Is dialectics 'history'?[1]

Frederik van Gelder

> „dialectics is the self-awareness of the objective context of delusion" – T.W. Adorno.

Dialectics, as a specific form of knowledge, with its origins in Kant and German Idealism and its systematics in a 'critique' of the 'whole' of knowledge and of contemporary society, has more or less disappeared from current philosophical discourse. With the exception of Jürgen Habermas and a few of his followers, a form of knowledge which seeks to comprehend the 'totality' of Being in all of its subjective and objective 'mediations' seems, today, of interest only to a few doughty Hegel-specialists – for Analytic Philosophy it has long counted as a kind of 'type fossil' for 'irrationalism'.[2] 'Dialectics' is one of those few terms that can still get one into quite an altercation in philosophy even today – and in intellectual circles generally. Whereas in one of the standard philosophy reference works on the Continent (the 14-volume Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie), there's a 60-page plus research article on this one lemma 'dialectics' – a collaborative project by 10 or more scholars, including a 1000-plus bibliography[3], showing that it's perfectly possible to write an

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1 9th May 2007. Melbourne U.

2 John Passmore, *A Hundred years of Philosophy*, p. 466: „... that fundamental opposition between British and Latin-Teutonic philosophy on which I have several times insisted ... "...if most British philosophers are convinced that Continental metaphysics is arbitrary, pretentious and mind-destroying, Continental philosophers are no less confident that British empiricism is philistine, pedestrian and soul-destroying." There are really two competing narratives within the philosophy of the last hundred years: the Anglo"Saxon, liberal-technocratic one in which it's autonomous individuality occupying centre stage; and the Hegelian"inspired concentration on the forces shaping that same individuality „ something not well rendered by the English term 'mediated'.

3 "The history of the term dialectic would by itself constitute a considerable history of philosophy" (Barbara Cassin, ed., *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies*, Paris, 2004.

entire history of Western philosophy by doing no more than trace out the etymology of this one word, in English there is, as far as one can ascertain, nothing comparable.[4] It's as if Karl Popper's philippic against what he saw as the root cause of all evil in the world still places a kind of taboo on the subject, or perhaps analytic philosophy – with its very successful forays into linguistics, cognitive science, computer science – is now so deeply embedded in this scientific-technical civilization of ours, this system of globalized competition that seems to have become the ultima ratio, the final word on everything, that the very attempt at seeking a vantage point from which all of this can be 'relativised', from which the 'other' of reason could swing into our ken, that this whole quixotic quest (if that is what it is) has now indeed become 'history' in the colloquial meaning of my title. In the sense of: antiquated, out of date, on a par with phlogiston and Ptolemaic spheres. But perhaps this is also a matter of different historical experiences and the way these get symbolically encoded over time – and we've simply had to wait for the animosities aroused by two world wars to subside for it to be possible to examine, sine ire et studio, with the distance that comes with hindsight, what it was that the generation of Russell and Wittgenstein,

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4 With this one exception: it has now re-emerged (as an issue, expressed in a different terminology) in the confrontation between historical and philosophical approaches to currently controversial terms such as freedom, democracy, modernity and enlightenment. (c.f. Jonathan Israel, 1991: The Anglo-Dutch moment – essays on the Glorious Revolution and its world impact; by the same author 2001: Radical Enlightenment – philosophy and the making of modernity 1650-1750.). Just as this was the case within the 'left-Hegelianism' of a century ago, it is a controversy which revolves around differing methodological approaches to the same terms used by philosophers and historians. Who were Descartes, Spinoza, Voltaire, Hume and Kant? (Or for that matter, on a more 'positivist' reckoning, Galileo, Newton and Einstein?) What did they stand for and what do they represent? Philosophers, even when they reach quite antithetical conclusions on these canonic authors, do so on the basis of a 'life-and-works' approach: via textual analysis, 'close reasoning', logical argumentation and biographical depiction. – if they don't simply subsume them under a 'history of science' heading in the first place. Not so historians, who, when analysing e.g. that key period in the making of the modern world – say from the Reformation to the French Revolution – accept sociological and other data to a much greater extent than even 'Continental' philosophers are prepared to countenance. Even a phrase like 'from Reformation to French Revolution' itself assumes that shift of focus that is at issue here: it suggests a unity at the 'macro' level, something discernable when we scrutinise the 'total' picture, which as philosophers delving into the minutiae of the controversies themselves (say: Hume versus Kant) we tend to miss. Our canonic group, from Descartes to Hume and Kant, made an indelible mark on modernity – but then so did guns, germs and steel. Not to mention the authors of the American Constitution, the British Empire, and two world wars.

