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DELETING INDIVIDUALITIES: HABERMAS' WORRY ABOUT AUTONOMY

1. Communicative Turn in Critical Theory

Jürgen Habermas' philosophy expresses well the relationships between culture and personal identity, which, by preserving the notion of free will, allow him to preserve a key notion for his philosophy — the notion of critique (social and political), which comes from autonomy. Habermas' first and main interest is in critical theory, and in particular in developing an approach to critical theory that aims at avoiding the narrowness of the past theories. Since Marx, and continuing through Adorno, critical theories expose social constructions with an emancipatory aim: what sometimes seems to be inevitable can be unmasked as depending on contingent and hidden interests. Criticism also makes possible the modification of those realities that turn out to be mere constructions with manipulatory purposes.

The main problem from Marx to Adorno, Habermas thinks, consists of considering subjects as separate from the intersubjective relationships in which they live. In this view, they are subjects *before* entering social relationship and cultures, so that they can criticise ideology, but only from the outside: they are not deeply related to the social and political system they live in. We can define ideologies as spread illusions of legitimacy that, to maintain power, hide a particular interest whose appearance would crumble the legitimacy that

people wrongly attribute to a particular situation.[1] Critical theories aim at dissolving illusions (ideologies) that, in turn, aim at controlling communication. An example of how ideology works can be found in George Orwell's *1984*, where Big Brother adjusts the telling of history to communicate the legitimacy of his power. This is why ideologies are authoritarian: an authority is authoritarian if it restricts free discussions, excluding a dogmatic (and legitimating) core from the realm of discussion.[2]

Critical theory is "critical" not only in a negative sense: after discovering and dissipating an ideology, it also aims at imposing a new and legitimate social order. Here arises the problem of creating social order (a legitimate one, not imposed through violence but by acceptance of the social order as valid) from individuals who share nothing but their own desire to see their interests safeguarded. This circumstance puts social order in a critical position of instability because if it is true that interests unite individuals, it is a temporary rapprochement, since interest is the least steady basis of society.[3] Interest is a bonding force that is *external* to individuals the subject relates to: Habermas searches, instead, for a more stable bonding force. He finds it in the force of good reasons, which bond people by *convincing* them. This agreement, reached through discourse (argumentation) animated by the normative idea of an ideal speech situation (aiming for maximum inclusiveness of people and themes, and equal respect for varying opinions), is at the core of Habermas' communicative critical theory: argumentation is the means of criticizing illegitimate powers and, simultaneously, the way to set up legitimate ones.

1 J. Habermas, *Theorie und Praxis. Sozialphilosophische Studien* (Luchterland: Neuwied-Berlin, 1963/78), pp. 307–335, here p. 311.
2 M. Cooke, "Avoiding Authoritarianism: On the Problem of Justification in Contemporary Critical Social Theory", *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 13 (3), 2005, pp. 379–404, here pp. 382–383.
3 J. Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (Surhkamp: Frankfurt a.M., 1981), II, pp. 176–177.

2. Social Order between Individuals and Society

Formulating the possibility of social criticism *from within* presupposes a conception of society as neither (1) the mysterious output of isolated subjects nor a (2) steel cage imposed from above on individuals. In the first case, the difficulty is in explaining how social integration would be possible—that is, how interactions based on mere reciprocal influence can consolidate (*verstetigen*) into laws.[4] In the second case, the difficulty is preserving an individual's autonomy (the ability to determine their own rules—that is, self-determination, the only source of legitimacy), while acknowledging that society, woven together by "networks of linguistically mediated interactions", is not encountered as an "external nature", accessible only to an observer, and so unchangeable.[5] In fact, individuals can also access social phenomena "from within"; this hermeneutic perspective is complementary to the external-observative one that is typical of social scientists who approach social interactions as *systems*.[6] The hermeneutic perspective is rather related to the *validity* of social relations, which in turn has to do with their origin as related to the "shared meaning" that participants in social interactions must share to reach mutual understanding (*Verständigung*) first, before looking for an agreement (*Einverständnis*).

Mead and Wittgenstein provide Habermas with the basis for the development of a "communicative theory of society".[7] In fact, the identity of meaning is the basis for social coordination and thus for social order: an hermeneutic perspective can encompass the prior phenomenon (accepting and stipulating same meanings) that creates what an observer can then perceive as system.

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4 J. Habermas. *Nachmetaphysisches Denken. Philosophische Aufsätze* (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt a.M., 1988), pp. 63–104, here p. 82.

