Jürgen Habermas: Discourse Ethics and the Development of a Contemporary Christian Ethic

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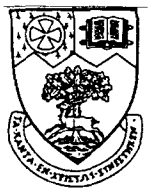

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Upon the recommendation of an oral examination committee and vote of the faculty, this thesis-project by

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to introduce the reader to the person and work of social philosopher and social theorist Jürgen Habermas. It introduces pertinent aspects of Habermas's biography, and surveys a portion of his library of writings. It then explains Habermas's communication theory, specifically his theory of communicative action. Then, Habermas's theory of discourse ethics is introduced and explicated. This thesis culminates with an examination of the appropriateness and applicability of Habermas's theory of discourse ethics for the development of a contemporary Christian ethic.

Acknowledgements

The preparation of this thesis has been an edifying experience, and I would like to extend thanks to a number of people who made the experience what it has been.

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To the congregations of Mountsberg and Westover Baptist Churches, where I ministered during the preparation of this thesis, thank you for you encouragement, prayers, and for freeing me the time to complete this work. My intent was to determine whether there is a place for discourse ethics in the church, and my time in the pastorate during its writing gave me a chance to think through the potential for theory to be put into practice, and its effectiveness there. Thank you.

To my parents, Don and Sheila Ford, and my in-laws Sonya and Jim Ott, thank you all for your unending support and encouragement during this thesis and the past years.

Last, but most certainly not least, thank you to my wife, Victoria. If it were not for you, this thesis would never have become a reality. Thank you for the inspiration, the encouragement, and the deadlines. Thank you for the conversation, the challenging questions, and the many, many edits. I love you very much and thank God that you are in my life.

Michael John Ford
Hamilton, April 2003

Table of Contents

Introduction

The term *ethics* is complex and multifaceted. Though there exist many definitions that attempt to encapsulate the nature of ethics, a particularly comprehensive definition has been provided by R.M. Hare. According to Hare, there are three types of questions that one may define as 'ethical':

> (1) questions as to what is right, good, etc., or of how we out to behave (normative ethics, morals); (2) questions as to the answers given by particular societies and people to questions of type (1) (descriptive ethics or comparative ethics, a branch of moral sociology or anthropology); and (3) questions as to the meanings or uses of the words used in answering questions of type (1), or the nature or logical character of the moral concepts, or, in older language, of what goodness, etc., are theoretical ethics, philosophical ethics, moral philosophy.[1]

Though each of these three definitions may appear at first glance to be unique, they are instead intrinsically related. The common thread that holds them together is found in number (1). For Hare and others who are engaged in the task of ethics, "ethics is about the good (that is, what values and virtues we should cultivate) and about the right (that is, what our moral duties may be)."[2] In other words, ethics pertains to the study of what is good and bad, and what is right and wrong.

Related to the term *ethics* is the term *morality*. Semantically, it is possible to differentiate between the two. For some, "they define ethics as the "theory" and morality as the "practice" of living morally good lives.[3] However, despite the minute differences between ethics and morality, the terms are often used synonymously. Therefore, for the duration of this thesis, the terms ethics and morality will be used

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[1] R.M. Hare, "Ethics," in *A Dictionary of Christian Ethics*. Ed. John MacQuarrie (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1967), 114.

[2] Arthur F. Holmes, *Ethics: Approaching Moral Decisions* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 10.

[3] Richard C. Sparks, *Contemporary Christian Morality: Real Questions, Candid Responses* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997), 2.

interchangeably to signify considerations about what is right and wrong, and good and bad.

However, although it is unnecessary to distinguish between ethics and morality, it is necessary to acknowledge the differences between ethics and *Christian ethics*. According to L.S. Keyser, an American Lutheran scholar, *Christian ethics* is "the science which treats of the sources, principles, and practices of right and wrong in the light of the Holy Scriptures, in addition to the light of reason and nature."[4] While both ethics and Christian ethics consider matters of right and wrong, what makes Christian ethics distinct is the source to which one turns when considering matters of ethical importance. Within a secular context, one may determine whether something is ethically right or wrong, good or bad, by turning to rational thought or to a community consensus. For Christian ethics, the source of validation for whether or not something is right or wrong, good or bad, comes instead from three sources: Scripture, tradition, and nature. These have been the sources of Christian knowledge regarding ethical matters for many years, and continue to be the source at the present day. However, recourse to these sources of knowledge for inspiration when making ethical decisions has become increasingly more difficult as the world in which we live is witnessing the explosion of religious pluralism.

We live in a pluralistic society where pluralism means "more than one." However, "when applied to beliefs or systems of thought, to be pluralistic is to acknowledge more than one ultimate principle. In a pluralistic society, various points

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[4] Henlee H. Barnette, *Introducing Christian Ethics* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1961), 3.

of view are encouraged and considered valid."[5] To live in a pluralistic society means that when discussing issues of ethical importance with another individual, it is difficult to turn to Scripture or tradition as the source of an answer, because there is no guarantee that the person with whom one is talking will share the same Christian belief set. What is needed is an approach to ethical decision-making that is respectful of the various strands of individual tradition, but is not bound by those traditions. Such an approach would value tradition, be it religious or secular, and create a forum where dialogue can occur. The intent of such dialogue is to reach mutually satisfying resolutions to an array of ethical issues.

In recent years, German social philosopher and critical theorist Jürgen Habermas has put forth a communicative-based alternative to traditional forms of ethics that require recourse to history or tradition or to an authoritative document. This thesis will seek to determine whether Habermas's theory, called the theory of discourse ethics, is an ethical theory that is appropriate or applicable for use within the context of Christianity, particularly within the context of the Christian Church.

Chapter One will introduce the person of Jürgen Habermas. It will include pertinent biographical details of Habermas's life, including his childhood, his education, and relevant career highlights. This chapter will introduce readers to Habermas's development of thought that will be traced through the many important works of his career. Lastly, this chapter will conclude with a section dedicated to reading Habermas, focusing on characteristics of Habermas's works that make them both interesting and challenging to read.

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[5] Donald C. Posterski, *Reinventing Evangelism* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 65.

Chapter Two will introduce one of Habermas's most important theories, the Theory of Communicative Action. It will begin with an introduction to the task of critical theory in general, and more specifically to Habermas's involvement in the task. This chapter will outline in considerable detail the communication theory of Jürgen Habermas, and his theory of Communicative Action.

Chapter Three is concerned with the origins of Habermas's theory of discourse ethics. The influence of G.W.F. Hegel, Immanuel Kant, and Charles Sanders Peirce will be explained. Finally, Habermas's notion of the moral justification of norms will be identified as a reason for his engagement in the task of ethics.

Chapter Four will explicate further the theory of discourse ethics. In it, the final form of discourse ethics will then be outlined, identifying Habermas' use of existing social theory, and his own particularities that influenced the final shape of the theory. Further, some cautions will be presented that must be taken into consideration when one is contemplating applying discourse ethics, in general and within a specifically Christian framework, as well as some critiques and concerns that should be acknowledged.

Chapter Five will deal with the appropriateness and applicability of discourse ethics for the development of a contemporary Christian ethic. The traditional approach to Christian ethics will be identified, and then the possibility of applying discourse ethics will be discussed. First, it will be identified why religion in general and the Christian church in particular has been hesitant to accept the writings of Jürgen Habermas. Then, in light of the growth of pluralism, the possibility of

applying aspects of discourse ethics will be considered. It will be demonstrated that although the theory in its totality may not be entirely valuable to the Christian ethical ethos, there are aspects of Habermas's theory of discourse ethics that can, and arguably should, be applied to the contemporary Christian church.

Chapter I – The Life and Work of Jürgen Habermas

Jürgen Habermas, German philosopher and social theorist, was born on June 18, 1929 in Dusseldorf, Germany. Raised in "the small town of Gummersbach, some 35 miles east of Cologne, where his father was director of the Chamber of Commerce," Habermas's life and work were indelibly influenced by the political climate of his youth.[6] Habermas "describes the political climate in his family as one of 'bourgeois adaptation to a political environment with which one did not fully identify, but which one didn't seriously criticize either', and recounts 'the impression of a normality which afterwards proved to be an illusion."[7] In his formative teenage years, Habermas was exposed directly to the reestablishment of the German political system in the shadow of the loss of the Second World War. As Habermas notes,

> the shock of the Nüremberg revelation and the fact that his first education in liberal democratic theory was in the context of 'reeducation' separates his generation from those who had known the 'half-hearted bourgeois republic' of Weimar, which made some of them impatient with the elements of restoration in post-war Western Germany. It also separates him from the later generation, growing up under a democratic regime which some of them were quick, in the late 1960s, to dismiss as an illusionary democracy.[8]

It is within this socio-political ethos that Jürgen Habermas received his informal political education based on his observations of the unfolding political climate, as well as within which he began his formal higher education.

Jürgen Habermas received an eclectic education at some of the prominent teaching centers in Germany. He first "studied philosophy, history, psychology and

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[6] William Outhwaite, *Habermas: A Critical Introduction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 2.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

German literature at the University of Göttingen, and then in Zürich and Bonn."[9] It was at Bonn that Habermas "submitted a dissertation (1954) on Schilling (1775-1854)."[10] Following a short period of employment as a newspaper journalist, Habermas accepted a position in 1956 as research assistant to Theodor Adorno at the *Institute Für Soziale Forschung* ("Institute for Social Research") in Frankfurt am Main, Germany.[11] While at the Institute for Social Research, Habermas participated in a number of research studies, including "an empirical study on the political awareness of students, published in 1961."[12] It was also during this period that Habermas commenced work on his first major publication, *Structural Transformation and the Public Sphere*. Though this work "was rejected by Adorno as a *habilitation*[13] thesis [it was] supported instead by Wolfgang Abendroth in Marburg,"[14] where Habermas went for a brief period to complete this publication.

Following a period as Professor of Philosophy at Heidelberg, Habermas returned to Frankfurt in 1964 as Professor of Philosophy and Sociology. According to William Outhwaite, "the year 1968 was of course a time of major student-led protest, in West Germany as elsewhere. Habermas participated fully in the movement, welcoming its intellectual and political challenge to the complacency of

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[9] Ibid.

[10] Thomas McCarthy, "Habermas, Jürgen," in *Encyclopedia of Ethics*. Vol. 2. Eds. Lawrence C. Becker and Charlotte B. Becker (New York: Routledge, 2001), 643.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Outhwaite, 2.

[13] A 'habilitation' is a publication required of German professors before they are granted permission to teach at a university.

[14] Outhwaite, 2.

West German democracy."[15] However, while many of the ideologies of the student-led protest were founded in the theories established and supported by Habermas, Habermas soon distanced himself from the movement. He was concerned that the movement was becoming overly radical, rejecting both academic political scholarship in general, and distorting his ideologies. Despite his resistance to the movement, Habermas "continued to give a very positive view of the long-term effect of the movement on the political culture of the Federal Republic, while deploring the short term legacy of its failure: a decline into apathy and desperate terrorism."[16]

Following his tenure at Frankfurt, Habermas was named co-director of the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Conditions of Life in the Scientific-Technical World in Starnberg, a position he held from 1971-1981.[17] This environment was clearly conducive to the development of sociological and political thought, and it was here that Habermas published a considerable amount of material, including *Legitimation Crisis* (1973) and his magnum opus *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981).[18] The Max Planck Institute deserves recognition as the site where Habermas composed much of his social theory that came to exert a considerable influence on the social theory of the twentieth century. After 1981, Habermas returned to Frankfurt University and assumed the position of Professor of Philosophy, from 1983 to 1994, and later Professor Emeritus of Philosophy, from 1994 to the present.

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[15] Ibid., 3.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Kenneth Baynes, "Habermas, Jürgen," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Ed. Edward Craig (London: Routledge, 1998), 194.

[18] Outhwaite, 3.

Habermas's personal, educational, and professional experiences have contributed to the shape and content of his various writings. To witness this variety, it is valuable to survey chronologically the development of his thought through the different stages of his career.

Development of Thought

According to philosopher Nicholas Walker, Jürgen Habermas's intellectual career has been undertaken against the backdrop of profound social and political upheaval and continual ideological realignment.[19] Over the course of his career, "Habermas has continued to pursue, with constantly rearticulated intellectual means, a path of intransigent critical reflection which has a complex relationship to the tradition of critical theory in which he was initially schooled (the 'Frankfurt School' and the particular form of Western Marxism that originally sustained it)."[20] To understand the basis of Habermas's approach to critical theory, it is necessary at this junction to note briefly what is meant by the term 'Frankfurt School'.

The 'Frankfurt School' and its so-called 'critical theory', was a movement of thought which arose out of the need to redefine political theory in light of the collapse of the existing political systems in Germany in the years following the Second World War. The Frankfurt School, according to Nicholas Davey, "attempted to retrieve Marxism from Stalinist orthodoxy and remold it into an incisive form of ideological and cultural criticism."[21] This desire for a reformulation of the foundations of

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[19] Nicholas Walker, "The Reorientation of Critical Theory: Habermas," in *The Edinburgh Encyclopedia of Continental Philosophy*. Ed. Simon Glandinning (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1999), 489.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Nicholas Davey, "Habermas, Jürgen," in *Biographical Dictionary of*

political and social thought has been reflected in Habermas's corpus of intellectual works. Habermas's work has consistently returned to the task of determining the foundations of social theory and criticism that are not supplied in traditional Marxism or by contemporary revised approaches to critical theory.[22] In essence, Habermas is interested in filling in the voids that he perceives to exist in extant social theory, and thus develop a more firm foundation upon which to develop a comprehensive social theory. It is in response to this task that many of Habermas's scholarly works are composed.

Habermas's first scholarly endeavor, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1961) was composed initially as his habilitation under the tutelage of Theodor Adorno and later under Wolfgang Abendroth at Marburg. According to Robert Audi, this work is an historical analysis of the notion of an ideal public sphere that Habermas contends emerged in the social ethos of the eighteenth century, only to decline shortly thereafter.[23]

Following the publication of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas turned "to the problems of the foundations and methodology of the social sciences, developing a criticism of positivism and [providing] his own interpretive explanatory approach in *The Logic of the Social Sciences* (1963), and his first major systematic work, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1967)."[24] *Knowledge and Human Interests* examines the dissolution of Kantian epistemology, the study of

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Twentieth-Century Philosophers. Eds. Stuart Brown, Diane Collinson, Robert Wilkinson (London: Routledge, 1996), 296.

[22] Robert Audi, ed., "Habermas, Jürgen," in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 359.

[23] Ibid., 359.

[24] Ibid.

knowledge, to its twentieth century status as a less critical scientific theory.[25]

Habermas's critique of the dissolution of epistemology

> argues that all forms of knowledge are rooted in fundamental human interests. He identifies three 'quasi-transcendental' or 'anthropologically deep-seated' cognitive interests with reference to which distinct forms of knowledge can be delineated: the natural sciences correspond to a technical interest; the historical-hermeneutic sciences, to a practical interest; and the critical sciences ... to an emancipatory interest. Thus, through a kind of continuation of epistemology by social theory, Habermas sought to complete a critique of positivism and provide a 'prolegomenon' for a critical social theory.[26]

Habermas sought to develop an approach to social theory grounded not in the complex psychoanalytic jargon or concepts, but rather using rational thought as the foundation for inquiry.

During his time as co-director at the Max Planck Institute in Starnberg, Habermas entered into the second phase of his intellectual career. "In the next phase of his career he developed a comprehensive social theory, culminating in his two volume *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981). The goal of this theory was to develop a "critical theory of modernity," on the basis of a comprehensive theory of communication (as opposed to instrumental) rationality."[27]

In the last, and arguably most practically applicable, phase of his career, Habermas "applies his conception of rationality to issues of normative theory, including ethics, politics, and the law. [For instance] "Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Moral Justification" (1982) argues for an intersubjective notion of practical reason and discursive procedure for the justification of moral norms."[28] It is

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[25] Baynes, 194.
[26] Ibid., 195.
[27] Audi, 359.
[28] Ibid.

in this final phase of his career, which has thus far spanned over twenty years, that Habermas has taken the theory which he has developed over the past decades and is applying it to the contemporary social and political ethos.