Max Weber and Max Horkheimer had in common, across the schools, in spite of national differences, in terms of a single European heritage.[5]

For, in its origins, (before it got hijacked by the dogmatists, that needs to be said), the 'dialectic of subject and object' was a method for the thematisation of two topics of which it can hardly be said that they lack contemporary relevance: individual and collective identity on the one hand, socio-political crises on the other.

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If one turns from philosophy proper to the Social Sciences – and we are, after all, here in a department which seeks to implement, at the research level, what the Philosophy of Science holds up as the rational way of conducting such research – this powerful influence of Analytic Philosophy (in the sense of Philosophy of Science) is just as evident as it's ever been.[6]

If one looks through a list of recent methodology books written for and within the individual disciplines – anthropology, sociology, psychology, economics – then there seems little doubt that the assumptions on which

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5 No doubt the proximate reason for the divisiveness is historical: the Soviet Union, from the October Revolution to its collapse in 1989, was run in the name of a construct called „Marxism-Leninism", both at home and in the countries under its sway, and one of the consequences of this was that, during the Cold War, a sure-fire shibboleth for telling friend from foe was to establish whether someone did or did not 'believe' in 'dialectical materialism'. That that had nothing to do with philosophy in the academic sense was pretty irrelevant in those countries in which one's career, or even one's life, depended on whether one did or did not pay lipservice to the official line.

6 The social sciences since World War II have been, amongst many other things, also a stage on which two competing conceptions of scientific objectivity and methodology have been fought out: that coming from the natural sciences, and that coming from what was left of the old 'humaniores', the Humanities, the 'Greats'. Anyone who did their university training in the social sciences (anthropology, psychology, sociology, history) will be familiar with the controversial and invariably inconclusive debates about objectivity, research design, and the empirical results/sociological theory relationship. Does one try to set up (in anthropology, sociology, psychology) quasi-experimental situations in which competing hypotheses are to be tested, or does one give a 'voice' to those sectors of society that have been marginalised or exploited, and that are clamouring for recognition? Are we dealing with causal relations that need to be researched, or is a Social Science department more like a parliament in which pressure groups must be given adequate representation in order to keep the peace? Causes or Recognition? (The debate is ongoing: Thomas McCarthy, 1994: „On the Methodologies of a Critical Social Theory" in: David Couzens Hoy and Thomas McCarthy: *Critical Theory*, Blackwell 1994, p. 81; Fred Dallmayr (1997): „The Politics of Nonidentity: Adorno, Postmodernism – and Edward Said" in: *Political Theory*, 25, nr. 1, p. 33-56; Nancy Fraser, Axel Honneth (2003): *Redistribution or Recognition? – a political-philosophical exchange*, Verso.)

these are based, the relationship of research to theory, the theoretical constructs presupposed, on the way one is to generalise from specific results to general conclusions, on the whole raison d'être that underlies the various disciplines, that these too have hardly changed over the last forty years or so. There's the occasional concession to gender studies and cultural studies, there's the occassional tilt at post-coloniality, the environment and even 'critical theory', there are an almost infinite number of special studies across the entire range of the social sciences, but at the 'theory' level it is pretty much what it was when my own generation studied social science in the sixties and seventies. Science is what scientists do, and that means what the natural sciences do – as interpreted for us by Analytic Philosophy and the Philosophy of Science.[7] Little wonder that recent books containing 'Philosophy of Social Science' in their title have returned to a kind of pragmatist version of what Paul Feyerabend once called 'the anything goes' approach – the attitude seems to be: let's juxtapose the different schools, place them next to each other in a line-up, and have done with it. Durkheim, Weber, Popper, Rorty, Critical Theory, Postmodernism, Gender-studies, Deconstructionism – they'll have to fight it out for themselves.[8] That is: the paralysing conundrum within the methodology of the social sciences – what is objectivity, what is social theory, where is the unity to be found in all of this – this is sidestepped by placing the different schools next to each other in a kind of pseudo-harmonious pantheon, from which one can take one's pick according to personal taste and inclination.