5 Ibid, p. 84, See also Id., *Vorstudien und Ergänzugen zur Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt a.M., 1984), pp. 11–126. Maeve Cooke, "Habermas, Autonomy and the Identity of the Self", *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 18 (3–4), 1992, pp. 269–291, in the case of Habermas speaks of an identity of meaning between autonomy, self-determination, self-realisation and individuation, p. 272.

6 J. Habermas, *Nachmetaphysisches Denken*, cit., p. 84

7 Id., *Vorstudien und Ergänzugen zur Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, cit., pp. 26–27 and 58. Using the same meaning is neither a coincidence nor a miracle. Id., *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, cit., II, p. 34–39 to see how Habermas integrates Mead and Wittgenstein.

The identity of meanings comes from the union of expectations that subjects have about a phenomenon. In this way, the shared meaning arises when *intersubjectivity* takes place. Meanings are neither outside nor inside the mind (prior to intersubjectivity); individuals find and create them by drawing close to each other. This notion protects the autonomy of individuals with their possibility to influence the process of meaning creation; at the same time, it put constraints on individuals because they do not have infinite ways to come to understanding, yet they have to consider the possible understanding of the partner of the interaction.[8]

If social order must be conceived as emerging from processes of consensus about the interpretation of reality (phenomena and needs), the problem arises regarding where can men find the resources for coming to the same interpretation of reality (understanding) as a basis for developing a consensus. This consensus is possible because the individuals who are engaged in an interactive search for it share the same "lifeworld" (*Lebenswelt*), a reserve of meanings on which they have a "previous agreement" made of "unquestioned certainties" that provide a "backing" that, being constantly nourished by shared experiences and feeding back on previous interpretations, absorbs the risk of a strong and insurmontable incommunicability, and subsequent disagreement.[9] In Habermas' view, social actors are part of a "circular process" in which the actor does not appear as the initiator, but as the product of (1) traditions, of (2) groups to which he belongs and of (3) processes of socialisation and learning.[10] In fact, Habermas identifies three components of a lifeworld: that is,

(1) cultural models;
(2) legitimate systems of norms;
(3) structures of personality.

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8 J. Habermas, N. Luhmann, *Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie. Was leistet die Systemforschung?* (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt a.M., 1971).
9 J. Habermas, *Nachmetaphysisches Denken*, cit., pp. 85–86.
10 Ibid, p. 95.

They are all defined as "condensations and sedimentations" of communicative processes of agreement, action coordination and socialisation.[11] In particular:

- culture is defined as a reserve of knowledge for interpretations of situations;
- society as legitimate systems of norms that rule memberships;
- and structures of personalities as reasoning and abilities that are provided to the subjects with their own identity.[12]

The concept of society and social interaction, as conceived by Habermas, seems to strike the right balance between the priority of individual or of society, allowing social scientists to describe society from two perspectives, i.e., respectively the observative and the hermeneutic. In the hermeneutic approach, the social scientist is still an observer, but a "participant-observer" who, by participating in the same lifeworld, can understand reasons and meanings that are otherwise incomprehensible through mere observation.[13] This is because humans are both natural beings (characterised by physical behaviours that can be described as causal events) and cultural beings (acting based on reasons that originate from their culture). These reasons of action are linguistically shaped, according to Habermas, since humans think linguistically and language is a pragmatic and adaptative tool, adequate to its use-context. This fact, in turn, makes meanings (which, pragmatically, are also reasons for actions) contextual and explains why, to understand them, a social scientist has to participate in the same context (lifeworld) that he has to explain hermeneutically.[14] To balance Habermas' notion of identity, on the one hand, and society and

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11 Ibid, p. 96.
12 Ibid, pp. 96–97.
13 Id., Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns, cit., I, p. 168.
14 Here the distinction arises between explaining/describing and understanding as two mutually exclusive and complementary approaches. Habermas has developed a pragmatic theory of meaning, through the notion of speech act, that represents the double dimension of the human being (natural and cultural) through the compresence of illocutive and perlocutive sides in every speech act. If the illocutory effect is the agreement reached understanding the act — that is, understanding the sense we give

culture, on the other hand, the key is to find the *boundary* between a social determinism on the individual and a determinism of the individual on society: the first would lead again to ideology (imposing an order and restricting or manipulating individual autonomy), while the second would lead to the problem of explaining social order. The balance of these two types of determinism depends on the development of a complete concept of critical theory — that is, completed by both *pars destruens* and *pars construens*. If individual determinism is stronger than the social one, so the deconstruction of ideology can not be followed by the reconstruction of a legitimate society: how can subjects come to share identical meanings and so coming to an agreement? If social determinism is stronger, what ensures us that the new order is not a new ideology, as the individual has no freedom to check and influence it?

