Habermas and Critical Thinking

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In this paper, I propose to examine some of the implications of Jürgen Habermas's discourse ethics for critical thinking. Since the argument that Habermas presents is complex and multi-dimensional, I will not be able to confront its entirety. Instead, I will briefly summarize the argument and then examine the implications of his standards for reason and communication for education and critical thinking. Critical thinking is also a broad topic with conflicting interpretations. Therefore, I will ground my use of critical thinking in a conception similar to that of Richard Paul's account, which I will also summarize briefly. Given this background, I will argue that Habermas's theory directly confronts the central problem in characterizing critical thinking. The problematic tension in his theory — between the acceptance of profound social differences, and the attempt to ground moral reasoning in universal principles — is also a challenge for critical thinking. Critical thought must be characterized in a way that allows for different subject matter and different methods without sacrificing its usefulness for particular disciplines and diverse learners. I argue that although the requirements that Habermas places on reasoning may need to be broadened to incorporate different kinds of thought, his theory demonstrates the epistemological and ethical need for a general commitment on the part of the thinker to reflect critically on personal and social beliefs.

Before explaining Habermas's theory, it is helpful to place his work in the context of recent social and ethical theories directed at problematizing the Enlightenment. Many philosophers have provided powerful critiques of the way that the Enlightenment's appeal to universal truth and reason in the name of freedom can lead to exclusion and oppression.[1] These writers see themselves bringing to light the false pretensions of traditional conceptions of Truth and Reason. While Habermas acknowledges some of the oppressive tendencies in the Enlightenment tradition that postmodernists address, and rejects transcendental and idealistic accounts of reason, he wants to preserve a conception of reason that will enable the evaluation of social norms.[2] He wants to provide some criteria for the arbitration of moral issues in order to avoid the extreme relativism that a complete renunciation of reason and truth might produce. Yet in order to avoid the pitfalls of traditional theories, Habermas's criteria for reasoning about normative issues must be grounded in historically defined human activity rather than ideal, transcendental systems of rules.

The challenge that Habermas confronts is mirrored in questions surrounding the educational project of critical thinking. Educational theorists have been struggling with the extent to which there is a kind of thinking that can provide insight into a general set of problems. The basic model for this kind of critical thinking is formal logic, where according to a strict set of rules, problems can be solved across a nearly universal range of subject matter. Yet, most theorists now realize that the kind of thinking involved in addressing problems is, at least to some degree, dependent on knowledge about the context where the problems arise. The question then becomes

whether critical thought consists in anything but the use of specialized knowledge in a particular field, or whether, despite dependence on contextual information, critical thinking can contribute generally to the framing and solution of problems. The immense criticism of generalized critical thinking is analogous to the critique of idealized rationality in the Enlightenment tradition. In fact, one could argue that those who promote generalized critical thinking are necessarily employing ideal and universal accounts of reason, abstracted from historical, cultural, or personal influences. Those who want to preserve the usefulness of critical thinking without relying on abstract and idealized categories, therefore, have a stake in Habermas's project.

Habermas attempts to provide criteria for ethical decisions that are grounded in contextually-defined human interaction through his argument for "discourse ethics." Discourse ethics consists essentially of a single abstract principle which underlies the pragmatic requirements of any argument. This central tenet of discourse ethics is that in order for any norm to be considered valid, it must meet the condition that: "all affected can accept the consequences and side effects its *general* observance can be anticipated to have for the satisfaction of *everyone's* interests."[3] This principle is quite straightforward: in order for us to recognize a claim as valid, everyone who could be affected by its adoption must freely accept it. Habermas is obviously employing a different line of reasoning than traditional Enlightenment arguments like that of Kant's which makes no reference to the interests of specific individuals. Nevertheless, this principle is universal like Kant's theory in that a single rule is supposed to apply for all situations regardless of the particularities.

