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The Normative Individuality of the Other.
Habermas in Dialogue with Adorno

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There were quite a few of his contemporaries in the academic world for whom Habermas, despite all his reserve, felt deep affection. He always spoke of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Wolfgang Abendroth—as different as they were—with the utmost gratitude—no doubt also because they had both come to his aid in quick succession when the seamless continuation of his academic career was in danger of falling apart. He felt more than just well-meaning sentiments toward two of his German contemporaries, Ernst Tugendhat and Albrecht Wellmer; whenever they came up in conversation, his admiration for the analytical rigor of their thinking was mixed with concerned sympathy for the fate of two philosophical loners and nonconformists. He could occasionally wax lyrical about the deeply humanistic outlook of a Richard Rorty or Lawrence Kohlberg; to him, they were the living embodiments of the civil, thoroughly egalitarian spirit of American democracy. But whenever the name Theodor W. Adorno came up, something else always came into play—a tone that was quite unusual for him, sober, unsentimental, and averse to pathos as he was: reverence paired with touching gratitude, admiration for a seemingly omnipotent mind combined with deeply felt affection—occasionally he spoke of Adorno as his only true teacher; once he even used the term "genius"—a concept otherwise entirely foreign to him—in reference to Adorno: "Philosophical 'maturity that is capable of retaining its childhood,'" as Habermas wrote with reference to Adorno as early as 1963, is likely "the secret" of his "genius." Anyone familiar only with the exoteric side of Habermas's writings may be surprised by this deep-rooted devotion to Adorno. But it reveals a bond that he never relinquished throughout his life and preserved in nearly all his work and activities. Anyone who wishes to understand the driving force behind his work must acknowledge this unconditional loyalty; only by viewing him as entangled in a constant dialogue with Adorno can one adequately trace the course that Habermas's theory has taken over the decades.

1. Public Sphere

It was Adorno himself who, against Max Horkheimer's resistance, chose Habermas as the heir to the tradition of Critical Theory established in the early 1930s. The two social philosophers were divided by many things when they began working together at the Institute for Social Research in 1957—their formative life experiences, cultural orientations, and ties to philosophical traditions; and yet, from the very first moment they met, there existed between them an intellectual affinity that stemmed not so much from theoretical common ground as from a deeper layer of shared perceptions of social threats and personal vulnerabilities. Whether this convergence in their individual anxieties and concerns stemmed from the fact that they were both particularly sensitive to social discrimination—each based on different experiences—or whether, at that time, they shared the same oppressive fear of a resurgence of Nazi sentiments in Adenauer's Federal Republic is difficult to determine in retrospect; in any case, from the very beginning there existed between Adorno and Habermas a unity that reached deep into the innermost layers of their personalities, the bedrock of which was a highly acute sensitivity to violations of the fragile fabric of human interactions. This may well have been the reason that led the older of the two to be convinced that he could confidently entrust the younger one with the task of carrying his own thought across into the completely transformed times of democratic conditions—and all those who, even after his death, refuse to stop accuse Habermas of betraying Critical Theory have never understood this sympathetic harmony and have always stubbornly tried to deny it.

The emotional kinship between the two philosophers—their shared sense of the constant danger of social regression—first took shape in the discussions they had together regarding Habermas's habilitation project on "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere," which he had undertaken at the Institute for Social Research. Adorno had to have taken Habermas's project to heart, if only because he and Max Horkheimer had always maintained the thesis that only the liberal phase of capitalism had, for the first time in human history, produced a type of personality possessing certain traits of individual "maturity" and autonomy; admittedly, in this conception—which had already been hinted at in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* and then elaborated more fully in *Negative Dialectics* and *Minima Moralia*—it had always remained somewhat unclear whether that socially responsive ego-strength was due more to the requirements of self-confident action in a capitalist market not yet monopolized, or to the benefits of loving socialization within the protective sphere of the bourgeois family —but Adorno held fast throughout his life to the idea that there is a normative preference for liberal civility and bourgeois sensitivity in social life. For this reason alone, he was bound to take a liking to Habermas's project of

uncovering, through the informal conversations in the bourgeois salons and coffeehouses of the 18th century, the communicative conditions that would soon thereafter attain normative efficacy in democratic societies through the idea of a public sphere free from domination: All matters of public concern were, in theory, to be considered open to discussion in these socially protected spaces; every argument was to carry equal weight in the exchange between speakers and listeners, regardless of social status and power asymmetries; and only rational understanding could ultimately lead to a result acceptable to all participants. It was likely not so much Habermas's insistence on the sole authority of the better argument in such public deliberations as his reference to the dispositions required for this—sincerity, an egalitarian mindset, and the ability to adopt other perspectives—that Adorno may have found appealing, even captivating, in the planned habilitation thesis; he could easily rediscover in the habitual requirements that Habermas saw as necessary for the attitude of dialogue partners in public discourse those very normative conditions by which he himself wished to characterize communicative interaction among people who had attained true autonomy—the freedom to "be different without fear" was the formula he had coined for this form of recognition of the otherness of the other in successful interaction.

