Strengths and Weaknesses of Habermas' Pragmatic Realism

Salvatore Italia

Department of Education, Psychology, Philosophy, University of Cagliari

After analysing Habermas' philosophical evolution from his theory of interests to his late pragmatic realism (1), I will focus on the problems of this last conception (2), trying to draw a plausible way out which avoids both naturalistic reductionism and a too weak form of realism (3). While doing so I will focus on the concept of objectivity, highlighting the problems that come from Habermas' approach to it. I suggest a gradual approach to objectivity and realism as a possible way out from Habermas' impasse. This is also compatible with Habermas' critical theory as it keeps for truth the role of an opening device for social and theoretical discussions.

Keywords: Habermas, realism, truth

1. Introduction

The overarching philosophical question leading to the general development of the following pages can be summarized in this way: how much of our knowledge is due to our linguistic and cultural apparatus rather than to the way in which reality is, independently of our perception of it? To answer this question, we should be able to access both our language and reality in a neutral or objective way. Unfortunately, we can access reality only through our linguistic and cultural perspective, which is impossible to objectify in a completely neutral way. The rootedness of any human knowledge in its cultural and linguistic context complicates the path towards obtaining an answer to this question, sometimes threatening to put in doubt the very existence of an independent reality and, above all, its role in determining our truths.

The process of obtaining knowledge in any field of human research shows that sometimes "something" (e.g. a "fact") turns out to be independent from

Corresponding author's address: Salvatore Italia, Department of Education, Psychology, Philosophy, University of Cagliari, Via Is Mirrionis, 1 09123-Cagliari, Sardinia, Italy. Email: salvatore.italian29k@gmail.com.

us, while sometimes it turns out to be surprisingly dependent upon us. This phenomenon is connected to our lives in more than one way. With respect to our *practical* life, it has long been debated whether good and evil are objective or subjective and, if objective, what kind of objectivity we are dealing with. Are we dealing with a culture-relative or a universal kind of objectivity? And, if we choose the subjective route, what does 'subjective' mean here? Is it possible to reach intersubjective agreement (as a measure of objectivity) starting from merely subjective starting points? A similar process occurs in the scientific fields (as constituting our *theoretical* life), where all entities to which the sciences refer are subjected to the same scrutiny with respect to their *degree of autonomy* from human influence (contextual perspective and interpretation).

The reason why it is important to look more closely at realism (defined as the attitude of considering some entities as really existing) is because the degree of autonomy for each kind of entity we encounter as part of reality has not yet been adequately determined. This is true especially after the still ongoing end of metaphysical foundationalism (the idea of putting trust in some human knowledge as a means of establishing the *absolute* foundation of the sciences, as well as other beliefs and behaviours) and the spread of the conviction that humans can only reach specifically *human* results. Challenges to foundationalism rest on the idea that science's results about the autonomy or independence of entities are contingent results that can not be absolutely grounded: they are dependent on contextual influence, both in their genesis and in their acceptance as valid. If the sciences can not be conceived of as providing us with absolute answers, then this might incline us to forget about the question concerning the degrees of independence of the entities we encounter in our lives.

Based on these issues, the question of realism has been revived, lodged in between the grip of metaphysical realism (as an attempt to find new bases for foundationalism) and post-modern relativism (promoting a constructivist view of human concepts according to which the degree of autonomy depends only on their perspective and value to human beings). The question of realism, then, is a way of dealing with the problem of coming out from between this grip without losing awareness of the contextual dependence of our knowledge and the common-sense intuition of the existence of an independent reality. In particular, a realist can ask about the *boundary* between what is dependent and independent: Is it fixed by reality itself or by us? In the latter case, what do we mean by us? Are we referring to 'us' as inhabitants of a particular socio-cultural context, to 'us' as human species, or another elevated category?

These concerns arise due to our naive belief that there is a definitive bor-

der between us and the world (which would explain fallibilism, or the idea that our knowledge sometimes proves to be false even when we are convinced that what we believe is true). But there is another naive belief that could help in this context: the idea that different entities have different degrees of independence. However, the difficulties in following this third path between realism (the belief in the independent existence of entities) and constructivism (the belief in the dependence of them on us) has led to different attempts at resolution. Here again returns the problem of relativism: once we admit a certain degree of dependence, who are the "authors" of this dependence-relation? The single subject, his society, his cultural horizon, or the human species as a whole (to go from the more extreme forms to the softer kinds of relativism)?

Habermas' perspective on realism and truth seems to me to be a promising way to approach these themes. The type of realism that is analyzed in this writing is Jürgen Habermas' pragmatic realism, which considers reality as pragmatically independent from us; this means that in such a view reality is considered as independent in order to fulfill our daily activities (both in the theoretical and practical aspect). Here it does not matter if, independently from the existence of human beings, reality has its own existence and features.

Pragmatic realism (as far as it comes from pragmatism) consists of the attitude that a difference which makes no difference is no difference at all. This is to deflate all the philosophical problems that for centuries have troubled thinkers from different philosophical backgrounds. In light of this deflationary approach to philosophical problems, Habermas comes to pragmatism through his post-metaphysical thinking, i.e. exemplifying the post-modern awareness of finitude (fallibilism and contextualism) as opposed to metaphysical faith in the accessibility of a God's-Eye Point of View. Both Habermas and pragmatists refuse the objectivist idea that there is a God's-Eye Point of View. While getting closer to pragmatism, Habermas refuse the relativist openings of pragmatists like Richard Rorty, rather approaching Hilary Putnam's positions. It is in 1988 that Habermas first revised his *consensualist* theory of truth via the discussion of the debate between Rorty and Putnam on realism and truth; this volume takes the name of *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, and clearly shows its pragmatist interest (Habermas 1988b, 175).[1]

---

[1] The debate between Rorty and Putnam is between a relativist and a realist interpretation of pragmatism. In Rorty's "radical contextualism" (as defined by Habermas 1988b, 153) there is no such a thing like a neutral context where it is possible to make truth something more than a mere perspectival and contextual agreement that is bond to the limited perspective of a linguistic community with its own interests. Habermas is closer to Putnam's appeal

After a short summary aiming at showing how Habermas comes to his first consensualist theory of truth (2), it will be provided an analysis of his move to a more pragmatically oriented theory of truth (*Janus-faced* theory of truth) (2.2). It will follow an evaluation of his realist claims (3). The criticism here provided mostly deals with the notion of objectivity and the ambiguities that are implicit in Habermas' *realist-claimed* philosophical approach to it: how can we explain in a realist way the difference among different claims of objectivity, i.e. truth and moral rightness, if they both are only *attitudes* that we can assume towards different domains? The goal is to show that such a pragmatic realism is unable to take into account the complexity of reality as it is experienced daily on both a theoretical and a practical aspect (4), lacking of a realist account of degrees of reality that only seems to fully explain the whole spectrum of our experiencing objectivity.

2.   A short summary

2.1   Coming to a consensualist theory of truth

Since the beginning of his career in the 1960s, Jürgen Habermas has been a Kantian philosopher. In fact, similar to Kant's idea of the transcendental categories, Habermas started speaking of different "interests" that play the role of transcendental conditions for everything we take to be a part of reality. This tight relationship between interests and knowledge (1968) is connected to his critical approach to epistemology, as it comes from its critical theory.

