The Politics of Fulfilment and Transfiguration

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Seyla Benhabib’s *Critique, Norm, and Utopia* is, without doubt, the most philosophically acute and learned history of the critical theory of society yet to be written. Because the intentions of Benhabib’s work are systematic rather than historical, her history is equally a major contribution to critical theory which will, I am sure, prove to be a powerful focus and catalyst for future research.

Benhabib subtitles her work ‘A Study in the Foundations of Critical Theory’. Her point of departure is the now familiar aporia of Adorno and Horkheimer’s totalising critique:

If the plight of the Enlightenment and of cultural rationalization only reveals the culmination of the identity logic, constitutive of reason, then the theory of the dialectic of Enlightenment, which is carried out with the tools of this very same reason, perpetuates the very structure of domination it condemns (p. 169).

For Adorno and Horkheimer this aporia belongs not to their theory but to modernity. For Habermas however it marks the place where the question of foundations must be resurrected and answered anew in terms of language and communication. Benhabib’s study conceives the question, and at least the form of Habermas’s response. What distinguishes her study is its subjection of Habermas’s Kantian inspired communication theory to an Hegelean critique.

As she admits, her conclusion amounts to something of a ‘belated vindication’ of one of the central insights of early critical theory. My contention shall be that Benhabib’s final vision requires more than her admittedly large concessionary nod to early critical theory. In order to sustain her remarkably bold and compelling vision she will have to take on board the core of Habermas’s theory of non-identity. Indeed, precisely through her desire to avoid the impasses of Adorno’s philosophy, her austere presentation of the shortcomings of Habermas’s theory amounts to the fullest vindication of Adorno yet to appear.

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* The Philosophy of the Subject
Throughout *Critique, Norm, and Utopia* Benhabib deploys and develops a subtle and elaborate theoretical apparatus with which she interrogates her chosen authors. Central to this theoretical scheme is what Benhabib calls ‘the philosophy of the subject’. Benhabib isolates four presuppositions as being constitutive of this philosophy: (i) a unitary model of activity based upon Hegel’s phenomenological conceptualisation of labour; (ii) the model of a transsubjective subject; (iii) history as the story of transsubjectivity; and (iv) the ultimate or inner identity of constituted and constituting subjectivity (p. 54). Each of the components of this model possesses a comprehensible and often sound theoretical motive. The rationale behind the development of (i), the dialectical model of transformative activity which is world and self spiritualizing/humanizing, is too well-known to bear repeating.

Two thoughts underlie (ii). On the one hand, it was obvious to Hegel that natural right theories tended to project into the state of nature images of reason derived from their understanding of their own concrete historical experience. It hence became necessary to recognize that reason was not an ultimate term of analysis or a raw given, but a historically conditioned product. On the other hand, however, it was equally obvious that reason tended to forget or repress its historical and social situatedness, and to regard itself as naturally or metaphysically transcendent to the work of history. Since reason was not, at bottom, ‘in the head’ anyway, but rather manifest in complex social practices, and could only be perceived from the perspective of an outside observer-thinker, it looked plausible to regard the ‘object’ observed as ‘the’, transsubjective, subject. Once this thought is harnessed together with (i), (iii) and (iv) follow quite unproblematically.

Now in almost none of the writings Benhabib considers does the model of a collective, singular subject that exteriorizes itself and subsequently reappropriates what it has been exteriorized operate in isolation from a contrasting perspective. We get an idea of what is involved in this contrasting perspective if we examine Benhabib’s suggestion that throughout *Capital* two strands of analysis, corresponding to two distinct social epistemologies, are followed. The first perspective is interpersonal, considering individuals as always enmeshed in complex social relations with other individuals. Corresponding to this participant perspective is a crisis theory which presents crises as ‘lived’ phenomena of
alienation, exploitation, and injustice' (p. 123). The second perspective, implying the philosophy of the subject, views the movement of capital from the perspective of a third, of a thinker-observer. Corresponding to this perspective there is a crisis theory which regards crises as the failure of the functional logic of the system. Benhabib theorizes these two perspectives in terms of Lockwood's now familiar distinction between social integration and system integration. System integration takes place through the 'functional interconnection between the consequences of social actions' (p. 127). Adam Smith's concept of the 'invisible hand' and Hegel's account of the 'system of needs' can serve as adequate models for what is at issue here. Social integration requires the coordination of social actions, and this occurs through the harmonizing of action orientations. Individuals can orient their actions to one another because, Benhabib says, 'they understand the meanings, social rules, and values in question' (ibid.). What is required here is not an act of dissolution, but rather a workable account of how these perspectives can be mediated.

Nonetheless, it is no accident that the system perspective has come to dominate since, in the first instance, it was not the theorist who objectified, reified interpersonal activity but capital itself. The logic of capital works behind the backs of the agents of capital, and its comprehension therefore necessarily invokes the perspective of the thinker-observer. Since the philosophy of the subject is precisely that it brackets and then, forgetfully, dissolves interpersonal experience in the objectifying gaze of the thinker-observer. What is required here is not an act of dissolution, but rather a workable account of how these perspectives can be mediated.

These perspectives, of course, are the social equivalents of the traditional philosophical distinctions between first and third person, agent and spectator, inside and outside perspectives, and are as irremovable, discordant and recalcitrant to easy reconciliation as they are. To her credit, Benhabib never suggests that this duality can be dissolved. On the contrary, her critique of the philosophy of the subject is precisely that it brackets and then, forgetfully, dissolves interpersonal experience in the objectifying gaze of the thinker-observer. What is required here is not an act of dissolution, but rather a workable account of how these perspectives can be mediated.