When speaking of the phases of development in Habermas's thought, it is important to note that his

> thinking is not so much marked by distinct transitions as by a continuous bringing forward of one or another of a cluster of themes that bind his overall position together. These include an intense resistance to scientific, political and philosophical attempts to monopolize knowledge and truth, a passionate commitment to open and undistorted communication as a means to truth and the conviction that vigilant criticism of untruth offers the only route to an intellectually open and politically unrepressive society.[29]

In fact, though many of the issues with which Habermas's contends could be perceived to be esoteric, far from useful, this is not necessarily the case. Rather, "it can be argued that Habermas's lifelong project has been to reposition the criticism of society he gained from Marxism and from the Frankfurt movement, called "critical theory," so that it would be a relevant instrument for analysis."[30] At the core of Habermas's extensive corpus of scholarly works is the desire to produce for the social sciences an approach to critical social theory that is both comprehensive and practically applicable within the contemporary societal ethos.

Principle Writings

Although some of the preeminent works by Jürgen Habermas have already been mentioned to illustrate various phases in the development of his thought, there

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[29] Davey, 296.

[30] William L. Reece, "Habermas, Jürgen," in *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion: Eastern and Western Thought* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1996), 278.

are other notable items in his *oeuvre* and I will note some of the other principle writings in what follows.

Interspersed amongst the works mentioned thus far one should note a number of other important books and articles in the field of social theory and political and social philosophy that have been composed by Habermas. In 1963, Habermas published *Theory and Practice*, which contains short essays on modern political theory, several of which are concerned with Hegel. In 1970, Habermas published *On the Logic of the Social Sciences*, which examines Habermas's interpretive approach and his critique of Gadamer's political hermeneutics.[31] In 1971, Habermas again turned to a critique of Hegel in his work *Theory and Practice*, which contains several significant essays on the influential philosopher. In 1973, *Legitimation Crisis* was published and came to represent an early yet important formulation of Habermas's critical analysis of society, which was the topic that would be examined in greater detail in *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, published in 1976. The English translation of this work "contains essays on Habermas's theory of social evolution and an important essay on the linguistic grounding of normative critique, 'What is Universal Pragmatics?'"[32] It is his article on universal pragmatics that served to provide the preliminary concepts that came to form Habermas's theory of communication.

Following the 1981 publication of his *magnum opus*, the two-volume *Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas wrote his major work dedicated to moral theory. *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, which contains five essays, one of

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[31] Baynes, 199.
[32] Ibid.

which is focused on the theory of 'discourse ethics,' was published in 1983. Returning to his roots as a social and political philosopher, Habermas then published his treatise on modernity entitled *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* in 1985. This work is a series of lectures on topics ranging from Hegel to Foucault, in which Habermas challenges the postmodern turn that he observes in contemporary philosophical discourse.[33] Continuing with the topic of modernity and post-modernity, in 1988 Habermas published *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, which is "a collection of essays defending his 'postmetaphysical' position from both traditional philosophy of consciousness and its postmodern alternative."[34] Finally, in 1992 Habermas published *Between Facts and Norms*, a book that is an interpretation of the interconnection between law and democracy.[35]

Throughout his career, Jürgen Habermas has been and continues to be a prolific writer as he has shaped the field of critical and social theory. Although this list does not contain the titles of his many articles, it does seek to illustrate the vast number of works he has produced, and the diversity of subject matters that he has dealt with. When one considers that each of these works was published originally in German, and then translated into English, one may see the significant importance and impact of the work of Habermas on the academic world both in Europe and in North America.

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[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.

Reading Habermas

Though the works of Jürgen Habermas have been of significant importance within the academic world, both in Europe and in North America, this does not mean that there are not difficulties or challenges inherent in reading Habermas. The following represent a few of the most prominent challenges.

The first challenge arises due to Habermas's multi-disciplinary approach to social theory. Though Habermas received his academic training in the study of philosophy, William Outhwaite remarks that characteristic of Habermas's work is an ability to amalgamate "a deep grounding in the philosophical tradition with a remarkable openness to a wide variety of contemporary philosophical and social theories."[36] Various individuals who have influenced the development of Habermas's thought through his academic career include "Hegel, Kant, Marxist philosophy, Schilling, Fichte, Dilthey, Weber, Adorno, Horkhimer, Lukaćs, Searle and Anglo-American linguistic philosophy."[37] These diverse influences have contributed to Habermas's multi-disciplinary approach to social theory. It is possible to see in his writings aspects of philosophy, epistemology, hermeneutics, sociology, anthropology, ethics, and linguistic, political, and educational theory.[38] While the breadth of concepts Habermas has considered and utilized in his writings over the course of his career is admirable, for many, this has made reading and comprehending his works a challenge. If one considers the fact that his writings assume the reader's familiarity

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[36] Outhwaite, 5.

[37] Davey, 296.

[38] Francis Schussler Fiorenza, "Introduction: A Critical Reception for a Practical Public Theology," in *Habermas, Modernity, and Public Theology*. Eds. Don S. Browning and Francis Schussler Fiorenza (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992), 1.

with a wide range of disciplines, authors, and approaches, that he often makes his point by reviewing broad areas of research and steering ongoing discussions in new directions, the obstacles [to understanding the writings] seem insuperable.[39]

The second challenge with Habmermas's work pertains to its original, distinctly German, orientation. According to Habermas scholar Thomas McCarthy, the reception of Habermas's work in America

> has been hindered by the usual problems of cultural distance attending the penetration of any work that is deeply rooted in the German tradition. If our appreciation of Kant is considerably developed, that of Hegel is decidedly less so; and Fichte and Schelling are still relegated to the nether world that we reserve for peculiarly German spirits. If Weber and Freud now have a firm place in our pantheon, Dilthey and Gadamer are still largely unknown.[40]

This may be read both as a fact, and as a warning. When a Western, English-speaking reader approaches Habermas's writings, the reader must recognize that Habermas is writing from a specific time and a distinct place. His writings are infused with examples and illustrations from the socio-political landscape in which he was raised. English speaking readers must be sensitive to this reality and acknowledge that to understand Habermas's social theory most fully, they cannot attempt to overlay the content of his writings onto their own socio-political framework. Rather, the general themes Habermas introduces can be transferred, for the most part, from context to context, while the specific aspects of these themes may not be so easily transferable.

The third challenge in reading Habermas's writings comes from his approach. According to McCarthy, "in our empirically and analytically inclined culture, we are

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[39] Ibid.

[40] Thomas McCarthy, "Preface," to *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas* (London: Hutchinson & Co. Ltd., 1978), ix.

bound to be dismayed by someone who seems to thrive in the rarefied atmosphere of general ideas and who views social theory so broadly as to include virtually the entire range of systematic knowledge about man [sic]."[41] Rather than dealing with specifics, an approach that the Western academic world has come to regard as proper or at least normative, Habermas prefers to deal in generalities. His goal is to develop an encompassing and practically applicable social theory for use in the contemporary world. When a reader approaches Habermas's writings looking for concrete examples, this reader may become frustrated to discover these concrete examples often do not exist. Instead, there are general statements and extended, intellectually complex, arguments.

The forth challenge in reading Habermas is with regards to the style of the writings. According to Thomas McCarthy, "there are problems of style, dense and convoluted formulations that often seem impenetrable, problems [that are] exacerbated at times by inept translations that make what is already difficult impossible." [42] Though it is possible to suggest that some of the difficulties arise from translation problems from the original German, it is more likely a result of Habermas's writing style itself. Habermas has a fluid and integrative approach to writing. One feels as if one is part of a stream of consciousness journey. As Habermas considers different topics, the reader is brought along for these intellectual deliberations. In many instances, he will weave together various schools of knowledge to derive his individual perspective. This style can become verbose, and

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[41] Ibid., x.
[42] Ibid.

can confuse readers who may not have a strong grasp of the various concepts Habermas is introducing and developing.

The final challenge with which a reader may be faced when reading Habermas is that his thoughts and concepts are developed from one work to the next. To aid in following his line of thought, it would be advisable to secure a good introduction of the library of Habermas's works.[43] While no general introduction can provide a complete overview of his thought, a good introduction can familiarize a reader with the person of Jürgen Habermas and with the general concepts or issues in his thought that will aid in the comprehension of his other writings.

Since Habermas's theories develop from one text to the next, when speaking of one particular theory it is important to introduce relevant concepts or principles. For this reason, when considering Habermas's issue of discourse ethics, it is valuable to look first to some of the preceding works which have provided some of the foundational concepts for his later thought. Therefore, Habermas's theory of communicative action and issues there within will be considered prior to progressing to an explanation and discussion of discourse ethics proper.

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[43] Fiorenza, "Introduction: A Critical Reception for a Practical Public Theology," in *Habermas, Modernity, and Public Theology*, 3.

Chapter II – Theory of Communicative Action

Throughout his career, Jürgen Habermas has directed the vast majority of his scholarly efforts at the development and articulation of a comprehensive and applicable critical theory. However, prior to the introduction and treatment of one of Habermas's primary intellectual concepts, communication theory and the theory of communicative action, it is important to define precisely what is meant by the term critical theory.

Critical Theory

Critical theory, in its most foundational sense, refers to the "interdisciplinary project announced by Max Horkheimer and practiced by members of the Frankfurt School and their successors, whereby the Enlightenment ideal of a civil society might be achieved by bringing scientific research to bear on Marx's theory of social change."[44] In the words of Peter Osborne, those involved in this initial foray into critical theory would define the Enlightenment as "an eighteenth-century cultural movement which attacked the authority of tradition, especially in matters of church and state, in the name of the public use of reason."[45] In other words, the period of the Enlightenment emphasized the use of secular reason and deliberation, in the place of religious tradition, to which people previously would turn for direction on matters of truth and morals, church and state. Critical theory emphasized the priority of reason as manifest in scientific research to bring about social change. However, the term

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[44] Michael Payne, "Critical Theory," in *A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory*. Ed. Michael Payne (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 1996), 118.

[45] Peter Osborne, "Enlightenment," in *A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory*. Ed. Michael Payne (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 1996), 174-175.

critical theory has since been appropriated and reapplied more generally by social theorists.

In its revised form, "critical theory is now a more general term under which research projects in the social sciences and/or humanities attempt to bring truth and political engagement into alignment."[46] Again, self-knowledge and reason are the means by which this task is to be accomplished.

To understand the task of critical theory, one must turn to an elaboration of the preceding definitions of critical theory. One of the most succinct and applicable elaborations of critical theory has been articulated by Raymond Geuss. Geuss argues three points with regards to critical theory. First, "critical theories have special standing as guides for human action that: a) are aimed at producing enlightenment in the agents who hold them, i.e. at enabling those agents to determine what their true interests are; b) are inherently emancipatory, i.e. they free agents from a kind of coercion which is at least partly self-imposed."[47] Second, "critical theories have a cognitive content, i.e. they are forms of knowledge."[48] Third, "critical theories differ epistemologically in essential ways from theories in the natural sciences. Theories in the natural sciences are objectifying; critical theories are reflective."[49] In summary, according to Geuss, critical theories serve to guide human action toward personal enlightenment or freedom, act as legitimate forms of knowledge, and are inherently reflective.

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[46] Michael Payne, "Critical Theory," in *A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory*, 118.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Ibid., 118-119.

[49] Ibid., 119.

Contemporary critical theory

> is informed by multidisciplinary research, combined with the attempt to construct a systematic, comprehensive social theory that can confront the key social and political problems of the day. The work of critical theorists provides criticisms and alternatives to traditional, or mainstream, social theory, philosophy, and science, together with a critique of a full range of ideologies from mass culture to religion. At least some versions of critical theory are moved by an interest in relating theory to politics and an interest in the emancipation of those who are oppressed and dominated.[50]

One of the most valued aspects of critical theory is the interdisciplinary nature of the task. Those involved in the task of critical theory are able to address pressing social, philosophical, or political issues of the day. Critical theory successfully "traverses and undermines *boundaries* between competing disciplines, and stresses the *interconnections* between philosophy, economics and politics, and culture and society."[51] Critical theory maintains the freedom to draw upon all available resources from various disciplines so as to respond most accurately and completely to the issues of the time.

Jürgen Habermas is engaged in this form of multi-disciplinary critical theory. In his writing, Habermas blends together the disciplines of philosophy, sociology, political history, and social theory in a way that makes him a leading critical theorist.

The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas

Jürgen Habermas's development as a critical theorist is rooted in the foundational principles he acquired from Max Horkheimer and the Frankfurt School. These principles transferred quite amicably to his activities at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of the Scientific and Technical World, where he continued to

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[50] Douglas Kellner, *Critical Theory, Marxism and Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), 1.

[51] Ibid., 7.

follow the Frankfurt School's mandate to combine social theory with philosophical and cultural critique. However, by the early 1970s, the work of Jürgen Habermas began to take a 'linguistic turn'[52], and the thrust of much of his work in the late 1970s and 1980s focused on linguistic and philosophical themes. It was in this period that he transformed critical theory into a communications theory, and began to explore the fundamental issues that would eventually take shape as his theory of communication.[53]

Habermas and Communication Theory

Jürgen Habermas began his preoccupation with communication and linguistic discourse with *Structural Transformation and the Public Sphere*, published in the 1960s. After touching upon the theme briefly in different essays and lectures, Habermas brought his thoughts on the subject together in the 1970-71 Christian Gauss Lectures at Princeton. At this lecture series, Habermas attempted to give a wholly linguistic foundation to social theory. Though he has since retreated from such a radical approach, in the words of William Outhwaite, "this 'trial run' at the theory of communicative action or, as he called it at the time, a 'communication theory of society', brings out the relevance of what might otherwise seem rather pedantic [or overly academic, theoretical] discussions of language."[54] The response from this lecture series and the thoughts that it generated served as the catalyst for

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[52] 'Linguistic turn' means that Habermas began to place a greater emphasis on the use and modes of language and communication. The 'linguistic turn' marked a shift in Habermas's theory and became the starting point of a period of critical reflection that culminated in the development of the theory of communicative action and other communication theories including discourse ethics.

[53] Kellner, 211-212.

[54] William Outhwaite, *Habermas – A Critical Introduction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 39.

Habermas's foray further into the realm of communicative theory, which eventually found its temporary culmination in the essay "What is Universal Pragmatics?" published in 1976.

In "What is Universal Pragmatics?" found in *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, Jürgen Habermas explores the basic presuppositions of his theory of communication. It is important to spend some time with the principles of this work because many of the concepts and terms that he introduces and stipulates are explicated further in his *Theory of Communicative Action*.

In "What is Universal Pragmatics?" Habermas suggests that for him "the task of universal pragmatics is to identify and reconstruct universal conditions of possible understanding [*Verständigung*]."[55] To Habermas, there are different types of action that can facilitate understanding. For example, "conflict, competition, strategic action in general – are derivatives of action 'oriented toward reaching understanding' [*verständigungsorientiert*]."[56] While there are various forms of action human beings use to facilitate understanding, Habermas wanted to "single out explicit speech actions from other forms of communicative action."[57] For him, speech acts were the central form of communicative action and the predominant means by which understanding is achieved. In making this point, he began to identify the primary tenet of his communication theory.

In identifying his primary objective, Habermas writes, "I shall develop the thesis that anyone acting communicatively must, in performing any speech action,

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[55] Jürgen Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society*. Tr. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), 1.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Ibid.

raise universal validity claims and suppose that they can be vindicated [or redeemed]."[58] By engaging in a speech action (dialogue), each party professes to be fulfilling four validity claims. According to Habermas, each person "claims to be: *uttering* something understandably; giving [the hearer] *something to understand*; making *himself* [sic] thereby understandable; and coming to an understanding *with another person*."[59] These four validity claims serve as the universal presuppositions Habermas believes are brought to any communicative situation.

The following may serve to clarify the manner in which these validity claims function. According to Habermas,

> The speaker must choose a comprehensible [*verständlich*] expression so that speaker and hearer can understand one another. The speaker must have the intention of communicating a true [*wahr*] proposition (or a prepositional content, the existential presuppositions of which are satisfied) so that the hearer can share in the knowledge of the speaker. The speaker must want to express his [sic] intentions truthfully [*wahrhaftig*] so that the hearer can believe the utterance of the speaker (can trust him). Finally, the speaker must choose an utterance that is right [*richtig*] so that the hearer can accept the utterance and speaker and hearer can agree with one another in the utterance with respect to a recognized normative background. Moreover, communicative action can continue undisturbed only as long as participants suppose that the validity claims they reciprocally raise are justified.[60]

By engaging in such a communicative process, the goal is to come to a mutually acceptable resolution or agreement that "terminates in the intersubjective mutuality of reciprocal understanding, shared knowledge, mutual trust, and accord with one another."[61] The byproduct of such communication is thus a transformation in the relationship between the two individuals engaged in the communicative act. From

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[58] Ibid., 2.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid., 2-3.
[61] Ibid.

the contact there can emerge a shared understanding and knowledge about a given situation, and perhaps a mutual trust can develop from the communicative interaction.