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7 The 1991 MIT reader (Richard Boyd, ed,: *The Philosophy of Science*) could just as well have been written in the sixties: there's Carnap on the unity of science, Popper on falsification, Kuhn on scientific revolutions, Schlick on Positivism and Rationalism. That's then the basis for sections on the „Philosophy of Biology", „The Philosophy of Psychology", „The Philosophy of the Social Sciences", to be capped by Max Weber's classic paper on the fact/value dichotomy. The more recent Blackwell reader (M. Lange, ed, 2006: *Philosophy of Science*), is a little more cautious – with regard to the extrapolation to the Social sciences – but the 'unity of science' premise on which the whole edifice is based is given pride of place by starting off with Hempel's 1945 „Studies in the Logic of Confirmation." A look at some recent manuals confirms the impression – e.g. E. Babbie's 2003 *The Basics of Social Research* – that the old 'colonialistic' attitude of the logicians and mathematicians, that the formal 'structure' of all theories must conform to that of the natural sciences – that this holds just as rigidly and unchallenged as before. The rapidity with which the notion of logical-empirical grounding then comes to mean market research is exemplified by C. Goulding (2002): *Grounded Theory – A practical Guide for Management, Business and Market Researchers*.)

8 Patrick Baert (2005): *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*; S.P. Turner & P.A. Roth (eds, 2003): *The Blackwell guide to the Philosophy of the Social Sciences.*

So in the first meaning of my title, in the sense that the 'dialectical' conceptions of society that were current in Europe during the sixties, and which one could perhaps see culminating in the 'Positivist Dispute' between Popper and Adorno[9], that these notions have indeed 'become history'.[10] At any rate: as far as their operationalisation within the individual social science disciplines is concerned, at the level of their 'logic'.

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But let me turn now to the one theorist, in the Social Sciences today, who still holds to a substantive conception of the 'dialectic', and let's see if the old idea of a 'unity of science' cannot be grounded in a way that avoids the reductionism of analytic philosophy.[11] By dwelling on the specific insights and discoveries of individual disciplines – hermeneutics, psychology, Marxist historiography – it was above all Habermas who has loosend the all too narrow empiricist-mathematical corset which has squeezed the individual social sciences breathless for most of the last century.

Let me deal with Habermas's work under three different aspects: i) the meaning of the concept 'stance'; ii) the methodological implications of this notion for concrete research practices[12]; iii) the relationship of 'stances', validity-claims' and the moral-practical-political sphere of our lives.

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9 T.W. Adorno et al. (1976): *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*.

10 One could present a fair summary of the whole CT tradition by saying that its purpose is to counter the radical nominalism expressed in this everyday colloquialism, which calls something 'history' because it – this nominalism – registers only the hic et nunc, the eternal here and now. Psychologists have no difficulty in diagnosing, in such ordinary language expressions, that cultural narcissism which is such a sign of the times. As long ago as Erich Fromm's 1937 paper the feeling of helplessness to which this correlates was placed in a causal relationship to the passivity afflicting so many German voters in the last years of the Weimar Republic. To trace out such objective aspects of mass culture had been the very purpose of integrating psychoanalysis into social theory in the first place – not because the Horkheimer group were so keen on starting an interdisciplinary journal but because they badly wanted to know why the trade Union and Workers' movement had collapsed in the face of the NSDAP.

11 This is a necessary process of emancipation which we've seen above all in psychoanalysis, in anthropology and in the kind of macro-historical studies that reach from Marx through to Wallerstein and Hobsbawm. It is no accident that all three of the disciplines mentioned have gone through intense phases of methodological self-reflection.

12 More or less unnoticed by the standard works on the subject, Critical Theory's influence in Germany during the 60s and 70s on the methodological foundations of the Social Sciences has been considerable – starting with psychology, sociology, anthropology, historiography, media studies, theory of education, philosophy of religion.

1. On the concept of 'stances'[13] in Habermas

One way into this complex set of issues in the work of Habermas is to approach it from within the context of analytic philosophy itself. If the whole purpose of the approach is to show, ultimately, that this form of justification – the logical-epistemological kind – is to be, at the very least, juxtaposed to a more 'naturalistic' form of the same, that need not keep us from recapitulating the arguments that first of all made the introduction of the term 'stances' plausible.

Let me focus for a moment on the question: what are 'stances', and how do we recognize them?

Speech-act theory from Austin to Searle have as their 'material' paradigmatic sentences that are used to analyse their formal features, and Habermas's Universal Pragmatic does much the same. Let me start by uttering three of those paradigmatic sentences:

1) „My PC has been on the blink for a week and I can't figure out why."
2) „My girlfriend says I'm an undeconstructed chauvinist and it's time I learnt to cook."
3) „I hate people bellowing into their mobile phones."

Of the three, the first one most closely resembles the kind of sentence on which Logical Empiricism once set out to determine just what it is that we mean when we claim that 'p' is true. It's not quite 'the-cat-sat-on-the-mat' material, but it is the kind of sentence that lends itself to an analysis in terms of the propositional content that it presupposes: whether my PC is or is not defective is easily ascertained or corroborated by the next person, and our culture provides routinised, well-established procedures for the next step: we give the Call Centre a ring, we ask someone from the IT-department to drop by, and so on.

