTING THEORY WITH PRACTICE: THE "CAUSALITY OF FATE"

Habermas's concept of the "causality of fate" is based on his central philosophical claim about social practice, that the formation of individual identity comes about through "taking the attitude of the other."³⁷ He claims this mechanism enables the individual to see his own behavior from the perspective of others. It is only with this, says Habermas, that the individual comes into view to himself. Self-consciousness arises in a context of interaction, in the form of letting go of an entirely egoistical perspective. This move from a centered to a decentered frame of reference is an expanded capacity for perception. According to Habermas, an important implication follows when we understand this dependency of the individual on a context of interaction with others. The identity of human beings can be stable only when individuals maintain a specific form of interaction, one in which *reciprocity* is secured. This is so because individuals cannot "have" their identity as a possession; identity or individuality contains an "intersubjective core."³⁸ Identity is an attribute that can be formed and sustained when each person takes into account the needs and interests of all others. Identity is necessarily injured and damaged *for both parties* in relationships of exploitation. When an individual does not recognize others, they cannot recognize themselves *as an individual*. If they treat others as objects, they take away a point of view from which they themselves could come into view as a subject rather than as an object to be manipulated.

For Habermas, the features of language use mean that individuals, to form an inward sense of identity, must enter on the unstable terrain of interpersonal relations. It is through this risky process of relating to others, and through this process alone, that one can gain a personality oneself. In doing

so, the subject exposes itself to the reliability and sense of concern of its interaction partners. Habermas argues nonreciprocal or noncommunicative forms of action are parasitic on the human way of life. The fundamental intuitions of moral theory are, from this point of view, anthropologically rooted. They represent “a safety device compensating for a vulnerability built into the socio-cultural form of life.”³⁹ Morality protects the “almost constitutional insecurity and chronic fragility of personal identity—an insecurity that is antecedent to cruder threats to the integrity of life and limb.”⁴⁰

Habermas claims that when the fragile framework of intersubjectivity is disrupted in some way, individuals immediately feel the repercussions. Communicative structures represent a net within which all humans are linked together. The effects of isolated disturbances spread out radially in all directions along connecting pathways.⁴¹ For Habermas, these disturbances explain, at the level of individual psychology, a great deal of human suffering: damaged communicative fabrics are inhabited by unstable individuals. He describes the overarching conceptual framework in which such disruptions can be understood in terms of Hegel’s idea of the “causality of fate” or “dialectic of the moral life.”⁴² Hegel refers to the “criminal” who “annuls the complementarity of unconstrained communication and the reciprocal gratification of needs by putting himself as an individual in place of the totality.” This sets off a fateful struggle “ruled by the power of the suppressed life.”⁴³ The struggle ends only when the parties to it restore reciprocal relations and, thereby, their mutually dependent identities.

This general idea can be elaborated at two different levels.⁴⁴ Habermas has preferred to apply it mainly at an intellectual level in arguments with post-structuralists and moral skeptics. It leads, when linked with the concept of “validity claims,” to the notion of “performative contradiction.” Habermas claims theorists such as Foucault or Derrida commit this contradiction by putting forward claims to validity that are in conflict with the presuppositions logically entailed in making those claims. They set off, in his view, a fateful process of logic that rebounds on them in argumentative practice. Habermas, in defending a universalistic rationality and cognitivist concept of morality, purports merely to register the intellectual dynamics of this causality of fate. The notion of validity claims is derived from the system of “performative verbs” that form part of a series of basic distinctions fundamental to any speech situation. The structure of speech situations is also composed of an equally important element, the system of “personal pronouns.” The personal pronouns refer not to claims to validity, to claims about statements, but to the identity claims described earlier, the claims subjects make to be recognized as subjects. A discourse in which claims to validity are thematized and contested presupposes the redemption of identity claims. For this reason, Habermas stresses that “identity claims aiming at intersubjective recognition must not be confused with the validity claims that the actor raises with his speech acts. For

the 'no' with which the addressee rejects a speech-act offer concerns the validity of a particular utterance, not the identity of the speaker."⁴⁵