Critical theory is generally conceived of as involving the criticism of ideologies. We can define ideologies as widespread illusions of legitimacy which, in order to maintain their power, veil a particular interest whose appearance would crumble the very legitimacy that people wrongly attribute to the ideology itself (Habermas 1963a, 311). Habermas sees any type of scientism—defined as the blind trust in science's power to provide us with certain and indisputable results—as committed to the ideological representation of its own results (Habermas 1965, 1152). This is why Habermas believes it is important to develop a *dialectic* epistemology: to understand the results of science, we need to trace them back to the interests that first made them possible. In other words, the results of scientific inquiry are never disconnected from the discursive dialectic of the valid and the invalid. What is taken as an objective belief is inherently linked to a discursive dynamic

to the difference between objectivity and solidarity, and between "rationally valid" and "socially agreed." See (Putnam 1981) and (Rorty 1979). Similarly to Habermas' consensual theory of truth, in the '80s Putnam develops a conception of truth as a justification coming from an ideal speech situation. In the '90s, both authors try to recover a more robust form of realism for their theories, the first developing a Janus-faced theory of truth while the second opts for a natural realism based on McDowell's theory of perception.

of arguments for and against a particular belief, from where its validity may arise.

To be clear, a dialectic epistemology is not a *relativist* epistemology. Even if both share the anti-absolutist and anti-scientist attitude, the first still sees as possible the reaching of universal consensus (universal validity reached through argumentative processes). In fact, a dialectic epistemology, as it is *communicatively* conceived by Habermas, sees the validity of a belief coming from the discursive struggle of arguments for the validity or invalidity of a thesis: the winning one is the one that in the end is going to be taken as valid. This shows that science's results are not an absolute description of an entity or process, rather being dependent on argumentative struggles that hide perspectives and interests.

The link between validity and interest must not be misunderstood. Habermas is far from that relativism that leads to the futility of the concept of criticism that for Habermas' critical theory is fundamental. It is the perspective from where to approach the notion of interests, here, that is at stake: for relativists interests are limiting conditions that make a *non-sense* talking about validity and attempting to win into argumentative struggles. On Habermas' point of view, interests are the conditions of possibility from where to start any attempt to know and to create a valid scientific knowledge: they do not prevent the reaching of consensus that can overcome differences of perspective. They are not selfish values of individuals that can not be shown; in Habermas' Kantian approach they are conditions of possibility. There are three interests of knowledge, that is, three main interests which knowledge aims at satisfying:

(a) technical interest, aimed at manipulating and providing information (e.g. knowing the laws regulating a natural or social phenomenon in order to exploit it);

(b) practical interest, aimed at understanding and providing interpretations (e.g. understanding a book written in another language or a different culture);

(c) emancipatory interest, aimed at self-refection and providing analysis (e.g. psychoanalysis and critical theory).[2]

With respect to what they share in common, these interests all have:

- a *quasi-transcendental* status: they provide the subjects with three general points of view from where reality can be alternatively grasped;

---

[2] For a detailed exposition of the differences see (Habermas 1965, 1146–1147).

- anthropological roots: they each result from the imperatives of a socio-cultural form of life linked to language and labour (Habermas 1963b, 16).[3]

More specifically, these interests: mediate between a *value-full* life and knowledge that aims at being objective and *value-free*, and they are derived from a socio-cultural form of life through the imperative of reason, which has to be conceived of as an adaptive organ. In this perspective, interests come "at the same time from nature and from the cultural break with nature," because reason is both natural and cultural (Habermas 1965, 1149). To be clear, Habermas speaks of quasi-transcendence because, differently from Kantian's transcendental categories, Habermas' interests are deemed contingent; they operate here and now but nothing can be said about their future validity. In fact, given the progression of natural and cultural evolution, their validity can not be absolute and necessary. The post-Darwinian sense of contingency clashes with the Kantian sense of the transcendental; the result is the quasi-transcendental status of adaptive interests. However, the impossibility of establishing an *absolute* foundation of our transcendental conditions for knowledge does not lead directly to a skeptical approach; it only discredits a dogmatic, ideological, and absolute interpretation of knowledge.

Science's results are never absolutely value-free, but this does not mean that such results can not achieve a level of objectivity (i.e. independence from the subject) that allows them to be judged as true and thus trusted; quite simply, this objectivity has to be deflated into something that humans can access within their limitations. The three transcendental interests come into play here, since they can be conceived of in two different ways according to the theoretical perspective we assume. They can be seen as *limiting* conditions if we are metaphysical realists who think of objectivity in the absolute sense, but they can also be conceived of as conditions of possibility for knowledge if we endorse Habermas' "post-metaphysical" awareness of the essentially limited nature of human cognition. According to Habermas, human beings are always locked in a particular perspective, and an absolute view from nowhere is impossible despite the other impressive cognitive progress that we may be able to achieve.[4] Hopes for any sort of absolute degree of knowledge would lead us directly back to skepticism, since we can never fully trust our actual cognitive access in an absolute way. If this were the case, then we could never really know if we were already in that absolute

---

[3] As from Kantian tradition, 'transcendent' and 'transcendental' have two different meanings, the first referring to something that exceeds a limit while the second is to be understood as related to what makes something else possible to be seen or epistemically grasped.

[4] Habermas' notion of "post-metaphysical" is from the '80s, but it can be used to identify ideas he already had in the '60s.

position we were looking for, and so we could never trust the actual knowledge that we may have. Interests can not simply be deleted; they are the mark of human contextual finitude. For us, absolute knowledge is impossible, and all that can be done in order to achieve a *lower* degree of objectivity ('lower' in the sense of being compared to what an absolutist seeks) is reaching a consensus within the perspective opened up by these interests.

However, not just any type of consensus can be held as the meter of validity; only a consensus inspired by the ideals of a rational consensus qualifies, ideals including maximum inclusion and respect. Consensus arises within a human dimension, and it is exactly this consensus which becomes the gauge of validity (or legitimate knowledge). In particular, Habermas' idea of consensus is different from Rorty's ethnocentrism, to the extent that the first is open to the possibility of reaching a universal consensus (if discurse is inspired by an ideal speech situation) while the second is an extreme form of relativism (Rorty 1989, 167–183).[5] This solution meets both Habermas' need to keep the process of evaluating knowledge dialectically open and the demands of his own conception of *interested knowledge* (since consensus is always context-dependent, even when inspired by ideals of universality which are context-transcendent).

The linguistic-communicative approach becomes pivotal in Habermas' philosophy during the 1970s when he endorses the "linguistic turn": the idea that an understanding of human phenomena is best achieved by focusing on linguistic phenomena. In his work during these years, Habermas maintains that the three interests can be translated into three different linguistic claims of validity.[6] Depending on the particular claims of validity that a speaker raises when he utters a sentence, he can enter into an objective world (if he raises a truth claim), a social world (if he raises a claim of rightness), or a subjective world (if he raises a claim of expressive sincerity). These are *formal* structures of everyday and theoretical interactions (respectively named "communicative actions" and "discourses"). In Habermas' perspective it does not matter *what* subjects are talking about; what is important is their attitude towards a particular situation. In fact, they can refer to nature, society, and personality through either the objectifying attitude (from which nature, society, and personality are seen as part of the objective world), the normative-prescriptive attitude (the social world), or the expressive attitude (the subjective world).

---

[5] If relativism claims absolute validity (thus falling into self-contradiction), ethnocentrism only claims a contextual validity.

[6] This is the result of his study of formal pragmatics, aimed at discovering the linguistic-pragmatic structures that remain unaffected by the differences of contextual uses of language; he identifies three coordinates of discourse that are involved in all uses of language.