Habermas offers an extremely complex and rich argument in favor of this ultimate moral principle. The most important aspect of this argument is that it is, as Habermas calls it, a "transcendental-pragmatic" argument. Habermas searches for the presuppositions of normal conversations, and in doing so, hopes to find pragmatic requirements that underlie *all* discourse. His method is thus pragmatic in the sense that it turns to the real needs of everyday conversation for its criteria, but it is transcendental in the sense that is directed at finding universal criteria. The presuppositions that Habermas is looking for are not, then, the kind that an individual makes when creating an argument; they are "public" presuppositions that one necessarily makes when engaging in a particular kind of communication. Habermas hopes to derive a universal principle from everyday, contextual requirements of conversation, and thus provide an unshakable grounding for moral claims while avoiding reference to abstract, idealized concepts.[4]

It is important to note that Habermas is concerned with a very particular kind of communication — namely, argumentation — which he defines as the situation where participants "critically examine a hypothetical claim to validity."[5] Habermas, in finding a grounding for the evaluation of ethical claims, is concerned only with conversations where people are discussing whether or not a particular practice is acceptable. He argues that this special kind of conversation has three general levels of presuppositions: the logical level of products, the dialectical level of procedures, and the rhetorical level of processes.[6] First, the logical level of presupposition

concerns the production of cogent, consistent arguments. It requires that speakers avoid contradicting themselves and employ the meanings of expressions consistently. Second, the dialogical or procedural level of presupposition requires that people engaged in discussion about a problematic claim adopt a hypothetical attitude through which they consider the validity of claims regardless of their immediate needs in the situation. This hypothetical attitude requires that the participants in the argument step back from their personal perspective and consider the relevant issues critically. Finally, the rhetorical or process level of presupposition requires that the "structures of the speech situation [be] immune to repression and inequality."[7] Since the kind of argument that Habermas describes requires that agreement be rationally motivated, influences apart from reason cannot interfere with the participants' decisions. When people are forced or tricked into agreeing with the reasons of others, the conversation cannot be considered an argument in the sense that Habermas explains. Therefore, this presupposition about the political context of argumentation requires that participants enter freely, with a genuine sense of equality.

By identifying these essential presuppositions to argumentation, Habermas completes his argument for the universal principle (U). If, whenever discussing a claim to validity, one must follow the rules of logical sense, assume a hypothetical attitude toward the relevant facts, and ensure the free and equal status of all the participants in the dialogue, then Habermas can derive the principle of discourse ethics: a norm is valid only if it meets the free approval of every person that may be affected. For Habermas, a norm is morally justified for a community only if it is agreed upon as a result of a free, rational discussion. With this argument, Habermas appears to have achieved his goal: a universal criterion for evaluating moral claims whose justification is based on the actual, pragmatic needs of people engaged in argument. Habermas's own argument avoids reference to abstract ideals by beginning with presuppositions that he believes to represent the natural intuitions involved in actual arguments.

The last presupposition clearly plays the most important role in his principle with respect to the social and political context of discourse, but the first two reveal the conception of human reason that he sees inherent in the transcendental-pragmatic requirements of argument. In order to understand better the kind of thinking involved in argumentation for Habermas, we must question further the epistemological requirements on the participants in the argument. Potential difficulties emerge for Habermas when we try to discern how people can open themselves to rationally motivated consensus despite their fundamental involvement in social-historical circumstances. Habermas's use of Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development to support his theory provides a fuller picture of the kind of mental work he sees involved in argumentation. Habermas adopts Kohlberg's description of a three stage progression in moral thinking from pre-conventional thinking about punishments and rewards, through conventional thinking about the norms of friends and society, to post-conventional thinking about universal rights and principles.[8] Since Habermas's theory requires that the participants in argument consider only the force of reason by adopting a hypothetical attitude with respect to relevant claims,

Kohlberg's post-conventional stage, in which reasoning according to abstract principles becomes possible, plays an important role in his theory.