The causality of fate is also applicable at the level of identity, as has already been implied. Axel Honneth has mobilized this insight in elaborating his theory of the "struggle for recognition." This theory charts an historical movement toward emancipation propelled onward by the denial of subjects' need for recognition. The struggle aims to reestablish relations of reciprocity at a number of levels. Habermas's focus on validity claims in his theory of communicative action means the construction of social theory is left over to a conceptualization in terms of systems. Honneth, on the other hand, in bringing claims to identity to the foreground, displaces the need and importance of systems theory and privileges the causality of fate as the framework for understanding the dynamics of modernity. With this, the more substantive elements of Habermas's theory are highlighted and a link with practical orientations is regained. Honneth's intervention is, therefore, significant although it may also be viewed as "only an extension and a further development of what is already implicit in Habermas's theory."⁴⁶ Further discussion of Honneth's approach takes place at the end of the chapter. For now, I would like to elaborate the possible implications of the causality of fate for Habermas's employment of systems theory.

Habermas notes it is the criminal's "act of tearing loose from an intersubjectively shared lifeworld [which] first *generates* a subject-object relationship."⁴⁷ The significance of the introduction of subject-object relationships is that an unconscious element emerges in the interaction system. Communication is consensual, free and autonomous, for Habermas, only when the motives and intentions of individuals can be articulated and expressed consciously in the form of norms. Subject-object relations, which have spread throughout modern society via the economic, political, and cultural scarring of communicative interaction, exclude normative regulation. Significantly, this structuring of relationships creates a distorted understanding of freedom. Habermas argues that when we are clear about the communicative construction of the self, it is obvious that freedom and independence cannot be arrived at "by detaching [one]self from particular life contexts," by "step[ing] outside of society altogether and settl[ing] down in a space of abstract isolation and freedom."⁴⁸ This delusion becomes compelling, however, insofar as individuals are alienated from a life whose rules and regulations are the outcome of a cooperative discussion. They get the impression freedom lies in the direction of expanding strategic power over others. This understanding and the action flowing from it merely reinforces the initial repression of the conditions of possibility of identity. The problem is that what is required to restore conscious regulation and identity now appears to be a sacrifice of one's own interests. For Habermas, if this can be overcome, one learns, again, how to see oneself through the eyes of the other, thereby regaining an intersubjective capacity

for thought and action. It is the deep-seated prejudice ingrained within modern consciousness by subject-object relationships that systematically obstructs this different path of development.

An understanding of how the causality of fate leads to the development of a specific syndrome of mentalities, attitudes and intentions may be a way of conceptualizing “systems” that does not presume they are evolutionary superior steering mechanisms. It could indicate how systemic structures are not mutually exclusive to forms of social integration but are, instead, bound up with the personality traits of individuals. From this point of view, “systemic structures” represent an underdeveloped moral consciousness rather than a necessary form of historical progress. In addition, individuals reappear in the critical theory of society as authors of their own fate. They choose, consciously or unconsciously, to follow one of two basic conceptions of freedom. Critical theory, in clarifying those choices, provides both an explanation of social reproduction and a starting point for various political and pedagogical attempts to make those choices a topic of reconsideration.

Such a social psychological point of view may seem to be subject to the same criticism that Habermas directs at Marx, that it reduces to moral terms what can only be understood as an evolutionary process. As argued above, though, Habermas tends to prejudge this *empirical* question from the other side. Moreover, the social psychological perspective can be defended as both more impartial than, and more consistent with, Habermas’s own reconstructive approach. Interpreting systems as forms of restricted communication allows, first, for objectivity because it in no way prevents recognition that these restrictions contribute to efficiency, productivity, and free time from the demands of labor; and, second, for consistency with the ideals of communicative rationality because it reopens explicitly a syndrome of mentalities and motivations to the possibility of discursive transformation.

