

## **An Ambition for Transcendence: Habermas on Truth<sup>1</sup>**

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### I

We speak of the use of terms for concepts in languages or language-games in which those terms occur. We speak of concepts—the *use* of terms—rather than just the terms themselves in order to get something as specifically language-neutral as we can. And we stress use in order to avoid reification.

Rudolf Carnap said in 1933 that truth is time-independent while confirmation is time-dependent. This can easily be expanded, without obscuring anything, into truth is time-and-place independent while justification is time-and-place dependent. These remarks for Carnap, I assume, were taken to be analytic or more broadly what Wittgenstein rather gnomocially called grammatical remarks. But whatever their status, they seem plainly to say things that are true. We can come to recognize this when we reflect on our uses of ‘true’, ‘confirmed’ and ‘justified’, when in our everyday speech (or, if you will, in our lifeworld) the engine is not idling.

I think reflection on the uses of these terms in the language-games and practices in which they standardly occur will show that Jürgen Habermas’s account of truth and justification is seriously flawed and is hardly the important accessory to critical theory that he takes it to be. He has not, I shall argue, recognized and taken to heart key implications of what he takes to be his own fallibilism; there is still too much of a passion for, or at least the ambition for, transcendence; something we

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<sup>1</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Truth and Justification*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003.

cannot get and do not need. Even if truth and justification are somehow internally related they are still very different concepts, and the terms 'truth' and 'justification' have very different uses. Truth should not be construed as the ultimate or finally the firmest justification we can get: the 'transcendent moment' in our fixation of belief. There is, or so I shall argue, no such moment or indeed a need for one. Indeed, the very idea is scant intelligibility.

Truth, as Habermas grants, is not a success term or an achievement term. We can intelligibly aim at winning a gold medal in swimming at the Olympics, getting nominated by the NDP to run for Parliament or publishing an article in the *Journal of Philosophy*. We can, and sometimes successfully, aim at getting the best, most carefully corroborated belief or beliefs for a given time and place, about a certain matter, say, the best account of why global warming is occurring, why the American Empire is in trouble, why ISIS is a dangerous threat or why justice as fairness is the best account of distributive justice that we presently have. However, where truth is thought to be something *more* than establishing the best corroborated and clearly and coherently articulated beliefs that the most extensive, most informed communication community can corroborate, *we will have something that we cannot get* and do not even understand what it would be like to get. It can, of course, be the case that what is the best corroborated belief this year may not be the best corroborated belief next year. If that a flu epidemic occurred in Montreal in December of 2004, it may not be true in December of 2005. But it need not be true that a flu epidemic will occur in 2005 because it occurred in 2004. Several centuries down the road historians might dispute whether the flu epidemic occurred in 2004 or 2005 or in both years. The records may not be clear. But didn't it either occur in 2004 or 2005 or in both or not? Yes, of course, but in 6000 years there might be no way of ascertaining with any confidence what happened in 2004 and 2005 and this at least in principle will be true for any belief at any time and any place. If it is true that a flu epidemic occurred in Montreal in December of 2004 then that truth will never change. But in spite of the primitive certainties that our lifeworld may have, what we are *justified* in believing to be substantively true will always remain time-and-place

dependent. At a later time with better corroborated evidence a belief may be more adequately justified than at an earlier time. And at a later time with better evidence a belief once thought to be true may be disconfirmed. But at any time justification is time-and-place dependent. All we can rely on is the very best justified beliefs that can be garnered at any given time and place by the widest communication community that at the time is to be had. We cannot intelligibly ask for more. We cannot have a justification of the truth of a substantive belief that is time-free and space-free. What is reasonable to rely on at any given time and place is the widest and best informed beliefs most committed to and adept at careful verification and reason giving that can be had. No matter when and where we are reasoning we cannot intelligibly ask for more. Still it remains true that what is justified by such a community but still possibly false remains intelligible and true. It is a well-taken grammatical remark. It squares with our language-games. The most thoroughly warranted beliefs that we can gain can still be false. That is just the way the grammar of our language and indeed of any language works and with it the rhythm of our lives.

It is natural to respond: 'Those beliefs are true which would stand up to the most rigorous, carefully elaborated, coherently organized and perspicuously displayed attempts by anyone, anywhere at any time (including in the future) to refute them. Those beliefs that *so* withstand refutation are the beliefs that are true. Still, is it senseless to say they might be false? And if it isn't senseless, then the above cannot be what we mean by 'true'.