This threefold ontology could be interpreted from an ontological-metaphysical or pragmatic point of view; that is, we can identify each world according to the differences among their own objects or, as Habermas does, according to the pragmatic attitude which we adopt when we refer to the objects within them. The former approach interprets the differences between worlds in terms of different entities rather than different communicative attitudes, where each different entity belongs to a specific world. There are several problems with this metaphysical approach, e.g. are emotions subjective or natural? Without a precise boundary between worlds, the distinction between the natural and subjective domains is blurred. Moreover, under this model, would we have to deny that social relationships influence emotions and desires? Our desires, which influence our political and social order, are influenced by sociality too; there are desires of which we might never be aware because we live on a socio-cultural horizon which does not allow for such perception (but does allow for other forms). Without a precise boundary between the social and subjective worlds, the distinction here disappears. With respect to the objective world, progress in science and technology can make it possible to modify what we have always perceived as naturally unchangeable. To the extent that progress is socially and politically contingent (e.g. science depends on public funding and is socially organised, even if it also depends on individual genius), we fail to distinguish the exact boundary between these worlds. As a result, the subjective, natural, and social worlds, when *metaphysically* conceived, seem to be difficult to make sense of. This apparently motivates a preference for Habermas' pragmatic approach. The goal of this essay, though, is to question this quick abandonment of a metaphysical approach to ontology, and the third section will deal exactly with this issue.

Inheriting the contingency of the three epistemological interests, Habermas sees the three validity claims originating from a "cognitive evolution" to be conceived of as a progressive "construction of a system of references" (Habermas 1981, I, 106). This system is part of a lifeworld, which is the product of a process of demythologisation involving the desocialisation of nature and the denaturalisation of society. The lifeworld is a reserve of linguistic meanings upon which subjects have a "previous agreement" as members of the same lifeworld, and that shapes every human dimension of understanding from personal identity to the knowledge of the external world (Habermas 1988a, 85–97). This differentiation prevents us "from conflating what is true with what is right or expressively authentic, and from identifying right or wrong with what inspires attraction or repulsion" (Albinus 2013, 5). The link between the transcendental interests and the respective linguistic validity claims can be highlighted in this way:

(a-1) truth refers to the objectifying attitude that is involved in the observational attitude of technical interest;

(b-1) moral rightness is based on the understanding attitude that is typical of practical interest;

(c-1) expressive sincerity refers to the self-reflective attitude that characterizes emancipative interest.

Habermas conceives of the linguistic validity claims as mostly related to communication (as the natural goal of language) and, as such, he sees communication as pragmatic, that is, as comprised of speech acts with which speakers are at the same time actors, since our linguistic agreements also have practical consequences. Actors are at the same time speakers, since we can act only by following the paths that our language makes available to us. Over the years Habermas enhances the pragmatic core of his approach to transcendental conditions, thus approaching a kind of weak naturalism. However, when Habermas begins to acknowledge that there is a difference in the degree of objectivity between the social and objective world, his pragmatic approach seems to be complemented by a very specific ontological insight.

2.2   The Pragmatic Turn

Habermas' transcendental view persists after his realist turn (1999), where he conceives of his prior interests as still communicative but primarily pragmatic. Through his linguistic turn, Habermas' thought shifts towards the grounding of the cognitive interests in the linguistic and communicative nature of human beings and, more specifically, human thought (as exemplified by the idea of the anthropological roots of the transcendental interests). With his late pragmatic turn, Habermas seems to be providing further grounding, by setting communication within our pragmatic approach to reality. In other words, he is stressing the *adaptive* dimension of communication. However, in doing so he avoids a strictly naturalist view (as I am going to show below). His general idea is that it is now possible for us to take different approaches to the same object, a skill which has been developed as an evolutionary advantage since it increases our freedom with respect to objects and affords us with the opportunity to "use" them in different ways. For example, using only a natural-causal attitude (a technical interest or an objectifying attitude, according to the terminology in either his 60s or 80s lexicon, respectively) would prevent us from developing the moral category of guilt; at the same time, using only a culturalist attitude would prevent us from developing a scientific approach, and thus hindering the development

of medicine. The reason behind Habermas' pragmatic turn seems to be his increasing interest in the "ontological problem of naturalism":

> (ONT) How to reconcile the normativity that we experience within the lifeworld with the contingency of the evolution of our lifeworld.[7]

This is also linked to another problem, which he calls the "epistemological problem of realism":

> (EPI) How to reconcile the hypothesis of a world that is independent of our description and identical for everyone, with the idea that we do not have direct contact with naked reality, or reality as non-linguistically filtered (Habermas 1999, 8).[8]

Normativity is made possible by directions opened up by the world we live in; this presupposes that the world is one (the universe that we share with other beings), even if we can not access it "from nowhere," that is, without the linguistic filter of the lifeworld; so we access it only contingently. From the union of the two problems above, it emerges that Habermas' main problem is one of balance:

> (BAL) Finding the right balance between the normativity that leads us to think of our knowledge as correct and trustworthy and the contingency that leads us to think of our knowledge as contextual and fallible (because our access to the world is always mediated).[9]

Our lifeworld is the condition by which we have access to the world, and it is the product of a cultural and natural evolution; it is our communicative frame of orientation in a physical world. If its evolution was to be conceived of as completely random, this would open the gates to idealism. Instead, our forms of knowledge are not the product of our transcendental structures only. But how is it that we are to conceive of the idea of socio-cultural learning in this case?[10]

---

[7] Here ONT is representative of 'ontological.'

[8] Here EPI is representative of 'epistemological.' The idea of the impossibility of accessing a naked reality was already there in the '60s: any access to reality is always mediated by interests.

[9] Here BAL is representative of 'balance.'

[10] According to Maeve Cooke, learning is a phenomenon that *can* take place on three levels. Socio-cultural learning "refers to beneficial changes in the prevailing standards of what constitutes beneficial change on the second level-in other words, to a beneficial transformation of the very standards according to which changes in individual participants' perceptions, interpretations and evaluations are deemed changes for the better" (Cooke 2002, 83).

How can we make sense of the fact that we conceive of our knowledge as a means of improving our lifeworld, as working towards a goal rather than being completely random? Even if we have no magical-metaphysical aim or project beyond the evolution of our worldview, and if we avoid the absolute reification of our worldview, then we have to see the process of learning as not only improving our actual knowledge but also as extending our *horizon of conceivability*. Humans are both natural and cultural beings, and thus we need a perspective of the world that is able to maintain both the common-sense idea of the self (driven by reasons he accepts) and a coherent image of the universe that also includes man as a natural being subject to natural laws (or causes) (Habermas 2005a, 156).

Habermas' "weak naturalism" is presented as an attempt to integrate causality and freedom, with man as both a natural and a cultural being; in this world, subjects who act freely on the basis of reasons can not "escape" from natural events (Habermas 2005b, 188). Looking back at Habermas' theory of interests, it emerges that Habermas' weak naturalism is an attempt to answer the following question: how can an observational attitude and a hermeneutic attitude (or a technical and a practical interest) towards the same objects exist, since the first is looking for causal relations while the second is aiming at discovering motives. In Habermas' perspective, causes and reasons are not to be conceived of as two sides of the same coin (ontological dualism), but instead as two approaches that subjects (through their evolution) have developed to operate *on* subjects/objects in the first case and *with* subjects/objects in the second. This is a form of methodological dualism. The only way to maintain this dualism, which allows for instrumental and communicative operation on the same object, is to consider it as the product of our own view of reality, which, in turn, is the product of an evolutionary dynamic whose engine is the lifeworld.

