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Source: *New German Critique*, No. 35, Special Issue on Jurgen Habermas (Spring - Summer, 1985), pp. 83-96

Published by: Duke University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/488201>

Accessed: 16-04-2017 16:56 UTC

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The Utopian Dimension in Communicative Ethics

by Seyla Benhabib

I. In his retrospective on Walter Benjamin, "On the Actuality of Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique," Habermas discusses an issue which for many has seemed to point to a lacuna in his own understanding of moral progress and emancipation: "In the tradition that reaches back to Marx, Benjamin was one of the first to emphasize a *further* moment in the concepts of exploitation and progress: besides hunger and oppression, failure; besides prosperity and liberty, happiness. Benjamin regarded the experience of happiness he named secular illumination as bound up with the rescuing of tradition. The claim to happiness can be made good only if the sources of that semantic potential we need for interpreting the world in the light of our needs are not exhausted."¹ In the semantic heritage of a cultural tradition are contained those images and anticipations of a fulfilled life-history and of a collective life-form in which justice does not exclude solidarity, and freedom is not realized at the expense of happiness. Certainly, Habermas continues, it is not possible to achieve freedom and to realize justice without unleashing (*entbinden*) the hidden potentials of culture. In that sense, the semantic unleashing of culture and the social overcoming of institutional repression are mutually supportive. Yet the suspicion remains whether "an emancipation without happiness and lacking in fulfillment might not be just as possible as relative prosperity without the elimination of repression."²

*This essay is a slightly altered and abbreviated section from my book, *Critique, Norm and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*, forthcoming from Columbia University Press later this fall. It is printed here with the courtesy of Columbia University Press.

1. Habermas, "Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique," in *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, F. Lawrence, trans. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), p. 156. I have modified Lawrence's translation such as to render "Unterdrückung" in this context as "oppression" rather than "repression." Cf. "Bewusstmachende oder rettende Kritik — Die Aktualität Walter Benjamins" (1972), in: Habermas, *Kultur und Kritik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973), p. 340.

2. *Ibid.*

Written a year before the *Legitimation Crisis* (1973) and four years before *The Reconstruction of Historical Materialism* (1976), this essay contained a programmatic anticipation of how Habermas proposed to argue not only against the tradition of counter-Enlightenment (Nietzsche, Spengler, Jünger and Heidegger) but against the messianic utopian strand of critical theory as well — Bloch and Benjamin in particular.³ But these subsequent works have not dissipated the force of the suspicion which has been voiced. Increasingly in recent years, Habermas has pointed to the *limits* of a theory of practical discourse which focuses on freedom while excluding questions of the good life; which concerns the validity of normative sentences (*Sollsätze*) while ignoring the question of the integrity of values (*Werte*), which in short, concerns institutional justice but cannot say much about those qualities of individual life-histories and collective life-forms which make them fulfilling or unfulfilling.⁴

This questioning on Habermas' part is neither a coincidence nor of mere philological interest. It reveals the intimate relation between "transfiguration" and "fulfillment," between the poles of *utopia* and *norm* within which the discourse of a critical social theory unfolds. By "transfiguration" I mean that the future envisaged by a theory entails a radical rupture with the present, and that in such a rupture a new and imaginative constellation of the values and meanings of the present takes place. The concept of fulfillment, by contrast, refers to the fact that the society of the future executes and carries out the unfinished tasks of the present, without necessarily forging new, imaginative constellations out of this cultural heritage. These are concepts which I use to designate an essential tension in the project of critical theory and which can also be referred to as "utopia" and "norm" respectively.

Since Marx's early critique of civil society, the project of emancipation was viewed both as the fulfillment and transfiguration of the existing order. In developing an immanent critique of capitalism, critical Marxism held this social order to its own promises, and required that abundance, the betterment of human life, and an end to exploitation and misery be realized for all, and not only for some. This demand did not call into question the Enlightenment project of combining human freedom and happiness with the scientific-technologically based progress of productive forces. The course of European history after the

3. Joel Whitebook, "Saving the Subject: Modernity and the Problem of the Autonomous Individual," *Telos*, 50 (Winter 1981-82), 81-82.