Individuals and society are not two systems that are external to each other: "communicatively socialised subjects" would not be subjects without the structure of social institutions and cultural traditions. Persons are symbolic structures, while their "natural substrate", "completely" symbolically structured, is experienced as their "own body".[15] By means of "interpretative performances", individuals preserve and innovate culture, while the latter can serve as a resource for people's identity construction: they build themselves by renewing and stabilising society.

The problem is the *completely symbolical character of identity*, which makes it dependent on culture and society. It is true that self-formation is a process of socialisation: I recognise the other as having the possibility of taking my place, but I recognise him as someone different from me. If identity is intersubjectively shaped, emancipation can not be an emancipation *from* society, but an emancipation *in* society, a redemption from a certain kind of isolation where ideological societies drive individuals. Only through a *pure* sociality individuals can develop identity and freedom.[16]

to it by communicating a locutive content (illocutory effect/success 1) and accepting it (illocutory effect/success 2) — then perlocutory effects are *physical* effects, acting as contingent consequences of illocutory ones.

15 J. Habermas, *Nachmetaphysisches Denken*, cit., pp. 100–101.

16 By interpretating communication (and language) as made of speech acts, Habermas can link linguistic meaning to action meaning, and so he can link together communi-

In this way, the goal is the "rational foundation" of cultural prescriptions and social norms, where the validity of a norm is made conditional on a consensus reached through a "communication free from domain".[17] Habermas considers self-formation as a process of socialisation: I recognise the other with his possibility to take my place, but I recognise him as someone different from me. This process of "individualisation through socialisation" is available only in a community: infants do not develop into persons until they do not come to intersubjectively shared meanings.[18] In this vein, he thinks that identity can arise only at the intersubjective level — but self-identity then becomes a questionable "criterion of demarcation" (*Abgrenzungkriterium*).[19]

The way out from this empasse consists of aknowledging another type of constraint, different from the cultural one – the natural ones – as Habermas does in 2002. Here he reinforces the idea that nature is the substrate for the development of personal history that makes a person unique.[20] If a person was only the product of a socialization process which he/she undergoes, he/she would lose any reference to his/her *self*. Each one is determined also by abilities, qualities and predispositions that come from genetics.[21] In this way, Habermas seems to revise his original conception of the *completely* symbolic character of identity, which makes it dependent on culture and society (social world). This is Habermas late idea. Into the subject, manipulation of communication and genetic engineering attempt at controlling respectively the cultural and natural non-epistemic dimensions of his/her identity, that is the socialized and the natural aspect of it, whose *personality* make the subject original and autonomous (aknowledging his intentions as its own intentions).

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cation and building society. See J. Habermas, *Nachmetaphysisches Denken*, cit., p. 64. I speak of pure society in the sense of a society that does not impose a model and let free the dialectic between social refusal and acceptance (of ideas and persons).

17 Id., *Erkenntnis und Interesse* (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt a.M., 1968), p. 344.

18 Id., *Nachmetaphysisches Denken*, cit., pp. 187–241.

19 J. Habermas, and N. Luhmann, *Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie,* cit., pp. 216–217.

20 J. Habermas, *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion. Philosophische Aufsätze* (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt a.M., 2005) , pp. 187–215, p. 194.

21 J. Habermas, *Die Zukunft der menschlichen Natur. Auf dem Weg zu einer liberalen Eugenik?* Suhrkamp: Frankfurt a. M., 2001/2002, pp. 80-114, here p. 105.

3. Saving Individuals: Free Will between Cultural and Natural Determinism

I have argued that to make criticism possible it takes a certain degree of autonomy, to allow people the possibility to become aware of ideological pressures and manipulations. Autonomy is linked to free will, so critical theory too is linked to it. This connection motivates Habermas' attempt to save free will from *determinist* attacks. Habermas refers to the Kantian concept of freedom as the possibility of self-determination, strictly related to autonomy. To be clear, free will is necessary for critical theory, but also for a concept of learning that is consistent with the interpretation of humans as free to learn and to make mistakes (fallibilism). As learning is necessary for critical theory (at least in its *pars destruens*), it is important to save this phenomenon. A reductionist view, like strong naturalism, is not able to explain what learning is because learning is a normative activity, one that can succeed or not; for this reason, a strong naturalist perspective is insufficient, even if it can show the biological basis of learning and how learning operates in its biological substrate. As Habermas observes, on neurological self-description, individuals become unintelligible as learners:

> "According to the neurological self-description of a 'dialogue of brains,' the researchers would no longer be able to understand what it means to correct theoretical hypotheses in light of better reasons, and would thus be unable to improve the state of their knowledge or even to seek out new knowledge. For knowledge and the growth of knowledge are irredeemably normative concepts that resist all attempts at empiricist redescription".[22]

22 J. Habermas, "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 (1), 2007, pp. 13–50, here p. 25. If knowledge and science aim at enlightenment and emancipation, strong naturalism is an extreme perspective that loses the original and emancipatory possibilities of science, ibid., p. 42.