This is a kind of "Kantian pragmatism," where our categories to approach, see, and know reality are subjected to cultural and natural evolution.[11] For example, evolution does not distinguish between the brain and the mind, but it led humans to develop this distinction as two different and complementary approaches to understanding human cognition. The ineluctability of these two approaches is not necessary but simply factual: evolution might

---

[11] It is the reference to Kant that makes Habermas' realism close to Putnam's (1999) one, to the extent that both try to deflate Kantian's transcendental category in Darwinist terms, i.e. conceiving them as subjected to a natural and cultural evolution, still keeping the possibility of developing objective knowledge, differently from Rorty's pragmatism. The difference between Habermas' and Putnam's types of pragmatism is that Putnam is more pragmatist than Habermas, who is more faithful to the Kantian tradition. This is visible when Habermas keeps separated moral validity and truth, i.e. practical and theoretical reasons, while the American tends to put them on the same level. See (Habermas 2003, 212–235).

have proceeded differently, leading to the development of maybe three or more different approaches (Habermas 2005a, 170). What makes Habermas' naturalism "weak" is that through this approach he avoids the risk of assuming that the contingency of what is necessary for us is absolutely necessary, thus avoiding the risk of identifying what we know here and now with how things really are (from the God's Eye Point of View). This is why Habermas opts for *a methodological* dualism rather than an ontological one.

As a part of his Kantian pragmatism, Habermas conceives of truth as Janus-faced; this is because we can approach knowledge from two sides, the transcendent and the epistemic one, revealing how truth is both transcendent in nature and also based on justifications. According to Habermas, the notion of truth has to be conceived of as constituted by two pragmatic processes as entailing both a descending and an ascending process, and evolving from discourse to practice and vice versa. The behavioural certainties ascend to the discursive level when they are faced with a problem in the world; at the discursive level, they face the opposition of the other speakers (Habermas 1999, 25). Here, the discursive achievements return back to the action level, where they find confirmation of their correctness as a sign of a greater possibility of truth that makes them trustworthy (under the auspices of a pragmatic perspective).

Even if post-metaphysically aware of the impossibility of grasping absolute truths, on the action level we treat truths as absolutes; this "realism of everyday praxis" that takes truth as "unconditional"—"with no epistemic index"—is a pragmatic *fiction* which provides the necessary amount of trust (for justification) to perform daily activities (Habermas 1999, 52). In fact, "We would step on no bridge, use no car, undergo no operation, not even eat an exquisitely prepared meal if we didn't consider the knowledge used to be safeguarded" (Habermas 1999, 255). On the discursive level, the fictional character of this unquestioned trust gives rise to a discussion about the validity of these apparent certainties. Here, discourse is the means of questioning what is naively taken for granted as valid or invalid and to restore a new trust, giving it the "license for a return to a naive practical frequentation of the world," where action's success enhances the strength of justifications to the point of being *probably* true (Habermas 1999, 53).

This is a pragmatic improvement of Habermas' past theory of truth (1984), which was more focused on the discursive level, and thus lacking of a realist grasp of reality. In 1972, in fact, he conceived of truth as the consensus achieved after discourse based on the norms of an ideal speech situation, characterized by maximum inclusiveness of people and themes, and equal respect for varying opinions. This setting persists in his pragmatic and realist turn in 1999, but it is now integrated with a pragmatic reference to reality.

This integration is provided in response to the need to acknowledge the transcendental character of truth with respect to justifications, a transcendence that is connected to fallibilism (the idea that what is considered true could always turn out to be false). Truth is intuitively defined as a "quality" that "can not be lost," and action is the means by which what is simply justified can be sustained (Habermas 1999, 288). There is a gap here between truth and justification, even if our access to truth is always epistemically mediated by justifications (either actual or potential). Habermas tries to keep the "epistemic primacy" of linguistic justifications together with the "ontological primacy" of truth (Habermas 1999, 41). Despite the gap between truth and justification, which is useful in the sense of explaining why we attribute a non-epistemic sense to truth (its transcendent character), there is also an internal relation which is useful for explaining the epistemic sense of truth, or why we think of justification as operating driven by truth (epistemic character). What all of this shows, then, is that if in 1972 Habermas thought of truth as *epistemically* transcendent, as ideally transcending the *actual* output (consensus) of a discourse but still maintaining its status as the output of an *ideal* discourse, he now thinks that we have to conceptualize of transcendence in a non-epistemic way,[12] as metaphysically transcending every linguistic-justificatory context, even an ideal one.

3.   An evaluation of Habermas' theory

Endorsing pragmatism, Habermas conceives of truth as both a norm of social life (as he already had in the '70s) and as an adaptive device for survival. These two ideas are not incompatible: at the discursive level, the normative character is predominant, while at the action level, normativity fades into the background as the idea of truth as a *tool* emerges in the foreground. If, as a tool, truth is still a norm, at least in a very basic or practical sense to distinguish between good or bad action' habits, then as a norm of social life, truth still is a tool in a very sophisticated sense of a device used for the restoration of social order and for the orientation of a community's ideas.

This is because pragmatism does not separate theory and praxis, or, in Habermas' case, discourse and action. We speak of truth and we act on truth (this being truth's Janus-faced character), but since (i) our speaking is also a form of acting, and (ii) our acting also is a form of speaking, and given that we can act only by following the directions that our language makes available, then these two dimensions are intertwined. If (i) was already present in Habermas' work from the '70s,[13] then (ii) becomes even more important

---

[12] Non-epistemic (*out of knowledge*) is a reality, or dimension, that does not depend on the human access to it.

[13] Habermas sees communicative agreement as also entailing pragmatic consequences be-

with his increasing attention to naturalism. In fact, Habermas acknowledges that our language has three irreducible but connected functions: the semantic-cognitive (language as a reserve of propositional truth), the pragmatic (language as our variable perspective on propositional truth as conveyed through reasons), and the expressive (language in its primary function of disclosure on reality) (Habermas 1999, 65–86).[14] Habermas' idea of expressivity is originally linked to the notion of the subjective world, i.e. to an internal content that a subject "opens" up to a listener (Habermas 2012, 24). But the expressive function of language is linked to the idea of a border surrounding everything that can be linguistically conceived within a lifeworld by a user of a particular language.

The primacy of the expressive function over the others is easy to understand, and it is linked to Habermas' worry of naturalism: without an opening to the world there would be neither facts and propositions to know (on the semantic level) nor reasons in support of them (on the pragmatic level). To wit, we can not access truth conditions (on the semantic level) that we can not potentially justify (on the pragmatic level), and we can not access justifications that we can not even conceive of (on the expressive level). In Habermas' words, "we should distinguish three levels: the level of linguistic articulation of the lifeworld background, the level of practices of reaching understanding […] and the level of the objective world, formally presupposed" (Cooke and Habermas 1998, 334–336). What is important to focus on now is the expressive function of language, or the "horizon of meaning" that is anticipated by the language and that "is equivalent to the entire scope of the world," since each language "traces around the nation to which it belongs a circle from which it is impossible to go out unless entering in a new language" (Habermas 1999, 67–68).[15] Highlighting the role of this disclosing veil helps in avoiding the reification of "internal" results as "absolute" truths, i.e. forgetting that our access to the world is always prospective. Habermas' attention on the expressive level is underestimated by Apel, who sees him committed to a kind of metaphysical realism (Apel 2003). It is debatable whether or not this prioritization of the expressive function of language—emerging from Habermas' saying that the "inner-worldy aspects" of linguis-

cause of the performative nature of the components of a language (speech acts). This lead him to develop a pragmatic theory of meaning that I do not have space to discuss here. See (Habermas 1988c, 128).

