THE RATIONAL BASIS OF CRITIQUE

by

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Abstract

The main question I address in this thesis is whether critique of norms and social practices has theoretical underpinnings. A derivative question is whether the idea of “progress” can be philosophically justified. Habermas answers these questions in the affirmative with his construal of communicative rationality, which he argues provides the theoretical basis for critique. He believes that critique needs a rational basis to distinguish it from mere de facto acceptance. Furthermore, he believes that this critique-generating rationality is already operative in everyday communicative practice, albeit in attenuated form. Communicative action is rational insofar as it consists in defending claims on the basis of their validity. Such action thus has determinate rational presuppositions. Habermas’s main task is to lay bare these presuppositions in order to show that critique has a substantive rational basis.

Rorty answers the leading questions in the negative. He contends that while critical practices are operative, they do not need theoretical support, particularly not from any theory of rationality such as Habermas’s. According to Rorty, it simply makes no pragmatic difference to critical practice whether or not such practice is considered to be theoretically grounded in any rational conceptions such as validity, justification or truth.

My contention is that Habermas’s theory of rationality, suitably pragmatically attenuated, provides a more substantive basis for critique than does Rorty’s pragmatism. This implies that I hold that theory has an important role to play in critical practice.

I have structured the thesis as follows. In the Introduction I present the main philosophical concepts Habermas uses, including his hermeneutic construal of justification, and
describe his transcendental argumentative strategy. In Chapter One I lay out his “theory of rationality.” This includes tracing the history of the development of the theory and giving Habermas’s supporting arguments for it. In Chapter Three I present Rorty’s contextualist objections to the theory, which hinge on scepticism concerning the need for theoretical notions in critical practice. In Chapter Four I give Habermas’s rebuttal to contextualism and pragmatically reinterpret Habermas’s theory in light of Rorty’s objections. Finally, in Chapter Five I conclude that the “pragmatized theory of rationality” demonstrates that critique needs theoretical underpinnings.
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Above all, I lovingly acknowledge my wife Jemima, whose patience and dedication sustained me during long hours of work.
Dedication

For Maxine Abena Kafui, who was conceived during one incarnation of this work and born during another.
General Introduction

In this thesis I will be concerned with the question of whether critique has or needs theoretical underpinnings. The term “critique” applies to those situations in which norms or social practices are called into question in a systematic or informed way. Derivative questions are whether the idea of “progress” is intelligible and, if so, whether it can (or indeed should) be philosophically justified. Habermas implicitly answers all of these questions in the affirmative with his construal of communicative rationality, which he argues provides the theoretical basis for critique. He believes that critique of inter alia existing social practices needs a rational basis to distinguish it from mere de facto acceptance (or worse, coercion and force). Furthermore, he believes that this critique-generating rationality is already operative in everyday communicative practice, albeit in attenuated form. Communicative action is rational insofar as it consists in the raising of claims defended on the basis of their validity. Such action thus has determinate rational presuppositions. Habermas’s main task is to lay bare these presuppositions in order to give critique substantive rational basis. So in a clear sense he is carrying on the Kantian project of showing that critique is based in Reason. However, Habermas’s construal of communicative reason is decidedly unKantian; although it has a “transcendent moment,” it is firmly rooted in mundane, contingent instances of intersubjective agreement. Thus, Habermas contextualizes reason in a way Kant does not. In addition, I hope to show that Habermas has a pragmatic motivation for his critical task, one which he does not always recognize or acknowledge.

Rorty answers the first and third leading questions in the negative and the second in the affirmative. He contends that while critical practices are not only possible but operative, they do
not need theoretical support, particularly not from any theory of rationality such as Habermas’s. Rorty thinks that the Kantian hope of securing an immutable place for Reason amidst a sea of contingency is chimerical. It simply makes no pragmatic difference to critical practice whether or not such practice is considered to be theoretically grounded in any rational conceptions such as validity, justification or truth. Persons will come up with new and better ways of saying and doing things without appealing to the rationality or validity of their sayings and doings. So while I contend that Rorty and Habermas are both pragmatically motivated, their respective construals of pragmatism drastically differ.

My contention is that Habermas’s theory of rationality, suitably pragmatically attenuated, provides a more fruitful basis for critique than does Rorty’s pragmatism. This implies that I hold that theory has a role to play in critical practice and a fortiori that critical theory and critical practice are inseparable. However, I reject anything more than what may be termed “contingent necessity” in this picture, a kind of necessity that Habermas only implicitly acknowledges and Rorty explicitly rejects.

My strategy is as follows. First, I will introduce the main philosophical concepts Habermas uses, including his hermeneutic construal of justification, and describe his transcendental argumentative strategy. Second, I will lay out what I have unimaginatively dubbed Habermas’s “theory of rationality.” This will include tracing the history of the development of the theory and giving Habermas’s supporting arguments for it. The crucial task here is to reveal reason’s Janus face. Third, I will present Rorty's contextualist objections to the theory, which hinge on scepticism concerning the need for theoretical notions in critical practice. Fourth, I will
give Habermas’s rebuttal to contextualism and pragmatically reinterpret Habermas’s theory in light of Rorty’s objections. Fifth and finally, I will conclude that the “pragmatized theory of rationality” demonstrates that critique needs theoretical underpinnings but that it concomitantly rejects that such underpinnings need be “metaphysical.”
Chapter One -- Introduction: Habermas on Rationality and Critique

To begin I will flesh out what I have dubbed Habermas’s “theory of rationality.” Habermas does not call his theory such, preferring the more social-scientific “theory of communicative action.” But because his construal of rationality is so basic to his theory for both its justification and application, getting clear on it is crucial for understanding his thought. Furthermore, focusing on the issue of rationality sharpens the debate between Habermas and those contextualists like Rorty who deny that rationality has any sort of theoretical primacy over practical concerns.

Habermas typically operates on two levels simultaneously: that of the socio-historical and that of the conceptual. This is primarily because, as a “historicist,” he believes there is an explanatory interrelation between what analytic philosophers take to be these two distinct realms. According to Habermas, formalizing communicative rationality in the way that he does in his theory explains those socio-historical changes which have occurred, placing them under the rubric of “rationalization.” The criterion of success of the theory is thus its explanatory fruitfulness. However, the criterion itself is hermeneutical in the sense that it is not theory-independent; to wit, the process of rationalization is rational only insofar as it accords with the theory of rationality. Although these levels are interrelated in this way, they have distinct domains of

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¹McCarthy says Habermas is “...historical without being historicist...” (Habermas 1978, intro., p.vii.). Without getting into this squabble, I inter alia mean by the term “historicism” is the thesis that concepts are historically emergent rather than immutable, as some “realists” believe. Certainly “realist” objections to historicism are salient, but these are not my main concern here.

²What I mean by the term “hermeneutical” pertains to a process of justification which consists in the mutual accommodation between the theory and object domains of inquiry. On this construal of justification, neither domain can be elucidated entirely independently of the other.
application and thus may be treated independently for heuristic purposes. Indeed, my intention is to so treat them. Accordingly, I will discursively isolate the socio-historical from the conceptual strand of the theory below in Chapter Two, Part A.

Habermas’s theory of communicative action breaks with some aspects of philosophical tradition and conforms to others. It breaks decisively with strict subject-object ontology, representational epistemology and truth-functional semantics by placing these relations within broader communicative contexts. In addition, it views philosophical problems as solved only with reference to the socio-historical contexts in which they are generated. However, despite this contextualization it retains the Kantian hope of reaching an Archimedean Point, or what Habermas terms an “ideal speech situation,” from which claims raised within these contexts, including those pertaining to de facto accepted practices and norms, can be criticized. In a nutshell, Habermas hopes to provide a philosophical justification for critique of the status quo without appealing to any traditional foundationalism. I will use an objection to elucidate the kind of nonfoundational justification Habermas uses.

Lukes charges that Habermas’s ideal speech situation is rigged in much the same way as critics contend Rawls's Original Position is rigged concerning justice, namely that it guarantees rationality:

If we are asked to imagine what ideally rational agents would do under the posited conditions, the whole argument turns on the nature of those agents and the constraints set by the conditions. If those together are such that the appropriate answers are necessarily reached, then [Habermas's theory]...emerges as vindicated only because it has been formulated that it must do so. Ideally rational people in an ideal speech situation cannot but reach a rational consensus (Lukes 1982, p. 140).
There are a couple of ways to respond to this objection. First, as Habermas states in an interview, “[o]ne should not imagine the ideal speech situation as a utopian model for an emancipated society [or, *ex hypothesi*, for any *actual* social situation]. I use it only to reconstruct the concept of rationality, that is, a concept of communicative rationality...” (1979, p. 42). But if there is no connection between the actual and the ideal, Lukes could retort, what function does the latter serve? Perhaps Habermas could spell out the link in the way Rawls speaks of the relationship between “rational” and “full” autonomy:

The rational autonomy of the parties is merely that of artificial agents who inhabit a construction designed to model this more inclusive conception [namely, of that full autonomy]. It is the exclusive conception which expresses the ideal to be realized in our social world (Rawls 1980, p.532).

However, the phrase “designed to model” reintroduces the alleged circularity at another level. The question remains exactly *how* the ideal models the actual and, the objection would go, this remains unexplicated in this passage.

A second and more fruitful line of response is to question what kind of justification Lukes presupposes is required. Lukes’s rejection of “circular” justifications reveals his prejudice for the kind of “foundational” justification Habermas, Rorty, Putnam, Gadamer *et al.* argue we cannot have. Lukes presupposes that there *could* be a theory which provides a non-circular justificatory link with practice by indicating some extratheoretical (or, to use the old jargon, “objective”) basis for it. Since the demise of positivism few philosophers have consistently endorsed *this* kind of foundationalism. Of course, not all of those who reject foundationalism thereby embrace the hermeneutical construal of justification (namely that, to paraphrase Heidegger, all justification is either virtuously or viciously circular (Heidegger 1962, pp. 194-5)). In his less hermeneutical
moments Habermas too seems to want a more robust kind of justification; for example, in his appeal to deep universal anthropological structures (which I address below). Suffice it to say here that Luke’s charge seems anachronistic.

A. The Theory of Rationality: Intersubjectivity and Communicative Reason

"Intersubjectivity" and "communicative reason" are the conceptual cornerstones of Habermas’s theory. Habermas uses the terms "reason" and "rationality" quite interchangeably. Some philosophers clearly distinguish these notions. For example, Rawls contrasts the notion of "the Rational," which applies to agents of artificial moral-political constructions, from that of "the Reasonable," which applies to persons in actual situations (Rawls 1980, pp.528-32). However, because Habermas embeds both conceptions in actual communicative contexts, distinctions such as Rawls’s do not apply. In any case, I will not question Habermas’s use of these terms in what follows. I will begin Chapter One by explicating these conceptions. Then I will present what I have dubbed his "theory of rationality," showing how these conceptions figure in the theory. I will show exactly how Habermas thinks he can steer a middle course between contextualism and transcendentalism to solve the practical problem of how to rationally generate critique. It is the Janus-faced nature of reason itself which facilitates this move, thereby demonstrating what Habermas takes to be the crucial relationship between theory and practice. To fully explicate this relationship I will tie his arguments together in Chapter Two to develop his neo-Kantianism, which is not merely incidental but is the cornerstone of the theory. Next, I will show how the theory purports to solve long-standing philosophical problems, crudely categorized under the
standard headings of “epistemology,” “ontology” and “semantics.” Finally, I will conclude Chapter Two by showing how Habermas critically applies the theory of rationality.

Habermas assigns a primacy to mundane practice that renders other contexts of understanding parasitic upon it. As I will show in Chapter Two, modernity’s failure to recognize the primacy of mundane understanding is the main source of its “distortion” of rationality. The scope of the theory of communicative action is that of persons interacting to communicatively achieve understanding, which is the raising and defending of criticizable validity claims in everyday communicative contexts. Hence, intersubjectivity may be considered a primitive notion in Habermas’s theory of communicative action. By “primitive” I do not mean originary, self-evident or simply given, but rather fundamental or constitutive. For example, Habermas is sceptical of any “philosophy of origination” such as Heidegger’s in which truth consists in some original event upon which all subsequent “revelations” depend (Habermas 1987a, pp.131-160). Whether Heidegger actually holds this view is not pertinent here, although the Heideggerian/Gadamerian view of truth-as-event provides an illustrative contrast to Habermas’s more standard view of truth-as-linguistic-relation.

Habermas’s justification for his emphasis on intersubjectivity is pragmatic (as I will show in Chapter Four) but also philosophically revisionary in that it questions subject-object dualism in all of its typical guises. When he speaks of “understanding” it is in its broadest, hermeneutical

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3These mundane contexts are linked to other contexts with arguments I will largely ignore. If Habermas’s argument for the primacy of the mundane is sound, these “bridge” arguments are merely supplementary. For those arguments pertaining to science in particular, see Habermas (1971) and Hesse (1982).
sense. Understanding occurs not just within the “objectivistic” realm of science but within mundane practical and aesthetic contexts as well. Habermas contends that “[u]nlike the sciences, [rational understanding] has to account for its own context of emergence and thus its own place in history” (1985a, p. 196). The distinction here is between “critical” or “reflective” theory, which “...is itself always part of the object domain which it describes...,” and scientific or “objectifying” theory, which is not (Geuss 1981, p. 55; cf. Habermas 1987b, p. 401). Intersubjectivity is in one sense a necessary condition of reflective processes of understanding and in another a product of it. Habermas explains in a recent passage:

Subjects capable of speaking and acting who, against the background of a common [i.e., intersubjectively shared] lifeworld, come to an understanding with each other about something in the world, relate to the medium of their language both autonomously and dependently: they can make use of grammatical rule-systems, which make their practices possible in the first place, for their own purposes as well. Both moments are equiprimordial. On the one hand, these subjects always find themselves already in a linguistically structured and disclosed world; they live off of grammatically projected interconnections of meaning. To this extent, language sets itself off from the speaking subjects as something antecedent [to particular acts of reaching understanding] and objective, as the structure that forges conditions of possibility. On the other hand, the linguistically disclosed and structured lifeworld finds its footing only in the [intersubjective] practices of reaching understanding within a linguistic community. In this way, the linguistic formation of consensus, by means of which interactions link up in space and time, remains dependent on the autonomous “yes” and “no” positions that communication participants take toward criticizable validity claims (Habermas 1992, p. 43).

The term “intersubjectivity” does not explicitly appear in this passage—hence I have inserted it in places where it is implied. The passage illustrates the hermeneutical process of mediation between the pre-structured lifeworld and particular linguistic practices of reaching understanding, but several of its terms merit explication.
The "lifeworld," a term Habermas borrows from Husserl, is the background or horizon of our interaction in the world which includes all that we presuppose in interaction, for example, that we use a grammatically structured language. The lifeworld cannot be thematized (i.e., rendered problematic or put into question) all at once—this is because it is the context of thematization (Habermas 1985a, p. 210; 1987b, p. 283). Any aspect of the lifeworld can become problematic and therefore be thematized and become the object of rational scrutiny (but precisely as facilitating specific thematizations, the lifeworld itself must remain unarticulated). I will extend the analogy with natural language. Claims raised within a language can be disputed—hence Habermas's appellation "validity claims"—but it would be absurd to claim that the language itself could be disputed. Perhaps it could be said to be inadequate for certain descriptive tasks, for example, but not that it is amenable to affirmation or negation in toto. (To claim such would be to commit what analytic philosophers call a "category mistake.")

What can be thematized, according to Habermas, are aspects of three distinct relations in the lifeworld: those between the subject and himself, those between persons, and those between propositions and states-of-affairs in the world. These relations are subsumed under the three respective formal world-concepts: subjective truthfulness, normative rightness and (objective) truth (Habermas 1987a, p. 313). Habermas intends this tripartite division, the products of which he elsewhere calls the three "value spheres" or "rationality complexes," to correspond to Kant's
distinction between the empirical, the moral and the aesthetic (Habermas 1982a, p. 235). But, as I shall argue below, his justification for this division is very unKantian.

B. Rational Presuppositions of Communicative Action

Persons thematize world relations by raising "criticizable validity claims," claims concerning aspects of these relations that can be defended with reasons. Validity claims are raised and defended only within communicative, intersubjective contexts. Of course, Habermas does not want to preclude individual subjects from so doing, but would argue that such actions are parasitic upon intersubjectively communicative ones.

It is the acceptance of reasons as valid that forms the rational basis of intersubjective agreement. Habermas explains:

...we can say that actions regulated by norms, expressive self-presentations, and also evaluative expressions, supplement constative speech acts in constituting a communicative practice which, against the background of a lifeworld, is oriented to achieving, sustaining and renewing consensus--and indeed a consensus that rests on the intersubjective validity of criticizable validity claims. The rationality inherent in this practice is seen in the fact that a communicatively achieved agreement must be based in the end on reasons. And the rationality of those who participate in this communicative practice is determined by whether, if necessary, they could, under suitable circumstances, provide reasons for their expressions. Thus the rationality proper to the communicative practice of everyday life points to the practice of argumentation as the court of appeal that makes it possible to continue communicative action with other means when disagreements can no longer be repaired with everyday routines and yet are not to be settled by the direct or strategic use of force (Habermas 1984, pp. 17-18).

This passage clearly distinguishes instances of rational consensus from other means of attaining agreement which are thereby deemed irrational. If rational consensus is to be achieved, it will be

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4However, Habermas does not make clear how the aesthetic gets in. Surely it is not just subjective truthfulness, because aesthetic "understanding" implies a relation between the subject and the work which is thus not merely subjective (Heidegger 1977; Gadamer 1989, Part I).
based on reasons. Hence, Habermas wants to retain the rational-irrational dichotomy without grounding it *a priori* but rather "formal-pragmatically."