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Free will is the most general kind of freedom because it involves the same possibility of conceiving of all other kinds of freedom.[23] Free will is the basis for responsibility, a feeling through which we take ownership for all our actions and decisions that we conceive of as free.[24] A sense of responsibility can be lost in both determinist and indeterminist conceptions. At the same time, *determinism* is a category that collects all those positions arguing for responsibility and free will's inexistence, since in this view everything is determined. *Indeterminism*, by contrast, suggests that events are not necessarily determined but only probable. The problem arises due to the casuality associated with actions, which runs against self-determination associated with free will and with the possibility of conceiving of reasons as having the same force of causes (normativity).

If under determinism we can not act differently (it can be causal, teleological or fatalistic determinism, but here I will refer to the first type), under indeterminism we do not control our choices and actions, which are completely random. Two paths are available here: *incompatibilism*, according to which free will and determinism are not compatible, forcing us to choose between them; and *compatibilism*, according to which a way for reconcilation is available.

This last is Habermas' route. The question is: how can we conceive of an action as both free (determined by only will) and determined by social or biological factors? Habermas thinks it is possible by way of a Kantian pragmatism that sees freedom and determinism as two complementary and inevitable *lexicons*, both useful to describe human life, and both of which we impose (*auferlegen*) on reality, globally considered. This is connected to the double character of human knowledge of human phenomena (accessible by both observation and understanding), as depending on the double character of humans as both cultural and natural beings. If determinists are right in saying that mental events are always associated with physiological events, the first can not be reduced to the latter, since the lexicon of free will makes us able to understand many so-

23 People can be free *of* or free *from* something; still, there is political, religious, economical freedom.
24 *Epiphenomenalism,* too, can take into consideration responsibility and will, but only as mere manifestation of the *real* reality — that is, made of nervous reactions to stimuli.

cial and human phenomena (associated with the normative dimension), such as the attribution of responsibility and social coordination by means of a system of faults and awards.

The possibility of a complementarity of two different and opposed perspectives is the result of the degree of development of our lifeworld, which allows people to take different approaches to the same phenomenon and, for example, to unite both a scientific and a daily-common-sense perspective on phenomena like decision, responsibility and free will. This fact answers the human need for a perspective able to maintain both the common-sense idea of the self and a coherent image of the universe that also includes man as natural being, subject to natural laws (causes).[25] Habermas' "weak naturalism" is presented as an attempt to integrate "free will into the whole of nature".[26] He looks for an answer to the ontological problem of naturalism—how to reconcile the *contingency* of our natural and historical evolution with the normativity we feel as members of a culture.[27] Habermas' answer is a "weak" naturalism (*schwache Naturalismus*), where compatibilism makes it possible to avoid a reductionist view like Quine's (defined as "strong" naturalism) that loses the meaning of actions as distinguished from behaviours and events:

> "The difficulty consists in the fact that the language games, terminologies, and explanatory models that we have to employ in such cases cannot be reduced to one another. Descriptions of persons and their thoughts or practices cannot be translated into behaviorist or physicalist terms without losing or changing their meaning. Every attempt at conceptual reduction fails in the face of the intersubjective constitution of a mind that is intentionally oriented towards the world, communicates

25 J. Habermas, *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion*, cit., pp. 155–186, here p. 156.
26 Id., "The Language Game of Responsible Agency and the Problem of Free Will. How Can Epistemic Dualism Be Reconciled with Ontological Monism?", cit., p. 17. Subjects who act freely, on the basis of reasons cannot "escape" from natural events, *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion*, cit., p. 188.
27 Id., *Wahrheit und Rechtfertigung. Philosophische Aufsätze*, (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt a.M., 1999), p. 8.

via propositional contents, and is responsive to rules and standards of validity".[28]