[14] We can talk indistinctly of a 'level' or 'function' because these levels are identified according to the function they pursue.

[15] The three functions of language are connected to the three dimensions of the lifeworld, that is, "athematic knowledge" (the expressive function), "thematic knowledge" (the semantic knowledge function) and "with-theme knowledge" (linked to the pragmatic function as a middle ground between the other two). See (Habermas 1988a, 86).

tic use are secondary compared to the linguistic "function of opening the world"—implies that his previous communicative theory has been abandoned, where priority was given to the pragmatic role of language (Habermas 1999, 67–68). However, what is important for the present purpose is that this change in Habermas' view explains why it is accurate to say that we can perceive, know, and act only through the directions that our lifeworld makes available to us.

The world as linguistically shaped by the expressive function of language encounters a presupposed non-epistemic reality (considered independent from actual or possible knowledge) to the extent that we are part of a universe "to which humans belong as natural creatures" (Habermas 2007, 40–41). Does Habermas, however, really take into account the constraints that nature puts on us? Does he acknowledge the presence of constraints on what we know of the world on the semantic level and on what the expressive level can make available to us? As said above, we need to conceive of the lifeworld as being subjected to a kind of learning that curbs the contingency of its evolution. This is because we are naively pushed away from an idealist conception of the world in favour of a realist one. Thus, it is true that:

> [s]ince we can not escape the epistemic primacy of the linguistically articulated horizon of the lifeworld, the ontological priority of language-independent reality can make itself heard in our learning processes only by imposing constraints on our practices and by indirectly steering us via the interplay of construction and experience. (Habermas 1999, 39)

Even if we can become aware of them only indirectly, there are boundaries on the evolution of our lifeworld, constrained both from the foreground and from the background. These constraints are not to be conceived of as absolutes. In fact, it is also true that our pragmatic activities within the lifeworld can change the external world that is supposed to put constraints on the freedom of the expressive function of the language.

A non-epistemic reality, external to our lifeworld (whose scope is determined *by* and coinciding *with* the expressive function of language), can be conceived of as external without endorsing metaphysical realism. The main problem, in fact, is just avoiding a commitment to the *rigidity* of some features of a non-epistemic reality. As much as external reality puts constraints on our lifeworld, it also changes for different causes, either coming from us or coming from other external dimensions that we are unable to even imagine. This kind of resistance of an external reality (never absolute) is supposed to explain the transcendence of truth. It is not an absolute transcendence to the extent that we can not think of absolutely independent truths (that is, without reference to a particular perspective) and of eternal truths: they can

change for either justificatory reasons (e.g. the earth was supposed to be round, but it is not), or changes of the same external raw material (e.g. we know that water is H_2O but contingencies could definitively change its structure into H_3O), and from our unavoidably internal perspective, we could never know which is the case.

Does Habermas adequately explain this realist effect, i.e. the resistance of an external reality? Habermas rightly acknowledges two uses of truth, one more committed to action and the other to discourse, but they are *vertical* uses. This is only half of the complexity involved in the notion of truth. The fact is that the resistance we experience in obtaining knowledge or engaging in practical activities (objectivity) is not always of the same degree. There are domains where truth faces a higher degree of resistance and others where the resistance is minimal.

This is because not every domain of facts possesses the same degree of independence. For example, when we experience the resistance of social norms with respect to our desires, this is a less rigid kind of resistance, since we can try to change them (e.g. by convincing, persuading, or forcing the other members of a community to conform to our expectations). Things are different when we experience the resistance of nature: we can not force water to be H_3O rather than H_2O. Habermas seems to acknowledge this difference by differentiating moral rightness from truth. Still, the following question arises:

(Q) How can we explain this difference if both truth and moral rightness are only *attitudes* that we can assume towards different domains (as Habermas has maintained since 1981)?[16]

This question is the main argument against a pragmatic approach to truth. We can speak of truth in reference to nature as well as society: Is it true that water is H_2O? Is it true that to be a king I first need to be a prince? Both propositions are *truth-apt* but in different ways, as I could easily change the truth conditions of the second; things are different with the first, where I can not force water to be different. I could only discover that I was *wrong* before. The point with (Q) is that what makes these truths different is not just the attitude but the *raw material* constituting the facts. Is it possible to argue for this difference from a Kantian pragmatic approach? At first, it seems difficult to introduce this metaphysical claim into a post-metaphysical perspective. However, I think we should acknowledge this ontological difference to the extent that if we do not, then there might be consequences for the concept of truth.[17]

---

[16] Here (Q) is used for 'question.'

[17] It is important to point out that my criticism of Habermas' pragmatic realism is not alone.

3.1   Objectivity: Habermas' ambiguity

In Habermas' perspective, the objective and social worlds are the only ones that can be linked to the idea of *universal* agreement about their contents (Cooke 1994, 32). Habermas speaks of objective worlds to the extent that in all cases where a world is implied, speakers are referring to a formal plan where their subjective claims can be intersubjectively (and therefore trans-subjectively) judged and criticized. However, he ambiguously uses the adjective "objective" for both worlds and yet for only one of them at the same time. This is because in each world we can experience the resistance of different opinions, a resistance that could cause our claims to fail in meeting their goal of obtaining a consensus. Habermas' ambiguity in the use of the adjective 'objective' is therefore a sign of his indecision between:

(EQ) Equalizing the ontological weight of both worlds; and

(DV) Attributing more *ontological weight* (or more objectivity) to the objective one (Habermas 1981, I, 114–148).[18]

In fact, what he really acknowledges is the following:

(EQ) All validity claims receive a discursive treatment that is "analogous to truth": people orient themselves in *practical* discourses, as in *theoretical* ones, according to the idea of a "single right answer" (Habermas 1999, 264); and

(DV) Only the objective world "preserves the ontological meaning in the strict sense of a totality of entities" (Habermas 1981, I, 126).

The problem arises when (EQ) opens the door to either: (1) bringing the concept of truth too close to that of validity, deflating in a counterintuitive way its non-epistemic quality (i.e. its transcendence and its immutability with respect to justifications); or (2) bringing the concept of validity to close to that of truth, thus increasing, in an equally counterintuitive way, its *ontological burden*. The problem is due to Habermas' apparent refusal to sever the connection between truth and validity, which is useful for avoiding ideological drift (by keeping truth within the dialectic dynamic of the valid/invalid), but still can not account for the fact that truth is a particular claim that takes its validity from both argumentative and non-discursive validation.

The point is that truth participates also in another dialectic game: the dialectic of the real and the unreal. Reality is a wider domain than that of validity, even if we can determine what is real only through validity claims.

See (Langlois 2003), (Radder 2012), (Levine 2010), (Levine 2011).
[18] (EQ) refers to 'equalization' while (DV) stands for 'division.'