Habermas fills out his formal pragmatics by laying bare the rational presuppositions of language use and then extending this analysis to the other areas of socio-practical engagement in the world. This extension is justified only if linguistically achieved understanding is fundamental to all other types of understanding. McCarthy describes the extension by conjoining a phrase of Habermas's to one of his own, clearly revealing its Kantian "transcendentalism." He says that Habermas wants to lay bare the "'general and unavoidable presuppositions of achieving understanding in language' (Habermas 1978, p. 2)...to elucidate the general structures of communicative social action..." (McCarthy 1982, p. 60). These "general and unavoidable presuppositions" are those of rationality, and appeals to those of them which are implicit in our practices will form *inter alia* the basis of critique of those practices. Communication is normal only when these conditions are satisfied; otherwise, it is distorted. Therefore, communicative presuppositions are tantamount to normalcy conditions which can be applied, for example, to actual utterances to ascertain distortions from these conditions. To put this another way, communicative distortions result from violations of the formal conditions on processes of reaching understanding, and therefore can be traced back to them. In this way, criticism of validity claims is empirically grounded (Habermas 1984, p. 139). So reason is preserved and revealed, even if only implicitly, in the binding force of intersubjective understanding, which consists in the mutual acceptance of validity claims (Habermas 1984, p. 278).

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5He does not use the terms "necessary" and "formal" in their strictly logical senses. I will explain his usage in the section immediately following.
Formal conditions on communicative understanding apply at two distinct levels. The first is that of the speech situation itself. The speech situation is ideal insofar as it is "free of internal and external constraints." Such discursive freedom, which Habermas labels discourse as such, obtains

...only when the meaning of the problematic validity claim conceptually forces participants to suppose that a rationally motivated agreement could be achieved [which removes the internal constraint], whereby the phrase "in principle" expresses the idealizing proviso: if only the argumentation could be conducted openly enough and continued long enough [which removes the external constraint] (Habermas 1984, p. 42).

Talk of an internal constraint on discourse would bother those like Rorty who do not distinguish two types of force here: rational and irrational. But of course this distinction is crucial for Habermas's "nonfoundational rationalism." As for the rather Peircean removal of the external constraint, I return to it in Chapter Two when I discuss Habermas's conception of convergence.

The second level comprises those necessary conditions which enable persons to act within communicative contexts. These are the formal presuppositions of intersubjectivity:

In communicative action we today [in contrast to premodern times] proceed from those **formal presuppositions of intersubjectivity** that are necessary if we are able to refer to something in one objective world, identical for all observers, or to something in our intersubjectively shared social world. The claims to propositional truth or normative rightness actualize these presuppositions of commonality for particular utterances. Thus the truth of a proposition signifies that the asserted state of affairs exists as something in the objective world; and the rightness of an action in respect to an existing normative context signifies that the interpersonal relation established merits recognition as a legitimate element in the social world. Validity claims are in principle open to criticism because they are based on formal world-concepts. They presuppose a world that is identical for all possible observers, or a world intersubjectively shared by members, and they do so in an abstract form freed of all specific content. Such claims call for the rational response of a partner in communication (Habermas 1984, p. 50).
It is clear from this passage that the tripartite rationality complex is the conceptual framework which generates the formal presuppositions of intersubjectivity. This is the basis for Habermas's claim that the rationality complex is an historically emergent formal framework which constrains communicative understanding, implying that historical contingency and formalism are not mutually exclusive.

This suggests that while Habermas clearly does not want to establish a canon of pure reason that would settle all possible disputes (Habermas 1987a, p. 322), he does want to appeal to what he terms the "moment of unconditionality" to distinguish rationally motivated from prescribed agreement and thereby support the distinction between distorted and undistorted communication and the critique of current discourse and practice dependent on it. He explicates his notion of "unconditionality:"

Everyday communication makes possible a kind of understanding that is based on claims to validity that we raise in conversation—that is, when we say something with conviction—we transcend this specific conversational context, pointing to something beyond the spatiotemporal ambit of the occasion. Every agreement, whether produced for the first time or reaffirmed, is based on (controvertible) grounds or reasons. Grounds have a special property: they force us into yes or no positions. Thus, built into the structure of action oriented toward reaching understanding is an element of unconditionality. And this is the unconditional element that makes the validity that we claim for our views different from the mere de facto acceptance of habitual practices (Habermas 1990, pp. 19-20).

Thus, there is an unconditional element to valid claims that does not pertain to those claims de facto accepted. Only the former claims are rationally motivated. I will discuss Habermas's supporting arguments for this crucial distinction in Chapter Two. First, it may help to elaborate on the argumentative strategy he employs.
C. Transcendental Argumentative Strategy

Habermas calls his general strategy of revealing the unavoidable presuppositions of language use—and of practical or pragmatic dealings in general—“universal pragmatics.” Occasionally he replaces “universal” with “formal.” He uses the latter term in the Kantian sense of presupposition, i.e., that P which is required for some evidently actual state of affairs Q to obtain. Thus, he adopts Kant’s “transcendental” argumentative strategy. It should be clear, therefore, that Habermas does not employ the term “formal” in any strictly logical sense. I should also add here that although he adopts Kant’s argumentative strategy, he does not accept all of the conclusions he reached with it.

Habermas gives his view of the historical process of rationalization empirical support: increasing extranormative action orientations indicates increased societal rationalization and thus expanded room for the critique of existing norms and norm-guided practices. (I discuss this process in the first section of the next chapter). This strategy of replacing aprioristic theses with those that have (or require) strong empirical support is Habermas’s way of de-transcendentalizing Kant’s argumentative framework (McCarthy 1982, p. 60). Instead of attempting to analyze all the necessary and sufficient conditions for any possible X, Habermas attempts to lay bare the presuppositions for a strongly evident X. Habermas explains:

Every reconstruction of a basic conceptual system of possible experience has to be regarded as a hypothetical proposal that can be tested against new experiences. As long as the assertion of its necessity and universality has not been refuted, we term *transcendental* the conceptual structure recurring in all coherent experiences [specifically, the general and unavoidable presuppositions for reaching communicative understanding]. In this weaker version, the claim that that structure can be demonstrated a priori is dropped...In place of a priori demonstration, we have transcendental investigation of the conditions for argumentatively redeeming validity claims that are at least implicitly related to discursive vindication (Habermas 1978, pp. 22-3).
Habermas admits that from the point of view of communicative participants, knowledge of these implicit structures is *a priori*—but from that of the reconstructors, it is *a posteriori*. Thus, the strict *a priori/a posteriori* dichotomy breaks down (Habermas 1978, pp. 24-5). These are, of course, epistemological points. I will return to them when I discuss the “philosophical” implications of Habermas’s theory in Chapter Two.
Chapter Two -- Modernity and Rationality

A. The Rationalization of the Lifeworld and the Shift to Procedural Rationality

While the lifeworld forms the omnipresent backdrop for all understanding, it is plainly insufficient to repair modernity’s ruptures by itself. One of modernity’s distinguishing hallmarks for Habermas is its lack of theoretical-practical enclosure. In pre-modernity, all disputes could be (and were) settled within the lifeworld context and many kinds of problems which now arise did not arise then. It is misleading to say that the premoderns settled disputes by appealing to the lifeworld, for this is to speak in the language of modernity. All of their problems were circumscribed by lifeworld contexts and therefore the process of thematization, with its “transcendent moment” (which inter alia means “appeal to reasons not contextually circumscribed”), was absent. Of course, contemporaries with views as discrepant as those of Gadamer (1989) and Murray Bookchin (1980) reject Habermas’s premodern/modern distinction. And while Habermas agrees with Gadamer that the “modern” is a set of prejudices, he contends that it includes a hitherto unarticulated prejudice--namely, that prejudices are themselves provisional. Nevertheless, Habermas insists that the “modern worldview” can be neither affirmed nor rejected in toto.

Habermas asserts that this distinction between validity and context-dependent acceptability has emerged historically (and recently) in a process he calls the “rationalization of the lifeworld.” He clearly implies that the distinction between rationally motivated and prescribed agreement

5A good example of this is MacIntyre’s discussion of the Homeric worldview (1984, ch. 10). A better example, one which contrasts modern and premodern worldviews and brutally describes the tragic infusion of the former into the latter, is Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart.
emerged during the Enlightenment—what he calls the “decentration of worldviews”—and therefore that critique became possible only with Enlightenment interpretive processes:

The more the world view that furnishes the cultural stock of knowledge is decentered, the less the need for understanding is covered in advance by an interpreted lifeworld immune from critique, and the more this need has to be met by the interpretive accomplishments of the participants themselves, that is, by way of risky (because rationally motivated [i.e., open to questioning]) agreement, the more frequently we can expect rational action orientations. Thus...we can characterize the rationalization of the lifeworld in the dimension “normatively prescribed agreement” versus “communicatively achieved understanding” (Habermas 1984, p. 70).

This passage underscores that the theory of rationality is empirical and is corroborated by the increasing proportion of instances of rationally motivated over normatively prescribed agreement.

Habermas holds that one of the hallmarks of modernity is its use of procedural rather than substantive rationality. Premoderns characterized rationality as conformity to preordained standards which pertained to the content of what was to be considered rational or irrational: e.g., whether an action conformed to God’s commands. They held that the world is rationally structured by reason:

A totality that is rational in itself, whether it be of the world or of a world-constituting subjectivity, guarantees participation in reason for its various parts or moments. Rationality is thought of as being material [hence, is substantive], as a rationality that organizes the contents of the world, from which it can itself be read off (Habermas 1992, pp. 34-5).

In contrast, the modern conception locates rationality in procedures and results--it reduces rationality “…to something formal insofar as the rationality of content evaporates into the validity of results...[so that] what counts as rational is solving problems successfully through procedurally suitable dealings with reality” (Habermas 1992, p. 35). Unlike substantive rationality, procedural rationality does not operate on the basis of an antecedently guaranteed ontology. All that is
guaranteed is that, if reason is employed, the result will be rational. But there is no guarantee that this result conforms to any preconception about the way things are.

The procedures which Habermas argues yield rationality are those of communicative action:

...rationality is assessed in terms of the capacity of responsible participants in interaction to orient themselves in relation to validity claims geared to intersubjective recognition. Communicative reason finds its criteria in the argumentative procedures for directly or indirectly redeeming claims to propositional truth, normative rightness, subjective truthfulness, and aesthetic harmony (Habermas 1987a, p. 314).

The basis of rationality is that of agreement on the acceptance or rejection of validity claims pertaining respectively to each of these validity spheres. Particular instances of intersubjective agreement are rational insofar as they are achieved on the basis of criticizable validity claims, that is, claims raised, defended and agreed upon with reasons. It is this procedure which yields rationality. It may be instructive to compare this conception of procedural rationality with Rawls's description of pure procedural justice (which is itself based on a broader conception of procedural rationality): “The essential feature of pure procedural justice...is that there exists no independent criterion of justice; what is just is defined by the outcome of the procedure itself” (Rawls 1980, p. 523). As neo-Kantians, Habermas and Rawls reject exclusive appeal to, respectively, a substantive worldview or “Good Life” to settle problematic claims or questions of justice.

Nevertheless, despite his repudiation of substantive construals of rationality, Habermas believes that the strict dichotomy between these and procedural construals is unfounded. The worry, first articulated by Weber, is that once rationality loses all substance it will thereby lose
"...its power to have a structure-forming influence on the lifeworld beyond the purposive-rational organization of means." On the contrary, Habermas contends that communicative rationality does not purge rationality of all of its substantive aspects:

...communicative reason is directly implicated in social life-processes insofar as acts of mutual understanding take on the role of a mechanism for coordinating action. The network of communicative actions is nourished by the resources of the lifeworld and is at the same time the medium by which concrete forms of life are reproduced (Habermas 1987a, pp. 315-6).

Validity claims are not raised and defended ex nihilo but only in lifeworld contexts. This does not imply that they are settled by explicit appeal to the lifeworld, only that the lifeworld is the intersubjective context of their settlement. Indeed, that such claims arise from aspects of the lifeworld which have become problematic implies that the lifeworld is by itself inadequate to solve them. This points to the Janus-faced nature of reason itself, that is, to its concomitant context-boundedness and transcendency.

Habermas undercuts relativism and contextualism by pointing to the rational presuppositions in all language use, and characterizes rational progress as the process of inter alia making these presuppositions explicit (Habermas 1984, p. 68). There is however a problem here: if, as Mendelson says, these presuppositions are "immanent in language per se," why have they only become articulated in the modern cultural contexts (Mendelson 1979, p. 73)? Isn't it just sheer modernist prejudice to argue that they are universal and therefore implicit even in mythological (i.e., "closed") worldviews, and that progress consists in their articulation? (Furthermore, as McCarthy (1982, p. 65) and Habermas (1984, p. 138) point out, even in the

6I will return to this Weberian worry in Chapter 2 below.
modern period there are huge transcultural epistemic variations which militate against extracting a “universal core”). McCarthy argues that to rebut this charge

...Habermas has to show that the ability to act communicatively (in his strong sense) and to reason argumentatively and reflectively about disputed validity claims is a developmental-logically advanced stage of species-wide competences, the realisation and completion of potentialities that are universal to humankind (McCarthy 1982, p. 66).

Habermas echoes this:

...the theory of communicative action can ascertain for itself the rational content of anthropologically deep-seated structures by means of analysis that, to begin with, proceeds reconstructively, that is, unhistorically. It describes the structures of action and structures of mutual understanding that are found in the intuitive knowledge of competent members of modern societies...A theory developed in this way can no longer start by examining concrete ideals immanent in traditional forms of life. It must orient itself to the range of learning processes that is opened up at a given time by a historically attained level of learning (Habermas 1987b, p. 383).

Thus, the explanatory link between the two “levels” of the theory of rationality can be rendered thus: the historically emergent theory of rationality is taken to be ahistorical in order to explain critical “advances.” These intentions are evident in Habermas’s appropriation of so-called “reconstructive” sciences, e.g., his use of Piagetian ontogenesis.

The details of Habermas’s protracted discussions of the reconstructive sciences are not relevant here. McCarthy provides an excellent summary of “rational reconstruction,” as much as we need: “The aim of rational reconstruction is precisely to render explicit the structures and rules underlying...[a subject's] ‘practically mastered, pre-theoretical’ know-how, the tacit knowledge that represents the subject's competence in a given domain” (McCarthy 1982, p. 60). The move to universality proceeds thus: “We can reconstruct the normative content of possible
understanding by stating which universal presuppositions have to be met for understanding to be achieved in an actual case" (p. 63).

I will now turn to Habermas's arguments for universality. I ultimately hope to show that his central arguments need not appeal to "deep anthropological structures," despite what he claims in the passage quoted above. I will argue that the question of whether there are such structures is independent of whether there are universal presuppositions of communicative interaction. The burden of the theory of rationality is to affirm the latter.

B. The Arguments for the Universality of Reason and the Rational Basis of Critique

I have structured this section according to the following rationale. First, I will present Habermas's central arguments for the universality of reason. These involve "transcendental" extensions from the rational presuppositions in language use to communicative interaction in general. Second, I will present Habermas's account of rational progress and rebuttals to general relativist/contextualist counterarguments to it. This hinges crucially on the salience of his main arguments for universality. This discussion will reveal that Habermas's account of progress is nonevaluative, as implied by the nonsubstantive rationality which forms its basis.

We now come to the cornerstone of Habermas's view of rationality, namely what could be loosely termed its "nonfoundational universality." Universalism is starkly evident in passages like the following: "...although they may be interpreted in various ways and applied according to different criteria, concepts like truth, rationality, or justification play the same grammatical role in every linguistic community" (Habermas 1992, p. 138). I will first present Habermas's
"universalism," arguments for which he shares with Putnam (despite their difference in theoretical concern). Accordingly, I will flesh out the theory of rationality by comparing their views.

As I have said, Habermas contends that no matter how contingent the conditions of any particular action oriented towards reaching understanding are, there is "...a moment of unconditionedness" built into those conditions (1985, p. 195). This unconditionedness consists in whether one accepts or rejects a validity claim in question and whether one can defend this decision with reasons. The question of whether reasons are employed is distinct from consideration of particular contexts of employment, on specific situational contingencies (although of course these are necessary). Here Habermas appeals to the "special property" of the grounds that serve as the basis for agreement by providing the element of unconditionality (as discussed above on p. 14). Take, for example, the case of truth: "Whatever language system we choose, we always start intuitively from the presupposition that truth is a universal validity claim. If a statement is true, it merits universal assent, no matter in which language it is formulated" (Habermas 1984, p. 58).

The antecedent of this last hypothetical claim introduces an ambiguity. Habermas elsewhere argues that if a statement is claimed to be true (i.e., if a validity claim which involves truth is accepted), this implies the claim that the statement merits universal assent. But this universality is entirely intralinguistic, so to speak. The antecedent in question here implies there is (or at least could be) an extralinguistic, univocal fact about whether or not a claim is true. This would of course militate against the need to construe rationality communicatively rather than "realistically." This objection may seem innocuous given that Habermas leaves the concept of
“truth” largely unexplicated and therefore forges a neutral position between its realist and nonrealist construals. After all, why should “is true” entail anything more than its approbative, disquotational and cautionary senses? My worry is that in claims like these Habermas reveals a realist impulse, lending support to those who see him—erroneously I believe—as just another metaphysician.

Habermas’s most eloquent statement of the “Janus-faced” nature of reason well illustrates how he attempts to reconcile universalism and contextualism. I quote it at length before I turn to the supporting arguments:

...validity claims have a Janus face: As claims, they transcend any local context; at the same time, they have to be raised here and now and be de facto recognized if they are going to bear the agreement of interaction participants that is needed for effective cooperation. The transcendent moment of universal validity bursts every provinciality asunder; the obligatory moment of accepted validity claims renders them carriers of a context-bound everyday practice. Inasmuch as communicative agents reciprocally raise validity claims with their speech acts, they are relying on the potential of assailable grounds. Hence, a moment of unconditionality is built into factual processes of mutual understanding—the validity laid claim to is distinguished from the social currency of a de facto established practice and yet serves it as the foundation of an existing consensus. The validity claimed for propositions and norms transcends space and time, “blots out” space and time; but the claim is always raised here and now, in specific contexts, and is either accepted or rejected with factual consequences for action (Habermas 1987a, pp. 322-3).