This is the difference between behaviour and action; the first is described from an observer-perspective, while to understand actions we need to participate at the same cultural horizon of the agent under analysis. Actions, as normatives, can go wrong while behaviours simpy take place. In Habermas' perspective, causes and reasons are no longer conceived as two sides of the same coin (ontological dualism), but as two approaches that subjects (through their evolution) have developed to operate *on* subjects in the first case and *with* subjects in the second. The only way to preserve this useful dualism — which allows for operating on the same object (the other subject) both instrumentally and communicatively — is to consider it as the product of our view of reality, rather than as something existing independently from our ability to conceive it (non-epistemic). This is a kind of Kantian pragmatism (*Kantische Pragmatismus*), where our categories to approach, know, and see reality are subjected to a cultural and natural evolution.[29]

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Habermas' perspective seems to be that the distinction between mind and brain originates from the evolutionary history of human being — not from the *objective* side (as a mutation of human natural body), but from the *subjective* side (as a mutation that we, through our culture, can *create*). Evolution did not distinguish between brain and mind, but led humans to develop this distinction as two different approaches. The ineluctability of these two lexicons is not necessary but simply factual: evolution might have proceeded differently,

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28 Id., "The Language Game of Responsible Agency and the Problem of Free Will. How Can Epistemic Dualism Be Reconciled with Ontological Monism?", cit., p. 25. Against reductionism, Habermas thinks we have developed two "irreconciliable ontologies", Id., *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion*, cit., p. 172.

29 The two lexicons (transcendental conditions) are now inserted in an evolutionary conception (in a way the Kantian one was not). Even if usually we see examples of instrumental action in daily contexts (strategic actions), according to Habermas this is possible only on the basis of a communicative framework that, e.g., makes lying possible. Attempts to reduce mental life to natural impulses that are instrumentally manipulatable (in their predictability) hides the dream of manipulating human life, Id., *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion*, cit., p. 173.

leading maybe to three or more (or less) different possible approaches.[30] What makes Habermas' naturalism 'weak' is that in this approach he avoids the risk of assuming that the contingencies of what is necessary for us are the same as what is absolutely necessary — that is, the risk of identifying what we know here and now with how things really are (God's Eye Point of View).[31] This is why Habermas opts for a methodological dualism, rather than an ontological one.

How can this help with our question? How can we conceive of an action as both *free* (determined by only will) and *determined* (conceiving of will as caused by social or biological factors)? Habermas conceives of free will as endowed with its own causality, but free will is in the grip of both natural and social causes. This is why he distinguishes between the "absence of freedom" (*Un-freiheit*) as contraints from the outside and "freedom under condition" (*Freiheit unter Bedingungen*), where one can be free to choose among different ways to act but the choices are predetermined by the natural and bodily substrate of personality and by the lifeworld.[32] If it is easy to figure out how the natural body puts contraints on free will (genetic predispositions), the lifeworld restricts free will in a similar way: the reasons that are available to subjects in their particular culture to justify/motivate their choices and actions are not infinite and thus: "freedom [...] appears only in the deflationary form of a conditioned freedom, embedded in the context of reasons as they arise within the lifeworld".[33] This is because "in taking on the role of motives that are sufficient to explain an action, reasons acquire a causal effectiveness that they initially, as semantic content, lack".[34] If the actor had chosen a different model-reason-desire (available among those provided by his own culture), he would have wanted and acted differently.

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30 Id., *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion*, cit., p. 170.
31 Id., *Wahrheit und Rechtfertigung*, cit., p. 34. Habermas post-metaphysical thinking is aimed at showing 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.
32 Id., *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion*, cit., p. 161.
33 Id., "The Language Game of Responsible Agency and the Problem of Free Will. How Can Epistemic Dualism Be Reconciled with Ontological Monism?", cit., p. 19.
34 Ibid., p. 16. "Only retrospective demands for reasons tend to reveal the unclear feelings, dispositions, preferences, and values that direct action pre-reflectively. These motives can be traced to moods, preferences, inclinations, and character traits that often merely express traditions, customs, and social norms", ibid., p. 18.

Whoever acts can conceive as a constraint the reasons coming from his character and history only if he steps out of himself and looks at his personal history as a natural event.[35] The constraints of reasons are therefore different from the constraints of natural causes, which can't be chosen or changed in the same way but only accepted/recognized. To be clear, there are pragmatic, ethical and moral reasons:

"Pragmatic reasons, based on current desires or given preferences, can become relativised by ethical reasons, which bring into play long-term interests. These can be trumped, in turn, by moral reasons. Ethical reasons have a broader temporal scope than pragmatic reasons but, like them, remain bound to the agent-relative perspective of what is good 'for me' or 'for us'. Moral and rights-based reasons are the only reasons that are directed at a decentered perspective of what is equally good (or just) "for all"".[36]

Cultural influence on individuals takes the form of these constraints on the available reasons. It is not a tight influence, allowing people to choose among different (but not infinite) model of actions. What emerges from this perspective is that natural causes are somehow conceptually (but not existentially) submitted to cultural ones, to the extent that Habermas conceives of the first as "enabling conditions" (*ermöglichende Bedingungen*), waiting to be exploited by reasons.[37] In fact, Habermas thinks that humans think and feel only through the language they use to interact and, consequently, to create their own identities. This is because awareness of freedom is the awareness of participation in a space of reasons that others can understand and among which the subject can choose.

