Between Emancipation and Domination:

Habermasian Reflections on the Empowerment and Disempowerment of the Human Subject

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Introduction

The central objective of Habermas's 'linguistic turn' is to provide a normative foundation for critical theory.[1] The main reason for this

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1 See, for example, J. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action. Volume 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. T. McCarthy (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987 [1981]), hereafter *TCA I*, pp. xli and xliv. See also J. Habermas, *On the Pragmatics of Social Interaction: Preliminary Studies in the Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. B. Fultner (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001 [1984]), pp. 36 and 102-103.

Habermas's aim to provide normative foundations for critical theory has been thoroughly discussed in the secondary literature. See, for example: R. J. Antonio, 'The Normative Foundations of Emancipatory Theory: Evolutionary versus Pragmatic Perspectives', *American Journal of Sociology* 94(4), (1989), pp. 721-748, here pp. 722 and 726-730; J. Bengoa Ruiz de Azúa, *De Heidegger a Habermas. Hermenéutica y fundamentación última en la filosofía contemporánea*, 2a edición (Barcelona: Herder, 2002 [1992]), pp. 127-128; C. Bouchindhomme, 'La théorie critique : théorie ? critique ?', in C. Bouchindhomme and R. Rochlitz, eds., *Habermas, la raison, la critique* (Paris: Cerf, 1996), pp. 139-151, here p. 149; M. Cooke, 'Avoiding Authoritarianism: On the Problem of Justification in Contemporary Critical Social Theory', *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 13(3), (2005), pp. 379-404, here pp. 392 and 398; T. Couture 'Habermas, Values, and the Rational, Internal Structure of Communication', *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 27(3-4), (1993), pp. 403-416, here pp. 404-405; A. Créau,

undertaking is the conviction that any social theory that claims to be committed to the emancipation of the human condition needs to demonstrate on what grounds both its critique of social domination and its pursuit of social liberation can be justified. Just as Habermas's belief in the necessity and possibility of human emancipation is epitomised in the concept of the 'ideal speech situation'[2], his acknowledgment of human domination cannot be dissociated from the concept of

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Kommunikative Vernunft als "entmystifiziertes Schicksal" (Frankfurt am Main: Anton Hain, 1991), pp. 31, 136-137, and 149; W. Detel, 'System und Lebenswelt bei Habermas', in S. Müller-Doohm, ed., *Das Interesse der Vernunft: Rückblicke auf das Werk von Jürgen Habermas seit "Erkenntnis und Interesse"* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000), pp. 175-197, here p. 176; B. Fultner, 'Translator's Introduction', in Habermas, *On the Pragmatics of Social Interaction: Preliminary Studies in the Theory of Communicative Action*, pp. vii-xxiv, here pp. vii, ix-x, xv-xvi, and xxii; A. Honneth, 'La dynamique sociale du mépris. D'où parle une théorie critique de la société ?', in C. Bouchindhomme and R. Rochlitz, eds., *Habermas, la raison, la critique* (Paris: Cerf, 1996), pp. 215-238, here, pp. 225 and 237; N. Kompridis, 'Rethinking Critical Theory', *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 13(3), (2005), pp. 299-301, here p. 299; T. McCarthy, *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981), p. 415; S. Müller-Doohm, 'Kritik in kritischen Theorien. Oder: Wie kritisches Denken selber zu rechtfertigen sei', in Müller-Doohm, ed., *Das Interesse der Vernunft: Rückblicke auf das Werk von Jürgen Habermas seit "Erkenntnis und Interesse"*, pp. 71-106, here pp. 72-73 and 83-100; M. Papastephanou, 'Communicative Action and Philosophical Foundations: Comments on the Apel-Habermas Debate', *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 23(4), (1997), pp. 41-69, here pp. 41-48 and 51-62; M. K. Power, 'Habermas and the Counterfactual Imagination', in M. Rosenfeld and A. Arato, eds., *Habermas on Law and Democracy: Critical Exchanges*, Berkeley (California: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 207-225, here p. 207; G. Raulet, 'Critique de la raison communicationnelle', in Bouchindhomme and Rochlitz, eds., *Habermas, la raison, la critique*, pp. 69-103, here pp. 75-79; J. B. Thompson, *Critical Hermeneutics: A Study in the Thought of Paul Ricoeur and Jürgen Habermas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 82-84; and A. Wellmer, 'Practical Philosophy and the Theory of Society: On the Problem of the Normative Foundations of a Critical Social Science', in S. Benhabib and F. R. Dallmayr, eds., *The Communicative Ethics Controversy* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990 [1979]), pp. 293-329, here, p. 296.

2 See, for example, Habermas, *On the Pragmatics of Social Interaction: Preliminary Studies in the Theory of Communicative Action*, pp. 85-86, 93, 97-99, and 102-103.

'systematically distorted communication'.[3] Although the significance of these two concepts for Habermas's communication-theoretic approach to the social has been widely recognised and extensively debated in the literature[4], their overall importance for a critical theory of human empowerment and disempowerment has hardly been explored in a satisfying manner. At first glance, it seems that these two concepts stand in a contradictory, yet complementary, relationship: whilst the possibility of communication free from domination is diametrically opposed to the

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3   See, for example, ibid., pp. 129-170.

4   On the concept of the 'ideal speech situation', see, for example: K.-O. Apel, 'Is the Ethics of the Ideal Communication Community a Utopia? On the Relationship between Ethics, Utopia, and the Critique of Utopia', in Benhabib and Dallmayr, eds., *The Communicative Ethics Controversy*, pp. 23-59, esp. pp. 24-25, 33-35, and 42-51; S. Benhabib, 'Afterword: Communicative Ethics and Contemporary Controversies in Practical Philosophy', in Benhabib and Dallmayr, eds., *The Communicative Ethics Controversy*, pp. 330-369, here pp. 330-331 and 343-345; R. J. M. Bernstein, *Recovering Ethical Life: Jürgen Habermas and the Future of Critical Theory* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 47-57; D. Böhler, 'Transcendental Pragmatics and Critical Morality: On the Possibility and Moral Significance of a Self-Enlightenment of Reason', in Benhabib and Dallmayr, eds., *The Communicative Ethics Controversy*, pp. 111-150, esp. pp. 114, 132-133, and 136; M. Cooke, *Language and Reason: A Study of Habermas's Pragmatics* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994), pp. 31, 172n.8, and 172-173n.9; R. A. Factor and S. P. Turner, 'The Critique of Positivist Social Science in Leo Strauss and Jürgen Habermas', *Sociological Analysis & Theory* 7(3) (1977), pp. 185-206, here pp. 194, 196, and 201-202; R. Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 65-75; M. J. Matustik, 'Habermas on Communicative Reason and Performative Contradiction', *New German Critique* 47, (1989), pp. 143-172, here pp. 159 and 166-167; L. Ray, 'Pragmatism and Critical Theory', *European Journal of Social Theory* 7(3), (2004), pp. 307-321, here pp. 309 and 315-317; and A. Trautsch, 'Glauben und Wissen. Jürgen Habermas zum Verhältnis von Philosophie und Religion', *Philosophisches Jahrbuch* 111(1), (2004), pp. 180-198, here p. 183.

On the concept of 'systematically distorted communication', see, for example: J. Bohman, 'Formal Pragmatics and Social Criticism: The Philosophy of Language and the Critique of Ideology in Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action', *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 12(4), (1986), pp. 331-352, esp. pp. 332-333 and 336-344; G. Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 35; N. Crossley, 'On Systematically Distorted Communication: Bourdieu and the

reality of distorted communication, the empowering features of the former can challenge the disempowering consequences of the latter. This essay is an attempt to contribute to a more fine-grained understanding of the relationship between the empowerment and the disempowerment of the subject in Habermas's communication-theoretic approach to the social. Challenging idealistic and fatalistic conceptions of the social, the paper makes a case for the view that a comprehensive critical theory of society needs to account for both the emancipatory and the repressive potentials of language if it seeks to do justice to both the empowering and the disempowering potentials of the subject.

