

GENUINE COMMUNICATION : A HABERMASIAN APPROACH

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One of the important contributions of Habermas is the notion of "ideal speech situation" which serves as a regulative goal of human existence. It is definitely an advancement over the conclusions of Adorno and Horkheimer¹ as Habermas moves forward in a pragmatic way to show how this could be realised. He has successfully shown how the ideal speech situation would make the social relations more meaningful. Equal communicative understanding is possible, according to Habermas, when the hierarchy between the speakers is transcended by ideal speech situation. The first step in this process is that there should exist a symmetrical distribution of chances among the speakers to choose and apply speech-acts. In other words, if those who involved in the discourse, are given equal opportunities in communication, then there is no place for distorted communication. Quite often, our communication has been distorted by the asymmetrical distribution where there is a hierarchy among persons involved in discourse.

This paper attempts to study the importance of Habermas's ideal speech situation which serves as a necessity for human existence. The first part deals with the differentiation in "knowledge-constitutive interests" on which Habermas develops his notion of ideal speech situation. How he dismantles the systematic distortion of communication and prescribes the ideal of communicative competence, forms the second part of the paper. The third part attempts to explain that the ideal speech situation is not a mere myth but something which could be realised, by analyzing some of the criticisms, especially of Paul Ricoeur.

I

For Habermas, it is vital to make the distinction between work and interaction and the latter, according to him, is the basis of the communicative and symbolic activities through which social life is constituted. This made him to formulate the distinction among the three types of knowledge-constitutive interests which govern all human activities. The pluralism of interests are :

- (i) empirical-analytical interest in potential control,
(i.e., instrumental interest)
- (ii) hermeneutic-historical interest in understanding,
(i.e., practical interest) and
- (iii) critical-emancipator interest in freedom and autonomy.

The above differentiation is necessary for Habermas in order to disprove the claim made by the positivists that knowledge is identified by a single interest. By rejecting such a claim, Habermas explains how to distinguish these three basic forms of our scientific interests in knowing about the world and how they underlie all cognitive activities whether we are conscious of it or not.

In empirical-analytical interest, the validity depends on the technical exploitability. It is rooted in a desire for political control over external nature. In his study of Peirce's pragmatism, Habermas explains how it vitiates the narrow scientist and naive objectivism which could be seen in the writings of early positivism. He also conjectures why Peirce accedes to a concealed positivism and says that Peirce's pragmatic criterion of meaning in fact, destroys the foundation of pragmatism itself. "Had Peirce taken seriously the communication of investigators as a transcendental subject forming itself under empirical conditions, then pragmatism would have been compelled to a self-reflection that overstepped its own boundaries"², says Habermas. The ground of inter-subjectivity is not the ground of purposive-rational action which pragmatism of Peirce is interested in. It is the symbolic interaction between subjects who reciprocally know and recognise each other as individuals. This communicative action, in Habermas's view, is a system of reference that cannot be reduced to the framework of instrumental action³. In the behavioural system of instrumental action, the language is monologic due to the three modes of inference, namely, deduction, induction and abduction⁴. But communicative

action is a dialogue and has a system of reference which cannot be conceived in the behavioural system of instrumental action. In dialogue, the mode of knowledge is linked to the framework of symbolic interaction. Habermas observes :

...every dialogue develops on entirely different basis, namely that of the reciprocal recondition of subjects who identify one another under the category of self hood (*Ichheit*) and at the same time maintain themselves in their non-identity. The concept of the individual ego includes a dialectical relation of the universal and the particular, which cannot be conceived in the behavioural system of instrumental action⁵.