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35 Id., *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion*, cit., p. 161 and 196–197. M. Cooke, 'Habermas, Autonomy and the Identity of the Self', cit., p. 274, stresses that Habermas's concept of "recognition" here does not imply "agreement" but only understanding. In fact, "what is recognised is not the rightness of what the autonomous self does or says but its willingness to accept responsibility for what it does or says", ibid., p. 286.
36 Id., "The Language Game of Responsible Agency and the Problem of Free Will. How Can Epistemic Dualism Be Reconciled with Ontological Monism?", cit., 18.
37 Id., *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion*, cit., p. 164. Social relationships are like a *second* nature, ibid., p. 189.

Can this double form of constraints be associated with freedom? According to Habermas, it depends on the existence of something like consciousness, a coordinating centre of human personal identity and history; however, it has to be conceived as *osmotic* (that is, socially built), whose boundaries are redesigned with the individual social living. In particular, according to Habermas, if we can aknwoledge the power of society on the brain, we also have another step to make: acknowledging the feedback of the subject on society and so ensuring his freedom, which can be exploited to change his own identity-possibilities, or the cultural models among which he can choose his reasons, will, and identity. This can be done only indirectly, i.e., by operating on society and hoping to change it as a means to change culture and therefore the influences on the individual's own identity. This is exactly what critical theory wants to preserve — the possibility for subjects and societies to change cultural pressure that otherwise would be conceived of as ideological (dogmatic and immutable).

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Free will is a presupposition of our social life, but one that has to be conquered every day so that we can participate in social life with a personal contribution and not feel the burden of being ineluctably socially built. In particular, people born assuming the available models but growing up as subjects can reflexively feed back on their culture, exerting a critical pressure on it.

It is only in the public sphere that a subject can *show* his freedom, where he is accountable for the reasons of his actions;[38] it is only in the public sphere that a subject can *be* free, where there is a dynamic of negotiation of (at least social) constraints. However, Habermas also fears for the future of human *nature*, that is its disappearance from influencing the public realm. In fact, if a person was only the product of an educational socialization his self would get out of hand, disappearing into the vortex of influences and relationships;[39] there is a natural body too, that is supposed to work as both a constraint and a source of renewal for the cultural and symbolic formation of personality. Its disappearance would also lead to the disappearance of the individual self. It is

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38 Free actions have to be explained by referring to an intention based on reasons. This can show the subject's responsible authorship of the choice, *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion*, cit., pp. 191–192.
39 J. Habermas, *Die Zukunft der Menshlichen Natur*, cit., p. 103.

from the body that the subject can take the innovative resources to innovate and influence society.

The game of these two sources of influence on free will makes the individual autonomous because they make him free: through socialization he can choose among the natural pressures he feels as coming from its bodily side; through his bodily side he can choose which social influences are apt (or are not) to its own particular personality. Still, through his socialization side of influence on his personal growth, he can feed back on its own natural desires (by restricting those judged as unacceptable) and through his bodily side he can push new ideas into the social realm. From these new ideas the social sphere can be innovated so to fit better the needs of the individuals. Without one of the two poles, the internal dialectic between social and natural influence would crumble, leading it to the distruction of the individual autonomy as a centre of mediation (by making the subject completely subjected to either society or nature). So, without a dialectic of internal/external (necessary for an autonomous Self) also the dialectic between individuals and society would be compromised.

4. Culture and Individuals, Culture and Nature: Couples of Mutual Influence

Thus far, I have shown how culture relates to identity construction, but also how the latter is not completely constructed, depending on natural influences too (natural causes) that are complementary to social ones. Finally, I have mentioned how identity relates to culture in a positive (and not just parasitic) way: entering into public space individuals innovate it by bringing new desires into the public sphere, where they can be seen and publicly discussed.[40] This innovation is particularly evident in modern societies, characterised by "deliberative democracy" (mirroring their evolutionary degree of emancipation from traditions and religious pressures).[41]

40 New desires and ideas can come from imagination or from intercultural exchanges.
41 Habermas sketches the history of the evolution of political forms mostly in *Struk-*

What is at stake now is the possibility for culture to feed back on nature. In fact, Habermas here acknowledges that the mind is part of a natural history where the "universe […] includes humankind as part of nature".[42] In fact, "Even if the complementarity interlocking of epistemic perspectives is part of the constitution of socio-cultural forms of life, everything speaks for the assumption that our forms of life, like other animal forms of life, are the result of natural evolution".[43] However, "Since we can not escape *the epistemic primacy* of the linguistically articulated horizon of the lifeworld, *the ontological priorit*y 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".[44] We can conceive the lifeworld as our specific orientation modality into the natural world.