The paper is structured as follows. The first part argues that the self-formation of the subject is essentially characterised by a constant struggle between self-actualisation and self-alienation. The second part suggests that the construction of society is unavoidably shaped by the relationship between communicative processes of deliberation and systemic imperatives of functionalisation. The third part explains why the development of the human species cannot be understood without taking into account the interdependence between cognition and action. The fourth part looks into the anthropological presuppositions that undergird the early Habermas's communication-theoretic conception of the subject. The fifth part illustrates why the consolidation of emancipatory speech situations is a precondition for the creation of empowering life situations. The sixth part elucidates why the spread of distortive speech situations is conducive to the emergence of disempowering life situations. The seventh part puts forward the view that the very possibility of society depends on the subject's existential orientation towards intelligibility.

Socio-Analysis of Publics', in N. Crossley and J. M. Roberts, eds., *After Habermas: New Perspectives on the Public Sphere* (Oxford: Blackwell/Sociological Review, 2004), pp. 88-112, esp. pp. 88-89 and 109; A. Edgar, *The Philosophy of Habermas* (Montreal & Kingston, Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), pp. 153-157; Fultner, 'Translator's Introduction', pp. xx-xxi; Müller-Doohm, 'Kritik in kritischen Theorien. Oder: Wie kritisches Denken selber zu rechtfertigen sei', pp. 88 and 92-94; and M. Pusey, *Jürgen Habermas* (London: Routledge, 1987/1995), pp. 69-75.

I.

Given its interest in the normative nature of social life, critical theory has always been concerned with the exploration of both the emancipatory and the repressive potentials of human existence. From the point of view of critical theory, the dialectics between the empowering and the disempowering forces of the human being-in-the-world manifest themselves in the antagonistic interplay between emancipation and domination. As a species capable of emancipation, we are able to liberate ourselves from structural sources of unnecessary constraints and repression. As a species capable of domination, we are able to construct systemic imperatives which obstruct the possibility of human self-realisation.

To be sure, different critical theories of society put forward different conceptions of the human self in order to account for our ambivalent situatedness between emancipation and domination. From a Kantian perspective, we are *rational* entities equipped with the capacity to determine our lives by virtue of reason.[5] According to Hegelian parameters, we are *intersubjective* entities seeking to affirm our existence by virtue of mutual recognition.[6] Relying on the Marxian conception of the world, we are *productive* entities able to shape the course of history by virtue of labour.[7] From a Freudian point of view, we are *desiderative* entities deemed to project ourselves upon the world by virtue of our sexual unconscious.[8] In Husserlian terms, we are *experiential* entities condemned to attribute meaning to our existence by virtue of our lifeworld.[9] Within the Heideggerian universe, we are *linguistic* entities

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5 See I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, translated and edited by M. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997 [1788]).

6 See G. W. F. Hegel and L. Rauch, *Hegel and the Human Spirit: A Translation of the Jena Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit (1805-6)*, trans. L. Rauch (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983).

7 See K. Marx and F. Engels, 'The German Ideology', in D. McLellan, ed., *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, 2nd Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000/1977 [1846]), pp. 175-208.

8 See S. Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, trans. J. Riviere and J. Strachey, Rev. Edition (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1962 [1923]).

9 See E. Husserl and L. Landgrebe, *Experience and Judgment: Investigations in a Genealogy of Logic*, trans. J. S. Churchill and K. Ameriks (revised and edited by L.

destined to build the house of being by virtue of language.[10] Following the Gadamerian vision, we are *prejudiced* entities prone to make sense of the world by virtue of culturally contingent preconceptions.[11] In accordance with the Habermasian account of the human species, we are *communicative* entities able to construct society by virtue of the intersubjective force of mutual understanding.[12]

What these theoretical approaches have in common is that they seek to identify the species-constitutive elements of human existence. What distinguishes these perspectives from one another, however, is their presuppositional specificity: they offer different accounts of the foundational elements which largely determine the constitution of human society. It may be relatively uncontroversial to assume *that* human existence is shaped by both emancipatory and repressive forces. Yet, it is far from uncontroversial *what* these forces exactly are and what kind of impact they may have upon the development of society. To the extent that the realisation of our species-constitutive potentials is a crucial source of self-actualisation (*Selbstverwirklichung*), the repression of these potentials is a decisive source of self-alienation (*Selbstentfremdung*). The emancipation of the human species depends on its capacity to unfold its self-empowering potentials; the domination of the human species is rooted in society's power to control and repress these potentials.

II.

From a Habermasian perspective, both social emancipation and social domination cannot be dissociated from the constitution of linguistic communication.[13] A society oriented towards emancipation is a society in

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Landgrebe, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973 [1939]).

10 See M. Heidegger, *Pathmarks* (edited by W. McNeill, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

11 See H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd Edition (translation revised by J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall, London: Sheed & Ward, 1989 [1975]).

12 See J. Habermas, 'What is Universal Pragmatics?', in his *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, trans. T. McCarthy (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984 [1976]), pp. 1-68.

13 See, for example, J. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action. Volume 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, trans. T. McCarthy (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987 [1981]), hereafter *TCA II*, pp. 374-403.

which communicative processes contribute to the *deliberative* rationalisation of human coexistence. A society oriented towards domination, by contrast, is a society in which communicative processes are colonised by the *systemic* rationalisation of human coexistence. The more a given society is capable of determining its development through the coordinative force of communicative action, the more its existence depends on intersubjectively constituted processes of deliberative rationalisation. The more a given society is prone to determine its development through the success-oriented force of purposive action, the more its existence is shaped by instrumentally driven mechanisms of systemic rationalisation. From a Habermasian point of view, then, human emancipation is intimately interrelated with communicative autonomy, that is, with people's deliberative capacity to coordinate – and, if necessary, discuss – their actions by relating to one another communicatively. Human domination, on the other hand, is closely intertwined with functional heteronomy, that is, with society's purposive capacity to influence – and, if required, control – people's actions by steering them systemically.

Within the Habermasian architecture of the social, the instrumentally driven system is diametrically opposed to the communicatively structured lifeworld.[14] Whereas the former is maintained through functionalist rationality, which is built into the purposive construction of both the polity and the economy, the latter is shaped by communicative rationality, which is intrinsic to the coordinative construction of humanity. Just as the increasing bureaucratisation and commodification of society are indicative of the growing functionalisation of human reality, the communicative structuration of the lifeworld is symptomatic of the discursive mediation of human interactions. The more the polity and the economy succeed in imposing their purposive-rational imperatives on the lifeworld, the more our everyday relations are colonised by the functional necessities of the system. Thus, according to Habermasian parameters, the relationship between emancipation and domination can be understood in terms of the interplay between lifeworld and system: whereas the empowering force of communicative reason is anchored in the lifeworld, the disempowering force of functionalist reason is imposed upon society by the system. Actors' communicative autonomy, developed in the lifeworld, is antithetical to their functional heteronomy, enforced upon

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14 See ibid., pp. 153-197.

them by the system. The communicative nature of the lifeworld is the cradle of social emancipation; the instrumental nature of the system, by contrast, is the main structural source of social domination.

III.

Despite the substantial differences between his 'early' and his 'late' writings[15], Habermas's social theory is characterised by one central conviction: the idea that communicative action – i.e. action oriented towards mutual understanding – is an emancipatory force. The existential significance of the emancipatory nature of communicative action is expressed in the early Habermasian distinction between three knowledge-constitutive interests:[16] (i) the empirical-analytic sciences are driven by our *technical* cognitive interest in controlling the world, (ii) the historical-hermeneutic sciences are guided by our *practical* cognitive interest in reaching a communicatively mediated understanding about the world, and (iii) the critically oriented sciences articulate our *emancipatory* cognitive interest in liberating the human world from dependence on repressive forms of power. This anthropological account of the relationship between knowledge and interests obliges us to abandon the dream of scientific neutrality: the human production of knowledge is – always and unavoidably – interest-laden. If our technical orientation towards *instrumentality* is fundamental to the preservation of humanity, and if our practical orientation towards *intersubjectivity* is essential to the construction of society, our emancipatory orientation towards *reflexivity* is crucial to the formation of human autonomy and social responsibility.