The defender of the conception of truth I am opposing might go on to say our conception of true belief must be of beliefs that could withstand refutation *by every possible person in all possible worlds*. Still, such a conception is absurd for it would exclude the possible truth of any empirical beliefs. And that is plainly absurd. We obviously do not know and cannot know or even conjecture when, or if ever, these conditions would be even approximately satisfied. With all these possibilities we have no idea of these beliefs being falsifiable. We cannot even gesture at when these beliefs could fail or reasonably be thought to fail all attempts at refutation. With fewer possibilities we have some

idea of what it would be like for them to fail to stand up to demands for justification. But then we still face Moore's open-question argument. And with all these possibilities, Moore's question or not, we are utterly at a loss here. We have something so indeterminate as to be useless. Talk of 'possible worlds' or 'everyone' even in our world, let alone in all possible worlds, is just arm waving. We could never know when everyone had, given or having gained those conditions, found any belief rationally acceptable or a belief that would withstand all objections. There is no reason or even need to expect we could ever get such an agreement or consensus. Worse still, it is thoroughly unclear what it would be even in principle to get it. This is an idealization which is at best useless and at worst unintelligible. It is like a wheel, to use Wittgenstein's famous analogy, that turns no machinery.

In saying that a true belief is one that will stand up to all (or all possible) objections, we may have in mind all objections that might be given by a comprehensive communication community at a given time. However, it is still logically in place to ask the open-question: 'Yes, all challenges made now have been met, but perhaps a little later challenges will be made that cannot be met?' There is no way except arbitrarily of ruling that out. We have not been given an unassailable truth-claim with unassailable truth-conditions. We have not shown we have anything substantive which has *unconditional validity*. Alternatively, it might be said that a belief is a truth-claim and not *just* a claim of justification if it is a claim that could meet all challenges by everyone at everyplace for everytime. But then, to repeat, we have a claim that at best does no work. It claims a difference which makes no discernible difference. We do not understand when it would be the case that a belief had stood up to everything with those conditions appended. Habermas wants true substantive beliefs which are justification-transcendent, time-and-place-free beliefs which hold for all time, for all places and for all people. He wants a substantive belief—what he would call a 'true belief'—which has unconditional validity. Not a belief like '2 + 2 = 4' which some have called 'analytical' and Wittgenstein called 'a grammatical remark'. But we do not understand what it would be like to have such a belief that is substantive rather than in some way just conceptual. Moreover, we do not need

to have one as long as we have justified beliefs which continue to be justified to wider and wider audiences in more varied and diverse circumstances. We understand what it is for this coming to be and perhaps—empirically perhaps—this can just go on and on for ever wider and more diverse audiences for an indeterminate future. We then would have progress at hand. But we never get anything we know or can sensibly postulate to be true which ‘goes beyond’ our strongest possible justifications: justification which (even the best of them) are always for a time and place.

This does not mean that we should, or perhaps even can, dispense with the use of the word ‘true’ and just stick with something like ‘warranted assertibility’, ‘superassertibility’ or ‘rational acceptability’. ‘True’ has many important uses but none are incorrigible justificatory ones. None have a super-assertability transcendent role. It has—perhaps most importantly in the present context—‘cautionary uses’ designed to cut down our *hubris* and our quest for certainty. Keeping in mind its use, we will say of even a well justified claim ‘Well justified but perhaps not true’. That reminds us that the very best justified judgements may not add up to being true ones. And beliefs may be true which are not justified. Fallibilism and contingency are inescapable—something that epistemological theories of truth have not firmly enough kept in mind. Even Quine does not go that far.

‘True’ also has the familiar disquotational uses taught to us by Tarski. The sentence ‘Ethnic cleansing is diminishing’ is true if and only if ethnic cleansing is diminishing. A well-formed indicative sentence used to make an assertion is true or false only if it says something which purports to be so when what is quoted on the left side of the biconditional has its quotes removed on the right side of the biconditional. It disquotes on the right side what is mentioned on the left. This is a formal property of a sentence that can be used to make an assertion. Such disquotationalism—this, if you will, semantic account of truth—is *neutral* with respect to the correspondence, coherence or pragmatic theories of truth. Indeed it is neutral vis-à-vis any theory of truth purporting to be *substantial*. But it reveals a central feature of our uses of ‘truth’.

Finally, the word 'true' helps preserve order in logical inferences, e.g. if the two premises in an argument are true and the argument is valid then the conclusion is true. 'True' is usefully used to mark such things.

All of these are genuine features of our use of 'true'. They are built into the grammar of our language. But they do nothing to refute or undermine the claim that justification is one thing and truth is another; that the one is time-and space-dependent and the other is not. There are no substantive genuine justification-transcendent truth claims. The very idea (*pace* Habermas) does not make sense. There are no non-grammatical substantive truth claims that are justification-transcendent. (I use 'grammatical' in Wittgenstein's sense.)

## II

I now want to work through some central positions of Habermas's *Truth and Justification* to see if he has done anything to undermine or legitimately supplement this, if you will, deflationary account of truth. (From *Truth and Justification* I have centrally in mind pp. 36-42 in his opening essay, "Realism after the Linguistic Turn", and his penultimate essay, "Rightness versus Truth", pp. 149-261.)