Post-conventional thinking is central for Habermas's moral theory because he believes that human knowledge is largely determined by its social-historical circumstances. For Habermas, everyone is a product of their "lifeworld," or the cultural-linguistic traditions in which they participate. The lifeworld defines the norms at issue in any argument: "the shared lifeworld offers a storehouse of unquestioned cultural givens from which those participating in communication draw agreed-upon patterns of interpretation for use in their interpretive efforts."[9] Yet, for Habermas there are three dimensions of the lifeworld: the objective world, which represents facts independent of human thought and serves as a common reference point for determining truth; the social world, comprised of intersubjective relationships; and the subjective world of private experiences. For Habermas, the person who can differentiate between the three aspects of experience and the different perspectives they involve, achieves a "decentered" understanding of the lifeworld. Decentering allows one to distinguish matters of truth, justice, and taste according to the objective, social, and subjective views respectively.[10] Decentering, then, corresponds to Kohlberg's post-conventional moral stage where one is able to transcend personal needs and societal norms to consider moral problems abstractly.

The concept of decentering for Habermas is explained further by his conception of the hypothetical attitude which, as described earlier, is an essential presupposition of his account of genuine argument. With this attitude, one's beliefs about objects, social relations, and private experience can be suspended to the extent that one can consider reasoning about the norm that is at issue. If the participants in the argument cannot, to some degree, leave behind their commitments to certain facts and norms, then they cannot be considered *legitimate* matters for discussion. With this attitude, which is achieved through decentering and suspending conventional beliefs, one can enter an argument prepared to be moved only by reasoning or "the force of the better argument."[11] By dislodging one's self from personal needs, social norms, and prior beliefs, one is equipped to move to rationally motivated consensus about the validity of norms with people who share this attitude.

Yet there seems to be a tension in Habermas's theory surrounding the concept of decentering. On the one hand, Habermas recognizes people as embedded in their personal and social history. On the other, his theory seems to ask that rational and moral people give up these prior commitments and consider them hypothetically when arguing with others about the acceptance of a norm. Yet how far does Habermas think people can go in giving up personal and cultural identities in favor of "the force of reason?" In some places, he is adamant about the historically and culturally defined nature of human action. Habermas sees himself clarifying everyday intuitions that are themselves socialized and historically grounded. He is careful to say that he is not proposing a "sustained objectivity of inter-personal attitude."[12] Although the culturally determined lifeworld is the only background for all thought and communication, Habermas believes that particular issues may become thematized in specific contexts, and that we may take a hypothetical attitude

toward these contextually-defined problems.[13] Though he does not sacrifice the primacy of social-historical contexts in determining our knowledge, he places especially rigorous expectations on individuals within particular contexts to achieve a disinterested perspective. Furthermore, he proposes informal logic as a model for human reasoning, which combines the consideration of substantive content with the requirements of logical validity. By adopting this formal methodology, he believes that participants in argumentation are able to assume the perspectives of everyone else affected by the practice. This universal exchange of roles requires that individuals step outside of their own perspectives to consider the needs of others while attuning themselves to the requirements of logical reasoning. Habermas's commitment to consensus suggests further that this process of "putting yourself in someone else's shoes" can occur in a relatively non-problematic way despite socio-cultural differences.[14]

As previously mentioned, critical thinking theorists are addressing a tension analogous to the one that Habermas confronts. Despite substantive differences, nearly all critical thinking theorists, implicitly or explicitly, invoke concepts similar to "decentering" or the "hypothetical attitude" that Habermas describes. Harvey Siegel describes a "critical spirit" through which thinkers believe in and abide by the "fairminded evaluation of reasons." In order to achieve this spirit, he explains that critical thinkers must be disinterested inquirers, ignoring their personal needs in a given situation.[15] John McPeck, who de-emphasizes reasoning ability in critical thinking, calls for an attitude in which a thinker "reflectively appreciates the strengths and limitations of his own knowledge."[16] In order to assess the strengths and weaknesses of our own ideas, of course, we must step back and view them from other perspectives, invoking an attitude like the one that Habermas suggests. Habermas is thus trying to characterize reasoning in a way that is implicit in the work of critical thinking theorists at very different ends of the debate about generalizability.