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15 The importance of these differences is reflected in the fact that, on some occasions, the 'late' Habermas explicitly distances himself from the 'early' Habermas. See, for example, J. Habermas, 'Nach dreißig Jahren: Bemerkungen zu Erkenntnis und Interesse', in Müller-Doohm, ed., *Das Interesse der Vernunft: Rückblicke auf das Werk von Jürgen Habermas seit "Erkenntnis und Interesse"*, pp. 12-20, esp. pp. 12-16, 18, and 20.

16 See J. Habermas, 'Knowledge and Human Interests: A General Perspective', in his *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. J. J. Shapiro (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987 [1965/1968]), pp. 301-317. See also J. Habermas, 'Reason and Interest: Retrospect on Kant and Fichte', in ibid., pp. 191-213, and J. Habermas, 'A Postscript to *Knowledge and Human Interests*', in ibid., pp. 351-386.

Whereas from a Nietzschean and Foucauldian point of view we have a will to power[17], from a Kantian and Habermasian perspective we have a will to reason.[18] In fact, reason *is* power: a rational power derived from and developed through the communicative experience of the world. As the early Habermas insists, our will to reason is "a will to emancipation":[19]

> I mean the experience of the emancipatory power of reflection, which the subject experiences in itself to the extent that it becomes transparent to itself in the history of its genesis. The experience of reflection articulates itself substantially in the concept of a self-formative process. Methodically it leads to a standpoint from which the identity of reason with the will to reason freely arises. In self-reflection, knowledge for the sake of knowledge comes to coincide with the interest in autonomy and responsibility (*Mündigkeit*). For the pursuit of reflection knows itself as a movement of emancipation. Reason is at the same time subject to the interest in reason. We can say that it obeys an *emancipatory cognitive interest*, which aims at the pursuit of reflection.[20]

In other words, our emancipatory cognitive interest in critical reflection is not a mere fantasy; far from representing a fictitious element of an ideological imaginary, our interest in liberation through reflection manifests itself in the emancipatory nature of human reason. "Indeed, the category of cognitive interest is authenticated only by the interest innate in reason. The technical and practical cognitive interests can be comprehended unambiguously as knowledge-constitutive interests only in connection with the emancipatory cognitive interest of rational

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17 See F. W. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. W. A. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), and M. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* (edited by C. Gordon, translated by C. Gordon [et al.], Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980).

18 See Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, and Habermas, *On the Pragmatics of Social Interaction: Preliminary Studies in the Theory of Communicative Action* (esp. pp. 85-103).

19 Habermas, 'Reason and Interest: Retrospect on Kant and Fichte', p. 205.

20 Ibid., pp. 197-198 (italics in original).

reflection."[21] Our technical cognitive interest in *controlling* our natural environment and our practical cognitive interest in *communicating* with our social environment cannot be divorced from our emancipatory cognitive interest in *self-realising* ourselves through our natural and social environment. Our will to exercise control *over* the world and our will to communicate *with* the world are embedded in our will to emancipate ourselves *through* the world.

To be sure, the tripartite typology of our knowledge-constitutive interests is indicative of the cognitive complexity of human ontology: as purposive, communicative, and contemplative entities, we are oriented towards instrumentality, intersubjectivity, and reflexivity. The self-formative nature of human existence is based on the purposive, communicative, and contemplative potentials of human reason. Given the teleological (*zielorientiert*), societal (*gesellschaftsorientiert*), and thoughtful (*gedankenorientiert*) nature of our immersion in the world, we need to face up to the inevitable interest-ladenness of our existence. "It is in accomplishing self-reflection that reason grasps itself as interested"[22], and it is the task of critical theory to uncover the interest-laden constitution of rational entities. We are oriented towards instrumentality, intersubjectivity, and reflexivity because we have an interest in the preservation of humanity, the construction of society, and the formation of autonomy.

IV.

The early Habermasian view that our immersion in life is permeated by an "[o]rientation toward technical control, toward mutual understanding in the conduct of life, and toward emancipation from seemingly "natural" constraint"[23] is based on five anthropological assumptions.

The first presupposition is that "*[t]he achievements of the transcendental subject have their basis in the natural history of the human species*"[24]. Thus, far from regarding the transcendental subject as a supernatural force placed outside history, the human species is to be

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21 Ibid, p. 198.
22 Ibid., p. 212 (italics removed from the entire sentence).
23 Habermas, 'Knowledge and Human Interests: A General Perspective', p. 311.
24 Ibid., p. 312 (italics in original).

conceived of as a collective actor situated within the horizon of worldly immanence. In other words, 'transcendental' means not 'above' or 'outside' the world but *necessarily* 'within' and 'through' the world. The history of the transcendental subject is the history of a worldly subject compelled to come to terms with the conditions of its own natural constitution.

The second hypothesis is that "*knowledge equally serves as an instrument and transcends mere self*-preservation"[25]. Instead of falling into the naturalistic fallacy of reducing the production of human knowledge to a mere manifestation of our purposive immersion in the world, here our cognitive relation to the world is also understood in terms of its normative and reflexive dimensions. As subjects capable of cognition and action we are oriented not only towards self-preservation but also towards communication and reflection. The tripartite constitution of our knowledge-guiding interests emanates from our purposive, communicative, and reflective capacities as a species. Given our communicative capacity to develop codes of normativity and our emancipatory capacity to contemplate ourselves through the exercise of self-reflexivity, knowledge must not be reduced to an expression of our teleological capacity to convert the world into a purpose-driven universe of instrumentality. For "the three knowledge-constitutive interests […] derive both from nature and *from the cultural break* with nature. Along with the tendency to realize natural drives they have incorporated the tendency toward release from the constraint of nature."[26] Not only do we aim to preserve our life as a species, but we also seek to create "the good life"[27] for ourselves as a species.

The third contention is that "*knowledge-constitutive interests take form in the medium of work, language, and power*"[28]. Rather than relegating our knowledge-constitutive interests to the scholastic sphere of philosophical abstraction, the point is to recognise that they are anchored in ubiquitous forces of human reality: work, language, and power. Our technical cognitive interest in controlling the world is expressed in the *purposive* force of labour; our practical cognitive interest in communicating with the world is represented in the *intersubjective* force

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25 Ibid., p. 313 (italics in original).
26 Ibid., p. 312 (italics in original).
27 Ibid., p. 313 (italics removed).
28 Ibid. (italics in original).

of language; and our emancipatory cognitive interest in realising ourselves in the world is challenged by the *performative* force of power. These three existential orientations – which are indicative of the cross-cultural validity of the motivational driving forces of human cognition – "originate in the interest structure of a species that is linked in its roots to definite means of social organization"[29]. To the extent that the production of knowledge is intimately interrelated with the production of human life, our knowledge-constitutive interests (*erkenntnisleitende Interessen*) reflect life-constitutive interests (*lebensleitende Interessen*) of the human species. Only if we account for the fact that we are a purposive, communicative, and reflective species can we comprehend that our knowledge cannot be dissociated from work, language, and power.