4. Habermas, "Reply to My Critics," in *Habermas: Critical Debates*, ed. by John B. Thompson and David Held (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982), pp. 166 and 262.

beginning of the 20th century left little hope that the Enlightenment could fulfill its own *promesse du bonheur*. Critical theory lamented the dialectic of an Enlightenment condemned to leave its own promises unfulfilled. The project of emancipation was increasingly viewed not as the fulfillment, but as the transfiguration of the Enlightenment legacy. Their increasingly esoteric conception of emancipation forced the critical theory of Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse into a series of aporias. More and more, emancipation ceased to be a public project and became a private experience of liberation achieved in the non-dominating relation with nature and in moments of revolutionary eros.

Habermas has attempted to reestablish the link between Enlightenment and emancipation, and to bring the project of emancipation into the light of the public by going back to the Enlightenment legacy of practical reason. His project requires fulfilling the universalistic promise of social contract and consent theories which, since the 17th century, have always limited such universalism on the basis of sex, class, race and status distinctions.

Even when we concede that the realization of bourgeois universalism is a necessary condition for emancipation, it seems hardly sufficient. "Can we preclude," asks Habermas, "the possibility of a meaningless emancipation? In complex societies, emancipation means the participatory transformation of administrative decision structures."⁵ If this were all that was meant by "emancipation," if indeed the goal of critique exhausted itself in the "joyless reformism" of a welfare-statist or social-democratic compromise, then indeed critical theory would have established the link between Enlightenment and emancipation by forsaking far too much of its utopian tradition. Let me ask, therefore, if the goal of realizing bourgeois universalism, of making good the unfulfilled promise of justice and freedom, must exhaust itself in a "joyless reformism," or whether, speaking with Benjamin, one cannot see a *Jetztzeit*, a moment of transfiguration, in this very process? I want to suggest that the seventh stage of moral development postulated by Habermas as a corrective and extension of the Kohlbergian scheme, that is, the stage of "universalized need interpretations," has an unmistakable utopian content to it, and that it points to a transfigurative vision of bourgeois universalism.

I will begin with a brief outline of the central theses of Habermas'

5. Habermas, "Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique," p. 158.

communicative ethics (II). I will then focus on the role of “need interpretations” in this theory (III). My thesis is that Habermas, following Mead, restricts moral autonomy to the standpoint of the “generalized other,” and does not do justice to the utopian dimension in his own project.

II. The theory of communicative ethics has been named by Habermas also a “cognitivist ethics of language.” The cognitivism of this theory rests with its assumption that normative statements like “Child molesting is wrong,” cannot be translated into a statement like “I dislike child molesting,” as the emotivists claim. The predicate “is wrong” in this statement is to be understood as a claim that there are good reasons to adopt the rule in our practices that children ought not be molested. To establish this meta-ethical premise Habermas develops the concepts of moral rightness and wrongness by means of a theory of practical argumentation. Basing himself on Stephen Toulmin’s work in *The Uses of Argument*, he maintains that just as the truth of theoretical claims can only be established in light of an argument in which they are shown to be warranted with good grounds, so too the validity of normative claims can only be established via practical argumentations in which they are shown to be defensible with good grounds.

Arguments dealing with theoretical truth claims, with statements about what the case is, or with practical assertions, with statements about what ought to be done, are named “discourses.” Discourses are described as special argumentation procedures in which both facts about what is the case and norms about what is right are challenged and no longer taken for granted. In discourses we “suspend belief” in the truth of propositions and the validity of normative claims that we ordinarily take for granted in our everyday transactions.⁶

The aim of discourses is to generate a “rationally motivated consensus” on controversial claims. The concept of the “ideal speech situation” is introduced in this context. The “ideal speech situation” specifies the formal properties that discursive argumentations would have to possess if the consensus thus attained were to be distinguished from a mere compromise or an agreement of convenience. The ideal speech situation is a “meta-norm” that applies to theoretical as well as to practical reason. It serves to delineate those aspects of an argumentation process which would lead to a “rationally motivated” as opposed to a false or apparent consensus.

6. Habermas, “Introduction to the New Edition,” *Theorie und Praxis* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1978), p. 25. English translation by John Viertel, *Theory and Practice* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).

