

Habermas's Treatment for Relativism

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This paper introduces the critical theory of Jürgen Habermas by presenting it as a response to the problems of relativism. While relativism offers a critique of power abuse, it has the additional effect of undermining the use of reason in political and moral action. Habermas seeks to preserve its strengths, and at the same time to defend a role for reason. Following an exploration of the gains offered by his approach, it is suggested that, though his treatment for relativism is effective, it too has a side-effect.

Progress is seldom an unmitigated success. Often, solutions generate new problems which themselves require treatment. In medicine, a second symptom *which is caused by the attempt to cure the first*, is referred to as an iatrogenic effect. In political theory, we currently face just this situation, for while universities across continental Europe and North America produce vast quantities of negative criticism of the abuses of power, an iatrogenic effect has arisen: that of relativism. This paper explores the origins of relativism, and focuses on its inability to help us with our real political concerns. It then inspects one attempt to overcome relativism which is currently attracting increasing interest, this being the critical theory of Jürgen Habermas.

From realism to relativism.

Before post-modernism, before even modernism, we were *naive realists*. We gazed directly on the only possible moral world, our moral intuitions were always correct, and we knew what was right. We can see naive realism in operation in the ship's log written by Columbus upon arrival in America. Remarking on how friendly the Indians were, the log then baldly states the following: 'the natives bear no arms... with fifty men we could make them do whatever we want' (Zinn, 1980, p.1).

The nastiness of such a view seems extraordinary to us today. But more extraordinary still is the innocence of Columbus's remark. He never doubted the superiority of his own values, and it simply *did not occur to him* that an Indian culture, though different from his own, might be equally valid. For this reason, we can describe his realism as naive. At the same time, we can see that Columbus made the assumption that his own knowledge was applicable everywhere, that it was, in effect, *universal*. Naive realism thus deploys supposedly universal knowledge to trump any competing description of the world.

Since that time, we have lost (at least) the innocence of our domination. During the last century, philosophy has worked to systematically undermine all forms of universal

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knowledge. The scientific attack on religion, the Marxist demystification of market relations and the Nietzschean equation of power with knowledge, all combine to form a quite particular discovery: that of contextualism. By asserting that knowledge is confined to contexts or particular cultures, contextualism is able to mount a very powerful critique of any claim to universal knowledge, for it asserts that what is right in one place may not be right in another; and yet both may be equally valid. Generally, we might say that contextualism results in a profound shrinkage in regard to the area we can apply our knowledge.

Columbus's casual remark serves another purpose, of course, for it alerts us to the fact that universal knowledge is usually a bully. Contextualism sought to prevent such bullying, and it did so by calling into question *any* claim to superiority by one culture over another. Now, all claims to universal knowledge are challenged for a justification. What *reasons* can be given for a universal claim? Is it really universal, or merely the expression of knowledge from a particular context? One by one, the justifications offered in defence of universal knowledge found themselves unable to withstand such questioning. First to fall was the religion of the popes, then went the divine right of kings, then the grand systems of philosophy.

But the gains offered by contextualism did not stop at the limitation of bullying, for it served also to highlight the *differences* between cultures and worldviews, resulting in greater attention to historical circumstances, to local practices and to the traditions which gave rise to those practices. In general, contextualism sought to preserve the *right to be different*, for by shrinking universal knowledge, it made room for a plurality of values.

Once begun, however, the contextual critique has proven hard to stop. Like other forms of progress, it has generated secondary or iatrogenic difficulties. Where morals are conceived as relative to particular cultures, they come to resemble the rules of etiquette:

merely questions of what is customary in that culture, or even as simple statements of personal preference. Are we then to take the statement, 'fascism is wrong,' as merely an expression of preference or local etiquette? Surely not. Yet when we try to offer a justification for a critique of fascism, we find ourselves talking about basic moral beliefs like human rights, decency and equality. If pressed, we cannot give universal *reasons* for such beliefs; for us, they are just 'obviously' true. Yet the Fascist does not hold such beliefs to be self-evident. In order to criticise fascism therefore, we *must* claim our basic moral beliefs to be something more than the product of our particular culture, we must claim them to be universally applicable. Now we can see that *all* criticism of other practices requires an appeal to some form of universal knowledge. To criticise the Fascist, we need to be a bit of a bully.