Putnam and Habermas differ considerably both in their philosophical styles and areas of concern. While Habermas is mainly concerned with mundane communicative practices, Putnam’s work focuses heavily on scientific theory and practice. And while Putnam is an “analytic” philosopher almost par excellence, Habermas is one of the few philosophers who straddle the

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7For a discussion of these senses and an argument that taken together they are sufficient to exhaust the concept of truth, see Rorty (1993, p. 460 including note 8).
Continental and Anglo-American traditions which have become sadly disjoint. But underlying these differences is a strong theoretical affinity. Both consider theoretical concepts, particularly that of rationality, to have an ineliminable role in critical practice. Compare Putnam's two-fold conception of reason with Habermas's Janus-faced conception just quoted:

...the standards accepted by a culture...cannot define what reason is, even in context, because they presuppose reason (reasonableness) for their interpretation...Reason is...both immanent (not to be found outside concrete language games and institutions) and transcendent (a regulative idea that we use to criticize the conduct of all activities and institutions) (Putnam 1983, p. 234).

He elsewhere calls this conception, in a similar Kantian vein, a limit-concept of rationality (Putnam 1981, p. 216). This reveals an aspect of Putnam's departure from the usual realist view of truth. Unlike the realists, Putnam does not disjoin truth from justification (claiming such a disjoining entails the external epistemic perspective he argues we cannot have), but just from any particular de facto justification (Putnam 1981, p. 56). "Warrant" is warrant-in-the-ideal and is not based on currently agreed upon norms, standards, or opinions (Putnam 1990, p. 21). In fact, Putnam argues that "[t]o say that whether or not it is warranted in a given problematical situation to accept a given judgement is independent of whether a majority of one's peers would agree that it is warranted in that situation is just to show that one has the concept of warrant" (1990, p. 22).

Habermas would concur that reason is presupposed when persons are attempting to mutually understand one another (see my discussion of these presuppositions above); an act of communicative understanding, like any interpretive activity, presupposes that reason has been used to bring it about, rather than, say, blind acceptance or force. So Putnam's warrant/acceptance distinction is tantamount to Habermas's distinction between rational grounds
and *de facto* acceptance. (See McCarthy (1990a, p. 369) for a summary of the Putnam-Habermas view).

Putnam sums up his view with the claim that "...there is no eliminating the normative" (1983, p. 246). By "normative" he does not mean "the norms of current practice" but "an idealized rationality" which guides enquiry, particularly normative reform. He explains how this process works: "...relying on our existing norms and standards of warrant, we discover facts [or, less realistically put, anomalies] which themselves sometimes lead to a change in the pictures that inform those norms and standards (and thus, indirectly, to a change in the norms and standards themselves)" (Putnam 1990, p. 25). Putnam borrows this view of idealized rationality and the "convergence" it generates from Peirce. Habermas succinctly presents the Peircean view:

...the objectivity of experience cannot be made dependent on the agreement--no matter how rational--of a contingent number of participants, i.e., a contingent agreement within any particular group. Better arguments, which would refute what is here and now held to be true by you and me, might emerge in different contexts or on the basis of further experiences. With the concept of reality, to which every representation necessarily refers, we presuppose something transcendent. As long as we move within a particular linguistic community or a particular form of life, this transcendent relation cannot be supplanted by the rational acceptability of an argument. Since we cannot break out of the sphere of language and argumentation altogether, we can only establish the reference to reality--which is not equivalent to "existence"--by projecting a "transcendence from within." This end is served by the counterfactual concept of a "final opinion," or a consensus reached under ideal conditions. Peirce makes the rational acceptability of an assertion, and thus its truth as well, dependent upon an agreement that could be reached under the communicative conditions for a community of investigators that is extended to ideal limits in social space and historical time. If we understand reality as the conceptual totality of all assertions that are true in this sense, then we are able to do justice to its transcendence [i.e., limitlessness] without having to surrender the internal connection between the

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8Cf. MacIntyre’s view of the progress of rational enquiry, in which the ideational end point or *telos* of enquiry need not be achieved (1988, pp. 79-81). Of course, on Putnam’s view it *cannot* be achieved, being, as it is, purely ideal.
objectivity of experience and the intersubjectivity of reaching mutual understanding... (Habermas 1992, pp. 102-3).

Habermas’s own sense of “discourse,” quoted above on p. 13, accords with this idea of convergence. A necessary condition on this sense of discourse is that agreement could in principle be achieved. He cashes out the phrase “in principle” by appealing to convergence, specifically that if argumentation were freely conducted without temporal constraint, agreement would be achieved (Habermas 1984, p. 42).

The problematic premise in Peirce’s argument is that “[w]ith the concept of reality, to which every representation necessarily refers, we presuppose something transcendent.” Why does every representation (or validity) claim necessarily refer to a transcendent (or extralinguistic) reality? As Ramberg points out, this premise (which Putnam reiterates as the claim that warrant in part just means context-transcendence (Putnam 1990, p. 22)) begs the whole question. The point is to justify why our critical practices must rely on context-transcendent concepts (Ramberg 1992, p. 235). That is, why does critique need an externalist semantics? A rejoinder open to Putnam turns on his externalist semantic/internalist epistemic distinction. From his denial that

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Putnam employs a four-fold distinction between internalist/externalist semantics and internalist/externalist epistemology. The semantical distinction centers on the question of whether what a person means by a kind-word is determined by what is in his mind or by objects external to it, in particular those objects which are in his environment when he learns to use the word to refer to those objects. Since Putnam argues that it is a precondition for such learning that this determination is external (1981, pp. 14-16), he is a semantical externalist.

Putnam characterizes externalist epistemology thus: “[t]here is exactly one true and complete description of ‘the world,’” and knowledge consists in mapping internal representations onto external bits of ‘the world.’ He argues that this is incoherent, and holds instead that ‘the world’ is known only “…within a theory or description” (1981, p. 49). Thus, he is an epistemological internalist.
reality is “radically non-epistemic” (1978, p. 125) he could infer that his externalism is intended presuppositionally, not actually. I contend that it is precisely the presuppositional sense of convergence which Habermas embraces.

Habermas responds to the question of the need for context-transcendency with an elaboration of one of Putnam’s arguments. I quote:

If the distinction between a conception that is held to be true here and now and a conception that is true, i.e., one that is acceptable under idealized conditions, collapses, then we cannot explain why we are able to learn reflexively, that is, are able also to improve our own standards of rationality. The dimension in which self-distancing and self-critique are possible, and in which our well worn practices of justification can thereby be transcended and reformed, is closed off as soon as that which is rationally valid collapses into that which is socially current (Habermas 1992, p. 137).

This argument is “transcendental” in form and may be rendered schematically as follows:

1. Reformative learning as transcendence of the status quo is initiated by a critique independent of it.
2. Reformative learning (qua progress) does occur.
3. Reform-generating critique is rationally structured.
4. Therefore, there are structures of rationality which are independent of the status quo.

Only the first premise of this argument is relatively unproblematic, that is, if “independent of it” is taken in the innocuous sense of “not normatively stipulated by it.” Habermas does not clearly separate premises 2 and 3, often talking as if all “progress” is rational. (Perhaps this is a residue of Hegelianism he inherited from Marx). Putnam does separate them, but insists that they condition each other (1990, pp. 21, 26). The brunt of Habermas’s argument thus far has been to demonstrate 3, and it is no surprise that his critics focus on it. But, rather than treat these premises separately, I wish to lay out his entire view of rational progress, and the
counterarguments to relativism and contextualism it entails, as a means to flesh out this argument. Of course, much of this has been implied by what I have said thus far about his theory.

To flesh out his argument that reformative learning (and a fortiori critique) needs context-transcending normatives, Habermas adds a point about the "symmetry of understanding" between aliens trying to come to understanding. This symmetry is tantamount to the Gadamerian process of the "fusion of horizons [i.e., perspectives]" as yielding an emergent perspective not merely reducible to one or the other initially alien perspective (Gadamer 1989). This fusing/learning process is clearly one of convergence:

The merging of interpretive horizons, which according to Gadamer is the goal of every process of reaching understanding, does not signify an assimilation to "us"; rather, it must mean a convergence, steered through learning, of "our" perspective and "their" perspective—no matter whether "they" or "we" or both sides have to reformulate established practices of justification to a greater or lesser extent. For learning itself belongs neither to us nor to them; both sides are caught up in it in this same way. Even in the most difficult processes of reaching understanding, all parties appeal to the common reference point of a possible consensus, even if this reference point is projected in each case from within their own contexts. For, although they may be interpreted in various ways and applied according to different criteria, concepts like truth, rationality, or justification play the same grammatical role in every linguistic community.

Certainly, some cultures have had more practice than others at distancing themselves from themselves. But all languages offer the possibility of distinguishing what is true and what we hold to be true. The supposition of a common world is built into the pragmatics of every single linguistic usage [oriented to reaching understanding] (Habermas 1992, p. 138).

This passage makes it abundantly clear that the convergence which steers learning is not that of convergence towards some fixed, predetermined point. It is rather a perspective which emerges from the process of reaching understanding, a process which is procedurally constrained to the extent that it must involve the raising and defending of validity claims.
Habermas is aware of the challenge in trying to defend universality with neither metaphysical underpinnings nor an “untenable belief in progress” and in face of a pluralism of both historical and contemporary worldviews (1984, pp. 137-8). A thoroughgoing context-dependency of rationality seems to be the only alternative to metaphysical levelling. But Habermas sees a third alternative, provided by the moment of unconditionality which occurs when validity claims are raised. He disjoins his view from the that of the “contextualist” (e.g., Rorty) thus:

The context-dependence of the criteria by which different cultures at different times judge differently the validity of expressions does not, however, mean that the ideas of truth, of normative rightness, of sincerity, and of authenticity that underlie...the choice of criteria are context-dependent in the same degree (Habermas 1984, p. 55).

The way that validity claims are acceptably settled is dependent on the particular culture in which they are raised, but that they are validity claims at all is not so dependent. Habermas’s own statements in this regard are at times misleading. For example, at one point he says in response to the contextualist that “...the question of which beliefs are justified is a question of which beliefs are based on good reasons...” (Habermas 1985, p. 195). But of course what constitutes a “good reason” can vary with contexts. The important point for Habermas is that reasons are employed--it is precisely this that putatively transcends any given context. So the degree of rationality of a worldview depends not on its adherence to or divergence from fixed standards (or criteria) of rationality de facto accepted--for this would be merely substantive rationality--but on its openness to alternatives presented when validity claims are raised. In short, the rationality of a worldview...
depends on its openness to critique.\textsuperscript{10} Habermas is confident that raising validity claims will increase the probability of undermining \textit{de facto} accepted norms, while tradition and other aspects of the lifeworld will together act as a "conservative counterweight" against this risk (1987a, p. 326).

To sum up the universality argument, Habermas contends that rational progress consists not in convergence towards a pregiven ideal, but on an increased rationalization of the lifeworld (i.e., an increased differentiation of validity complexes), which concomitantly induces the explicit development of those universality structures latent in all communicative action. This process is not "abstract" and necessary, as is Hegelian historicism at least on its absolutist (or "acontingent") interpretation, but concrete and contingent. This should be clear from the following:

In culturally embodied self-understandings, intuitively present group solidarities, and the competences of socialized individuals that are brought into play as know-how, the reason expressed in communicative action is mediated with the traditions, social practices, and body-centered complexes of experience that coalesce into \textit{particular} totalities. These particular forms of life, which only emerge in the plural, are certainly not connected with each other only through a web of family resemblances; they exhibit structures common to lifeworlds in general. But these universal structures are only stamped on particular forms of life through the medium of action oriented to mutual understanding by which they have to be reproduced. This explains why the importance of these universal structures can increase in the course of historical processes of differentiation. This is also the key to the rationalization of the lifeworld and to the successive release of the rational potential contained in communicative action. This historical tendency can account for the normative content of a modernity threatened by self-destruction... (Habermas 1987a, p. 326).

\textsuperscript{10}See Habermas (1984, pp. 61-4) for explication of the "open/closed" distinction -- cf. Heidegger's distinction between "vicious" and "virtuous" hermeneutic circles, which can plausibly be interpreted as that between instances of understanding which foreclose alternative interpretations and those which are open to them (Heidegger 1962, pp. 152-3).
The relationship that has historically emerged between universal forms and particular instantiations of them is analogous to that between the context-transcendence and context-boundedness of reason itself; namely, that the former, while not reducible to the latter, is dependent on it. The key to this relation of dependency of the "universal" on the "contingent" is expressed in the claim that the "...universal...[is] only stamped on [the] particular...through the medium of action oriented to mutual understanding by which they have to be reproduced" (quoted above; emphasis mine).\(^\text{11}\) The exclusivity and necessity (underscored by my emphasis) is socio-historical, not philosophical. As the interactions between persons became more detached from stipulated normative contexts (specifically from self-enclosed worldviews), the need to settle problems communicatively increased. The force of "need" is clearly pragmatic—that is, the need to facilitate convergence which was no longer to be brought about merely by means such as uncritical adherence to accepted norms or brute force. It is important to add that not just the means to attain it but the kind of convergence was different. Thus the "rational" emerged historically and "progress" is gauged as the degree of fit between lifeworld rationalization and communicatively achieved understanding.

An interesting feature of Habermas's account of rational progress is that it is nonevaluative, i.e., he does not consider progress as consisting in the successive development of

\(^{\text{11}}\)This identification of the "particular" with the "contingent" may seem specious, especially since there is the lingering question of whether Habermas believes that particular forms of life are subsumable under a general structure of history, i.e., whether he is an acontingent historicist like the later Hegel or, arguably, Marx. I contend that if he were, not only would he be repudiating his meta-philosophical critique, but he and Rorty would have nothing to say to one another (nor \textit{a fortiori} if I believed he were would I have bothered to write this.)
better ways of interacting. This is implied by his rejection of substantive rationality (particular accounts of which would determine what is to be considered of value, i.e., what the Good Life is). Like Rawls, Rorty and any other good liberal, Habermas wants to leave evaluation up to individuals. Rational progress consists in increasing differentiation of validity spheres and use of validity claims constrained by the contexts of these spheres. The hallmark of modernity is, as we have seen, that its worldview can be called into question—albeit not all at once but only piecemeal—by the raising and defending of validity claims. To be sure, from the point of view of participants, progress consists in devaluative shifts: “With the transition to a new stage the interpretations of the superseded stage are, no matter what their content, categorically devalued. It is not this or that reason, but the kind of reason, which is no longer convincing” (Habermas 1984, p. 68). For Habermas the important point here is that these devaluations concern the kind of reason persons give to defend their claims. According to modern understanding, reasons anchored in "religious, cosmological, and metaphysical figures of thought" (p. 68) are no longer admissible as reasons (for reasons must be given within the context of a specific validity sphere). This is what makes the process rational. But what is not so clear is what makes it progressive. As I have said, the kind of progress is not evaluative, despite how it may seem from the point of view of successors. Habermas unequivocally rejects that, for example, modern understanding is better than mythological understanding. So is progress merely change? In philosophical terms, does it merely consist, as Rorty claims, in the substitution of one vocabulary for another? Habermas’s answer is “no.” I believe that the historical process of rationalization is progressive for Habermas because it is explainable with reference to a fixed parameter: namely, the kinds of
reasons (or justifications) persons give for their utterances and beliefs. Rational progress consists in the increasing detachment of these reasons from stipulated normative contexts. Of course, it remains an open question whether modernity’s differentiated validity spheres do not just comprise another of these contexts. But that the distinction can be made between “normative” and “rational” contexts is sufficient to make Habermas’s point.

C. Habermas’s Metaphilosophical Critique: Philosophical Implications of the Theory of Rationality

Habermas argues that the theory of communicative action overcomes the pitfalls of what he calls “Western logocentrism” without abandoning all justificatory appeal to reason. He characterizes logocentrism as “...the ontological privileging of the world of beings, the epistemological privileging of contact with objects or existing states of affairs, and the semantic privileging of assertoric sentences and propositional truth” (Habermas 1985, p. 197). On the other hand, communicative reason

...conceives of intersubjective understanding as the telos inscribed into communication in ordinary language, and of the logocentrism of western thought, heightened by the philosophy of consciousness, as a systematic foreshortening and distortion of a potential already operative in the communicative practice of everyday life, but only selectively exploited (Habermas 1987a, p. 311). For Habermas the rectification of such foreshortening and distortion is the raison d’etre of critique. And this rectification must be not just ad hoc but theoretically, i.e., rationally, informed.

However, before I return to this crucial underlying theme I will separately discuss the ontological, epistemological and semantic implications the theory, particularly of taking intersubjectivity as “primitive.” As I have discussed, Habermas holds not only that the standard philosophical realms are inadequate to the tasks posed by modernity, but that the distinctions
between them ultimately break down. Nevertheless, taken heuristically these distinctions serve to further elucidate crucial aspects of his theory.