The fourth assertion is that "*in the power of self-reflection, knowledge and interest are one*"[30]. The distinctively human exercise of self-reflection is endowed with an emblematic status because it illustrates that we can be existentially closest to ourselves when reflectively most distanced from ourselves. Distancing ourselves from ourselves contemplatively allows us to approximate ourselves to ourselves responsibly. The power of reflexivity is closely tied to the power of linguisticality: speaking about the world we are capable of reflecting upon the world. The self-understanding (*Selbstverständnis*) of every subject is inconceivable without mutual understanding (*Verständigung*). Just as there is no reason (*Verstand*) without communication (*Verständigung*), there is no communication (*Verständigung*) without comprehension (*Verständnis*). It is through language that, in a collective effort of humanisation, we have learned to reflect upon ourselves by reflecting with and through others. "The human interest in autonomy and responsibility is not mere fancy, for it can be apprehended a priori. What raises us out of nature is the only thing whose nature we can know: *language*. Through its structure, autonomy and responsibility are posited for us. Our first sentence expresses unequivocally the intention of universal and unconstrained consensus."[31] Our orientation towards reaching understanding (*Verständigung*) anticipates our orientation towards agreement (*Einverständnis*), for subjects capable of mutual understanding are also, at least in principle, capable of mutual agreement. Understanding implies

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29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., p. 314 (italics in original).
31 Ibid. (italics in original).

the will to understanding; agreement presupposes the will to agreement; and "[r]eason also means the will to reason. In self-reflection knowledge for the sake of knowledge attains congruence with the interest in autonomy and responsibility. The emancipatory cognitive interest aims at the pursuit of reflection as such."[32] As children of humanity we are carriers of communicative reflexivity.

The fifth, and final, thesis is that "*the unity of knowledge and interest proves itself in a dialectic that takes the historical traces of suppressed dialogue and reconstructs what has been suppressed*"[33]. If knowledge is articulated through human language and if knowledge is a carrier of human interests, then our linguistic relation to the world is impregnated with the interest-laden nature of human life. The ideal nature of an emancipatory social formation is anticipated by the ideal nature of emancipatory communication. "However, only in an emancipated society, whose members' autonomy and responsibility had been realized, would communication have developed into the non-authoritarian and universally practical dialogue from which both our model of reciprocally constituted ego identity and our idea of true consensus are always implicitly derived. To this extent the truth of statements is based on anticipating the realization of the good life. […] [T]he autonomy and responsibility posited with the structure of language are not only anticipated but real."[34] In the long run, "the path to unconstrained communication"[35] is doomed to failure without the path to an unconstrained society. The understanding-oriented nature of linguisticality, which endows us with a sense of both autonomy and responsibility, is rooted in the understanding-oriented nature of society: our capacity to talk with one another emanates from our need to live with one another. A society without dialogue is just as absurd as a dialogue without society. It is from mouth to mouth that we have converted the performative capacity of our *Mund* into the normative capacity of *Mündigkeit*. Our reliance upon mutual intelligibility has led us to develop a sense of social responsibility.

Taken together, the five theses outlined above lay the presuppositional foundation for Habermas's communication-theoretic conception of the human subject. In other words, a subject capable of speech and action is

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32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., p. 315 (italics in original).
34 Ibid., p. 314.
35 Ibid., p. 315.

(i) a transcendental subject, (ii) a cultural subject, (iii) a cognitional subject, (iv) a moral subject, and (v) a dialogical subject. (i) As a *transcendental* subject, the human species is a collective historical actor spatiotemporally situated in the world. (ii) As a *cultural* subject, the human species elevates itself above nature and places itself within society, transcending the drive for self-preservation through the urge for self-realisation. (iii) As a *cognitional* subject, the human species is capable of mobilising its purposive, linguistic, and reflective capacities to determine the course of history. (iv) As a *moral* subject, the human species is able to develop a sense of autonomy and responsibility through the communicative force of consensual intelligibility. (v) As a *dialogical* subject, the human species is equipped with the communicative ability to attribute meaning to the world by virtue of the quotidian exercise of mutual understanding. These five anthropological features are fundamental characteristics of all subjects capable of speech and action.

V.

Every subject capable of forming real speech acts is also capable of constructing ideal speech situations. If we recognise that "the formal qualities of ideal speech situations"[36] are "those structural elements of communication which make reasoning possible"[37], we can comprehend that the idealising presuppositions of speech acts represent constitutive elements of ordinary language, rather than hypothetical conditions of scholastic thought experiments. In other words, the ideal speech situation is *presupposed* by linguistic communication, since the latter always already contains the structural characteristics of the former. Thus, the ideal speech situation is implicitly present every time subjects capable of speech and action engage in the linguistic exercise of reasoning. To assume that "the *emancipatory interest in knowledge* has a derivative status"[38] means to suppose that both the technical interest in shaping the physical world and the practical interest in communicating with the social world are inextricably linked to the emancipatory interest in reflecting upon the world. As self-formative beings, we are able to get rid of

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36 Habermas, 'A Postscript to *Knowledge and Human Interests*', p. 362.
37 Ibid., pp. 362-363.
38 Ibid., p. 371 (italics in original).

unnecessary constraints and create the social conditions of a 'good life'. In this sense, the possibility of the ideal *speech* situation hints at the possibility of an ideal *life* situation, that is, at the viability of a society whose development depends on people's deliberative capacities.

To be sure, communicative deliberation is preponderant over communicative distortion: "the structure of distorted communication is not ultimate; it has its basis in the logic of undistorted language communication."[39] Put differently, distorted forms of communication are always parasitic upon undistorted forms of communication. For if, following Habermas, we accept that communicative action is oriented towards reaching understanding, then distorted forms of communication can diverge from, but not undermine, the foundational status of undistorted forms of communication. The point is not to put forward the somewhat idealistic view that the ideal speech situation is the prototype of ordinary communication. Rather, the point is to acknowledge that even in distorted forms of communication, which substantially deviate from ideal speech scenarios, we need to presuppose the conditions of an ideal speech situation in order to allow for the very possibility of linguistic communication. Our linguistic orientation towards intelligibility constitutes the existential ground for our normative orientation towards responsibility.

> In a certain way, mature autonomy [*Mündigkeit*] is the sole idea which we have at our disposal in the sense of the philosophical tradition […] for in every speech act the *telos* of reaching an understanding [*Verständigung*] is already inherent. "With the very first sentence the intention of a general and voluntary consensus is unmistakably enunciated." […] Wittgenstein has remarked that the concept of reaching an understanding lies in the concept of language. We can only say in a self-explicative sense that language communication 'serves' this reaching of an understanding. Every understanding reached is confirmed in a reasonable consensus, as we say; otherwise it does not represent a 'real' understanding. Competent orators know that every consensus attained can in fact be deceptive; but they must

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39 J. Habermas, 'Introduction: Some Difficulties in the Attempt to Link Theory and Praxis', in his *Theory and Practice*, trans. J. Viertel (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988 [1971]), pp. 1-40, here p. 17.

always have been in possession of the prior concept of the rational consensus underlying the concept of a deceptive (or merely compulsory) consensus. Reaching an understanding is a normative concept; everyone who speaks a natural language has intuitive knowledge of it and therefore is confident of being able, in principle, to distinguish a true consensus from a false one.[40]

In other words, the difference between a *true consensus* and a *false consensus* lies at the heart of the distinction between *undistorted communication* and *distorted communication*. Every subject capable of speech and action knows that an attained consensus can be true on the surface and false in reality. A consensus which is forced upon people without taking into account the opinions and necessities of everybody affected can hardly claim to be a true form of agreement. By contrast, a consensus which has been reached by people who succeed in considering the opinions and necessities of every member concerned can indeed assert to be a genuine form of agreement. The concept of the ideal speech situation, then, captures what is always already real: the orientation towards understanding and agreement inherent in ordinary language.

The Habermasian notion of the ideal speech situation is intimately tied to the idea that speech acts are oriented towards reaching understanding, for it epitomises the understanding-oriented *Gesellschaftlichkeit*[41] which is built into the *Sprachlichkeit*[42] of human existence. The utopian moment of human existence is not simply a mental fantasy, but it is built into the very structure of language, since, following Habermas, "in every discourse we are mutually required to presuppose an ideal speech situation"[43]. In the ideal speech situation "communication is impeded neither by external contingent forces nor, more importantly, by constraints arising from the structure of communication itself. The ideal speech situation excludes systematic distortion of communication."[44] To be more precise, the thesis that the ideal speech situation constitutes a

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40 Ibid. (italics in original).

