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Normative aspects of communicative rationality

DOCTORAL THESIS

ABSTRACT

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Summary – Normative aspects of communicative rationality

The topic of the dissertation is the examination of the category of communicative rationality in Jürgen Habermas's social theory and his philosophical concept of communicative action. Within this framework, I analyzed the normative aspects of communicative rationality.

As a social scientist, Jürgen Habermas's work is related to action and systems theory, as a philosopher, he became outstanding as a theoretician of communicative rationality and communicative ethics. His political thinking is closely related to the idea of deliberative democracy, his writings in this sense I did not examine in the thesis.

In our everyday life the experience of continuous changes affecting the social world requires reflection on a collective and individual level. I see the actuality of the topic, as it highlights the role of languale comprehension and communicative experience in our social and individual actions. Our attention is directed to leading questions, such as what defines the motivations and coordination of our actions, how we conform to norms in everyday communication and what conditions determine the dialogue and the processes of understanding. The recognition of the close connection between language and practice is related to the linguistic turn, that took place in philosophical thinking in the XX. century. Furthermore, the scientific examination of social actions in the philosophical-epistemological aspect has formed one of the most fundamental areas of debate in the XX. century.

In the course of this scientific dialogue, Habermas' thinking represents a very specific interdisciplinary point of view, which he developed in his seminal work, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, published in 1981. This social theory program was inspired by his debates with Niklas Luhmann, Thomas Luckmann and Alfred Schütz, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Karl-Otto Apel. Regarding his wide-range work, in the dissertation I refer above all to the analyses of Thomas McCarthy and Albrecht Wellmer from the foreign language literature, respectively to the related writings of Ferenc Tallár and Gábor Felkai within the Hungarian scientific field.

The purpose of the thesis unfolds in two directions. My aim was to reflect on the category of Habermas' communicative rationality from the perspective of intersubjective understanding and the normativity that comes into force in it. In addition, I intended to point out the relevance of understanding processes in everyday, intercultural and scientific communication in an epistemological aspect.

The thesis is based on the idea that communicative rationality, which goes back to the normative roots of modernity and the idea of the public, in Habermas' social theory can be examined within the paradigm of communicative reason and mutual understanding. I also base the analysis on the differentiated concept of rationality, which is rooted in Max Weber's theory of rationalization.

My research hypothesis includes the assumption, that the meaning-organizing conditions of communicative rationality form a way of cognition, that is inherent in the rationality structures and world understanding ways of any era in form of discourses.

In this way, the legitimacy of rationality is not directly linked to reason, but rather is present in the communicative structures of language. The central question of my research hypothesis is whether the social scientific foundation of the concept of communicative rationality really justifies the normativity rooted in language.

In the dissertation, I first connect the concept of communicative rationality to the category of communicative action, based on Habermas' action theory typologies. In a system theory perspective, Habermas' lifeworld concept becomes central, since in his view social processes and individual interpretations of situations can only emerge from this background. As a third key concept, I highlight the rationality of culture, since the practical aspects of communicative rationality can be illustrated mainly in this problem area.

The research method is a theoretical research following a reconstructive procedure. At the same time, as Habermas himself emphasizes, this method of procedure does not exclude futher empirical and practical adaptations, or the application itself, which ultimately forms the basis of the motivation behind Habermas' theoretical endeavors.

The dissertation is structured in five chapters.

In the first chapter entitled – *Modernity, rationality, philosophy in Habermas' thinking* – after introducing the paradigm of communicative reason, I presented Habermas' reinterpretation of the Enlightenment and the reflexive nature of modernity. The purpose of his reinterpretation

was to liberate the instrumentalist concept of modernity and Enlightenment from its one-dimensional meaning, on which Habermas reflects in the context of the critical social theory of Adorno and Horkheimer. The concept of philosophical cognition based on the subject-object objectification relation did not prove to be tenable in Habermas' interpretation, as the former does not grasp the intersubjective nature of understanding meaning and social reality. In his view, the critique of reason rooted in the Young Hegelians' and Nietzsche's philosophy has led to a kind of Counter-Enlightenment, which resulted on the one hand in the crisis of knowledge critique and on the other hand in the relativism of postmodern narratives.

In Habermas' conviction the potential of understanding inherent in the process of free communication and discursive consensus can override the instrumental forms of social interaction. In addition, he emphasizes, that utopian ideas must balance everything that the ideas of the Enlightenment and modernity opposed.