In its most virulent forms, the relativisation of values generated by contextualism subjects our most basic moral beliefs to a remorseless questioning. Post-structuralism, for example, has declared humanism to be *passé* (Lyotard, 1984). Notions such as human equality and emancipation are now described as grand fictions, as stories which may warm our hearts but which can have no *rational* justification. According to such a view, we simply have no basis upon which to make a criticism of a practice like fascism.

Contextualism, perhaps the sharpest critical blade ever produced by western philosophy, generates the iatrogenic effect of cutting everything indiscriminately. Having started so well, it now threatens us with value relativism. All values are equal, the grand fictions we use to criticise others appear as arbitrary, and we confront a kind of supermarket of worldviews. There are, therefore, no universal values; just different traditions, just grand fictions to be fought over. What contextualism gives us then, is the right to be different, what the resultant relativism takes away is simply this: *critical power*.

There are many contemporary theorists

who do not lament this loss. Post-structuralists generally suggest that while relativism may have its drawbacks, it is unavoidable. Yet when we ask post-structuralism that most famous (and equally unavoidable) question in political theory: what should we do? there is silence, or worse, we are ridiculed for asking. Baudrillard, for example, when discussing the morality of the Gulf War, playfully claimed that no such war had ever taken place. His interest was to show that history itself is little more than a grand fiction. Similarly, when discussing moral claims, followers of Derrida advocate an ironic stance, a mood of uncertainty, an explosion of laughter (White, 1991, p.72).

Most other critical approaches to political science, and certainly those of Marxists, Feminists and Habermasians, are less comfortable with the loss of critical power brought about by relativism. To them, the ironic laughter of the post-structuralists, though appealing, is simply not enough. Indeed, as the uninhibited slaughter of innocent people continues, such a hands-off approach hardly suffices. There are real questions to be answered, real sufferings to be addressed, and it seems reasonable to look to political theory for some guidance as to what we should be trying to do about them.

The central drawback of relativism then, comes in the form of a dilemma which all those who seek to criticise a political practice must necessarily face. On the one hand we must deny universal knowledge in order to preserve the right to be different, while on the other we must have universal knowledge in order to criticise obnoxious positions and guide our political actions. We want to be a *bit* of a bully, we want just a *bit* of universal knowledge. Yet surely, universal knowledge is either universal or it is not. Like being dead, it's hard to have a little bit of it.

Beyond relativism

The critical theory of Jürgen Habermas is explicitly designed to offer a treatment for

relativism, and thus to overcome this dilemma. His position articulates a universal justification for critique which at the same time preserves a plurality of values. Habermas approaches the dilemma by way of an insight derived from the Frankfurt School (Held, 1980). This group of theorists had suggested that the world was gradually being taken over by a kind of machine mentality, an endless lust for technical mastery and control (Horkheimer, 1947). Particularly evident in the march of bureaucracy and in the domination of economic concerns, this new way of organising human activity seemed to be progressively encroaching into people's daily lives. Following Max Weber, the Frankfurt School called this new mentality *instrumentalism*. Its primary orientation was to getting the job done, to dominating nature, to winning. It concerned not the ends of human action, but only the efficient deployment of means.

Habermas agrees that instrumentalism is on the rise, but he suggests this is only half the story. His central claim is that instrumentalism is *not the only way of organising human activity*. Much of what we do is based on language, on communication, and he tries to show that communication has its own particular rationality.

When we talk, we appeal to a whole host of background assumptions in order to make ourselves understood. Habermas argues that communication rests on a series of (usually) unexpressed claims about what we are trying to do with the words we use (Habermas, 1991). First, there is a claim to truth regarding physical facts; second, a claim to appropriateness regarding moral statements; and third, a claim to sincerity on the part of the speaker. Each time one interacts, a blend of these come into play, though almost always, real communication transgresses them in some manner. Some forms of communication, like humour and irony, raise these claims in strange ways, yet they too rely directly upon them. Habermas therefore tries to show that all communication, anywhere and anytime, rests on a series of universal 'validity claims.'