Habermas believes that there is a sense of context-independent validity that can be salvaged from the concept of truth itself. If "the semantic-deductive concept of justification fails to take hold"—something he believes to be so—"then the validity of fallible propositions can only...be justified acceptance by a given audience" (249). It looks like the "truth of a proposition...can be warranted only by its coherence with other propositions" and this in a time-and-place dependent way. But this, Habermas claims, cannot be right for "a coherence that is produced solely through a chain of reasons cannot explain why even the most thoroughly justified assertions can turn out to be false" (250). Why not? Because, Habermas says, it is rooted in our very concept of truth that truth is a property of propositions that cannot be lost. Yet the best reasons we can have for believing a

proposition to be true can still be invalidated by future evidence. We are, Habermas has it, faced with a dilemma; the dilemma, Habermas tells us, is “that we have nothing but justificatory reasons at our disposal in order to convince us of a proposition’s truth, even though we apply the truth predicate in an absolute sense that transcends all possible justifications” (250). But there is no dilemma or even a problem here. *If* a proposition is true then it will always be true and never be false. This tells us something about the grammar, the use, of ‘true’. In a completely trivial sense it gives us our “moment of unconditionality”, i.e. ‘Once true always true’ is a grammatical remark. But it tells us nothing about whether we should believe a proposition (any proposition) to be true—take it for true, hold it to be true; that depends not on grammar but on evidence or reasons and the coherence of them with other bits of evidence or reasons. Justification just comes to this. And any justification is just in this way time-and-place dependent and it can always be the case that at some later time or in some other context some evidence would turn up or some better coherence could obtain that would show that what we *took* to be a justified belief—took to be the best reasons for believing something to be true—was not. That does not mean (*pace* Habermas) that a property—supposing truth is a property—has been lost. It only would mean that it never had that characterization and was only mistakenly thought to have had it. *If* it is true, it has it and will always have it; if it is false, it doesn’t and never will. How we determine whether it is more reasonable to believe it is true or more reasonable to believe that it is false is another matter entirely. Where, *pace* Habermas, is the problem? Where is the dilemma?

We cannot intelligibly say, as Habermas tries to, that “a proposition that is justified according to our standards differs from a true proposition in the way that a warranted proposition in a given context differs from one for which warrants could be provided in any possible context” because (*pace* Habermas) we have not the foggiest idea of what it would be like to provide warrants for something that would be warranted in any *possible* context. Does this come to anything more than to the banal idea that no fallible proposition can be so warranted?

Habermas, in an attempt to give us a sense of what we are about here, gives a *procedural* and what he calls being a *formal* account of 'true'. What we should do is idealize "the formal and procedural properties of argumentation rather than its goals" (251). Habermas goes on to say:

The *form* of communication is to ensure the full inclusion as well as the equal uncoerced participation oriented towards mutual understanding on the part of all those affected so that all relevant contributions to a given topic can be voiced and so that the best arguments can carry the day. Accordingly a proposition is true if it withstands all attempts to invalidate it under the vigorous conditions of rational discourse (251).

Again, a Moore-like open-question argument applies. All these conditions can fully apply: a proposition could withstand all attempts to invalidate it under those stringent conditions yet it could still be false. These conditions, if satisfied, perhaps yield the best reasons for believing that we are justified in thinking at a given time and place that the proposition in question is true. But again, well justified or not, it still could be false. Even with such rigorous justification we do not *thereby* get from justification to truth. The ghost of G. E. Moore still haunts us, this time not about good but about truth. The best justified beliefs might still be false. We in no way bridge the gap between truth and justification. We in no way escape our finitude.

Habermas sees at least something of the force of this. We are, he says "barred from direct access to uninterpreted truth conditions" (251). Instead we must depend exclusively on better reasons. But they, even when for some time they are the best that diligent inquiry can come up with, will not take us from justification to truth. As Habermas goes on to admit, "the gap between truth and justification cannot be closed even by idealizing the conditions of the actual processes of justification. Since any real discourse takes place in time, it will remain provincial relative to learning processes in the future; "we cannot know whether propositions that today seem to us to be warranted even under approximately ideal conditions will indeed withstand attempts to invalidate them in the future" (252).



Habermas concedes, seeming to me fatally, that there is no escaping this. “We must rest content with rational acceptability under conditions as ideal as possible as sufficient *grounds* for truth” (252, italics mine). Still, paradoxically it seems to me, he regards this as insufficient for it “still fails to explain what *authorizes* us to take as true a proposition we suppose to be ideally warranted” (252). But do we need authorization? Must or even can we always have it? Isn’t this philosophical mystification?