This is why truth is both linked to justifications and transcendent of them. With this in mind, in 1999, Habermas diversifies his concept of objectivity, pointing out that claims of moral validity lack the justification-transcendent weight of claims of truth because the first lacks the "ontological connotations" of truth claims (Habermas 1999, 264, 281). The social world does not become "real" without the collaboration of moral actors, while the objective world possesses the connotation of "unavailability." If, in the first case, consensus (through justifications) serves to "motivate," where justifications play an exhaustive role, in the second case, it serves to "ascertain states of facts," where justifications play only a partial role (Habermas 1999, 300). In other words, even if "communication" is seen in both cases as a process where the speaker seeks to establish agreement with a partner "on something," this "something" is different between the social and objective worlds, with the latter having greater independence.[19] This can be read as a means of embracing a more ontologically committed concept of the world that depends not only on the attitude of the agent but also on the type of entities that are referred to. However, one could still ask:

(Q-1) How could Habermas be open to this ontological commitment without diverging from his Kantian pragmatism?

Here Q-1 is a consequence of Q, as it comes from the problems that derive from it (i.e. problems releted to the lack of differentiated attitudes towards two claims of objectivity). The only way to explain these differences in a consistent way is by recurring to an ontological commitment that contradicts Habermas' pragmatic and postmetaphysical attitude. To wit, how can we affirm an ontological differentiation if the only differences we can experience are between different attitudes? In fact, if (DV) follows from his promise of a realist turn (Habermas 1999, 15–16), his Kantian pragmatism is an obstacle for this same realist turn, further supporting (EQ) instead. However, he affirms (DV) when he says that the social world does not become real without the collaboration of moral actors, while the objective world possesses the connotation of unavailability. Habermas opts for a pragmatic conception of truth in order to link truth to this complexity and to explain its transcendent character, other than its epistemic one.

The problem arises when it becomes clear that the concept of reality which Habermas refers to is that of a pragmatic *fiction*, useful for daily action. But a similar pragmatic fiction seems to be presupposed by our moral arguments too, where the idea of an ideal speech situation would play the same role as that of an external reality in explaining pragmatic failures within

---

[19] Habermas speaks of a "different material" in the case of the objectivity of the objective world, with no further details (Habermas 1999, 295).

the sphere of the objective world. This pushes Habermas to adopt (EQ*), a new pragmatic form of (EQ).

In brief, within a pragmatic horizon, both external reality and the ideal speech situation are two fictions that work as useful devices for explanation of our daily practices. In this way, Habermas' pragmatic approach is the mark of an improvement with respect to the communicative approach, but it is also a failure with respect to the promise of realist turn. A better solution would involve stressing the difference between these two fictions by reference to the different degrees of objectivity that they entail as a consequence of the different *material* that they are made of.

4.   Grasping complexity

4.1   Different degrees of objectivity

Despite his good intentions, Habermas' realist turn is not realist enough in order to make sense of a concept of truth that is far enough away from his concept of moral rightness (for which he maintains cognitivism but not realism). In fact, it seems that based on a Kantian pragmatic conception we can not make sense of *ontological differences* if not in terms of mere *differences of attitudes*. However, even without pushing truth conditions to an absolute dimension, it is possible to argue for some realist adjustments of Habermas' pragmatic realism as a way out from (Q) and its consequences. Reality is still epistemically conceived because of its contextual dependence on the lifeworld: reality is all that our lifeworld could allow us to access. To the extent that:

- reality is a reality of facts;

- facts can be potentially embedded in propositions; and

- propositions can be potentially true or false;

we can talk of facts as actual or potential truths (depending on the point of view). This is because propositions are conceived of in terms of truth conditions; in other words, understanding a proposition is knowing its truth condition. However, Habermas rejects the idea of propositions, instead referring to sentences, since he sees the first as leading to the idea of *reified* truth conditions that are thus compromised by metaphysical realism under which they are absolutely independent from the speakers' perspectives and potentially unknowable (opening to door to skepticism). Habermas prefers speaking of sentences and conditions of validity: reality is a reality of facts, facts are uttered in sentences, sentences are valid or invalid, and so facts are valid sentences. This shows that even by endorsing Habermas' refusal of truth conditions, the argument does not change.

Habermas does not directly acknowledge different degrees of objectivity. For Habermas, truth is still deeply epistemically constrained and he is not open to the view of truth as (sometimes) "hinged on the world" (Zuidervaart 2012, 2–3). If truth depends on recognition of the validity of a claim of truth, we should also remember that it also depends on how things really are, truth being transcendent with respect to epistemic validity. In this sense, truth is *also* non-epistemically constrained. This is the way we can get out of Q and Q-1 in a realist way, thus explaining the difference of attitude according to how non-epistemic constraints relate to them. Truth and moral validity are two different attitudes, yet they are not only differences of attitudes: the difference between truth and moral validity is also understandable in ontological terms, according to the influence of non-epistemic constraints in determining respectively truth and moral validity.

Our *recognition* of validity via our epistemic resources (justifications) is fundamental in both cases, yet in the case of truth non-epistemic constraints play a more important role. Our recognition, in the case of truth, happens because of the epistemic resources of our lifeworld that allow us to access certain kinds of facts, depending on values, interests, and previously developed knowledge. However, this alone is not sufficient to make the recognition of truth different from the recognition of moral rightness or of expressive authenticity. What makes truth different is that in this case we recognize something that has its own structure independently from us: this *ontological structure* contributes, to the same degree of justifications, to the recognition of something as true (truth attribution). This gives credit again to a metaphysical approach to ontology as opposed before to a pragmatic approach. To avoid its problem, though, some adjustments must be undertaken.

Our lifeworld is the access condition to the world itself; as such, it is crucial for providing the substantial content of each formal world.[20] However, it seems to me that it is the relationship between the lifeworld and what is *external* to it that creates different types of objectivity according to how external and internal (*lifeworldly*) components are intertwined in each fact or entity, i.e. according to the weight of external and internal components in each fact or entity. It is exactly this reference to external dimensions that Habermas should stress in order to make sense of different degrees of objectivity.[21]

---

[20] Of course every day, since the first of our days, we have been part of the external reality (even if we never approach to it from an epistemological attitude when we are infants).

[21] It is worth noting that Apel (2003) sees the late Habermas as too committed to this external dimension. To me, it does not seem so. This committment is exactly what Habermas still lacks.

In the broad use of the concept of truth, we deal with different degrees of objectivity; we experience different *degrees of resistance* coming from the particular object of recognition. This has to be conceived of as an experience of a different material rather than of mere different attitudes towards the same material. For this reason, I support Habermas' threefold pragmatic ontology, but without dismissing the idea that ontological differences exist between different entities. I see no problem in that: the two perspectives (metaphysical and pragmatic) on reality can intersect smoothly. In fact, a subject can assume an objective/descriptive, subjective/expressive or normative attitude towards an objective, social or subjective reality. We can refer e.g. to nature in the descriptive attitude of natural sciences (true/false, effective/ineffective), in the normative attitude of a subject who wants to judge a natural order with respect to a value (right/wrong) and in the expressive attitude of an artist (beautiful/ugly).

Not all entities are on the same level of objectivity, even if we can access them only through a world-system. An ontological difference between different entities is what explains the different ontological connotations of the objective and social worlds. However, this is an *ideal* differentiation between two ideal poles to the extent that we deal with differences in *degrees of objectivity*. In our daily lives, we refer to entities which exhibit more or less resistance to our manipulation or interpretation.