COMMUNICATIVE VERSUS SUBJECT-CENTERED REASON

A recovery of the individual in Habermas’s social theory strengthens critical theory’s practical orientation. It may not be enough to relink theory and practice satisfactorily, though, since Habermas has developed other, philosophical methods of avoiding the individual. On the philosophical plane of analysis, he insists that explanations of the origins of self-consciousness and of the nature of relationships between individuals are marred by indissoluble problems when elaborated from within the philosophy of the subject. In his view, the communications-theoretic explication, summarized very briefly above, renders these problems “objectless” or “pointless.”⁴⁹ Habermas declares the “paradigm of the philosophy of consciousness is exhausted” and “with the transition to the paradigm of mutual understanding” these “symptoms of exhaustion should

dissolve.”⁵⁰ The essential point, for him, is that the dilemmas thrown up by a philosophy insisting on the primacy of subjectivity rather than intersubjectivity can be set aside once we realize the subject does not exist in itself but emerges only in a context of interaction.

This chicken-and-the-egg debate may be interminable.⁵¹ I would like to bypass a direct examination of the complex issues involved and mention just one important point that emerges from elements of the critical commentary. This point is that while Habermas’s move to a paradigm of intersubjectivity may well be significant and even persuasive in many respects, it does not achieve all that he claims for it. It does not, in particular, “dissolve” the problems of the philosophy of consciousness but, in Dewey’s formulation, merely “sidelines” them by emphasizing the significance of a different set of issues and problems.⁵² The original problems and issues persist, in other words, only they are now considered much less relevant than before.⁵³ These problems and issues involve the subject’s relation to itself, the “dimension of private subjective interiority” left “completely unplumbed” by Habermas’s focus on intersubjectivity.⁵⁴ In this final section of the chapter, I would like to offer a reappraisal of the significance of these problems and issues. Rather than examine the more strictly explanatory questions, however, I will focus on the ethical and political dimensions of the tensions between subjectivity and intersubjectivity.

From my reading, it seems a general fear of the political implications of a concrete, ethical mode of philosophy informs Habermas’s theory. Habermas thinks, first, a philosophy claiming universal applicability and intending to provide existential orientation is dangerous and totalitarian. Authoritative discussion of the good life is supposed to violate the pluralistic conditions of modern societies. In this connection, an important rationale of the theory of communicative action is to overcome the dependence of earlier critical theory on the particular and exclusionary norms of bourgeois society. Habermas seeks an anchor in structures of everyday practice whose origins lie “back beyond the threshold of modern societies” rather than in the concrete ideals “specific to a single epoch.”⁵⁵ This is designed to provide foundations that transcend limitations of time and place and are not prejudiced in favor of historically contingent norms.

Habermas argues, second, this anchor must not be individualistic in character. The emphasis on the “intersubjective core” of identity is meant to establish that the conditions for effective discussion rest in the structures of a linguistic framework external to the consciousness of individuals. This supports, in turn, an evolutionary view of history in which modern culture and political institutions are seen to have developed in order to secure the principle of discussion above that of violence as a means of resolving social problems. The discourse theory of democracy and law, for example, indicates how modern institutions “play the role of ‘congealed’ or ‘sedimented’ virtue” thus making “the *actual practice* of . . . virtues, such as truthfulness, wisdom, reason, justice

and all kinds of exceptional moral qualities, to some extent dispensable—on the part of both the rulers and the ruled.”⁵⁶

Habermasian critical theory finds its foundations not in individuals but in much larger structures that function to “steer” individual behavior along desirable pathways. These considerations help explain why the basic idea of communicative action, and the concept of the lifeworld connected to it, is imbued with a functionalist hue. Yet Habermas’s attempt to avoid the individual at all costs does not achieve his aims. First, there is the mistaken suggestion that identifying norms at an abstract, intersubjective level avoids the problem of “telling people what to do” in a liberal culture. In Habermas’s thinking, this abstraction makes possible a strictly reconstructive approach: one that clarifies only what is always already the case and thereby does not preempt autonomy and freedom with directives about what should be done. The reconstructive ideal, nonetheless, is not tied necessarily to this *kind* of abstraction. The concreteness of classical philosophy, for example, can also be interpreted reconstructively. Plato and Aristotle present clear accounts of the moral and the immoral ways of life in such a way that the individual is stimulated to reflect on his or her current condition. Habermas’s reservations are misplaced insofar as he thinks this perspective has an indissoluble connection with a particular way of life. A philosophy which stresses “the importance of the good does not need the community dimension.”⁵⁷ A theory interested in the good life can be based, rather, in a conception of character able to claim universality without compromising pluralism because it refers to abstract dispositions not tied up with specific communitarian claims. Aristotle emphasizes both the abstractness and practical focus of philosophy when he insists the aim is ultimately practical rather than theoretical. Even though a *theory* responds to the question, “How should I live?” it still compels “the agents . . . at every step to think out for themselves what the circumstances demand.”⁵⁸