Finally, the intended concluding section of the work—in which Habermas sought to demonstrate how, with the growing commodification and privatization of the media, the institution of the bourgeois public sphere that had once been established was threatened with disintegration under the pressure of capitalist imperatives of exploitation—likely did its part to ensure that Adorno was impressed by his colleague's plans. There was not a moment's doubt between the two philosophers that Marx, in his critique of political economy, had adequately analyzed the destructive dynamics inherent in capitalist economic systems, which drive private owners of the means of production to tirelessly increase their economic profits; for both Adorno and Habermas, therefore, Marx's analysis of capitalism remained a self-evident component of their respective social theories throughout their lives—for the elder as a constant underlying chord in all his analyses, for the younger as a frame of reference for his understanding of modern societies. Adorno must therefore have seen it as a retrospective confirmation of his diagnosis—developed in The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* —of a transformation of culture into the capitalist "culture industry" when Habermas, in his planned study, sought to demonstrate historically how, with the rise of capitalism and under the influence of monopolized entertainment companies, the "culture-reasoning" public increasingly became a "culture-consuming audience."

However, it was not the topic alone, but just as much the proposed approach to the habilitation thesis he was supervising that likely quickly convinced Adorno at the time of its great significance. Adorno had always been committed to an interdisciplinary research style, not for external reasons—such as gaining reputation or complying with academic policy requirements—but solely for the sake of the subject itself, as he put it: He regarded the principle that a social phenomenon can only be analyzed conclusively if "the immanent interplay of elements studied relatively independently of one another by economics, history, psychology, and anthropology" is taken into account, as a methodological guideline for all social-theoretical research. At the Institute, however, such objectively grounded interdisciplinarity was not exactly in good shape in the 1950s; for the areas of responsibility of the staff had, in line with developments in academic policy, been tailored according to disciplinary criteria, so that a threatening tendency toward individual specialization was beginning to emerge. In Habermas, Adorno now found a young researcher who intended to write his habilitation thesis on the public sphere without any regard for the boundaries between individual disciplines; due to his academic career and his impetuous curiosity, he embodied—in a single person, so to speak—the very interdisciplinarity that had been a matter of course at the Institute before the forced exile. When Adorno finally saw the completed habilitation thesis before him, the interdisciplinarity playfully exercised within it must have downright thrilled him: In the account of the historical rise and subsequent decline of the liberal public sphere, interdisciplinary research was practiced in a constant back-and-forth between political history, social historiography, literary sources, economic considerations, and normative arguments with such ease and naturalness that the transition from one discipline to another was no longer even noticeable to even the most attentive reader. It will remain a psychological mystery of Adorno's personality why he was unable at the time to muster the "ego-strength" he himself had called for, in order to help his student's habilitation thesis achieve the success it deserved in the face of Max Horkheimer's bizarre objections at the Institute; the many times he later invoked the principles of popular sovereignty and the public use of reason in his writings on democratic education certainly demonstrate that Habermas's habilitation left a profound mark on him.

2. Knowledge and Interest

The dialogue that had unfolded between Adorno and Habermas regarding the book on the Public Sphere was tacitly continued behind the participants' backs

in what became known as the "Positivism Controversy"; the younger man had, through his appointment to Max Horkheimer's chair, by then become a colleague of the older man, so that their relationship had now shifted from that of a student to his teacher to one between two equals and friends who were both advocates of Critical Theory. Imperceptibly, during this phase, it began to emerge for the first time at which crossroads the two philosophers' ideas about the future of Critical Theory might diverge. They quickly reached agreement on the basic principles of defending critical social research against attacks from proponents of an empiricist theory of science: Following Hegel, Adorno and Habermas insisted on the conceptual mediation of all seemingly raw facts; both, again in line with Hegel, saw in this the possibility of a normative reliance on what is normatively required by the thing itself, and both sought thereby to overcome the opposition between "is" and "ought" championed by empiricism in the form of an immanent critique of existing conditions. Behind this consensus in defense, however, lay considerable disagreement regarding the epistemological question of what should ultimately constitute the foundation of a critical theory. From an early stage, Adorno unofficially adhered to a theory of affective perspectives rooted in the work of Freud and Nietzsche; according to this theory, it is the prevailing needs and affects of a person, a group, or an era that determine how the world is categorically interpreted and cognitively grasped in each instance. Accordingly, in his *Negative Dialectics*, he was able to assert that states of mind characterized by fear of the forces of nature generated a drive toward mastery and reification, that affects of revenge produced a search for closed, systematic worldviews, and that sustained needs for symbiosis and reconciliation provided the impulse to understand the environment as a qualitatively rich entity worthy of mimetic disclosure; for Adorno, therefore, every critical knowledge had to be animated by the emotionally tinged memory of a state prior to the subject-object separation, prior to the fear-driven reification of the world, because only in this way could it grasp the difference that always exists between the given reality and the possibilities inherent in it. In preparation for his study *Knowledge and Human Interest*, Habermas quietly but unmistakably raised objections to this psychologically tinged theory of knowledge; in the completed book, these concerns are addressed in the very last chapter, which is devoted to a critique of the naturalism in Nietzsche's epistemology and which attempts to conclusively justify the concept of "knowledge-guiding interests"—a chapter that is often overlooked, even though it secretly also contains an engagement with Adorno's epistemological speculations.