Habermas's objectives are, of course, quite different from those of the critical thinking theorists. Habermas wants to provide a foundation for an ethical theory. He is only indirectly interested in deriving an account of reasoning about controversial norms to prove his moral principle. Furthermore, since he is attempting to provide an argument for a universal principle, he must employ extremely rigorous and determinate accounts of the concepts that he uses. Critical thinking theorists, however, are trying to describe a particular kind of thought: thought that is in some way better than everyday thinking. They are trying to describe how critical thinkers avoid common confusions, fallacies, and sophistry. Since they are not trying to derive a principle, their theories need not be as rigorous as Habermas's. Yet, to the extent that Habermas explains the reasoning that is required for a genuine argument, reasoning that avoids common pitfalls such as fallacies and prejudice, he is providing an account of critical thinking. He also provides an argument for the epistemological and ethical necessity of critical thinking, since he sees it as presupposed in the most fundamental structure of human communication. Neverthe-less, Habermas's relevance for critical thinking must be seen in light of his fundamentally different project.

Richard Paul's depiction of critical thinking shares a particularly strong affinity with Habermas's theory of moral reasoning, reflecting further the relevance of Habermas's work for critical thinking while highlighting the problems with his theory. The epistemology in which Paul bases his account of critical thinking coincides with the one that Habermas hopes to preserve. Both see thought as embedded in a social history. Paul uses the concepts "form of life" and "worldview" to explain the way that interests, perceptions, and goals are defined by the groups and activities in which we participate. Forms of life, for Paul, then seem to be what lifeworlds are for Habermas: the cultural background in which we formulate individual expressions, social norms and objective facts about the world. Knowledge for both Paul and Habermas is the product of human goals and interests, rather than idealized objects, independent of human contexts.[17]

Given the socially determined character of knowledge for Paul, he believes that critical thinkers are those who avoid prejudice and bad habits of thought through reflection on themselves and their environment. Since our beliefs may be informed by faulty thinking, whether our own or of those who taught us, Paul explains that: "the best we can do to move toward increased objectivity is to bring to the surface the set of beliefs, assumptions and inferences from the perspective of which our analysis proceeds."[18] Critical thinking involves turning inward to examine one's own interests and the conceivable prejudicial effects they may have on a particular problem. This critical examination applies to personal convictions, but also to the presuppositions of social norms and practices. The search for these presuppositions adds the reflexive element to Paul's theory that is implied in Siegel's critical spirit, McPeck's critical attitude, and Habermas's hypothetical attitude.

Does Paul's critical examination of implicit interests and presuppositions avoid the tension that Habermas's theory faces in asking participants in argument to identify with the others' needs and open themselves to the force of reason? It depends on how we interpret Paul. In his examination of hidden presuppositions, Paul wants to avoid prejudice and faulty habits of thought. Yet, what does he see as the ultimate goal of critical thinking? What does thought without prejudice mean when knowledge is socially constructed? I interpret Paul as rejecting the possibility that critical thinkers could ever achieve a completely objective perspective. When he says, "the best we can do to move toward objectivity," he implies that critical consideration of presuppositions moves away from a preoccupation with one's own interests, but he does not necessarily imply that an ideal objective state of knowing is possible. While implying that critical perspective is possible, Paul does not suggest that a strictly defined hypothetical attitude can be achieved with respect to any particular problem. Arguments, for Paul, are not a special case in conversation where the commitment to validity transcends personal and community interests. For Paul, arguments always "reflect the biased interest of the person who formulated [them]."[19] For Habermas, however, arguments where participants articulate their positions to favor their own interests are not *real* arguments. Habermas requires that all participants adopt a hypothetical attitude and distance themselves from personal and social influences. Without explicitly confronting this issue, Paul implies that the participants in argument cannot completely shed the personal interests that may bias their

own analyses and prevent them from completely identifying with the perspectives of the other participants in the argument. Yet, despite the inherent fallibility of reasoning for Paul, critical thinking is productive in its attempt to bring tacit elements of thought into the realm of consideration and discourse.

Paul does not seem to require as much of critical thinkers as Habermas does of the participants in his form of argumentation, nor does he delineate a clear picture of reasoning. While he says that reasoning is "an essential and defining operation presupposed by all human acts,"[20] he explains that reasoning rarely takes the form of an argument, and that the full implications of reasoning are never manifest in the argument itself. Reasons, justifications, or claims to validity appear to be very broad concepts for Paul. Whether he intends to or not, Paul leaves specific accounts of what reasoning and validity might mean open to interpretation. He shows that comparatively "vague" conceptions of reasoning and critical thought can still serve as a guide to educators despite their open-ended definitions.