The four conditions of the ideal speech situation are: first, each participant must have an equal chance to initiate and to continue communication; second, each must have an equal chance to make assertions, recommendations, explanations, and to challenge justifications. Together we can call these the “symmetry condition.” Third, each must have equal chances as actors to express their wishes, feelings, and intentions; and fourth, the speakers must act *as if* in contexts of action there is an equal distribution of chances “to order and resist orders, to promise and to refuse, to be accountable for one’s conduct and to demand accountability from others.”⁷ Let me call the latter two the “reciprocity condition.” While the symmetry stipulation of the ideal speech situation refers to *speech acts* alone and to conditions governing their employment, the reciprocity condition refers to existing *social interactions* and requires a suspension of situations of untruthfulness and duplicity on the one hand, and of inequality and subordination on the other.

This “cognitivist ethics of language” is viewed by Habermas as a reinterpretation of Kantian universalism in moral theory in the light of the communicative foundations of human action. Indeed, one can illuminate some of the central theses of communicative ethics by briefly comparing it to Rawls’s project in *A Theory of Justice*. There are two premises shared by Rawls and Habermas.⁸ I will call the first the “consensus principle of legitimacy” and define it as follows: the principle of rational consensus provides the only criterion in light of which the legitimacy of norms and institutional arrangements can be justified. More significantly, Rawls and Habermas share the meta-theoretical premise: the idea of such rational consensus is to be defined *procedurally*. Rawls maintains that his theory of justice provides us with the only procedure of justification through which valid and binding norms of collective coexistence can be established. Habermas argues that the “ideal speech situation” defines the formal properties of discourses, by engaging in which alone we can attain a rational consensus. The fictive collective choice situation devised by Rawls and the “ideal speech situation” devised by Habermas are *normative justification procedures* serving to illustrate the consensus principle of legitimacy.

7. J. Habermas, “Wahrheitstheorien,” in *Wirklichkeit und Reflexion: Festschrift für Walter Schultz*, ed. by Helmut Fahrenbach (Pfullingen: Neske, 1973), p. 256. My translation, abbreviated in the following as *Wth*.

8. For a detailed discussion of this problem, cf. my article, “The Methodological Illusions of Modern Political Theory: The Case of Rawls and Habermas,” in *Neue Hefte für Philosophie*, 21 (Spring 1982), 47-74.

Despite these common assumptions, there are some fundamental differences between communicative ethics and the Rawlsian position which I would like to summarize around six points.

First, although the theory of communicative ethics also proceeds from a counterfactual called the “ideal speech situation,” this construct is not to be interpreted as advocating a “veil of ignorance” but is to be understood as defining certain rules of discourse which we have *no good reasons* to want to deny.

Second, such argumentations as take place in discourses continue everyday moral dialogue with other means. What motivates the transition to discourse is not some abstract decision, but the fact that the self-explanatory character of our life-world often fails, and requires clarification and mutual reinterpretation. Discourses are continuous with the questioning, puzzling, explaining, and negotiating which form the matrix of everyday morality.

Third, since discourses are not hypothetical thought-experiments that can be carried out by isolated moral philosophers but are intended to be actual processes of moral dialogue among real actors, we do not need to predefine theoretically a concept of the person and the identity of moral actors. Such persons need not stand behind a veil of ignorance or be ignorant about the specific circumstances of their birth, ability, psychological make-up, status, and the like. Discourses only require from moral actors a reflexive attitude which enjoins them to settle normative controversies in a spirit of cooperative dialogue.

Fourth, it is not necessary to place any knowledge constraints upon such processes of moral reasoning and disputation, for the more knowledge is available to moral agents about the particulars of their society, its place in history, and its future, the more rational will be the outcome of their deliberations. Practical rationality entails epistemic rationality as well, and more knowledge rather than less leads to a more informed and rational judgment. To judge rationally is not to judge as if one did not know what one could know, as Rawls maintains, but to judge in the light of all available and relevant information.

Fifth, in such moral discourses agents can also change levels of reflexivity, that is to say, they can introduce meta-considerations about the very conditions and constraints under which dialogue takes place, and they can evaluate its fairness. There is no closure of reflexivity in this model as there is, for example, in the Rawlsian one, which enjoins agents to accept certain rules of bargaining before the choice of the principles of justice.