When such claims are explicitly questioned, as for example, when we suggest that what a person says is untrue, we enter a particular kind of communication, which Habermas calls a *discourse* (1991). In discourses, we argue about the various claims, we try to make decisions, to give reasons and to produce evidence. Again, actual discourses are usually power-saturated. The discourse surrounding the assertion that Columbus was a National Hero, for example, has been so distorted by various power relations that we would want to question its outcome. Relativism fails us in this regard because it lacks any universal base from which to question the morality of Columbus's actions. As we saw earlier, relativism prevents our telling the fascist that his personal preference is wrong precisely because it is unable to put up any standard of right against which such a claim can be compared.

Habermas overcomes this difficulty by showing that our socialisation into communicative competence involves learning not only the validity claims inherent in speech, but also the conditions under which those claims are properly and fairly questioned. Whenever we use reasons to defend our moral views, we in fact appeal to a further series of inescapable presuppositions (Habermas 1992a, pp.89-92), this time pertaining to a particular form of communication: that of argumentation. To argue with reasons is to appeal to a notion of what discussion might be like if it were completely free from the distortions of power (Habermas, 1976, pp.102-113). Though we may never see it in the real world, discourses presuppose and anticipate an ideal of communicative fairness. Habermas believes that these presuppositions, which he has sometimes expressed as an 'Ideal Speech Situation' (Habermas, 1976, p.110; 1985, p.86), is available to us when we seek to evaluate the fairness of a particular instance of communication (Habermas, 1974, p.258). We can therefore derive, from the presuppositions of argumentation, the intuition that if a decision

is to be a moral one, all affected must be allowed to speak, all must be listened to, and all must be allowed to question others (McCarthy, 1984, p.306). Certainly, these conditions of fair communication might be interpreted differently in different cultures (Passerin d'Entreves, 1990, p.16), yet it remains the case that the ideal is embedded in the very possibility of communication; it is universal, and it therefore offers a justification for critique.

The suggestion is that we use the Ideal Speech Situation as a moral test. Take, for example, the use of electric shock treatments in British mental hospitals. Is it right? To answer, we would need to assess factual information regarding its value and inspect the personal experiences of those who have received such treatment. We might want to know if patients are given adequate information about the treatment, about its outcomes and side-effects. If people are pressured into it, if information is withheld, if they are rushed or silenced or ridiculed when they try to question it, then we want to be able to say that this communication between doctor and patient is unjust.

Notice that here we are using the Ideal Speech Situation as a standard to evaluate the fairness of a practice. When we ask if it is right, we hold that practice in one hand, weighing it carefully, while in the other hand is the ideal of completely fair communication. We ask: How do they compare? Notice also how we can adopt a critical approach to this practice precisely because our ideal is a universal and thus affords critical power. If challenged to justify our critique, we can show that this ideal is embedded in all communication, it is universal, and we can give a good argument in its defence.

Habermas suggests we inspect a practice by asking the following question: would all those who participate in that practice agree that it was fair if they could debate it freely and without any distortion of power? (Habermas, 1992a) In other words, could that practice cope with being openly and fairly questioned?

Racism, for example, cannot withstand such questioning, nor can sexism or other forms of discrimination. The racist simply cannot defend his position in a discussion which is free from domination. He can defend it only by excluding or silencing certain participants in the debate. Habermas wants us to use Ideal Speech to criticise real practices, he wants us to be suspicious, to keep a lookout for the many subtle ways in which the conditions of Ideal Speech are transgressed by power relations. To those who reject the universality of Ideal Speech, like the fascist, or those that claim it is just another grand fiction, like the post-structuralists, he has given a *justification*: ideal speech is an unavoidable presupposition of communication.