Second, significant dangers are created by the abstractive and functionalizing tendencies within Habermas’s work. These tendencies neither leave things open to the participants, nor do they identify a surer foundation for democratic order. Even though Habermas’s approach is motivated by respect for individual autonomy, it ends up putting this autonomy at risk because of what it prioritizes and leaves out. The emphasis on basic moral rights and freedoms, in particular, represents a privileging of protection against outward “personal injury” over inward “spiritual desperation.”⁵⁹ This minimal outlook is best elaborated in a philosophy of communication because the latter deemphasizes the world of inner experience. But without a firmer direction or guidance for interaction, individuals are left only to the dominant tendencies of the age as frameworks for interpreting themselves and the world. *Critical* theory, to this extent, fails to provide effective opposition to the worldviews that arise out of the dynamics of the causality of fate. Habermas’s approach becomes vulnerable to a criticism he had referred to in relation to systems theory and its inbuilt arguments against revo-

lutionary change. In “anxiously striving to avoid at all costs catastrophes that are provoked,” his strictures against a more substantial mode of philosophizing “not only fail to protect us from catastrophe that makes its way in a quasi-natural fashion—fascistic catastrophe—but deliver us up to it.”⁶⁰

In general, then, the movement away from the individual found in Habermas’s theory of communicative action significantly enfeebls the relation between theory and practice. It also fails to ease the fears motivating it. Habermas insists, though, that a connection between theory and practice is essential to the identity of critical theory. The remainder of this section of the chapter examines a further set of problems that derive from these weaker practical implications. To make clear these problems derive from the communications-theoretic paradigm as such, an inverse set of dilemmas is also considered in connection with Axel Honneth’s version of critical theory. To set up this interpretation, I will begin with a few observations made by Nancy Fraser about contemporary struggles against injustice.⁶¹ Fraser discusses, among other things, the tensions between the short- and long-term dimensions of a strategy of emancipation. The easiest way to motivate disaffected groups for political action, she notes, is to affirm their existing identities against suffered injustice. Drawing attention to an economic class, a sexual group or a racial minority identifies the addressees such a politics is trying to agitate. The emotional and affective potential attached to existing experiences of injustice offers an energy basis for action. A more radical and “truthful” approach, however, cannot make such concessions. The lure of a short-term appeal must be bypassed for the sake of a more fundamental and demanding questioning of the nature of identities. What Fraser describes as a “deconstructive and socialist” politics is “far removed from the immediate interests and identities” of most of those concerned. If this strategy is to be “psychologically and politically feasible,” people will need to be “weaned from their attachment to current cultural constructions of their interests and identities.”⁶² Each of these strategies has, then, a particular economy of advantages and disadvantages.

The tension between the short- and long-term aspects of struggle has been a perennial issue in progressive politics. It is argued here that rather than resolving this problem, the communications paradigm of critical theory provides for a link between theory and practice that tends toward one or the other pole but not one that enables a satisfactory consideration of both. To begin with Habermas, we may consider his version of deliberative politics and democracy as an exemplification of his theory’s attraction to the long-term aspect of change. Deliberation, in Habermas’s sense, is very demanding. Both the liberal pursuit of self-interest and the republican commitment to the norms and values of one’s community of belonging need to be tempered substantially so as to make room for reflection on broader interests. Living in this way is moral, it aspires to universality, but it is also exacting. A deliberative approach requires considerable time and energy, a willingness and ability to

question one's needs and interests and be empathetic towards those of others. Individuals need to be independent enough to resist the lures held out to them by both the liberal and republican traditions. My objection is not to the strong normative aspirations of this perspective, but to the weak model of philosophy that supports it.