Culture can feed back on nature, in particular on environment. This has to be conceived as part of the *nature-universe*, which in turn may be conceived of as the indefinite sum of all environments that are external to our own perspectival environment (including our own). An environment can be defined as the realm of potential actions for each living species.[45] It depends, on the one hand, on constraints posed by other environments (natural selection) and is in that sense independent from us. On the other hand, environment also depends on our cultural or ecological intervention (niche construction). These two sides are related because "products, resources, and habitats that [...] organisms construct [...] constitute fundamental components of their

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turwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt a.M., 1962). An analysis of the characters of deliberative democracy is provided in *Faktiztät und Geltung. Beiträge zu Diskurstheorie des Rechts und des demokratischen Rechtsstaats* (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt a.M., 1992).

42 Id., "The Language Game of Responsible Agency and the Problem of Free Will. How Can Epistemic Dualism Be Reconciled with Ontological Monism?", cit., p. 37. "The epistemic subject does not simply encounter the world but also knows itself to be one entity among others in the world", ibid, p. 23.

43 Ivi.

44 Ibid, p. 39.

45 J. T. Sanders, "An Ontology of Affordances", *Ecological Psychology*, 9 (1), 1997, pp. 97–112, here p. 108.

world and those of *other* species".[46] In other words, a species's niche construction processes constitute natural selection forces for other species.

To be clear, I use "natural selection" in a "non-selectionist" way, rejecting "environmental determinism", the idea that the environment as an independent variable supplies a set of possibilities (or ecological niche) to which we must conform in an adaptive way[47]. This traditional selectionist view, "best captured in the metaphor of adaptation", forgets that animals' "utilisation, destruction and creation [of elements of their respective environments] are central elements in evolutionary dynamics", so that "animals do not evolve so as to fit in a pre-existing environment".[48] If an environment does not pre-exist the animals to which it is linked through the notion of *affordances* (defined as relations between the abilities of organisms and features of the environment), it remains the case that other environments do (*nature-universe*).

The notion of affordance was first coined by J. J. Gibson, to describe what the environment offers the animal as a possibility, either good or bad. If a species disappears, the affordances linked to it (whose sum constitute its environment) also vanish; the same is not true for *other* environments or for "geological and hydrological processes [that] can also alter the affordances in an animal habitat".[49] Affordances owe their existence to the existence of a species able to perceive and exploit them, while their exploitability depends on the appearance of an intention.[50] The gap between intentions and affordances (what is available for intentions accomplishment) can be bridged by human niche construction: animals can alter the environment "in order to change what it

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46 R. L. Day, K. N. Laland and J. Odling-Smee, "Rethinking Adaptation: The Niche--Construction Perspective", *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, 46 (1), 2003, pp. 80–95, here p. 87, italics mine. It is important to stress that niche construction also holds for plants.

47 A. Costall, "Darwin, Ecological Psychology, and the Principle of Animal Environment Mutuality", *Psyke & Logos*, 22 (2), 2001, pp. 473–484, here p. 478.

48 R. Withagen and M. V. Wermeskerken, "The Role of Affordances in the Evolutionary Process Reconsidered: A Niche Construction Perspective", *Theory Psychology*, 20 (4), 2010, pp. 489–510, here pp. 489–490.

49 Ibid, p. 503. See J. J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Houghton Mifflin: Boston, 1979).

50 T. A. Stoffregen, "Affordances as Properties of the Animal-Environment System", *Ecological Psychology* 15 (2), 2003, pp. 115–134, here pp. 125–126.

affords them".[51] In the case of humans, this niche construction process happens mostly through the use of language as a powerful instrument of intentions formation, communication and realisation. Language is the cultural instrument humans use to change their own environment. When affordances do not allow us to realise an intention, we begin to think about different solutions in order to realise our goals. Our thoughts are linguistically and culturally shaped, so that is language that allows us to feed back on culture and then on nature. In a few words, we can say that human niche construction operates mostly through *culture*—that is, through sociality and linguistic communication (following Habermas' idea that primarily language is there for communication).[52]

