

The “Binding Force” of Everyday Speech

If a distinction works well for practical purposes in ordinary life (no mean feat, for even ordinary life is full of hard cases), then there is sure to be something in it, it will not mark nothing: yet this is likely enough to be not the best way of arranging things if our interests are more extensive or intellectual than the ordinary. . . . Certainly, then, ordinary language is not the last word: in principle it can everywhere be supplemented and improved upon and superseded. Only remember, it *is* the *first* word.

—J. L. Austin, “A Plea for Excuses”

The full weight of the theory of communicative action rests on the following claim: That the relationship between the logic of language and moral insight is such that, in submitting to the force of the former, one is inevitably drawn into processes of understanding and mutual obligation that underlie the development of the latter. This claim is based in turn on Habermas’s central intuition that our use of everyday language presupposes *in principle* the possibility of obtaining intersubjective agreement concerning the basic moral and epistemological texture of a commonly inhabited world. On this view, everyday speech provides the core (socio-)logical medium in which “different participants overcome their merely subjective views and, owing to the mutuality of rationally motivated conviction, assure themselves of both the unity of the objective world and the intersubjectivity of their lifeworld.”¹ Habermas’s concept of “communicative rationality” is designed to capture precisely this link between the “binding force” of everyday speech, on the one hand, and processes of rational interpretation and argumentation, on the other.

The aim of this chapter is to establish a more rigorous connection between Habermas’s theory of communicative action and the tradition of practice-based inquiries inspired by Wittgenstein and elaborated by the ethnomethodologists. I will begin by examining the motivation behind

Habermas's attempt to develop a pragmatic theory of meaning that links the formal conditions for communicative rationality to empirical studies of language and social life. Here I trace Habermas's concern with the pragmatic structure of everyday language to his reconstruction of the rationality problematic in Weber, and in particular, to his critique of Weber's thesis regarding the materialization of positive law in modern society. In contrast to Weber, who argued that positive law is characterized by forms of procedural rationality which, in the modern period, becomes increasingly cut off from the traditional authority of customary practice, Habermas argues that the demand for rationality, which is intrinsic to positive law, forces a reliance on processes of practical-moral argumentation that arise *outside* the domain of legal discourse, within the "substantive rationality" of everyday public life. For this argument to succeed, Habermas needs to demonstrate that this "substantive rationality" is linked both with formal processes of argumentation, on the one hand, and with the actual conduct of speech and social activity, on the other. Hence, the ability to link-up with empirically guided analyses of speech and social activity is a crucial test of Habermas's theory, and indeed, of *any* program that would travel down the road mapped by the theory of communicative action.

Following this preliminary discussion, an attempt will be made to deepen the connection between practice-based inquiries and the theory of communicative action through a consideration of Habermas's reflections on "the problem of understanding meaning in the social sciences." Here I contrast Habermas's conception of "rational interpretation" based on the model of philosophical hermeneutics with an approach, common to ethnomethodological and Wittgensteinian investigations, which treats problems of interpretation, translation, understanding, and agreement as occasioned by, and intelligible with respect to, actual courses of practical action.

CRITICAL THEORY AND THE RATIONALIZATION OF MODERN LEGAL SYSTEMS

In his 1971 essay, "Does Philosophy Still Have a Purpose?," Habermas identifies "three urgent tasks" for critical theory: (1) to provide a critique of "the objectivistic self-understanding of the sciences and any scientific concept of science and scientific progress"; (2) to establish relations with methodological questions in the social sciences such that "the elaboration of adequate basic concepts for systems of communicative action [is] not hindered but promoted"; and 3) to elucidate "the dimension in which the connection of the logic of research and technological development with the logic of consensus-forming communication becomes clear."² According to Habermas, only a philosophical program capable of absorbing the late-twentieth-century

critique of "totalizing knowledge," while at the same time preserving the utopian content associated with a rationally grounded interest in emancipation, can gain a practical-democratic foothold in the present age. Such a philosophy, he argues, "no longer conceives itself as philosophy," but rather, "understands itself as critique" and "apprehends itself as the reflective element of social activity."³

The theory of communicative action attempts to deliver on the emancipatory promise of critical theory by situating the critique of instrumental reason within a formal theory of meaning and argumentation. According to Habermas, the writings of the Frankfurt School had left critical theory at an impasse: by extending Weber's concept of rationalization to the totality of social and economic relations, critical theory was able to expose processes of fragmentation, distortion, and monadization at the core of modernist conceptions of reason. At the same time, the reflexive application of this critique meant that critical theory was itself incapable of providing rationally grounded (nonarbitrary, nonauthoritarian) standards of truth and political will formation. Elsewhere, Habermas summarizes the consequences of this negative critique for the prospects of systematic philosophy:

Horkheimer and Adorno radicalize Lukács' critique of reification. They do not consider the rationalization of the world to be only "seemingly complete"; and thus they need a conceptual apparatus that will allow them nothing less than to denounce the whole as untrue. They cannot achieve this aim by way of an immanent critique of science, because a conceptual apparatus that could satisfy their desiderata would still share the pretensions of the great philosophical tradition. But this tradition—and this is the Weberian thorn in the side of critical theory—cannot simply be renewed with its systematic pretensions; it has "outlived" its own claims; in any case, it cannot be renewed in the form of philosophy.⁴