Implicit in sentence 1. however, are all kinds of additional presuppositions (in Habermas's terminology: 'validity claims') that need to be fulfilled before the alter-ego or interlocutor to whom this sentence is addressed would be prepared to accept it as true – or, what amounts to the same thing, accept it as a contextually appropriate 'speech act' to which he or she would, according to reciprocally accepted norms, be prepared to respond in accordance with the intentions of the original speaker.

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13 "Grundeinstellung zur Welt".

Uttered in a different context – on the tram, to a fellow-passenger, at a restaurant, on the beach – it could at best pass muster as a somewhat gauche attempt to strike up a conversation, for making 'small-talk', for passing the time, but is then taken in a quite different sense to what it is ostensibly meant to convey: that someone takes a look at my PC, and helps me to fix it. In general, – to confine myself here to the result of such speech act analyses –, it turns out that for me to be able to utter a successful sentence, a sentence that is accepted by one or more other subjects as 'true', appropriate, contextually 'fitting' and acceptable, it needs to fulfill at least three fundamental validity claims: that the explicit or implicit propositional content that it contains is factually correct; that the (intersubjective) normative-practical-ethical implications that it presupposes tacitly are legitimate and acceptable to the addressee; that the subjective-emotional state of mind, the subjective needs which this expresses, that this is acceptable to the hearer or hearers. (It's easy enough to imagine the ways in which each of these validity claims, which in sentence 1. are only implicit, are thematisable in the kind of 'mini-discourses' that make up every-day interaction: „Aw go on, you forgot to switch it on"; „That's not my business – go ask someone else"; „What do you want a PC for?", and so on.

Worth noting about these validity claims is:

a) their universality – that is, we cannot imagine any form of social life, any kind of society, in which communication does not involve: the thematisation of (objectified) things and processes in the 'external' world; the thematisation of norms of intersubjective behavior; the expression of subjectively felt needs, desires, wishes, fears, and hopes.

b) the way we've all become rather expert at juggling all three of these validity claims: in the realm of things and processes, in the realm of rules and norms, in the realm of needs.[14]

But reflection on the conditions for the possibility of carrying out successful speech acts, as this has been carried out from the later Wittgenstein through to Austin and Searle, (i.e. the 'making explicit' of the validity claims that are implicitly raised every time we utter 'p') is still something that takes place at the level of subjective reflection. Such insights are comparable to trying to understand the grammar of our own native tongue; it is the 'rational reconstruction' of a competence that we already (intuitively,

14 c.f. the methodological debate on the foundations of PA, and especially Habermas's concept of systematically distorted communication:

unconsciously) possess, and not the learning of new facts or a new technical-computational skill that we are trying to acquire.

How does this fit in with philosophy? Insight into the validity claims that we must of necessity make for speech-act 's' to be a success (i.e. for 'p' to be accepted by at least one alter-ego as 'true') seems still to 'fit' into the philosophical tradition because it is still 'analytic' in the general post-Kantian sense of a clarification of the 'transcendental' or 'universal' conditions for true statements – even if the actual route taken, in the post-Wittgenstinian elaboration of 'language-games', took a rather different direction from the one that German Idealism had traversed a century or so earlier.

But at the next stage of argumentation this no longer holds. The self-reflection that I engage in to reconstruct competences that I possess intuitively is something else from the empirical finding, coming from Anthropology and Biology, that all living systems – right through to our own species – must carry out a number of basic functions if they are to survive: they need some way of dealing with the 'external' environment, (food, 'economy' in the widest sense); some mechanism for social integration, and some mechanism for what in Parsonian functionalism used to be called 'pattern maintenance' over time. ('Reproduction' in the physical, in the social, and in the psychological sense.) Generalised conclusions from Biology and Anthropology of the kind that have gone into 'systems theory' of the Parsons and Luhmann type are contributions from the empirical sciences towards the study of how society 'as a whole' functions, and no longer a self-reflection in the sense of a philosophical 'coming to consciousness' of something already intuitively mastered. It is this additional connotation in the term 'stance' that lifts it out of the realm of philosophy.

Let me say something on how these 'stances' relate to the philosophical tradition on the one hand, to the empirical sciences on the other.

Since it's based in the 'logic' of all living systems (every species has to 'survive' with respect to the environment, and over time) the stances relate to traditional philosophy in the way that 'economic formation' once related, in Marxian analysis, to class consciousness (or, even further back, in the Hegelian system, to the way that concrete Spirit related to absolute Spirit).