Sixth, if there are no knowledge restrictions upon such discourses, if the theory does not idealize the identity of moral agents, if reflexivity is encouraged rather than limited by the theory, then it also

follows that there is *no privileged subject matter* of moral disputation. Moral agents are not only limited to reasoning about primary goods which they are assumed to want whatever else they want. Instead, both the goods they desire and their needs and desires can be legitimate topics of moral disputation. By focusing on the role of needs in communicative ethics, let me now analyze its radical departure from other neo-Kantian theories.

III. As early as the essay on “Theories of Truth,” we encounter the claim that the appropriate language of morals “permits determinate groups and persons, in given circumstances, a truthful interpretation both of their own particular needs, and more importantly, of their common needs capable of consensus.”⁹ From the standpoint of universalistic ethical theories, whether it be Kant’s or some contemporary version of it, like Rawls’s or Gewirth’s, such a requirement would transgress the *limits* of practical discourse. In Kant’s case this would be so, simply because the requisite universality of morality can only be established by abstracting away from, indeed by repressing, those very needs, desires and inclinations which tempt moral agents away from duty. The disregard in contemporary deontological theory for “inner nature” is more complicated, but ultimately, it seems to me, it is based on the classical liberal doctrine that as long as the *public* actions of individuals do not interfere with each other, what they need and desire is their *business*. To want to draw this aspect of a person’s life into public-moral discourse would interfere with their autonomy, i.e., with their right to define the good life as they please as long as this does not impinge on others’ rights to do the same.¹⁰

Against this assumption of Kantian moral theories, Habermas draws upon an insight of Hegel’s that has both empirical and normative relevance: this is the insight that the relation between self and other, I and thou, is *constitutive* for human self-consciousness. Empirically, this leads to a conception of the human personality as developing only in *interaction* with other selves.¹¹ Normatively, this conception of identity implies a model of autonomy according to which the relation between self and other is not external to the ego’s striving for autonomy.

In requiring that need interpretations become the subject matter of

9. Habermas, *Wth*, p. 252.

10. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), pp. 24 and 513ff.

11. R. Döbert, J. Habermas, and G. Nunner-Winkler, “Introduction,” *Entwicklung des Ichs* (Köln, 1977), p. 12.

practical discourses, Habermas is underscoring both points. From the standpoint of socialization theory, individual nature, while being “private,” is not immutable; individual need-interpretations and motives carry with them the marks of societal processes by participating in which alone an individual learns to become an “I.” The grammatical logic of the word “I” reveals the unique structure of ego identity: every subject who uses this concept in relation to himself or herself also learns that all other subjects are likewise “I’s.” In this respect the ego becomes an I only in a community of other selves who are also I’s. Yet every act of self-reference expresses, at the same time, the uniqueness and difference of this I from all others. Discourses about needs and motives unfold in this space created by commonality and uniqueness, general societal processes, and the contingency of individual life-histories.

The requirement that a “truthful” interpretation of needs also be part of discursive argumentation means that ego autonomy cannot and should not be achieved at the expense of internal *repression*. Thus Habermas writes: “Internal nature is thereby moved in a utopian perspective; that is, at this stage internal nature may no longer be merely examined within an interpretive framework fixed by the cultural tradition in a nature-like way. . . . Inner nature is rendered communicatively fluid and transparent to the extent that needs can, through aesthetic forms of expression, be kept articulable or be released from their paleosymbolic prelinguisticity.”¹² Ego autonomy is characterized by a twofold capacity: first, the individual’s *reflexive* ability to question the interpretive framework fixed by the cultural tradition — to loosen, if you wish, those sedimented and frozen images of the good and happiness in the light of which we formulate needs and motives; second, such reflexive questioning is accompanied by an ability to *articulate* one’s needs linguistically, by an ability to communicate with others about them. Whereas the first aspect requires us to assume a reflexive distance towards the content of our tradition, the second emphasizes our ability to become articulate about our own affective and emotional constitution.¹³ In both instances, reflection is to be understood not as an abstracting away from a given content, but as an ability to communicate and to engage in dialogue. The linguistic access to inner nature is both a distancing and a coming closer. In that

12. Habermas, “Moral Development and Ego Identity,” in *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, trans. by Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), p. 93.

13. Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. I, trans. by Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), pp. 41ff. Abbreviated as TCA in the following.

we can name what drives and motivates us, we are closer to freeing ourselves of its power over us; and in the very process of being able to say what we mean, we come one step closer to the harmony or friendship of the soul with itself.

If the highest stage of a universalistic ethical orientation is this open, reflexive communication about our needs and the cultural traditions in light of which they are interpreted, then a number of oppositions on which communicative ethics seemed to rest begin to lose their force: questions of justice merge with questions of the good life; practical-moral discourses flow into aesthetic-expressive ones; autonomy is not only *self-determination* in accordance with just norms but the capacity to assume the standpoint of the concrete other as well.

It should be emphasized how *different* this outcome is from that usually associated with universalistic ethical theories. As the definition of stage six in Kohlberg's moral theory reveals, the highest stage of moral orientation is the *public* discourse of rights and entitlements. Neither the needs which drive the actions through which rights are exercised, nor the concept of entitlement which the *ethos* of a right-bearing and invariable adult male implies, are called into question in such a moral theory. Thus, the insistence that "universalizable need interpretations" move into the center of moral discourse is not simply a further *evolution* of such a perspective; it entails a *utopian break* with it, or what I have named its "transfiguration." "Inner nature is moved into a utopian perspective," in the sense that its contents, our needs and affects, become communicatively accessible; in psychoanalytic terms, the threshold of repression is lowered. The utopia of society in which association (*Vergesellschaftung*) is attained without domination, namely, justice, and socialization without superfluous repression, namely, happiness, moves to the fore. Conceptions of justice and of the good life flow into each other.

Discourses in which our needs and the cultural traditions shaping them are thematized; in which the semantic content of those interpretations defining happiness and the good life are brought to light, and what is fitting, pleasing, and fulfilling are debated, are named by Habermas "aesthetic-expressive" ones.¹⁴ It is maintained that modernity institutionalizes not only the discursive evaluation of moral and political questions, but those of aesthetic and expressive subjectivity as well. Whereas practical discourses are oriented toward what is public and universalizable, aesthetic-expressive discourse is oriented toward

14. J. Habermas, "A Reply to My Critics," in *Habermas: Critical Debates*, p. 262.

what is semi-public, non-universalizable, and culturally specific. Expressive discourses cannot be abstracted from the hermeneutic and contingent horizon of shared interpretations and life forms.

This distinction between normative and aesthetic-expressive discourses does not do justice, however, to the significance of needs and their interpretations in the moral realm. In fact, by confining such debate concerning need interpretations to the expressive realm alone, Habermas is making an effort to preserve the purity of the normative realm which he has restricted to an analysis of the binding force of "normative ought sentences" (*Sollsätze*).¹⁵ But the very fact that need interpretations also become thematized in moral discourses once more indicates that Habermas' construction of the model of communicative ethics is ambiguous. On the one hand, it shares with deontological theories like Rawls's the desire to separate the public discourse of justice from the more private discourse of needs; on the other hand, inasmuch as it is critical of theories of justice which do not extend to a critique of consumerist and possessive-individualist modes of life, it has to revert to the critique of needs, false socialization, and the like.

I want to suggest that Habermas does not thematize this utopian dimension adequately, for, following George Herbert Mead, he assumes the standpoint of the "generalized other," of rights and entitlements, to represent the moral point of view par excellence. Mead formulates the ideal of a community of communication as follows:

"In logical terms there is established a universe of discourse which transcends the specific order within which the members of the community, in a specific conflict, place themselves outside of the community order as it exists, and agree upon changed habits of action and a restatement of values. Rational procedure, therefore, sets up an order within which thought operates, that abstracts in varying degrees from the actual structure of society . . . It is a social order that includes any rational being who is or may be in any way implicated in the situation with which thought deals . . . It is evident that a man cannot act as a rational member of society, except as he constitutes himself a member of this wider commonwealth of rational beings."¹⁶

15. Habermas, *Moralbewusstsein und kommunikatives Handeln* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983), and esp. the essay, "Diskursethik: Notizen zu einem Begründungsprogramm," pp. 53ff.

16. George Herbert Mead, *Selected Writings*, as quoted in J. Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, vol. 2 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1981), pp. 144-145.