The lesson Habermas draws from the self-annihilating critiques of Horkheimer and Adorno is that such a philosophy—critical of present society but unable to make any foundational claims in its own right—risks degenerating into a contentless, "empty exercise of a self-reflection."⁵ According to Habermas, critical theory can avoid this fate only by turning its attention back to the field of concrete social praxis. No longer able to exclude itself from the contingent workings of everyday life, critical theory must locate itself *within* those workings, and must seek to identify the "kernel of rationality" that is both internal to the conduct of communicative action and constitutive of the possibility of rational criticism. Habermas's concept of "communicative rationality" is intended to capture this substantial, critical, and rational element implicit in all "communication aimed

at understanding." This shift in focus—away from the critique of consciousness, which characterized the work of his Frankfurt School predecessors, and toward the development of a positive theory of communicative praxis grounded in the normative order of lifeworld relations—can be better understood against the backdrop of Habermas's reconstruction of Weber's theory of the rationalization of law in modern societies.⁶

Weber's conception of the rationalization of modern legal institutions is situated within his more general theory of the transition from traditional to posttraditional forms of social organization. Weber argues that this transition is characterized by ongoing processes of institutional differentiation and rationalization. On this view, areas of public life which in traditional societies arise out of the customary and practical social behavior of a people are, in the modern world, progressively differentiated into relatively autonomous spheres of activity—of art, science, and law. Each of these three spheres develops its own distinctive patterns of organization and rationality. In so doing, they become increasingly detached both from one another, and from the traditional patterns of organization typical of premodern social life. Hence, the prevailing trajectory of development of modern legal systems is toward the formalization of legal statutes and procedures in line with a mode of legal rationality that is increasingly specialized and technical, and so increasingly cut off from the traditional authority of practical (or "customary") moral life.

For this reason, Weber concludes that in modern societies the legitimacy of legal authority cannot be derived from principles of practical moral life, but rests instead on the legitimacy of forms of rationality—methods of codification, procedural requirements, standards of argument, and so on—that are "intrinsic to the form of law itself." Hence, for Weber, "any fusion of law and morality threatens the rationality of law and thus the basis of the legitimacy of legal domination."⁷

With the rise of the modern welfare state, however, we witness precisely this sort of interpenetration of law and morality as legal systems increasingly are called on to arbitrate between the competing claims of different sectors of society in line with ethically charged notions of equality, social justice, and the like. What Weber diagnosed as the "materialization of law" is the process by which the formal structure of the legal system is broken down by external demands for substantive justice, and by the revelation of the law's sensitivity (and hence, susceptibility) to the pressures of practical-moral disputes. According to Weber, this development threatens the autonomy of legal rationality, and with it, the viability of the legal system as a form of social control.

Weber's theory of the rationalization of law provides Habermas with a critical foil for advancing an alternative account of the socio-logical basis of

legal-rational authority. According to Habermas, Weber's crucial mistake was that he conceived legal rationality too narrowly, without attending to the historically specific conditions that make the form of rationality peculiar to bourgeois formal law both plausible and legitimate.⁸ Habermas first points out that Weber's conception of the "rational" is meant to exclude all moral valuations or so-called subjective value orientations. His conception of "legal rationality" thus carries with it overtones of a "pure" rationality in which practical-moral considerations are excluded *by definition* from the domain of rational dispute and deliberation.

It is at this point that Habermas makes his most compelling argument against the view that the legitimacy of modern legal systems is grounded in the autonomous rationality of positive law. What Weber overlooked, according to Habermas, was that the different modes of formal rationality—the procedural, the purposive, and the scientific—all rely on relatively informal, practical methods of moral reasoning. He thus failed to appreciate the degree to which practical reason, though concerned with the common moral life of the community, is nevertheless deeply woven into formal procedures of deliberation and adjudication, and further, that these practical methods of moral reasoning follow a procedural logic that is at core *rational*, in the classical sense of "being capable of formalization." Habermas then argues that an analytic distinction can be made between the value orientations that emerge in the course of practical moral discussion, which are contingent and particularistic, and the procedural (socio-)logic on which practical moral discourse is (ideally) based. As he concludes:

Weber did not recognize [the] moral core of civil law because he qualified moral insights as subjective value orientations . . . He did not distinguish the preference for values which, within the limits of specific cultural life forms and traditions, *commend* themselves, so to speak, as superior to other values, on the one hand, from the moral oughtness of norms that *obligate* equally all whom they address, on the other. He did not separate the value judgments spread across the whole range of competing value contents from the formal aspect of the binding force or validity of norms, a validity that does not vary with the contents of the norms. In a word, he did not take ethical formalism seriously."

Far from denying the profound effects of processes of rationalization, Habermas's strategy is to *extend* Weber's rationalization thesis by showing how a belief in the autonomous rationality of modern legal systems is itself historically situated and mythical in nature, and how the demand for rationality that is intrinsic to positive law forces a reliance on processes of argumentation that first appear outside the domain of legal discourse. While

he agrees with Weber, for instance, that "[i]n positive law all norms have, at least in principle, lost their sheer customary validity,"¹⁰ the consequence he draws from this is that the formal principles of positive law, and with them, the rationality and legitimacy of their exercise, have become increasingly subject to inspection and rational critique within the practical-moral discourse of the public sphere. Whereas for Weber, the autonomy of positive law is threatened by incursions from (an essentially irrational) public discourse, for Habermas, that "threat" signifies the development of a critical public discourse in which forms of practical-moral reasoning and argument that are basic to the exercise of legal authority increasingly are brought into view.