Even if we can access facts only from the perspective and resources of our lifeworld, sometimes we deal with facts that are decreasingly dependent upon it and increasingly dependent upon nature (indicating a higher resistance to change).[22] Even if the boundary between the objective and social world is nuanced, we can not replace this ontological distinction with a merely pragmatic one. This would entail ignoring the fact that humans are both natural and cultural beings. Habermas does not want to forget about this conception of the human in his weak naturalism. Still, he does not take from this fact all of its consequences for the development of his theory of truth in a realist direction. If he acknowledges those natural/non-epistemic constraints underlying the actions and attitudes of individuals (since their contingent epistemic and lifeworldly condition is due also to natural evolution, which endorses constraints that do not depend on us), he should also make use of these constraints in his concept of truth, which would require a three-fold relation between subjects (S), the lifeworld (and communication) (L), and reality (R) which is not completely constructed. This means that our truths are due not only to our discursive acknowledgement and to our possibility to access them, but also to the fact that they refer to facts as they

---

[22] They are real, both the objects coming from the natural sciences (e.g. quarks, DNA) and from the social sciences (e.g. values, ideals, laws); only, they are real in different ways.

really are. Habermas seems to acknowledge the force of (R) on (S) in the form of those limits that people encounter from their naturally having three different pragmatic interests (as he has been saying since the '60s).[23] He also acknowledges the kind of *lifeworldly epistemic limits* due to (S)'s contingent epistemic resources. These are limits coming *from behind*. Habermas does not acknowledge that (R) also constrains our discourses about truth *from the front*, i.e. through the lifeworld which is only an *access* condition and not the arrival point where we can find the constraints of our truths. Here the lifeworld enables external constraints to come into view.

In his discursive theory of truth, the only meaning of objectivity Habermas had been using was as the experience of a discursive resistance, arising when our claims were faced with opposition from others. With his pragmatic turn, he acknowledges another side of the concept of objectivity, that is, the resistance we experience not only as speakers but also as actors. Even if we never cease to be speaker or actors, sometimes we act more as actors and sometimes we act more as speakers: when we ask each other for the reasons for our claims or actions, we are above all speakers (even if we are also acting); on the contrary, when we play football we are mainly acting but also tacitly speaking. In fact, validity claims are actions (in the performative sense given by their being comprised of speech acts) and actions are based on potential claims of validity that the actor can make explicit in order to explain the reasons of his action. The difference is only in the different balance of the two aspects.

To the extent that both external reality and the ideal speech situation are pragmatic fictions, truth and moral rightness are still conceived by Habermas as facing the *same* resistance. But this generalization does not facilitate a realist turn; in other words, how can Habermas be a realist about truth without accepting a differentiated account of objectivity that would be able to explain this difference? It could be the case that Habermas does not want to establish this difference, since this might imply that he must acknowledge an ontological difference with respect to its referents, thus conflicting with his post-metaphysical attitude which prohibits the assumption of differences that are not (internal) differences of attitude. Furthermore, as a way of avoiding ideology, he does not want to separate truth from the dialectical game of truth and falsity. But is a realist concept of truth really incompatible with this critical theory's requirements? In other words, is acknowledging that the dialectic of the real and the unreal is not always completely coinciding with the dialectic of valid and the invalid necessarily problematic for a critical social theory?

[23] His weak naturalism picks up this idea again, which was clouded (but not deleted) by the idea of their communicative unfolding.

I think that it is not. Developing a *differentiated account of objectivity* can still keep truth within the epistemic dialectic of true and false investigations (as critical theory demands), while still acknowledging differences in the referred facts. In this light, what is important is recognizing the differences among the material we are referring to each time, but without going too far and speaking of absolutely transcendental truth conditions. Truth conditions are always epistemically dependent on the evolution of the lifeworld's scope, even if the facts that occur *sometimes* are not. However, the objectivity of truth conditions has to be *stratified* in terms of more or less epistemic objectivity (and, vice versa, in terms of more or less non-epistemic objectivity), according to the type of fact we are referring to. Truth conditions are not all on the same level: they are sometimes more and sometimes less independent. There is always an important role played by values, conventions, linguistic structures, hypotheses, and methodological rules, but sometimes these factors have more or less of a determinant role (i.e. in determining truth in a particular situation). In some cases, observation plays a greater role than the conceptual framework itself (which never ceases to be influential). What is the case depends on how close to the experience's world is the considered issue in each case under analysis. Habermas' idea of truth as operating via a circular-*vertical* process is a valuable idea, but it should be complemented by a *horizontal* differentiation which diversifies the vertical relationship between truth and justification according to each particular domain (where some domains are more or less epistemically constrained).

Objectivity is a product of both internal and external factors (i.e. epistemics and non-epistemics). As internal factors, we may identify the lifeworld as the grounding reserve of meanings and ideas which are at the basis of the same three-world process of differentiation: people must first be part of a lifeworld in order to access the three-world system (and so the external reality from an epistemological point of view). However, we can not think of the opposition of the other members of the same lifeworld as sufficient for explaining all of the objectivity that we experience in our daily (as well as theoretical) lives. Sometimes, we face a dimension that is external not only to our *thematised* lifeworld but also to the *athematic* side of the lifeworld. In fact, a lifeworld is made of an "athematic" knowledge that can be made "thematic" according to situational needs. The lifeworld can not be completely thematised all at once; this would give rise to a paradoxical situation in which speakers judge their own perspective from any other possible perspective. The "athematic" knowledge could be considered, then, as a softer degree of non-epistemicity (as I define it). The non-epistemic dimension is a perspectival category, and it is a matter of degree.

In particular, what constitutes the difference in the degrees of objectivity of what we experience is the particular mix between the degree of non-epistemic and epistemic ingredients—that is, the *degree of pressure* from the non-epistemic side. Where the first degree is more we experience an higher degree of objectivity. This holds for both the social and the objective worlds; the difference, generally speaking, is that the objective world is composed of entities characterised by a major degree of *non-epistemicity*. The social world, on the contrary, is made up of entities whose components are more dependent on the lifeworld. For example, water boils at a determined temperature, a point that can be described by different thermal systems, but water boils only at one temperature point (objective world) independently from the existence of human being. Furthermore, what makes water H_2O rather than H_3O does not depend on us. On the other hand, language and communication create a certain degree of freedom in human organisation and coordination—a freedom that has more to do with the social world, where language has a more constitutive (rather than descriptive) role.[24] This greater degree of freedom characterises the weaker degree of objectivity of the social world, together with its resulting higher degree of conflict due to the fact that everyone tries to find a consensus or a compromise that best suits his/her needs. Each world deals with a non-epistemic dimension, except that it is dealt with by these respective worlds in different ways, each of which more or less committed to non-epistemic constraints. For instance, the social world floats at a different level with respect to the objective world. It is the weaving between construction and discovery that is different between cases.

5.   Conclusion

Habermas is so worried about naturalism that he is unlikely to accept my suggestion to see truth as an adaptive tool, and that knowing the world *realistically* is the first way to avoid mistakes, thus providing clues for evolutionary directions. But, as far as I can see, his work could also be declined according to stronger realist claims, as I suggest, still avoiding the problems of naturalistic reductionism, i.e. avoiding the absolute interpretation of merely perspectival results. As language is the species-specific adaptive tool that evolution has provided us with, inside the language is truth which plays this central adaptive role by pouring trust on some facts rather than others. The assessments themselves must be as objective as possible (asymptomati-

---

[24] Where the justificatory process is ruled mostly by reasons, we can not aim at univocal results (Habermas 1999, 307). In the objective world too, language and communication play a great role by providing us the epistemic approach which is needed to state a fact.

cally tending to be value-free) in order to be as accurate as possible and, in turn, useful for adaptation. Here, consensus—inspired by an ideal speech situation—corroborated by pragmatic success, still seems to be the core of the epistemological evalutative process.