Now if, on the one hand, we consider the occluded value-producing agents of capital to be 'the proletariat'; and, on the other hand, consider defetishizing critique as analyzing theoretical versions of everyday forms of social consciousness with reference to a future actuality, where that actuality is cashed out in terms of systematic crises (the falling rate of profit, unemployment, et al), then it again becomes quite natural to put into operation the discourse of the philosophy of the subject. According to Benhabib, Marx's critique of Hegel in the 1844 Manuscripts is not a rejection of this model, but a 'materialistic' continuation of Hegel's discovery (p. 21), wherein Marx 'simply replaced "Spirit" with "mankind" or "humanity"' (p. 54). Again, the deployment of defetishizing critique in Capital is more nuanced. It presupposes only that the categories of political economy are theoretically refined versions of the social discourse it is theorizing. Political economy handles these socially given categories as if they were natural, and as a consequence 'fails to uncover the social constitution of its own object domain' (p. 108).

Benhabib distinguishes between immanent and defetishizing critique; and between categorial and normative critique. Immanent critique has its origin in Hegel's critique of natural right theories. Hegel proceeds by demonstrating how the accepted definitions and significations of the categories of political economy turn into their opposites without the intervention of a separate categorial framework. For example, 'if capital is defined as self-expanding value, and if the reason for the increase in the value of capital is sought in the sphere of the exchange of commodities, then either the exchange of commodities violates the principle of equivalence or the self-expansion of the value of capital becomes unintelligible' (p. 106). However, immanent critique can also be normative, when the categories of the political economist are normative. In this case critique involves comparing the norms of bourgeois society - e.g., 'Freedom, Equality, Property, and Bentham' - with 'the actuality of the social relations in which they are embodied' (p. 107). Normative immanent critique thus reveals the apparently a priori norms of experience to be distorting, albeit factual, appearance forms of the social relations they help to articulate.

Defetishizing critique has its origin in Hegel's reinterpretation of self-reflection as involving the recuperation of the historical and social conditions which have produced the self. Once this position is articulated with the labour model of activity, defetishizing critique can be read as the critical motive for and consequence of the philosophy of the subject. According to Benhabib, Marx's critique of Hegel in the 1844 Manuscripts is not a rejection of this model, but a 'materialistic' continuation of Hegel's discovery (p. 21), wherein Marx 'simply replaced "Spirit" with "mankind" or "humanity"' (p. 54). Again, the deployment of defetishizing critique in Capital is more nuanced. It presupposes only that the categories of political economy are theoretically refined versions of the social discourse it is theorizing. Political economy handles these socially given categories as if they were natural, and as a consequence 'fails to uncover the social constitution of its own object domain' (p. 108).

Finally, the model of self-actualiza-
tion operative in the philosophy of the subject assumes 'an epistemologically transparent self, who seems to possess un-equivocal knowledge for determining what would 'actualize' him/her' (p. 137). As such, it suppresses the very situatedness, the context-boundness which characterizes interpersonal existence.

As mentioned above, throughout her account of the domination of the illicit model of the philosophy of the subject in Hegel and Marx, Benhabib etches a counter-story of the interpersonal situation of the philosophy of the subject assumes 'an 'him/her' (p. 137). As such, it suppresses the very situatedness, the dimensions of Hegel's sensuous finitude in the 1844 Manuscripts, and in the historical chapters of Capital. What is important here is not simply the existence of another perspective, but the fact that it entails a different account of human emancipation. Roughly, in accordance with the model of the philosophy of the subject, emancipation amounts to the fulfillment of the possibilities and potentialities of the present. However, in accordance with the model of interpersonal, communicative relations, emancipation involves the qualitative transformation of our needs, pleasures, and self-understanding; in short, it conceives of emancipation as transfiguration.

With these elements before us we can now, quickly, anticipate the predicament of contemporary critical theory. Given its historical situation, early critical theory was led to deny that there were any potentials in the bourgeois world worth fulfilling. On the contrary, it looked to Horkheimer and Adorno as if enlightened reason and the philosophy of the subject had already and disastrously been fulfilled in Nazi Germany. However, since they accepted the Hegelian critique of the a priori, then there were no norms, immanent or transcendent, on which they could base their critique. Emancipation as fulfillment was hence not a live option for them. Habermas attempts to re-ground critique by displacing the philosophy of the subject with a theory of communicative action, which will simultaneously salvage the emancipatory potential of the enlightenment conception of bourgeois rights and self-reflection. Surprisingly, then, communicative interaction becomes the ground for a defusifying, normative critique which operates with a logic of emancipation as fulfillment. In a sense, Habermas's theory draws what had been the transfigurative moment of Marxism back into the enlightenment developmental scheme. This programme, however, can only be carried out through a surreptitious continuation otherwise of the discourse of the philosophy of the subject, and through the restriction of emancipation to fulfillment.

Hegel v Habermas

From nearly the beginning of his career Habermas has been axious to argue that the growth of Western rationality does not entail a loss of freedom. On the contrary, if we can categorically distinguish technical from communicative rationality, then we can demonstrate that there is an emancipatory potential in communicative rationality which the technization of society brought about through capital expansion and the altered role of the state in the post-war period has suppressed. For Habermas 'the constituenkts of cultural modernity - decentration, reflexivity, and the differentiation of value spheres - are binding criteria of rationality' (p. 254). The emancipation of society would involve the fulfillment of these criteria.

