

Jürgen Habermas: Communicative Reason

“There is no pure reason [...] Reason is of its nature always an incarnate reason imbedded in complexes of communicative action and in structures of the lived-in world.”

(Jürgen Habermas, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*, Frankfurt/Main 1985, p. 374)

“Between the two World Wars, the founding fathers of the Frankfurt School, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, developed a critical theory of society aimed at an unconditional identification and analysis of the destructive forces within social development. The original impulse came from the Frankfurter Institute of the Social Sciences, where the question was posed, how can one develop a critical and practice-oriented social science without losing sight of a societal perspective.

In the wake of Fascism and Stalinism and of the mass murders in World War II, Horkheimer and Adorno realized that practical reason had been instrumentalized in such a way as to forfeit its claim of enlightenment both on the theoretical and the practical level and thus had led to a return to barbarity. Auschwitz and Hiroshima stand as symbols of this *dialectic of the enlightenment*, which no longer holds forth a perspective for progressive social improvement. Ever since Marx, ethics has been regarded as either being meaningless or as reflecting only the morality of those in power in society. Thus Horkheimer and Adorno put little faith in practical rationality as a means of resolving social problems in an age of human catastrophes.

Nevertheless, the claim of their theory to refuse being put to the service of the powerful and to bring to light the truth hidden in suffering remains essentially ethical, despite its abandoning the idea of social action. When, in the face of the gulags and mass murders, all efforts to make the world more human fail, critical thinking can at least continue positively to pursue enlightenment about enlightenment. [...]

Jürgen Habermas, born in Düsseldorf in 1929, distanced himself from this pessimistic concept of his predecessors. He habilitated under Wolfgang Abendroth in Marburg in 1961 and became professor in Frankfurt am Main in 1964. From 1971 to 1980 he headed the Max-Planck-Institut in Starnberg. In 2001 he was awarded the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade Organization. Habermas took up once again the

original intention of the critical theory of the 1920's, namely the question of how to do social research with a practical, reform-oriented perspective. For Habermas, the critique of reason, since Nietzsche in particular, has failed to grasp what Karl-Otto Apel has called the communicative content of reason and thus it has lost sight of the real conditions constitutive for living together in society.

In its communicative form, reason unfolds a social practice in solidarity, both in the form of historical tradition and in the form of concretely bringing forth the particular conditions of the lived-in world. In this way, human living together can be rationally organized. Thus Habermas holds fast to a rational perspective of emancipation, combining communicative reason, the product of the idea of freedom, with solidarity, combining liberalism and socialism, Kant and Marx. For Habermas, as for Apel, reason unfolds ethically in language, developing the structures of acting for the sake of communication. The normative content of the modern age reveals itself in the communicative, ethical perspective of a reason, which is based on structures of speech. Speech connects human beings with each other and addresses communicatively the interpersonal situation. How do we learn to live with each other? We do so by listening to the powers latent in language.”¹

“Arguments can and should convince, without violence, but naturally only under the conditions of cooperative communication, when human beings inter-subjectively relate and mutually recognize each other, i.e. by accepting the common structures that make communication possible. In Habermas' way of thinking, a global ethic would find both its basis and its limitations in such structures. Otherwise – when namely the representatives of different cultures refuse to recognize each other as persons each having his/her own dignity – claims to power will distort the situation and prevent a reasonable conversation. This manifests itself then as a lack of communication-oriented, practical reason.”²

¹ Hans-Martin Schönherr-Mann, *Weltethos in philosophischer Perspektive*, Munich 2008, p. 197–199.

² *Ibid.*, p. 201.