Why do we need any *authorization* here? Why is authorization even at issue? We have here the best reasons we can have for claiming such a proposition to be true. What more could we reasonably or even intelligibly want? Why in addition do we need some authorization? Or even say it is an authorization? Habermas’s account seems to me here to be both problematical and opaque. He thinks a discursive conception of truth suffers from placing propositional truth in the language-game of argumentation. There we get a discussion of truth claims where they have become a hypothetical object of debate. But this is so, Habermas says, “Only once they have been pried apart from their functional contexts and have been neutralized as it were.” But, he has it, we should take account of how truth claims function *within* the lifeworld. Here we have a pragmatic conception of truth which complements the discursive account of truth rooted in argument. It is a strange kind of pragmatic account which, or so Habermas claims, does “justice to the weak ontological connotations that we associate with the “grasping of the facts” and thereby “salvages the moment of unconditionality that continues to characterize even the understanding of truth that is accessible to us only by means of the discursive redemption of truth claims” (252). But why make or acknowledge such a bifurcation? Pragmatists are supposed to be wary of dualisms. I, with my feet planted firmly in the lifeworld, say ‘The Chicoutimi caught fire while at sea’ and I under certain conditions assert this without the slightest doubt. And the sentence (proposition or statement, if you will), ‘The Chicoutimi caught fire while at sea’ is true if and only if the Chicoutimi caught fire at sea. But again, how we know this (if we do) is a different matter entirely. It is a matter of having evidence or reasons

or both. And that is a fallible, contingent matter and may conceivably be overturned tomorrow; there is no ‘moment of *unconditionality*’ here though we remain solidly in the lifeworld. A subjective psychological sense of certainty does not add up to a certainty or unconditionality, or even a coherent idea of one, anywhere except perhaps in some person’s psyche or the psyche of some collectivity of persons. And we do not need, even supposing we could, to transcend the lifeworld—whatever that would be—to recognize that. Moreover authorization and authority do not come in here at all.

Habermas rightly claims “The gap between truth and justification cannot be closed even by idealizing the conditions of actual processing of justification” (252). But the recognition and acceptance of this for Habermas is not enough for it still fails, he has it, to take as true a proposition which is rationally acceptable under conditions as ideal as possible. Well if we mean by ‘authorizes us’ what justifies us, then we should say such a justification authorizes us for that is just what we *mean* by justification *in this context*. We say as full a justification as can be had, is just what we find ‘rationally acceptable’ under such conditions. This is how the language-game is played. If, incredibly, ‘authorization’ is taken to mean something else—something far stronger—then we should respond that we have no need here for God or the Divine law, the ‘natural’ law, international law or the positive law of the state. Where questions of truth, at least about matters of fact, are at issue such matters are not germane at all and, I should think, Habermas would be one of the first to acknowledge that.

Perhaps we can stop here but Habermas does not. He remarks in *Truth and Justification*:

Pragmatism makes us aware that everyday practice rules out suspending claims to truth in principle. The network of routine practices relies on more or less implicit beliefs that we take to be true against a broad background of intersubjectively shared or sufficiently overlapping beliefs. Everyday routines and habituated communication work on the basis of certainties that guide our actions. This “knowledge” that we draw on performatively has the Platonic connotation that we are operating with “truths”—with sentences whose truth conditions are fulfilled. As soon as such certainties are dislodged from the framework of what we take for granted in the lifeworld and are thus no longer naively accepted, they become just so

many questionable assumptions. In the transition from action to discourse, what is taken to be true is the first thing to shed its mode of practical certainty and to take on instead the form of a hypothetical statement whose validity remains undetermined until it passes or fails the test of argumentation. Looking beyond the level of argumentation, we can comprehend the *pragmatic role* of a Janus-faced truth that establishes the directed internal connection between performative certainty and warranted assertibility (252-53)

Habermas stresses that the pragmatists, and he could have added Wittgenstein as well, make us aware that “the networks of routine practices relies on more or less implicit beliefs that we take to be true against a broad background of intersubjectively shared or sufficiently overlapping beliefs” (252-53). But this lifeworld ‘knowledge’—Habermas puts ‘knowledge’ here in scare quotes—has, he tells us, Platonic connotations. For Habermas this means we are operating with ‘truths’ (again the scare quotes) with, that is (as he has it), “sentences whose truth conditions are fulfilled”. But we only get a whiff of Platonism if we read truth-conditions in an early Fregean way. But if we take, à la Wittgenstein, a more verificationist understanding of truth-conditions, where we get for truth-conditions verification-conditions, we get with that assertibility-conditions and then the last trace of Platonism vanishes. Parsimony and good sense would seem to require this Wittgensteinian way. But be that as it may, neither interpretation can simply be read off the lifeworld. We denizens of the lifeworld need *take no stand on what are contestable philosophical claims*. We can legitimately use what Rawls calls the method of avoidance here. Moreover, it is question-begging and tendentious to speak of the beliefs of the lifeworld as being *naively* accepted as compared with the *sophisticated* understanding of things when we go up the discursive ladder of argumentation. I say ‘question begging’ for we are being asked to engage in a very tendentious conception of argumentation. It is as if argumentation were not alive and well within the lifeworld itself; as if there were not the give and take of argument right there in the lifeworld. Again beware of reification and beliefs about what philosophy can establish if it could just overthrow or set aside all of common sense. Here we forget G. E. Moore—the G. E. Moore of commonsense—and the Wittgenstein of *On Certainty*.