Benhabib considers Habermas' claim for the bindingness of communicative rationality as resting on three claims, each of which she rejects.

(1) Habermas claims for communicative rationality a quasi-transcendental status based on a rational reconstruction of the anonymous rule systems or deep structures underlying cognition and action. More precisely, he claims that the criteria of communicative rationality are the results of a non-reversible or developmental process of social learning or evolution whose compelling logic is under-written by the quasi-empirical reconstrucrive sciences of cognitive psychology, genetic epistemology and generative linguistics. Against Habermas's claim for the quasi-transcendental status of communicative rationality it has been argued that he presupposes that there is just one correct explication of linguistic competence, etc., ignoring the fact that for each of the phenomena he considers there are competing explanatory frameworks (p. 266). This entails dropping the uniqueness claim associated with transcendental arguments generally; and from this it follows that the line separating reconstructive narrative from hermeneutical narrative may not exist.

(2) Communicative rationality, with its insistence on the validation of claims through argumentative procedures, correctly captures the growing 'reflectiviness' characteristic of the cultural tradition of modernity. How could such reflexivity not be binding for us? Notoriously, however, as the whole of Habermas's evolutionary schema suggests, this claim simply begs the question when faced with the claims of other cultures, cultures which do not share our penchant for reflexivity and argumentation. Habermas, in fact, is not averse to offering to the critical theorist a privileged epistemic situation from which he can judge the comparative 'health' or 'sickness' of different societies:

If we do not wish to renounce altogether standards of judging a form of life to be more or less misguided, distorted, unfortunate, or alienated, if it is really necessary the model of sickness and health presents itself.

(3) Finally, Habermas claims for communicative reason an existential irrevocability. For him, the development of scientism, universalistic morality and post-audric art represent "irreversible developments, which have followed an internal logic", and which could be reversed only at the cost of regressions (p. 276). This contention is deeply reminiscent of speculative philosophies of history, where the 'normal' future is already latent in the present. Not only does such a thesis provide history with a closed logic, but it regards the fulfillment of the legacy of modernity in theoretical rather than practical terms. As Benhabib states: 'The question here is: does such a demand for fulfillment of modern reason project the image of a future we would like to make our own?' (p. 277). And here one wants to say: Habermas has denied
that we can have such a question (without being irrational or mad). This is not to deny that the standpoint of modernity and the norms of communicative rationality are in some sense binding for us. Benhabib’s contention is only that this binding is cultural and contingent, not trans-historical and logical, and hence the binding itself can always be brought into question.

Benhabib’s account of Habermas’s programme for a communicative ethics, which draws from the ideas of communicative rationality the presupposition of an ideal speech situation embedded in all discursive argumentation, is, disconcertingly, simultaneously compulsively sympathetic and astutely critical. Habermas’s thesis is now familiar: discourses are forms of speech which rationally examine controversial claims concerning truth and normative rightness that have arisen in the course of ordinary communication. The ‘ideal speech situation’ specifies the ‘formal properties that discursive argumentations would have to possess if the consensus thus attained were to be distinguished from a mere compromise or an agreement of convenience’ (p. 284). These divide into a two-part symmetry condition and a two-part reciprocity condition. The symmetry condition states that each participant must have an equal chance to initiate and continue dialogue; and an equal chance to make assertions, recommendations, etc. The reciprocity condition states that all participants must have an equal chance to express their wishes, feelings, etc; and they must act as if, in action contexts, systematic domination was not a feature of their relations with others. It must be noted here how strong the reciprocity condition is. It not only requires honesty and sincerity (a dubious social virtue?), along with, I think, by implication the non-existence of self-deception, but further makes essential reference to action contexts where inequality and subordination of a systematic kind can play no part.

Initially Benhabib considers the now standard objections to Habermas’s programme. As we have already seen, the attempt to provide a strong justification, which would ground a communicative ethic on the fundamental norms of rational speech through the establishment of a quasi-transcendental connection between the structures of rational speech and a communicative ethic must fail. Other arguments against Habermas suggest that his theory is circular; that it presupposes a richer semantic content than the symmetry and reciprocity conditions in general entail; and that once we reach the stage of universalist moral orientation, the formal criteria demarcating that orientation (impartiality, universalizability, etc.) are no longer sufficient to arbitrate between competing moral theories. Habermas now contends, following Apel, that the relation between argumentative speech and communicative ethics is neither deductive nor inductive, but rather invokes the idea of a performative contradiction. That is, the sceptic who doubts that validity claims can be settled through rational argumentation immediately gets involved in a performative contradiction. This shows that the ideal is ‘unavoidable’ and ‘uncircumventable’.

It is at this juncture that Benhabib reformulates the Hegelian objections to Kantian moral theory so as to be applicable to Habermas’s revised communicative ethic. Hegel raised three essential objections: (i) the objection to Kantian formalism; (ii) the institutional objection that Kantian theory illicitly abstracts from the functional interdependency of practices; (iii) the objection to Kantian moral psychology that it falsely contrasts reason and emotion, disallowing the formative capacities of reason. Benhabib’s reformulation of these objections follows Hegel’s pattern of argumentation.

