

## Jurgen Habermas

German philosopher and social theorist, a leading representative of the Frankfurt School. This school of thought developed at the Institute for Social Research founded in Frankfurt, Germany, and it introduced a style of analysis known as critical theory. Critical theory draws on the ideas of German political philosopher Karl Marx in its studies of the sources of domination and authority in society that restrict human freedom.

In his later work Habermas turned his theory of **communicative action** to the domains of politics and law. He became an advocate of "deliberative democracy," in which a government's laws and institutions would be a reflection of free and open public discussion. Habermas assumes that many Western beliefs—for example, the legitimacy of private property—would have to be revised if they were subject to uncoerced and unlimited discussion by free and equal human beings. In the democracy he envisions, men and women, aware of their interest in autonomy (self-governance) and responsibility, would agree to adhere only to the better-reasoned argument.

As Seyla Benhabib, a professor of political theory at Harvard, explains: "Habermas believes human social life rests on our capacity to have more or less clear communication with each other." We communicate -- to paraphrase Descartes -- therefore our society exists.

A rather antiquated, idealistic message to be spreading, some might think, in a world of abusive talk-show hosts, misogynistic rap groups and earphone-encased teen-agers. Habermas is, to be sure, as concerned about pop culture as the next philosopher. But he continues to believe that somewhere behind the better of our attempts to communicate with each other, there have to be some shared values, shared respect and acknowledged equality. He sees the participants in conversations, in other words, as playing on the same teams. And as they talk together, Habermas insists, they make an effort to employ reason.

Habermas' theory, she explains, calls into question a belief that is widely held by cynical and fashionable thinkers on the right and the left: the belief that human behavior should be seen as a battlefield upon which each of us is merely out for our own strategic interests. In our "communicative actions," the right sees selfish individuals struggling to get a leg up on each other; the postmodern left sees the powerful exploiting the powerless; but Habermas sees, of all things, a kind of

cooperation. Indeed, he shares with Socrates an almost utopian belief in the wholesomeness of debate and discussion.

Habermas is perhaps the last major thinker to embrace the basic project of the Enlightenment, a project for which he is often attacked. This suggests that the Enlightenment was a struggle, which began 200 years ago, in the name of reason, against tyranny, superstition and inequity. Voltaire and Thomas Jefferson saw themselves as involved in that struggle. Kant also developed these thoughts and Habermas has contributed to it, too.

But the Enlightenment, you see, left open a crucial question: How does reason -- at whose behest so much has been challenged -- justify itself? Reason has undercut our belief in the spiritual, in the traditional. What is to prevent reason from challenging the reason of the Modern era? When the media pay attention to Habermas, it is usually to pair him in this theoretical debate over issues surrounding postmodernism. By defending Reason and progress and that real truth can be found through 'communicative action', Habermas usually in the minority in the contemporary philosophical conference circuit.

Foucault, Gadamer, Lyotard, Derrida, etc. are often set up as his opponents who suggest that in the postmodern age humans aren't seen as having universal impulses or sharing a common ground. Postmodernists have no use for such generalizations. Human attitudes, they insist, vary as much as human cultures do. Japanese see things differently than Swedes. Metallica lovers probably see things differently than those who fancy Counting Crows. The world, postmodernists maintain, is full of egocentric and ethnocentric biases, full of complexities. Attempts to squeeze it into smooth, rectangular packages -- in philosophy or in architecture -- are futile and foolish.

Sources for this section:

\* <http://www.nyu.edu/classes/stephens/Habermas%20page.htm>

\* <http://www.bigchalk.com/cgi-bin/WebObjects/WOPortal.woa/>

Duncan note: The section below comes from *The Continental Philosophy Reader*, Kearney and Rainwater, Routledge, 1998. It summarizes Habermas' look at language, and the role of philosophy plays in society.

**Philosophy as Stand-In and Interpreter (1990)**

Announcements of the death of philosophy began with the decline of the dialectical Heglian cultural synthesis, as did the various attempts to supersede philosophy. For Habermas, the debate still rages on. How can philosophy be the 'Voice of Reason' given the core of truth in radical hermeneutics and late pragmatism which places language and meaning and Reason to the web of everyday communication within culturally and historically variable forms of life?

Habermas thinks the role of philosophy is twofold.

Philosophy can be a placemaker, or stand-in (definition: a person who takes the place of the star actor until they are ready), this time locating it more precisely in relation to concrete empirical research programmes. Philosophy can no longer pretend to function as the highest arbiter or final judge of science and culture, as a stand-in assigning each area of knowledge (or actor) to its proper place within the play of knowledge through the process of pure reason. Rather, it now enters into a **contributing relationship** with the human sciences, or social sciences, which examines humanity, across many subject areas such as psychology and sociology and politics.. It is this new 'paradigm' of hybrid discourses which inserts philosophical ideas into empirical research. It can be a supplier of ideas as well as a critic of methodology or a reflection of universalist claims of successful hypotheses.

In Habermas' view, philosophy has a second role to play today, one closely tied to a specific feature of modern Western society: the differentiation of what Weber called the 'cultural value spheres' of science and technology, art and literature, law and morality, each with their specialized 'logics' for dealing with the questions of their rarefied 'expert cultures' increasingly separated from the communicative practice of everyday life. Philosophy, Habermas suggests, can function as a **mediator** and interpreter to offset this compartmentalization and separation. As a mediating interpreter, it can help to open up the encapsulated spheres of science, morality and art and feed them into the world so as to establish there a new balance among the now 'separated moments of reason'.

Thus, Habermas' transformation of philosophy envisions for it both a contributing role within certain specialized areas of inquiry and a mediating role between the various expert cultures and the lifeworld. In both roles, it retains its relation to reason in the emphatic sense, that is, to the consideration of universal validity claims that can only be redeemed through the force of a better argument.

Questions on Habermas

1. Use your own words to describe Habermas' theory of communicative action.
2. Explain Habermas' position which pits him against the postmodernists.
3. What two roles does Habermas see for contemporary philosophy. Describe each in your own words.