Once the burden of legitimation has been shifted from the autonomous rationality of positive law to the development of forms of critical public discourse, the question then becomes whether or not these critical discourses are themselves legitimate bearers of the concept of rationality (where "rationality" is construed in the positive sense of the methods by which a community expresses a reflexive grasp of the rights, duties, and principles of mutual recognition and respect that form the basis of enlightened forms of political association). Here Habermas argues that while rational disputes over the legitimacy of legal norms are conducted in terms that are suitable to the legal culture in which they arise—that is, in line with modes of legal argumentation—they must also inevitably appeal to "the internal constraints of a logic of argumentation for producing good reasons."¹¹ The upshot of this argument is that Weber's diagnosis concerning the threat to the autonomy of legal-rationality in posttraditional society was essentially correct, though for different reasons than he suspected. Processes of rationalization at work within posttraditional society bring with them a growing awareness that the claim of positive law to represent the moral will of a community stands in need of continual testing and discursive validation. These processes of testing and validation rely, in turn, on principles of argumentation and language use that are drawn from outside of legal culture proper. As Habermas puts it: "The legitimacy of legality is due to the interlocking of two types of procedures, namely, of legal processes with processes of moral argumentation that obey a procedural rationality of their own."¹²

The task Habermas sets for critical theory is to recover the rational basis, or "procedural rationality," underlying legitimate processes of practical reasoning and argumentation. In contrast to the writings of Horkheimer and Adorno, which grew increasingly pessimistic in their attempt to swim against the rising tide of Weberian rationalization, Habermas opts instead to enter fully and self-consciously into the very center of the stream. The theory of communicative action presupposes the rationalization of communication, and with it, of all practical-moral life.¹³ The question is no longer whether or not processes of rationalization will win the day, but rather, what specific form

the outcomes of those processes will take; how "rationality" will be defined and understood; or again, which pillars will stand at the center of a "rational society" and which will be consigned to its margins. We thus arrive at the strategy, so central to the theory of communicative action, of seeking a way around the rather grim implications of Weber's rationalization thesis via the elaboration of a positive conception of forms of rationality specific to communicative action.

This seemingly counterintuitive strategy—of opposing instrumental rationality by embracing processes of rationalization—makes sense once we adopt a longer view in which purposive-rationality is seen as a contingent moment within a more general and encompassing history of rationalization. Habermas's strategy is to reach back behind Weber in order to reconstruct a history of rationalization that extends in directions other than the narrow trajectory mapped by the concept of purposive-rationality; *an alternative history that traces the development of rational properties of practical-moral discourse*. This is what Habermas means when he accuses Weber of not having taken ethical formalism "seriously enough": that Weber failed to recognize *first*, that the mode of rationality specific to legal discourse trades on elements of practical reason and moral argumentation that shape the taken-for-granted discursive backdrop of everyday life in modern civil society; and *second*, that this practical-moral discourse has specifiable formal properties, and therefore is itself *rationalizable*.

In sum, the theory of communicative action aims to *deepen* Weber's claim regarding the progressive rationalization of the modern world by showing how, under conditions of modernity, processes of rationalization are implicated in the very constitution of the lifeworld, and hence, in the most basic structures of human experience and social relations. Of course, this trajectory of development is itself a contingent theoretical projection that remains to be realized through actual developments in social and political practice. In this regard, the concept of "communicative rationality" is, as Gunn points out:

less . . . a panacea or guarantee than . . . a "wager": a wager in which reason and salvation are not gambled against each other, as in Pascal, but in which reason and salvation weigh together on the same side. This is so if, on the one hand, communication and theorizing as an instance of communication are seen as projecting—prefiguring—mutual recognition . . . and if, on the other, mutual recognition is seen as the medium in which theory and reason exist.¹⁴

Philosophy and social theory can become a "practical force" to the extent that they are able to locate themselves as a critical and redemptive moment

within this history of the rationalization of society. The purpose of a critical theory of society is thus to elaborate concepts of "reason" and "understanding" that are sufficient to oppose the rationalizing effects of instrumental reason at the primordial level of everyday thought and practical social experience.

CRITICAL THEORY AND ORDINARY PRACTICE

In order to develop a concept of communicative rationality that resists the reduction of "what is reasonable" to "what is effective," Habermas needs to insist on a strong distinction between instrumental, or "purposive rationality," and the "substantive rationality of everyday life." Moreover, he needs to show that the latter is *in principle* irreducible to the former. At this point the relevance of practice-based inquiries for Habermas's project becomes clear: it is these traditions that have elaborated a methodologically consistent approach to the study of everyday life that neither reduces practical action to categories of formal analysis, nor forsakes the analytical issues associated with the classical problematics of reason, logic, and social order.

In the Introduction, I argued that Wittgenstein's remarks on rules and rule following were directed primarily against theoretical idealizations of the foundations of human behavior. In parallel fashion, ethnomethodological studies are founded on a radical critique of theoretical idealizations of practical action. It was this issue that exercised Garfinkel in his early critique of Parsons: namely, that those features of practical activities that constitute their organizational coherence—their reasonability, comprehensibility, order, and sense—are irreducible to the terms of "rational action" contemplated by constructive theorizing in general, and by Parsons's conception of the "unit act" in particular.¹⁵ Parsons's "rational actor" was seen by Garfinkel as the theoretical product of professional sociology's preoccupation with formal-analytic theories of action: a "judgmental dope" who in principle would be incapable of functioning in the social world, much less of actively participating in its constitution.