For Habermas, communicative understanding is no more offered up in a passive relation to the world than it is normatively prescribed. Understanding something about the world does not consist merely in matching up sets of propositions to objects and states-of-affairs in the world. Habermas states that “[t]he communicative use of language, in contrast [to the ‘propositional’ use], poses the problem of the connection between this about [i.e., propositional] relation and the other two relations (being an expression of something and sharing something with someone)” (1990, pp. 25-6). These three relations of intersubjectivity are equiprimordial (i.e., equally fundamental) in any act of understanding, and this equiprimordiality points the way to a repudiation of subject-object dualism.\(^\text{12}\)

**Epistemology**

Habermas is an epistemological revisionist insofar as he wants to do away with what he calls the “philosophy of the subject,” which is, in short, the view that the fundamental philosophical problematic consists in establishing a set of relations between subjects (i.e., conscious selves) and objects in the world. (To this extent his project is in harmony with Rorty's repudiation of representationalism (Rorty 1979)). He characterizes his position thus:

\(^{12}\)It is instructive to compare Habermas’s view with Heidegger’s “fundamental ontology,” which is plausibly construed as Dasein’s being-in-the-world (Heidegger 1962, p. 131) and also with Dewey’s repudiation of subject/object dualism (Dewey 1958). Of course, Habermas’s tripartite relation of representation is borrowed from Peirce, who replaces usual two-place mental representation with three-place symbolic representation (Habermas 1992, p. 95). I contend that the basis of all three is pragmatic.
If...the self is part of a relation-to-self that is performatively established when the speaker takes up the second-person perspective of the hearer toward the speaker, then this self is not introduced as an object, but as a subject that forms itself through participation in linguistic interaction and expresses itself in the capacity for speech and action (Habermas 1992, p. 25).

Further, he adds that

...the objectifying attitude in which the knowing subject regards itself as it would entities in the external world is no longer privileged. Fundamental to the paradigm of mutual understanding is, rather, the performative attitude of participants in interaction, who coordinate their plans for action by coming to an understanding about something in the world (Habermas 1987a, p. 296).

So Habermas questions whether the process of subjective conscious reflection, with its attendant dualism, is our fundamental relation to and in the world:

The communicative practice of everyday life is, as it were, reflected in itself. This "reflection" is no longer a matter of the cognitive subject relating to itself in an objectivating manner. The stratification of discourse and action built into communicative action takes the place of this prelinguistic and isolated reflection (Habermas 1987a, p. 323).

This indicates another of Habermas's divergences from Kant--namely, over the role of "experience." Habermas holds that the main idea underlying Kantian transcendental epistemology is that "...we constitute experiences in objectivating reality from invariant points of view; this objectivation shows itself in the objects in general that are necessarily presupposed in any coherent experience..." (Habermas 1978, p. 24; includes remainder of quotations in paragraph).

However, he doubts that there is an analogue between this analysis and that of communicative presuppositions. This is because "[e]xperiences are...constituted; [while] utterances are at most generated." What I take him to mean here is that unlike experiences, linguistic utterances are not objects--they arise and subsist only in communicative contexts (which are essentially
intersubjective). Thus, utterances are not amenable to objectifying analysis in the sense of being divorceable from their contexts of employment. As he states, "...acquiring the experiences we have in processes of communication is secondary to the goal of reaching understanding that these processes serve." So to apply transcendental analysis to processes of reaching understanding would require a model different from that of "the epistemological model of the constitution of experience..." ("...perhaps [he adds] the model of deep and surface structure." But I will argue in Chapter Four that this is precisely another of the objectivating analyses he is repudiating.)

**Ontology**

This revision of philosophical reflection entails a revised ontology based on three fundamental relations: those between the subject and himself, those between persons, and those between propositions and states-of-affairs in the world. These relations are subsumed under the three respective formal world-concepts: subjective truthfulness, normative rightness and (objective) truth (Habermas 1987a, p. 313). Habermas explains how this ontology is instantiated in everyday communicative contexts:

In their interpretive accomplishments the members of a communication community demarcate the one objective world and their intersubjectively shared social world from the subjective worlds of individuals...The world-concepts and the corresponding validity claims provide the formal scaffolding with which those acting communicatively order problematic contexts of situations, that is, those requiring agreement, in their lifeworld, which is presupposed as unproblematic (Habermas 1984, p. 70).

So we can see that despite the analogy that Habermas draws between his view and Popper's three-world ontology (Habermas 1984, pp. 76-9), he is not supplying an ontology in any standardly "primitive" sense. What is fundamental is the lifeworld context and intersubjective agreement about those aspects of it which have become problematic. Hence there is more affinity...
here to Hegel's process ontology (Hegel 1977) than to any Kantian-rooted ontology (Habermas 1992, p. 142). I believe that maintaining a tripartite categorization of these aspects best facilitates intersubjective agreement, and therefore the justification for adopting it is pragmatic rather than standardly philosophical.

A comparison with Rawlsian formalism should make clearer the distinction between the subjective and intersubjective aspects. Rawls distinguishes between the formal demands of justice and an individual's conception of the "Good Life" (Rawls 1971, pp. 446-452); hence, between normatively binding demands and merely subjective ones. Intersubjectivity provides the framework in which the latter are integrated with the former. Now this separation between the Good and the Right may be artificially analytic, but the important point of analogy is that the reason for this distinction is to facilitate agreement—to allow persons to live together and commensurate their interests. Of course it is not clear how we would "ontologically" separate individual or collective values from social norms, for clearly the former can and often do determine the latter (this has been a charge typically levelled at Rawls's use of the Original Position); but to pragmatically distinguish them seems relatively unproblematic. Habermas claims that his view

...presupposes that acting and speaking subjects can relate to more than only one world, and that when they come to an understanding with one another about something in one [of these] worlds, they base their communication on a commonly supposed system of worlds (Habermas 1984, p. 278).

This "ontology" is presupposed in communicative acts which do in fact occur--it is not stipulated a priori.

Semantics
Among the crucial hermeneutical distinctions Habermas embraces is that between description and understanding. Accordingly, he contrasts describing an event with understanding its meaning:

Any meaningful expression...can be identified from a double perspective, both as an observable event and as an understandable objectification of meaning. We can describe, explain, or predict a noise equivalent to the sounds of a spoken sentence without having the slightest idea what this utterance means. To grasp (and state) its meaning, one has to participate in some (actual or imagined) communicative action in the course of which the sentence in question is used in such a way that it is intelligible to speakers, hearers, and bystanders belonging to the same speech community (Habermas 1990, pp. 23-4). To describe or predict an event falls under the rubric of the propositional use of language, of saying “...what is or what is not the case.” In contrast, in the communicative use of language “...one says something to someone else in a way that allows him to understand what is being said.” The difference is that only the latter presupposes a speech situation in which speech acts are performed, conforming to the tripartite relation mentioned earlier: the speaker, “...in communicating with a hearer about something, gives expression to what he means” (Habermas 1990, p. 24). The former use, which expresses the merely propositional relation between a statement and an event, is not embedded in this semantical context.

I will furtherly explicate Habermasian semantics by comparing it to standard truth conditional semantics, which holds that “...we understand a sentence when we know the conditions under which it is true...” (Habermas 1987a, p. 312). Although understanding involves knowledge of truth conditions, it is not merely reducible to it:

\[\text{Cf. Rorty on the failure of physical reductionism to yield meaning (1979, pp. 354-5); and also Ramberg’s point that semantics requires embeddedness (1993, p.236).}\]
The pragmatically expanded theory of meaning overcomes this fixation on the fact-mirroring function of language. Like truth conditional semantics, it affirms there is an internal connection between meaning and validity, but it does not reduce this to the validity proper to truth. Correlative to the three fundamental functions of language, each elementary speech act as a whole can be contested under three different aspects of validity. The hearer can reject the utterance of a speaker in toto by either disputing the truth of the proposition asserted in it (or of the existential presuppositions of its propositional content), or the rightness of the speech act in view of the normative context of the utterance (or the legitimacy of the presupposed context itself), or the truthfulness of the intention expressed by the speaker (that is, the agreement of what is meant with what is stated). Hence, the internal connection of meaning and validity holds for the entire spectrum of linguistic meanings—and not just for the meaning of expressions that can be expanded into assertoric sentences (pp. 312-3).

This of course does not prejudice how truth is to be construed, but just says in this regard that meaning is not reducible to it. Habermas's reasons for adopting a consensus theory of truth lie elsewhere.

So for Habermas, truth is not a matter of a fixed relation of correspondence between propositions and a domain of objects but is generated through linguistically achieved consensus. But truth still retains universal applicability, i.e., if a claim is accepted as true it merits universal assent no matter how particularistic is its formulation (Habermas 1984, p. 58). Thus there is a distinction between the form of a true statement, P, namely that P is universally applicable, and its content, P itself. A claim accepted as true entails the implicit claim that it is universally true, regardless of which construal of truth (e.g., correspondence or consensus) is operative.

Habermas relates understanding to validity:

...we understand a literally meant speech act when we know the conditions under which it could be accepted as valid by a hearer...[and] we connect the execution of speech acts to various validity claims: claims to the truth of propositions (or of the existential presuppositions of the propositional contents), claims to the rightness of an utterance (with respect to existing normative contexts), and claims to the truthfulness of an expressed intention. With these claims we take on, as it were, a warrant for their
redemption, should it be necessary—above all, in that we offer, at least implicitly, reasons for the validity of our speech acts (Habermas 1985, pp. 203-4).

So meaning encompasses a whole validity complex—it is not reducible merely to the truth of propositions. Furthermore, meaning is understood only in the tripartite context speaker-hearer-validity claim; truth encompasses only the bipolar relation subject-object. It is unimportant for contrasting truth with meaning whether the truth relation is taken intra- or extra-linguistically. So whether “true” is taken in its purely “disquotational” sense or in the more philosophically robust sense of “correspondence” is otiose here. (For an explication of this distinction, see Rorty (1991a, pp.126-150)). As Habermas maintains, “...it is not the use of propositions per se, but only the communicative use of propositionally differentiated language that is proper to our sociocultural form of life and is constitutive for the level of a genuinely social reproduction of life” (1987a, p. 312).

If questions of meaning are not fully settled by appeals to objective truth, meaning retains a degree of hermeneutic fluidity and open-endedness. Persons engaged in discourse presuppose that the linguistic expressions they are using have the same meanings (Habermas 1992, pp. 46-7). But Habermas wants to forestall the objection that this view closes off perspectival variation and linguistic innovation. For example, although the necessary conditions for meaningfulness of utterances includes grammatical “correctness,” grammatical rules alone do not prescribe meaning:

Certainly, grammatical rules guarantee an identity of meaning for linguistic expressions [i.e., the use of such rules presupposes that the same expressions have the same meanings]. But at the same time, they must leave room for individual nuances and innovative unpredictability in the use of these expressions, whose identity of meaning is only presumed. The shadow of difference that is cast on every linguistically attained agreement is explained by the fact that the intentions of speakers also diverge again and again from the standard meanings of the expressions they use...The intersubjectivity of linguistically achieved understanding is by nature porous, and linguistically attained
consensus does not eradicate from the accord the differences in speaker perspectives but rather presupposes them as ineliminable (Habermas 1992, pp. 47-8).

Were the meanings of utterances (as understood in communicative contexts) reducible to their socially or objectively stipulated meanings, the possibility of meaning variance, and with it linguistic novelty, would be foreclosed. Habermas clearly implies here that communicative rationality will not restrict but facilitate the generation of concrete alternatives to the status quo.

D. Critical Application of the Theory of Rationality

Thus far I have misleadingly implied that Habermas has unquestioning faith in the progressive nature of processes of rationalization, particularly that modernity has uncovered the rationality of communicative practices and thereby laid the groundwork for critique of those practices. But he believes that modernity too is subject to critique, specifically that it has distorted rationality's communicative potential by drastically limiting how rationality is conceived and by systematically channelling (a now denuded) rationality's application. This distortion is by implication not complete, for if it were, this critique would itself be foreclosed. But there is of course the omnipresent possibility that individuals will raise contentious validity claims, claims which cannot be redeemed by the status quo. This is, I believe, the basis of Habermas's individualism. Be that as it may, the diminution of the concept of rationality is empirically instantiated in its socio-political systematization, which is a crucial aspect of Habermas's "thesis of internal colonization" (1987b, pp. 352-6). The thesis states that it is instrumental rationality (i.e., means-end or goal functional rationality in which the goals are systemically determined) which modernity accords the predominant role, particularly where systemic steering media, most generally money and power, have replaced the need for persons to come to communicative
understanding with one another. (Habermas contends that this is the case in most of the contemporary public sphere). Public convergence is *systemically generated* by "self-maintaining economic and administrative action systems" and thus no longer dependent on individuals communicatively acting to achieve consensus (Habermas 1987b, p. 396). In fact, forms of interaction not consistent with systemic imperatives are deemed irrational (Habermas 1979, p. 43). As I discuss below, there is an analogy here with that analytic philosophical methodology which considers only "scientifically" specifiable discourse and practice to be rational.

Habermas distinguishes the rationalization of the lifeworld, which makes communicative action possible, from the increasing systemic complexity that "colonizes" the lifeworld and thereby renders communicative rationality otiose (1987b, p. 396). This turns on the more fundamental distinction between *consensus-building* and *influencing*, and the claim that communicative action is "by nature" motivated by the former and not the latter (Habermas 1982a, p. 237). Ensuring the validity of this distinction is of course one of Habermas's main conceptual tasks.14 These processes are, however, ironically interdependent:

...the communicative potential of reason first had to be released in the patterns of modern lifeworlds before the unfettered imperatives of the economic and administrative subsystems could react back on the vulnerable practice of everyday life and could thereby promote the cognitive-instrumental dimension to domination over the suppressed moments of practical reason. The communicative potential of reason has been simultaneously developed and distorted in the course of capitalist modernization (Habermas 1987a, p. 315).

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14There is some analogy between Habermas's thesis and Foucault's critique of modern power relations, except of course that unlike the former the latter denies that there is a (nonlocalized and nontemporary) way out of these relations (Foucault 1978). Foucault would also reject the rationalization-systematization and consensus-influence distinctions.
This takes us to the conceptual heart of Habermas's critical thesis. But before I turn to this, I will examine examples of internal colonization.

Habermas claims that although the concept of internal colonization is abstract, it is empirically instantiated and thus can be corroborated (1987b, p. 356). He develops a series of examples under the rubric of "juridification," which is the historical process whereby realms of action which previously had been communicatively regulated are now regulated by public law and thus are subject to noncommunicative bureaucratic imperatives. I will highlight his examples which center on the modern welfare state.

Most generally, the implementation of welfare policies subject persons to "violent abstraction[s]" from their concrete life experiences. Subject to adminstrative and social exigencies, persons are not free to determine fundamental aspects of their lives despite the fact that their independence and self-reliance is the supposed raison d'etre of welfare state intervention (Habermas 1987b, p. 363). The important point for Habermas is that such intervention restricts freedom by denying persons the ability to communicatively interact, in this case with state bureaucracies, to reach consensus concerning the goals and means of intervention. Such goals and means are systemically rather than communicatively determined. This is clearly the case with the social welfare system, but it is no less so with the public school system. School curricula are increasingly determined by economic factors such as systems of employment and market forces. Furthermore, the implementation of school policy is becoming increasingly bureaucratized to the extent that student socialization and teacher decision-making, both of which
are dependent on communicative action, are "...broken up into a mosaic of legally contestable administrative acts" (p. 371). Similar effects are evident in family law. Habermas contends that

[the formalization of relationships in family and school means, for those concerned, an objectivization and removal from the lifeworld of (now) formally regulated social interaction in family and school. As legal subjects they encounter one another in an objectivizing, success-oriented attitude (p. 369).

Hence, what were hitherto communicative relationships aimed at inter alia bringing about mutual understanding have become functional relationships the goals of which are determined noncommunicatively. The thesis of internal colonization furnishes the means not only to predict when the aforementioned social effects will occur, namely as capitalist modernization "advances," but also to explain why they occur. They occur as aspects of the lifeworld which were formerly regulated by communicative interaction are becoming increasing subject to noncommunicative systemic imperatives.

Habermas contends that the process of rationalization which colonizes the lifeworld also furnishes the means to overcome it. But this can be effected only if rationality is taken communicatively:

...paradoxical contemporaneity and interdependence of the...processes [of rationalization and systematization] can only be grasped if the false alternative set up by Max Weber, with his opposition between substantive and formal rationality, is overcome. Its underlying assumption is that the disenchantment of religious-metaphysical world views robs rationality, along with the contents of tradition, of all substantive connotations and thereby strips it of its power to have a structure-forming influence on the lifeworld beyond the purposive-rational organization of means. As opposed to this, I would like to insist that, despite its purely procedural character as disburdened of all religious and metaphysical mortgages, communicative reason is directly implicated in social life-processes insofar as acts of mutual understanding take on the role of a mechanism for coordinating action. The network of communicative actions is nourished by resources of the lifeworld and is at the same time the medium by which concrete forms of life are reproduced (Habermas 1987a, pp. 315-6).
This is further elaboration of the contention that the dichotomy between substantive and procedural rationality is false if rationality is taken communicatively. Communicative reason, though it has a context-transcendent component, is essentially bound to the lifeworld context, a context which cannot be wholly "colonized." It is thus communicative rationality’s embeddedness in the lifeworld which enables it to overcome the negative effects of reason’s differentiation into distinct spheres.

The reunification of reason Habermas is indicating here is not stipulative, i.e., he is not prescribing the way reason should be unified. On the contrary, he is describing the rationality which is implicit in communicative practices: "...in a certain way the unity of reason is a tergo always already realized in communicative action--namely in such a way that we have intuitive knowledge of it" (Habermas 1985, p. 210). Clearly when he speaks of intuition here he is not referring to some faculty which intuits what is the case (lest he fall victim to the "objectivist fallacy"), but to the pragmatic presuppositions of linguistic interaction. This avoids appeal to a problematic epistemology. He continues: “A philosophy that wants to bring this intuition to a conceptual level must retrieve the scattered traces of reason in communicative practices themselves, no matter how muted they may be” (p. 210). So it is to philosophy that Habermas ascribes the role of reason's unifier--that it will clear up modernity's distortions, thereby providing a (nonsubstantive) basis for critique. And it is here that his dispute with Rorty comes to a head. But before I turn to Rorty I will briefly discuss how Habermas envisions philosophy’s role in this process of rectification, a role which is prescriptive.
Habermas is under no illusions that philosophy was the historical origin of the rationalization of the lifeworld: the "...three moments of reason crystallized [into their respective 'validity complexes'] without help from philosophy" (Habermas 1987b, p. 397; see also 1990, p.17). This implies that Kant merely described a process of rationalization that was already occurring (although most certainly his three Critiques assisted in the process). Much of this process occurred at the level of mundane practice. However, two questions remain. First, what is this "reason" that became fragmented and now has to be reunified? And, second, could philosophy do this even if "reason" could be delineated? The answer to the first of these questions is provided by application of the theory itself: it is the communicative reason latent in modernity which has become only selectively utilized. Because communicative rationality emerged with modernity as at least ideally unified across and within validity spheres but is actually restricted in both ways, it is natural to say that it has become fragmented. The answer to the second question merits further elucidation of this.