Habermas reaches the concept of rationality emerging in intersubjective communication in his analysis of Max Weber's rationalization theory. Although differentiated forms of rationality are present in Max Weber's theory, they reach their maximum in goal oriented rationality. In the rationalization processes, Habermas recognizes the dual structure of rationality in the categories of actions oriented towards understanding, respectively towards success.

Thereafter, I examined the context of the methodological problem of the social sciences. From a methodological point of view, it can be said, that Habermas' concept of understanding-oriented action incorporates phenomenological, linguistic and hermeneutic considerations as well. In the description of communicative experience, following Wittgenstein, Habermas links the process of intersubjective understanding to the key concepts of colloquial grammar, language-games and rule following.

In the second chapter entitled – *Establishing the concept of communicative action* – following Habermas, I analyzed the phylogenetic roots of communicative action and then attempted to define communicative action by summarizing the characteristics of understanding-oriented communication and communicative rationality.

Through the analysis of language utterances and the coordination of social interactions, Habermas examined the emerging forms of modern structures of consciousness, in which forms of mutual understanding can be demonstrated. In connection with this, the central

question became, in what sense the intersubjectivity rooted in language interactions is implied in the medium of language. Following Mead and Durkheim, Habermas examined the linguistic transformation of the sacred in a phylogenetic analysis. In this regard, I highlighted how the sacred foundations of social integration and socialization are transferred into the environment of linguistic communication and mutual understanding processes.

Habermas leads back the normative power of linguistic communication and, at the same time, the communicative rationality to the speech acts formed in the medium of linguistic grammar, as well as to the related validity claims. In his view, the propositional, normative, and expressive speech acts inherent in linguistic expressions create an environment that can be connected to through yes/no position taking. Following Habermas, the development of normative consciousness can be derived from three universal validity claims diagnosed in language, which represent three forms of possible reference to the world in the forms of truth, rightness and truthfulness. At the same time, I reflected on the action-coordinating aspect of communicative understanding and communicative rationality from Austin's speech act theory. Finally, in terms of the methodology for the investigation of understanding-oriented actions, I pointed out the advantages of formal pragmatics formulated by Habermas.

In the third chapter entitled – *The rationality of the system and lifeworld* – I moved on to the second pillar of the dual construction of Habermas' social theory, namely the analysis of the concept of the lifeworld in terms of system theory. At this point, the problem statement focused on a society concept, which can be examined scientifically. In the analysis of the theorized forms of society as lifeworld and as a system, Habermas came to the conclusion, that in the theoretical concept of the social system, the former must be illustrated simultaneously in the relation to these two, eliminating the limitations of theoretical interpretations derived from subjective experience. In the presentation of Habermas's thought process, I focused on perspectives of Mead's communication theory, Luhmann's system theory and Durkheim's sociology of religion.

Habermas considered it necessary to introduce his own concept of lifeworld, since the concept of lifeworld of phenomenological sociology did not prove to be sufficiently diverse for the reconstruction of the pre-theoretical knowledge. In his view, the lifeworld constitutes a permanent background for the communicative actors, however it is only accessible in detail in a current situation. At the same time, the point of view of those not participating in the interactions requires to assume society as a system as well.

In Luhmann's conviction, the question of rationality it is only reasonable at the level of the system. He theorizes the movement of the meaning not as a function of the subject's activity, but as a function of the meaning producing social systems. Habermas, on the other hand claims, that an empirical system concept is necessary, since the functionalist system concept cannot be applied to society as a whole. He also emphasizes, that social systems exist in temporal life contexts and their complexity can only be grasped formally. Habermas therefore highlights, that the system effects on individuals are to be examined in integration processes.

In the following step, I examined the proposed interpretation of society as both lifeworld and system from the perspectives of social and system integration. The difference between the system- and action-rationality was pointed out by the different nature of rational processes in social and system integration. Following Habermas, the social sphere is integrated within the narrowed system of the lifeworld along the understanding processes, furthermore the rational structures of society are integrated in terms of the functionality of success-oriented action systems.

The central question of the fourth chapter, entitled – *The connection between culture and rationality in Habermas' approach* – is the extent to which the concept of communicative rationality can offer solutions to the practical problems of intercultural dialogue.

I examined the form of rationality that manifests in the medium of culture along the problem of universality demand of the cultures, respectively of the plurality of cultures. I questioned, whether the rationality of culture can be justified within the paradigm of communicative reason so that the idea of truth does not fall apart into relativistic narratives, and to what extent such a concept of rationality can be grasped, which entrusts the idea of truth to the judgment of a communication community.