Studies by Garfinkel and the first generation of ethnomethodologists¹⁶ were aimed at exploring the diversity of methods of practical reasoning in order to demonstrate the staggering insufficiency of prevailing social scientific conceptions of rational action to the actual, concerted activities of social actors, and to begin to outline a set of alternatives for sociological investigations of the classical themes of reason, logic, and order.¹⁷

Unfortunately, this radical epistemological critique is often blunted by textbook interpretations of the ethnomethodological "classics." As Sharrock and Anderson have recently pointed out, while Garfinkel's famous "breaching experiments" were originally formulated as investigations of the practical

limitations on specific modes of inquiry, and thus on particular species of rational action, textbook accounts routinely describe them as demonstrations of the fragility and contingency of social order.¹⁸ For example, in one of these well-known exercises students were asked to engage people in casual conversation, and to insist at every opportunity on further clarification regarding the variously ambiguous, nonliteral, or indexical features of the other person's remarks. On Sharrock and Anderson's account, the demand for full-on semantic clarity—a requirement that has a home within the practices of scientific theorizing—is here being juxtaposed with the rational expectations of ordinary conversation. As might be expected, "[t]he implementation of that requirement [of semantic clarity] does not, however, result in better organized, more rationally conducted conversation but in the disruption, even destruction, of the conversation itself."¹⁹ Thus, Garfinkel's experiment demonstrates not only the *difficulties* of making ordinary conversation accountable to the methods and practices of scientific inquiry, it shows the *impossibility* of doing so. As such, it provides *prima facie* evidence that the rational properties of practical activities are irreducible to any one standard or any single set of uniform criteria of rational action.

Like Wittgenstein, Garfinkel insists on the socio-logical integrity of ordinary speech and social activity, and on the sufficiency of endogenous methods of reasoning and acting to the task of organizing and comprehending everyday events. On this account, reason is not "abolished," but is respecified praxiologically as "the rational properties of practical activities that emerge in and as the course of those activities' orderly conduct." In contrast to Wittgenstein, however, Garfinkel envisions a program of empirical sociological inquiry that extends beyond the critique of philosophical method. This program seeks to recover socially organized methods of practical action such that the diverse species of "rationality-in-practice" come into plainer view.

Although the conception of rationality that emerges from Garfinkel's program of ethnomethodological studies contrasts markedly with the formal-analytic conception developed by Habermas—and indeed, takes its point of departure from a critique of systematic theory—there are nonetheless three areas of significant overlap between the two projects:

1. Both reject the standing model of "rational action" as an unwarranted reduction on the "rational properties of practical activities";
2. both maintain that a rejection of this narrow conception of rationality is a first step toward understanding how social activities are described, explained, argued about, and understood in situ; and

3. Both regard these practical methods of description, explanation, argument, and understanding as definitive of what it means for social activities to be capable of being "rationalized."

This general agreement on basic issues surrounding the rationality problematic provides initial grounds for a dialogue between ethnomethodology and the theory of communicative action.

A further warrant for presuming that practice-based inquiries have serious bearing for Habermas's project concerns the stated requirement that the formal criteria of communicative rationality be grounded in what Habermas terms "empirical pragmatic" analyses of communication. In order to demonstrate that the criteria of communicative rationality are foundational to the overall structure of the lifeworld, Habermas must find a way of linking the distinction between "purposive-rational action" and "communication aimed at understanding" to the basic conditions of everyday speech. However, by focusing exclusively on the linguistic determinants of order and meaning, the theory of communicative action leaves aside many of the most salient issues concerning the pragmatic organization of speech and social activity, issues to which ethnomethodologists and conversation analysts have closely attended in their empirically guided studies of language and social life.²⁰ By restricting his conception of pragmatics to the terms of formal linguistic analysis, Habermas is constrained to adopt a narrowly cognitivist approach to the pragmatics of understanding and agreement.

Habermas defines "communicative action" as communication aimed at understanding, and contrasts communicative action with purposive-rational action, or action aimed at producing some instrumental effect. The question of whether or not some utterance is "aimed at understanding," however, is, for Habermas, determined by reference to formal-pragmatic criteria of communicative rationality (truth, rightness, and sincerity). But these criteria refer, in turn, to determinations of whether or not that discourse, or any of its particulars, is "aimed at understanding," thus forcing a regress to the definition of communicative action. While this conceptual bootstrapping may be a useful for framing the central intuition of an ethics of communication grounded in the normative expectations of everyday speech, it is inadequate to the task of specifying what the procedural rationality of understanding and agreement comes down to in practice. In order to sustain the claim of having provided pragmatic criteria for distinguishing between communicative rationality and instrumental reason the theory of communicative action needs to be linked to material sites where that distinction is at issue, and to the actual methods by which relevant determinations of meaning and intent are made. Failing this, Habermas is forced to impute his conceptual machinery to communicative settings without regard for the

ways in which the "rational properties of practical activities" emerge as accountable courses of social action. As long as the concept of communicative rationality lacks a referent in the practical life of social actors critical theory will remain incapable of overcoming the impasse posed by Horkheimer and Adorno: of the choice between authoritarian social science, on the one hand, or the collapse into relativism, on the other. An important consequence of this argument is that the need to provide formal justification (or "grounding") is, for Habermas, an internal requirement of the history of rationalization. This point serves as a corrective to the impression left by Rorty, among others, that Habermas's foundationalism is part of a kind of sentimental attachment to the worn-out demands of enlightenment metaphysics, and could be tossed off like an old coat. Here there appears to be a conceptual disagreement over the purpose and meaning of "philosophy."²¹