All purely interpretative or humanistic approaches are guided by hermeneutic-historical interests. This practical interest supports a model of communicative action where there is inter-subjective action. It is not only hermeneutical but also historical because the meanings that come to constitute societies are the outcome of the development of historical tradition. Habermas is of the view that these kinds of interests do not constitute an exhaustive approach to the study of social phenomena. They are restricted by the limits of the medium of language which can be seen in the writings of Wittgenstein and Gadamer⁶. Habermas analyses the writings of Dilthey to explain how the object of the cultural sciences is the interpretation of meaningful structures. Dilthey's understanding that the ordinary language is the ground of the inter subjectivity is appreciated by Habermas. "Whereas empirical-analytic methods aim at disclosing and comprehending reality under the transcendental... hermeneutic methods aim at maintaining the inter subjectivity of mutual understanding in ordinary language communion and in action according to common norms"⁷. The knowledge constitutive interest of the cultural sciences is practical because of the presupposition of practice involved in them. But Habermas makes it clear that the hermeneutic-historical cannot do a complete justice to the study of social phenomena because of their claim to self-sufficiency and universality. In Gadamer, for example, the growing of all knowledge in tradition cut him off from appreciating the system of social labour and power potentially distort consciousness. Thus in the empirical-analytic sciences, there is a total denial of the critical approach and in the hermeneutic-historical science, there is a pre-understanding of traditional heritage. Hence, there is a need for the third kind a interest, namely, critical-emancipator interest which points towards an

ideal space for free communication unmasking the hidden systematic distortions.

Habermas admits that the third kind of interest is simply special case of the hermenutic-historical one.⁸ The main difference is that emancipatory interest involves a different attitude toward meanings. It is not a mere description and understanding but to criticize and transform them. This means that values and norms have social functions linked to social and cultural reproduction. A special feature of this kind of interest is that a cognitive activity unites both empirical and normative theorizing. It is here that there is a shift from the empirical analysis of "what is" to the normative analysis of "what ought to be". In the empirical analysis, it is a mere study of how power relations constrain the realization of human potentials and lead to distorted communication. Whereas a normative analysis aims at an ideal speech situation where falsifying consciousness would be reduced because communication here assumes the form of authentic dialogue not based on asymmetrical relations of power. Habermas declares that in the power of self-reflection, knowledge and interest are one. The importance of interest in emancipation is explained as follows :

.... only in an emancipated society, whose members' autonomy and responsibility had been realised, would communication have developed into the non-authoritarian and universally practical dialogue from which both our model of reciprocally constituted ego identity and our idea of true consensus are always implicitly derived.⁹

The unity of knowledge and interest proves itself in a dialectic which takes the historical traces of suppressed dialogue and reconstructs what has been suppressed, says Habermas.¹⁰ This makes his position clear that only in the ideal speech situation, there is a genuine dialogue where there is no hierarchy between the speakers.

Thus Habermas tries to argue that all knowledge is basically guided by interests. The modern positivism which has a totally detached impersonal and valued system of "Objectivity" has been thus completely rejected. By narrating the distinction between instrumental and practical interests which are concerned with control and survival, and mutual understanding respectively, Habermas proves how the emancipator interest is concerned with the freedom from a dogmatic and controlling past. He admits that the form of social action here is communication which is made possible through ideal speech situation. This

means that only in critical science, a naturalistic and suitable interpretation is possible. Thus, critical theory, according to Habermas aims at "ideal speech situation".

II

The ideal speech situation is explicitly known by the basic distinction which Habermas makes between action and discourse. In any successful discourse, the speakers involved-in must have reciprocity. "The competent speakers must reciprocally maintain with each of their speech-acts", says Habermas. There are four conditions to be fulfilled in a discourse.

- (i) intelligibility of the utterance,
- (ii) the truth of the propositional content,
- (iii) the correctness of the performatory component, and
- (iv) the sincerity of the speaking subject.

If all these conditions are satisfied, then communication is not only complete but also unproblematic. In his *Theory and Practice*, Habermas says :

The declarative claim to truth and the normative claim to correctness are, claims of validity which can be proven only in discourse. The factual recognition of these claims bases itself in every case, even that of error, on the possibility of the discursive validation of the claims made.¹¹

The meaningful of language and its usage can become a complete process only in the form of a discourse. Those who participate in the discourse no longer seek to exchange information or to convey experiences, but rather to place arguments for the justification of validity claims. All authentic discourse aims at a regulative ideal of universal, unrestricted communication.

The result of a discourse is decided by the force of better argument alone. This Habermas calls "rational motivation". The logic of discourse is pragmatic and not deductive. This means that in the logic of discourse, argument is based on speech-acts. Ultimately, it is the speech acts which shapes the logic of discourse. The condition under which the force of better argument alone would prevail is made possible, according to Habermas, by the theory of communicative competence. As a theory, it talks about the general conditions of communication.