(i) Habermas’s discursive, procedural reinterpretation of Kant’s categorical imperative states that a maxim is morally valid only if it can be agreed to be a universal norm following the procedures of rational argumentation. This thesis is weaker than Kant’s since it does not seem to be able to prohibit a group from consenting to a principle which entails the violation of that principle. Habermas attempts to circumvent this objection by claiming that the principle of universalizability belongs among the pragmatic presuppositions of argumentation, and thus cannot be materially violated without (a pragmatic) contradiction. However, as Benhabib demonstrates in a careful analysis, this reveals the principle of universalizability to be, as Hegel would have it, either redundant or inconsistent. Benhabib states:

Either this principle explicates the meaning of rational consent in such a way that nothing new is added to the available explication of the argumentation procedure in practical discourse; or this principle defines the meaning of rational consent in some additional way, but this definition is neither the only one compatible with accepted rules of argumentation, nor can it be said to follow from the rules of argumentation without the introduction of additional assumptions not belonging to the specified rules of argument (p. 308).

(ii) The question of the institutional bases of communicative ethics asks this question: Does Kantian moral theory have a privileged object domain, namely, the domain of legal and jurisdictional relations between individuals, but remain blind to other forms of relationships: familial (which is, of course, also jurisdictional), erotic, fraternal and the like? This would be so if, where there are conflicting interests, participants could legitimately come to an agreement while simultaneously refusing either (a) to forgo any of their own interests or (b) to consider changing the form of life which generated those interests in the first place. And this would be so if general interests were defined, Rawlsianly and minimally, as ‘not taking an interest in each others interest’ (p. 311). Accepting this has the undesirable consequence of letting our form of life in which the pursuit of happiness is defined in terms of the private consumption of material goods remain unquestioned, and reducing the rules of justice to rules for regulating commercial warfare. In short, if these conditions obtain, then the universalist ethical position is exhausted by a legal/juridical construction.

On this matter, Benhabib contends that, while Habermas does have a participatory democratic aspect to his thought which would entail the promotion of (a) and (b) (that is, an aspect which results in the process of argumentation as capable of transforming given interests and questions the forms of life in which given interests are generated), he fails to adequately appreciate the problem. He consequently vacillates between a legal/juridical conception of universalizability, indistinguishable from assorted other such versions, and a radical democratic conception which would see universalizability as procedurally generating radical social transformations.

(iii) Since communicative ethics does not Kantianly distinguish between duty and inclination, Benhabib reformulates the Hegelian objection to Kantian moral psychology through this question:

Does the cognitivist bias of communicative ethics also lead to the rationalistic fallacy, namely, to a view of reason as a self-generating faculty, determining both the conditions of its own genesis and application? (p. 317)

Benhabib contends that this question must be answered in the affirmative for three reasons. First, what may be called the Gadamer objection states that the ideal of a rational consensus can only be relevant when it is an ideal consciously striven for in a particular culture. But this culturally concrete ideal assumes, amongst those using it, a reconciled intersubjectivity; after all, rational consensus inscribes part of the integrity of their form of
life. However, for those who feel that the reconciled intersubjective- 
tivity of the culture has been produced at their expense, it might be 
mentally legitimate to refuse to participate in the rational consensus 
game until it appears to be materially applicable to them.

Secondly, Habermas insists on distinguishing moral justification 
from questions of contextualization or application. But this 
cludes the question of moral judgment. If we consider moral 
ment a question of (social) character, then this elision entails 
a question mark as to what it might mean concretely to embody the 
pecies of communicative rationality. In short, the question of 
application cannot be regarded as wholly independent from the 
question of justification, for until we know what will count as a 
proper application of the principle we know far too little. The point 
here is not that we require a formalism to specify its conditions of 
lication. It is rather that the meaning of the formalism itself is 
only revealed fully through its concrete embodiment.

These two objections together yield the third objection, 
ally that Habermas provides insufficient motivation for pursu-
ng rational argument. Habermas states, following Hegel, that 
reason can become a fact only if it shapes and transforms desire:

The desirability of reason entails the rationality of desire. 
Reason that refuses to heed inner nature and the 
ividual's demand for happiness and fulfillment can lose 
its motivating power (p. 324).

But is not this to say that reason can motivate us to justice only if 
happiness too is promised? Not for nothing did Hegel regard 
Kant's 'Postulates of Pure Practical Reason' as the exposed and 
vulnerable core of the Kantian programme.

Desires: Public or Private

Benhabib summarizes her critique of Habermas's communicative 
 ethic by reiterating the objection encapsulated in the passage from 
her quoted above: either Habermas's theory is too empty and/or 
formal to be morally informative, or it requires additional assump-
tions that can not be justified in the theory's own terms. Benhabib 
relentlessly tracks down the source of this difficulty in Habermas's 
continuation of the discourse of the philosophy of the subject. This 
occurs at those points in his theory when the reconstruction of our 
species competences becomes a 'formative history of the subject 
of history' (p. 331). Habermas's procedure assumes that the 
standpoint of the reconstruction is the standpoint of mankind as 
such. Not only does this procedure construct the 'we' of the 
present theoretically, but in so doing neutralizes real history into a 
'semantic gloss on a structural process which proceeds with 
necessity and invariably from one sequence to the next' (p. 331).

Further, as already noted, even if we grant that evolutionary 
argument takes us to the standpoint of a post-conventional, 
iversalistic morality, such a theory is useless in arbitrating between 
competing universalistic theories and positions. Since the future 
is not theoretically determined, the application and contextuali-
tion of the theory for the sake of the future cannot be worked in 
thoretical terms. Or better, the application of theory cannot be 
made from the position of the third, the thinker-observer.