What the formal specification of the preconditions for "communication aimed at understanding" does, however, is to thematize understanding and agreement as possible topics for investigation of settings where the "ends" of discourse are routinely placed at issue, deliberated, and criticized. This opens up a rather deep inroad for ethnomethodological studies of social activities organized by and as a variety of deliberative, argumentative, and interpretive tasks.²² So, for instance, the problem of resolving discrepant versions of past events can be studied from within the working context of persons who have this task as their professional charge.²³ Practice-based inquiries provide a working alternative to the definition of "the problematics of understanding and agreement" provided by the methodological discourse of the social sciences. In what follows I shall consider the consequences that an ethnomethodological reworking of these issues holds for the theory of communicative action.

THE PROBLEM OF UNDERSTANDING MEANING IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

The argument to this point has been as follows: (1) that Habermas's turn toward communicative action is motivated by a concern to reconstruct the rationality problematic at the level of practical moral discourse; (2) that critical theory and practice-based inquiries share an interest in the foundational critique of standing conceptions of rational action; and (3) that Habermas's account of the key concepts of "communicative action" and "communicative rationality," though formally rigorous, is pragmatically empty. There thus exists a *prima facie* case for treating practice-based studies of language and social action as candidates for filling out the pragmatic level of the theory of communicative action. What follows is an attempt to clarify the relationship between Habermas's philosophical project and the empirical-

analytic program of Wittgenstein-inspired ethnomethodology through a consideration of Habermas's reflections on the "problem of understanding meaning in the social sciences."²⁴

This discussion recalls the second of Habermas's "three urgent tasks" for critical theory outlined above: namely, that critical theory must establish relations with methodological questions in the social sciences such that "the elaboration of adequate basic concepts for systems of communicative action [is] not hindered but promoted." To accomplish this Habermas needs to demonstrate the relevance of the concept of communicative rationality to the methodological self-understanding of the social sciences. His strategy is to identify the methodological position of the social scientific interpreter with the hermeneutic principle of translation that, he argues, is implicit in the general evolutionary structure of communicative action. On this view, the methodological discourse of the social sciences represents a special case in the development of hermeneutic self-understanding insofar as the social sciences adopt a self-consciously rationalized approach to the problematics of understanding and agreement. This history of methodological discussion, reflection, and critique thus provides critical theory with a form of disciplinary access to what Habermas terms the "rational infrastructure" of action oriented to reaching understanding.²⁵

Habermas's reflections on the problem of understanding meaning in the social sciences are situated within his broader critique of positivism, and of the objectivistic self-understanding of the "empirical-analytic sciences of action." In this regard, his general argument has not changed much over the past three decades. Because they are concerned not merely with behavioral events, but with the *meanings* of those events and with the symbolic structure of their interpretation by members of a community, the social sciences are at essence a hermeneutic enterprise. Moreover, as a consequence of the observation that the meaning of events is dependent on the historical and cultural positioning of their symbolic interpretation, the discourse of the social sciences is forced by its internal rational structure continually to reflect on the epistemological foundations of its own inquiries. In short, the social sciences are understood by Habermas as *reflexively self-constituting sciences of action*. For this reason, they provide an historical site par excellence for the philosophical analysis of the transcendental preconditions of objectivating interpretive practice. As Habermas continues:

What is at issue here is the transcendental conditions of the intersubjectivity of linguistically mediated systems of action as such, and thus the logical structure of the social lifeworld, which has a twofold status in research. On the one hand it is the object domain of research; in this respect a transcendental analysis yields infor-

mation about structures of reality that are prior to any empirical analysis. On the other hand, however, the social lifeworld is also the very basis of research; in this respect a transcendental investigation permits a self-reflection of the methods employed.²⁶

The discourse of the social sciences is thus bound to reflect on the logical structure of the lifeworld in two ways: (1) at the level of the phenomena that comprise the material substrate of analysis, and (2) at the methodological level of the conditions that provide for the coherence of its own investigations. The investigation of the logical structure of the lifeworld thus requires both the empirical-analytic study of lifeworld relations—that is, of basic structures of language, experience, and practical action—and the critical-theoretic reflection on the contents, methods, and aims of those investigations as these are constituted *pretheoretically* within the cultural and historical horizon of the social scientific interpreter. Habermas identifies three intellectual traditions that prefigure the sort of transcendental investigation he has in mind: phenomenology, Wittgensteinian "linguistic" analysis, and philosophical hermeneutics.

In the third chapter of *On the Logic of the Social Sciences* Habermas discusses each of these approaches in order. Because I wish to argue that Habermas's readings of Wittgenstein and phenomenology are skewed to fit with his reflections on philosophical hermeneutics, I will invert the order of his discussion, and begin with a brief sketch of the background to the hermeneutic conception of language through which these other two traditions are being read.

