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# A Brief Commentary on Habermas's Concepts of the Subjective World and Dramaturgical Action

## 1. Introduction

Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action is a theory that spans a broad range of issues and has been the subject of extensive research from a variety of perspectives. However, there is one topic that has not been touched upon much by Habermas himself or by secondary studies of his thought, even though it is located close to the center of his theory. It is the subjective world, dramaturgical action, and the relationship between the two.

There are several reasons for this. Habermas is a philosopher who advocates intersubjective communicative reason and has devoted considerable effort to confronting the philosophy of subjective consciousness. We can safely say that subjective consciousness, experience, and judgement were not his primary concerns. While the notion of dramaturgical action implies an act of self-expression, as represented by a work of art, Habermas does not have an aesthetic or theory of art as extensive as that of Adorno. His thought on art was developed exclusively as a theory of *Moderne*, which does not discuss the process by which art is produced, but the process by which the produced art must be incorporated into our society. As a result, his ideas about the subjective world and dramaturgical action give the impression of being somewhat oversimplified. In other words, the speaker expresses a part of his subjective world to the hearer in a communicative act, in terms of a dramaturgical act. Almost nothing is said about the processes inside the subjective world.

Needless to say, this attitude of Habermas is not satisfactory to philosophers such as Dieter Henrich and Manfred Frank, who still insist on the primacy of subjectivity in the modern age. However, even those who favor the pragmatic turn that Habermas has long advocated and who do not want a reactionary return to the philosophy of consciousness may have room to question such simplicity.

For example, it could be questioned whether dramaturgical action is entirely communicative. According to Habermas, dramaturgical action involves controlling the public for a certain purpose (cf. Habermas 1984, 86). How is this to be distinguished from strategic acts, which are essentially manipulative and goal-oriented? What are the criteria for evaluating dramaturgical acts, whose sincerity may be questioned by the hearer? If the speaker is the only one who has access to the entirety of the subjective world, and if the

dramaturgical act expressed is controlled by her, then its content does not seem to qualify as evidence of her sincerity.

Based on these issues, this paper presents a brief commentary on Habermas's conception of the subjective world and dramaturgical action. The reminder of this paper proceeds as follows. (1) First, we confirm that Habermas has consistently criticized the philosophy of consciousness and insisted on the primacy of intersubjectivity. (2) Next, we review the outline of the three-world theory that Habermas critically inherited from Popper and developed in his own way. (3) We confirm that Habermas adopts the concept of dramaturgical action as a mediator between the subjective world and communication. Finally, some comments on the nature of the dramaturgical act are provided.

## 1

In a lecture he gave in the United States in 1971, Habermas discussed the impossibility of using Husserl's phenomenology as the foundation of social theory. Husserl believed that we experience everyday life in an intersubjectively shared lifeworld; therefore, everyday experience is not private. On the other hand, the basic premise of his phenomenology is that our consciousness is an orienting action, an action of thinking (*Noesis*). This action is tied with the positing of the existence of an oriented object (*Noema*). Hence, in Husserl, "the Lifeworld as a whole is also posited" (Habermas 2003, 63), and it is due to the natural attitude in which the lifeworld is taken naively realistic (objective, so to speak).

From these premises, however, it is difficult to explain the intersubjectivity of the lifeworld; Husserl argues that "how I can [...] constitute another ego and nevertheless experience what is constituted in me as another ego?"(72). This was one of the main issues of his *Cartesian Meditations*. However, Habermas points out that from Husserl's phenomenological starting point, it is, in principle, impossible to resolve this challenge.

> [H]usserl Develops this construction only to the point where I […] put myself in the place of the appresented inner life of the other and identify its world with mine. For a common world is constituted only through a symmetrical relationship that allows the other equally to put itself in my place, that is, in place of the inner life that is appresented to it, and identify my world with its. Husserl cannot adequately account for this complete reciprocity since the phenomenological approach begins with the meditating ego, whose subjectivity must always be the ultimate possible horizon of demonstration and verification (78).