Now there is an aspect or moment of Habermas's theory which 
pushes in this direction, namely, his addition to Kohlberg's schema 
of moral development of a stage of universalizable need interpre-
tations. The significance of such a thesis is not far to seek, for it 
contravenes the privacy of human desire presupposed by most 
deontological ethical theories. As Benhabib boldly states the 
issue:

To want to draw this aspect of a person's life (i.e., their 
needs, desires, and feelings about things - JMB) into 
public-moral discourse would interfere with their auton-
omy, i.e., with their right to define the good life as they 
please as long as this does not impinge on others' rights to 
do the same (p. 332).

Habermas backs the requirement for this stage with the relatively 
uncontentious thought that needs, desires and the like are always 
already socially mediated, and in that sense not private; and that 
the grammatical logic of the term 'I' reveals that the use of the term 
by a unique subject involves a recognition of other such subjects 
to hold this position. One becomes an 'I' only in a community with 
other subjects who are also 'I's.

It is at this juncture that Benhabib transforms the Habermasian 
discourse into her own. Benhabib claims that needs and their 
interpretations can only be discursively thematized if the cultural 
traditions and practices, the semantic content of which defines the 
good life and happiness, are thematized. But this will reveal, and 
subject to interpretation and critique, that our idea of justice itself 
rests upon a certain understanding of needs. When such an 
interpretable search is pressed, it reveals the non-detachability of 
conceptions of justice and the good life. And while this says 
nothing we already knew, namely, that the idea of a public 
discourse of rights and entitlements as capturing the highest stage 
of moral development secretes the idea of a good life as something 
to be sought in private (and, I suspect, a good deal more, e.g., a 
vaporization of intimacy, individuality, personal growth, etc.), it 
goes further. For the insistence that universalizable need interpre-
tations move into the centre of moral discourse is not simply a 
further evolution of the perspective of rights and entitlements, it 
entails a 'utopian break' with it; it involves a fundamental 'trans-
figuration' of the perspective of universalistic moral theory.

This is the 'belated vindication' of early critical theory I men-
tioned at the outset. What I want to argue is that Benhabib's brief 
flashing out of the politics of transfiguration in fact requires more 
of the resources of early critical theory than she recognizes, 
and hence a more sympathetic reading of it than she, under 
the influence of Habermas, offers. I shall discuss these problems 
under three rubrics: the question of the separation of the spheres 
of value; the question of non-identity; and the question of the 
political.

Art, or the Politics of Desire

Habermas labels the forms of discourse in which our need 
interpretations are thematized, and whose semantic content de-
fines happiness and the good life, 'aesthetic-expressive'. This, of 
course, coheres with the idea that the good life is a (semi-)private 
affair, that is non-universalizable and culturally specific, and 
hence outside the bounds of either truth or morality. Benhabib 
contends that this distinction between the normative and the 
aesthetic-expressive does not do justice to the significance of 
needs and their interpretations in the moral realm. One can only 
read Habermas's preservation of this distinction as an attempt to 
protect the purity of the moral realm; and this appears to prohibit 
Habermas from making good his critique of theories of justice 
which do not extend to a critique of consumerism, and possessive-
individualist modes of life. Benhabib goes on to note that there is 
a continuing vacillation in Habermas between a model of com-
munity as one of rights and entitlements, and a model of commu-
nity as formed through needs and solidarity.

Benhabib states that Habermas has failed to adequately thema-
tize the idea of a community of needs and solidarity because, 
following Mead, 'he assumes the standpoint of the "generalized 
other", of rights and entitlements to represent the moral view par 
excellence' (p. 339). Now while Benhabib's point has real force,
as I shall say more about in the next section, it moves too quickly past the issue of Habermas's acceptance of the separation of spheres of value, the separation between the discourses of truth, right, and beauty, represents an unassailable and irreversible accomplishment of modernity. What is ironic here is that, although Benhabib has been brought to the pitch of doubting this thesis because of the now evident lacuna in the post-conventional, universalistic standpoint which traces the idea of a community of rights and entitlement, she fails to draw the obvious conclusion that the historical institution and material inscription of this standpoint requires the prohibition on universalistic need interpretations, and hence the autonomy and independence of aesthetic-expressive discourse, i.e., art, for its maintenance. This exclusion of need interpretations, and the consequent marginalization/autonomisation of art echoes the substantial exclusion/marginalization of persons (alias the proletariat) which conditions the reconciled intersubjectivity of the bourgeois, liberal state. It is because these exclusions are, however obliquely, in the mode of a mutual conditioning, 'the same', that autonomous art became for Adorno a politically privileged object for social critique.

Because she has failed to see that the point of Adorno's focus on autonomous art is to critique the extrusion of need interpretations from morality and social understanding, she is led to make three false claims concerning Adorno's theory: first, that the theory of non-identitary reason, a reason which would not (violently) subsume particulars under universals, conceives of such a reason as essentially non-discursive (p. 170); secondly, that in Adorno 'poiesis, becomes not praxis but poetics' (p. 220); and thirdly, that the destruction of objective reason is irrevocable (p. 215).

Adorno does not claim that either language or conceptuality are intrinsically identitary, and that therefore a relation to the other which does not linguistically or discursively dominate must be non-discursive. On the contrary, he contends that non-identity is 'opaque only for identity's claim to be total' (ND, p. 153); and in The Dialectic of Enlightenment he attempts to reveal how this claim became materially and historically dominant. It is only for us, now, that non-identitary truth remains non-discursive. Any attempt to discursively cash out the truth claim of an (autonomous) work of art will be subject to the now suppressive logic of identity thinking. Autonomous art's resistance to the claims of discursive reason as it now exists, and its nonetheless continuing, albeit conditioned and contingent, claim on us, is its critique of autonomous truth and purified, formal and procedural morality. Benhabib conflates the critical, non-discursive illusion of truth in autonomous art with the idea of non-identitary reason itself.