In this sociological reformulation of the Kantian Kingdom of Ends of Mead's part, Habermas sees two utopian projections: he names the first the perspective of *self-determination*, that is, of autonomous action oriented toward universalistic principles; the second perspective corresponds to that of *self-actualization*, the capacity to unfold one's individuality in its uniqueness.¹⁷ "The ideal community of communication corresponds to an *ego identity* which allows self-actualization to unfold on the basis of autonomous action."¹⁸ But whereas the perspective of autonomous action corresponds to the standpoint of the "generalized other," what, following Carol Gilligan, I would like to call the standpoint of the "concrete other," cannot be accommodated within the rather ego-centered notion of self-actualization.

The standpoint of the "generalized other" requires us to view each and every individual as a rational being entitled to the same rights and duties we would want to ascribe to ourselves. In assuming this perspective, we abstract from the individuality and concrete identity of the other. We assume that the other, like ourselves, is a being who has concrete needs, desires, and affects, but that what constitutes her moral dignity is not what differentiates us from each other, but rather what we, as speaking and acting rational agents, have in common. Our relation to the other is governed by the norm of *symmetrical reciprocity*: each is entitled to expect and to assume from us what we can expect and assume from her. The norms of our interactions are primarily public and institutional ones. If I have a right to "x," then you have the duty not to hinder me from enjoying "x," and conversely. In treating you in accordance with these norms, I confirm in your person the rights to humanity, and I have a legitimate claim to expect that you will do the same in relation to me. The moral categories that accompany such interactions are those of right, obligation, and entitlement; the corresponding moral feelings are those of respect, duty, worthiness, and dignity, and the vision of community is one of rights and entitlements.

The standpoint of the "concrete other," by contrast, requires us to view each and every rational being as an individual with a concrete history, identity, and affective-emotional constitution. In assuming this standpoint, we abstract from what constitutes our commonality and seek to understand the distinctiveness of the other. We seek to comprehend the needs of the other, their motivations, what they search for, and what they desire. Our relations to the other are governed by the

17. *Ibid.*, p. 148.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 150.

norm of *complementary reciprocity*: each is entitled to expect and to assume from the other forms of behavior through which the other feels recognized and confirmed as a concrete, individual being with specific needs, talents, and capacities. Our differences in this case complement, rather than exclude one another. The norms of our interaction are usually private, non-institutional ones. They are the norms of solidarity, friendship, love, and care. Such relations require in various ways that I do, and that you expect me to do in the face of your needs, more than would be required of me as right-bearing person. In treating you in accordance with the norms of solidarity, friendship, love, and care, I confirm not only your *humanity* but your human *individuality*. The moral categories that accompany such interactions are those of responsibility, bonding, and sharing. The corresponding moral feelings are those of love, care, sympathy, and solidarity, and the vision of community is one of needs and solidarity.

These moral ideals and the corresponding moral emotions have been separated radically from each other in moral and political thought since Hobbes. The institutional distinction between the public and the private, between the public sphere of justice, the civic sphere of friendship, and the private sphere of intimacy, has also resulted in the incompatibility of an ethical vision of principles and an ethical vision of care and solidarity. The ideal of moral and political autonomy has been consistently restricted to the standpoint of the “generalized other.” while the standpoint of the “concrete other” has been silenced, I want to suggest, even suppressed by this tradition.¹⁹

As is evidenced by Kantian moral theory, a public ethics of principles entails a repressive attitude towards, “inner nature.” Our needs and affective nature are excluded from the realm of moral theory. This results in a corresponding inability to treat human needs, desires, and emotions in any other way than by abstracting away from them and by condemning them to silence. Institutional justice is thus seen as representing a higher stage of moral development than interpersonal responsibility, care, love, and solidarity; the respect for rights and duties is regarded as prior to care and concern about another’s needs; moral cognition precedes moral affect; the mind, we may summarize, is the sovereign of the body, and reason the judge of inner nature.

