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Book Review

The Liberating Power of Symbols. Jürgen Habermas. (Trans. Peter Dews) Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001. 130 pages. \$17.95 paper. ISBN 0-262-58205-8. *The Postnational Constellation*. Jürgen Habermas. (Trans., edit. Max Pensky) Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001. 190 pages. \$21.95 paper. ISBN 0-262-58206-6.

Jürgen Habermas is regarded by many philosophers as one of the most important thinkers of the latter half of the 20th century, in terms of both breadth and depth. His writings, especially the two-volume *Theory of Communicative Action* – considered by most as his magnum opus – display remarkable intellectual rigor and acuity over a range of philosophical concerns. While known most prominently as a social and political philosopher, Habermas has written a great amount on philosophy of language and epistemology (or, reason) as well. With Apel and Rorty, Habermas has not only incorporated into his own thinking positions and influences across the “analytic/ continental” philosophical divide, but he has (like Apel and Rorty) striven for decades to bridge that divide, engaging with the thought of Quine and Davidson with equal comfort and familiarity as with that of Heidegger and Lucaks. Associated primarily with the Marxism-inspired Critical Theory movement, Habermas has written numerous works over the past four decades shifting the assumptions of his predecessors from what he has called a philosophy of consciousness to a philosophy of communication. The sustained development and analysis of his earlier and more renowned works are not in the forefront in the present two books. Rather, *The Liberating Power of Symbols* (LPS) is a collection of essays and speeches given on various occasions in the early- and mid-1990s, and *The Postnational Constellation* (PC) is a collection of political essays written in the mid- and late-1990s.

LPS is a collection of eight pieces, each focusing on the significance of the thought or influence of an important European thinker. Some of these thinkers are known to most philosophers (even English-speaking ones!), such as Ernst Cassirer, Karl Jaspers, Karl-Otto Apel, and Georg Henrik von Wright; others are less known, such as Michael Theunissen and Alexander Kluge. Often less an analysis and more an homage to the importance of these thinkers, the various essays nevertheless identify themes and positions that philosophers generally recognize and embrace. For example, in the title essay, on Cassirer, Habermas likens Cassirer’s contributions to semiotics and language analysis to that of the early Wittgenstein, claiming it was indeed Cassirer more than Wittgenstein who influenced a generation of German philosophers to make the “linguistic turn.” Following the work of Wilhelm von Humboldt, it was Cassirer, says Habermas, who transformed “the world-constituting activity of the knowing subject into the world-disclosing function of the trans-subjective form of language” and “explode[d] the architectonic of the philosophy of consciousness as a whole” (LPS, 15). That is, he stressed the intersubjective and pragmatic features of language and communication as being equally important to a full analysis of language as are representational and denotative features. Presaging much contemporary work in the pragmatics of language, Cassirer

emphasized the metaphoric nature of language as well as the ontological commitments that are ineliminable from language. These linguistic themes are picked up in the essay, “A Master Builder with Hermeneutic Tact,” which was a speech given to commemorate the retirement of Karl-Otto Apel. Like Cassirer (and Habermas), Apel wrote frequently on the communicative function of language and its relation to representative and denotative functions. This essay is neither an analysis nor a critique of such a position, but rather a commemoration.

Carrying the theme of communication, indeed the preconditions of communication, beyond the analysis of language per se to the analysis of cultural understanding and interaction, Habermas identifies the work of Karl Jaspers as providing a fruitful model of communication. Bringing in the works of McIntyre, Rorty, and Rawls, in their rejection of a dichotomy between universalism (i.e., a universal unity of reason) and relativism (i.e., all traditions regarding reason are incommensurable), Habermas cites Jaspers’s concept of “existential communication” as sharing their commitment to some form of contextualism (i.e., validity claims - criteria and standards of acceptability - are neither unconditional nor subjective). For Habermas, the lesson of Jaspers’s model is that we recognize “the horizon of the linguistically structured life-world, within which we always already find ourselves. We find ourselves within it in three different respects: as self-asserting subjects in the struggle for existence, as an impersonal consciousness in general in objectifying thought, and as communicatively socialized – and thus also individuated – members of an ethical community held together by shared ideas” (LPS, 38).