Importantly, Ideal Speech tests the *procedure* of a discussion, but it cannot tell us what the *outcome* should be. Unlike Rawls, Habermas offers no answer to the question: what should we do? (Habermas, 1992a, p.66). Instead, his theory directs our attention to *how* such a decision is made. It says: whatever participants choose to do, they should make sure it can pass this moral test. It therefore states only the *form* of justice, and it holds that only actual participants can provide the content (Habermas, 1992a, p.179). This, Habermas claims, is all one wants of a theory. We don't want to be told what to do by a lone theorist who knows nothing of our particular situation. Individuals bring different values to discussions, these values are then argued for, and there is heated debate. However, if this debate is distorted by power, then its outcome is unjust. In this way, Habermas's theory carefully defends a space for individual views. It claims a limited or thin universality which, as it concerns only the manner in which decisions are made, provides critical power *and* preserves the right to be different.

Theory and practice

The gains afforded by such a theory are significant. First, in highlighting the impor-

tance of communicative rationality, the increase in instrumental methods we see in late capitalism appears also as a *progressive replacement of communicative methods*. Thus, for example, the rationality of the market, of profits and efficiency, comes to 'colonize' areas of our lives which were formerly coordinated by communicative processes (Habermas, 1987a, pp.322ff). Second, by articulating the moral basis of democracy in terms of a practical discourse free from domination, we are offered a method of analysis for particular practices and a direction for political progress.

Attempts to apply the theory to practice range across the areas of cultural criticism, empirical sociology and political theory. Habermas himself has tended to concentrate on the former, and has deployed his categories to study the crisis tendencies of late capitalism, to diagnose the pathologies of modernity (Bernstein, 1985, p.23) and to delineate the normative basis of law (Habermas, 1993a, Shelley, 1993). He has also used the theory to suggest directions for student protests (Holub, 1991, pp.78-105). Other researchers have deployed the theory in the field of education order to distinguish between indoctrination and the increase of communicative competence (Young, 1989), in the analysis of New Social Movements (Cohen, 1985) and the mass media (Hallin, 1985), to give direction for those counselling battered women (Anderson and Rouse, 1988) and drug users (Carroll, 1993), and to the analysis of public policy in services for the elderly (Rodwell, 1990) and social work (Blaug, 1994). Still others have used it to test the validity of planning procedures (Forester, 1985), to generate new methods of empirical research (Mulhotra, 1987), to suggest ways forward for the politics of Northern Ireland (O'Neill, 1994), and to assert the importance of politics as a communicative rather than an administrative venture (Dryzek, 1990). Social justice is seen to hinge on expanding the public sphere (Habermas, 1989; Rodger, 1985), on making spaces for us to meet face

to face wherein we can debate and discuss what should be done (Holub, 1991, pp.1-19) and on increasing democratic guidance of the market (Wisman, 1991).

Yet the theory does not prescribe particular institutional forms. In the end, Habermas shrinks back from giving a utopian blueprint for society (Habermas, 1982, p. 251; Benhabib, 1985), for he wants to say that this is up to real participants (Habermas, 1974, p.40; 1992, p.67). Again, he does not tell us *what* to do about the problems we confront. Instead he seeks to indicate some avenues we might fruitfully pursue in order to find out *how* we might decide upon courses of action.

Habermas adheres with great care to this limitation of theory, and he is similarly aware that his approach generates its own iatrogenic effects (Habermas, 1992a, pp.106-109). He knows that what we require in order to make practical judgments is knowledge about the everyday world, and that universal knowledge must be *applied back* to particular situations if it is to be of practical use (Habermas, 1993, pp.35-39; Günther, 1988). Yet we have seen that universal knowledge is always de-contextualized. His treatment for relativism reconstructs a formal ideal, and we should not be surprised, therefore, to find significant difficulties arising when we try to apply the ideal to particular contexts. For this reason, applications so far tend to be highly abstract (Ruane and Todd, 1988), and the theory seems to function better as a guide for our recognition of power distortions than as a method of empirical research.

In sum, Habermas seeks to provide a treatment for relativism which preserves *both* critical power *and* the right to be different. Though his approach moves us into the thorny area of the relation between universal and particular, his defence of a procedural universalism is a powerful one. It may be that his reading of the post-structuralists (Habermas, 1987b, Holub, 1991, pp.133-161) is constrained by his insistence on the possibility of rational action, that we must *do* something. Yet the sheer scale of human suffering we see

around us means we cannot merely throw up our hands and walk away. If relativism cannot help us decide what to do, it is indeed a disease in need of treatment.

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