Habermas here also forgets Peirce and Davidson. They (and Wittgenstein as well) hold that there are, and we all as well have, a massive number of background beliefs, only a few of which we could, on specific occasions, and some of which we come to doubt, but most of which at any given time we do not doubt and some of which we do not understand how to doubt. And feel and see no need for doubt and indeed do not doubt. Without these taken for granted and often taken for true beliefs in place we would not be *able* to doubt at all or think or navigate our world. *Doubt implies belief*. We can only doubt against a background of belief. We must not confuse Cartesian doubts—what Peirce calls ‘paper doubts’—with genuine doubts. Doubt cannot obtain by merely saying (even sincerely) ‘I doubt’ or by turning one’s thoughts in a certain direction. And doubt cannot be obtained by our *willing* to pervasively methodologically to try to doubt and by in some sense so proceeding to try to wipe the slate clean and eschew all background beliefs. Nothing like this is even remotely possible. We would not understand how to do so. (Think here of the pragmatist’s assault on Cartesianism and Hume’s scepticism concerning philosophy itself. Say of Descartes or Locke concerning philosophy itself.)

We can only intelligibly doubt when some specific belief in our lifeworld gets blocked by the challenge and clash of beliefs either within ourselves or with others in our lifeworld as we are living it. But to fix such an unsettled specific belief or some small cluster of such beliefs we must have a massive cluster of beliefs as a background that is not in doubt and could not massively be doubted. This must obtain for us to be able to doubt at all and to find a given belief troublesome and later to come to validate or reject unquestionably Hume, Peirce and Wittgenstein. Here we have something that is not questioned and perhaps even cannot be.

It need not be that any belief can be permanently immune from being doubted in some circumstance, though there is no possibility of doubting a considerable mass of beliefs all at once or even most of them all at once. It will most probably be the case that there are some—indeed many—beliefs which will as a matter of fact never be doubted. But it does not follow from that that there are

many that never could in some circumstance be doubted. We have contingency and fallibility *without wholesale scepticism* all the way down but we have no ‘moment of unconditionality’ in which we get an intelligible justification-transcendent claim to truth. Though there are many things that at any given time are not questioned they still remain in principle open to question though they in fact may never be questioned. And not all could be questioned at once, not even a vast number can be so questioned. But that does not mean that there are no individual beliefs with any substance that are logically impossible to question. Nor is there the slightest reason why many of them, e.g., ‘Frost occurs in Alberta at least by November’ should be questioned. Wittgenstein well shows us in *On Certainty* that certain kinds of questioning are just crazy.

Habermas seems to recognize something like this when he tells us that “practical uncertainties arise when knowledge is problematized” (253). But he seems to treat this as a merely practical matter of little theoretical significance. “The need to act in the lifeworld,” he remarks, imposes temporal constraints on what is from an internal perspective “an infinite conversation” (253). Here he misses the rather different Marxian, Wittgensteinian and Deweyian point converging on a common claim that where we get “an infinite conversation” we get babble or (more charitably) a conversation without a discernible point. And if we attempt to so bracket things such that by “highly artificial measures” we “insulate rational discourses against pressures of the lifeworld” it “render[s] them autonomous where we get something that is at best vacuous” (254). We should not try to rule out such ‘conversations’—perhaps à la Rorty. Something will come of them, but we need not welcome them or try to push things in such a direction either.

Habermas thinks that the “lifeworld, which extends into discourse...operates with strong Platonist concepts of truth and knowledge that refer to practical certainties”, e.g. that human beings die, that it snows in the winter in the Arctic, that torturing people just for the fun of it is vile. That there are certain truisms that we are more confident of than we are of *any philosophical* claim perhaps indicates that there are some things that are *de facto* universal, but that does not sanction

Platonic concepts or Platonic conceptions. Habermas does not *read* Platonic concepts off from the lifeworld, but tries to *impose* them on it. He is not being a good or thorough pragmatist. Even if we knew what it means to orient ourselves by context-independent truth-claims or context-dependent truth-claims we do not automatically have Platonism involved in our lifeworld furnishing us with a justification-transcendent standard or an unconditional criterion of validity by which to orient our lives or orient anything else. Moreover, there is no reason to think our everyday concept of truth is Janus-faced or that there is any clear understanding of what it means to say this. We should not reify or objectify the illocutionary force of our assertions into a Platonism. That is like objectifying the shadows cast by emotive meaning or use into transcendent substantive realities. It may be that we express with true sentences—or at least a certain subset of them—“that a certain state of affairs ‘obtains’ or is ‘given’ and that these states of affairs in some way in turn refer to or characterize ‘the world’ as the totality of things about which we may state facts” (254). (Again, note the scare quotes.) This is obscure stuff. Are facts sentence-shaped somethings that fit our indicative sentences? Are they made to so fit them like a glove the hand? Yet it is at best counter-intuitive to speak of facts as social constructions or as myths. Perhaps Habermas’s talk of facts here is, unless we go metaphysical, innocent enough or can be so construed but there is no need to talk in such a way or any point in doing so. After all, we live in, Habermas is fond of telling us, a *postmetaphysical* world. That notwithstanding, Habermas is simply caught here in a pervasive philosophical tradition—something that goes with only a few interruptions from Plato to Frege—when he speaks of this as an “ontological way of speaking” (259). Can we be postmetaphysical and keep ontology? That seems (to put it mildly) strange. That aside, if we do not worry about being either realists or anti-realists, as Arthur Fine, Michael Williams or Richard Rorty do not, but simply respond in what Cora Diamond (Wittgensteinian that she is) calls the realistic spirit (something that has nothing to do with philosophical realism) and say quite unproblematically that human beings are patterned noise-making ambulatory medium sized movable macro objects that sometimes collide with other macro