One can recognize from the precepts of the theory that have been mentioned thus far that there is a degree of ambiguity with the term 'understanding'. According to Habermas there are two distinct meanings that he calls minimal and maximal. For Habermas, understanding in its minimal meaning "indicates that two subjects understand a linguistic expression in the same way; [but understanding in] its maximal meaning is that between the two [people] there exists an accord concerning the rightness of an utterance in relation to a mutually recognized normative background."[62] In other words, the minimal meaning of understanding is a simple understanding of the utterance, whereas the maximal meaning of understanding is an affirmation of the rightness or wrongness of the utterance. Although initially this distinction between minimal and maximal meanings may appear to be a mundane semantic issue, it does prove to be a valuable and important distinction both in Habermas's theory communicative action, and in his theory of discourse ethics.

In an ideal speech situation where all four of the previously mentioned speech validity claims are fulfilled (claims to be uttering something understandably, giving the hearer something to understand, making oneself understandable, and coming to an understanding of something), reaching a mutual understanding is a reasonable expectation. However, in some states, these four claims are not fulfilled and the task of reaching a position of mutual understanding becomes increasingly complex. For Habermas, these "states are in the gray areas in between: on the one hand,

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[62] Ibid.

incomprehension and misunderstanding, intentional and involuntary untruthfulness, concealed and open discord; and, on the other hand, pre-existing or achieved consensus."[63] In each of these states there is a violation of at least one of the validity claims that Habermas argues are the fundamental presuppositions of speech interaction aimed at creating and facilitating understanding.

When two or more individuals encounter a situation of speech communication, each person, ideally, comes with the expectation that the four validity claims will serve as the foundation of the dialogue. However, when even one of these claims is violated, for whatever reason, "the presupposition that certain validity claims are satisfied (or could be vindicated) is suspended, [and] the task of mutual interpretation is [now] to achieve a new definition of the situation which all participants can share."[64] In this instance there has been a communication break-down, and thus "communication can continue only if the misunderstanding is cleared up in the course of interaction (such as through explication, elucidation, paraphrase, translation, semantic stipulation)."[65] When these attempts to clarify prove fruitless and the possibility of verbal communicative action is halted, then the individuals are left with three options: resort to another form of communication that is not reliant on the adherence to such validity claims, turn to an argumentative form of communication that does not necessitate the fulfillment of mutually acceptable validity claims, or break off communication all together.

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[63] Ibid., 3.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Thomas McCarthy, *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas* (London: Hutchinson & Co. (Publishers) Ltd., 1978), 289.

In his writings on communication theory, Habermas concentrates on speech actions where the four validity claims serve as the fundamental presuppositions that are present in dialogue. Upon this foundation Habermas begins to isolate individual parts of speech to consider the manner in which those individual elements work with each other to create comprehensible speech patterns that can be used in dialogue to help create and maintain a state of understanding. "What is Universal Pragmatics?" serves as his first attempt at outlining and explaining these intricate elements involved in speech communication. While a comprehensive examination of each of these elements would only complicate matters at present, when dealing with subsequent issues and concepts, for instance with regards to Habermas's theory of discourse ethics, relevant terms and ideas first outlined in "What is Universal Pragmatics?" will be introduced and incorporated.

Habermas and Communication Theory – *The Theory of Communicative Action*

One of the characteristic features of the writings of Jürgen Habermas is that he will introduce a concept or an idea in an essay or book, but then he will return to that concept or issue again, though providing a more developed treatment in the later writing. This is the case with Habermas's theory of communication. The concepts that were first introduced in *Structural Transformation and the Public Sphere* in the 1960s and developed in "What is Universal Pragmatics?" found their culmination in Habermas's perennial work on the subject of communication theory: *The Theory of Communicative Action.*

The Theory of Communicative Action is arguably Jürgen Habermas's most important work, both for critical theory in general, and for communicative theory in

particular. According to social philosopher Nicholas Walker, "all Habermas's original theoretical and practical concerns find an impressive, if provisional, resolution in the massive work which can be said to project all the salient features of Habermas's later development."[66] It is in this work that Habermas both brings together many of the issues and concepts introduced in his earlier works, and raises some of his issues with his predecessors in the arena of critical theory. His primary concern with his predecessors is that their attempts to formulate a critical theory only respond adequately to social issues of the past. With the continual evolution of society such critical theories are, according to Habermas, no longer entirely relevant for the contemporary social situation.

Therefore, "Habermas claims here [in the *Theory of Communicative Action*] to reorient the program of critical theory on the theoretical side, precisely in order to do justice to the demands made upon it by the changed character of advanced industrial societies on the practical side."[67] In a sense, Habermas is simply continuing the trend of those who preceded him in the Frankfurt School. Adorno, Habermas's mentor, Horkheimer, and other members of the School initially set about the task of reformulating critical theory because they deemed the existing approaches to critical theory to be lacking. They maintained that while various critical theories may have been useful at the time of their composition, they were no longer as valuable because the social world had changed. For instance, despite the significance of Marxist political philosophy, members of the Frankfurt School came to be critical

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[66] Nicholas Walker, "The Reorientation of Critical Theory: Habermas," in *The Edinburgh Encyclopedia of Continental Philosophy*. Ed. Simon Glendinning (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1999), 496.

[67] Ibid.

of it because it did not meet the political and social needs of the changing social ethos. However, Habermas's motivation to reformulate critical theory is much more complex.

Habermas's radical reformulation of critical theory is seen "in terms of a necessary change of intellectual paradigm: the move from a traditional 'philosophy of consciousness' to a 'philosophy of intersubjectivity'."[68] In his reorientation of critical theory, Habermas is attempting to do away with the previous monological conception of self-consciousness. Instead, he attempts to legitimate a communal conception of group-consciousness developed through dialogue and intelligible discourse. It is this conception of linguistic discourse that is a significant feature of the theory of communicative action.

In light of the need to produce a theoretically accurate and practically applicable theory of communication, Habermas set out to develop and articulate his position with a clarity not seen before. It is from the work started by this motivation that Habermas produced *The Theory of Communicative Action*, published in 1981.

The two-volume *The Theory of Communicative Action* presents extensive reflections on the primary principles of social theory, coupled with Habermas's observations on the importance of rationalization as a force in modernization.[69] It is this notion of rationalization that Habermas develops as a primary theme in *The Theory of Communicative Action*.

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[68] Ibid., 497.

[69] Kenneth Baynes, "Habermas, Jürgen," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Ed. Edward Craig (London: Routledge, 1998), 195.

Habermas grounds his thoughts on the subject of societal rationalization in the recapitulation of the task of philosophy. For Habermas, "philosophy has always had as its main task reflection upon reason. But contemporary philosophy has become a diverse array of specialisms [sic], no longer seeking to provide a unified world view."[70] While some scholars may have felt despondent about the state of philosophy, to Jürgen Habermas it presented a challenge: how to establish a relationship between philosophy and the social and natural sciences that would amalgamate the best theory that the fields had to offer to create a comprehensive, unified, world-view. To accomplish this, Habermas put forth a practice of 'rational reconstruction'. The procedure of 'rational reconstruction' is "the process of reconstructing what can be regarded, after the event, as the rational content of a field of research or subject area."[71] That which is determined to be rational content is maintained, while that which is determined not to be rational content is discarded. The remaining collection of useful rational content serves as the basis of a developing theory. However the question then remains, precisely what is meant by the term 'rational'.

According to sociologist Anthony Giddens,

> Rationality has less to do with knowledge as such than with the manner in which something is used. If we consider the circumstances in which we speak of something as 'rational', we see it refers either to persons or to symbolic expressions which embody knowledge. To say that someone acts rationally, or that a statement is rational, is to say that the action or statement can be criticized or defended by the person or persons involved, so that they are able to justify or 'ground' them.[72]

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[70] Anthony Giddens, *Social Theory and Modern Sociology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 228.

[71] Ibid., 228-9.

[72] Ibid., 229.

Rather than limiting rationality to that which can be proven empirically, this use of the term suggests a communicative rationality; the person must be able to provide a verbal reason for their actions. Ultimately, for Habermas, "rationality *presumes* communication, because something is only rational if it meets conditions necessary to forge an understanding with at least one other person."[73] The concept of rationality and the potential that it can be determined rationally through intelligible discourse are two of the most significant ideas found in *The Theory of Communicative Action.*

Jürgen Habermas's foray into the reconstructive science, which attempts to amalgamate philosophy and social and natural sciences, "follows two procedures, the historical critique of theory and the subsequent reconstruction of that theory."[74] The primary subject of this historical critique is Max Weber. According to David Rasmussen, Habermas's reading of Weber's view of the history of rationalization "plays on his [Weber's] well-known attempt to interpret the history of the West as a kind of drama in which a certain form of rationality and rational action triumph, while negatively it extends from the judgment that this form of rationality results in a certain impoverishment of the human species."[75] For Weber, this form of rationalization found its institutional basis in capitalism, and was manifest in purposive-rational actions, which is a distinction that will be explained shortly.

While Weber's contributions to social and political theory are important, much of it is beyond the scope of this paper. What is important to note is that

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[73] Ibid.

[74] David M. Rasmussen, *Reading Habermas* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 23.

[75] Rasmussen, *Reading Habermas*. 23.

Weber's form of rationalization served as the basis for subsequent writers including Lukać, Adorno, and Horkheimer. And it is all four of these theorists who are critiqued and ultimately refuted by Habermas in his first volume of *The Theory of Communicative Action*.

While each theorist may offer valuable insights, much of what they have to say does little to enhance the theory of communicative action as forwarded by Habermas. Perhaps the most significant insights they provide is that they help Habermas identify the types of actions that serve as the basis of societal interaction. For Habermas,

> The basic distinction is between 'consent-oriented' (or communicative) and 'success-oriented' (or purposive-rational) actions; within the latter he distinguishes further between strategic and instrumental action. Instrumental actions are goal-oriented interventions in the physical world. They can be appraised from the standpoint of efficiency and described as the following of technical rules. Strategic action, by contrast, is action which aims at influencing others for the purpose of achieving some end.[76]

Consent-oriented and success-oriented actions provide the two traditional types of social interaction held by Habermas's predecessors in critical theory including Weber, Lukaćs, Adorno and Horkheimer. However, communicative action constitutes an additional type of action and represents Habermas's contribution to the discussion of societal rationalization.

The practical purpose of *The Theory of Communicative Action* is to provide a contemporary approach to rationalization based on linguistic interaction called the communicative action. Differing from earlier models, "the goal or 'telos' of communicative action is not expressed or realized in an attempt to influence others,

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[76] Baynes, 195.

but in the attempt to reach an agreement or mutual understanding about something in the world."[77] In this sense, communicative action is a non-instrumental, non-strategic approach to rationalization. Unlike instrumental actions which are oriented towards achieving a certain goal that may be met by the adherence to certain rules, "a communicatively achieved agreement has a rational basis; it cannot be imposed by either party, whether instrumentally through intervention in the situation directly or strategically through influencing decisions of opponents."[78] The mandate to reach a mutually satisfying agreement or understanding through the use of dialogue and communication skills is the practical starting point for the theory of communicative action.

For Habermas, however, the theory of communicative action involves a number of interrelated concepts that contribute to the goal of effective dialogical communication. First is the notion of validity claims. Repeating a concept introduced first in "What is Universal Pragmatics?" Habermas contends that "communication that is oriented toward reaching understanding inevitably involves the reciprocal raising and recognition of validity claims."[79] To reiterate, validity claims are statements that individuals engaged in dialogue presuppose to be the fundamental truths of the dialogical process: the belief that each person is uttering something in a way that is understandable; that the hearer is thus being given something to understand; that the hearer, by speaking in a way that the hearer is able to understand is in the process making him/herself understandable; and that both

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[77] Ibid.
[78] Rasmussen, *Reading Habermas*. 27.
[79] McCarthy, 325.

people involved in the process wish to come to an understanding about something in the world. The concept of validity claims has served as a prominent element of Habermas's communication theory from its inception. However, in *The Theory of Communication Action*, Habermas expands on the idea of validity claims to incorporate another aspect into his theory: argumentation.

According to Habermas,

> when validity claims are rendered explicit, and when their grounding is assessed purely in terms of how far good reasons can be offered for them (rather than by constraint or force), there exists what Habermas calls a process of 'argumentation'. Argumentation, as he puts it, is a 'court of appeal' of the rationality inherent in everyday communication: it makes possible the continuation of communicative action when disputes arise, without recourse to duress.[80]

While argumentation is traditionally conceived of as a coercive act in which individuals debate the truthfulness of a statement, for Habermas, argumentation is instead an arena where discussion over the rationality of statements can occur. Rationality is not concerned so much with whether a statement is explicitly true, but instead with whether the statement embodies relevant knowledge. The greater concern is whether the statement contains relevant knowledge that will help those engaged in the dialogue to reach mutual understanding. The ability to engage in the process of argumentation serves as a principle concept in Habermas's recapitulation of communicative action.

Another important concept that is foundational for communication theory is the idea of the *life world*. According to sociologist Anthony Giddens, the life world

> is the taken-for-granted universe of daily social activity. It is the saturation of communicative action by tradition and established ways of doing things. The

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[80] Giddens, 230.

> life world is a pre-interpreted set of forms of life, within which everyday conduct unfolds. It 'stores up in the interpretive work of many generations'. The weight of tradition in the life-world acts as a counter-balance to the intrinsic possibilities of disagreement which communication raises.[81]

The life world is the sum of all tradition and social history. It is the context, formulated by the accumulation of past experiences and traditions, which serves as the forum for contemporary conduct. For instance, the life world of a Christian in the twenty-first century is shaped by the Christian tradition that has come before. Theological ideologies of a particular denomination are the by-product of years of different experiences that shaped the understanding of the faith, and an extensive period of interpretation of the history of the group.

It is important, however, to remember that the life world is not a static entity; as the process of social evolution occurs, world-views are broadened and de-centered, and the character of the life world changes. The life world of a first-century Christian would be markedly different from the life world of a Christian today due to different influencing social situations, and a different period of time for reflection and interpretation. However, "the more advanced the de-centering process [for instance from the solitary world-view of the Christian world], the less the achievement of consensus is guaranteed by pre-established beliefs or codes of behavior. The expansion of rationality thus presumes a diminution of the hold of the life world."[82] When a people begin to see the world as a larger entity, they no longer perceive themselves or one particular view to be the solitary view. When this is the case, the

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[81] Giddens, 232.
[82] Giddens, 232.

tenuous hold on certain historically grounded beliefs or codes of behavior are loosened and the hold of the life world on the contemporary situation is decreased.

As we shall see, when Habermas uses the concept of life world in his theories of communication, he is suggesting recognition of the presence of the life world, but not submission to it. When one can understand that the life world one is functioning within exerts considerable pressure on the dialogical process, one can take steps to minimize the effects of the life world and thus free the conversation from the chains of the past, and allow freedom for open dialogue directed toward mutual understanding in the future. This is the goal of contemporary communicative action.

While the theory of the life world is an important concept in various subjects, particularly in the study of politics and economy, it is also an important issue for the theory of communicative action. According to Rasmussen,

> If one can show that communicative forms [of action] are by nature prior to instrumental or strategic forms, then the earlier interpretation of modes of rationality as represented by Weber and others can be dismissed as false. Equally, one can show how this discursive form of rationality came to take the place of earlier, non-discursive, mythic forms of rationality. Further, one can demonstrate the essentially regenerative power of reason without recourse to historical argument. In other words, the thesis regarding the primacy of communicative over strategic forms functions as a hypothesis of reconstructive science. *The argument is not that communicative forms ought to be primary, the argument is that they are primary. Reason does not need to be generated, it is by nature regenerative in the sense that reason as communicative reason is embedded in language*. (italics mine)[83]

In this case, it is communication that leads to understanding. Dialogical communication is infused with reason and rationality. When one is able to communicate with another, a state of mutual understanding may be achieved. Reason, when expressed through dialogue, has regenerative or perspective changing

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[83] Rasmussen, *Reading Habermas*. 28.

properties. Though radical, "the theory of modernity, the theory of evolution, the discourse ethics, the theory of the origin and development of language, the concepts of politics and law – all can be systematically derived from this fundamental thesis."[84]

A deeply philosophical debate is embarked upon when one sets out to determine the primacy of communicative forms of rationality over alternative forms of rationality. This is not a debate that will be developed within the pages of this thesis. However, it must be acknowledged that for Habermas, communicative rationality, embedded in language and manifested in dialogue, serves as the foundation for all of rationality. Rationality, according to Habermas, is composed of a number of interrelated concepts: validity claims, the ideal speech situation, and the notion of the life world. These concepts contribute to the dialogue that is essential for Habermas to determine what is to be deemed rational.