Habermas initially agrees with Adorno and Horkheimer on the thesis that all human striving for knowledge—for rational understanding of our environment—

must stem from the context of overcoming practical challenges of life; in doing so, all three jointly contradict the traditional notion that the methodologically controlled generation of scientific theories begins only where the connection to social practice is severed and where "pure" research—free from any admixture of everyday concerns—can be conducted. The question that then arises in response to such a critique of the positivist fiction of the self-sufficiency of all sciences, however, concerns the nature of those pre-scientific contexts in which every form of knowledge acquisition is said to be originally rooted; and already at this early stage, the paths pursued by the three representatives of Critical Theory diverge. While Horkheimer, as is well known, proposes in his early writings to distinguish between activities of self-preservation and actions critical of domination, in order to locate therein the constitution of traditional knowledge on the one hand and critical knowledge on the other, Adorno leans toward the previously hinted-at notion of an affective basis for every striving for knowledge; according to him, it is differently oriented emotional stirrings or emotional states that determine the categorical framework within which we humans can cognitively disclosure the environment. Habermas, for his part, disagrees with both proposals for identifying the pre-scientific roots of methodologically generated knowledge, because he believes that neither of them can adequately pinpoint the actual meaning and methodological significance of the production of critical knowledge; but in his critique of Nietzsche's epistemology, he addresses only Adorno indirectly, with whom he continues to engage in a dialogue on the future of Critical Theory.

What Habermas readily concedes to both Nietzsche and Adorno is the philosophical claim that our pursuit of methodologically controlled knowledge stems from the natural dispositions of the human species; he, too, is convinced that in our efforts to attain rationally grounded knowledge, we cannot free ourselves from nature to the point where we suddenly become nothing but spirit and have lost all connection to organic necessities of life—Habermas will never break free from this weak naturalism, from this idea that all human reason is bound to nature, even in his later work. Therefore, in contrast to Nietzsche and Adorno, he first concedes that humans attempt to understand their external and internal worlds solely because they possess a deep-seated, naturally rooted desire to do so; however, he argues against equating this endeavor with a mere drive or affect, contending that this would make it impossible to explain the perspective from which the connection between such drives and our cognition itself is to be understood; for how could it become clear, from the perspective of such a causally active affect, why the cognitive image of reality constituted by it does not represent a mere illusion, but actually provides a useful and therefore valid understanding of reality? The strategy by which Habermas believes he can

resolve this dilemma of an affect-based theory of cognition consists in proposing that those natural drives toward knowledge be understood not as affective dispositions but as cognitive interests—interests that stem from consistent human requirements for action and that can be successfully addressed only through systematically acquired knowledge. If such an approach—which he terms "transcendental-pragmatic"—is adopted, Habermas is convinced that it can also be made clear that, beyond the two action-oriented interests in the mastery of nature and the expansion of communicative understanding, we also have a higher-order interest in understanding ourselves and freeing ourselves from causally operative dependencies —a critical perspective that, accordingly, should also enable us to constantly remind ourselves of the difference between mere illusions and socially beneficial knowledge. One must describe as ingenious the theoretical move with which Habermas attempted at the time to link this idea of "emancipatory reason" back to the central theme of his book on the civil public sphere: For him, that urge to free ourselves as a species from natural constraints and dependencies through self-reflection means nothing other than fighting to secure an ever-greater space for communicative understanding in social life, because only in this way can external coercion be transformed into collective self-determination, and opaque domination into communicative freedom—through the structure of language, that is, through communication oriented toward mutual understanding—as Habermas stated as early as 1965—"our autonomy is grounded."