This explains why she thinks that Adorno reduces praxis to poetics. Again, autonomous artistic practice is not itself praxis, anymore than it is a realization of non-identitary reason. Rather, such practice presents the image of true praxis, but as an image it is still confined to the illusory world of art. Such a world is illusory because its practice is neither truly transformative nor truly, fully, cognitively meaningful. Adorno does not think that true praxis would be poietical practice set free into experience, whatever such might mean. Rather, true praxis would be transformative activity and cognition practised without the exclusion of aesthetic-expressive considerations. To claim, as Benhabib does, that for Adorno 'non-sacrificial non-identity is not a social ideal, but an aesthetic one' (p. 211) seems to me to exactly miss the whole point of the function of aesthetic theory within Adorno's critical programme.

The 'hinge of negative dialectics' (namely, 'to change [the] direction of conceptuality, to give it a turn toward nonidentity (ND, p. 12)) is embodied in the social practice of autonomous art where form, the artistic equivalent of conceptuality, 'mobilizes technology in a different direction than domination does' (AT, p. 80). If the truth claim of autonomous art is valid -- and remember Adorno believes that 'Art works are true in the medium of determinate negation only' (AT, p. 187) -- then objective reason is possible. Of course, such an objective reason would not have the articulation of truth, beauty and goodness grounded in either nature or some transcendent source. The ground of a new objective reason would have to be the solidarity of its communal carriers. What would further make such reason objective is that it would not 'rigidly' juxtapose 'rationality and particularity' (AT, p. 144); and it would equally be ends and not means rational:

In the eyes of existing rationality, aesthetic behaviour is irrational because it casts the particularity of this rationality in its pursuit not of ends but of means. Art keeps alive the memory of ends-oriented reason. It keeps alive the memory of a kind of objectivity which lies beyond conceptual frameworks. That is why art is rational, cognitive. Aesthetic behaviour is the ability to see more in things than they are (AT, p. 453).

The Concrete Other and Non-Identity

As noted above, Benhabib regards Habermas's failure to thematize the idea of a community of needs and solidarity as following from his adoption of Mead's conception of the standpoint of the 'generalized other', the standpoint of rights and entitlements, as representing the fulfillment of the moral point of view. Adopting the standpoint of the generalized other involves abstracting from the concrete individuality and identity of the other, which allows us thereby to treat this other, and hence all others, as equal rational beings who are entitled to the same rights and duties as we would wish to ascribe to ourselves. On this account, the moral dignity of an individual derives not from what differentiates them from all others, but from what, as a speaking and acting agent, they have in common with all others. Within such a scheme our relations to others are governed, for the most part, by public and institutional rules obeying the norms of formal reciprocity.

In opposition or contrast with this Benhabib proposes the standpoint of the 'concrete other'. This standpoint requires us to view each and every rational being as an individual with a concrete history, identity, and affective-emotional constitution. Our relation to each other is governed by the norm of complementary reciprocity; each is entitled to expect
This standpoint, Benhabib states, has been silenced, even suppressed by the liberal political tradition.

Clearly Benhabib believes that the standpoint of the concrete other corresponds to the general requirement for the universalizability of need interpretations; or better, that we cannot think such a universalizability unless we are willing to publicly, as it were, include the standpoint of the concrete other. Further, however, we have already seen that Benhabib regards the standpoint of universalizable need interpretations as what separates critical theory from other universalistic moralities, i.e., from liberal moral and political theories. From this it would follow that whatever grounds this standpoint grounds critical theory. However, Benhabib introduces this standpoint via Habermas's adding of it to the Kohlbergian scheme after having demonstrated that this scheme, as it figures in Habermas's theory, is not, and cannot be, rationally compulsive. At best, again, the denial of the universalist stage of the scheme involves a pragmatic contradiction. But this should not be regarded as overly significant since a pragmatic contradiction will ensue from the denial of any 'foundational' belief within a cultural tradition; e.g., if all meaning comes from God, then the denial of God's existence pragmatically contradicts itself.

Within our tradition, however, no pragmatic contradiction is involved in our denying the universalizability of need interpretations. This apparently leaves critical theory without a rational, normative foundation; and hence puts Benhabib in a position not significantly different from the position in which Adorno and Horkheimer found themselves. But this should not be surprising since, if the formal universalistic reason of our tradition excludes universalizable need interpretations, and the motivation for securing reason relies on the promise of happiness, then we cannot regard the ideal of the formation of communities of need and solidarity as a rational supplement to the model of a community of rights and entitlements. That is, if the standpoint of the generalized other stands to the standpoint of the concrete other as third person, observer accounts of our moral-political situation stand to a participatory perspective, and the former perspective has been established and consolidated through its exclusion of the latter, then 'our' position is like those members of a tradition who feel that its reconciled intersubjectivity has been established at their expense. This is not to deny the standpoint of universalistic morality, or the ideal of a community of rights and entitlements. It is only to claim that 'We' can only pursue this ideal on the basis of an alternative perspective.