Conclusion

One of the most prominent characteristics of Habermas's writing is his tendency to introduce an issue in one book or article, and then to return frequently to the issue in subsequent writings, each time allowing the initial issue to serve as the basis upon which further inquiry develops and new concepts and ideas are introduced. This approach is seen with remarkable clarity regarding the issue of the theory of communicative action. Not simply visited on one occasion, "in the context of Habermas's later works, the theory of communicative action provides the basis for forays into other areas. Certainly the foremost of these is the one leading into

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[84] Rasmussen, *Reading Habermas*. 28.

ethics."[85] Congruent with his task as a reconstructive scientist, Habermas has amalgamated the most appropriate and applicable aspects of his previous thought on social and communication theory and turned his focus to the issue of ethics and morality. The result is Habermas's contribution to the field of ethical and moral theory called "discourse ethics."

[85] Rasmussen, *Reading Habermas*. 56.

Chapter III – Discourse Ethics – The Early Influences

As a reconstructive philosopher, Jürgen Habermas's primary task is to re-evaluate existing social theories and to develop and articulate new theories that in his view meet the challenges of the contemporary social condition. In recent years, Habermas has begun to write more extensively on the field of ethics and morality. Although this may appear to be a departure from his traditional areas of academic inquiry, in the words of David M. Rasmussen, Habermas is simply assuming the program of the German Enlightenment to "somehow establish a basis for ethics that fully acknowledged that the traditional world had disappeared."[86] No longer would tradition and history serve as the determinants by which ethical and moral decisions are made. In the search for a foundation for contemporary ethical inquiry, tradition would need to be augmented with reason.

The tension between tradition and reason as sources of knowledge, particularly ethical knowledge, has existed for some time. It may be traced back to the German philosophy of the eighteenth century. According to Rasmussen,

> there are two basic strains in the history of German philosophy. One strain argues that thought or reason is constative, the other that it is transformative. The former orientation can be traced to the debate initiated by Kant over the limits of human reason, while the latter can be traced to Hegel's philosophy of history, which attempted to locate philosophical reflection in a discourse about the history of human freedom.[87]

Rasmussen identifies two key characteristics in the history of German philosophy whose perspectives on the sources of knowledge differ: Kant, who maintains that

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[86] David M. Rasmussen, *Reading Habermas* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, Inc., 1990), 56.

[87] David M. Rasmussen, "Critical Theory and Philosophy," in *The Handbook of Critical Theory*. Ed. David M. Rasmussen (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 13.

knowledge is derived from reason alone, and Hegel, who posits that reason is supplemented by tradition and history to shape what constitutes knowledge. Although a comprehensive examination of each philosopher and their contributions to ethical theory is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is necessary to introduce their primary positions regarding the source of knowledge. In doing so, the ethical insights of Kant and Hegel will be seen to represent two of the prominent ideologies circulating at the time of Habermas's writing, and that have either explicitly or implicitly influenced Habermas's theory of ethics.

Kant and Hegel

In *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) defines ethics as "the system of *ends* of pure practical reason."[88] In this definition of ethics there are two concepts that demand explanation: the concept of 'ends', and the notion 'pure practical reason.' First, for Kant, "an 'end' is an object of choice (of a rational being)."[89] Human beings are considered to be rational beings in that they have the capacity to identify an ideal outcome or product for their actions, and to work towards that goal. The goal that one chooses to work towards is called an 'end.'

Second, 'pure practical reason' is reason that is generated solely from the use of one's own mental and cognitive capabilities. Pure practical reason is present by virtue of being born a human, and is considered to be *a priori* reason, that is, reason present prior to experience.[90] In other words, pure practical reason is present in each

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[88] Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*. Ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 146.

[89] Ibid.

[90] Ibid., 9.

person and is not dependent on knowledge gained through experiences or through the other senses.

It is possible to assert that for Kant, ethics is founded upon *a priori* knowledge, expressed through the rational capabilities of an individual, which can provide all the information necessary to make decisions. In the Kantian conception of ethics, experience does not play a large role in influencing decisions.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's (1770-1831) approach to ethics provides an alternative to Kant's rational approach and places a much higher value on experience as a source for, and supplement to, reason. Hegel, in *The Phenomenology of the Mind* and *The History of Philosophy* maintains that rationality is important as a foundation for ethics, but suggests that reason is not limited to *a priori* knowledge that is entirely removed from experience. According to Hegel, "reason is the substance of the universe; ... [and] the design of the world is absolutely rational."[91] However, despite the inherent rationality of the world, it is also the Hegelian view that the whole world is subject to a process of unfolding. This unfolding is called a 'dialectical process.' The dialectical process involves the positing of a thesis (a statement or an assertion), an antithesis (a response to the initial statement or assertion; a counter-statement), and a synthesis (where the thesis and antithesis are both considered and amalgamated).

According to the notion of a dialectical process, what is considered 'reality' is continually in flux, being influenced by new ideas and new cultural and historical events. As such, reason that is determined *a priori* provides the basic foundation for ethics, but that foundation is augmented repeatedly as time passes and this dialectical

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[91] G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*. Tr. J. Sibree (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), 9.

process of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis is used to determine and re-determine what is considered 'real' knowledge. While Hegel uses aspects of Kant's ethical theory, the profound difference is with the emphasis that Hegel places on the role of experience as the foundation for ethics.

Two potential foundations for ethics have been proposed. Kant's suggestion emphasizes the use of pure practical reason as a source for ethical knowledge. Hegel's approach promotes the use of reason as a source for ethical knowledge, but acknowledges that reality is constantly in flux as a result of personal and corporate experiences. As such, what is considered to be valid ethical knowledge is also transitive based on the traditions and experiences had by the individual and community that shape the form of the original rational thought. And so the question remains, how is one to construct an ethics that acknowledges the valuable contributions of these earlier positions, yet makes its own unique contribution? The answer for this can be found in the original work of Jürgen Habermas.

For Habermas, the solution to this problem is 'discourse ethics.' Discourse ethics is an approach to ethics that is founded upon rules of dialogue, and which encourages participants to approach an ethical dilemma with both pure rational reason and experience firmly in hand. Both these facets of knowledge are intended to supplement the dialogue, and help the community reach a mutual understanding regarding a particular moral or ethical issue.

While Habermas does not claim to be entirely Kantian or Hegelian in his approach to discourse ethics, threads of both of these streams of thought can be located within this ethical theory. Habermas begins with reason as the primary source

for ethical knowledge, which is a Kantian contribution. Then, in a Hegelian fashion, Habermas supplements reason with individual and corporate experience, history, and tradition. Remnants of Hegel's dialectical process can be found in Habermas's conception of a discourse ethics. Like Hegel, one can find in Habermas's discourse ethics a thesis (the original statement or assertion of an ethical or moral position based on rational thought), and antithesis (varying views expressed through the process of argumentation), and a synthesis (the communally determined, mutually accepted resolution). Finally, Habermas returns to the work of Kant in the way that the product of the dialectical process becomes regarded as valid moral or ethical knowledge or truth. This is done through the application of a modified version of the Kantian principle of universalization.

This chapter will introduce Charles Sanders Peirce, who will be identified as the person whose influence suggested for Habermas the possibility of a communicatively determined truth. It will then present Habermas's notion of the justification of moral norms that serves to explain why Habermas would concern himself with the development of a theory of discourse ethics.

Charles Sanders Peirce

Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) was an American philosopher and scientist whose work exerts an undeniable influence on Habermas. As with many scholars of his era, Peirce was concerned with formulating a new philosophical understanding of the field of scientific inquiry that would be responsive to the challenges of modernity. According to David M. Rasmussen, Habermas's "original idea for a discourse ethics comes from Charles Sanders Peirce ... [who suggested]

that the possibility of scientific truth presupposed a scientific community which could make judgments on the validity or invalidity of scientific achievements."[92] It was Peirce who proposed that the notion and content of 'truth' could be determined communicatively, that is, through the activity of communication.

Peirce was adept at working in a variety of disciplines. According to Francis E. Reilly in her book *Charles Peirce's Theory of Scientific Method,*

> as a philosopher and a scientist Peirce studied the universe, using the work of previous philosophers and the method of the sciences to guide his conjectures about its constitution. For him the method of the sciences was not only a tool employed in examining nature, but was also the direct object of his careful study. A lifelong associate of scientists, Perice says that he devoted thirty or forty years to the study of the methods employed by them.[93]

Based on his own experience as a participant and observer within the scientific community, Peirce observed firsthand how a company of scientists could construct its own conception of 'truth.'[94] For instance, within a scientific community, scholars are continually attempting to prove various hypotheses. When a hypothesis has been repeated and the results documented as consistent, then the hypothesis is accepted as a theory. This acceptance may be either explicit or implicit. A hypothesis receives explicit acceptance when scientists make a communal decision that the hypothesis has been verified and is reliable enough to serve as the basis for further study. A hypothesis receives implicit assent when the scientific community continues to use a

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[92] Rasmussen, *Reading Habermas*. 58.

[93] Francis E. Reilly, *Charles Peirce's Theory of Scientific Method* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1970), 1-2.

[94] For a comprehensive examination of Peirce's conception of truth and the categories of truth, see Chapter Five and Six of Charles Sanders Peirce. *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Pierce: Volume Five – Pragmatism and Pragmaticism*. Ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1934).

hypothesis prior to its public acceptance as a theory. The continued use of the hypothesis provides an implied acknowledgement of its value as scientifically verifiable.

When the scientific community gathers and accepts a hypothesis as a theory, they are communally defining something as 'truth.' However, such a communicatively determined notion of 'truth' remains open to change. In a 1908 letter to Lady Welby, Peirce made this notion of the subjectivity of 'truth' clear. Peirce wrote that "I do not say that it [a communicatively determined notion of truth] is infallibly true that there is any belief to which a person would come if he were to carry his inquiries far enough. I only say that that alone is what I call Truth. I cannot infallibly know that there *is* any Truth."[95] Even though a finalized notion of 'truth' is not available through this process, it is this presupposition that truth (in some form or another) can be determined as a community that provides the basis for Habermas's theory of discourse ethics.

Further to Peirce's postulation of a discourse approach to determining the validity of truth claims is his suggestion of the means by which to determine this validity. Whereas Kantian rationalism encourages internal personal reflection regarding moral or ethical problems, Peirce's conception of a communicative rationality demands the communal use of language as a tool. For Peirce,

> gone is the fixation on the cognitive function of consciousness. Gone too is the emphasis on the representational function of language and the visual metaphor of the "mirror in nature." What takes their place is the notion of justified belief spanning the whole spectrum of what can be said – of what Wittgenstein and

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[95] Charles S. Peirce, *Charles S. Peirce's Letters to Lady Welby*. Ed. Irwin C. Lieb (New Haven: Whitlock – The Graduate Philosophy Club of Yale University, 1953), 26.

> Austin call illocutionary force – rather than just the contents of fact-stating discourses.[96]

Habermas acknowledges Peirces emphasis on the value of language in discourse when he writes that those in communication "proposed analyses that started from linguistic expressions or observed behavior and were open to intersubjective testing."[97] The process of communication that Peirce proposed involved raising validity claims, either through linguistic expressions or through observable behavior, and then testing those claims as a community to determine the acceptability of the claims. According to Habermas, it was Peirce's position that "a statement is true if and only if it commands a consensus with regard to the validity of the belief which it expresses."[98] For Peirce, claims to validity needed to be tested in a setting where mutual consensus is possible. This is clearly the case in Peirce's scientific community where scientific claims, in the form of hypotheses, could be tested in a communal setting before a claim of valid or invalid was applied. As we progress through Habermas's theory of discourse ethics we will discover that while Habermas has expanded upon Peirce's concepts, the influence of Peirce on Habermas is undeniable.

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[96] Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. Tr. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999), 10.

[97] Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action – Volume Two - Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*. Tr. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 3.

[98] John B. Thompson, *Critical Hermeneutics: A Study in the Thought of Paul Ricoeur and Jürgen Habermas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 79.

The Justification of Moral Norms

Habermas was not the first person to develop a communal approach to determine validity. And while Peirce's influence on Habermas is recognizable, the question remains why Habermas would concern himself with the task of developing a discourse ethics. His answer is found as he proposes his justification for moral norms.

In a reading of Habermas's *Moral Consciousness and Communicative* Action, there would appear to be two categories of questions with which one must contend. The first types are those that can be answered by the presentation of a simple fact, as is the case with a mathematical equation. The second type are those that by their very nature demand a value judgment be made. Questions of the second type constitute moral questions. According to Habermas, "moral-practical questions in the form what ought I to do? are considered not amenable to rational debate unless they can be answered in terms of purposive rationality."[99] Many individuals find it easier to answer questions that demand a formal, rational response, and shy away from questions of moral importance. Habermas takes it as a challenge to explain why questions of morality have value, and why they deserve to be given intellectual consideration in a similar fashion as questions of fact.

In his most comprehensive work on discourse ethics, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, Habermas begins by suggesting that moral experience is worth considering despite the inability to solve moral problems with pure rationalism. To strengthen his position, Habermas surveys the work of philosopher P. F. Strawson

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[99] Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. 45.

who "begins by examining an emotional response which in its obtrusiveness is well suited to convince even the most diehard skeptic that moral experience has real content."[100] Using resentment as an exemplar of moral experience, Strawson maintains that moral experiences are not entities that can be treated by purely rational means because they are intrinsically bound up in relationships that are not subject to the same critical approaches of other, empirical concepts. According to Habermas,

> Strawson's phenomenology of the moral is relevant because it shows that the world of moral phenomena can be grasped only in the performative attitude of participants in interaction, that resentment and personal emotional responses in general point to supranatural standards for judging norms and commands, and that the moral-practical justification of the mode of action aims at an aspect *different* from the feeling-neutral assessment of means-ends relations ... Feelings seem to have a similar function for the moral justification of action as sense perceptions have for the theoretical justification of facts.[101]

The thrust of Habermas's argument is that there is something unique about the justification of moral decisions that differs from the justification of facts. What is unique is the presence of feelings. Feelings, which Habermas maintains have real and substantive content, are essential in moral decision-making because feelings motivate our reasons for taking one action over another. Habermas emphasizes this point by turning to philosopher Stephen Toulmin who writes that "rightness is not a property; and when I asked two people which course of action was the right one I was not asking them about a property – what I wanted to know was whether there was any reason for choosing one course of action rather than another."[102] According to Toulmin, rightness cannot be defined by resorting to a prescribed response. Instead, all that two people engaged in the task of determining rightness can do is present their

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[100] Ibid., 45.
[101] Ibid., 50.
[102] Ibid., 54.

position and support their positions with reasons. In this sense, "to say that *I ought* to do something means that *I have good reasons* for doing it."[103] The justification of moral norms is done by the presentation of well-developed and convincing reasons, rather than by recourse to a previously prescribed response.

For Habermas, prior to treating the distinct aspects of discourse ethics, it is important to explain why moral-decision making is important. He maintains that moral experience has real content and must not be dismissed. However, Habermas suggests that we cannot determine whether something is morally right or wrong, good or bad, based on the rational analysis of semantic content. Instead, these decisions can be made in community through the presentation and consideration of arguments, based in rational dialogue but expressing personal perspectives, opinions, and feelings. Therefore, resting on the notion that moral norms are justified in dialogue and community, it is now appropriate to look at the components of rational dialogue to determine precisely how these decisions can be made. We will now turn to the fundamental components of discourse ethics proper.

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[103] Ibid., 49.

Chapter IV – Discourse Ethics - Fundamental Components

In this chapter, aspects of the development and key features of discourse ethics will be given a comprehensive treatment. Further, objections and challenges to discourse ethics will be identified and considered. This investigation will be based in a thorough reading of selections of Habermas's primary works, specifically *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* and "What is Universal Pragmatics?" The reading of Habermas will be supplemented by secondary sources that will enhance or clarify certain observations. The whole of this chapter will provide an investigation of Habermas's theory of discourse ethics that will allow for informed observations regarding the applicability of the theory in the development of a Christian ethic.

Like other of Habermas's writings, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action (MCCA)* represents the culmination of many years of work on communication theory and ethics. However, in it Habermas takes for granted that his readers will have a familiarity with the concepts with which he interacts. There are certain themes and concepts that he develops in MCCA that have been introduced in his earlier writings. For one to craft a thorough and understandable explanation and evaluation of the theory of discourse ethics, it is necessary to incorporate explanations of some of his earlier writings into this final project on ethical theory. Therefore, what follows is an examination of the fundamental components of discourse ethics, derived largely from MCCA but supplemented by Habermas's earlier writings. While much of Habermas's order that he has imposed on the material in MCCA is followed in this presentation, it is important to note that there are points of departure from this

original format. These deviations from the original order are for clarity and ease of comprehension.