Habermas implies a very restricted sense of genuine reasoning. For him, participants in an argument must abide by logical rules, consider social norms and their own beliefs hypothetically, and commit themselves to the free and equal participation of everyone involved. Should critical thinking be applied through these criteria, it would refer to a very restricted domain of human thought. Yet because Habermas's account would make critical thinking infrequent does not necessarily make his view unsatisfactory. Habermas's account of critical thought has normative force since it is derived from the fundamental presuppositions of communication. In this sense, his standards constitute a goal for discursive thought rather than a description. Most critical thinking theorists would agree that critical thought, as a goal, is the exception, not the norm. Even if Habermas's characterization of reasoning and the hypothetical attitude are too strict to preserve social and historical specificity, the normative force of his claim stands: in order to genuinely communicate, one must achieve some sense of critical distance from one's personal position.

In defining reasoning so broadly, and in failing to provide a specific description of validity, Habermas might see Paul as open to the criticisms of relativism. If reasoning or reasons can have different meanings in different contexts, there is no common basis for the resolution of conflicts. In this case, two different ideas about social norms may be incommensurable, with no criteria to give one claim priority over the other. Though this does seem to be a possibility in any theory of moral reasoning like Paul's that does not strictly delineate criteria for validity, Paul's prescription of critical thinking is hopeful. He recognizes room for "movement" toward "objectivity," whatever that may mean. Paul shows that the commitment to decenter, which Habermas argues is essential to all of our discursive thought, can remain meaningful if conceived in an open way.

How can we acknowledge the potential for irreconcilable difference and maintain a commitment to some kind of rationality, however vague? The point of agreement between Habermas's theory and critical thinking theory is also the point of difficulty: decentering and the hypothetical attitude. In order for socially determined difference to be authentically recognized, while still providing the possibility

of agreement, participants in dialogue must move beyond their own perspective. Yet, why does this require replacing all immediate concerns with the exigency of "validity?" Furthermore, can validity have different meanings? If reason and validity are understood more broadly, decentering could take many different forms: listening to a story requires decentering to identify with the characters, interpreting a piece of art requires decentering in order to imagine the artist's intentions, and supporting a friend requires decentering in order to make suggestions for the good of another person. These may not be the kinds of "decentering" that Habermas intended, but they suggest a way of preserving Habermas's commitment to difference. Decentering need not mean radical transcendence of personal needs and social norms, nor need it result in completely disinterested thinkers. Decentering could be, more generally, an openness to the situation of others which, in turn, requires reflection on one's own position. A tendency to try to understand different perspectives does not require *identification* with the interests of "everyone affected" by a norm, nor does it ensure that immediate practical concerns will not color one's thinking. Opening the concept of decentering to more flexible interpretations may sacrifice the sense of certainty that Habermas hoped to achieve, but that conception of certainty may be a false ideal, analogous to Enlightenment conceptions of truth and reason that he wants to avoid.

The rigor and comprehensiveness of Habermas's principle are lost in this broader account of the decentering process. However, the normative strength of his argument can be maintained if one argues that decentering, to some degree, is presupposed in communication and that, as interdependent social beings, we are obligated to struggle to empathize with those who are different from us. With such an obligation to understand others, we must also reflect on our own beliefs. The intuitions that Habermas attempts to describe in his theory are meaningful. Though the rigor of his theory may not do justice to the indeterminate nature of these intuitions and the plurality of voices through which they may be articulated, the possibility of ethical judgments requires some commitment to these intuitions, however flexible and general.