41 Literal translation from German into English: 'sociability'.

42 Literal translation from German into English: 'linguisticality'.

43 Habermas, *On the Pragmatics of Social Interaction: Preliminary Studies in the Theory of Communicative Action*, p. 97.

44 Ibid.

necessary presupposition of communication is based on the following six key assumptions:

(i)   the understanding-oriented nature of communication allows us to come to an intersubjectively established *agreement*;

(ii) we can distinguish between a *genuine* and a *deceptive* agreement;

(iii) in order to guarantee that an agreement is genuine, we need to rely on the *unforced force of the better argument*;

(iv) genuine agreement can only be claimed to exist as long as communication is *not* obstructed by *internal or external constraints*;

(v)   communication that is genuinely free from internal and external constraints presupposes the *symmetrical distribution of chances* to select and employ constative, regulative, expressive, and communicative speech acts; and

(vi) only a situation in which this symmetrical distribution of chances is guaranteed can be called an *ideal speech situation*.[45]

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45 Cf. J. B. Thompson, 'Universal Pragmatics', in J. B. Thompson and D. Held, eds., *Habermas: Critical Debates* (London: Macmillan 1982), pp. 116-133, here p. 128. It should be noted, however, that Habermas dissociates himself from the term 'ideal speech situation' in his later works in order to avoid an 'essentialist misunderstanding', as he calls it. According to this misunderstanding, the 'ideal' or 'transcendental' presuppositions of every speech act are located outside, rather than within, the world. Yet, Habermas makes it clear that the 'ideal' or 'transcendental' presuppositions inherent in ordinary speech are always world-embedded (*weltimmanent*). – See J. Habermas, 'The Sociological Translation of the Concept of Deliberative Politics', in his *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. W. Rehg (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996 [1992]), pp. 315-328, here p. 323: "The counterfactual presuppositions assumed by participants in argumentation indeed open up a perspective allowing them to go beyond local practices of justification and to transcend the provinciality of their spatiotemporal contexts that are inescapable in action and experience. This perspective thus enables them to do justice to the meaning of *context-transcending* validity claims. But with context-transcending validity claims, they are not themselves transported into the beyond of an ideal realm of noumenal beings. [...] This thought experiment [of the ideal communication community] [...] refers to concrete societies that are situated in space and time and already differentiated." (Italics in original.)

In short, the ideal speech situation is an intersubjectively created communicative space that allows the speakers to reach an agreement by virtue of the force of the better argument, without this communicative force being hindered by internal or external constraints, and with a symmetrical distribution of chances to choose and utter speech acts.

On the whole, the concept of the ideal speech situation has five main macrotheoretical implications for Habermas's account of the social. First, it locates the emancipatory potential of the social in the subject's

On the Habermasian notion of the 'ideal speech situation', see also, for example: J. Habermas, 'Dogmatism, Reason, and Decision: On Theory and Praxis in Our Scientific Civilization', in his *Theory and Practice*, (1988 [1963]), pp. 253-282, here pp. 279 and 281; J. Habermas, 'Towards a Theory of Communicative Competence', *Inquiry* 13(4), (1970), pp. 360-375, here pp. 367 and 371-374; J. Habermas, 'Introduction: Some Difficulties in the Attempt to Link Theory and Praxis', p. 17; *TCA I*, p. 42; J. Habermas, 'Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Philosophical Justification', in his *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. C. Lenhardt and S. Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990 [1983]), pp. 43-115, here pp. 86-94; Habermas, *On the Pragmatics of Social Interaction: Preliminary Studies in the Theory of Communicative Action*, pp. 85-86, 93, 97-99, and 102-103; J. Habermas, 'An Alternative Way out of the Philosophy of the Subject: Communicative versus Subject-Centered Reason', in his *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. F. Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987 [1985]), pp. 294-326, here p. 323; J. Habermas, 'Morality, Society, and Ethics: An Interview with Torben Hviid Nielsen', in his *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics*, trans. C. Cronin (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993 [1990]), pp. 147-176, here pp. 163-165; J. Habermas, 'Remarks on Discourse Ethics', in his *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics*, (1993 [1991]), pp. 19-111, here pp. 54-57; Habermas, 'The Sociological Translation of the Concept of Deliberative Politics', pp. 322-323; J. Habermas, 'Reconciliation through the Public Use of Reason: Remarks on John Rawls's Political Liberalism', *Journal of Philosophy* 92(3), (1995), pp. 109-131, here p. 117; J. Habermas, *Kommunikatives Handeln und detranszendentalisierte Vernunft* (Stuttgart: Reclam, Ditzingen, 2001), pp. 7-8, 10-13, 23, 29, 37, 42, 45-47, 52, and 83-84; and J. Habermas, 'Freiheit und Determinismus', *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 52(6), (2004), pp. 871-890, here p. 875.

In the secondary literature see, for example: Apel, 'Is the Ethics of the Ideal Communication Community a Utopia? On the Relationship between Ethics, Utopia, and the Critique of Utopia', esp. pp. 24-25, 33-35, and 42-51; Benhabib, 'Afterword: Communicative Ethics and Contemporary Controversies in Practical Philosophy', pp. 330-331 and 343-345; Bernstein, *Recovering Ethical Life: Jürgen Habermas and the Future of Critical Theory*, pp. 47-57; Böhler, 'Transcendental Pragmatics and Critical Morality: On the Possibility and Moral Significance of a

discursive capacity (*discursive power*). Second, it suggests that utopia is unavoidably anticipated in every communicative speech act (*anticipatory power*). Third, it detranscendentalises the notion of counterfactuality insofar as it attributes an emancipatory status to the necessary presuppositions inherent in ordinary language (*ordinary power*). Fourth, it regards the "counterfactual conditions of the ideal speech situation [...] as necessary conditions of an emancipated form of life"[46] (*foundational*

Self-Enlightenment of Reason', esp. pp. 114, 132-133, and 136; M. Cooke, 'Habermas and Consensus', *European Journal of Philosophy* 1(3), (1993), pp. 247-267, here p. 253; Cooke, *Language and Reason: A Study of Habermas's Pragmatics*, pp. 31, 172n.8, and 172-173n.9; M. Cooke, 'Are Ethical Conflicts Irreconcilable?', *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 23(2), (1997), pp. 1-19, here pp. 9-13; M. Cooke, 'Redeeming Redemption: The Utopian Dimension of Critical Social Theory', *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 30(4), (2004), pp. 413-429; N. Davey, 'Habermas' Contribution to Hermeneutic Theory', *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 16(2), (1985), pp. 109-131, here pp. 113-114 and 120; Factor and Turner, 'The Critique of Positivist Social Science in Leo Strauss and Jürgen Habermas', pp. 194, 196, and 201-202; A. Ferrara, 'A Critique of Habermas' Consensus Theory of Truth', *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 13, (1987), pp. 39-67, here pp. 44-45; Fultner, 'Translator's Introduction', pp. xv-xvi; F. I. Gamwell, 'Habermas and Apel on Communicative Ethics: Their Difference and the Difference it Makes', *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 23(2), (1997), pp. 21-45, here p. 37; Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School*, pp. 65-75; K. Günther, 'Communicative Freedom, Communicative Power, and Jurisgenesis', in Rosenfeld and Arato, eds., *Habermas on Law and Democracy: Critical Exchanges*, pp. 234-254, esp. pp. 235-236; R. J. Kilby, 'Critical Thinking, Epistemic Virtue, and the Significance of Inclusion: Reflections on Harvey Siegel's Theory of Rationality', *Educational Theory* 54(3), (2004), pp. 299-313, here p. 308; L. Koczanowicz, 'The Choice of Tradition and the Tradition of Choice: Habermas' and Rorty's interpretation of Pragmatism', *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 25(1), (1999), pp. 55-70, here p. 57; Matustik, 'Habermas on Communicative Reason and Performative Contradiction', pp. 159 and 166-167; T. McCarthy, 'A Theory of Communicative Competence', *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 3(2), (1973), pp. 135-156, pp. 145-148; J. Mendelson, 'The Habermas-Gadamer Debate', *New German Critique* 18, (1979), pp. 44-73, here pp. 71-73; P. Milley, 'Imagining Good Organizations: Moral Orders or Moral Communities?', *Educational Management Administration and Leadership* 30(1), (2002), pp. 47-64, here p. 58; G. R. Mitchell, 'Did Habermas Cede Nature to the Positivists?', *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 36(1), (2003), pp. 1-21, here p. 7; Ray, 'Pragmatism and

power). Fifth, it serves as a yardstick for the critical analysis of systematically distorted communication (*normative power*).