While the process of rationalization (i.e., the differentiation of validity spheres) is in no need of philosophical justification, Habermas contends that it does pose problems of "mediation" (1990, p. 17). (That he uses a philosophical term here--"mediation"--suggests that the solutions to these problems are properly philosophical.) These problems are evident at two levels: that of reason itself, namely those affecting the relations between the spheres; and those between each of the spheres and mundane communicative practice. Habermas gives priority to the latter level, claiming that everyday life is the "...more promising medium for regaining the lost unity of reason" (1990, p. 18). His reasoning here is explicitly pragmatic: we look to mundane practice,
rather than to the “expert cultures” themselves, because doing so will help us to overcome the fragmentation of the lifeworld. He explains:

In everyday communication, cognitive interpretations, moral expectations, expressions, and evaluations cannot help overlapping and interpenetrating. Reaching understanding in the lifeworld requires a cultural tradition that ranges across the whole spectrum, not just the fruits of science and technology. As far as philosophy is concerned, it might do well to refurbish its link with the totality by taking on the role of interpreter on behalf of the lifeworld. It might then be able to set in motion the interplay between the cognitive-instrumental, moral-practical, and aesthetic-expressive dimensions that has come to a standstill today like a tangled mobile. This simile at least helps to identify the issue that philosophy will face when it stops playing the part of the arbiter that inspects culture [as it had up to and including Kant (pp. 3-4)] and instead starts playing the part of a mediating interpreter. That issue is how to overcome the isolation of science, morals and art and their respective expert cultures (Habermas 1990, p. 19).

The solution is, of course, to adopt Habermas’s theory of communicative action, i.e., to view validity claims as both context-bound and context-transcending (Habermas 1990, pp. 19-20).

This point can be put in terms of contingency. Validity claims are contingent in the sense that they are based on controvertible grounds, but the process of raising and defending them is not contingent. I will develop a fuller explication of this distinction in Chapter Four.

Habermas contends that philosophy is well suited for the role of mediating interpreter because it has always been “closely affiliated” with the lifeworld--what he now says is tantamount to the “sphere of common sense”--despite the “subversive power” of reflection and critical analysis which are antithetical to common sense (1992, p. 38). What I take this to mean is that the goal of philosophy is and has always been to explicate the totality of human experience (“experience” in its mundane rather than philosophical sense), and it is particular philosophical methods which have betrayed or at least ignored this goal: modern analytic methods have, so to speak, harvested the trees at the expense of the forest; and mythological-metaphysical methods
have operated with an untenable worldview. Concerning the latter, Habermas observes that “postmetaphysical thinking operates with a different concept of the world” (namely, with the Heideggerian/Husserlian pragmatic-phenomenological “lifeworld”). But how does the fact that the postmetaphysical conception is different from the metaphysical conception imply that it is better?

Part of Habermas's answer consists in a rejection of communicative rationality's strongest rival, modern analytic methods. These methods reduce reason to only one of its dimensions, namely to the scientific, thereby undermining much of its explanatory and critical power: “...the capacity to represent and act upon objects, or to the fact-stating discourse that specializes in only...the truth of assertoric sentences” (I have already discussed how Habermas's construal of communicative reason putatively overcomes this “reduction”). He concludes that “[ultimately, methodically pursuing questions of truth is the only thing that still counts as rational [to the exclusion of the other validity dimensions]” (Habermas 1992, p. 50). Habermas considers it an irony that contextualist/sceptical critiques of reason (like Rorty's) depend on this analytic reduction. These critiques imply that by rejecting scientific representationalism they have thereby rejected all appeal to reason. Thus by presupposing that rationality's application is restricted to matters of truth (in agreement with the “reductionists”), they overlook its broader application and hastily conclude that reason goes by the board. In the following chapter I will closely examine Rorty's contextualist critique to assess the salience of Habermas's counterargument.

Chapter Three -- Rorty's Critique of Habermas

In this chapter I do not intend to lay out Rorty’s “metacritique” of the philosophical enterprise in anything approaching exhaustive detail. But I believe that his criticisms both of Habermas’s theory, and of his motivations for theorizing, reveal much of the crux of his metacritique. Therefore, for my purposes it is not necessary, for example, to rehash the arguments Rorty gives in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. I will first indicate the points at which he explicitly discusses Habermas's theory in hopes of, second, extracting from the debate which has transpired between them their divergences over the role of theory in critical practice. Rorty claims that his “…differences with Habermas are what are often called ‘merely philosophical’ differences” (1989, p. 67). These include the respective critical roles they attach to theoretical concepts such as “rationality” and “validity.” Rorty’s guiding pragmatic principle for accepting such concepts is that they make a difference to practice. But, he contends, they do not make such a difference and therefore are dispensable.

A. Practice contra Theory: Critique of Habermas’s Kantianism

As early as 1979 Rorty was calling Habermas a transcendentalist, charging that with his distinction between distorted and undistorted communication “…Habermas goes transcendental and offers principles” (1982, p. 173). Rorty rejects the view that critique is generated by distinguishing distorted from undistorted communication, as if only the latter were transcendentally fixed, i.e., based on principles. But he is not simply repudiating this distinction,

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15 Where this debate has become explicit (as in the exchange in *Critical Inquiry* 16), Habermas is replaced with his American surrogate, Thomas McCarthy. Except in places otherwise indicated, I take McCarthy’s and Habermas’s views to be one and the same.
but instead is claiming that Habermas sees it as theoretical rather than as the practical one it is (Rorty 1982, p. 204). Almost ten years later he echoes this criticism:

...the cash value of Habermas’ philosophical notions of “communicative reason” and “intersubjectivity” consists in the familiar political freedoms fashioned by the rich North Atlantic democracies during the last two centuries. Such notions are not “foundations” or “defenses” of the free institutions of those countries; they are those institutions... (Rorty 1991b, p. 190).

Further, he claims that the possibility for critique of the status quo inheres in democratic institutions themselves, not at some transcendent point outside them accessible only by principle (p. 190). His main point is that justification is practical, not theoretical. The “institutions” to which Rorty refers are structured sets of justificatory practices, but they are not themselves theoretically grounded.

However, Rorty does not seek to eschew justification altogether. He clearly distinguishes “validity” from (mere) “justification,” implying that there are “nonfoundational defenses” for democratic institutions. These “defenses” consist in appeals to other practices; theoretical appeals are generalizations from practice made ex post facto, so to speak. To be sure, Rorty is not charging that Habermas is a foundationalist in the sense of attempting to ground communicative practices in “first principles.” But nevertheless he sees a residual foundationalism in Habermass view that communicative rationality consists in an appeal to “argumentative procedures” (Rorty 1991b, p. 189). He also contends that Habermas’s key concepts have no standardly philosophical significance—for example, the kind of ontological significance Habermas attributes to “intersubjectivity.” This is because they have no theoretical significance at all (Rorty 1982, p. 204).
The following quotations succinctly sum up the difference between Rorty and Habermas over the pragmatic value of theoretical notions like rationality:

Habermas believes that “a partiality for reason has a different status than any other commitment” (Habermas 1986, p. 51.) I would like to substitute a “partiality for freedom,” and in particular for freedom of thought and communication, for “a partiality for reason.” The difference may seem merely verbal, but I think that it is more than that. It is the difference between saying “let us defend our liberal democracy by politically neutral accounts of the nature of reason and science” and saying “let our philosophical accounts of reason and science be corollaries to our commitments to the customs and institutions of liberal democracy.” The latter, “ethnocentric” approach seems to me more promising, since my holist view of inquiry suggests that there are no politically neutral instruments to use for defending political positions (Rorty 1991a, p. 62, n. 32).

My attitude is not “theory is dead,” but rather “as things have been going, it looks as if we could use a bit less theory and a bit more reportage.” I am not saying that the idea of truth is “invalid” or “unteachable,” nor that it “deconstructs itself,” but simply that for our present purposes there are more useful ideas...As to “the dichotomy between theory and practice,” this seems to me overcome as soon as we...[think] of our beliefs as rules for action--tools for getting what we want--rather than...as candidates for unconditional validity (Rorty 1990, pp. 640-1).

Rorty’s main metaphilosophical objection to Habermas’s theory of rationality is that it concerns that Kantian residue we would be better off without: namely, rationality. To speak of “Reason,” “rationality” and the like is for Rorty to speak in metanarrative, i.e., to attempt to ground theories extra-theoretically. And it is the Kantian metanarrative, namely that we and the world are rationally structured and therefore rationally understood, which Rorty detects most prominently in Habermas’s theory and which he believes is empty. Rorty charges that Habermas believes the structure of rationality to be transcendentally fixed (and therefore based on specifiable principles), that is, not amenable to contingency (what Kant calls “empirical”), and hence that it is universal and knowable a priori. Rorty sums up Habermas’s Kantianism as the belief that modernity “...has a ‘theoretical dynamic,’ one which can be identified with...‘the nature of
rationality’” (1991b, p. 170). Elaborating, he argues that Habermas accepts “...the Kantian presumption that there is some sort of inviolable ‘metaphysical’ break between the formal and the material, the logical and the psychological, the non-natural and the natural--between, in short, what Davidson calls ‘scheme and content’” (Rorty 1991a, p. 168). So he implicitly places Habermas in the company of those neo-Kantians who have claimed to have overcome the foundationalist problematic but are actually perpetrating it under new guises (Rorty 1979, p. 162). I can only refer to my lengthy discussion in Chapter 2 of the ways in which Habermas’s theory undercuts traditional philosophical dualities. The residue of the scheme/content distinction in communicative rationality is just the distinction between the procedure of raising validity claims (form) and that which is claimed (content). It is questionable whether this residue is as philosophically insidious as Rorty thinks.

This point can be made another way. In a paper largely devoted to a discussion of Rawls’s theory of justice, Rorty implicitly equivocates on the term “rationality,” ignoring the procedural sense of it which Rawls and Habermas embrace. I have argued in Chapter Two that this is the extent to which they accept the Kantian conception of rationality; and that, to wit, they reject its metaphysical underpinnings. But Rorty misses this when he says that “Rawls can wholeheartedly agree with Hegel and Dewey against Kant and can say that the Enlightenment attempt to free oneself from tradition and history, to appeal to ‘Nature’ or ‘Reason,’ was self-deceptive” (1991a, pp. 180-1). It is true that neither Rawls nor Habermas are Kantians in this sense, but Rorty ignores the sense in which they are; namely, that they construe rationality to be purely procedural rather than substantive.
Rorty's broadest gloss on Habermas's general project is illustrative:

[Habermas tries]...to undercut Nietzsche's attack on our religious and metaphysical traditions by replacing the "philosophy of subjectivity" with a "philosophy of intersubjectivity"—replacing the old "subject-centered conception of 'reason'" shared by Kant and Nietzsche with what Habermas calls "communicative reason." Habermas here...[tries] to construe reason as the internalization of social norms, rather than as a built-in component of the human self. Habermas wants to "ground" democratic institutions in the same way Kant hoped to—but to do the job better, by invoking a notion of "domination-free communication" to replace "respect for human dignity" as the aegis under which society is to become more cosmopolitan and democratic (Rorty 1989, pp. 62-3).

Rorty makes a major exegetical concession when he says that Habermas has dispensed with appeals to "deep-seated anthropological structures," at least as embedded in individual subjects. (Below, I will argue that he ought to--but does not quite--do this). But, if this is so, then it is not clear to what Rorty's charge of "Kantian grounding" amounts. Habermas sees rationality as distinct from the mere internalization of de facto accepted social norms; if it were otherwise, rationality would lose its critical force. Perhaps the basis of Rorty's charge is that this construal of rationality, while shed of much of Kant's transcendental ontology, is still grounded ahistorically in some sense. Indeed, the Janus-faced nature of reason could be cashed out as follows: reason is essentially embedded (or grounded) in historical communicative contexts but also has an aspect which transcends any given context. However, Rorty counters that intersubjectively achieved "...agreement does not have (pace Habermas) any ahistorical conditions of possibility, but is simply a fortunate product of certain historical circumstances" (1989, p. 195). Hence, the historical contingency of agreement wholly circumscribes any of its apparent ahistoricality. This remains a key point of contention between them.
Rorty also rejects Habermas's "reading" of history, including the processes of "rationalization" which have resulted in "modernity." He says that Habermas holds

...the conviction that the story of modern philosophy (as successive reactions to Kant's diremptions) [i.e., rationalization--the differentiation of discourse into three separate validity spheres] is an important part of the story of democratic societies' attempts at self-reassurance. But it may be that most of the latter story can be told as the history of reformist politics, without much reference to the kinds of theoretical backup which philosophers have provided for such politics...Habermas's assumption [is] that the story of the realignment, assimilation, and expansion of the three "value-spheres" is essential to the story of the Selbstvergewisserung [self-understanding] of modern society, and not just to that of the modern intellectuals (Rorty 1991b, pp. 171-2).

This charge amounts to the claim that Habermas puts too much emphasis on Kantian philosophy's historical influence on modernity and not enough on that of mundane practices. Accordingly, Rorty detects vestiges of Kant (and Weber) in Habermas's "three world" ontology. Habermas explicitly rebuts this charge of overreliance on Kant when he says that the sons and daughters of modernity did not need philosophical backup when they differentiated the validity spheres (1987b, p.397). Furthermore, Habermas does not claim that the former is essential for the latter, but that telling such a story is explanatorily fruitful (pp.399-401).

I have claimed above that Habermas accepts Kantian ontology in a pragmatically provisional sense. He does not seek to ontologically demarcate the three value spheres (that is, carve up the world in a univocal way) so much as show that it is conducive to our interests to interact in a way that corresponds to modernity's differentiation of the spheres. Rorty agrees that it "...is right to emphasize the way in which the separateness and autonomy of three 'expert cultures'--roughly, science, jurisprudence, and literary criticism--have served the purposes of liberal society..." (1989, p. 142 n. 2). However, Rorty thinks that the over-simplified, rather
reductionistic framework Habermas adopts (again, his “taking Kant too seriously” (1991b, p. 170)) induces him to neglect the interrelationships which are evident between these “cultures.” I can only retort that since Habermas devotes much discussion to just such interrelationships (e.g., 1984, pp. 273-337), it is difficult to see how he thereby takes Kant too seriously in this sense.

Thus, on the whole, Rorty’s broad criticisms of Habermas’s Kantianism fall short of seriously threatening the theory of rationality, at least until the counterarguments are fully fleshed out. There is, however, one notable exception, namely his suspicions of the existence of a rationality faculty. (However, as I’ve noted above, Rorty elsewhere concedes that Habermas does not claim humans possess such a faculty (1989, p. 62). Perhaps this inconsistency is merely an oversight on Rorty’s part.) Rorty claims that

\[\text{as long as one thinks of “reason” as a faculty capable of attaining transcultural validity, one will want a theory of the nature of rationality. But if one gives up on transcultural validity...[t]he interesting question is not whether a claim can be “rationally defended” but whether it can be made to cohere with a sufficient number of our beliefs and desires (Rorty 1990, p. 640).}\]

I certainly share Rorty’s scepticism about there being any deep univocal structures of rationality embedded in all human subjects. But, as I hope to show in the next chapter, to claim such structures exist is flatly inconsistent with Habermas’s historicism and, as I will develop it, his pragmatism. I will now turn to Rorty’s specific counterarguments to Habermas's construal of communicative rationality.

**B. The Spuriousness of the Validity/Facticity Distinction**

Rorty considers Habermas’s de-subjectivization of Kantian rationality as tantamount to adopting the Peircean “public” construal of rationality as generated by the convergence of
intersubjective inquiry. Certainly there is strong textual support for this view, which largely accords with that which I have presented in Chapter 2. However, Rorty questions whether Habermas’s intersubjective construal of rationality needs any appeal to such convergence. As he states,

...I see Habermas’s substitution of “communicative reason” for “subject-centered reason” as just a misleading way of making the same point which I have been urging: A liberal society is one which is content to call “true” (or “right” or “just”) whatever the outcome of undistorted communication happens to be, whatever view wins in a free and open encounter. This substitution amounts to dropping the image of a preestablished harmony between the human subject and the object of knowledge, and thus to dropping the tradition epistemological-metaphysical problematic. Habermas is willing to drop most of that problematic. But even after he has done so, he still insists on seeing the process of undistorted communication as convergent, and seeing that convergence as guaranteeing the “rationality” of such communication. The residual difference I have with Habermas is that his universalism makes him substitute such convergence for ahistorical grounding, whereas my insistence on the contingency of language makes me suspicious of the very idea of “universal validity” which such convergence is supposed to underwrite (Rorty 1989, p. 67).

This passage merits a couple of comments.

First, it is not clear how the phrase “contingency of language” is to be interpreted. I take “contingent” here to mean “could have been otherwise.” If the phrase is taken to mean that the existence of language itself is contingent, then Habermas would certainly not disagree. Habermas holds that, given that language does exist, certain specifiable presuppositions are entailed. So calling language contingent could amount to denying this, i.e., asserting that it is contingent how language is structured. That language is contingent would thereby entail that it has no context-transcending aspect. Validity claims are embedded in particular languages and linguistic practices, but the presuppositions of validity do not transcend those particular languages and practices. But this is merely to restate a major issue of contention between Habermas and Rorty. So if non-
context-transcendency were the sense of contingency he had intended, Rorty would not be furtherly illuminating the issue. Perhaps Rorty intends “contingency of language” to mean that it is contingent how language “hooks up to” the world. This would accord with his non-representational view of language. But, as I’ve shown in Chapter Two, Habermas shares this view. Therefore, he would accept that language is contingent in the sense that there is no univocal way that it attaches to the world.