Validity Claims

Foundational to the notion of discourse ethics, and to any speech communication at all, is Habermas's conception of validity claims. Introduced by Habermas in his early work "What is Universal Pragmatics", validity claims represent the cornerstone of discourse and discourse ethics. In linguistic communication, where two or more people are engaged in dialogue, there are four implicit validity claims that all parties must recognize as the mutual presuppositions underlying the dialogue. While these validity claims have been introduced in chapter two, it is important to return to them here and to make particular observations regarding their application in situations regarding discourse on ethical principles.

The first validity claim is that "the speaker must choose a comprehensible expression so that the speaker and hearer can understand one another."[104] In the case of discourse regarding ethical principles, it is necessary that the speaker select words and phrases that maintain the truths of the argument but that are comprehensible for the hearer, so that he or she may understand the content of the argument.

The second validity claim is that "the speaker must have the intention of communicating a true proposition (or a prepositional content, the existential presuppositions of which are satisfied) so that the hearer can share in the knowledge

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[104] Jürgen Habermas, "What is Universal Pragmatics?" in *Communication and the Evolution of Society*. Tr. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), 2.

of the speaker."[105] The discourse must be motivated by the desire of the speaker to share his or her knowledge with the hearer. With regards to moral or ethical discourse, the speaker must be motivated by the desire to share his or her knowledge with the hearer so as to enlighten the hearer to an alternative position. If the speaker is not motivated by such altruistic purposes, then the validity claim cannot be fulfilled. For instance, if the speaker is motivated by a desire to convert the hearer to an alternative view as an expression of power or as a show of influence, then it shall be seen that the other principles governing discourse cannot be fulfilled. Discourse must have the altruistic motives of sharing the knowledge one holds.

The third validity claim is that "the speaker must want to express his intentions truthfully so that the hearer can believe the utterance of the speaker (can trust him [sic])."[106] In dialogue, it is assumed that all parties engaged are speaking truthfully to one another. When the speaker expresses a position, it must be assumed by the hearer that what is being expressed is the truth, so far as truth is understood. It is inappropriate for the speaker to express a position with the intent to deceive the hearer, or to convey falsities. If all parties in the dialogue are unable to assume the intrinsic principle of truthfulness, then it is impossible to reach a genuine consensus.

The fourth validity claim is that "the speaker must choose an utterance that is right so that the hearer can accept the utterance and speaker and hearer can agree with one another in the utterance with respect to a recognized normative background."[107] The speaker must select an appropriate means of communication so that the hearer

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[105] Ibid., 2.
[106] Ibid., 2-3.
[107] Ibid., 3.

may take in what is being said and accept the validity of what they hear. When the validity of the statement is accepted, then the position of the speaker too may be accepted. This is the portion of dialogue where the speaker has laid out his or her position with clarity, the hearer has understood the position and trusted that the content of the position is true, and the hearer comes to accept the position of the speaker, thus coming alongside the speaker as one who shares the same position or perspective.

According to Habermas, these four validity claims, introduced in earlier works and assumed in MCCA, serve as the fundamental presuppositions that one must anticipate are present and operating in a dialogical situation.

Moral Argumentation

In addition to the four validity claims mentioned in the previous section, Habermas uses the term validity claim to refer to any statement that a person asserts to be valid. According to William Outhwaite, validity claims are also "specific claims about matters of fact or morality."[108] They are, in a sense, the propositional content of the speaker's position. It is important to mention this definition here because Habermas uses the expression validity claims in this broader sense throughout his writing on argumentation.

In contemporary society, the term 'argumentation' carries with it a reputation. For many, arguing or engaging in argumentation is something to be avoided. For Habermas, however, argumentation is a cornerstone of discourse ethics. It is when people engage in argumentation, undergirded by the four presupposed validity claims

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[108] William Outhwaite, "Discourse Ethics," in *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics*. Vol. 1. Ed. Ruth Chadwick (San Diego: Academic Press, 1998), 797.

mentioned in the last section, that they are able to express and hear various positions. However, in Habermas's understanding of the term there are some important concepts that must be mentioned.

(a) *Strategic Versus Communicative Action*

For Habermas, there are two types of rational action that may be employed in discourse: goal-oriented action (strategic and instrumental action), and communicative action.[109] Within the grouping of goal-oriented action, Habermas focuses on strategic action. Strategic action exists when participants in discourse are oriented toward success. Communicative action exists when those engaged in dialogue are oriented towards reaching understanding.[110] According to Habermas,

> whereas in strategic action one actor seeks to *influence* the behavior of another by means of the threat of sanctions or the prospect of gratification in order to *cause* the interaction to continue as the first actor desires, in communicative action one actor seeks *rationally* to *motivate* another by relying on the illocutionary binding/bonding effect of the offer contained in his [sic] speech act.[111]

One can conclude from this elaboration that strategic action attempts to force, by the use of threats or sanctions, the behavior or agreement of another individual. In communicative action, however, agreement is brought about through the illocutionary binding/bonding effect created through a series of mutually acknowledged and accepted speech acts.

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[109] For an explanation of the types of rational action as used by Weber and his critics, see pages 31-32.

[110] Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action – Volume 1 – Reason and the Rationalization of Society*. Tr. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 286.

[111] Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. 58.

In a form of moral argumentation that is oriented towards reaching a mutual understanding, it is communicative action that is the norm, not strategic action. The question then remains, if it is communicative action that is the basis of moral argumentation, how is it that this argumentation functions? To respond to this question it is necessary to introduce Habermas's notion of employing certain speech acts.

(b) *Speech Acts – The "Double-Structure" of Speech*

The first speech act that Habermas values in communicative action is that of the 'double structure of speech.' This principle contends that there are two components inherent in every utterance that is directed towards reaching a mutual understanding in a communicative situation: the propositional and the illocutionary. Propositional speech acts, also known as the prepositional content of communication, refers to simple statements of experiences (states of affairs) uttered without any ulterior motives. A propositional statement is simply a statement of fact. Illocutionary speech acts, on the other hand, refer to speech that is used to do something, or to accomplish a particular goal. In the case of discourse ethics, when both speaker and hearer employ the four underlying validity claims, then they are freed to use illocutionary speech acts to convey various positions and to attempt to attain a state of mutual understanding.[112]

In this distinction between propositional and illocutionary speech acts, Habermas acknowledges that illocutionary speech acts are used in discourse to solve a problem or to convey one's position convincingly, but it says little of how this is

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[112] Habermas, "What is Universal Pragmatics?" 41-44.

accomplished. If someone is unaware of exactly how a speaker claims validity for a statement or attempts to justify a particular position, then they will not be equipped fully to engage in discourse. As such, Habermas provides details as to how individuals in dialogue claim validity and justify statements.

(c) *Illocutionary Speech Acts – Three Classes of Speech*

According to Habermas, illocutionary speech acts are those dialogical acts that serve to solve a problem or to convey one's position. To explain the manner in which these illocutionary acts work, Habermas distinguishes between three classes of speech acts: constatives, regulatives, and expressives. Matthew T. Mathews, writing on Habermas, provides a succinct introduction to the notion of speech acts. Mathews suggests that,

> by attending to the type of verbs used in people's everyday communicative action, Habermas has identified three classes of speech acts: constatives, regulatives, and expressives. Corresponding with each type of speech act is a unique type of 'validity claim'. Each type of speech act and validity claim thematizes a particular "world" or domain of reality.[113]

Although the presence of three 'validity claims' in this instance may appear to contradict the four validity claims that have also been spoken of in this paper, it is important to remind oneself that Habermas uses the term validity claims to mean two different things (the four underlying validity claims, and any statement that one asserts to be true). Therefore, it is possible that there are validity claims that correspond to each of the three types of speech acts. In this case validity claims are statements of asserted truth.

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[113] Matthew T. Mathews, "Religious Meaning in the Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas," in *Surroundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*. Vol. 82. No. 3-4 (1999), 385.

It is important to look briefly at these three classes of speech acts so as to gain a better understanding of how one goes about presenting one's position in moral argumentation and dialogue. Although Habermas introduces these classes in his *Theory of Communicative Action* Volume Two, he has borrowed them from analytic philosophy, and thus he assumes his readers have a familiarity with the terms. To supplement Habermas's brief mention of these terms, Mathew's explanation of the three classes will be provided.

First, for Habermas there are "constative speech acts in which *elementary propositional (assertoric) sentences* are used."[114] According to Mathews, "constative speech acts thematize "*the* world" of external nature in an objectifying, cognitive attitude. They seek to represent facts through propositional statements ... [and] the validity claim that is thematized is *truth*."[115] If a speaker were asked to justify a constative statement, the speaker would "appeal to a shared field of verifiable experience to secure the truth of her [sic] claim. Her utterance would be validated if she could "redeem" or establish its truth-character in a manner recognized by hearers."[116] Constative statements are concerned with true, factual, propositional content that can be verified or justified through dialogue.[117]

Second, for Habermas there are "regulative speech acts in which either *elementary imperative sentences* (as in commands) or *elementary intentional sentences* (as in promises) appear."[118] In regulative speech acts, which tend to be the

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[114] Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action – Volume One*. 309.
[115] Matthews, 385.
[116] Ibid., 385.
[117] Propositional content refers to simple statements of fact.
[118] Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action – Volume One*. 309.

basis of ethical and moral argumentation, "the speaker thematizes "*our* world" – the socially shared participatory world of intersubjectivity. Regulative speech acts make claims not about the facts or truth but about the *norms* that establish legitimate interpersonal relations. The validity claim for regulative utterances is *appropriateness* or *rightness*."[119] It has already been established that for Habermas, truth is found in the justification of moral norms based on a mutual dialogue. If the speaker were asked to justify a regulative statement, the speaker would appeal to norms, rather than to pure factual information.

Third, for Habermas there are "expressive speech acts in which *elementary experiential sentences* (in the first person present) appear."[120] Such expressive speech acts "thematize "*my* world" of internal nature, that is, the inner, subjective world ... [and in doing so] seek to disclose the speaker's subjective states or intentions to the hearers. The validity claim that corresponds to expressive utterances is *sincerity*."[121] Because the personal is so prominent in an expressive speech act, if the speaker were asked to justify an expressive statement, the hearer can only resort to the trust that has been established in the hearer over a period of time. The fact that the speaker has given evidence that their statements are trustworthy based on the proven validity of such statements in the past serves as the basis for the acceptance of new statements. As such, though the speaker is only expressing subjective evidence to the validity of a statement, the hearer can accept the trustworthiness of the statements and therefore deem valid what is being presented.

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[119] Mathews, 386.
[120] Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action – Volume One*. 309.
[121] Mathews, 386.

(d) *Speech Acts and the Bonding Principle*

At the core of Habermas's conception of speech acts is the belief in a mutually reciprocal dialogical relationship. Habermas maintains that when two or more people are engaged in dialogue, each person may employ the features of these speech acts to express validity claims. When the claim has been expressed, Habermas contends that the other person can express their validity claim, and then the two parties can dialogue about the validity claims that have been expressed. Each person may ask for further justification regarding all three of these types, and that justification must be extended. The hope is that when this process is undertaken, discourse of this sort can result in the attainment of mutually satisfactory agreements about a decision or course of action.

Although he does not dispute the importance of speech acts in dialogue, Habermas does contend that communicative action is not successful solely due to the employment of various speech acts. Instead, it is the reciprocal bond that is created in dialogue that creates the possibility of a successful mutual relationship. Habermas states that "the fact that a speaker can rationally motivate a hearer to accept such an offer [as a validity claim presented in illocutionary speech] is due not to the validity of what he says but to the speaker's guarantee that he will, if necessary, make efforts to redeem the claim that the hearer has accepted."[122] In other words, the speaker does not only make an assertion in the form of a validity claim, but provides justification and reasons that are meant to convey the content of the proposition and make it appealing to the hearer.

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[122] Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. 58.

While engaged in argumentation, when the speaker expresses a validity claim and when the hearer accepts the validity claim, then both speaker and hearer necessarily enter into a mutual relationship. According to Habermas, "as soon as the hearer accepts the guarantee offered by the speaker, obligations are assumed that have consequences for the interaction ... [in that] he [sic] creates a binding/bonding effect between speaker and hearer that makes continuation of their interaction possible."[123] In the Habermasian sense, argumentation is no longer something that divides two people, as is often the contemporary sense. Instead, argumentation provides the possibility to exchange validity claims and to enter into a mutually satisfactory relationship between all parties.

Despite Habermas's emphasis on the notion of validity claims and a variety of speech acts, both of these serve the practical aspects of dialogical communication. While validity claims and speech acts serve the purpose of helping people communicate with one another and to express positions and beliefs, they do nothing to determine the appropriateness of a claim in a moral or ethical dilemma. In his theory of discourse ethics, Habermas brings together his earlier writings on communication theory and applies his insights to the moral and ethical realm. In doing so, he strives to formulate an approach to moral or ethical discourse, based in communication theories, but which is responsive to the unique needs of moral and ethical dialogue. To meet these unique needs, Habermas again draws upon his multidisciplinary background, turning to Immanuel Kant who provides Habermas with the principle of universalization. It is the principle of universalization that

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[123] Ibid., 59.

Habermas reformulates to meet the needs of discourse ethics, and which we will see comes to form a prominent aspect of the theory.

(e) *Universalization*

When writing about the philosophy of discourse, Habermas notes a disjunction between theory and practice. For Habermas, "in theoretical discourse the gap between particular observations and general hypotheses is bridged by some canon or other of induction. An analogous bridging principle is needed for practical discourse."[124] There are two realms in discourse. In one realm there are the observations that one makes about oneself and the world. In the other realm there are the hypotheses that these observations form when brought together that makes them more than just observations but instead something with real meaning and content. This is demonstrated by returning to Peirce's reflections upon the scientific community.

For Peirce, those engaged in scientific inquiry formulate various observations and conclusions based on their research and study. When scientists gather with their findings, they engage in dialogue and reach a conclusion that the findings, once hypotheses, now represent a verifiable theory. In the scientific world, according to Peirce, the bridging principle between observations and theory is a process of formalized dialogue that is dependant on research findings to validate one's observations as mutually acceptable facts. In moral theory, Habermas argues the need of an analogous bridging principle that will permit personal moral beliefs or observations to be tested and tried, and then amalgamated as an accepted theory or

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[124] Ibid., 63.

hypothesis. For Habermas, this bridging principle is the process of discourse undergirded by a reformulation of the Kantian principle of universalization.

In his own opinion, Habermas is not breaking new ground with his reliance on Kantian universalization in ethical theory. He writes that "*all* variants of cognitivist ethics take their bearings from the basic intuition contained in Kant's categorical imperative [which is another term for universalization]."[125] Due to the strong reliance on universalization, it is appropriate to follow Habermas's own approach in MCCA of laying out for his readers the basic form of Kant's principle of universalization. Therefore, before identifying Habermas's modifications of the theory, it is useful to outline the theory in its original form as postulated by Immanuel Kant.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) is often regarded as one of the most influential voices in the history of philosophy. Kant provided many of the foundational principles for Habermas's moral theory. In particular, Kant's *The Metaphysics of Morals* played a prominent role.

The Metaphysics of Morals provides Kant's most systematic treatment of the ethical life. Kant surveys what he calls 'the doctrine of right' and the 'doctrine of virtue.' The doctrine of right is concerned with "duties of outer freedom – the manner in which one person's behavior affects others, as in the fulfillment of contracts."[126] The doctrine of virtue, also known as ethics, is defined as "the science of how one is under obligation [even to fulfill external duties like beneficence from the motive of duty] without regard for any possible external lawgiving."[127] The

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[125] Ibid., 63.
[126] Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*. xi.
[127] Ibid.

difference between right and virtue is in the role that external lawgiving plays on the determination of one's course of actions or behavior in a given situation. While much of Kant's writing on the doctrine of virtue provided the foundation upon which contemporary ethics is based, the most important aspect of the theory for Habermas is Kant's notion of universalization.

According to Kant, "the supreme principle of the doctrine of virtue is: act in accordance with a maxim of *ends* [so] that it can be a universal law for everyone to have."[128] This formulation is called the principle of universalization or Kant's 'categorical imperative.' The principle of universalization maintains that a maxim should be carried out if it would be beneficial to the whole of society if it were to be done in all instances. However, Kant does not maintain that we ought to act according to every principle that has the potential to be universalized. What Kant does suggest is that "we ought *not* to act according to any principle which could *not* be universalized [italics mine]."[129] According to Kant, it is not necessarily beneficial for one to act according to every principle that theoretically could be universalized. However, if a principle cannot, by any means be universalized, then this should be an indication about the appropriateness of a particular maxim, and should indicate that the maxim should not be done.