But one must not assume that this alternative perspective can be simply adopted, that there is a waiting standpoint available such that if we adopted it, then a politics of transfiguration could be pursued without further ado. At one point, Benhabib quotes the following statement from Negative Dialectics: 'The concept of the person and its variations, like the I-Thou relationship, have assumed the oily tone of a theology in which one has lost faith' (ND, p. 277). Now Benhabib goes on to claim that in order to reject this claim we must demonstrate that intersubjectivity points to a genuine lacuna in negative dialectical thought. But we can now see that whatever that presumed lacuna is, it is not one that can be filled by the Habermasian account of communication; and further, that the standpoint of the concrete other, at least as Benhabib presents it, surely does have the sound of 'the oily tone of a theology in which one has lost faith'.

Adorno was not unaware that communication could not be theorized in terms of the labour model of activity; but for this very reason he regarded the 'idea' of communication as harbouring an inexpungible transcendence (a utopian moment) which marked the limit of theoretical reflection:

If speculation on the state of reconciliation were permitted, neither the undistinguished unity of subject and object, nor their antithetical hostility would be conceivable in it; rather, the communication of what was distinguished. Not until then would the concept of communication, as an objective concept, come into its own. The present one is so infamous because the best there is, the potential of an agreement between people and things, is betrayed to an interchange between subjects according to the requirements of subjective reason.

Communication signifies reconciliation, about which theory can only respond in the language of Sollen (ought); hence Adorno's withdrawal of the image of communication in its positing. This is not to deny the virtues of love or sharing, but to assert that these are not 'universal' virtues that have remained untouched by the formations and deformations of capital expansion, et al; and hence, that the 'hard' (difficult/critical/aporetic) political love required by the standpoint of the concrete other as transfigured is quite unlike the privatized/domesticated/ fetishized love of our present.

As for universalistic need interpretations, as we have seen, it has been systematically relegated to the autonomous domain of art. This is no escapist ploy on Adorno's part, no retreat. His point is that what is wanted from communication or the perspective of the concrete other cannot be found directly. What has been repressed returns, but elsewhere, in all but recognizable forms. Adorno never meant to say that non-identitary reason was restricted to art in modernity. But he did want to assert that only there was it preserved, for the time being, in an intrinsic way; and further, therefore, that only there could we begin to appreciate what taking the standpoint of the concrete other required.

The whole point, then, about the standpoint of the concrete other, about, that is, non-identitary reason, is that within our tradition it is 'beyond' reason, beyond the claim of reason and beyond what reason requires. Only critique can reveal that this is not a criticism of the standpoint of the concrete other, but a categorial fault in the constitution of reason itself in modernity.

Risk: Praxis Without Foundations

Earlier I noted Benhabib's criticism of Habermas for committing what she termed the 'rationalistic fallacy', the view of reason as a self-generating faculty. Now I want to suggest that Benhabib commits just this fallacy twice over. First, she nowhere overtly concedes what she needs to concede if the standpoint of the concrete other is to be achieved, namely, that the grounds for autonomous action are themselves heteronomous. This, I take it, is the point of Hegel's Phenomenology. The whole course of that work is a search for recognition and self-possession (autonomy), which continues to fail through either taking the wrong sort of object, or through committing some form of the rationalistic fallacy. While recognizing its adequacy, Hegel uses and deems the theological term 'forgiveness' in establishing the moment of reconciliation between self and other, the recognition of self in otherness, precisely in order to reveal that such a recognition does not conform to the dictates of categorial reason (God's forgiveness of evil is excessive); and further, that categorial reason can gather itself only if it first dispossesses itself of what we call its autonomy, 'Our aim,' Adorno says, 'is total self-relinquishment' (ND, p. 13).
This is a somewhat oblique way of pointing to the fact that in adopting the standpoint of the concrete other we must, perforce, acknowledge our dependence on the other. But this ethico-ontological dependence is not something that can be established from 'within', by what we call autonomous reason, by adopting the standpoint of the spectator, observer, or theorist. It is no accident, I think, that Benhabib so misreads Hegel and Adorno, for she reads them as theorists, while their programmes of 'phomenology' and 'critique' are avoidances of theory, theory's own self-overcoming in the name of what lies beyond theory.

Secondly, although Benhabib notes, and indeed urges the thought, that the neglect of a radical, participatory, and pluralist conception of politics has been a central blind spot in the development and history of critical theory, she conceives of this neglect as a 'theoretical' fault. But surely this 'fault' is itself an exemplar of the rationalistic fallacy. Since Plato, Western metaphysics has attempted to ground politics, a just political order, on a secure theoretical, normative foundation. A good political order was to be the instantiation, the application of the 'Rational Idea' of such an order as it was theoretically established; in short, the tradition subordinated politics to theory. Does not the theoretical inadequacy of the standpoint of the concrete other follow from the attempt to ground it theoretically, while its critical function is a protest against the claims of theory as founding? And isn't this what Adorno's critical theory was pointing to in its refusal of theory? And isn't this what makes critique as practised by Adorno a form of political discourse in circumstances where the so-called political realm had disposed of the truly political?

At one point Benhabib criticizes Habermas's theoretical construction of the 'we' of the present post-conventional, universalistic moral standpoint in these terms:

[Benhabib's] shift to the language of an anonymous species-subject preempts the experience of moral and political activity as a consequence of which alone a genuine 'we' can emerge. A collectivity is not constituted theoretically but is formed out of the moral and political struggles of fighting actors (p. 331).

But if collectivities are themselves the source of the discourses through which their experience can be rendered theoretically intelligible, then one can only find critical theory by struggling for the community of needs and solidarity it critically images. Such a project, however, is both paradoxical and risky; paradoxic because the ground of such a 'self-transforming', 'self-grounding' project is beyond the self in the non-identical other; and risky, therefore, because pursuing such a project requires surrendering the self which has made the undertaking of the project 'necessity'. Risk is the appropriation of the anxiety consequent upon the acknowledgement that what appears as the grounds of subjectivity is the source of its domination, its suffering. Such grounds, such foundations cannot be had. With good reason, Hegel made 'risk' the master trope of the entire phenomenological programme.