Second, Habermas does not “see” undistorted communicative processes as convergent but rather points out that they operate as if they were. The convergence is second order, so to speak. Undistorted communication is distinguished from distorted communication by the fact that only it is conducted in free and open inquiries, which would generate convergent views if they could be conducted openly enough and long enough (Habermas 1984, p. 50; discussed above). This is as much of the Peircean view of convergence Habermas adopts, having jettisoned its metaphysical baggage. And it seems little different than Rorty’s own condition of “free and open” inquiry.

However, I should not be too quick to make this identification. Rorty considers this need for convergence, however counterfactual, to be metaphysical baggage. Consider his surprisingly Nietzschean worry that Habermas’s “ontology” forecloses the possibility of its own overcoming: “Habermas wants world-disclosure always to be checked for ‘validity’ against intramundane practice. He wants there to be argumentative practices, conducted within ‘expert cultures,’ which cannot be overturned by exciting, romantic disclosures of new worlds” (Rorty 1989, p. 66). Rorty certainly has a salient criticism here, one that goes beyond the mere questioning of the “contents” of value spheres. It pertains to Habermas’s whole notion of rational validity which,
while denuded of substantive excesses such as stipulated values, still insists on a formalization of the rational limits of practice and inquiry. Rorty sees the effect of such formalization as the constraining foreclosure of critique; Habermas, on the contrary, as the “liberating” basis of it. Rorty sees critique as the rejection of one “world” and its supplantation by another (as the last quotation implies); Habermas sees critique as a process occurring within the (historically emergent) “world of modernity” and, in an ironically pertinent way, only within this world. This difference may be one of philosophical nuance rather than substance; indeed, it is difficult to imagine how either could be corroborated. But it does relate to their differing construals of pragmatism.

As I have shown in Chapters 1 and 2, Habermas grounds his view of rationality in the distinction between validity and de facto acceptance, arguing that only the former is context-transcending and hence rational. Hence, critique is rational insofar as it is based on the intersubjective agreement on validity claims, agreement which is ipso facto rational. Accordingly, Rorty’s attack on Habermas’s Janus-faced construal of reason centers on the distinction between what he has recently dubbed “validity” and “facticity” (Habermas 1994, p. 23). I will now flesh out Rorty’s arguments for his charge that this distinction is spurious.

It may be useful here to assemble what could be considered Rorty’s pragmatist principles of justification. They are:

1. Basic Principle: only those differences which make differences in practice are relevant.

2. Principle on the distinction between truth and justification: The difference between old and new audiences is the only difference between truth and justification which makes a difference in practice (Rorty 1994, p. 7).
3. Derivative Principle on Justification: Justification is the norm of inquiry, not truth (Rorty 1994, p. 5).

4. Principle on the Strategic and nonstrategic uses of language: The distinction between strategic and nonstrategic uses of language is between, respectively, cases in which we want to convince others and cases in which we want to learn something (Rorty 1994, p. 11).

I will refer to these principles directly and indirectly in my presentation of Rorty’s position.

Rorty contends that critical practice is neither facilitated by nor based on the context-transcendence of reason. His gloss on Habermas’s argument for the need to construe reason thus is as follows:

For Habermas, the problem posed by “incredulity towards metanarratives” is that unmasking only makes sense if we “preserve at least one standard for [the] explanation of the corruption of all reasonable standards.” If we have no such standard, one which escapes a “totalizing self-referential critique,” then distinctions between the naked and the masked, or between theory and ideology, lose their force...[that is] Habermas thinks that if we drop the idea of “the better argument” as opposed to “the argument which convinces a given audience at a given time,” we shall have only a “context-dependent” sort of social criticism. He thinks that falling back on such criticism will betray “the elements of reason in cultural modernity which are contained in...bourgeois ideals...” (Rorty 1991b, pp. 164-5; Habermas quoted from 1982b, pp. 18, 28-9).

But Rorty charges that this view of “rationality” is not only question-begging, but also that it ignores the historical flux of such conceptions. (I have already discussed Habermas’s “hermeneutic” construal of justification, one which Rorty shared in 1979 but apparently has subsequently rejected.) Paraphrasing Geuss, he says that narratives such as Habermas’s

...which go to make up their sense of what is to count as “rational” will see to it that such studies produce a conception of undistorted communication which accords [merely] with the desires they presently have [or, more broadly, with their merely contingent present purposes]....So while Habermas compliments “bourgeois ideals” by reference to the “elements of reason contained” in them, it would be better just to compliment those untheoretical sorts of narrative discourse which make up the political speech of Western democracies. It would be better to be frankly ethnocentric (Rorty 1991b, p. 168).
This endorsement of ethnocentrism amounts to an implicit claim that it is particular, contingent, non-theoretically grounded practices which facilitate critique and thereby render so-called “liberal society” liberal. To reiterate, such liberal practices can and do operate without theoretical bolstering. However, rather than take up this socio-political thread, I wish to rejoin Rorty’s counterargument to the facticity/validity distinction.

I have discussed how Habermas and Putnam hold that a conception of “normativity” or “convergence” captures the meaning of “truth” and “rationality.” Rorty counters that

...whatever else truth may be, it is something we are more likely to get as a result of free and open encounters than anything else. Whatever else rationality may be, it is something that obtains when persuasion is substituted for force...[W]hat enables us to make...criticisms of the standards of truth we have inherited] is concrete alternative suggestions--suggestions about how to redescribe what we are talking about (Rorty 1990, p. 634).

So at most the conception of “regulative ideal” commends fallibilism, but they do not give us a “moment of unconditionality that opens us up to other points of view” (McCarthy 1990a, p. 370). Rorty contends that “[i]t is the particular attractions of those other points of view” which facilitate criticism. This gives him a conception of progress: “[c]oncrete suggestions are a necessary condition of...progress, but not, of course, sufficient” (1990, p.635). To underscore this he says that it may be true that our culture is “…everywhere structured around transcultural notions of validity,” but implies that this is not necessary for progress (p.635).16 So the debate now boils down to this: what must accompany concrete alternatives to sufficiently facilitate

16He goes on to say that it is “not so structured everywhere, just in some places...So I can appeal to things that are said and done in other places” (Rorty 1990, p.637). But the claim that it is so structured only in some places is inconsistent with first clause of his preceding claim. But since this “error” does not figure in what follows, I will henceforth ignore it.
critique? Habermas argues that some context-transcending notion of reason is required. But of course Rorty's argument for the necessity of concrete alternatives rules out the need for such theoretical notions.

Habermas has recently said that raising and defending validity claims "...overshoots local standards" and that "...this transcendent moment alone distinguishes the practices of justification oriented to truth [or validity] claims from other practices that are regulated merely by social convention" (Habermas 1994, p. 31). Rorty's reply to this is another way of characterizing his debate with Habermas. He says: "These practices do not transcend social convention. Rather, they are regulated by particular social conventions..." (Rorty 1994, p. 12). Thus, Rorty holds that argumentative rules are internal to particular practices of distinguishing valid from invalid claims (1994, p. 10). Habermas counters that any use of rules of validity presupposes that such rules are not merely de facto accepted--to appeal to validity is to appeal to a context-transcending normative. However, in affirmation of reason's Janus face, he does not hold that validity is wholly noncontextual. Reasons are generated in communicative contexts:

Because the rules of synthetic inference cannot of themselves generate compelling results, and thus cannot be reproduced on the semantic level as algorithms, the argumentative processing of information has to resemble the form of an intersubjective practice. Certainly, in argumentation the "yes" and "no" positions of the participants should be regulated by good reasons. Nonetheless, what may count as a "good reason" in any case has to be decided within argumentation itself. There is no higher court of appeal than the agreement of others that is brought about within discourse and, in this respect, is rationally motivated (Habermas 1992, p. 102).

So while the procedure of applying rules to assess validity claims is not contextually specific, what is to count as valid or invalid is. The question of whether or not a claim is a validity claim (i.e., the form of the claim) is distinct from what the claim says (i.e., its content).
Rorty's criticisms of Putnam's idea that reason is both immanent and transcendent, which is tantamount to Habermas's Janus-faced conception of reason, furtherly elucidates the antinomy. He charges that there are two senses of this distinction upon which Putnam equivocate:

When Putnam says that "reason is both transcendent and immanent," I can agree with him. This is because all I can mean by "transcendent" is "pointing beyond our present practices, gesturing in the direction of our possibly different future practices." But this is not what Putnam means, for he takes this claim to entail that "philosophy, as culture-bound reflection and argument about eternal questions, is both in time and eternity" (Putnam 1983, p. 247).

I see Putnam, in making this inference, as running together a possible transcendence of the present by the future with the necessary transcendence of time by eternity. More generally, I see him as running together our ability to use tensions with our present body of beliefs of [sic.] desires to put anything (including our present norms and standards for warranted assertibility) up for grabs with our ability to achieve a rightness that is "not just for a time and a place..."[e.g., with Habermas's] notion of a "universal validity claim"... (Rorty 1993, p. 461).

Rorty has recently claimed that Habermas asserts that to raise and defend validity claims is to *ipso facto* assert that they hold unconditionally (1994, p. 10). He says that by using of the notion of a "transcendent moment," Habermas equivocates in precisely the same way as does Putnam. Rorty considers it not only unproblematic but commendable to attempt to raise and defend validity claims and thereby pose alternatives. But he says that Habermas contends that to defend validity claims is to *defend them against further criticism*, which he of course rejects. So the equivocation is between a provisional defense--which Rorty argues is all we can have--and the unconditional defense Habermas thinks follows from his construal of validity (Rorty 1994, p. 10).

But Rorty himself equivocates on the term "unconditional" which, if left in this context unexplicated, is quite ambiguous between "presupposed to hold unconditionally" and "*in fact* holds unconditionally" (I've added the "*in fact*" to the latter to emphasize that only it has
Rorty may respond that this equivocation is innocuous because both senses of the term are metaphysical. Therefore, he might continue, Habermas is smuggling a metaphysical sense of truth into his avowedly “nonmetaphysical” theory. However, Habermas presupposes no such picture of the truth relation. The clearest indication of this is that the theory of rationality not only permits but insists that validity claims are provisional in that they may later be called into question or rejected. In short, communicative rationality guarantees that critique is not foreclosed (as it would be on a metaphysical construal of truth, where only epistemic limitations could prevent us from getting at “the facts”) but facilitated. Habermas has no picture of the way the world is apart from our interactions in it, a way which might in principle be determined via some metaphysical truth relation. Rorty apparently thinks he has at least vestiges of this picture, a belief not warranted by Habermas’s texts. Furthermore, he seems to ignore the middle ground Habermas is trying to forge between these two extremes of metaphysical entrenchment and sheer contingency. I will return to this important objection in Chapter Four when I explicate Habermas’s conception of necessity.

There is yet another way of characterizing the debate. Habermas says that communicative rationality “absorbs the tension” between facticity and validity by distinguishing between, respectively, the “strategic use” of language and that “oriented to reaching understanding” (Habermas 1994, pp. 23-4). Rorty suggests that this may be a pragmatically fruitful distinction, namely one “...which lets us interpret the distinction between context-dependence and universality in a way which makes a difference to practice” (1994, p. 11). However, Rorty interprets the distinction according to Principle 4, and does not see how this distinction has “...anything in
particular to do with [that] between context-dependence and universality” (p. 11). It should be noted, however, that this objection is salient only if we accept Rorty’s reinterpretation of Habermas’s distinction. But this is an aspect of the issue in question, viz., whether Principle 2 is acceptable. Another way of putting this is whether Rorty’s construal of pragmatism, encapsulated in Principle 2, is the only or even most plausible interpretation of Principle 1 (granting of course that we accept Principle 1). My interpretation of Habermas’s pragmatism implies it is not.

Rorty takes another angle on Habermas’s position when, instead of attacking his argument for the need for context-transcendence, he questions the distinction between context-dependence and context-independence upon which it rests. He says:

What would it be like for me to make a context-dependent assertion? Of course in the trivial sense that an assertion may not always be a propos, all assertions are context-dependent. But what would it mean for a proposition asserted to be context-dependent, as opposed to the speech-act being context-dependent? (Rorty 1994, p. 16).

Rorty’s “best guess” at how this distinction is made out is supplied by a quotation from Wellmer:

“Whenever we raise a truth [or validity] claim...we presuppose that no arguments or evidence will come up in the future which would put our truth claim into question” (quoted in Rorty (1994, p.16); my editing). Hence, validity claims are nonprovisional. But as I've argued above, this is clearly not Habermas’s view.

Habermas wants to give his own view what I have termed “hermeneutic open-endedness,” that is, he wants “validity” to leave open the possibility that specific validity claims raised, defended and accepted now may be called into question or rejected later. But critique of this sort is not performed in vacuo but according to a justificatory structure (namely, the “hermeneutic circle​”) wherein the theory and object domains are related in a process of mutual accomodation.
This is the main critical “lesson” Habermas learned from Heidegger. Rorty here fails to distinguish the concept of validity from particular validity claims, even though his own gloss on “justification” is tantamount to doing precisely that. Furthermore, and this is something I got directly from his own mouth, facilitating “openness” is a goal he shares with Heidegger, Gadamer and, I suggest, Habermas. If he is dissatisfied with the hermeneutic account of this process, the onus is on him to provide an alternative beyond the *ad hoc* “let’s just start telling another story” one he gives, which is a *de facto* admission that the goal of openness is not *worth* pursuing any more than any other goal.

C. The Pragmatic Basis of Justification: the “Thin Theory”

Rorty’s own account of justification, encapsulated in Principles 1-4 above, dispenses with appeals to theoretical notions such as “truth” or “validity.” His Davidsonian point that there is no communally-generated agreement without truth, nor truth without agreement (Rorty 1994, p. 25) may seem to be tantamount to Habermas’s position that intersubjectivity is “ontologically primitive.” However, Rorty contends that this position is neutral between kinds of community (i.e., distorted vs. undistorted) because any kind of justificatory community is sufficient to produce language users. Furthermore, the “presupposition” of universal validity does not have a role to play in explanations of linguistic behaviour. He infers from this that the democratic tradition to which he and Habermas adhere obtains no support from reflection on language as such (Rorty 1994, p. 26).

Rorty believes that the most that can be obtained from the semantics of such notions as “truth,” “rationality” and “validity” is what can be obtained from the “thin,” pragmatic sense of
"justification." All that this thin sense of justification does is mark off persuasive means of changing person's behaviours, beliefs and desires from other means of doing so, such as the use of force. It amounts to persons deciding upon what kind of community they want to create, rather than reflecting on the essential nature of linguistic interaction (Rorty 1994, p. 31). Habermas holds that to adopt the persuasive, communicative means, and to be able to mark these off from strategic means, carries with it those presuppositions of intersubjectivity I have discussed in Chapter One. His disagreement with Rorty here amounts to whether such presuppositions are essential to language as such. Habermas's contention that validity claims can be justified only within argumentation itself seems to amount to the thin theory. Substantive questions cannot be settled by appeal to grammar or semantics alone. But there are broader questions here. Does formal pragmatics have the metaphysical commitment that Habermas's intersubjective construal of rationality putatively rules out? And, derivatively, do the critical practices which rest on formal pragmatics thereby rest on what Rorty has argued to be questionable, nonpragmatic theoretical assumptions?

The answer to these questions turn on just how Habermas's pragmatics is to be interpreted. *Prima facie* universal pragmatics requires nonpragmatic assumptions, assumptions which may seem tantamount to foundations. But upon closer scrutiny it becomes clear that the view ultimately derives support not from abstract theoretical assumptions but from discourse oriented to intersubjectively achieving understanding, and thus is contingent on that goal. But at times it seems as if Rorty wants Habermas to require the kind of foundational, nonhermeneutic
justification they both avowedly reject. This is perhaps the main residual issue of their debate, an issue which will require the remainder of this work to settle.
Chapter Four -- Habermas as Pragmatist: A Rebuttal to Rorty

In this section I will develop an interpretation of Habermas's pragmatism which seeks to absorb Rorty's main objections and yet provide a more satisfactory basis for critique than does Rorty's antitheoretical pragmatism. The interpretation will emerge from two main sets of Habermas's objections to Rorty's view, which I have clustered under the headings “ontological conservatism” and “analytic reductionism” respectively. Once I have assessed these objections I will be in a better position to answer the leading questions and show why Habermas's construal of communicative rationality provides a more satisfactory substantive basis for critique than does Rorty's view. These latter points will occupy the fifth and final chapter.

It may be useful to present Habermas's characterization of Rorty's position before I turn to his objections to it. McCarthy provides a clear and accurate gloss on Rorty's epistemological behaviourism: "Explicating rationality and epistemic authority is not...a matter of coming up with transcendental arguments but of providing thick ethnographic accounts of knowledge producing activities..." (1990a, p.359). This implies that for Rorty explicating the basis of rationality and justification is not a matter of revealing those presuppositions which make it possible but rather of giving accounts of the justificatory practices themselves.