The crux of the Kantian perspective on universalization is that the determination of the universalizability of a norm or an action is left in the hands of the individual who is expected to use rational thought and reflection to reach a

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[128] Ibid., 157.

[129] A.C. Ewing, "Kant and Kantian Ethics," in *A Dictionary of Christian Ethics*. Ed. John Macquarrie (London: SCM Press, 1967), 187.

decision. There is an intrinsically monological feature of Kantian universalization that assumes people have the rational capacity to make the decision about whether a maxim could or should be universalized. Although Habermas has borrowed the essential concept of universalization from his philosophical predecessor, it is important to note that he has not transferred the principle directly. Instead, Habermas has made some alterations to the original form of the principle to meet his needs more appropriately with regards to the development of discourse ethics.

Whereas Kant believes that the determination of universalization can be made monologically by personal reflection, Habermas's reorientation of the principle puts the task in the hands of a collective group of individuals who are involved in the moral or ethical discourse. Habermas calls this principle (U) for universalization. He believes that for a norm or course of moral action to be determined as valid or invalid, the various consequences and side effects of the general observation of the norm must be acceptable to all who are to be affected by it. It is Habermas's argument that this type of determination can only be made in community through dialogue. In the words of Habermas, "discourse ethics replaces the Kantian categorical imperative by a procedure of moral argumentation."[130] Habermas differs from Kant in that he argues that

> valid norms must *deserve* recognition by *all* concerned. It is not sufficient, therefore, for *one person* to test whether he [sic] can will the adoption of a contested norm after considering the consequences and the side effects that would occur if all persons followed that norm or whether every other person in an identical positions could will the adoption of such a norm.[131]

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[130] Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. 197.
[131] Ibid. 65.

For Habermas, one individual should not engage in contemplative reflection regarding a maxim and reach a decision about its universalizablity. Rather, Habermas contends that all people who are to be affected by the implementation of the maxim or norm must be part of the process of determining its universalizability. For a norm to be deemed fully impartial, the norm "must embody a position that is common to all, which can be only determined through active participation in the deliberation of the norm which will result in its eventual consent."[132]

In light of this treatment of the influence of Kant on Habermas, it is possible to present a Habermasian reformulation of Kant's categorical imperative that would read as follows:

> rather than ascribing as valid to all others any maxim that I can will to be a universal law, I must submit my maxim to all others for the purpose of discursively testing its claim to universalizablity. The emphasis shifts from what each can will without contradiction to be a general law, to what all can will in agreement to be a universal norm. This version of the universality principle does in fact entail the idea of a cooperative process of argumentation.[133]

With this new emphasis on the dialogical means of attaining consensus, the question remains, what are the parameters that enable this type of communicative interaction to develop with regards to moral and ethical discourse?

(f) *Parameters of Moral Discourse and the Ideal Speech Situation*

It is Habermas's position that through the raising and disputation of validity claims in a dialogical setting, consensus can be reached regarding the validity of a moral or ethical issue. To accomplish this, however, there are certain parameters that

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[132] Craig Faucette, *So Is There a Place for Morality? A Defense of Jürgen Habermas's Discourse Ethics*. Master's Dissertation (Hamilton: McMaster Universtiy, 2000), 28.

[133] Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. 67.

must be in place that regulate the dialogical interaction, so as to conform both to Habermas's view of argumentation, and to his conception of the principle of universalization.

According to Habermas, "argumentation insures that all concerned in principle take part, freely and equally, in a cooperative search for truth, where nothing coerces anyone except the force of the better argument. Practical discourse is an exciting form of argumentative decision making."[134] The premise is that in a dialogue, each person who will be affected by the outcome will have an opportunity to express personal opinions and beliefs, and ultimately the best argument will prevail. Others will, theoretically, be so convinced by the power of the argument that they will see the issue from a new perspective and their views will be altered. In turn, they will be forever changed by the interaction. But this begs the question, what are the parameters that allow this type of interaction to function?

Habermas responds to this question by citing R. Alexy's three rules for discourse that Alexy has formulated from Habermas's original theory. For Alexy, there are three rules for discourse that enable meaningful, resolution oriented dialogue to take place. The first rule is that "every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in a discourse."[135] This means that each person who wishes to partake in the discourse has a right to do so. The second rule has three parts: "a. everyone is allowed to question any assertion whatever; b. everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatever into the discourse [and]; c. everyone is allowed to

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[134] Ibid., 198.
[135] Ibid., 89.

express his [sic] attitudes, desires and needs."[136] This rule suggests that each person engaged in the dialogue has the capacity and right to question the validity claims raised by others, and to introduce one's own argument that arises from personal attitudes, desires, or needs. The third rule is that "no speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising his [sic] rights as laid down in [the first two rules]."[137] Each person must not be limited in expressing his or her position or in demanding further justification for the position of another. For Alexy and Habermas, these three rules represent the foundational rules that guide the practical aspects of discourse.

If we are able to presuppose the possibility of an unconstrained dialogue to which all people have equal access to the dialogue and in which the force of the better argument prevails, then we have achieved what Habermas calls the 'ideal speech situation'.

The ideal speech situation provides the parameters to any dialogical interaction that will allow the process of dialogue or discourse to unfold in a manner that is balanced and uninhibited. It is assumed that if an ideal speech situation is in place, then those engaged in dialogue may reach a consensus that has been attained by the power of reciprocal discourse. An ideal speech situation is one that is "free from external distortion through unequal power and in which the participants are prepared in principle to be challenged and their conclusion rendered provisional in the

[136] Ibid.
[137] Ibid.

light of future and better evidence or more compelling argumentation."[138] Although this is the ideal, it will be identified as one of the most criticized aspects of Habermas's theory in that for a variety of reasons this ideal is often difficult to achieve.

First, in an ideal speech situation, all parties involved in the discourse are expected to be free from unequal power. In this sense freedom from unequal power means that no single agent in the dialogue will be able to exert undue pressure on another as a result of unequal social, economic, or political power. Each person is to be treated as equal regardless of their power of status in other areas of life. However, it is often difficult to entirely eliminate this inevitable presence from all discourse. For example, in Habermas's conception of expressive speech acts, it has already been mentioned that because the speaker cannot justify something that is expressive or emotive, then the hearer must rely on the trust that has developed with the speaker to accept the validity of the statement. This is just one example of how an ideal speech situation that is supposed to assume people are of equal value is difficult, because people are continually accumulating trust and credibility, and thereby value. What is important, therefore, is to recognize the potential of power imbalances between members of the dialogue, and to strive to neutralize them as best as possible. By neutralizing power imbalances, it frees up dialogue so that the most compelling argument alone can prevail. As such, the ideal speech situation is one where both

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[138] Nicholas Walker, "The Reorientation of Critical Theory: Habermas," in *The Edinburgh Encyclopedia of Continental Philosophy*. Ed. Simon Glendinning (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1999), 498.

speaker and hearer are considered of equal power and value, thus guaranteeing that the power of the best argument is the sole determinant in the dialogue.

Second, in an ideal speech situation, both speaker and hearer would be willing to have their principles challenged and rendered provisional and open to refinement and modification. In theory this is not an unreasonable request, but in practice it can prove more difficult. In dialogue, people often have the tendency to hold to beliefs with a strong grip, rather than loosening the grip and allowing themselves to be influenced as convincing arguments are presented. This remains an ideal speech situation because it is often difficult to open one's views to reformulation, and to continue to function with a set of views knowing that from time to time they may change.

Should these two facets of an ideal speech situation be in place, one can conclude that unrestricted, unconstrained dialogue can ensue on ethical issues can take place, but that it can be difficult. These difficulties, as mentioned above, are often derived from inevitable power imbalances, and from tendencies to guard individual positions with little flexibility to change. If these two aspects can be minimized, then Habermas would agree that the potential for discourse ethics to thrive could be maximized.

Considerations on the Application of Discourse Ethics

When considering the task of applying discourse ethics to existing ethical issues, certain characteristics of the theory must be kept in mind. First, Habermas maintains that

> the principle of discourse ethics (D) makes reference to a *procedure*, namely the discursive redemption of normative claims to validity. To that extent discourse

> ethics can properly be characterized as *formal*, for it provides no substantive guidelines but only a procedure: practical discourse. Practical discourse is not a procedure for generating justified norms but a procedure for testing the validity of norms that are being proposed and hypothetically considered for adoption.[139]

In other words, discourse ethics provides an approach to an ethical issue, but not a proscribed resolution to that issue. It is not possible to take an ethical issue and turn to discourse ethics for a clear resolution. Furthermore, the inherently communal nature of discourse ethics does not provide the individual with a means by which to comprehend personal moral choices. Discourse ethics simply does not function in that manner. Instead, it provides a formalized approach to ethical decision-making that can be employed in order to assist a group of individuals to come to a mutually acceptable resolution to the issue at hand.

A second characteristic of discourse ethics that must be kept in mind when considering its application is that it runs contrary to most other forms of ethical decision-making. Discourse ethics changes the role of the ethical 'professional' by making all members of the dialogue equally 'professionals.' Theoretically there is no distinction between the professional and the neophyte because every person engaged in dialogue is to be treated equally. Outhwaite, in his article on Habermas, explicates this shift. He writes that

> discourse ethics might also be said to generate certain constraints on the professionalism of applied ethics. Whereas a more traditional deductive (e.g. deontological) or consequentialist (e.g. utilitarian) ethics might give priority to the contribution of experts, the implication of discourse ethics is that experts will tend to be confined to a maieutic role of facilitating and clarifying discussion, as well as making their own contributions as *participants*.[140]

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[139] Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. 103.
[140] Outhwaite, "Discourse Ethics." 802.

There is a shift from the professional's role as professional, to a role as participant and perhaps facilitator. This is a shift from other forms of ethics that are heavily reliant on the leadership and influence of the expert.

A third characteristic that Habermas himself raises is that though unconstrained dialogue is the feature of discourse ethics, some structure is necessary to facilitate the discussion. As such,

> topics and contributions have to be organized. The opening, adjournment, and resumption of discussions must also be arranged. Because of these factors, institutional measures are needed to neutralize empirical limitations and avoid internal and external interference so that the idealized conditions always already presupposed by participants in argumentation can at least be adequately approximated.[141]

Habermas does not stipulate who the facilitator must be, but he does suggest that to ensure a smooth flow to the dialogue, there needs to be at least one person versed in the rules of argumentation who can facilitate the group.

A fourth characteristic of discourse ethics that must be recognized when considering application is that there is a notion of freedom coupled with empathy that is intrinsic to the theory. Discourse ethics is first and foremost about raising validity claims, justifying those claims, and then testing those claims against a principle of universalization. The final goal is to reach a mutually satisfying agreement. However, this agenda does not negate individual freedom. For Habermas, the agreement that is reached in discourse ethics is dependant upon two things: the potential and right for an individual to assert yes or no, and the individual's ability to

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[141] Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. 92.

look beyond himself or herself to see the multiplicity of potential positions being tendered.[142] Habermas maintains that

> without the individuals uninfringeable freedom to respond with a "yes" or "no" to criticizible validity claims, consent is merely factual rather than truly universal. Conversely, without empathetic sensitivity by each person to everyone else, no solution deserving universal consent will result from the deliberation ... [therefore] the equal right of individuals and the equal respect for the personal dignity of each depend on a network of interpersonal relations and a system of mutual recognition.[143]

In discourse ethics, one must maintain the freedom to say 'yes' or 'no' to the various validity claims that are being presented, and respect the rights of others to do the same. Empathy for the views of others can be achieved when one strives to place oneself into the scenario of each situation presented to determine whether the norm being discussed is indeed fair to all. While one may start from a point of self-reflection and mentally placing oneself in the position of others, a task somewhat analogous to the Kantian principle of universalization, in Habermas's discourse ethics, the final form of this process of deliberation must be done communally, rather than individually.

When considering the task of applying the theory of discourse ethics, it is important to remember these four characteristics of the theory: that discourse ethics is a method not a solution; that there are no experts in the process; that there must be some formality to the endeavor; and that freedom and empathy must infuse the discussion. When these characteristics are kept in mind, the possibility that those engaged in the task of discourse ethics may succeed at their undertaking is greatly increased. Yet, while discourse ethics appears to be a useful and applicable approach

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[142] Ibid., 202.
[143] Ibid., 202-3.

to moral and ethical decision-making, to make an educated decision about the worthiness of this theory, it is important to recognize some of the critiques and criticisms with Habermas's theory of discourse ethics.

Critiques and Criticisms with Discourse Ethics

No moral or ethical theory is without its potential faults. Discourse ethics is no exception. There are a number of objections to Habermas's discourse ethics, most of which are found to be along the same lines as G.W.F. Hegel's objections to Immanuel Kant's ethics. In MCCA, Habermas identifies four of the most pressing objections that Hegel raised against Kant, and then sought to determine whether those same objections applied to discourse ethics.

The first objection that Hegel raised against Kant was with regards to the apparent formalism of Kantian ethics.[144] Such formalism appears for Hegel in the principle of Kant's categorical imperative where a maxim can take the form of a universal law. Hegel argues that "since the moral principle of the categorical imperative requires that the moral agent abstract from the concrete content of duties and maxims, its application necessarily leads to tautological judgments."[145] In response to this criticism, Habermas responds by claiming that

> neither Kantian ethics nor discourse ethics lays itself open to the charge that since it defines the moral principle in formal or procedural terms, it can make only tautological statements about reality. Hegel was wrong to imply that these principles postulate logical and semantic consistency and nothing else. In fact, they postulate the employment of a substantive moral point of view. The issue is not whether normative statements must have the grammatical form of universal sentences. The issue is whether we can *all* will that a contested norm gain

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[144] Ibid., 195.
[145] Ibid.

binding force under given conditions.[146]

Habermas thus contends that discourse ethics does not lead to tautological judgments, where truth is developed by logical semantic means which cannot be disputed by experience.

Hegel also objects to Kant's abstract universalism. Hegel contends that because the categorical imperative is concerned with the universalization of norms, "a judgement [sic] considered valid in terms of that principle necessarily remains external to individual cases and insensitive to the particular context of a problem in need of a solution."[147] For Hegel the principle of universalization negates the possibility of dealing with concrete situations because of its over-emphasis on the theoretical, hypothetical universals. Further, Hegel argues that an ethics that involves the monological determination of a universalization principle does not consider the effects of such a principle of everyone involved.

Habermas responds to this potential criticism by suggesting that "neither Kantian ethics nor discourse ethics lays itself open to the objection that a moral point of view based on the generalizing of norms necessarily leads to the neglect, if not the repression, of existing conditions and interests in the pluralist society."[148] Further, Habermas believes that "discourse ethics has a built-in procedure that insures awareness of consequences."[149] The built-in procedure is the process of a dialogical principle of universalization. As such, Hegel's primary concern with Kant's formulation is nullified by Habermas's modification to the principle.

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[146] Ibid., 204.
[147] Ibid., 195.
[148] Ibid., 205.
[149] Ibid.

The third objection Hegel has with Kant is with regards to the *importance of the mere ought.*[150] Hegel is concerned with the dichotomy between duty and inclination on the one hand, and reason and sense experience on the other. Hegel contends that because Kant keeps the two separate, they are not applicable when theory moves into practice. However, Habermas believes that this concern is not applicable to discourse ethics because discourse ethics does not keep these two realms separate. In short, "the concept of practical discourse postulates the inclusion of all interests that may be affected; it even covers the critical testing of interpretations through which we come to recognize certain needs as our own interests."[151] Discourse ethics provides a comprehensive platform upon which to integrate duty, inclination, reason, and experience to determine what should be done, and what could be done when applied to a practical situation.

The fourth objection that Hegel has raised against Kant pertains to the terrorism of *pure conviction.*[152] In Kantian moral theory, the goal is to bring about the best possible ends. The concern is that the categorical imperative can justify ends that are detrimental to the individual so long as one person can unilaterally and monologically universalize the action. Habermas responds to this challenge by suggesting that "neither Kantian ethics nor discourse ethics exposes itself to the charge of abetting, let alone justifying, totalitarian ways of doing things."[153] He believes that discourse ethics is a means by which people can work together to

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[150] Ibid., 196.
[151] Ibid., 207.
[152] Ibid., 196.
[153] Ibid., 208.

express their positions, and to reach a mutual understanding that is free from totalitarian tendencies.