I am suggesting, then, that accounts of critical thinking should focus on decentering in the sense of considering previously unacknowledged presuppositions underlying one's own beliefs and the norms of society. This account is elaborated by Paul, and I have argued that it is supported by Habermas's theory of discourse ethics which shows that there are certain obligations presupposed in communication, including a commitment to decenter from one's social-historical perspective. However, I argue that the decentering process need not be understood as restrictively as Habermas implies. When we view decentering as the examination of worldviews, or the consideration of fundamental and implicit presuppositions, critical thinking as decentering moves thought toward more complete understandings. Given this broader conception of decentering, critical thinkers do not achieve truth or even consensus, but only a richer understanding that will lead, some of the time, to more fruitful communication and to more genuine respect of difference.

Educators must then consider the value that this kind of investigation — that addresses fundamental presuppositions — may have for diverse fields. In doing so,

they may need to challenge the language of informal logic in which critical thinking has traditionally been cast. "Reason," "conclusion," "assumption," and "presupposition" may be an inappropriate vocabulary for investigations in different fields. Paul's less formal account leaves open the possibility for diverse interpretations of what it means to "move toward objectivity," but Paul, himself, does not suggest changes that would push the language of reasoning in new directions.[21] A great deal of work is left to be done in fleshing out new accounts of decentering and imagining the diverse modes through which education can contribute to this process. Within different disciplines, educators must ask what it means to reflect critically or consider underlying issues, and they must also find the best methods for encouraging learners to consider the fundamental interests at work in themselves as well as the subject they are studying. Learners may become critical thinkers by analyzing the fundamental, but usually hidden, issues involved in problems. They will then have a more thorough understanding of the subject matter and, at the same time, an awareness of the contingency of their knowledge, leaving them better prepared to compromise and learn anew. Ideally, they will also develop a habit of considering presuppositions in other subject areas. Though the kind of underlying issues and the ways they are revealed may be very different across varied subjects, the commitment to look beneath the surface and question one's own perspective will hopefully become a habit that transcends these differences.

Though I have suggested that the picture of thinking required in Habermas's discourse ethics may be extreme, and have recommended a broader interpretation of his theory of decentering that may compromise its rigor, I hope to have preserved his general intent. Accounts of critical thinking must struggle to meet Habermas's original goals: they must do justice to a diversity of socially defined perspectives while providing a grounding for the evaluation of controversial problems. If critical thinking is described too loosely, it fails to be a useful concept for educators; but defined too narrowly, it can undermine its own empowering intent by eclipsing valuable ways of thinking. By beginning his argument with the intuitions involved in actual dialogue, Habermas suggests an approach to grounding reason that avoids these extremes, and he shows that a commitment to decenter is a necessary presupposition of genuine communication. Habermas's concept of decentering mirrors many accounts of critical thinking, and engages in a struggle that they both share: the attempt to gain a clarifying perspective in evaluating controversial claims without denying the socially defined character of human beings. By attempting to characterize what it means to decenter and critically reflect on personal and social norms in new and creative ways, I believe that educators and philosophers can address this challenge that reason poses for preserving human difference.

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1. See in particular, Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972).

2. Richard J. Bernstein, *The New Constellation* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 199-226.

3. Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 65.

4. Ibid., 83-84.

5. Ibid., 85.

6. Ibid., 86-94.

7. Ibid., 88.

8. Ibid., 123-25.

9. Ibid., 135.

10. Ibid., 133-41.

11. Ibid., 158-59.

12. Ibid., 48.

13. Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action vol. 2 Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 122-23.

14. Seyla Benhabib suggests several revisions in Habermas's theory to alleviate this tension, such as abandoning the theory's requirement on consensus. See Seyla Benhabib, "In the Shadow of Aristotle and Hegel," in *Situating the Self* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

15. Harvey Siegel, "Education and the Fostering of Rationality," in *Critical Reasoning in Contemporary Culture*, ed. Richard Talaska (Albany: State University of New York Press), 90.

16. John E. McPeck, *Teaching Critical Thinking* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 16.

17. Richard W. Paul, "Teaching Critical Reasoning in the Strong Sense: Getting Behind Worldview," in Talaska, *Critical Reasoning in Contemporary Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 141-43.

18. Ibid., 142-44.

19. Ibid., 145.

20. Ibid., 143.

21. My reading of Paul is restricted to the article above and so I am not in a position to say whether he as accomplished this project in his larger and more recent works.