It is easy to imagine how Adorno might have reacted to this transcendental-pragmatic positioning of Critical Theory within an emancipatory interest in communicatively freeing ourselves from external dependencies. He would likely have argued that the frame of reference for the insights gained from such a guiding principle would be limited solely to the conditions under which improvements in interpersonal communication are possible, and would therefore have to disregard those pertaining to a reconciliation with nature; and, building on this objection, he might have insisted that only knowledge driven by memories of a symbiotic relationship with nature would be capable of retreating beyond the threshold of the opposition between subject and object, thereby adopting a perspective of communicative engagement not only with our fellow human beings but also with nature both within and outside of us – "Communicability" is not "the criterion of truth," as Adorno states in *Negative Dialectics,* but rather only the unerring certainty of having grasped, in an object, everything that had hitherto been obscured in it by conceptual thinking; "surrendering oneself to the object" out of a mimetic impulse, nestling against it, and thereby grasping its full qualitative richness—this is what Adorno regarded as the hallmark of emancipatory knowledge. However, the dialogue

that could have been conducted between Adorno and Habermas regarding these epistemological alternatives never took place ; the elder had died far too soon, in the year following the publication of *Knowledge and Human Interest*, so that the younger was henceforth compelled, as it were, to continue the discussion with his teacher in a fictional sense. That he in fact did so and continued to regard Adorno as his most important interlocutor can be readily demonstrated—without any hermeneutic contortions—by the further development of his theory.

3. System and Lifeworld

Even during the two years between Adorno's death in 1969 and his move to the Max Planck Institute in Starnberg, Habermas had begun to increasingly set aside epistemological questions and instead focus more intensely on the task of renewing social theory through communication theory. Building on his previous work, he sought—through an engagement with classical sociology and recent philosophy of language—to demonstrate that communicative understanding—the linguistic negotiation of mutually agreeable solutions to problems of action—is not merely a moral ideal, but must be understood as the very foundation of all social life. Work on this groundbreaking renewal of the sociological framework of Critical Theory spanned over ten years, until it culminated in the grand outline of a two-volume *Theory of Communicative Action* and could be presented to the public. The fundamental idea was that the social reproduction of societies takes place primarily through the medium of linguistically mediated interactions, by means of which members of society can mutually coordinate their respective individual intentions for action; Habermas explained that such communicative understanding is nevertheless possible despite all the ineradicable differences among participants due to the presence of a lifeworld that has always been given in the background and which ensures overarching commonalities in moral and theoretical convictions. Thus, the starting point for the human species was initially defined very differently than in the sociological framework of Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: It was not an impulse born of fear of the forces of nature to control the environment and master reality—that is, what, in the view of the two earlier critical theorists, was supposed to lead to the formation of instrumental rationality—but rather a mode of interaction, made possible by the lifeworld, for the cooperative management of existence that, for Habermas, stood at the very beginning of the historical development of humankind. However, the thread of dialogue with Adorno would have been severed here already had Habermas left it at this mere assertion of a genetic and logical primacy of communicative

understanding over instrumental mastery of nature; but the fact that, on the contrary, he intended to continue his teacher's ideas—and certainly not to abandon them—is evident in the way he attempts to further develop the idea of the origin of socialization stemming from the human capacity for dialogical perspective-taking in his book.

In a return to Adorno and Horkheimer, Habermas assumes in the next step of his argument that Max Weber was correct in holding that the knowledge acquired by members of society through action can always be rationalized; "Human beings cannot help but learn," as Habermas pointedly states in many places, and must therefore always draw conclusions from past mistakes to improve their knowledge in the future. While this Weberian premise meant, in the context of The *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, that human beings learn to cognitively perfect the means of mastering nature over time, for the author of *the Theory of Communicative Action*, it means that the lifeworld-background of linguistic communication gradually loses its traditional certainties through constant testing against reality and thus undergoes an overall process of detraditionalization. For sociocultural evolution, this rationalization of the lifeworld, according to Habermas, has the far-reaching consequence that, at an advanced stage, it makes it possible to relieve material reproduction of the pressure of mutual understanding—for the sake of increasing its efficiency—and to switch to a non-communicative mode of control. Thus, in his view, the two functional spheres of the economic market and the bureaucratic administrative apparatus emerged at the beginning of modernity, in which the actions of members of society are no longer coordinated through linguistically mediated interactions—that is, communicatively—but rather through each individual's orientation toward financial or political success—that is, strategically. By orienting his social theory toward the decoupling of the two systems—the market and bureaucratic administration—from the lifeworld, Habermas had, however, once again found a direct connection to the central problem posed by *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*; for just as Horkheimer and Adorno had explored in their book the question of what damage human subjectivity sustains in the process by which the means of mastery over nature become autonomous powers of their own, he could now ask what harm is inflicted on human intersubjectivity as soon as the two spheres of economic activity and administrative action are detached from the horizon of communicative understanding. Habermas's answer to this question is well known and largely coincides with that of his predecessors in terms of critical diagnosis, but it decidedly diverges from them in its normative guidance: At the moment of the colonization of the lifeworld by the increasingly autonomous spheres of the market and bureaucracy, the human species is in danger of becoming alienated

from itself—not because it thereby lose every resonant relationship with nature within and outside themselves, but because the human ability to put oneself in the other's perspective and to seek intersubjective understanding with the other through language begins to fade. With his *Theory of communicative action*, Habermas had carried out a communication-theoretical reinterpretation of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that did not share its historical starting point but nevertheless sought, with the same critical impetus, to examine the civilizational catastrophe resulting from the transformation of human-conceived means into ends that take on a life of their own.