Hegel's four objections to Kant's ethics constitute the four primary objections that Habermas believes could be leveled against his own view. However, there is one final concern that is more practical in orientation, that Habermas does not mention, but which deserves attention.

Habermas's theory of discourse ethics "demands from its participants a *willingness* and *ability* to consider normative questions from a universalist standpoint and to regard every being as equal regardless of the actual constellation of relations in real life."[154] The concern arises when one considers that not everyone who could be engaged in ethical dialogue will be able to, or want to, be involved. Some people are unable to be involved in moral discourse because of time restraints or geographical restrictions. In addition, some people are apathetic to moral discourse and do not wish to have any involvement in debate or dialogue.

Further, discourse ethics demands that all people who may be affected by the decisions that are validated be part of the dialogue. Due to a variety of reasons, not everyone who ideally should be engaged is going to be able to be involved. For instance, a child who inevitably will be affected by outcomes of an ethical dialogue may not have the capacity to be engaged in such a dialogical process. Because Habermas's theory maintains it is inappropriate for one person to speak for another or to attempt to universalize the norm for another person, the position of the child cannot be expressed. The child is therefore excluded from participation. Although this may

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[154] Rasmussen, *Reading Habermas*. 66.

be an extreme example, there is concern that those who wish to be involved in the discourse simply are unable to do so.

The preceding is not an exhaustive list of the critiques and concerns with the theory of discourse ethics. What these concerns do suggest, however, is that as with any moral or ethical theory, there are bound to be critics who scrutinize aspects of the theory so as to raise concerns. This is the case in most contexts, and would presumably be the case within a Christian framework. Therefore, it is important to address these concerns as they arise, and to continually return to the fundamentals of the theory when considering its appropriateness or applicability for new situations. It is this task of re-evaluating the usefulness of the theory of discourse ethics for a distinct context that will be addressed in the next chapter. It will examine whether discourse ethics is an appropriate and applicable theory of ethics to be applied to the development of a contemporary Christian ethic.

Chapter V – Discourse Ethics and Christian Ethics

Ethics and morality are defined as the distinction between the good and the bad, and the right and the wrong. As such, "we are accustomed to think of morality as a dimension of life defined primarily by dilemmas and decisions. And naturally so, since morality comes to our attention in the form of questions about how we should act in particular situation."[155] For those who approach the dilemmas inherent in ethics and morality from a Christian standpoint, the dilemmas are often resolved by the return to two primary sources of knowledge that are intended to guide ethical decision making: Scripture and tradition.

Christian Recourse to Scripture and Tradition

To determine the ethical rightness or wrongness of a proposed decision or course of action, those engaged in Christian ethics most commonly return to the Scriptures as the primary source of knowledge and guidance. When one turns to Scripture for aid in determining a course of action to resolve an ethical dilemma, one is most often looking for an indication of whether or not a particular decision or course of action would be pleasing to the will of God. In Christian ethics, for something to be considered ethically 'wrong' means that it is determined to be in opposition to the will of God.[156] In short, if there is any suggestion in the Scriptures that a decision would be pleasing to God, then that suggestion alone would determine the course of resolution to a particular ethical or moral decision. Conversely, if there is a suggestion within Scripture that a decision would not be pleasing to God, then

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[155] Thomas F. Schindler, *Ethics: The Social Dimension – Individualism and the Catholic Tradition* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1989), 270.

[156] R.M. Hare, "Ethics," in *Dictionary of Christian Ethics*. Ed. John MacQuarrie (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1967), 114.

that alone would indicate that the action should not be taken. Though at first glance this may appear straightforward, the matter is complicated greatly when one considers the difficultly of determining the will of God.

In some instances, the will of God regarding particular ethical matters is relatively clear. For example, the Ten Commandments, found in the Old Testament book of Exodus, suggest that God prohibits murder.[157] Therefore, if a Christian is faced with the dilemma of whether or not to murder another individual, the Christian may turn this prohibition and determine that it is the will of God that they not engage in the act of murder. It would be reasonable to assume that scripture indicates, with some degree of clarity, the will of God with regards to this matter. However, there are other dilemmas where scripture does not provide as clear a window into the will of God, either because the issue is not given direct treatment, or because there are conflicting statements that would appear to support both sides of the argument.

For Christians, many issues in contemporary biomedical ethics present just such a scenario where there are no direct Scriptural passages that speak to the issues, thereby identifying the will of God. For example, the issues of new reproductive technologies, including artificial insemination, have no Scriptural precedent. For a Christian who is faced with an ethical or moral decision regarding the practice of these technologies, they are unable to turn to Scripture to determine the will of God to resolve this exact situation. As such, when one attempts to engage in Christian solely on the grounds of returning to Scripture to determine whether or not something is

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[157] Murder refers to "the unlawful premeditated killing of a human being by another." Katherine Barber, *The Canadian Oxford Encyclopedia* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1998), 955.

ethically or morally right or wrong, good or bad, there are bound to be a number of different issues where there is no simple, prescribed resolution.

The second source of knowledge to which a Christian may turn regarding moral decision-making is one's religious tradition. Whether one maintains Catholic or Protestant ideologies, tradition can be an important source in aiding an individual to make ethical and moral decisions. For instance, the Catholic tradition maintains certain rigorous ethical positions, particularly in the realm of sexual ethics.

Catholic ethicist Richard C. Sparks in his book *Contemporary Christian Morality: Real Questions, Candid Responses*, uses a relaxed question and answer format to respond to numerous ethical issues. Sparks is unabashed about his Catholic perspective, and on many an occasion he prefaces his answers by recognizing that what follows is a response rooted in the Catholic traditions. This is clear, for example, in his response to the questions about the use of contraception. Sparks writes that "from an official Roman Catholic perspective, the answer is clearly and unequivocally no. It is not morally justifiable to use the pill, a condom, or any other form of direct contraception."[158] The Christian scriptures do not address the issue of contraception directly, and therefore to determine the response to this ethical or moral dilemma, Sparks has had to resort to the traditions of the church. He continues to explain the basis for this resolution in tradition by remarking that "I am a Catholic priest and moral theologian. Thus, I am rightly obliged to show *obsequium* – variously described as respect, deference, or even religious tradition – to my church's

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[158] Richard C. Sparks, *Contemporary Christian Morality: Real Questions, Candid Responses* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997), 67.

official teaching, on this matter and on other moral issues.[159] In the case of the absence of a Scriptural admonition towards a particular resolution, Sparks has determined that the best possible recourse is to his own religious tradition.

However, the recourse to tradition is not something that is done only by Catholics. Various denominations of Protestantism have particular traditions regarding ethical and moral decision making that are turned to when individuals are faced with a dilemma that lacks a scriptural precedent. It is possible to see that when faced with an ethical or moral dilemma, those engaged in the task of Christian ethics turn frequently to Scripture and faith tradition as two primary sources for insights regarding ethical and moral decision- making.

Christian Ethics in Light of Pluralism

Pluralism is a derivative of the word *plural* which essentially means "more than one." When applied to a set or system of beliefs, "to be pluralistic is to acknowledge more than one ultimate principle. In a pluralistic society, various points of view are encouraged and considered."[160] For Christians, this ultimate principle is the will of God, manifest in Scripture and attested to in tradition. For others who do not adhere to Christian systems of belief, this ultimate principle may be another conception of a god or divine being, or it may be something that is entirely worldly, such as money or power. According to the principle of pluralism, while each individual is encouraged to maintain personal convictions and belief in the ultimate principle, other points of view are to be both encouraged and considered.

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[159] Ibid., 67-68.

[160] Donald C. Posterski, *Reinventing Evangelism* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 65.

In an increasingly pluralistic culture, when discussing ethical or moral decision-making, a Christian cannot simply resort to Scripture or tradition to validate one's perspective on a particular matter. This is not a helpful approach because those with whom the Christian may be speaking will not necessarily adhere to Christian principles. Instead, an alternative to the traditional Christian recourse is needed that will both encourage Christians to maintain their distinct perspectives, but that will enable and encourage dialogue between individuals and groups with varying perspectives on ethical and moral issues. One particularly strong alternative that responds to the situation posed by religious pluralism is that of discourse ethics, proposed by Jürgen Habermas.

Habermas and Discourse Ethics

Characteristic to the writings of Jürgen Habermas is a tendency to draw upon aspects of various academic disciplines, and weave together pertinent aspects of those disciplines when formulating his own approach to issues of social and critical theory. Habermas has consistently utilized insights from the fields of philosophy, sociology, history, and political science, blended those insights with his own, and developed and articulated new and innovative approaches to existing social and critical theory. Due to the interdisciplinary approach employed by Habermas, scholars in a wide array of fields have found his writings to be of considerable value in their own academic endeavors. For example, Habermas's theory of communicative action can now be found explained and applied in books on the subjects of philosophy, linguistic theory, communications, sociology, and politics, among others. However, despite the apparent usefulness of Habermas's writings, two areas of scholarly inquiry that have

dismissed or not considered the value of his writings are those of religion and theology.

One of the predominant reasons that Habermas's theories have not been given credence by those engaged in religion and theology is due to his early perspectives on these disciplines. Therefore, prior to evaluating the value of Habermasian theory, in particular the theory of discourse ethics, for its appropriateness and applicability for the development of a contemporary Christian ethic, it is important to establish first how Habermas's views of religion have changed over the years and as such, why he should no longer be dismissed.

Habermas's Early View of Religion

Jürgen Habermas, like others engaged in the task of critical theory, began his career with a generally low regard for religion. According to William Meyer in his article "Private Faith or Public Religion? An Assessment of Habermas's Changing View of Religion," in his early academic career, "Habermas thought that religion had simply become superfluous in modern life."[161] At the heart of Habermas's contention was that religion could do nothing more for society than could a process of pure rationalism. Placing a remarkably high value of rationality, Habermas maintained that "modern structures of rationality have evolved or developed to the point where they represent a genuine logical advance over the rational structures found in religious and metaphysical worldviews."[162] It is possible to see how Habermas came

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[161] William J. Meyer, "Private Faith or Public Religion? An Assessment of Habermas's Changing View of Religion," in *The Journal of Religion*. Vol. 75, no. 3 (1995), 372.

[162] Ibid.

to this conclusion by surveying his view of the "evolutionary development from myth to metaphysics to modern communicative rationality."[163]

According to Habermas, "mythology permits narrative explanations with the help of exemplary stories."[164] The myth is therefore the most primitive means of societal self-understanding and development. For Habermas, "the further transition from archaic to developed civilizations is marked by a break with mythological thought. There arise cosmological world views, philosophies, and the higher religions, which replace the narrative explanations of mythological accounts with argumentative foundations."[165] In this slightly more developed realm, religion and metaphysical principles are based on a knowledge "that can be dogmatized, that is, professionally rationalized."[166] For a time, the fundamental tenets of religion could be conveyed as absolute truth, free from challenge. However, this was not the case for long. Due to the influx of scientific discoveries and verifiable truths, the role of religion as the determinate of 'truth' was lessened. According to Habermas, with the onslaught of means of determining truth,

> for the first time, the universalistic potential already contained in the rationalized world-views could be set free. The unity of the world could no longer be secured objectively, through hypostasizing unifying principles (God, Being, or Nature); henceforth it could be asserted only reflectively, through the unity of reason (or through the rational organization of the world, the actualization of reason.[167]

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[163] Ibid.

[164] Jürgen Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society*. Tr. and Introduction by Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), 103.

[165] Ibid., 104-105.

[166] Ibid., 105

[167] Ibid.

Religion was no longer the sole determinate for truth. Instead, reason and rationality, augmented by knowledge gained through social and scientific advances, became the primary source for knowledge of oneself and the world in which one lives. For this reason why Habermas could maintain "that modern structures of rationality have evolved or developed to the point where they represent a genuine logical advance over the rational structures found in religious and metaphysical world-views."[168]

Perhaps the most profound by-product of Habermas's new conception of truth was the emphasis that it placed on the linguistic-communicative aspects of rationality. With the role of religion as a source of truth largely displaced by rationalism, for Habermas, the significance is that "it opens up the possibility for rational public criticism; it opens up the possibility for genuine public discourse and consensus concerning the rational validity of truth and moral claims."[169] According to Habermas, this new form of discursive rationality avoided virtually all of the drawbacks inherent in a religious world-view that lacked differentiation. Habermas, in reflecting on the limitations of a religious or metaphysical world-view, maintained that a reliance on a religious world view

> inhibited the potential for rational public criticism in at least two related ways. First, their underlying ultimate principles, such as the notion of God, were never exposed to rational criticism and argumentative doubt (i.e., they lacked reflexivity). And second, in their quest for totality – in their quest to symbolize and describe the whole of reality – they always fused or blended together the different validity claims and the different spheres of culture (i.e., they lacked differentiation). The fusing together in the name of the sacred or totality formed a barrier to learning and inhibited the potential for rational public criticism and, thus, limited the degree to which the profane realm could be rationalized.[170]

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[168] Meyer, 372.
[169] Ibid., 374.
[170] Ibid.

According to Habermas, there were two limits of the religious or metaphysical world-view. The first was that the existence and actions of God were never subject to rational criticism. The second limitation was that culture and religion were never differentiated. In other words, the profane was subsumed under the auspicious of the sacred, and was not allowed to stand-alone and be subject to the critiques of rationalization. Due to these limitations, Habermas developed, and for much of his career maintained, a dismal view of role of religion within society.

Habermas's Current View of Religion

As is typical of Habermas's approach to writing, after dealing with an issue in an early work, he will return later and revisit the issue, making any necessary changes to his original position that may be deemed necessary at the time to reflect the recent trends of his thought. This is the case with his perspectives on the role and value of religion in society.

According to William J. Meyer, "over the past decade or so, Habermas has come to admit that his earlier dismissal of religion was too hasty."[171] In his more recent writings, Habermas has tempered his stance on the value of religion and now maintains that "one must leave open the question as to whether anything more can be retrieved from the fragments of modern religion ... [and as such] the philosopher must wait and see what essential content can be critically appropriated from the religious traditions."[172] Habermas is acknowledging that there may be a place for religion, but that as a philosopher it is his responsibility to wait and see what remnants of religion may surface and of what value they may be. This is bound to be

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[171] Meyer, 375.
[172] Ibid.

a task that will necessitate a continual return to the notion of religion to assess critically what value it has and continues to have well into the future.

At the present time, based on recent reflections on the value of religion, Habermas has concluded that "religion is indispensable and irreplaceable, as long as it continues to offer an inspiring and consoling message that helps peoples cope with the existential crises of life."[173] While still adhering to his concerns regarding the lack of rationalism inherent in religion, due to its continual recourse to history and tradition, Habermas has assumed a position that religion, "in spite of its non-rational content, still offers something that eludes the differentiated character of modern communicative reason and culture."[174] What religion offers is an existential usefulness that can provide support and encouragement to those in need during crises of life. In other words, when rational thought cannot justify or provide answers to life's existential questions, that is the place for religion.

It is clear that Habermas has undergone a shift in his views on the place of religion in social theory. When those engaged in religion recognize this shift, they may be more willing to accept his theories and apply them to the contemporary religious ethos. Though many of Habermas's scholarly insights could be of use for those involved in religion and theology, in light of the reality of religious pluralism that is facing the church, one aspect of Habermas's theory would be of particular value: discourse ethics.

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[173] Ibid., 375-376.
[174] Ibid., 376.

The Appropriateness and Applicability of Discourse Ethics for the Christian Ethos

Habermas began his foray into the field of ethics because it was the task of the German enlightenment thinkers to determine a basis for ethics that would take into account that the traditional world was no longer present. This notion of a traditional world could be assumed to include the traditions of religion, that for some time was the driving force behind ethical decision-making. When faced with an ethical decision, it was not uncommon for people, especially Christians, to resort to the religious response to the dilemma, be it scripture, tradition, or one's Christian nature. However, in recent years, "traditional religion as a significant moral and integrative social force has, it is claimed, been superceded by rational moral argumentation."[175] As church attendance continues to shrink, it is reasonable to assume that fewer and fewer people turn to faith tradition for solutions to their problems, including ones of a moral nature. Instead, many people are turning to another means of determining the ethical rightness or wrongness of a situation: a communicatively based ethics of discourse. In other words, whether they realize it or not, many people in the contemporary social ethos are turning to Jürgen Habermas's theory of discourse ethics to provide the basis and justification by which ethical problems are approached and resolved.