It, in other words, explains the qualifications which a competent speaker must possess in order to engage in the process of communication. Chomsky's theory of linguistic competence has been developed by Habermas into a theory of communicative competence. Pointing to the limitation of the Chomskian notion of linguistic competence, he says :

.... it is not enough to understand language communication as an application - limited by empirical conditions - of linguistic competence ... On the contrary, in order to participate in normal discourse, the speaker must have - in addition to his linguistic competence - basic qualifications of speech and of symbolic interaction (role-behaviour) at his disposal, which we may call communicative competence.¹²

A close examination of the theory of communicative competence would prove how Habermas deviates himself from the traditional methods of Austin and Searle. For example, ordinary language philosophy restricts itself to the description, of typical speech-acts applied in particular situations, whereas in the theory of communicative competence, it is the reconstruction of the system of rules so that sentences in any situation can be known or understood. In the paper, "What is universal pragmatics?", Habermas makes it clear that his theoretical framework has to do with the reconstruction of the system of rules which underlies the ability of a subject to express sentences in *any* situation.^{1 3}

Habermas contends that there are four categories of expressions recognised as dialogue-constitutive universals, which are necessary for communicative competence. First, the personal pronouns and their derivatives which form a reference system between potential speakers, allowing each participant to take the roles of "I" and "you" simultaneously. Secondly, articles and demonstrative pronouns which form the reference system of possible denotations. Thirdly, greetings and interrogations as communicative speech-acts. Finally, the constative, representative and regulative speech-acts which form a system. In the process of communication, we are bound to employ these categories of expressions. The theory of communicative competence provides the means for the construction of an ideal speech situation, where nothing would obstruct a communicative exchange between the participants of a discourse. The structure of communication itself produces no constraints, observes Habermas, if and only if, among all possible participants, there is a symmetrical distribution of chances to choose and to apply speech-acts. The point there is that there is

equality among the potential participants and they have the same chance to discuss and argue through dialogues. It implies that no pre-conceptions decide the result of the argument. Nothing is hidden and everything is transparent among the potential participants. To order and to prohibit, to obey and to refuse, to accept and to reject, all the participants will have equal rights and opportunities. The ideal speech situation is neither an empirical phenomenon nor merely a construct, but rather an unavoidable reciprocal presupposition of discourse. It is not a mere anticipation or speculative issue but a practical hypothesis which could be realised.

The main objective of Habermas's ideal speech situation is to reduce the existing obstructions to the attainment of genuine social relations. Presently, equal communicative exchange is obstructed by different types of problems. Only in ideal speech situation, these obstructions are removed thus making the genuine social relations possible. By their words and actions, the potential participants will possess equal opportunity to initiate discussion which will be transparent. The privileged positions among the participants naturally distort communication which is due to unequal distribution. In distorted communication, there is always a divergence from the recognised system of linguistic communication. Also, there is a rigid and compulsory repetition of behavioural patterns which would lead to the disintegration of linguistic symbols, actions, patterns and expressions. Thus the ideal speech situation, for Habermas, is a critical standard which will help us to identify and dismantle the limitations which prohibit symmetrical democratic system of communication. Only in such idealized dialogue, a form of life which will guarantee the ultimate be realized.

Genuine communication thus is based on the principles of liberty and consensus and not on domination and power. It occurs only when and insofar as the participants' actions are oriented toward an agreement that presupposes the mutual recognition by both parties of "corresponding validity claims of comprehensibility, truthfulness (in the sense of sincerity) and rightness (in the sense of moral justness) and moreover that terminates in the inter-subjective mutuality of (their) reciprocal understanding, shared knowledge, mutual trust, and accord with one another".¹⁴ In ideal speech situation, we are not in search of a retrieval of lost meaning but an anticipation of possible meaning. By deciphering and dismantling the distorted communication, the ideal of communicative competence could be possibly attained. The point which

Habermas tries to focus here is that communication is not prior understanding but posterior understanding which will emerge. It gives the possibility of correct understanding. This possibility is to be achieved by critical theory and interest in emancipation. The ideal speech situation does not involve any pre-condition of understanding. It is a universal ideal which requires the free participation of individual subjects responding to social situations.