Habermas himself provides a detailed characterization of Rorty's contextualism which merits quoting at length:

Rorty recognizes that contextualism must be cautiously formulated to be radical. The contextualist must exercise caution in order not to take that which he may assert as a participant within a specific historical linguistic community and a corresponding cultural form of life and translate it into a statement made from the third-person perspective of an observer. The radical contextualist claims only that it is pointless to uphold the distinction...between knowledge and opinion. “True” denotes what we hold to be justified
according to our standards in a given case. And these standards of rationality are simply not to be distinguished in type from any other standards used in our culture. Practices of justification, like all other social conduct, are dependent upon our language, our traditions, and our form of life. “Truth” does not signify the correspondence between statements and some X prior to all interpretations; “truth” is simply an expression of commendation, with which we advise those who speak our language to accept the conceptions that we hold to be justified. Rorty explains the objectivity of knowledge in terms of an intersubjectivity of agreement based...on agreement in our language, our factually shared form of life. He replaces the aspiration to objectivity with the aspiration to solidarity within the linguistic community to which he contingently belongs. The cautious contextualist is not going to extend his lifeworld into the abstract...He must rigorously avoid every idealization, and it would be for the best if he did without the concept of rationality altogether. For “rationality” is a limit concept with normative content, one which passes beyond the borders of every local community and moves in the direction of a universal one. An idealization of this sort, which conceives of truth as acceptability grounded in reasons under certain demanding conditions, would constitute a perspective that would in turn point beyond the practices of justification that are contingently established among us, one that would distance us from these practices. According to Rorty, that is not possible without a backslide into objectivism. The contextualist should not let himself be lured out of his participant perspective--even when the price he has to pay for this is admitted ethnocentrism. He admits that we have to privilege the linguistic horizon of our own linguistic community, although there can be no non-circular justification for this. But this ethnocentric standpoint only means that we have to test all alien conceptions in light of our own standards (Habermas 1992, pp. 135-7).

Habermas’s most basic point is that contextualism denies there is an external perspective from which to assess the validity of contingently accepted claims or practices. Contextualism holds that idealizations such as rationality have no pragmatic content. His implicit charge is that without such idealizations there is no means to criticize de facto accepted claims and practices because there is no way they can be transcended. This is roughly the charge of “ontological conservatism.”

The charge of “analytic reductionism” is levelled at Rorty’s argumentative methodology. In order to assert the absolute priority of the “participant perspective,” Rorty implicitly depends upon precisely those idealizing concepts he has putatively rejected. The charges are therefore
related. I should add that it is interesting that Habermas’s characterization of Rorty’s construal of truth is much akin to his own. Both hold that truth is a matter of intersubjective agreement about validity claims. They also agree that the matter of which particular validity claims are accepted is context-dependent. They disagree, however, over whether the notions of “truth” or “validity” entail context-transcendence. Habermas of course asserts that they do. Rorty, as we have seen, holds instead that such notions are wholly cashed out in terms of particular justificatory practices and thus do not entail transcendence.

In the following two sections I will, respectively, delineate these charges. McCarthy has explicitly engaged in debate with Rorty, so I will give his versions of the charges. However, in key places I believe he has misconstrued Habermas’s position. Therefore, I will disjoin his interpretation from mine in those places.

A. The Charge of "Ontological Conservatism"

What I have dubbed the charge of ontological conservatism concerns Rorty’s prescription for change; namely, if you don’t like the present story, then start telling a different one and try to convince others to accept it. This prescription is arguably conservative because there is no extra-narrative basis upon which to accept or reject a story and hence are no “better” or “worse” stories. We are ontologically and normatively stuck with what we happen to have or happen to come up with.\(^{18}\) Thus, so the argument goes, meaningful critique is foreclosed.

\(^{18}\)The rationale behind using the terms “ontological” and “normative” together here is rooted in Rorty’s view that the way the world is carved up (i.e., ontology) depends on whoever presently happens to be deferred to (e.g., scientists or legislators) and thus on currently accepted practice (hence, on normative stipulation).
McCarthy contends that epistemological behaviourism precludes reformative critique by purging discourse of context-transcending idealizations:

...it is [the] moment of unconditionality that opens us up to criticisms from other points of view. Without that idealizing moment, there would be no foothold in our accepted beliefs and practices for the critical shocks to consensus that force us to expand our horizons and learn to see things in different ways. It is precisely this context-transcendent, “regulative” surplus of meaning in our notion of truth that keeps us from being looked into what we happen to agree upon at any particular time and place, that open us up to...alternative possibilities...Idealized notions of rational accountability, objectivity, and truth, among others, are pragmatic presuppositions of communicative interaction...Replacing rational accountability with conformity to established patterns, as Rorty does, undercuts the...principal alternative to resolving differences through coercion,...[viz.] rational dialogue (McCarthy 1990a, p. 370: italics mine).

The objection that Rorty replaces rationality with conformity amounts to the charge of ontological conservatism. McCarthy’s passage merits a digression before I continue with the charge.

Initially, two distinct claims need to be disentangled in the passage: one is empirical and the other is “normative.” The empirical claim is that “...our culture is everywhere structured around transcultural notions of validity” (McCarthy 1990a, p.361). The “normative” claim is that this ought to be the case. The former claim is the less problematic of the two and, as Rorty concedes, may even be true (although he contends there are no grounds for either affirming or rejecting that such notions are operative) (Rorty 1990, p. 635). But the whole issue in question turns on the justifiability of the latter claim, and it is indeed here that McCarthy runs into problems.
Is it that we accept there being “transcultural notions of validity” because doing so accords with our pragmatic purposes?\(^{19}\) If this were the justification, the whole question at issue would be begged; namely, why these purposes rather than some others? Because they accord with our notion of transcultural validity? Rorty’s point is that there is no noncircular way of justifying our prejudices, at least if we are to reject foundationalism and be pragmatic. (As I will show, Habermas himself ultimately agrees with Rorty on this central issue.) McCarthy clearly thinks there is. He contends that there is an internal relation between truth and idealized rational acceptability that is embedded in our practices of truth-telling—such that, for instance, it makes perfectly good sense to say things like: “We have every reason to believe that \(p\) and we are all agreed that it is so, but of course we may be wrong, it may turn out to be false after all” (McCarthy 1990a, p. 369).

Rorty of course will question the status of the possibility that “it may turn out to be false.” Either it presupposes some extra-discursive, metaphysical anchor, which clearly he and Habermas reject, or it just accords with the notion of “revisable warranted assertion” that he contends is all “the truth” we can have. So the question becomes whether this possibility needs any theoretical bolstering.

McCarthy implicitly acknowledges this in his explication of the “Janus-faced” nature of reason:

...[a]ny adequate account of our practices of truth will have to attend not only to the situated, socially conditioned character of concrete truth claims and of warrants offered for them, but to the situation-transcending import of the claims themselves. While we have no idea of standards of truth wholly dependent of particular language and practices,\(^{19}\)

\(^{19}\)However, there is a huge distinction between “transcultural” and “transcendental.” I will show below that it is the latter, not the former, which is important for Habermas. Therefore, the debate over “transcultural validity” and “universal competences” is a red herring.
“truth” nevertheless functions as an “idea of reason” with respect to which we can criticize not only particular claims within our language but the very standards of truth we have inherited (McCarthy 1990a, p. 369).

Rorty would add to the final clause “...including this standard that truths are ‘transcendent,’ a notion we can happily do without.” McCarthy of course recognizes this when he says that Rorty “...would not find among our settled convictions the belief that what is settled among us is ipso facto right” (1990a, p. 365 --in a discussion of Rorty’s adaptation of Rawlss notion of “reflective equilibrium,” hence the talk of “settled convictions”). But the reason he would not find it, or more importantly need it, is that it would actually work against those critical practices which McCarthy argues it facilitates. It would do so because it would make us less tolerant of those points of view which are not presently among our settled convictions but which may eventually undermine them. However, McCarthy’s take on the debate here misses the main point of Habermas’s use “transcendental” concepts like reason.

It misses the point because it presupposes that these concepts are being employed substantively. For Habermas, a claim is valid if there is no countervailing reason why it should not be accepted. Therefore, any validity claim is provisional. But the notions of “validity” and “reason” are not themselves thereby provisional. In fact, if they were, it would be difficult to see how “provisional” could mean anything more than “random.” The whole process of raising, defending and accepting validity claims would fall into obscurity. So Habermas’s point is that some notion of the whole form of the critical process, as opposed to particular instantiations of it, is necessary to facilitate critique. This is another way of explicating his notion of
"transcendence." It also indicates that his justification for the use of this notion is pragmatic; namely, that it facilitates those critical practices which he, Rorty and other liberals value.

This point can be made in another way which brings out one of Habermas's central insights. McCarthy distinguishes universal claims from transcendental claims in that only the latter assert necessity. He challenges Rorty to give the basis on which he claims that there are no universals of *inter alia* language, asking whether it is *a priori* (McCarthy 1990b, p. 645). Rorty’s sense of "...contingency is opposed to necessity, not universality, and so one might well ask whether there are any contingent universals relevant to [the empirical human sciences]..." (McCarthy 1990b, p. 649). But the charge of apriorism is misguided. Rorty contends there are no grounds either to affirm or reject the claim that there are universals of language, culture, etc. Presumably even if there were good empirical grounds for supposing there were, this would not guarantee there are.

However, McCarthy misses a "deeper" implication of the contrast between contingency and necessity, one which has nothing to do with the question of whether there are such "universals." This is Habermas's sense of "transcendental presupposition," which is distinct from this question of universality. It is contingent that there are such-and-such languages or that language itself exists at all. But, given that it does exist, certain specifiable presuppositions are entailed. These are, according to Habermas, the rational presuppositions of communicative action. Now these could be called "universals," but as such they would not accord with the usual substantive sense of the term. That validity claims must be raised in no way constrains what their content may be.
McCarthy charges that Rorty too depends on transcendental notions and reiterates the charge of ontological conservatism. His term “normative” is tantamount to the explication of “transcendent” I've just given:

Rorty has not eliminated all “normative” content from his notion of truth, which is that ...the idea of truth warns or reminds us that we might be mistaken, that what we are certain of might be false, that our well-justified beliefs might be misguided, and so on. The only disagreement seems to be whether a “moment of unconditionality” attaches to truth-claims...The issue is the context-transcendence of truth-claims: do they or don't they claim a validity which transcends the particular contexts in which they are raised? To ask such a question is to answer it, and Rorty’s admonitions and reminders make no sense unless he were of the same mind. If no such normative expectations attach to truth-claims, how is it that we expose ourselves to future corrections? What is it that opens us up to alternative (better?) suggestions? So the real disagreement must concern how far this context-transcendence reaches. Rorty’s position seems to be: as far as the borders of language and no further. Habermas’s and Putnam’s view is: there are no such impassable borders; truth-claims can be contested indefinitely and from an indefinite diversity of points of view, precisely because they claim unconditioned validity. The force of that view is misunderstood if it is understood metaphysically, as it was traditionally and still is by Rorty. Understood pragmatically, it runs exactly counter to what Rorty supposes: toward the ongoing critique of dogmatism, error, and self-deception in all their forms (McCarthy 1990b, pp. 646-7).

Rorty himself gives an argument for this idea of “linguistic enclosure,” only to ultimately reject it:

Consider the abstract problem of how one can ever “escape” from a vocabulary or a set of assumptions, how one avoids being “trapped” within a language or a culture. Suppose that there is universal agreement within a community on “the conditions of intelligible linguistic expression” or “the vocabulary in which it is permissible to speak.” Then suppose somebody in that community wishes to say that we made a mistake—that actually these conditions or criteria, or that vocabulary, were the wrong ones. This revolutionary suggestion would easily be disposed of. For either it would be made in obedience to the old conditions or criteria, within the old vocabulary, or it would not be. If it were, then it would be self-referentially inconsistent. If it were not, it would be unintelligible, or irrational, or both...[Nevertheless,] [n]ot only is there no universal agreement on the conditions of intelligibility or the criteria of rationality, but nobody even tries to pretend there is, except as an occasional and rather ineffective rhetorical device (Rorty 1991b, pp. 99-100).
Rorty here argues that the charge of ontological conservatism goes through only if there is universal agreement on *inter alia* criteria of rationality. But, since there is not, the charge fails. In one sense he makes a concession to McCarthy's spin on the debate by reducing the issue to a matter of there being or not being universal *qua* transcultural conditions. I have already argued why this is an inadequate interpretation of Habermas's argument.

This point can be made by considering another of McCarthy's criticisms. The issue concerns Rorty's implicit belief that "...validity and justification [are] equated with persuasion and conversion..." (McCarthy 1990b, p.647). To this he applies Pierce's dictum that there are "...enormous social consequences attached to the different methods of fixing belief" (p. 647). Thus, the issue here becomes whether beliefs are fixed by mere persuasion or by rational justification. McCarthy claims that Rorty rejects this distinction when says that we should not ask "...whether a claim can be 'rationally defended' but whether it can be made to cohere with a sufficient number of *our* beliefs and desires" (p. 640). McCarthy thinks that this implies conservatism: namely, that we should not "...engage in radical criticism of *our* culture [and cultural tradition] and society' (p.648). Rorty would not dispute Pierce's pragmatic claim--but add that there is *nothing but* social consequences (and social motives) for "fixing belief" one way rather than another. There are none of the implications for "rationality" which McCarthy claims there are. The nub of Rorty's evasion of the charge of "conservatism" is that appealing to unconditional validity does none of the work of critique. Moreover, it is unclear why McCarthy assumes that the stock of "*our* beliefs and desires" is both fixed and self-enclosed. Only if Rorty believed this were the case, which I have just shown he clearly does not, would the charge go
through. Again, McCarthy has apparently misconstrued Habermas's position. It does not seem that the fundamental issue between Rorty and Habermas comes down to whether critique is confined to a language. It lies elsewhere.

All of McCarthy's talk of "borders of language" is ambiguous between that of \textit{a particular language} and that of \textit{language in general}. Obviously Rorty would not confine himself to a determinate set of particular languages; but he must admit that to use any language at all has entailments. Linguistic contexts are produced as we act and speak, but we do so in ways which render those contexts \textit{inter alia} communicative, i.e., by raising and defending validity claims to achieve intersubjective agreement. Habermas does not appeal to anything \textit{outside} of language to argue what must go on \textit{within} language.

This point is expanded in a passage wherein Habermas calls into question Rorty's rejection of "validity" in a particularly illuminating way:

...we live in the expectation of future resolutions. As long as we take part [in communicative practices] and do not merely look over our shoulders as historians and ethnographers, we maintain precisely the distinction Rorty wants to retract: between valid and socially accepted views, between good arguments and those which are merely successful for a certain audience at a certain time.

In believing that he can consistently replace the implicitly normative [i.e., standard-yielding, not \textit{de facto}] conception of "valid arguments" with the descriptive concept of "arguments held to be true for us at this time," Rorty commits an objectivistic fallacy. We could not even understand the meaning of what we describe from a third-person perspective if we had not already learned the performative attitude of a participant in conversation; that is, what it means from the perspective of the first person to raise a validity claim that points beyond the provincial agreements of the specific local context (Habermas 1985, p. 194).

The operative distinction Habermas employs in this argument is that between "critical" or "reflective" theory and scientific or "objectifying" theory, which I have outlined in Chapter One,
Part A above. His charge that Rorty commits an “objectivist fallacy” is that he presupposes that his own participation in validity-generating discourse is independent of the discourse itself. This explains why Rorty “...remain[s] fixated on the natural sciences” (Habermas 1985, p. 197). I should add that the distinction between reflective and objective science is an illicit distinction if it is taken in more than a pragmatic sense. Natural sciences work only because their theory-domain and object-domain are taken to be separate, but of course they are not. Habermas’s point could be interpreted in a pragmatic way by saying that human sciences just do not work if these domains are taken to be separate.

The aforementioned also explains the link Habermas sees between the language of reason and the historical emergence of rationality. The link is that only reflective theory, as opposed to Rorty’s preferred just “telling a story,” makes this process intelligible by explaining reason’s historical situatedness. Reason is situated within the communicative accomplishments of persons raising and defending validity claims and only therein. It follows that to use reason or to reflect on it, one must have raised and defended validity claims and thus have been a participant in the communicative process. I should reiterate here that it is the communicative process in toto, and not particular claims raised within it, which transcend specific local contexts. Rationality has applicability only within this reflective framework, not at some neutral point outside of it. Therefore, as Habermas claims, “...metanarratives,’ in the sense of foundational ‘ultimate groundings’ or totalizing philosophies of history, could never even arise [on his view]” (1985, p. 196).
So while Rorty can evade the charge of ontological conservatism if it is taken to depend on the notion of “linguistic enclosure,” he fares less well against Habermas’s charge that his view is explanatorily deficient. Communicative rationality makes out the explanatory link between the process of communication and the participation of persons within it. One way it does so is to show that for persons to be rational they must understand both the provisionality of particular reasons they give and the nonprovisionality of using reasons in general. Hence, the following condition of success on formal pragmatics pertains not just to societal rationalization but also to individual communicative actions:

With its self-imposed modesty of method, a philosophy starting from formal pragmatics preserves the possibility of speaking of rationality in the singular. Unlike the sciences, it has to account for its own context of emergence and thus its own place in history (Habermas 1985, p. 196).

B. The Inextricability of Theory and Practice and the Charge of Analytic Reductionism

McCarthy contends that Rorty “favours” practice over theory and therefore implies that there is a nonpragmatic distinction between theory and practice. If he were to use such a distinction, however, Rorty would thereby undermine his own pragmatic justification for critical practice. Therefore, he might instead not emphasize one side of the distinction so much as attempt to transcend it: “It is no small irony that [the] absolute split between a depoliticized theory and a detheorized politics should be the final outcome of a project that understands itself as a pragmatic attempt to overcome the dichotomy between theory and practice” (McCarthy 1990a, p. 366). However, McCarthy charges that this implies that “[t]here can be no politically relevant critical theory and hence no theoretically informed critical practice” (McCarthy 1990a, pp. 366-7). This is a serious charge indeed.
The charge can be made out at two levels: the sociopolitical and the more basic philosophical. To be sure, Rorty would insist that to separate these levels is a philosopher’s fiction, and that only the former level is needed. In a sense this illustrates rather than rebuts McCarthy’s charge. Consider first the sociopolitical level. Rorty claims that theoretical notions are not necessary for “progress.” McCarthy points out that Rorty does not want to dispense with the notion of “moral progress,” but claims that “...he does believe that there is nothing fundamentally wrong with the culture and institutions of contemporary liberalism” (1990b, p. 654). But upon what basis could he make such a claim? For to claim that progress has exhausted itself is to presuppose that with which this account of progress has putatively dispensed; namely, some context-independent standard which indicates its exhaustion. Such a standard depends on the use of theoretical concepts such as reason. This takes us to the second level.