Based on a comprehensive analysis of Habermas's theory of discourse ethics, it is possible to conclude that there are some aspects of discourse ethics that would be of considerable value for the Christian community as it redefines its approach to

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[175] Matthew T. Mathews, "The Persistence of Religious Meaning in the Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas," in *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*. Vol. 82, no. 3-4 (1999), 384-384.

ethical decision-making in the contemporary ethos. However, there are also aspects of the theory that would not be of value for the Christian community. It is important at this junction to survey some of the strengths and weaknesses of the theory of discourse ethics so as to determine the overall appropriateness and applicability of discourse ethics for the development of a contemporary Christian ethic in light of the advent of pluralism.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Discourse Ethics

Jürgen Habermas's formulation of a discourse ethics based on the principles of rational communication and consensus building is a utopian approach to ethics. In this sense, the word utopian suggests that if all of the requirements of discourse ethics were fulfilled in their ideal manner, then the theory of discourse ethics would be without rebuff. For instance, if each person involved in an ethical dialogue were to adhere completely to the presupposed validity claims, then the basis would be set for a mutually trustworthy and valuable dialogue. If the community in dialogue were able to give each person an opportunity to express their position, and then each position were to be judged against the marker of universalization (universalizing the maxim), then the statements made could be accepted and it is conceivable that a mutual agreement could be reached. However, the possibility that all of these conditions be fulfilled is somewhat idealistic.

It has been mentioned previously that to engage in a dialogue where all of these conditions were to be fulfilled would be difficult. While it may be possible to approach an ethical conversation and find the presupposed validity claims to be fulfilled, the possibility achieving Habermas's ideal speech situation is more difficult.

According to the ideal speech situation, each person who may be affected by the outcome of an ethical or moral decision must have the opportunity to voice his or her position. When these positions are voiced, it is the responsibility of others in the community to listen to what is being said, and to consider each statement as a possible solution. These possible solutions must then be considered against the marker of universalization. If the solution can be universalized, then it may be accepted as an ethically or morally viable solution. This is, in essence, how Habermas conceived of unrestrained dialogical communication dedicated to resolving ethical or moral dilemmas. However, the reality of the conditions of the ideal speech situation being achieved is at best remote.

Anyone who has engaged in Western culture for any amount of time would be hard-pressed not to acknowledge the pervasive individualism that guides decision-making. Individuals in society may maintain the desire to work together as a community to determine mutually satisfying responses to various dilemmas, but in reality, individualism makes this communal approach to decision-making a challenge. First, it many situations it is difficult to have people put their own opinions and positions at a distance that enables others to share thoughts, and have them considered as viable alternatives. For some, thoughts and opinions are held very strongly, and to waver in one's thoughts or beliefs is a difficult proposition to consider.

Further, Habermas's theory of an ideal speech situation demands that all people who would be affected by the outcome of a decision have the opportunity to express their positions. The first difficulty with this approach is with regards to determining who all the people are who would be affected by the outcome of a

decision. There are bound to be people who are affected by a decision that one would not immediately consider would feel its affects.

The second difficulty with this approach is that in many instances it is logistically difficult to ensure that all those who would be affected by an outcome have a say in the discussion. In a limited context, such as that of a church, it is conceivable that all those who would be affected would be able to have a say in the dialogue. However, some ethical decisions have a much broader influence. In some cases, to ensure that all people are given an opportunity to be heard would means that hundreds, thousands, or millions of individuals would need to be given an opportunity to speak. For the most part this is not logistically possible.

Third, it is often difficult to determine the scope of those who will be affected by a particular decision. It is entirely possible that more people will be affected by a single ethical or moral decision than was first thought. In this case, it is not possible to allow each person to speak to the issue because it is unknown who these people are or how or when they will be affected by the outcome of the decision.

Finally, Habermas's theory of discourse ethics necessitates that the validity or invalidity of each ethical be judged against the marker of universalization. In its inception, the Kantian notion of universalization could have been a valuable tool to determine whether one should act according to a given maxim. According to Kant, it is the responsibility of the individual to reflect on the maxim and to determine whether it could or should be universalized. However, the Habermasian conception of the principle of universalization indicates that it is the responsibility of the dialogical community to consider the universalizability of a maxim. Again, it is

difficult to allow each member of the community to express their beliefs regarding an issue, either because the scope of the community is too broad, or because for many issues some people are indifferent and do not wish to be involved.

Further, the principle of universalization is a difficult proposition because it assumes that if a maxim can be universalized then it is considered valid. On a large scale, it is difficult to ascertain whether peoples of different countries, cultures, languages, etc. would view the universalization of a particular maxim to be beneficial given the particular and individual contexts. Though universalization is theoretically a good idea, in that it helps to confirm the validity or invalidity of a potential decision, in its practical form it becomes a difficult proposition.

Though there would appear to be some difficulties with the theory of discourse ethics, it should not be discounted as a contemporary ethical theory. Instead, there are some aspects of discourse ethics that could be salvaged and applied within the Christian context that would be both appropriate and applicable to the contemporary Christian Church.

Christian ethics has come to face some significant challenges regarding its perspectives on and approach to ethical problems. With regards to distinctively Christian ethics, "one of the greatest problems with contemporary debates over moral or ethical questions has been our lack of charity towards the positions of others."[176] It is not uncommon for a Christian to be so entrenched in his or her own position that the views of others are either not heard or heard and discounted. In other cases,

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[176] Craig Faucette, *So is There a Place for Morality? A Defense of Jürgen Habermas's Discourse Ethics*. MA Dissertation (Hamilton: McMaster University, 2000), 87.

"although we may remain tolerant toward others who differ from us, we usually never place ourselves in a position to learn from them."[177] According to philosopher Georgia Warnke, what is needed is "an approach that is premised on acknowledging the fact that differing points of view may be able to offer an insight into our own beliefs and opinions."[178] This approach is discourse ethics.

Traditionally, those who were engaged in ethics from a distinctly Christian perspective would rely on the recourse to Scripture and tradition. However, due to the prominence of pluralism in the contemporary social and religious ethos, recourse to a particular tradition or faith is no longer an acceptable means by which to solve ethical dilemmas. Simply put, it is insufficient to refer to the wisdom of Scripture or tradition when faced with a moral decision because others with whom one is speaking may not recognize the validity of such a source of ethical instruction. Scriptural principles and tradition may be one's starting point, but they cannot be the whole of one's argument. Instead, what is needed is an approach that will encourage and enable dialogue to take place, while at the same time will encourage one to maintain and express ones religious convictions. Jürgen Habermas's theory of discourse ethics can do these things, and therefore it is valuable to look at some of the characteristics of the theory that make it an appropriate and applicable theory for the development of a contemporary Christian ethic.

Tantamount to Habermas's theory of discourse ethics is the notion of validity claims that serve as the presuppositions that underlay communication. In discourse regarding ethical matters, the four validity claims posited by Habermas provide the

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[177] Ibid.
[178] Ibid.

basic presuppositions that all parties may anticipate to be present in the communication. It must be assumed that the speaker will intend to convey true content in a manner that can be heard, understood, and accepted. From a Christian perspective, validity claims must be present in order to have meaningful communication.

At the core of Habermas's conception of the ideal speech situation is the belief that all individuals engaged in dialogue should have the opportunity to both express their own positions and be heard. As such, there is a quality of reciprocity that is present in discourse ethics. In many instances with Christian ethics, one is so entrenched in one's position that it becomes difficult, oftentimes impossible, for the various perspectives to be heard. Often, both sides of the ethical dialogue are speaking at one another, rather than with one another. Although the ideal speech situation in its totality may be somewhat idealistic or utopian, the aspect of reciprocity inherent in the principle can and should be applied within a Christian framework. When reciprocity is a guiding principle of discourse, it becomes possible that all of the individuals engaged in the dialogue may share their individual perspectives and though the perspectives may be different from the others, they will be granted the equal opportunity for sharing. In this sense, reciprocity is an important aspect of discourse ethics for the Christian church.

Another aspect of discourse ethics that has an application in a Christian context is the notion of challenging one's claims to truth. When a speaker presents a solution to an ethical problem, the other members of the dialogue are provided the opportunity to challenge that which the speaker has presented. Accordingly, it is the

responsibility of the speaker to be prepared to defend the position to the challenges presented by the rest of the group. What stems from this challenge is what Habermas calls the process of argumentation, which is accomplished through the use of various linguistic techniques of persuasion.

Much of Habermas's work on the notion of persuasion has been concerned with the study of linguistic conventions. These conventions are called speech acts, of which there are many different categories. According to Habermas, each type of speech act makes a particular statement regarding a certain validity claim. For example, constantive speech acts use purely cognitive means to justify statements about the world at large. When challenged as to the validity of these statements, a speaker may resort to identifying a mutually understood aspect of the world. For instance, if a speaker maintains that the leaves on a tree are green, this is a constantive speech act, making reference to something in the world at large. If challenged regarding the validity of this speech act, the speaker may point to the grass and other things that are green, ask if the listeners would agree that these things are green, and then on the affirmation of this point return to the statement that the tree is green, thereby having given proof to the statement. A thorough examination of all types of speech acts would be cumbersome, but it is important to recognize that within the field of ethics, when a person is challenged regarding an ethical or moral belief, it can be argued using a number of different speech act principles all motivated by the desire to persuade listeners to adopt the speakers position.

Habermas's approach to persuasion involves the presentation of convincing arguments that can be supported by specific acts that give credence to the statement.

This is an appealing approach to ethical decision-making for Christian communities because it is a similar approach to that used by Christ. For example, in Jesus' teaching on murder found in Matthew 5:21-26, he makes a statement about the wrongness of murder and about how one will be judged for anger with one's brother (or sister) in the same way one is judged for murder. He then proceeds to give a story or an illustration that is intended to substantiate his claim. He does this in community, with the intent of expressing his position and convincing the listeners of the viability of his claims. Within a Christian community, persuasion would ideally function in the same way. It would involve the presentation of one's position, and the substantiation of the position with examples and illustrations. In this manner, persuasion is only appropriate when the listener maintains the free capacity to determine whether he or she will accept what has been stated free from coercion.

Finally, Habermas's theory of universalization, though it presents some problems, makes an interesting comment regarding the collective nature of ethical decision-making. In his discourse ethics, Habermas has reformulated the Kantian notion of universalization, moving the principle from a largely monological consideration to a dialogical consideration. In other words, no longer can an individual be responsible for determining whether a maxim should be universalized. The responsibility for this task now lies in the hands of a community. For the Christian context, this is an important shift. With regards to ethical decision-making, if one were to adhere to the theory of discourse ethics, it would mean that decisions cannot be made and then imposed based on one persons assumptions regarding the benefits or costs of the decision. In discourse ethics, a minister cannot make a

decision regarding an ethical issue and then attempt to determine whether it should be universalized across the congregation. Instead, the minister must work with the congregation to determine an ethical decision, taking into account all of the other varied positions. As a participant in the dialogue, the minister must not impose his or her position on the congregation, using their status to substantiate their claim. Instead, they must express their claim and then seek the input of those who will be affected should the maxim be universalized. Though the application of this principle becomes difficult when one considers a decision made on a larger scale, for instance a decision that would affect an entire denomination, it does appeal to a smaller congregation.

It is not unreasonable to suggest that if a congregation were faced with an ethical decision all members of the congregation could have a say in resolving the dilemma. Further, if a mutually acceptable solution is determined, it may be possible to universalize the maxim for all of those affected, if the scope of those affected is relatively limited. In this sense, Habermas's theory of universalization can and arguably should be applied to the Christian church as it strives to make responsible and mutually satisfying decisions regarding ethical or moral issues.

Though there are other aspects of Habermas's theory of discourse ethics that could provide some insights into the development of a Contemporary Christian ethic, the preceding has illustrated the potential value for discourse ethics.

Conclusion

Ethics is a complex discipline. There are many approaches one may take to resolving ethical or moral dilemmas. One approach that has been popular is to approach ethics from a distinctly Christian perspective. Characterized by a recourse to Scripture and tradition as the source for ethical and moral insights, Christian ethics has had a valued past. However, as pluralism becomes the dominant ideological system functioning within the Western world, purely Christian ethics has proven to be an increasingly complicated endeavor. No more is recourse to Scripture and tradition wholly sufficient to resolve ethical dilemmas, because no more do the majority of individuals adhere to Christian belief systems. Instead, Christianity is now simply one of many competing ideological systems. As such, for Christianity to remain a visible presence in ethical debates, a new approach to ethics must be developed that will respond to the influx of pluralistic principles and beliefs. Such an approach would allow all of the voices of pluralism, Christian and non-Christian, to share and learn form each other. This thesis has sought to propose Jürgen Habermas's theory of discourse ethics as a alternative worthy of serious consideration.

Chapter One introduced pertinent aspects of the life of Jürgen Habermas. It then traced the development of Habermas's work through the various stages of his career, outlining the works that were published during each of the phases. Finally, the chapter identified some of the distinguishing features of Habermas's writing that would prove useful in subsequent readings of his work. The intent of Chapter One was to introduce readers to the person of Jürgen Habermas, and to set the stage for an examination of his particular contributions to critical and social theory.

Chapter Two introduced the task in which Habermas was engaged: critical theory. After defining critical theory, the uniquely Habermasian approach to critical theory was defined and examined. In particular, Habermas's linguistic approach to critical theory was identified, as was his major contribution to the field, *The Theory of Communicative Action*. The intent of Chapter Two was to provide the information necessary to create a foundation for one particular aspect of Habermas's critical theory: the theory of discourse ethics.

Chapter Three was dedicated to a survey of the origins of the theory of discourse ethics. It explained the influence of Immanuel Kant and G.W.F. Hegel, and identified the significance of the work of Charles Sanders Peirce on Habermas's theory. It then outlined Habermas's notion of the justification of moral norms to explain his motivation to apply his critical theory to the study of ethics. The purpose of Chapter three was to isolate some of the early influences on Habermas that contributed to his foray into the academic study of ethics.

Chapter Four examined particular aspects of the theory of discourse ethics. It surveyed such things as validity claims, the ideal speech situation, and the principle of universalization. Places where Habermas borrowed the ideas of his scholarly predecessors were identified, as were places where his own original content helped to shape the final form of his theory. Included in this chapter were some comments regarding considerations necessary for application of the theory, and some critiques and criticisms of the theory itself. The intent of Chapter Four was to provide a comprehensive though accessible explanation of discourse ethics so the reader could

determine for him or herself the appropriateness or applicability of discourse ethics for the development of a contemporary Christian ethic.

Chapter Five was concerned with the application of the theory of discourse ethics to the contemporary ethical ethos. First, the traditional Christian approach to ethics was identified, involving recourse to Scripture and tradition as the primary sources of guidance for ethical or moral decision-making. Second, the issue of pluralism was introduced as a reality with which Christian ethics would have to deal. Third, the chapter sought to explain why Habermas has been used very little if at all within the field of Christian ethics. It was suggested that Habermas's early antagonism towards religion in general tainted the Christian perspective on the value of his writings. As such, the chapter then provided an explanation of Habermas's early views of religion, and how they have shifted considerably to his present views, which affirm a place for religion in society. This development was included to provide an explanation of why Habermas's contributions to social and ethical theory could, and should, be considered within Christian religious circles.

Fourth, the theory of discourse ethics was presented as an alternative to traditional Christian ethics, suggesting that discourse ethics was of some value for Christian ethics. As such, some of the weaknesses with the theory were identified, as were some of the strengths. In light of this information, it was possible to conclude that discourse ethics is not a flawless solution to the dilemmas posed by the rise of pluralism. However, it is an extremely viable alternative to a traditional Christian ethic based on simply recourse to Scripture and tradition.

It is concluded that while discourse ethics may never replace a Christian ethic based on Scripture and tradition, it does possess attributes that make it an exciting and useful contribution to traditional Christian ethics. As the Christian church becomes less and less reticent about avoiding anything with the name Habermas attached to it and looks at his theories for what they are, critical social theories, then the possibility is increased that aspects of Habermas's theory of discourse ethics will become entangled with traditional Christian ethics. Christian ethics will come to see the value of a communicatively based mode of discourse regarding issues of ethical and moral importance, and will turn to the contributions of Jürgen Habermas and discourse ethics to supplement and augment Christian particulars.

Discourse ethics is simply one of many alternative approaches to dealing with the issues of ethics and morality. For the Christian faith, discourse ethics provides an opportunity to encounter and interact with the plurality of beliefs present in the world, while permitting and encouraging the maintenance of one's Christian beliefs. As such, it may be concluded that while the theory as a whole may not be entirely applicable to a Christian context, there are many aspects of the theory that make Jürgen Habermas's discourse ethics an appropriate and applicable tool that can be used in the development of a contemporary Christian ethic.

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