objects and interact as well with *some* others, namely other similarly patterned noise-making ambulatory macro objects some of which make patterned noises that some other noise-making ambulatory macro objects also make and respond to. These noise-making moving macro objects interact with each other such that, as we would say in the Queen's English, they come to understand each other. And there are other macro objects that certain ambulatory noise-making macro objects do not interact with in anyway that could constitute a mutual understanding but which are in the same space and time and sometimes collide with these ambulatory noise-making macro objects in certain typically determinate ways. We (to go back to the Queen) as such ambulatory noise-making language-using macro objects could, as part of the world—part of its space-time segments—not, causally speaking, be out of touch with 'objective' or 'external' reality.

Idealism, linguistic or otherwise, is not false but incoherent. Habermas, postmetaphysical philosopher that he wishes to be, gratuitously sets up an incoherent traditional philosophical problem and, quite unnecessarily, makes heavy weather for himself, and perhaps for us, about how we can make contact with the objective world. 'How could we not?' might be more reasonably asked. Only by sticking with outmoded traditionalist conceptions does Habermas seem to succeed in making problems for us and for him, and make it seem that we must find a kind of de-mythologized Kantian rationale before we could articulate a critical society theory. Critical social theory can well do without such a metaphysical prolegomena or indeed any metaphysical or epistemological prolegomena or any other such matters. Who but someone blinded by metaphysics could even dream that the world—the totality of things, the totality of space-time entities—might somehow be up to us, something that we can will or posit and think that something like that might not be the case and might *not* in some reasonably plain way be in some crucial ways the same for all of us? Is that something that we can even coherently wonder about or even characterize? Is there any intelligible alternative to what I have been conceiving of as the world? If there is let this alternative stand up and be counted.

Isn't it time we overcame our infantile omnipotence and not treat such matters as 'deep philosophical reflections'?

Recognizing and intelligibly acknowledging what Habermas pleonastically calls the 'objective world' does not require a metaphysical or ontological or epistemological take or a commitment to realism but just being sane and deliberately flat-footed about how things go. Moreover, there is no reason to think, as Habermas does, that beliefs are confirmed in action by something different than in discourse (254).

However, to continue along the Habermasian *weg*: Habermas claims that "interlocutors continue to associate the connotation of 'grasping facts' with the goals of discursively redeeming unconditional claims to truth . . . and thus they keep the objective world in view indirectly." But, as I remarked above, 'objective world' like 'physical world' is a pleonasm; there can, except in some metaphorical sense, be no other worlds, though we can speak of imagined worlds or imaginary worlds. But that is not at all what he is trying to speak of here. And we cannot 'lose the world' or not keep it in view. Where would we have to be able to do this? That is absurd. We need a little Moorean literalism. There is no world well lost. But we can, of course, grasp (come to see or understand) that some *particular way* we thought to be a part of the way the world goes is mistaken. We might think (as I once did) that all robins in Quebec migrate to the South in winter when as a matter of fact some occasionally do not. But we cannot be mistaken in thinking that we, medium sized macro objects that we are, are a part of the world, that we have thoughts (if that be folk psychology then viva la folk psychology) which are therefore a part of the world and that we sometimes bump into other parts of the world which constrain our behaviour in certain definite ways. There is no room for non-paper doubts about these things. Someone who thinks there is is someone suffering from a philosophical *malaise* and is in need of conceptual therapy. There is no getting such matters wrong. There is just one world which for the most part we construe in the same way. We are middle sized macro objects, using language and interacting with other such macro objects and bumping up against non-human



macro objects as well. In these things, as we do, in some limited domains come to grasp what we take to be the facts. *Perhaps* they are just happenings, events, things or processes. However, fact-talk in everyday life, and perhaps sometimes in philosophy, is useful but (when we go philosophical about it) we often obscure matters. Perhaps we just end up saying rather plitudinously, but securely, that facts are whatever true statements state. But, like truth is what is so, it is not going to help anyone philosophically puzzled. (But perhaps it is a good thing to stop being philosophically puzzled while remembering that contingency is inescapable?)