In light of this, affordances are the connectors between cultural and linguistic human activity and external reality, always linguistically and culturally perceived. External reality reveals its unavailability when it does not allow change to happen (at least at the present time), showing a resistance from a dimension that does not depend on us. For example we can not force water to be XZY rather than H2O. This circumstance depends on something that is external and independenf from us, not in our power, – what I have called *nature-universe* — and exists prior to an environment. It is worth to remind that culture too can avoid some change to happen (from the individual's perspective), providing a different kind of resistance. Cutures and societies (respectively through traditions and institutions) save "good" reasons that can change when circumstances change but that we also face when we try to establish new standards of evaluation or to change social order.[53]

When there is a cultural change it is *learning* that takes place. It can happen both for internal and external effects. In the first case "the change [...] is a direct result of the act of articulating certain points of view", while in the other, "the change [...] comes about as a result of things that happen independently of that situation".[54] In fact, such a change can be brought about "argumentatively, as

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51 T. Kono, "Social Affordances and the Possibility of Ecological Linguistics", *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science*, 43 (4), 2009, pp. 356–373, here p. 366.
52 J. Habermas, *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion*, cit., pp. 15–16, here p. 19.
53 J. Habermas, *Nachmetaphysisces Denken II. Aufsätze und Repliken*, (Suhrkamp:, Frankfurt am Main, 2012), p. 73.
54 M. Cooke, "Violating Neutrality? Religious Validity Claims and Democratic Legiti-

when we are swayed by the arguments of others", or through "non-argumentative experiences, which make us receptive to these arguments".[55] But what does learning means here?

I am referring to "socio-cultural learning". According to Maeve Cooke, learning is a phenomenon that can take place on three levels. There is a technical learning, which refers to "gains in knowledge for a pre-defined purpose"; a personal learning, when "it refers to beneficial changes in the self-understandings of the participants, and in their assignments of meaning and value"; and finally, there is a socio-cultural learning, which "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".[56]

In this way, it is possible conceiving learning as the linguistic-connecting activity among the individual, the cultural and the external-natural dimension, as a chain of dialectic interactions between culture (providing all the intentions the self finds as socially accepted), nature (the self's natural predispositions) and the individual, which is both the object and the subject of all these processes of mutual influences.

5. Conclusion

I have shown how critical theory is better conceived under communicative dresses (1); I have also highlighted that critical theory's concern is to legitimate social order. To make it possible, we need to conceive humans as free (3). However, a coherent image of freedom can not be without aknowledging both

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macy", in C. Calhoun, E. Mendieta, J. Van Antwerpen (eds.), *Habermas and Religion*. Cambridge: Polity Press, pp. 249–274, p. 259.

55 M. Cooke, "The Limits of Learning: Habermas' Social Theory and Religion", *European Journal of Philosophy*, (2014) (Early View, Online Version of Record published before inclusion in an issue) pp. 1–18, p. 8. She says that "the internal/external distinction is analytic. Since the causes of perceptual shifts are multiple and complex, such a distinction is rarely possible in practice" (ibid.)

56 M. Cooke, "Argumentation and Transformation", *Argumentation*, 16 (1) (2002), pp. 79–108, p. 83.

social and natural determinism (4), so the point for critical theory is to play a role into the dialectic dynamic between freedom and determinism, choice and acceptance, identity and socialization.

If it is true that culture emerges along the course of natural evolution, culture can also feed back on nature. Environment and identity, as *partially* cultural dependent, are Janus-faced (cultural and natural at the same time). These two poles have a shape that is prior of culture but that is heavily influenced by culture. Culture can feed back on nature, but nature—both mental and environmental—is not completely constructed and determinable by culture. If inside men there is biological and chemical resistance, outside there are constraints that other environments provide our own with, together with the resistence of the physical structure of reality.[57] This is how nature can negatively feed back on culture and on individuals, by putting constraints that we can not help but taking into consideration in the development of our self.

110   As individual identity is also culturally and socially shaped, and as free will can assert itself only in the public sphere, so democracy is the only way to raise and preserve differences and to allow them to have a role in decision-making (by means of argumentation). Democracy is thus the only way to influence natural constraints in a non-ideological. Only democratic processes can drive cultural feedbacks on nature in a way that retain both the individual experience of free will and the responsibility towards our destiny as social and natural beings. Democracy, by allowing criticism, responsibility, and an autonomous contruction of the self (which also entails recognition of what is unchangeable about us), seems to play a central role in this dynamic of natural and cultural feedbacks.

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57 E.g., we cannot modify the boiling point of water.

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