Fundamentally speaking, truth is a formal-anthropological-adaptive device and, given the complexity of our lives, it connects us with different facts, each with its own degree of objectivity. This allows us to conceive of truth in disquotational terms, where for any sentence S used to make a statement p, s is true if and only if p. Thus, 'true' is an adjective for assessing statements or beliefs. In fact, truth seems to have something in common with trust: "there are not only true statements but true friends (real or genuine friends), true emotions (sincerely felt, not fake), true heirs (rightful or legitimate), as well as true north [...] knives that cut true" (Searle 1995, 210). The assignment of 'true' to statements is all but arbitrary, depending on conditions in the world that are "external" to the statement; in this view, statements are still made true by reality, even if the degree of externality can change according to the domain of facts referred.

Habermas, on the contrary, in order to explain the complexity of a life-world inflates the complexity of a plain concept like truth: there is no need for that. We can keep a simple concept of truth while still acknowledging the complexity of reality, mirrored in our uses of truth and in our experiences of different kinds of objectivity. All of this leads us to think of truth as a norm leading the evolutary process of our lifeworld, while it deals with different facts with different degrees of objectivity. This is because truth, as a formal-inferential-adaptive device, is also experienced as a *regulative* idea. This relates to Habermas' concerns for critical theory: truth is a task to which we all are called to democratically contribute because conquering it comes through openness to experience and critical-rational discussion, the widest possible, of the different intellectual and cultural perspectives.

The reason for this "Janus-faced" nature of truth (as both an adaptive device and a regulative idea) is that to work in an adaptive way, it needs to be used in its purest form, i.e. cleansed from influences, dogmas, and limitations of the communicative process, as Habermas highlights well in his work. The formal character of this conception is easily explained. If truth-conditions are contextual, the constraints, even if only contextually accessed, are not contextual *in the same sense* as their access conditions. Constraints can not be seen as absolutes anymore (post-metaphysical thinking), but they can be conceived of as transcending our access within the lifeworld because they come (at least partially) from a reality that is *out there* (which makes itself present more or less depending on the accepted domain of facts). We have the idea of truth conditions as more and more transcendent because

the constraints our truth receives from reality (as complementary to those coming from our contingent access conditions to reality) can be grasped also from more transcendental positions. Working to grasp such truths means working to reach and create a broader context.

This seems to me to be an effective way of reconciling a realist conception of truth as transcendent and objective with the epistemological objective of critical theory, which sets truth at the core of the dialectical game of validity. Part of the constraints on the facts that truth refers to are not coming from within the lifeworld, even if accessed only through it. Critical theory is necessary if we aim at the progress of our lifeworld (to increase its truths); critical theory, though, is not incompatible with an idea of reality as at least partially Ready-Made. Thus, why should we think that these constraints operate only in the background of subjective life (as transcendental conditions) and not also in the foreground where a concept of truth is constrained in not-merely-epistemic ways? Even if the notion of a constraint needs a reference to a particular perspective (from which the constraint is experienced), given that it is a relational concept, we can easily figure out structures of a non-epistemic reality that are out there even if there would be no lifeworld from which to access or experience them.

Bibliography

Albinus, L. (2013). Can science cope with more than one world? A cross-reading of Habermas, Popper, and Searle, *Journal for General Philosophy of Science* **44**: 3–20.

Apel, K. O. (2003). Wahrheit als regulative Idee, *in* G. S. D. Böhler, M. Kettner (ed.), *Reflexion und Verantwortung. Auseinandersetzungen mit Karl-Otto Apel*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, pp. 171–198.

Cooke, M. (1994). *Language and Reason. A Study of Habermas's Pragmatics*, The MIT Press, Cambridge.

Cooke, M. (2002). Argumentation and transformation, *Argumentation* **16**: 79–108.

Cooke, M. and Habermas, J. (1998). *On the Pragmatics of Communication*, The MIT Press, Cambridge.

Habermas, J. (1963a). Dogmatismus, Vernunft und Entscheidung — Zu Theorie und Praxis in der verwissenschaftlichten Zivilization, *in* J. Habermas, *Theorie und Praxis. Sozialphilosophische Studien*, Luchterland, Neuwied-Berlin, pp. 307–335.

Habermas, J. (1963b).	Einige Schwierigkeiten beim Versuch, Theorie und Praxis zu vermitteln, *in* J. Habermas, *Theorie und Praxis. Sozialphilosophische Studien*, Luchterland, Neuwied-Berlin, pp. 9–47.

Habermas, J. (1965). Erkenntnis und interesse, *Merkur* **213**: 1139–1153.

Habermas, J. (1968).	*Erkenntnis und Interesse*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main.

Habermas, J. (1981).	*Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main.

Habermas, J. (1984).	Wahrheitstheorien, *in* J. Habermas, *Vorstudien und Ergänzugen zur Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, pp. 127–186.

Habermas, J. (1988a). Handlungen, Sprechakte, sprachlich vermittelte Interaktionen und Lebenswelt, *in* J. Habermas, *Nachmetaphysisches Denken. Philosophische Aufsätze*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, pp. 63–104.

Habermas, J. (1988b). *Nachmetaphysisches Denken. Philosophische Aufsätze*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main.

Habermas, J. (1988c).	Zur Kritik der Bedeutungstheorie, *in* J. Habermas, *Nachmetaphysisches Denken. Philosophische Aufsätze*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, pp. 105–135.

Habermas, J. (1999).	*Wahrheit und Rechtfertigung. Philosophische Aufsätze*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main.

Habermas, J. (2003). Norms and values: On Hilary Putnam's Kantian pragmatism, *in* J. Habermas, *Truth and Justification*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, pp. 212–235.

Habermas, J. (2005a).	Freiheit und Determinismus, *in* J. Habermas, *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt, pp. 155–186.

Habermas, J. (2005b).	'Ich selber bin ja ein Stück Natur'. Adorno über die Naturverflochtenheit der Vernunft, *in* J. Habermas, *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, pp. 187–215.

Habermas, J. (2007). The language game of responsible agency and the problem of free will. How can epistemic dualism be reconciled with ontological monism?, *Philosophical Explorations: An International Journal for the Philosophy of Mind and Action* **10**: 13–50.

Habermas, J. (2012). *Nachmetaphysisces Denken II. Aufsätze und Repliken*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main.

Langlois, L. (2003). Habermas et la question de la vérité, *Archives de Philosophie* **3**: 563–583.

Levine, S. (2010). Habermas, Kantian pragmatism, and truth, *Philosophy and Social Criticism* **36**: 677–695.

Levine, S. (2011). Truth and moral validity: On Habermas' domesticated pragmatism, *Constellations* **18**: 244–259.

Putnam, H. (1981). *Reason Truth and History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Putnam, H. (1999). *The Threefold Cord: Mind, Body and World*, Columbia University Press, New York.

Radder, H. (2012). *The Material Realization of Science. From Habermas to Experimentation and Referential Realism*, Springer, Dordrecht.

Rorty, R. (1979). *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.

Rorty, R. (1989). Solidarity or objectivity?, *in* M. Krausz (ed.), *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, pp. 167–183.

Searle, J. R. (1995). *The Construction of Social Reality*, Free Press, New York.

Zuidervaart, L. (2012). How not to be an anti-realist: Habermas, truth and justification, *Philosophia Reformata* **77**: 1–18.