Habermas's discussion of the *Verstehen* problematic is framed by a conception of understanding that emphasizes the *distance* between the author (of a text or action) and its interpreter, and places "understanding" as the *endpoint* of a process of fusing historical, cultural, and cognitive horizons. This approach is consistent with a line of argument initiated by Schleiermacher, Droysen, and Dilthey, and elaborated more recently in the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer.²⁷ The canonical move in this tradition is to treat the "problem of understanding" arising within the scholarly interpretation of historically and culturally "distant" texts as a *general precondition* of all communication. This conception of communicative activity is summarized in the Schleiermachian maxim that "misunderstanding, rather than understanding, arises of its own accord."²⁸ By generalizing the hermeneutic problem of understanding to all communicative settings the search for universally valid principles of rational interpretation is established as a central topic for metatheoretical reflection.

It is in this context that the historical development of the social sciences takes on special importance. According to Habermas, the principal task of

the social scientific interpreter is to describe and understand cultural beliefs and practices in terms of the meaning, plausibility, and coherence they have for members. This means that social scientific interpretation must proceed from a position that is *internal* to the participants' culture and their methods for the symbolic constitution of meaning. This requirement raises the familiar methodological difficulty of reconciling native understandings with the assumptive grasp of actions, events, and their meanings that constitute the familiar world of the social scientific interpreter. The issue becomes more pronounced as the cultural and historical distance between the discourse of the social sciences and the lifeworld of the "native culture" is increased. Here the position of the social scientist begins to approximate the circumstance of classical hermeneutics, where cultural and linguistic differences are compounded by vast temporal distances between author and interpreter. On this view, both the social scientist and the hermeneutician operate on the cusp between horizons of meaning that are historically, linguistically, and culturally distinct. The significance of hermeneutic practice, according to Habermas, is that in the course of attempting to translate between alternative systems of meaning, the social scientific interpreter continually runs up against particularities of language and belief that constitute his or her own tradition of symbolic expression. The revelation that one's own language is in this sense limited in no way contradicts the possibility of the hermeneutic achievement. On the contrary, hermeneutics overcomes the "limits" of ordinary languages in and through the act of translation. Philosophical hermeneutics and interpretive social science merely appropriate a "tendency to self-transcendence" that is built into the structure of ordinary language. As Habermas continues:

Languages themselves contain the potential for a rationality that, expressing itself in the particularity of a specific grammar, reflects the limits of that grammar and at the same time negates them in their specificity. Reason, which is always bound up with language, is also always beyond languages. Only by destroying the particularities of *languages*, which are the only way in which it is embodied, does reason live in *language*. . . . This mediating generality is attested to by the act of translation. Formally, it is reflected in the trait that all traditional languages have in common and that guarantees their transcendental unity, namely, the fact that in principle they can all be translated into one another.²⁹

Habermas identifies the transcendental-pragmatic moment of critical theory with the position of the social scientific interpreter because he conceives the (ideal-typical) social scientist as the embodiment of a material engagement between cultures, mediated by a rational discourse oriented toward

achieving understanding. For Habermas, interpretive understanding is a practical discursive achievement, and the methodological discourse of the social sciences is (or at least, ought to be) concerned at the most fundamental level with the epistemological status of that achievement.

A similar argument occurs in the first chapter of *The Theory of Communicative Action*.³⁰ Here, Habermas aligns the discussion of the *Verstehen* problematic with Giddens's formulation of the "double-hermeneutic" task of the social scientific interpreter.³¹ On this account, the materials on which social scientists base their accounts are always already "symbolically prestructured" by the work of local practitioners. The "problem of understanding meaning" therefore consists in the difficulties of providing warrantable—that is, *rationally valid*—interpretations of an analytical substrate that is itself an assemblage of "first-order interpretations," the coherence and integrity of which is available only with reference to a native understanding:

The *specific Verstehen problematic* lies in the fact that the social scientist cannot "use" this language "found" in the object domain as a neutral instrument. He cannot "enter into" this language without having recourse to the pretheoretical knowledge of a member of a lifeworld—indeed of his own—which he has intuitively mastered as a layman and now brings unanalyzed into every process of achieving understanding.³²

The familiar consequence of the "double-hermeneutic" is that it places the social scientific interpreter between the competing demands of culture-specific understanding, on the one hand, and objectivating social science, on the other.³³ As Habermas continues:

The *Verstehen* problematic can thus be expressed in the brief question: How can the *objectivity of understanding* be reconciled with the performative attitude of one who participates in a process of reaching understanding?³⁴

The solution he proposes is to conceive the process of rational interpretation as involving a continual alternation between the "performative attitude" of one who participates in interaction and the "objectivating attitude" of the social scientific interpreter who reflects critically on the "pretheoretical knowledge" necessary for achieving a participant's understanding. This process of making explicit the "pretheoretical knowledge" of the social scientific interpreter reveals the core structure of communicative action; that is, the "rational infrastructure of communication aimed at understanding" which, by virtue of their specialist preoccupation with the problematics of understanding, has been developed and formalized to an extraordinary degree within the methodological discourse of the social sciences. For