Finally, however, this risky and paradoxic project cannot be pursued blindly. Theory must be 'risked', both attempted and subordinated to the political. Or better: dialectic is the acknowledgement of philosophy's non-identity with itself. Philosophy, theory, can remain selfsame and universalistic only through the repression of its non-identical other. Dialectical phenomenology or negative dialectics is the presentation of the misrepresentations of substance and subject, of subject as substance. In Adorno's words, dialectics is 'the ontology of the wrong state of things' (ND, p. 11). It is 'the self-consciousness of the objective context of delusion [which] does not mean to have escaped from that context' (ND, p. 406).

Political Love, Woman and Dialectics

Benhabib closes her book with a beautiful vision of communities of need and solidarity united together into 'polities' governed by the ideal of a community of rights and entitlements (p. 351). There are two quite natural ways of reading this vision: firstly, as an imaginative account of what we desire; and secondly as an account of how things 'ought' to be. Neither of these readings is plausible. The first contravenes the critique of privatized desire, while the second would be a morally legislated blueprint of a goal to fulfill. How else are we to read this vision than as an identity, a reconciliation, of identity (rights) and non-identity (solidarity)?

For Benhabib the ideal of a community of rights and entitlements is both what is and what ought to be. As what is, it is deformed by its exclusion of particularity, need, happiness, solidarity. Its concept images the equality and liberty of all, which in practice, because of what it excludes, becomes domination. Communities of need and solidarity equally both are and are not; they are but only as deformed by their grounding in the contingent overlap of privatized desires. Each form of sociation, dialectically comprehended, comprehended in its historical determination and in its concept, presses towards the other, its other as that which it historically requires and refuses.

Something more needs saying here, for, thus far, the idea of the perspective of the concrete other as it operates in Benhabib's work sounds as if it were a pure theoretical construct. But such is not the case. In footnoting her claim that the standpoint of the concrete other 'has been silenced ... even suppressed' by the tradition of universalistic moral and political theory, she says that this suppression is, without doubt, 'also a consequence of the epistemic and social exclusion of women's voice and activity from the public sphere and their denigration' (p. 409). The claim of the perspective of the concrete other as a theoretical figure is parasitic upon the claim of women, women. It is because, however, Benhabib has been unwilling to problematize this claim, to note the contradictions in that silence and in that suppression, that she can so easily dismiss the claims of the aesthetic with the calm brush-off that the perspective of the concrete other cannot be accommodated by aesthetic expressive discourse because 'relations of solidarity, friendship, and love are not aesthetic but profoundly moral ones' (p. 342) — as if for us what is moral or love or friendship has not become deeply problematic, aporetic; as if we knew what we do not; that the moral is different from the aesthetic, and the aesthetic indifferent to the questions of morality or love.

Benhabib's appropriation of the silence of woman is made without anxiety, without the anxiety which would mark that appropriation as a repetition whose excess "beyond", whose non-identity with that silence, alone gives its voice: makes it the claim of the non-identical other.

It is, I think, unequivocally clear that the relation between concrete other and generalized other, fulfillment and transfiguration, ought and is, in Benhabib repeats Adorno's speculative identification of autonomous art and philosophy. Must we not say here that the figures of art and woman are equivalents, that they translate one another with respect to their third: the domination of subjective reason. As figures of non-identity autonomous art and feminism critically install the remembrance and anticipation of an other reason, of reason for the other, of reason transfigured. The historical experience informing Benhabib's dialectic simply blinds her to the historical experience informing Adorno's dialectic. Both dialectics, however, are dialectical only through their speculative constructions of an identity of identity and non-identity, through their recognition of the possibility of overcoming the duality of particular and universal without positing that overcoming.
Benhabib's dialectic, often despite itself, articulates the speculative sentence that 'the standpoint of the generalized other and the perspective of the concrete other are one,' just as much as Adorno's writing is governed by the unacknowledged speculative sentence that 'philosophy and art are one'. These statements of identity are, of course, equally statements of non-identity. Since the speculative thinking of the Absolute which both invoke are neither statements of fact nor prescriptions of what ought to be, then we must acknowledge that speculative thinking is, as such, a form of political insight, political wisdom, *phronesis*. In acknowledging this we are not following an inference or obeying an obligation; rather such an acknowledgement would be aporetic, difficult, an anxious act of political love.

In attempting to draw out this line of thought, my account of *Critique, Norm, and Utopia* has had to pass over in silence much of its rich argument and commentary. I have said almost nothing about Benhabib's reading of Hegel, Marx, and Horkheimer; nor her staunch defence of Habermas's diagnosis of the ills of late capitalism. And I have said too little about her reading of Adorno given the role it plays in my argument. Others will certainly want to take up Benhabib's provocative and urgent analyses.

The scope and richness of argument in this work are daunting. But what makes it such a splendid book is that its historical and critical acumen are put to work in the service of critical theory and its project of emancipation.

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**Notes**

1. While not directly entering into the debate between McCane (RP 42) and Dews and Osborne (RP 45), I take it that what follows shows how the pattern of explanation and critique that Dews and Osborne defend works in a particular case. I doubt, however, that they would sympathise with the speculative construction I place on that pattern.