Habermas, in his request for deliberation, fails to meet individuals halfway by being meager in philosophical substance. As established earlier, the importance of identity claims means that engaging constructively in a demanding discourse implies individuals will have resolved many questions about their life as a whole. These broad, existential questions are, nevertheless, outside the scope of philosophy for Habermas. He has sought, instead, to develop a theory of how discursive structures develop and function so as to create the conditions of possibility of deliberation. In place of addressing the individual prerequisites of discourse, he has focused only on functional and linguistic factors. Such theoretical efforts ignore the evident truth, though, that "people of good character can 'live together well' without complicated procedures or far-fetched assumptions."⁶³ This truth implies the need for a mode of philosophizing that addresses questions of morality and ethics in a substantial way. To be sure, acknowledging individual character as an important ground of politics does not provide us with foundations of the kind that Habermas hopes for. Character is variable in a way that structures of linguistic interaction are not. The object of theory need not, however, be the identification of foundations in this sense. Philosophy, rather, might better serve morality and ethics by becoming more sensitive and responsive to the ambiguities and contingencies of their practice.

This rationalistic one-sidedness in Habermas's approach is remedied in Axel Honneth's restructuring of critical theory. Honneth seeks to provide more substance by outlining a notion of *ethical life* that is nevertheless universalist, one which can be "extracted from the plurality of all particular forms of life."⁶⁴ In focusing on claims to identity, he insists social conflicts are hardly ever purely instrumental in character but relate to the underlying relations of recognition on which the identities of the participants depend. Honneth argues "successful ego-development presupposes a certain sequence of forms of reciprocal recognition."⁶⁵ The role of critical theory is to make clear how the denial of identity claims obstructs this developmental process and can lead subjects to "see themselves obliged to engage in a 'struggle for recognition.'" He identifies three forms of recognition (love, respect, and solidarity) that constitute the "structural elements of ethical life." In turn, he specifies three corresponding forms of disrespect that help to explain "the motivational impetus for social resistance and conflict."⁶⁶ He maintains "the experience of disrespect is always accompanied by affective sensations that are, in principle, capable of revealing to individuals the fact that certain forms of recognition are being withheld from them."⁶⁷

Honneth's emphasis on the identity claims of individuals, in comparison to Habermas's focus on validity claims, means theory can link up with practice by responding to felt needs. To return to the discussion of Fraser, though, Honneth's outlook, while being more substantial, appears to capitulate to a short-term but unfruitful strategy of emancipation. It articulates and mobilizes an energy basis for action and struggle but, in doing so, may well reinforce rather than question the relevant identities. Once again, I would argue the communications-theoretic paradigm produces these problems. The emphasis on communication and recognition signifies the focus of theory is on the conditions of identity outside the individual. Honneth insists it is only "with the help of their interaction partners" that human subjects can acquire freedom and happiness, through more symmetrical structures of recognition.⁶⁸ Of course, support from others, especially when a person is very young, is crucial to the formation of identity, as Honneth emphasizes with the category of "love." Throughout life, a variety of cultural, social, economic and interpersonal sources of assistance are similarly significant. Nonetheless, inward conditions of thought and action may be equally, if not more important in many ways. For each person, a level of freedom and detachment *from* needs for recognition is indispensable. As Dieter Henrich remarks in connection with Habermas, "anyone who is able to turn a discussion towards measure and truth must have achieved a certain level of insight concerning himself."⁶⁹ Struggles for recognition will be unable to achieve long-term goals if they neglect such "inner" concerns. Establishing a just and good society requires reflection and conduct that is, paradoxically, both free from and inspired by dissatisfaction with the present order of things.⁷⁰

In conclusion, there is a widespread perception that modern societies are suffering from a high level of alienation and exploitation. Do struggles for recognition grounded in emotional deprivations represent a desirable response to this predicament? Or, given the interpenetration of the structures of society with the personality characteristics of individuals, is the legitimation of such struggles potentially part of the problem? Clearly, the modern world is filled with injustices that need to be addressed through struggle and agitation. Such methods may be fruitful, however, only if they are mobilized by subjects who have already attained a certain level of independence within themselves. The issues involved in achieving such independence cannot be addressed adequately without a philosophy of subjectivity. Contemporary critical theory will therefore remain deficient unless it makes room for such a philosophy and recovers a conception of individuality. The following two chapters seek to elaborate, in different ways, on how the required notion of individuality might be understood.