Habermas, the social sciences therefore represent a special case of "communication aimed at understanding": A hermeneutically oriented discourse which, owing to its tradition of methodological reflection on the bases of communicative understanding, articulates the formal-pragmatic conditions of communicative action. By extending the formalization of social scientific methods in the direction of "communicative aimed at understanding" Habermas hopes to arrive at a concept of communicative rationality that is "encompassing and general" and "satisfies universalistic claims."³⁵

In the previous chapter I briefly sketched how Habermas assimilates Wittgenstein to a conception of language use modeled on the principles of philosophical hermeneutics. It should be clear from this and the discussion above that Habermas is operating with an idealized conception of social scientific practice. It is, however, an idealization that finds support within the philosophy of the social sciences, and in particular, within the tradition of *verstehende* sociology culminating in the writings of Peter Winch.³⁶ It remains for the ethnomethodologists to provide the next step of the argument in which philosophical conceptions of interpretation, understanding, and agreement that rely on an idealized image of social scientific practice, are subjected to critical sociological scrutiny.

RESPECIFYING THE PROBLEM OF UNDERSTANDING MEANING IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Habermas's attempt to make contact with universal principles of communicative action via the intermediaries of hermeneutic philosophy and professional social science contrasts sharply with the strategy, common to the traditions of ethnomethodological and Wittgensteinian argument, of attempting to unravel the problems of philosophy and social theory by consulting perspicuous cases drawn from domains of ordinary practice. It is not surprising, then, that the two approaches should yield quite different appreciations of the problematics of interpretation, understanding, and agreement, and of their significance for the interpretive social sciences, as well as for sociological inquiries more generally construed.³⁷ In making the case for the ethnomethodological/Wittgensteinian alternative, I will be concerned to show not only how it differs from the approach adopted by Habermas, but more important, how it undermines the very terms in which Habermas's hermeneutically inspired conception of the "problem of understanding meaning" is framed.

An exceptionally clear treatment of these issues is provided by Sharrock and Anderson in their discussion of the relationship between ethnographic theory and the practices of ethnographic research.³⁸ Their argument centers on what they term "the inaccessibility problem" in contemporary ethnography.

According to Sharrock and Anderson, ethnographic theory has tended to presume that "cultures" represent uniformly discrete (i.e., "monolithic") systems of thought and action, and that "native understanding" consists in transparent and total access to a given cultural system. Hence, the vocabulary within which the discourse on ethnographic methods is conducted establishes a series of polarities—"native"/"nonnative," "us"/"them"—which organize persons "into standard types following standard patterns of behavior and, thereby, showing *their* culture."³⁹ It follows from this that ethnographers face the problem of gaining access to an entire way of life, and with it, an entire historical, cultural, and cognitive legacy, that is not only different from, but radically alternative to, their own. "The inaccessibility problem" consists in the theoretical impossibility of being at once both "inside" (as "native") and "outside" (as "ethnographer") the host culture. It is this conception of "culture as monolith" that frames the familiar theoretical puzzles surrounding the relativity of cultural knowledge and the so-called incommensurability thesis, or the general impossibility of achieving a "total" understanding of cultures other than one's own.⁴⁰

As Sharrock and Anderson point out, however, this negative conclusion regarding the possibilities of doing ethnography is not based in any sort of fieldwork experience, but is instead arrived at *a priori* on the basis of the theoretical idealizations of "culture" and "native understanding." As they continue:

The mapping of one set of cultural experiences onto another is not found to be impossible: it is assumed to be so. We are being invited to accept that if we meet a society of people who claim that they carry their souls around in boxes, or that paternity has nothing to do with reproduction, or that some people can inflict harm on others merely by wishing to do so, we are faced not merely with a translation problem which ought, in principle, to be soluble. Instead we have incomprehension which can never be resolved.⁴¹

At the center of these difficulties lies a conception of "understanding" that is at once too general and too narrow. It is too general insofar as it presumes that "the problem of understanding" is an invariant feature of cross-cultural discourse—that there is nothing, for instance, on which we and the Azande might possibly agree. At the same time, because actions and their meanings are depicted as either wholly transparent or entirely opaque, "native understanding" appears as a sort of "uniform content," with no middle ground accorded to commonly recognized pathways of acculturation and with little recognition of the diversity of practices that makes up what we commonly refer to as "a culture." Persons may, with respect to a specific practice, have differential knowledge or be at various stages in their training without

having their membership in the culture thereby raised for question. The theoretical idealization of "native knowledge" leads us to overlook both that practical knowledge is unevenly distributed throughout human communities and that the so-called "natives" are ongoingly engaged in social and cultural inquiries of their own.

The overly general nature of this conception of "understanding" follows from its narrowness with respect to ordinary methods of expression and their situated comprehension. The "problem of understanding meaning" becomes a theoretical barrier to ethnographic research only when practical actions and their local interpretations appear as fundamentally incomprehensible expressions of an alien culture. But here we need to ask what criteria are being brought to bear on these actions and their interpretations such that "fundamental incomprehensibility" might emerge as their salient feature. Typically, this occurs where specific actions, reports, or descriptions are taken to be emblematic of an overarching cultural cosmology. They are then compared with a paired proposition drawn from the anthropologist's own (usually western scientific) belief system, the contradiction between the two serving as proof of the former's "fundamental incomprehensibility." Note that it is not necessary that one come down on one side or the other for this demonstration to succeed. All that is necessary is that one accepts the legitimacy of the rivalry between the paired statements.