Keeping his focus on intercultural understanding, as well as his attention on the communicative function of language, Habermas asks, in a discussion of the thought of Johann Baptist Metz, the question: Where does anamnestic (reminiscent) reason belong (Israel or Athens)? That is, what is the role of historicist-based understanding for theology and/or philosophy? His answer is, along the same lines as those noted above in his discussion of Jaspers, that situated knowledge, with a “focus of remembrance,” is neither subjective nor objective, but intersubjective, neither universalist nor relativist, but contextualist. As Habermas puts it:

The Greek *logos* has transformed itself on its path from the intellectual contemplation of the cosmos, via the self-reflection of the knowing subject, to a linguistically embodied reason. It is no longer fixated on our cognitive dealings with the world – on being as being, on the knowing of knowing, or the meaning of propositions which can be true or false. Rather the idea of a covenant which promises justice to the people of God, and to everyone who belongs to this people, a justice which extends through and beyond a history of suffering, has been taken up in the idea of a community tied by a special bond...Without this subversion of Greek metaphysics by notions of authentically Jewish and Christian origin, we could not have developed that network of specifically modern notions which come together in the thought of a reason which is both communicative and historically situated. (LPS, 81-2)

By “that network of specifically modern notions” Habermas means notions of autonomy coupled with socialized subjects, of liberation both in a descriptive sense of emancipation from degrading conditions and in a normative sense of a utopian project of a harmonious form of life. Habermas carries through these themes and this commitment of historically-situated contextualized reason, mediated by and structured by the communicative function of language, in his other essays on the

work of von Wright, Gershom Scholem, and Alexander Kluge.

The issues of cultural and intercultural understanding as seen through the lens of the communicative function of language are made even more explicit (and more explicitly political) in *The Postnational Constellation*. PC contains eight essays ranging from sweeping remarks on conceptions of modernity to quite specific arguments regarding human cloning. With a strong connecting thread of an analysis of “globalization” underlying the separate essays, Habermas extends his approach of seeking the conditions of communication that is seen in LPS to the conditions for political legitimacy here in PC. As editor Max Pensky notes, taken as a whole, this collection of essays proposes the thesis that if the democratic process is to secure a basis for legitimacy beyond the nation-state, it will be collective will-formation and not the State or the Market that will provide this legitimacy. The first three essays (“What is a People?,” “On the Public Use of History,” and “Learning from Catastrophe?”) all analyze how the notion of the State (or of a People) was socially constructed, particularly in Germany. These analyses carry through Habermas’s on-going view noted several times already of knowledge (in this case, identity) as being constructed in the context of historical situations, that is, a Kantian-like focus on the conditions of knowledge, communication, and in this instance political legitimacy.

The longest essay, nearly 1/3 of the entire volume, is “The Postnational Constellation and the Future of Democracy.” Here Habermas lays out in greater detail his take on what globalization is and how it is to be legitimated in the context of trans-national Markets and Democratic ideals (e.g., trans-national human rights). Fundamental modes of human interaction – interaction that is defining of who we are – such as commerce, communication, culture, are all transcending national boundaries and challenge the very relevance of the nation-state as a means of either understanding or of handling and guiding such modes. It is the following essay, however, “Remarks on Legitimation on Human Rights,” that would feel the most comfortable of the entire collection to analytical philosophers, as it provides a more detailed and focused treatment of the nature of rights and less in the way of what seem at times rather sweeping claims. He begins by identifying the issue of political legitimation with procedural justification, i.e., laws. Laws are our collective means of regulating behavior and by their very nature they are coercive. Their coerciveness is substantive (i.e., they have content to them; they proscribe or prescribe specific behaviors), and in two ways: (1) as laws of coercion, saying what we may not do and (2) as laws of freedom, saying what we may do (and what others may not do with respect to us). This is reminiscent of the standard Hohfeldian analysis of rights as powers (what we may do) and as immunities (what may not be done to us). This raises the well-known concern of how to balance popular sovereignty and human rights. What is particularly important about Habermas’s take on this issue is that he connects it to his concerns about communication and conditions of legitimacy:

Now, if discourses (and bargaining processes) are the place where a reasonable political will can develop, then the presumption of legitimate outcomes, which the democratic procedure is supposed to justify, ultimately rests on an elaborate communicative arrangement: the forms of communication necessary for a reasonable will-formation of the political lawgiver, the conditions that ensure legitimacy, must be legally institutionalized.

The desired internal relation between human rights and popular sovereignty consists in this: human rights institutionalize the communicative conditions for a reasonable political

will-formation. (PC, 117)

What this view shows is, once again, Habermas's attempts to steer a course between universalism and relativism, as, for him, rights are contextualized though not subjective (or even merely relative to a given group).

The value of these two collections of essays lies not so much in providing an overview or even a substantive, systematic presentation of Habermas to a new-comer to his thought. Nor does the value lie in providing a sustained dialogue with analytic philosophers over any particular topic. His other, more renowned works do that job (e.g., *The Theory of Communicative Action*, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, *Between Facts and Norms*). The value of these two present volumes, rather, lies in fleshing out his philosophical stances and commitments in the margins or borderlands of his philosophical corpus. To that extent they are a revealing window into the more fruitful and more developed works noted above.

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