The theory of ideal speech situation has raised doubts about the critical theory of Habermas among the critics. The debate between hermeneutics and critical theory was initiated by the publication of Habermas's *On the Logic of Social Sciences* in 1967 (Eng. trans. 1988), which makes a critical study of Gadamer's *Truth and Method* and was followed by a dialogue between these two thinkers. Commenting on this dialogue, Ricoeur says that this debate is an antinomy between participation and alienation. For Ricoeur, critical theory presupposes hermeneutics in a way that vitiates its claim to an independent epistemological status. He objects to the third type of interest, namely, the interest in emancipation if it is not founded on the second type of interest, i.e., practical interests. Ricoeur raises two questions in this regard :

- (i) How do we know that the interest in emancipation stands at the summit of the hierarchy of interests?

Is it possible to distinguish and, even more so, to oppose the interest in emancipation and the practical interest still called interest in communication?¹⁵

Ricoeur attempts to mediate between the practical and emancipatory interest and offer a practical solution to the antinomy of values. He contends that Habermas's ideal speech situation which tries to avoid distortions of communication would be empty unless it is supported by the reinterpretation of the past. In "Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology", Ricoeur says :

..... the ideal of communication is precisely our capacity to overcome cultural distance in the interpretation of works received from the past. He who is unable to reinterpret his past may also be incapable of projecting concretely his interest in emancipation.¹⁶

Thus for Ricoeur, to avoid distorted communication and to formulate the ideal speech situation, the past has to be reinterpreted. It is also argued against

the interest in emancipation that it is cyclical process and the cycle from domination to emancipation recurs over and again through various human epochs. What appears as emancipation on to-day's horizon is a domination of tomorrow's fore-ground.¹⁷

But although these criticisms point out some of the limitations of the Habermasian programmer, they are not widely separated from that of Habermas as they appear to be. He comes very close to Ricoeur on two points. First of all, Habermas does not belittle the role of practical interest. In fact, he shows the advantages of practical interest over instrumental interest and admits that emancipatory interest is not an entirely new type of interest; it is the continuation of practical interest. Secondly, it is not difficult for Habermas to accept the Ricoeurian position that the reinterpretation of the past is essential for an ideal communication. The question comes only with regard to the extent to which one depends on the reinterpretation of the past. Similarly, the criticism that emancipation is a cyclical process can be answered from the standpoint of dialogical activity. The basic idea in supporting the emancipatory interest is to show how it can help us in understanding social relations. It teaches how to make the dialogical activity more acceptable and meaningful. It tries to provide conditions for the possibility of communication through consensus. The problem before us is to free ourselves from the constraining situation and Habermas attempts a solution in a pragmatic way by transcending the hidden interests of domination and power.

NOTES

1. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming, (London : Allen Lane, 1973).
2. Jurgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans, Jeremy J. Shapiro, (London : Heinemann, 1972), p. 137.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 138-139.

6. Jurgen Habermas, *On the Logic of the Social Sciences*, trans. Shiere Weber NicholSEN and Jerry A. Stark, (Cambridge : Polity Press, 1988), See Chapter III, Section 6 & 7.
7. *Knowledge and Human Interest*, p. 176.
8. Paul Ricoeur, "Ethics and Culture" Trans. David Pellaue, in *Philosophy Today*, vol. xvii, No. 2/4, summer 1973, pp. 153-165.
9. *Knowledge and Human Interests*, p. 314.
10. *Ibid.*, 315.
11. Jurgen Habermas, *Theory and Practice*, p. 18.
12. Jurgen Habermas, "Toward a Theory of Communicative Competence", in *Recent Sociology*, No. 2, ed. Hans Peter Dreitzel, (New York: Macmillian 1970), p. 138.
13. Jurgen Habermas "What is Universal Pragmatics?" in *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthey, (London : Heinemann, 1979), p. 32.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
15. Paul Ricoeur, *op. cit.*, p. 162.
16. Paul Ricoeur, "Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology", in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences : Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, ed. & trans. John B. Thompson, (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 97.
17. Christopher Broniak, "What is Emancipation for Habermas?" in *Philosophy Today*, vol. 32, No. 3/4, 1988, pp. 205-206.