Whatever we end up saying, fallibilism, in one way or another, is the rule here and this ‘grasping of facts’ does not yield unconditional claims to truth. Indeed we do not understand what would. Each human macro object in the culture it is a part of grasps some facts from a particular positioning in space-time and cultural history. This macro object and the other macro objects in its culture have no idea of how to view the *whole* of the facts or the whole of the *scheme* of things entire or even of ascertaining if there is a *scheme* of things entire. Indeed, if we try to get literal, we have very little understanding of what that is. Since sometimes two or more of us human macro objects bump into the same macro object or macro objects, we know we are in the same world but we have very little (if any) idea of what this same world is in its *entirety* or even in very extensive domains, though, of course, astronomy does some work here if it doesn’t get too speculative. But this is no reason to try to go idealist or even sceptical about the ‘external world’ or about whether we can know there is or isn’t one—as if that is something to be puzzled about.

What it is reasonable to believe about this world, *if true*, is time-independent. That is a grammatical remark, and we shouldn’t make a big deal about it unless we bump up against a truth-denier or someone trying to be an extreme sceptic rather than a Humean moderate one or someone trying to be an idealist. But what we are justified in believing about this world—no matter how well warranted our belief or beliefs are—is always time-and-place dependent. There is, to repeat, no bridging the gap between justified belief and truth or escaping our contingency and finitude. (Note

talk of 'justified truth' and 'unjustified truth' is conceptually incongruous. What used to be called in the heyday of ordinary language philosophy 'logically odd'. It is not at all like 'justified belief' and 'unjustified belief'. These beliefs are not conceptually incongruous.) But recognizing our inescapable finitude and the inescapable contingency of things does not yield nihilism or scepticism or a 'rage against reason'. Hume was on to this. It does not make everything relative or everything subjective. We have nothing to get distressed about here. Truth is not the goal or end of inquiry, but well-warranted, well-articulated, well-justified and perspicuously displayed belief arguably is. But this never gives us infallibility or an escape from contingency.

We cannot in any literal sense seek truth, love truth, be committed to truth, grasp truth or die for truth. These are perhaps sometimes useful metaphors when we are not doing philosophy. People who talk this way, and get serious about it, are mistakenly and perhaps unwittingly trying to assimilate truth to ideal warranted assertibility or something like that and missing the actual and distinctive uses that the word 'truth' has including its cautionary use. Or they may be confusing 'truth' with 'truthfulness'. (Moreover, it makes some kind of rhetorical sense to say 'I would be willing to die that truth prevail.' But we would hardly substitute 'I would be willing to die that warranted assertibility would prevail.' (All of our proper uses of language are not cognitive.) What fuels this misunderstanding, this conceptual confusion, for many at least, is an irrational urge to escape finitude. But that is an incoherent belief and desire. It is like looking for the colour of heat.

### III

I have worked through critically a crucial section on truth and justification in Habermas's *Truth and Justification* where Habermas seeks to establish that truth outruns justification and that we can somehow gain a non-time and non-place dependent grasp of truth and unconditional validity; that we can somehow transcend here anything that can be achieved by justificatory processes. I have tried to show that his claims here are at best mistaken. As can happen in a collection of essays, there

are other places I have not closely examined where he turns to what seems to me to be essentially the same subject. He does this in the first half of Chapter 2, with his discussion of Robert Brandon in Chapter 3 and again in Chapter 4. I do not think that he adds anything in these places that would undermine my arguments. But that, of course, itself needs discussion and argument in a fuller treatment of the subject.

Departing from a close inspection of crucial parts of Habermas's text, I turn now briefly to some largish, essentially metaphilosophical issues that readily emerge from the above account.

I have argued against the classic philosophical tradition that we as medium sized, ambulatory, noise-making macro objects could not be out of touch with the world, though we can be rather confused about it or alienated from or in denial of it as many of us are about climate change. And that the ancient so-called problem of the external world and how human beings could connect with it or whether we generally speaking can accurately represent it or fail to do so cannot, except as confusions, could even arise. Does this commit me to the view that our interactions with nature are something, and should be viewed as something, given in *purely causal* terms or should we supplement these causal accounts with conceptual accounts as well? We are not ghostly immaterial selves or some somethings we know now what that can be answerable to or fail to be answerable to the world. We are simply parts of the world so such a question cannot intelligibly arise. What would it be like for a part of the world to be not answerable to the world? What are we talking about? Nothing!

There is a divide in contemporary philosophy here. Philosophers such as Quine, Davidson, Rorty and Brandon think that we can account for the beliefs and practices we have by giving *causal* narratives of an evolutionary sort. Philosophers such as Habermas, Apel, McDowell and Charles Taylor, roughly following Kant and sometimes with a little Aristotle, believe that we need also *to explain how our beliefs and practices were made possible in the first place*. Causal explanation, they have it, is not enough. Quine-like stories, they have it, do not take seriously enough the *normative*

components of our language. That we can get something wrong, fail to get something right or get something right means, these latter philosophers have it, that our linguistic and communicative practices have a built-in normative element that purely causal accounts cannot account for. Habermas and McDowell feel that strictly causal accounts will rob us of the full grasp of the normativity that guides inquiry and is crucial for our lives. Such causal accounts fail to come to grips with attempts at rational persuasion, at reasonableness (or for that matter unreasonableness) in social interaction and in conversations in what Habermas calls the lifeworld.