Thus, the notion of the ideal speech situation allows us to understand Habermas's conception of emancipation in terms of five forms of power. (1) *Discursive power*: If the emancipatory potential of the social is to be located in the subject's discursive capacity, then our ability to shape the development of society by virtue of critical reasoning is an indispensable feature of human emancipation. (2) *Anticipatory power*: If utopia is unavoidably anticipated in every communicative speech act, then there remains an emancipatory element even in the most repressive forms of society, no matter how systematically distorted or structurally deformed communication may be in a particular socio-historical context. (3) *Ordinary power*: If the concept of the ideal speech situation detranscendentalises the notion of counterfactuality by attributing an emancipatory status to the necessary presuppositions inherent in ordinary language, then every subject capable of speech and action – regardless of its social status and linguistic capital – is equipped with the dispositional tools to contribute to the consolidation of a consensually constructed society. (4) *Foundational power*: If the counterfactual conditions of the ideal speech situation can be considered as constitutive elements of an emancipated form of life, then the possibility of a society beyond domination depends on the reality of sociality through communication. (5) *Normative power*: If the concept of the ideal speech situation serves as a yardstick for the critical analysis of systematically distorted communication, then the reality of social domination can be measured against the possibility of ideal communication.

VI.

As a normative yardstick, the ideal speech situation is crucial to Habermas's communication-theoretic critique of power, for we can only recognise the factual distortion of language if we are able to identify the necessary conditions of its counterfactual non-distortion.

Critical Theory', pp. 309 and 315-317; and Trautsch, 'Glauben und Wissen. Jürgen Habermas zum Verhältnis von Philosophie und Religion', p. 183.

46 Habermas, *On the Pragmatics of Social Interaction: Preliminary Studies in the Theory of Communicative Action*, p. 99.

[…] communication can be systematically distorted only if the internal organization of speech is disrupted. This happens if the validity basis of linguistic communication is curtailed *surreptitiously*; that is, without leading to a break in communication or to the transition to openly declared and permissible strategic action. The validity basis of speech is curtailed surreptitiously if at least one of the three universal validity claims […] is violated and communication nonetheless continues on the presumption of *communicative* (not strategic) action oriented toward reaching mutual understanding.[47]

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47 Ibid., pp. 154-155 (italics in original).

On the Habermasian concept of 'systematically distorted communication', see also, for example: Habermas, 'Towards a Theory of Communicative Competence', p. 374; Habermas, 'Introduction: Some Difficulties in the Attempt to Link Theory and Praxis', pp. 16 and 24; *TCA I*, pp. 332-333; *TCA II*, pp. 134, 141-143, and 148; Habermas, *On the Pragmatics of Social Interaction: Preliminary Studies in the Theory of Communicative Action*, pp. 99 and 129-170; and Habermas, 'Nach dreißig Jahren: Bemerkungen zu *Erkenntnis und Interesse*', pp. 15-18.

In the secondary literature see, for example: A. Abbas and M. McLean, 'Communicative Competence and the Improvement of University Teaching: Insights from the Field', *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 24(1), (2003), pp. 69-81, here p. 71; Bernstein, *Recovering Ethical Life: Jürgen Habermas and the Future of Critical Theory*, pp. 44-47; Bohman, 'Formal Pragmatics and Social Criticism: The Philosophy of Language and the Critique of Ideology in Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action', esp. pp. 332-333 and 336-344; J. Bohman, 'Distorted Communication: Formal Pragmatics as a Critical Theory', in L. E. Hahn, ed., *Perspectives on Habermas* (Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 2000), pp. 3-20; Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, p. 35; Crossley, 'On Systematically Distorted Communication: Bourdieu and the Socio-Analysis of Publics', esp. pp. 88-89 and 109; Edgar, *The Philosophy of Habermas*, pp. 153-157; Fultner, 'Translator's Introduction', pp. xx-xxi; C. B. Grant, 'Rethinking Communicative Interaction: An Interdisciplinary Programme', in C. B. Grant, ed., *Rethinking Communicative Interaction: New Interdisciplinary Horizons* (Amsterdam: J. Benjamins, 2003), pp. 1-26, here p. 14; M. Hesse, 'Habermas' Consensus Theory of Truth', in her *Revolutions and Reconstructions in the Philosophy of Science* (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1980), pp. 206-231, here p. 215; J. Kilby, 'Critical Thinking, Epistemic Virtue, and the Significance of Inclusion: Reflections on Harvey Siegel's Theory of Rationality', p. 308; Mitchell, 'Did Habermas Cede Nature to the Positivists?', p. 8; Müller-Doohm, 'Kritik in kritischen Theorien.

Systematically distorted communication can be regarded as the *antithesis* of the *ideal speech situation*, for the former covertly violates the presuppositions of the latter. The power of linguistic validity is always also the power of discursive transparency: what is communicatively valid can be discursively questioned. The power of systematic distortedness is always also the power of deceptive secretiveness: what is strategically distorted can be deceptively concealed. Whenever the endogenous validity of ordinary speech is surreptitiously encroached upon by the exogenous instrumentality of strategic force, the power of discourse is undermined by the power of deception. The more we are caught up in distortive deceptiveness, the more powerful is the secretive potential of strategic action; the more we engage in argumentative discursiveness, the more powerful is the emancipatory potential of communicative action.

Since the systematicity of distortive instrumentality is always parasitically dependent upon the ubiquity of communicative validity, the projection of the merely strategic community goes against the structure of language, whereas the "projection of the unlimited communication community is backed up by the structure of language itself."[48] Therefore, the concept of the ideal speech situation serves both as a detour and as a shortcut: as a detour, it idealises the structural conditions under which an emancipatory society *could* be realised; as a shortcut, it directly recognises that these conditions are *always already* existent in ordinary language. Reciprocal recognition articulated through language is the recognition of the other not only as a conversational interlocutor

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Oder: Wie kritisches Denken selber zu rechtfertigen sei', pp. 88 and 92-94; F. Poupeau, 'Reasons for Domination, Bourdieu versus Habermas', in B. Fowler, ed., *Reading Bourdieu on Society and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell/Sociological Review, 2000), pp. 69-87, esp. p. 73; Pusey, *Jürgen Habermas*, pp. 69-75; Y. Sintomer, 'Bourdieu et Habermas', in his *La démocratie impossible ? Politique et modernité chez Weber et Habermas* (Paris: La Découverte & Syros, 1999), pp. 158-162; U. Steinhoff, *Kritik der kommunikativen Rationalität: Eine Gesamtdarstellung und Analyse der kommunikationstheoretischen jüngeren Kritischen Theorie* (Marsberg: Die Deutsche Bibliothek, 2001), pp. 333-343; and Thompson, *Critical Hermeneutics: A Study in the Thought of Paul Ricoeur and Jürgen Habermas*, pp. 94-95.

48 J. Habermas, 'Individuation through Socialization: On George Herbert Mead's Theory of Subjectivity', in his *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays*, trans. W. M. Hohengarten (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992 [1988]), pp. 149-204, here p. 188.

(*Gesprächspartner*), but also as an existential interlocutor (*Lebenspartner*). The ideal of an "unlimited communication community"[49] (*Kommunikationsgemeinschaft*) is the ideal of an "unlimited life community" (*Lebensgemeinschaft*). In the long term, human existence is only conceivable in terms of consensus-oriented coexistence.