The "reciprocity" referred to here can also be described as the "interchangeability" (75) or "mutual intertwining" (78) of perspectives. At the end of this installment of the lecture, he concludes that "[e]xperience that is intersubjectively communalized in the strict sense cannot be conceived without the concept of meaning that is communicated and shared by different subjects (81)."

In more recent discussions, Habermas has opposed those who argue for the significance of subjectivity in the philosophy of consciousness, such as Dieter Henrich and Manfred Frank, by emphasizing the superiority of sociality or communication on the basis of this reciprocity (cf. (cf. Habermas 1992, 24; Habermas 1995, 563).

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On the other hand, it is not the case that Habermas discarded the realm of subjectivity in which the so-called first-person privilege is recognized. He develops a three-world theory, which is a development of the one proposed by Karl Popper, in which the "subjective world" is secured alongside the "objective world" and the "social world".

Popper's three-worlds theory is based on the traditional two-worlds distinction in philosophy, namely, the world consisting of physical objects or physical states (first world), the world consisting of states of consciousness or mental states (second world), and the third world consisting of contents of objective thoughts, scientific knowledge, and works of art (cf. Popper 1979, 106). Popper's three-world theory is a criticism of the philosophy of consciousness in that it deprives the latter of objective knowledge. Habermas shared the same problematic view.

However, Habermas found flaws in Popper's three-worlds theory (and in its application to sociology by I. C. Jarvie). First, it ignores the coordination of actions through reflection on cultural values and the reciprocal action to do so. Second, the third world in this position ignores elements of cultural traditions that are not reducible to propositions that can be true or false, even though they are supposed to include the content of art. And Jarvie, among the two, does not distinguish between cultural values that float freely and those that are institutionalized and have an autonomous and coercive character (cf. Habermas 1984, 80-82).

To overcome these deficiencies, Habermas extends Popper and Jarvie's third world to a social world in which the validity of institutionalized values can also be questioned, rather than being tied only to propositions that can be true or false. Free-floating cultural values are taken back into the subjective world and are explained as a process of understanding between the self-expression of the actor and its viewers. Thus, Habermas's three-world theory,

consisting of objective, social, and subjective worlds, is introduced.

One might think that Habermas, who insisted on the superiority of intersubjective pragmatics or communication theory over the philosophy of consciousness of subjectivity, could have simply deleted Popper's second world (the subjective world). However, the subjective world was preserved in Habermas's three-world theory, and it was given a richer role concerning cultural values, especially in the context of art, than in Popper's version. Furthermore, first-person privileges are granted in the form of privileged access only to the speakers.

However, Habermas does not go into detail in the analysis of subjective processes themselves, that is, states of consciousness, only in that he does not deny the existence of such realms or processes. It can be said that Habermas does not consider the subjective world as a "private" sphere in the sense of Wittgenstein. For while it is true that only one person has free access to a subjective world, the partner of communication also has access to whatever part of the subjective world the speaker allows. Ultimately, for Habermas, the importance of the subjective world lies in its ability to provide the results of subjective processes for communicative practices, supported by the reciprocity of perspectives. He also provides developmental psychological arguments for the developmental stages of the subject, but only reconstructs the sequence of developmental stages, not the dynamics of development (cf. Paulus 2009, 21).

In other words, Habermas shows little interest in the question of which processes within the subjective world lead to the output of concrete representations. Not the content of the process, but even the form: not only the content of the representation in the Kantian sense, but also according to what forms of sensibility and understanding it could be brought to cognition (and offered to communication), Habermas does not seem to be interested in such a subject.

> We should not understand subjective experiences as mental states or inner episodes [….] An actor has desires and feelings in the sense that he can at will express these experiences before a public, and indeed in such a way that this public, if it trusts the actor's expressive utterances, attributes to him, as something subjective, the desires and feelings expressed (Habermas 1984, 91).