By allowing need interpretations to move to the center of moral discourse and by insisting that “inner nature be placed in a utopian

19. Cf. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

perspective,” Habermas comes close to subverting this bias of traditional normative philosophy; but his insistence that the standpoint of the “generalized other” alone represents the moral point of view prevents this move. It is also inadequate to claim that aesthetic-expressive discourse can accommodate the perspective of the “concrete other,” for relations of solidarity, friendship, and love are not aesthetic but profoundly moral ones. The recognition of the *human* dignity of the generalized other is just as essential as the acknowledgement of the *specificity* of the concrete other. Whereas the perspective of the generalized other promises justice, it is in the relation to the concrete other that those ephemeral moments of happiness and solidarity are recovered.

A communicative concept of autonomy attains utopian and motivating force insofar as it promises neither a merger nor a fusion, but the necessary interaction and confrontation of these two perspectives.²⁰ The ideal community of communication corresponds to an ego identity which allows the unfolding of the relation to the *concrete other* on the basis of *autonomous* action. Only then can we say that justice without solidarity is blind and empty.

As this discussion may indicate, while endorsing the necessity of the paradigm shift in critical theory which Habermas's work has initiated, I am less convinced by the abandonment of the utopian-anticipatory moments of critique. When communicative ethics, and the perspective of moral autonomy and community it entails, are presented as if they were the logical and inevitable outcome of a normal sequence of development, only carrying to its conclusion what is implicit in the process itself, one reverts back to the philosophy of the subject. One posits a fictional collective “we” that is not only the subject of evolution but the subject of history as well. Much like Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the theorist then begins to speak in the name of a fictional collective “we” from whose standpoint the story of history is told. This fictive subject appears both as the subject of the past and of the future; it is empirical and normative at once. In Habermas's account, too, the empirical subjects as whose learning process the cultural evolution of modernity takes place, shift their status, and this process becomes a representative tale in which “we,” the subjects of the present, are to dis-

20. For a detailed account of the suppression of the “concrete other” in modern moral theory and a discussion of the relationship of these two perspectives, see my “The Generalized and the Concrete Other: The Kohlberg-Gilligan Controversy and Feminist Theory,” forthcoming in *Praxis International*, special issue of Feminist Theory, S. Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell, guest editors.

cover ourselves.²¹ What is objectionable in this procedure is twofold. First, who is the “we” in the present such that reconstructions present a process of development with which all can identify? Why is it assumed that one is already facing a collective singularity — mankind as such? This shift to the language of an anonymous species-subject preempts the experience of moral and political activity as a consequence of which alone a genuine “we” can emerge. A collectivity is not constituted theoretically but is formed out of the moral and political struggles of fighting actors.

In the second place, this shift to the language of a hypostatized subject has as further consequence that the historical process is *naturalized*. History begins to appear as the semantic gloss on a structural process which proceeds with necessity and invariably from one sequence to the next. But we cannot naturalize the history of the species, for we have no models of development to compare it. At this point, a certain anticipatory utopia, a projection of the future as it could be, becomes necessary. Since the lines of development leading from present to future are fundamentally underdetermined, the theorist can no longer speak the language of evolution and necessity, but must conceive of herself as a participant in the formation of the future. By focusing on the seventh stage of moral development, which in Habermas’s construction concerns universalizable need-interpretations, I have attempted to render this utopian moment visible.

21. “Moreover, evolution-theoretical statements on contemporary social formations have a direct practical relation insofar as they serve for the diagnosis of developmental problems. Thus the necessary restriction to retrospective explanation of the historical material is abandoned in favor of a *retrospective that is designed from action perspectives*: the diagnostician of our time takes the fictional standpoint of the evolution-theoretical explanation of a past lying in the future” (“History and Evolution,” David J. Parent, trans. *Telos*, 44 (Spring 1979), 44). Only insofar as we can assume that empirical subjects in the present can discover themselves in this presentation of the past can we say that “theories of evolution and the explanation of epoch-making developmental leaps based on them can enter those ‘discourses’ in which competing identity-projections are ‘subject to debate’ ” (*ibid.*). My question is: whose identity? Of men or of women? Of Jews or of Gentiles? Of Westerners or of Africans? While it is not incumbent upon a social theorist engaged in explaining social evolution to necessarily offer an answer to these questions, it is nonetheless necessary to specify if these theoretical constructions succeed or fail when one attempts to mediate them with the formative history of specific groups. The problem will not go away by distinguishing between history and evolution, because the suspicion remains that this evolution is really the logic of the history of one group alone.