That is, these 'stances' are 'objective' in a sense that Logical Empiricism rejects: in the sense, namely, of being constitutive for the very possibility of thought and thinking itself; being older than the human race, by virtue of being grounded in the logic of all living systems, they provide a conceptual framework for 'reconstructing' the stages involved in that most ancient and

enigmatic of all biological processes, the transition from 'nature' to 'culture' some 3M years ago, leading to our own species.[15]

Or another way of putting it: since its relation to philosophy is comparable to the old 'base/superstructure' relation of Marxian economics, one could speak hence of a 'dialectic' between stances as anthropological universals and the specific/concrete institutions which our species has developed over time as a kind of 'extention' of physiological functions: economy, law, the Arts.[16]

The advantage over traditional philosophy of science is above all the solution it provides to the standard conundrum of objectivity versus relativism. If 'stances' are universal competences which all modern subjects need to master, on their way to autonomous adulthood,[17] then the conundrum disappears, the 'either-or'-alternative of traditional empiricism – either objectivity or relativism – is replaced by the reflectively gained insight into the universal functions which all intersubjective communication must fulfill. The human race needs a common, shared 'symbolic universe':

- to 'objectify' outer nature as the condition for technical manipulation and economic exploitability;
- to provide the basis for the non-violent negotiation of a universalistic ethic, and
- to provide an individualisable subjective world within which each individual person is able to build up meaning and identity.

Here is a rather nice summary on all of this from a recent paper by Max Pensky. He's still dealing with the older notion of 'knowledge constitutive interests', but the point is the same:

„An interest in the technical manipulation and control of external nature, oriented towards success in coping with contingency and aggregating true claims about nature according to the model of feedback-generated correction, makes scientific objectivity possible. And such a knowledge-constitutive interest ['stance' – fvg] generates a world in which correspondence theories of truth can apply, a world of predictable regularity of manipulable and uniform objects. Yet this mode of knowledge is, according to the theory, entirely distinct from that of the historical and interpretive sciences, which trace back to a distinct but equally foundational interest in the reaching of intersubjective understanding through nonviolent communication; that is, the need to materially reproduce the species via the means of

15 anthro. fn.
16 Gehlen; Plessner.
17 c.f. JH: system der Ich-Abgrenzungen.

communicatively steered sociation, interpretation, and consensus-based group action. Such a communicatively constituted world privileges interpretive or consensus-based truth theories in which knowledge consists of successful processes of intersubjective understanding, and hence the interest in intersubjective agreement represents the historical-transcendental condition for the possibility of the interpretive truth of the hermeneutic-historical sciences."[18]

Let us pause for a moment to take stock. I confined myself here to the interpretive mode, to do no more than to show that it is indeed possible, even in the thoroughly sceptical 'post-positivist' research environment in which we find ourselves today, to defend a version of the old 'subject-object' philosophy of fifty and hundred years ago; that it can be made plausible even at the level of research methodology.[19]

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18 Max Pensky: „Truth and Interest – On Habermas's Postscript to Nietzsche's Theory of Knowledge" in: Babette E. Babich (ed., 2004), (*Habermas, Nietzsche, and Critical Theory*, p. 72.
C.f. also Robert B. Pippin, „Hegel, modernity, and Habermas": „Habermas has always had trouble convincing his critics that these communicative norms are (presupposed) in so much human activity, that we simply cannot, under the pain of a (performative contradiction), engage in such activity without a commitment to such norms." (*Monist*, vol. 74, no. 3, 1991, p. 329-357.)
James Bohman: „Habermas's ... criticism of modern societies turns on the explanation of the relationship between two very different theoretical terms: a micro-theory of rationality based on communicative coordination and a macro theory of the systemic integration of modern societies in such mechanisms as the market." („Critical Theory as Practical Knowledge" in: S.P. Turner and P.A. Roth, 2003: *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, p. 93.)
Hoy, in Hoy and McCarthy (op. cit.): „The central thesis of KHI is that science, historical understanding, and critique are forms of organized human inquiry that are based upon far more fundamental 'interests' and that these interests are, in turn, grounded in the 'general cognitive strategies' according to which the species seeks to reproduce its material existence. Hence the forms of inquiry specific to a region of organized knowledge, like the forms of social institution and practice appropriate to them, trace back to, are legitimated by, and ultimately develop criteria for truth and justifiability according to the deep, natural-historical interests that generate them. Cognitive interests, in other words, are not world-disclosive but world-constituting, since they generate the criteria according to which a world can be constructed as an object of organized inquiry. In this sense, cognitive interest emerge as historically embedded transcendentals: they constitute the conditions for the possibility for any objectively true statement in the forms of inquiry that they generate insofar as they provide the conditions for possible experience."