The Quineans and Rortyians, in some respects as different as they are, will respond that the desire for more than a causal touch with the world is a chimerical one, an unfortunate hang-over from both metaphysical religiosity and the tradition of Enlightenment *rationalism*: from both Aquinas and Holbach. Since language does not have the capacity to represent, to correspond to the world, to give an accurate account for the way things are in themselves, the way things are anyway, the way things deeply, truly and enduringly are, we should take language non-representatively as in effect a diverse collection (to switch metaphors) of tools, crafted for different purposes, answering to diverse needs, wants, desires and hopes. Looking at language in this way will make it impossible to articulate, Kant-wise or Habermas-wise, *a set of enabling conditions to stand 'behind' or 'above' our linguistic and social practices* and to *somehow justify them or show they have a rationale*. We will be led, if we care at all about consistency, to think, in a way that Habermas and Putnam do not want to do, of the normativity embeddedness in our language and language-games as something *sociological* and *practical* rather than philosophical and conceptual. For we big brained animals equipped with opposable thumbs, language is another, for us very essential, tool for coping with our environment. Thinking like this generates, in reaction, Habermas's and Putnam's fear of 'Rortyan relativism' and value-nihilism. But these are pseudo-issues for it is instead a thorough historicism that is at issue, and taken by those pragmatists and Wittgensteinians as inescapable, and not the straw figures of

relativism maintaining absurdly that every belief is as good as every other belief or of nihilism that nothing is of any value.

This historicism comports very well with a Wittgensteinian anti-scientism and seems at least to conflict with Quine's view that causal explanation is all the explanation and understanding that there is and the entailed claim that what science (probably natural science) cannot tell us humankind cannot know or in any way believe (or at least reasonably believe) or perhaps even understand. Something that Russell once proclaimed. However, if this coping non-representationalist, practice-oriented conception of language is on the mark a monolithic, ubiquitous scientism (*pace* Russell and Quine) is out, but a more localized scientism can still be in.

Let me make this non-paradoxical. When we are concern with the world—what Habermas pleonastically calls 'the objective world'—causal explanations are the only thing that will do the job. Once they are set forth adequately we have nothing more that is intelligible to say in this domain. Here causal explanation is sufficient. But this is a toothless particular language-game, particular practice-dependent scientism. It tells us that when we are trying to explain what the world is like then stick with causal explanations. What we need is science, not philosophy or theology. But when we want to say something normative about how the moral and political life should go, we should be, let us not implausibly say, Rawlsian. There we also travel metaphysically light and use the method of avoidance and, if we speak of moral and political worlds, we use those phrases metaphorically. There is only one world and it is accessible in principle to us all in a philosophically unproblematic causal way. But our understanding of the world—of space-time entities—is always incomplete, contextual and historically conditioned. We do not get causal explanations which outrun this. We never overleap history or get something complete here, or elsewhere, and in this way universal. There are no complete and final explanations in physics (a few metaphysically inclined physicists to the contrary notwithstanding) anymore than in history or anthropology. And there is no *last* word

in any of these disciplines any more than there is in philosophy or otherwise in life, except the last words people say before they die (Thomas Nagel to the contrary notwithstanding).

However, there remain questions—hardly causal questions—like those John Rawls asks about how we persons (we macro objects), but now viewed politically or morally or both, are to relate to each other. Here we are working with a political or moral conception of the person. Moreover, there are Marxian questions about what to attend to in the physical world and in societies (a part—what else?—of the physical world) when we are coming to grips with Rawlsian questions about what is to be done. The Rawlsian ones—to repeat—at least are typically not causal questions. We can live very well (get in various appropriate ways a grip on things very well) with Quine, Rawls and Marx (or at least analytical Marxism not caught with Marx's obstetric metaphors; remember G. A. Cohen here). These theoreticians, taken together, not only peacefully co-existing but supplementing each other, each in their own corner, but each in his own way giving a holistic view which, along with the others, can be woven together into a more adequate holistic view than any of them have individually. But they are all without a context-independent conception of validity or a conception of truth or truth-aptness that goes beyond the reach of our inevitability, historically and context-dependent practices. *Perhaps* here we have something that, if worked out (including clarified) would be the rational kernel of a different critical theory than a Habermasian one: one without metaphysical dangles and obscure sayings: great obscure metaphysical blockbusters in spite of Habermas's avowed postmetaphysicality.

Habermas wants to be (and thinks he is) a postmetaphysical philosopher, but he continues with too much Kantian baggage and is still haunted by the ghost of Plato. He should have taken Hume more seriously. He wants to be a fallibilist yet has not learned to live with our finitude and with what he regards as Hegel's (and Brandon's) historicism. Are we condemned obsessively to react to what Wittgenstein regarded as the old philosophical nonsense? That issue stands as a minor irritant to

what might come to be our emancipation. Enlightenment *hopes* should not be abandoned but Enlightenment *rationalism* should be excised.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I thank Andrew Lugg for comments on an earlier draft. He saved me from some errors.