It is not easy to imagine how the late Adorno would have reacted to this new theory by his former disciple in dialog. The style, that much is certain, would not have pleased him at all; he would have found the book's language too heavily laden with theoretical jargon, and he would have regarded the direction of its arguments as lacking in concrete phenomena—as not sufficiently focused on the matter at hand, namely experiences of social coexistence. He would certainly have felt a considerable sense of unease at the stark contrast drawn between the lifeworld and the system, especially since, in his *Minima Moralia* just a few years earlier, he himself had demonstrated how deeply the powers of the administered world had by then penetrated the immediate sphere of interpersonal communication, leading there to a reversal of personal attention into egocentric intentions, and of tact and consideration into the mere pursuit of self-interest —to which Habermas, in turn, might have replied that the rhetorical device of exaggeration for the purpose of startling illustration had, after all, been taught to him by his teacher Adorno himself, and that this was one of the main reasons why he had always sought to idealize linguistic communication by emphasizing the traits of freedom from domination and reciprocal adoption of perspectives. At the heart of the dialogue between the two theorists, however, would likely have been the question of the role in human history of a reason that is not instrumental but communicative, a reason that unfolds only in dialogue—and here I am no longer quite so sure of the older theorist's answer to the younger one. For if one considers the fervor with which Adorno had begun to defend democracy in his writings on pedagogy published since the late 1950s—arguing that only democracy enables individual maturity and autonomy—and further takes into account how strongly he had begun to criticize the state of social interaction and communicative relationships during the same period, because, under the influence of the capitalist economic system, they no longer offered any space for mutual empathy and care, it is easy to imagine that he would have met his student halfway. He might then have conceded that, alongside the rise of instrumental violence in human history, there had also been a countervailing tendency toward the moral assertion of

greater autonomy and fundamental rights—a tendency that would be negligent to disregard, since it points the way toward the requirements of a truly democratic society; and perhaps at this point he would also have admitted that, up to that point, he had accorded the law—as a communicative means of peacefully resolving conflicts of interest—too little importance in his understanding of history. Certainly, however, this admission would still have been far from sufficient to persuade him to now acknowledge, alongside instrumental reason, a second, equally valid form of reason—one that does not aim at control and domination, but rather at communicative agreement in the light of shared reasons. Taking such a step would have been unthinkable for Adorno simply because, if at all, he could only ever conceive of another form of reason along the lines of a "remembrance of nature within the subject" , that is, the liberation of humanity from the delusion of a nature that is entirely determined by laws, in favor of a communicative and responsive engagement with it as a life-sustaining source of all living things. At the very least, however, he could have conceded to Habermas that such a different relationship to nature is reflected in the horizontal dimension of social relations, in forms of social interaction in which one person acknowledges the other in their own will and their inalienable individuality—not as a second or different form of reason, but as a foreshadowing of what might yet come in the future in terms of communicative reconciliation with nature. Habermas did not allow himself to be intimidated by Adorno's insistence in the further development of his work that we should reserve the concept of such a different, non-instrumental reason only for relationships in which nature would no longer be objectified, but rather "liberated"; however, the question of what exactly it means to speak of the integration of all human reason —including communicative reason—into nature, as he himself did, will remain a persistent thorn in his fictively continued dialogue with Adorno.

While working on his next major monograph, however, Habermas seemed to have temporarily withdrawn from this internal dialogue. He now sought to give discourse-ethics —which he had since further developed together with Karl-Otto Apel and which had only begun to emerge in the *Theory of communicative action*—a stronger orientation toward legal theory, in order to deepen his original reflections on the significance of public deliberation for democratic communities. In doing so, he consciously built upon the legal-theoretical work of the early Frankfurt Institute, which had been advanced by Franz Neumann and Otto Kirchheimer and which Adorno, due to his initial distrust of the normative power of law, had found of little value at the time. I will trace this phase in Habermas's work only briefly, up to the point where the decisive turning points become clear—points at which even the later Adorno, despite his now

greatly increased confidence in democracy, would likely still have raised objections.