Habermas contends that contextualist views such as Rorty’s appeal to the rationalist construal of truth it purports to reject (Habermas 1992, p. 49). I will reiterate the charge I presented at the end of Chapter Two, with some elaboration. Modern analytic methods reduce reason to only one of its dimensions, namely to the scientific:

...the capacity to represent and act upon objects, or to the fact-stating discourse that specializes in only...the truth of assertoric sentences...Ultimately, methodically pursuing questions of truth is the only thing that still counts as rational [to the exclusion of the other validity dimensions] (Habermas 1992, p. 50).

He considers it an irony that Rorty’s critique of reason depends on this analytic reduction. For example, Rorty “[a]t times... suggests that any attempt to ‘get at something universal’ is ipso facto an attempt to grasp ‘real essences’ (Rorty 1989, pp. 76, 75). But unless metaphysics is the only science, that is evidently not the case” (McCarthy 1990b, p. 649). An implication is that by
rejecting such a metaphysical construal of science Rorty has thereby rejected all appeal to reason. Thus, by presupposing that rationality’s application is restricted to matters of truth (in agreement with the “reductionists”), he overlooks its broader application and hastily concludes that the concept of rationality simply has no role to play in critical practice.

But of course Habermas believes that rationality has a pragmatically fruitful role to play. His counterargument to Rorty shows that the use of such theoretical notions is eliminated at cost of implicit inconsistency. This anti-contextualist argument is analogous to the argument that relativism is self-refuting in that each depends upon a notion that it putatively rejects. However, Habermas agrees with Rorty that practice has primacy over theory, if for different reasons:

Unlike the other scientific disciplines..., philosophy... maintains a certain relation to pretheoretical knowledge and to the nonobjective totality of the lifeworld. From there, philosophical thinking can then turn back towards science as a whole and undertake a self-reflection of the science that goes beyond the limits of methodology and the theory of science and that—in a reversal of the ultimate grounding of all knowledge in metaphysics—exposes the meaning-foundation of scientific theory-formation in prescientific practice (Habermas 1992, pp. 48-9).

Not only does Habermas here support the primacy of practice in a way Heidegger and Foucault (but not Rorty) would endorse, he clearly reiterates philosophy’s critical/reflective function in contradistinction to science's normalizing/objectifying function. His point is that this distinction, which philosophy (ideally) lays bare and utilizes, is not tantamount to that between, e.g., normal and abnormal discourse. Rather, the distinction operates, as Foucault says of his “archaeology,” below the level of language (Foucault 1970, p.xxii). This is because critical philosophy makes explicit that theoretical inquiry depends on a pre-theoretical, meaning-generating and sustaining lifeworld: “It...discovers a reason that is already operating in everyday communicative practice”
(Habermas 1992, p. 50). Contextualism, on the other hand, "...assimilates all standards of rationality to habits or to conventions that are only valid in situ" (p. 49).

While the "grounding" of validity in mundane communicative contexts may seem to merely amount to contextualism, Habermas is clear that it does not. Validity claims...intersect...within a concrete, linguistically disclosed world horizon; yet, as criticizable claims, they also transcend the various contexts in which they are formulated and gain acceptance. In the validity spectrum of everyday practice of reaching understanding, there comes to light a communicative rationality opening onto several dimensions at the same time, this communicative rationality provides a standard for evaluating systematically distorted forms of communication and of life that result when the potential for reason that became available with the transition to modernity is selectively utilized [viz., internal colonization] (Habermas 1992, p. 50).

In an ironic way, Rorty's contextualism closes off access to lifeworld contexts by denying context-transcendence. There is no way to assess our current normative framework in any informed way and call it into question. Therefore, there is no critical practice which is not merely either a reaffirmation of current norms or an ad hoc rejection of them. In addition, by denying there is an explanatory link between societal rationalization and the use of reason, contextualism prevents the formulation of theoretically informed social criticism such as Habermas's thesis of internal colonization. However, application of this thesis will ascertain the extent to which society has inhibited those free and open encounters which liberals so value. Thus, it has a pragmatic value which Rorty should not ignore. (I have presented examples which illustrate the pragmatic and explanatory value of applying this thesis in Chapter Two, Part D).

C. Habermas Pragmatized: Separating Procedure from Substance

Habermas's theory of rationality may be plausibly interpreted as being pragmatically motivated. Using the theory is a means of securing democratic convergence and thus facilitating
that free, open and undistorted communication we have come to desire. So a specifically \textit{pragmatic} reason for adopting this view of rationality is that it gets us the kind of consensus we want. But it does more than this. The important point for Habermas is that it does not just achieve the consensus we happen to want but also gives us a means of \textit{criticizing} that consensus and our desire for it. Theorizing in general, and the theory of rationality in particular, have pragmatic value.

The crux of this interpretation is made clear by examining McCarthy’s claim that this kind of convergence is best facilitated if “ideal regulatives” are taken to be operative (1990b, pp. 367-9). But \textit{pace} McCarthy the basis of this is entirely pragmatic and therefore the so-called “idea of reason” has value insofar as it is pragmatic and not because it is “of reason.” He admits that the presupposition that this regulative exists is “...frequently--strictly speaking perhaps even always--counterfactual.” However, he goes on to say that “...it is of \textit{fundamental significance for the structure of human relations} that we normally deal with each other as if it were the case” (1990a, pp.368-9; emphasis mine). This betrays both a yearning for something more than a pragmatically-generated conception and a desire to pin down a univocal way to be human. This precisely illustrates the tension in Habermas's theory that I have tried to lay bare. My reasons for opting for the pragmatic interpretation, and discarding that towards which the brunt of Rorty’s objections are directed, may be brought out by considering one of the clearest instantiations of this tension.

As I have already said, I agree with Rorty that Habermas's attempt to “ground” his arguments for the theory of rationality in “deep anthropological structures” is misguided, particularly because it undermines much of the critical insight and pragmatic value of his theory. I
would strengthen McCarthy's claim that the burden of proof that such structures exist is “considerable” (1982, p. 66) to “unattainable,” or, rather, that talk of “proof” here is otiose. Reference to “deep structures” implies there are things objectively there for reconstructive science to reveal. But Habermas's theory operates at the level of formal-pragmatics, not at that of objectivistic science (which at most captures only one validity complex, not validity in general). If my interpretation of Habermasian pragmatics is correct, namely that it is based on intersubjectively achieved understanding, then talk of universalistic structures is otiose. The rational presuppositions of communicative language use are pragmatic, i.e., necessary only in so far as they are required to facilitate consensus (and those learning processes which instill intersubjective competences). Suitably qualified, these are the necessary preconditions of communicative interaction. That is, if an intersubjective relationship is to be established and maintained communicatively rather than, say, by force or normative stipulation, these conditions must be met. These conditions are not necessary in the nomological sense that terms like “deep structure” entail. When Habermas appeals to anthropological deep structures, he commits what he himself calls an “objectivistic fallacy.” So on his own grounds he should dispense with such appeals and instead emphasize the formal character of the theory and pragmatic value of formalism.

Consider Habermas’s Gadamerian spin on reformative learning which I discuss in Chapter Two. There he makes quite clear the formal aspect of universal pragmatics. I contend that it also demonstrates that the theory need not (or even cannot) make appeal to deep anthropological structures. For surely we would not want to a priori preclude that we, and aliens who ex
hypothesis do not share our particular structures, could fuse horizons and thereby come to mutually understand one another. The formal as opposed to structurally specific character of rationality guarantees at least the empirical possibility of such understanding.

The pragmatic interpretation of Habermas's theory may be linked to the question of justification. Rorty claims that there is no hermeneutic relation between facticity and validity in which, as Habermas says, the social sciences are trapped (Habermas 1990, p. 118). He considers this distinction to be a philosopher's fiction, the result of distinguishing two aspects of a situation for no practical reason and then fabricating a theory to reunite them (Rorty 1994, p. 36). But surely there are good pragmatic reasons both for distinguishing between what Heidegger calls the "ontic" and the "ontological" and for uniting them in an interrelationship of justification. How else would justification (or, more precisely, justificatory practices) work once foundationalism is rejected except hermeneutically? Rorty himself appropriates Rawls's notion of "wide reflective equilibrium," which is hermeneutical in a broad sense. I have shown that in places Habermas claims that isolating "universal competences" and "deep-seated anthropological structures" will unite the ontological (i.e., universal structural) level with the ontic (i.e., the mundane practices of communicative interaction). But it is hard to see how this would serve to dissolve the hermeneutic circle, or, to put the point less obscurely, obviate further need for justificatory practices. Open "normative" questions will always remain, such as "Have we isolated the right structures?" and "Why this competence rather than that?" There will be the permanent possibility of having to justify the theory on the basis of such questions. Part of the pragmatic attraction of the hermeneutic construal of justification is that it not only leaves open these possibilities, but it
acknowledges them in its very articulation (loosely, it "explains" why they will arise). Habermas’s failure to explicitly acknowledge his use of the hermeneutic model tends at times to obscure the pragmatic basis of his theory.
Chapter Five -- Conclusion: Theory and Practice

I am now in a better position to answer both the leading questions of this thesis and the residual questions remaining between Habermas and Rorty. These of course are closely related. By answering the questions I hope to bolster my pragmatic reading of Habermas's theory of rationality. This will involve contrasting his construal of pragmatism with Rorty's.

The main thematic question is whether critique needs theoretical justification. That is, do theoretical notions such as rationality have an essential role to play in critical practice? Derivative is the question of whether the notion of progress needs theoretical justification. I contend that the question of progress is derived from that of critique because progress can be gauged only if there is a means of distinguishing "better" from "worse" ideas and practices, of ipso facto criticizing them.

We have seen why Habermas holds that theoretical notions such as rationality and validity have an ineliminable role to play in critical practice. The reason is not that we could not make sense of critique without such notions. This would be to claim that critique in part just means the employment of theoretical notions. The question, however, would remain--why accept this construal of critique? I have shown that Rorty makes sense of critical practice without relying on theoretical notions. For example, his notion of progress is ex post facto. Progress is simply the process whereby concrete alternative ideas are raised and practices tried, some of which come to be seen as better than previous ones and are therefore accepted. Semantics alone cannot adjudicate between these alternative views of progress.
I believe that Habermas's implicit answer is that it is pragmatically fruitful to employ concepts like rationality. This suggests that practice and theory are not as distinct as Rorty's view implies. I have argued that both Habermas and Rorty assign primacy to practice, but they do so in different ways. Habermas holds that theory and practice are inextricably linked. An important example is his Janus-faced construal of reason. Reason is employed in concrete practices but has an aspect which transcends any given practice. However, Rorty presupposes that theory and practice are distinct in order to reject the former in favour of the latter. Therefore, he assigns an absolute primacy to practice which Habermas finds objectionable.

Habermas contends that critically relevant practices are "shot through" with theoretical assumptions. As I have shown, Habermas defends this point by elucidating the rational presuppositions of communicative practice. But the point also applies to scientific practice. A basic assumption of scientific practice is that the world is empirically specifiable. Surely Rorty would accept this. Perhaps he does not recognize empirical specifiability as a theoretical assumption but rather as a way of looking at things and thus as a whole perspective. Perhaps the tautologous ring of this would not bother him.

Rorty's main worry about Habermasian theoretical presuppositions is that they contain metaphysical residue. He thinks that formal pragmatics has metaphysical commitment--commitment that Habermas's intersubjective construal of rationality putatively has ruled out. Thus, Rorty holds that the critical practices which rest on formal pragmatics thereby rest on questionable, nonpragmatic theoretical assumptions. There are at least two reasons why this charge is not decisive.
The first reason is that Habermas notion of the concept of "necessity" or "presupposition" is nonmetaphysical. That persons achieve intersubjective agreement is unproblematic. What Habermas contends is that if they are to do so *rationally*, certain presuppositions are entailed. The most general presupposition is that persons raise claims which they defend on the basis of reasons. It is necessary that they do so if their agreement is to be rationally motivated. So, given that rational consensus is the goal, there are necessary conditions to achieve it. But because the goal itself is contingent, such conditions may be termed "contingent necessities." Rorty denies that there are any such necessities, affirming that contingency goes all the way up, so to speak. But it is difficult to see how linguistic interaction would be possible at all without some weakened sense of necessity. For example, one of Habermas's specific rational presuppositions of communicative action is that persons use terms with consistent meanings. If this condition were not met, there would be pervasive scepticism concerning the claims of others which would undermine our ability to accept or reject them. This would render communication highly tenuous, if not impossible.

So while *prima facie* universal pragmatics seems to require nonpragmatic assumptions, upon closer scrutiny it becomes clear that it ultimately derives support not from abstract theoretical assumptions but from discourse oriented to intersubjectively achieving understanding, and thus is contingent on that goal. Furthermore, Habermas's theory of rationality demonstrates that it is pragmatically fruitful to distinguish theory from practice, particularly what is rationally defensible from what is merely *de facto* accepted. This is the basis of his critical project: to show that critique should be based on reasons. Critical theses such as that of internal colonization
challenge us not to merely accept the *status quo* but to rationally defend or reject it. Such theses work to facilitate the openness that liberals value, but they are cannot be formulated or applied without appeal to theoretical notions.

The second reason why Rorty's charge is not decisive is it assumes that Habermas at least implicitly still relies on the kind of foundational justification he has quite decisively rejected. A leading theme of my interpretation of Habermas is that the pragmatic and hermeneutic construals of justification are mutually reinforcing. It works to discursively both separate out and interrelate aspects or levels of the subject matter under consideration because such aspects are both distinct and interdependent. This applies to the relation between theory and practice, to that between context-boundedness and transcendence, and to all the other important hermeneutic relations to which Habermas appeals. Using these relations has pragmatic value in that they help to facilitate consensus and critique. They also have explanatory value. Habermas relates the conceptual and socio-historical aspects of rationalization hermeneutically in the development of the theory of communicative action. For example, our present emphasis on reason over unquestioning acceptance is in part explained by modernity's detachment of the lifeworld from stipulated normative contexts. But of course this process of detachment is in turn explained by a theory of rationality which implies such emphasis on reason. Each of these respective explanations has a range of application within which it can work, but neither has the primacy that a foundational construal of explanation requires.

Habermas's and Rorty's motivations are both pragmatic, but their construals of pragmatism differ. Rorty seems to want to expunge all vestiges of theory from practice. His
pragmatics is strongly antitheoretical. However, I have attempted to show how his view actually has unpragmatic implications. His insistence that, for example, all appeals to ideal rationality are metaphysical blind him to the ways which such appeals serve pragmatic purposes. Habermas's theory of rationality elucidates many of these purposes. Rorty believes that critical practice consists in the generation of concrete alternatives. Habermas agrees, but adds that concrete alternatives are generated in determinate ways, namely by the raising and defending of validity claims. But the strongest point in his favour is that alternatives are best facilitated if the process of doing so is structured according to theory of rationality. At very least, the theory unambiguously marks off rationally motivated consensus from other means of attaining “agreement.” Rorty's view of justification falters in this regard. He leaves it a matter of contingency whether the means of persuasion will remain rational, or be replaced by alternatives which would militate against or even foreclose critique. The hermeneutical nature of Habermas’s structure of rationality guarantees that openness will be preserved. It preserves a framework in which concrete alternatives will continue to be raised. (It is sensitive to the possibility that an alternative to it may be raised. But the fact that it would be able to identify such an alternative, and ipso facto reject it, is another of its pragmatic advantages).

Rorty explicitly endorses the pragmatic spirit of Habermas's project, if not the details. He says that “[s]ocial purposes are served, just as Habermas says, by finding beautiful ways of harmonizing interests, rather than finding sublime ways of detaching oneself from others’ interests” (Rorty 1991b, p.176). To furtherly elaborate on the defoundationalized, nonmetaphysical nature of Habermas’s view, the idea of detachment could be taken in its
philosophical sense in addition to its social sense Rorty here employs. His theory does not detach rationality from actual intersubjective encounters but embeds this concept within them. Rationality is employed only within particular concrete instances in which persons raise, defend and accept or reject validity claims. But this does not imply that the whole rational process can be reduced to particular communicative actions, that it is identical to the practices which bring it about. Only a questionable dichotomy between practice and theory would lead one to believe that to engage in justificatory or consensus-building practices precludes the use of ideal regulatives. But it appears as if Rorty accepts the force of this dichotomy and, by rejecting theory, overlooks that there can be and are fruitful practices which employ theoretical concepts not just incidentally but indispensably.

So to answer the question whether critique needs theoretical justification along the lines that Habermas argues, the answer is “yes” if it is to be informed rather than arbitrary. Now this may sound blatantly circular in itself: critique needs theoretical justification to be theoretically informed. But conjoined with the pragmatic reason for it, it is not so problematic. Habermas’s non-substantive theory of rationality gives us a framework with which to raise and consistently assess substantive alternatives to the status quo, whether they be socio-political or philosophical. Communicative rationality gives us a powerful alternative to the dualisms which have dominated Western philosophical thinking since Plato. With the thesis of internal colonization, it gives us a means of identifying why, where and how Enlightenment ideals have been betrayed. And it accomplishes these seemingly disparate yet interrelated tasks not by securing an immutable critical standard, but by revealing the rational processes which are implicit in an historically emergent
modernity. Habermas's theory of rationality undoubtedly has problematic aspects, some of which I have discussed. But that it has pragmatic value should not be doubted. Perhaps the reason Rorty does doubt it, and continues to badger Habermas with criticisms, is that he wants to achieve a goal they both share--"to keep the conversation going."