In the case of culture, Habermas speaks of a differentiated form of rationality, that withdraws itself from the functional nature of the processes of system-like organization. The medium of culture is always shaped in time, space and in *its own* language. At the same time, its specially organized reproduction processes reveal to us the conditions for the possibility of the dialogue, which is always shaping us. At the same time, the attitude of modern consciousness, which is rationalized towards totality, unity and integrity, cannot have a universal aspect in terms of its content. This is pointed out by the heterogeneity of cultures and the differentiation of rationality.

Following Habermas, it is not enough to approach the confrontational experience of different cultures only on the level of value theory. With the concept of communicative rationality, he approaches this problem from the point of view of the formation possibilities of communicative processes. Furthermore, he proposes a model of argumentative discussion for the fulfillment of validity claims, referring to the fact, that consensus cannot be targeted in a rational way in a dialogue that asserts different value judgments, i.e. as a possible form of discursive will formation. It was not my intention to review the Habermasian proposal extensively, but as a conclusion, following McCarthy, it can be stated that the discourses discussing more specific definitions of the "good life" cannot necessarily be integrated into Habermas' idea, that prioritizes the universal validity claims.

In the fifth chapter entitled – *The possibilities of communicative understanding and consensus* – I examined the limits of communicative rationality by involving the perspectives of philosophical hermeneutics. In connection with the consensus problem, I tried to answer the question, to what extent can we consider the concept of the ideal speech community, which theorizes communicative-discursive rationality in the form of a formal-pragmatic model, as utopian.

The hermeneutic reflection, based on an approach more focused on life practice, considers the processes of mutual understanding to be grasped as a state of being in history, embedded in language. Consensus and dialogue as the way of "coming to understanding" are defined in the context of the historically effected conciousness, respectively as the circular movement of the meaning organization of the tradition.

Habermas, on the other hand, derives mutual understanding from the universal pragmatic conditions of language. He claims, that the ability to answer practical questions carrying the idea of truth is the one that leads to the concept of consensus. According to the theory of communicative understanding, the understanding inherent in colloquial communication moves along the normative structure of the language, constantly anticipating the consensus. This continuity takes place as a permanent anticipation of four universal validity claims, which in itself presupposes a performative attitude, but at the same time does not contain strategic elements. Based on his analogy, the difference between "real" and "false" consensus can only be judged according to the assumption of the ideal speech community.

The proposed formal-pragmatic model aims to approach practical discourses through the lens of a formal theory, but at the same time this entails a multitude of practical questions. As

Wellmer pointed out, the consensus is determined above all by the value system formed in the cultural embeddedness of the individuals. In practice, therefore, validity claims do not necessarily override value judgments. Philosophical hermeneutics also reflects on the preliminaryness of being embedded in linguistic tradition, pointing out, that the movement of reflection is not only present in everyday experience in the form of emancipatory communicative rationality. In this way, Habermas' approach renounces the potential situations of learning processes, that are not formed based on the criteria of communicative rationality.

To the question of the extent to which the idea of an ideal speech community can be judged as utopian, our answer is, that the former is essentially a utopian idea, so it consciously carries idealistic features within itself. According to Habermas, we do not need to assume the idealized form of everyday speech situations in an effortful way on a theoretical and practical level, since this assumption is immanently present in the normative structure of language.

Conclusion

I consider the research hypothesis, which asked about the verifiability of the normativity rooted in language, by the social theoretical and epistemological concept of communicative rationality, respectively within the paradigm of communicative reason and mutual understanding as well founded, since the normative structure of language can be experienced in the medium of intersubjective communication. At the same time, the proposed formal-pragmatic framework can be questioned in practical terms. The complexity arising in practical discourses and the uniqueness of situations must also be taken into consideration.

The double-structured concepts of Habermas' theoretical thinking provided an opportunity to theoretically emphasize the relevance of understanding and agreement processes in everyday life as well as in social, political and institutional context. The purpose of the individual contribution was to point out, that although the model of discursive will formation can be refuted in itself, but as a principle it is without an alternative, since communication and cooperation are irreplaceable in the processes of socialization.

The dissertation asserts an interdisciplinary point of view, which is also why I see the problem statement as beneficial, as it opens up perspectives for many scientific and everyday areas of linguistic communication. The interdisciplinary research of Habermas' social theory

in Hungarian language in terms of philosophical and epistemological aspects is relatively narrow, therefore I consider the dissertation as an individual contribution to it.

As a partial result of my own research, in recent years I have summarized and published my analyzes related to the topic of the dissertation in the form of several studies with the following titles: *The relationship between rationality and language in the structures of the lifeworld*, *Habermas' concept of culture and rationality*, *The normative and symbolic background of communicative rationality* and *Publishing perspectives in the modern public sphere*.