4. Democracy and Difference

In his book *Between Facts and Norms*, Habermas returns, in a sense, to his roots by revisiting the topic of the civic public sphere with the help of his discourse ethics—developed in the 1980s—and further developing it into a theory of the democratic constitutional state. However, the method by which he now addresses this topic is no longer that of a normatively inspired historiography, but rather that of a reconstructive procedure that attempts, as it were, to logically derive the normative prerequisites of a democracy from the requirements for the institutional stabilization of a collectively self-governing community. Typical of this new approach—which reveals a clear departure from Hegel and a complementary alignment with Kant and John Rawls—is the very contract-theoretical question with which Habermas opens his inquiry: What fundamental rights, he asks hypothetically, would citizens have to grant one another if they wished to legitimately regulate their coexistence through positive, state-enacted law? Habermas explains at the outset why he believes he must frame his study of the normative conditions of a democracy on the basis of this question, citing the process of rationalization of the lifeworld that we have already encountered in the *Theory of Communicative Action*: According to Habermas, this process has advanced so far in the course of modernity that even the last remnants of a collectively shared morality—which had formerly intrinsically motivated individuals to set aside their private interests and take the common good into account—have now melted away; he is therefore convinced that, under the conditions of modern societies, morality must be replaced by state law, which establishes the necessary degree of agreement in communicative action no longer through subjective convictions but through sanctions that can, if necessary, enforce compliance with socially agreed-upon rules. Based on this historical rationale—the now-necessary shift from the social mode of integration provided by morality to that of positive law—Habermas now puts the following question into the mouths of his methodologically constructed citizens: What fundamental rights would they grant one another if they wished to regulate their coexistence in a manner acceptable to all?

As self-evident as this methodological opening move may sound—Kant, Rawls, and even Durkheim have taken a similar approach—the next step is all the more surprising, indeed once again ingenious, in which Habermas, together with his citizens, answers the initial question posed to them; he believes they would agree to jointly reserve the right to always decide in public discourse for

themselves which subjective rights they grant one another in each instance, so that they may exercise their individual freedoms together. In the language Habermas chooses, this means that the realization of popular sovereignty—the people's right to democratic self-determination—is co-originated with the constitution of subjective rights to individual freedoms in the sense that both are mutually dependent and must constantly be brought into a new balance: Citizens can participate in public self-legislation only if, as addressees of the law, they grant themselves the necessary freedoms in the form of subjective rights; and they can do this, in turn, only if, as authors of the law, they continually and consensually redefine the content of these subjective rights.

For Habermas, the dynamic that thus flows into the communicative process of democratic self-legislation arises from the explosive force of the normative claims that countless others—both from outside and from within—can direct, in the name of their previously unheard voices, toward the discursively agreed-upon balance between collective and individual autonomy: From outside the demos—which is entitled to legislate—demands may be made to be admitted into the circle of citizens entitled to participate in decision-making, on the grounds that one is already affected by its decisions; and from within the demos, complaints may be raised that one's subjective rights are not being adequately taken into account, because these rights do not sufficiently consider the restrictive conditions of one's own life situation. The task of articulating these various objections to the respective legal regulations in a way that resonates with the so far unheard voices now falls, in turn, to the social institution that Habermas had placed at the center of his democratic-theoretical reflections from the very beginning: a public sphere supported by the general public, which is now, however, viewed less from the perspective of its justifying and scrutinizing role than from that of its innovative contribution to uncovering ideological one-sidedness and biases in democratic self-legislation. Within the framework of fundamental rights, which is permanently enshrined in the constitutions of democratic states, the public process of will-formation by the people must therefore, for Habermas, always remain a project open to the future; he considers the democratic process to be open-ended up to the point where the fundamental principles themselves would be violated—principles that guarantee all those affected by the decisions an equal role as both the addressees and the authors of every legislative change.

These brief hints must suffice to briefly raise the question of how Adorno might have reacted to this book by his younger colleague—the only one, incidentally, that made no reference whatsoever to his own work. He would certainly have appreciated the vibrant, innovative element that Habermas had transplanted into the heart of democratic processes with his emphasis on the role of the

public sphere in bringing problems to light; it would have aligned with his view that we can never be certain whether, in our struggle for more just forms of democratic coexistence, we have already sufficiently taken into account all facets of the other's non-identity. But the methodological approach by which Habermas had arrived at this conclusion would, without a doubt, have deeply alienated Adorno; Like Hegel, he would have asked what advantages the methodological device of a deliberative decision-making process among citizens conceived as free would offer with regard to the question of a normatively appropriate form of democracy, when so much that is desirable had already been projected into the very framework of such an imagined deliberative process in advance, rather than being distilled immanently from the already institutionalized legal principles. In response, Habermas could in turn counter, echoing Rawls, that he had done nothing other than hermeneutically elucidate the necessary self-understanding of citizens living together in a democracy and recursively interpret the principles presupposed necessarily by them. The discussion between the two would thus revolve for a time around the question of how much of Hegel's "spirit" is actually present in Habermas's own method, if he understands it as an explication of the normative principles on which the members of a democratic constitutional state must have always already agreed. But even if Adorno had been able to concede this, Habermas's approach would likely still have seemed to him too dependent on a series of unfounded idealizations; would Habermas not, he would ask, have to presuppose a political culture in which citizens act exclusively with a view to mutual understanding and have therefore already overcome all malicious affects within themselves? Perhaps Adorno would even use this point in their discussion to raise the question that had long preoccupied him: whether communicative action could indeed be adequately interpreted solely as a linguistic phenomenon, and whether, as a result, one would have to lose sight of all the elements of affective transference and desire involved in it. Yet, if one were to keep these irrational elements in view, Adorno might continue, it would also become clear what dangers constantly threaten democracy from diffuse impulses stemming from the fear of social boundaries being dissolved and the emergence of new freedoms—a theory of democracy without psychoanalytic insights into the depths of collective reliance on authority and the formation of prejudice would have remained, for him, too much of a mere ideal theory. On this one point—and only on this one—Adorno and Habermas had drawn opposite conclusions from the civilizational rupture caused by National Socialism: While the elder believed he had to continue incorporating politically volatile emotions into his analyses of contemporary democratic society for the sake of a prophylactic realism, the younger sought to keep them out of his theory of democracy for the