However, this raises the question of how subjective outcomes that have been extracted from the subjective world through a certain blind process are offered in intersubjective communication. Habermas believed that communicative intersubjectivity is superior to subjectivity, as conceived in the philosophy of consciousness. On the other hand, he

clearly states that "the subjective world counts as the totality of experiences to which, in each instance, only one individual has privileged access." (Habermas 1984, 52). Thus, although the subjective world as a whole cannot be considered a private domain, it has not been intersubjective from the beginning. In other words, it is not a world whose entirety is visible from the beginning to the partners of communication. In order for the product of the subjective world to become visible, some mediation is necessary.

What is important here are the action types corresponding to the objective, social, and subjective worlds, and the types of speech acts characteristic of each of them. Dramaturgical action is a form of communicative action that mediates or bridges between the subjective world and intersubjective communication[1].

What is dramaturgical action, then, and how does it relate to the subjective world? This term is adapted from E. Goffman's sociological theory, and although it includes the concepts of theatrical roles and acting, its scope is not limited to the artistic scenes, but extends to our interactions in general.

> The actor evokes in his public a certain image, an impression of himself, by more or less purposefully disclosing his subjectivity. Each agent can monitor public access to the system of his own intentions, thoughts, attitudes, desires, feelings, and the like. In dramaturgical action, participants make use of this and steer their interactions through regulating mutual access to their own subjectivities (86).

Thus, dramaturgical action engages the subjective world by managing others' access to it. It is the role of dramaturgical action to choose which of one's own subjective experiences, which are potentially public in nature, to make public in reality, and to make them public in practice.

In Habermas, dramaturgical action typically takes the form of expressive speech act. This is a category that basically follows J. R. Searle's classification, which includes avowals and disclosures, etc. (cf. 327).

> With expressive speech acts the speaker refers to something in his subjective world, and in such a way that he would like to reveal to a public an experience to which he has privileged access. The negation of such an utterance means that H [the hearer]

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[1]  Similarly, normatively regulated actions (regulative speech acts) correspond to the social world. The objective world, on the other hand, is somewhat special. This is because the objective world is not only a world of conversation, which is a cooperative communicative act oriented toward understanding (conversation here means, in effect, discussion), but also a world involving goal-oriented, egocentric strategic acts (cf. 329).

doubts the claim to sincerity of self-representation raised by S [the speaker] (326).

Expressive speech as a dramaturgical act raises a subjective sincerity claim and the hearer judges its sincerity. However, dramaturgical acts originally had the characteristics of controlling the hearer according to a certain purpose. Then, can we say with certainty that a dramaturgical act is a communicative act that is oriented toward understanding? Rather, it may appear indistinguishable from a strategic act that is oriented toward goals.

Habermas believes that this is not the case.

> Cooperative interpretive Processes run through different phases. In the initial phase participants are often handicapped by the fact that their interpretations do not overlap sufficiently for the purpose of coordinating actions. […] In this phase, then, the perlocutionary acts have to be embedded in contexts of communicative action. These strategic elements within a use of language oriented to reaching understanding can be distinguished from strategic actions through the fact that the entire sequence of a stretch of talk stands——on the part of full participants——under the presuppositions of communicative action (331).

This argument relies on Habermas's famous argument of parasitism. That is, goal-oriented or strategic language use is merely parasitic on understanding-oriented language use, the latter being "the original mode" (288).

Thus, a brief sketch of the consequences of the above is as follows: Habermas's subjective world can be incorporated into his theory of intersubjective communicative action because it can be mediated by dramaturgical acts. However, dramaturgical action involves hearer control. This control must be distinguished from a strategic action. As expected, this is possible insofar as the entire sequence in which dramaturgical acts are performed is communicative. Therefore, Habermas's theory of the subjective world is supported by the parasite theory.

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