This discussion recalls Gilbert Ryle's famous example of the undergraduate student and the college accountant.⁴² The student is given access to the accountant's books, where he finds that for every matter associated with his daily life at the college, there is some sort of entry. There are entries for the tuition that students pay, for the salaries their instructors receive, for rent on the buildings, and care of the grounds. As Ryle continues:

At first the undergraduate is merely mildly interested . . . But then under the influence of the auditor's grave and sober voice he suddenly begins to wonder. Here everything in the life of the college is systematically marshaled and couched in terms which, though colorless, are precise, impersonal and susceptible of conclusive checking. To every plus there corresponds an equal and opposite minus; the entries are classified; the origins and destinations of all payments are indicated. Moreover, a general conclusion is reached: the financial position of the college is exhibited and compared with its position in previous years. So is not this expert's way, perhaps, the right way in which to think of the life of the college, and the other muddled and emotionally charged ways to which he has been used the wrong ways?⁴¹

Ryle's aim is to show how deep the temptation can be to treat systematic descriptions as competitive with our everyday or commonsense accounts and understandings. At first the student is unimpressed, but as it gradually emerges that the accountant's books comprise a record of university life that is both systematic and complete, the student begins to doubt the merits of his own appreciation of "university life." It begins to look as if there is no room for alternatives to the accountant's ledger; that everything that needs to be said about the life of the college has been said, and that, in the words of the accountant, "the stories that you tell about it to your brothers and sisters are only picturesque travesties of the audited facts."⁴⁴ The confusion arises from our supposing "university life" to be a singular (and thus, singularly accountable) thing. "University life" is not a thing, but rather, it is a *concept* that takes on occasional relevance by virtue of its relationship to some sort of business, preoccupation, or task-at-hand.

Ryle illustrates this point with the example of library books. For the accountant, what is important about the book is that a receipt for its purchase is recorded. His records are, in this sense, complete when for each book in the library's possession there is a corresponding figure in his ledger. It is *not* a matter of accountant's interest what the subject matter of some book might be, who its author is, or where it can be found on the shelves. Neither is it the case, that the accountant's interest in the book is competitive with the student's, though there may be occasions on which the two interests might momentarily come together (e.g., if the book is lost and a reckoning of charges is required). The book has a different place in "university life" for both the accountant and the student in accordance with their different understandings of what "university life" comes down to in practice. We do not feel compelled, at this point, to figure out whose book—the accountant's or the student's—is the real book, since, in Ryle's words, "There are not two books, nor yet one real book, side by side with another bubble-book—the latter, queerly, being the one that is useful for examinations. There is just a book available for students, and an entry in the accounts specifying what the college paid for it."⁴⁵

Recall the anthropologist's dilemma: Native accounts appear to contradict propositions fundamental to the anthropologist's own belief system. This circumstance is then taken as evidence for the "fundamental incomprehensibility" of "native understanding." The point of Ryle's argument, however, is to show that this dilemma is the result of a theoretical confusion concerning the nature of scientific accounts. Owing to their completeness, systematicity, standards of precision, and the like, scientific accounts may often seem to provide the "last word" on things, or more, to explain the world (or some dark corner of it) so fully as to leave no room for any other method of approach. But this is so only if we accede to an epistemic amnesia

concerning the manifold nature of our own experience and the diversity of our ordinary linguistic practices. There is no *essential* rivalry between "native accounts" and the propositions of western science just because they are sometimes, strictly speaking, *incomparable*. A painted portrait and a mugshot offer quite different views of the same person, yet there is room in the world for both things. As Sharrock and Anderson continue:

Many of the propositions to be found in other cultures turn out to be wrong or meaningless if they are measured against our standards of factuality. We know that paternity is necessary for human reproduction and that souls, if they exist, are not the kinds of things you can tote about in boxes. But are we not then in the same position as someone who claimed not to understand what was meant when it was said that one person had all the brains in the family, since experimental biology had conclusively demonstrated that cranial content varies among the human population?

By casting the argument as one about facts and values, subjectivity and objectivity, and not the plausibility or otherwise of alternative translations, what is being discussed gets irretrievably stuck in the quagmire of the determinants of rationality, the existence of logical universals and the foundations of truth.⁴⁶

This is not to say that *all* native accounts are metaphorical or that there are no conditions under which "native understandings" conflict with the values of western science and rationality. However, when such conflicts do arise, they are also recognized and disputed in terms of contextually specific matters of practice and belief. Indeed, the process of translation is itself a contextually *specific* achievement insofar as the criteria by which the adequacy of a specific translation is judged are tied in fundamental ways to the circumstances of its production.

A recent study by Bjelic provides a case in point.⁴⁷ Bjelic recounts a situation in which he served as a translator for a Bosnian woman whose son had been wounded when the Croatia military had shelled their village near the city of Mostar. The young man was initially sent to a local hospital where he received only superficial treatment. He was then rescued by United Nations personnel and admitted into a U.S. military hospital in Split, Croatia. A U.S.-based aid organization called Veterans for Peace then had the mother and son brought to the United States to continue his treatment. Thus began their cultural odyssey.

Bjelic was asked by the local organizers of Veterans for Peace to accompany the boy and his mother from Andrews Air Force Base in Washington, D.C. to the U.S. military base in Lewiston, Maine, and to serve as a translator during their journey. Bjelic describes the mother as "a simple village