time being—as if to ward off their dangerous, unpredictable potential—and was willing to accept a touch of idealization in return. If we were to break off the imaginary dialogue between Adorno and Habermas at this sensitive point, it would likely not have found a fruitful path even after a few more rounds.

5. The Natural Roots of Reason

As if Habermas had by then come to feel that the distance between himself and Adorno's intellectual legacy had become too great, he returns—on various occasions following *Between Facts and Norm* —to the question left open between the two of them: how the natural embeddedness of human reason ought to be properly understood. For Adorno, as we have already seen, this meant having to step back from the worldview of instrumental reason in order to see that we are always embedded in the natural processes of a living nature and owe our liberating and redemptive insights solely to an intellectual sublimation of its productive forces; only in recollections of states prior to the subject-object separation in instrumental reason do we become aware that we not only originate from nature but must interact with it in order to liberate our original rational faculties. However, Habermas has so far been unwilling to take the step toward suspending our scientistic understanding of nature that Adorno was prepared to take; in his internal dialogue with his teacher, he had previously always insisted that any allusion to a nature no longer conceived as an object would risk a relapse behind the achievements of post-metaphysical thinking. However, this strict defensive stance began to crumble step by step in Habermas's thinking at the dawn of the new millennium; in his parallel engagements with naturalism—which had gained massive strength through brain and genetic research—on the one hand, and the legacy of the Judeo-Christian religion on the other, a new phase in his thinking began, in which he moved surprisingly close once again to Adorno's critique of an instrumentalist understanding of nature. For the history of Critical Theory, this moment of rapprochement between Adorno and Habermas is of the utmost importance, because it determines which understanding of nature will guide it in the future, even under post-metaphysical conditions.

In his critique of prevailing naturalism, Habermas initially agrees with Adorno on a point that seems to concern only the subjective nature of human beings. Even now, he is not yet willing to completely abandon the epistemological premise—which he has defended since *Knowledge and Human Interests* —that we humans must learn to understand nature as a law-governed entity in order to be able to intervene in it in ways that benefit our physical safety and material well-being; the cognitive disclosure of an objectified nature remains unobjectionable to him

as long as it does not interfere with the sense of freedom of rationally acting subjects themselves. For him, however, this point has already been crossed in the present, because with the emergence of brain research and genetic engineering, two sciences have developed that attempt to grasp the spiritual nature of human beings themselves exclusively in terms of causality and regularity. For Habermas, this epistemic encroachment has two consequences, which he describes—drawing on Adorno—as steps toward a conceptual reification of human subjectivity that widens the gap to our "performatively indestructible sense of freedom" : If we were to begin to conceive of our natural dispositions as having been pre-selected and determined through genetic manipulation, then, first of all, we could no longer understand ourselves as persons who are the authors of our own life and who must therefore, each in their own way, shape the natural scope of their future lives out of their randomly acquired bodies. Any manipulative intervention in the human genome, however well-intentioned its purpose may be, would therefore, from Habermas's perspective, violate the natural preconditions to which our sense of individual freedom is inextricably bound.[1]

But that is not all; secondly, in his view, the naturalistic objectification of human beings also threatens to undermine and destroy the specific nature of human intersubjectivity from within: For the more today's naturalism insists on explaining human behavior by appealing to causes rather than comprehensible reasons—that is, to causal determinants rather than thoughts and feelings—the more we lose sight of the fact that behind every interaction partner in communication lies an irreplaceably unique individual who possesses individual convictions whose meaning can only be understood hermeneutically.[2] According to Habermas, however, we are constantly dependent on such an hermeneutical understanding of other people in our everyday practice, because without their agreement we could not know at all whether our respective experiences of the world can be considered certain and reliable. In this respect, the specific nature of human intersubjectivity consists, from Habermas' perspective, in the constant alternation between the observer's and the participant's perspectives, between observant behavior and dialogical interaction: We constantly relate to the world in an observant manner , but we can only know whether we can rely on the experiences we gain in the process if we simultaneously relate to other people in an understanding manner, people who can confirm or reject our experiences.[3] At this point, Habermas takes a step that actually brings him very close to the understanding of nature that Adorno upheld throughout his life. He asserts, in