Systematically distorted communication is the antinomy of the ideal speech situation, for the disempowering features of the former violate the empowering aspects of the latter: under the condition of systematically distorted communication, agreements can only be deceptive; under the condition of the ideal speech situation, by contrast, agreements can only be genuine.

In analogy to the notion of the ideal speech situation, the concept of systematically distorted communication has five main macrotheoretical implications for Habermas's conception of the social. First, it locates the repressive potential of the social in the distortive capacity of strategic action and systemic imperatives (*distortive power*). Second, it implies that domination is, however subtly, reinforced in every systematically distorted speech act (*reproductive power*). Third, it linguistifies the notion of domination insofar as it ascribes sociological significance to the distortive use of language (*performative power*). Fourth, it conceives of systematically distorted communication as a parasitic deformation of understanding-oriented action (*parasitic power*). Fifth, it serves as a yardstick for the critical analysis of the ideal speech situation (*normative power*).

Just as the concept of the ideal speech situation is central to Habermas's conception of social emancipation, the concept of systematically distorted communication is fundamental to his notion of social domination. The significance of systematically distorted communication for Habermas's communication-theoretic account of the social is reflected in its multifaceted power. (1) *Distortive power*: If the repressive potential of the social is to be located in the distortive potential of strategic action and systemic imperatives, then our capacity to shape the development of society in accordance with strategic calculations and systemic necessities is a constitutive element of human domination. (2)

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49 Ibid., pp. 184 and 188. See also M. Cooke, 'Habermas, Autonomy and the Identity of the Self', *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 18(3/4), (1992), pp. 269-291, here pp. 273-275.

Reproductive power: If domination is necessarily reinforced in every systematically distorted speech act, then there remains a repressive element even in seemingly insignificantly distorted forms of communication, no matter how equally distributed and deliberatively structured communication may be in a particular socio-historical context. (3) *Performative power*: If the concept of systematically distorted communication linguistifies the notion of domination by ascribing sociological significance to the distortive use of language, then every subject capable of speech and action – regardless of its social status and linguistic capital – is equipped with the dispositional tools to contribute to the proliferation of a systematically distorted society. (4) *Parasitic power*: If the deceptive nature of systematically distorted communication can be considered as a parasitic deformation of understanding-oriented action, then the corrosive force of strategic action remains dependent on the coordinative power of communicative action. (5) *Normative power*: If the concept of systematically distorted communication serves as a yardstick for the critical analysis of the ideal speech situation, then the disempowering effects of social domination can only be understood in relation to the empowering characteristics of social emancipation.

VII.

The problem of systematically distorted communication obliges us to reflect upon the difference between communicative action and strategic action, that is, upon the competing relationship between two forms of human action which are fundamental to the construction of social order. To be more precise, "communication pathologies can be conceived of as the result of a *confusion* between actions oriented to reaching understanding and actions oriented to success"[50]. Undistorted communication occurs whenever all parties involved in the communication process are, at least in principle, aware of the nature of their interaction. Thus, strategic action is not a source of systematically distorted communication *per se*; it is only a source of distortion if at least one party engages in strategically motivated interaction on the presumption that the encounter is primarily communicative, rather than strategic. If "one of the parties is deceiving himself about the fact that he

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50 *TCA I*, p. 332 (italics added).

is acting with an attitude oriented to success and is only keeping up the appearance of communicative action"[51], it is appropriate to characterise his action as systematically distorted. Hence, *deception* is a constitutive component of systematically distorted communication. It is not *open* strategic action but *concealed* strategic action which is the breeding ground for distorted forms of social interaction, for it is the deceptive force of a distortedly deformed unconscious which can undermine the transparent force of our communicatively constructed consciousness.

Distortive deceptions can be located on various presuppositional levels of communicative interactions. "The strongest cases of systematic distortions are those in which the speaking subjects themselves are unaware of their violation of communicative presuppositions, such as when a competent speaker expresses herself unintelligibly without realizing it, when one spouse deceives herself about her feelings for the other, or when a speaker thinks she is acting in accordance with social norms but is actually violating them."[52] In other words, systematically distorted communication undermines the (i) assertive, (ii) normative, (iii) expressive, and (iv) communicative presuppositions of speech acts. (i) The assertive nature of language allows us to assume that a speech act is true. (ii) The normative nature of language permits us to suppose that a speech act is right. (iii) The expressive nature of language makes us believe that a speech act is sincere. And (iv) the communicative nature of language enables us to ensure that a speech act is intelligible. In cases of systematically distorted communication, however, the presuppositions of ordinary speech are violated. We are not aware of the violation of communicative presuppositions (i) when we consider something to be true even if it is actually false, (ii) when we assume that we obey specific social norms although we are in fact undermining them, (iii) when we deceive ourselves – consciously or unconsciously – about the truthfulness of our utterances, or (iv) when we express ourselves incomprehensibly but do not notice that we are doing so.

In all four cases, actors are at the same time protagonists and victims of communicative deception. The power of distorted communication derives from its capacity to deceive the deceivers themselves. Indeed, there is no stronger form of deception than self-deception. Every *subject capable of speech and action* is not only a *subject capable of speech and*

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51 Ibid.
52 Fultner, 'Translator's Introduction', p. xxi.

reflection but also a *subject capable of speech and deception*. If we were unable to violate the presuppositions of ordinary speech acts, it would be pointless to explore the sociological value of functional, as opposed to dysfunctional, communication processes. Empowering forms of intelligibility are a *sine qua non* for empowering forms of society. To regard the critique of systematically distorted communication as a critique of systematically distorted socialisation means to appreciate the significance of understanding-oriented forms of agency for the very possibility of a responsibly regulated society. Just as we cannot do without mutual understanding, we cannot do without at least a minimal degree of truth, rightness, sincerity, and intelligibility. To acknowledge the parasitic status of systematically distorted communication means to recognise that human interactions based on deception cannot generate sustainable forms of social organisation.

Conclusion

(I) If critical theory is truly committed to the transformation of society, it needs to provide a normative framework able to distinguish between the emancipatory and the repressive potentials of human reality. As a species capable of emancipation, we are able to create both individual and collective forms of empowerment. As a species capable of domination, we are able to generate both individual and collective forms of disempowerment. To be sure, it is far from clear what the species-constitutive features of humanity are; it *is* clear, however, that their significance for the construction of social existence needs to be explored if we aim to understand the unique resources of the human world. Inasmuch as the realisation of our species-specific potentials is a source of self-actualisation, the repression of these potentials is a source of self-alienation.

(II) From a Habermasian point of view, the constitution of power relations is inextricably linked to the constitution of communicative relations. The more a given society succeeds in enhancing its members' *deliberative* power, the more it contributes to the creation of autonomous social relations. The more a given society is shaped by its *systemic* power, the more it is characterised by the creation of heteronomous social

relations. According to the Habermasian architecture of the social, then, the communicative nature of the lifeworld is diametrically opposed to the instrumental nature of the system: whereas the former allows for the normative regulation of society based on subjects' communicative autonomy, the latter leads to the gradual colonisation of society resulting in subjects' structural heteronomy. Insofar as the lifeworld permits us to engage in the quotidian exercise of communicative action and thereby develop a sense of locality, solidarity, and identity, it constitutes the cornerstone of social emancipation. Insofar as the system compels us to function in accordance with the colonising principle of instrumentality, it represents a major source of social domination.

(III) Knowledge and human interests cannot be separated from one another because they depend on one another: just as the production of knowledge is necessarily interest-laden, human interests are pursued through the construction of knowledge. Our technical cognitive interest in *controllability*, our practical cognitive interest in *comprehensibility*, and our emancipatory cognitive interest in *criticisability* are indicative of our existential interest in the collective construction of humanity. Our technical orientation towards instrumentality permits us to preserve ourselves as a *purposive* species, our practical orientation towards intersubjectivity allows us to coordinate our lives as a *communicative* species, and our emancipatory orientation towards reflexivity equips us with the capacity to liberate ourselves as a *contemplative* species. As controlling entities, we act *upon* the world (*Weltbearbeitung*); as comprehending entities, we act *with* the world (*Weltverarbeitung*); and, as critical entities, we act *beyond* the world (*Welterarbeitung*). Our will to control, comprehend, and critique the world cannot be divorced from our will to reason: we have developed the *teleological capacity* to act upon the world by virtue of *purposive reason*; we have acquired the *social capacity* to act with the world by virtue of *communicative reason*; and we have obtained the *critical capacity* to act beyond the world by virtue of *reflective reason*.