19 That there is a huge literature which problematises every aspect of this position, that this Habermasian position which I am here presenting is very much a minority view, all that goes without saying.

2. Research Methodology in the light of Habermasian 'stances'[20]

What's new about Habermas is the distinction he makes between objectivity in the natural sciences sense, (in the sense of a 'Kantian' 'world out there', an an sich existing independently of our perceptions of it) and objectivism (in the sense of an 'objectifying stance') as something that we all learn in the process of a normal socialisation process.

Let me at least mention some of the areas in which this distinction has proved its worth:
i) in the inner-philosophical debate about the 'nature of Mind';
ii) in the controversy between Psychiatry and experimental Psychology on the one hand, Psychoanalysis on the other;
iii) in developmental Psychology in the tradition of Piaget;
iv) in the Kohlberg-initiated debate about the stages of moral-ethical development in children;
v) in the (paleo-)anthropological debates about just what it is that we're doing when we're 'reconstructing' the fossil record of our own species;
vi) in Cultural Anthropology's debate about mythology and our relationship to so-called 'primitive' cultures.
vii) in the post-Darwinian and post-Marxian 'reconstruction' of just what it is that constitutes the basis for a 'macro-history' of our species.

What all of these diverse areas have in common is that there's a relationship there between two different subjects – that of the observing scientist or scholar, on the one hand, that of the object/subject of these endeavours, separated from us by circumstances of various kinds: geographic, chronological, cultural-linguistic, or (in the case of children or animals) maturational/developmental. The separation between 'us' and 'them' is so

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20 What is especially fascinating is the way in which Habermas has used this analytic distinction between objectivity in the natural science-sense and objectivism as a stance in the psychological sense to overcome long-standing controversies in some of the natural sciences themselves. Let me take just one example: Piaget and Developmental Psychology.
It touches on a standard problem of just what it is that takes place in childhood development. [footnote: Entwicklung des Ichs] [the old paradox: Nature or Nurture]
The paradox is that an understanding of the human socialization process is not possible without an abandonment of the logical empiricism which is usually being presupposed by those who have devoted themselves to its study.

large that the normal 'subject-subject' mode of life-world interaction is not possible.

But what else is it that this objectivity/objectivism distinction leads to?

Of the three 'paradigm-sentences' that I started out with above, we've said nothing yet about sentences two and three, those that clearly touch on ethics and values – or, in Habermas's terminology: for which we adopt the 'moral-practical' stance.

To turn now to:

3. The relationship of 'stances', validity-claims' and the moral-practical-political sphere of our lives.

From a purely scientific perspective, basing itself on the standpoint of value-neutrality and the quasi-experimental replicability of research results, ethics (together with art, music, religion) is assigned to the purely spurious sphere of private opinion and subjective 'value-judgements'.[21]

It has been Habermas' position, at least since the TcA, that a resolution to the Strawson-Austin-Searle-Chomsky debate on the relationship of sentence-production on the one hand and speech acts on the other, as I started to show above, is achievable by moving the debate about truth content away from symbol- and sentence-meaning to the pragmatics of language use – and the real-world 'stances' that we automatically adopt.

Once one makes this 'pragmatic turn', ordinary language comes into our ken as a realm in which the mechanisms for the raising, contesting, supporting, proclaiming of moral-ethical claims (in practical discourses) are of no less relevance that the analogous function of raising, contesting, acknowledging the cognitive claims thematised in theoretical discourses.[22]

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From the point of view of the history Western Philosophy, – to put this in our original context of 'dialectics' – it is clear that Communicative Ethics introduces, within Analytic Philosophy's own ambit, questions which in

21 Meaningful statements, to quote Searle on the 'Verification principle' on which Philosophy of Language was premised during its heyday, „are either analytic on the one hand or empirical and synthetic on the other", everything else is considered meaningless or purely emotive. (Searle 1971, 5.) Or: „Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man schweigen", in the words of its most famous advocate, Ludwig Wittgenstein.

22 Swindal, 2001

the 'dialectical' tradition once went under the heading of the 'reflection' of 'spirit' and 'mind' – with the difference that this time these issues are being raised not within the idealist, but within the empiricist tradition. If the 'validity claim' for the moral-ethical aspect of speech acts is an 'anthropologically universal' component of all human communication, then there's a relationship there to be worked out between norms and values, practical discourses, and social integration, which the objectivistic mainstream in the social sciences has missed because of its unnecessarily restrictive methodology.

Let me return now, in my concluding remarks, to the kind of 'macro'-themes also implied by the notion of 'dialectics'.