[1] See also: Jürgen Habermas, **The Future of Human Nature: Toward a Liberal Eugenics?**, Frankfurt/M., 2001.
[2] Habermas, "I Myself Am, After All, a Part of Nature," op. cit., p. 211.
[3] Ibid., p. 214.

fact, that this intertwining of the participant's and observer's perspectives—which is characteristic of our communicative existence—arose "simultaneously with the cultural form of life itself."[4] As unassuming as this sentence may seem, the statement it implicitly contains is powerful, even daring; for it says nothing less about objective nature than that, at some point in its evolution, it made a leap that suddenly gave rise to a new realm of freedom out of a realm of mere causality —for this is precisely what Habermas means when he states that nature itself has brought forth with humans a being that is no longer strictly subject to its own dictates, because this being must always first examine them—in argumentative exchange, that is, from the perspective of the participant—for their social consequences and intersubjective reliability. Habermas grapples with the question of how the assertion of such a rupture in the history of nature can be conceived under the conditions of post-metaphysical thought throughout much of his later work. In doing so, he faces two alternatives, neither of which seems entirely comfortable to him: Either he returns to a pre-scientific understanding of nature, as Adorno advocated throughout his life with his thesis that only by suspending our instrumentalist worldview can we grasp nature in its productive vitality; or he could join the scientifically intended attempts in the pragmatist tradition of Charles Sanders Peirce or John Dewey to conceive of nature cosmologically as a goal-oriented learning process that culminates in the sociocultural form of life of language-endowed beings. In his last major work, *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie* (*Also a History of Philosophy*), however, Habermas rejects both alternatives with specific arguments; he is still unwilling to take Adorno's path because it seems to him to lead back into metaphysics, and he cannot follow the path of Peirce and Dewey because he does not yet see sufficient evidence for such cosmological speculations within the natural sciences themselves.[5] He thus leaves unanswered the problem of how we are to reconcile our causal conception of nature with the simultaneous assertion of our communicative freedom; though in a single passage of his last book he does state, albeit quite vaguely, that there might one day be research that "develops a concept of learning that allows us to trace animal learning processes—as the precursor to our sociocultural learning processes—all the way back into organic nature." Until then, however, Habermas concludes, the problem of naturalism—already raised by Kant—remains unsolvable for him.

One can interpret this candid admission as the final word in the dialogue that Habermas has been conducting, albeit implicitly and continuously, ever since his first encounter with Adorno. But let us now imagine for a brief moment that Habermas had, in his later work, conceded that we might well conceive of the

[4] Ibid., p. 215.

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history of nature—in line with Peirce or Dewey—as a continuous process in which intellectual potentials are constantly expanding until they reach their full flowering in the communicative use of language by human beings. Under this hypothetical premise, he would then have been able, like Adorno, to interpret the social history of humanity as an event that threatens to interrupt the progressive development of nature, because the dominance of instrumental or functionalist reason transforms the living into the dead, and the flow of communication into something merely lawful or mechanical: In the culture of capitalism—a term coined by Max Weber that Habermas did not use, but could easily have employed—two social systems, the capitalist market and state bureaucracy, come to dominate and begin to destroy what nature, in the course of its evolution, has bestowed upon us as a special capacity: the freedom of communicative understanding. Admittedly, as mentioned, Habermas never went so far as to assert this and thereby give Adorno's ideas of a derailed natural history a communicative-theoretical twist; but this motif from the philosophy of history lies, like an unfulfilled yet ever-preserved promise, in many of his writings, from *Knowledge and Interest* through *The Theory of Communicative Action* to the final section of *Also a History of Philosophy*.

Habermas was certainly not a loyal and authority-worshipping disciple of his teacher; he did not follow him in prioritizing aesthetics over all other modes of knowledge, and by emphasizing human communicative reason, he ultimately forged his own path in the further development of Critical Theory. Yet Jürgen Habermas never became disloyal to or betrayed his teacher; even when he delved into the finest intricacies of speech-act theory or sought to meticulously justify his ethics of discourse, he did so with the awareness that, alongside Adorno, he had to defend reason against its pathological distortions by the capitalist way of life. That admission—that he was ultimately unable to resolve the problem of naturalism—can therefore be read as a sign of this lifelong loyalty; while Adorno sought to remain in solidarity with metaphysics at the very moment of its downfall, Habermas felt he had to leave open the possibility that, in our efforts toward reason, we might yet hope for a nature that comes to meet us.