(IV) In order to do justice to the self-constitutive nature of the human species, we need to shed light on the anthropological specificity of the human subject. Every entity capable of speech and action is at the same time a (i) transcendental, (ii) cultural, (iii) cognitional, (iv) moral, and (v)

dialogical subject. (i) As a *transcendental* subject, the human species can mobilise its self-formative potentials in order to transform the conditions of its worldly immanence. (ii) As a *cultural* subject, the human species can create a social world beyond the natural world, thereby immersing itself in the distinctiveness of its own existence. (iii) As a *cognitional* subject, the human species can exploit the empowering resources of work, language, and power to embrace the purposive, communicative, and reflective conditions of its own universe. (iv) As a *moral* subject, the human species can convert its own existence into an object of contemplation and develop a sense of autonomy and responsibility. (v) As a *dialogical* subject, the human species can use the power of linguisticality to construct spheres of sociality based on the normative force of mutual intelligibility. In short, a species capable of self-formation is a species capable of self-emancipation.

(V) An emancipatory theory of the human subject needs to identify the emancipatory resources of society in order to account for the emancipatory potentials of humanity. From Habermas's communication-theoretic perspective, the main emancipatory resource of society is communicative action, that is, our rational capacity to reach mutual understanding. As a species capable of speech and action, we have developed our *Verstand* (reason) through the coexistential exercise of *Verständigung* (communication), which is – at least in principle – always oriented towards *Einverständnis* (agreement). Given our existential orientation towards understanding and consensus, the formal qualities of the ideal speech situation are anticipated by the presuppositions of ordinary linguistic communication: only by making an – implicit or explicit – effort to understand one another can we succeed in constructing a coexistential situation which permits us to live with one another. Put differently, the communicational and consensual nature of linguisticality emanates from the coexistential condition of society. In essence, the ideal speech situation constitutes a real speech situation as it forms – always and unavoidably – part of ordinary communicative encounters. The emancipatory nature of ideal speech manifests itself in five levels of power. (1) Its *discursive* power enables the subjects to determine the constitution and evolution of society by virtue of critical reasoning. (2) Its *anticipatory* power is reflected in the fact that even in the most repressive forms of society, which produce systematically distorted forms of

communication, the emancipatory potential of communicative action continues to exist, for no society can possibly do without a minimum of linguistic intelligibility. (3) Its *ordinary* power is due to the fact that, in principle, every subject capable of speech and action – regardless of its social authority and linguistic legitimacy – can participate in the collective realisation of consensual deliberation. (4) Its *foundational* power implies that there are no emancipatory forms of socialisation without emancipatory forms of communication, since empowering frameworks of human coexistence depend on communicative processes of mutual agreement. (5) Its *normative* power suggests that the disempowering situation of social domination can be measured against the empowering condition of ideal communication.

(VI) An emancipatory theory of the human subject needs to uncover the repressive resources of society if it seeks to account for the repressive potentials of humanity. Whilst, according to Habermas, communicative action is the key emancipatory resource of society, the distortion of communicative processes is a crucial indicator of the establishment of human relations which undermine, or even obstruct, the unfolding of the empowering potentials inherent in action oriented towards reaching an understanding. Although, as a species capable of speech and action, we have developed our *Verstand* (reason) through the coexistential exercise of *Verständigung* (communication), our linguistic interactions are not always oriented towards *Verständnis* (understanding) or *Wahrhaftigkeit* (truthfulness) but can also be aimed at *Mißverständnis* (misunderstanding) or *Täuschung* (deceptiveness). The deceptive nature of systematically distorted communication is reflected in its multifaceted power. (1) Its *distortive* power stems from our capacity to shape the development of society in accordance with concealed strategic motives and perpetuated systemic imperatives. (2) Its *reproductive* power confirms the suspicion that the more we engage in the production of systematically distorted communication, the more we contribute to the reproduction of social domination. (3) Its *performative* power demonstrates that every subject capable of speech and action is also capable of speech and deception and, therefore, able to generate distortive forms of communication. (4) Its *parasitic* power is due to its ontological dependence on non-distortive – i.e. understanding-oriented – forms of social action, for the coordinative force of communicative action always

remains preponderant over the corrosive force of systematic distortion. (5) Its *normative* power obliges us to explore the damaging effects of deceptive communication and the pathological consequences of systemic colonisation.

(VII) Whereas Habermas's belief in the necessity and possibility of human emancipation is epitomised in the concept of the ideal speech situation, his analysis of human domination cannot be dissociated from the concept of systematically distorted communication. The former is founded on the understanding-oriented force of communicative action; the latter, by contrast, is symptomatic of the utility-driven force of strategic action. To be sure, it is not *open* but *concealed* strategic action which lies at the heart of systematically distorted communication. Deception is a constitutive component of distortive forms of intelligibility, just as domination is a central element of repressive forms of society. Whenever one of the fundamental validity claims inherent in linguistic communication is surreptitiously violated without an interruption in communication or a transition to overtly pronounced strategic action, the internal organisation of speech is disrupted and the external relation between speakers is distorted. In other words, if the validity basis of speech is secretly curtailed, systematically *organised* communication is replaced by systematically *distorted* communication. A communication-theoretic account of the social which claims to be realistic, rather than idealistic, needs to recognise that subjects capable of speech and action are not only subjects capable of speech and reflection but also subjects capable of speech and deception. Just as our speech acts can be oriented towards truth, rightness, truthfulness, and understanding, they can be oriented towards falsehood, inappropriateness, deceitfulness, and misunderstanding.

The sociological power of communicative action is due to subjects' *coordinative* capacity, which allows for the possibility of a *consensually* regulated society. The sociological power of concealed strategic action is due to subjects' *deceptive* capacity, which allows for the possibility of a *distortedly* steered society. A realistic, rather than idealistic or fatalistic, theory of the social needs to account for both the binding force of communicative action and the misleading force of concealed strategic action if it seeks to understand not only the coordinative and constructive,

but also the deceptive and destructive potentials of the social. Every time we engage in communicative action we presuppose the possibility of an ideal speech situation, which is indicative of the emancipatory power intrinsic to mutual understanding and genuine agreement; and every time we engage in concealed strategic action we reinforce the possibility of systematically distorted communication, which is symptomatic of the repressive power inherent in deception and delusion.

Given the *discursive* power of ideal speech, we are able to discuss and weigh up our thoughts and motives; given the *deceptive* power of distorted speech, we are able to conceal them. Due to the *anticipatory* power of ideal speech, emancipatory life forms are always already present in communicative speech acts; due to the *reproductive* power of distortive speech, repressive life forms are unavoidably perpetuated by deceptive speech acts. Drawing on the *ordinary* power of ideal speech, we can rely on the quotidian ubiquity of mutual comprehension; drawing on the *performative* power of distortive speech, we need to face up to the mundane frequency of mutual deception. In light of the *foundational* power of ideal speech, we need to recognise that emancipatory forms of socialisation presuppose emancipatory forms of communication; in light of the *parasitic* power of distortive speech, we need to acknowledge that the corrosive force of systematic distortion is parasitic upon the coordinative force of communicative action. The *normative* power of ideal speech enables us to appreciate the empowering nature of truthful deliberation; the *normative* power of distortive speech, by contrast, compels us to uncover the damaging effects of deceptive communication. In short, we need to account for both the emancipatory and the repressive potentials of language if we seek to understand both the empowering and the disempowering potentials of the communicative subject.