What are the ethical foundations of the 'globalised' world system to which we seem to be moving and which will determine our collective fate? For the Frankfurt School this is a question which acquires its urgency not so much on theoretical as on practical grounds. After the world wars of the past century and the less than auspicious start to the present one, the 'legitimation crisis' afflicting Western societies (and even more so the international system) is not something that needs to be 'proved' – it can be read about in the papers every day. Doleful neologisms like '9/11', 'WMD', 'war on terror' and the like are a reminder that, in an increasingly fractious and conflict-ridden world, ethics (or rather its obvious absence) has become an issue of global import. This is perhaps why the popular hopes sometimes projected onto Habermas have come to acquire, at times, almost messianic overtones.[23]

That is, Communicative Ethics – and 'dialectics' in this sense – is not so much an 'answer' to this 'world problem' (no merely academic discussion could possibly get away with such pretentions) as that it seeks to rehabilitate, within the relativistic, atomised and commercialised university and media system of the West, the „grounding of normativity itself".[24] How does it do that? In the words of Albrecht Wellmer: „By presenting a linguistic-analytic foundation of ethics and social theory" capable of taking over the role of a „metatheoretical foundation for the social sciences".[25]

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23 "Two world wars and persistent regional conflicts made the 20th century one of the most violent periods in human history. Prof. Habermas, who lived in Germany during World War II, has focused his life's work and study on how to create an ideal, public-minded society, free of violence and oppression. His theories of Communicative Action and Discourse Ethics model the pursuit of mutual understanding and agreement as a basis for more democratic social communication." San Diego; also Borradori 2003.

24 Dallmayr 1990, 3.

25 Wellmer 1990, 296.

The intuitions which guide it lie in German Idealism, and in a 'Continental' tradition which sees the moral foundations of democracy not in 'unified science', positive law and unbridled individualism, but in an intersubjectively produced consensus – which is always fragile, and at times, especially at a time of crisis, is in need of re-negotiation. In the 'final analysis' this consensus must be based on a universalistic ethic if it is to remain non-violent. That is, it holds, just like Kant did two centuries ago, to a 'categorical' difference between theoretical and practical discourses. This it no longer does dogmatically, from the point of view of a 'first philosophy', or a 'prima philosophia', but rather in cooperation with those areas of the social sciences (linguistics, some areas of Analytic Philosophy, Psychology, child development) which have made it possible to re-examine some old topics in the area of 'mind', 'psyche', and the pragmatics of language use, while at the same time overcoming the positivistic separation of normative ethics and empirical social theory that has dominated these areas for most of the last century. Piaget's and Kohlberg's studies of cognitive and ethical learning processes in children, Chomsky's extention of traditional linguistics into areas where universal aspects of language acquisition and production have swung into view, communication processes in higher primates other than ourselves, Austin's and Searle's generalisation of Wittgensteinian 'language-games to a general theory of 'speech acts', are all probing aspects of 'communicative action' in our own species which are both universal (valid for all competent adult speakers) and at the same time the product of a contingent evolutionary or developmental process, the stages of which can be 'reconstructed' empirically. (Hence: competences which are both 'universal' and 'pragmatic' at the same time.)

If the intersubjectivity of meaning, as an analysis of even the simplest of speech acts seems to show, is based on more than the transferral of cognitive-technical information on the model of the goal-oriented individual seeking to maximise private interest[26], then norms and values, as well the 'real-world' process of their thematisation, can no longer be declared 'meaningless' on the positivist model.

But Communicative Ethics and the substantive conception of the relationship between ethics, morality and political legitimacy on which it is based[27] goes further than the 'critique of positivism' as this was articulated during the nineteen-sixties.[28] The (social) reproduction of a form of life

26 Grice 1971
27 Habermas 1991
28 Adorno 1972.

such as our own seems to be tied to the maintainance of an intersubjectivity of meaning which cannot be stripped of its moral-ethical components without leading to the kind of 'life-world' pathologies so typical of our age: neuroses and other forms of mental afflictions at the level of the psyche, 'legitimation crises', competing fundamentalisms and the danger of (civil) war at the level of politics.

No modern society seems able to maintain political stability over time once the 'lifeworld' of its citizens has become so thoroughly colonized by technical-instrumental and commercial imperatives that the core areas of primary socialisation (family, school, youth organisations, education) are no longer able to cater for the 'biological-primal' need for identification, mimesis, and recognition. From this point of view – from the point of view of the 'anthropological' need for 'identification' – the 'grand narratives' of the past, culminating in the semi-secularised 'dialectical' constructions of German Idealism, were a lot more functional than the 'alienating' culture of a technocratic civilization based on the adoration of new and bellicose idols: those of possessive individualism, technical-bureaucratic control, economic expansionism.

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Freedom, and autonomy, the ideals of the European enlightenment, (codified for instance in the United States Constitution, the United Nations declaration of human rights, the various treaties of the EU) are real, necessary, utopian-democratic goals that are worth striving and fighting for; and at the same time these are ideals that have been deeply compromised and corrupted by the very medium which once gave them their substance, and has been the means for their propagation ever since: the militarised and economically expansionist nation-state.[29] Ever since Hegel watched the French revolution descend into terror and chaos, the fundamental conviction of all Hegelians right through to Adorno has been that the point of departure for an understanding of the world is nothing rationalistic, nothing empiricistic; rather: that it's urgently necessary to put one's finger on what it is about rationalism and empiricism, about reason itself, the spirit of modernity, that, left to its own devices, seems all too frequently to self-destruct. That is: what Hegel and the German Idealists brought to bear on this

29 which already in the 17th century had shown their expansionistic-militaristic side: free trade, universal fungibility, exchange.

whole complex question of 'secularisation and its discontents'[30], were the venerable techniques of demythologisation, of critique. They could do so because reason and rationalism, like every other 'abstract' manifestation of spirit (Hegel), can be misused for ideological purposes – the history of modern Physics being a case in point. Against this, German Idealism brought to bear an idealised 'other' whose relationship to the real world was that of an ideal, a hope, a counterfactual promise, something purely virtual, but functional none the less at the level of subjective motivation.

Hegel had seen something, articulated in the language of philosophy, which transcended philosophy. (Hence Adorno's Negative Dialectics.) The Marxist realisation of the necessity of sublating philosophy into something quite different, is not something which can be argued conclusively on either philosophical or logical-rationalist grounds. That is why the Frankfurt School had as one of its founding axioms that there is no way back from Marx's critique of Hegel, and at the same time no way back from the realization that on purely Marxist premises the European catastrophy of 1914-1945 was inexplicable. That had been the background of the Dialectic of Enlightenment. This is not something that can be argued for or against within philosophy at all. The argument is that there is a mechanism at the heart of Western society – at the level of its core institutions of market, media, democracy, – which, sociologically speaking, is inherently unstable. Even Habermas criticises this as 'pessimism', but without this 'thesis' – let's call it that – the Negative Dialectics is inexplicable, and a great deal of Continental Philosophy besides.

Hegel was the first to have raised this fateful question which hovers over our collective future like a threat: what are the institutional preconditions for a functioning, peaceful, free democracy. (This was – for the post-Napoleonic European nations which had almost all, in varying degrees, been drawn into the revolutionary ferment and wars sweeping the continent – a much more pressing matter than it had been, at the time, in England, which had emerged victorious from the post-revolutionary fray and could retreat behind its newly expanding Empire and Navy.)

The crises which, in the first instance, the Frankfurt School were focussed on, were of course those of second nature, rather than first nature; that is, not natural but social disasters of the kind Europeans had to endure since 1914. Hence it was not surprising that they concentrated on those as-

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30 Jonathan Israel, 2006: *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man (1670-1752)*. OUP.

pects of popular and populist opinion that represented a threat to the very notion of democracy. Whatever the causes were of the anti-Semitism that had been so poisonous to the German body politic and elsewhere in the interbellum,[31] it showed that the very principle of representative government can be all too easily undermined by a mentality which sees democracy itself as the means to an end: its replacement by something much more totalitarian, either secular or religious.

But there are other aspects of the contemporary crisis which lies somewhere between society and the environment, between 'first' and 'second' nature, in the terminology of Critical Theory. Global warming, the pressure on non-renewable natural resources, all these other scenarios that we know from Hollywood (asteroids, tsunamis, Krakatoa-like volcanic eruptions[32]) all of these are reminders of the fact that neither in the external environment nor at the level of culture and the public sphere, is there a great deal to be particularly optimistic about.

Perhaps one could put it like this: Critical Theory is the embodiment of the fear that we all now feel in our bones, the fear of what industrialised, 'democratised' warfare is capable of doing to us all – which Critical Theory however transforms into a concrete, methodological program for the Social Sciences and the Arts – at least in the Habermas version.

Now that modernity's deeply corrosive effect on all traditional modes of thought and behaviour has become obvious to anyone who reads a newspaper, Kant through to Hegel and Marx become topical in a way which the positivism of the 'science-is-measurement' mentality no longer is, namely as the earliest of the attempts, from within the Western philosophical tradition, to 'reground' reason, truth and ethics within a purely secular world.

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31 there are two theories on this: from above – 'structural', and from below,

32 What the Geo-Physicists call Gee-Gee's: „Global Geo-Physical Events."